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Metro 2033: Cracks in Adaptation

Metro 2033 by Dmitry Glukhovsky follows the adventures of Artyom throughout the metro-turned-bomb-shelter of Moscow. His narrative takes him around various stations, each with their own way of life and micro cultures. It's structured similarly to *Dante's Inferno* – the importance is placed on what he sees, not how he fights it. *Metro 2033*, the first person shooter developed by 4A Games, adapts Glukhovsky's story. However, Artyom, now a mostly silent protagonist, uses his trigger finger much more often. While he visits the same stations and hits the same narrative points, the game doesn't take time for extend philosophical tangents through darkened tunnels. Rather, it emphasizes the difficulty of surviving in post-apocalyptic Moscow, forcing the player to experience the challenges the book presented. The game never apologizes for the tonal change, rather embracing its more action driven retelling. This attitude highlights a difficulty in adapting literature into games – the practical requirement for visual and interactive conflict forces narrative abstraction when moving from literature.

Games, at their core, offer a challenge to the player. Whether that's through peaceful puzzles or things to interact with, every game brings some form of test. Literature also does, but in a different manner. Written works, instead of being dexterity or reflex based, push the reader into looking at the world differently. As such, books have the luxury of being able to hold specific moments as long as needed – describing

every contour of a tunnel isn't wasted effort. In addition, long philosophical musings are not out of place in novels. *Metro 2033*, the book, embraces that fact. Despite being in a hostile world, where paranoia and danger lies on every corner, Artyom rarely engages in violence. Rather, he has continued discussions with his rotating cast of companions over themes of fate, humanity, time, and religion. The story is balanced with an immense sense of dread and tension, even in spite of limited engagements. Artyom's struggle at each step becomes whether to take the next.

Games don't have this same luxury. Conventional design relies on combat, and high budgets demand conventional theory. In the novel, Artyom fires at his fellow man once, about halfway through the story when crossing into fascist territory (182). To cross into the same station in the game, Artyom has to move through and kill both sides of a Soviet-Fascist battle, and has already engaged with dozens of bandits in the previous hours. The struggles faced by the player aren't whether or not the noises from a pipe will kill them – it's the moments when the magazine runs dry or the gas mask breaks. Instead of focusing on the philosophy of human life and fate, 4A Game's production highlights the extreme challenges of life in the book's metro. The reliance on bullets as currency gets turned into a major focus, as opposed to a brief muse on the value of human life (98). Time, which got distilled into an abstract idea in the novel, becomes a crux of surviving in the game's hostile environments, specifically with the need to replace filters or suffocate. 4A used combat to elicit the same feelings of fragility and tension, while providing an experience beyond walking in darkness for the player.

One prominent example is in the differing versions of Bourbon. In the books, this roguish companion lasts for about twenty pages. In the game, he's around for a few hours, and guides the player through many of the opening tutorials. Both display him as an untrustworthy criminal, experienced in moving through the tunnels. However, his presence in the books just shows how dangerous the tunnels are – his death, turning to Artyom and saying "I've died," is a random, uncontrollable act (101). It's shocking, and shows the strangeness and danger of the tunnels, but Bourbon doesn't matter, and it's hard to feel emotional after so little characterization and even fewer pages.

Conversely, the game has the mercenary guide take you beyond the comfort of the stations. Through Bourbon, the game explains stealth, ammo conservation, and scavenging. It even goes so far as to introduce surviving outside the metro – Bourbon takes Artyom to the surface to evade capture in Hansa (Figure 1). While Bourbon still has a moment of mental breakdown, his levels focus on grounding the player in an established world. Glukhovsky use few instances of surface travel, but 4A rely on it to push the ideas of survivability. Through Bourbon's experience, the player learns about swapping gas masks, evading traps, managing filters, and searching for stalker caches. Bourbon's character gets definition through these interactions – a sarcastic jerk experienced both in making deals and running from any overwhelming threat. Bourbon is well equipped (with a polished Kalashnikov instead of a cobbled together machine gun), has more connections, and just knows the metro better than the inexperienced Artyom. His death from a deal gone bad becomes more impactful simply due to time spent with him and his berating background chatter. While the book uses Bourbon to

show the dangers of the metro, the game uses him to define how to survive it, and as such his connection to the player seems greater than that to the reader.

