Do You Feel Like A Hero Now?

Understanding *Spec Ops: The Line* as a Satirical Response to the Modern Military Shooter Genre

Master's Thesis

By

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to examine how the 2012 video game *Spec Ops: The Line* presents itself as a satirical take on the genre of modern military shooters. In order to do this, a comparative analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* and four major titles from the modern military shooter genre, namely *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), *Battlefield: Bad Company* (2008) and *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* (2010), is conducted. The theoretical focus of the analysis consists of three elements: the narrative structure, the representation of war and soldiers, and how these games create a sense of moral disengagement in the player.

What the research found was that most traditional modern military shooters are structured as romance narratives, drawing upon the "knight goes on a quest" elements from chivalric, epic, and Arthurian romances especially, and that the heroes of modern military shooters tend to be the same infallible supermen as in these knight romances. Furthermore, a mix of American exceptionalism and various moral disengagement inducing strategies are used to make the player enjoy and be entertained by the simple "good vs evil" war narrative and to make them feel like powerful heroes.

On the other hand, *Spec Ops* aims to make the player feel exactly the opposite, since it not only presents war as something brutal, horrible, and not in the least bit entertaining, but it also casts the player as the villain of the story, since it is their desire for escapist power-fantasy that leads to so much death and destruction. *Spec Ops* does this by initially imitating the gameplay and narrative of other modern military shooters, in order to make the player think they are playing a standard modern military shooters and that the player character, Captain Walker, is the usual kind of hero, at which point *Spec Ops* flips the script. Walker is exposed as a man whose need to be a hero complete warps his relationship with reality, his men slowly decent into madness, and the entire narrative is completely lacking in the kind of simplicity that most modern military shooters provide.

Thus *Spec Ops*' satirical message is made very clear; that the tendency in modern military shooters to present armed conflicts as entertaining is both unrealistic and creates wrongful perception of war, and that players who seek to live out their power fantasies through virtual violence are complicit in this trivializing of real violence.

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Introduction

The danger that hangs over every genre of every kind of media and art is the danger of growing complacent. The idea that what has worked so far will continue to work forever, and that there is no real reason for innovation or self-reflection in art, is dangerous because the audience will eventually grow resentful of being fed the same things over and over again. Currently, it is the movie industry, which is being most consistently criticized for being too complacent and focusing more on remakes, reboots, and sequels rather than pouring any creative energy into projects that explore the medium of film in new and exciting ways.

However, a few years ago another branch of media faced similar albeit less vocal criticism, namely the videogame industry, and the first-person shooter genre especially. The most popular of these games were the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series, which had gained popularity by shifting the setting of their military combat games from the Second World War, to the modern-day world. While these series where incredibly popular and sold massive amounts of copies, critics were also noting problematic tendencies that seemed to be an inherent part of these games. They seemed to glorify the efforts of the US military, they featured troubling representations of non-American individuals and they presented their action combat as fun and enjoyable, while also selling the games as providing a realistic picture of what armed combat would look like. These games became known as modern military shooters, and from 2007 until today, they have dominated the videogame market.

Complacency in the arts, however, often times leads to the production of texts that point out the flaws and failures of the complacent genre; this happened with modern military shooters, with the release of *Spec Ops: The Line* in 2012. As a relatively low-profile release, *Spec Ops* took the gaming world, and especially gaming critics by complete surprise, since it presented one of the most damning consternations

of the modern military shooter genre, while still being a part of this same genre. How exactly *Spec Ops* managed to do this will be the focus of this project.

The project will analyze *Spec Ops* as a satirical text targeting modern military shooters as a whole, and *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* in particular. During this analysis it will be discussed how *Spec Ops* positions itself as a satire, what elements of modern military shooters it focuses on and why it chooses to do so from within the same genre.

In order to do this, the structure, themes and conventions of modern military shooters must be made clear, which is why this project will start with an analysis of four games, two from *Call of Duty* and two from *Battlefield*, which came out before *Spec Ops* premiered in 2012. This analysis will focus on three elements, which will also be the focus in the analysis of *Spec Ops*: narrative structure, representation of soldiers and war, and how the concept of moral disengagement enables players to enjoy the games' violent content.

Methodology

Since the primary focal point of this project is how *Spec Ops*: *The Line* can be seen as a critical response to the modern military shooters that came before it, the methodology applied in this project will use a comparative multiple case study research design, analyzing of *Spec Ops: The Line* and four other modern military shooters. The games in question will be *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) (hereafter referred to as *Modern Warfare 1*), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), *Battlefield: Bad Company* (2008) (hereafter referred to as *Bad Company 1*), and *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* (2010). These four games were chosen on the criteria of representing the two major franchises in the field of modern military shooters, *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*, making them more likely targets for the critique found in *Spec Ops: The Line*, as opposed to the lesser known modern shooters like *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012). However, each of these four games also appear to have contributed something specific to the DNA of *Spec Ops: The Line* (like *Modern Warfare*'s "Death from Above" mission and *Bad Company*'s army-buddies setup) which makes them ideal for this project.

Along with these four games, *Spec Ops: The Line* itself will be analyzed with a specific focus on the narrative structure, the representation of war and its combatants, and the way each game encourages moral disengagement. The combination of these three elements will form the theoretical basis of this project, and will be explained further in the theory section below. The choice of theory is based on what elements of modern military shooters that *Spec Ops: The Line* seems to be most critical of, these being the simplistic narratives, the representation of the enemy and the abundance of consequence-free violence. The research has been limited to these three elements, in order to make this project as concise as possible, and to avoid overloading it with too many disparate elements.

The final part of this project will focus on whether or not *Spec Ops: The Line* had an effect on any subsequent modern military shooters depiction of war. This section will build on the previous analysis-sections, and will also discuss the problems *Spec Ops: The Line* might have in presenting itself as a satirical text.

Theory

As mentioned above, the theoretical foundation of this project is separated in to three parts. To start with, much of the analysis will be based on literary theories regarding story and narrative structure. These theories will be outlined in their general form as per Frye and Denham, but they will also be discussed in relation to videogames specifically, since videogames offer a level of interactivity that most other types of media do not. The second part of the theoretical foundation will focus on theories of representation, especially the representation of war. This will be done by examining how modern military shooters present the different participants in a war, and how this representation tends to eschew the complex narratives of war in favor of a simpler binary "good vs evil" narrative. Finally, the theory of moral disengagement will be discussed in relation to videogame violence, since most videogames, and almost all videogames relating to war, require the player to commit violent acts in order to make progress.

Narrative Structure

A narrative is, as defined by Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, "a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do" (Abrams 233). This definition is, however, rather vague, and does not touch upon the difference between a *narrative* and a *story*. The difference is that a story consists of all the unique characters, places and elements that make up the plot, while a narrative is the specific way in which these elements are combined to make a coherent whole. Thus, two stories might have completely different characters and events, but still be the same kind of narrative, e.g. as in *The Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hanzel and Gretle*. The stories are different, with the only shared element being a trip through the woods, but both are structured in a way that makes a fairytale-narrative. In this way, the concepts of narrative and genre share certain elements, since both serve to provide a familiar framework for the story, but the difference lies in that while genres require certain specific elements to be present in the story, narrative is much more concerned with how these fit together than the elements themselves.

While certain narratives have been used repeatedly, making them so well established, that they can be considered a specific narrative type, such as the aforementioned fairytale-narrative; most scholars agree that almost all narratives fit within the four major structures: comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire. In his book *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye writes comprehensively on these four major narrative structures, or *pregeneric mythoi,* as Frye calls them. In *Northrop Frye and Critical Method* Robert

Denham notes that these pregeneric mythoi are mainly defined be their story structure (such as comedy ending in a peaceful conflict-resolution while tragedy ends with the fall of the protagonist) and what kind of character's are typical in each mythoi (Denham 69).

However, while they are defined separately, it would be a mistake to think of the pregeneric mythoi as being mutually exclusive, as some scholars have argued that there is a considerable overlap between them. Frye argues this point, when discussing the four pregeneric mythoi. Concerning the relationship between the pregeneric mythoi, Frye writes: "We shall realize that they form two opposed pairs. Tragedy and comedy contrast rather than blend, and so do romance and irony, the champions respectively of the ideal and actual. On the other hand, comedy blends insensibly into satire at one extreme and into romance at the other; romance may be comic or tragic; tragic extends from high romance to bitter and ironic realism" (Frye 162). Thus, Frye proposes that instead of the pregeneric mythoi being four separate types of narrative structures, they actually combine to form four hybrids of two mythoi each. The only restriction to this hybridization is that a mythoi can only combine with the two mythois from the other pair, and not its own apposing mythos. That is to say that tragedy, for example, can combine with romance and irony, but not comedy, since tragedy and comedy contrast, and not with romance and irony at the same time, since these two also contrast.

Frye expands on this idea of the combined pregeneric mythoi by proposing that each of pregeneric mythoi can be further divided into six phases, where the first three phases are shared with one of the adjacent mythoi and the last three phases are shared with the other adjacent mythoi. Denham describes this further division of the pregeneric mythoi thus: "There are six phases to each of the pregeneric mythoi and also that the phases from adjacent mythoi tend to merge, or to blend "insensibly" into one another." (Denham 76), which is to say that if the tragedy mythos is used as an example once more, the first three phases of tragedy will correspond to the first three phases of romance, while the last three phases of tragedy will correspond with the last three phases of irony instead. The phases in each mythoi are differentiated by looking at the same elements, which was used to separate the pregeneric mythoi themselves, which are "imagery, theme, plot structure, character, and mood." (Denham 83).

During the analysis of this project, the mythos, which will be most prominently discussed, is that of the romance. This is because, as David M. Leeson writes in *Northrop Frye and the Story Structure of the Single-Player Shooter*: "Single-player shooters are mostly romances—adventure stories in which the hero is superior in degree to other men and to his environment" (Leeson 138). While Leeson is mainly

discussing games like *Halo, Half-Life 2* and *Max Payne 2* in his article, and not the kind of "realistic" shooters, which are the focus of this project, the same kind of romance narrative is apparent in those as well.

However, the analysis of since *Spec Ops. The Line* will focus much more on the satire mythos. This is because *Spec Ops.* can easily be read as a response to the romantic narratives of most modern shooters, and its narrative should be assumed to be using a satirical narrative, as a consequence of satire being the contrasting mythos to romance. Indeed, as Frye writes: "As structure, the central principle of ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways" (Frye 223). As will be argued in a later section of this project, parodying and twisting what the audience normally associates with modern shooters is exactly what *Spec Ops.* sets out to do.

An important thing to note when discussing narrative structure within videogames, is that videogames as a medium is unique due to its high level of interactivity. In some videogames, narrative structure is almost completely nonexistent, because players are given complete control over the order in which they experience the game's content. This is most prevalent in the so-called sandbox games, e.g. *GTA* and the *Elder Scrolls* franchise, but can be found in mission-hub-based games, where the player chooses the order of missions with little to no restrictions. While each of these games does indeed have a narrative and plot, players are just as free to play for hours if not days at a time without ever touching upon these, instead simply experiencing the game's mechanics, thereby removing any sort of narrative flow from these games. Therefore, it becomes important to clarify the level of control a player has over the game's narrative, before any real analysis can take place.

In *Simulating Philosophy: Interpreting Video Games as Executable Thought Experiments* Marcus Schulzke writes that "one of the central debates in game studies has been the disagreement over whether games should be judged like other media, in terms of their plot, character development, and narrative, or whether they should be treated as distinctive media that are primarily defined by their gameplay mechanics" (Schulzke, "Simulating Philosophy" 251). However, to present this as choice between either looking at a game's narrative *or* its gameplay mechanics could be the wrong approach, as the narrative of a game is often directly linked to its mechanics. Some games, like the highly acclaimed *Bioshock* (2007), feature a clear moral choice mechanic for instance, where you either help or hurt small girls known as Little Sisters. The game progresses in the same linear manner, whether the player chooses to

help the Little Sisters or not, but the narrative of the game, including the ending changes depending on the player's choices. One choice leads to the player becoming the savior and protector of the Little Sisters, and the other leads to becoming a monster bent on world domination. Because of this mechanic, an analysis of *Bioshock*'s narrative would be incomplete without looking at how the player's choices affects the final narrative. Where *Bioshock* essentially only has two different choices, and thus, two separate paths for the narrative to take, other games feature many pivotal choices and require extensive replays before a player has experienced all the different narrative paths. However, in the last couple of years the polar opposite of these "branching path"-games have appeared, a genre of videogame that has been dubbed "the walking simulator". These are games that feature little to no gameplay mechanics, and instead the player simply walks around as the narrative unfolds around them, with the player unable to influence the narrative. Schulzke writes that "gameplay mechanics set the rules that govern players' range of choices." (Schulzke, "Simulating Philosophy" 252) and it is, indeed, these rules and how they influence the game's narrative, which must first be understood before a narrative analysis can take place.

The games that are the focus of this project fall somewhere between the walking simulator and the branching path of *Bioshock.* While all five are linear games with little to no exploration or diverting from the set path possible, *Spec Ops* in particular, features moments of choice, and even includes four different endings to the story. Adding to this is the fact that all five games use gameplay mechanics, and features unique to the medium of gaming to tell their individual stories. Therefore, it is important when undertaking an analysis of the kind presented in this project that attention is placed on both the theories of narrative structure as presented by Frye and Denham, and on how the medium of videogames presents new and interesting ways to tell stories, and construct narratives through the use of gameplay mechanics and game design in general.

Representation in Video Games
When discussing how a video game represents certain groups or events, it tends to be difficult to reach a consensus on the subject of whether or not videogames are seen as being as "real" as other visual media by its consumers. Video games are unique in this regard, since every single frame has to be created from scratch, which means that where television and film would hire extras to play crowds or unnamed characters, a video game will simply use duplicated character models. In a single play-through of a modern military shooter a player will kill the same identical enemy soldier at least a hundred times,

which would assumingly eliminate any sense of these enemies being "real people" quite quickly. Additionally, the fact0 that even though computer graphics have gotten better by leaps and bounds since the medium first appeared, video games are still the visual media which looks the least "real".

However, as Tilo Hartmann and Peter Vorderer write in their article *It's Okay to Shoot a Character: Moral Disengagement in Violent Video Games:* "Multiple strands of research provide compelling evidence that users readily perceive mediated objects as social beings, primarily due to automatic social perception processes" (Hartmann and Vorderer 95). This indicates that despite duplicated enemies and human characters, who might have vacationed for too long in the uncanny valley, users of video games are still able to accept the characters and action on the screen as "real", or at least as real as they would a television show or film. This also means that videogames can be held to the same standard as television and film, in regards to representation.

