chapter eight

THE RUBBLE AND THE RUIN

Race, Gender, and Sites of Inglorious Conflict in Spec Ops: The Line

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SPEC OPS: THE LINE (2012), DESIGNED BY YAGER DEVELOPMENT AND published by 2K Games, is a third-person military shooter whose primary target is the military shooter itself. As Captain Martin Walker, you (the player) have been ordered to Dubai on a search and recon mission, after receiving a radio distress signal from deep within a city buried beneath shifting dunes for six months. Mega-sandstorms and domestic conflict have battered Dubai relentlessly, forcing its inhabitants to abandon the city. Privileged members of society and those accorded citizenship have been evacuated. Many were lost, but through on-screen messages, you gather that thousands of immigrant workers were left behind when the storms hit, and they are still fending for themselves as the tempests grow worse. Army Colonel John Konrad, a decorated war hero who once saved you in Kabul, is somewhere in the heart of Dubai with his men. As Walker, motivated by the loyalty of a life-debt and committed to leave no man behind, you are to find Konrad and any survivors and then radio for evacuation. Along with fellow Delta Force operators Adams and Lugo—whom you may minimally direct to neutralize a target, stun victims, or provide medical aid to each other—you explore the ruins in search of the source of a distress signal. The ensuing scenarios combine ecological apocalypse and humanitarian intervention with issues of race, gender, and moral culpability within a recognizable military narrative.

The Line—with its core game mechanic of shooting—is eminently playable, narratively rich, and visually gratifying. At first glance, one might mistakenly presume this game to be jingoistic, and perhaps not even the most exemplary of what the genre has to offer. However, it challenged the mainstream industry to deliver more thought-provoking content. With the aim of elucidating the game's genre

iconoclasm, this chapter plumbs the significance of three notable aspects of *Spec Ops: The Line*: (1) the racialized world-making of an Arab megacity in ruins as a site of deep anxiety around non-Western modernity, (2) a mythic American construction of militarized masculinity as troubled and profoundly eroded under the duress of inglorious conflict, and (3) the mobilization of women and children as humanitarian symbols of victimhood to rationalize a military response. Through analysis of story, gameplay, and the establishment of a convincing sense of place, I discuss what the physical rubble and moral ruin visualized in the game mean within the context in which it was made. In its critical address of ideological tropes around the military action shooter, *The Line* allows us to consider its potentials, failures, and successes in mobilizing internal self-criticality within a dominant game genre. In a larger sense, this investigation provides one possible model of understanding playable representations, from a cultural studies and visual studies perspective, that form complex expressions of the "dream life" of a culture.[1] These playable representations are in conversation with and constitutive of the deepest fears, hopes, desires, and anxieties of their times.

Place as Race: Into a New *Heart of Darkness*

The affective impact of setting forms a key strategy of the game's intervention. *The Line* has been widely referred to as the *Apocalypse Now* of video games. Key developers of the content and imagery of the game have enumerated many filmic and televisual influences, such as *Jacob's Ladder* (1990, Adrian Lyne), *Spider* (2002, David Cronenberg), *Generation Kill* (2004, HBO), *Black Hawk Down* (2001, Ridley Scott), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979, Francis Ford Coppola). Certainly, many others, like *Platoon* (1986, Oliver Stone), the HBO series *Band of Brothers* (2001), and *Jarhead* (2005, Sam Mendes), bear mentioning. Walt Williams, lead developer and writer, created a story line that he describes as initially inspired by Joseph Conrad's 1899 anticolonialist novella *Heart of Darkness*, significant because it is the primary inspiration for *Apocalypse Now*.[2] *The Line* borrows affect from these earlier forms by distilling some of their most potent filmic moments and representing them in a new context.

In the cases of both the original novella, set in the colonial Belgian Congo, and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, set in Cambodia during the Vietnam War, a perilous and profoundly alien sense of place is established. Similarly, the game space is phantasmagoric, hostile, and uncanny. The first time a churning, howling 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. As you flail about in the wind like a rag doll, visibility is reduced by the red cloud of sand, and weapons aiming becomes unsteady and fallible. You (as Walker) might find yourself in a discotheque, the black-lit interior still glowing incongruously with garish decoration while you navigate the space, collecting ammunition and confirming enemy kills. Exterior scenes of resort-like locations, palm trees still decorated with twinkling

lights, discarded Jet Skis, public sculpture, and billboard advertisements stand out against makeshift sandbag gun turrets and chunks of blackened human flesh that evidence recent carnage.

