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**Ben Hammond**

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# ‘Do you feel like a hero yet?’: *Spec Ops*, *Call of Duty* and the Problems of Playing Soldier

BEN HAMMOND\*

University of Kent, UK

Email: [brh24@kent.ac.uk](mailto:brh24@kent.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

*During the Global War on Terror the modern military shooter became one of the most popular genres of video games. This article examines the way modern combat was portrayed in Spec Ops: The Line in contrast to its genre contemporaries, particularly the Call of Duty franchise. It articulates that despite the game’s commercial failure it asserted itself as an important historical document for analysing media portrayals of modern warfare. By questioning the ethics of military video games, and the role of the player themselves, Spec Ops functions as a locus for new perspectives on the video game industry.*

## Introduction

During the early years of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) the most financially successful genre of video game was the modern military shooter. The reason for this genre’s dominance is attributed to the *Call of Duty* (COD) franchise, and specifically the release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (COD4) in 2007.<sup>1</sup> The significant commercial and critical success of the COD franchise’s shift in settings from the Second World War to modern combat led to a sea change within the video game industry. In the wake of its release many developers made their own attempts to garner the same success, leading to the release of a range of competing modern military shooters such as entries in the *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor* franchises. None of these attempts ever reached the financial heights of COD. However, within this sea of competitors, one release emerged as an anomaly. Yager Development’s *Spec Ops: The Line* (*Spec Ops*) was released in 2012 to muted commercial acclaim but offered a unique perspective on games and modern combat.<sup>2</sup> What appeared to be another

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\*Ben Hammond is a PhD candidate studying History at the University of Kent, UK.

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<sup>1</sup>Infinity Ward. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Activision. Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Mac OS X/Wii. 2007.

<sup>2</sup>Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K. Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/OS X/Linux. 2012.

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attempt to profit from the success of COD instead offered a very different approach to virtual warfare. *Spec Ops* directed its player to partake in the same kind of violence as COD but focussed on the aftermath of that violence in a way other military shooters had not. Many of the most memorable sequences in the game revolved around portrayals of the human cost of military violence and the protagonist's spiral into madness, instead of the exciting action set pieces for which the genre is well known. By forcing the player to reckon with the consequences of their violent actions within the digital medium, *Spec Ops* functioned as criticism of how the realities of modern warfare were increasingly being gamified into entertainment by franchises like COD.

This article will illustrate how *Spec Ops; The Line* exists as an important historical document by contrasting its release, reception, and content in relation to *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. There is significant work on the military shooter as a genre during the GWOT, and these two games have been analysed in detail separately by various scholars.<sup>3</sup> Matthew Thomas Payne's book *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* (2016) for example has a chapter which examines *Spec Ops* portrayal of drone warfare in contrast to one of the sequels to COD4 through the lens of game studies.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there is a significant body of work which considers the wider role of video games as an art form as an avenue for historical consumption, both for historians and the public.<sup>5</sup> However, it is their relationship to each other in the historiographic context of the GWOT and what this means for the two games as historical documents where this article finds its focus.

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<sup>3</sup>Marc A. Ouellette and Jason C. Thompson, *The Post-9/11 Video Game: A Critical Examination* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017); John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 110-160; Manuel R. Torres Soriano, 'Between the Pen and the Sword: The Global Islamic Media Front in the West,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:5, (2012), pp. 769-786.; Kristine Jørgensen, 'The Positive Discomfort of *Spec Ops: The Line*,' *Game Studies* vol. 16, Issue 2 (December 2016).; Matthew Thomas Payne, 'War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31:4, (2014), pp. 265-282.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Thomas Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 116-145.

<sup>5</sup>Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2018); Robert Houghton, 'World, Structure and Play: A Framework for Games as Historical Research Outputs, Tools, and Processes,' *Práticas Da História. Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, 7, (2021), pp. 11-43.

COD4's release represented a monumental shift in the video game industry and the impact of this will be illustrated via analysis of impressions from both professional reviewers and the scale of its financial success. The content of the game itself will then be analysed in greater detail, both to illustrate the thematic dynamics of the period's modern military shooters, but also as specific sequences are later referenced and criticised within *Spec Ops* itself. In contrast to the success of COD4, *Spec Ops* proved a commercial failure, due in part to the fatigue that had begun to settle after years of modern military shooters. Upon release some critics argued that the way in which *Spec Ops* presented its violent and emotional sequences hampered their overall impact as the player was forced to partake in such acts to proceed.<sup>6</sup> However, as will be illustrated in the following section covering the content of *Spec Ops*, this line of argument misunderstood the wider point of the game. *Spec Ops* is not simply an anti-war or anti-violence game, it is specifically a criticism of the way in which the violence of modern conflict had been filtered through modern military shooter video games.

Through this analysis it will be illustrated that *Spec Ops: The Line* functions as a unique piece of metatextual criticism of the depiction of war present within the *Call of Duty* franchise. Though common in other forms of entertainment media this sort of critical art rarely emerges within video games outside of direct parody.<sup>7</sup> This makes *Spec Ops* a uniquely important historical document to consider when analysing how the violence of the GWOT was portrayed within what was and remains to be an extremely popular medium of entertainment. By forcing the player to consider the moral and societal implications of 'playing soldier' within COD and its contemporaries, *Spec Ops* asserted itself as a new lens with which to study the culture and consumption of the military video games of the period.

### **The Impact of Call of Duty 4's Release**

Before the release of COD4, the first three entries in the COD franchise focused on depictions of the Second World War. Though the franchise found significant critical and commercial success with this formula, the shift to the aesthetics of the GWOT in the fourth instalment pushed the franchise into the status of industry-leading blockbuster. In the month of its release 1.57 million copies were distributed in the United States alone, and despite releasing in November, it became the highest grossing

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<sup>6</sup>David Wildgoose, 'Spec Ops: The Line Remains The Best Exploration Of Bloodlust In Games,' *Gamespot*, 26 June 2022, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/spec-ops-the-line-remains-the-best-exploration-of-bloodlust-in-games/1100-6504888/>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>7</sup>Examples include Rare, *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, Rare, Nintendo 64, 2001; And, *People Can Fly*, Epic Games, *Bulletstorm*, Electronic Arts, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/PlayStation 4/Xbox One/Nintendo Switch, 2011.