Modern military shooters have developed a somewhat problematic relationship with representation, especially when it comes to the representation of enemy characters, which is something with which earlier videogame shooters did not need to concern themselves. This is because in videogame shooters of the past, the enemies, which the players had to kill in order to make progress, tended to be monstrous aliens, demons or zombies, as was the case with games like *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) or *Doom* (1993). These types of monsters were the ideal enemies in early videogame shooters for two reasons. Firstly, most early shooters had very little in the way of story or plot. The mission in each level was essentially to find all the keys (or keycards or some other such item) so the player could open all the doors, and get to the level boss whose demise would also end the level. This run-and-gun type of gameplay did not need to give its monster-enemies any motivation more complex than "they are monsters and they want to do monstrous things", which then in turn provided the player character with all the motivation they needed, which was "kill the monsters, because they are monsters". Secondly, since the gameplay of early shooters consisted of nothing but enemy-killing, the games needed enemies which the player would have no moral qualms about killing. This also made monsters ideal, since players perceive them as being a malignant other, therefore, resulting in no moral consequence associated with the elimination of them. Hartmann and Vorderer write: "users of violent games argue that shooting opponents in a video game does not constitute the elimination of social entities but rather the removal of objects or obstacles" (Hartmann and Vorderer 95) and this is particularly true when it comes to enemies who are decidedly non-human.

In the late 90s, videogame shooters started its shift towards "realism" as more and more games adopted the setting of World War 2. While the enemies of these games where mostly human (though exceptions existed, namely the *Wolfenstein* series), they still served mainly the same functions as the monsters used in previous shooters, and the player was asked to care and empathize with them just as little as they had with the monsters. This lack of moral consequence is probably owed in equal parts to two factors. Firstly, the fact that the player was almost always playing as the Allied Forces while shooting Nazis, which is as close to a clear-cut good-vs-evil narrative as modern history can provide. Secondly, it might also be because that the early shooters had conditioned players to regard enemies as obstacles and not as social entities.

However, with the attack on The World Trade Center in 2001, the landscape of videogame shooters changed along with the rest of the world. Much of American media began to focus on the "war on terror" and all types of media began generating texts that imagined how the American military would deal with this new threat. Matthew Thomas Payne writes in the article *War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in Spec Ops: The Line* that "the culture industries were swift in crafting a raft of nationalistically redemptive military entertainment, or "militainment," in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks." (Payne, "War Bytes" 265), and this new direction in the entertainment industry was also quite noticeable in videogames.

Where military shooters had the setting of the WWII, or in some later cases, the less clear-cut, and thus more difficult to market, Vietnam War, many videogame companies began producing games for their various franchises, which dealt directly with the "war on terror" and which ostensibly took place in the modern-day world. The enemies present in these games changed as well, and a closer look at some of these titles will reveal that "in military shooters—especially those produced after the 9/11 terrorist attacks— the typical enemy is a non-white, "Other" who speaks a different language and who worships a different god" (Payne, "War Bytes" 272). While this does indeed give many modern military shooters a troubling undertone of xenophobia, the shift from monster and Nazis to terrorists is not puzzling. As Schulzke writes in *Being a terrorist: Video game simulations of the other side of the War on Terror*: "terrorists make perfect video game enemies, as they can be easily characterized as intrinsically evil and threatening targets, even within the context of games that have relatively shallow narratives." (Schulzke, "Being a terrorist" 208), thus, the use of terrorists could be seen as the next logical step in the evolution of videogame enemies, as they share the "inhuman" qualities of their predecessors. However, the problem

with this new form of videogame enemy is not that they are terrorist, but they are almost invariably non-white, as Payne writes, and even more specifically Middle Eastern. There are instances of the major enemy being renegade Russians as is the case in the *Modern Warfare* series, since the shadow of The Cold War is still present in the American consciousness. Nevertheless, even in these games, the enemy will in some way have ties to a fundamentalist terrorist group based in a Middle Eastern country, as is the case with the Russian enemies in the *Modern Warfare* games.

This is not unique to the media of videogames after 9/11 texts were produced for almost all types of media wherein the complicated narrative of modern-day terrorism was reduced to a much more digestible "American military = good vs Islamic terrorist = evil"-narrative. This narrative helped shape how the average American citizen perceived both the concept of terror, and the people committing acts of terrorism and the soldiers fighting to stop them. The representation of subjects such as war and terrorism is highly important since "for most audiences, real experiences of terrorism and war are far removed from everyday life, making media images the primary means of experiencing terrorism" (Schulzke, "Being a Terrorist" 209). This is also the reason why the consistent post-9/11 portrayal of terrorists as Middle Eastern is problematic, as it generalizes the terrible actions of a few to being the responsibility of all people of Middle Eastern decent. Adding to this, is the fact that the goals or motives of real life terrorists are so rarely clear, that in video games these motives are often boiled down to "hatred of the West" or "for the glory of Allah" or some such unsubstantiated nonsense. Schulzke also comments on this problem, writing that a "lack of substantive analysis of terrorists' motives often leads them to be defined according to group characteristics, such as religion or ethnicity. This results in entire populations, especially Arabs and Muslims, being wrongly associated with terrorism." (Schulzke, "Being a Terrorist" 211).

While the representation of the Middle East as being completely populated by violent terrorist is problematic in other media, the presence of the same representation in videogame shooters is arguably worse. This is due to the fact that in videogame shooters, the player is not only asked to recognize other characters with thoughts of "he is Middle Eastern, thereby an enemy", but they are then also asked to kill said character. Thus, the interactivity of the videogame media forces the players to recognize both the representation of Middle Easterners as terrorist that the game puts forth, but also to recognize military superiority as the only solution to the threat they pose, since the players are the ones who will have to pull "the trigger".

As mentioned above, players tend to see the killing of videogame enemies as simply the removal of obstacles, which, while harmless when the enemies where monstrous demons from space, becomes dangerously dehumanizing when the enemy is a faulty representation of an entire ethnic population group. Basing entire games around killing people whose culture and motives the player does not understand beyond the fact that they are presented as being evil, is troubling to say the least, especially when considering that, as mentioned before, most players have no other point of reference regarding these cultures outside of these games. Additionally, the fact that the player can rarely proceed in a modern military shooter without killing the enemies, is of great concern, as it seems to be an almost willful disregard for how modern-day warfare actually works. In *Have You Won the War on Terror? Military Videogames and the State of American Exceptionalism* Nick Robinson writes on the topic of modern military shooters that "these games also reject rule bound negotiation as a possible response, with the enemy always portrayed as beyond reason and frequently making good on the threat that it offers." (Robinson 460), which once again links back to the representation of the enemy in these types of games. Robinson writes, that "most military games portray representations based on Orientalism, with the Middle East depicted as backward, violent and resistant to civil order" (Robinson 452), pointing out that the depiction of the Middle East, which is seen in most modern military shooters, is not a new development, but harkens back to the time of western imperialism.

An interesting point concerning the representation of the enemy in modern military shooters, is that the player occasionally gets to experience the world through their eyes, which is undoubtable intended to provoke controversy, as you take on the role of a terrorist. However, while at first glance these types of missions might seem like an effort on the game developer's part to show the standard terrorist enemy in a more nuanced way, a closer look reveals that the reality is quite the opposite, since even in these missions the games say "virtually nothing about why the terrorists commit acts of violence" (Schulzke, "The Virtual War on Terror" 595). More often than not, these missions provide no real insight into the character and motivations of the enemy, but instead paint them in the same light as in the rest of the game, with the only difference being the perspective of the player. Instead of presenting the player with a representation of terrorists, which is deeper and more complex than the standard enemies, these missions essentially state that there is in fact no deeper complexity to the average terrorist. This is problematic from a representative viewpoint since, as mentioned above, the enemies of these games tend

to be seen as representative of not just terrorists, but of the entire population of the Middle East. Regarding the problem with these "terrorist levels", Schulzke writes:

> These games serve a double ideological function by hiding the terrorist Other's subjectivity, while also creating the illusion that nothing has been hidden and that the terrorist's experience has been accurately recreated. Rather than illuminating the feeling of being a terrorist, video game simulations conceal it with a false acquaintance that gives the impression that there is nothing to terrorists aside from mindless acts of violence. (Schulzke, "Being a Terrorist" 208).

Thus, Schulzke argues that these terrorist levels are purposely put into modern military shooters in order to strengthen credibility of the claim these games tend to make, which is that terrorist are inherently evil and the American military is inherently good. Some games do this in subtle ways, like *Modern Warfare 2* and its infamous airport scene, which will be discussed later in this project, and some games are less subtle like *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, wherein the terrorist mission is simply named "Through the Eyes of Evil".

Having discussed how the enemy in modern military shooters is often represented as Middle Eastern terrorists, when they are not Russians renegades, the final part of this section will discuss how the heroes of these games are primarily represented. Modern military shooters often have the player take control of multiple characters over the course of the game, and while some of these player-characters hail from other countries, like the British John "Soap" MacTavish from the *Modern Warfare* games, most of them are American soldiers. In order to understand the way American soldiers are represented in modern military shooters, it is important first to understand how America views itself, and in order to do this, American exceptionalism must be understood, since according the Robinson "American exceptionalism is seen as a core concept that underpins American nationalism." (Robinson 455). The idea behind American exceptionalism is, as the word suggest, that America is unique and exceptional compared to all other countries in the world, and it is an idea, which has been imbedded in the culture since the first European settlers crossed the Atlantic to "the promised land" of America. Additionally, American exceptionalism entails that "[the nation] has a mission or duty to export the qualities that make it unique" (Tomes 45).

However, as Robinson also points out, the belief in American exceptionalism waxes and wanes on a national level depending on the political landscape of the world, which can be seen in America's foreign policy. As Robinson puts it: "US foreign policy can be seen as oscillating between periods of American pride and moral superiority with periods of widespread self-doubt and a sense of insecurity that gives rise and direction to attempts at social purification when domestic problems and international uncertainties coincide" (Robinson 458). An example of periods where America did not only attempt "social purification" but a complete societal purification is the Cold War, where America fought many culture wars and two actual wars to stay the spread of communism. The post-9/11 era is arguably another such period, since America has been plagued by problems and uncertainties both domestic and international in the period following 2001, namely the economic crisis in 2008 and the constant specter of international terror. Before discussing the "social purification" of the post-9/11 era, another aspect of American exceptionalism must be clarified. Robinson writes:

> "An overarching theme within American exceptionalism is the relationship between the perception that a threatening and hostile environment confronts the USA, thus situating America as an innocent victim, and the resulting sense that this allows the USA to justify a response to such threats based on a pattern of military violence in which it is not bound by international rules" (Robinson 459).

Coupling this self-ascribed role as victim and the accompanying justification of military action, with the idea that America exercises societal purification in times of international uncertainty, these aspects of American exceptionalism quickly add up to an American worldview where its latest military endeavors, Iraq and Afghanistan, were not only necessary but also justified. The narrative this worldview creates is one where the threat posed by terrorist operating out of these countries, and the moral obligation to purify these societies by rooting out said terrorists lends both these wars complete legitimacy. However, as is now known, the narratives of both these wars were more complicated and morally ambiguous. While the war in Afghanistan turned into a quagmire where the loss of human lives was entirely too high for all involved, the war in Iraq turned out to have been initiated under what can most generously be described as misleading pretenses. The result was that America ended up having "forfeited its reputation as an icon for democracy and justice, even among its closest allies" (Zalman and Clarke 101).

This conflict between the narratives dictated by American exceptionalism and the real narratives of these two wars has had an influence on the way in which both America's role in military engagements

and the wars themselves are represented in modern military shooters. Despite never utilizing the Iraq or Afghan wars as the setting, many of the military conflicts in these games only differ from the real conflicts by name. Thus, these games can be seen as historical revisionism, where the complex narratives of the real conflicts are swapped for the blessedly simple "good vs evil" narratives of the games. America is the hero of these games, and "these games portray the USA as being uniquely able to respond to (and defeat) the threats facing both itself and those facing the rest of the world and, therefore, as having a responsibility to protect other threatened countries" (Robinson 460). Thus the representation of America's military engagement in modern military shooters casts the American (and more specifically, the America military) not only as the heroes, but heroes who are morally justified in their actions, which is the type of moral clarity and righteousness that real world military conflicts rarely provide. Furthermore, America is often the target of whatever nefarious plan the villains have, which means that "America is shown as being uniquely threatened in a hostile world and therefore justified in maximizing its freedom of action by shedding the constraints of international rules – thus provide very powerful illustrations of American exceptionalist thinking within military videogames." (Robinson 462).

The representations of American soldiers as the stalwart heroes, who fight for the forces of good, and the terrorist (and the occasional Russian) as purely evil, with little motivation beyond the desire to spread death and destruction thus seems to be the norm in the modern military shooter genre. Why this makes a lot of sense considering that shooters tend to be romance narratives, and how *Spec Ops: The Line* turns these standard representations on its head, will be discussed in the analysis part of this project.

Moral Disengagement
So far, the two previous sections of the project have discussed the theories concerning the narrative structures that might be at work in modern military shooters, and how these games represent the opposing sides in the military conflicts, which are at the heart of their plots. This final theory section will focus on an element, which is present in all modern military shooters and in fact in all games wherein the player is supposed to commit acts of violence in order to make progress. This is the element of moral disengagement, the act of leaving a regular moral compass behind when entering the fictional world of a videogame, or as it is defined by Klimmt et al. in *How players manage moral concerns to make video game violence enjoyable*: "the temporal suspension of moral standards" (Klimmt et al. 312).

Moral disengagement is achieved through various means, and is in many ways necessary in order for the player to enjoy a violent videogame, and often the appeal of such games is precisely the fact that they provide a way to experience the catharsis of violence without any of the real world consequences. On the topic of enjoying violence, Hartmann and Vorderer writes "we assume that virtual violence is only enjoyable if it comes with no or minimal costs, that is, if it does not violate inner moral standards and cause aversion or dissonance" (Hartmann and Vorderer 97). This is exactly what most shooters provide, with hordes of enemies to kill, and different inventive ways to kill them. Therefore it is important in most shooters that the player almost immediately experience moral disengagement to be able to enjoy the violent gameplay from the beginning. Games do this by including moral disengagement cues, in order to convey to the players that the violence they are about to see and commit is morally okay. As Hartmann and Vorderer puts it: "moral disengagement cues, such as a good reason to fight (e.g., to save the world), particularly against nonanthropomorphic creatures (e.g., aliens), may frame violence against game characters as acceptable even though those characters are perceived as quasi-social entities" (Hartmann and Vorderer 99). Thus, players are essentially conditioned not to feel bad when the kill thousands of alien demons in order to save the world, since this type of violence is framed as acceptable.

However, as discussed earlier, modern military shooters do not use nonanthropomorphic creatures as enemies, relying instead on terrorists and renegade Russians, enemies who are supposed to represent real human beings, at least in theory. Has this resulted in modern military shooters being less easily enjoyable, since their violence cannot as easily be framed as acceptable? Considering how both of the major shooter franchises, *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty*, first started experiencing massive commercial success after the change to a modern setting, the answer to this question must be no. One of the reasons as to why this might be is that players of videogames have simply grown accustomed to the violence, and therefore experience an automatic moral disengagement. It might simply be that the general public's increased familiarity with videogames and videogame violence has desensitized many, which fits with the study by Hartmann and Vorderer where "users' familiarity with violent games reduced guilt and negative affect" (Hartmann and Vorderer 112). This familiarity might also explain why players no longer consider the human enemies of modern military shooters any different from the monstrous enemies of *Duke Nukem 3D* or *Doom*.