Williams, on the choice of Dubai as a backdrop, described 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."[3] The world of the game—a fictitious Dubai—is one of a megacity in ruins, "the world's most opulent ruin," in which the constructed value of worldly sumptuousness and grandeur stands revealed for its true worthlessness and absurdity.[4] The metropolis is now a place beyond domestication, taken over by nature, unlivable (figure 8.1). 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. The deviation of the narrative from a strictly wartime scenario typical of most realistic military shooters is key here. Dubai is not a site of aggressive military intervention but of a natural disaster, and the moving targets of this shooter are a combination of desperate refugees of varied and mostly unspecified origins, CIA operatives, and rogue US Army Thirty-Third Battalion soldiers, purportedly under Konrad's command. In this way, the game differs greatly from most military shooters and stealth games set in the present day, or that recreate historical conflicts. In most cases, there is a clearly defined foe, such as Nazi soldiers during World War II or terrorists in the post-9/11 War on Terror. *The Line*, however, immediately presents the moral ambiguity of an ill-defined enemy—one who is unexpected, or even a compatriot wearing the same uniform. As a player progresses through the increasingly hellish spaces of this third-person shooter, it becomes increasingly apparent that

Figure 8.1. A fictitious Dubai, destroyed (*Spec Ops: The Line* game still)

Walker (player), Adams, and Lugo cannot avoid wrenching choices between life and death for which there is no ethical high ground and that the humanitarian mission of rescue will quickly devolve into chaos and confusion. Over the course of fifteen chapters, a player moves deeper and deeper into a heart of darkness, and 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.

What can this self-conscious choice of location mean, within the sociopolitical context in which *The Line* was made? *Heart of Darkness* has largely become an iconic representation of the brutality of conquest. The relationship between the original literary work, its liberal adaptation in film, and *The Line* is one in which the latter circles back to both earlier forms, while mining their cultural currency to maximum effect. This interlocking set of relations allows the game to engage with both the original colonial narrative and its cinematic reinterpretation, one that stands as an iconic cultural emblem of American moral feeling. Released four years after the war's end, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* gathers up that moral feeling around the "bad" war, which resulted largely from the excessive visualization of war in mass media for the first time, made possible through news footage and photojournalistic reportage. *Apocalypse Now* adapts Joseph Conrad's narrative into a disorienting, nightmarish, acid-war vision of being caught in the turbine blades of the civilizing engine. The game draws on the capital and potency of these irruptions in culture but then recontextualizes them once again; it forms a palimpsest of imperialist ethical crisis, traumatic encounter with the other, with bad war, moral feeling, and now entanglement with conflicts in the Arab world.

Much has been written on the problems of imaging war in light of persistent questions of moral culpability—particularly in relation to the Vietnam War.[5] In her analysis of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* as cultural refrains expressing imperialist moral foreboding and culpability, Neda Atanasoski writes, "The 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."[6] Similarly, *The Line*'s narrative reveals anxiety around the widening chasm between the idea of doing something good and the actual destruction that ensues in the mobilization of purported humanitarian effort.

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 parallel the actions of both the literary and filmic characters of Kurtz; in doing so, he calls on their already-concentrated cultural potency. For example, in the beginning of the game, Walker and his Delta Force are drawn into conflict with nonspecific combatants who appear to be refugees, and even then the team attempts to communicate with the refugees before engaging in conflict. But by chapter 4, "The Refugees," the

player is asked to openly fire on US soldiers in uniform—"our own guys," as Adams protests—with only the flimsy rationalization that they are "rogue" to validate these actions. Complicity with Walker's actions is established through play, as you must interact with the game for the narrative to move forward and for the game to progress.