Another companion, Khan, showcases a different text-to-game translation. Khan's interactions highlight the game's stance on the philosophy of *Metro 2033*. While Khan remains an odd mystic type character, as in the book, his levels are defined by combat. With a brief nod to the "singing pipes" of the novel, the player engages in trails by fire against hordes of mutants. The musings on the fluid nature of time can't occur, due to the presence of Artyom's watch, with included filtration timer. Ghosts makes a brief appearance, but never were present in the book, and seem out of place in the realistic, mechanical metro of the game (Figure 2). In the level where Khan and Artyom diverge, enemies continuously spawn as the player reaches the goal. While it invokes the feelings of dread and a war of attrition between humans and the beasts of the metro, it doesn't create an atmosphere for musings on fate around a campfire (Figure 3). Since Khan doesn't save Artyom too often in the game, his recurring influence and return feel less important due to his interactions with the player being very short lived (Figure 4). Khan's levels push the survival horror aspect of *Metro 2033*, with the limited resupply opportunities, frequent monsters, and cramped poorly-lit settings. They're the closest thematically to the tone of the book, but feel like a separate beast in the game. Whereas 4A's *Metro* let the grizzled survivor Bourbon shine, it dulls Khan's spiritual impact.

Comparing the book's characterization to the game's counterpart serves to highlight the philosophies behind each version of *Metro 2033*. The game, with its combat focus, invites the player to identify with Bourbon and experienced stalker Miller.

4A makes both of these characters friendlier, and more willing to aid the player in the story. They become human because their struggle mirrors the viewer's – surviving in an unfair world. Khan, conversely, becomes more alien to the player. He's evidently a good guide, but his spiritual nature seems disconnected from the presentation. He enters and leaves in only a few levels, and his lessons, like dealing with ghosts, don't recur throughout the game's story. He's unique, but simultaneously more difficult to relate to. The book moves opposite – Khan's musings are vital to Artyom's thoughts and motivation, and his actions keep Artyom alive. Bourbon's bravado leads to an early death, memorable in its strangeness, but so random as to make his character forgettable. Miller, called Melnik in the novel, becomes a gruff, unwilling guide who berates Artyom's lack of ability or military attitude. Ultimately, book Artyom instantly regrets his violent actions upon nuking the dark ones, recalling Khan's teachings as he understands he destroyed something wonderful (458). Artyom in the game just wonders if his actions were negative, unsure but not unashamed of his use of force (Figure 5). Both experiences, in sharing a narrative, invite the reader to explore the world and its inhabitants, they just do so with different lenses.

The book and game also handle trips to the surface very differently. In the novel, Artyom's limited trips showcase how humanity no longer belongs on the surface. He gets chased, encounters creatures he can't understand, and always risks running out of supplies. He can't hope to survive for long, and if he did the rising sun's light would blind him. Even his attempts to sneak around lead in detection from the superior senses of the librarians, watchers and demons on the surface. For the denizens of the metro, only a select few have the skills to survive on the surface, and they always need

to work together. Philosophy takes a backseat, since the ruminating on fate can wait until Artyom's no longer pursued by a horde of hungry mutants. However, shooting is still a danger due to the noises attracting nonhuman hunters. Rather than showcase humanity's survival nature, the book continues to emphasize how mankind has been left to live in the tunnels, with no exit in sight.

The game is much freer with its usage of the outside world. Consistently, Artyom finds himself with a gas mask on and filter timer counting down. Blinding sunlight becomes a non-issue, as the player is outside more often at day than in the night with no negative side effects. However, the fallout fauna remain true to the books. "Watchers" will call ambushes on unaware players, and demons and librarians come charging when guns start firing. Once on the surface, the player must manage ever decreasing supplies, and take care not to damage their gas mask. Cracked masks hinder vision and eventually break, with replacements being hard to find. Ammo becomes more scattered and dangerous to recover, as Artyom must navigate to where previous explorers died to replenish his equipment (Figure 6). The struggle to survive is emphasized above all else. While the player is never safe on the surface, they can become so skilled as to not fear open air adventures, mimicking the adventures stalkers of the novel.

