Spec Ops: The Line's Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter

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ABSTRACT
The contemporary videogame genre of the military shooter, exemplified by blockbuster franchises like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor*, is often criticised for its romantic and jingoistic depictions of the modern, high-tech battlefield. This entanglement of military shooters and the rhetoric of technologically advanced warfare in a "military-entertainment complex" is scrutinised by Yager's *Spec Ops: The Line*. The game's critique of military shooters is as complex and messy as the battlefields the genre typically works to obscure. Initially presented to the player as a generic military shooter, *The Line* gradually subverts the genre's mechanics, aesthetics, and conventions to devalue claims of the West's technological and ethical superiority that the genre typically perpetuates. This paper brings together close, textual analysis; comments made by the game's developers; and the analytical work of videogame critics to examine how *The Line* relies on the conventions of its own genre to ask its player to think critically about the cultural function of military shooters.

Keywords
Military-entertainment complex, representation, virtual war, military shooter, textual analysis, *Spec Ops: The Line*, videogames

INTRODUCTION
By the closing scenes of Yager's third-person military shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), playable character Captain Walker is a broken man. Covered in mud and blood, half his face has been burned black from a helicopter crash several chapters earlier. The camouflage fabric over his Kevlar vest has been shredded by a shotgun round. Over the game's length, Walker—with the player's aid—has killed civilians, gunned down an entire battalion of US Soldiers, and been responsible for the deaths of his squad mates. As the player pushes forward on the thumbstick to move Walker towards the final showdown with the game's antagonist, Colonel Konrad, Walker does not even bother to pick up a gun; he just drags his sorry, beaten body forward. In the end, there is no finale boss battle, no giant spectacle, just the realisation that Konrad is already dead, a mere hallucination of Walker. *The Line* tells Walker and the player that every horrific event that happened throughout the game happened explicitly because they kept playing, and gives them a

Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies.

single binary choice to respond with: kill Walker for the crimes the player committed in order to progress through the game, or shoot at a hallucination of Konrad, and deny that this was their fault.

The Line is not a conventional military-themed shooter. Its dark themes, gruesome violence, and ethical ambiguity are a far cry from the blockbuster, jingoistic entries of the *Medal of Honor* or *Call of Duty* franchises. Despite relatively poor sales (Brown 2012), it sparked conversations and essays about the role of various forms of violence in videogames between videogame critics, developers, and players for the greater part of 2012.[1] Yet, in both the way it plays and the setup of its narrative, *The Line is* a conventional military shooter. The player is offered few choices throughout the gameplay other than steering Captain Walker through the world and shooting whatever targets pop up from behind cover. What the player 'does' with their body in relation to the videogame controller to play *The Line* differs little from what is demanded by other games in the genre.

The genre of the contemporary military-themed shooter (hereafter referred to simply as 'military shooters') falls within what various scholars have called a military-entertainment complex—a symbiotic relationship between entertainment industries and militaristic interests (Nieborg 2006). Through the military-entertainment complex, the technologically mediated representation and execution of war perpetuates a joint myth of the West's technological and ethical superiority over a distanced enemy combatant reduced to a pixilated other (Der Derian 2009, 223). In particular, military shooters deploy simplistic, romantic, and jingoistic depictions of the modern, high-tech battlefield. Manifestly 'good' Western (typically US) special operatives fight waves of clearly 'bad' Islamic or Communist (or both) insurgents across battlefields conspicuously void of civilians, occasionally deploying advanced technological weaponry with pinpoint accuracy and total devastation. Such simple depictions of the battlefield by the technologies used to both conduct and represent warfare obscure a messy reality where battlefields are rarely without a civilian presence, precision-guided ordnance is rarely precise, and where battle lines can rarely, if ever, be neatly reduced to 'good' and 'bad' guys.

Through a close analysis of *The Line* within and against the broader genre of military shooters, this paper examines how *The Line* works to make the player aware of the violence concealed by the military-entertainment complex generally and military shooters in particular through a conventional subversion of the genre. By 'conventional subversion' I mean to draw attention to both how *The Line* subverts the genre's conventions, and how this subversion is conventional. While no shortage of New Media artists have created works to critique videogame violence and militarism from beyond the boundaries of the mainstream entertainment industry,[2] *The Line*'s critique speaks directly to those players most strongly invested in the military shooter genre. *The Line* does not offer an alternative to the military shooter, but by gradually altering the *context* of the player's actions over the course of the game, it draws attention to the messiness that technologically mediated warfare works to obscure but not eradicate. Over the course of the game, the player is asked to consider what it is they are 'really' doing when they play a military shooter.

