



KILLING IS HARMLESS

A CRITICAL READING OF *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

By Brendan Keogh

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*At night you can see the lights sometimes from a passing tanker or trawler. From up on the cliffs they are mundane, but
—down here they fugue into ambiguity. For instance, I cannot readily tell if they belong above or below the waves. The
distinction now seems mundane; why not everything all at once! There's nothing better to do here than indulge in
contradictions, whilst waiting for the fabric of life to unravel.*

—Dear Esther, *The Chinese Room*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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—Brendan Keogh

FOREWORD

“The second wave of Western filmmakers (Sergio Leone, Sam Peckinpah, Clint Eastwood) turned our deep familiarity with the genre in on itself, addressing existential questions and examining the nature of violence. These films were radical departures from the Hollywood formula, not because they rejected the familiar settings or the guns or the hero/villain dichotomy, but because they made these the very subjects of their scrutiny.”

—[Michael Abbott, The Brainy Gamer](#).

“We shouldn’t be afraid to question our own medium. It is ours to do with as we see fit. There is no problem in questioning what is your own and asking what it is that you want to do with it, and are we necessarily doing the right thing with it? I mean, that’s the other great thing about mediums, is that there is no right thing.”

—[Walt Williams, lead writer for Spec Ops: The Line](#).

In his article “High Noon For Shooters,” videogame critic Michael Abbott notes that as the Western film genre matured, it turned its gaze inwards onto the Western genre itself to ask questions about the ways it depicted violence. This second wave of Western filmmakers were not necessarily trying to determine if what Western films did was ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but they simply wanted to create films that poked at the genre, interrogated it, unsettled it.

Abbott’s point is that the bulging bubble that is videogame’s shooter genre is heading towards a similar introspective turn. Only so many games can be absolutely uncritical and unthinking in the violence before players start to think more critically about what these games are asking of them and developers start to question just what they are creating. After so many years of shooters that don’t think twice about the excessive violence they ask their players to participate in, the shooter genre is set for a ‘second wave’ of games that, much like the Western film genre, turn the gaze back onto themselves. These shooters won’t necessarily be trying to determine if shooters are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but will simply want to create shooters that poke at the genre, interrogate it, unsettle it.

Of course, critics have been critiquing shooters for years. Even those of us that sincerely enjoy shooters can’t shake the feeling that there is something fundamentally unsettling about them. Even though most of the articles I write about shooters are praising positive things about them, I always feel obliged to add caveats. The *Modern Warfare* trilogy is an absolutely magnificent example of how to tell a scripted story in a videogame—even if that story makes absolutely no sense and the trilogy completely alienates and vilifies the stereotypical Russian and Arabic enemies in really problematic ways. The *Gears of War* games are a terrific example of how to convey a game’s tone through its combat mechanics, with its seminal cover system evoking the intensity and claustrophobia of an utterly futuristic war—even as the games laughably ask us to weep for a character’s dead wife moments after he trampled an enemy while stomping on his brains. *Far Cry 2*’s open vistas and persistently uncontrollable skirmishes give an intensity to its violence matched by few games—even as it chooses to depict a nation without civilians, a conflict without collateral.

There’s no shortage of shooters that want to be about *something*. But very few shooters are brave enough to look in the mirror—or to force the player that enjoys shooters to look in the mirror—and question what they see. Not to pass judgment. Not to ask them to change their ways. Just to understand what is going on here. To appropriate Abbott’s post, it is high noon for shooters to take a long, hard look at themselves.

Clearly, Abbott is onto something with his prediction. Not two months after he wrote his article Yager and 2K released *Spec Ops: The Line* and made me question everything I’ve ever thought about shooters.

The Line is a shooter about shooters. It makes some interesting commentaries on modern warfa and Western interventionism to be sure, but what I got out of it most were questions about the shoot genre itself—the questions that other shooters either willfully ignore or simply don't think to ask. Is really okay to be shooting this many people? Does it actually matter that they aren't real? What do it say about us, the people who play shooter after shooter, the people who have a virtual murder cou in the thousands of thousands, that these are the games we enjoy playing? What does it say about u as a culture, that these are the kinds of games that make so much money?

The Line isn't interested in answering these questions; it is interested in asking them. Or, rather, is interested in having its players ask themselves these questions. Just like the many times that Walk is forced to look at his reflection throughout the game, *The Line* forces the player to look at their ov reflection in the television set. It turns its focus outwards to not ask questions about shooters as the are designed but as they are *consumed*.

In *The Line*, the city of Dubai has been destroyed by the worst sandstorms ever seen by humankind. Before the storms intensified, US Army Colonel John Konrad volunteered his entire battalion—the 33rd—to aid in the evacuation of Dubai's citizens. When ordered to leave the city as the storm intensified, Konrad disobeyed and stayed in Dubai. His men followed him, and the entire 33 effectively defected from the US Army to assist the people of Dubai.

Presumed dead after no contact is made for six months, a distress signal from Konrad intercepted, and a squad is sent in to Dubai's ruins to look for survivors. This squad is Delta Squa lead by the playable character, Captain Martin Walker, and also consisting of Lieutenant Adams an Sergeant Lugo.

As Delta venture deeper and deeper into Dubai, they make difficult decisions that they then have live with. These decisions change them. They force the three men to look at their own actions in a ne light and to question everything their own identities are based on.

As the game progresses, Walker loses track of Delta's original orders to just make contact wit survivors, instead becoming obsessed with finding Konrad. What follows over the course of the gan is a slow and uncertain descent into madness—or, at least, that is how most want to categorise it. For me, I don't think 'madness' is the right word. What follows, for me, is a slow and uncertain desce into *darkness*. As Captain Walker leads his men into Dubai and struggles to deal with the violence h is 'forced' to commit, he doesn't so much go mad as come to terms with who (and what) he truly is.

Reality itself begins to unravel as the game progresses, and the game ultimately refuses to offer th player any clear answers as to what is 'real' and what is imagined by Walker. As I said above, *The Line* isn't interested in finding answers. Only in asking questions.

