

## War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Matthew Thomas Payne

To cite this article: Matthew Thomas Payne (2014) War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31:4, 265-282, DOI: [10.1080/15295036.2014.881518](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2014.881518)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2014.881518>



Published online: 13 Feb 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1844



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

# War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Matthew Thomas Payne

*The vast majority of commercial military-themed video games produced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks celebrate America's War on Terror as a grave but necessary and patriotic undertaking. This essay argues that the multi-platform Spec Ops: The Line (2012) runs counter to this tradition in recent military entertainment (or militainment) by engendering a host of gameplay displeasures that critique the interactive attractions of mainstream first- and third-person shooters. In particular, the game's brutal mise-en-scène, its intertextual references to popular war media, and its real and imagined opportunities for player choice create a discordant feeling that lays bare the problematic ease with which most video war games indulge in their nationalistic power fantasies. The result is a game that wields its affective distance as a critique of the necessary illusion that all military shooters trade in, but one that so few acknowledge.*

*Keywords:* Video Games; Militainment; Shooter; Military; War; Pleasure; Spec Ops; Critique; Interactivity; Game Studies

## **Introduction: “Do you feel like a hero yet?”**

Like a team of first responders answering their nation's desperate call, the culture industries were swift in crafting a raft of nationalistically redemptive military entertainment, or “militainment,” in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These pro-War on Terror commodities assumed an eclectic multiplicity of forms: clothing, toys, novels, comics, music videos, films, TV shows, video games, etc. (Andersen, 2006; Faludi, 2007; Stahl, 2006, 2010). Not surprisingly, the “military

---

Matthew Thomas Payne (Ph.D. in Media Studies, University of Texas; MFA Film Production, Boston University) is an Assistant Professor of Telecommunication & Film at the University of Alabama. He is co-editor of *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence* and *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*. Matthew is currently working on a book manuscript that examines the production and reception of military-themed shooter games following the September 11th terrorist attacks. Correspondence to: Matthew Thomas Payne, Telecommunications & Film, University of Alabama, Box 870152 Tuscaloosa Alabama 35487, USA. Email: [mtpayne@ua.edu](mailto:mtpayne@ua.edu)

shooter” genre of video games—those that immerse players in first- and third-person perspectives on historical and fictional battlefields—proved to be among the most commercially popular post-9/11 offerings. Activision’s *Call of Duty* (2007), Electronic Arts’s *Battlefield*, and Ubisoft’s “Tom Clancy”-branded franchises, to name but a few, have all been cross-platform hits, with each series earning billions of dollars for their publishers.

Yet the multimedia battle for the “hearts and minds” of citizen-consumers is neither a seamless campaign, nor is it an all-or-nothing, zero-sum affair. Inevitable contradictions emerge from such a widely distributed cultural and commercial undertaking, and with these incongruities come opportunities for social resistance. Counter-games, peace-building serious games, in-game protests, and machinima projects are but a few ways that artists, educators, critics, and designers have critiqued the game industry’s virtual war profiteering and its public relations efforts in games like *America’s Army* (see, Galloway, 2006, Chapter 5; Bogost, 2006b; Chan, 2010; and Chien 2010, respectively). Media scholars have likewise scrutinized the ways some commercial titles deconstruct their own design strategies and subvert their interactive pleasures (Galloway, 2006, Chapter 3; Higgin, 2010). This essay takes a similar tack at understanding, by way of a detailed textual analysis, how a contemporary combat game engages in a self-reflective critique that makes unpleasant the martial activities typically celebrated in military shooters.

At first glance, *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), designed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games, is your prototypical modern-day military shooter. In the game’s campaign you play as U.S. Army Captain Martin Walker who is tasked with locating the soldiers of the 33rd Battalion (aka “the Damned 33rd”) who went missing after cataclysmic sandstorms all but obliterated the city of Dubai. Alongside fellow Delta Force operatives Lt. Adams and Sgt. Lugo, Capt. Walker traverses the decimated and sand-swept ruins for signs of survivors and for Colonel John Konrad, the commanding officer of the Damned 33rd. The fictional conceits of the game’s narrative setup, while demonstrably implausible, are no more ludicrous than the “save the world” campaigns common to franchise favorites *Halo*, *Gears of War*, and *Call of Duty*. The game’s cover-and-fire combat system is also exceedingly familiar, and is perhaps even dated when compared to its commercial rivals. Indeed, the opening levels of *Spec Ops* evidence nothing that we have not seen or played elsewhere, begging the question: “How is this game any different from every other military shooter on the market?”

In seeming response to this question, the game gradually introduces narrative uncertainties and gameplay oddities foreign to the shooter genre. For example, Walker and company are forced to fight and kill fellow American GIs; Walker is increasingly plagued by hallucinations that cloud his judgment; the team slaughters unarmed civilians; and even the game’s interstitial loading screens taunt the player with rhetorical questions and cynical quotes (i.e. “Do you feel like a hero yet?” and “Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you”). As one makes their way through the campaign, it becomes evident that, first impressions to the contrary, this game is *not* what it purports to be. Indeed, *Spec Ops* might be the game industry’s first major, anti-war military shooter.

