



culture, ludonarrative, must play, virtual worlds [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=7453>] , October 6, 2012 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=7453>] by Anjin Anhut.



This article is filed under [game criticism](#) and [game semiotics](#).



I will make comparison of two on the surface very similar player journeys, with one key distinction at the core.

Bioshock asks and answers all existential questions within its game play mechanics for you. While Spec Ops The Line pushes you – the player in front of the screen – to ask and maybe answer the questions for yourself. ...and therefore turned out to be one of the most interesting and perspective-changing interactive experiences I had this console generation.

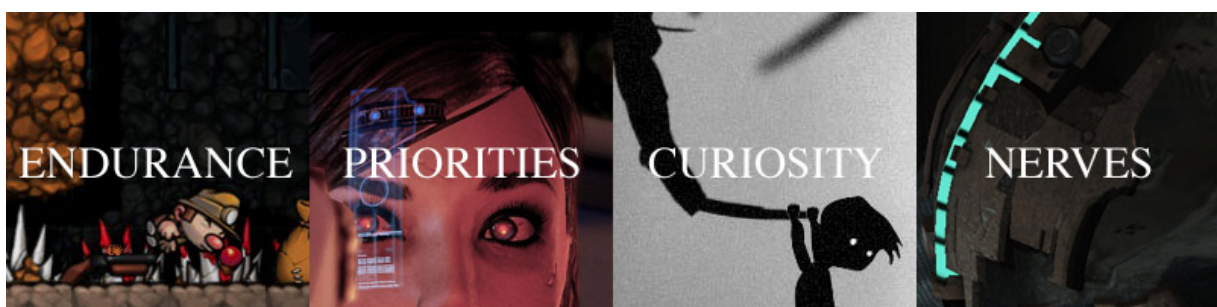
After Spec Ops:The Line, for me, there is no more going back. My relationship with games has changed. Profoundly.

Warning, this article is full of spoilers.

Video Game Existentialism

Most game designers aim at creating a state of oblivion, making the player get lost in the world and colors and mechanics, immersed, in state of flow, hopefully completely forgetting the controller in their hand and their butt on the couch.

To me, the most intresting and intense gaming experiences are the ones that make me self-concious. They challenge me with more than skill tests, logical conundrums or quizzes... they challenge me to explore who I am. Of course there is still some translation work involved, the virtual game world is an abstarction after all. Still, if a game makes me discover something about myself, imho it becomes truly meaningful. More meaningful, than any high score could be. It becomes a personal Voight-Kampff test basically.



Bioshock was one of those games. Amongst others, like Mass Effect, Limbo, Shadow Of The Colossus, Red Dead Redemption, Dead Space, Spelunky, Dragon Age 2, Alice – Madness returns, The Darkness... and now – very high on

Why compare Bioshock and The Line?

Well, the structures of both games and how they lead up to the existential revelation in the end are very very similar. There are major parallels in the way the both stories unfold from a bird's eye perspective. But even under close scrutiny, looking at individual elements, it becomes evident, that both games basically provide the same context for the player's actions and decisions. ... but from there The Line takes you to a place where Bioshock didn't dare to make you go.

Into The Heart Of Darkness

Here is a quick overview of the key sequences in both games I'd like to discuss:

label	in Bioshock	in Spec Ops: The Line
The Birth	crashlanding with plane into ocean	crashlanding with helicopter into desert
The Creator	introduction to Andrew Ryan via ingame film	introduction to John Konrad via cutscene
The Realm	introduction to Rapture via wideshot and ongoing revelations of corruption during campaign	introduction to Dubai via wideshot and ongoing revelations of corruption during campaign
The Trial	You decide: save or harvest Little Sisters?	You decide: who will live and who will die?
The Revelation	Ryan confronts you with your actions	Konrad confronts you with your actions
The Judgement	You kill Ryan	You kill Konrad/Yourself

I gave labels to the key sequences I'd like to discuss here and found, that treating the game sequences as metaphors for stages of a life's journey in reference to christian mythology ends up being rather appropriate.

Please note, that – while the credits roll after The Line's conclusion – the campaign in Bioshock actually continues. There are a couple of mission following the big cataclysmic revelation. They basically contribute nothing to the experience than a completely unnecessary, undeserved and conciliatory winning scenario, which only serves to make the game get in line with normative expectations. So, I'm going to treat the conclusion in Bioshock as final as it is in The Line.

Anyway, let's begin.

The Birth

We crash-land in a hazardous environment (desert and ocean), instantly struggling for survival, with only one option to save ourselves: find shelter (in Dubai or Rapture). I both games we know basically nothing about the character we play before we crash land. Live basically begins here. Surviving an accident like that often gets referred to as "being reborn" or "getting a second chance for life". Note: In The Line the order of events was shuffled to start the game with the crash.

*Three ~~kings~~ soldiers,
wandering through the
desert, following a
~~shining star~~
distress beacon.*



The Creator

Very soon after the crash landings in both games – before we start exploring the cities – we get introduced to the creators.

The Creator is a superiorly powerful, intelligent and ruthless being. Godlike. The evil of the world gets blamed on him, because he supposedly created it. Though he shaped the world around us and speaks to us, we never meet the creator until the end of our journey.

