

While there is much scholarly literature on stereotypes in popular culture, and Eastern European stereotypes in particular, the field of video games as another inflection of popular attitudes to Eastern Europeans remains largely unstudied.<sup>1</sup> While it is generally acknowledged that racial stereotypes pervade games as much as they do popular cinema, portrayals of Eastern Europeans as a distinct 'ethnic' group have remained largely unexamined. By looking at a number of video games released internationally over the last decade, we can see distinct trends in representation which are just as fundamentally wrong as those presented in some travel writings, or popular films.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a number of as-yet-unreleased games also perpetuate the negative view of Eastern Europeans, indicating that these tropes of Eastern Europe are still present in the public consciousness.

It is surprising that over the last 10 years or so there has been little change in the representations of Eastern Europeans that are present in video games. In *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, published by Westwood Studios in 1996, Russian aggression is a major theme.<sup>3</sup> The story of the game involves the capture of Hitler by a time-traveling Albert Einstein. In doing so the main 'balance' to Soviet power is removed. This paves the way for Russia to make a wide-scale invasion of Western Europe. In doing so, the developers of this game have switched Russia with Germany, and all the negative associations of WWII Germany that go with it. In doing so they make a number of assertions about Russia and Eastern Europe in general. They involve Russian aggression - without a strong power in West Europe to balance it, it increases in power until Stalin invades Europe. The images that are used in the game to communicate this concept are very evocative - a trickle, then a flood of blood red from Russia flows over Europe.

This theme of aggressive, unstable Russia is continued until the present day, where it is used not only within games but in publicity for them. The trailer for *Team Fortress 2* features the Heavy

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1 M.Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, NY, 1997

2 R Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1994, and *Borat*, Larry Charles (Dir.), 2006, are two examples.

3 *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, Electronic Arts, 1996

Weapons Guy.<sup>4</sup> This character possesses a thick Russian accent and appears to conform to the overly muscled, "Schwarzenegger" style of male representation. The character then proceeds to describe the qualities his weapon possesses with obvious pleasure. After this, we are shown a clip of the character engaging in combat and laughing maniacally.

While the clip is not a complex one, there are very many tropes encoded into it. Firstly, the character's accent is very thick. When combined with the character's choice of diction the audience is positioned so that we believe that the character is somehow impaired in their mental function. Speculatively, this may be the result of the (predominantly) Western-speaking audience of the game equating the ability to speak English fluently with intelligence. This is also reinforced when the character makes the comment, "Some people think they can out smart me... Maybe." The core implication of all these things is that Russians, and by extension Eastern Europeans in general, are mentally inferior to everybody else. The character design also implies that the individual is not intelligent and is useful only in the capacity of a combatant.

The body language of the character is also intended to present a stereotype; his manner when talking about his gun is almost manic, he laughs for no apparent reason, and in the game-play footage he mows down his foes whilst laughing and yelling, "Waaaaah, Waaaaah, [crying noises] Cry some more!". In having the character behave this way the producers of the trailer are making statements about both the character, and the sort of player who should control such a character, but by having the character speak with a Russian accent these implications are also transferred to all Russians: crazy, mentally unstable individuals. This mode of representation for Russians and other Eastern Europeans generally is not unique to this game; amongst others, the other games viewed as case studies in this work also contribute to the discourse which presents Eastern Europeans as fulfilling these tropes.

This is compounded by the reaction the character has when he thinks someone has touched Sasha

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<sup>4</sup> Meet the Heavy, Valve Corporation, 2007

(his gun). The implication of the character naming his weapons is twofold- firstly, he shares the attachment to weaponry stereotypically attributed to Eastern Europeans, and secondly that he is crazy and mentally unstable enough to equate his weapon with a real person. His bellows of "WHO TOUCHED MY GUN!" also add to the impression that this individual, and the group of people he represents, are needlessly violent and overly emotional, responding almost animalistically to any perceived threat.

Half-Life 2, another first-person perspective game, also makes use of stereotypes of Eastern Europe, albeit in a much more subtle manner at times.<sup>5</sup> Set in the near future, Half-Life 2 links themes of decay, human corruption, weakness and decline with an environment strongly suggestive of Eastern Europe. Through a combination of graphical references to Eastern Europe, the game communicates these assertions in a much more subtle manner than the overt stereotyping used in the Team Fortress clip. While never explicitly stating that the game is set in an Eastern European city, there are a number of links which indicate that this is the case. They include a striking similarity between the Combine Nexus (headquarters for the alien Combine Occupation) and the Serbian Parliament.



