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Crossing the Line

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CROSSING THE LINE: NARRATIVE THEORY, VIDEO GAMES, AND *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

By

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CROSSING THE LINE: NARRATIVE THEORY, VIDEO GAMES, AND *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

An Undergraduate Honors Project Presented

By

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To

Department of Arts and Sciences

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Honors Committee Chair   Date

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Department Chair   Date

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, author H. Porter Abbott defines narrative as "the representation of an event or a series of events" (13). Given this broad definition, narrative events can be represented in a number of ways, as seen in different storytelling mediums like literature, film, television, paintings, video games, or even daily oral storytelling. Narrative is the way in which one communicates a story. In literature, writers must use text and the placement of text on a page or a screen in order to convey a series of events. Writers can utilize narrators in literature in a number of ways, such as using a third-person omniscient narrator in order to present a character's thoughts, feelings, and actions throughout a novel or a short story, or using word placement, details, and punctuation in order to imply a length of time. Unlike literature, films contain audio and visuals that can be utilized by filmmakers in order to tell their stories. While the medium of film may use some of the same devices as literature, such as various styles of narrators, imagery, or metaphors, films perform and present these devices differently than literature does.[1] While literature presents the setting of the story through text and word-based imagery, films present the setting through visual images and sounds, displaying images of New York in order to communicate that location to the audience, or incorporating sounds of a busy cityscape in order to imply that a scene takes place in or near a busy city area. The way in which each storytelling medium is structured is different, and this allows for differing ways of presenting content to audiences.

This difference in representation also changes the way that a story is experienced by the audience. Stories in literature are typically presented in text on a series of pages or on a screen. In order to experience or "consume" literature, one must read the words and turn pages (or scroll through screens) in order to read more words until there are no more words to look at, mentally translating the text into images and sounds in an attempt to understand what is happening in the

story, as well as to interpret thematic meanings through the way that the story is presented. This is fundamentally different from films, which are experienced by watching moving images on a screen and listening to audio. In order to experience a story presented in film, the audience must look at the images and listen to the sounds until the film is over, taking in information from the images and sounds in order to attempt to understand what is happening in the story as well as to interpret meaning from it. This difference in presentation and experience does not mean that any narrative form is better than any other, only that one storytelling medium will have different ways of presenting the story than another, as well as different ways in which their stories can be "consumed," interpreted, and analyzed.

While narrative theorists have a lot to say about literature, film, and the visual arts, there is not as much discussion about the medium of video games in relation to narrative theory, even within the emerging scholarly field of gaming studies. For instance, while Jesse Schell's book *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* does attempt to answer the question, "How can you create something that will generate a certain experience when a person interacts with it?" in regard to games, Schell's book is more about working through the development and production of a game as part of the development team (11). Schell's discussion of game design is more a helpful formalist discussion of the medium of video games as opposed to the application or examination of existing concepts of narrative theory applied to video games. In the book *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know About Narrative Techniques*, Evan Skolnick presents an extremely helpful examination of existing creative-writing concepts, like the three-act structure, the monomyth, and foreshadowing, and provides examples of their inclusion in existing games. Skolnick even dismantles the suggestion, "hire the best writers from the world's foremost storytelling media—motion pictures and television—and you should get the

best results" by explaining, "when we look at the writers who were behind the most powerful, memorable, and impactful narrative experiences that video games have had to offer, it's almost impossible to find the guiding hand of Hollywood scribes" (103). Yet, while the book covers a lot of storytelling basics, Skolnick does not fully explore the ways in which game developers can utilize the unique qualities of the gaming medium to tell their stories.

Some scholars even dismiss games as a storytelling medium altogether. For example, Jesper Juul, writer of *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, claims that storytelling is entirely outside the capability of games, as storytelling would leave no possibility for "attachment" to a goal, "no player effort" would be required, and there would be a "fixed outcome" (44). Juul includes in this categorization of games and "not games" works of hypertext fiction, which Juul conversely argues are not games for similar reasons (44). Abbott likewise raises a question about whether or not games are a narrative medium or are simply "life itself" (35). Abbott's reasoning is that games are simply "ergodic chain[s] of event[s]" in which events are not represented but rather occur (37). In other words, according to Abbott, games are simulations of real systems, and therefore players' actions are akin to actions in the real world, where a person's actions are not represented by any form of discourse and are not contextualized by a narrative in any way. Abbott's description of games, however, ignores the ways in which games can contextualize the actions of the player, and the ways in which in-game events are mediated both by the game itself and by the interface through which players access and play a game.

Abbott's description also raises questions about games utilizing "procedural rhetoric," a term coined by Ian Bogost in his book *Persuasive Games*. Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as "the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using

oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively" (29).

Bogost argues that "verbal, written, and visual rhetorics inadequately account for the unique

properties of procedural expression" within video games (29). This description of the medium of

games, along with Jesse Schell's statement that game designers "give the player a great deal of

control over the pacing and sequence of events in the experience" compared to other forms of

storytelling, points to games a unique medium that must represent events in different ways than

other media (Schell 10).

Many popular games utilize a similar structure of storytelling, featuring segments of

"gameplay" followed by segments of exposition-heavy dialogue known as cutscenes that are not

controllable by the player. Terence Lee, a game developer of Hitbox Team, compares this

attempt at storytelling to intertitles in a movie. Lee states, "Intertitles are those fullscreen

captions that describe what is happening or contain dialogue. During these captions, the film

regresses back a dimension—it ignores the sensory experience, the thing that makes film unique

from literature, and puts straight up literature on the screen" ("Designing Game Narrative").

Likewise, when a game makes the narrative progression of the game unable to be controlled by

players, Lee argues that developers "ignore the whole dimension of interactivity, the thing that

makes games unique from film" ("Designing Game Narrative"). While media such as film or

literature have interactive elements, there is a different kind of interactive exchange between

players and games in comparison to the exchange between readers and literature or viewers and

films. In video games, the player is able to directly participate in the telling of the story, which

changes the ways in which this particular medium is consumed by its audience. While the

interpretation and effect of a piece of literature are interactive elements of the medium, games

are interactive in the sense that the player is actively participating in enacting the events that

compose the story of the game, including (within limits set by the game developers) the order and outcome of those events..

In contrast, the only way that readers are able to actively participate in creating the events that compose the story of a piece of literature is to imagine different events from the ones described on the page or the screen in one's own mind. This means that any attempt of a reader to actively shape the story of a piece of literature will have to occur extra-textually. Aside from imagining different events, two other ways in which a reader can interact with a literary text is by imagining the images that are generated by words on a page or screen and interpreting the meaning conveyed through the story. While reader-response theory generally holds that the interpretive process is highly interactive, with meaning created by the reader in the engagement between reader and text,[2] when it comes to narrative or narration the reader has no ability to directly determine the direction in which the plot progresses in a piece of literature. Likewise, the medium of film comes with its own unique (medium-specific) ways that the audience can interact with a film. Since viewers are already given sounds and images from the film, viewers cannot interact with film in the same way that readers can interact with literature. Viewers do not get to imagine what characters, settings, or objects look like, but instead have the option of paying attention to details within the frame that are not the focus of the plot or of the camera's framing. Similar to interacting with literature, film viewers can also engage in interpreting a film by examining elements of film form that are being used to present the story.[3]

When it comes to impacting the direction of the plot, however, both literature and film leave their audiences unable to direct or alter the events that are unfolding on the screen or on the page. This is what makes the style of "interaction" found within the medium of games unique; in video games, players are able to alter the events that occur in games and even determine the

course of the story. The player does not have complete freedom in that the developers of the game determine what actions the player can and cannot do, but within those limits players are able to generate new events in the story, and sometimes even generate events that the developers did not foresee. For example, in the open-world game *Grand Theft Auto V*, players can engage in completing the developer-created "missions," in which they are asked to complete a specific task, or players can begin the game and give themselves an entirely self-generated goal. Perhaps some players will run to the top of the tallest mountain in the game world, while others might decide to rob a convenience store. Some players who play games like *Fallout 4* or *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* simply enjoy creating their own characters and exploring the game world, largely avoiding missions altogether. This idea applies to less open-ended games as well; even if players are playing a game in which the ending of the game is always the same, players' interactions may still alter the path that the story takes to get to the end. This causes an interesting paradigm shift in which the game developer no longer solely determines the events that take place in a story. In many ways, the player becomes a co-author to the story, and determines the path of the story through their actions in the game world.

Because video games are still a relatively new medium, many games struggle to find ways of telling the story through interaction and allowing the player to be a part of the telling of the story, as opposed to using exposition-heavy dialogue or in-game videos, yet some game developers are discovering ways of combining story and gameplay, utilizing the unique components of video games in order to tell a story. *Spec Ops: The Line*, a third-person military shooter and action-adventure game developed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games in 2012, is one such game that uses gameplay as the means of telling its story through player interactions with the game narrative. Even more interesting within the context of an

examination of interactivity and narration in video games, *Spec-Ops: The Line* also employs player interactions to provide commentary on video games and the relationship between the players and the creators of a game when it comes to shaping both the game's narrative and the meanings communicated through it. This thesis attempts to explore the ways in which video games are able to tell their stories in a way that is media-specific, and which differs from other literary and media-based modes of storytelling like novels or films. Through a critical reading of *Spec Ops: The Line* and short analyses of several other games, this thesis will examine the media-specific methods of storytelling utilized by video games, the equally specific modes of both consuming those stories and simultaneously taking part in their narration through the act of game play, and the types of interactivity between video game text and player that determine both of these things. This thesis will also examine *Spec Ops: The Line*'s critical commentary on war, war games, and power fantasies, as well as the game's meta-commentary on video game structure and the interactive relationship between the developer of a game and the player of a game when it comes to shaping the game's story.

