

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Spec Ops: The Line
Platform: PC, Xbox 360, PS3, OS X
Genre: Third-Person Shooter
Release Date: June, 26, 2012
Developer: Yager Development
Publisher: 2K Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Walt Williams, Richard Pearsey(Writers) / Cory Davis, Francois Coulon (Director)

OVERVIEW

Spec Ops: The Line is a third person cover based shooter where players lead their Delta squad, from the perspective of Captain Martin Walker, through the city of Dubai that has been destroyed by sandstorms. Walker and his squad are tasked with investigating the missing 'Damned' 33rd, an American battalion returning from Afghanistan that stayed behind in an attempt to evacuate the citizens of Dubai. Initially sent in solely as a reconnaissance team, Captain Walker changes the squad's objective after a firefight with the locals and discovering fighting between CIA agents and 33rd troops. The story progresses with Walker looking to "get to the bottom of this" and he focuses on finding the leader of the 33rd, Colonel John Konrad, who he knows from a deployment in Afghanistan.

The story that unfold draws heavily from themes explored in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and the film Apocalypse Now, but does not directly pull from either story for the game's narrative. Spec Ops uses traditional shooter mechanics to convey the narrative with linear progression, set piece action sequences, cut-scenes, collectible lore items, and moral choice moments in the gameplay. However, this game takes a spin on many of these traditional game elements to create a narrative that eschews the hero fantasy for a critical examination of war games and the players.

CHARACTERS

Cpt. Martin Walker - the only playable character of the series voiced by Nolan North, voice actor for Nathan Drake from the Uncharted series. Walker serves as the vehicle for the player to experience the narrative, Walker's own experience of the events that take place in Dubai are suspect, as the game reveals bit by bit until finally revealing the extent of Walker's trauma. The toll of the combat affects him physically (his character model becomes heavily scarred) emotionally (the voice acting becomes more aggressive as the game progresses) and he eventually begins to have hallucinations (seeing squad mates' faces on enemies). Walker

begins as a typical shooter hero with the intentions of “saving the day” but then becomes a character of vengeance bent on making “Konrad pay for what he’s done” though it is never clear exactly what the 33rd’s Colonel has done. He is a character who seeks to perform heroic acts but ultimately accomplishes only the death and destruction that accompanies a shooter hero.

SSgt. John Lugo - the sniper of the group who begins as the wisecracking joker of Delta squad, his position allows for some extra dialogue from the character as he will cover Walker and Adams as they advance. While all members of Delta squad have trouble reconciling their actions in Dubai, Lugo expresses the most distaste for the squad’s violence, except when Delta meets the radio man who Lugo shoots after a civil discussion regarding the radio equipment. Lugo dies at the hands of Dubai natives when the squad is separated and a loading screen points out he may be the lucky one.

Lt. Alphanso Adams - heavy weapons member of the squad, Adams is a more no-nonsense squad mate and he and Lugo reach a flashpoint and fight when the squad begins to question exactly why they are still in Dubai. After Lugo’s death he shows open disdain for Walker and openly revels in his destruction of the 33rd and the civilians who killed Lugo.

Col. John Konrad - The enigmatic Colonel of the ‘Damned’ 33rd serves as the antagonist for the game after Delta squad use white phosphorus against the 33rd. Little is known about Konrad, except that he saved Walker’s life in Afghanistan and lead the 33rd in a failed evacuation of Dubai after all other forces withdrew. His character and name is a nod to the author Joseph Conrad and the character “Kurtz” from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and the film Apocalypse Now. Whoever the real Konrad was, it is revealed that the Colonel Walker who speaks is a figment of Walker’s own guilt laden imagination. Konrad serves as the typical, all seeing villain who can comment on Walker and the player’s actions and provides an explicit enemy to fight towards. Konrad provides a generic antagonist at first glance but offers a deeper understanding of Walker and the player’s psyche upon further consideration.

Radioman/Robert Darden- reporter sent to Dubai to report on the sandstorms, gets trapped and remains with the 33rd. Provides the ‘music’ for Delta and springs several traps on Delta and often mocks them, for which Lugo promises to kill the radioman - which he does. The radioman also serves to break the 4th wall with commentary on game violence and the player.

Agent Jeff Riggs - veteran CIA agent embedded in Dubai with a mission to cover up the atrocities the 33rd committed after their failed attempt to evacuate the city. He leads Delta squad in stealing the city’s water from the 33rd and chooses to destroy the supply when the 33rd attempt to retake the water trucks. Trapped under a burning truck he begs Walker for the mercy of a quick death.

Agent Rick Gould - CIA agent who saves Delta squad from a 33rd ambush and leads insurgents in an assault against the 33rd at “the Gate”, where the game’s infamous white phosphorous scene occurs.

BREAKDOWN

The game opens with a high intensity helicopter battle, Walker (the player) is behind the Gatling turret shooting down enemy aircraft until a crash landing as the helicopter enters the sandstorm. A cut scene introduces Konrad with Walker praising the man for his time in Afghanistan and for attempting to rescue the citizens of Dubai. As gameplay resumes Delta enter Dubai after walking past an upside down American flag and a "Stop" sign, Walker states the squad's objective clearly - "locate survivors, radio command from outside the storm wall, they send in the cavalry, we go home."