In such an analysis, I align myself with those scholars that call for close, textual analysis of videogame works 'as played'. In the introduction to *Videogame, Player, Text*, Atkins and Kryzwinska note that the videogame critic must "look with care at what the

individual game represents, how it relates to other games […], how it communicates its meaning, how it functions as played event, and how engagement with it through play generates pleasure" (2007, 2). Similarly, Jason Wilson claims that the videogame critic must actively engage with particular works (2007, 64). The following analysis is concerned with *The Line* as played. It combines thick description with analyses from the burgeoning field of popular games criticism to examine how narrative, controller, audiovisual representation, mechanics, and the player's embodied existence all come together in the play phenomenon to allow *The Line*'s conventional subversion of the military shooter.

After an overview of how videogames function as part of the military-entertainment complex, I outline *The Line*'s plot in more detail before examining specific scenes and movements. Firstly, I look at how the game's eighth chapter, "The Gate," closely mimics the *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) level, "Death From Above" to interrogate the apparent superiority of warfare executed from behind a targeting monitor. Next, I look at how Walker's character arc across the narrative functions to make the player aware of the 'othering' that is required of the player in all shooters, and how this works to perpetuate an ethical superiority of Western militaries. Combined, these conventional subversions attempt to make the player conscious of their complicity in the military-entertainment complex whenever they play a military shooter.

WAR NEVER CHANGES

Videogames and the Military-Entertainment Complex

That representational media are often influenced by imperial interests is not a new claim. Throughout history, hyperbolic ballads, exaggerated paintings, and staged photographs have worked to glorify one side of a conflict and dehumanize the other. Over the past decades, numerous scholars have scrutinized the complex web of relationships between the military, the media, and technology. Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard, amongst others, have traced intimate histories between the co-development of firearms and film cameras (Virilio 1989), and the role of the media in determining how a war is represented (Baudrillard 1995). For videogames in particular, there is much interest in the deep connections between the medium's aptitude for depicting complex simulations in real-time and the US military's technological advancements. In *Gameplay Mode*, Patrick Crogan traces the intimate material ancestry shared by both videogames and military technologies, looking specifically at "the cybernetic approach to modeling complex phenomena, realtime interactive control through virtualization, and the convergence of simulated and real events" (Crogan 2011, 3). Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire*, meanwhile, claims that videogames "originated in the U.S. Military-industrial complex […] to which they remain umbilically connected" (2009, xxix). James Der Derian maps what he exhaustively calls the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (or MIME-NET) through the virtualisation of war in *Virtuous War*. For Der Derian, virtualised war "projects a technological and ethical superiority in which computer simulation, media dissimulation, global surveillance, and networked warfare combine to deter, discipline, and if need be, destroy the enemy" (2009, 21).

Each author traces significant historical, material, and ideological links between the US military and the videogame industry. Each highlights important links such as the way videogames are used as training simulators or, in the case of *America's Army* (United

States Army, 2002), as recruitment portals. Most significantly for this essay, however, is a more traditional concern with how videogames—like the various other media historically caught up in militaristic interests—*represent* war in ways that virtualise it until the true human cost is obscured (Der Derian 2009, 146) and render it banal until it becomes part of the everyday (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 100). Through the virtualisation of the battlefield, the distance between here and there, fact and fiction collapses, while the distance between the self and the other is expanded (Der Derian 2009, xxxiv). Enemy forces—be they real or imagined—can be reduced to a pixilated, stick-figure 'bad guy' on a monochrome radar image, and the civilians that are unfortunate enough to call the battlefield home disappear altogether. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter succinctly and ironically say of *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), the tactical first-person shooter built in collaboration between the US Army and Pandemic Studios: "The miracle of Zekistan [*Full Spectrum Warrior*'s fictional country] is that its streets are deserted and houses empty, apart from the ubiquitous Tangos (who all die instantaneously when hit). Air and artillery strikes do not hit wedding parties. There is no collateral damage. War is peace" (2009, 113). Military-themed videogames produced for a popular audience, particularly the modern military shooter, both depend on and perpetuate the 'pixilation' of war through representations of the West's technological and ethical superiority on a modern battlefield that is simple, black and white (literally, sometimes, through the camera of the unmanned drone), and devoid of civilians.