This disregard for the humanity of the enemy, coupled with how the enemy in modern military shooters is often misrepresented, is where moral disengagement becomes a problem, especially in games

which sell themselves as "realistic", which many modern military shooters do. As Hartmann and Vorderer note "moral disengagement results in dehumanization of a character and neglect of a character's moral status and human essence." (Hartmann and Vorderer 98), and in a game that sells itself as "realistic", a dehumanization of the enemy is obviously problematic, as it helps popularize the faulty representation of war as a simple good-vs-evil narrative. According to Schulzke no such moral disengagement exists in real combat situation and "studies of real world soldiers reveal that opponents generally recognize their shared humanity and have great difficulty overcoming this feeling in order to kill each other." (Schulzke, "Being a Terrorist" 209).

That modern military shooters stray from what actual modern warfare is like, does make sense, since these games are meant as entertainment, and true warfare situations provide little in the way of this, but instead vast amounts of fear, pain and death. Arguably, modern military shooters need the kind of moral disengagement discussed here in order to be even slightly enjoyable, since the subject matter of these is grim and serious. People usually play videogames in order to enjoy themselves, and Hartmann and Vorderer write that "players also reported that disturbing situations interfered with their enjoyment" (Hartmann and Vorderer 97). Thus moral disengagement is necessary for the players to enjoy the games, and this enjoyment is vice versa necessary for the games to sell and make a profit. It is, therefore, not surprising that modern military shooters rarely break this moral disengagement, even if its persistence comes at the cost of the games' realism, but it is interesting that these games hardly ever directly address the fact that their entertainment value is also what makes them considerably less realistic than they otherwise might be. In *Marketing Military Realism in Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* Payne comments that "commercial video games about military interventions are rarely sold on their ability to prompt gamers into reflecting critically about how the combat scenarios are designed for their enjoyment." (Payne, "Marketing Military Realism" 306), and this is obviously because these games tend to sell themselves on their realism as well. It is, however, important to remember that despite most modern military shooters calling themselves realistic, the reality is that they are often as far from realism as their demonic-alien-featuring predecessors. As Payne puts it: "Commercial military video games use technological and representational realisticness to deliver visceral experiences. These design attributes do not transform them into realist texts, however, because these games often fail to acknowledge soldiers' lived experiences." (Payne, "Marketing Military Realism" 309). However, as will become clear during the analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line*, even when games deliberately try to shatter any moral disengagement

in the service of realism and story, the conventions of the videogame world might still trap them and partially ruin the message.

Modern Military Shooters

An important thing to note about modern military shooters is that in most of them the single-player campaign is not what sells the game. Instead, the campaign focus is placed on the games' massively popular online multiplayer. However, with the popularity and overwhelmingly positive critical response garnered by *Modern Warfare 1*'s single-player campaign, both *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* franchises have been focusing more on the single-player experience than previously. It is these single-player campaign that this project will focus on, since it is here the narrative and representational features of these games are found, and the subject of the games' multiplayer sections will only be mention occasionally and very briefly.

This first section of the project will analyze the narrative structure of the two *Modern Warfare* games and the two *Bad Company* games, and how these can be seen as romance narratives, as mentioned in the theory section. This will lead into an analysis of the representation of hero and foe in these games, and finally a closer look at how and why they create moral disengagement in order for the players to better enjoy them.

Modern Military Shooters as Romantic Narratives

In the theory section, it was pointed out that shooters are mostly romance narratives. Indeed, this is true of most modern military shooters as well, and in the four games that the research will focus on in this section there are both tragic-romance narratives and comic-romance narratives present. Modern military shooters fall into a very particular type of romance narratives, perhaps closest to epic, but with elements of both chivalric romance and Arthurian stories mixed in, though without the courtly love of the former and the Arthur of the latter. These three types of romances share several elements but overall they all focus on great men, often knights, doing great things.

That modern military shooters should belong to a mix of these types of romance narratives seems logical considering how soldiers are the closes thing to knights that the modern world has to offer. Indeed, the narrative of most of these games feature the hero going on a quest, defeating various enemies and escaping from situations, which would have been the death of any lesser man, essential acting the knight of chivalric or Arthurian stories but with an assault rifle instead of a sword. Thus it might, for the sake of clarity and simplicity in the rest of this project, be prudent to unify the three aforementioned types of romance narratives under a single term, which shall be referred to as *knight romances*. This knight

romance narrative is especially clear in both *Modern Warfare 1* and *Modern Warfare 2*, wherein the player follows the journey of a new recruit, who through numerous trials and battles earns the respect of the other men in his unit.

In *Modern Warfare 1* this new recruit is John "Soap" Mactavish, who joins the SAS at the beginning of the game. Soap is arguably the main character of both games, despite the player mainly controlling Gary "Roach" Sanderson, a new recruit under Soap's command in *Modern Warfare 2*, but after Roach is killed, the player assumes control of Soap, and he becomes the player character for the rest of the game. Both games also include sections where the player controls other characters, namely American Sgt Paul Jackson in *Modern Warfare* and CIA agent Joseph Allen and Pvt. James Ramirez in *Modern Warfare 2*, but out of these three only Ramirez survives to the end of the game. Each of these different player characters have their own specific part to play in the plot of each game, but what they all have in common appears to be a complete lack of actual character, which is why Soap falls into the role of main character of the series simply by being the only one who is there from beginning to end. None of the player characters display any growth or change over the course of the game, except for the change from living to dead, and none of the characters ever say anything while the player is controlling them, which advances the perception of Soap as a main character, as he talks when the player is controlling Roach. It can seem odd to have static and one dimensional player characters in games that otherwise have a fair bit of effort put into the story, but the oddness of it all is diminished when it becomes clear that this is also one of the ways in which these games are romance narratives.

In romance, what is important is the events of the story. As Denham writes: "the essential element in the plot of romance, [Frye] maintains, is adventure" (Denham 71) and thus both Denham and Frye places great importance on the adventure, the events, of a romance narrative, with less emphasis on characters and interpersonal drama. The beginning of the quest, the slaying of the monster, the saving of the damsel, these things are what is important in a romance narrative. While these event might change the hero from poor to rich, scorned to respected, child to adult, there is rarely any internal growth of character, at least not one which is openly acknowledged by the characters in the story. Little is done on the author's part to display the thoughts and feelings of a character in a romance narrative, particularly the knight romances that modern military shooters seemingly utilize in their narrative. In the same way, the player is never privy to the internal life of the player characters in *Modern Warfare 1* and *Modern Warfare 2*. Even when horrible events occur like a terrorist attack on a Russian airport, which an

undercover Allen participates in, the player does not get Allen's reaction to this trauma, or any emotional reaction to what is happening around him. While the reason for Allen, and the rest of the player characters in the *Modern Warfare* games, being almost devoid of character traits other than their clear superiority to their fellow soldiers, appears to stem from their romance roots, another reason might also be present. Shooters like the *Modern Warfare* games are often power fantasies, stories designed to make the players "feel effective and powerful, and allow them to enact a male gender role" (Hartmann and Vorderer 97). The heroes of these power fantasies are often blank slates for the audience to project themselves onto, and this is seemingly also a factor in *Modern Warfare*'s blank characters. The idea of a relatively bland main character for the audience to easily project themselves onto is utilized by different types of media, but in first-person video games like *Modern Warfare*, this is taken to an extreme, since the player characters are essentially faceless, as the world is experienced almost entirely from their point of view.

The characters of the two *Bad Company* games are more defined than those of the *Modern Warfare* games, even going so far as to have actual character traits. Over the course of the two *Bad Company* games the player follows a team of four soldiers, and unlike the *Modern Warfare* games where the setting, mission and even player character change from level to level, the *Bad Company* games never leave the perspective of these four soldiers. The player character is Pvt. Preston Marlowe who, like Soap in *Modern Warfare 1*, is a new recruit of the "B" company, or "Bad Company", a unit of troublemakers whose function is to serve as cannon fodder. While Marlowe is just as silent and faceless as Soap or Roach when the player controls him, his character gets fleshed out through cut-scenes, and his narration during the various loading screens.

However, just like the three other members of "Bad Company" Marlowe is essentially a stock character, an architype to go along with the other architypes on display in these two games, where the story is more action romp, than *Modern Warfare*'s war drama. There is the nerd architype in the form of Pvt. Sweetwater, who wears glasses, runs his mouth constantly and flirts ineptly with their commanding officer. There is the southern gun-nut architype presented by Pvt. Haggard, who is a fan of NASCAR and monster trucks, loves explosions and yells "god damn liberals!" during combat. And finally there is Sgt. Redford who is a no-nonsense African-American superior just three days from retirement. Marlowe himself is a laconic action hero in the style that was made popular by Bruce Willies in *Die Hard* (1988). All of these are clear action movie stereotypes, and even though the characters of *Bad Company* are more clearly defined than those of the *Modern Warfare* games, they still present very little in the way of arc

or growth over the course of the games. As mentioned above, these static characters, especially in the case of the player character, matches well with what is expected of a romance narrative, which often focus on idealized heroes, and, thus, precludes any growth of character as necessary. However, the *Bad Company* games leans towards the comedy side of romance, whereas the *Modern Warfare* games are closer to the tragedy side.

The characterization, or indeed the lack thereof, of the player characters are not the only aspects of the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games that can be found within the spectrum of romance narratives. Several elements of the story, especially in the *Modern Warfare* games, seem to have direct parallels in the knight romances, which inform much of the narrative structure of these games. The heroes are by default uniquely capable when it comes to defeating the enemy, and over the course of a single playthrough, the player character will kill ten times more enemy combatants than even the most skilled and grizzled veteran would come across over an entire career. Leeson comments on this, writing that: "in a single-player shooter, the player's character almost routinely triumphs over small armies of enemies, while surviving wounds that would kill a normal man." (Leeson 139). This is much like the knights of knight romances, who would often be portrayed as almost superhuman individuals, able to best any foe in combat, and to survive even the most terrible wounds.

The heroes still function as modern parallels to knights in the less dramatic *Bad Company* games, and interestingly this is one of the major differences between *Bad Company 1* and *Bad Company 2*. While in *Bad Company 1* the heroes are presented as lovable rogues rather than chivalrous knights in terms of character, *Bad Company 2* makes an effort to turn them into knights as noble as those found in *Modern Warfare*. Pvt. Haggard, who in the first *Bad Company* was presented as being selfish, is the first to jump at a chance to save one of their captured allies in *Bad Company 2*, and at the end of the game Marlowe gives a rousing speech that convinces the other members of the squad to risk it all in order to complete the mission. While this change might have been made in order to show character growth from game to game, it could also have something to do with the fact that audiences worldwide had a much better reaction to the serious tone of *Modern Warfare 1* than the more comedic tone of *Bad Company 1*. In fact, many of the ways in which *Bad Company 2* differs from its predecessor in terms of characters and plot seem to own a lot to the success of *Modern Warfare 1*. While the first game was about the B Company hunting a mercenary leader called The Legionnaire because he pays his soldiers in bars of gold, and the B Company want to become rich, the second game is contrastingly a patriotic affair, where the B

Company singlehandedly saves America from an evil Russian with a superweapon. This plot is essentially the same one as in *Modern Warfare 1*, and while this may be a coincidence, it seems more likely that this change in plot, as well as the change in characters mentioned above, serves to imbue *Bad Company 2* with a romance narrative similar to that found in the more popular *Modern Warfare* games.

The challenges the hero faces in these modern military shooters can also be seen as modern versions of the trials romantic knights would encounter. The slaying of terrible monsters is present in the form of battles with hostile tanks or helicopters; their roaring mechanic forms an almost perfect substitute for the dragons and trolls of the knight stories. The parallel even extends to the fact that the knight would often need a special magical weapon to kill these terrible beasts, and in the same way, the hero of a modern military shooter utilizes special weapons like mines or rocket launcher to deal with enemy machinery. The trial of taking of an enemy stronghold is also found in these modern military shooters, serving as the modern equivalent to the knight having to besiege an enemy castle. These strongholds take many different shapes, be it the ship in the first mission of *Modern Warfare 1* or a dictators mansion in *Bad Company 1,* and *Modern Warfare 2* discards any semblances of subtlety and has the player lead an attack on an actual castle. While such an obvious similarity to the romance narratives of old might have been played at least partly for laughs, if the game or its characters had in any way acknowledged it, nothing of that sort happens in the game. *Modern Warfare 2* and its predecessor are not presenting a knowing parody of the idea that soldiers are modern-day knights, but are instead drawing bold lines under the idea and presenting it as a statement of fact.

Arguably, the concept of soldiers being analogous to knights even extends to the classic knight trial of rescuing a damsel in distress, if the boundaries of what constitutes a damsel are allowed to be extended; the damsel in the case of the *Modern Warfare* games being America. While this may appear farfetched, the terms used for America can be said to give weight to this theory of the nation being a damsel in distress within these war narratives. Countries are often referred as being inherently feminine with several countries having a woman as their national personification; America also adheres to this concept.. While most people probably think of Uncle Sam as the national personification of America, another such national personification of America exists in the goddess-like Columbia, and later Lady Liberty (particularly presented in her statue form), who has since supplanted her as the main personification of America's spirit and beliefs. In both *Modern Warfare* games, the player has to protect America from complete destruction, first from a nuclear attack in *Modern Warfare 1* and then from a Russian invasion

in *Modern Warfare 2*, both of which the player succeeds at of course. Thus, when the plot of the *Modern Warfare* games involve soldiers dealing with direct threats to not just the American people, but to the country itself, it is valid to see this as another example of these games styling themselves as being romance narratives, with soldiers as knights, and America as the damsel in nearly constant distress. Of course, that America specifically should function as the damsel beset on all sides by enemies in these narratives is firmly planted in American exceptionalism, which will be discussed later in this project.

The interesting question is, therefore, not whether these modern military shooters are romance narratives, but rather why the romance narrative seems to be a key component to their popularity? A great deal of it could be based on the power fantasy. After all, as Leeson points out "At one point, Frye defines the romance quite simply as 'the story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins' " (Leeson 147), and what could be more powerful than that? However, another reason for this type of narrative's popularity when it comes to video games is its simplicity. Romance narratives always provide a clear-cut good-vs-evil construction, a simplicity and straightforwardness that real life often lacks. Clear definable goals and sense of accomplishment when beating the finale boss could be some of the main reasons why video games are such excellent escapist tools.

That being said, there are certain problems that arise when the simple good-vs-evil stories of romance narratives are transported from the imaginary setting of knight legends to the all too real setting post 9/11 armed conflicts.