Modern military shooters are a popular form of banal war media (Mirzoeff, 2005) that normalize combat spectacle as entertainment in the service of supporting American Empire (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2010). If the initial story premise and gameplay design of *Spec Ops* are painfully banal, its ultimate experiential objectives are not. And therein lies its critique of militainment. *Spec Ops* is not a parody of military shooters that lampoons tired conventions through representational excess and sophomoric humor (e.g. *Duty Calls*, *Duke Nukem*, and *Bulletstorm*). Instead, the game's critique is achieved by combining narrative elements with gameplay demands that challenge the conventional military shooter's basic gaming pleasures.

### Battling “Realism”

Video games are pleasurable for many because they offer an escape from one's reality. They are personally meaningful, however, because they cannot help but to connect to one's lived reality. It is this affective bond to one's world that gives games their cultural weight. It is also this visceral connection between the real and the virtual that cultural producers of militainment and marketers of war games must negotiate when selling their virtual wars lest they be deemed “too realistic” (Payne, 2012).

Realism—understood as a set of claims about the world—is not necessarily synonymous with verisimilitude, or a media technology's ability to re-present worldly sights and sounds. And yet, the entertainment industry purposefully conflates the war game's ability to render photorealistic graphics and surround sound with broader notions of experiential realism. Militainment producers, and those associated with the military-entertainment complex (Andersen, 2006; Stockwell & Muir, 2003) wage this kind of campaign because the discursive slippage muddies the proverbial waters, helping them sidestep criticisms that their wares elide unpleasant aspects of warfare such as the killing of civilians and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while celebrating more palatable elements like spectacular explosions, battlefield tactics, and recreations of historical firefights (Campbell, 2008; Fullerton, 2008; Hess, 2007).

To be realistic, there must be meaningful connections between a game's formal design elements and its users' play contexts. If, however, there is disaffecting discord between the game's textual claims about reality and the player's personal experiences of the reality simulated on screen, the game loses its credibility. Game scholars have given different names to this virtual loss of faith; Bogost (2006a) calls it “simulation fever” (p. 108), and Galloway (2006) says such disagreements fail his “congruence requirement” (p. 78). Indeed, the reason why most U.S. military shooters are not realist texts for Galloway is because their simulated activities are such fantastic departures from the demands of actual warfighting: “... there must be some kind of congruence, some type of fidelity of context that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one's thumbs, into the game environment and back again ... Without it there is no true realism” (2006, p. 78). Thus, the user's play environment and his or her life history come together as the experiential backdrop against which the seeming reality or unreality of a gaming experience is judged.

Part of what makes *Spec Ops* so remarkable is the player context that the game assumes. The game does not presume that its audience is knowledgeable about the city of Dubai (the game's location), that players have any familiarity with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (its inspirational, source material), or that gamers understand the protocols of military "search and rescue" missions (the game's narrative catalyst). Instead, the player context that *Spec Ops* assumes, and which it subsequently deconstructs in an unremitting fashion, is *the experience of playing military video games*. In other words, the experiential realism of *Spec Ops* derives not from the game's fidelity to some worldly reality; its experiential realism emerges from the game's troubling of the aesthetic relationship that we typically enjoy in first- and third-person shooters. The game critiques the attempt by any war game—itsself included—to pleasurably immerse users in war's horrors. This is the true mission of *Spec Ops*.

*Spec Ops*, as it is detailed shortly, possesses consciousness-raising potential because it performs a virtual slight of hand that inverts the player's expectations concerning the rules and conventions of the shooter, effectively throwing into dramatic relief the unreality of the genre's fictional conceits. The following sections scrutinize how *Spec Ops* creates an uncomfortable gaming experience that asks players to reflect on the quotidian and banal pleasures of militainment. Media scholar Tanya Krzywinska (2006) underscores the utility that close readings serve for critical media analyses, stating: "Being up close and personal with a given game forces you to think through its specificity, helping thereby to ensure against the temptations of overgeneralization and testing the validity of top-down analyses of 'games' as a general category" (p. 121). We should hasten to add "military shooters" to the list of game categories that are often subject to overgeneralizations without regard to the design choices of individual titles. Krzywinska continues:

The analysis of the game as text means that it is approached as an aesthetic form, but not in the same way as other texts. The focus is on the relationship between text and player in terms of game play, design, style, reception, and cultural / semantic context. To regard games as texts does not therefore mean simply that they are stories. (p. 121)

Not only should we refrain from treating military shooters as if they function in ideological lockstep as pro-military or pro-war propaganda without attending to their specific design choices, we should likewise recognize how individual combat titles go about producing their textual pleasures (Annandale, 2010). Or, in the case of *Spec Ops*, how a game might generate its displeasures.

### **The Critical Displeasures of *Spec Ops: The Line***

*"Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort caused by holding two conflicting ideas simultaneously."*

—Loading screen in *Spec Ops: The Line*

In an October 2007 blog post, game developer Clint Hocking coined the term “ludonarrative dissonance” to describe his main design complaint with that year’s critically acclaimed first-person shooter, *Bioshock*. Taking place in the crumbling underwater city of Rapture and set in the dystopian future, *Bioshock*’s overt critique of Ayn Rand’s objectivism was lauded for its engaging fusion of gameplay mechanics with its philosophical themes, all set within a richly stylized, art deco world. But, for Hocking, the game committed a fundamental design sin that generated a sense of, what he termed, ludonarrative dissonance. This disaffecting state was the result of the game pitting its “narrative contract” against its “ludic contract.” That is, for Hocking, what *Bioshock* communicates as a story is at irreconcilable odds with what *Bioshock* communicates as a set of rules and play mechanics. Hocking (2007) states:

By throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition, the game seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all. The leveraging of the game’s narrative structure against its ludic structure all but destroys the player’s ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest (which I almost did) or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story, and then finish it for the mere sake of finishing it.

