RACE, GENDER, AND GENRE IN *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

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Video games, like films, largely conform to genre classifications. Among the oldest and arguably most popular of these is the "shooter." *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, et al., 1962), a two-person spaceship torpedo battle game, is considered the first example of the shooter. What started out as a demonstration tool for the capabilities of the PDP-1 computer at an MIT lab ended up inaugurating a whole genre and driving advances in computer games. Hugely popular shooters like *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992), *DOOM* (id Software, 1993), *Quake* (id Software, 1996), *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), *Medal of Honor* (Dreamworks Interactive, 1999), and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003) have popularized video games in general, spawned major franchises, polarized a conversation about games and violence, and shaped major technical and aesthetic innovations.[1]

Within the shooter genre, the so-called "military shooter" subgenre typically consists of weapons-based combat from a first- or third-person perspective, tactical use of a squad, stealth, and a cover system. And as in cinema, every once in a while a game comes along that makes a keen, incisive, and self-referential critique of its own genre conventions. *Spec Ops: The Line*, designed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games in 2012, is such a title.[2]

The Line is part of the *Spec Ops* military shooter franchise initially developed by Zombie Studios in 1998, and then later by Runecraft and Big Grub in the early 2000s. *The Line*, the tenth title of the series, is a "reboot" in the sense that it departs thematically, chronologically, and narratively from its precursors. At first glance, one might mistake *The Line* for pure jingoism, as it contains all the clichés of mainstream military-themed entertainment: the straight, white, square-jawed super-soldier; his cocky, smart-mouthed companions; flagrantly male chauvinist humor; and the display of superior training and weapons. The playable character, with whom the player is identified, is initially configured as "good" and "just" in his fight. But as *The Line*'s narrative unfolds, players

start to question the character's thinning rationalizations for violence and his perpetual straying off-mission. Players begin to want to distance themselves from the very figure with whom they are initially encouraged to identify. By situating combat in increasingly fraught circumstances, and creating its hero as an unreliable narrator, *The Line* weaponizes its core game mechanic of shooting against the genre form itself. In short, the game distinguishes itself by thoroughly undermining any gratification and immersion that could arise from a player's executing missions precisely, or being the hero—which runs counter to genre conventions in general, and military shooters especially. For these reasons, some game critics have called *Spec Ops: The Line* the "first major, anti-war military shooter."[3]

The setup of the game is straightforward: playing the role of Captain Martin Walker, you are ordered to Dubai on a search and rescue mission after receiving a radio distress signal from missing Army Colonel John Konrad and his lost battalion, the "Damned 33rd." Mega-sandstorms and local conflicts have battered the metropolis, forcing its inhabitants to leave. Citizens and a privileged elite have been evacuated, but thousands of immigrant workers living there have been left behind. Konrad, a highly decorated war hero who went rogue to rescue these refugees, is hiding somewhere in the heart of Dubai. Along with Delta Force operators Adams and Lugo, you explore the ruins in search of him and his men. Through gameplay, the horrors of war and an increasing psychological confusion are gradually revealed to the player. The ensuing nightmare combines ecological apocalypse, societal breakdown, and moral culpability into a recognizable military narrative.

This scenario may sound familiar, for the key developers of *The Line* have enumerated their many filmic and televisual influences: *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990), *Generation Kill* (Susanna White and Simon Cellan Jones, HBO, 2008), and *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001). Above all, the game's lead developer, Walt Williams, created a storyline that he credits to Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) for inspiration.[4] Since *Heart of Darkness* was also the source

material for Coppola's psychedelic antiwar vision, game critics' common characterization of *The Line* as the "*Apocalypse Now* of video games" makes sense. Wandering the game-space as Walker, you might find yourself in a defunct discotheque, the black-lit interior still glowing incongruously with garish decoration while you collect ammunition, scout for the most advantageous position, and confirm enemy kills. Exterior scenes of resort-like locations, discarded jet skis, public sculpture, billboard advertisements, and palm trees still decorated with twinkling lights all stand out against make-shift sandbag gun turrets and chunks of blackened human flesh that evidence recent carnage.