Like in the books, the outside escapades also become a chance to find needed supplies. Recovering weapons and finding ammo caches greatly increase a player's options, but losing focus on the main task can mean being stranded without filters. Each player has to find a comfortable balance for them between looming mortality and extra cartridges. These surface levels are where the game's combat focus shines – it

lines up perfectly with the themes of survivability, risk, and adaptation emphasized in both versions. While the outside levels don't fit the novel's philosophy-focused nature, the frequent excursions of the game embrace the interactivity of the medium. By pushing the player to tell their own story, whether it's grabbing a dead man's shotgun as a demon closes in or sneaking through an enemy camp while wheezing out of a heavily cracked mask, it grabs the user regardless of supporting narrative context. It encourages people to fall into Artyom's muted view and experience having to survive against all odds. There's limited musings and even dialogue – the focus is on the simple question of whether or not Artyom lives.

However, that isn't to say the game removes all the philosophy that makes Glukhovsky's work interesting. Before each level, a brief paragraph or two gets read by Artyom, and there are notes to be found in most levels that give insight into his character (Figure 7). However, both elements are easily skippable without losing the story, since companions communicate important points during levels. Most of the notes focus on exploring the metro's history, going into detail on each station, or giving a little extra on encountered characters. For example, the Front Line notes explain where the neo-communists came from, and why they're a problem, but could be completely ignored with nothing lost in the overall story (Figure 8, Figure 9). Rarely do they explore the broader ideas of the novel, but occasionally, like Note 4 in the Defense level, they call back to the book's ideas like bullets as currency being a metaphor for the value of human life (Figure 10). As the game nears its end these entries become more introspective, but still are a far cry from the cerebral sequences of the book. Instead, it feels like optional flavor text. An interesting bit for sure, but nothing required for the

tone of the game. It's a reminder of the work's pedigree more so than a component of the game's narrative.

Beyond Artyom's musings, there are entire sequences the game moves past (or adds) to fit its combative nature. One of the more prominent ones is the encounter in Polyanka. In the novel, this sequence follows Artyom's "escape" from the Jehovah's Witnesses (also absent in the game) as he stumbles across two men huddled around a campfire. What follows is a discussion on the nature of stories, plots, and the very idea of constructed narratives breaking the rules of observable reality (247-257). It's a very cerebral section, as the three characters discuss the nature fate and Artyom's goal. Character wise it provides the motivation to push Artyom forward, pays off Khan's willing guidance of the main character, and lays the groundwork for Artyom being the Dark One's ill-chosen Christ figure.

And it's completely skipped in the game. Few sequences in 4A's production take control away from the player, and even less lock them into an extend dialogue, which is the crux of Polyanka's interaction. Rather, the developers chose to remove those moments – other examples being incarceration by the fascists, the Giant Worm cannibals, and the companion duo Mikhail and Vanechka. Those side stories and tangents get abstracted into pre-level monologues or singular cutscenes. The game uses repeated Dark One related visions to push the player forward, whether through fear or a sense of duty (Figure 11). More importantly, the player never relies on others for motivation, just the means to progress. The player decides Artyom's morality through their experience (like donating to beggars or engaging in firefights), and determines his ethical standing. The game also respects the source by not turning

sequences like a Jehovah's Witnesses' service into a shootout. It adds violence and interactions, but they remain consistent with the adapted story. By doing so, the overall narrative of saving VDNKh (Exhibition in the game) from the Dark Ones and the themes of survival, human adaptability, isolation, and a fear of the unknown are preserved.

