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The Virtual War: Representing and Criticizing Militarism in Games

When considering how war is represented, whether in entertainment, art, or media as a whole, the impact and influence of video games cannot be understated. Games make up a multi-billion dollar industry that currently dominates the entertainment market, with game releases claiming the biggest entertainment launch of every year since 2009. Notably, save for 2013's best-selling *Grand Theft Auto V*, every one of those record-breaking sales figures has been attached to an installment of the *Call of Duty* military shooter franchise. *Call of Duty* is hardly an anomaly in the game market, nor is it a simple trendsetter; titles such as *Battlefield, Medal of Honor, Wolfenstein,* and many other games featuring the American military as protagonists predate the first *Call of Duty* game by many years and still see widespread success today. Tying the military and game industry even closer together, into what Nick Robinson refers to as a "military-entertainment complex", is a shared history and culture born out of the military's assistance with the development of gaming technology in the 1980s. This investment developed into a symbiotic relationship between the two industries, as games in turn began providing simulators and other tools for the US military to use in training (Robinson 508). The existence of such a mutually beneficial environment ensures that games with pro-military themes are prominent in the modern market. Indeed, the existence of propaganda games like *America's Army* that are explicitly developed and released for the purpose of marketing the U.S. military

seem to be the natural outcome of such an environment. The more intriguing angle to pursue when examining the representation of war in games is found not in the common pro-war or otherwise militaristic titles, but in those games that protest conflict, imperialism, and violence within a context that does not easily support such perspectives. The difficulty in accomplishing this goal appears to be proven by the relative rarity of such titles on the market. However, games such as Yager Development's *Spec Ops: The Line* have successfully pushed back against the wider narrative of the military gaming culture in large part through explicit acknowledgement of that environment. *Spec Ops* specifically presents itself on the surface as a by-the-numbers military shooter about brave American soldiers seeking to bring aid to a suffering Middle Eastern nation, only to turn this narrative completely on its head through deliberate recognition and rejection not just of military shooter tropes but of the wider expectations for the military-entertainment complex and video game narratives. In doing so, *Spec Ops: The Line* provides clear examples of how games as a medium can utilize and subvert player agency and immersion for the purpose of inspiring introspection and critical thought about war and militarism.

The first notable aspect of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s intertextuality is the method with which it initially aims to appear to fit the mold of other games in the military-shooter genre for the purpose of capturing the attention of players with experienced with such games and guiding them to view military shooters through a radically different lens. *Spec Ops'* generic title and cover art, accompanied by a trailer and marketing campaign that depicted it as a standard action-packed military shooter, sold the game as one of many similar *Call of Duty*-inspired titles. The game's title screen, with its battered and upside-down American flag waving to the tune of Jimi

Hendrix's anti-war cover of *The Star Spangled Banner,* provides a clue of the game's true nature only when viewed with a critical eye, as players eager to experience the game itself likely skip right past it. After an exhilarating opening action sequence, the player is introduced to the game's protagonist, Captain Martin Walker, the rest of his Delta Squad, and the story's high concept premise and setting. The player is told that, after the city of Dubai was consumed by a series of violent sandstorms, Colonel John Conrad of the US Army took his 33rd Infantry Battalion into the city against orders to bring relief to the civilian population. The player's task initially is to simply to scout the area for survivors, determine what happened in Dubai, and evacuate any remaining survivors. When this peaceful mission quickly devolves into a massive melee across the ruins of Dubai, however, the player is hardly surprised; this is, after all, a military action game.

This assumption of a need for violence to facilitate progression in military games underlies an important aspect of *Spec Ops'* criticism of the military-entertainment complex and militaristic attitudes toward attaining victory strictly through elimination of the enemy. In his own analysis of how *Spec Ops* criticizes the spectacle of "militainment", M.T. Payne puts forth that this opening expects the player not to be familiar with the geopolitical realities of Dubai, of military procedure, or of the many allusions to Joseph Konrad's *Heart of Darkness,* but instead assumes familiarity with "the experience of playing military video games" (Payne 268). Payne states that the experience of playing *Spec Ops* relies in large part on intertextuality in this manner, with the game's story and design in equal parts referencing and subverting the accepted conventions of the military shooter genre. This phenomenon can be clearly observed in the player's first encounter with enemy forces. Held at gunpoint by unidentified men speaking