This game is decidedly progressive in its critique of genre conventions, yet it conveys both a strangely retrograde image of women and a deeply racialized vision of an Arab global metropolis as a new "heart of darkness." It demonstrates the erosion of American militarized masculinity through inglorious conflict, with a corresponding commentary on the use of violence within the context of shooters; in fact, these are its most discussed interventions. Much less mentioned are the problematic race and gender politics that permeate its action. What is revealed across the six hours of gameplay is the centrality of an Arab mega-city in ruins as a site of deep anxiety concerning non-Western modernity, as well as the trouble-some mobilization of women and children as symbols of victimhood to rationalize a military response. In short, while a sophisticated intervention into the shooter genre's exhausted forms of violence, *The Line* is startlingly devoid of criticality around representations of gender and race.

The contradiction between a smart critique of shooter genre violence and fraught representational politics issues most starkly from the game's setting: specifically, its location and nonplayable characters. Here, Dubai is not figured as a site of aggressive military intervention but of a natural disaster; both present-day and parallel reality, it resembles the actual lived Dubai except that within the game that city is destroyed. The moving targets of this shooter are a combination of desperate refugees of varied and mostly unspecified origins, CIA operatives, and the soldiers of the rogue United States Army 33rd Battalion, purportedly under Konrad's command.

The game differs greatly from most military shooters and stealth games, whether set in the present day or recreating historical conflicts, where there typically would be a clearly defined enemy (i.e., Nazi soldiers during World War II or terrorists in the post-9/11 War on Terror). *The Line*, in contrast, immediately presents the moral ambiguity of an ill-defined foe—one who is unexpected, or even a compatriot wearing the same uniform. This approach requires that almost all killing be either military fratricide or the slaughter of civilians. It becomes increasingly apparent that Walker (or the player as Walker), as well as operators Adams and Lugo, cannot avoid wrenching choices for which there is no ethical high ground, and their humanitarian mission of rescue will quickly devolve into chaos and confusion. As a key narrative intervention, the game sets out—at least on the surface—to introduce a progressive critical departure from heroic stories that populate the genre. Indeed, as the game narrative develops, player interaction elicits intense visions of the worst of war, including civilian casualties, chemical and remote warfare, massacre, blight, torture, desperation, and extreme psychological breakdown.

I've Got a Bad Feeling about This

Since *The Line* bears many of the superficial characteristics of a hyper-macho military shooter, it is odd that so many of its reviewers expressed how the game made them *feel*. With rare exception, players of military shooters assume the role of hero, and games are largely designed to create a strong identification between the player (you) and the primary player-character (in this case, Walker). Diverging from expectation, *The Line* erodes this relationship in a productive way, pointing toward a critique of the genre through the Kurtz-like transformation of the main character from hero to psychotic mass murderer and by forcing players to shoot targets who normally wouldn't be seen as enemies. One reviewer remarked: "Every firefight ends with Walker and his Delta Force squad regretting what they've done."[5] Another games journalist observed: "You'll shoot hundreds, maybe thousands of 'enemies,' but by a few hours in, the characters' uncertainty over what they were doing, their angst, for lack of a better term, was my own."[6]

Similarly arguing that the game breaks with traditional military entertainment games by injecting its whole play scenario with "discordant feeling," games scholar Matthew Payne suggests that this technique stimulates a critique of the genre.[7] By interrupting the basic enjoyment of the military shooter (which he describes as resting on the pleasure of escapism within the context of an affective bond to the lived world), *The Line* creates a productive discomfort for the player that gives rise to internal self-reflection on the "banal pleasures of militainment."[8] Moral dilemmas are presented, but gameplay does not necessarily permit the player to opt for a more morally sound path. The frustration of this is stark; there is simply no way to make things right.

For critic and scholar Brendan Keogh, the game invokes criticality by forcing players to consider their intentions while playing and to interrogate their own rationalizations of in-game brutality as having been enacted "without

Captain Martin Walker (the playable character), Adams (left), and Lugo (right) enter Dubai. (*Spec Ops: The Line*, Yager Development, published by 2K Games, 2012).