Military Shooters and the Convergence of the Real

The single-player campaigns of the most popular military shooter franchises fall outside the wider net of 'simulation' games that most authors focus on when situating videogames within the military-entertainment complex. Alongside their competitive multiplayer components, blockbuster franchises such as *Medal of Honor* or *Call of Duty* explore more narrative-focused means of claiming an 'authentic' window onto US military operations. While these franchises are less explicitly connected to the military, their narrative-focused representations of modern war regularly perpetuate notions of the West's technological and ethical superiority.

Such franchises predominately began as World War II-themed shooters in the late 90s and early 2000s through games like *Medal of Honor* (DreamWorks Interactive 1999), *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003), and the multiplayer-only *Battlefield 1942* (Digital Illusions 2002). Unlike strategy-focused shooters like *Full Spectrum Warrior*, these franchises (along with countless others at the time) offered gameplay that was tactics-lite and story-heavy, using the 'roller coaster' approach popularized by games like *Half-Life* (Valve 1997) to keep the player advancing through a tightly-scripted world past a series of spectacles. While many action-based videogames work to make the player feel like an all-powerful, individual actor, the original WWII-themed iterations of the military shooter worked to have the player feel like just one cog in an expansive military machine. On the micro-level, this is depicted on each stage's battlefield as the player's avatarial soldier is surrounded on all sides by computer-controlled soldiers and technical support. On the macro-level, it is depicted in the way the campaigns of the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* series shift the player's perspective through a variety of soldiers' bodies across a variety of global battlefields to offer the player "a trans-individual position, the consciousness of a collective military entity" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 106).

As the ongoing coverage of the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions built an audience interested in contemporary military engagements (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 101), each franchise was eventually lured into modern day (or near-future) setting with

Battlefield 2 (2005), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), and the rebooted *Medal of Honor* (2010). While their WWII predecessors typically depended on replicating famous battles (often as depicted in recent Hollywood films), each franchise worked to capture an audience captivated by the post-9/11 battlefield through doubled claims of 'authenticity' through technology. 'Doubled' as, firstly, they claim to authentically depict modern military engagements as they are often augmented by technology, and secondly they claim to be able to depict this battlefield through the expensive, cutting edge technologies that the games are built on. Modern military shooters glorify the technologies of war and the technologies of videogames.

This is perhaps best seen in *Modern Warfare* and its two sequels. The trilogy keeps the skeletal structure of its WWII-themed ancestors—the player jumps between individual characters and battlefields to trace a global network of warfare, with Russian and Middle Eastern terror cells replacing Nazis and Japanese soldiers—but the newer games also constantly highlight and put at centre-stage the technologies of modern warfare that the foot soldier is but an interface for (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 109). At set points of each stage, the player calls in predator drones, takes control of gunships orbiting high above the battlefield, and locks onto tanks with autopilot-guided Javelin missiles. Even when not aided by outside technological forces, the playable character's embodied experience of the battlefield is augmented with red-dot laser sights, night-vision goggles, and remote-detonated explosives. Technology rules the modern battlefield. Whatever indiscriminate technology the opposing force unleashes, the West (always the West) counters with a more impressive and surgical technology. Through the controller, the military shooter player becomes a cyborg in charge of a cyborg, taken through a *tour de force* of technological might.

As military shooters increasingly make claim to 'authenticity' and 'realism', real wars are increasingly fought from behind pixilated screens, with controllers that resemble those used by console game players (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 121). In *Modern Warfare*'s "Death From Above" stage, the player's viewpoint ascends out of their previous avatar into the gunner aboard an AC-130U gunship, casually aiming at targets on a low-resolution, monochrome screen (see Figure 1). More so than the immediacy offered by the high-definition graphics and overwhelming action of the game's other stages, "Death From Above" feels authentic through the multiple layers of technology that *distance* the battlefield. This distance is most explicit in the player's invincibility; the enemy on the ground is unable to retaliate against the AC-130U. The safety of the ship's crew makes them cavalier about the hell they are unleashing. As the level ends, they chuckle, "That's one for the highlight reel."

Figure 1: *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s "Death From Above" mission.

Figure 2: Footage from a US Apache firing on Routers journalists released by *Wikileaks* in 2010

Indeed, a highlight reel from a real war is uncannily similar to this stage. Released by activist group Wikileaks in 2010, the video shows a 2007 engagement in Iraq where US apache helicopters gunned down civilians alongside two Reuters journalists (see Figure 2). The audio accompanying the graphic, blurry images produced the most controversy, with the crew casually joking about their victims. When Wikileaks's editor-in-chief Julian Assange released the video at Washington's National Press Club, he made the point that "The behavior of the pilots is like they're playing a video game. It's like they want to get high-scores in that computer game" (Pergram 2010). At stake here is not the typical, derivative argument that videogames make young men violent. Instead, Assange's comments highlight the othering—and imagining—of enemy combatants—and the desensitisation towards violence that is a consequence of virtualised killing. Deaths are reduced to stick figures on a screen, and real war becomes as inconsequential as videogame war. As military shooters use increasingly advanced technology to convince players they are depicting war how it 'really' looks, real wars use increasingly advanced technology to turn war in to a videogame. There is a *convergence* of how war is conducted and how it is represented, with death devalued and humans othered.