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game of 2007.<sup>8</sup> Reviews from industry professionals of the time illuminate why the game itself became so popular. For example, Jeff Gerstmann writing for the popular video game news website *Gamespot* commented, 'Infinity Ward [COD4's developer] finally got the message that World War II is played out,' and that 'The quality of the content in the campaign is totally top-shelf, and the multiplayer is some of the best around, making [it] a truly superb package.'<sup>9</sup>

The popularity of the game attracted the attention of the United States military. Through a series of freedom of information requests made by Tom Secker, the United States Marine Corps has been shown to have assisted with the development of sequels to COD4.<sup>10</sup> This relationship emerged as early as the next entry in the franchise, *Call of Duty: World at War*, and extended to at least the release of *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3* in 2011.<sup>11</sup> Though little is known about the exact nature of the connection between the American military industrial complex and video gaming, there has been a significant body of work regarding how the military has been involved in prior media industries, most notably Hollywood films. As is argued by Alford and Secker in their book *National Security Cinema (2017)* state involvement with entertainment production is not a new phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Emerging during the Second World War, this relationship has included embedded 'advisors' directly from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Department of Defence (DoD), and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), helping to blacklist actors and directors, and embed pro-state ideological messaging within film

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<sup>8</sup>Tor Thorsen, 'NPD: November cooks up \$2.63 billion in game sales,' *Gamespot*, 14 December 2007, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/npd-november-cooks-up-263-billion-in-game-sales/1100-6184008/>. Accessed 5 August 2024; 'Call of Duty(R) 4: Modern Warfare Ranks #1 Title in Units Worldwide for Calendar 2007,' *Activision*, 25 January 2008, [https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/call-duty-r-4-modern-warfare-ranks-1-title-units-worldwide?](https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/call-duty-r-4-modern-warfare-ranks-1-title-units-worldwide?ReleaseID=289631) ReleaseID=289631 Accessed 5 August 2024,

<sup>9</sup>Jeff Gerstmann, 'Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare Review,' *Gamespot*, 12 May 2015, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/call-of-duty-4-modern-warfare-review/1900-6182425/>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>10</sup>Alan McLeod, 'Call of Duty Is a Government Psyop: These Documents Prove It,' *Mint Press News*, 18 November 2022, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/call-of-duty-is-a-government-psyop-these-documents-prove-it/282781/>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>11</sup>Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War*, Activision, Windows/PlayStation 3/Wii/Xbox 360, 2008; Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, Activision, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Wii, 2011; McLeod, 'Call of Duty Psyop'.

<sup>12</sup>Mathew Alford and Tom Secker, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood*, (Scotts Valley; CreateSpace, 2017), 'The CIA: In From the Cold, Sheltered in the Cinema'.

in return for funding and military hardware for use on screen.<sup>13</sup> Though the military has not given an explicit reason for the establishment of a relationship with the COD franchise, it is logical to assume that it is for a similar purpose to their work within film and television. Secker himself articulated the following on this phenomenon:

For certain demographics of gamers, it's a recruitment portal, some first-person shooters have embedded adverts within the games themselves...Even without this sort of explicit recruitment effort, games like *Call of Duty* make warfare seem fun, exciting, an escape from the drudgery of their normal lives.<sup>14</sup>

Though the military has developed its own in-house video games as recruitment tools, such as *America's Army*, none of these attempts have ever had the same demographic reach as the COD franchise.<sup>15</sup> In truth, few franchises within modern video gaming have ever reached the financial heights of COD. Therefore, it should be understood in contrast to its contemporaries as one of the most important and influential intellectual properties in the industry, built primarily upon the vast financial and critical success of COD4.

#### **Playing the Modern Soldier in Call of Duty 4.**

On a mechanical level COD4 is a first-person shooter and does not represent any major departure from earlier games in the same genre, popularised by blockbuster PC game hits such as DOOM.<sup>16</sup> Within the first-person shooter genre, the camera is situated at the player character's eye level, providing a 'first-person' perspective with only their hands holding a weapon visible. The game features a single player 'campaign' mode and an online multiplayer component. The former finds focus on an interconnected series of fictional conflicts across the Middle East and former Soviet Union. In some levels the player takes control of a member of the British Special Air Service (SAS) fighting against Russian 'ultra-nationalists', and in the remainder an American Marine in a fictional Middle Eastern country beset by civil war. Though both strands are fictional, the latter certainly attempts to portray something closer to the realities of the concurrent GWOT. The setting and antagonists specifically resemble the invasion of Iraq, which at the time of release was marked by the Iraqi civil war and insurgency era which emerged after the fall of the Ba'ath party in 2003. For instance, the combat sequences in these sections take place in a Baghdad-inspired cityscape

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<sup>13</sup>Alford and Secker, *National Security Cinema*, 'How Bad Could It Get?'

<sup>14</sup>Mcleod, 'Call of Duty Psyop'.

<sup>15</sup>United States Army, *America's Army*, United States Army, Windows/Xbox/Xbox 360/Linux/Mac OS X/PlayStation 4, 2002.

<sup>16</sup>Id Software, *DOOM*, Id Software, MS-DOS, 1993.

