

War Crimes, Cognitive Dissonance and the Abject: An Analysis of the Anti-War Wargame *Spec Ops: The Line*

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*This article argues that the critical discourse on war video games is limited by a methodology that can tend to rely on theory above content, where political-economists in communication studies frequently argue that games are little more than ciphers by which dominant ideologies—like the pre-eminence of the military-media complex—ensure their proliferation amongst wider culture, particularly in younger players. Political-economists of the military-industrial-entertainment complex have offered valuable structural analysis of the institutional and ideological links between the U.S. Department of Defense, video game corporations and war-themed video games. Several scholars have also analyzed how the narratives of war video games give ideological support to the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. war policy. Though these studies are important, they overlook an important fact: that not all war-themed video games offer simplistic, one-dimensional and affirmative war stories and war play experiences. The goal of this article’s analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* is to show how an ostensible war game is capable of turning players against war or, at least, encouraging them to contemplate its consequences.*

Keywords: video games, militainment, war, anti-war wargame, *Spec Ops: The Line*

Introduction: Digital militainment beyond war propaganda

There is significant sense in critical communication studies that war-themed video games are overwhelmingly characterized by sympathy and resonance with the military-industrial complex, and even outright endorsement of it. It is difficult to argue with such assertions. Matteo Bittanti emphasizes the role that the gun plays in First Person Shooters as a celebration of “the gun as the ultimate technology.”¹ Aaron Hess points out how *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* is emblematic of the ahistorical zone video games can so easily inhabit.² David Nieborg³ chronicles how military-themed video games are conditioning young people to be more receptive to military recruitment. Tanner Mirrlees⁴ shows how several video games have been commissioned by the United States military as part of their drive to increase recruitment and psychological-operations in civilian space. Some of these titles have been quite successful, although it is harder to gauge their psychological impact. Many more titles seek some kind of partnership with the military as part of the development process, most commonly in the form of military or ex-military advisors, who are used as consultants on

the military context or feel of the title. Such consultancy ranges over everything from tactics and communications protocol to weapon use and soldiers' animations, with the normal aim being to enhance the so-called realism of the title.⁵ However, this notion of "realism" comes with a significant amount of ideological baggage. The same dynamic and exciting aspects of military life used in recruitment advertisements are emphasized in many games, to the almost total exclusion of the menial and unpleasant aspects of the job of being a soldier. No player-character in a military first-person shooter ever has to go through weeks of cold, tiring, bullying boot-camp. Neither does she have to roll out of bed at 5am every day to get shouted at on the parade ground if her boots are not clean or her sheets are not folded. And she most certainly does not have to watch her fellow soldiers slaughter civilians. In games, it is the enemy that does this. Since the player-character cannot possibly be "the enemy," she and her friends can never kill civilians, so games tend not to even give the player the opportunity to do so: the battlefields are free from inconvenient distractions from the job of killing the enemies of the somewhat-unspecified "free world."

That this article seeks to redress the balance in critical studies of war-themed video games might seem like a hopeless task, but there are several holes in the methods most writers use to criticize video games as little more than militainment. I am sure that those writers would object that they are not characterizing "video games" as being overwhelmingly pro-military, but rather criticizing particular titles or sub-media. Unfortunately, there is a sufficient critical-mass of these articles, very few of which admit any counter-narrative, that it would be difficult for a non-specialist to imagine there are any video-games at all except those produced by the military-industrial complex for the ideological programming of young male subjects. In reality, the content of "video games" is as diverse and varied as any other form of popular culture, but there are not many literary critics accusing "the novel" of being a pawn of the military-industrial complex, just because Tom Clancy novels are so popular. While it is true that there is less diversity in the military-themed shooter, that genre is still a relatively young and developing one. My analysis of *Spec Ops* is designed to encourage academic study of the genre that is alive to the possibility that self-awareness, meta-critique and historic-political engagement is not only possible in the genre, but is currently happening.

One of the biggest problems with much of the extant literature on the topic of militarism in wargames, then, is that of selective assessment combined with universalism. Scholars either analyze the worst examples of militainment (*America's Army*, *SOCOM*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, et al.) to the exclusion of titles or examples that may disturb that narrative, or they make fairly radical claims equating metrics like the popularity of a game with its level of influence. A related problem is the lack of specific, sustained analysis of video games as texts or complex cultural artefacts. It is fairly common for critics of video games to refer to the medium as an entity that is mutually agreed upon, rather than a multiplicitous space that is always open to interpretation, sufficiently so that it is not worth interrogating the evidence. In an otherwise convincing essay, Frédéric Gagnon accuses *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* of reinforcing "stereotypes about other cultures by suggesting that Russians are cold-blooded individuals who cannot be deterred from trying to destroy the West