But, of course, even as deaths are rendered invisible, they do not disappear. The representations of modern military technologies as efficient, precise, and superior obscures the indiscriminate devastation on the other side of the screen where helicopters gun down Reuters journalists, air-strikes hit wedding processions (Sturcke 2008), and civilian deaths are not counted until long after the fact (Der Derian 2009, 282). For Der Derian, this is the darker side of virtualised war that only surfaces "long after the first image of technological wizardry yielding political success have been burned into the public consciousness" (2009,146). Virtualised war disappears and devalues bodies not by accurately depicting the battlefield, but by selectively depicting the battlefield at a distance, even as it is pulled into the lounge room. This is where the modern military shooter fits into the military-entertainment complex: by perpetuating myths of technical and ethical superiority thorough the depiction of real and imagined war technologies, invading forces are made benevolent, enemies are reduced to faceless 'bad guys', and war becomes everyday.

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

Where military shooters typically perpetuate myths of technological and ethical superiority through simplifying and exoticising the battlefield, *The Line* depicts a blunt, tragic account of the consequences of the pixilation of war. In place of a benevolent America aiding a Middle-Eastern community, an interventionist America only worsens the situation in Dubai. Technologies are not precise and efficient but devastate indiscriminately. Through depicting ethically ambiguous consequences of the player's conventional actions, *The Line* wants the player to consider just what they are complicit in when they play a military shooter.

The *Spec Ops* franchise was founded as another straightforward military shooter series with several games on PC and Playstation between 1998 and 2001. Publisher 2K decided to renew the franchise, and German studio Yager pitched for the project (Pitt 2012). Interestingly, *The Line* was already a military shooter before it became a subversive military shooter. Yager were determined to make a darker, heavier story than the common military shooter and it was only during development that the team decided the

game would have to comment on the military shooter itself. In an interview, the game's lead writer, Walt Williams, describes the process:

> There was this point where the pain of the product began to show itself within the project. It reached this point where it was like, 'Oh, you want to play this kind of game for fun? Fuck you. I'll show you what's fun about this.' And it just started to turn. But once we started to analyze that emotion we were like, well, actually there is something here. There is something to this that is very real and which should be said. (Keogh 2013)

In *The Line*, the city of Dubai has been destroyed by a series of devastating sandstorms. Before the storms intensified, US Army Colonel John Konrad[3] volunteered his entire battalion—the 33rd—to aid in the evacuation of Dubai's citizens. When ordered to abandon the city, Konrad disobeyed. His men followed him, and the entire 33rd effectively defected from the US Army. As Dubai became sealed off from the outside world, the 33rd attempted to maintain order in the city by implementing martial law. Six months later, a distress signal from Konrad leads the Army to send in Delta Squad—playable character Captain Walker and his two squad mates, Lieutenant Adams and Sergeant Lugo—to run reconnaissance, with the orders to contact any survivors and then to withdraw. However, as Walker stumbles into a complex conflict between the 33rd and local insurgents dissatisfied with the 33rd's iron-fisted rule (themselves armed and provoked by CIA operatives trying to make the 33rd 'disappear'), he constantly sets new objectives for his team that lead them further into Dubai. At first he wants to rescue the 33rd from the 'insurgents'; then he wants to rescue the 'refugees' from the 33rd; then, at last, he becomes obsessed with just finding and killing Konrad. This leads Walker—and the player—from killing faceless Middle Eastern insurgents, to killing American soldiers in self-defense, to killing American soldiers for no clear reason at all. The point (or lack thereof) of anything Walker and the player do in the game is increasingly scrutinised. By the end, it is clear that most of the disasters that happen throughout Walker's journey only happen because Walker and the player continue their blind, uncritical march forward. Towards the end of the game, a loading screen directly and snidely asks the player: "Do you feel like a hero yet?"