choice," as inevitable. In his extensive phenomenological analysis, Keogh writes: "I may not have always had a choice in my actions in *The Line*, but I was still responsible for being present in those choice-less situations. Or, put another way, what I chose to do doesn't matter so much as what I did."[9] Basically, it is impossible to play *The Line* as a "good" or "evil" Walker, as you only have the choice between "bad" and "worse" options. In one scenario, for example, one must choose between shooting a man who stole water out of desperation—a grave offense—or shooting the soldier who killed the thief's family in an attempt to apprehend him. Under threat of sniper fire, one must decide between equally unacceptable options: shoot the soldier or civilian, attempt to free them by shooting their ropes, attempt to shoot the snipers, or simply try to run. While some nuances of narrative result from these varying options, none profoundly impacts the trajectory of the story by providing more positive outcomes. Yet the game was widely praised and highlighted as exemplary for seeking to integrate moral questions into the shooter genre, for ethically challenging players, and for crafting a subversive narrative.[10]

In designing the military shooter, Williams insisted that a player should have to "hold a mirror up to [himself] and say, 'Why am I playing this game the way that I am playing it?'"[11] The game's load screens, which appear during the time that new segments of the game take to load, use the opportunity to berate the player with phrases:

> "Do you feel like a hero yet?"
> "You cannot understand, nor do you want to."
> "This is all your fault."

These are messages that overtly contradict the understood objectives of the game. They stimulate introspection by recognizing and hailing the player, and undermine the presumption that one plays from a central position of good, or as the hero of the narrative. One message even references the popular Vegas advertising slogan, rewriting it as "What happens in Dubai, stays in Dubai," to suggest letting go of one's inhibitions in the sequestered party zone of "Sin City."

Who to shoot: soldier or civilian? (*Spec Ops: The Line,* Yager Development, published by 2K Games, 2012).

In the case of the game's fictive Dubai, it is not pleasure but rather an orgy of violence that is left behind.

In interviews explaining his intentions, game designer Williams identified the development team's use of "ludonarrative dissonance," that is, the friction between the stated narrative contract of the game and the contract implied by its game-playing mechanics.[12] This term was initially proposed by Clint Hocking to characterize a flaw in a game whereby the message contained within the narrative is somehow contradicted by actions undertaken in gameplay—or even in the point-scoring system. Hocking notably critiques the retrofuturistic dystopian first-person shooter *BioShock* (2007, 2K Boston and 2K Australia), considered one of the most important games of all time for its aesthetic vision and its philosophical roots in Ayn Rand's Objectivism. Specifically, he suggests that *BioShock*'s narrative of self-sacrifice contradicts the gameplay itself, through its promotion of opportunism and violence in player actions, ultimately conveying a message of self-interest. However, rather than seeing this as a liability or design flaw, *The Line*'s designers mobilized its pioneering ludonarrative dissonance as an asset. Speaking on the use of violence in his own game, and within the genre, Williams explained:

> I don't believe that violent games make violent people, and I don't believe that violent games desensitize us to

violence. I do, however, believe that violent games desensitize us to violence in games . . . our genres are defined by action, and that action is how you are going to be interacting with the world. It's going to be how you overcome obstacles, how you effect change, how you progress in your goals. If it is a platformer, you are going to do that by jumping. If it is a shooter, you are going to do this by killing someone with a gun.[13]

Fundamentally, the core game mechanic of *The Line*, he explains, shapes the limitations of what the player can do. A shooter requires shooting, so it is not as if Walker is going to do much else. But *The Line* shows how this dissonance between the ideals of a humanitarian mission and the use of excessive violence can be maximized, the apparent hypocrisy mined as constitutive of the main character, instead of being a flaw of the game design. As another critic opined, "As the game goes forward, it becomes weirder and weirder that he's killing so many people."[14]

Place as Race: Into a New Heart of Darkness

The Line does successfully corrupt the genre's core mechanic as a form of critique. However, its gamespace validates notions of the Arab world that feed the very jingoism which the game apparently interrupts. In both Conrad's original novella, set in the colonial Belgian Congo, and Coppola's

A fictitious Dubai, destroyed. (*Spec Ops: The Line*, Yager Development, published by 2K Games, 2012).

Apocalypse Now, set in Vietnam-era Cambodia, a perilous and profoundly alien sense of place is established. The game's fictitious Dubai is "the world's most opulent ruin" in which the constructed value of worldly sumptuousness and grandeur stands revealed for its true worthlessness and absurdity.[15] The metropolis is now a place beyond domestication, taken over by nature, unlivable. The once destination-city of Dubai is designated a no-man's land for American troops, so one's very presence there is fraught from the beginning.