and engaging in acts of mass destruction.”⁶ While this is partially true, Gagnon ignores the fact that the West, in the form of the UK and US, allies with other Russians in the game, and it is these allies that save the player-character’s life at the end of the narrative. In a later critique of *Modern Warfare 2*, he quotes the assertion of “U.S. Army Lieutenant General Shepherd” that “learning to use the tools of modern warfare is the difference between the prospering of your people, and utter destruction,” as an example of how the game encourages Americans to believe that the best defense is a good offense. However, at the end of the game it transpires that Shepherd is the biggest villain in the game, and has been behind the attempts to make the U.S. more warlike. Gagnon does not mention this fairly crucial plot point. While *Modern Warfare 2* has numerous problems, I am not sure that quoting Shepherd as obviously emblematic of the game’s ideology is entirely fair.

This article seeks to redress the balance of a lack of critical attention to military-themed games that are anti-war, and to sustained analysis of games as complex, valuable texts, by performing an extended analysis of the game *Spec Ops: The Line*, on PC and Xbox 360/PS3. *Spec Ops* is a third-person military-themed shooter with strong narrative, metafictional and emotive elements. My methodology will combine narratological analysis with Ludology. I will build through my analysis of *Spec Ops* to a reading of the game alongside Julia Kristeva’s⁷ formation of the abject, in order to demonstrate the viscerally anti-war outcome of the combination of gameplay and narrative.

Considering a video game like *Spec Ops* in an extended, detailed fashion is critical to adding nuance to studies of the medium. However, this kind of criticism necessarily precludes the kind of exhaustive genre analysis that might also bring more weight to claims about what military-themed games do or do not do. While each mode of criticism is valuable, one advantage of an extended reading of a title like *Spec Ops* is that this essay is explicitly not making claims about the whole genre, or indeed the medium of video games itself. I would hope that more widespread complex analysis of individual video games, which involves taking them seriously as valid objects of cultural study, would tend to result in a recognition that games are just as impossible to generalize as any other cultural form. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced that we are yet at the point where the academy consistently demands the same level of detail and engagement from its critics of video games as it does from its critics of history, art or literature, but this too is a relatively young form of analysis. My efforts here are intended to show a singular, but significant, example of what is possible in the genre of the military-themed shooter: an example that is almost precisely the opposite of what many critical media studies scholars claim is happening. That this essay is also not representative of an entire genre, let alone medium, is obvious, but my own version of selective assessment is not intended to be so widely emblematic. Rather, it is a method of injecting a coherent, detailed counter-narrative into a body of scholarship on war-themed video games that too frequently gives the impression of a mono-dimensional genre.

Finally, I would like to comment on the variety of personal pronouns at work in this piece. There are several layers or avatars of anthropomorphic mediation between what happens on the screen of a video game and some kind of meaning or response, and giving voice to the significance of these is an enduring challenge for authors, particularly in the dry, two-

dimensional context of the printed page. While I attempt to use context as much as possible to keep the distinctions clear, a brief précis might be useful. In *Spec Ops: The Line* there is the main character “Walker,” who seems best referred to as “he.” Then there is the “player,” who I refer to as “she.” Either might be appropriate for the “player-character,” a hybrid of these two notions who might be more “he” or “she” depending on context, but I choose to default to “he.” Finally, there is my use of “you.” The most powerful aspect of any video game tends to be its interactivity: its ability to call upon “you,” the individual “player” (rather than the abstracted concept of one, similar to “the reader” in literary criticism), to act in the game world and to make decisions for which there will be seemingly real consequences. I accept that the majority of people who read this article will have not played *Spec Ops*, but engaging with the unique interactive power that video games have is very important to my contention that *Spec Ops* is capable of being an anti-war war game. Therefore, at crucial points in this piece I use “you” to hold the reader to account, to demand that she imagine being faced with the horrors I narrate as being represented in the game.