While its themes and plot may be more complex than the average military shooter, *The Line* is played in a very conventional manner. Much like the *Call of Duty* games, there is only ever one path forward, with the illusion of a much more expansive world around the player. Where *The Line* differs from most military shooters is in its perspective. While the most popular franchises are all first-person shooters, *The Line* is played from a third-person perspective, looking over Walker's shoulder. This perspective allows the game to implement a sticky cover system, as popularised by *Gears of War* (Epic 2006) and proliferated through games like *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog 2007), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008), and *Vanquish* (Platinum 2010). Pressing a button near a wall 'sticks' Walker to that piece of cover, protecting him from enemy fire. Simple orders can also be given to squad mates with a single tap of the right bumper when looking at an enemy. Walker will automatically choose what order is the most appropriate to take out that enemy.

Some critics have argued that its conventional mechanics nullify any nuanced message *The Line* wants to make (Cobbett 2012; Lindsey 2012; Galloway 2012). However, such criticisms miss that game mechanics never exist in a vacuum detached from a game's audiovisual representation. Steve Swink shows in his book *Game Feel* that audiovisual

design greatly determines how a game feels—both materially in the players' hands, as well as aesthetically (2009, 49). Similarly, Dovey and Kennedy stress that the mechanics of contemporary videogames are always overlaid with representation pleasures that cannot be ignored (2006, 88). By using representational strategies to challenge genre conventions, *The Line* slowly changes the tone of the player's conventional, uncritical performance to force them to consider the depictions of technologically and ethically superior Western militaries that the genre perpetuates.

Imprecise and Inefficient

The eighth of *The Line*'s fifteen chapters, "The Gate," forces the player to consider what is obscured in the pixilation of war. A major turning point for the game's plot and Walker's character, Delta need to pass through a heavily-guarded 33rd security checkpoint to get to a gate they believe to be important. Heavily outnumbered, Walker decides to fire white phosphorous shells from a nearby mortar cannon to destroy the camp. Legally and ethically dubious (International Humanitarian Law Research Initiative 2009), white phosphorous unleashes thick smog of incandescent particles that stick to and burn through flesh. Used extensively throughout the Korean and Vietnam campaigns by the US Army, it has often been deployed on civilian areas to terrible effect, and is still used in various conflicts today. Lugo protests the use of white phosphorous against the American soldiers, but Walker insists: "We don't have a choice."

The stage is depicted much like *Modern Warfare*'s "Death From Above" mission, with the player aiming a crosshair on a low-resolution, black-and-white targeting monitor. As Walker looks down at the screen, the camera flies in from behind his head to take on a first-person perspective. Walker disappears behind the player, and the player's television screen doubles as the targeting computer in a literal and symbolic convergence of actual and virtual technologies. Key targets—soldiers with RPG launchers and armoured vehicles—are highlighted with red squares, and the sequence ends once the player destroys them all. But the mortars never *just* take out the priority targets; the white phosphorous always spreads, killing numerous soldiers and leaving a white mist on the monitor. Walker is not safely hidden away on a gunship; if the player takes too long to take out all the targets, Walker will eventually be shot and the mission will fail. Significantly, the proximity of Walker to his targets means the screams of his victims are audible to the player, unlike the dull thud for the "Death From Above" player. As the player takes out the final vehicle, parked towards the end of the camp, the white phosphorous is sucked into a nearby trench, wiping out a group of targets that, on the monitor, look the same as the soldiers.

As the white clouds take up more and more of the black screen, Walker's reflection slowly becomes visible, coalescing with the targets being killed (see Figure 3). By the time the final shell destroys the targets in the trench, the player is not looking at the people they are killing but *through* them back at Walker. The slow emergence of Walker's reflection is exemplary of what the entire game attempts to do: it places the player in a situation not unlike those offered by other military shooters; it expects the player to uncritically engage in the situation as per genre conventions; then, while the player is still playing, it tears away the curtain of distance and desensitisation that virtualised war imbues to reveal the player's complicity. As the last screams from the camp fade, all that is left is Walker's face looking back at himself—back at the player—over the pixilated corpses. "Okay," he says. "We're done."

Figure 3: Walker's reflection appearing on the targeting monitor as he drops white phosphorous on the 33rd checkpoint

Next, *The Line* closes the distance between the player/Walker and the battlefield. To get to the gate, the player must walk through the remains of the camp. While pushing the left analog stick all the way forward usually jogs Walker at a moderate pace, as Delta approach the camp the game forces them to a slow walk, insisting they linger among the devastation. While the battlefield as depicted by the targeting computer was minimalist in its monochrome, reality is gruesome. Charred corpses litter the ground; soldiers that are somehow still alive crawl along the ground, begging for water. Scared, broken voices pleading for help echo from beneath the burnt wreckages of vehicles and tents. By just playing a military shooter, by just doing what the game asks of them, the player has unthinkingly participated in a devastating, inhumane attack. As the AC-130U gunner of *Modern Warfare*, I never have to see what I wrought, but *The Line* forces me to walk right through it. It gives me the absolving distance of virtualised warfare just long enough for me to act how I would normally act, and then it rips the distance away, rubs both Walker's and my face not just in what I have done in this one chapter of this one game, but in what I do every time I play and enjoy a military shooter.