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against a guerilla force led by a Saddam-esque figure named Al-Assad, as opposed to the more rural combat which characterised the war in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

An odd dichotomy emerges between the gamic chapters in COD4 in their portrayals of the enemy fighters that the player aims to kill. The Russian ultra-nationalist fighters attack the player in small, calculated, and challenging assaults, equipped with advanced weaponry and tactical gear. In contrast, the enemies the Marine character faces are irregular guerrilla fighters, made literally faceless by balaclavas and bandanas, who attack the player in large, disorganised waves. These 'terrorist' style enemies are significantly easier to dispatch than their Russian counterparts and are killed in far greater numbers. In one sequence a box truck full of around 20 of them crashes into frame, and the player can simply hold down the fire button as they emerge from the back door, collapsing dead into a great pile of nigh identical faceless enemies. The function of this is to indicate to the player that the ostensibly 'whiter' enemies are a more serious threat than their Middle Eastern counterparts. This is further enforced by the revelation towards the end of the game that the civil war in the Middle East is being orchestrated by the Russian ultra-nationalists for their own gain. While the player may have to make tactical decisions when facing the completely fictionalised Russian forces, when facing the more realistic 'terrorist' characters, the player is invited to indulge in a revenge-fantasy against enemies stylised to resemble those considered to be the perpetrators of the 9/11 terror attacks and America's real-life enemies in the GWOT. These two strands in unison contribute to the dehumanisation and alienation of America's non-white enemies abroad, turning them into facile and faceless cannon fodder for the player to destroy.

### **Military Hardware & False Reality in *Death From Above* and *Shock and Awe***

Two specific sequences from COD4 are worth particular scrutiny: The seventh level '*Death From Above*', and the ninth Level '*Shock and Awe*'.<sup>18</sup> '*Death From Above*' is focussed on the player utilising an AC-130 military gunship's suite of weapons to kill a significant number of Russian ultra-nationalist soldiers. This sequence is presented primarily as a power fantasy, wherein the player is invited to 'play' with a virtual simulacrum of a very real military technology. The aesthetic framing of this sequence is the most salient and troubling aspect of the level, as it appears to be designed to resemble footage of similar weapon platforms utilised by the real life American armed forces. The grainy black and white visual effect coupled with distorted audio strongly resembles footage of real killings by the US military in the Middle East, the most famous example being

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<sup>17</sup>Though the name certainly resembles the name of Syrian Al-Assad family, the character looks physically far more like Saddam Hussein.

<sup>18</sup>Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4, Death from Above.*; Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4, Shock and Awe.*

the 'Collateral Murder' video obtained and distributed by WikiLeaks in 2010.<sup>19</sup> The AC-130 also makes an appearance in the multiplayer suite for the game as a 'Killstreak' in the sequel *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2*.<sup>20</sup> These 'Killstreaks' are a series of rewards for killing a number of enemy players without dying, and take the form of drones, attack helicopters and various other power-ups including one mechanically identical to the gameplay of 'Death From Above'. This is an important facet of COD4 to consider regarding *Spec Ops*. This gamification of overwhelming technological force in the level and in subsequent entries represents a normalisation of the sort of asymmetric and autonomous warfare which emerged through the expanded utilisation of technologies such as the AC-130 and predator drones during the GWOT. What emerges from this is a glorification of military technology still currently used for depersonalised mass killing, embedding it within the public consciousness as an acceptable tactic through play.



Figure 1: The player aims through the AC130's camera system.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, 'Body horror on the internet: US soldiers recording the war in Iraq and Afghanistan,' *Media Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, Issue 6 (2009), pp. 921-938.; Reuters Staff, 'Leaked U.S. video shows deaths of Reuters' Iraqi staffers,' *Reuters*, 6 April 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6344FW20100406>.

<sup>20</sup>Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, Activision, PlayStation 3/Windows/Xbox 360, 2009.

<sup>21</sup>Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4*, Death from Above.





**Figure 2: The player sees the ruined city seen after nuclear strike.<sup>22</sup>**

The ninth Level ‘*Shock and Awe*’ concerns a final assault on a presidential palace to capture or kill Al-Assad stylised to resemble Saddam Hussein’s own residence in Baghdad. This utilisation of Al-Assad as allegory for the Iraqi dictator continues as the player can topple a statue in a manner clearly referential to the downing of the statue of Saddam in Baghdad in 2003. Towards the end of the level, it is revealed that Al-Assad has escaped and has activated a nuclear warhead in the city in which you are fighting. As a result, the Marine that the player has taken control of, and presumably thousands of other American servicemen and civilians, are killed. The explosion itself rocks the player while they attempt to escape in a helicopter, and the character then dies from radiation sickness while later attempting to escape the helicopter wreckage. Though it is later revealed that this attack was organised by Russian ultra-nationalists as part of a wider plot to attack the USA, what the nuclear attack represents is a false reality and a political statement. In the real world, despite it being used as the primary *casus belli* for the invasion of Iraq, Saddam Hussein did not have access to any Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), nuclear or otherwise. By the time of COD 4’s release this was largely accepted by the public, and the absence of any real WMD in Iraq had been metabolised either as a major intelligence failure or as an outright lie. However, in the virtual world this sequence allows the player to imagine a world wherein the falsehood had been proven true. As is argued by Cayatte (2017), this imparts a feeling of how bad it hypothetically *could* have been had the information the US government

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<sup>22</sup> Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4, Shock and Awe*.

had given them been true, a worst-case scenario for both soldiers and civilians.<sup>23</sup> This is a thematic device that appears across the *Modern Warfare* games and entertainment media focused on the Iraq War as a method of resolving how different the protraction of the conflict was to images presented in the lead up to the invasion. For example, the game *Fugitive Hunter: War on Terror* (2003) features a combat encounter which sets the player against the 'real' Saddam Hussein, assuring the player that the man captured easily in December of 2003 was a body double.<sup>24</sup> COD4 further partakes in this fantastical reconstruction of history in an after credits bonus level wherein the player thwarts a terrorist attack on a commercial airliner reminiscent of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 hijackings.