The Line's variety of darkness is tied intimately to the sense of place created through natural elements, but notably, to human-made monuments as well. For example, the Burj Khalifa (Khalifa Tower), currently the tallest structure in the world, figures prominently in the landscape of actual Dubai, as well as in the iconography of the fictive, imagined city. In-game, it becomes a symbol of man's hubris, a twenty-first-century tower of Babel from which the rogue Konrad conveys his mad philosophy to Walker. An absurdity in such a place, the Burj Khalifa stands as a gleaming obelisk to failure. Particularly, one may draw out the Babel analogy further and think of the collapse of language and communication throughout: Walker and his team initially encounter men with whom they cannot converse; translation is botched with refugees of the storm who have splintered off into warlike tribal factions. This marks all future moments of communication, which are correspondingly misleading, broken, shot through with trickery, mistranslated, or unfulfilled. There are failed attempts to gather information from subjects who are dying (one, notably from sand in his lungs—a biological territory of language that is being taken back, as well). The so-called sand wall inhibits contact with the world beyond. There are communications that are traps, defunct news outlet spaces overrun by dunes and looting, and multiple instances of failure to communicate—or at times to even know precisely what one is seeing and hearing.

There is a cloying sense of the incomprehensibility of events, of rationalized motivations, of human nature as polymorphous and eminently destructive. With this hampered ability to gauge your own position as a player in a game that is too large to understand, the space of Dubai is a sublime nightmare. High capitalism in ruin is evidenced in the picked-through remains of luxury automobiles, jets, and yachts, partially consumed by the desert—a paradise of third-world riches lost. Oceans of sand dunes give way to the disorienting extreme verticality of skyscrapers virtually buried in sand, like an urban Grand Canyon.

Exteriors already give clear indication of the constructed value of worldly things, but it is with entry into interior spaces of abandoned hotels, clubs, aquatic centers, and other luxury sites that the uncanny nature of fictitious Dubai comes into view. For example, in chapter 3, titled "Underneath," Walker regains consciousness after crashing through a glass ceiling into a defunct hotel. The highly decorative interior features details proper to a grand hotel—rich blue and gold décor, with monumental peacock statues and ostentatious touches. Signs of excess such as bottles of champagne litter the site. The shifting sands have made it an underground cavern where it was once aboveground. The familiar made strange is heightened as Walker and his team engage in an extended firefight in an effort to escape their ultraconsumerist tomb alive. This spectacular setting is one of many

instances in which the inside and the outside become confused, up and down reversed, and the spaces of civilization revert to sites of urban warfare and barbarity.

In short, the atmospheric, imagined Dubai of the game becomes a site of trauma for Walker, in a fictive heart of darkness of 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 that owes much of its affect to films like *Apocalypse Now*. The obvious reading is of the rubble of Dubai as an externalization of Walker's crumbling mental interiority. Less charitable is a 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. *Heart of Darkness* was set in the Belgian Congo and underscored the degree to which the European colonizing presence defined itself in opposition to its African subjects and undomesticated land. *Apocalypse Now* was made during a time in which the United States defined itself in contradistinction to the hostile presence of communism in Asia, specifically Vietnam. Coppola's Captain Willard searches for Colonel Kurtz in a foreboding dark jungle that is constructed in the film as pure peril and savagery. The site of *The Line* departs from this by presenting a once-grand metropolis that has been reabsorbed by nature. This dystopia of the opulent space resonates readily with a more recent cultural moment in which the presence of rapid modernization and industrialization in Asia (particularly the Arab world and China) produces anxiety for the West, which has until now tenuously maintained its superpower status. Specifically, the Western fear of the rise of non-Western economic, industrial, and technological centers has manifested itself in framing the ideological construction of rapid modernization of these regions as rapacious in their exploitation of labor and destruction of the ecosystem.[7] This fear is ironic, considering the United States attained its dominant status by similar means.

The fictive Dubai becomes, in this context, 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 megacity of indulgence. On the other hand, 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 megacity 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 of Europe and the West as the seat of scientific and technological advancement in the world. Modernization is coded as Eurocentric, and therefore its presence in Asia is correspondingly marked as inauthentic, or a parody. Non-Western modernity is fundamentally skewed as an imitation of what it means to be genuinely civilized. Under this reading, the storms do not destroy these Arab spaces; rather nature returns them to the savagery that lies beneath their gilded surface. The sandstorms tear away a veneer to reveal the essence of the space, which is conceived of as implicitly barbarous.