The scene's final attack on the player comes when they reach the far side of the camp and discover the people killed by the final shell were not soldiers, but a group of civilians that the 33rd had tried—and failed—to protect *from* Delta Squad. On the monitor, all the people were just reduced to targets, but here Walker and the player are forced to see the true technological superiority of virtualised war: not precision, but indiscrimination; not less killing, but easier killing. "The Gate" demonstrates to the player just how videogames fit within the military-entertainment complex by demonstrating to them just how willingly they will take up a weapon like white phosphorous in a military shooter with little consideration for the consequences.

Shifting Sands and Questionable Ethics

Third-person videogames are exemplary of the regime of action and vision that videogames use to hold the player's attention (Chesher 2004). The player embodies and identifies with the playable character not just through how they control, but also through how they look and sound. The playable character of a third-person game, visible on the screen, contextualizes the player's embodied presence in the game world (Taylor 2002, 22). Through the character's body—through how it functions and how it is represented—the player gains an embodied understanding of the world that the game presents.

While most videogame narrative arcs focus on the player's spatial navigation from one set piece to the next, character arcs are usually non-existent. The playable character is a static, constant perspective—possibly evolving in physical ability, but rarely in identity. In the *Modern Warfare* trilogy, with the exception of those character that lose their lives, the events that happen around the characters have no lasting effect on them. In At the end of *Uncharted*, the number of men that protagonist Nathan Drake has murdered seems to have left no impression on him. In *The Line*, though, Walker becomes increasingly unhinged as the game progresses. His dialogue shifts from depersonalised orders to dehumanising taunts. His visible presence on the screen shifts from controlled military operative to a mud- and blood-covered murderer (see Figures 4 and 5). Walker's gradual visible and audible change sets *The Line*'s narrative apart from those of most videogames that are primarily about shooting people. Even as Walker functions the same through the controller for the duration of *The Line*, his constantly changing depiction works to alter how the player's embodied perception of the game feels through Walker's body. By transitioning the player's character—and by extension the player's embodied perspective on the game's world—from a clean-cut, self-assured soldier to a destroyed, self-defeated man, *The Line* works to counter the claims of ethical superiority—of the West as the world's 'good guys'—that military-shooters perpetuate.

Walker is a talkative character, constantly providing audible feedback to the player. Voiced by prolific voice actor Nolan North, his voice will be uncannily familiar to many videogame players. North has voiced playable characters in a variety of popular game series such as *Uncharted*, *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007), *Army of Two: The 40th Day* (EA Montreal 2010), and *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft 2008). Through North's voice, Walker sounds like just another videogame character as he orders his squad mates to "Take down that target." But as the game progresses—especially after "The Gate"—Walker's dialogue shifts. When he kills a soldier, he might gloat, "And stay down!" When giving an order to a squad mate, he will say "I want that fucker dead!" Walker is still 'just another character' voiced by Nolan North, but that character has become something dark and alien. This affords an intertextual element in Walker's character. As game critic Tom Bissell remarks, "Suddenly you understand why North was cast: to allow [*Uncharted*'s] Nathan Drake to go insane" (2012). As the veneer of militaristic efficiency erodes, both Walker and the player are challenged to consider that perhaps there is a darker side to every playable character they embody. Perhaps they are only really here—in Dubai, in a military shooter, in a violent videogame—because they enjoy virtualised killing.

Figure 4: Walker's appearance at the start of *The Line*.