Representation in Modern Military Shooters

In the theory section of this project it was mentioned that one of the problems modern military shooters have with representation is that they tend to tell simple good-vs-evil stories in a setting which in the real defies this kind of simplicity. To paint one side of an armed conflict as wholly good and another as wholly evil can never be truly representative of how these types of conflicts actually work, since different soldiers fight for different reasons. Some modern military shooters get around this problem by painting the enemy simply as terrorists, and as mentioned above, the label "terrorist" has almost become as synonymous with evil as the label "Nazi" was in the second half of the 20th century. However, though much of the theory section of this project dealt with how "terrorist" in modern military

shooters tend to simply mean "anyone of Middle Eastern decent", interestingly this does not apply to as great an extend to the four games analyzed in this section.

Which is not to say that these games are completely devoid of troubling representations of Middle Eastern people. Early on in *Modern Warfare 1* the player is put in control of Yasir Al-Fulani, the newly dethroned president of an unnamed country in the Middle East, for what is essentially an extended cut-scene, since the player's control of Al-Fulani is limited to looking around. What the player is presented with in this level is the cruelty and viciousness of the new president Khaled Al-Asad and his men, as they break down doors and windows, kills civilians and finally execute Al-Fulani on national television. It is clear that the function of this level is to communicate to the player that Khaled Al-Asad and his men are evil, but it is in the speech Al-Asad gives that the strange representation of Middle Eastern countries and culture is found. Al-Asad says that the reason for Al-Fulani's execution is that he has been "colluding with the West" and that this deed will free the country from "the yoke of foreign oppression". Thus, one of the only named Middle Eastern characters in the game gives no other reason for committing his evil acts than a hatred of "the West", which is troubling as it reaffirms the misconception that all Middle Eastern countries have an irrational hatred of the west and America, in particular.

Additionally, while the Al-Fulani level might also have the intended purpose of making the player feel sympathy for the civilians of this country, these civilians are nowhere to be found in the rest of the game. As the player takes control of Sgt. Paul Jackson who is part of a team tasked with finding and eliminating Al-Asad, the player is expected to kill every single Middle Easterner they encounter, since all of them, from this point forward, are enemies. The fact that non-hostile Middle Eastern characters have been completely omitted from the game is problematic in regards to representation, as it indirectly implies that once the wrong people like Al-Asad take over, entire populations will quickly become militarized to a point where every citizen is also an enemy combatant. A version of this "all civilians are enemies in disguise" representation can be found in *Modern Warfare 2* as well. In one of the first mission set in a Middle Eastern country, which this time around is revealed to be Afghanistan, the player sees three men standing on a balcony, some of the only Middle Eastern civilians seen in the game, and it is immediately pointed out that they are probably scouting for the enemy. In the world of *Modern Warfare*, there is no such thing as a non-hostile Middle Easterner.

The *Bad Company* games do not actually feature any Middle Eastern enemies, with the enemies instead being mercenaries of unknown nationality in *Bad Company 1* and Russians in *Bad Company 2*.

However, *Bad Company 1* does feature the character Zavimir Serdar, the president of the fictional nation of Serdaristan. Though Serdaristan is actually a Caucasus country and not a Middle Eastern one, Serdar seems to have been designed as a parody of a stereotypical Middle Eastern dictator. He wears a military uniform in the style of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi and lives the same kind of opulent lifestyles associated with dictators, owning both a magnificent mansion and a gold-plated helicopter. Interestingly, Serdar is not presented as evil or even hostile, as most other Middle Eastern characters in modern military shooters, but instead takes on a clownish role in the story, constantly spouting one-liners and telling strange stories from his time as president. The reason why Serdar is such a clownish character might be a result of *Bad Company 1* being closer in tone to action-comedy, than any of the other games discussed in this project. Therefore it makes sense that a game with an overall comical tone like *Bad Company 1* would also include over-the-top comical characters. Another more interesting reason for Serdar's comical character might be that he is intended as a deliberate parody of dictators like him. Considering that the game was released in 2008, two years after Saddam Hussein had been both tried and executed, Serdar might be seen as a comical send-up of the former Iraqi Prime Minister, adding insult to hanging. This idea gives Serdar's bumbling and incompetent character an aspect of mockery to it, as if the game is pointing out how ridicules and non-threatening these supposedly powerful leaders are when the chips are down.

While Serdar is not a representation of an entire population group, like the Middle Eastern enemies in the *Modern Warfare* games, he does provide a bit of insight into how Middle Eastern leaders are portrayed in modern military shooters, especially when compared with his polar opposite, Al-Asad from *Modern Warfare 1*. *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* present Middle Eastern leaders as either bumbling and incompetent as is the case with Serdar because he is a character in a comedic story, or evil, menacing and out of control as with Al-Asad, who exists in a much darker and more serious story. The complete absence of competent and trusted Middle Eastern leaders in these games is indicative of how leadership and government in Middle Eastern countries is viewed from an American perspective. The government is either weak, corrupt and ineffectual as with Serdar, which makes them a threat since they cannot control their citizens, or the government is hostile, militant and dangerous as with Al-Asad, which makes them a threat due to their deep-seated hatred of America. These two views on government, both of which revolve around how the government is a threat to America, stem from the idea of American exceptionalism. How these four games involve this idea will be discussed later in this project.

This discussion of the way Middle Easterners are portrayed in both the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games is important because it clearly portrays the same view of the Middle East as was mentioned in the theory section. However, as was pointed out at the start of this section, all four games actually feature another force as the primary enemy, namely the Russians. In *Modern Warfare 1* an ultranationalist group has taken over large parts of Russia, and when *Modern Warfare 2* starts five years later, this group now rules Russia. During the aforementioned "Airport level" America is framed as having orchestrated the terrorist attack, which leads to Russia declaring war with America. Meanwhile, in the *Bad Company* games, Russia and America are also at war, but no reason is given, since the games are less interested in the larger war, than it is with the struggles of B Company. With all four of these games focusing on Russians as the main enemy, the question is: why Russians?

Of course, having Russians as the main enemy in any text was for a long time a given in American media. While the Cold War never resulted in direct combat, cultural shots were fired in pretty much all types of media, with representations like Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV* (19585) and as a result, the image of the scary evil Russian became almost a cliché. However, with the Cold War having ended almost 30 years ago, it seems odd for game-makers to stick to this representation of an entire nation.

One of the reasons for doing this might simply be realism and believability. While terrorists as the main enemy may have worked for both franchises, this choice would probably have limited the missions to small-scale skirmishes with smaller, not terribly well organized or well-armed groups. However, the games seem much more interested in telling stories of all-out war between two superpower nations, since this provides a much broader range of combat missions, from smaller skirmishes to stealth-infiltration missions to full-blown ground assault missions. Of course, in order to tell these kinds of stories, an enemy force with a strong enough military to pose an actual threat had to be determined, which left the game developers with four choices.

The first being to simply make up a fictional foreign power, but considering how these games usually try to sell themselves on realism, a fictional nation with enough power to realistically challenge America in open war might have been too though a sell, and would have challenged the player's suspension of disbelief to a point where it would probably falter.

The second choice would be China, which would also be a sensible choice, considering both America's tense relationship with China, and China's considerable economic and military power. Even though an evenly matched conflict between China and America makes sense, it is also quite clear why

the game developers chose not to go this route. China has historically been quite hard on any text in any media that portrays the nation in any type of negative light, with efforts often being made during the production of major blockbusters to make the movie fit for the Chinese market, by removing negative portrayals of the nation. For example, this has been done with the remake of *Red Dawn* from 2012, which originally featured China as the enemy, but this was changed in post-production, making the enemy North Korean instead. With China having "the largest game population in the world" (Cao and Downing 515) as well, the thought of losing a large chunk of the sales due to a supposedly realistic representation of China as the enemy, might understandably have given the game developers pause.

The third option would probably be North Korea, simply because North Korea has positioned itself in the world today as something resembling of a Bond villain, and thus a conflict between America and North Korea would probably appear as within the realm of possibility. This is probably why the game developers chose not to use North Korea, since the prospect of war might seem a little too real at times. As mentioned above, situations in games where players are made to feel uncomfortable interfere with the players' enjoyment of the game, and a game where the player is reminded of just how dangerous North Korea can seem at times could conjure such a feeling of discomfort.

The fourth and final option is therefore Russia, and it makes sense that the game developers chose this, given the fact that the nation matches all the criteria needed for creating a believable enemy in a modern military shooter. Russia has the military strength to threaten the United States, including the threat of a nuclear attack still lingering after the Cold War. The international relationship between Russia and America is also problematic and tense enough that an armed conflict between the two nations does not seem completely unrealistic, yet not so likely that the thought of it would distract and disturb the player. Of course, as mentioned above, Russia is used to being the villain in American media, which means that unlike a similar situation with China, the representation of Russia as the enemy in these games hardly has any effects on the sales in Russia, and neither is Russia as big of a market as China. This being said, there are some who have criticized the games for continuingly casting Russia as the enemy. This lead Grant Collier, one of the Studio Heads behind *Modern Warfare 1,* to "downplay the negative gamer feedback, saying that this narrative choice has irritated a few who have posted on the site's forums, but that it is important to remember that the game is fictionalizing a Russian separatist group" (Payne, "Marketing Military Realism" 314). While the representation of the Russian separatist group is in itself somewhat problematic, the game's sales clearly was not impacted by this criticism, since *Modern*

Warfare 2 took it a step further and cast the entire nation of Russia as the enemy. All of this explains why it makes sense for these modern military shooters to have Russians as the main enemy. However, it is important to discuss how the Russians are portrayed in these games, especially when compared to the way American and British soldiers are represented.

In many ways it is quite impossible to tell that the enemies of both the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games are Russians simply by playing the missions, since these enemies are given as little in the way of character as the aforementioned Middle Eastern enemies. However, while the lack of character depth and motivation for the Middle Eastern enemies is problematic, because it paints the entire Middle Eastern population as a single entity, this same lack in the Russian enemies is problematic because it robs the player of any understanding of the underlying conflict in both wars. As mentioned, in *Bad Company* the reason for the war with Russia is never stated, but it is, however, made clear that Russia is the aggressor in the conflict, since they are the ones attacking neighboring countries in *Bad Company 1* and America in *Bad Company 2*. Thus, despite the player not being told why they are fighting the Russians, they do know that they are right to fight them. As such, the way in which the *Bad Company* games represent Russians is not worth that much discussion, since the *Modern Warfare* games present the Russians in much the same way; the reason for the war in those games is, however, much more interesting.

Unlike *Bad Company*, *Modern Warfare* explains the reason why the player is fighting the Russians, by having the player take on a critical role in the start of the war. As mentioned, in *Modern Warfare 2* the player character Allen goes undercover within a group of Russian militants led by Makarov, who is part of the same quartet of villains as Al-Asad from *Modern Warfare 1*. The undercover mission takes place in a single game level, named "No Russian". It starts with Allen participating in a terrorist attack on an airport, and ends with Makarov shooting Allen in the head and leaving his body behind, thus, implicating America in the airport massacre and starting the war. The fact that Makarov alters the facts of events in order to incite the general Russian public against America is a clever plot-point, since it paints the Russians as simply manipulated into war rather than inherently evil.

However, the fact that the sparks of conflict between Russia and America can be fanned so quickly into the flames of war with wide national support leaves the Russian people seeming easily manipulated and almost eager for an excuse to attack America. This is only compounded by the fact that the game starts with most of the work from its predecessor undone, with the leader of the villain quartet, Zakhaev,

now hailed as a hero, and the ultranationalist party having completely taken over the Russian government seemingly with nation-wide support. This shows once again that the Russian people of this game is quite easily swayed by powerful men. However, what makes this representation of the Russian people problematic is that they are essentially presented as a uniform mass, a hive-mind that simply does whatever their leaders tell them to, and the fact that the game never shows what the Russian people actually think of this conflict only helps to strengthen this representation.

The hive minded uniformity of the Russian enemies in both the *Bad Company* and *Modern Warfare* games is contrasted heavily with the way the American military and its soldiers are portrayed, because in addition to being romantic narratives, these games are also fiercely patriotic narratives with deep roots in American exceptionalism, and the "appropriateness of military force as a foreign-policy tool" (Tomes 43). As previously mentioned the soldiers of these modern military shooters, the *Modern Warfare* games especially, can be seen as modern versions of knights, but most of them are also portrayed as red-blooded American patriots. Interestingly, in both *Modern Warfare* games it is the British player characters, Soap and Roach, who partake in the stealth missions, while the American soldiers, Sgt. Jackson and Pvt. Ramirez, are the player characters in missions involving open combat. This might be because the missions where the player controls Soap or Roach tend to involve actions that the player might reasonably see as morally questionable or directly dishonorable, such as killing enemies in their sleep in the first mission of *Modern Warfare 1*, or torturing an enemy for information in *Modern Warfare 2*. Thus, having the British characters commit these acts, the games allow the player to experience them, while also leaving the American military free from any moral tarnish such actions might incur.

Generally, the actions of the American military are valorized quite heavily in modern military shooters, and more so in the *Modern Warfare* games than in the *Bad Company* series, since, of the two, *Modern Warfare* is more concerned with telling a larger war-story, as opposed to *Bad Company*'s soldier-buddies romp. This valorization is seen many different times over the course of the two *Modern Warfare* games, but especially in scenes wherein the characters continue fighting in the face of mounting odds and almost certain defeat. An example of this can be found in *Modern Warfare 1* with the death of Sgt. Jackson, whose helicopter crashes after a nuclear bomb detonates and essentially levels Al-Asads city. After the crash, the player takes control of Jackson one last time, and guides him out of the crashed helicopter and into the streets of fire and ruin. It is a powerful scene, as Jackson struggles to stay upright but keeps marching on until he eventually succumbs to his injuries, and it is a perfect example of the way

American soldiers are represented in these games, as men of strength, spirit and valor who will fight until their dying breath.

This spirit is seen again during the missions where the player controls Pvt. Ramirez in *Modern Warfare 2*. These are the missions in which the Russian ground assault on America is experienced, and the Russians are shown to be winning handily, until they reach Washington DC. After an EMP knocks out all electricity in DC, a soldier in Ramirez' unite starts showing actual mental wear (a rarity in these games), at which point the commanding officer Sgt. Foley tells him: "Get a grip Corporal! Our weapons still work, which means we can still kick some ass". The game then doubles down on the valor of American soldiers, and America in general, by having Ramirez' unite retake the White House, which turns the tide of the entire war.

Instances like these, along with all the times soldiers cheer at airstrike or celebrate the arrival of other heavy ordinance, are all examples of how American exceptionalism is handled in the *Modern Warfare* games. As mentioned in the theory section is project, a part American exceptionalism is based on the idea that America is uniquely capable of dealing with the threats of the world, but this also hinges on the idea that most of the rest of the world wishes America harm in one way or another. This is seen in the *Modern Warfare* games to a large degree than in the *Bad Company* games, and the targeting of America is essentially what drives the entire plot. As mentioned earlier, the villains of *Modern Warfare* never offer any coherent reason for their hatred of America, and their wish to fight and kill Americans seems to be fueled by nothing but an unexplained hatred. It is this hatred and the subsequent attacks that forces America's involvement in the actions. On the subject of American exceptionalism, Robinson comments that many videogames portray America "as an innocent victim of violence so justifying a military response unbound by international norms and law." (Robinson 452), and while the first part of that statement is quite obvious in the *Modern Warfare* games, the second part is also present, though through more subtle means.