This presentation of a false reality to the player finds similarity to the practice of counterfactual history. This practice is primarily utilised within film and literature, though there are sparse examples within video games, such as *JFK Reloaded* which invites a player to simulate the assassination of John F. Kennedy to attempt replicate the exact conditions of the official narrative of his killing.<sup>25</sup> However, counterfactual history is usually deployed as an intellectual exercise to allow the participants and audience to consider how the events of the past or present 'true' reality came to be. This is often to allow some conclusion on or criticism of a contemporary issue. For example, James Blight, Janet Lang and David Welch's book *Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* (2009) sought to consciously map the failures of the American invasion of Vietnam with the invasion of Iraq.<sup>26</sup> They argued that; 'as the disaster in Iraq continues to unfold, and as the analogy with Vietnam becomes more arresting and multidimensional, we inevitably begin to ask, with renewed urgency, how the war in Vietnam, that disastrous "war of choice" might have been avoided.'<sup>27</sup> However, where the presentation of a counterfactual history in that exercise lead to a wider criticism of state policy, the fictionalised narrative of COD presented the inverse conclusion. Instead of a criticism, this process invited the player to conceptualise a simpler, fantastical reality, ignoring the complexities of the conflict for the sake of entertainment. By this process, the realities of the war become muddled in the cultural memory, and the risk of this idealised false reality melding indistinguishably with the truth of the events of the GWOT heightens. This resultant construction of an idealised

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<sup>23</sup>Rémi Cayatte, 'Framing and ideological discourse in the Call of duty: Modern Warfare series' in Nate Garrelts (ed.), *Responding to Call of Duty Critical Essays on the Game Franchise*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017).

<sup>24</sup>Black Ops Entertainment, *Fugitive Hunter: War on Terror*, Encore Software, PlayStation 2, 2003.

<sup>25</sup>Traffic Games, *JFK Reloaded*, Traffic Games, Windows, 2004.

<sup>26</sup>James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang and David Welch, *Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

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GWOT resembles Jean Baudrillard's conception of *hyperreality*, wherein the conception of the conflict becomes 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality', divorced from all real-life context.<sup>28</sup> The function of this is that it allows the player to partake in an imagined reality wherein the 9/11 attacks could have been stopped, or that the accusations of WMD in Iraq were in fact true. This emerges as both a power fantasy for the individual player, and as a way of processing the wider complexities of the United States' involvement in Iraq, by allowing the player to experience an idealised version of events which did not emerge in reality.

Though heavily fictionalised, the content of COD4 held entertainment value by allowing players to experience a hyperreal version of the GWOT wherein they could function as an avenging and heroic destroyer of America's enemies. It did this through the merging of the realities of modern military technology gifted to the player to engage with in simulacrum, and a fictitious version of their own reality in which they could utilise said equipment in a safe and controlled environment. The intended effect of this is entertainment, yet it also provided some attempted catharsis in the face of the complex and morally ambiguous conflict playing out in reality. Criticism of this dissonance is where *Spec Ops: The Line* finds its perspective and emerges as an important document.

### **The Growth of the Military Shooter & Release of *Spec Ops: the Line*.**

In the aftermath of the success of the COD franchise's switch to a modern setting several of its genre contemporaries also made the switch to a similar formula. Electronic Arts' two Second World War themed franchises, *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor*, both changed their approach after the success of COD4.<sup>29</sup> *Battlefield* implemented this change with the *Bad Company* (2008) series, whilst *Medal of Honor* pivoted with the reboot simply named *Medal of Honor* (2010), and its generically named sequel *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012).<sup>30</sup> This trend went beyond direct competitors to COD, as many games of varying genre and scope shifted to modern combat in the Middle East, including the bizarre celebrity endorsed *50 Cent: Blood on the Sand*.<sup>31</sup> This

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<sup>28</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup>*Battlefield* had attempted 'modern combat' earlier than *Call of Duty* with *Battlefield 2*, though it focussed on a fictional conflict between the US and China, whereas the *bad company* games released after COD4 feature a conflict with Russia in Central Asia much more akin to the plot of COD4.

<sup>30</sup>DICE, *Battlefield: Bad Company*, Electronic Arts, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2008.; Danger Close & DICE, *Medal of Honor*, Electronic Arts, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2010.; Danger Close Games, *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, Electronic Arts, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2012.

<sup>31</sup>Swordfish Studios, *50 Cent: Blood on the Sand*, THQ, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2009.

oversaturation led to fatigue within the gaming community, enough to become a common complaint levied by journalists when new entries in the genre were announced.<sup>32</sup> The *Spec Ops* franchise had not released a game since 2002, with *Spec Ops: The Line* emerging just as this player fatigue had begun to set in.<sup>33</sup> The result of this was that *Spec Ops: The Line* initially appeared to be just another modern military shooter released at a time where such games were flooding the market, and may account for the relatively poor sales *Spec Ops* received on launch.<sup>34</sup> Though a cult following developed around the game, its financial failure is largely credited as being the death knell for the *Spec Ops* franchise, and there have been no further instalments since its release.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, in stark contrast to *COD4* which revitalised its place within the industry with a perspective shift, *Spec Ops*' own attempt essentially killed its franchise.

Players of *Spec Ops: The Line* were treated to a vastly different gaming experience than that offered by its contemporaries. Reviews were mixed regarding *Spec Ops*'s gameplay, seen as a serviceable action shooter by some, and an actively frustrating experience by others.<sup>36</sup> The primary point of praise for reviewers however was the game's unique approach to storytelling. Mitch Dyer reviewing the game for *IGN* stated that, 'The sum of *Spec Ops*' unexpected story is an army shooter that makes killing people mean something. This, along with its thoughtful aesthetic and intelligent enemy

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<sup>32</sup>Mitch Dyer, 'E3 2013: DICE, Battlefield, and the Military Shooter Stigma', *IGN*, 13 June 2013, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/06/13/e3-2013-dice-battlefield-and-the-military-shooter-stigma>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>33</sup>Big Grub, *Spec Ops: Airborne Commando*, Gotham Games, PlayStation, 2002.