*Illustration 1: Serbian Parliament*



*Illustration 2: Combine Nexus*

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<sup>5</sup> Half-Life 2, Valve Corporation, 2004

Frequent signage uses the Cyrillic alphabet, and features a modified version of the CCCP logo associated with the USSR; additionally copies of Bulgarian Communist newspapers and signs advertising "Cafe Baltic" are very prominent throughout the earlier levels. In fact, the city in which most of the action takes place is referred to as 'City 17', which is a direct (and when compared to most of the other references this game makes, obvious) reference to the Soviet policy of numbering closed cities rather than naming them. The effect of all these references, when combined with images of urban decay and human decline incorporated into the setting, is to insinuate that Russia and other Eastern European countries are subject to the same conditions as City 17 in the game: Russian cities must be full of corrupt police, broken and abandoned vehicles; they must be full of mutated life-forms and have a repressed population that are underdeveloped and in stark contrast to the sleek, highly developed Combine.

As the game progresses and we move further away from the influence of the Combine, the stereotyping of the Eastern European landscape becomes more overt. We arrive in an abandoned mining town; the landscape as bleak as Transylvania ever was; crows and bodies abound. The sole survivor of this town which has been subjected to the Combine's biological warfare is Father Gregori, an Orthodox priest who speaks with a typical Russian/Balkan accent. As the player moves through the town, full of its inhabitants who have been corrupted by the Combine (a reference to the 'devious Russian' corrupted by his Communist overlords) , Father Gregori provides the player with arms and ammunition, pointing out the traps his 'devious Balkan mind' has laid, and quoting scriptures at a number of points throughout the level. In the figure of Father Gregori we see personified a plethora of tropes regarding Eastern Europeans, many articulated most notably in recent times by Robert Kaplan in *Balkan Ghosts*.<sup>6</sup>

Father Gregori, like the Heavy from *Team Fortress 2*, is presented as deranged, and attached to his weapon and the violence emanating forth from it. Furthermore he is presented as superstitious, a

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<sup>6</sup> R Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1994, pg 6

clever trickster who makes traps for zombies in his spare time, a man who now devotes himself to 'killing' the husks of those he once called his congregation in a process he refers to as 'tending his flock'. Like the Heavy, he possesses a thick eastern European accent but by speaking much quicker, presents an image of a much more intelligent individual. This is a dichotomy in stereotypes of Eastern Europeans - most males either fall into the categories of deranged, bluff, violent 'beef-cake' in the style of Arnold Schwarzenegger, or deranged, paranoid, devious and intelligent manipulator who uses other things to accomplish his goals, no matter how violent the result. Gregori's twisted religious references combined with his other features place him squarely in the second category. Another game which features an Eastern European who possesses the qualities of this stereotype is Max Payne 2.<sup>7</sup> This individual, whose name is Vladimir (as common in Eastern Europe as Gregori) initially plays the role of informant for the main protagonist. In the video which introduces him, Vlad is pinned down by armed mob members in his restaurant (named Vodka as all good Russian restaurants are). While he is at bay, Vlad bluffs and blusters at his enemies, putting on a brave show despite being wounded in one arm and running low on ammunition. However, he repeatedly calls out to Max (the agent/protagonist controlled by the player) for help. In this, Vlad can be seen as a representation of the USSR which contains aspects of the first stereotype - he is attempting to put the best face on his situation, while actually slowly weakening. This represents an inflection of a stereotype which had earlier been used to depict the Ottoman Turks in the Balkans - that of the Sick Man of Europe. The personification of Russia weakens, but hides this fact; he requires the personification of America to rescue him. This is similar to the way the original Sick Man of Europe was used to justify Great Power intervention in Turkish territories in the Balkans. This can be seen as popular sentiment viewing American capitalism as the savior of Russia from the weakness of Communism.

However, over the course of the game it is revealed that Vlad has been tricking and manipulating

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<sup>7</sup> Max Payne 2, Rockstar Games, 2003

Max all along. As the player assumes the role of Max throughout the game, the betrayal takes on a personal note. This means that the player is much more likely to make the correlation between Vlad's Russian nationality and his criminality, his violent nature and his devious, deceitful behavior. This correlation is further enhanced by Vlad's friend, 'Mike the cowboy'. Mike is also Russian, speaking with a stereotypical accent as Vlad does. He also initially assists the player before turning on him later on in the game. The trope asserting that Russians live in the past is also represented here by Mike's anachronistic appellation of 'cowboy'. By giving him this nickname the player is positioned such that Mike is framed as being in the past rather than the present.

Vlad also makes reference to stereotypes portraying Eastern Europe as torn by never-ending war between relatives and friends caught up in 'ancient ethnic hatreds' - at one point he makes the comment that Max and he are 'like brothers caught up on opposite sides of a civil war'. This continuing reference to violence and warfare certainly does nothing to dispel the myth of constant Eastern European turmoil.

Through the use of in-game televisions and Max's hallucinations involving Vlad, the developers of Max Payne also further hint at the deranged, crazy nature of Vlad and by extension all Russians. The 'show' "Address Unknown" is based strongly around themes of hidden enemies, psychotic killers and twisted people. The television show is a commentary on the treachery of Vlad and how he is actually Max's enemy. By extension this game can be interpreted as presenting Russia the nation as a hidden enemy of the United States.