 Spec Ops: The Line follows three Delta Force operatives, Captain Martin Walker, Lieutenant Alphanso Adams, and Staff Sergeant John Lugo, who have been sent to the city of Dubai on a reconnaissance mission. The game begins in *medias res* with the player controlling Walker. Walker, Adams, and Lugo are onboard a helicopter attempting to escape several helicopters that are trying to shoot them down, with Walker manning the minigun. As a sand storm increases, one helicopter crashes into Walker's, and the screen goes black. The player is then informed through the use of a cutscene that Dubai was hit by a large sand storm six months prior to the start of the game. As previously mentioned, a cutscene is a non-interactive in-game video that the player watches but cannot control in any way. Cutscenes may depict events that

surround and include the character that the player controls. For instance, a cutscene may depict a conversation between the protagonist and another character where the player cannot control the protagonist or the game in any way. Cutscenes are typically used to deliver exposition, introduce players to concepts that they might miss during gameplay, or to show the effects of players' actions during the gameplay.

The cutscene at the start of *Spec Ops: The Line* further reveals that Colonel John Konrad of the 33rd Infantry Battalion of the United States Army volunteered the 33rd to help with relief efforts in Dubai, remaining in the city even after being ordered to abandon it and the people within. Konrad and the 33rd's actions caused them to be disavowed for treason. As the dust storms increased, a storm wall formed around the city, disrupting communications and travel around and within the city. Two weeks before the events of the game, a message from Konrad managed to penetrate the storm wall. The message claimed, "This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai ended in complete failure. Death toll: too many." This cutscene reveals the purpose of Walker's presence in the city: to locate survivors in Dubai following the sandstorm. The game then returns to Walker's squad, who are just entering the storm wall surrounding the city. The screen displays the opening credits and, just before returning control of Walker to the player, the game displays the player's online username as a "special guest." The inclusion of the player's online username is important, as few games recognize the player's involvement during the opening of the game. The inclusion of the player's name here foregrounds the role of the player as both the person playing the game and one of the people shaping its narrative from this point on.

 Spec Ops: The Line is divided into chapters, which is revealed to the player as text fades in on the screen saying, "Chapter 1: The Evacuation." There are fifteen chapters in the game, the lengths of which are varied given that the length of a chapter depends on how quickly the player proceeds through any given area. Like other works of fiction, chapters, missions, or levels serve as a way to split games into segments. In *Spec Ops: The Line*, each chapter generally begins with some sort of goal that must be accomplished by the player, and ends either with the completion of that goal or with some revelation that alters the goal or sends Walker in a new direction.

 At the start of the first chapter, Walker explains the specifics of the characters'—and the player's—mission in Dubai: "Locate survivors. Leave the city immediately. Radio command from outside the storm wall. They send in the cavalry, we go home." After encountering some Emiratis with guns, Walker claims, "My name is Captain Martin Walker. We're looking for survivors." The Emiratis are nervous about Walker's squad because they have been attacked by some other group. During this exchange, the player can attack the Emirati men at any time, and

eventually must engage in combat in order to progress, as the Emiratis start shooting at Walker and Adams. When Lugo points out that these Emiratis are "refugees" and "survivors of the storm," Adams says, "That's good, right? We should radio Command. Give 'em the news," to which Walker responds, "Gentlemen! Less talking, more shooting!" Despite being ordered to evacuate after locating survivors, Walker decides that it would be best to push further into Dubai in order to find out what happened to Dubai's inhabitants and the so-called "Damned 33rd." After this moment occurs, players may notice that they are unable to call for an evacuation. With Walker refusing to call for evacuation and the player being entirely unable to call for an evacuation, the game frames radioing Command as an impossibility, not because Walker is incapable of doing so, but because Walker is unwilling to do so. In order to progress the story, the player must disobey orders and continue further into the city. In this way, the game allows Walker's goals to become the goals of the player, asking players to enact Walker's command to disobey his orders and proceed further into the city. This sets up the completion of Walker's goals as win-states for the player, as the only way to proceed through the game is to follow Walker's orders.

Walker's unwillingness to radio Command for an evacuation is the start of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s commentary on the politics of the American military and the invasion of foreign territory. In his book *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost, an author and game designer, spends a great deal of time discussing political games, or games with political messages. In particular, Bogost discusses the game *America's Army: Operations*, a government-funded game released in 2002 by the U.S. Army as an army recruiting tool. In the game, players control a soldier in the U.S. Army and are given missions in which they must kill enemy combatants. For following orders and killing enemies, a player is given "honor" points, which are tracked in online leaderboards that display

players' ranks and reveal which players have the most honor. Bogost's argument is that "the correlation of honor with the performance of arbitrary and politically decontextualized missions offers particular insight into the social reality of the U.S. Army" (77). The way that the game frames honor, which is how the player is awarded higher ranks throughout a worldwide leaderboard, has a lot in common with the way that military decoration works in reality. Bogost argues that in the real world, the "average citizen's lack of familiarity with the specific actions that warrant a ribbon or medal ensure that these designations signify the soldier's abstract worth rather than his individual achievements," which directly correlates with the way that honor, in the game, is just a number awarded to players who complete goals, with little regard for the players' individual achievements (77). Players are incentivized to raise their honor because honor increases players' ranks on leaderboards and allows players to proceed through the game.

In this way, *America's Army: Operations* creates an experience that exemplifies a political message. Utilizing the systems of the game, the message "follow orders regardless of context and you will be rewarded" is not only conveyed to the player, but additionally reveals the way in which the U.S. Army deals with the concept of honor and reward. Bogost's discussion of *America's Army: Operations* and political games is important because *Spec Ops: The Line* attempts to comment on the kind of blind, order-following, insistence on violence that *America's Army: Operations* (as well as *Call of Duty*, and other modern war games) rely on in their depiction of war and America. Not only do the game's characters and story events generate this commentary, but *Spec Ops: The Line* also utilizes the actions of the player in order to create a commentary based around players' ability to alter and determine the course of the story through interactions with the game world. Utilizing the conventions of other modern military shooter games, *Spec Ops: The Line* ends up creating a commentary on the kinds of political messages

and ideologies that are present in other titles. Furthermore, players come to understand this

commentary not just because characters in the world criticize players' actions, but because the

game generates an unsettling experience for players who chose to engage in this blind insistence

on violence that is common in many games, as well as in the real world.

   To this end, a large part of the way in which gameplay progresses in *Spec Ops: The Line*

is focused on creating a feeling of cognitive dissonance on the part of the player; a loading

screen later in the game even defines the term. As in most video games, every time the player

Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two conflicting ideas simultaneously.
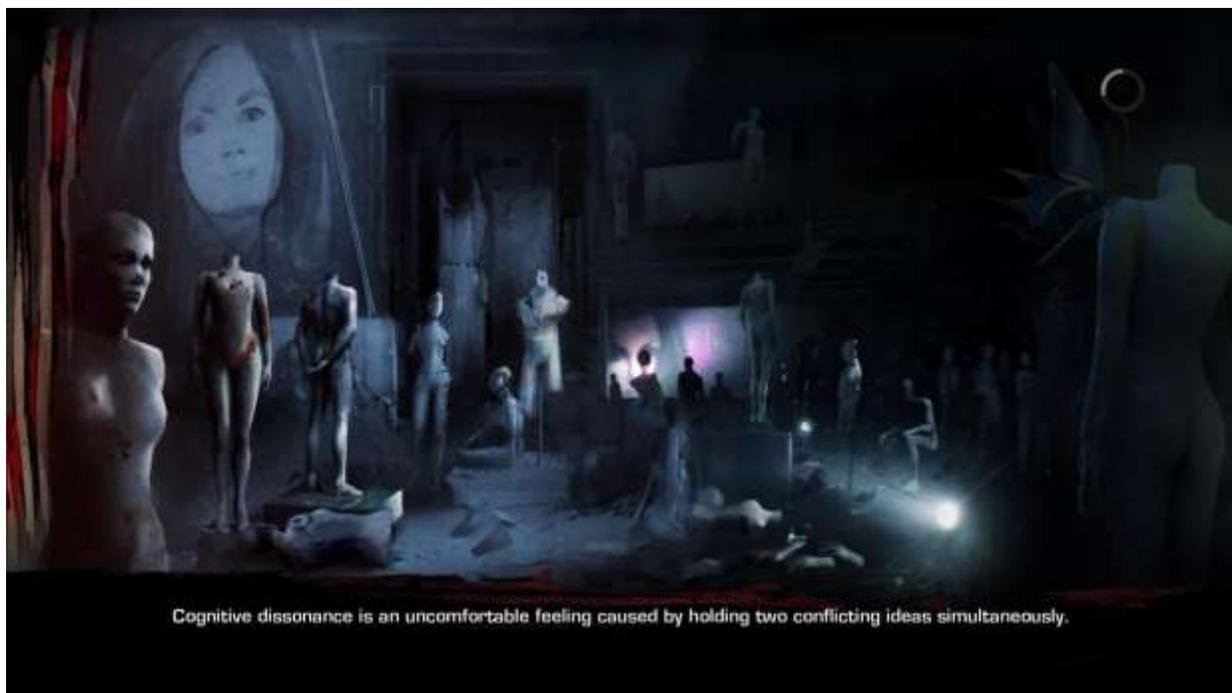
character dies, the player sees a loading screen. The loading screen provides something for

players to look at or read while the game loads an earlier checkpoint at which the player

character is not dead. Throughout most of the game, when players die, they will receive a

loading screen with varying images or text that either gives tips to the player or explains what is

going on in the story. For instance, one early-game loading screen explains that "to avoid fire

while on the move, take cover while sprinting. You'll slide into cover from further away." Later

in the game however, the loading screens begin to say things like, "There is no difference between what is right and what is necessary," or, "Can you even remember why you came here?" One appears that explains, "Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two conflicting ideas simultaneously."