Much has been made by [both critics and the developers themselves to *The Line's* allusions to th film *Apocalypse Now* and the book *Heart of Darkness*](#). Colonel John Konrad is a clear hybrid of *Hea of Darkness's* author Joseph Conrad and the character Kurtz. The fact he is a colonel also makes a no to Colonel Walter Kurtz (the renegade figure of *Apocalypse Now* who is himself obviously inspired b the Kurtz character of Conrad's novel). It is misguided to say that *The Line* is 'based on' the previous works, but the questions it demands of its players are indeed influenced heavily by th questions *Apocalypse Now* asks its viewers and *Heart of Darkness* asks its readers. Like both of the *The Line* is not looking for easy answers but wants to expose complex dualities.

Critic Tom Bissell, [in his fabulous *Grantland* essay](#), notes that *The Line* is about Nathan Dra going insane. By this, Bissell is alluding to the voice actor that *Uncharted's* Nathan Drake, *The Line*

Captain Walker, and countless other videogame characters share in Nolan North. Bissell is suggesting that *The Line* is about watching the playable everyman character go insane. I would alter this slightly however: *The Line* isn't about Nathan Drake going insane; it is about how Nathan Drake was *always* insane to begin with.

By contrast, Walker may be the sanest character we have ever occupied in a shooter. The violence he causes actually affects him. He spends the entire game in denial, to be sure, but the acts themselves get beneath his skin and his consciousness to affect him on a fundamental level. What makes *The Line* so fascinatingly unique is the slow, gradual development of its characters. As Walker is forced to commit increasingly terrible acts, who he is changes. What he looks like changes. What he sounds like changes. Perhaps what is most disturbing about Walker is that the more damaged he becomes, the more like a *normal* playable character he appears. If Walker goes insane over the course of *The Line*, Nathan Drake and the many other playable characters that came before must have been insane long before we joined with them.

This is, for me, how *The Line* delivers its critique of shooters. We often joke that Nathan Drake, Niko Bellic, Marcus Fenix, Sam Fisher must be sociopaths to do what they do in their respective games. *The Line* suggests our characters are sociopaths *because* of what they do in their games, and then it draws attention to just who it is that is making these sociopaths do these things that they do: the player. Suddenly joking about sociopathic characters isn't so funny when we are indicted along with them.

Towards the end of this project, in the conclusion, I call *The Line* a “post-Bioshock” game. I typed that weird, pseudo-academic, and somewhat pretentious neologism and then just stopped and looked at it, trying to figure out what I meant by it. *Bioshock*, through its “would you kindly” reveal, made a statement about videogame play. It noted how, as a player, I have never made a choice in a videogame. It noted that every time I thought I was making a choice of my own free will, I was, in fact, just doing what the game permitted me to do. This is as true for *Sim City* and *Minecraft* as it is for *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dear Esther*.

Post *Bioshock*, then, I think there has been an absolving of the player's responsibility in gameplay alongside, paradoxically, a determination to hang on to the player's agency. That is, players still demand the ability to make ‘choices’ but refuse to accept responsibility for those choices. We are happy to assume that the responsibility for what happens in a game lies with the developer—it's Naughty Dog's fault that Nathan Drake is a sociopathic killer, not mine. I was just playing the game. I can't be held responsible for my actions. I had no choice.^[1]

The Line, I think, reacts against this. It agrees with *Bioshock* that the player, for as long as they choose to play the game, doesn't really make any choices that the game has not already made for them. However, unlike *Bioshock*, it insists the player is still responsible for these actions *because* of the one choice the player did make: to play the game in the first place. If we laugh at the way Nathan Drake is a sociopathic killer, what does it say about us that we are still happy to share his company for three games and dozens of hours?

Critics [Matthew Burns](#) and [Sparky Clarkson](#) have written excellent essays that, on the contrary, don't see *The Line* exposing the player's responsibility so much as retreating from the developer's responsibility. These are perhaps fair criticisms, and I think developers and publishers are, without doubt, responsible for the kind of games that get produced. Yet, I don't think that negates what *The Line* says so powerfully: we as players are responsible for what we play.

There is a loading screen tip towards the end of the game, when Walker's cognitive dissonance is nearing its most extreme: “To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To

kill for entertainment is harmless.”

To kill for entertainment is harmless.

These loading screen messages, as we will see later on, are kind of Walker’s subconscious. Some of them question his actions. Others, like this one, seem to cement Walker’s denial of what his actions are doing. It is what he tells himself in order to justify what he does. So often we justify playing shooters with “It’s not real” or “It’s just a bit of fun”. Or, for me as a critic, I justify my interest in them as “Well, I know they are problematic, but I still enjoy them. I would rather understand their enjoyment that dismiss them outright.”

The real trick of this loading screen message is that it doesn’t specify ‘virtual killing’ as harmless but “killing for entertainment” as harmless. It is still labeled as killing. The statement seems to imply that when we play shooters, we are, on some kind of metaphysical level, still killing. At first that seems ridiculous. Of course we aren’t ‘actually’ killing when we kill in a videogame. But after playing *The Line*, I’m no longer sure the answer is that simple. On some level of my brain, when I choose to pull my controller’s right trigger while the crosshair is aimed at a group of polygons made to look like a man, am I not choosing to kill someone?

This is the beauty (the ugly, ugly beauty) of *The Line*. It doesn’t pass a value judgment on shooters. It doesn’t just try to tell us that shooters are ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Such a message would be hypocritical and, by all accounts, *The Line* is a shooter. It does not attempt to offer an alternative to the shooter, nor does it suggest that we even need an alternative. Instead, *The Line* shows that neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ are adequate labels for the complex, contradictory position in culture that the modern shooter holds. Instead it asks us to simply think about shooters with a bit more nuance, about what it is we are actually doing in these games, about what is going on in our minds while we play them, and why we are playing them in the first place. That’s all. Just think. *The Line* isn’t interested in offering answers to only questions.

A METHODOLOGY, OF SORTS.

So what is this ridiculously long thing that you have just started reading? As a freelance critic, *The Line* is, at first glance, exactly the game I rely on to make my pitches to editors: it is a game about *something*. It should have been easy for me to take a part of it and write a thousand words or two about what it ‘means’.

But almost immediately I came across a problem: I want to say more about *The Line* than I could fit into one or even several essays. When I tried to write shorter pieces about *The Line*, I realised it was practically impossible to take any one segment or scene of the game and write about it in a vacuum separate from the rest of the game. Because of how the game works with the way its characters and themes slowly evolve over the course of the entire game, no one chunk of the game can accurately depict what the game is about. Instead, the entire arc, from start to finish, has to be examined.