*Bioshock* cannot both purport to embrace the self-centered freedoms of objectivism in its gameplay design (giving the player the liberty to make ethical or unethical choices), and then present its players with a singular, unalterable storyline that undermines those freedoms without creating an affective disconnect that pulls the gamer out of the experience. For instance, *Bioshock* players can choose to save the game’s vulnerable “Little Sister” characters or harvest energy from them, killing them in the process (Hocking’s ludic contract). However, when it comes to experiencing the game’s overall story, players have no choice other than to act selflessly by opposing the game’s main antagonist (narrative contract). Conventionally “good” video game design dictates that there be harmony between a game’s narrative and the interactive assets for exploring and interfacing with that fictional world. In other words, the game’s interactive *form* and the game’s *content* should be logically compatible, if not mutually reinforcing. Not only does ludonarrative dissonance break a game’s holding power, but it also violates the presumptive social contract that most games have with their consumers by generating displeasure instead of pleasure.

But let us imagine for a moment if the point of playing a video game was not to lose oneself in escapist pleasures. What if the negative feelings resulting from ludonarrative dissonance was not some byproduct of miscalculated design but was instead purposefully crafted and mobilized for ends other than gratifying the player? Would players be “game” for such a potentially un-fun adventure? Might such a different set of expectations, in turn, liberate designers to create more diverse gameplay experiences, and encourage publishers to bankroll them? Perhaps Walt Williams—the lead writer for *Spec Ops*—wrestled with these questions after witnessing *Bioshock*’s creative team in action (Pitts, 2012).

Although working primarily as an assistant producer on *Bioshock*'s PR materials, Williams was especially impressed with the work of the game's creative team, led by director Ken Levine (who has since been elevated by the popular press as a luminary game auteur). A few years later, when working with Yager Development, Williams, along with co-writer Richard Pearsey and lead designer Cory Davis, would be tasked with creating a different kind of military shooter for the publisher 2K Games. In Cory Davis' words, "[2K and Yager] wanted to do something that was a very serious and dark and mature take on a war story" (Pitts, 2012). This alternative and daring design directive emboldened Williams, Pearsey, Davis, and the Yager team to craft a title centered on dissonance and dis-identification, in lieu of immersion and identification. The result is a game that wields its affective distance as a critique of the necessary illusion that all military shooters trade in, but one that so few acknowledge. In particular, the game's brutal *mise-en-scène*, its intertextual references to other war media, and its real and imagined opportunities for player choice, create a discordant feeling that lays bare the ease with which most video war games indulge in their power fantasies.

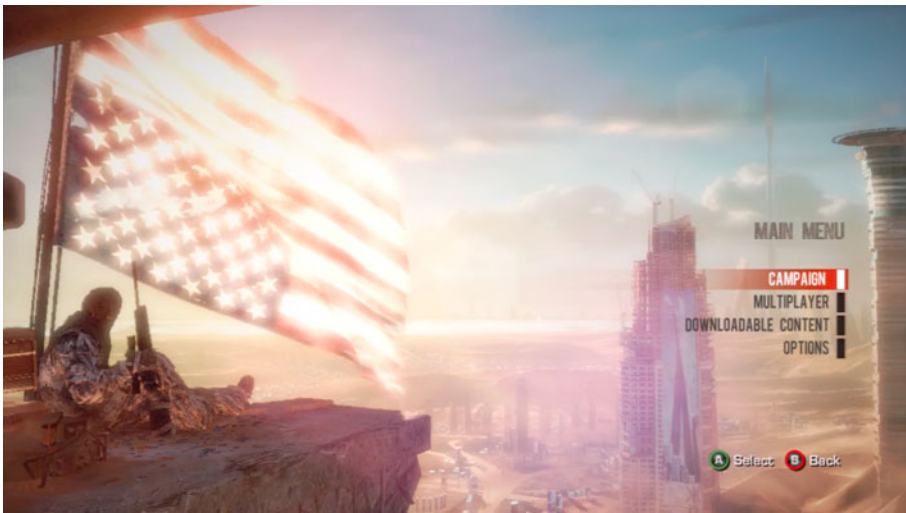
#### *A Mise-en-scène of Madness: The Deterioration of Spaces and Faces*

As a third-person, cover-based shooter, *Spec Ops* places a practical gameplay emphasis on understanding your avatar and fire squad's spatial relationships to the environment, and using level assets to gain strategic advantage against the AI-controlled opponents. The creative team wisely chose to utilize the game's *mise-en-scène*—in particular, its level construction and avatar design—to underscore Capt. Walker's descent into madness. By situating the player in the increasingly suffocating vestiges of Western civilization, and by altering Walker's appearance to reflect his transformation from a competent squad leader into a murderous monster, *Spec Ops* presents a damning indictment of the representational practices of "othering" that are so typical of post-9/11 combat games set in the Middle East.