Many reviewers and analyses of the game reflect positively on the game. It's praised for its world building, visual design, and presenting a noteworthy experience. The game primarily received praise for conveying the desire to survive, and the struggle to find enough resources to do so. Jim Sterling, when reviewing for Destructoid, said "everything you loot is *vital* to your survival" (1). The game hinges on that idea. It pushes survivability and physicality above all else. In his more negative write up on the game, Rock, Paper, Shotgun reviewer Alec Meer said "There's a palpable sense of *there to Metro 2033*" (1). Every aspect of the game, be it ammo counts, mask quality, maps, and even the stealth meter is conveyed in-world. Rather than turn the Metro into an entity, as the book does, it turns it into a setting. The cobbled together life shown in the game grounds the player ever more into the feeling of struggling to survive. The game turns its varied stations into similar hubs – each one offers the same dealings, with set stores and stands to explore before the next loading screen takes Artyom further. Ultimately, less importance is put on why the player continues than on the act of continuing. While Glukhovsky emphasizes Artyom's journey and lessons, 4A highlights his world.

The book does have fleshed out descriptions and highlights the challenges of metro life, but it does the latter less consistently. A woman offering her young son up for a few more cartridges is shocking, but those types of interactions are very rare in

Glukhovsky's book. Characters and factions get described in great detail, but their surroundings blur among the repeated dark, damp walls of the underground. 4A uses their visual medium to highlight metro life. True, the aforementioned woman doesn't appear. But beggars now exist in the stations, children draw on the floor and walls, even offering to help Artyom find locations for a few bullets (Figure 12). Guards gossip, pedestrians argue, and each station has a tone. Refugees wait to be processed at the entrances and mattresses lie next to cobbled shelter (Figure 13). As Tom Cross points out in his analysis of the game, the toilets and beds show that people wholly live in these environments (1, visual from game in Figure 14). While these type of descriptions are possible in text, Glukhovsky didn't explore them in as much detail. The game, through using the stations as a moment to rest, allows the player to become accustomed to the metro without harming the game's story. Through visuals, pages of description are replaced with a single instant. The post-apocalyptic life certainly isn't ideal, but the game goes through pains to show it's possible without hurting the atmosphere.

As much as 4A's game uses combat to fill its running time and tell a story using the medium's common language, it has the respect not to make its source unrecognizable. It doesn't attempt to compete with the book by adding insights into Artyom's mind or holding roundtable discussions on humanity. Rather, the player supplies the psychological threats, paranoia, and a personal philosophy (aided by environment design). Through the usage of side characters the game highlights the people in the metro, be it criminals, mystics, or skilled survivalists. The supporting cast doesn't have time to debate questions of human volition, and neither does the game's

pacing. Instead, it focuses on two major themes from the novel – the survival and adaptability of humans. While book Artyom stumbles through problems and survives often due to coincidence (paying in the lives of others), the game's Artyom fights for every breath. He only lives if the player can successfully navigate the hellscape given to them (Figure 15). The interactive nature of games facilitates this more than any sequence in the books. Reading about Artyom firing off a shell at a mutant is very different than frantically reloading a shotgun as monsters rush at you.

The book invites you to think on what living in tunnels under an irradiated land would do to mankind and whatever comes next. The game lets you live in that world. Artyom's body becomes a window behind a cracked gas mask and cobbled together weaponry. Few adaptations connect as well as the outside elements of both versions of *Metro 2033*, and then diverge so swiftly. The novel's focus on wandering and talking would have made a very strange adaptation to games. Both versions tell conflicting tales, but ultimately highlight the strengths of each other while shoring up weakness. While 4A's effort may not be the best adaptation because of its action focus and tendency to diverge, it fulfils the role of a companion piece and "what-if" scenario, especially with the possible variant ending. It helps make the world more concrete even with its liberties, providing a visual realm for the narrative to occur. Through its use of combat for narrative abstraction and character development, the game plays to the medium's strengths while preserving the setting and ideas of the novel, and then showing them in a new light.

Screenshots of *Metro 2033 Redux*

Figure 1



First time Artyom ventures outside of the metro.