I don’t just want to talk about broad themes. I don’t just want to try to answer the questions that the game forced me to ask myself. Instead, I want to understand how the game was able to make me ask these questions in the first place. To do this I need to talk about specific moments that can’t be easily separated from the context of all the other moments around them. So many themes emerge gradually over the course of the game (such as the progression/regression of the characters) that a critical reading of the game in its entirety is the only way I can think to truly critically appreciate *The Line*.

So that is what this is an attempt to do. Across the following chapters I will perform a “close critical reading” of *The Line*. Over the following chapters I will talk through an entire playing of the

game, from the moment I click on 'New Game' to the end of the epilogue. I will point out scene objects, sounds, and dialogue snippets, and I will discuss how I interpreted all of these. I will build up from these moments to see just how *The Line* asked the questions it asked. Or, more accurately, how it managed to motivate me into asking the questions I asked myself.

Ultimately, this is an act of interpretation. Like any reading of any text, it is necessarily a selective reading. The meanings I get out of it are unlikely to be precisely the same as those that you get out of it, or precisely the same as those that the developers intended to put into it. I'm not trying to claim that I know, objectively, exactly what *The Line* is 'about'. I am simply trying to understand my own experience with this game.

It's my hope that those readers who got *something* out of the game but can't quite describe what that something is will read this and find the words they need. I also hope that those readers who played the game and found it to be no more interesting than any other shooter can read this and see what others took away from the game. And, finally, I hope people who never plan to play the game themselves will be able to read this and get an idea of what the game is doing.

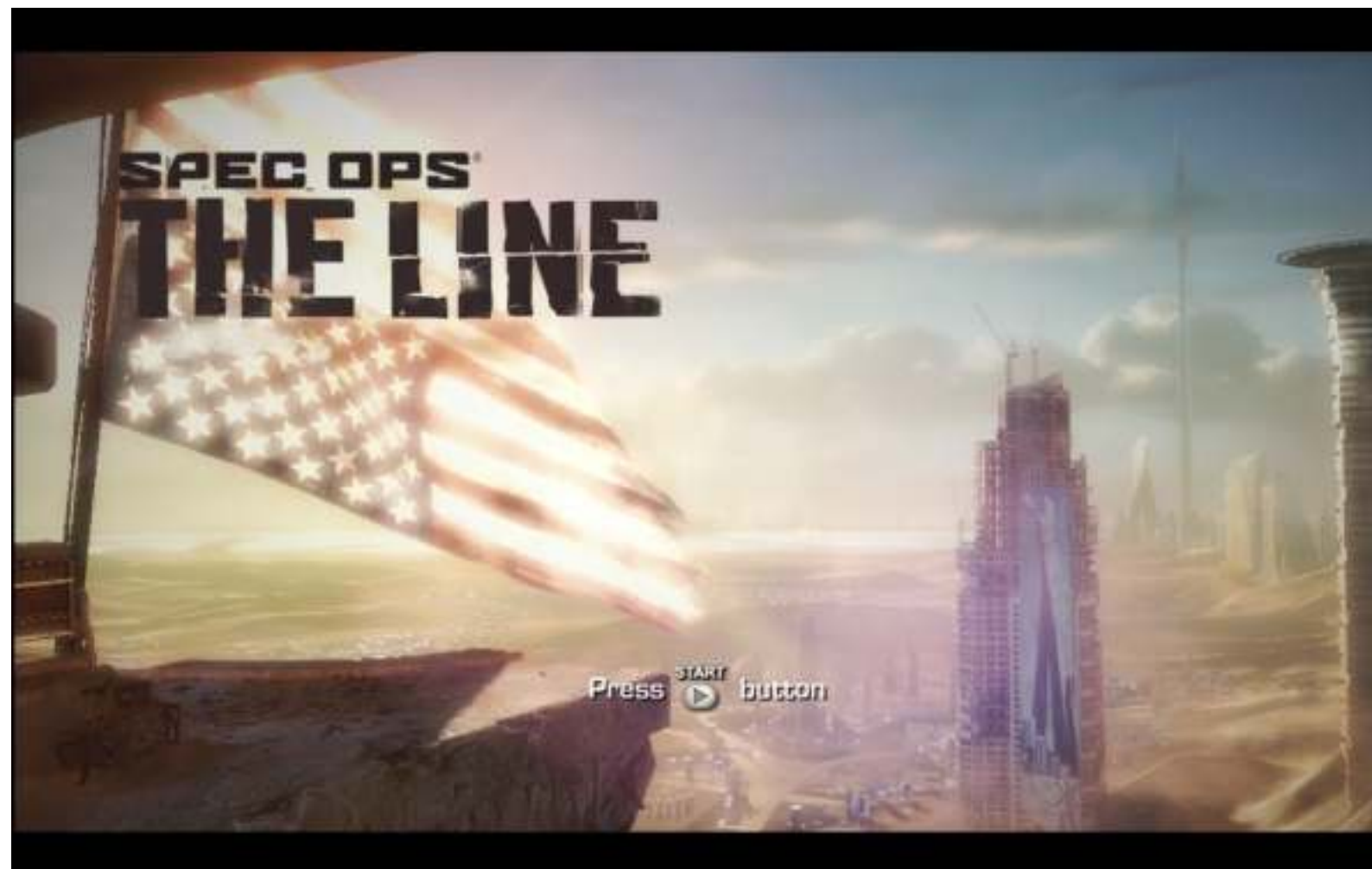
That said, it isn't my intention to spend 50,000 words trying to convince you that *The Line* is a great game. I think it is a *significant* game, and that is why I am writing this. However, I will try my best to acknowledge other people's criticisms and perspective. Similarly, it is also worth noting that many people will play the game as a generic third-person shooter and take away little more than that. I returned multiple times to a YouTube video series that plays through the entire game to check my references. The player that produced these videos spent much of the time trash-talking the NPCs and reveling in the violence with hardly a moment's reflection. [As he gunned down civilians towards the end of the game he shouted, "Die you faggots!" over his mic.](#)

But I don't think that other players getting nothing positive (or nothing at all) out of *The Line* negates the richly meaningful experience that many others and myself have taken away from the game. So what follows is not a defense of *The Line* nor is it a praise of *The Line*. It is simply a reading. It is an attempt to pick apart this game from start to end to try to understand just how I was so powerfully affected by it. For me, *The Line* made me question just what my responsibility is as a player of military shooters, and the following chapters are an exploration of *how* it made me ask those questions.

