28 UPENDING MILITARIZED MASCULINITY IN *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

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Locate and rescue Army Colonel John Konrad and his 33rd Infantry Battalion: This is the deceptively uncomplicated objective of *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), designed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games. Konrad, a decorated war hero, is somewhere deep in the heart of postapocalyptic Dubai. As Martin Walker, motivated by the loyalty of a life-debt to Konrad and committed to leave no man behind, you are to find him and his men, then radio for evacuation. Along with operators Adams and Lugo, you explore the ruins in search of the source of a distress signal. The ensuing scenarios combine ecological catastrophe and issues of moral culpability with a recognizable military narrative. Over the course of fifteen chapters, the game elicits intense visions of the worst of war, including civilian casualties, chemical and remote warfare, massacre, blight, torture, bare life, and extreme psychological breakdown. Walt Williams, the lead developer, created a storyline that he describes as initially inspired by Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. Accordingly, *The Line* has been widely referred to as the *Apocalypse Now* of video games, since it generally employs themes around the psychological cost of war and presents an ignoble vision of conflict.[1]

Spec Ops: The Line is visually gratifying, narratively rich, and eminently playable. At first glance, one might mistakenly presume this game to be a hawkish military shooter, and perhaps not even the most exemplary of what the genre has to offer. However, in its departure from typical genre conventions, it challenges the industry to deliver more thought-provoking content. Toward illuminating its iconoclasm, this chapter considers the game's troubled mythic construction of the normative (i.e., white, heterosexual, male) American soldier under the duress of inglorious conflict, against a racialized backdrop of an Arab megacity in ruins.

Normative Soldiers, Good and Necessary Wars

Criticism of wargames circulates around their pedagogical role at inuring players to militarized vision and violence, as well as their parallel uses as simulations for recruitment and training (see, e.g., Payne and Huntemann 2009; Dyer-Witherford et al. 2009; Gagnon 2010; Mead 2013). While there is much

Figure 28.1
Walker and his men enter Dubai.

sociology-based debate in the popular media of the direct connection between enacting violence in a game and doing the same in the lived world, less studied is the critical cultural approach that games may enlighten. Nina Huntemann draws connections between post-9/11 anxieties and the potential benefits of catharsis that thematically related games may demonstrate relative to that traumatic event. While she does not advocate for making generalizations around how a player may respond to the content of games like the *Kuma\War*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *SOCOM*, *Splinter Cell*, and *Rainbow Six* series, Huntemann does suggest a correlation between a phobic post-9/11 response and ideological constructions around masculinity as embracing warlike and jingoistic worldviews, or engaging in revenge fantasies (Huntemann

2009, 223–36). Tanine Allison (2010), elucidating present-day anxieties through World War II historical military shooters, analyzes an ideological sleight-of-hand in which such games point to a moment firmly constructed in history as good and necessary, and then nest contemporary conflicts within that sensibility. A player may then reenact the presented scenarios until they are surgically executed and perfected. This is achieved by presenting a system of missions that function within the formal structure of gameplay as goals and rewards, with no lived-world repercussions.

> Even if the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan do not fit the model that is propounded by these games—a war of precision aiming and firing in which enemies are clearly located and there is no

collateral damage—these games still reflect the fantasy of what modern war is: clean, precise, fast-paced, and with quantifiable success. Video games present war as something that can be controlled and mastered, without post-traumatic stress disorder or real death (Allison 2010, 192).

This seems to resonate with a contemporary political affective moment that for some heralds the death of "traditional America"[2] or generates fears around the erosion of the American way of life and its moral firmament, which was more stable in the historical configuration of World War II as a "good war."

It is true that most military shooters presume the heroic and moral rectitude of their protagonists, and that they may appeal to a player's desire to feel a certain way about their soldier-heroes. However, *Spec Ops: The Line* proves an exception to Allison's characterization of "good" military masculinity by presenting compelling missions that beg for successful and efficient achievement on a game-mechanical level, while on a narrative level grating against the character's (and by extension the player's) presumed sense of righteousness and moral culpability. In this, *Spec Ops: The Line* uniquely departs from its genre conventions (Payne 2014).