The shifting sands of this false Dubai's topography thus recall a destabilized space of constant reshaping and becoming. The land itself can become an asset too—piled heavily against windows, the sand can be released by shooting out the glass, causing a dune to shift and overwhelm enemies. Its shanty ruins of a global city, peopled by rogue insurgents and cast-off migrant laborers subsisting in the wreckage of Arab empire, bespeak a horror of order broken down, seepage between civilization and nature, self and other. What is the connection between that space and our space, between that context and our own? It is a hypothetical scenario of a "state of exception" in which extreme (martial) measures are necessary for survival and to stave off the chaos.[8] It has, in a sense, returned to an authentic state of disorder, certainly not Edenic, but nevertheless sublime. In this capacity, the game activates an anxiety around the global megacity and what it stands for but does not cogently critique that fear. This is interestingly discordant with the game's apparent critique of the ubiquitous military genre, which indicates that while the game questions the genre conventions of the military shooter, it does not critique its larger visual cultural politics of militarism. That is, it critiques neither the jingoistic militarism of the culture that gives rise to such representations nor the anti-Arab sentiments that (especially in the present political moment) tend to shore up those ideas.

Normative Soldiers, Good and Necessary Wars

Criticism of war games circulates around their pedagogical role in inuring players to militarized vision and violence, as well as their parallel uses as simulations for training and, more importantly, recruitment.[9] While there is much sociology-based discussion in the popular media of the direct connection between enacting violence in a game and doing the same in the lived world, what is understudied is the critical cultural approach that games may enlighten. Tanine Allison, for example, speaking primarily of World War II historical military shooters, analyzes an ideological sleight of hand through 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. Allison writes,

> 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.[10]

This seems to resonate with a contemporary political affective moment that for some heralds the death of "traditional America"[11] or 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 the soldier-hero. However, *The Line* proves an exception to Allison's characterization by presenting compelling missions that beg for successful and efficient achievement on a game-mechanics 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, *The Line* uniquely departs from its genre conventions.

In one scenario, 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 (figure 8.2). While some nuances of narrative result from the varying options, none of them profoundly impact the trajectory of the story in terms of providing morally satisfying outcomes. The game has generally been praised for seeking to integrate ethical questions into the shooter genre and for its subversive narrative. As this particular example shows, possible ethical conversations issue not from providing a good option and a bad one but by making all the choices gut-wrenching ones.[12]

The cinematic referentiality of the game additionally recalls semantic and syntactic elements of contemporary war films and relies largely on preexisting visual culture to lend it authenticity. The game is replete with military clichés that are self-consciously, annoyingly saccharine to the critical viewer. Gregarious

Figure 8.2. Whom to shoot: soldier or civilian? (*Spec Ops: The Line* game still)

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 practiced, efficient execution of commands; and stylized renderings of one-dimensional supersoldiers depict them banding together on a mission. However, as the narrative unfolds, these tropes turn in on themselves as the player begins to question Walker's thinning excuses for violence and his perpetual straying from the mission. 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 messages are charged with a kind of reverse polarity to the action of the game, which is itself dubious. They undermine the presumption that one plays from a central position of good, or as the hero of the narrative. Particularly, the lattermost 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 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 "hold a mirror up to [himself] and say, 'Why am I playing this game the way that I am playing it?'"[13] This notion of self-reflection appears as a refrain in *The Line*, through the use of mirrors and reflective images as a trope, to which I return later.

Players and game critics alike conveyed a marked affective response to the murky moral scenarios. A flurry of reviews reflected on how the game made reviewers feel. This likely attested to the potency of the narrative and aesthetic elements that encouraged rumination on the cost of military violence and framed Captain Walker's treacherous journey as stingingly tragic. While moral quandaries are presented, gameplay consistently denies the player the chance to perform as good or evil Walker. Brendan Keogh explores this in his critical analysis of *The Line*. He 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."[14] The game, he asserts, invokes criticality by forcing you as a player to consider your intentions while you play, and your own rationalizations of in-game brutality as having been enacted without choice or, in other words, as inevitable.

Williams seized his opportunity at the 2013 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco 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 importance of "ludonarrative dissonance" or, in other words, the oppositional friction between the stated narrative contract of the game and its mechanical contract.[15] 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 gameplay—or perhaps in the point-scoring system. For example, Hocking critiqued the purported narrative of self-sacrifice in *BioShock* (2007, 2K Boston and 2K Australia) because the gameplay itself, through its opportunism and violence, ultimately sends a message of self-interest. In his presentation "We Are Not Heroes: Contextualizing Violence through Narrative," Williams summarized his stance on the subject of violence in his own game, and games in general:

> 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, and I think that has to do with how we treat our games and how we treat our genres, which is that 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.[16]

