

Translator's Preface: If you followed S2 development closely, back in 2021 you may have seen some black & white concept art as a part of unique material given by GSC to [The Verge](#) in a 2021 news article about Chornobyl tourists:



On February 25th, 2025, its author, now ex-GSC employee Andrey Khokhlov, updated his [ArtStation account](#) with a lot more never-before-seen concept art and S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 development material in a post he named “Forgotten Level Design”. He said that he worked on the game for 2 years doing a variety of different work, but did not make it to the credits.

As this was the first time any actual development material was published by a developer directly instead of being put out there as a part of a marketing campaign, he was soon contacted by fans and agreed to [give an interview](#) to S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki: Zone Chronicles, Russian branch of Fandom Wiki, and Vandeley, a YouTube content creator, to describe his experiences at GSC.

This post is a translation of the most important excerpts from that interview, mostly focusing on development bits (some personal information and statements have been intentionally omitted). All the concept arts have also been translated to make sure the writing is readable, however, in some areas text was illegible in source images and left as-is.

Slag Heaps of Creativity: Working on S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2

Today, we sit down with Andrey Vladimirovich Khokhlov, who worked on *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl* in the role of a "one-man band," combining the responsibilities of Level Designer, Level Artist, World Designer, and Art Director. Andrey is from Bryansk, Russia, where he has lived most of his life, except for the periods when he worked at GSC Game World.

Together with Andrey, we will discuss his creative journey, the specifics of working on the game, the issues of continuity with the trilogy, burnout, and much more.



Tell us, where did you work before GSC?

Honestly, I worked in many different fields, but usually, these jobs had nothing to do with game development—ranging from engineer, salesperson, and PC operator to, of all things, a portrait artist in funeral services. That was actually my last job before joining GSC, as strange as it may sound.

For a time, I worked as a designer in an architectural department at a small company. Eventually, I was able to create my own department there—I even intended to turn it into a small indie studio for developing a project that was already taking shape at the time, *Ruins of a Count* (you can find concepts in my ArtStation portfolio). By the way, it was at this job that I first encountered game engines—I started learning them and creating 3D interactive presentations of various buildings. I was one of the first to think of using a game engine for presentations.

I remember starting with *CryEngine 3 SDK*, but after struggling with it for a while, I switched to *Unreal Engine 4*—which, back then, required a paid subscription (yes, in case anyone didn't know, Unreal wasn't always free).

At night, my "alter ego" emerged—I spent almost all my evenings studying various materials on drawing, 3D modeling, writing, and everything related to world-building, whether for games, movies, books, or simply beautiful artwork. I also played a lot of videogames, absorbing everything I saw.

Back then, there were no online courses, and if they existed, they were in English or ridiculously expensive. With my average salary of 15-20 thousand rubles, affording them was nearly impossible, so I learned everything myself. About ten years had passed from the moment I became interested in this field to the moment I landed my first real job.

Naturally, I also did freelance work to build up my portfolio as much as possible. That period was relatively short but crucial—it helped me avoid many pitfalls later on, allowing me to set clear priorities and land where I wanted to be—in big gamedev.

Perhaps the most important moment that made me reevaluate my approach to life and ultimately led me to big gamedev was seeing my name in the credits of a released game for the first time. The game was [*The Cursed Forest*](#). The people I met there were incredible. Thanks to one of them, I got the opportunity to join GSC.



Kindergarten - Star anomaly

One of Andrey's concept arts for Prypiat



Were you familiar with GSC Game World before joining the company?

Of course... I had played through all the Cossacks games, the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. trilogy, and even some of their lesser-known but quite interesting titles like Heroes of Annihilated Empires and Alexander, which was developed in collaboration with Ubisoft.

I had also read dozens of books from the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* novel series (*translator's note: Andrey refers to a 89-book novel series in Russian published by Eksmo back in 2007-2010 when GSC were lending the franchise; the books were only inspired by the official games and are not considered canon*).

My favorite was the Kalter series: Cold Blood and Lead Sunset by Roman Glushkov. So, when I was offered a test assignment, I honestly thought it was some kind of prank. And I wasn't the only one—many people around me were skeptical and doubted that it would lead anywhere, especially in the middle of the COVID pandemic.

But I quit my job to dedicate all my time to this uncertain yet potentially life-changing opportunity. I felt that if I didn't get in, if I didn't give 100%, I might as well give up on creative work altogether.

So, I spent a week and a half working 13–15 hours a day. Sometimes, I didn't sleep at all, cutting out parts I didn't have time to finish (yes, even test assignments result in cut content) and polishing the storyline. The assignment was for a Level Designer position—it involved creating a small level using blockouts, with the original S.T.A.L.K.E.R. as a reference. In the end, I kind of lost it and ended up making almost a full-fledged game in those 1.5 weeks.

I took a free Horror Engine pack from the Unreal Marketplace and reworked it as best I could. I built a 1.5x1.5 km map, a decent art blockout using free assets (I figured actual blockouts wouldn't get the idea across), and put together a simple but branching storyline lasting about 1.5–2 hours. I hacked things together as best as I could, but the final result turned out pretty solid—good enough that GSC clearly took notice and offered me an official position on the project.

Later, some employees directly asked me, with suspicion:

"You just submitted a project you had worked on with someone else before, right? There's no way you did all this just for a test assignment in such a short time..."

And just like I said back then, I'll say it again now: no, everything was created from scratch within the given timeframe—no more, no less. A week for the main project, plus a couple of days for polishing, testing, and bug fixing. Sure, the result was rough in places, some parts looked raw and unfinished, but that's exactly what a test assignment is—it's not supposed to be a fully polished game.

[By the way, I'll attach a link to the test project.](#) If anyone's interested, feel free to check it out—just keep in mind, it's only a rough concept. *(Translator's note: the project is playable but all the text is in Russian)*

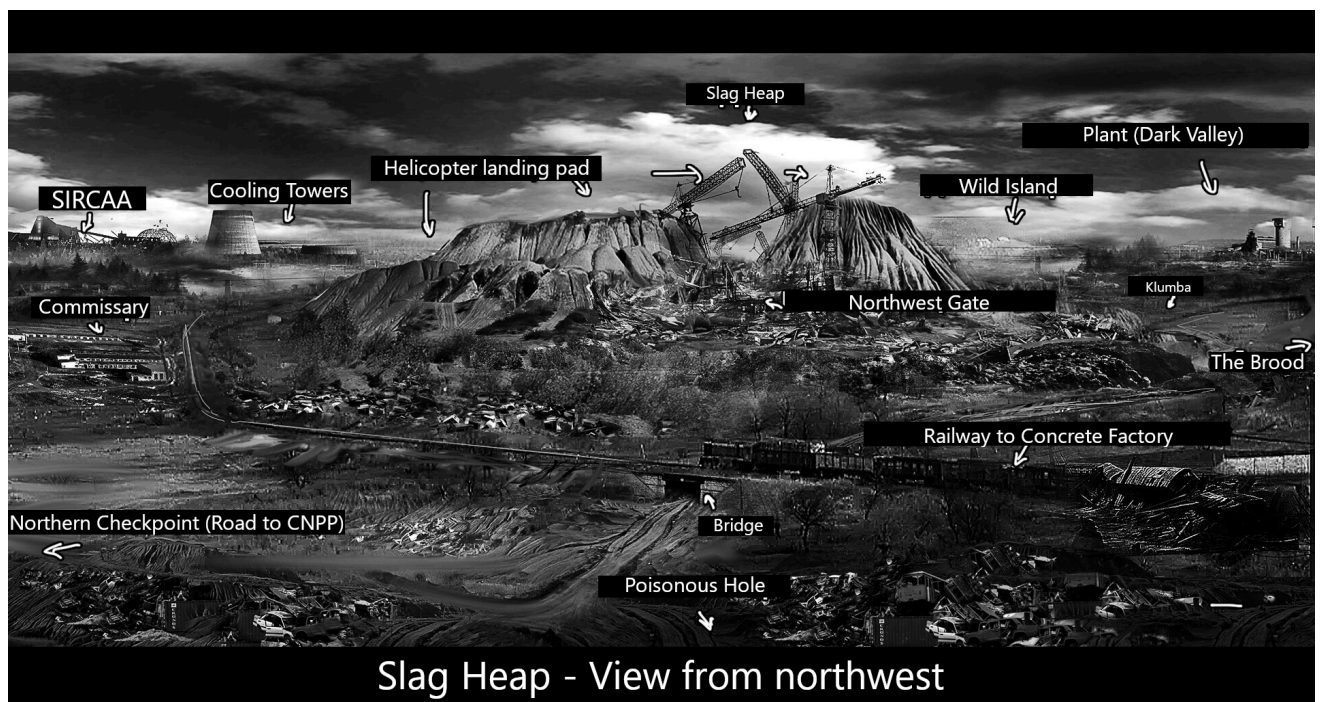
Oh, and for the record: the test assignment was unpaid. I bought my own tickets to Kyiv and paid for my accommodation out of pocket—at least during my first period at GSC. The second time around, things were completely different, but I'll get to that later.