Given that the player will only see these screens when Walker dies, the select amount of text that the developers chose to include in the game is important. The loading screens serve to generate a feeling of cognitive dissonance by using loading screens in a way that other games do not. Unlike other games, *Spec Ops: The Line* uses loading screens in a way that is not simply utilitarian, but that also allows the player to think about what is happening in the game before they return to gameplay. This, like the inclusion of the player's name at the start of the game, stands apart from the ways in which most games utilize load screens; some games will simply let the player know that the game is loading in order to prevent the player from thinking that the game has crashed or otherwise stopped working, while other games, like *Dark Souls* or *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, simply give the player tips for being better at the game or explain the lore of the game world to the player. At the start of *Spec Ops: The Line*, the loading screens indeed give tips to the player, but as the game progresses and as the player continues committing gruesome acts of violence to progress the story, the loading screens begin to convey an awareness of players' role in perpetuating the acts of Walker in the game world, as well as of the player's complicity in carrying out those actions. In this way, the death of Walker and the resulting loading screen also provide the player with time to think about (and critically reflect on) Walker's actions outside of the way that the gameplay frames them.

While the political critique of *Spec Ops: The Line* comes in part from the ways in which the loading screens begin to comment on—and urge the player to question—their actions in

carrying out Walker's mission within the game, it also comes from the way in which that mission plays out over the course of the story, as well as the ways in which players begin interacting with the systems of the game as that story progresses. In the first chapter, the player is guided through a tutorial of the controls and the systems of the game that the player can interact with. The player is introduced to their two weapons, both of which are American guns. The first is an M4A1 assault rifle and the second weapon is an M9 pistol. Both of these weapons come with optional silencers that can be attached to tactically maneuver around groups of enemies without being heard. One of the tutorial prompts explains that the player can pick up and use enemy weapons, however the player may realize that all of the weapons that Walker can pick up at the start of the game are less practical than Walker's starting weapons. There are four weapons in chapter one aside from the starting weapons: a sub-machine gun, an AK47 assault rifle, a rocket launcher, and a shotgun. Both the AK47 and the SMG are less accurate than the M4A1 and M9, and neither of them can be silenced. The rocket launcher is only found once the player is navigating tight corridors, which make it extremely impractical to use. Finally, the shotgun is a decent weapon for close encounters, but is impractical for long distances, unlike both the M4A1 and the M9.

This immediately establishes within the game the idea that American weapons are more superior and practical than the weapons of the Emiratis, setting up a dichotomy in which the player can easily distinguish themselves from their opposition; the player is given a very clear understanding that Walker's squad is superior in both its technology and its tactics, and this understanding is delivered entirely through the feel of firing weapons as the player experiences combat. For instance, the player will notice that there is only a small amount of recoil when firing the M4A1, and therefore the player will not have to use the computer mouse or the analog

stick on the controller very much to compensate. While the AK47 has two firing modes, single shot or automatic, players' playstyles are limited to aggressive combat only, whereas the M4A1 has a visual indicator on the screen's heads-up display (HUD) that lets them know they can use a silencer and engage in stealth tactics as well. When Adams suggests that the squad "equip silencers" to gain an advantage, the player understands that this aspect of gameplay would not be possible without American weapons, therefore positioning Emirati weapons as tactically inferior. This understanding, conveyed through gameplay, is an example of Bogost's explanation of political games; through the use of combat gameplay and options for various tactics, *Spec Ops: The Line* uses weaponry in order to convey American superiority as the American weapons are the only weapons that allow the player to be highly accurate and to use silencers on their weapons for sneaking past enemies.

All of this being said, unless the player is an exceptional marksman, the player will eventually run out of ammo for American weapons. In the game, there are only two ways of regaining ammo for a particular gun: one can either find a box of ammo, which carries ammo for all of the weapons in the game, or one can pick up ammo from weapons of the same type that have been dropped in the environment. In the first chapter of the game, there are no ammo boxes, and since the player is fighting against Emiratis, there are no American weapons to be found lying around, leaving the player forced to switch to either an enemy weapon or to use the M9 exclusively, which cannot carry as much ammo or fire as quickly as the other starting weapon. Though there are ammo boxes in the second and third chapters of the game, they are scattered sparsely and the player will usually end up having to use Emirati weapons throughout.

Forcing the player to run out of ammo in the first few chapters of the game sets up conditions within the narrative that allow the game to simultaneously generate feelings of

cognitive dissonance in the player during gameplay and also provide ideological critique through players' experience of that cognitive dissonance. In chapter four, Walker discovers that agents of the CIA have been attempting to kill members of the Damned 33rd. When Walker and his squad finally locate several soldiers of the 33rd, the soldiers believe that Walker, Lugo, and Adams are members of the CIA, and begin to fire their weapons, forcing Walker's squad to engage in combat. As players engage in the killing of hundreds of American soldiers, they will find that they are either running out of ammo for the Emirati weapons, or that they can now switch back to using the superior American weapons that they were using at the start of the game. There are many more American enemies than there are Emirati ones, which means that the player will find ammo on the corpses of American soldiers in abundance. This reversal is interesting in terms of the game's ideological critique because it blurs the previously-distinguished line between the player and the opposition.

In a lot of military games, the line between the "good" and the "bad" teams are made entirely clear. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, for instance, if players put their crosshairs over an allied soldier, the soldier's name will appear on the screen, and the crosshair will turn green. If players try to fire at their teammates, the game will not let them. However, all of the enemies in *Call of Duty 4* are either Russian or Middle Eastern, typically wear masks, have distinguishable outfits when compared to players' teammates, and can be fired on at any given time. Given that the only way that one can engage with the world in *Call of Duty 4* is by pointing and firing their weapons, the sole mechanic of the game reinforces the idea that the player's team is good, while the enemies are presented as the "other," both bad and dehumanized.

Because *Spec Ops: The Line* turns American soldiers into the enemy of the game, it blurs a traditionally defined line between what the player would normally define as good or bad in a

modern military shooter game. Here, the concept of the "other" has been completely destroyed, and—more significant—it has been deconstructed through gameplay, as the player experiences the traditionally defined line in the first three chapters of the game, and is forced to confront a new experience in the fourth chapter. It is also important to note that, considering that the American weapons are also the strongest, most accurate, and most tactical weapons in the game, killing the American soldiers becomes easy to do. Indeed, Combat against American soldiers becomes laughably easy in this chapter of the game, as the player can kill the soldiers effectively while almost always keeping their ammo at full capacity. The idea that killing soldiers who are supposed to be on the "same side" as the player is easy—but is also encouraged by the game since it is necessary to further Walker's (and, by extension, the player's) mission—once again generates a feeling of cognitive dissonance, exposing the player not only to a critique of other military video games but also the U.S.'s tendency toward violent militaristic behavior. At the same time, reversing the conventions of military shooter games so that players must kill those "on the same side" in order to progress through the game also creates a sense of cognitive dissonance by framing "winning" the game as murdering a large number of human beings, including characters who are supposed to be on the same side as the protagonists. Thus, the game not only critiques ideologies of U.S. militarism, but also those games that glorify it—along with the player's own complicity in embracing this ideology through gameplay in this chapter of *Spec Ops: The Line*.