So as Walker leads Lugo and Adams in Konrad's footsteps into the unknowns of post-storm Dubai so I'm leading you, my reader, into the unknowns of a kind of videogame criticism I have never attempted before. I learned as much about my experiences with this game in writing the words on the following pages as I did in the three plays of the game that preceded it. I hope that you, too, will find something that may enlighten your own experiences of the game. So let's enter the storm and see what we learn about shooters, and what we learn about ourselves.

Welcome to Dubai.

[1]. Anjin Anhut has written a far more comprehensive comparative piece about *Bioshock* and *The Line* at <http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=7453>



If a picture says a thousand words, I could probably spend twice that talking about *The Line*'s menu screen. In the foreground, a shredded, battered American flag flaps limply, hanging upside-down over a pile of rubble. The perspective is that of standing on a cliff or balcony, and beyond the inverted flag I look out over the skyline of Dubai, half sunk beneath desert sand.

An upside-down flag can mean a variety of things, all of which are at work here. Most typically, an upside-down flag signals an SOS. Perhaps the 33rd are in distress; some Americans need you to come and save their souls.

The [US Flag Code](#) states that the US flag should *never* be flown upside-down except in dire distress. But maybe this flag is being flown upside-down because of the first half of that sentence: the 'never' rather than the 'distress'. Perhaps the 33rd have rebelled and defected. Are they calling for help or are they rejecting any affiliation? Or perhaps both? Later in the game, intel explains that Konrad has blacked out the stars of the US flag to create the Damned 33rd's own flag. It's a duality of meaning: distressed souls rebelling; rebellious souls in distress.

Beyond the flag is sand-sunken Dubai, the oppressive setting of *The Line*. *The Line* very much sets itself up as videogames's equivalent of *Heart of Darkness* or *Apocalypse Now*. Conrad's novel looks at the darkness in the heart of mankind, at how even 'civilised' man is still, under all those constructed layers, a beast of dualities. The 'other' of Conrad's time was the African that just so happened to live in the lands that the British Empire 'discovered' and colonised. In the time of Conrad's filmic revision of the tale, back in the 70s, it was the communist in Asia that sparked the fear of the other in western civilisation. Today, after 9-11 and with two ongoing occupations, it is the

Arabic other that captures the brunt of the Western zeitgeist.

Arguably, the United Arab Emirates' Dubai is seen as the West's foot-in-the-door into the Middle East. Or, at least, capitalism's foot-in-the-door. The West certainly doesn't 'own' Dubai, but Western culture and sensibilities are widespread. It's a Middle Eastern city where Westerners can feel safe, 'home,' like this is different from the rest of the Arab world. Dubai is a city that we look at and want to understand.

But in *The Line* the sands of that very Arabic world that terrifies the West have engulfed and destroyed Dubai, taking an entire battalion of US troops with it. Against the encroachment of the West, the world (at least, the natural world) has fought back.

So that is what you first see when *The Line* starts—before it starts, even: a blunt, pessimistic view of the fall of an expansionist empire, one covered in the sand it fears and crying for help even as it refuses any ties. Over it all, Jimi Hendrix's tired, warped, electric rendition of "Star Spangled Banner" plays on a record player that sounds like it is on its last legs. It's hard to tell what distortion is Hendrix's guitar and what is the music player dying—a distorted anthem for a dying empire.

Protest era music is a reoccurring motif of *The Line* in what is one of the game's clearest nods to *Apocalypse Now*. Not directly through using songs that were used in *Apocalypse Now*, but through using songs from around the same time, about the same war. The songs used throughout the game give a sense of irony to the bloodshed. At this stage, though, on the menu, Hendrix's warped take on the national anthem just says that America's iron grip on the rest of world is perhaps on its way out. Or, at the very least, it speaks to a decline in confidence, where even the national anthem comes in stuttered, uncertain bursts. This decline in confidence is something that Agent Riggs will allude to later as he lies dying.

*

Choosing 'New Game' allows the menu screen itself to act as the game's opening scene. Two helicopters roar over the camera, which lazily lifts up like a bloated fly and follows them down away from the inverted flag and towards the skyscrapers and ruin.



“I can’t shake him!” the pilot of one helicopter shouts.

The camera follows the smaller of the two helicopters as the other helicopter peppers it with tracer fire. I assume that the helicopter the camera is chasing is ‘my’ helicopter but before long it explodes and crashes, and the camera quickly rushes over to the other, the one I had believed to be the enemy.

It’s subtle, but it’s as though the game is telling me straight away that perhaps it is I who is the enemy in this game.

But I don’t really think about that straight away. I am behind a gatling gun with infinite ammo and there are helicopters to shoot.

It’s a generic enough opening sequence. I destroy attacking helicopters among the ruins of Dubai. A high pitch drone rings out and the game’s credits fade in and out of existence. Finally, as a sandstorm engulfs us, one of the enemy choppers spirals right into us and the screen goes black.

*

“Earlier...” the game says, and throws me back in time.

The opening cut scene after this introduction depicts a calmer time. A man who we are led to believe is Colonel Konrad is preparing his breakfast and reading his newspaper. Walker’s voice talks over the top of the scene:

“Is John Konrad the greatest man I ever served with? Well, I don’t know. There was this one time in Kabul where he dragged my bleeding carcass half a mile to an evac chopper. So maybe I’m biased. But the facts don’t lie. The man is a fucking hero.”

Straight away, Walker’s (blind) admiration of Konrad is set up. Just like Charles Marlow’s obsession with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Walker seems fated to follow Konrad anywhere. Straight

away Walker has admitted a bias and, just as quickly, dismissed that bias to objectively claim Konrad is a hero.

The song playing in the background is “R U Still In 2 It?” by post-rock band Mogwai. It’s one of their quieter songs. The silly, text-type title of the song mirrors the themes I take out of the entire game. *The Line* doesn’t state that shooters are bad. Saying such a thing would be hypocritical because *The Line* is a shooter. What *The Line* does say is, “This is what shooters do,” and then it asks constantly and persistently, if you are okay with this. Are you still into it? What about now? What about now?