Screenshot from the test project submitted as an assignment for GSC

So, 2020 - you've joined the team.

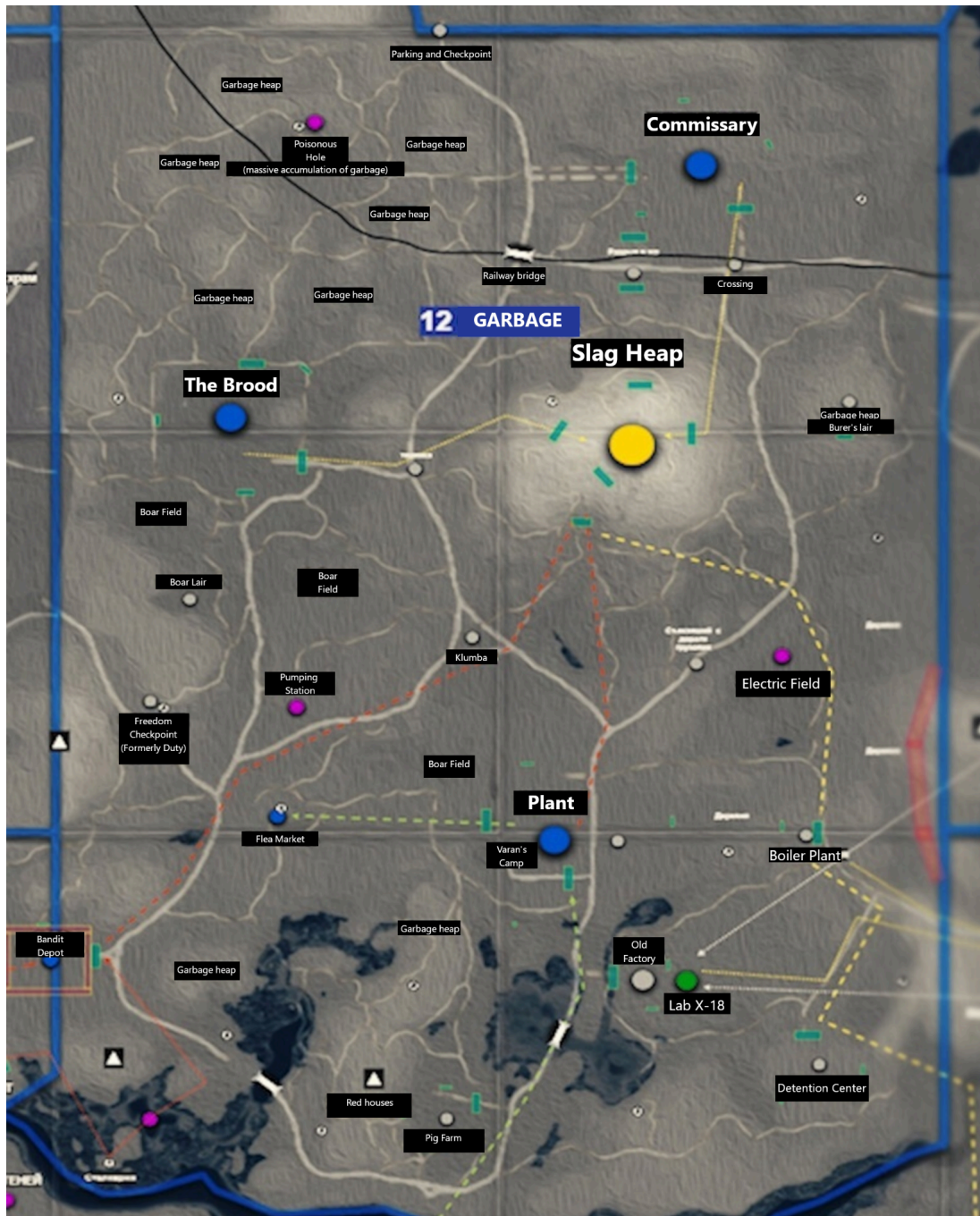
I joined GSC as a level designer. There was no hierarchy like “junior”, “experienced” or “senior” there. Our department had five people. Almost immediately, I was thrown into the deep end of a completely empty world—at that time, at least—but one that was impressive in its scale and potential. Honestly, when the community manager, either Prischepa (*translator's note: Rock_4*) or Bazarov (*translator's note: McCulkin*), I don't remember exactly, publicly stated that the world was bigger and better than *The Witcher 3*, it actually seemed like a fair assessment to me. The only problem was that this world existed only on paper—or as a single point on the map—without any details.



My first assigned region was Garbage. Or, to be more precise, a mix of the "old" Garbage (the Depot), Dark Valley, and new territories like the Slag Heap, the Brood, the Commissary, the Detention Center, and various micro-locations that eventually made it into the final release. The most surprising thing was that the most challenging areas turned out to be locations from the old games.

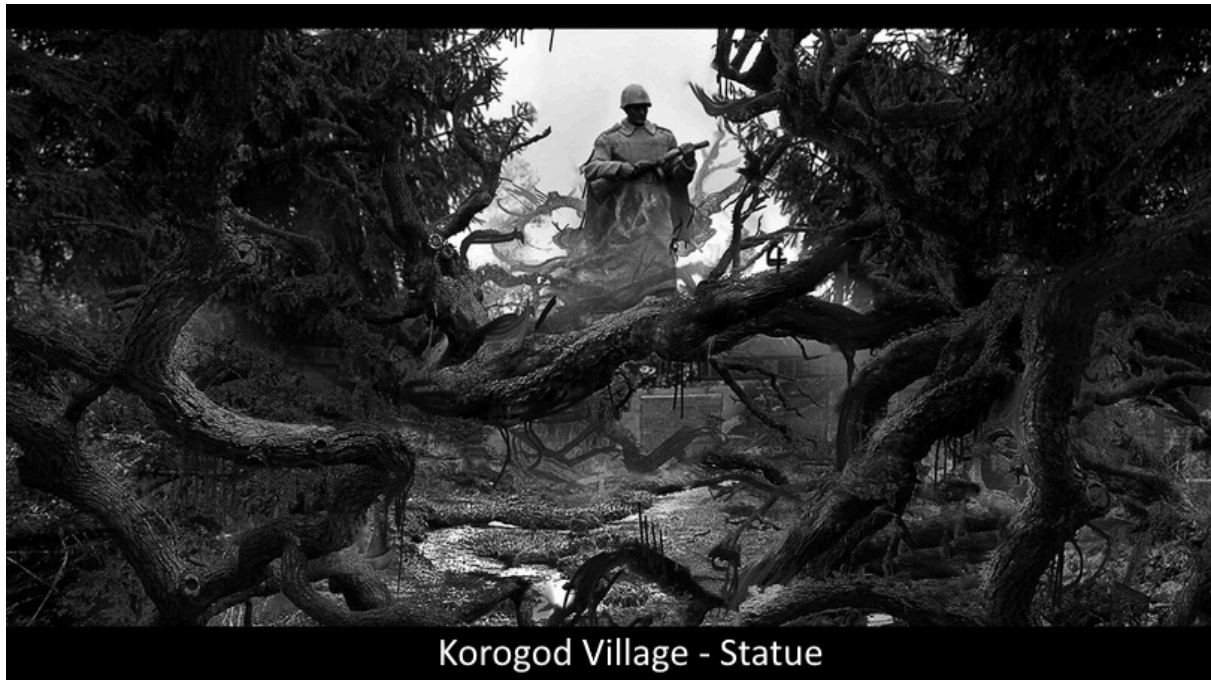
I had never worked with mods or even touched X-Ray (never really got to it), so when I discovered that the proportions of buildings, doors, people, and other elements in the older games sometimes made no logical sense at all, I was a bit stunned. I mean, we're talking about 3-meter-tall doors or doorways barely 1.5 meters wide, along with some puzzling structural elements in buildings and basements.