In order to fully understand this, it is important to return to something mentioned earlier in this section, namely that the action in the first *Modern Warfare* is split between Soap's SAS unit, and Jackson's men in the American army. What is interesting about this is that Soap is the one who survives and ends up killing Zakhaev, thus making Britain and not America the triumphant hero of the story. However, by the time *Modern Warfare 2* begins, Soap is no longer part of the SAS, but is instead a captain in Task Force 141, an international special operations unit under the command of the American

General Shepherd. Soap, as well as Roach, are in this way Americanized, since the Task Force they are part of is led by an American, and mainly focuses on the issues and threats facing America. This allows the American military effectively to be the hero of both the American land war featuring Ramirez, and the secret mission of Soap and Roach to bring down Makarov.

This all fits with the concepts of American exceptionalism, but a spanner is thrown in the works when it is revealed that the villain of the Soap and Roach's story-line turns out to be the American General Shepherd. This is where the second part of Robinson's statement comes into play, since this betrayal by Shepherd forces Soap to take matters into his own hands. Much like how America uses its role as victims to justifying acting outside of the law, so does the game justify Soap having a carte blanche to kill Shepherd because of his betrayal. Interestingly, the reason behind Shepherd's betrayal can also be seen as rooted in American exceptionalism. The reason he gives for his betrayal is that the nuclear bomb that killed Jackson and many others in *Modern Warfare* is proof that the world is a threat to America, and his actions will rally the American people behind the military, so they can combat the foreign threats. Thereby, the game presents the player with two characters who disregard rules and laws in order to complete their self-imposed missions, and while the contrast between villain and hero is clear, it is interesting that the game would present their motives as being so similar.

However, it makes more sense when considering that another essential part of American exceptionalism is the strength and resourcefulness of the individual, and that hard labor eventually will reap the greater rewards, as per the American Dream. While Shepherd is the face of the American military in the game, the methods he uses to achieve his goals are underhanded, cowardly and dishonest; traits that are all far removed from the idyllic, American perception of its military. Shepherd gets what he wants through deception and not hard work, which is what labels him a villain. In one of the final missions, Shepherd is even shown hiding in a system of caves in Afghanistan, which is essentially the game's way of equating him with that omnipresent specter of evil, the terrorists. On the other hand, Soap (and all the other player characters as well) work hard, and rely on their strength and wits to survive. As Leeson points out "the distinguishing characteristics—indeed, the cardinal virtues—of the romantic hero (and heroine) are forza and froda—violence and cunning" (Leeson 141), and these characteristics are all present in the player characters of the *Modern Warfare*. Furthermore, the soldiers all exhibit the talent for being both part of a larger group, i.e. the military, while still functioning as individuals. Soap and his men question the decisions of the high command, and at times even directly disobeys their orders when

they find they know better, at times comment, "Command's got their head up their ass". This focus on how the American soldiers act on their own accord and by their individual decision-making, contrasts strongly with the hive-like way in which the Russian enemies are presented. As American exceptionalism would dictate, these virtues that the American soldiers possess are also the reason that they eventually prevail, both against Shepherd and the Russians.

The project will now turn to a discussion on how the games represent war itself. This will be done by examining the concept of Moral disengagement, given its close ties to the subjects of war and violence.

Moral Disengagement in Modern Military Shooters

As discussed in the theory section of this project, moral disengagement is often key to enjoying violent videogames, especially videogames where the enemies are representation of human beings. Players rarely find it enjoyable when they are made to feel guilty about their actions in a game, such as killing an enemy, but on the other hand, "if users continuously reminded themselves that ''this is just a game,'' the game would hardly be enjoyable" (Hartmann and Vorderer 96). A game, therefore, needs to strike a balance between immersion and moral disengagement.

Both the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games try to achieve this by focusing on the realism in the games for the immersion part, while also shying away from the parts of real warfare that would break the player's moral disengagement. Of the two series, *Modern Warfare* starts off being the more realistic of the two, though this might also be attributed to the first *Bad Company* game's action-movie sensibilities.

In *Modern Warfare* the player is in control of Soap in a tutorial mission, which has the function of instructing new players on how to play the game. Rather than simply telling the player "press x to shoot", the mission is structured like a military training course with an NPC (non-player character) telling you want to do, for instance "shoot all the targets", and textboxes telling the player *how* to shoot. This feeling of realism continues throughout the game, with guns, uniforms and vehicles all directly adapted from what the real-life military uses, and it is heightened even further by the authentic tactical terms used by the friendly NPCs such as "tango neutralized" and "check your corners". The *Bad Company* games do much of the same thing, and the realism that is lost on the basis of their larger-than-life characters, is regained through the rather impressive destructible environments, which allows the player to blow holes in buildings or level the enemy's cover with a well-placed grenade. All of these elements work well

together in forming game-worlds that the player can truly immerse themselves in, which is especially impressive considering that by all logic, the more realistic a game about war is, the less enjoyable would it be. This is of course the point of moral disengagement: making something that should be disturbing or morally troubling seem okay, and *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* do this in various ways.

Firstly, there are the ways in which the games treat the subject of killing the enemy. It has already been mentioned that players of modern military shooters tend to regard the killing of an enemy as simply removing an obstacle, but what has not been mentioned is how these games condition the player to think that. In *Modern Warfare 1* for instance, the first mission after the tutorial shows Soap and the rest of his team attacking a cargo ship, and in the brief loading screen, which provides the player with mission relevant exposition, the player is told that the crew of the ship is expendable. The player does not even have to kill anyone for a long time in the mission, and can simply stay back while the rest of the team dispatches most of the crew. In this way the player is taught that killing the enemy is generally accepted as normal by this team, and since Soap never reacts to any of this, the player must assume that Soap is indifferent towards it, and thus, by extension, should the player be.

Bad Company 1 approaches this conditioning of the player in a different way, since the game's tutorial mainly focuses on showcasing the player's ability to blow up the environment. The player is told to blow a hole in a house, all while Haggard is talking about how much fun it is to blow things up. This all serves to make the player think "Haggard is right, blowing things up is fun", and once this is accepted by the player, there is barely need for any other examples. By starting out with the destruction of inanimate objects, the player is also invited to think of all other things in the game as inanimate objects, and so the enemy soldiers are reduced to moving objects that are entertaining to blow up.

The two series of games also have a common element in that airstrikes and other sorts of bombardments feature prominently in both. In the real world, these kinds of bombardments are often looked on as problematic things, since they involve something as impersonal as the press of a button as a way of causing massive amounts of destruction and death. However, since they are an established part of modern combat situations, the games have found a way to include the bombardments without reminding the player of the consequences these attacks have in the real world, often with civilian casualties as well as enemy combatants. Interestingly, the way in which the two series handle the bombardments are almost identical, as they have all friendly NPCs cheer when an airstrike or bombardment is called. When the shells or missiles strike down from the sky, obliterating building and

enemies alike, everyone on the players side can always be seen cheering, communicating to the player that what just happened is an unequivocally good thing. In one of *Modern Warfare 1*'s more famous missions, titled "Death From Above"*,* the player gets to be the one doing the airstriking, a clear indication of what Payne calls "the genre's celebratory handling of advanced technologies and 'smart' weapons" (Payne, "War Bytes" 276). As part of the crew on a AC-130 gunship, the player controls a screen showing a birds-eye view of a small Russian village, where Soap and his team are trapped. The player is then tasked with shooting everything that is not Soap's team or a couple of civilians, using several different weapons, some of which are able to destroy a house in a single hit. The missions contains a very strange mix of military realism and a flippant attitude towards killing people, with the commentary from the AC-130's navigator ranging from military jargon like "request to engage" to gleeful "Kaboom!"s and "Good kill! Good kill!", and it even ends with a comment that "this is gonna be one hell of a highlight reel". The mission is intended to make the player fell powerful, almost godlike, as they are able to kill the enemy with a single click of a button, thereby showing the player the entertainment value of that power, which vindicates the cheers of the NPCs from the bombardments from earlier in the game

Interestingly, this attitude towards death also extends to the player character's allies, who also happen to die in sizeable numbers. In the *Modern Warfare* series, the death of a fellow soldier often comes and goes without remark or reaction from the other NPCs, and when these death do incite commentary, they are often dead-pan and lacking in emotion. At one point in *Modern Warfare 1*, Soap's unit loses three men in a helicopter crash, and his commander's only reaction to this is: "bugger". In *Bad Company 2*, the characters show a little more humanity when faced with the death of their allies, as seen when their pilot, Flynn, is killed. Since the *Bad Company* games have a stronger focus on characters, it makes sense that the death of an ally would be treated as much more significant, but as with most other games, death has no lingering effect on the minds of the characters. In *Bad Company 2* Haggard has a brief moment of grief when Flynn dies, but two levels later he seems to have forgotten all about it, which is seemingly the model for how characters in modern military shooters react to death.

The handling of death in modern military shooters is one of the aspects in which the games seem to intentionally abandon any pretense to the realism that otherwise serves as the main selling point of these games as "the entertainment industry purposefully conflates the war game's ability to render photorealistic graphics and surround sound with broader notions of experiential realism." (Payne, "War Bytes" 267). However, as mentioned above, these games are meant to be enjoyable to play, and being

disturbed by the gaming experience can seriously damage a player's enjoyment of the game. Therefore, it makes sense for these purportedly realistic games to abandon its realism when dealing with how much the death of a fellow soldier or the killing of enemy combatants affects the psyche of those who survive. In the real world, it is a well-known fact that for many soldiers "deployment stressors and exposure to combat result in considerable risks of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" (Hoge et al. 14), but these realities would of course be completely at odds with the escapist entertainment that shooters are supposed to provide. Thus, modern military shooters shy away from depicting the grim realities of war for the same reasons that action movies rarely feature the hero being disturbed by their own actions after killing the umpteenth henchman, or contemplating their own mortality after their partner has been killed. The trouble with comparing these two things is that action movies rarely advertise themselves as being realistic, while modern military shooters, and especially the *Modern Warfare* games, are all too happy with applying the "realistic" label to themselves. It is, therefore, important to remember that despite their claim of realism, most modern military shooters only extends this to the uniforms, weapons and vehicles, and not the emotional and psychological trauma of actual combat. The world that is presented in these games looks real, though with the difference of presenting killing your fellow man as being fun and consequence free, and death in all its many forms is simply shrugged off.

When considering this avoidance of acknowledging the emotional reactions to killing and death in modern military shooters, it might seem somewhat strange that both of the *Modern Warfare* games include levels where the horror of modern-day war is brought to the forefront. The levels in question are the nuclear detonation and Sgt. Jackson's subsequent death in *Modern Warfare 1* and the "No Russian" level in *Modern Warfare 2*, and both have been mentioned before in this project, as they are indeed two of the most talked-about levels in the series. So why does a series so keen on presenting a world where wars are both modern but also simple, brutal but also entertaining, include levels that are as shocking and disturbing as these? Arguably, it is quite likely that the levels have nothing to do with a sudden urge from the developers to depict war as being gruesome, otherwise, they would have kept the tone throughout the game. This indicates that these levels serve a onetime purpose in the game, and there are a couple of different possibilities as to what that purpose is.

The first possible explanation is simply marketing. During the production of *Modern Warfare* the developers must have expected that the level in which Sgt. Jackson drags his broken body from the

helicopter and dies, was going to be the major talking point of every review of the game. It was bold, brutal and never done before, so it would obviously garner the game heaps of free publicity. However, since *Modern Warfare* as a whole was an experiment within the *Call of Duty* series, by being the first game set in a modern-day world, the developers might not have expected it to become as huge and influential as it did. The sequel would of course have to top it, and the developers knew they would need another shocking level for that game as well, and so they turned to the only thing more controversial than nukes in this day and age: terrorism. The "No Russian" level seems to be almost tailor-made to be the kind of "shocking"-level that results in a massive amount of free publicity, but which is also safe enough for the game not to be banned. "No Russian" features many safeguards to keep the level from being so controversial that it would hurt sales, rather than help them, such as an option to skip the level entirely and the fact that the game never tells the player to kill any of the civilians, and indeed the level can be played without opening fire once. It might seem overly cynical to assume that "No Russian" only exists to shock players into telling their friends about it, who then goes out and buys it, but it is rather telling that the level is not important to the overall arc of the plot, and thereby, there being no real reason for the player taking an active part in this massacre.. As mentioned earlier in the project, the player character Allen never truly reacts to the horrors of the massacre, so it serves no function as character-building. Neither does the players control of Allen serve any narrative-purpose, since the player is not able to stop the massacre from happening, and the outcome of the massacre might as easily have been told in a cut-scene. And of course, since the level can be played without actually firing your weapon, it seemingly serves no gameplay-challenge purpose either. It appears that the only reason the player controls Allen during this terrorist attack, is so that various news outlets could provide the game with free publicity when they discussed how the game lets the player control Allen during a terrorist attack. The game itself does not even take the "No Russian" level all that serious, as evidenced by the fact that there it even features a very obvious joke, where, in the middle of the level, the player spots a giant board listing all the outgoing flights, all of which immediately changes to "Delayed".

Of course, games like *GTA* had allowed and even encouraged players to kill civilians for years before *Modern Warfare* came out, so while shock is definitely part of the reason for the inclusion of these levels, another more narratively-based reason should be considered. As mentioned above, the narratives of these games are akin to those found in knight romances, with the main conflict of these narratives being a battle between good and evil. This is another instance where modern military shooters tend to

shed their ties to realism in favor of creating an entertaining experience, since armed conflicts in the real world are seldom straightforward "good vs evil" affairs, but the experience that these games are providing fits much more readily with such a narrative. In such a narrative, the evil side must be shown as being evil beyond any reason or sense. This might be the narrative reason for the inclusion of both the nuclear detonation and the "No Russian" mission, since they quite clearly cements the opponent's wickedness, and, thereby, lends justification to the hero's cause. Seeing the villains blow up an entire city or shooting down an airport full of civilians might cause the player to feel unease or discomfort during those levels, but the implied evilness of the villains creates a powerful sense of moral disengagement, that allows the player to kill them with a clear conscious for the rest of the game.