***Spec Ops: The Line* and the Problems of U.S.-Driven Warfare**

Numerous references to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in the opening sections of *Spec Ops: The Line* indicate to the player that the game is likely to be as much about psychology as it is about physical action. However, as in the novel and its Vietnam-era reimagining *Apocalypse Now*, the physical journey for the main character in *Spec Ops* is an inseparable part of the psychological exploration. The journey to the centre of Dubai parallels the journey to the centre of the mind of Captain Walker and, by extension, the mind of the player herself. In *Darkness* and *Apocalypse*, that journey reveals an environment that worsens the closer the narrative gets to the centre because each protagonist is approaching the enigmatic great enemy: (Colonel) Kurtz. It is the actions of Kurtz, serving as metaphor for the corruption and insanity of European and American imperialism, which has changed the peoples and environments bordering each river. When Marlowe and Willard reach that characteristic, metaphorical centre, they realize that they have no option but to excise it, by physically removing Kurtz from his throne. However, in *Spec Ops* the environment and events which surround the player-character start to change because the character of Walker himself is becoming psychologically corrupted by his own actions in the war. In this new interpretation of the action of Conrad’s novel, the protagonist arrives at the corrupt heart of things only to realize that it is he who has brought that darkness with him.

One of the most widespread criticisms of war-themed video games, as evinced by Gagnon’s critique of the representation of Russia in *Modern Warfare*,⁸ is that they deliberately abstract themselves from the problems of war and from the poor conduct of the dominant culture, generally the United States. *Spec Ops: The Line*, by contrast, demonstrates that the genre is capable of responding to such criticisms by making reference to significant problems in the way that the United States conducts warfare. It is common knowledge that the state security apparatuses, such as the CIA and NSA, were given unparalleled powers in the

wake of September 11th 2001, to the extent of explicit authorization of torture, extraordinary rendition and deniable military operations in sovereign states, even ones the United States was not at war with (see Pakistan). *Spec Ops* makes knowledgeable references to the CIA being ever more involved in “traditional” warfare. Once Walker locates the 33rd United States Army Infantry Division, it becomes apparent that CIA officers are also present in Dubai, attempting to counter the 33rd's takeover of the city by fomenting a civilian rebellion. One of the aims of this rebellion, according to an agent named “Riggs” (probably an ironic reference to Mel Gibson’s trigger-happy character in the *Lethal Weapon* films)⁹, is to defeat the 33rd before anyone penetrates the sandstorm and finds out the devastation that has been wrought by American forces going rogue. Rather than wishing to fix the problem then, the CIA is in Dubai purely to prevent damage to the image of America abroad. Several scenes in the game depict civilians being killed in droves by the 33rd, and it is difficult to see this cavalier attitude to civilian casualties without thinking of, for example, American psy-ops encouraging the Iraqis to rebel against Saddam Hussein during Operation Desert Storm. Many civilians did rebel, and that rebellion was brutally suppressed by Hussein. *Spec Ops* involves the player in the desperation of warfare, in part to show how easy it is to turn to unethical methods in order to secure one’s goals. However, part of the point of the CIA’s failure to overthrow the 33rd by using the civilian population, *qua* US psychological operations in Iraq, is to demonstrate the arrogance of any force imagining they can control the outcome of making such significant moves in the chaos that is war.

Spec Ops presents the player with a chaotic and absurd state of exception, cut off from the world and from any stable moral compass, much as the Europeans seek to act like gods in Conrad’s Congo by exchanging slaves for ivory, or as the US Air Cavalry machine gun a village in *Apocalypse Now* so Willard can find Kurtz, and the commanding officer can go surfing. *Spec Ops* emphasizes how far away from reality war can be with the figure of “Radioman,” who appears to be working for the 33rd by broadcasting instructions to their soldiers, and absurdist disinformation to the player-character, from a radio tower at the centre of Dubai. This figure seems to be something like an anthropomorphic personification of the fog of war. From the start of the game, Walker and his Delta Force squad of three are cut off from the outside world because of a massive sandstorm. Walker and the player have very little idea what is going on in Dubai. Communications with central command are cut off, and Radioman’s continual mocking of the player-character’s actions – that you are not helping anyone, that you are causing more damage than the 33rd or anyone else, and that your fantasy of saving people through violence is the height of arrogance – are not only largely true but also a dramatization of the fog of war: the confusion that sets in for soldiers as a result of combat stress and lack of proper information or direction. With a combination of absurdity and horror, the game illustrates how easy it becomes for moral relativism to emerge on all sides in a conflict. The state of exception of a war zone, where legal restraints on behavior are largely rescinded, is revealed as an inevitable consequence of going to war in the first place, no matter the apparent justification.

Spec Ops goes further in engaging with the American flirtation with the state of exception, by illustrating to the player some of the consequences of relying on operations by small

special forces teams, largely independent from command oversight, as a key plank in the U.S.'s continued "war on terror." Jeremy Scahill's latest film, *Dirty Wars*,¹⁰ chronicles this trend as a response to the massacre of part of an Afghani family: a useful counter to the triumphalism of *Zero Dark Thirty*. The situation the player's Delta Force squad finds itself in during *Spec Ops* seems extraordinary but, apart from the grandiose setting of a parched Dubai in the grip of the sandstorm, this is the reality of U.S. military operations across the globe, from Afghanistan to Libya. In dramatizing the huge potential for total disaster that can result from this kind of deployment, *Spec Ops* illustrates viscerally the way that modern war is very different from how it is frequently represented in media of all kinds: as morally and legally justified and as a legitimate and relatively clean response to global problems.