Clint Hocking, creative director at the Ubisoft Toronto game company, coined the term "ludonarrative dissonance" while discussing the game *BioShock*. Hocking uses the term ludonarrative dissonance to describe the experience of a game's "play" being in direct conflict with its narrative ("Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*"). The term is helpful in describing

why many moments in the game, including the reversal of weapons and ammo, create a feeling

of cognitive dissonance in *Spec Ops: The Line*. Once the player begins fighting their way

through an empty market, Lugo attempts to negotiate with the 33rd, who will not listen. During

the ensuing firefight, Adams and Lugo continually remind Walker, and therefore the player, that

they are killing American soldiers. The story of *Spec Ops: The Line* paints this conflict, in which

two sides of the American military are clashing, as disturbing and difficult to overcome, and yet

combat has become easier and more fluid, and the game as a violent power fantasy has only

made it easier for the player to feel power and to kill others. Despite the fact that the story of the

game has reached a shocking turning point, the style of gameplay, taking cover and shooting at

enemies, has remained largely the same. This moment exemplifies ludonarrative dissonance as

the story of the game is in direct conflict with the mechanics of successfully completing—i.e.

winning—the game. The two conflicting ideas that killing Americans is wrong and that killing

Americans is easy and even fulfilling (while Lugo is shouting about the squad killing American

soldiers) creates a feeling of unease, something that the game has been building toward from

chapter one. This feeling of unease comes directly from the dissonance caused by the story of the

game and the gameplay being in direct conflict with each other. Ultimately, the narrative

structure of *Spec Ops: The Line* calls into question the very goal of "winning" or completing the

game by asking players not only to recognize Walker's mindless violence but also to call into

question their own complicity in enacting mindless violence in the game as players are the ones

who are choosing to engage in this violence in the first place.

  The concept of ludonarrative dissonance also helps to explain the feeling of cognitive

dissonance that one receives from the exaggerated nature of the gameplay. While the story of the

game is incredibly gritty and disturbing, much of the gameplay is exaggerated to the point of

being silly. Players control Walker who, along with two squad members, manages to kill an entire army of enemies. Weapons in the environment glow white so that the player knows that they can be picked up. Players can replenish Walker's ammo by picking up an entire glowing ammo crate, which gives Walker ammunition for every weapon in the entire game. In the first chapter of the game alone, Walker and the player will kill roughly 50 people. Given that the gameplay is mostly the same in each chapter, and that there are 15 chapters in the entire game, the player's kill count rises to extremely high numbers. The people that Walker kills are also the people that Walker is intended to be saving; the victims are refugees and American soldiers, both groups that Walker was ordered to evacuate, and yet the player kills these people in droves, amassing an ever-increasing death toll that seems out of place, given how serious and realistic the premise of the story is.

Not only is this gameplay exaggerated, but that exaggeration is used to generate a powerful feeling of ludonarrative dissonance that not only draws players' attention to the unsettling acts that they are committing, but also facilitates the game's commentary on the reliance on violence in video games. Violence is used as a primary or important mechanic even in games that do not require violent gameplay. In a YouTube video titled "TUN: Slow Down the Violence," YouTuber MrBtongue discusses violence in video games and the presence of ludonarrative dissonance in the game *L.A. Noire*. In *L.A. Noire*, the player controls a detective by the name of Cole Phelps. Much of the gameplay revolves around solving crimes, having the player collect items, take notes, and interview key witnesses in an attempt to put a criminal behind bars. As MrBtongue puts it, however, "There were two games inside the *L.A. Noire* box. In one of those games, I examined crime scenes, collected clues, took notes in my notebook, and interviewed witnesses. In the other one, I shot people. Lots of people." MrBtongue goes on to

explain, "In one *L.A. Noire*, Cole Phelps is a relatively normal person… but in the other *L.A. Noire*, Cole Phelps is a *GTA*-style[4] one-man-army, capable of dispatching … 20 or more enemies by himself [and shaking] off multiple gunshots like they're nothing."

The feeling generated by ludonarrative dissonance makes the gameplay feel excessive, while the story of the game lacks impact due to the silliness of the player's involvement. MrBtongue finishes explaining this dissonance by asking the questions, "Why does a rank and file detective have a body count in the triple digits after just a few months on the job? Why does advancing every case I'm working on require me to wade through a fresh mountain of corpses?" MrBtongue's argument highlights an important aspect of many violent video games: they rely on violence as a gameplay mechanic but do not examine the consequences of violence on either the victims or the perpetrators. The gameplay puts players in a position where they are much stronger than their enemies and must kill all enemies as an objective force of good. Violence is used solely as an aspect of play, power, and fantasy. Drawing on this convention, *Spec Ops: The Line* examines the consequences of violence in a way that other games do not by constantly revealing the effects of players' actions in the game world. One of the best examples of this is in the so-called "white phosphorous scene."

Before addressing the white phosphorous sequence, it is helpful to note the similarities between the white phosphorous sequence and a mission in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is divided into missions. One particular mission, named "Death from Above," has the player controlling a gunner on an AC-130 gunship. The player takes orders from the pilot of the AC-130 and a squad on the ground. The player is placed in the point of view of the gunner camera, and is able to aim the gunship's weapons and fire at the small white figures

that the pilot orders the player to fire at. While firing at the figures, the pilot will make comments

or continue to give orders, such as saying, "Engage anything without a flashing strobe light.

Those are all hostiles," or saying, "Hot damn" when the player kills a certain number of figures.

In this mission, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* again presents a situation where players are

forced to trust their squad, and see the military conflict as one of good versus evil. The player is

intended to trust that the figures they are shooting at, and being congratulated for shooting at, are

actually enemies and not allies or civilians. In contrast, *Spec Ops: The Line*, through the use of

its white phosphorous scene and the range of interactions that the player is allowed, engages in a

commentary on this kind of blind, order-following violence driven gameplay that other games,

including modern war games like *Call of Duty 4*, develop as central to their interactivity.

White phosphorous is a form of incendiary munition that can be used in order to increase

visibility or to generate a smoke screen, among other uses. In chapter seven of the game,

Walker's squad, as well as the player, are introduced to the effects of white phosphorous on human beings. There are conflicting accounts over whether or not the use of white phosphorous on personnel is allowed, and yet here American soldiers rain down white phosphorous on a group of Emirati attackers, burning their skin. The player must navigate through a large group of burning men in order to progress to next chapter, in which Walker's squad comes to a large gate guarded by a camp of what Lugo describes as "an army, give or take," of American soldiers. As the player guides Walker to the edge of a building above the large camp, a cutscene begins in which the squad attempts to figure out how to get past the group of American soldiers. The player watches as Adams suggests that the squad fires white phosphorous into the camp, and Walker agrees. Lugo protests by saying, "You're fucking kiddin', right? That's white phosphorous. You've seen what this shit does! You know we can't use it." After Adams says, "We might not have a choice," Lugo explains that "there's always a choice." Walker finally states, "No, there's really not." At this moment, the cutscene ends and the player is given control of Walker once more, and can walk around the small balcony on which they were discussing their plan.

At this point, the player can immediately choose to man the white phosphorous terminal, yet, in the opposite direction at the end of the balcony, is a group of three poles. These poles are seen numerous times throughout the game and become a visual indicator that the player is able to move down to a lower area and, in fact, usually has to in order to progress to the next part of the game. Players will come across these three poles, press the use button on their controllers or keyboards, and Walker and his squad will rappel downward, usually initiating more dialogue between the characters and allowing players to progress the story. In this case, however, the player is not given the ability to rappel. Despite the three poles, Walker's statement remains true

for the player, that there really is not a choice. In this way, *Spec Ops: The Line* further aligns the

goals of the player with those of Walker, the character through which the player is experiencing

the game world. However, this inability of the player to refuse to enact Walker's plan in this

scene also foreshadows the ending of the game, in which it is revealed to the player that Walker

is psychologically unstable, rendering him an unreliable narrator, and rendering the player

complicit in his madness by going along with his "mad" acts in order to progress through—and

ultimately win—the game.

   Despite being very capable of rappelling down to fight the soldiers, Walker insists at this

point in the game that white phosphorous is the only way to progress, and so the gameplay

echoes this sentiment; players become unable to progress unless they force themselves to

participate in Walker's plan. This recalls the dynamic established near the beginning of the

game, when Walker first encounters survivors of the sand storm and the player not is given an

option to call for an evacuation. As in that earlier chapter, during the white phosphorus scene if

the player wishes to progress through the game, the player is forced to participate in Walker's plan to use the white phosphorous, and the player learns this by interacting with the game, something which can only be done in the medium of video games. While movies may put the audience in the protagonist's perspective by visually showing the world that the protagonist sees, video games have the unique capability to put the audience in the protagonist's perspective by allowing the player to experience the world as the protagonist experiences it, but also to directly affect the game world through the protagonist/player character's actions. Players know that Walker sees no other option than to use the white phosphorous because it is the only action available to them as players. This moment of the game positions players in such a way that they experience the events of the story through Walker's point of view, not simply by presenting story events from his perspective, as might be done in literature or film, but rather by predicating player interactions during gameplay on that perspective so that all interactions within the game are based on the player thinking and acting within the game world as Walker. This is a type of first-person narration that is unique to video games in that it positions players to participate in the game narrative as the character within the game in ways that directly impact the progression of the game narrative.

In this way, *Spec Ops: The Line* positions players such that cognitive dissonance intensifies in players' minds as they realize that the only way to progress and thus "win" the game is by engaging in Walker's plan to burn American soldiers. The resulting feeling of cognitive dissonance is one that could not have been achieved in a medium in which the player does not actively participate in playing out the events of the story as, in literature and film, readers and viewers are presented with story actions but are not able to determine them. While it is true that readers and viewers can be positioned to identify with characters who are committing

those story actions through first-person narration or point of view, games require players to

actually choose to perform those actions.