Most impressive is the similarly phantasmagoric, hostile nature of the gamespace itself. The first time a churning, howling orange sandstorm strikes during battle, you must cling tightly to a barrier so as not to be blown away, all the while firing on insurgents with your free hand. Writing on this uncanny Dubai, Payne attributes the lack of fidelity to the actual city to its "function primarily in an allegorical capacity" as a monument to failed advanced capitalism.[16] Indeed, Williams describes a center of "luxury and overindulgence that has now become completely useless to the inhabitants of the city because it is cut off from the rest of the world."[17] Identifying the sand as a menacing character unto itself, Payne points out the peril endemic to the space as a result of fierce sandstorms, the intense destructiveness of the shifting sand's weight on compromised architectures, and

the possibility of being literally swallowed up by the land itself. While I agree that the site of the game functions in this capacity, the choice to use the specific city of Dubai stands out as odd.

This self-conscious choice of location has a complex meaning within the sociopolitical context in which *The Line* was made. Where Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* became an iconic representation of the brutality of conquest, *The Line* circles back to both film and novel, mining their cultural currency to maximum effect. This allows the game to engage with both the original colonial narrative, and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, a cinematic reinterpretation that conveyed the disorienting, nightmarish, acid-war vision of being caught in the turbine blades of a civilizing engine. The film, released four years after the war's end, remains an iconic cultural emblem of the American moral feeling about the "bad" war that resulted largely from the explicit visualization of war through mass media for the first time, made possible by news footage and photojournalistic reportage. *The Line* draws on the capital and potency of these irruptions in culture but recontextualizes them into a palimpsest of the imperialist ethical crisis, from the traumatic encounter with the other to the moral feeling of a bad war, applied now to an entanglement with the Arab world.

Much has been written on the problems of imaging war in light of persistent questions of moral guilt, usually in relation to the Vietnam War.[18] In her analysis of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* as cultural refrains expressing imperialist moral foreboding and culpability, Neda Atanasoski writes: "[T]he post-Vietnam ethical dilemma of how to portray the nation's encounter with its own heart of darkness, which played out largely in the realm of visual culture, can be read as an attempt to grapple with questions about how a nation maintains or loses its faith in its own ideals when it encounters their destructive and deadly force."[19]

The Line's narrative reveals an anxiety over the widening chasm between the idea of doing something good and the actual destruction that ensues in some "humanitarian" efforts. Through Walker, the player is led to a place that is supposedly in a state of disorder and outside the light of civilization; but instead of bringing order, Walker reveals the darkness in himself. He commits atrocities that invoke the cultural potency of Kurtz as both literary and filmic character. Complicity with Walker is established through engagement: the player must perform these actions in order for the narrative to move forward, and for the game to progress. There is a cloying sense of the incomprehensibility of events, of rationalized motivations, of humans as eminently destructive. With a hampered ability to gauge one's own position as a player in a game that is too large to understand, the space of Dubai becomes a sublime nightmare. High capitalism in ruin is evidenced by the picked-through remains of luxury automobiles, jets, and yachts, all partially consumed by the desert, suggesting a paradise of third-world riches lost. Oceans of dunes give way to the disorienting extreme verticality of skyscrapers virtually buried in sand, forming an urban Grand Canyon.

These exteriors give a clear indication of the constructed value of worldly things, but it is only with the player's entry into the game's interior spaces of abandoned hotels, clubs, aquatic centers, and other luxury sites that the uncanny nature of fictitious Dubai comes into view. In Chapter 3, "Underneath," Walker regains consciousness after seemingly crashing through a glass ceiling into a defunct hotel. The highly decorative interior features details proper to a grand hotel with a rich blue and gold décor, monumental peacock statues, and ostentatious touches, with bottles of champagne littering the site as signs of excess. The shifting sands have made the hotel into an underground cavern where it once was aboveground. The effect of the familiar made strange is heightened as Walker and his team engage in an extended firefight in an effort to escape their luxurious would-be tomb. This spectacular setting is one of many instances in which the inside and the outside become confused, up and down are reversed, and the spaces of civilization revert to sites of urban warfare and barbarity.

The atmospheric, imagined Dubai of the game thus becomes a site of trauma for Walker, a fictive heart of darkness in the Arab world. Upside-down ragged American flags—a sign of dire distress—and the evidential failure of humanitarian intervention dot the landscape. It is a hellish vision, which owes much of its affect to *Apocalypse Now* and the genre it spawned. The rubble of Dubai is figured, then, as an externalization of Walker's crumbling mental interiority. Less charitably, it presents an outsider's racialized vision of moral decay of the Arab world from within.