Video Game Aesthetics and Counter-Cultural Storytelling

Numerous critics have observed that popular war-themed video games like the *Battlefield* series unapologetically reinforce neo-conservative ideas about American manifest destiny and a god-given right to intervene militarily in sovereign nations. Such criticisms are frequently, if not always, correct (in *Battlefield 3* it is the CIA who ultimately impede your pursuit of a terrorist, not some foreign power). This effect is not just achieved through narratives that present America as acting in a morally justified way, but also through aesthetic strategies that encourage the player to see America and her allies as obviously "good" nations. In *Modern Warfare* the clean, light and calm aesthetic of the SAS training centre in Hertfordshire is contrasted with the darkness, destruction and chaos in the non-Western countries you are deployed to. In *Battlefield 3* and *4* you spend long transitional phases between the chaos of each mission in the peace and cleanliness of the American fleet, where everything is orderly and nothing has been destroyed by irrational foreign powers. Indeed, the transparency of this aesthetic strategy reaches its apotheosis in the later stages of the *Battlefield 4* single-player story, where the rogue Chinese general attacks the U.S. fleet and brings the foreign chaos to your hitherto pristine and untouched warship, literalizing the implication the game makes: that the only thing standing between the player-character and foreign-born chaos and destruction is the U.S. Military.

Spec Ops reverses this aesthetic strategy in a far less bombastic, but still effective, fashion. Throughout Dubai the player-character finds imagery revealing that normal people dislike the United States, such as the skeletal Statue of Liberty familiar from Iranian propaganda and graffiti, or tags proclaiming "Death to America" and "Fuck the 33rd." There is nothing revolutionary about these images in isolation, but the key context is that they are often located explicitly in environments not associated with "terrorism," such as living areas where people are living in difficult conditions, but still take time to light candles and furnish their temporary accommodations with richly-coloured cloths and coverings. It is difficult for the player-character not to sympathise with the reasons behind that graffiti when you see the way in which Dubai has been placed under martial law by the "rogue" American Army Division. The graffiti is not calling on the player to dislike the United States, but to encourage

consideration of why peoples exposed to US military coercion might end up feeling that way. Such feeling is not irrational, the game implies. It is not due to “radical Islamism” or some other kind of extremist religious ideology, but is a direct response to the civilian suffering which is the inevitable consequence of war. The gameplay of *Spec Ops* engages the player directly with the inevitability of that consequence. The first time I played the game, shortly after the graffiti in a civilian living space described above, my character rounded a corner in the middle of a firefight and saw a backlit figure rushing towards him. As I instructed my character to fire on the threat, I noticed that this was not a soldier in a balaclava but an unarmed woman in a headscarf, running away from the fighting with her hands crossed over her head. She was running towards me because I had been out of sight around the corner. My player-character had just experienced his first killing of a civilian, and I felt terrible. Most games avoid the possibility of making their players sad, even in an ostensibly war-themed game, but *Spec Ops* does not shirk that responsibility. Indeed, it makes most wargames seem morally monstrous in comparison, but despite that extra degree of visceral interactivity provided by the video-game form, I would argue that this responsibility is shirked by almost all forms of media.

The wider aesthetics of *Spec Ops* are dark and unsettling, in a strategy clearly meant to foreshadow and underscore doubt about the player-character’s actions. Reflective moments in the narrative are juxtaposed with the freewheeling action sequences that are supposed to be the hallmark of why wargames are fun. The contrast serves to sharpen the implied criticism in the more reflective moments. In a particularly dark moment, as the homicidal CIA agent Riggs is about to die under a burning truck near the close of the game, your character must choose whether or not to use his one remaining bullet to save Riggs from an agonizing death by fire. Whatever option you choose, as you walk away from the burning trucks (gaining the “achievement” of either “Unfriendly Fire: Save a Bullet” or “Friendly Fire: Show Mercy”), your shadow grows ever-longer in front of you, in a powerful illustration of the substance of your narrative arc. Indeed, the game’s blend of ludology and aesthetics interlaces with the downward spiral of the narrative, to the extent that the point should be that we cannot separate narrative and ludus so easily: rather, each contributes to the other in the form of a mobius strip. Walker’s close-range kills become more violent as the narrative situation becomes more dangerous. The characters’ communications become more frantic, louder, more chaotic and less disciplined. Sweat, grime, blood and injuries become very apparent on your character’s face, and on the faces of your squadmates. The fighting becomes more desperate as you continually run out of ammunition and have to run forward, braving a fusillade of fire to find a fallen enemy’s weapon. The level of destruction you mete out on the world becomes greater and greater: the odds are so stacked against you that time and again you destroy walls, floors and even buildings in order to overcome the overwhelming numbers of soldiers facing you. The context-sensitive music sets an aggressive, relentless pace that mirrors the calls from your character to “just keep moving.” All of these produce a real, engaging sense of your character becoming inescapably enmeshed in the dark world he is helping to make darker.