Of course, this isn't meant as a criticism of the old developers, as it might seem—it's more that, for me, coming up with something entirely new seemed easier and more interesting than measuring everything with a virtual ruler and trying to adapt past designs to modern standards. In other words, there was no point in messing with the design of the previous games—it was great work, so why ruin it?



Garbage region map in Andrey's vision

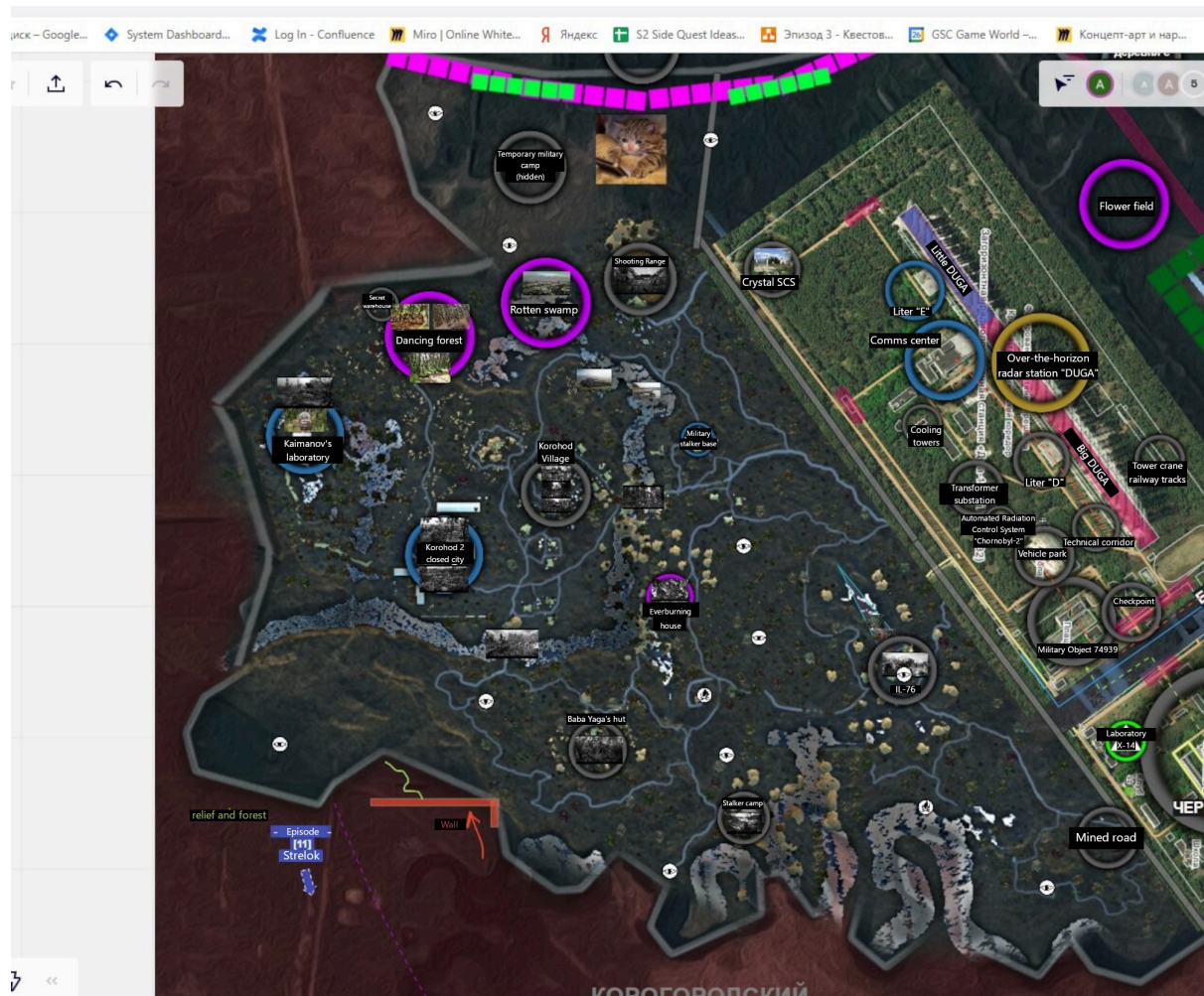
Judging by my early work at the studio, others took notice as well. So after working on the Garbage, I was assigned entirely new regions: Korogod Forest, Burnt Forest, the 4th Microdistrict of Prypiat, northern Prypiat, the Plateau, and various smaller areas from other regions, where I was sent whenever I finished my regions and had nothing else to do or when my help and advice were needed.



Korogod Village - Statue

As I mentioned earlier, I was officially a level designer, but within a few months, I started getting involved in other areas—and it turned out to be quite successful. If I needed a concept but the concept artist was busy, I made it myself with black-and-white sketches. If the narrative for a location was missing and no one had figured it out yet, I wrote it myself. If gameplay was lacking, I came up with ideas on my own, including anomalies, arch-anomalies, and mechanics that unfortunately didn't make it into the final game.

The biggest challenge was that development was happening in parallel, with different aspects of the game being worked on separately. Sometimes, I couldn't even properly run through my own levels, let alone do full-scale testing and design polishing. What started as an empty field would, after my work, become a fully fleshed-out region with detailed narrative justification, extensive documentation, references, and concepts.



Korogod region that Andrei worked on. It was later cut from the game.

People noticed this approach, and some even started adopting it because it proved to be both productive and high-quality. I was more than happy to share my knowledge, skills, and inspiration. After all, we were working on a shared project, and at the time, I wouldn't have forgiven myself if I had been selfish and kept everything to myself.

By nature, I'm a friendly and social person, so I quickly fit into the team and made a lot of friends. In fact, I don't think there was anyone who didn't know me or hadn't at least heard about our evening gatherings on the terrace with a guitar and a good drink. We also had movie nights, which, more often than not, were my idea. We would settle into bean bags in the lounge area, in front of a massive TV, and watch all sorts of films—The Matrix, Harry Potter, even Tarkovsky's Stalker. Sometimes, we even watched football matches.



One of places in Korogod, with sap flowing from the burning trees

But unfortunately, not everyone welcomed this kind of activity. Everything has a flip side. As I grew closer to my colleagues—both professionally and personally—I also started to annoy certain individuals. This became especially apparent after three months when our department lead, Denis Rudoy, went on medical leave and temporarily put me in charge. It was an incredibly awkward situation when he returned, as I had, in the meantime, reworked a lot of controversial elements, significantly improved communication between departments, and even—due to certain circumstances—contributed to the dismissal of one of the team members.

In short, I ended up redoing a ton of work that no one had explicitly asked me to touch, simply because I believed it couldn't be left as it was. I genuinely wanted to improve things, but my pace of work was too intense for some people. And I had to come to terms with that—though not completely. Which, of course, brings us to the reason for my first departure from the project.