*Will you still miss me, when I’m gone?
Is there love there, even when I’m wrong?
Will you still kiss me, if you find out?
I will now leave here but don’t follow me.*

All of *The Line* is about Walker following in Konrad’s footsteps—well after Konrad left Dubai behind himself, as the end of the game shows us. As Konrad steps outside, he passes a Japanese sand garden, content, calm, ordered. The lines perfectly raked around the standing stones. This leads to outside Dubai where Konrad stands on his morning balcony and looks over the ruins of Dubai. The sheer mediocrity of Konrad getting out of bed and starting his day jars against the devastation outside, as though to suggest that this is Konrad’s everyday existence. This is his empire. Over this, plays the distress signal that brings Walker’s squad looking for Konrad and the Damned 33rd: “This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai ended in complete failure. Death toll: too many.”

A new scene introduces me to the playable character that I will be joining on this adventure: Captain Walker, and his two squad mates and comrades throughout the game, Lieutenant Adams and Sergeant Lugo. Together they are “Delta Squad.” As they make their way through a sandstorm toward Dubai, more credits roll over their introductory banter, ending in “Special Guest: [My Gamertag].” Games adding ‘you’ to the credits are not a new feature. Games want to seem more active and immersive; they want you to feel like you are part of this. In *The Line*, the effect is not to say “you are a part of this” but to say “you are *complicit* in this.” There is no avoiding that I am in part responsible for what will happen in Dubai. My name is right there on the credits. I can’t deny it.

“Gentlemen,” Walker says as they come down a sand dune and the city appears in the distance. “Welcome to Dubai.”

THE EVACUATION



The Line starts slowly and generically enough by giving me some bits of cover and teaching me the cover controls. I have trouble with the controls at first; they are just similar enough to *Gears of War* to be familiar and just different enough to mess with my muscle memory.

When I say *The Line* is generic, I do not mean bland or unoriginal. I mean ‘generic’ in the semantic sense of ‘genre-ic’. It is a game that solidly attempts to fulfill the role and gameplay of a specific genre: the shooter. Similarly generic about the game is the use of Nolan North to voice the playable character Captain Walker. It is a running joke that Nolan North voices practically every videogame playable character. His use in *The Line* is very much intentionally generic. North is a talented voice actor, capable of a great range of different voices, but the voice he uses for Walker is the most typically North-ish, almost identical to that of Nathan Drake. Just as the game can only really examine shooters by being a shooter, the use of the most common and welcoming voice in videogames as my playable character lures me into feeling comfortable. It lets me think that I know exactly what kind of game this is, that I know what is going on. It lowers my defenses.

Even Walker’s name is generic. Walker. The one that walks. That is the role of the playable character: to be the player’s vehicle through the world and its narrative. And, all the way to his downfall, that is what Walker does: he walks. If he only ever stopped walking forward, so much carnage would be avoided. He just needs to stop walking.

Indeed, the very first landmark I walk past in the game after the initial tutorial cover is a STO

sign. Bright red, pointing right at me. STOP. Just stop. It's foreboding. It doesn't say "Do not enter" It just says STOP. ~~The choices I will make in this game are irrelevant. The only choice I can make is to play or to stop.~~

I ignore it. Of course I ignore it. Why wouldn't I? I move on.

Not five steps past the stop sign, Lugo says, "What happens in Dubai, stays in Dubai." It is the first of many quippy one-liners that the members of Delta say that don't seem significant at all until the second game. It's a play on a common enough saying, signifying that 'anything goes' in this insulated experience that is entirely detached from the rest of our life. "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Of course, this doesn't work out for Walker. As Konrad explains to Walker in one of the game's possible endings, once men like them cross a line, there is no going home. It's not simply a matter of what happens in Dubai staying in Dubai after Delta leaves and gets back to their 'real' lives. Rather, those who enter Dubai stay in Dubai, and those that leave Dubai are not the same people that entered it.

My squad passes an inverted US flag and some corpses of the 33rd, and walk down a highway jammed with the rusting cadavers of cars that tried to escape the sandstorms. Delta are set up as the most generic, clean-cut of videogame characters. Lugo reflects on how this wild goose chase is wasting the time of "three cold hard handsome killers like ourselves". Perhaps continuing the commentary on the unaware playable characters of most shooters, Walker asks Lugo, "Lugo, do you ever actually hear the shit that comes out of your mouth?"

"No sir," Lugo replies. "I do not. I find it messes with my rhythm."

Videogames are all about finding a rhythm. The rhythm of a kill streak, of an active reload, of goombas being knocked out with a kicked shell. We find a rhythm and then we lose ourselves to it. Sometimes I just 'zone out' playing *Super Meat Boy*, not even thinking about what my fingers are doing. If I realise I am not thinking, I start thinking about what I'm doing, and that is when I start to fail more, that is when I lose my rhythm. Similarly, if Lugo stopped to think about the things he says he would lose his rhythm that allows him to unthinkingly be a "cold hard handsome killer".

It doesn't take long for the squad to come across the distress beacon transmitting the message and a freshly killed US soldier. The camera zooms in pretty closely on the corpse's wide-eyed face. The death of this single US troop is meant to be shocking. Or, at least, we are meant to note that it is shocking for the characters. Walker noticeably flinches and looks away as the body collapses out of the jeep. For me, a dead body at the start of a videogame is about the least shocking thing I can think of. In retrospect, that says something about me.

Moments later, we confront the first signs of human life in Dubai. Three gunmen stand atop a bus looking down at us, assault rifles pointed. Walker takes cover as Lugo tries to reason with them in Farsi, to convince them we are here to help. Obviously, the gunmen are suspicious (for very understandable reasons, I realise as the conflict that happened here becomes clearer as the game progresses).

Because *The Line* is a generic shooter, I know that we have to begin shooting things sooner or later. I have played enough similar games to know that these negotiations are going to fail. I have played enough similar games to know I am going to shoot these men.

Likewise, Walker and Adams expect the situation to go downhill. While Lugo continues to negotiate in Farsi, Adams notes the bus behind the gunmen is filled with sand, and shooting out the windows would wipe them out. To ensure I know what he is talking about, the game paints a big, red flashing crosshair on the bus's window, almost demanding me to shoot it. Really, this is just a tutorial segment, teaching me a way to exploit the environment that the game will afford time and again

The lead gunman of the group, who has been listening to Lugo negotiate, looks over and sees Walker and Adams whispering. He assumes we are plotting to kill them and orders his men to open fire. Instantly, without even really thinking, I shoot at the big red crosshair and crush them under sand.