War Ludology and the Aporia of Killing and Fun

As the moments of aesthetic darkness mount up in calmer, more reflective scenes, the player-character becomes ever more likely to notice the uncanny horror of the combat sequences that intersperse them, and are supposed to be the “fun” of a war-themed video game. Close range “executions” are brutal, with blood spattering the player-controlled camera. The American soldiers you slaughter scream in unbearable pain when they are hit by the more powerful weapons, and a sequence when you protect a convoy of water using a grenade launcher is distinctly unpleasant, as your enemies explode in a wet mass of red matter upon a direct hit, which is itself a powerful antidote to other grenade launcher sequences like the escape from the burning building in *Far Cry 3*. There, your enemies are thrown like dolls in a perfect instantiation of power fantasy, yet they are not otherwise affected. They do not lose limbs or more than a small amount of blood, allowing the player-character to maintain distance from what such a sequence might represent. The convention of verisimilitude, where what you see is similar to how you imagine a real combat scene would look, is maintained only so far as to allow the player to remain relatively comfortable. The *Spec Ops* grenade launcher sequence subverts this complacency. This kind of aesthetic complexity, in its problematization of wargame conventions, is almost certainly a key part of why reviews of the game commented both on how unaccountably gripping the game was, and yet how it was not very fun.¹¹

Nevertheless it is difficult to resolve *Spec Ops*' critical commentary on conventional militainment gameplay with the fact that the vast majority of *Spec Ops* also involves the player-character visiting violent deaths on the representations of people. While I will argue below that this is part of a more sustained and sophisticated strategy to visit the sense of the abject on the player, I would also state that this kind of rhetoric is not without theoretical precedent. Linda Hutcheon famously wrote in the 1980s that, far from endorsing totalizing forces like capitalism, postmodern art inscribes totality in order to challenge it.¹² *Spec Ops* is attempting precisely this strategy, by reinscribing the absurdity of much militainment gameplay in order to confront it. The game is using a fundamentally different approach than merely listing all the reasons why titles like *Battlefield* are problematic. The opening of the game happens *in medias res*, dropping the player into a helicopter gunship sequence in Dubai that is absurd in its level of destruction. The game is both self-aware in its level of absurdity, and at the same time knowledgeable that the level of absurdity is precisely normal for many wargames, like the similar gunship sequence in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* that introduces the U.S. invasion of a Middle Eastern country, and which features a similar level of excessive destruction. After this opening sequence in *Spec Ops*, the narrative flashes back to Walker's initial insertion into Dubai, and it is only several hours later that the game returns to the helicopter sequence. When your Delta Force squad is once-more flying over the rooftops of Dubai, near the end of the game, Walker exclaims “Wait, this isn't right.” Lugo and Adams thinks that he is talking about the sheer number of helicopters chasing them, but Walker clarifies that “No, I mean we did this already,” before saying “Ah, fuck it” and carrying on carving his swathe of carnage through the city. Apart from being a knowingly-metafictional moment, reminding the player that she is experiencing a game where she might not wish to totally suspend her disbelief, this event is an instantiation of a

technique the game uses multiple times in order to criticize the representation of warfare, and the player's unquestioning acceptance of that representation: the literalization of problems in such an obvious way that the characters and player miss them precisely because they are so obvious. Walker's call to "Wait, this isn't right" is literally what they should do. Instead of continually driving forward to a nu-metal soundtrack, layering destruction on destruction, Walker and his squad should wait and analyze what they have actually been doing, and what the likely results of their planned actions will be. The squad, and the player, are given numerous opportunities to stop fighting and stop playing, respectively, but, at least in the case of the former, they never do. By the time of this gunship sequence, the white phosphorous warcrime described below has already happened, yet that moment – where the player-character does something unconscionably horrible – is foreshadowed moments before when an unknown force mortars people with white phosphorous right in front of Walker. The player-character is presented with the visceral, horrifying results of using a banned weapon, making it clear that its use is never acceptable, yet a few minutes later Walker ends up using it nevertheless. The solution to the situation is made abundantly obvious: do not use white phosphorous. But the player-character essentially says "Ah, fuck it" and continues anyway. *Spec Ops* draws explicit attention to the moral ramifications of an on-rails narrative, where the player's reaction to narrative events must merge with the actions of the protagonist in order for the game to continue. The emphasis on command structure in the game, particularly in the white phosphorous scene where both of your subordinates object to your strategy of using it, makes it likely that the game is also drawing parallels between the ethical railroading of many wargame narratives and the similar railroading of soldiers under rigidly hierarchical command structures in wartime.