So, were there multiple departures?

I worked at GSC twice. There was a period when I left but later returned. I first joined the team in the summer of 2020 and left around late spring 2021. I spent the summer back home in Bryansk, and by mid-autumn, I was on my way back.

The real development push started when I first joined. Before that, there was no game world, no finalized script, and no narrative for about 80% of the game's locations. Up until 2020, the game was still in the world-building stage. Then the real work began, which, for me, was an absolute thrill. Everything that exists in the final game comes from the development period between 2020 and 2022. From 2022 to 2025, it was mostly about cutting content and simplifying things.

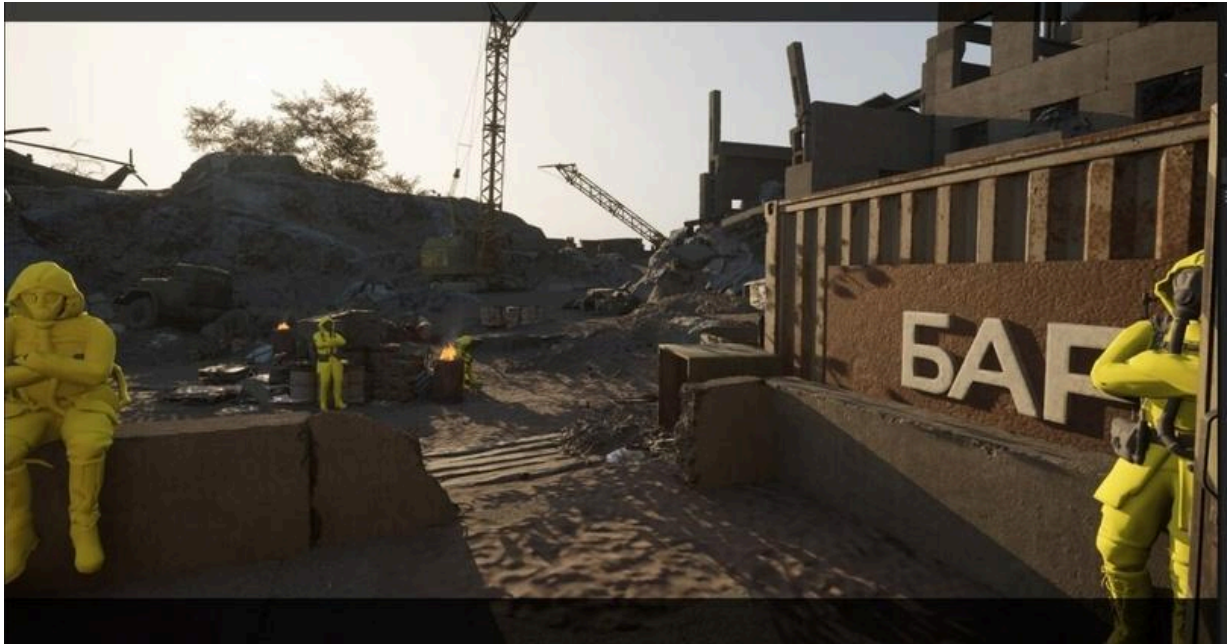
The first time I left was specifically because of my unique approach to work. Honestly, who in the era of big corporations takes on multiple roles at once? The industry isn't built for someone who can do concept art, write narrative, design levels, create mechanics, and then polish everything to perfection. This was something that Yaroslav Kravchenko, the lead writer, helped me realize during one of our late-night discussions—he had more industry experience than I did. The industry wants every role to be filled by a separate, low-paid specialist who sticks to their assigned task and doesn't step out of line.

But I just couldn't accept that kind of system. Being a fan of old-school games from the era of Gothic, the first Warcrafts, and other legendary titles—including S.T.A.L.K.E.R.—I couldn't help but carry over that same creative spirit, that raw rock 'n' roll energy that I had read about in old developer interviews. You don't hear stories like that anymore unless it's from indie studios or industry veterans like Kojima, Neil Druckmann, or Todd Howard. These are the kind of creators I admire—the ones who make you want to push others forward with you. That was my goal.

Unfortunately, after eight months of running into a brick wall of indifference, I lost my connection with management. They understood that I was trying to make things better, but to them, I was moving way too fast. They simply weren't ready for such a flood of ideas and expertise coming from someone they had originally hired for one of the lowest-level positions. And yet, there I was, reshaping half the game world.

It all came down to my official experience, which misled them about my actual skills and knowledge. If anyone says I'm exaggerating or lying, they either weren't there or are lying themselves. Of course, my perspective is subjective—everyone sees things differently, and I always try to account for that. In my opinion, development was heading in a very dangerous direction, and it was painful for me to see any kind of half-baked work or shallow approach to content from certain team members.

Naturally, this started affecting my health. In other words, I burned out. After thinking it over for a while and seeing no real changes in the process, I decided to leave the project. My health mattered more. I walked away believing this was the end of the story—but it wasn't.



Blockouts of initial Slag Heap design

Returning to my hometown of Bryansk, reconnecting with my old friends—who had long missed my talkative face—I finally started to unwind. Of course, I had no intention of quitting the industry. "Great things are ahead!" I kept telling myself for motivation.

Almost immediately, I landed a remote job at Dreamside Interactive, a Moscow-based studio, working on an ambitious and unusual project called OUTSIDE. There, I basically did the same things I had done on S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: level design, level art, narrative, and concept work. And I think I did it quite successfully, though I never found out what ultimately happened to the project. Most likely, it was either canceled or sold to another company—which is a shame because it had real potential. But that's just speculation.

I forgot to mention something very important—something that would play a role later. My departure from S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 had a big impact on many people I worked with, essentially half the company at the time. For some, it was even a shock. And I could understand why. I had always tried to be a source of positivity, motivating people to be creative, not someone who made them feel like giving up. But my departure made some people start questioning things—"if someone like him is leaving, then maybe there really are serious problems"...