Significantly, once the player decides to use the white phosphorous terminal, the player

sees the terminal from Walker's POV. The terminal's camera is similar to that of the AC-130's

camera in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s "Death from Above" mission; the terminal displays

an infrared view of the camp below Walker's squad, with targets like vehicles and soldiers being

solely white figures. Since most of the terminal is a dark screen, the player can also see Walker's

reflection in the screen. Interestingly, if the player is at the right angle, they can also see their

own reflection in their monitor or TV screen that they are playing the game on, visually

mirroring the identification between the player and Walker. This occurrence is similar to the

concept of suture in film theory, which is the "stitching" of the viewer into a film's narrative

through the use of POV shots (Silverman). However, this process works differently in terms of

video game play, and in this example it takes on a powerful meaning given that the player is

made aware that they are the ones who are firing white phosphorous. Walker is given targets by Lugo and Adams, and the player chooses when to fire and who to fire at. At the end of the segment, Walker is informed that the final target is a vehicle positioned in front of the gate. The player can see a number of targets behind the gate and, when the vehicle is destroyed, the explosion carries over all of the targets behind the gate.

It is only after this moment that the player is allowed to rappel the squad down the balcony and onto the field on which Walker and the player fired white phosphorous. The player is forced to walk through the field of dying soldiers, some of them calling for help or trying to breathe, until the game enters another cutscene. During the cutscene, Walker encounters a burning soldier who says, "We were helping," before dying. It is then revealed that the large number of targets behind the gate were actually Emirati refugees, who have now been burned alive by the player's actions. Within the cutscene, Walker does not blame himself, but rather blames Konrad for forcing his hand and believes that Konrad is behind whatever evil acts were committed in Dubai. Significantly, though, unlike *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s mission "Death from Above," players are not congratulated for their actions at this point within *Spec Ops: The Line*, rather the game reveals the consequences of players' actions. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, the "win-state" is one in which the player unquestioningly murders a large number of white dots on a screen. As players kills more enemies, the characters in the game cheer for players and congratulate them for participating in violence that the game assures players is entirely "good versus evil." The white phosphorous scene in *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, not only criticizes military shooter games that perpetuate this ideology, but also examines the ideology itself, drawing attention to the fact that Walker continues to tell himself he had no other choice and that he is not to blame. In this way, *Spec Ops: The Line* creates a

commentary on the ideology behind thoughtless and unquestioning violence, as well as players' participation in violence for the purpose of domination.

During the white phosphorous sequence, the player can only proceed by engaging in violence. As mentioned earlier, the ability to interact with the world only through violence is common in war games like the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* series. Many violent games are developed as power fantasies in which the player must fight to save the allied forces from outside harm. These games are typically designed so that the player feels strong, or at least strong enough that they can overcome the challenges presented by the game. For instance, in the game *Half-Life 2*, Gordon Freeman, the character that the player controls, is constantly given praise by other characters in the world. When the player accomplishes tasks, other characters will congratulate Gordon, giving him and the player more weaponry and ammo to take on other challenges. These games present a reality in which the player can take on anything, and the player will be praised for taking on the task of "saving the world." Saving the world in military shooter games usually corresponds with utilizing power and violence in order to dominate foreign powers, as military games are also usually presented as power fantasies in which the player is asked to take on an immense task in order to end some form of conflict with a foreign nation or a terrorist group. *Battlefield 3*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* all put the player in a position where they are meant to use their abilities in order to dismantle American and western European conflict with eastern nations.

Spec Ops: The Line at first appears to be a violent power fantasy as well. The game begins with Walker being tasked to rescue refugees from a harsh environment and hostile forces. The player is given an arsenal of weaponry which is intended to be used to fight off the Emiratis who challenge Walker. Walker can take an incredible amount of damage before dying as he is

regularly shot by enemies during gameplay just as Cole Phelps from *L.A. Noire* is, and Walker's

health is regenerated over time. This means that, as long as Walker does not die, Walker can be

shot a few times, take cover, and have his health regenerate over time. This is the way that health

functions in the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* games as well, making the characters practically

unable to die unless they take a dense amount of damage in a short span of time. The box art of

Spec Ops: The Line even invites comparison to the box art of other war shooter games, which

typically feature a male soldier facing the camera and holding a gun.

Also similar to other military shooter games, Walker will yell out battle cries after killing

enemies, such as yelling, "He's dead" or saying, "Heavy trooper is fucking dead" after killing a

stronger soldier, popular in games like *Gears of War* or *Grand Theft Auto V*. In many games,

these callouts are intended to be satisfying to the player, as the dialogue connects the player to

the player character emotionally after completing a difficult challenge. Even more of a

connection to other action games, Walker's voice actor is Nolan North, an actor who plays the

role of a violent hero in several games, including *Uncharted*'s Nathan Drake and *Assassin's*

Creed's Desmond Miles, and is so prolific that his inclusion as the protagonist in this game is

sure to create parallels between Walker and his other characters. Finally, and most significantly, like the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series, the player is primarily only able to interact with the world in *Spec Ops: The Line* through violence.

There are only two peaceful controls that the player can make use of within the game: moving Walker and rotating the camera around Walker. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a third-person

shooter game. Though players do not see the world directly from Walker's eyes, the game implies that the player is still viewing the world from Walker's perspective. The player even sees quite a few of Walker's hallucinations before the end of the game. The camera is instead positioned around him, usually behind his back. The player can rotate this camera by pushing an analog stick on the controller or using the mouse while playing the game on a computer. Rotating the camera controls where Walker aims his weapon, but it also allows players to examine their surroundings. These two abilities, movement and examination, are the only

options that players have to examine and question the world around them, and the game further conveys this idea through the use of "collectables" called "intel."

In video games, the term collectable usually refers to a series of in-game objects that can be collected by the player. Gathering these objects is not necessary for the completion of the game, but typically exists as a reward for players who travel beyond the path to completing the game and explore the world. They are usually difficult to find, as they are placed in areas that the player is not easily led to via the composition of the game world. In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the collectables are a series of objects, be they voice recordings, documents regarding the events in Dubai, or even a child's doll that Walker finds. Once players pick up one of these pieces of intel, they are prompted to press a button to "listen" to what they have discovered, at which point the game pauses and a transcript appears, accompanied by audio. One of the first collectables in the game, for instance, is the black box of the plane pictured in the screenshot above. Upon finding the black box, the player can listen to an audio recording of the pilots discussing the sandstorm moments before the plane crashed. The player can find recordings of events that happened before Walker's arrival in Dubai, and can even find a psych evaluation for Colonel Konrad.

Perhaps most interesting about these collectables is that a few of them trigger self-reflection by Walker. Though there are other games that utilize collectables in a similar manner, *Spec Ops: The Line* utilizes its collectables as both a way of rewarding players for non-violent play and as a way to foreshadow revelations that occur later in the game. One of the collectables, a hidden collection of silver jewelry being melted down to create bullets, causes Walker to say, "In old horror movies, they always use silver to kill the monster . . . In Dubai, these hostiles are using silver bullets to kill soldiers. Guess that makes us monsters." After finding a child's doll, Walker notes that the doll was made after the storm hit Dubai, and says, "That means children.

Families. I'm starting to wonder about our enemy. We're not that far from Konrad's failed evac. Could these be the survivors? Are we killing the people we came here to save?" Later in the game, a group of Emirati civilians hangs Lugo and kills him. After finding Lugo's body, the player can discover another nearby collectable: an effigy of Konrad. Upon picking up the effigy, the player can listen to a voice-over narration by Walker, in which Walker notes that the Emiratis seem to worship Konrad. (This moment, among others, is a reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with Konrad being a mix of Conrad's name and the first letter of Kurtz's name). Walker begins to discuss the worship of Konrad and says, "And why shouldn't they? They're clothed, fed, sheltered. And until we showed up, relatively safe from harm. These people killed Lugo to protect Konrad. I killed them to protect myself. At least, that's what I'm telling myself today."

None of these lines of dialogue, in which Walker questions his actions in Dubai, occurs without acquiring these hidden collectables. Throughout *Spec Ops: The Line*, players' only ability to really question the violence that they are committing is through movement and exploration. As introduced in the white phosphorous sequence, the game forces the player to commit gruesome acts of violence in order to progress. The collectables in *Spec Ops: The Line* however, allow players to use their only peaceful methods of interaction, movement and examination, to understand that the Walker is indeed committing violent acts that even he seems to condemn upon introspection. The player would never find these items if they had played through the game only focusing on the objectives presented by story, and their inclusion foreshadows what Walker learns at the end of the game: that he is not a hero and is instead the real "bad guy." In this way, by including hidden collectables that contain information about Walker and the refugees in Dubai that can only be found through exploration and careful

examination, *Spec Ops: The Line* continues its ideological critique by allowing players to have an experience in which slowing down and acquiring more context about the events that occurred in Dubai reveals the true nature of the player's involvement in the violent events that take place in the game. As mentioned previously, this critique can only occur in a medium in which the player is able to experience and choose to perform violent actions during gameplay. The game allows the player to experience the game as someone who unquestioningly performs violent actions to "win" or to dominate, or the game allows the player to search for context and question their actions, putting the player in a position where they experience the critique of unsympathetic violence. This critique culminates in the end of the game, after Walker and the player have committed a number of violent acts including killing a number of refugees and destroying the city's remaining water supply.