***Spec Ops* and the Abject: Inducing Emotive War-Phobia**

Spec Ops makes clear from the opening credits that it will make the player an explicit, singular part of the game. Rather than being sublimated behind a quasi-realistic narrative where an in-game avatar, or protagonist, stands-in as the player's representative, in *Spec Ops* the player is engraved as a key member of the cast. At the end of the opening credits the player's real name is announced as, in my case, "Special Guest: Nick Morwood." The game is able to do this because you give a name, hopefully your real one, when you create your profile upon login. The effect is quite startling. No other game I am aware of does this, and this unique representative decision already signals that an outwardly conventional beginning, about a U.S. Military mission gone awry, will quickly become something rather more interesting. While I have already addressed some of the ways in which the player is drawn into a sense of responsibility, if not culpability, for her expectations and actions within the game, this explicit casting of the player as a member of what makes the game possible is also a way-in to my claim that *Spec Ops: The Line* produces an abject response in the player-character, such that she feels horrified and disgusted by her own actions in the game as well as by the military-themed gameplay experience.

Kristeva describes the abject as the disgusted, horrified reaction the self endures when faced with the visceral, material proof of death. Seeing a corpse "upsets...violently the one

who confronts it,” such that one must “behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders.”¹³ Kristeva, using characteristically psycho-analytic terminology, asserts that this reaction comes as a result of the breaking down of the perceived difference between self and other (and/or subject and object), as a result of “fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside.”¹⁴ For Kristeva, our abject reaction to a corpse, or to feces, waste or detritus, is so violent because these things display the inevitability of our own death, that “these bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.”¹⁵ Thus, death reveals the fragility of our distinction between self and other. If we all die, if all the world turns to shit, then our self might be nothing but a false bulwark against the most inevitable: death and our reintegration with the shitty, corporeal world surrounding us (which we were never truly absent from – hence the horror). In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the game consciously engineers a sequence of events and representations that results in a sickening collapse of the easy distinctions the player makes between herself and the “self” of her character, and between the desires of her character and the desires of herself.

In key moments of *Spec Ops* the player realizes something of what Kristeva speaks of when she addresses the abject encounter with the cadaver: “There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.”¹⁶ This abject response is characterized by a feeling of deep horror and disgust, caused by the player-character’s actions when trying to get past a heavily-guarded chokepoint, somewhere behind which the 33rd Infantry Division are holding some captured civilians who seem to be in imminent danger of being executed for rebelling against the 33rd. Unfortunately, standing in your/Walker’s path is an entire chokepoint the size of a football field, filled with soldiers and armoured vehicles. It seems impossible for your three man squad to get past, but on the top of an overlook you find a mortar armed with white phosphorous shells, ammunition the use of which on humans is banned. You have already seen this weapon used on people a few minutes previously, when an unknown force attacks several soldiers right in front of you. You are forced to walk through their screaming, convulsing, burning bodies to reach your next objective. There can be no doubt that this is a terrible weapon. Walker announces that using it is the only option to get past the giant chokepoint, while your squad objects to your character’s assertion.

It should be noted at this point that your squad’s situation and actions have become steadily more desperate for several hours before reaching this moment. You are massively outnumbered and continually running out of ammunition. The narrative carefully prepares you for this moment. Using the phosphorous certainly appears extreme, but the game makes sure to let you know that you are in a desperate situation. Nevertheless, my reaction when first playing this game was to refuse to use the white phosphorous, and attempt to progress using conventional weapons. This is impossible. If you wish to continue playing the game, you have to use the white phosphorous. This is a momentary but significant weakness of the critique the game is presenting, because almost the entirety of the rest of the narrative takes great care to emphasize that it is your player agency that has brought the game-world to such a terrible state. You do still have an option here, though, which is to stop playing entirely, and this might be the only ethical option.