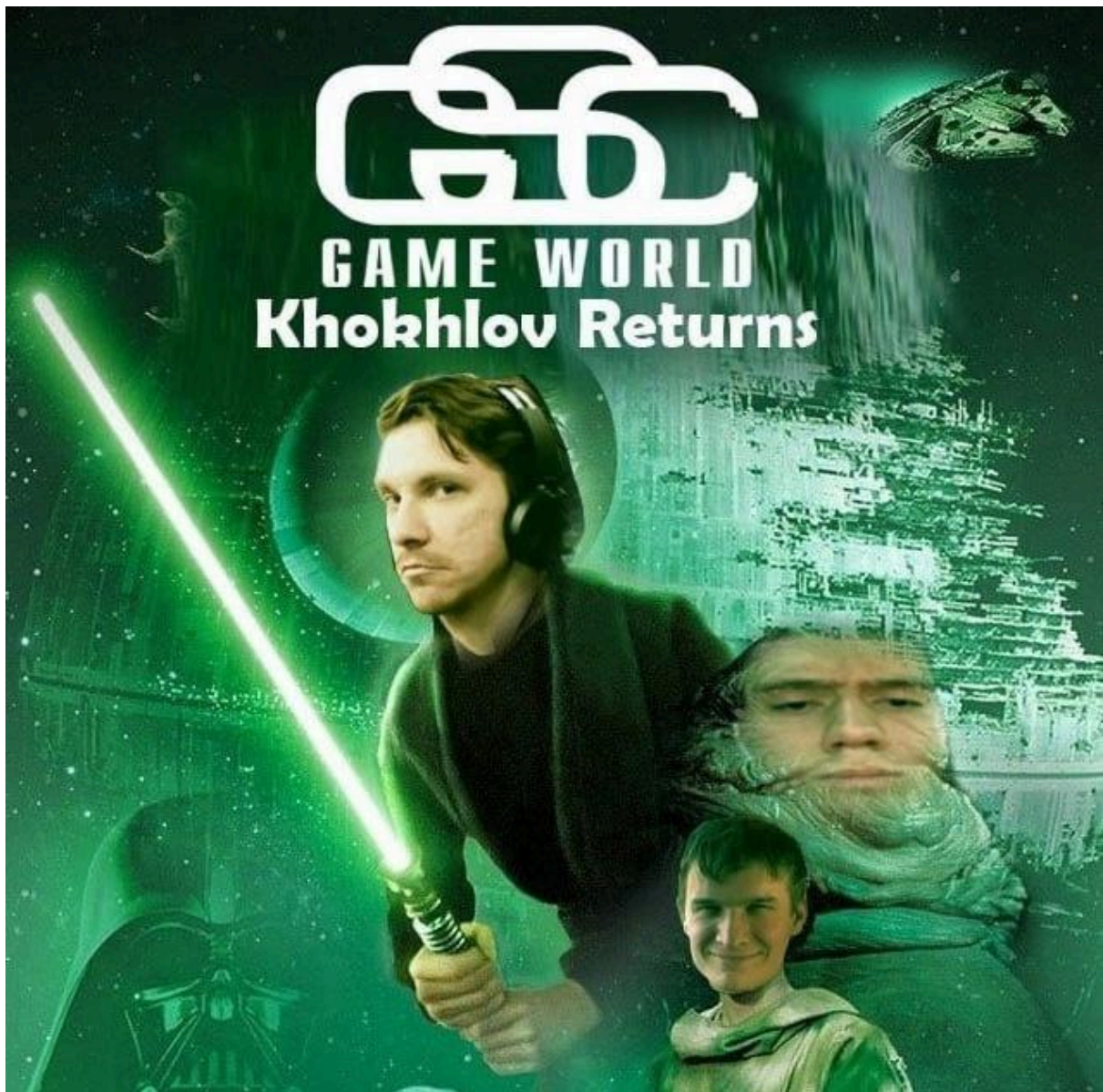
Every conversation I had before leaving was filled with genuine disappointment and sadness. It was almost enough to make me stay... but in the end, I still left, and that decision weighed on me.

After a few months at my new job, I started feeling a strange sense of longing. Despite all the frustrating moments at GSC, we had truly great times together, and most importantly, we were in a state of pure creativity—something I realized I was beginning to miss.

And then, of course, there was the fact that S.T.A.L.K.E.R. was my first major project. "This is S.T.A.L.K.E.R.!" I kept thinking. "How could I walk away from something like this? How could I leave behind all the people I built this world with?". And honestly, those people didn't let me forget about them either. We kept in touch constantly—messaging, calling, sharing updates. It wasn't like I had truly left.

Then, one day, Artyom Nor, who by that point had become the lead level designer, reached out with an idea that sounded completely insane—he suggested I come back. After my departure, that seemed impossible. Many people had left before me, and as far as I knew, no one had ever returned. The company’s attitude was clear—if you leave, you’re gone for good.

But for me, they made an exception. I reached out to the producer, Maria Grigorovich, and we settled all the issues that had been a problem for both of us. Soon after, I received an official invitation—and once again, I was on my way to Kyiv. But this time, everything was different.



“That’s what the guys made when I came back”

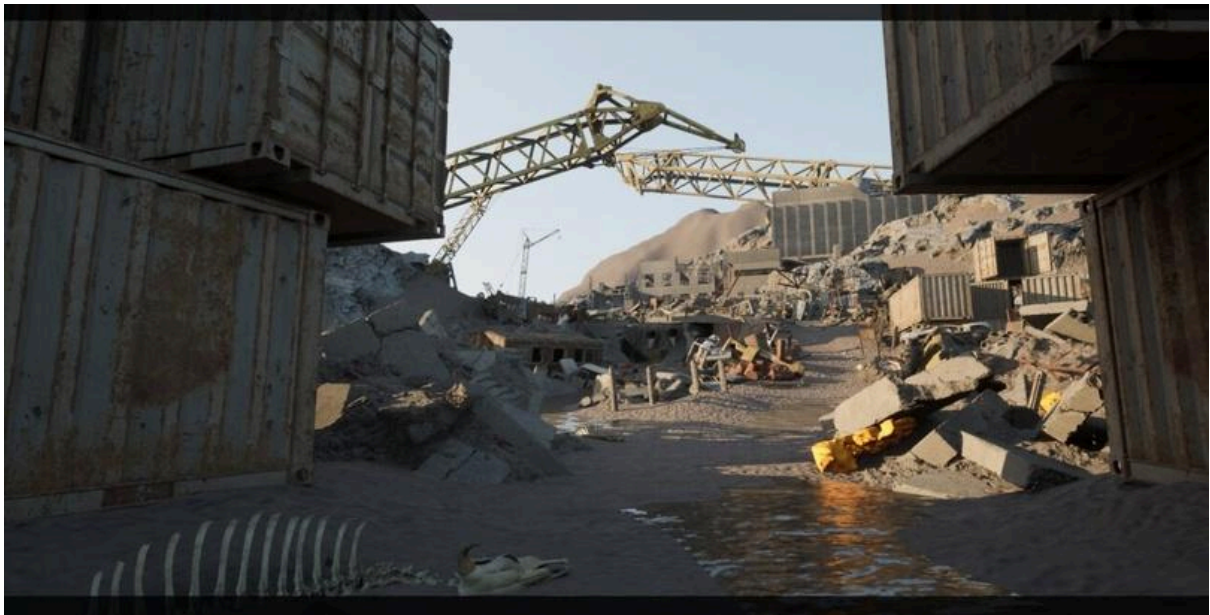
This time, I arrived at the company with a completely different status. The attitude towards me was nothing like it had been during my first stint. By the time I returned, the company had grown nearly three to five times larger. When I first joined, there were only about 30 people. Now, around 60 percent of the team were new faces, yet, for some reason, they knew who I was.

That was a strange feeling for me. But thankfully, I didn't let it go to my head—I had already experienced something similar back in university, and that helped me handle the overwhelming attention. I remember that on my first day back, it took me almost an hour just to reach my workspace. And when I saw the way my old colleagues' eyes lit up, it was hard not to notice. Maybe I was misinterpreting things, but it really felt like my return had inspired some of them. If they did truly know who I was, they likely understood that I wasn't coming back for the money. It meant that I still believed in the project, and that gave people confidence that things were on the right track.

And, for the most part, they were. The project had finally settled onto solid ground and was moving steadily toward release—though, of course, not without its problems. The sheer number of employees was probably the biggest issue on that list.

To be honest, having so many people, even on a large project like this, felt more like a drawback than a benefit. Before the core foundation had even been fully established, the company had begun expanding rapidly, trying to cover the workload with quantity over quality. As a result, the percentage of junior-level employees was so high that you could practically smell the inexperience in the air. But that's just the reality of AAA development nowadays. It's not just about S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2—look at Starfield, Dragon Age, and countless other games that ended up being very different from what people had originally envisioned.

On top of that, in the six months I was gone, most of my previous work had either been lost or reworked because no one understood the massive amount of documentation I had left behind. The materials were all there, but for some reason, people just didn't bother to look at them. Even that, I managed to accept. I reassured myself with one thought—at the very least, I would bring one region to the level of quality I wanted. That region was my first one, Garbage.



I remember going over almost every inch of the region again, unable to understand why so much had been changed. In the end, out of respect for those who worked on it after me, I created a third version—one that incorporated both the old and the new design elements.

Ultimately, that version was cut back to the previous one, based on what I saw in the final release. But that was their decision, and I don't judge them for it.

Did you get to work on the Wild Island?

Yes, I did, but another person was mainly responsible for that region. Like most of the regions, it unfortunately feels like something you just pass through in the final version. The narrative doesn't really help immerse you in the theme of the area. It doesn't feel like there's a distinct difference between entering the Wild Island, the Garbage, or any other location. I can't say for sure, but even when I was still working on the game, it already felt that way to me.