Fundamentally, the core game mechanic of *The Line*, he explained, shapes the limitations of what the player can do. A shooter requires shooting, plain and simple, so it is not as if Walker is going to do much else. But this dissonance between the ideals of a humanitarian mission and the use of excessive violence in the process can be maximized, the apparent hypocrisy mined as constitutive of the main character, as opposed to being a flaw of the game design. As one critic opined, "as the game goes forward, it becomes weirder and weirder that he's killing so many people."[17]

Gender and the Theater of War

Evan Watts has discussed ruins as a prevalent aesthetic of many game spaces and what this might mean symbolically in terms of social structures and the toppling of a phallic order. In this interpretation, architectural structures become "monuments of a masculine-dominated society" and a ruin then functions as "a space that offers freedom from the same gender-oppressive institutions that once permeated them, and thus sites of empowerment."[18] In the case of the ruin aesthetic of *The Line*, the site does engender a kind of freedom, but of the nihilistic variety. In this mythic structure, men can be men, but their violent mark-making is aberrant. Watts analyzes this through several games, most notably the underwater ruins of *BioShock*, arguing that in a larger sense, even though the new social order arising is "horrific," it at least reveals the heteronormative order to be socially

constructed and therefore malleable.[19] While in the case of *The Line*, where gender reversals may not be at play in the same way that Watts lays out, it is important to consider the imaging of white (normative) masculinity in crisis and its relation to an imagined site of social chaos.[20]

Watts is correct insofar that, as sophisticated expressions, games do model gender standards, power relations, racial biases, class differentials, and sexual norms. 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. Though the patriarchal order is disrupted in the false Dubai, the result is chaos, as opposed to an alternative or gender-reversed solution. Jennifer Terry, a scholar working at the intersection of war, technological innovation, and humanitarian intervention, traces the ways in which history has shown gender and the promise of women's liberation to be a tool of empire. Through a reading of Amy Kaplan's work, she elucidates the ideological role of gender in garnering support for expansion:

> Humanitarian 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: these are fundamental ideological mystifications burying wounds and deaths that continue to haunt the United States.[21]

Terry ultimately contends that militarism, humanitarianism, and imperialism are of the same order, that their destructive powers are mobilized through ideologies of saving the other, and that the wounds this destruction leaves are legible traces of geopolitical and biopolitical ideology. Similarly, the scorched or otherwise traumatized bodies of women imaged in *The Line* become both a moral motivation for the ensuing conflict, as well as a necessary collateral cost of the conflict (figure 8.3). That they are neither playable characters nor secondary interactants points to their configuration as pawns as opposed to agents—at least in the world of the game.

Still, 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,"[22] Sara Humphreys discusses games as cultural expressions that "influence the development of cultural, racial, political, social, and national identities."[23] Games, she argues, re-present myth models: "powerful paradigmatic myths that serve as models for the construction of similar myths."[24] She cites the Western action genre of games, specifically *Red Dead Redemption* (2010, Rockstar San Diego), as proselytizing American exceptionalism, neoliberalism, and white

Figure 8.3. Female refugee from a cutscene (*Spec Ops: The Line* game still)

supremacy. In *The Line*, Captain Walker performs his role of supersoldier, 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 to burned, bloodied, traumatized aggressors. Their psychological breakdown mirrors this, but particularly 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 for the stability of that normative male role. But it is eroded throughout the game until what remains is psychopathy and a figure of hero as menace 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 impotent.

This transformation 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.[25] This is consistent with the military shooter genre. But as key characters of *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 transforms into a menacing figure, a terrorist who imposes his ideology and will on others in pursuit of unsanctioned objectives no one else shares. Through this shifting representation,

which is slowly revealed by play, the image of the ideal soldier as the embodiment of righteous justice is tarnished, and the critique takes shape.

The literal and metaphorical use of mirroring as an analog of self-criticality, or in other words, looking at one's self in the mirror, becomes a leitmotif within the game. Culpability and ethical clarity are closely connected to key peaks in the game's narrative arc, as well as moments of revelation that interrupt the character's coherent sense of self. The most potent example is in the pivotal white phosphorous assault in chapter 8, "The Gate," during which Walker uses incendiary warfare on American Thirty-Third Battalion 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 phosphorous mortars are not unlike those used for gameplay—a case with 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 you (the player) simultaneously see an on-screen self and the remote bomb-vision of white phosphorous charges deployed at your command. It is self-reflection, literalized. The resultant casualties—chemically burned soldiers writhing on the ground in pain and frozen in grisly death poses—are 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 (figure 8.4). 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 have 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 phosphorous as not being in violation of chemical warfare prohibitions on account of its official classification as "incendiary."[26]

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. In this, 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.