<sup>34</sup>David Scammell, 'Max Payne 3 and Spec Ops: The Line sales 'lower-than-anticipated' - Take-Two,' *Video Gamer*, 1 August 2012, [https://web.archive.org/web/20150907195712/http://www.videogamer.com/xbox360/max\\_payne\\_3/news/max\\_payne\\_3\\_and\\_spec\\_ops\\_the\\_line\\_sales\\_lower-than-anticipated\\_take-two.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20150907195712/http://www.videogamer.com/xbox360/max_payne_3/news/max_payne_3_and_spec_ops_the_line_sales_lower-than-anticipated_take-two.html). Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>35</sup>Andy Chalk, 'Spec Ops: The Line sequel has 'no chance' of happening and Yager is okay with that,' *PC Gamer*, 21 July 2014, <https://www.pcgamer.com/spec-ops-the-line-sequel-has-no-chance-of-happening-yager-is-okay-with-that/>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>36</sup>Andrew Laughlin, *Spec Ops: The Line* review (Xbox 360) A story with a heart of darkness,' *Digital Spy*, 26 June 2012, <https://www.digitalspy.com/videogames/a389659/spec-ops-the-line-review-xbox-360-a-story-with-a-heart-of-darkness/>. Accessed 5 August 2024 - Nick Cowen, 'Spec Ops: The Line – review,' *The Guardian*, 26 June 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/jun/26/spec-ops-the-line-game-review>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

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encounters, defies the standard established by low-aiming action games.<sup>37</sup> This is indicative of most of the reviews of *Spec Ops* from the time of its release. There were however some who argued that the method by which *Spec Ops* delivered its messaging damaged its overall effectiveness. Some gamers argued that by ‘forcing’ the player to commit acts of violence to progress, some of the emotional and narrative weight of said sequences fell flat. Brad Gallaway writing for *Game Critics* argued ‘How can I possibly take the ramifications of death and killing seriously when the developers want me to gun down wave after wave after wave of generic grunts in contrived shooting galleries?’.<sup>38</sup>

This attitude persists to this day as a common criticism of the game. For example, a post on X from @HMBohemond in October of 2023 stated the following in response to a meme image lampooning this method of storytelling in games: ‘Spec Ops the Line does this and it’s why I hate it. The fact the creators coped about it by saying “You could have turned the game off but you didn’t” makes it worse. Absolute hacks.’, the post garnered over 4,600 likes and 241,000 views according to the website’s metrics, illustrating that this criticism has persisted.<sup>39</sup> However, what this line of criticism misses, as will be illustrated in the next section, is that *Spec Ops* was not simply an ‘anti-war’ or an ‘anti-violence’ game. *Spec Ops* instead asserted itself much more specifically as a commentary on the way in which modern military violence was being portrayed and gamified in video games like the COD franchise. The game did not ‘force’ the player to partake in violence, instead, it utilised the tropes and mechanics of its contemporaries to make a wider comment about how extreme violence is required to progress storylines in such games. Through this the game invited the player to consider the wider ramifications of such a practice within wider video gaming culture.

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<sup>37</sup>Mitch Dyer, ‘Spec Ops: The Line Review,’ *IGN*, 26 June 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/06/26/spec-ops-the-line-review>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>38</sup>Brad Gallaway, ‘Spec Ops: The Line Review,’ *Game Critics*, 1 August 2012, <https://gamecritics.com/brad-gallaway/spec-ops-the-line-review/>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>39</sup>Marshall Bohemond @HMBohemond ‘Spec Ops the Line does this and it’s why I hate it. The fact the creators coped about it by saying ‘You could have turned the game off but you didn’t’ makes it worse. Absolute hacks.’ Twitter/X. 23 October 2023, 9:00pm, <https://twitter.com/HMBohemond/status/1716545270681358837>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

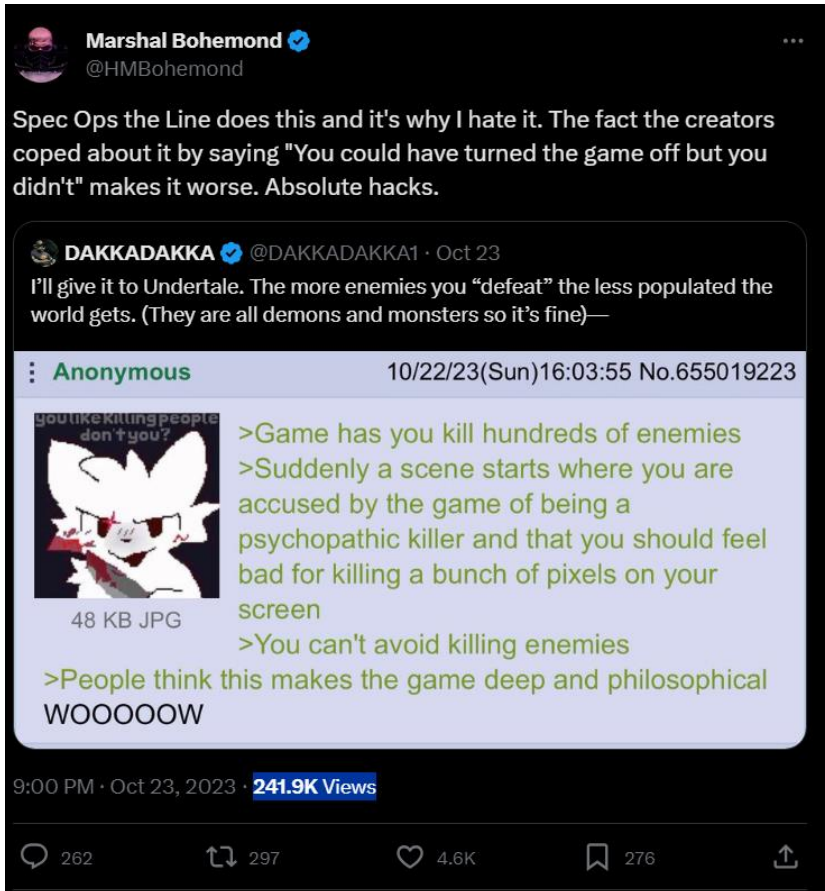


Figure 3: Critical post on Twitter/X from @HMBohemond.<sup>40</sup>

### Death, Destruction, and Deconstruction in Spec Ops: The Line.

*Spec Ops: The Line* sought to portray the after-effects of the kind of simulated violence COD and its contemporaries typically glossed over. This was not only in a literal sense with depictions of grisly violence inflicted on enemy combatants, civilians, and the environment, but also in a more metatextual sense, focussing on the effect on the player character, and the live player themselves. This was the direct intention for the game from the start, as was re-iterated by the game's creative director, Cory Davis in a 2022 ten-year retrospective interview,