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Figure 2



First encounter with a group of ghosts. Khan will be able to guide Artyom through them by muttering prayers.

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Figure 3



Khan and Artyom arrive at a station facing hordes of mutants.

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Figure 4



Khan's return during Miller making plans to fire the nuke.

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Figure 5



Canonical ending to *Metro 2033* where Artyom lets the nukes fall on the Dark Ones.

His ending speech: "But to this day, I wonder: when we burned the Dark Ones from the face of the Earth, was something lost as well?"

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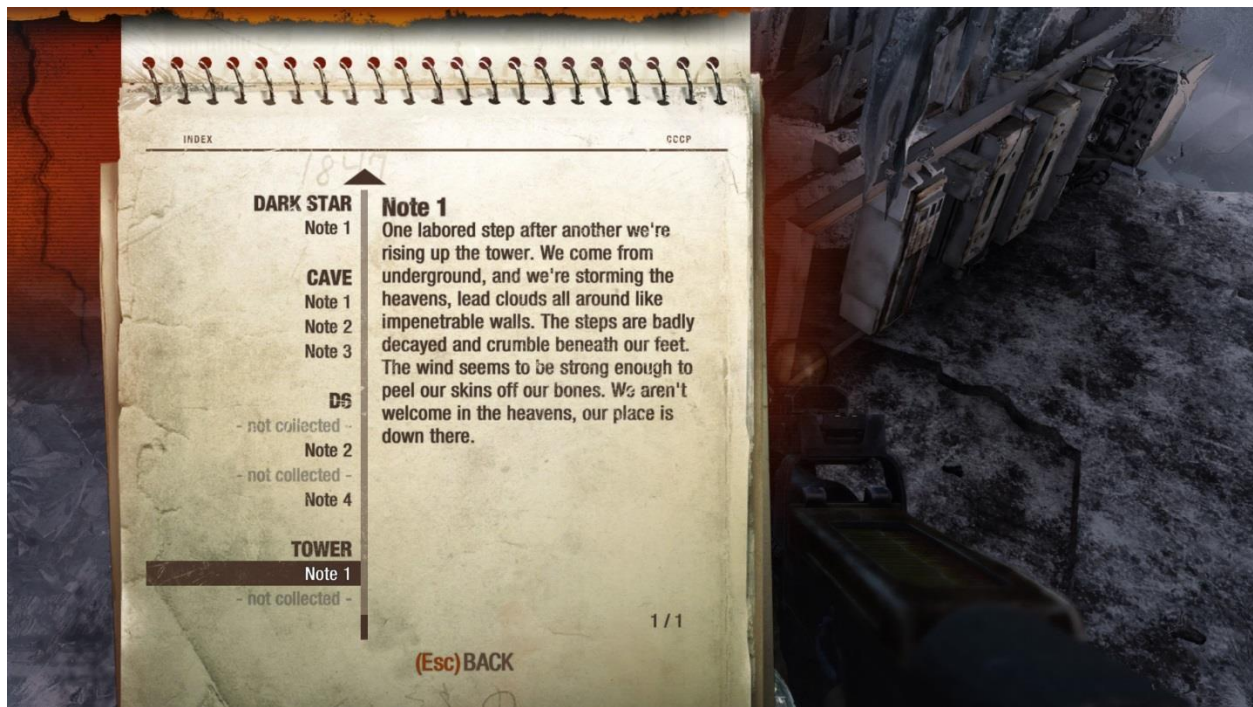
Figure 6



Have to survive by finding those who fell before. Also shows mask damage.

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Figure 7



Note recalling themes of heaven and hell from book, as well as Artyom's thought process.