The game proceeds to ignore that initial objective after Delta discover slain American troops and get ambushed by locals, who are thoroughly "othered", no faces shown, no English speakers. A distress call from surviving 33rd troops draws Delta deeper into Dubai and creates the pivotal change in objective as a dying soldier tells Walker that there is a captured soldier taken to "The Nest". The objective again changes to saving this soldier.

As the fighting continues and a sandstorm forces Delta inside we discover that the locals are led by CIA agents, and here Walker focuses on finding Konrad, whom he trusts, in order to find answers about what happened in Dubai. The game drives the narrative with this sense of mystery, which also encourages players to discover the hidden "intel" pieces on the map that feature Walker's voice describing details about the 33rd, Konrad, CIA agents, and even citizens of Dubai. With no clear answers Walker comes up with the 33rd "civil war" theory. Walker believes the Radio man, who has taunted them at every step, led a mutiny against Konrad. The Radio man becomes a convenient bad guy and Walker's hero worship of Konrad leads Delta further past their initial objective in order to "find answers".

The Radio man attempts to trap Delta with a recording of a CIA agent being tortured. Delta is briefly saved by agent Gould, who is leading Dubai locals in an attack against the 33rd. As Delta escape the trap and move to join the fight they watch as the 33rd drops white phosphorous on the local assault and time slows down. Important to note here is that time has slowed during gameplay for headshots and explosions that net a kill. Here it becomes clear that this isn't for gratuity but indicates shock, it highlights the horrific violence Walker witnesses as his mind (and the game) says - do not forget this.

Shortly after the white phosphorus attack Delta find Gould captured and interrogated as three civilians are tortured in front of him. Lugo wants to save Gould but Adams wants to save the civilians and here the player has their first choice, but it is not presented with any menu prompts or objective overlays. The player can do nothing and watch as two of the living civilians are dragged away before Gould is shot. They can shoot the captors, which results in a large skirmish, or they can stealthily follow the two civilians and kill the 33rd soldiers who are reluctant to execute the civilians and spend time arguing over which one will carry out the deed. In the end, regardless of the player's decision, Gould is dead and documents on him indicate Delta must head to "the Gate".

This first white phosphorous scene is foreboding as Delta approach the Gate, a chokepoint filled with 33rd troops. Looking over the overwhelming numbers Walker sees a mortar they

can use, Lugo objects pointing out that these are the same white phosphorous mortars they just witnessed used against the civilians. The squad argue over whether they have a choice, Walker and Adams firmly insisting there are no alternatives with Lugo arguing “there’s always a choice”. Mechanically Walker and Adams are right, there is no other choice for advancing the story, Delta and the player must use the white phosphorous. Firing the white phosphorous is done through a computer camera that depicts the 33rd as white outlines of heat. The screen lights up with the explosion of the mortars but the screams of the burning men are audible as Walker and the player shell the 33rd.

The game never hides the violence Delta commits, after shelling the troops below the player must walk through the destruction, past burnt crawling soldiers and through the ash up to where a cutscene begins that shows a trench filled not with troops but civilians. Walker focuses on the husks of a mother clutching her child, attempting to shield her from the fire, while a distraught Lugo screams: “He turned us into fucking killers”. The game up until now had slowly brought in elements to make the player uncomfortable, fighting American troops, deciding between the death of Gould or the death of civilians. All of these could be dismissed with the hero fantasy that Walker and Delta squad would solve the mystery and save Dubai. The game needed the player to maintain this hero fantasy in order to pull back the curtain on the mirror and ask the player if they are comfortable with the violence they simulate.

After this scene the game spirals down and the violence you commit against the 33rd highlights just how very un-heroic Walker and Delta’s actions are and have been. Delta themselves have lost a part of this fantasy, their character models are ragged and injured. Walker barks orders filled with swears and snarls at his enemy, executions of downed soldiers go from a swift punch to shooting the prone enemy in the knee before shooting them in the head.

Up until this point Konrad has only been a character mentioned by Walker but after shelling the civilians Delta comes across a room where officers of the 33rd were tied to chairs and burned. It is in this room that Walker picks up a radio and we begin to hear Konrad speaking. As a door opens Konrad echoes one of Walker’s initial lines at the start of the game “Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai” as a new objective appears “obey”.

From here Walker blames Konrad for all the terrible violence and destruction Delta has inflicted upon the survivors of Dubai. Konrad plays the all-seeing villain well, quipping in through the radio at the actions of Walker and Delta and ‘forcing’ us through more choice set-pieces in the game.

The “objectives” of Delta squad lead the narrative of Spec Ops in circles, saving American troops, then fighting the CIA to save 33rd soldiers, then fighting the 33rd with the CIA, then fighting the 33rd for vengeance. At this point the narrative sticks to fighting the 33rd, Delta has little justification but Walker and the squad do attempt to justify their actions. Walt Williams, lead writer for Spec Ops, argues that it was important for Delta squad to be flawed but also for them to attempt to rationalize those flaws. This gains impact as it not only diverts Delta’s responsibility for the violence in Dubai, but also the players’.