Figure 8.4. Victims of white phosphorous (*Spec Ops: The Line* game still)

The protagonist of most first- and third-person military shooters assuredly fights on the side of right. In this game, 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. In fact, after using the aforementioned cinematic elements and military shooter signifiers to present a conventional vision, *The Line* deftly exploits morally condemnable tactics as a strategy for confounding players' expectations that they represent the good.

Conclusion

In "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*," Matthew Payne suggests that "indeed, *Spec Ops* might be the game industry's first major, anti-war military shooter."[27] Arguing that the game breaks with the tradition of military entertainment games by injecting the whole scenario of its play with "discordant feeling," Payne concludes that a genre critique is at work.[28] By interrupting the basic pleasures of the military shooter (which he describes as a pleasure of escapism within the context of an affective bond to the lived world), *Spec Ops* creates a productive discomfort for the player that gives rise to internal self-reflection on the "banal pleasures of militainment."[29] What, ultimately, are the possibilities for self-critical address of ideological constructions that typically populate the military game genre? This is, after all, a fraught time for creative contribution. The ongoing actions in the Arab world—namely, the Gulf Wars and the Global War on Terrorism—have been incessantly and immediately represented in visual culture (with the repetition of animated graphics of war, smart-bomb vision, and planes striking towers). The global effort demands a political unity that charges

any critique with being antiwar and anti-nation. The question for a creative producer then becomes how to respond through visual culture when the only two viable options seem to be support or silence. Critique virtually guarantees censure, while complicity engenders propaganda. The work of the imagination demands more than this, so what becomes of the expression? What generation of meaning is possible?

Yes, *The Line* does contain a critique of the cost of war (particularly the psychological toll) at the story level. It does borrow from the visual culture of the antiwar film (*Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, etc.), and it does break with the military shooter genre's jingoism by turning its core action against itself. From a gender equity perspective, women are configured as victims without agency or as absent, in both the diegesis of the game and as a tool of the larger critique it seems to make—a retrograde maneuver in an otherwise sophisticated intervention. As Keogh has remarked, "In 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."[30] More interestingly, the racialized sense of place points to fears around what the modernization of non-Western centers mean for the United States, with its imperiled superpower status. But the pleasure in the game comes from tapping into a deeper American cultural imaginary of the Arab world as regressing into calamity and mired in extreme poverty, reinforced through continual media representation. "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country," Susan Sontag once wrote, "is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds."[31] With this game, the horror of the everyday imaging of ruin and agony in remote places is brought into our living rooms in a new way. *The Line* presents a playable opportunity for those of a particular socialization—who see themselves mirrored in and functioning through Walker—to play their part in the destruction of a region that occupies a deep-seated racialized fear, that of a dark world rising up as a technological, wealthy, and research-rich competitor on the global stage. Returning Dubai, a gleaming symbol of that Arab world modernity, to a state of savagery, no doubt constitutes a cathartic vision for a certain type of nationalist, whose American identity is bound up in global dominance and the other as a manifestation of lack. And all this is achieved while Walker deludes himself that he (and by extension you) are on a humanitarian mission. The melancholic irony of *Spec Ops: The Line* issues, finally, from a friction between its call for technical mastery of gameplay and a moral bankruptcy that lies beneath it.

What are the rubble and ruin of this game? The rubble is of fallen empire. This is wishful thinking as it represents a rising Arab empire with all the fears and fantasies this possibility engenders. It also represents the conceit of a moralistic claim of judgment over the burgeoning modernization, opulence, and global economic dominance of that other space. Is the affective force of the atrocity

witnessed—and enacted within gameplay—not only one of violence but one of the dissolution between the self and the other? The ruin is of an ideal, in this case the psychological and ethical ruin of a Western soldier ideal, whose time has passed and whose prescribed role as a protector/gatekeeper against the encroaching chaos of an Arab heart of darkness is defunct.

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Notes

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1. This notion of a culture's "dream life" comes from Stuart Hall, *The Origins of Cultural Studies: A Lecture*, produced and edited by Sut Jhally (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006), DVD.