At the end of the game, Walker reaches the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in Dubai and Konrad's supposed stronghold. Walker and the player are informed that the Damned 33rd are surrendering to Walker, and that "Dubai is yours." Walker is also informed that Konrad is waiting for him upstairs, so the player can navigate Walker into an elevator. While going up in the elevator, a cutscene begins in which Konrad asks Walker over the radio, "Do you feel like a hero yet?" Once the player arrives at Konrad's penthouse, Walker and the player discover that Konrad has committed suicide long before Walker arrived in Dubai. According to Konrad, "The truth, Walker, is that you're here because you wanted to feel like something you're not. A hero. I'm here because you can't accept what you've done . . . You needed someone to blame, so you cast it on me, a dead man." Walker then sees himself standing in front of a large mirror, with both himself and Konrad shown in the reflection. Konrad says that he will count to five, and that

once he counts to five, he will shoot Walker. Walker pulls out his gun, and it is at this moment that the player has a choice between a number of endings.

First, the player is given the choice to have Walker either commit suicide or else be "killed" by his hallucination of Konrad. Considering that Konrad is already dead, either choice results in the same ending. If the player chooses to let Walker die, then a cutscene plays in which the player sees Walker's and Konrad's corpses and Konrad's original distress signal plays as the camera slowly moves to show the now burning city of Dubai. On the other hand, if the player chooses to shoot at Konrad, Konrad's reflection will begin to shatter and Konrad will say, "It takes a strong man to deny what's in front of him," to which Walker responds, "Stronger than you were." Walker hallucinates a soldier asking him for orders, and Walker responds by asking for a radio. Walker's voice is then heard saying, "This is Captain Martin Walker requesting immediate evacuation of Dubai. Survivors: one too many." The credits of the game begin to play, after which there is an epilogue which opens up three more endings for the player to experience.

The epilogue sees Walker sitting on the steps of the Burj Khalifa wearing Konrad's jacket. Walker appears extremely disheveled and is carrying a large shotgun. American soldiers arrive in vehicles, and Walker stands up, still holding his weapon. As the soldiers are nervous about the fact that Walker is not lowering his weapon, one soldier begins asking Walker to hand his weapon over. It is at this moment that the player gains control of Walker once more. Here, the player has three options. If the player chooses to give their weapon to the American soldier, Walker claims, "It's over." Walker climbs into the back seat of a vehicle, and a soldier asks Walker, "If you don't mind me asking, what was it like? How'd you survive all this?" to which Walker responds, "Who said I did?" On the other hand, the player can refuse to give up their

weapon and instead start firing at the American soldiers, at which point they become engaged in

a large firefight. If Walker dies during the firefight, a voice-over plays in which Konrad says,

"There's a line men like us have to cross. If we're lucky, we do what's necessary and then we

die. No… all I really want, Captain, is peace." If the player manages to kill every one of the

American soldiers outside of the Burj Khalifa, however, Walker picks up a radio and says,

"Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai."

Each of these endings is significant in some way to the ideological critique of the game.

As mentioned previously, during most of the game, the player can make Walker fire his weapon

or throw a grenade in the direction of the crosshair that appears on the player's screen. The

player is never given the option to surrender or retreat. However, in the final scene of the game,

while Konrad is counting to five, the player can point Walker's gun at Walker's own reflection.

While Walker's physical self is pointing the gun at the mirror, Walker's reflection is pointing the

gun up at his own head. This exemplifies a shift in the way that players perceive their own

 ability to aim, and the way that players see death.

Throughout the game, if Walker dies then players must restart a particular segment until they can complete the segment without dying. In this particular ending, however, Walker's death is seen as a valid direction for the story to flow, dismantling the extremely strict power fantasy that had been building up until this moment. It is also a shift in that the same button that players used to press in order to fire at their enemies can now be used in order to take the player character's life, the life that the player has been preserving throughout all 15 chapters of the game. This ending serves as Walker's and the player's recognition that they are to blame for the horrible acts that they have committed in Dubai. It is also worth noting that if the player lets Konrad shoot Walker, the same ending cutscene is played, the only difference being that Walker's reflection in the mirror still reveals that Walker is killing himself, implying that letting Konrad kill Walker is still a form of suicide. This scene also aids the game's commentary on the portrayal of moral absolutism in media surrounding the United States military and the enemy "other." At the start of the game, Walker is entirely concerned with shooting at people who are not like him. The game sets up a very clear dichotomy between Americans and Emiratis. Throughout the game, however, the enemies become more and more like Walker and his squad. By the end of the game, Walker finally has the chance to shoot and kill the complete opposite of the "other": himself.

In the endings of *Spec Ops: The Line*, if players choose non-violence over combat, players will realize that the controls of the game are changed in order to facilitate peace as opposed to violence. For instance, in the ending in which Walker shoots himself, the button that is normally used to shoot others is used to prevent Walker from killing anyone aside from himself. In the ending where Walker gives his weapon to the American evacuation team, the

player must choose not to pull the trigger but instead press the button that is typically used for making Walker sprint, allowing the player to use non-violent interaction as a way to end the game. While these options were not available to Walker before the end of the game, their inclusion serves to reveal the change in Walker's state of mind at the end of the game. The ability of the player to engage in a peaceful activity is a mechanical shift that does not appear in many other games, particularly modern war games. Up to this point in the game, *Spec Ops: The Line* has players engage in a similar amount of violence to that of other modern military shooter games. Unlike other military shooters, however, *Spec Ops: The Line* recognizes the consequences of players' actions and ultimately examines the ideology behind reducing complex political conflict to one of "good versus evil." Not only is this reductionist ideology examined, but it is examined in a way that has players experience Walker's perspective prior to realizing that he may have been unquestioningly murdering hundreds of people who did not need to die if he would only question the complex situation into which he had been thrust and choose peace instead of violence. It is only at the top of the Burj Khalifa that Walker is confronted with his actions, and Walker, instead of Konrad, is discovered to be the true creator of the atrocities that occurred in Dubai.

Given both the mirror imagery and the fact that Walker wears Konrad's jacket in one of the endings, a thematic relationship between Konrad and Walker is made apparent to the player. Both Walker and Konrad came into the city with the goal of helping people within Dubai. Both men committed horrible acts of violence to some degree. In the cutscene prior to choosing between committing suicide and shooting Walker's hallucination of Konrad, the camera rests behind Konrad's back as he as aiming at Walker in the same way that the camera rests behind

Walker's back when the player is aiming at Konrad. Both men, in one ending of the game,

commit suicide by shooting themselves. If the player refuses to commit suicide, Walker's call for

evacuation, "This is Captain Martin Walker requesting immediate evacuation of Dubai.

Survivors: one too many," mirrors the distress signal that Konrad sent out in which he claimed

that the death toll was "too many." When the player chooses the ending in which Walker kills the

American evacuation squad, Walker says, "Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai," which is what

Walker's hallucination of Konrad says earlier in the game. Most interesting, however, is the

relationship between Walker and Konrad as narrators.

When Walker first walks into Konrad's room in the Burj Khalifa, Konrad is painting a

picture of the refugees that Walker and the player burned with white phosphorous. Walker looks

at the painting and says, "You did this," to which Konrad responds, "No, you did." While

Konrad is the one doing the painting, Walker is both the one who is hallucinating Konrad's

existence and the one who burned the refugees in the first place. This sets up Walker as a creator

of the story's events, while Konrad is the one who frames Walker's actions. This relationship

between Walker and the player as the creators and Konrad as one who reflects on and frames the events, mirrors the process of playing and creating video games. Konrad painting a depiction of the refugees is extremely similar to the game's cutscene in which Walker discovers that he and the player have killed refugees with white phosphorous. This moment is the game draws a parallel between Walker and Konrad and player and developer. Here, the game implies that without Walker and the player, there would be no story to tell.

Players are a unique addition to entertainment media in that they are in some form both consumers and creators of the games that they are playing. On one hand, games are being developed by a developer, and published so that the player can consume the content that the developer has created. On the other hand, given the interactive nature of video games, the story that unfolds in a game is a result of the players' involvement. As stated by Daniel Floyd in an episode of *Extra Credits* called "The Role of the Player," "We as developers ship products that are, by necessity, incomplete. A painting on wall is a finished work. A movie on a reel is whole and complete. A novel on a shelf is what it will always be, but a game without a player is nothing." Floyd goes on to say that "the player is a part of the artistic processes. Their actions are generative. Without their help, games are left incomplete. [Players] must indubitably be considered [artists]." While it can be said that this holds true for movies and books, given that movies and books require audiences and readers, games require an active participant who not only consumes the story but shapes its course through their choices and interpretations.

For instance, in the game *Fallout: New Vegas*, the player emerges into an open world where they can choose to go anywhere in a post-apocalyptic landscape. There is no real structure to the story as players can choose to do missions, talk to townspeople, or even spend the entire game sitting in a shack on the side of a road. The player shapes both the story and the narrative

potential in ways that deviate from the developers' intentions for how the game should be played or how the game's narrative should unfold. Both the player and the developer are in a constant feedback loop, in which the player performs an action and the game gives a response. As Schell states, "Information flows in a loop from player to game to player to game, round and round… The information that is returned to the player by the game dramatically affects what the player will do next" (Schell 228). It is the relationship between Walker and Konrad, player and developer, that *Spec Ops: The Line* utilizes in order to comment on other military shooter games and the ideologies that those games support.