In strong contrast to both Max Payne and Team Fortress (and to a lesser extent Half-life 2), S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadows of Chernobyl, rather than referencing a Russian or Eastern European character and extending statements about those individuals to generalisations about Eastern Europe and its inhabitants, directly links stereotypes about Eastern Europe to its location.<sup>8</sup> As the name of the game implies, it is situated in the area surrounding Chernobyl, the site of a nuclear accident in

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<sup>8</sup> S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadows of Chernobyl, GSC Game Publishing, 2007

the mid 1980s. By accurately modeling Chernobyl and its surrounds (the game developers based the setting on footage and photos taken of the area), and combining this with accurate physics and graphics, the player is encouraged to suspend their disbelief which makes them subsequently vulnerable to the implications presented by the game.

The player in this game is a 'stalker' who hunts mutants in the 'zone' near Chernobyl. Straightaway two stereotypes about Eastern Europe are being referenced here. Firstly, 'stalker' has a primeval, animalistic connotation, implying that people in Eastern Europe are primitive animals; the very presence of mutants in a game so rooted in a real physical location cannot help but contribute to a perception that the people who live in that area are 'not quite right'. Furthermore this implies that deviancy is rife within Russia and Eastern Europe generally. As a consequence, by setting the game in a region left 'barren and distorted' by the disaster at Chernobyl we have a rather patronizing stereotype of Eastern Europeans being presented: one that asserts Eastern Europeans are unable to handle advanced technologies, they lack the intelligence and the resources to properly utilise the tools of civilisation such as nuclear energy, and when they attempt to imitate the West by implementing such technologies, disaster occurs. This disaster results in the land becoming barren, reflecting the nature of the people who live there; this form of stereotype was most notably used by Robert Kaplan in his book *Balkan Ghosts*, for example where he says:

*Snow beat upon the window. Black lignite fumes rose from brick and scrap-iron chimneys. The earth here had the harsh, exhausted face of a prostitute, cursing bitterly between coughs.*<sup>9</sup>

The strong imagery in the game of decay and corruption further reinforces this stereotype, and also exaggerates Western perceptions of the effects of the Chernobyl incident; in some ways this game could be seen as implying that Russia generally is a bleak and barren wasteland, devoid of resources.

Games continue to be developed that contain similar assertions to S.T.A.L.K.E.R; Sadness, an

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<sup>9</sup> R Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1994, p.16

upcoming release intended for the Nintendo Wii console, links narcolepsy, nyctophobia and paranoid schizophrenia with an undefined Slavic country, in the information the developers have released as *publicity* information.<sup>10</sup> This is an explicit indication of how game developers are aware of the stereotypes surrounding Eastern Europe and deliberately situate games there to create a mood based on these stereotypes, the net effect of which is the reinforcement of those stereotypes. The very fact that the developers called the game *Sadness* and linked it to Slavic countries, is also highly indicative of how pervasive these negative stereotypes of Eastern European countries are. One of the main characters is narcoleptic, and werewolves are said to be involved in the storyline as well; this reiterates the stereotype of Slavic deviancy that is common to many games which refer to Eastern Europe.

In many respects the representation of Eastern Europe in video games can be seen as more damaging than those presented in film; video games inherit much of their conventions and stereotypes from film, but enhance those tropes by positioning the audience so they take part in actions that reinforce those stereotypes. In doing so they help to make these assertions more believable for the audience by encouraging the suspense of disbelief. Current trends in the representation of Eastern Europe in video games are almost wholly negative in their nature; in many regards, for a new generation of Westerners who rely upon the media they consume for their definition of Eastern Europe, the representation they receive through these interactive channels is their main source of information. In order to reject or reverse "Balkanisation" as Todorova calls it, or its more general Eastern European inflection, it is important that newer, less traditional media forms are subjected to more scrutiny than is the present situation.<sup>11</sup> Until this is the case, gender and

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10 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadness\\_%28video\\_game%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadness_%28video_game%29) Accessed 30/05/07 Whilst not considered reliable enough for conventional essays, Wikipedia was the only location to collate all the information currently available on this as-yet-unreleased game and as such is referenced here. Regardless of the accuracy of the information on the Wikipedia page, the mere fact that gamers and others have accepted the apparent themes of the game without question is indicative of how pervasive these negative stereotypes are within games – they are not challenged and do not seem to excite comment.

11 M.Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, NY, 1997, pg 3

nationalistic stereotypes which distort our perspective of Eastern Europe will continue to exist regardless of how we insist upon realistic representation in film and literature.

*Borat*, Larry Charles (Dir.), 2006

*Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, Electronic Arts, 1996

*Half-Life 2*, Valve Corporation, 2004

Kaplan, R. *Balkan Ghosts*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1994, p.16

*Max Payne 2*, Rockstar Games, 2003

*Meet the Heavy*, Valve Corporation, 2007

*Sadness (Video Game)*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadness\\_%28video\\_game%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadness_%28video_game%29) Accessed 30/05/07

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