<sup>40</sup> @HMBohemond, Twitter/X. 23 October 2023

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I've always wanted to delve into that in games, and this was just the perfect opportunity to do that.... And even when we had our first reveals in the press they were going, "What is this Call of Duty clone?" .... We would discuss these things, but they really couldn't have imagined how invested we were until they got, you know, an hour or two, or sometimes even a little further into the experience, when they realise, "Oh my god, I've got all this blood on my hands."<sup>41</sup>

Despite its framing coming as a surprise to some, the game did not hide its intentions, with the title screen featuring both Jimmy Hendrix's protest cover of the star-spangled banner from the 1966 Woodstock music festival, and an upside down and tattered American flag flying over a ruined Dubai. The latter piece of imagery was commonplace in American media critical of the GWOT, such as in Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah*, denoted as a sign of acute national distress.<sup>42</sup> The game itself played functionally as a 'Third-Person' shooter, placing the camera over the player character's shoulder. Set in Dubai, the game explored the aftermath of a fictional ecological disaster wherein dust storms have engulfed the city and caused a major humanitarian crisis. Colonel John Konrad the commander of the 'Damned 33<sup>rd</sup>' Infantry Battalion of the United States Army, volunteers his forces to provide aid on their way back from a tour of Afghanistan, defying government orders to abandon the city. Konrad and the 33<sup>rd</sup> go radio silent and are declared to have gone AWOL, and as a result the government sends a 3-man black ops team of former 33<sup>rd</sup> members into Dubai to find out the truth of what happened, including the player/protagonist Captain Martin Walker. Whereas the player in COD4 is invited to immerse themselves through a silent first-person protagonist, in contrast the over the shoulder perspective combined with Walker being a fully realised and voice acted character creates a disconnect between his character and the player, existing as two distinct entities within the game.

As Walker the player fights off balaclava'd Middle Eastern insurgents typical of the genre, however the player can see them react with fear when one of their comrades is shot and that they attempt to tend to their wounded in contrast to the mindless militants of the COD franchise. Furthermore, it emerges that these fighters are refugees of the environmental crisis in the city, armed and influenced by the CIA to fight against the 33<sup>rd</sup>. They are then replaced as primary antagonist with members of the 33<sup>rd</sup> themselves, stylised to look like GWOT era American Marines, who attack

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<sup>41</sup>James Daly, 'Spec Ops: The Line' Creative Director Interview: Why It Needs A Remaster,' *Gaming Bible*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.gamingbible.com/features/spec-ops-the-line-dev-interview-why-it-needs-a-remaster-20220401>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>42</sup>*In The Valley Of Elah*, directed by Paul Haggis, (NALA Films, Samuels Media, Blackfriars Bridge, 2007), Blu-Ray Disc.

the player's squad after assuming them to be affiliated with the CIA. This inversion of the established trope of faceless 'terrorist' enemies in favour of American soldiers with individual faces and voices forces the (primarily western) player to reckon with the ethical ramifications of the significant digital body count a player accumulates in the genre. A further inversion occurs in overt reference to the previously covered 'Death From Above' level from COD4. In Chapter 5, Walker and his team discover a large, heavily armed contingent of the 33<sup>rd</sup>. Initially unsure how to proceed, the team locate a cache of white phosphorous mortars and after some debate Walker decides to use the weaponry to clear a path. Like in COD4 the player utilises the weapon to destroy dozens of human enemies and several vehicles, climaxing in the bombing of a large concentration of soldiers. The sequence is visually and intentionally resonant with the AC130 sequence in COD4, complete with the grainy black and white visuals indicative of real military systems. However, several aesthetic differences turn it from COD's military power fantasy into one which evokes a feeling of guilt and discomfort in the player. As is argued by Stemmler, in COD4 'Death From Above' depersonalises the violence as the player effectively becomes the machine itself, seeing through its mechanical camera 'eyes' rather than those of a fictional soldier.<sup>43</sup> In stark contrast Walker's reflection can be seen in the laptop he uses to control the white phosphorous, his verbal commands to 'burn 'em' visible to the player.<sup>44</sup> This removes a layer of distance that the player has in COD4 and makes it clear that this is their individual choice rather than it being filtered through a depersonalised weapons system. Furthermore, the audio design is far different, as enemy soldiers of the 33<sup>rd</sup> can be heard screaming and crying as the white phosphorous burns them alive.

The specific use of white phosphorous enforces the game's thesis that the way in which real military violence has been gamified has sinister implications for players. Some consider the use of white phosphorous as a real war crime due to its propensity to stick to the skin, how it can burn underwater, and because it can leave survivors with debilitating respiratory conditions. Despite this it has been recently utilised by both the American military in Iraq in the battle of Fallujah and by the Israeli government in Palestine.<sup>45</sup> By utilising white phosphorus specifically, the game attempted to make

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<sup>43</sup>Claudius Stemmler, 'New Media, same stale ideology: Recurring themes and Global Representations in the Modern Warfare trilogy' in Nate Garrelts (ed.), *Responding to Call of Duty Critical Essays on the Game Franchise*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), p. 55.

<sup>44</sup>Yager development, *Spec Ops*.