Much of the narrative in Spec Ops is critical of the heroic idea that strong men with weapons can save situations. Delta squad enter into Dubai and hope to save the day by killing other

men, the game does not explicitly say that they are wrong or bad but it shows that violence hurts the perpetrator as well as the victim. The game attempts to neutrally ask, if Delta performed monstrous acts with the best of intentions, what has been the role of the player?

This question is ultimately asked at the end of the game. Walker all alone now after Lugo dies, hung from a girder by the angry citizens of Dubai and after Adams dies fighting the 33rd, refusing to surrender against the troops he had shown no mercy. After all the emotional stress and the physical damage to Walker we discover Konrad, our antagonist, atop the highest tower in the city and dead. The voice we hear only a trauma induced rationalization for Walker and the player to press onward. The end of the game provides the final choice but the mechanics have not changed, pull the trigger or don't. Walker, and the player, can deny responsibility and shoot the apparition of Konrad or face the reality and turn the gun onto Walker. The game doesn't spell out the decision as you face the image of Konrad pointing a gun at Walker, but it gives the player a very slow countdown from Konrad. It gives you time to switch the gun between Walker and Konrad. Through the same mechanic by which the player has aimed and shot at countless enemies the final decision of the game requires the player to simply aim and shoot.

STRONGEST ELEMENT

Choice moments are very strong in this game as they are dynamic and operate through the core mechanic of the game, rather than a menu. The game's narrative still runs through in these choices, someone almost always dies for your choice as the core mechanic (shooting) is at the center of the choices. The player does not decide here with a button press in a menu but by lining up their crosshairs and pulling the trigger. These choices are paced so that the player has enough time to realize the consequence and change their mind, take agent Riggs trapped under the burning truck, he asks for Walker to shoot him before the fire kills him, if the player waits and the flames approach Riggs begins to beg and cry for the mercy of a swift death. The player may believe Riggs does not deserve the mercy, but the game forces the player to confront their decision.

UNSUCCESSFUL ELEMENT

Frankly, the story starts off requiring the player to suspend disbelief quite heavily and never really recovers. Part of the problem comes from the setting being a city that is instantly recognizable. Dubai is a well connected affluent city, yes it is in the desert but to be completely overwhelmed by sandstorms? Unlikely, especially given that it is a port city. However, it is equally implausible that one man can mow down an entire battalion's worth (up to 1500) of soldiers, yet that is quite mundane for a shooter. The implausible nature of the story creeps back up after the first playthrough when Walker's insanity is revealed. Why would two other Delta operatives follow Walker despite his clear instability?

HIGHLIGHT

End of the game scene and choice. The reveal of Konrad's death is not what is so significant as much as the reveal of the question that Yager, the developer, asks. Is the player complicit in the crimes of the character and should the player care? It asks the player to make that decision the same way the player has decided to make any choice in this game, by pulling the trigger. It's a well paced and wonderfully scripted scene that allows for several separate and equally provocative endings.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Most reviews lauded *Spec Ops* for delivering a new and interesting story but criticized the mechanics and gameplay. Nearly all critical reviews agreed that the story provided insight and was a bold release for a large AAA studio release. However, the sub-par mechanics and confrontational story were felt in the release and the game only shipped just over a million units across three platforms (according to VGChartz). The critical reception has not been universally positive and several reviews criticize the heavy handed approach taken by the story. The narrative ramrodding of the white phosphorous scene has been criticized as lazy design in an otherwise interesting game.

LESSONS

- **Choice set-pieces made through the main mechanic.** The mechanics are the primary interaction between the player and the game. Choice set-pieces in games tend to be narrative heavy moments. By combining the two strong elements Yager was able to make the *act* of deciding more impactful than the consequences.
- **Characterization during gameplay.** The changing character models, dialogue, and executions are quite jarring when first observed and remind the player about the story element during gameplay.
- **Level design reflects narrative.** Most of the levels become a landscape of the mind, almost every level you start up high but willingly or unwillingly descend.
- **Mechanics inform narrative.** The characterization during gameplay, scaling difficulty, choice made through main mechanic. Yager charged all the moments with imagery and meaning. The players do notice and begin to feel the emotions a designer attempts to convey, it was bold of Yager to assume the player would think past the immediate action and *Spec Ops* is richer for it.

SUMMATION

The story of *Spec Ops* focused on deploying as many game elements as possible to deconstruct the shooter genre in a self-reflective manner. Certain elements enhance the narrative and commentary contained within the game. The deliberate exploration of the core mechanic in most choice moments and flawed characters who were defined by that mechanic. The game's laser focus on exploring this mechanic allowed for tight control of the developer's commentary.

After Delta squad uses white phosphorous at the Gate the loading screens change from offering advice to the snide comments and bleak quotes from Sartre. One quote stands out in

particular: "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" *Spec Ops* never really answers *why* I should care about the violence in this game, but it demands that I wonder *if* I should.