I completely agree. The unique atmosphere of each location, which was so strong in the original trilogy, is rarely felt here. But some individual locations are still interesting. By the way, there are quite a few places in the game that are copied from real Russian places.

A lot, actually. Back then, nobody had a problem with it, and I even pushed for it. One Chernobyl Exclusion Zone alone wasn't enough to cover such a large area. In reality, there aren't that many visually interesting spots in the Zone beyond Prypiat, certain objects near the Chernobyl plant, and Chernobyl itself. For the most part, it's just forests and fields.

I can't help but remember this monument blockout from the design docs. :)



Sculptural Composition LOKOT: Duel with Chaos (Lost)

Yeah, that one's mine, haha. There was no model at the time, but I had to mark the spot somehow, so I just blocked it out using cubes. In the background, you can also see the second version of the Slag Heap, where there was supposed to be a combat encounter—you had to fight your way to the top, where a group of diggers had barricaded themselves in.

Are you talking about the geometry from the leaked build?

No, the build shows the fifth or sixth version of the Slag Heap. Honestly, I got tired of reworking it. The best version, in my opinion, was the one in that screenshot, though some of its ideas made it into the leaked build.

The most interesting part was that under the Slag Heap, there was supposed to be an arch-anomaly where artifact dealers would mine artifacts and sell them on the black market. The player was sent there because of rumors that Nestor had suddenly become rich, and you had to investigate. Through the mines and underground tunnels beneath the Slag Heap, you could even access a new section of Lab X-18 under the factory in Dark Valley, which I specifically designed. But all of that got cut—just like my entire vision for the Garbage.



Krug Antenna Complex with fallen antennas

For my second time at the company, I worked for about five months. During that time, everything went surprisingly smoothly, though this was likely because I had calmed down a bit and there were people I could talk to about various work-related issues. I focused on doing my job and observing the process, occasionally giving advice so that others wouldn't follow the same path to burnout that I had. At the same time, I got to know the new team members and gradually reintroduced them to the old mindset—work hard, but also know how to enjoy your time off.

Who was responsible for the geography of the game world? The continuity with the trilogy seems to have been completely lost.

Oh, that was an eternal, painful question: *"Why change the map so much?"* I must have raised it a hundred times, asking why key locations like the Brain Scorcher, the Swamps, and other areas couldn't remain as they were. But the answer was always something like: *"Dunno, it's a new game."*

Did they frame it with terms like "retcon" or "reimagining"? Or was it just a case of "we're changing it, and that's it"?

No, there was no fancy terminology—just a simple *"because we are."* And when people who actually understood the lore pointed out these issues, they (we), figuratively speaking, were just told to get lost.

What about fan service? There are a lot of references in the final release.

I had no hand in the fan service—that was all added after I left. Personally, I don't like references in games. In my opinion, they break immersion.

Did the team pull anything from old, unused concepts?

(translator's note: the interviewer refers to the 2011 cancelled version of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 that was developed on X-Ray Engine 2.0; lots of its design documentation has been leaked years prior)

Of course. The Perimeter idea came from the original S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 concepts, as did SIRCAA and everything related to it. Some locations were based on minor notes left by past developers, and the same goes for certain mutants. But as for taking an entire old piece and inserting it unchanged—no, that never happened. There were a lot of borrowed elements, though.

Only a handful of people actually maintained documentation. It was common for someone to leave, their work to be handed off to a new employee, and for that person to just start from scratch because they didn't understand anything. That happened with my work too—when I returned to the team the second time, I checked my old regions and was stunned by how much had been changed. Supposedly, there was *no documentation* for them. But there *was* documentation. Devs were very surprised when I showed them that it had existed all along.

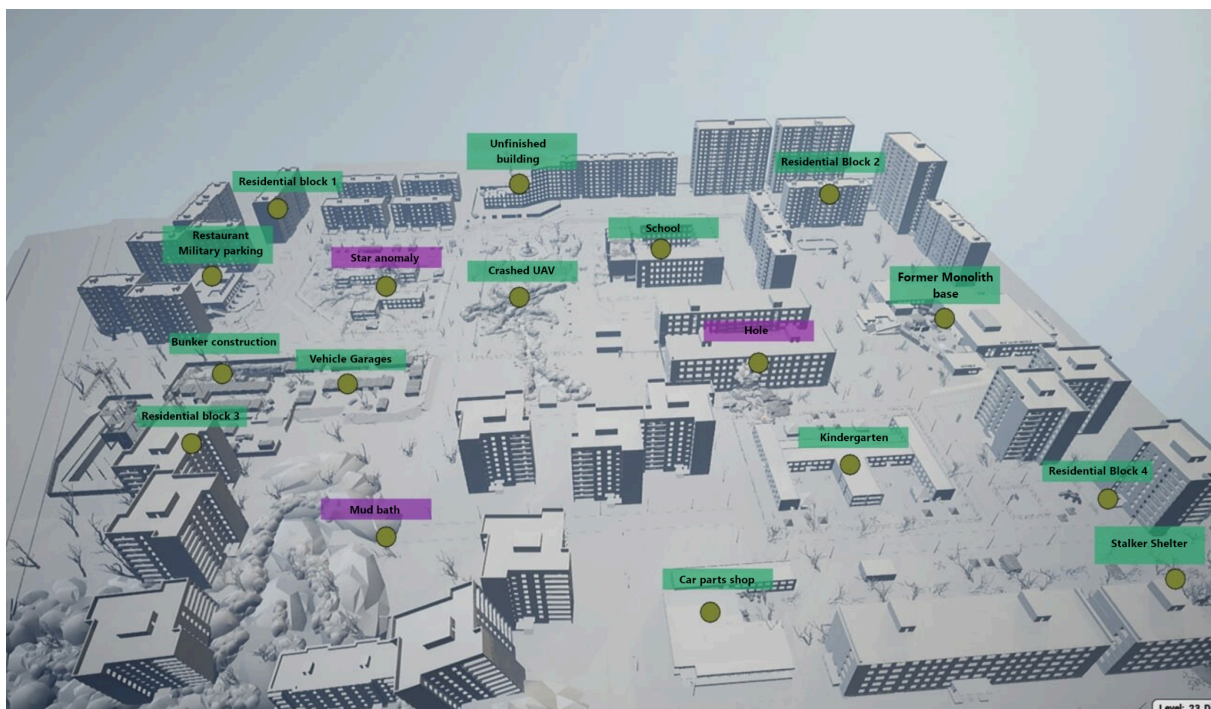
Most of the places I worked on initially came to me as an empty canvas—just a name, nothing more. For example, Burnt Forest was literally an empty field with zero narrative. After I was done with it, there were layers upon layers of ideas, quests, storylines, and details. But whether any of that made it into the final game, I have no idea.

The same thing happened when the engine was changed—entire sets of artwork were lost, so the world had to be redone twice. There was a lot of chaos and reasons why people left.

Did the team often refer to S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki during development?

(translator's note: This refers to the Russian wiki, SW:ZC, which is a highly detailed archive of information regarding the original trilogy and its development history.)

Quite often. You'd be searching for some piece of information that wasn't included in the materials provided by management, and then—boom!—the Wiki had everything you needed.