untranslated Farsi, the game instructs the player to shoot their weapon, either directly at one of the apparent “insurgents” or at a destructible environment that the game helpfully informs will bury the enemy forces in sand. The conventions of the genre indicate that the player is meant to shoot, and indeed they cannot progress until after firing the first shot. Thoughtful players, however, can recognize that these events would not need to escalate to violence; the Delta Squad is in Dubai to find and help survivors, not fight an unknown enemy force, and even has an operator that speaks Farsi who could easily cool tensions. By forcing the player to pull the trigger, *Spec Ops* both informs the player of their ultimate guilt for the resulting conflict from the start and underlines how military shooters convey violence as the only solution for complicated problems. From this point on, the narrative escalates in differentiating itself from standard military shooter fare. Far from being all-American heroes fighting hordes of evildoers to save the world, Captain Walker and his men become war criminals over the course of their time in Dubai. All three men become guilty of killing hundreds of Dubai’s citizens and soldiers of the 33rd Battalion, all of whom are simply struggling to maintain order and survive in the barren wastes. The player commands Captain Walker not just through firefights, but also in the torture and execution of prisoners, destruction of property and precious resources like water, and, in the game’s most infamous scene, the burning alive of a group of civilian refugees in a white phosphorous bombardment. These atrocities are notably all carried out within the same context of other military shooters. The player uses the same standard array of assault rifles, shotguns, and other firearms found in countless contemporary games. The cover system is not unlike that of *Gears of War* and many other third-person perspective shooters. Even the phosphorous sequence bears a more-than-passing resemblance to the air support mini-games that are quite common to

the *Call of Duty* series' campaigns. Presenting the events of this game in this context has the purpose of associating such games with the real-world consequences of militarism and warfare. In doing so, the team at Yager forces players familiar with other military games to grapple with how their own perceptions of war have been influenced by the standard tropes of the genre. Further, this constructed intertextuality leads the player to directly confront how that manufactured perspective conflicts with reality.

While these aspects of *Spec Ops'* gameplay draw on that of other military shooters for the purpose of criticizing the attitudes that underlie them, Yager's development team in many ways rejects one key aspect of many war games to more clearly convey a humanistic message: an adherence to realism and simulation. In his book *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture,* Patrick Crogan analyzes the complex and intertwined history of military simulation training and game design. Crogan makes a number of points about simulation's ideal role in games that are part of the military-entertainment complex. For one, he asserts that military games reflect a "military information society", the countless pieces of data that underlie the visible game experience reflecting how military intelligence attempts to shape conflict into something predictable, understandable, and winnable (Crogan, ch. 5). The idea of consistent simulation mostly rings true in *Spec Ops'* gameplay; the game regularly provides information about ammo count, and the third person perspective ensures a wide view of the battlefield in all its individual parts for the purpose of enabling the player to strategize. The game, at least initially, follows the assertion of Simon Gottschalk that "although video games texts provide an excess of visual and aural stimuli rapidly circulating on the screen, videology also offers the promise of reliable rules" (Gottschalk 13). Yet, as the story progresses and Captain Walker

becomes increasingly unhinged, this clarity of information and adherence to rules rapidly fades. Walker begins to hallucinate repeatedly, imagining enemies and seeing his foes transform into allies or superhuman monsters. In the middle of one battle, the game even flickers on and off, leaving the player almost helpless to fight even a small group of enemies that they can barely see. This "simulation" does not aim to recreate idealized battle scenarios as planned out by intelligence forces and armchair generals, but rather mimics the sensory, emotional, and psychological trauma inflicted by the "fog of war", PTSD, and physical stress experienced by those who directly experience violence. Beyond this rejection of a detached, data-centric view of war brought up by simulation, the story itself makes sure to emphasize the chaos and confusion of conflict. The game rarely presents clear objectives other than to keep moving forward; Walker and his squad are provided with no information about what the Damned 33rd Battalion or the CIA-led insurgents are planning or what their goals are, which leads to the squad inadvertently committing multiple atrocities. This breaking away from trappings of simulation for a more personal, emotional, and psychological perspective further rejects both the "war from above" perspective and propaganda that builds up war as an event with clear and understandable goals.