Although the playable gamespaces in *Spec Ops* are inspired by the actual city of Dubai, the creative team did not recreate the modern metropolis with any close fidelity because it functions primarily in an allegorical capacity. Instead of representing technological progress and economic vitality, the post-sandstorm skyscrapers of Dubai stand as crumbling tombstones of capitalism that support little life, save for the scavenger birds that pick at corpses. The characters' deteriorating emotional states match the player's descent-oriented exploration of the dead city. Examples of this descent thematic are plentiful: the player's helicopter plummets from the sky during the game's opening set piece; the first cinematic cutscene shows Walker looking out of a skyscraper down onto the city of Dubai; and Walker and company often travel from one skyscraper to another using a series of ziplines. Additionally, the earth occasionally opens up, sucking characters to their sandy deaths. In fact, the sand that covers and fills the buildings emerges itself as a menacing character. Lead designer Cory Davis, notes: "The sand avalanches and everything else we did, they were meant to be a part of the setting and a deepening

element of the setting... Sand is everywhere in *Spec Ops*" (Pitts, 2012). On several occasions, Walker and company are blinded and overwhelmed by passing sandstorms, and the player can periodically use the sand trapped behind glass as an environmental hazard to bury opponents.

*Spec Ops*' Dubai is clearly not our worldly Dubai. The decimated city and Walker's loss of control are allegorical proxies for the social and psychological costs of America's militarism (although this distinction matters not to the U.A.E., as the country and its regional allies have banned the game [Joscelyne, 2012]). Even the game's opening menu screen previews its spatial politics by displaying an upside down American flag in the foreground and a lost civilization behind it.



**Figure 1** Menu Screen of *Spec Ops: The Line*.

As Walker and company search for Konrad, they explore a series of spaces typically absent from mid-East military shooters. Instead of fighting tribal militants in mountainous outposts, or dueling enemy combatants across bombed-out city streets, the player traverses the sandblasted and abandoned opulence of Western civilization: a TV studio, an aquatic coliseum, luxury hotels and spas, an aquarium, etc.

These *de facto* graveyards contain no shortage of horrors. During one of the game's grislier moments, Walker's group discovers the remains of Konrad's command squad amid an underground mass grave. The team has been tortured and executed. With few exceptions, gamers rarely see depictions of slaughtered American soldiers in militainment. Furthermore, these slumped, hooded bodies sitting before blood-splattered American flags cannot help but call to mind the infamous photos of the detainee abuses at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad, Iraq. Or the scene might, for an older generation of gamers, remind them



of the horrors inflicted on U.S. soldiers imprisoned at “Hanoi Hilton” during the Vietnam War.



**Figure 2** Walker’s crew uncovers a mass grave.

As the player’s mission devolves from a “search and rescue” operation into military fratricide, the physical and mental toll begins to show on Walker’s face and body. The player’s third-person view of the Walker avatar offers a unique position for witnessing this metamorphosis. Walker is an easy projective surface for players at the beginning of the game, indistinguishable from countless other likeable if unremarkable heroes of American war games. But as Walker makes increasingly hideous and unjustifiable decisions, and as he becomes more physically ravaged, it becomes increasingly difficult for the player to identify with this screen surrogate.

Walker’s choices also begin to wear on the player as well. Players look forward to facing down all manner of monsters in games; they are less accustomed to becoming one. In military shooters—especially those produced after the 9/11 terrorist attacks—the typical enemy is a non-white, “Other” who speaks a different language and who worships a different god. The design team wanted to change this tired trope for *Spec Ops*. Cory Davis, the game’s lead designer, saw their alternative strategy as a success, stating:

Seeing gamers go into the experience hoping to have a fun, shooty bro-romp through a middle eastern environment... killing soulless, villainous enemies who are difficult to relate to (and thus easy to pull the trigger on), and then slowly finding themselves falling down the rabbit hole into a darker, more contemplative, more surreal, and character-driven experience has been amazing for me. (Purchase, 2012)

Captain Walker's transformation reaches its horrific but inevitable conclusion during the "Chapter 14: The Bridge" level. During an exchange with Adams, Sgt. Adams asks, "How we gonna do this?" referring to their combat plan. Walker answers, "Kill everything that moves." To which Adams replies, "Sounds like a plan." By severing itself from the shackles of verisimilitude and what passes as military realism in the commercial shooter market (Payne, 2012), the game includes combat "externalities" typically absent from shooters like civilian deaths, the psychological trauma of mortal combat, and how these repeated traumas have monstrous effects.

*"This isn't right ... We did this already": The critical intertextuality of Spec Ops*

Allusions to popular war media abound in *Spec Ops: The Line*. On the whole, the game's intertextual referencing of other militainment properties serve two purposes: first, they situate the game within a larger cultural milieu of combat fare (proving that the creative team knows the genre); and, second, and more germane to this article's thesis, the game's intertextuality breaks the diegetic fourth wall by addressing the player directly. With regard to the former point, *Spec Ops* playfully gestures to the popular war media that have been creative touchstones for the design team and which gamers should easily recognize. For example, the game's various achievements—awards earned for specific gameplay actions—are named after famous combat films (e.g. *Apocalypse Now*, *Deer Hunter*, *Three Kings*, *The Great Escape*, *We Were Soldiers*), recruitment slogans from popular ad campaigns (e.g. All You Can Be, Army of One, Aim High), as well as classic war novels (e.g. *A Bridge Too Far*, *A Farewell to Arms*). Additionally, the game's guitar-heavy musical score features numerous tracks associated with Vietnam war media, including Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner," Deep Purple's "Hush," and "Nowhere to Run" popularized by the Motown group, Martha and the Vandellas (Music credits, 2011).