Matters are complicated by Walker's gradual mental breakdown and delusions, not to mention the duplicitous aims of those with which he comes into contact. In one mission completed at the behest of a CIA agent named Riggs (Chapter 10, Part 2, "Stealing Water"), he agrees to collaborate in protecting the last remaining water supply in Dubai from the rogue 33rd. Too late, Walker learns the truth: that Riggs in fact depended upon controlling or destroying the supply, thereby killing all witnesses, so that the ugly truth about the 33rd would not be learned by the world. When, inevitably, the last of the water is destroyed by Riggs, Walker can only stand by and watch, knowing he's conferred a death sentence to both the remaining soldiers and the refugees. In fact, the vast majority of missions in the game are executed against soldiers bearing the same uniforms as your own, or in flagrant disregard for the original humanitarian mission of the 33rd. Early on, confusion obfuscates this truth, and missions are undertaken with seemingly earnest intentions. However, this does not last, and before long the combatants have transitioned from a nebulously described assortment of Arabs to very specific targets who were initially the objectives of a rescue operation.

Mirroring as Self-Criticality

The cinematic referentiality of the game mobilizes semantic and syntactic elements of contemporary war films to lend it authenticity. The game is replete with military clichés that are self-consciously generic to the critical viewer. Gregarious banter at the introduction of the core team of characters creates a sense of a preexisting bond. A strong physical

manifestation of elite training is conveyed through the practiced, efficient execution of commands. Stylized renderings of one-dimensional supersoldiers depict them banding together on a mission. Each of the Delta team soldiers is normative in the sense of embodying a cocksure, rugged, militarized manhood. However, as the narrative unfolds, these tropes turn

in on themselves as the player begins to question Walker's thinning rationalizations for violence, and his perpetual straying from mission—as well as his team's persisting loyalty. Players begin to want to distance themselves from the very character with which they should most identify.

Load screens didactically signal critique with phrases like:

"Do you feel like a hero yet?"

"You are still a good person."

"You cannot understand, nor do you want to."

"This is all your fault."

"What happens in Dubai stays in Dubai."

These are messages charged with a kind of reverse polarity to the action of the game, which is itself dubious. These undermine the presumption that one plays from a central position of good, or as the hero of the narrative. Particularly, the latter-most phrase makes reference to a popular advertising slogan, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas," which suggests letting go of one's inhibitions in the sequestered party zone of "Sin City." In the case of the game's fictive Dubai, it is not pleasure but an orgy of violence that is to remain behind—which configures the central figure as villain. In an interview, Williams, lead writer of *Spec Ops: The Line*, insists that anything there purely for shock value was removed. He wanted all moral dilemmas to be realistic. The game, he asserts, asks the player to

Figure 28.2
Walker's face reflected in the in-game camera monitor for mortar controls.

"hold a mirror up to [himself] and say, 'Why am I playing this game the way that I am playing it?'" (McAllister 2012)

This notion of self-reflection appears as a leitmotif in *Spec Ops: The Line*, through the repeated use of reflective surfaces. The literal and metaphorical use of mirroring as an analogue of self-criticality, or in other words, looking at oneself in the mirror, invokes culpability and lack of ethical clarity, as well as moments of revelation that interrupt the character's coherent sense of self. The most potent example of this is in the pivotal white phosphorus assault in Chapter 8, "The Gate," during which Walker uses incendiary warfare on American 33rd soldiers that far outnumber his team. If the player wishes to continue, there is no viable alternative but to play through Walker's choice. This 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 imaged in 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 phosphorus mortars are not unlike those used for game play: a case containing toggles, buttons, and a screen. First, despite the outspoken protest of Lugo, your team launches a camera device that will provide a bird's-eye view, to be observed on the monitor within the player screen. Most poignantly, Walker's face is imaged in the reflective surface of the camera monitor, so that the player sees simultaneously an onscreen "self" and the remote "bomb-vision" of white phosphorus charges deployed at "your" command. Initially, the enemy "army" is viewed from this distancing militarized logic, reduced to little

more than roaming white marks. Given the battlefield advantage of the "high ground" and the superior weaponry, the slaughter below is thorough, and impersonal in its remoteness. The playability feels easy compared to other elements of gameplay. But the actual damage—chemically burned soldiers writhing on the ground in pain and frozen in grisly death poses—is agonizing to survey later.

