JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Understanding Video Game Narratives: A Soulful Military Shooter

Lourembam Siddhartha
Student
Department of English
Jain (Deemed to be University)

Abstract:

Spec Ops: The Line, is a video game developed by Yager Development and published by 2k games which has garnered critical acclaim albeit years after its release, for its subversive and psychologically complex narrative, representing a groundbreaking departure from the traditional military shooter genre, utilizing the medium's unique storytelling capabilities to expose the moral complexities of modern warfare. Through its surprisingly linear and straightforward gameplay and exploration of themes such as trauma, perpetration, and the blurring of the lines between hero and villain, Spec Ops: The Line challenges the player's preconceptions and forces them to confront the consequences of their actions, ultimately questioning the very nature of the player's complicity in the game's violent events.The game is also an indictment of the conventional ways of dealing with military shooters of its era which all proves to be ultimately rather stale in storytelling and partly misleading in terms of social representation. This paper will examine how Spec Ops: The Line leverages the interactive nature of video games to create a narrative experience that is both immersive and morally ambiguous, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of the medium's potential for ethical reflection and the subversion of traditional tropes in the military shooter genre.

Keywords: Subversion, Meta-Narrative, Psychological ,Video Games

Introduction

In the domain of military-themed first-person shooter video games, where themes of heroism and patriotism frequently serve as a contextual framework for intense action sequences, Spec Ops: The Line emerges as a notable exception. The Line is a third person game where third person refers to the camera perspective of the game, allowing the player to see the character from behind the shoulder. This seemingly conventional third-person shooter game conceals a significant depth, presenting a narrative that rigorously examines the psychological impact of warfare, the indistinct boundaries between heroism and villainy and the all too familiar setting of a war trodden Arab region which had become a staple for military shooters in terms of setting, leading to a stereotypical representation of certain ethnicity. Through its uncompromising analysis of trauma, morality, and the human consequences of armed conflict, Spec Ops: The Line compels players to

confront the more complex aspects of their own agency, raising fundamental questions regarding the medium's capacity for nuanced narrative construction and ethical contemplation.

Literature Review

After a thorough examination of previous literature based upon Spec Ops The Line and specifically in terms of its psychological effect on the players and the aftermath of the full gameplay, there are literature upon the game which focuses mostly on textual analysis, and it becomes clear that it is near impossible to include all of the elements whether thematic or practical and real world. Toby Smetherst in his paper “We put our hands on the trigger with him”, Guilt and Perpetration in Spec Ops: The Line (2017), explores how art, specifically video games, can help people empathize with those who have committed terrible acts. It mentions Gillian Rose's idea for stories that enable viewers to empathize with characters who perform ethically questionable deeds, resulting in a nuanced emotional connection to their reasons and behaviors.

This paper will focus more on the unique narrative of the game and the player agency of how the game can be played which solidifies video games as an impactful medium of storytelling.

Methodology

The paper follows a close textual analysis of the game which enables a comprehensive study of the game’s underlying ideologies and overall to uncover the ways in which the game subverts its own genre. Developer interviews, relevant academic literature and a full play through of the entire game as a primary source of data was also used as part of the whole process.

Analysis

Subversion through the Generic

If anyone from this day and age played Spec Ops The Line without any prior information about the game, they would most likely deem it as basic and nothing extraordinary. In terms of gameplay, Spec Ops The Line is as generic as it gets for a military shooter from its time. Spec Ops: The story follows Captain Martin Walker, a U.S. Army Delta Force operative, as he guides a team to Dubai to look into a distress call from U.S. Army Colonel John Konrad. Upon reaching the destination, Walker and his team finds a destroyed city, prompting them to search for survivors and engage with the 33rd Infantry, an unauthorized U.S. Army unit under Konrad's leadership.

The Line looks to be a run of the mill third person shooter where you hide behind cover and kill enemies, where doing so will let you progress through the story and campaign. It received generally mixed ratings from most of the critics and content creators at the time of its release. Where the game struggles to keep one engaged with the gameplay, the story is what sets it apart from its competitors like Call of Duty and Battlefield. A painfully familiar looking gameplay paints a typical picture of a third person military shooter, but the developers are aware of this and willfully does so to subvert the whole eco system surrounding the genre by pretending to be something it is not, at least on the surface.

Meta-Fiction

The primary distinguishing feature of The Line is its adoption of metafiction. This video game demonstrates self-awareness regarding its narrative structure and acknowledges its medium as a "Video Game," as well as the presence of real-life players. The Line employs a non-linear narrative approach, where the apparent conclusion of the game is presented at its outset. The dialogue in which the protagonist, Captain Walker, states, "We did this already," coincides with the game's opening sequence, where Walker operates a

helicopter-mounted turret to engage enemy forces. Players encounter this same scenario in Chapter 12: The Rooftops, where Walker delivers the dialogue. Various analysts and players have interpreted this element differently, with one prevalent theory suggesting that the protagonist perished at the game's inception when the helicopter crashed, and paradoxically, also met his demise towards the conclusion of Chapter 12 as the sequence repeats. The game's metafictional nature is evident throughout, as it consistently addresses players directly or indirectly, compelling them to contemplate their virtual actions, the majority of which are ethically questionable

Do you feel like a hero Yet?

At the commencement of Spec Ops: The Line, Captain Martin Walker is portrayed as a conventional military protagonist. However, as the narrative progresses, his behavior and motivations are revealed to be flawed, challenging the notion of an unambiguous hero. The game presents a narrative that depicts the enemy in a more nuanced manner, compelling players to perceive them as individuals rather than a generic antagonistic force. This subversion of the hero archetype challenges players to confront the ethical complexities of warfare and the consequences of their decisions. Subtle game mechanics coalesce to construct the image of an ostensibly typical hero archetype with underlying moral ambiguity.