What's perhaps ironic about this scene is that we *were* plotting how to kill them. This conflict which precedes all the game's conflicts happened because this is a shooter and both Walker and myself assumed there would be shooting. There just had to be. In a strange kind of confirmation bias the game taught me how to be violent—the characters planned how to be violent—at a time when violence might not have been the only way out of the scenario. Like Neo knocking over The Oracle vase in *The Matrix*, the scene ended in violence because I knew it would end in violence.

This leads into the game's first shootout. It's a typical shootout, mechanically no different to what you would find in any other cover-based shooter and thematically no different to what you would find in any other modern military-themed shooter. Masked, generic Arabic men with scarves over their face shout in a foreign language as they shoot at us, and we three American men just put them down. We slowly move forward from one piece of cover to the next.

*

It's interesting just how removed these opening levels are in every way. The language Walker uses when directing Delta is neutral and disassociated from the violence he is asking his men to perform: "Fire on my target"; "Put him down." No talk of killing or of humans or, of course, of killing humans. Delta's responses are equally neutral: "Moving to clear". At this stage, the action is not about killing—it's simply about shooting at targets. At this early stage of the game, Walker and Delta are successfully able to 'other' the enemy as to not seem too human.

As [part of an interview with *The Line's* Lead Designer, Cory Davis, before the game's release](#), *Kickstart Screen's* Yannick Lejaq muses over the othering of enemy combatants in military shooters, saying that:

"A game writer once explained to me how his development team did its best to 'otherize' the enemy in the story it was trying to tell. Military shooters direct a terrific level of violence at more obviously human subjects than other genres of games. If people have any natural aversion to shooting one another—and many theorize that we indeed do—then a game has to convince you that killing these people isn't just acceptable, but desirable, even enjoyable. So the animators did the best to conceal the faces of your enemies even as they charged at the player, he explained, and the story piled on their atrocities that you witnessed."

There are countless examples of how videogames do this. Be it through repeated enemy models, balaclavas to hide faces, a lack of names, or a justification of the enemies as pure evil. In the *Call of Duty* games, moving the crosshair over any allied NPC will tell the player what that NPC's name is, humanising them. No such name appears for each enemy soldier gunned down without a second thought.

At this stage of *The Line*, the enemies are as typically othered as in any other military shooter. They are Arabic. They wear scarves over their faces. They speak in a language many players won't understand. They seem to be 'evil' in the way they attack us (even though we started it) and, in the next chapter, with what they do to the captured 33rd soldiers (even though they started it).

I've seen a lot of people left perplexed by these opening sequences, confused and troubled. "Is this it?" they ask on Twitter as Nolan North narrates his character's every whim while the player shoots waves of Arabic enemies, not sure what the big deal about this game is. Most games, even those dependent on a linear narrative, you can grasp pretty early on. The meaning is in the tone of the audiovisuals and the rhythm of the mechanics. You play a game for ten minutes or so, and you get the

vague idea of what 'kind' of game it is going to be. With *The Line*, it is not that simple. It has a slow pay-off. It demands an investment with the promise that it will give a return later on. The opening chapters are only meaningful when the later chapters subvert the promises and expectations the opening chapters set up for the player—namely, the promise that you will get to be a hero in the story. On their own, these opening scenes truly are generic and uninteresting. You could probably argue that this is poor game design. Personally, I think it is magnificently daring, and I wish more games would do it. *The Line* is not a static character going through a series of events; it is an evolving character going through a narrative *arc*. The opening chapters don't work without the later chapters and the later chapters don't work without the opening chapters.

The mechanics, however, do not evolve throughout the game. This will, I don't doubt, disappoint some players who will argue that it should be the mechanics that evolve, not the narrative—this is a *game* after all. For me, I think what you 'do' *does* change over the course of the game. Even if your actions remain the same mechanically, tonally they change drastically. *The Line* is a perfect example of how mechanics do not exist in a vacuum distinct from a game's audiovisual representation. As Walker changes, as his situation changes, what I do with him inevitably feels different.

What I am doing is the most conventional of cover shooting. Since *Gears of War* popularised cover shooters (after Playstation 2 titles *Winback: Covert Operations* and *Headhunter* introduced the idea) the genre has received much criticism for being conventional and boring. It's an unfair judgment, I think—one based solely on the mode's popularity. Cover shooters capture that exhilarating sensation from when I was a kid, playing with stick-guns or water pistols in the back yard. We would flatten us against walls like covert commandos, rolling from our cover behind a drainpipe to the security of a tree, shooting at each other opportunistically. In cover shooters, using cover has always been important, but in cover shooters take the spectacle of having your back to the wall as bullets whiz past and make that central to the experience. It's not just tactical; it's exciting.

The Line's particular brand of cover shooting reminds me most of *Uncharted*. There's an opportunistic desperation to *Uncharted's* gunplay where Drake is running from cover to cover, flinching from bullets and cowering from grenades. He tosses away guns as often as he reloads them. As Drake, I am not stoically holding the line, but frantically trying to survive against impossible odds. It's a tone of cover shooting I thoroughly enjoy, but which felt entirely out of place in *Uncharted*. As has been frequently commented upon, killing hundreds of men as Nathan Drake never feels right. *The Line* then, gives *Uncharted's* combat a context. Just like Drake, Walker scavenges in the sand for fifteen more bullets, cowers behind walls, swears as he runs out of ammo. It's not just Walker's voice that carries the ghost of Nathan Drake; it haunts his body, too, travelling up the cable and through the controller into the player's hands. Walker *feels* like Drake.

The Line is solid and generic. It does this to lull us into a false sense of security before it pulls that safety blanket out from under us and forces us to see the people we are shooting as human beings. It will, in the coming chapters, make them American. It will make their screams English. It gives us opportunities to hear their conversations. A recurring motive of this reading will be the way *The Line* refuses to let me other the 33rd troops when I start fighting them.

Of course, it is worth noting that while the enemies I face become less othered as the game proceeds, the Arabic people are never less othered themselves but merely replaced with more relatable Western enemies (more relatable to a Western audience, at least). On one hand, this is certainly problematic. Nothing that *The Line* does works to de-otherise Arabic people so dramatically othered in other shooters and media more broadly. But, on the other hand, by replacing them with US soldiers halfway through the game, *The Line* forces the player to realise they are—have always been—shootin

humans. How many players draw that connection back to consider the ‘insurgents’ of the early level as human, however, is questionable.