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.[3] Here women and children are configured not as having agency, but as passive victims. While women imaged in *Spec Ops: The Line* are initially a moral *motivation* for the ensuing conflict, they can no longer figure into Walker's savior-hero fantasy. Importantly, they function as civilian victims of excessive force used by a supposed hero. Internal fighting flares again when Lugo reacts to the horror, claiming they've gone too far this time. The question of who exactly has gone too far may point to Walker, Adams, and Lugo on one level; to the game designers, who painfully conjure the recent use of this weapon in Iraq by both Saddam Hussein and the United States; and the US military itself, which has defended its use of white phosphorus as not being in violation of chemical warfare prohibitions on account of its official classification as "incendiary" (*US Used White Phosphorus in Iraq* 2005).[4]

It is crucial to note as well that gameplay is also limited in the continuum of decisions it allows. That is to say, while moral quandaries are presented, gameplay does not permit the player to opt for a more morally sound path. It is not possible to play as

Figure 28.3
Woman and child victims of white phosphorus mortar attack.

"good" or "evil" Walker. In one scenario (Chapter 9, "The Road"), for example, one must choose between shooting a man who stole water out of desperation—a grave offense—or the soldier who killed the thief's family in an attempt to apprehend him. Under threat of sniper fire, one must decide: Shoot 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 the varying options, none of them profoundly impact the trajectory of the story or major outcomes. Still, the game was generally praised for seeking to integrate moral questions into the shooter genre, and for its subversive narrative. This is likely due to its effective mobilization of a tension between the core mechanic of the military-themed shooter, and the fact that shooting often means butchering civilian noncombatants and brothers-in-arms.

Mobilizing Ludonarrative Dissonance

Walt Williams, lead developer of *Spec Ops: The Line*, spoke at the 2013 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, which he seized as an opportunity to do a wrap-up of the game and his team's intentions. He spoke precisely about the tools they used to intervene in the typical genre conventions of military

action shooters, which operate on ludic and narrative levels. He identified the role of "ludonarrative dissonance," or in other words, the oppositional friction between the stated narrative contract of the game and its mechanical contract. This term was initially constructed by Clint Hocking as a way of characterizing a flaw in a game, whereby the message contained within the narrative is somehow contradicted by actions undertaken in game play, or perhaps in the point-scoring system. For example, Hocking (2007) critiqued the purported narrative of self-sacrifice in *Bioshock* (2007) while the gameplay itself, through its opportunism and violence, ultimately sends a message of self-interest. In his presentation, entitled "We Are Not Heroes: Contextualizing Violence through Narrative," Williams summarized how the core game mechanic of *Spec Ops: The Line* shapes the limitations of what the player can do:

> 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. (2013)

A shooter requires shooting, plain and simple, so it is not as if Walker, our main character, is going to do much else. But instead of being a flaw of the game design, 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's transformation. As one critic opined, "as the game goes forward, it becomes weirder and weirder that he's killing so many people" (Hamilton 2013).

Still, the heteronormative 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" (Watts, 256). In *Spec Ops: The Line*, Captain Walker performs his role of super-soldier, seeking to dominate every scenario with military might. However, as the game progresses, he and his team physically transform from a well-oiled and surgically accurate unit to burned, bloodied, traumatized aggressors. Their psychological breakdown mirrors this, but in particular, Walker's verbalizations to his men shift from jocular confidence to stern aggression, then finally psychotic rage.

This transition from supersoldier to mass murderer occurs across the arc of fifteen chapters of gameplay. In the early portions of the game, the narrative models hackneyed homosocial relations in terms of the mythmaking of soldiering as an unconditional, loving bond between men. This depoliticizes the image into a band-of-brothers myth, which functions through its focus on the individual and interpersonal relations, rather than larger political forces at play in the circumstances of soldiers in battle (Dyer-Witherford and Peuter, 97–122). But as key characters of *Spec Ops: The Line* become more exhausted, injured, filthy, surly, hopeless, and morally bankrupt, verbal cues by the primary character move from clichéd war film dialogue to unhinged bloodlust. Walker mutates into a menacing figure, a terrorist who imposes his ideology and will onto others in pursuit of unsanctioned objectives no one else shares. Through this, the image of the ideal soldier as embodiment of righteous justice is tarnished, which makes it harder for the player to sustain identification.