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Figure 8

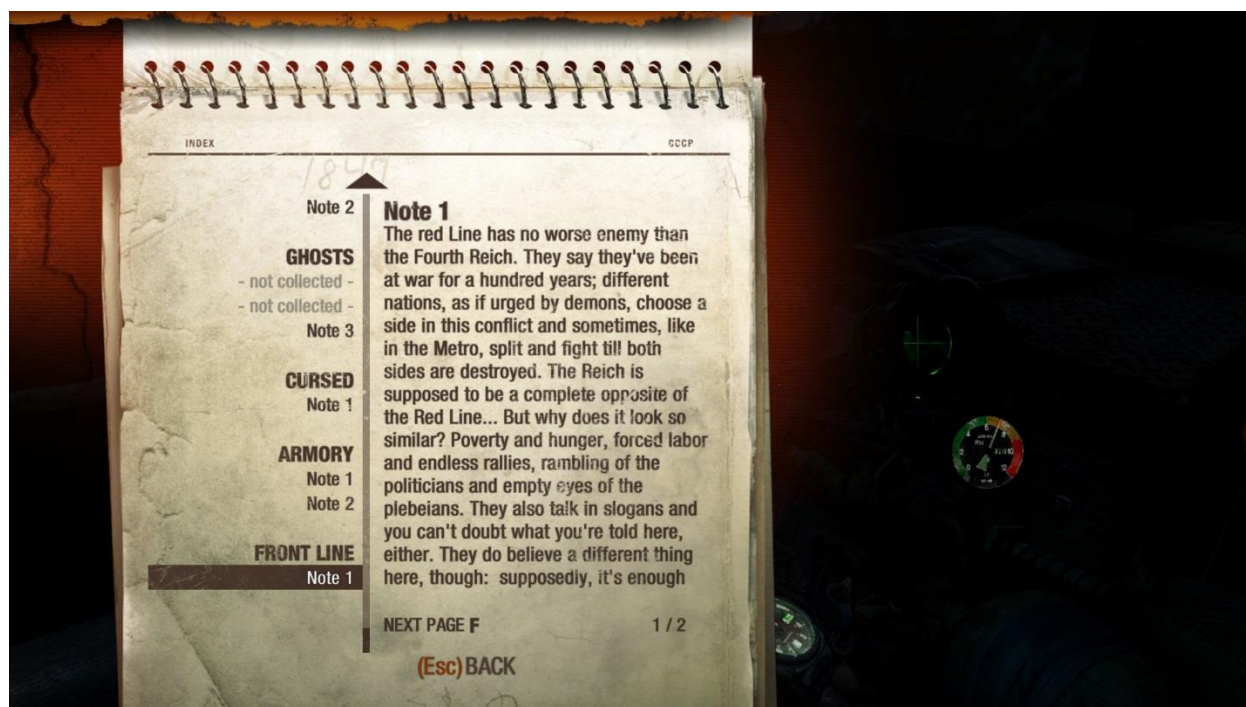
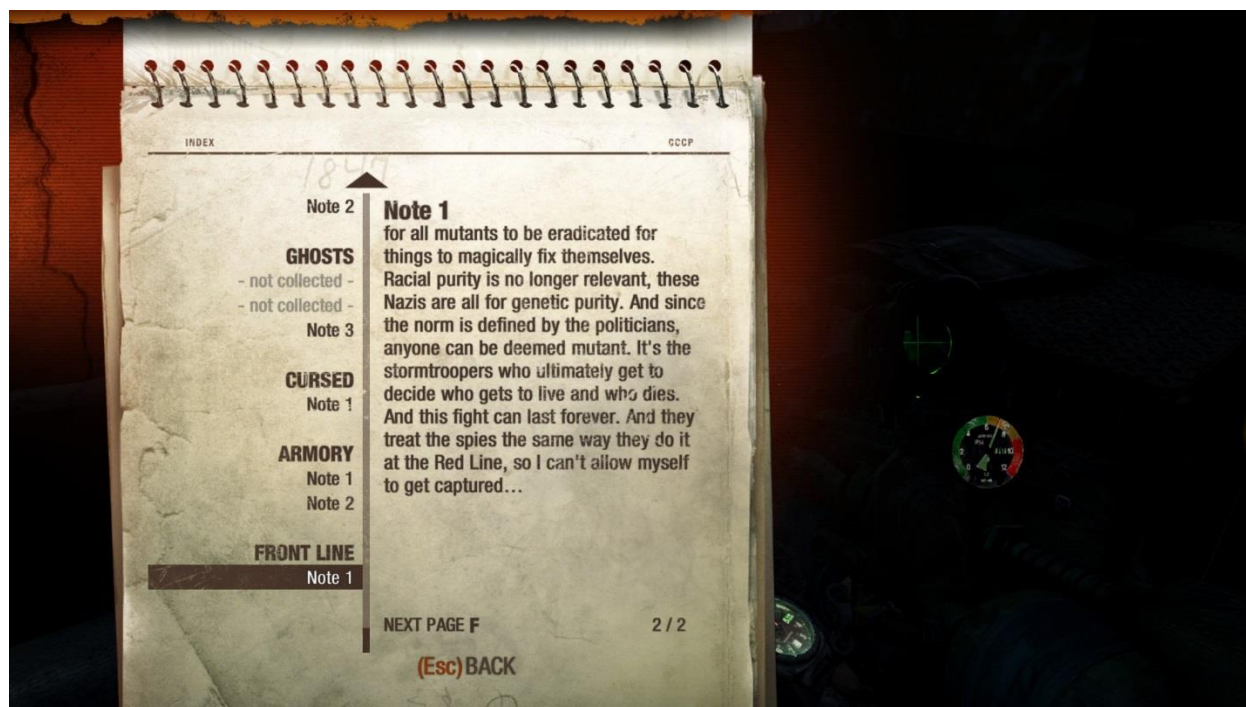