<sup>45</sup>'US forces used 'chemical weapon' in Iraq,' *The Independent*, 16 November 2005, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-forces-used-chemical-weapon-in-iraq-515551.html>. Accessed 5 August 2024; 'Israel admits white phosphorus use,' *Al Jazeera*, 20 July 2009,



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the player consider the slow escalation of real-world weaponry implanted into their entertainment, and how this weaponry can become normalised through play as a fun power-up, rather than exposed as a devastating real-world weapon. Creative director Cory Davis indicates that sequences such as this were directly attempting to invert the propagandistic tropes found in COD:



**Figure 4: Walker's is reflection visible during the attack.<sup>46</sup>**

The way that propaganda portrays war. It typically looks like something that is not only justified but could be very enjoyable. The way I see it pitched all the time is that this is more exciting than the thing you're probably doing right now...The glorification, and adding fun to a wartime experience, just wasn't the goal of anybody on the team.<sup>47</sup>

Instead of the mission ending when the enemies are defeated, Walker and his team must progress through the wreckage they have caused, coming across several suffering, still burning soldiers. One of the few survivors manages to stammer out 'Why? We were helping?' before succumbing to his injuries, leading Walker to discover that the large group of what he thought were soldiers was in fact a civilian refugee camp.<sup>48</sup> The team then discovers the result of the attack, a great pile of burned

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/7/30/israel-admits-white-phosphorus-use>.

Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>46</sup>Yager development, *Spec Ops*.

<sup>47</sup>Daly, *Spec Ops Remaster*.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

and mangled bodies, fused together by heat. This includes one of the most shocking and striking images in the game, a mother cradling her child, both dead and burned almost beyond recognition. This feeling of 'inversion' is seen in both the primary enemies of the game being American soldiers, and the negative feeling elicited from using military hardware in contrast to COD. Despite this effort, white phosphorous was introduced as a 'killstreak' in the 2019 reboot of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, illustrating that the power of such a sequence is to a degree limited by the significant difference in sizes of COD and *Spec Ops*'s player base.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, this inversion is *Spec Ops*' primary tool for coaching the player through a new and more nuanced understanding of how the perspective of the COD franchise had been normalised in the years since its release, offering an alternative way of consuming modern military combat through play.



Figure 5: The player discovers a mother and child burned to death.<sup>50</sup>

### The role of the Player in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

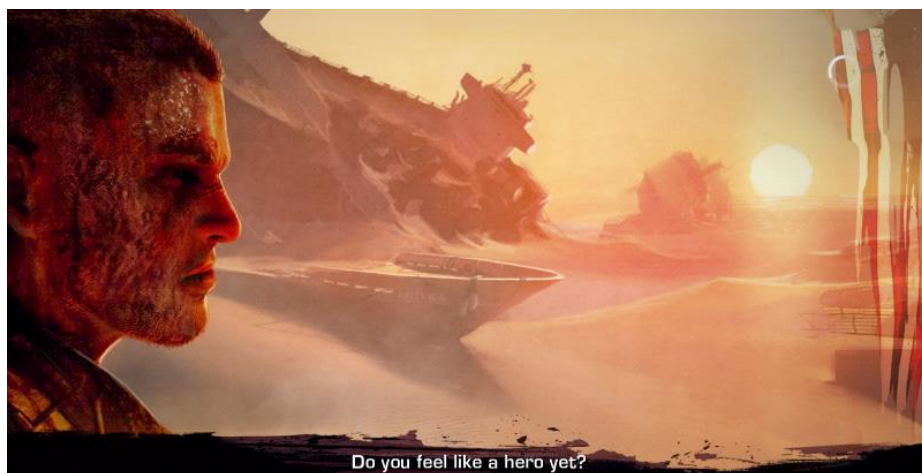
As Walker and his team continue to fight through the ruins of Dubai, they slowly become more and more unhinged. In a manner unique within its genre, this is reflected textually in the gameplay. For example, there is a gameplay mechanic wherein Walker can order his allies to attack positions or lay covering fire, and in the first hours of the game he does this by spouting accepted military commands. However, as the team

<sup>49</sup>Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, Activision, PlayStation 4/Windows/Xbox One, 2019.

<sup>50</sup>Yager development, *Spec Ops*.

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partakes in more violence this is replaced with Walker bellowing at his compatriots to kill their enemies in more basic and violent terms.



**Figure 6: A loading screen from the climax of *Spec Ops: The Line*.<sup>51</sup>**

This change in the characters psyche is reflected in the loading screens, where basic gameplay tips such as how to throw a grenade or take cover are replaced with direct addresses to the player such as 'None of this would've happened if you'd just stopped.' and 'Do you feel like a hero yet?'.<sup>52</sup> Walker also begins to have delusions and hallucinatory episodes, eventually breaking down when a member of his team is lynched by a group of refugees as revenge for the violence the player has committed against them to that point. In response Walker and his surviving companion are given the option to fire into a crowd of civilian refugees, signifying Walker's full descent into bloodthirsty mania. This descent is an intentional reference to the 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, with the creators openly admitting this influence, and implying that the plot itself is somewhat of a modernised adaptation of the novel.<sup>53</sup> Walker eventually fights his way to Colonel Konrad after killing most of the surviving 33<sup>rd</sup>, only to find he has been dead for months, potentially longer than Walker has been in Dubai, and all the atrocities committed in the name of finding and capturing him have been for nothing. The player can then choose their own ending, to have Walker kill himself in despair, leave Dubai in disgrace, or remain there, killing any American troops who enter the city.

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<sup>51</sup>Yager development, *Spec Ops*.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>The aforementioned antagonist, Colonel Konrad is named in reference to the author.; Daly, *Spec Ops Remaster*.