The Line certainly departs from its predecessors in its creative reimagining of a developed and wealthy city in the Arab world. In place of Kurtz's jungle, *The Line* presents a dystopia that resonates with a contemporary cultural moment of rapid modernization and industrialization in Asia (particularly the Arab world and China), one that has produced anxiety for the West. Today, Western fears of the rise of non-Western economic, industrial, and technological centers manifest themselves as a condemnation of rapid modernization in these regions due to their exploitation of labor and destruction of the ecosystem.[20] This is an ironic turn, considering that the United States attained its dominant status by similar means.

In this context, *The Line* presents Dubai as a scene of both wish fulfillment and anxious disequilibrium. On the one hand, uncontrollable forces of nature—a seeming "act of God"—struck down an Arab mega-city of indulgence. On the other, in its resultant disorder, one enters into the space to find a theater of war, with all its surreal atrocities. Location is key in that the mega-city has become undomesticated, and trappings of civilization (social order, opulence, hypercapitalism) exist only as ruins. In fact, the modernization of non-Western centers is often denigrated as a pantomiming of Western and continental development, due to an ideological configuration that situates Europe and the West as the sole seat of scientific and technological advancement in the world. With modernization coded as Eurocentric, its presence in Asia is correspondingly marked as inauthentic.

Non-Western modernity is thus fundamentally skewed as an imitation of what it means to be genuinely civilized. According to this logic, the storms have not destroyed these Arab spaces so much as returned them to the savagery that is thought to lie beneath their gilded surfaces. The sandstorms tear away a veneer, revealing the essence of a space, which is conceived as implicitly barbarous. The shifting sands of the false Dubai's topography, its shanty ruins of a global city, peopled by rogue insurgents and cast-off migrant labor

subsisting in the wreckage of Arab empire, bespeak a horror of chaos. It has, in a sense, returned to an authentic state of disorder, certainly not Edenic, but nevertheless sublime in its rendering.

This vision of Dubai is highly problematic, and resulted in its banning from the United Arab Emirates. How can the game's incarnation of the shooter comprise an effective intervention when the game affirms such problematic representations of the Arab world as a deeply othered, irrational space? Joseph Conrad's novella holds the key. *Heart of Darkness* bespeaks the horrors of imperialism and is widely understood as a denunciation of Europe's violent intervention in the Congo, while at the same time mobilizing deeply pernicious stereotypes of Africa as a savage dystopia devoid of logic and reason—a contradiction much critiqued by literary experts, despite the text's persistence as a classic.[21] Similarly, while *Spec Ops: The Line* upends the military shooter genre on the level of player-character identification to send an antiwar message, its choice of a present-day Dubai in ruins positions the non-Western metropolis within a highly racialized fantasy as a desirable space for playful destruction. This combination reifies some of the most persistent notions of the Arab world as fundamentally uncivilized, cruel, and forever outside of modernity.[22]

Gender, Humanitarianism, and the Theater of War

Ruins are a prevalent aesthetic of many gamespaces, as Evan Watts has discussed, questioning what this might mean symbolically about the terms of male-dominated social structures. In his interpretation, architectural structures become "monuments of a masculine-dominated society" and a ruin functions as "a space that offers freedom from the same gender-oppressive institutions that once permeated them, and thus sites of empowerment."[23] He argues that, even though their new social order is "horrific," in a larger sense at least it reveals the heteronormative order to be socially constructed and therefore malleable.[24] Within the ruin aesthetic of *The Line*, the site may engender a kind of freedom, but it is of a nihilistic variety. In its mythic structure, men can be men, but their violent mark-making is aberrant. It is important here to consider the imaging of white (normative) masculinity in crisis, and its relation to an imagined site of social chaos. Whether or not one agrees with Watts about the symbolic function of ruins, he is correct that games, as sophisticated expressions, do model gender standards, power relations, racial biases, class differentials, and sexual norms. And these relations to forms of difference are made manifest in the gamespace itself.