*Spec Ops'* intertextuality would hardly be remarkable though if it did not push beyond this fairly superficial level of referentiality. After all, naming levels and characters after popular war properties is standard operating procedure in military shooters. Far less common, and certainly more difficult to achieve, are introducing those textual elements and gameplay devices that hail the gamer not as a character of that fictional universe, but as a corporeal gamer who exists on the other side of the screen. The player gets an early sense of this hyperconscious design strategy when the opening production credits include the player's gamertag under the title "Special Guest." From its very beginning *Spec Ops* hails the player as a collaborator in its fabricated fiction. In addition to posing biting rhetorical questions like, "Do you feel like a hero yet?" the loading screens tease the player with prompts like, "Can you even remember why you came here?" "To kill for entertainment is harmless," and "The U.S. military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" The brutality of *Spec Ops'* combat and the eventual critique of that brutality, goes beyond the game's diegetic and narrative bounds to implicate the gamer as a co-conspirator in the creation of its on-screen violence.

*Spec Ops* also injects sardonic elements into the fallen city of Dubai that further lampoon military shooter conventions. For example, when Walker and company pass through the lobby of a movie theater during a firefight in an abandoned shopping area, they come across large promotional displays for *Legions of Krakator III*, a fictional sci-fi movie that bears a striking resemblance to any number of “space marine” game franchises like *Doom*, *Warhammer 40K*, or *Gears of War*; games that share shelf space with *Spec Ops*.

The game’s acts of Brechtian distanciation are built into the structure of the missions as well, exemplified in particular by the recursive helicopter sequence. The story of *Spec Ops* opens with a dramatic *in media res* set piece above the city of Dubai. Stationed at a helicopter’s minigun, the player is tasked with shooting down the enemy choppers that fill the city’s skies. After shooting down numerous enemies, a sandstorm blinds the remaining pilots as an exploding helicopter careens into the player’s vehicle. The screen then fades to black, and we transition to a cutscene that takes us back to the beginning of the *Spec Ops* story. Twelve levels later (during the “Chapter 12: The Rooftops” level), the player is once again seated in the same chopper behind the same mounted gun. The player has returned to the narrative point where their gaming adventure began, having now witnessed the actions that brought them to that moment. But instead of simply playing through the stage without comment, Walker voices his confusion to Lugo and Adams:

Walker: Wait. Wait, this isn’t right!

Lugo: Well it’s too late now.

Walker: Nah ... I mean ... we did this already.

Adams: What do you mean?

Walker: Ah fuck it! It’s nothing! Just shake these fucking guys!

Like the player controlling him, Walker realizes that he has been here before. Sharing this insight about the game’s iterative structure paradoxically aligns the character’s diegetic experiences with the player’s extra-diegetic knowledge while further alienating Walker from the player by insisting on their separate identities. Walker’s awareness of replaying the helicopter level is also a clear jab at the numbingly repetitive gameplay activities of shooters, where players must try over and over to best countless enemies before they can advance to the next stage.

“*What do you want me to do?*”: *Player freedom & the illusion of choice in Spec Ops*

*Spec Ops* is also a strident meta-commentary on the aesthetic pleasures of agency in video games, and the necessary illusion of those freedoms. Games seeking to engender a sense of immersion have to guard against breaking the illusion of choice lest they make for alienating experiences where players become too aware of the rules

and design restrictions imposed on them. But *Spec Ops* is unlike most games. The “freedom” at the heart of the *Spec Ops* experience is summed up nicely by one of its loading screen’s title cards (borrowed from an un-credited Jean-Paul Sartre): “Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.” Instead of giving players a world where they can affect meaningful change, *Spec Ops* makes the player feel trapped; they have no good choices, and every move they make leads to worse results and harder choices. Framing the game as a mystery story, co-writer Richard Pearsey contends:

Yes, it’s a shooter, but these guys don’t know what’s happened in [Dubai] ... The job is to go out and find survivors, and their perception is evolving of what’s going on. It’s a rescue mission that’s gone as bad as it could possibly go because you kill everyone that you rescue. (Pitts, 2012)

Thus, along with its bleak narrative and the inability or unwillingness to identify as Walker, the dissonant gameplay is achieved partly by the gamer’s vexed ability to control the hopeless situation.

Beyond making tactical decisions of where to stand and when to fire, there are a few pronounced moments of player choice in *Spec Ops*. Perhaps not surprisingly, these occasions also focus on whether or not to shoot. What is different about these moments, however, is that the game shifts from posing standard shooter questions—where to stand, how to outflank opponents, what kind of weapon to use—to asking a singular, existential one: to shoot or not to shoot? For instance, in “Chapter 8,” Walker’s crew comes across two men who are being held by the Damned 33rd for their supposed crimes. One of them is a civilian who stole water for his family. The other is a soldier who retaliated by killing that man’s family for the thievery. Both are now hanging upside-down by their feet. Konrad asks Walker over the radio, “What is justice?” and instructs him to execute one man or the other. The failure to choose will result in both of their deaths. Do you kill the captured civilian? The soldier? Do you fire at their captors? It is a telling choice that the creative team opted not to insert an overt user interface prompt that would clearly communicate the player’s available choices. Instead, the player is encouraged to simply act by shooting or not shooting. And because the player is not rewarded or punished for his or her decision, *Spec Ops* further underscores the seeming pointlessness of the player’s combat agency while deepening its sense of existential crisis.