One aspect of the relationship between the player and the developer that is exemplified in the game is the way in which Walker, after initially putting all of his trust in Konrad, blames Konrad for the violent acts that Walker and the player commit. One form of backlash to *Spec Ops: The Line*'s ideological commentary is that the player is not at fault for committing horrible atrocities, given that they have no other choice. As commenter Xer0Signal states in the comments of *Polygon*'s article "Don't be a Hero – The Full Story Behind *Spec Ops: The Line*," "I was actually mad at Yager, not myself… it's hardly 'all my fault' when you didn't give me a choice… No one wanted to use the white phosphorous, but, there's absolutely no other choice to be made there." Another commenter, TheDarkWayne, claims, "The game makes it very clear that 'there is no other choice', but that's kind of bullshit. There isn't a choice for me, the player, because hey made it impossible for me to proceed otherwise" ("Re: Don't be a Hero – The Full Story Behind *Spec Ops: The Line*"). Several players have argued that the developers constantly lead players to commit violent atrocities by giving them no other option, yet this argument does not hold up because players are entirely complicit in acting out the events of the story.

In many games, an objective list, or a list of players' goals, will appear on screen during gameplay or in a menu of some kind. In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the player's objectives will appear both on screen as the player receives them, and in the pause menu. In chapter nine, Walker hears Konrad's voice telling him to step outside. When Adams asks Walker what is going on, Walker explains that Konrad is behind all of the violence in Dubai and that, for now, they need to "play along" with Konrad. An objective appears on the screen that says "Obey." At this moment, the

player can still control Walker, and the player has the choice of either going outside and rappelling down a wall or continuing to examine the room around them. The player cannot make any other choice in-game; the player cannot turn around and walk out of the room, nor can they radio for evacuation as Walker was ordered to at the start of his mission. The only way to continue the story is to obey Konrad's order to step outside. The game even includes a line of hint dialogue from Konrad, letting the player know that they need to be going outside. In many games, hint dialogue is used as a way of directing the player to do perform a certain action or

navigate to a specific area. For instance, in a game like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, a character might be waiting for the player to board a helicopter, and will say lines like, "Come on soldier, get on board," periodically until the player boards the helicopter. While the line of dialogue is coming from a diegetic source, a character rather than on-screen text or a developer's voice, players who are familiar with these kinds of lines of dialogue will know when they are being used to pull the player into performing an action to continue the story. All of this being said, when Konrad says, "I don't appreciate being kept waiting," to players, and when players discover that going outside is the only way to progress the story, players understand that, in most games, all of this would amount to an attempt by the developer to guide players toward completing the developer-defined objective, or, as the player's objective list says, obeying.

What is interesting about the "obey" objective, however, is that, at the end of the game, the player discovers that Konrad has been dead since long before Walker arrived in Dubai. Konrad's voice is only in Walker's head, and does not serve to characterize the real Konrad in any way. This revelation means that Walker's statement, "It's Konrad. He did it. All of it," is a misguided statement, one in which Walker is denying his own complicity in the violence that he caused. Like the players who claim that the developers forced them to perform violent actions, Walker refuses to acknowledge his own complicity in performing them. The players who blame the developer for forcing their hand perfectly mirror Walker blaming Konrad for actions that he performed and denying any form of involvement. As mentioned earlier, the player is able to find a piece of intel, a hidden collectable, in one of the chapters that is a psychological evaluation of Konrad. It is unclear whether or not this evaluation is real, given Walker's hallucinations, but the link between Walker and Konrad, and the fact that Walker constantly uses Konrad as a moral scapegoat for his own actions, makes the acquisition of a psychological evaluation important to

discussing the relationship between Walker/Konrad and game developer/player. When the player

picks up the psychological evaluation, the player can listen to a recording of the evaluator's

thoughts on Konrad's psyche. In the recording, the evaluator states,

> Psycho-analysis indicates that John Konrad may be suffering from early-stage post
>
> traumatic stress disorder… In an individual as accomplished as Konrad, PTSD could
>
> manifest as a pronounced tendency towards ego-mania and calcification of moral
>
> certitude. More concerning is the way in which Konrad has been lauded as the greatest
>
> military leader since Patton. Konrad has internalized these sentiments and they may now
>
> constitute a crucial component of his psyche. It is believed that as Konrad comes under
>
> fire for failures in Afghanistan he will likely go to extreme lengths to internally fortify
>
> belief in this reputation. Konrad will begin looking outward to explain his failures while
>
> nursing a growing paranoia toward his superiors.

This collectable reveals incredibly important information about Konrad and the way that Walker

views the world. While the actual evaluation is stated to be about Konrad, much of the evaluation

mirrors the way that Walker as well as some players engage with the violent conflicts in *Spec

Ops: The Line* and other games. The statement that "Konrad has been lauded as the greatest

military leader since Patton" provides a direct link between Konrad and Walker and the ways in

which players are treated in other games. As mentioned earlier, in games like *Half-Life 2* or even

games in the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* series, the player is often congratulated and honored for

playing the game. In most violent games, the player is an objective force of good and fights both

to demonstrate skill and to help save a world in need of being saved, usually as the one person in

the game world that is capable of performing these feats.

In *Spec Ops: The Line*, this evaluation states that Konrad, who mirrors Walker, who in many ways is a vessel for the player, has internalized these sentiments, and any criticism of their achievements will result in Konrad, Walker, and players further fortifying their own beliefs in themselves by "looking outward to explain [their] failures." Like Walker and the players who deny their own complicity in the violent events occurring in *Spec Ops: The Line*, the psychological evaluation claims that Konrad will look "outward to explain his failures" rather than acknowledging his own mistakes. Not only is this trait common in the backlash to *Spec Ops: The Line* as demonstrated earlier, but it is entwined with the kind of ideology that views military conflict as an issue of "us versus them" or "good versus evil," where one side can only perform good actions and the "other" is entirely bad, unable to perform anything but evil actions. The game asks players to think about their actions and to think about the way in which conflict is framed by other military shooter games, the media, or even *Spec Ops: The Line* itself, prompting examination of several moments in the story following the "obey" objective.

Once the player chooses to obey Konrad and step outside, a cutscene begins in which Walker approaches two people hanging by their hands from a highway traffic sign. One of them is a civilian, and the other is a soldier. There is a group of snipers aiming their rifles at the two hanging men, and "Konrad" informs the player that the civilian stole water, and the soldier, sent to apprehend the civilian, ended up killing the civilian's family. Before Konrad says anything more, Walker states, "This is a test… I get it. We're meant to choose." Konrad then says, "Who lives? Who dies? Judge these men, or pay the price of insubordination." At this point, the player is given control of Walker, and players may notice that their objective is still to "obey." Several players claim that this is yet another instance of the developers forcing them to commit a violent act that they do not want to commit. However, this moment is not a binary choice. Players have

several choices here; the player can choose to shoot the civilian and let the soldier free, or shoot the soldier and let the civilian free. Doing either of these results in a cutscene where the snipers leave and the one the player did not shoot is freed. Aside from these choices, the player can also shoot the ropes that are restricting each man, dropping them both to the ground. The player can also choose to shoot at the snipers, which causes them to shoot at Walker and his squad. While these choices may seem like small additions, they are surprising inclusions to a genre that generally does not offer the player much choice aside from violence. Furthermore, performing these other actions results in the player failing their "obey" objective, revealing that the game acknowledges that some of its players want another option aside from violence.

This is also a moment in which cognitive dissonance plays a large role. As mentioned previously, other military shooter games like *America's Army* or *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* position "following orders" as a win-state, something that players need to perform in order to "win" the game. Unlike those games, however, *Spec Ops: The Line* presents obeying Konrad as something that perhaps should not be done. Konrad, representative of the designer to some degree, can be interpreted as communicating to players that following objectives makes them complicit in terrible acts of violence, something that, while true of other war games, is rarely addressed in any of those games. Throughout *Spec Ops: The Line*, the player is positioned to commit terrible acts of violence, and it is up to the player whether or not they want to be complicit in performing those actions.

Later in the game, Walker and his squad destroy Dubai's primary source of water, dooming the people who remain in the city. As an act of retaliation, a large group of civilians kills Lugo. While Walker closes Lugo's eyes during a cutscene, Adams says, "Sir! Permission to open fire! I need you to give the word! Walker! Give me the fucking word!" At this moment,

Walker pulls out his gun and stumbles forward toward the crowd. The player regains control of Walker, and an objective appears at the top of the screen that says, "Get the Hell outta Here." As with the sequence in which Walker believes he must choose between the two men, many players assume that they are being forced to slaughter a large group of civilians. Other players, however, try to engage with the crowd in ways that do not result in their death. Walking toward the crowd results in Walker being pushed back toward Lugo's corpse. If players choose to fire into the air, however, Adams will follow Walker's example and fire into the air, causing the civilians to run in fear. While firing a weapon is still an aggressive action, the player does have a choice to escape these moments of violence by using the limited range of interaction that Walker is capable of in ways that do not result in violent deaths. These moments are important because they highlight the fact that players can alter the course of a game by interacting with it in a specific way, and that players' interpretation of an event will cause them to interact with the game in certain ways. If players believe that that their own actions are morally justified, they may have no problem shooting at the civilians for killing Lugo. On the other hand, if players see that the game is shaming them for participating in violent acts, players may try to find an alternative path for the story to progress.