Women in *The Line* exist only as victims of torture and friendly fire; as the subject of casual joking between men; as burned, dead, casualties—precious, perhaps, but fundamentally secondary. One may ask why, given their tangential presence, are women even imaged within the game scenario? Scholar Jennifer Terry, working at the intersection of war, technological innovation, and humanitarian intervention, traces the ways in which history has demonstrated how gender and the promise of women's liberation have been mobilized as tools of empire. Through her engagement with Amy Kaplan's important work, Terry elucidates the ideological role of gender in garnering support for expansion:

> [H]umanitarian claims have been at the forefront of all modern American military excursions, claims that have been mobilized to rationalize the seizing of territory and resources from Native Americans; from Native Hawaiians; from peoples living in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, and now Iraq. Humanitarian salvation, Kaplan notes, has been a powerful ideological mechanism for justifying U.S. empire to the masses in the United States. A rationale of liberating others—of bringing democracy to allegedly backward cultures—and *particularly claims of liberating women* [italics mine]: these are fundamental ideological mystifications burying wounds and deaths that continue to haunt the United States.[25]

Terry ultimately contends that militarism, humanitarianism, and imperialism are of the same order, their destructive powers linked and mobilized through ideologies of saving the helpless other.

Similarly, the scorched, brutalized bodies of women imaged in *The Line* become both a moral motivation for the ensuing conflict and a necessary collateral cost of the conflict. That the women in question are neither playable nor even secondary characters points to their configuration as pawns—the functional equivalent of backdrop—at least in the world of the game. From a gender equity perspective, women are configured as victims without agency who are absent from the diegesis of the game and function as a tool of the larger critique it claims to be making: they are a retrograde maneuver in an otherwise sophisticated intervention. Keogh has remarked upon this: "[i]n a game that subverts and works against so many conventions, an entirely conventional lack of any real representation of women—without any real commentary on this lack—is incredibly disappointing."[26]

True, the heteronormative, white-male shooter trope is also undermined in the narrative. Watts writes of this, particularly the frustrated "'masculine' satisfaction accompanying gameplay mechanics of dominating one's environment using violence and aggression." [27] In *The Line*, Captain Walker

A female refugee is held hostage, tortured, and killed by soldiers. (*Spec Ops: The Line*, Yager Development, published by 2K Games, 2012).

performs his role of super-soldier, seeking to dominate every scenario with military aggression. However, as the game progresses, he and his team physically transform from a well-oiled and surgically accurate unit into burned, bloodied, traumatized aggressors. Their psychological breakdown mirrors this deterioration, as Walker's verbalizations to his men shift from jocular confidence to stern aggression, and then finally to psychotic rage. His metamorphosis under the duress of battle from the beginning to the end, and his mounting rationalizations that become tantamount to dementia, agitate a preexisting longing in the player for the stability of a normative male role, which is eroded throughout the game. What remains is a figure of the hero as menace, one who uses pure, excessive violence as a destructive form of expression. He is effective in the execution of his elite training, but his motivations are flawed and his ultimate endeavor to save lives is utterly futile.

Culpability and ethical clarity are closely connected to key peaks in the game's narrative arc, signaled by moments of revelation that interrupt the character's coherent sense of self. Its literal and metaphorical use of mirroring as an analogue of self-criticality (looking at oneself in the mirror) becomes a leitmotif of the game. The strongest example occurs in Chapter 8, "The Gate," with a scene of a white phosphorous assault during which Walker uses incendiary warfare on the soldiers of the American 33rd that far outnumber his team. Any player who wishes to continue in the game must play through Walker's choices. The pivotal moment comes at roughly the middle of the game, after a geographic descent that generates an aesthetic vision of this place as ever more hellish, treacherous, and unconscionable.

This incident is represented through a very sophisticated use of visual signifiers to conjure the act of playing the game in relation to the excessive cruelty that will take place—and

which mirrors recent lived-world events. The controls for the white phosphorous mortars are not unlike those used for gameplay: a case with toggles, buttons, and a screen. First, despite an outspoken protest by Lugo, your player's team launches a drone that provides a bird's-eye view, to be observed on the laptop monitor within the player screen. Brilliantly, Walker's face is shown in the reflective surface of the monitor, so that the player sees both an onscreen "self" and the remote "bomb vision" of white phosphorous charges deployed at "your" command. It is self-reflection, literalized, horrifically.[28]