The use of shocking moments to indicate the evilness of the villains is only one aspect of how these modern military shooters present themselves as good-vs-evil narratives, with players supporting a "just cause and thus act morally, by saving the world, restoring humanity, and fighting the forces of evil" (Hartmann and Vorderer 110), all while ostensibly focusing on a topic as complex as modern warfare. The representation of war as being simple is a massive oversimplification of the real-world armed conflicts. Yet, by oversimplifying war, moral disengagement becomes easier to provoke, as the enemy is unequivocally evil and the player is clearly good. This is maybe why the games discussed in this section constantly remind the player of the "good/evil" binary at work in the narrative. In *Modern Warfare 1*, one of the soldiers in Soap's unit asks their commander whether the Russians they are supposed to meet are "the good Russians, or the bad Russians." Likewise in *Modern Warfare 2*, Shepherd first tells Allen that "this is a time for heroes", and later that Allen looks like "one of the bad guys", after Allen has readied himself to go undercover. Both of these instances indicate that in the wars of this world, all people can be slotted into roles of either good or bad, hero or villain.

This binary view of the world is, however, rather strange when considering the main enemies in both the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games are. While the villains of the games are dangerous men with nothing but death and destruction on their minds, the actual enemies, that is the people the players spend most of their shooting at, are for the most part simply Russian soldiers, as discussed above. As Schulzke points out "the enemies in mainstream FPS are rarely ordinary soldiers. Rather, they are opponents whose ideologies or methods of fighting alienate them from any shared sense of humanity." (Schulzke, "Being a Terrorist" 210), but this clearly does not apply to the *Modern Warfare* or *Bad Company* games.

While the player is encouraged to fight the Russians soldiers in the *Modern Warfare* games through the means of nuclear detonation and airport massacres, the games never actually mention that the Russians that the player is fighting has no real connection to the ones who committed the aforementioned atrocities. In fact, the reasoning behind the airport massacre is that it will incite war between America and Russia, which is precisely what happens, but that also means that the Russian soldiers the player is fighting as Ramirez, are only there because of their anger and grief over the deaths in "No Russian". Yet, while the player is supposed to feel deeply disturbed by the killings in "No Russian", they are also expected not to feel sorry for the Russians they killed while playing as Ramirez. It could be argued that the Russians killed during the Ramirez-levels are soldiers, not civilians, and it is, therefore, okay to kill them, but this still does not sit completely right with the "good vs evil"-narrative that the games are otherwise presenting. By making the Russian enemies soldiers, the simple narrative is muddled quite substantially, since they are motivated by the exact same call of duty that motivates Ramirez and his unit. True, they are attacking America on a false foundation, making America the clear victim in the conflict, but the Russian rank-and-file soldiers are not to blame for the decisions of their commanders and politicians, but still the player is supposed to kill every last Russian soldier they come across. Thus the game encourages the treatment of the enemy as non-human objects rather than people, even though it also build an entire level around the horror of senselessly killing those same people.

Much of the same problem is present in the *Bad Company* games, only made more problematic by the fact that the war is never really explained. No context is ever given for why America and Russia are at war, and there is no shocking moment to galvanize the player's moral disengagement, so they can kill the Russian soldiers without a care.

One would think that it would be a problem for the soldiers the player fights in these modern military shooters to be essentially just doing their jobs and serving their country just like the player characters. However, it never truly becomes an issue in any of the games, mainly because there is never called any attention to it. In fact, it seems that the overall narrative of good-vs-evil completely overrules the individual motivations of the games' characters. For the player to experience the desired amount of moral disengagement, it is seemingly enough for the games to merely define the enemies as being inherently evil, and that the only way out of the situation is to kill or be killed. There might be several reasons why this is the case, but this research find the most likely to be that players are simply expecting the narrative to be simple and the enemies to be evil.

As mentioned earlier, players tend to see enemies as objects instead of characters, and this view of the enemy in shooters might be so ingrained in most players that they automatically reduce any enemies in a game to objects in need of removal, no matter whether the game has truly earned the moral disengagement or not. Schulzke describes a typical shooter-enemy as being "invariably simplistic figures that seem to be caricatures of evil. […]The enemies' love of violence and lack of individuation give them a subhuman status and transform them into objects of contempt that can be justifiably killed." (Schulzke, "Being a Terrorist" 209). Since this is the standard for shooter games, the player of a shooter like *Modern Warfare* might automatically assume that the enemies in that game fits this description, without actually paying any attention to whether this is true or not.

It could be argued that people like a certain amount of simplicity in their entertainment, since simplicity is one of the things real life so in woefully short supply of, and thus, most people will strive to see the simplest possible narrative in an entertainment text like *Modern Warfare*, and ignore any element which does not fit this simple narrative. It is, therefore, not necessary for modern military shooters like the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games to explain any elements, which seem out of place, as long as they keep their story firmly rooted in a simple "good vs evil"-narrative.

However, as will become clear in the next section of this project, that when something becomes as formulaic and standardized as the modern military shooters, there will also appear texts that take these established conventions and turn them on their heads, satirizing all the previous texts that created the conventions in the first place. *Spec Ops: The Line* is one such game, as it pulls all the flaws and "realism"-hypocrisies of modern military shooters into the harsh light of irony and satire.

Spec Ops: The Line

Spec Ops: The Line is a third person modern military shooters which came out in 2012 to quite positive reviews from critics and players alike, mainly because of its unconventional take on the modern military shooter genre. The game focuses on Cpt. Martin Walker and his squad mates Lt Alphanso Adams and SSG John Lugo who are sent into Dubai after the city has been almost completely destroyed by a series of sandstorms. The team's mission is to figure out whether an American Colonel named John Konrad and his Infantry Battalion, "The Damned 33rd", are still alive. A series of events, some of which result from Walker contradicting his orders, leads to the team being caught between the fractured Damned 33rd, CIA operatives and the civilian populations, many of whom has taken up arms against the occupying forces.

This section of the project will focus on how *Spec Ops: The Line* can be seen as a direct satirical response to the conventions used in most modern military shooters. This will be done by analyzing how the elements of narrative structure, representation, and moral disengagement are presented in *Spec Ops*, and comparing these with those of the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* series.

Spec Ops: The Line as an Ironic Narrative

One of the biggest differences between *Spec Ops* and the other modern military shooters discussed in this project is that the narrative of *Spec Ops* is not a knight romance, but rather a satire of those types of narratives.

As mentioned in the theory section, satire narratives are the polar opposite of the romance narratives, much like tragedy narratives are the opposite of comedy narratives. However, satire narratives are somewhat different from the other pregeneric mythos, as they are defined almost entirely by their relationship with their opposites, the romance narratives. This is because irony and satire narratives take their form from contorting typical romance narrative in a way in which the quest of the hero becomes at best a timewasting folly (if it is an ironic comedy) and at worst a devastating descents into madness where nothing is learned or won (if it is an ironic tragedy). *Spec Ops* sits quite firmly in the second category, as every action the "heroes" take only leads to further pain and death inflicted on them and the people around them.

In order to satirize the trends of modern military shooters, *Spec Ops* starts off mirroring the structure of most of these games quite perfectly, and the structure is clearly meant to seem familiar to

anyone who has played modern military shooters before. It focuses on a small group of soldiers who takes on a dangerous mission and must survive using naught but their strength and cunning, just like in the knight romance narratives that inform most other modern military shooters. While the setting of the sand-ravaged Dubai is clearly fantastical, and the narrative of a rogue Colonel and his loyal army of deserters is farfetched, it is, as Payne notes, "no more ludicrous than the 'save the world' campaigns common to franchise favorites Halo, Gears of War, and Call of Duty." (Payne, "War Bytes" 266). The player is meant to recognize all the signs indicating that the story of *Spec Ops* will be similar to that of most other stories they have played, and the game maintains this illusion of its story being nothing special for a considerable amount of time, which it does through various means.

One of the ways in which *Spec Ops* links itself to other modern military shooters is through the principal characters. The player takes control of Walker, just as the team is entering Dubai, and the first five minutes of the game serve to establish the three team members as a motor-mouth (Lugo), a tough-guy who is good with explosives (Adams), and the stoic no-nonsense blank slate (Walker). This is almost a point-for-point recreation of the soldier-buddies characters of *Bad Company*, and the player is clearly supposed to think that this game is like most other modern military shooters they have played so far.

This is strengthened by the fact that the first enemies encountered in the game are men wearing balaclavas and speaking Farsi, much like the nondescript terrorist enemies in the *Modern Warfare* games. After this encounter with the game's first hostiles, Walker also countermands the team's original orders, and presses on into the main city. This is another trope common to the modern military shooter, where the judgment calls of the heroes are often proved to be the right course of action all along.

Some of the other ways in which *Spec Ops* constructs itself as a satire of other modern military shooters are somewhat more subtle, than simply having the characters be duplicates of the stock characters from other modern military shooters. *Spec Ops* uses an element unique to its field of media, gameplay, to make itself seem like other shooters. While the gameplay of *Spec Ops* is completely functional, it is in no way anything special or groundbreaking, which is one of the points of critique often leveled against the game. However, it can be argued that *Spec Ops* having a gameplay that is seemingly so standard, that it could have been copied from numerous of other modern shooters is precisely the point. *Spec Ops* needs a style of gameplay that is familiar, in order to complete the illusion that it is just like all the other modern military shooters on the market, so that when it later reveals that it is in fact a satirical commentary on the state of modern military shooters, the player is taken by complete surprise.

Spec Ops also assumes that the player is familiar with the conventions of modern military shooters, since "the player context that *Spec Ops* assumes, and which it subsequently deconstructs in an unremitting fashion, is the experience of playing military video games" (Payne, "War Bytes" 268). Thus a player without prior experience in the modern military shooter genre, would not recognize the tropes of the genre and would, therefore, not be quite as able to understand when these tropes are being broken.

However, even the early parts of *Spec Ops* gives small hints that it is not exactly like other games of its kind. This is exemplified, when the team first encounters the enemies as they are first identified as "refugees", civilians who have survived the sandstorms, and are thusly not immediately hostile. In fact, as Lugo tries to communicate with the refugees, it is up to Walker and the player to decide whether or not to open fire on the men, thus indicating that *Spec Ops*, unlike the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games, is a game wherein the question of whether an NPC is friend or foe is not immediately apparent. It is only after Lugo intercepts a communication between 33rd soldiers that the enemies are labeled as insurgents, and in a comment on modern military shooters' view of Middle Eastern people, Walker and his men immediately accepts the insurgent-label as fact. However, as the game progresses, this "American military = good, native insurgents = bad" dichotomy is shown to be much more complicated.

Another hint is given by the fact that unlike most other modern military shooters, the action in *Spec Ops* takes place in the ruins of traditionally Western settings, as oppose to the rural country sides, unnamed Middle Eastern cities and South American slums of the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games. Payne comments on this as well, noting that "instead of fighting tribal militants in mountainous outposts, or dueling enemy combatants across bombed-out city streets, the player traverses the sandblasted and abandoned opulence of Western civilization: a TV studio, an aquatic coliseum, luxury hotels and spas, an aquarium, etc." (Payne, "War Bytes" 271).

After about half an hour of playtime, *Spec Ops* starts to make its satirical intentions known, as the story clearly diverges from what is expected of knight romances. The Damned 33rd are shown to have done horrible things to the population of Dubai in order to maintain order, as well as having brutally eliminated all disloyal soldiers within the 33rd. The insurgents are revealed to be fighting the 33rd because of the things the 33rd have done to them, and are aided by a group of CIA agents, whose real mission is to destroy all the evidence of the 33rd's atrocities, in order to avoid that the entire region declares war on America. Walker's mission, which in a knight romance would be a straightforward quest, becomes a mad

struggle for survival as tension builds within his team, and both Adams and Lugo try to question why they are still marching deeper into Dubai.

By the middle of the game, the narrative have already diverted pretty far from the simple "good vs evil" romance narratives of other modern military shooters, but the final push that sends the plot on a downward spiral of madness comes when Walker and his men use white phosphorous to destroy an enemy encampment. This part of the game is often simply referred to as "the white phosphorous level", and it is a scene of shock and terror, like the nuclear detonation or the "No Russian" level in the *Modern Warfare* games. The white phosphorous level will be discussed in more detail below, but the narrative importance of the level is that Walker and his men unwittingly murder 47 civilians along with the enemy soldiers, which results in Walker having a complete mental breakdown. He becomes convinced the Konrad is the one responsible for all the horrors in Dubai, and refuses to leave until Konrad has been brought to justice, despite clearly crumbling moral among his men and Walker himself suffering from hallucinations brought on by post-traumatic stress.

While the desire for revenge can be a motivator in some romance narratives, by the end of *Spec Ops*, Walker and the player learns that the conversations Walker has been having with Konrad over a walky-talky during the last half of the game have been part of Walkers hallucinations, and that Konrad has been dead since before the game began. This is once again a way for *Spec Ops* to distance itself from the simple romance narratives of other modern military shooters, which, even when they become as dark and gritty as the *Modern Warfare* games, always end with the completion of the quest, the killing of the final bad guy, or as Leeson puts it, "[the hero] defeats his enemy—the 'final boss.' After this, the hero is recognized and any remaining mysteries are revealed and resolved" (Leeson 140). In *Spec Ops,* however, the bad guy has been dead all along, the mission has been completely meaningless, and Walker's choice to abandon his original orders has only made everything much worse.

This question of choices, and whether it is possibly to know if one is making the right one, are a major theme in *Spec Ops*, especially because the choices Walker makes always end up hurt him, his men and everyone around them.

How the game handles these decisive choices is interesting, since it differs substantially from how it is used by other games. As mentioned in the theory section, most games which feature an element of branching path based on the players choice achieves this by including instances where the game pauses, and the player has to make a choice by pressing one button or another, after which the game un-pauses

and the choice takes effect. In *Spec Ops* the choices Walker (and by extension the player) has to make are not signposted in this way, but are instead integrated in the gameplay. When faced with a choice, Walker will often be informed of the options by one of his teammates, usually Adams, after which Walker and the player are free to pick which option to take. However, the game never pauses, so if the player takes too long to decide something else entirely will happen, which helps to illustrate the split-second decisions soldiers have to make in a combat scenario. Furthermore, these choices are also a great example of the satirical bend on videogame heroes and choice, which is prevalent in *Spec Ops*. Usually the hero of a videogame is to some extent the master of his own destiny, and the choices that the hero makes have ramifications for the entire game world. In fantasy RPGs like *Skyrim* (2011), the hero's choice of who to support in the game's civil war ends up turning the tide, and in games like *Bioshock* (2007) as mentioned above, the hero's choice of how to deal with the little sisters has an impact on whether or not the game has a good or bad ending. However, the choices that the player in *Spec Ops*, and by extension Walker, makes are more often than not completely inconsequential. This is exemplified by a sequence where the rogue soldiers of the Damned 33rd have taken CIA agent Gould prisoner and are torturing him, while also leading the civilians who have been helping Gould of to be executed. The player can try to save either, but not both, since the outbreak of a firefight will result in either Gould or the civilians being immediately shot. However, no matter what the player chooses, Gould ends up dead regardless, thereby, indicating that Walker and the player are not the kind of heroes that can singlehandedly shape the outcome of every situation, but he is rather tossed about by the whims of circumstance. As Payne puts it: "instead of giving players a world where they can affect meaningful change, Spec Ops makes the player feel trapped; they have no good choices, and every move they make leads to worse results and harder choices." (Payne, "War Bytes" 275).