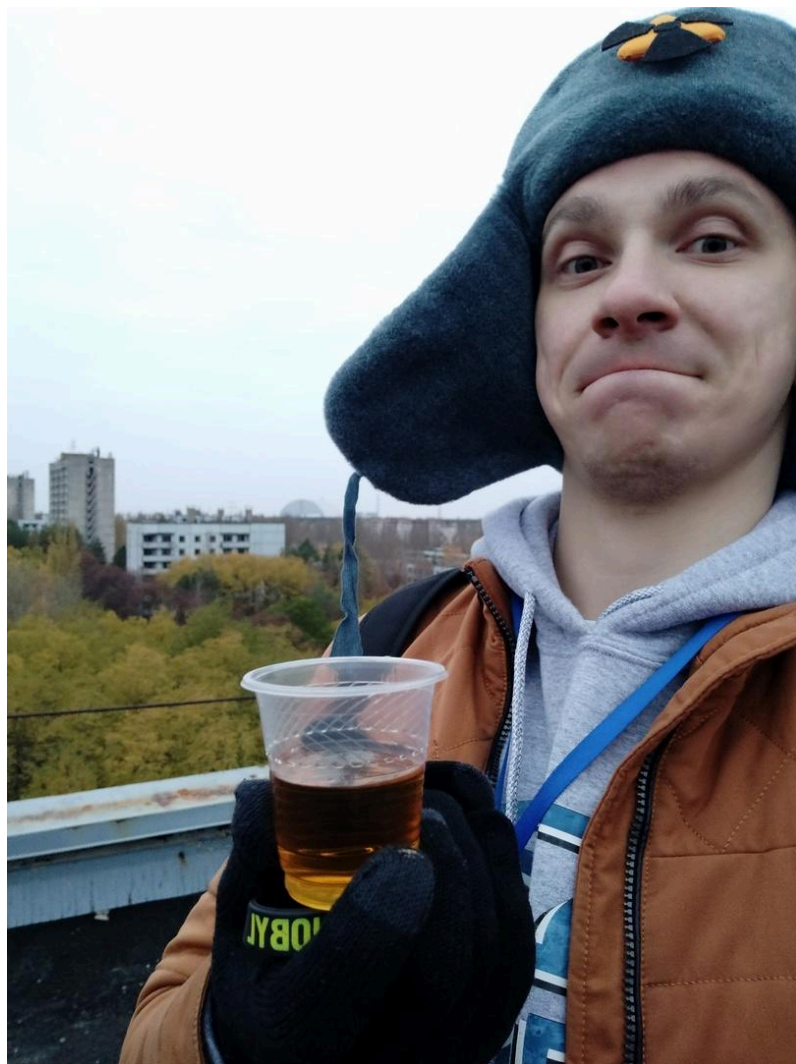


Prypiat blockout

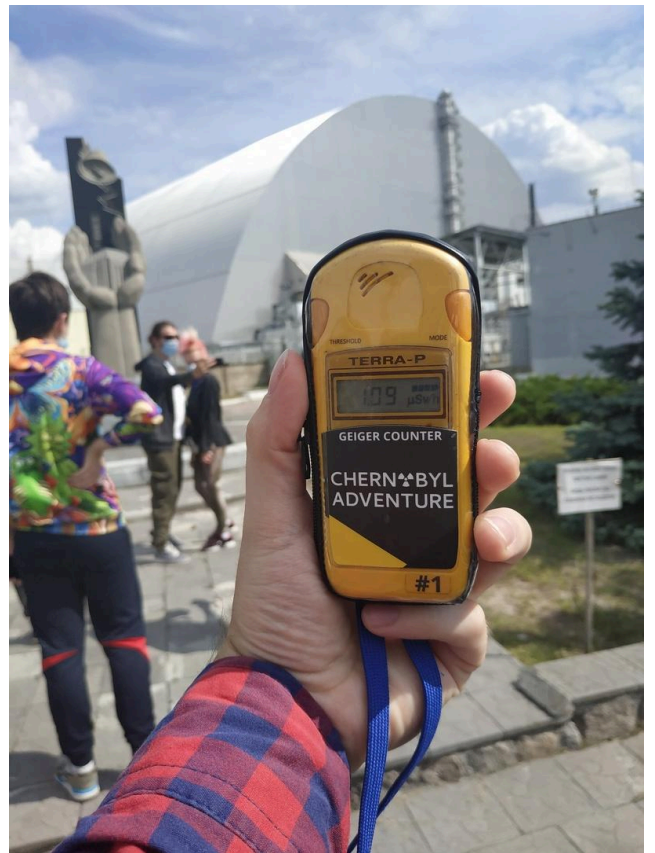
What are your most memorable experiences from working on the game?

The trips to Chernobyl and Prypiat, where we explored every place we could. One of the standout moments was when we climbed to the top of a high-rise, and our guide handed us a shot of cognac to keep us warm (it was already late autumn and quite cold).

Oh, the views... Looking out over a once-thriving Soviet city, where life had once been bustling. Endless abandoned streets, Energetik Square, the grand and haunting Duga radar array, the eerie corridors of former residential buildings, the chilling atmosphere of the hospitals, or venturing through the pitch-black factory halls of Jupiter... And the inside of the cooling towers—just standing there and hearing even the faintest whisper resonate through the space... I don't think I'll ever forget any of it. I will always remember it with warmth.



The drink in question





Or, for example, the endless nights spent at the office, where I soon realized I wasn't the only workaholic. Sometimes, there wasn't a single free couch left, and I had to crash on a punching bag, which was far from comfortable.

Then there were the sudden urgent tasks. It would be 10 PM, I'd be getting ready to head home, and suddenly I'd be told that some higher-ups needed a presentation. The same material I had worked on earlier in the week—except it was supposed to be just a rough reference piece, not something polished for an official showcase. But my conscience and professionalism wouldn't let me hand it over as it was. So instead of going home to sleep, I'd head to the nearest 24-hour store for energy drinks and grind for another two days straight. In the end, it turned into three full days without sleep, which was obviously too much. But it was worth it. I remember that work was later presented to the entire team as an example of the project moving forward. Of course, the final release looked much better—as it should.







Pre-renders of the VFX playground level that was crunched in three days.

Or the internal multiplayer tournament for the original S.T.A.L.K.E.R.. Our team came so close to winning the championship trophy, but in the end, it deservedly went to Yevhen Grygorovych's team. By the way, he's seriously good. And when it comes to Cossacks, I won't even start—he's probably unbeatable in that game.



Photos from the Shadow of Chernobyl multiplayer tournament

Or the time I met Ilya Naishuller, the famous director—but didn't recognize him when he was introduced in the communal kitchen. I just walked right past him. I don't think I've ever been so embarrassed in my life. I even remember someone asking me right then and there, "You've never heard of Naishuller?" And, in front of him, I just shrugged and said, "No idea who that is." Then I casually walked back to my desk, sipping coffee, listening to something in my headphones. Only later did someone tell me that guy standing next to me was actually him. You should have seen my face when I realized it. At a group photoshoot with him later on, I tried to apologize, but it came out all awkward, and I doubt he even remembered the whole incident. By the way, I still have his autograph in the GSC notebook they gave to everyone when they joined the company.



Nimble's looks in Heart of Chornobyl are based on Ilya

Or the endless hours spent in meeting rooms, debating locations and story details. Sometimes, you'd step into a meeting in the morning and not leave until late at night. Time flew by faster than a bullet...

Or the creative evenings with lead writer Yaroslav Kravchenko, who could always help with a creative block—or, on the contrary, get inspired by your work.

Or the trips across the region with the team, whether it was to the Carpathians, Lviv, or another city in those parts.

Or the corporate parties, which were truly epic at this company—not to mention the gifts. In this regard, the company was never stingy. I remember that at one of these events, the first gameplay trailer for the game was presented and published. It felt like you were part of something bigger, something grand. And we thought we were going to "conquer" the gaming world.

But sometimes, you have to wake up... Wake up to the beginning of the events that ultimately changed everything. It was the start of the invasion. I think it's no exaggeration to say that everyone was in shock. Though later, when I was back home, I realized that the signs had been there all along—I had just been so deeply immersed in development that seeing anything beyond that world was incredibly difficult.