There is one small nod to the human nature of these Dubai natives, however. Right at the start, right after I shoot my first person, Lugo asks who these people are, and Adams notes they are the refugees. Refugees.

It’s striking to me for a couple of reasons. Firstly, they are refugees made homeless in their own homeland, not refugees as we commonly perceive those that cross the borders into our developed nations. In Australia, over the last decade there has been a particularly vile discourse around refugees where that word is regularly replaced with “illegal immigrant” in a rhetorical move to criminalise and dehumanise them. ‘Refugee’ is too forgiving. It suggests we have a responsibility to help them. So we try to avoid it because our government wants the votes of the fearful masses that don’t like brown people. It’s interesting, then, to see the word used for the masses you are gunning down in *The Line*. Its use is strangely personalising, even if it is sandwiched between uses of the word ‘insurgent’.

*

The violence gets a bit more intimate when the game teaches me how to perform executions and melee attacks. Pressing ‘B’ knocks an enemy down, but they get back up if I don’t put them down permanently by standing over them and pressing B again to execute. Walker kneels down and punches the man in the face.

Standing back up in a small cut scene, he stretches his muscles and takes some deep breaths. Already, he looks exhausted from the skirmishes so far. Already, the fighting is having a greater effect on his body than it would on most playable characters that shrug off all injuries and pressures. “I thought we were rescuing people,” Walker pants.

An explosion in the distance gives us a new objective as American voices call for help over the radio. At last, ‘real’ survivors, right? Not just these typical Arabic insurgents but Americans with names and ranks. They need to be rescued!

Several more skirmishes teach the remaining mechanics of the game. There’s the ability to give Adams and Lugo orders to kill specific enemies. It’s a simple and intuitive ability: hold down right bumper, paint an enemy, and Walker will tell the best-suited ally to take out that enemy. If the enemy is far away, he’ll tell Lugo to use his sniper rifle. If Walker has his silencer on, he’ll tell Adams and Lugo to take targets out quietly. At this stage this is nothing special, but it is something else we will watch evolve along with the characters.

We approach a large plane crashed in the sand, clearly brought down by the storm, and flank the insurgents who have cornered the American squad. As we fight our way onto the plane, one of the three remaining Americans is shotgunned in the back. Then one is executed and the final survivor is taken hostage. We try to save him but ultimately fail. Before he dies, though, he tells us they have taken another soldier to “The Nest”. Outside, tracks are heading north deeper into Dubai. Walker decides to follow them.

At this point, it’s worth noting how much it seemingly matters that Americans are being killed, and how little it matters that we are slaughtering all these Arab refugees. This will all change when the mirror is later turned squarely on my own actions. For now, it leads Walker and his men deeper into Dubai—bucking our orders to just make contact and get out—as the game leads me into a false sense of security, into thinking I know what to expect from this experience.

THE DUNE

Chapter Two sees Walker and his men start to enter Dubai properly, climbing up off a sand dune onto the helipad of a mostly-buried skyscraper. Logos on the wall suggest the building houses a television network.

As we approach the adjacent circular, glass-walled building from the outside, I start finding boxes of grenades. This sets up another generic learn-how-to-use-this-mechanic section where I'm encouraged to lob grenade after grenade at groups of insurgents hiding in the next tower.

At this point, I start to hear what sounds like the first proper music since the game commenced. There have been moments of faint background guitars or the constant drone over the opening helicopter sequence, but here there is an actual, diegetic song playing from somewhere within the building. At first I can't figure out the actual song, but it is clearly a 60s (or thereabouts) protest-era song.

There's an easy irony gained from using protest-era songs to the background of conflict footage. Here I am, tossing grenade after grenade at these men while what I soon figure out is "Hush" by Devo. Purple plays over the top:

*Hush, hush
I thought I heard her calling my name now
Hush, hush
She broke my heart but I love her just the same now
Hush, hush
Thought I heard her calling my name now
Hush, hush
I need her loving and I'm not to blame now*

The idea of the song's narrator being lured by a woman they know they should stay away from seems particularly telling as Walker bucks his proper orders, delves deeper into the city, and starts lobbing grenades at refugees.

On some inner, subconscious level, it's meant to make us feel uneasy about our actions. Here I am just lobbing grenades at people while this song plays the vaguest of critiques about being lured in. But further, we are meant to disregard that urge to question our own actions as quickly as it arises. When Lugo disbelievingly asks "Does anyone else hear music?" during the skirmish, Walker responds "Who cares? Shut up and keep fighting!" as I lob two more grenades. Like Walker, the shooter player is assured that they don't have to worry about ethical quandaries, that they can just keep shooting. Forget the music and the questions it raises. Who cares? Just keep fighting.

*

The Line does this strange slow-motion thing with headshots where if you shoot someone in the head, time briefly slows down for about one second. The audio slurs, time drags, and blood blooms as the bullet connects with the target's head, and they start to collapse. The same effect occurs with a direct hit from a grenade. Time slows as the limbs are torn from the body in a brief red puff of blood before speeding back up as the disturbed sand leaves yellow clouds hanging in the air.

Lots of games reward headshots or otherwise 'good' kills. Whether it is the congratulatory bonus points of *Bulletstorm* or just the quick, efficient kill of any game that has you shooting humanoid

One that always felt a bit strange to me was the 2010 revamp of *Medal of Honor*. The game itself claimed to show how America's current wars are 'really' fought [1]—solely from the perspective of American troops, of course. Beneath all the jingoism there is something of a heaviness to that game, a solid 'thump' to the violence that is entirely non-celebratory and almost somberly respectful. That is until you get a headshot. Every headshot is rewarded with a medal. This medal doesn't do anything; it just tells you that you successfully shot some guy in the face. It's weird and self-congratulatory. Like a hardy pat on the back for killing a human being with the least amount of bullets possible. Those things are expensive, you know?

In *The Line*, the brief slow-down does the same thing, but as the game goes on and time slows with every single headshot and grenade-enabled body-rending, what at first feels like stylish, romanticized 'good' shots just become unsettling. It's like I'm *A Clockwork Orange*'s Alex having my eyelids forced open to confront the ultraviolence I commit. I don't want to see the slow-motion any more, but I am forced to.