As was previously detailed, a significant number of players and critics argued that the way in which *Spec Ops* delivered its content damaged its anti-war messaging. *Spec Ops* however does not function simply as a commentary on warfare, it is instead a hyper-specific criticism of its genre contemporaries. The function of the sequences and details outlined above provided a challenge to the player to consider the way in which modern military shooters portrayed a gamified version of the real-life violence of modern warfare. It did this in two major ways; direct reference to sequences within *Call of Duty*, and by presenting more thematic critique of gamified violence through its wider story presentation. The contrast between the mission *Death From Above* from COD4 with the white phosphorous sequence in *Spec Ops* seeks to make the player consider the normalisation of lethal modern military hardware within video gaming and make a player returning to those other games re-consider those gameplay sequences with this in mind.

The wider story and presentation of Walker's mental decline serves less as a cautionary message about violence or warfare, and more as an invitation for the player to consider their own role within the modern military shooter. Instead of acting as a disconnected third-party *Spec Ops* presented the player's actions to them as an active participant in the violence. This invited a player who also partakes in games like *COD* to re-consider their own role within the wider context of the game, and the ways in which warfare has been gamified for the purpose of entertainment. In a 13 person focus group study performed by Kristine Jørgensen, it was found that this direct addressing of the role of the player led to a feeling of 'positive discomfort', which forced them to consider their own role as players. She stated that 'This means that the game oversteps the sense of safety created by detachment, but by positioning the player as somehow responsible, the sense of safety connected to the fact that this is "play" also threatens to break.'<sup>54</sup> This *overstepping* of the boundary between art and consumer is a significant component of what makes the experience of *Spec Ops* particularly affecting, and an important historical document for GWOT-era gaming. Whilst *Spec Ops* does not present a more *realistic* view of modern combat than its contemporaries (its scenario is of course completely fictitious), it does present a more *empathetic* view of warfare. Through this it attempted to elicit in the player some connection with the protagonist avatar and the digital enemies they face together, and the player's problematic role in their consumption of a digitised portrayal of modern military combat.

## Conclusion

The release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* represented a monumental shift in the video game industry and how people interact with warfare through entertainment.

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<sup>54</sup>Jørgensen, *Positive Discomfort*.

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Though fringe examples of simulated modern warfare existed previously, the game's shift from the Second World War setting and intermingling of real-life military technology with power fantasy made it one of the most financially successful franchises in gaming. Sequences like 'Death from Above' allowed a player to utilise cutting edge American military hardware without the inherent risk of real combat, inviting the player to use this technology as a tool for entertainment removed from its real-life context. The simulated warfare allowed the player to imagine a version of history wherein the American and coalition forces were unambiguous forces for good, fighting an unambiguously evil terroristic enemy. The game stripped any ambiguity or question of morality from modern warfare, and even sought to present a reality wherein the proven falsehoods that led America to Iraq were true with the level 'Shock and Awe'. This ability to connect with the overbearing reality of the GWOT in a safe environment, devoid of difficult moral questions around war and its portrayal in media is responsible for the significant popularity and success of the franchise going forward. Its enormous success attracted the attention of both the United States military as a recruitment tool, and of the rest of the wider gaming industry who shifted their own settings to modern combat evoking the GWOT.

In this oversaturated environment, *Spec Ops: The Line* emerged as a unique historical document. *Spec Ops* sought consciously to act as commentary on the increasingly common way in which modern warfare was portrayed in video gaming after the success of COD4. Some players and critics derided its method of delivering this message as overbearing or heavy handed. These interpretations often misunderstood that the games intent was not to make the player 'feel bad' or believe a particular narrative about the GWOT. Instead, *Spec Ops* served more specifically as a metatextual criticism of the way modern military violence was being gamified in games such as COD4, and what this meant for the player. It did this through direct reference to infamous sequences from COD, most famously in the white phosphorous sequence, and in the inversion present in the player character battling the American soldiers who make up the team of heroes in COD. Furthermore, the games narrative and presentation of the slow descent into mania of Captain Walker due to the actions of the player re-enforced the player's agency in the death and destruction that occurred across the game's plot. *Spec Ops* therefore functioned as both criticism of its genre contemporaries, a rarity for video gaming as a young art form, and as a call to action for the player to re-consider their consumption of military action as entertainment. This made *Spec Ops: The Line* a useful document for historians going forward, not just of military video games and their relation to real life warfare, but also in a methodological sense for considering how to perceive the actions of the player within the context of video games.

Unfortunately, during the writing of this article, it was announced without warning on 30 January 2024, that *Spec Ops* would be immediately removed from sale on all digital

storefronts.<sup>55</sup> This is due to the expiration of several licences rather than any political or ideological agenda by the developers or parent company. This however belies a worrying trend for video games as historiographical sources as *Spec Ops* is far from the first or only game in recent memory to be 'delisted' without fanfare.<sup>56</sup> Though physical copies and digital piracy still present the ability to play the game, it certainly makes this important document less accessible for future historians focussed on digital media culture. The games director Cory Davis posted on Twitter/X that the news was 'devastating' but assured fans that 'This is not the end for *Spec Ops: The Line*.' Though how this return will be accomplished is unclear.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Ash Parrish, 'Spec Ops: The Line permanently removed from Steam and other digital stores' *The Verge*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.theverge.com/2024/1/30/24055807/spec-ops-the-line-delisting-licensing-2k>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>56</sup>*Delisted Games* has recorded over 1,900 games made unplayable in the same way. ShawnS, 'Spec Ops: The Line, already delisted on Steam, will be leaving all digital storefronts soon [UPDATE: It's gone]', *DeListed Games*, 1 February 2024, <https://delistedgames.com/spec-ops-the-line-already-delisted-on-steam-will-be-leaving-all-digital-storefronts-soon/>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>57</sup>Cory Davis @Snak3Fist 'Devastating personally, but also for those who poured their souls into its creation alongside me as developers, and for the gaming community at large. This is not the end for *Spec Ops: The Line*.' Twitter/X. 30 Jan 2024, 11:37pm, <https://twitter.com/Snak3Fist/status/1752476246326587520>. Accessed 5 August 2024.