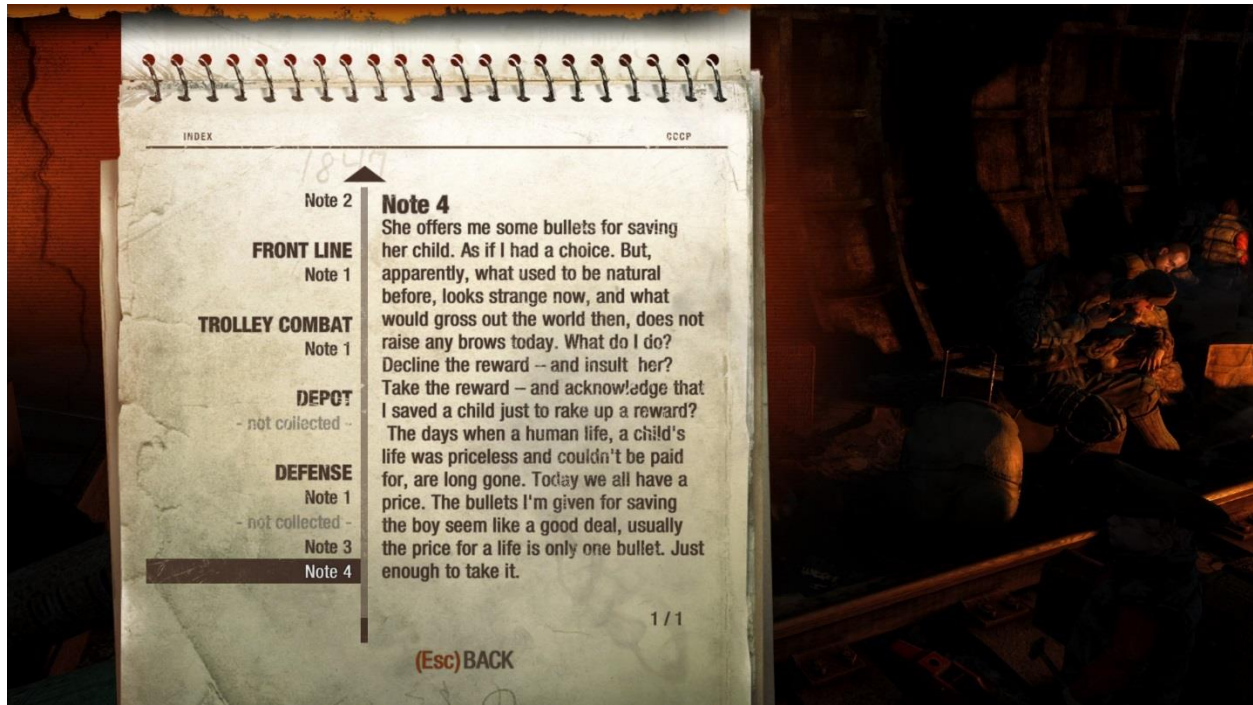
Figure 9



These fill an entry on the Soviet/Fascist interactions and ideology in the game's world.