None of the other choices in the game have any effect real effect either, except the two final choices Walker is presented with. When Walker finds out that John Konrad has been dead since before Walker and his men arrived in Dubai, he is given the choice by the hallucination-Konrad to kill himself. If the player declines this option, a second ending occurs where American troops arrive to pick up Walker; here the player is given the choice of having them let go of their weapons or start shooting at the troops. These two choices are essentially the same choice, since they revolve around whether or not the player thinks Walker deserves to die for what he, and by extension they, has done during the game. Thus, the game

ends on a very reflective note, questioning the player on whether they feel it was worth it, or if the deserve a punishment. This moral aspect of the game will be discussed later in this project.

Thus, it can be seen from these analyzed narrative elements from *Spec Ops* that it is an satirical narrative, in the way it deliberately builds its story up to seem like a knight romance just like most other modern military shooters, only to then turn everything on its head. The narrative of *Spec Ops* ridicules the idea of applying a simple narrative to games that deals with modern combat situations, as seen by the way in which Walker, and his men spend much of the first half of the game trying to figure out, who "the villain" in the story is. The moniker of "villain" is first given to the insurgents, then to the CIA agents and then to the 33rd, but none of these groups can truly bear it, as all of them are simply stuck dealing with a horrible situation just like Walker and his men. This lack of a clearly defined villain, is clearly meant to be as troubling for the player, as it is for the characters, since it robs the game of the simplicity that players expect from modern military shooters. In this way, Walker can almost be seen as acting on behalf of the player, when he, after the white phosphorous level, decides that Konrad is the villain of the mission and the game. Walker and the player have both just committed the horrible white phosphorous massacre, and the only way for Walker, and by extension the player, to justify continuing the game is to force simplicity into the narrative again, which Walker does by hallucinating the almost cartoonishly evil Konrad. Thus, *Spec Ops* is essentially saying that any use of a "simply evil" villain in modern military shooters is as false and ridicules as the Konrad that Walker dreams up.

The relationship between Konrad and Walker is also interesting to discuss because Walker seemingly needs Konrad to justify his actions, since he cannot be a hero if there is no villain. This relations ship will be discussed in the following section, as it is tied closely to the representation of Spec Ops characters, and the war that they are fighting

Representation in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Discussing representation in *Spec Ops* requires a different approach, as it deals more with the representation of characters and tropes from other games because of its status as being a satirical text, than other modern military shooters, i.e. *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company*, which deal with the representation of real life people. As *Spec Ops* builds itself as a response to the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games, most problematic aspects of its representations can arguably be seen as a satirical commentary on these problematic aspects in those games. For instance, is the representation of the native

Dubai population as an angry horde a problematic aspect of *Spec Ops*, or is it an example of *Spec Ops* commenting on a problematic aspect of the *Modern Warfare* games? It is hard to say, since both aspects might be true. Given this ambiguity, this project finds it more interesting to look at instances where the representation in *Spec Ops* deviate from those utilized by the other four games previously discussed by the research.

The characters of Adams and Lugo, on the basis of discussing the differences, are excellent examples. As mentioned earlier, both of Walker's men start out as nods to the wacky teammates found in the *Bad Company* games, and many others like them. Any player who starts *Spec Ops* with just an inkling of knowledge about action movie/game tropes will automatically assume, Adams and Lugo are headed for one of two fates; either they die nobly defending Walker like most NPCs in the *Modern Warfare* games, or the they grow closer as a team after enduring hardship, as per *Bad Company*. *Spec Ops* however, does neither, and opts instead to use Adams and Lugo as foils to Walker. From the beginning of the game, both of them question Walker's determination to head deeper into Dubai, and as the game begins its downward spiral into darkness, the relationship between the three soldiers starts to disintegrate. Lugo especially, serves as the voice of reason on the team, as seen by the fact that he keeps trying to remind Walker of their main reason for being in Dubai, and strongly objects to the use of the white phosphorous, arguing that they have already seen its horrible effects. That Lugo should serve as the reason on the team is also enforced by the fact the he is the one who dies first, killed by a mad mob, thereby, metaphorically indicating that the madness created by Walker kills the last bit of reason the team had left. Adams, on the other hands, dies in a suicidal attack on the remaining 33rd, choosing his own death instead of following Walker any further.

Uncommonly for a modern military shooter, Lugo and Adams are clearly changed by their experiences, and the stress and horror of a combat situation is seen actually affecting them. This might be seen as a response to the way the common soldier is represented in the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games, and an attempt to more realistically show the effects of war on the human psyche. As mentioned earlier in this project, the characters of the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games rarely show any reaction to the traumatic events they witness and the people they kill, but rather stays completely level-headed throughout the game. The way *Spec Ops* represents the common soldier through Lugo and Adams contrastingly opts for a more realistic portrayal of soldiers in battle, even if this

portrayal results in being grimmer than the consequence-free soldiering on display in other modern military shooters.

Lugo and Adams start of as being caricatures, who are as unreal as any found in the *Bad Company* games for instance, but their reactions to the horrors of their surroundings help to elevate their characters and humanize them. This is because Lugo's constant questioning of whether what they are doing is right, and Adams' growing resentment for Walker, a man he trusted, but who has clearly lead them all astray, are the kind of reactions the player knows real soldiers must deal with in similar situations. Most players probably know to some degree that the events of most modern military shooters would scar anyone living through them, but this knowledge is put aside in order for the simple narrative to be more entertaining. It is this mental scaring that *Spec Ops* decides to show the player, blatantly disregarding whatever discomfort it might course. The goal is not to entertain, but to portray the damage that war can cause to those who survive it.

At one point, the game also makes direct reference to how ridiculous it is, that most modern military shooters portray war as something that does not change or shape the people fighting it. After Lugo is killed, and just before the finale firefight, there is a brief moment of peace where Adams asks Walker: "what happened to us, man?" to which Walker replies "Nothing. We're fucking soldiers." Having the, at this point, borderline insane Walker say that they have not changed as people, clearly shows that according to *Spec Ops* the idea of the unchangeable soldier, the aforementioned idealized knight, who can do his duty without the duty changing him, is completely mad.

It is important to note, that while *Spec Ops* represents soldiers as people who can be as deeply affected by their tough choices and horrible experiences, this does in no way mean that the game is characterizing soldiers as weak in any way. The clearest example of this it that even as their mental states are deteriorating, Lugo and Adams continue to act as soldiers, taking orders from Walker, doing their best to survive and complete their objectives. The fact that their mental wellbeing is slowly draining is never used as an indicator of weakness, but rather as an indicator of their strength. Both Lugo and Adams are able to realize and accept that they are losing control of their faculties, something which Walker is not able to. In fact, Walker can be seen a cautionary tale of what happens when an ordinary man tries to be the idealized demigods of knight romances of other modern military shooters.

Much of Captain Walker's character arc revolves around the ironic-tragedy narrative of a man who tries to be a hero for no other reason than to be a hero. Even though some parts of the story in *Spec Ops*

are completely out of Walker's control, many of the worst events of the game, such as the white phosphorous attack and the destruction of the city's water supply, are the direct results of Walker trying to be a hero.

At the beginning of the game, much like how the plot imitates a standard romance narrative, the character of Walker is clearly meant to resemble the type of blank slate that usually plays the part of player character in most modern military shooters. He also fills the role of the classic romance hero, as he is presented as being stronger and smarter than most of the enemies he encounters. He even displays some of the almost superhuman qualities typical to romance heroes, as seen in the level "The Pit" when he survives a frankly ridicules fall from halfway up a skyscraper with little more than a bruise. However, the construction of Walker as the hero only serves to give him much further to fall when events start going downhill.

The fatal flaw in Walker's character is that he tries to be a knight in a conflict where such simplistic views of good and evil have no place. He is so convinced of his own ability to do good, that it completely blinds him to the ways in which his actions are harmful or destructive. Where Lugo and Adams constantly question their actions and argues that they are doing more harm than good, Walker is convinced of his own moral superiority and his position on the right side of the ethical line. This is shown most clearly through Walker's way of rationalizing the killings he commits. At one point, upon finding a discarded doll indicating the presence of (never seen) children, Walker says that "anyone shooting at us is an enemy, whether they've got families or not", essentially robbing any enemies of the complexity that might otherwise make Walker feel sympathy for them. Similarly, when Walker and his men are forced to engage the soldiers of the 33rd in combat, Adams points out that they are now killing other American soldiers, which Walker simply dismisses as having been self-defense. And of course there is the white phosphorous level, which is the clearest example of Walker's rationalizing, as he hallucinates Konrad as a villain even worse than himself in order to convince himself that the white phosphorous attack was necessary and justified. Thus, throughout the game, Walker is generally very quick to dismiss any concerns that their actions might not be morally defensible.

In this way, Walker becomes a satirical representation of how the type of "shoot first, ask questions later"-heroes found in the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games would quickly come to resemble psychopathic killers if they are inserted in any narrative more complex than simple "good vs evil" narratives. These types of heroes fit poorly into more realistic settings, because they rely on constant

certainty of who the enemies are and why they need to die, and real combat situations provided very little of this kind of certainty. The simple action hero that Walker is trying to be necessarily needs a correspondingly simple action villain, but Dubai provides nothing but complexities.

It can even be argued that Walker's certainty in his own heroism and the horrors this causes, is not only an satirical jab at the representation of heroes in other modern military shooters, but of the idea of American exceptionalism as discussed in the theory section. Walker embodies American exceptionalism in the way that he constantly justifies his actions as self-defense, and he repeatedly comments that the enemy has left him no choice, and that they brought these horrors on themselves. The ending of *Spec Ops* where Walker's mission is revealed to have been an exercise in folly, a destructive search for something that was not there, draws on the narrative of the Iraq war, where the American troops sought weapons of mass destruction, which turned out to made up.

Another interesting part of *Spec Ops'* portrayal of Walker is the way he changes over the course of the game. Much like Adams and Lugo, Walker changes from a caricature of stock characters from the modern military shooter genre, to a more complex character as the horrors of war slowly breaks his psyche. However, in the case of Walker, this change is also shown using videogame specific elements. Throughout the game, Walker is able to make his men perform certain tasks during combat, such as ordering Adams to throw grenades at entrenched enemies or having Lugo snipe enemies who are far away. The way Walker delivers these orders changes quite substantially as Walker descends into madness, starting of as simple military commands like "take out hostile on the roof" and becoming more aggressive until Walker is simply screaming at his men "I want that guy fucking dead". The same evolution happens to the animation of Walker executing downed enemies, which become increasingly brutal the closer the player gets to the end. These very subtle and gradual changes to how Walker carries out the will of the player indicates that Walker is slowly losing his mind, but they also have another purpose. Since the player has no control over the increased brutality displayed by Walker, this helps to break the player's identification with Walker as a player character, to a point where the player no longer wants to associate themselves with him, since he is slowly slipping out of their control. Thus, unlike most modern military shooters, or most videogames in general, *Spec Ops* "is not about the pleasurable fusion between Capt. Walker and the player; it is about the unrelenting friction between the two." (Payne, "War Bytes" 278). This rift between player and player character that Walker's brutality creates is only deepened by the reveal that Walker has been an unreliable narrator for at least half the game.

Another change that Walker undergoes is a visual one. Atypically for modern military shooters, *Spec Ops* is played in third person view, not the more popular first-person view. While this choice might seem odd at first glance, since the effectiveness of the game's satirical narrative hinges on it similarity to popular games like the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games, but as the game continues, the reason for the choice becomes clear. Unlike in most shooters, Walker's character model actually changes throughout the game, from a ruggedly handsome soldier to a burn, bloody and broken shell of a man in the final levels. This change would have been almost impossible to include if the game had been played in first view, at least without massive use of in-game cut scenes. To lose the visual change would have weakened the effect of Walker's psychological transformation, since it shows that his outwards appearance is slowly becoming as monstrous and as damaged as his psyche, making it "increasingly difficult for the player to identify with this screen surrogate"(Payne, "War Bytes" 272).

In general, the representation of war in *Spec Ops* is much darker than what is usually found in modern military shooters. While this comes across in the way the main characters are presented as realistic people whose lives and minds are irrevocably changed by their experiences in combat, it is also seen in how the war itself is presented. As mentioned above, *Spec Ops* rejects and actively satirizes the idea that any form of armed conflict can be a simple "good vs evil" narrative, and this is done by illustrating the complexities on all sides of the conflict in a number of different ways throughout.

Firstly, no side in the conflict is ever presented as being the indisputable "bad guys". Both the insurgents, the 33rd, and Walker's team all have their reasons for fighting, and with the possible exception of Walker himself, no side is presented as crueler or more monstrous than the others. In the beginning of the game Walker finds a group of 33rd soldiers who have evidently been killed by the insurgents, and while Walker is horrified in true American exceptionalism fashion of the murder of American troops, it is almost immediately made clear that these killings are retaliations for the way the 33rd has treated the people of Dubai. The game even points out this lack of a clear-cut enemy on multiple occasions Walker and his men make assumptions of their enemy's plans and motivations, only to be quickly proven wrong. This is seen when they believe the insurgents are attacking the 33rd on their own, after which it is revealed that they are being spurred on by the CIA agents, or when Walker and his men are convinced the 33rd is taking civilians away to kill them, where it turns out the 33rd is actually bringing them to safety.

Of course, other modern military shooters also include enemies who are not presented as wholly evil, like the Russians in the *Bad Company* games, but these still tend to involve a fairly simple "us vs

them" narrative. *Spec Ops* avoids this by taking the time to humanize the enemy soldiers. Occasionally, Walker and his men will come across members of the 33rd posted as guards or sentries, and if these soldiers are not disturbed, the player will be able to hear them small-talking about everyday things, like asking for a piece of gum, or really wanting a cigarette. This is clearly done in order for the player to sympathize not only with the motivations of the other sides of the conflict, but also with the individual soldiers who are portrayed as just as human as Walker and his men.

Finally, the way in which *Spec Ops* aims to portray war more realistically than its fellow modern military shooters is by never allowing the player to enjoy the violence of the game, much like how soldiers would never describe any fighting they do as enjoyable. From the moment it becomes clear that the repetitive gameplay in *Spec Ops* is really an aspect of its satirical nature, and all its action set pieces and violence are repetitive and almost boring on purpose, the gaming-experience changes for the player. It becomes just as much of a struggle for the player to keep going despite the fatigue-inducing gameplay, as it is for Walker to keep marching forward, and in this way "the game's critique is achieved by combining narrative elements with gameplay demands that challenge the conventional military shooter's basic gaming pleasures" (Payne, "War Bytes" 267). In *Spec Ops* the player is never supposed to lose themselves in the cathartic power fantasy that most shooters provide, and during the few levels where the player does this anyway, the game is quick to punish them for it. This is of course closely linked with *Spec Ops* treatment of the concept of moral disengagement, which is what the next section of this analysis will focus on.