If the player does decide to use the phosphorous and continue the game, the sequence is very well designed, closely mimicking the dehumanizing top-down thermal imaging viewpoint so many viewers of remote warfare on the news are familiar with. The mortar first launches a thermal imaging camera slung under a parachute, which the player-character looks through using a TV screen that acts as a targeting device. You call the shots, and your squad fires the rounds. It is not a coincidence that the presentation of this scene is so similar to the AC-130 sequence from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, which Gagnon so correctly identifies as attractive because, in the words of project lead Jason West, you are “annihilating anything in your path.”¹⁷ Both scenes use the signature black and white of the thermal imaging camera and targeting system, both share the same godlike high altitude perspective, dissociated from the real sounds and effects of your actions, and both call for an absurd level of death and destruction on the part of the player-character. Nevertheless, while the scene in *Modern Warfare* is mostly triumphalist and focused on fun, the white phosphorous in *Spec Ops* serves as a method to achieve disgust at the game, the game character, and yourself. After your mortar targeting camera has drifted over the chokepoint, and you have called down enough mortar shells to, as the game advises you in your objective panel, “clear the area” of the soldiers blocking your path (and who mercilessly cull you if you try not to use the white phosphorous), the game allows you to progress on. However, in order to do so, you must abseil down and walk through the courtyard filled with dead and dying soldiers, some of whom are still on fire. It is a horrific sight. Soldiers wander across your path, covered in burns and catatonic with pain and shock. Others crawl towards you begging that the pain will stop, some of them missing limbs or still on fire. The game has a “sprint” button that allows you to burst from cover to cover when under fire, and normally your character moves at a swift run even before sprinting, but in this scene the game forces you to walk, not run, and the option to sprint is disabled. The game ensures that you are forced to take time to look at what you have just accomplished, and it is sickening; an encounter with the abject that confronts the player-character with both the defilement of the human body that is a consequence of war, and your role in achieving this very particular defilement. This is not just an encounter with death but an encounter with your role in creating it. It collapses the distinction between player-self and other-protagonist. It was your clicks of the mouse or presses of a button that produced this sight, not a non-existent game character’s insistence to continue on no matter what. You could have stopped playing.

Unfortunately, worse is yet to come from the phosphorous scene, because at the far end of the football-field sized chokepoint you have just been forced to walk through, you encounter a dying soldier who is uncomprehending of why you have just done such a deed. “Why? Why? We were trying to help them,” he rasps out before expiring, and it is here that even your character, Walker, gets a creeping sense that something even more terrible has happened. Behind the soldier is an enclosure bordered by chainlink fence and barbed wire, and inside is the large group of civilians you came to rescue. They have been burned to death by the phosphorous, their flesh melted through in parts as the fast-burning chemical sundered their bodies. Several of them have died with their fingers locked in the chainlink, desperately trying to claw their way up and out of the enclosure, away from your phospho-

rous munitions. At the centre of this terrible diorama is a seated mother who has tried to curl over her young child in order to protect her, but the mother and child are locked together by their own burned, incinerated flesh. This is a scene of utter abjection, inducing feelings of self-disgust in the player so strongly that, the first time I played *Spec Ops*, I remember refusing to play for almost a week afterward, despite being halfway through the narrative. I am not sure there is another criticism of the violence of war, or of the video games that trivialize it, which is as uniquely visceral and horrifying. I accept that I am not necessarily a typical player, but there are numerous forum threads and reviews testifying to the power of *Spec Ops*' narrative and its ability to illustrate the player's role in Walker's crimes. As one Steam user writes, "Walker's on his path to damnation. It's up to you to follow his lead or refuse cooperation."¹⁸ The use of "damnation" here is particularly interesting regarding Kristeva and the abject, because it speaks to the way that the game challenges the player-character at the ontological level, at the level of being. *Spec Ops* calls upon its players to encounter the darkness at the heart of humanity's attraction to representations of warfare.