Spec Ops' gameplay does not just offer criticism of military simulation culture, but further protests the perceived sense of detachment simulations and game-like technology have helped to foster in modern warfare. This detachment is often associated with the distant nature of contemporary drone warfare, where operators are "piloting a powerful weapon using game controllers [and] viewing the world through a game-like interface", has created concern that drones' use can detach those making military decisions from considering the consequences of their actions to the human beings they potentially devastate (Griffiths 161). *Spec Ops* depicts

only one scene of drone warfare during the white phosphorous bombardment, during which the player is given a view of “a black-and-white bird’s eye view of the battlefield” in which “the action appears sterile and precise.” As Payne points out in his analysis of the scene, this action’s “key, effective difference” from aerial bombardment set-pieces in other military games is the immediate aftermath, in which “the player traverses the burning battlefield and witnesses first-hand the consequences of their actions” (Payne 276). The game goes to many other lengths to avoid having the reader become detached from the violence on screen. The third person perspective on Captain Walker keeps the player focused on his increasing haggard appearance and aggressive attitude; killing enemies with a headshot slows down time to emphasize the inflicted brutality. The game even sarcastically states during a loading screen that “The US military does not condone the shooting of unarmed civilians. But this isn’t real, so why should you care?” (*Spec Ops*) The game actively refuses to let the player remove themselves from the violence just because it isn’t real, inclining them to take the game’s messages and themes seriously. This rejection of detachment further prevents the aforementioned depictions of war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law from “trivializing violations of the law” or having “a potential undermining effect on perceptions of the normative framework” of warfare that posed a major concern to the Red Cross in regards to similar depictions in other war games (Clarke 727). Forcing a confrontation with the ethical implications and effects of warfare on those who experience it allows *Spec Ops* to engage players in facing the reality of war as not a distant numbers game but a visceral event that personally damages all who experience it.

The design of *Spec Ops* goes further than just reflect and criticize the standard presentation of military action in games; many aspects of *Spec Ops*’ presentation function as

commentary on a wider aspect of gaming culture, specifically the investment of the player in the pursuit of agency and progression, for the purpose of inspiring critical thought in the player about the implications of and inherent problems with pursuing real military goals in the same manner as a game that is concerned more with attaining victory than considering human costs. In a 1995 essay on the inherent assumptions of video game culture, or "videology", Simon Gottschalk puts forward that "The central organizing assumption of videology is inarguably that of violence…. In an overwhelming majority of [video games], violence is the basic assumption, the give in…. Violence is not among the many behaviors humans, animals, and machines sometimes participate in. It is the most typical behavior" (Gottschalk 7). This is indeed the case in *Spec Ops* from the beginning, but what makes *Spec Ops* particularly notable in this regard is how the game deliberately emphasizes through various design elements the player's limitation to only having the option of violence in order to progress. After the narrative is launched by the player literally taking the first shot, the game proceeds as an essentially linear shooting gallery, with Captain Walker and his team constantly following a single path through the city of Dubai. Walker's allies- the only characters in the game space that don't exist to be shot at by the player- are constantly pushing forward to meet more enemy opposition or otherwise waiting for the player to do the same. There are no branching pathways, and the rare instances of choice provided to the player inevitably offer the same general outcome until the very ending of the game. This is especially noticeable in Chapter 8: The Gate, during the white phosphorus bombardment. Faced with a huge enemy force, Walker and his team man a mortar that can drop the lethal incendiary on the enemy and allow for further progression. One of Walker's men, Lugo, insists that they don't use the device, pointing out its devastating effects and begging for