Moral Disengagement in Spec Ops: The Line
Analyzing the moral disengagement aspect of *Spec Ops* is interesting because, as mentioned above, the game actively strives to ruin the player's moral disengagement as often as possible. One way this is done is through Walker's increasingly aggressive and brutal behavior, which breaks a player's moral disengagement by reminding them that while their actions in the game are essentially consequence-free, they affect the mental state of their player character in ways outside of their control.

The fact that Lugo and Adams constantly question Walker's choices, and by extension the player's, especially during the different parts involving in-game choices, like the choice between saving Gould or the civilians, also serve to break the player's moral disengagement since it holds Walker and the player accountable for the death and violence their choices bring. When Adams points out that the firefight they

just survived was against their fellow American soldiers, the game is essentially forcing the player to reflect on their justification for killing. Modern military shooters usually discourage reflections like these, since they might ruin the player's enjoyment of them, but *Spec Ops* actively encourages these reflections in order to keep the player from enjoying the virtual violence they are presented with.

The most obvious instance of *Spec Ops* breaking any moral disengagement the player might have is aforementioned white phosphorous level. Interestingly, the white phosphorous level is probably the part of *Spec Ops* that most obviously parodies an aspect of another modern military shooter, namely the "Death from Above"-level in *Modern Warfare* (Payne, "War Bytes" 276). On the surface level the two levels are almost identical, as the player is presented with a black and white screen showing a bird's-eye view of the surroundings, and told to shoot all the little white specks which symbolizes enemy soldiers. The player is clearly supposed to get swept up in the same feeling of all-powerfulness that "Death from Above" gives players, as they rain down death and destruction on the enemy.

However, unlike in "Death from Above" which simply ends with Soap and his teammates leaving the bombed-out town behind, the cost of the enjoyment is quickly made clear in *Spec Ops*, as Walker and his men has to walk through the field of death they have created. Here the player is treated to a look at what these types of bombardments leave behind, a burning battlefield where "the few U.S. soldiers who are still alive scream in pain, many begging for death." (Payne, "War Bytes" 276). The player's walk through this hell-scape is topped off with the revelation that the final group of enemies seen on the black and white screen, who were a group so close together that the player could hardly avoid thinking them the perfect target, was actually a group of civilians the 33rd were providing with shelter. All of this drives home the message that *Spec Ops* is not a game where violence is consequence free, and that the player is not supposed to experience any sort of moral disengagement, but are instead supposed to feel horror and disgust with every life they take.

One might be tempted to write off the white phosphorous level as an attempt to capture the same kind of shock and subsequent sales boost that the *Modern Warfare* series got from its shocking levels, the nuclear detonation and "No Russian". However, while the white phosphorous level is probably a nod to the similar shocking stand-out levels of the *Modern Warfare* series, it does something which those other levels fail to do. While both the nuclear detonation and "No Russian" serve crucial narrative functions, they hardly seem to faze any of the characters in those games. The white phosphorous level however, influences the entire second half of *Spec Ops* on both a narrative and character level. While the

first half of *Spec Ops* suggests that perhaps Walker and his men should just leave Dubai as they were supposed to, after using the white phosphorous, it is clear to both Walker and the player that there is no turning back.

Since the second half of the game is dependent on Walker using the white phosphorous, this is also why the player is not really given a choice. The phosphorous has to be used in order for the rest of the game to happen, and this is even acknowledged in-game, when Lugo says that they can chose not to use the phosphorous since "there is always a choice", to which Walker replies "no, there's really not."

Similar instances of this type of fourth-wall breaking metacommentary helps *Spec Ops* control the player's level of moral disengagement, more often than not, by deliberately breaking any immersion and bringing the game's fictionality into focus. *Spec Ops* is acutely aware that the game's narrative is not the only narrative taking place when the game is played, since the narrative of a player playing the game is in itself a narrative, and the game is not afraid to acknowledge this intertextuality. As Payne points out "the player gets an early sense of this hyperconscious design strategy when the opening production credits include the player's gamertag under the title "Special Guest." From its very beginning Spec Ops hails the player as a collaborator in its fabricated fiction." (Payne, "War Bytres 273), and these instances continue throughout the game.

Spec Ops is by no means the first game to call attention to its own fictionality, but where other games use this to a humorous end; the goal of the self-awareness in *Spec Ops* is different. As mentioned above, it can be argued that Walker is the only real villain in *Spec Ops*. However, since the game is constantly calling attention to the fact that Walker is controlled by the player, the player takes on a supporting role to the villain of Walker, particularly in the second half of the game, after the white phosphorous level. As Walker's PTSD becomes more and more severe, thereby, making him increasingly uncontrollable, the game itself starts to become more hostile and aggressive. The loading screens, which earlier in the game displayed helpful tips on what all the buttons do, start displaying aggressive messages directed not at Walker, but at the player. Some of these messages are aimed at the idea that fictional violence is consequence free, like "To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless" or "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" Others are more directly aggressive, such as "If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here" and "Do you feel like a hero yet?". All of them, however, are implying that the real blame for all the horror that is happening in the game lies at the feet of the

player, and no one else. This parallel is also drawn through the way Walker rationalizes his actions, as mentioned above, since "Walker rationalizes away these atrocities in the name of completing his mission, just as the gamer sets aside disquieting feelings to finish the game." (Payne, "War Bytes" 279).

In-game the blame is also put on the player, though in subtler ways than during the loading screens. For instance, the phrase "you brought this on yourself" is repeated over the course of the game by many different characters. Considering that *Spec Ops* also actively tries to make the player feel uncomfortable and disturbed, this might be addressed to the player, essentially saying that if the player feels bad about anything in the game, it is their own fault for continuing to play.

Finally, there is one of the last scenes in the game, where Walker is talking to his hallucination of Konrad, who tells Walker "you're here because you wanted to feel like something you're not; a hero." For Walker this is true, since his desire to be a hero is what makes him abandon his original orders and cut a swath of death and destruction through Dubai. However, Konrad's words are equally true for the player. Most people play video games, especially action games, in order to fulfill the kind of power-fantasy that no other media can provide in the same way, which is probably true for most of the people who bought *Spec Ops*, since it does a very good job of seeming like a typical power-fantasy game in a modern military setting. Players want to feel like heroes, much like Walker, and for them to live out this desire, they are willing to kill thousands of virtual people, since in videogames killing is harmless. Thus, *Spec Ops* ends with the reveal that, despite one of the major parts of the game being the disassociation between Walker and the player, their narratives have been pretty much the same throughout the game, both concerning people vainly wanting to feel like a hero, only to end up broken and beaten.

Discussion

Considering how horrible *Spec Ops* depicts acts of war, it would seem logical to assume that it is an anti-war text. This, however, does not actually seem to be the case, since *Spec Ops* never condemns any of the military personnel in the game for being part of the military industrial complex. There are no direct statements related to Walker or any other character in the game being wrong based on their status as soldiers, or that war in itself is a bad or unnecessary thing. In *Spec Ops* war is simply a situation that people find themselves in, sometimes by choice and sometimes by accident, and while the events of war are horrible, it is neither good nor bad. Instead, *Spec Ops* "critiques the attempt by any war game—itself included—to pleasurably immerse users in war's horrors" (Payne, "War Bytes" 269). This is also the reason why it casts the player as essentially the main villain of the game, in order to comment on the modern military shooter genre, and how power-fantasies set in a modern combat scenario end up trivializing both war, violence, and the psychologically damaging side of combat.

The question of whether or not violent videogames helps to desensitize players to real world violence is a question that has been around almost ever since videogames became mainstream, and there have been several studies made of the subject, and "abundant research finds evidence that playing violent games increases short-term aggressive cognitions, feelings, and behavioral intentions" (Hartmann and Vorderer 94). *Spec Ops* seems to argue that a desensitization towards certain types of violence, namely the violence of war, is currently happening because of power-fantasy games being set in modern day wars, which claim to be realistic, yet, without any sense of consequence or mental anguish accompanying the violence.

Looking at the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games it is hard to argue that there is not a certain amount of truth to this idea. As mentioned, these games lets the player live out the same kind of power-fantasies that *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Doom* or numerous other action games provided, but the main difference is that these modern military shooters also claim to be realistic. Thus, the games are essentially equating real life war with entertainment and fun, something that is not just false, but also potentially damaging to the player's view of the world. If a player of *Modern Warfare* accepts the game's depiction of armed combat as realistic, this might result in them cultivating a worldview where military conflicts are simple "good vs bad" narratives, and that any and all of these conflicts can be solved through consequence free violence.

What *Spec Ops* tries to do instead, is to show the player what would happen if they tried to play out the same kind of might-makes-right power-fantasy in a conflict where the different sides cannot easily be divided into good guys and bad guys, and where the stress and horror of warfare actually affects the characters. The results are, as mentioned, a game where the only true villains are the player and the character they control, since it is their relentless push towards the next level that keeps the body count rising. *Spec Ops* strongly points out that power-fantasy and realism are not compatible, since power-fantasy involves the player feeling powerful through the use of violence in combat, where in reality these forms of combat only ever bring feelings of disgust, fear and meaninglessness. Any game that claims to be realistic, while also letting the player kill thousands of human enemies without the player-character batting an eye, are not only lying, but also making light of the human cost of war, both physically and physiologically. One of the loading-screen messages in *Spec Ops* reads "you cannot understand, nor do you want to." Thus, it points out, that though the representation of war in *Spec Ops* as something horrifying is closer to reality than in most games, the player could still never imagine what it is actually like to live through these kinds of situations. Neither would the player really want to experience these sort of situations, if it involved more risk than is afforded by the fictionality of videogames.

Spec Ops is thus a harsh indictment of both the modern military shooter genre and the players of those genres, who choose to live out their power-fantasies through virtual violence. However, while *Spec Ops* uses the tropes of modern military shooters to make its point, there are elements of the game that seem to undermine this point as well. For instance, the achievements included in the game are almost identical to the similar achievements in the *Modern Warfare* and *Bad Company* games, meaning that most are variations on "kill x soldiers with weapon y". Focusing on the game's message of how modern military shooters trivialize violence can be somewhat difficult, when the game at the same time rewards the player with an achievement for killing five enemy soldiers with a single grenade. True, these achievements are some of the trappings that occur when trying to satirize an element of media through use of that same media, but the inclusion of these achievements makes the game appear somewhat hypocritical. The same is true for the inclusion of a multiplayer mode in the game as well, meaning that the single-player campaign revolves around how there is nothing fun or entertaining about killing other people, and then the multiplayer lets the player do exactly that for as long as they want.

Of course, *Spec Ops* also challenges what a videogame is supposed to do, in a way that some might think is to its own detriment. *Spec Ops* actively strives to be un-fun to play, to make sure that the player

never has a good time. Instead, *Spec Ops* uses a medium, which usually defines itself as a provider of uncomplicated entertainment, to ask much bigger questions about how war and the people fighting in it are usually depicted in this very type of media. However, it can be argued that *Spec Ops* perhaps does too good a job of using boring repetitive gameplay in order to make its point, since the game plays like a subpar *Modern Warfare* clone for too long before it shows its true nature as a satirical text. This might lead to many players, especially those who are used to the gameplay quality of *Modern Warfare*, to stop playing *Spec Ops* before learning of its satirical content, which could be to the game disadvantage as this is exactly the type of players that the satire is aimed at. Hardly anyone would argue that *Spec Ops* is a good videogame, at least not if videogames are defined as being interactive texts aimed at entertainment, since it is profoundly un-fun to play. However, since *Spec Ops* is first and foremost a satirical text, its strengths or weaknesses as a videogame can be almost completely disregarded, since they are not the important aspect of the text. In general, satirical texts have the privileged of not needing to be as good functionally as the texts they are satirizing, as long as the comments they make on their satirical targets are well thought-out and insightful.

The question is then, whether or not the meticulous takedown of the modern military shooter genre and its players, which is found in *Spec Ops*, has actually been taken to heart be the gaming industry at large. Interestingly, one can actually notice a shift in both tone and content of the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* franchise games, which went into production after *Spec Ops* was released in 2012.

Newer *Call of Duty* games have been selling themselves less on realism, as evidenced by the fact that the series has been gradually moving away from modern confliction and into the genre of science fiction warfare, a genre previously dominated by the Halo series. The newest game *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* (2015) even has the player fighting robots in place of human beings, and generally, these newer *Call of Duty* games feature a tone more less serious and more suited for the heightened reality presented in these games.

The *Battlefield* series too has since moved away from the genre of modern military shooters, and into the realm of first-person police games with its newest games *Battlefield Hardline* (2015). This is in itself an interesting direction to take the series, since police-work is not exactly free from controversy, especially in America, and the thought of players living out their power-fantasy as police officers is troubling in its own right.

There is of course no way to know, if this new direction for the two biggest shooter series in the industry is because of *Spec Ops*, but it is rather interesting to note this kind of change happening after *Spec Ops* so masterfully pointed out the hypocrisy inherent in the words "modern military shooters".

Conclusion

After a thorough analysis, it becomes quite understandable that *Spec Ops* caused such a stir among gaming critics during the period after its release. For a game to openly criticize not only its own extremely popular genre, but the very players who bought the game hoping to be entertained, was not only interesting because of the design choices involved, but also because of the developers treatment of *Spec Ops* as a satirical text with a message first, and a game second.

Because of this commitment to the value of its satirical nature, *Spec Ops*' message, about the ridiculousness of using simulated, purportedly realistic war to enact some vain power fantasy, is crystal clear. As described in this project, every aspect of the game serves to reinforce and show this message. This is seen in the way the game's story diverges from the simple and familiar of romance narrative and becomes an ironic tragedy where everything the hero does makes matter worse, and only gray areas exist. It is seen in the way the gameplay becomes as sluggish and oppressive as constant combat would really be, and how the game actively aims to rob the player of any enjoyment they might get from playing. And it is seen in how the player character slowly becomes a deranged monster, a reminder of how monstrous and horrible acts of violence really are, when they are not kept at a comfortable distance.

It can be argued how big a lasting effect *Spec Ops* truly had on the industry, since the game generally became a bigger hit with critics, than with the larger gaming community, and while, as mentioned above, both *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* have moved on from the modern military shooter, it is very possible that this shift would have happened regardless. To many people within the gaming industry and outside of it, *Spec Ops* might be nothing but an interesting oddity, a game that actively tried not to be fun.

This is of course the way it goes with most satire. When the target of a satirical text fades from the cultural mindset, the satirical text often fades with it. However, it should be noted that some works of satire are able to outlive their intended targets, if their themes are sufficiently universal. Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) was first intended as a satire of the Stalin and his rule, but even today, long after the death of Stalin, the themes of how power corrupts and the oppression of the many by the few, still resonates. The same goes for many of Shakespeare's satires, which today lack their original cultural context, but despite that remain popular because of their treatment of love, want, and the human condition. Whether or not *Spec Ops* will stand the test of time, no one can say just yet, but since it deals with the idea of

wanting to be a hero, and the dangers thereof, it could be possible. Because if the entire videogame industry indicates anything, it is that, everyone wants to be a hero.

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