This is particularly heightened in Chapter 14, "The Bridge," near the end of the game. By this

time, one teammate, Lugo, has been eliminated; both Adams and the player character Walker are injured and under extreme duress. During this challenging mission, you face a large number of enemies in a courtyard that has been converted into a chain of bunkers with snipers, stationary machine guns and elite soldiers. Slowly pressing forward from one stronghold to the next, Walker's verbal abuses can be heard as he berates Adams to encourage him to fight. In one exceedingly perverse moment, you engage your long-dead operator Lugo in combat—a nightmarish delusion that he has returned as a fully armored and armed "heavy" to avenge his own death. Overhearing the verbal commands of your adversaries, it is clear from the nature of their agitated comments that you embody death itself for them. Though they greatly outnumber you, they are audibly terrified. The only option during this scenario is direct, meat-grinding brutality; it is not possible to progress using stealth or any other strategic avoidance of violence. Game critic Brendan Keogh in his compelling, book-length documentation of his experiences and insights while playing *Spec Ops: The Line*, excellently captures the inevitable conclusion drawn by players at this point:

Yet again, through the pervasive fear of the 33rd in this final stages, *The Line* manages to comment on something prevalent in all video games: the unreality of how much death and destruction the player brings along with them. *The Line* doesn't offer an alternative to this—it never offers alternatives—but instead it treats that death and destruction (and the player who brings it) as it should be treated: monstrous, impossible, terrifying, wrong (Keogh, loc.2278–82).

Walker's metamorphosis under the duress of battle from the beginning to the end, and his mounting rationalizations that become tantamount to dementia, agitate a deep-seated longing for the stability of that normative male role. But it is stripped away and eroded throughout the game until what remains is psychopathy and the figure of hero as menace who uses pure, excessive violence as a destructive form of expression. Walker is effective in the execution of his elite training, but his motivations are flawed and his ultimate endeavor to save lives is utterly impotent at this point. This is brilliantly underscored in the verbal articulations of Walker's insanity and aggression that are so overblown as to alienate the player from his cracked interiority.

Conclusion

With little exception, the protagonists of first- and third-person military shooters assuredly fight on the side of right, and the games are designed to encourage affinity in the player for the player character. In blurring the ethical boundary between soldier and mass murderer, *Spec Ops: The Line* indicts the idealized notions of militarized masculinity established at the beginning of the game and recognizable from

long-established genre conventions. In this, "the line" that is crossed may refer to excessive use of the core mechanic, specifically shooting and other forms of heinous violence, as a part of the game progression. Consequently, the enacted fantasies of full-spectrum dominance remain technically fulfilled but morally frustrated. As a player, this frustration results largely from feeling dragged into Walker's

insanity and self-righteous military display, without having any real power to choose otherwise, within the scope of options the genre compels.

This encapsulates the "wicked problem" of the game: how to keep playing and remain willing to partake in the insanity, how to make enjoyment of a shooter possible, despite the ethical self-scrutiny that the game invites (Sicart, 111–16). While cinematic elements and the signifiers of military shooters initially present a conventional vision, *Spec Ops: The Line* deftly exploits morally condemnable tactics as a strategy for confounding players' expectations that their character represents the good (Sadd). This troubles the implicit rules of the military shooter genre by sullying the gratification that would usually accompany a well-executed mission. When it is ultimately learned that John Konrad is long dead, and his voice heard throughout the game is a mere projection of Walker's delusion, the decimation of the militarized male protagonist is complete. What remains is the psychological and ethical ruin of a Western soldier-ideal, whose time has passed and whose prescribed role as a protector/gatekeeper against the backdrop of an Arab heart of darkness is defunct. The moral high ground of rescue is collapsed; the steady foundation of the righteous ends justifying a violent means is shattered. Walker's victory can only be seen as pyrrhic, in the sense that the emotional trauma and collateral damage of the battlefield far outweighs the gains. As for the question of whether the game itself effectively makes an ethical critique, it does model the relationship between the raw brutality of military conflict in its immediacy, and the sense-making that takes place to narrativize it later. The friction between these two things is virtually impossible not to contemplate through gameplay, thanks to the dissonance between *Spec Ops: The Line*'s primary mechanic of shooting, and its legitimizing narrative of militarized humanitarianism.

About the Author

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Notes

1. *Apocalypse Now* is widely known to be a loose interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*.

2. Bill O'Reilly, American television host of *The O'Reilly Factor* on the Fox News Channel, discusses

this, but it is common terminology used by conservatives to speak about what they believe to be a break from "traditional" America, especially in the wake of President Barack Obama's 2012 reelection.

3. Even as of the game's release in 2012, it is extremely rare to see children imaged in military conflict games, and even rarer for the player-character to be able to hurt or kill them.

4. White phosphorus is a key ingredient in flares, used to illuminate areas, or to create smoke. Because it comes from an "incendiary" device, namely flares, it has not been officially categorized by regulating bodies, such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (2005), as a chemical weapon. Its status is undefined, and thus it skirts regulations.