an alternative solution, saying that "There's always a choice." Walker replies curtly, "No. There's really not" (*Spec Ops*). Walker is technically incorrect: the player can choose to take the enemy forces head on, but the game will continue to spawn infinite waves of soldiers to face Walker and his men until the player inevitably fails and dies. The only option that provides progress is using the mortar, and in doing so inadvertently murdering the civilian refugees the enemy forces were keeping safe just behind their defenses. *Spec Ops*, a game in a medium whose major draw has been, in part, its ability to "metaphorically transfer the power of control" from reality to the machine, makes apparent to the player the manufactured nature of that control (Gottschalk 4). Despite in theory determining the course of action, the game's progress and messages are in truth revealed here to be ultimately in control of the developers. By "lifting the curtain" in this way, the developers take part what Ken McAllister calls "game work", "creating a rhetorical event that works to make meaning in the players" (Robinson 507). In this instance, the white phosphorous attack conveys not just an aspect of game design, but emphasizes that "progress" is not equivalent to agency. By conveying this point within the context of a mass murder of enemy soldiers and civilians, this message is then explicitly connected to warfare and militarism. The ability to wage war and defeat your enemies, the game asserts, is not itself an indication or means of strength, but only a process in which humans are killed or are made killers. Concepts of victory or glory as a goal of warfare are refuted a criticized by the game's rhetorical rejection of progress as something to be pursued in lieu of choice.

Yet the white phosphorous scene does offer another choice for the player, one that creates a measurably significant impact on the progression of the games' storyline and its overall themes; the game outright suggests that the player quit and turn off the game in order to

encourage a similar attitude toward real life war. As ridiculous as it might seem for a piece of art or entertainment to promote ignoring its own existence, that's exactly what the game does. Payne muses in his review of the game: "But what if the negative feelings resulting from ludonarrative dissonance was not some byproduct of miscalculated design but was instead purposefully crafted and mobilized for ends other than gratifying the player?" (Payne 269) Payne makes the case that *Spec Ops* does just that by staging the story and its themes in such a way that the player is both bombarded by disturbing imagery and made to feel complacent in it. The game goes to great lengths to ensure that its players understand that this is its intention; later in the game, as the list of crimes Walker and his squad are guilty of mounts, the loading screens between stages begin to actively mock the player's morality for continuing to play through the atrocities. "If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here." "You are still a good person." "Do you feel like a hero yet?" (*Spec Ops*) This rhetorical use of story and gameplay does not, however, serve as much of a breaking away from the conventions of game design as it does a fulfillment of its potential. A year prior to *Spec Ops*' release, Nick Robinson wrote in his analysis of militainment that "the interactive nature of games allows them to use processes that can be used to make arguments about the nature of social and political life, and so challenge the preconceptions of the player (Robinson 505)." At the time Robinson wrote this piece, he acknowledged that the military-entertainment complex prevented examples of this sort of criticism from being prevalent, particularly in mainstream Western titles; the only games he was then able to provide as examples to support this thesis that had seen much success in Western markets belonged to the *Metal Gear* franchise from Japan. Most other examples he presented were smaller games from Middle Eastern or independent American developers or modifications of larger military shooters

by players that protested the original developers' pro-military position. Yager, the American developing team based out of Germany responsible for *Spec Ops*, used the same general strategy as these predecessors of "combining both a political critique and a mode of gameplay that reinforces rather than contradicts their message", its explicit messages averting the possibility that players will "not get the joke" and miss said critique (Robinson 515). By shaping gameplay with the purpose of making the player both complicit and helpless to avert atrocities, *Spec Ops* forces the player to think critically about the inherent suffering, moral degradation, and ultimate pointlessness of warfare. By insisting that the player stop playing the game, the developers also insist that the world stops playing at war; that, knowing what it entails, players do what Captain Walker in the game cannot, reject violence as necessary for victory, and "go home".

Spec Ops: The Line's use of intertextuality with other military shooters, simulators, and games in general in its storyline and gameplay are all primarily focused on keeping the player constantly cognizant of the fact that the game is made to make the player think, not to provide visceral entertainment. It refuses Gottschalk's "pleasurable loss-of-self experience" that he claimed to define most games by constantly jolting the player out of feelings of detachment with its disturbing depictions of violence the player is made complicit to (Gottschalk 5). In doing so, it proves correct Robinson's assertion that video games "have vital potential to embed real social critique in players' experiences of their virtual world" through providing clear examples of how immersion can make players think critically not just of warfare, but of the military-entertainment complex that surrounded the game's production and release (Robinson 519). This experience of immersion is not limited just to *Spec Ops: The Line*; it is a vital aspect of video games as a medium. The rhetorical techniques like those displayed by Yager's title can continue to be used

by other games in the future to lead readers to recognize many military games' role as propaganda and the futility, degradation, and real suffering that occurs in real contemporary combat.

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