Contrasting (and perhaps diminishing) this is the progress bar that pops up in the corner every other headshot that informs me of how many more headshots I need before I get the achievement for 25 headshots. While the slow-motion tries to rub my face in what I have done, the progress bar tempts me to do it again and again. Like the game wants me to admit that I love this terrible thing.

Attacking the news station, lobbing grenade after grenade after grenade (as the segment is clearly set up for me to do), time plays like a broken record. Fast as the insurgents see the grenade, yelp, and start to run. Slow as it explodes, picks up their bodies and throws them in pieces across the room. Even the Deep Purple song speeds up and slows down in time with my violence. In fact, it *is* a broken record. Looping over and over until I get through this segment.

*

On the far side of the news station, a PA announcement plays out of the same makeshift speakers as the song: an American voice, claiming the 'ceasefire' between the 33rd and (one assumes) the refugees is off. But it sounds strangely happy about this fact. As Adams says, this is when it officially gets weird. He insists to Walker that they've already completed their mission objective of finding survivors and that they should radio for evac.

Walker still says no. Not until we find Konrad and the kidnapped soldier. It's always one more thing, one more step deeper into Dubai.

*She's got loving like quicksand.
Only took one touch of her hand
To blow my mind and I'm in so deep
That I can't eat and I can't sleep.*

From here, I fight my way across a few more rooftops to a final battle where we are pinned down in an ambush as a storm approaches. Two chapters into the game, and it's all still very much run-of-the-mill shooter with the occasional allusion to what is to come. During this final battle of the chapter, Lugo shouts "Die you fucker!" as he drops an enemy. It's easily missed over all the gunfire, but it's surprising to hear, and is the earliest sign I've noticed of Delta's sheen beginning to crack. Adams berates Lugo for his language, and Walker tells him to keep his cool.

Eventually, the storm approaches, rips out the floor from underneath us, and plunges us down into the top of a buried skyscraper.

[1]. A promotional video for the game, titled “Authenticity” is exemplary of this claim: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn1cobOotz8>

UNDERNEATH

Chapter Three is perhaps the least interesting of all of *The Line*'s chapters, not at all helped by a rather large dose of ludonarrative dissonance not too far into it. Or perhaps it is no less interesting than the two chapters that came before it, and at this stage I am just tired of such conventional, generic gameplay. In the next chapter, finally but slowly, it will start to get interesting when Delta actually starts fighting the 33rd and their ambiguous ethical standing is interrogated. In Chapter Three however, we have been fighting generic Arab insurgents for a while now, and it is easy to begin wondering if stuff is actually going to change.

After falling through the ground at the end of the previous chapter, Walker and his team are now in a buried, fancy hotel of grand pianos, marble floor, florally columns. It gives me a weird kind of vertigo where I realise that until this point the ground I had been walking on was metres above the 'real' ground, atop a mountain of sand that was burying entire skyscrapers. (Somehow the fact Walker had pulled himself up onto a helipad at the beginning of the previous chapter was not a blunt enough hint).

Because a door is locked, the squad must hold their ground against waves of insurgents jumping down through the hole in the ceiling. Yet, the moment they drop C4, Adams is able to shoot the door open in a second for our escape. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, and is perhaps the single most annoying part of the game for me.

Further into the hotel, after a brief silence, Adams ponders if we should try to stop fighting against the refugees: "Anyone else feel like we should talk to these guys again? I mean we did come here to save them." It's interesting to see an in-game character acknowledge that all this violence started over a simple misunderstanding.

"Man we are waaay past that point," replies Lugo. "These people don't want to talk. They are out for blood."

Walker agrees with Lugo, saying that the "best we can do is find the 33rd before these people tear them apart,"

These people.

It's perhaps at this point, seconds before we see the first 'bad' American that the schism between 'us' and 'them' is at its widest. Soldiers are people worth saving. The refugees are *these people*, the people who are completely distinguishable from us. These people who are 'out for blood' when it was us who were plotting how we might be able to kill them before the first shot was even fired.

It stands out starkly on my first play, the fact that one of my characters would even think to question our actions. But I as a player can't help but agree with Walker. What choice do I have but to keep going?

*

In the same room is a collectible piece of intel. Intel works as kinds of hidden items to collect, and also gives insights into various perspectives of the Dubai mess, much like *Bioshock*'s tapes give insights into the characters of Rapture.

Various characters are recorded on the intel scattered throughout the game, but Walker himself voices this piece. It's hard to tell if this is just meant to be Walker's thoughts based on the objects he just found, or if the intel is his report recorded after this mission is over. In this piece of intel Walker

muses over how the locals are melting down silver jewellery and other valuables to create silver bullets, like the kind one would use in a fairytale to kill a monster. “I guess that makes us monsters” shrugs off Walker, adding as an afterthought: “At least a soldier’s life doesn’t come cheap.”

Here, what is important isn’t who is right or wrong, who is humane and who is monstrous, but who is ‘worth’ more. Walker doesn’t mind that the soldiers are monsters in this analogy, as long as killing them is expensive.

And then that is almost instantly complicated and turned on its head in a cut scene when an American walks by, clearly in league with the insurgents, giving them orders, and alluding to how he will violently interrogate the US prisoner from the 33rd.

Of course, it was always somewhat predictable we would end up fighting Americans. The name ‘Konrad’ might as well be Kurtz. But now we have an American sided with the locals talking about torturing another American. Things are getting complicated. The generic black-and-white setup of the game—of every shooter—is starting to crack.

After more fighting, Walker and his squad come to an elevator shaft going deeper down into the buried hotel. The entire game can almost be seen as a series of geographical highs and lows that mirror Walker’s own emotional journey. Delta starts atop the dune, confident and self-assured. Slowly they begin to descend—both into the depths of themselves and of Dubai. They eventually end up back on rooftops, then plummet down to the underground. Again and again Walker finds something to hold onto; again and again it is ripped away from him—usually with another layer of flesh in tow.

Walker wants to hurry: “Every minute we waste could mean the difference between a soldier going home alive and going home in a bag.” The phrase is drenched with irony. Walker is wasting his time in Dubai, and countless soldiers will be dead because of his future actions. Every minute that Walker wastes in Dubai will mean another soldier going home in a bag.

“Let’s see what’s down the rabbit hole,” he says and starts climbing down. An obvious *Alice in Wonderland* metaphor, perhaps, but appropriate, as clear dichotomies such as good/bad and real/unreal begin to break down as Delta descend into the city.

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