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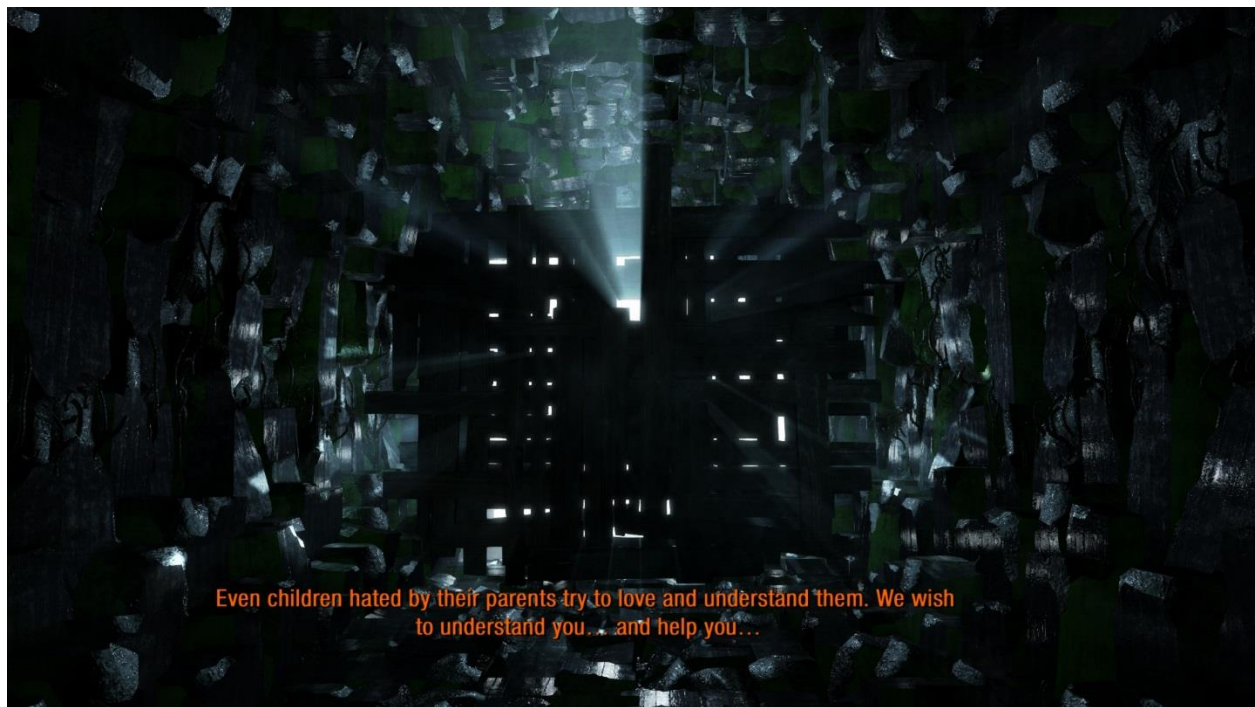
Figure 10



Note recalling the book's discussion on bullets as currency and human lives.

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Figure 11



Sample of a vision from the Dark Ones, albeit with less subtlety than Glukhovsky's original work.

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Figure 12



Child willing to guide Artyom to Bourbon for a fee.

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Figure 13



Homeless citizens of the Metro, along with those just looking to leave the station.

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Figure 14



A set of toilets in Riga station.

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Figure 15



A standoff with an intimidating mutant, called a librarian.

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