2. The connection to *Heart of Darkness* was frequently mentioned in interviews with Walt Williams. See, for example, Hollander Cooper, "Spec Ops: The Line—Learn about the Story with Lead Writer Walt Williams," *GamesRadar+*, March 30, 2012, http://www.gamesradar.com/spec-ops-line-learn-about-story-lead-writer-walt-williams/.

3. Gillen McAllister, "Spec Ops: The Line GRTV Interview," *Gamereactor*, June 21, 2012, http://www.gamereactor.eu/news/33921/Spec+Ops%3AThe+Line+GRTV+Interview/.

4. From the game documentation included with PlayStation 3 version packaging.

5. For a thorough deconstruction of the relationship between *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*, and shifting attitudes around the Vietnam War and humanitarian intervention, see Neda Atanasoski, "The Vietnam War and the Ethics of Failure: *Heart of Darkness* and the Emergence of Humanitarian Feeling at the Limits of Imperial Critique," in *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 73–101.

6. Ibid., 76.

7. Among the many recent examples, see the nine-part Showtime documentary television series focusing on climate change, *Years of Living Dangerously* (Season 1, directed by Joel Bach and David Gelber), which premiered April 2014. See also the documentary of photographer Edward Burtynsky, *Manufactured Landscapes*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal (Foundry Films, 2007), whose photographs of ecological destruction and labor abuse in China starkly point to Western anxieties around the ascension of China to superpower status through rapid industrialization, urbanization projects, and energy revolution.

8. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9. There are many examples, but see especially Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

2009); and Nina B. Huntemann and Matt Payne, eds., *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (London: Routledge, 2009).

10. Tanine Allison, "The World War II Video Game, Adaptation, and Postmodern History," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2010): 192.

11. Bill O'Reilly, American television host of *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News Channel, uses this common terminology, with which conservatives speak about what they believe to be a break from "traditional" America. Bill O'Reilly, "Talking Points Memo: Is Traditional America Gone for Good?" *Fox News*, November 12, 2012, http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2012/11/13/bill-oreilly-traditional-america-gone-good.

12. For an excellent analysis of the ethical gameplay design in *The Line*, see Miguel Sicart, "Into Play," in *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 111–116.

13. McAllister, "Spec Ops."

14. Brendan Keogh, *Killing Is Harmless: A Critical Reading of Spec Ops: The Line* (Marden, Australia: Stolen Projects, 2013), Kindle edition, loc. 2394.

15. Williams's discussion is part of a 2007 debate that resulted from Clint Hocking's coining of the phrase "ludonarrative dissonance" on his blog. See Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*: The Problem of What the Game Is About," *Click Nothing*, October 7, 2007, http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

16. Walt Williams, "We Are Not Heroes: Contextualizing Violence through Narrative," presentation at Game Developers Conference, March 27, 2013, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/188964/Video_Spec_Ops_The_Line_contextualizes_violence_through_story.php.

17. Kirk Hamilton, "*Spec Ops* Writer on Violent Games: 'We're Better Than That,'" *Kotaku*, March 27, 2013, http://kotaku.com/spec-ops-writer-on-violent-games-were-better-than-th-460992384.

18. Evan Watts, "Ruin, Gender, and Digital Games," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 3 and 4 (2011): 248.

19. Ibid., 255.

20. Here I want to be clear that although there are three soldiers including Walker, Lugo, and Adams (Euro-American, Italian American, and African American, respectively), it is Walker who is losing his mind.

21. Jennifer Terry, "Significant Injury: War, Medicine, and Empire in Claudia's Case," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1–2 (2009): 200–225.

22. Watts, "Ruin, Gender, and Digital Games," 255–256.

23. Sara Humphreys, "Rejuvenating 'Eternal Inequality' on the Digital Frontiers of *Red Dead Redemption*," *Western American Literature* 47, no. 2 (2012): 202.

24. Ibid.

25. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter discuss this in "Banal War: *Full Spectrum Warrior*," in *Games of Empire*, 97–122.

26. "US Used White Phosphorus in Iraq," *BBC News*, November 16, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4440664.stm.

27. Matthew Thomas Payne, "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 4 (2014): 265–282. See also Matthew Thomas Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

28. Payne, "War Bytes," 266.

29. Ibid., 268.

30. Keogh, *Killing Is Harmless*, loc. 1239–1241.

31. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 18.