Later in “Chapter 13,” after Lugo has been lynched by an angry mob, Walker must deal with a menacing crowd that is pelting him and Adams with rocks. Here again the player must act. Do you fire into the air to disperse the crowd? Do you fire into the throng? Do nothing? Finally, during the game’s “Epilogue,” a small rescue force confronts Walker hoping to take him into custody. Do you surrender to the Americans, or do you continue the fight against these soldiers as well? Powerful as these moments of choice are, the game’s most potent commentary on killing and dying in shooter games comes when the player has no real choice.

The activities in the “Chapter 8: The Gate” level—often referred to simply as the “white phosphorous” level—demonstrate dramatically how the illusion of choice

reinforces the game's production of dissonance while also indicting the genre's celebratory handling of advanced technologies and "smart" weapons. Here, our heroes must eliminate an overwhelming force to liberate civilian hostages. Walker and company decide to shell their opponents with mortar rounds loaded with white phosphorus, an incendiary weapon that has been used by U.S. troops in Vietnam and Fallujah, Iraq (in so-called "shake and bake" operations against insurgents), and which typically kills through smoke inhalation or second- and third-degree burns. Once the shelling begins, the player is treated to a black and white bird's-eye view of the battlefield courtesy of a surveillance camera. The action appears sterile and precise, and is modeled after the popular "Death from Above" level in the 2007 blockbuster, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Yet the key, affective difference between *Spec Ops*' handling of its remote shelling and firing rounds from the safe remove of the AC-130 gunship in *Call of Duty* (and, indeed, other games like it) is what comes next. Instead of simply progressing to the next firefight, the player traverses the burning battlefield and witnesses first-hand the consequences of their actions. The few U.S. soldiers who are still alive scream in pain, many begging for death. The game leaves it up to the player to kill the injured or leave them to their wounds. The game's co-writer, Walt Williams, notes on the playtesting of this level:

People were focus testing [that scene] and...they were pausing the game and they were leaving the room ... Some people were playing through it, waiting for it to be over and they were being very, kind of, upset that this had happened. That we had put them through this particular moment. It was affecting people very emotionally. (Pitts, 2012)

The Yager team acknowledge the problematic bind that they are putting the gamer in during this telling, pre-bombing exchange:



**Figure 3** The sterile view from the mortar's aerial camera in *Spec Ops: The Line*.



**Figure 4** The chaotic view from the ground following the mortar attack in *Spec Ops*.

Lugo: “You’re fucking kidding, right? That’s white phosphorus.

Walker: Yeah, I know what it is.

Lugo: You’ve seen what this shit does! You know we can’t use it.

Adams: We might not have a choice, Lugo.

Lugo: There’s always a choice.

Walker: No, there’s really not.

After they traverse the burning battlefield, Walker’s team discovers that the civilians that they were trying to rescue have also been burned alive. The other soldiers were trying to move them to a more secure place—to keep them safe from Walker (and the player). Again, Williams:

We wanted the player to be stuck in that same kind of situation, even to the point of maybe hating us, as the designer, or hating the game for, in many ways, tricking them, making them feel like we had cheated the experience and forced them to do this thing ... They would have to decide whether or not they could choose to keep playing a game like this after this moment, or if they would be pissed to the point of putting the controller down and saying, “No, this is too much for me, I’m done with this. Fuck this game.” (Klepek, 2012)

To be clear, there is no way for the player to complete “The Gate” level without using the white phosphorous. The fact that the game forces the player’s hand on this point is not especially remarkable. (Indeed, most games demand that players complete specific tasks for level and story progression.) What is remarkable, though, is that *Spec Ops* brazenly flaunts its profoundly unpleasant design choice.



**Figure 5** Walker's use of white phosphorous kills enemy combatants and civilians

## Conclusion

Walt Williams and his collaborators at Yager embedded their critique of the power fantasy that dominates commercial shooters into the core narrative and gameplay design of *Spec Ops*. As it has been argued, their game is not about the pleasurable fusion between Capt. Walker and the player; it is about the unrelenting friction between the two. Instead of coaxing the player into identifying with the main character and enjoying the co-creation of an immersive fantasy, the player's actions make them guilty of war crimes. *Spec Ops* is no military fantasy. *Spec Ops* is a humanitarian nightmare.

Williams began his address at the 2013 Game Developers Conference with the following admission:

It's going to maybe sound like I'm being critical of violent games, but I want to say right off the bat that 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. (Hamilton, 2013)

His tempered language to the contrary, Williams *is* being critical of violent games; he is critical of their uninspired design tropes, and he is critical of their tired narratives. Later he continues:

[Developers have] allowed killing to become not simply mundane, but run-of-the-mill ... Not only that: *filler*. The more enemies you kill, the more it feels like it's padded out. For an industry that in the past couple years has been striving to create more emotional connectedness between the game and the user, it's interesting how we've allowed killing to stay so mundane. (Hamilton, 2013)

Of course, what Williams is not saying here, but which is evident in *Spec Ops*, is that this criticism does not simply lie with his colleagues. Gamers are likewise culpable. The human slaughter that dominates *Spec Ops* is excessively mundane, an ordinariness that abounds in military shooters. However, *Spec Ops*' ordinary brutality is disturbed by the game's unmanageable deaths. Walker rationalizes away these atrocities in the name of completing his mission, just as the gamer sets aside disquieting feelings to finish the game.