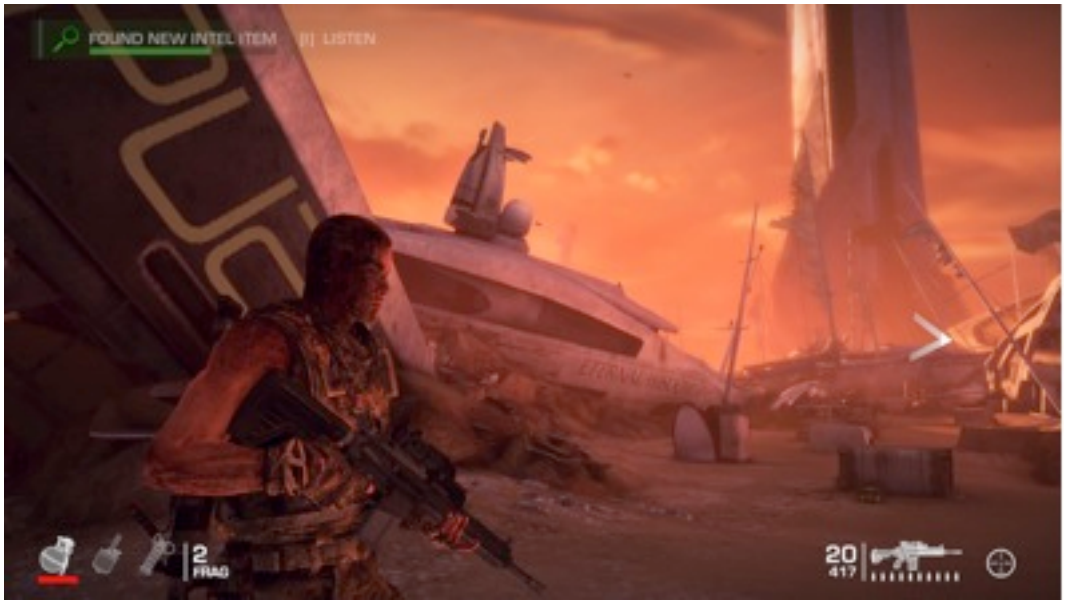

Figure 5: Walker's appearance towards the end of *The Line*.

As Walker's downward spiral exposes the insanity inherent in every shooter's playable character, the depiction of enemy combatants shifts, too. As Walker becomes less than human, enemies become more than other. As Walker's dialogue becomes more ruthless, the shouts of the enemies become more fearful. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag notes how the more exotic the place, "the more likely we [Westerners] are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying" (2003, 63). Indeed, in military shooters built for a Western audience, the men (always men) at the other end of the crosshair are almost always Russian, Middle-Eastern, or African. *The Line* begins in the same way, but it does

not take long before the player finds themselves fighting American soldiers—a far less exoticised enemy for the game's target audience. But the game's portrayal of their deaths becomes no less full frontal. This channels back to the player who, as the game progresses, "find [themselves] gunning down these American soldiers with the same finesse and zeal Modern Warfare fans usually save for Russian terrorists" (Lejacq 2012). As Walker's motives become increasingly questionable and the player begins to doubt just what they, alongside Walker, are doing in Dubai, it becomes harder for the player to other the enemies, to see them, simply, as 'bad' guys.

But Walker is still always differentiated from the waves of men he kills through the immortality offered to him as a playable character. "The big lie of war-as-video-game" is that the 'good' guys are immortal—a simple reloading of a checkpoint away from resurrection and another chance to succeed (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2011 112). This paradox, too, is built into the dehumanising of Walker. As the player steers Walker through the last survivors of the 33rd, they are notably afraid of him. "How is this possible?" they sometimes exclaim. "How is he still alive?" The coupling of player and character is at last revealed as not an ethically superior 'good' guy saving the world from waves of faceless, fundamentally evil 'bad' guys; not a member of a technologically superior army capable of precise attacks; but an invincible, monstrous cyborg conducting murder for the joy of it, against human beings that do not want to die. What *The Line* ultimately claims through Walker's development is that the genre's conventional imagining of the US military as a benevolent, benign force for good obscures a reality where an interventionist US causes the very conflicts they attempt to prevent.

CONCLUSION: A CONVENTIONAL SUBVERSION

Speaking specifically of *Full Spectrum Warrior*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter exhaustively pin down their concerns with the genre of military shooters:

> *FSW* contributes to the broader banalization of war by promoting uncritical identification with imperial troops; by rotely celebrating the virtue of their cause and the justice of their activities; by routinizing the extermination of the enemy; by diminishing the horrors of battle and exalting its spectacle; by forming subjects of, and for, armed surveillance; by investing pleasurable affect in military tactics and strategy; and by making players material partners in, and beneficiaries of, military techno-culture. Virtual involvement of civilian populations in actual imperial war makes military games a home-front component of full-spectrum dominance. (2009,118)

The Line, though, insists the player is critical of their identification with Walker; questions the contribution of an interventionist West into foreign states; explicitly comments on how the extermination of the enemy is made routine; renders the battlefield horrific; and prioritises the blind march forward over tactics and strategies. These are the reactionary moves it makes against its own genre. It does not create a radically different type of game capable of explicit political statements, such as Molleindustria's *Unmanned* (2012); it does not stage an explicit intervention of a pre-existing military shooter, like Joseph DeLappe's *Dead-in-Iraq* (2006). Instead it subversively repurposes the conventions of the military shooter to draw attention to the ideologies embedded within those conventions. *The Line* has the player do what they would typically do in a military shooter, but shifts the context of these actions to expose the myths of technical and

ethical superiority that the military-entertainment complex perpetuates. By taking the player's expectations from years of playing military-themed videogames and working against them, *The Line* insists its player considers what is not being represented in virtual warfare.