Later, the results of this remote warfare are agonizing to survey up close: chemically burned soldiers writhing on the ground in pain and frozen in grisly death poses. Worse yet is the collateral damage of noncombatant refugees, many of them women and children, who have suffered the same fate. A close-up of a charred woman and child, huddled together, her hand held over the child's eyes, drives home the not-so-subtle message. Again, here women and children are configured not as having agency, but as passive victims; more importantly, they are civilian victims of excessive use of force by a supposed hero. Internal fighting flares again when Lugo reacts to the horror, claiming they've gone too far this time. Who exactly has gone too far? The question may point to Walker, Adams, and Lugo on one level; to the game designers, who painfully invoke the use of this weapon in Iraq by both Saddam Hussein and the United States; and to the U.S. military itself, which has defended its use of white phosphorous by arguing it is not in violation of chemical warfare prohibitions since it is officially classified as merely "incendiary."[29]

In blurring the ethical boundary between soldier and mass murderer, *The Line* indicts the supposed civilizing mission or "white man's burden" of protecting the globe from degenerating into disorder, darkness, and barbarism. But "the line" that is crossed may also refer to the dissolution of stable white masculinity as it is put into crisis through a racial encounter with the other in the Arab world. The protagonist of most military shooters is assumed to fight on the side of right. In this game, fantasies of full-spectrum dominance are technically fulfilled, but remain morally frustrated. As a player, this frustration results largely from feeling dragged into Walker's insanity and self-righteous military display, without having any in-game ability to choose otherwise. After manipulating its players with cinematic elements and military shooter signifiers to present a conventional vision, *The Line* deftly exploits morally condemnable tactics to confound expectations that Walker represents the good.

Victims of white phosphorous. (*Spec Ops: The Line*, Yager Development, published by 2K Games, 2012).

Walker affected by seeing the results of his choice to use incendiary warfare. (*Spec Ops: The Line*, Yager Development, published by 2K Games, 2012).

Conclusion

The Line contains a critique of the cost of war (particularly its psychological toll) at the story level, borrows from the visual culture of the antiwar film (*Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket* [Stanley Kubrick, 1987]), and breaks with the military shooter genre's thoughtless imaging of violence by turning its core action against itself. However, in the ideological treatment of present-day Dubai, its racialized sense of place points to fears surrounding the modernization of non-Western centers and what that might mean for the United States, with its imperiled superpower status. Core to the pleasure of *The Line* is its access to a deeper American cultural imaginary of the Arab world as regressing into calamity, and the necessity of intervention in the name of women and the innocent. This attitude is reinforced through continual media crisis representation. As Susan Sontag has written: "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds."[30]

With *The Line*, Sontag's prescient horror of the everyday imaging of ruin and agony of other places is brought into the living room in a new way. In the end, it offers a playable opportunity for those of a particular socialization—those who can see themselves mirrored in and functioning through Walker—to play their part in the destruction of a region that embodies a deep-seated racialized fear of a dark world rising up as a technological, wealthy, and research-rich competitor on the global stage. Dubai, a gleaming symbol of that Arab world modernity, is reduced to a state of savagery, no doubt constituting a cathartic vision for a certain type of nationalist, one whose American identity is bound up in global dominance that configures the other as a threatening manifestation of difference. This transformation is achieved while Walker deludes himself that he (as an extension of the player) is on a humanitarian mission. Women and children are mobilized as motivation within the game, but can only exist as passive tools. This is a vision that shores up ideological positions rather than disrupting them; therefore, the game's lauded self-criticality should not be confused with its making any statement against the predominating American view of the Arab world.

The Line does enact the psychological and ethical ruin of a Western soldier-ideal, whose prescribed role as a white protector against an Arab heart of darkness is revealed as defunct. And, within the game world, it does launch an inspired and necessary genre critique. But the melancholic irony of *Spec Ops*: *The Line* issues from the gulf between the moral address of the shooter and the ethically problematic space of the game's own race and gender politics.

Author's Note

Notes

1. This is delineated in Gerald Voorhees, "Shooting," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 251–58; and Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock, eds., *Guns, Grenades and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games* (New York: Continuum, 2012).
2. Designed for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Microsoft Windows, and Mac OSX.
3. Matthew Thomas Payne, "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in Spec Ops: The Line," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 4 (2014): 265–82.
4. "Spec Ops: The Line—Official Walt Williams Interview," *VISO Games*, June 26, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=73AlLAglbho
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