The game's shifting critique from the shooter genre to its admonishment of its players reaches its climax when Konrad's true fate and identity are revealed. When Walker arrives at the missing Colonel's penthouse, he discovers a decaying corpse holding a gun. It is Konrad's body, and it is clear that he killed himself some time ago. Through a quick montage, it is revealed that all of Konrad's radio correspondences with Walker have been in Walker's head.

"If the truth is undeniable, you create your own," Konrad says to Walker. Surgical strikes. Friendly fire. Collateral damage. These and similar euphemisms recast war's unfathomable horrors as necessary evils. Military shooters largely avoid depicting dead civilians and slaughtered American soldiers because they fail to conform to our expectations of popular militainment and because they make for disaffecting experiences. And, despite having a direct hand in racking up absurd numbers of kills, shooters rarely implicate players as collaborators in committing these virtual slaughters. *Spec Ops*' acerbic loading screens, its immersion-breaking gameplay elements, and the self-conscious mission design prevent gamers from ever truly losing themselves in a military fantasy. The player has committed too many horrors to hide behind something as facile as a euphemism. When the "You are still a good person," loading screen rings hollow, it is evident that *Spec Ops* has deconstructed both understandings of the military "shooter"—the genre and the player.

As rare as it is, *Spec Ops* is not the first piece of mass entertainment to critique an unpopular military engagement shortly after the cessation of hostilities. In fact, there is a rich vein of scholarship focusing on Hollywood's handling of military identity, masculinity, and the national crisis of consciousness (among other concerns) following the fall of Saigon. Moreover, there are striking parallels between Hollywood's response to Vietnam (in films like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *First Blood*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*) and *Spec Ops*' handling of the invasion and occupation of Iraq that put these controversial texts into a historical lineage. The points of overlap include the theme of inevitability (i.e., war is hell, but it is also said to be necessary), and the privileging of character and protecting one's band of brothers above understanding the social policies that begat the conflict (see, Stahl (2009), and what Wetta and Novelli (2003) identify in more recent war cinema as the "New Patriotism").

Yet the most notable point of similarity between *Spec Ops* and its cinematic antecedents is that they all possess a "dialectical disorientation" (Rasmussen & Downey, 1991) that creates a sense of political ambivalence. This feeling of unease is the result experiencing a "confrontation between two powerful, incompatible, and complementary world views which reveals the strengths and weaknesses of each.



Thus, acceptance of uncertainty becomes the only viable response to the disorder precipitated by such discourse” (p. 177). Striking a similar note in his analysis of *Apocalypse Now*, Tomasulo (1990) notes that: “One of the most important binary oppositions in any myth or film is that between the social representation in the text (its social imaginary) and the social realities from which those representations are derived and with which they interact” (p. 146). The unresolvable friction between what we are told narratively, and what we know to be the case in our lived reality, generates a state of political paralysis or ambivalence. For example, in *Apocalypse Now*:

By subsuming the Vietnam War under an appeal to the “primitive” within all of us, *Apocalypse Now* blames everyone (and hence no one) for the policy decisions that created the conflict. In addition, it suggests that the war was lost because the United States was not willing to “get primitive” enough to exercise its “will to horror” (even though six times the tonnage of bombs used in World War II were dropped on a country the size of New Mexico). (Tomasulo, 1990, p. 156)

Similarly, the gamer’s oscillating ability to manage the battlefield chaos versus the loss of that control creates a state of dialectical disorientation in *Spec Ops*. The game tacitly posits that a competent and conscientious warrior *could* make the right decision, but the game denies to the player the ability to do so.

Yet as great as these similarities are, there remain important differences between *Spec Ops* and the cinematic militainment that inspires it. Players who make it to the game’s “Epilogue” have marched on despite enduring the game’s multiple alienating elements and entreatments to stop playing. Combat games and military shooters too often reinforce popular militainment’s emphasis on media spectacle and adulation of cutting-edge weapons by rewarding tactical combat excellence that unfolds in virtual worlds devoid of meaningless deaths and suffering. But *Spec Ops* is more than an unfair game about an unmanageable event. *Spec Ops*’ deconstruction of shooters’ textual pleasures also has implications for one’s relationship to worldly violence. And herein lies its consciousness-raising potential as a provocative piece of social technology (Flanagan, 2009).

One of the inherent attractions of all games is that players enter into them freely; the activity cannot be play if one is forced to participate. Many gamers enthusiastically play shooters because they can exercise control over a chaotic situation, round after round, level after level. Of course, the same cannot be said of actual war, which is often indiscriminate, messy, and final. *Spec Ops*’ inclusion of collateral damage, fratricide, PTSD and war’s attendant horrors remind us that there is a wide experiential gulf between consuming those combat stories that are fit to be sold, and reflecting on how combat victories are actually secured. When such omissions move from the periphery to the center of the military gaming experience, the “right” way to play *Spec Ops*—the kind of social resistance to militainment’s pleasures and the consciousness-raising that it proposes—begins not with learning how to shoot, but with asking what it means to do so.