While it is a weakness of *Spec Ops*, in a game that so frequently gives the player branching options (such as to kill Riggs or not), that there is no narrative way to avoid using the white phosphorous, there is a later moment of potential abjection in the game that entirely hinges on player agency and interactivity, and thus redeems much of that earlier failing. Very close to the end of the game, what remains of the local population have realized that it was your incompetent efforts to "save" them that has led to their suffering being accentuated still further, and a mob of them descend on the player-character after killing one of your squad, cornering you, surrounding you and pushing in ever closer. Some of them start to throw rocks and chant for your death. It is genuinely frightening, instigating a strong fight or flight response, but there is nowhere to run. I have spoken to several players whose reaction was, in desperation, to shoot at this point, killing at least one of the mob but scattering the rest. If you choose this option, you are given an "achievement" called "A Line, Crossed." However, your character also has a "melee attack" option which you can use at this point, which will also scatter the mob without inflicting any casualties. In this case the achievement reads "A Line, Held." All the players I spoke to did not think to use the non-lethal option, although it is difficult to ascertain why. My contention is that the violent ludology of the game, where you have to shoot countless characters and almost never use the melee function, makes it almost inevitable that players will – under stress – choose the lethal option here. The achievement serves the function of commenting on the context of the game as a whole, for only here does the meaning of "The Line" in the title become clear, but also it indicates to the hasty player that there was more than one option for her in that desperate moment, which is crucial to the abject response of self-disgust. Knowing that you did not have to kill, and knowing that it was still your first option, is nothing if not an echo of the phosphorous scene, but this time it demonstrates that, even with agency, many players take the same, unpalatable option. It is not hard to extend this thinking to real soldiers on real battlefields, and *Spec Ops* thus not only achieves serious critique of militainment in video game culture, but also of military structures and practices more widely.

Conclusion: PTSD and the Final Excision of Kurtz

Spec Ops critiques militarism and militainment, but it also engages with the serious issue of mental health in soldiers and war veterans. Despite his professional insistence that his squad “keep moving” after the white phosphorous atrocity, it becomes clear at the end of the game that this is the moment where Walker starts to experience acute mental health problems, possibly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He starts to imagine he can hear the voice of Konrad, the 33rd's commanding officer, taunting him and demanding he do bizarre things like shoot dead bodies, and much of Walker's command decisions for the rest of the game are rationalized by this hallucinatory conversation. It transpires at the close of the narrative that Konrad has been dead for some time, Walker's invented avatar of him even presenting Walker with a portrait of the burned mother and child as proof. In this version of *Heart of Darkness*, the protagonist is not Marlow but Kurtz. Kurtz never existed beyond an objective correlative the player-character uses to justify his violent, unlawful actions. It is at this point that the player realizes how far she has tumbled down the rabbit hole with her character, a realization that illustrates the abject erasure of player-self and character-other that the game achieves, producing a profound negative emotional reaction towards both war and the war game (at least this one) in the player. Your character has not simply gone crazy, however, but is a representation of the clear cause-and-effect relationship between the terrible violence of war and dehumanization. The focus on Walker's mental health at the last sequence is an important engagement with the notion that the American soldier also suffers in war. The final option to commit suicide and take charge of ending the narrative yourself, excising Kurtz/Konrad/Walker from the heart of Dubai, is not just an opportunity to break the abject horror of the player-character fusion with a man as unpleasant as Walker, but is also a reminder of how many soldiers take their own lives after returning home, due in large part to inadequate support from their home country.

Notes

1. Matteo Bittanti, “From GunPlay to GunPorn. A techno-visual history of the first-person shooter,” 2006, accessed March 20 2014, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.91.6565&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
2. Aaron Hess, “‘You Don’t Play, You Volunteer’: Narrative Public Memory Construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24:4 (2007): 339.
3. David Nieborg, “Training Recruits and Conditioning Youth: The Soft Power of Military Games,” in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. by Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew (Thomas Payne. London: Routledge, 2010).
4. Tanner Mirrlees, “Digital Militainment by Design: Producing and Playing *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs*,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 5, 3 (2009).
5. Tanner Mirrlees, “Digital Militainment by Design.”

6. Frédérick Gagnon, “‘Invading Your Hearts and Minds’: *Call of Duty* and the (Re) Writing of Militarism in U.S. Digital Games and Popular Culture,” *European Journal of American Studies* 2 (2010): 7-8.
7. Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
8. Gagnon. “‘Invading Your Hearts and Minds,’” 7-8.
9. *Lethal weapon*, directed by Richard Donner, performed by Mel Gibson, and Danny Glover, Warner Home Video, 1987.
10. *Dirty wars*, directed by Rick Rowley, performed by Jeremy Scahill, 2013.
11. Tyler Chancey, “Spec Ops: The Line –The Shooter We Need Right Now,” 2012, accessed on March 1st 2014, <http://www.allagegaming.com/feature-articles/spec-ops-the-line-the-shooter-we-need-right-now>.
12. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 55.
13. Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*, 3.
14. Ibid., 4.
15. Ibid., 3.
16. Ibid., 3.
17. Gagnon, “‘Invading Your Hearts and Minds.’”
18. Black Phoenix, “Spec Ops: The Line > General Discussions > What if you could end it?” *Steam Community*, 2014, accessed July 12 2014, <http://steamcommunity.com/app/50300/discussions/0/540743213027366865/>.

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