While the player and Walker have multiple ways of interacting with the game and progressing through the story in those two moments, the argument that the game ultimately forces you to continue through the game by murdering people remains. Returning once more to the room in which Walker is asked to "obey" and step outside, the player has no real way of defying Konrad in the game. Once again, the player cannot radio for evacuation, despite the fact that Walker was supposed to radio for evacuation at the start of the game when the squad first encounters refugees. The player cannot walk away from the conflict, as Walker does not open

the door back into the previous room that he was in. The only two options you really have in-game are to obey, or to sit in the room. This raises an interesting question about the need for players to play a game.

At the end of the game, Walker explains to his hallucination of Konrad, "What happened here was out of my control," to which Konrad responds, "Was it? None of this would have happened if you'd just stopped. But on you marched. And for what?" Konrad's statements to Walker are also very clearly intended for the player, meaning that this Konrad, the Konrad that reveals the truth to Walker, can be interpreted as the developer telling players that they have the freedom to put down the controller at any time and stop playing, but players chose not to. Here, *Spec Ops: The Line* posits that putting down the controller is a valid ending to the game. The game gives the player control to make choices through Walker, but when Walker refuses to perform the actions that the player wants to take, like calling for an evacuation, the game tells the player that refusing to partake in Walker's delusions is just as valid of an ending to the game as making it to the "end" of the story. Walt Williams, the lead writer of *Spec Ops: The Line* even stated, "There are four official endings and one unofficial ending. One in Konrad's penthouse. Three in the epilogue. And one in real life, for those players who decide they can't go on and put down the controller." While even Williams describes the act of putting down the controller as an unofficial ending, his recognition of this act as a potential ending highlights a unique aspect experiencing video games as a medium; video games and the stories that video games present only exist if the game has a player to shape the game. If the player chooses to stop playing, there is no story, and in the case of *Spec Ops: The Line*, there is no violence.

Dubai even functions as a psychological landscape in the game, a representation and examination of Walker's state of mind that furthers this commentary. Players may notice that

progressing through the game often requires the player to rappel down to a lower area. By the

end of the game, the player and Walker's squad have gone so far downward that it seems

geographically impossible that there is any more room to go lower. As Walker descends further,

he experiences more hallucinations, exemplifying a Freudian descent into the unconscious mind

of Walker. The choice to go down is a conscious move by the player, an act that pushes Walker

further into violence. This concept is exemplified when the player chooses to obey Konrad after

his first command. In order to "step outside," the player needs to rappel down the side of a

building. After choosing to begin rappelling, a sharp noise plays, and Walker and his squad

rappel down the shiny, reflective surface of the building. As mentioned earlier, the only real non-

violent tools that players have at their disposal are the abilities to move Walker and to move the

camera. While rappelling down the building, players cannot control Walker's movement, but

they can still move the camera. If the player chooses to look at the reflection on the building, it is

possible to see Lugo hanging by his hands, a foreshadowing of his death by hanging later in the game.

This moment exemplifies the entirety of the game's argument about players' involvement in the violent campaign; it reveals that the player choosing to progress results in a downward spiral. This moment also reveals that the criticism, "The developers made me do it" may not be valid criticism. This is not because the game includes every way that a player might think to peacefully engage with a situation, but because the player makes a choice to progress, and turning off the game is a valid option. This moment also still allows players to question what they are doing, by once again using their non-violent ability to maneuver the camera to see that their progress will only result in the death of a companion. Ultimately, the game utilizes these sequences in order to create a commentary on players' complicity in Walker's actions and the nature of video games as a storytelling medium in general, and much of this commentary relies on an understanding of and a familiarity with video game conventions.

Much of the game works to create a commentary about games, player involvement, and the responsibility of the developer in a way that no other medium can explore by exploiting conventions of video game play. The "obey" objective in particular utilizes a typical user-interface component of video games, an objective list, in order to give the player a feeling of cognitive dissonance that causes them to question the goal of progressing the story and completing the game. Likewise, the killing of hundreds of enemies is a standard feature of many modern military shooter games, and yet *Spec Ops: The Line* frames it in such a way that it becomes unsettling. The game even includes "achievements" which help to serve this purpose as well. Achievements or "trophies" in games are optional developer-defined goals that the player can choose to complete in order to obtain points or even simply bragging rights. One example of

an achievement in *Spec Ops: The Line* is to "recover all intel items" in the game. After

completing this goal, the player will receive points and the achievement will be displayed on

their user profile, which friends or others online are able to view. Unlike other games, *Spec Ops:*

The Line includes achievements in a way that also serves to generate a feeling of cognitive

dissonance, as well as to generate ludonarrative dissonance. For instance, one achievement in the

game asks players to kill 50 enemies with a sniper rifle. This is a pretty standard achievement in

shooter games, as *Call of Duty 4* has similar achievements like asking the player to "kill two

enemies by blowing up a car" or "kill four enemies in a row with headshots." The inclusion of

this achievement in *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, is interesting as it intentionally rewards

players for doing things that the game ultimately frames as wrong. The story of the game asks

the player to view the killing of American soldiers as wrong and yet rewards players with an

achievement for killing 50 of them with a specific weapon. After being yelled at by Lugo for

engaging in combat with American soldiers, the game still presents players with a reward for

killing them, something that generates feelings of cognitive dissonance and puts the player in a

position where the story and facets of gameplay are at odds with each other. There are also

achievements for completing segments of the game, allowing a feeling of cognitive dissonance to

grow every time that the player is rewarded for participating in an action that the game ultimately

frames as wrong. There is an even an achievement for "obeying" Konrad when the obey

objective appears on the screen, where the description of the achievement simply reads, "Follow

your orders." This achievement presents players with a reward for being complicit in Walker's

madness, something that the game will eventually criticize Walker and the player for.

Not only is the player rewarded progressing through the game and taking part in violent

conflict, the player is made to be complicit in carrying out violent actions in a way that one

might argue makes players complicit in writing the very power fantasy that the game ends up commenting on at the end. Aside from putting down the controller, the player has no choice but to participate in violent atrocities for which the game later condemns Walker and the player. Like in the sequence in which Konrad paints a picture of the refugees that Walker burned, the player is the one who performs the actions that the game later frames. Players become co-authors of the story in that they are the ones who choose to be complicit in giving story events to the narrative. As mentioned previously, blaming the developers for players' actions becomes questionable given how much the actions of Walker, while limited by the developers' content, are only performed by the player. Furthermore, by choosing to follow Walker, the player chooses a particular trajectory for the game's narrative to progress along, ultimately leaving the player as the one who participated in the ideologies conveyed in the game and the one who controls the game's story.

While *Spec Ops: The Line*'s story or its commentary on power and ideology can be understood by using aspects of literary theory, film criticism, or narratology, those modes of analysis ignore important facets of games as a narrative and storytelling medium. The game's implementation of cognitive dissonance, something that is central to the game's commentary, or the game's focus on forcing players to be complicit in enacting violent atrocities are entirely missed if one does not engage in examining games and the act of playing from an analytical perspective such as the one this thesis offers. A film, for example, may be able to examine the mindset that causes Walker to push onward and blame everyone other than himself, but games can be structured in a way that allows players to experience and participate in both the ideology that informs Walker's actions as well as the actions themselves that make up the story.

This analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* could not have been performed without engaging in understanding the unique relationship between text and audience within the storytelling medium of video games. This thesis ultimately aims to highlight the necessity of the study of video game narrative with a focus on developing an even more thorough theory of narration and player interaction that examines the medium in a way that does not rely on literary-based reader response theory or film-based audience reception theory models. Indeed, while audience reception theory and reader response theory may aid in understanding the story and themes of *Spec Ops: The Line*, those models cannot account for the number of ways that games are able to communicate stories and themes using the unique qualities of the medium. This thesis foregrounds the need for new models of analysis and more scholarship surrounding the analysis of video games using these new modes of interpretation.

Not only would a new model assist in the analysis and interpretation of video games, a new understanding of narrative as it applies to video games would also serve to change the way that games are developed to be consumed. As in Hocking's analysis of *BioShock* wherein he claims that the game "seems to suffer from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story," further analysis of ways in which games communicate ideas and meaning will help to serve storytellers by exploring the narrative potential of video games as a storytelling medium, lending more scholarship to the field of video game studies and development ("Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*"). This thesis steps away from the more formalist discussions of video games by Schell, Juul, and Skolnick, and serves as a stepping stone on the path toward understanding the ways in which players interact with video games and how that interaction shapes narrative, ultimately helping to change the way one examines video

games from an analytical perspective and the way developers develop games as stories to be told

and experienced by players.

<u>End Notes</u>

[1] See, for example, Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*; Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film*; Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative in Fiction and Film*.

[2] See, for example, Fish and Iser, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*.

[3] See, for example, Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*; Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*; Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942*.

[4] *Grand Theft Auto* is another game series made by Rockstar Games, the developer that made *L.A. Noire*, in which players typically engage in murdering large groups of the in-game population.

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