## References

- Andersen, R. (2006). *A century of media: A century of war*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Annandale, D. (2010). Avatars of destruction: Cheerleading and deconstructing the “war on terror” in video games. In A. Froula, K. Randell, and J. Birkenstein (Eds.), *Reframing 9/11: Film, popular culture and the “war on terror”* (pp. 97–106). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Bogost, I. (2006a). *Unit operations. An approach to videogame criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bogost, I. (2006b). Videogames and ideological frames. *Popular Communication*, 4(3), 165–183. doi:10.1207/s15405710pc0403\_2
- Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* [computer software]. (2007). Santa Monica, CA: Activision.
- Campbell, J. (2008). Just less than total war: Simulating World War II as ludic nostalgia. In Z. Whalen & L. Taylor (Eds.), *Playing the past: History and nostalgia in video games* (pp. 183–200). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Chan, D. (2010). Dead-in-Iraq: The spatial politics of game art activism and the in-game protest. In N.B. Huntemann & M.T. Payne (Eds.), *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games* (pp. 272–286). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chien, I. (2010). Playing against the grain: Machinima and military gaming. In N.B. Huntemann & M.T. Payne (Eds.), *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games* (pp. 239–251). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dyer-Witheford, N., & De Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Faludi, S. (2007). *The terror dream: Fear and fantasy in post-9/11 America*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.
- Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical play: Radical game design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fullerton, T. (2008). Documentary games: Putting the player in the path of history. In Z. Whalen & L. Taylor (Eds.), *Playing the past: History and nostalgia in video games* (pp. 215–238). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Galloway, A. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hamilton, K. (2013, March 27). *Spec Ops* writer on violent games: “We’re better than that.” *Kotaku*. Retrieved from <http://kotaku.com/spec-ops-writer-on-violent-games-were-better-than-th-460992384>
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2010). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hess, A. (2007). “You don’t play, you volunteer”: Narrative public memory construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24, 339–356. doi:10.1080/07393180701567729
- Higgin, T. (2010). “Turn the game console off right now!”: War, subjectivity, and control in *Metal Gear Solid 2*. In N.B. Huntemann & M.T. Payne (Eds.), *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games* (pp. 252–271). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hocking, C. (2007, October 7). Ludonarrative dissonance in *Bioshock*: The problem of what the game is about. *Click Nothing: Design from a long time ago*. Retrieved from [http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html)
- Joscelyne, S. (2012, February 2). Yager responds to *Spec Ops: The Line* ban. *Sprong*. Retrieved from <http://spong.com/nibble/26286/Yager-Responds-to-Spec-Ops-The-Line-Ban>
- Klepek, P. (2012, July 24). This is all your fault. *Giant Bomb*. Retrieved from <http://www.giantbomb.com/articles/this-is-all-your-fault/1100-4291/>
- Krzywinska, T. (2006). The pleasures and dangers of the game: Up close and personal. *Games and culture*, 1(1), 119–122. doi:10.1177/1555412005281913
- Mirzoeff, N. (2005). *Watching Babylon: The war in Iraq and global visual culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Music credits. (2011). *Spec Ops: The Line* music credits. Retrieved from <http://www.2kgames.com/specopstheline/musiccredits/>
- Payne, M.T. (2012). Marketing military realism in *Call of Duty 4 Modern Warfare*. *Games and Culture*, 7(4), 305–327. doi:10.1177/1555412012454220
- Pitts, R. (2012, August 27). Don't be a hero—the full story behind *Spec Ops: The Line*. Polygon. Retrieved from <http://www.polygon.com/2012/11/14/3590430/dont-be-a-hero-the-full-story-behind-spec-ops-the-line>
- Purchase, R. (2012, August 29). Yager: *Spec Ops* multiplayer was “bulsh\*\* and should not exist.” *Eurogamer.net*, Retrieved from <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-08-29-yager-spec-ops-multiplayer-was-bullsh-and-should-not-exist>
- Rasmussen, K., & Downey, S.D. (1991). Dialectical disorientation in Vietnam War films: Subversion of the mythology of war. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77(2), 176–195. doi:10.1080/00335639109383951
- Spec Ops: The Line* [computer software]. (2012). Novato, CA: 2K Games.
- Stahl, R. (2006). Have you played the war on terror? *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(2), 112–130. doi:10.1080/07393180600714489
- Stahl, R. (2009). Why we “support the troops”: Rhetorical evolutions. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 12(4), 533–570. doi:10.1353/rap.0.0121
- Stahl, R. (2010). *Militainment, inc: War, media, and popular culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stockwell, S., & Muir, A. (2003). The military-entertainment complex: a new facet of information warfare. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://one.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-004-the-military-entertainment-complex-a-new-facet-of-information-warfare>
- Tomasulo, F. (1990). The politics of ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as prowar and antiwar film. In L. Dittmar & G. Michaud (Eds.), *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (pp. 145–158). New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press.
- Wetta, F., & Novelli, M. (2003). “Now a major motion picture”: War films and Hollywood’s new patriotism. *The Journal of Military History*, 67(3), 861–882. doi:10.1353/jmh.2003.0263