In Chapter 8 of the game titled “The Gate”, players are introduced to the infamous white phosphorous scene, a major turning point within the story and the scene that has garnered much attention within the gaming community. *“White phosphorus is a chemical substance, dispersed in artillery shells, bombs, and rockets, that ignites when exposed to oxygen. The chemical reaction creates intense 815-degree Celsius heat. It produces light and a thick smoke used for military purposes, but also inflicts horrific injuries when the phosphorus comes in contact with people”* (hrw.org)

Captain Walker is compelled to make the difficult decision of utilizing white phosphorous against the 33rd, who are guarding "The Gate" through which the players must pass to advance the narrative. Lugo, a member of the delta squad, reminds Walker of the dangers associated with white phosphorous, stating, "There's always a choice". This statement further reinforces the meta-narrative of the game, raising the question of whether Lugo is imploring Walker not to use white phosphorus or if Lugo is addressing the players themselves. Following a not so thorough discussion of the weaponry, Delta Squad and, on a meta level, the players are confronted with what is arguably one of the most disturbing scenes in video game history. It is revealed that the 33rd had been gathering civilians for rescue, whom Walker and his team inadvertently killed in a less than merciful manner.

Subverting Player Agency

Spec Ops: The Line pushes back against the standard idea of player control, making players face the outcomes of their decisions. The design of the game frequently involves players in the darker aspects of the story, blurring the distinction between good and bad. This undermining of player control prompts introspection, prompting players to ponder their role in the narrative and the real intentions behind their decisions.

Towards the conclusion of the narrative, players are presented with the agency to determine Captain Walker's fate by either ending his life through self-inflicted means or by eliminating Konrad, who exists in a state of simultaneous life and death. Both decisions lead to distinct conclusions; however, the elimination of Konrad presents three additional potential outcomes. Should Walker choose self-termination, the narrative concludes with his demise and Dubai's continued state of conflagration. Conversely, if Walker opts to eliminate Konrad, the narrative progresses to a conclusion wherein Walker appears to survive and depart

from Dubai. In the final moments of the Epilogue, Walker is rescued by US forces, at which point the player is afforded the option to either cooperate peacefully or engage in conflict with the rescue team. While one might question the rationale behind attacking the rescue squad, it is noteworthy that the narrative does not explicitly mandate a decision between aggression or submission; rather, it merely implies the existence of this option, exemplified by the presence of a shotgun in the player's possession during the concluding sequence.

The Ramifications of War

The game criticizes the romanticization of war and the military-industrial complex, portraying a story that reveals the negative sides of military involvement. The made-up location of Dubai, a city destroyed by war, offers insight into the harmful outcomes of military operations. The game criticizes the idea of a fair and honorable war by depicting a corrupt and inept military leadership. The game also provides a meta-analysis of how war and violence are depicted in the media, emphasizing the desensitization and glorification of these topics. Encouraging players to think critically about these issues, Spec Ops: The Line presents a more nuanced and critical perspective. The white phosphorus scene serves as a direct allusion to real-world warfare and its consequences; however, the game also incorporates more subtle and nuanced elements that address the psychological impact of war. For instance, following the white phosphorus scene, Captain Walker's behavior undergoes a notable transformation. His language shifts from "target neutralized" to more aggressive expressions such as "Got this son of a bitch!", while his executions become increasingly violent. Yager Development's adept integration of gameplay and narrative contributes to the development of Walker's character, portraying his gradual descent into psychological instability, burdened by guilt and the perpetration of violence.

Narrative Structure

The line is an example of how a nonlinear narrative is employed to further strengthen the subversive quality of the game. As stated before, the beginning of the game is also the end but as an Avant Garde product of its genre, the writer of the game, Walt Williams also leaves the game on an open end, leaving room for the player’s imagination to differentiate between reality and dream. As mentioned before, towards the end of the game, it quite possible that Walker had died before the actual ending of the story. In Chapter 12: The Rooftops, during the turret section where Walker states “We did this already”, leaves room for interpretation. If Walker had already died during the earlier parts of the story, Chapter 12 would be that section, Walker’s dialogue hinting that he had already died in this section of the story and everything from that point of time to the end of the game in the Epilogue is Walker relieving all the traumatic experiences and the war crimes he had committed in an endless loop.

Conclusion

In an ever-evolving world of constant threats on the horizon, Spec Ops The Line is a game which mirrors the real world, satirizing military and American Interventionism, and the portrayal of Middle Eastern ethnic identities as a cultural standard of terrorists. All of which is done through a very conscious decision making upon its design of the gameplay mechanics and the meta narrative it employs which helps to separate itself from its genre competitors as it forces the players to question the game’s presented reality and ponder upon the virtual atrocities they have committed under the pretense of patriotism.

References

1. Keogh, Brendan. "Spec Ops: The Line's Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter." Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), 2011.
2. Smethurst, Tobi. "We Put Our Hands on the Trigger with Him: Guilt and Perpetration in Spec Ops: The Line." *Criticism*, vol. 59, no. 2, Spring 2017, pp. 201-221. Wayne State University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/criticism.59.2.0201.
3. Gingy. "A Story Analysis of Spec Ops the Line." *YouTube*, 12 July 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJTl_LesrWc.
4. "Questions and Answers on Israel's Use of White Phosphorus in Gaza and Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*, 12 Oct. 2023, www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/12/questions-and-answers-israels-use-white-phosphorus-gaza-and-lebanon.