However, on Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's final point that military-themed games make players beneficiaries of military techno-culture, *The Line* is undeniably no less complicit. Before anything else, *The Line* is an entertainment product produced by a publisher to return a profit through a depiction of military endeavours. For everything it says about the virtualisation of war and the convergence of how war is conducted and represented, *The Line* remains a part of the same paradigm. It is still a military shooter, and faces criticism for placing all the blame on the player while absolving the developer. Michael Clarkson argues that by putting all the blame on Walker and the player for simply not turning back, *The Line* "retreats from the complicity of the designer in the glorification of and lust for violence" (2012). Similarly, developer and critic Matthew Burns thinks by not actually offering the player the chance to choose to do anything but what they would normally do in a military shooter (that is, walking forward and killing everything), *The Line* shows an abdication of responsibility on behalf of the game: "While it guarantees the player can only make the singular choice, it is also more manipulative" (2012).

It is thus important to stress the actual significance of *The Line*'s achievement. Still existing as it does within the paradigm of the military-entertainment complex, it should not be read as a statement against the military shooter genre's existence, but as a reaction against the totalising myths of technological and ethical superiority that military shooters and their players uncritically perpetuate. To conclude his review of Crogan's *Gameplay Mode*, Ian Bogost muses that perhaps logistics—that is, "the contemporary extension of wartime practices in times of peace, indeed at all times"—is itself "a toy worth playing with, a feature of the world that both haunts and intrigues us" and that accounting for the intimate historical relationship of videogames and the military "not only makes us complicit in the Cold War's logics, but also provides us with the pleasure—and the honesty—of fessing up to that complicity" (Bogost 2012). Its own genre's complicity in the military-entertainment complex certainly both haunts and intrigues *The Line*, and it asks its player to be equally haunted and intrigued by their complicity. Through the subversive use of the genre's mechanics, aesthetics, and conventions to devalue claims of technological and ethical superiority, *The Line* insists that its player "fesses up" to their own complicity in the system. The player does what they have always done, but what they have always done is shown to be something quite horrible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Tom Apperley, Christian McCrea, Larissa Hjorth, Dan Golding, Helen Berents, and my anonymous reviewers for invaluable feedback at various stages of this paper's development.

NOTES

1. I have compiled a non-exhaustive compilation of the various essays, interviews, and blogs written about *The Line* for the website *Critical Distance* at http://www.critical-distance.com/2012/11/20/spec-ops-the-line/

2. Such works frequently take the form of mods of existing games or interventions into the online spaces of multiplayer games. For instance, Eddo Stern and Mark Allen's *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001) comments on videogame violence through modifying a fighting game to electrocute players as their character is struck. Stern also created *Sheik Attack* (1999), a machinima film constructed from footage of a variety of videogames that comments on Israel's complex and bloody history, and how the media constructs reality. Part mod and part intervention, *Velvet Strike* (2002) by Anne-Marie Schleiner, Condon, and Jean Leandre was a project to create anti-military digital graffiti tags to be deployed within the multiplayer shooter *Counter Strike* (Valve 2000). One of the most popular intervention works of recent years is Joseph DeLappe's *Dead-in-Iraq* (2006). DeLappe enters online games of *America's Army*, drops his character's weapon, and types the names of soldiers killed in Iraq into the game's chat channel. For a more detailed analysis of the games and performances created by New Media artists to critique the relationship of videogames and the military, see the chapter "Playing Through" in Crogan's *Gameplay Mode* (2011).

3. In its pre-release press cycle, much was made by *The Line*'s developers/producers of the influence of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, suggesting that the game would offer a darker commentary on war, imperialism, and othering practices (LeJacq 2012). However, with the exception of several explicit nods (such as Colonel Konrad's name), these influences exist more in implicit thematic parallels than explicitly in the structure of the plot. While a comparative reading of these three texts would be a fruitful endeavor, such an undertaking is, sadly, beyond the scope of this paper's interest in *The Line*'s conventional subversion of the military shooter genre.

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