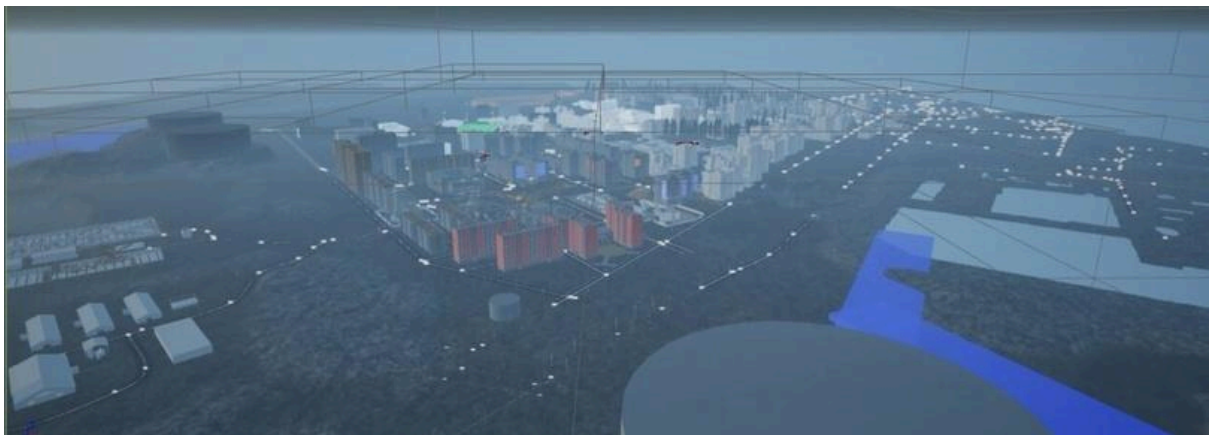
Despite all the negativity that followed the start of these events, during the evacuation, the company's leadership handled the situation in the best possible way: no one was abandoned, everyone was helped to leave the country, and even salaries continued to be paid on schedule.



So, the company relocated... The project was temporarily frozen. And then the question arose—what's next? A choice had to be made. But honestly, it wasn't that difficult of a decision. By that point, a couple of months had passed, giving me time to cool down, think things through, and put everything in perspective. I could step back and observe, watching both my friends and strangers go about their lives. We were still in Budapest at the time.

It turned out that the world I had been living in no longer existed. The people I had worked and bonded with were no longer the same; they had retreated into their own realities, and there was no place left for me in there. Not only because I realized we were now on different paths, but mostly because, in a way, I was no longer invited.

And besides, what kind of sane person would put a project—even a really cool one—above everything else and casually drink beer in Czech Republic while their family and friends are just across the border? Seriously... I guess only the most immoral individuals could do that—and fortunately, I'm not one of them.



Prypiat, view from above

Do I regret leaving GSC? Not at all. I did everything I could. The memories are nice, but that chapter of my life has long been closed. And I don't think the book called Life is anywhere near its final page.

So even though I wasn't given credit in the game's final version—a bit of a bitter pill to swallow—it doesn't diminish my contribution. However, the game that was ultimately released is **not the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. I worked on**. I believe its true potential will only unfold over the next few years through updates, DLCs, and, of course, mods, as strange as it may sound. But that's exactly what happened with the original S.T.A.L.K.E.R. games. So maybe I'm wrong. Maybe no game today is safe from criticism. I finally understand why some actors never watch their own films or why

many developers rarely play games. That said, a lot of people in my current circle really enjoyed the game—they played it from start to finish.

One more thing I'd like to add. I think it's clear that the first half of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2's development was pure creativity—and management made an effort to support that, keeping people inspired and avoiding burnout.

But the moral of the story isn't about me—whether I had a good or bad time working there. It's about being careful when choosing projects, being mindful of the people you get close to, and making sure you step outside the project's world from time to time. Because at the end of the day, we don't live in a fictional world. And that's something worth remembering.

What Was Your Career Path in Game Development After GSC?

After leaving GSC, I worked for about 2.5 years at Reaction Games on a mobile action-survival RPG called Dead Impact. I also contributed a bit to Days After, their previous project. Dead Impact was eventually released, and from what I've seen, people seem to like it. My role there was essentially the same as in S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and OUTSIDE—level design, level art, narrative, and concept work.

Even though I worked remotely, I became really close with the team. There were corporate events, trips to the St. Petersburg office, and plenty of shared experiences. I'm no longer with them, but those people will always remain part of my good memories. During that time, I was also involved in volunteering and spent time traveling across Russia.



Cooling Towers - Anomalous Vine

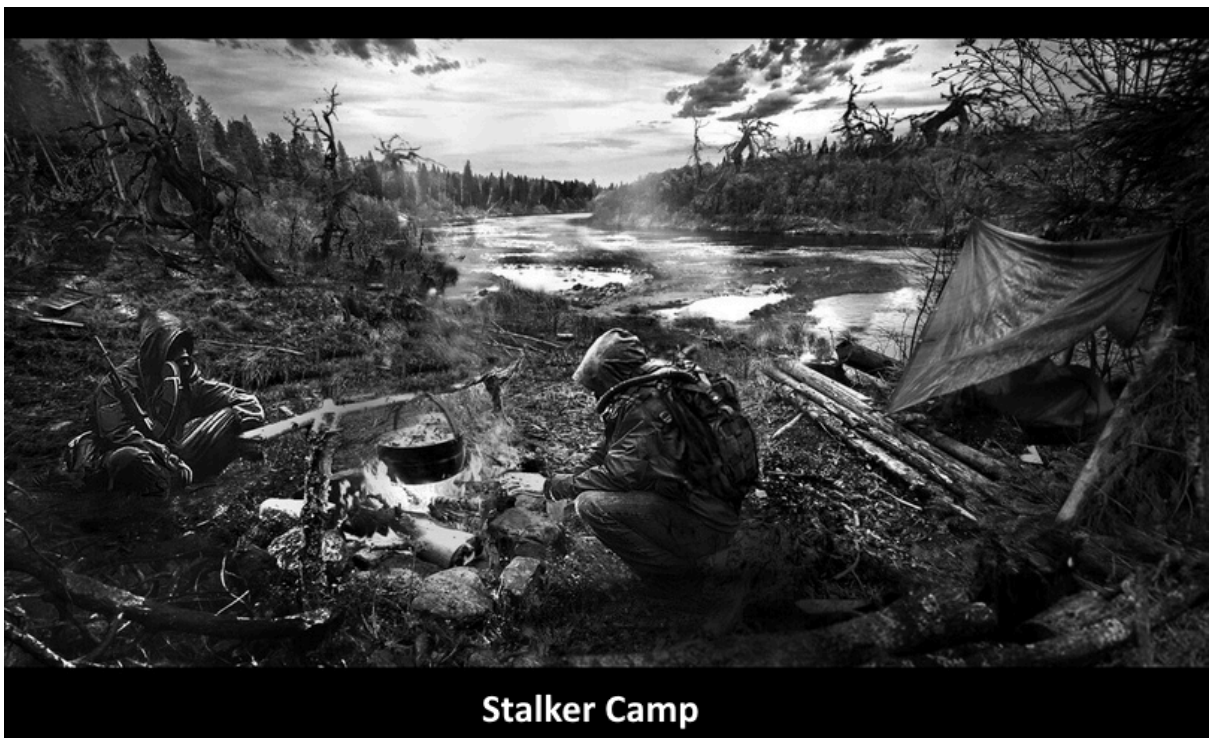
And finally, as a "one-man band," what advice would you give to newcomers trying to develop a game in a small team of 1-3 people?

If your goal is to make money, then strict planning, competitor analysis, and a clear vision of the final product are essential.

If your goal is purely creative, forget about everything else and make what you want, while keeping an eye on modern trends and successful design choices in new games.

You can't please everyone. Dedicating your life to a project you don't enjoy or that doesn't align with your vision, just because anime-style games are trending right now, isn't worth it. Even if the project never gets finished, if you spent that time pushing yourself to the limit, the experience will definitely help in your future work.

And most importantly, don't let yourself drift aimlessly. Stay sharp and never switch off your creative instincts, because originality wears down quickly when you're too comfortable, just working from paycheck to paycheck.



Stalker Camp