Here Ryan is the one who envisioned Rapture, while Konrad is the one who established his own brand of law and order in the ravaged Dubai. In both games missions are structured around finding them and dealing with their followers, while being appalled by the environment, they helped create.

Konrad and Ryan both share another eerie similarity: They are both not only the architects of the unfolding scenarios, they are also both named in reference to the writers, who created the books, which inspired the games. John Konrad represents Joseph Konrad, who wrote *The Heart of Darkness* and Andrew Ryan (anagram for *We r Ayn Rand*) represents Ayn Rand, writer of *Atlas Shrugged* (amongst other relevant books). They are literally named after the actual creators of each respective universe.

More on the creators and their similarities and function in *The Revelation*.



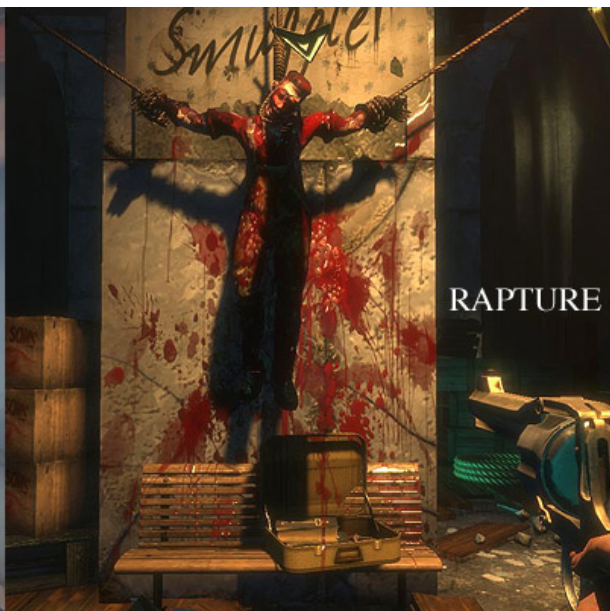
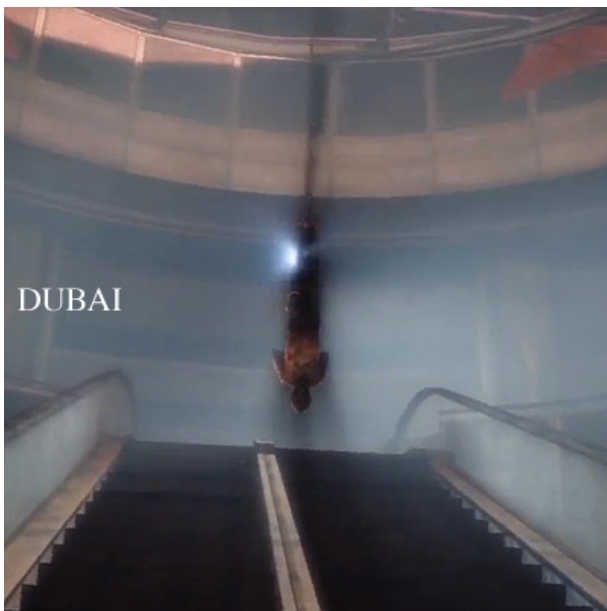
In both games, when the city gets revealed, the creator is superimposed over the world he shaped... In *The Line* Konrad is standing on a balcony sharing his top-down view with us, while in *Bioshock* Ryan's voiceover accompanies the skyline shot.

The Realm

In each game we get a wide shot of the city at the end of the introduction of the creators. This connects the creator with their respective cities and allows us to see the vast structures, we are going to explore.

Both – Dubai and Rapture – are originally symbols of wealth, decadence and kapitalism, featuring lush architecture, art and expensive interiors... which then got ravaged by a major catastrophe. In Dubai a massive sandstorm struck, while in Rapture everyone got mad. The fall of man, another biblical motif, a paradise lost. Two cities drowning in sin and getting divine punishment for it. Both cities are surrounded by an endless empty deadly terrain – an ocean and a desert – effectively turning the cities into prisons with their citizens starting to literally tear each other apart.

In *The Line* the biblical motifs are much more obvious with the sand storm mimicking the great flood and the paradisaic imagery of the resort hotels you fight in. Other small signs, like the classic music played when ~~God's~~ Konrad's ~~Angels~~ soldiers rain ~~Judgement~~ bullets from the ~~Heavens~~ helicopter. The track played by the radioman during the helicopter attack is Giuseppe Verdi – *Dies irae* (see [youtube/wiki](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)).



Common crucifixions in both cities.

The Trial

The more we descent into Dubai and Rapture the more we get exposed to the corruption, the madness and the sin... and we are confronted with it, forced to react to it, fight it. The people around us are depicted as wrongdoers... monsters.. and it is our trial not to become one of them.

This is where we experience the first core distinction between the two games, which will be very important once we start sorting things out after The Judgement: In Bioshock you are told where to go and you are never explicitly confronted with any questions, regarding how okay it is to gun down Splicers. They are the enemy and you need to take em down. The splicers are all corrupted by their own desires, to be beautiful, to be strong, to be smart. They used Adam – an omnipotent chemical with a not so subtle biblical reference in its name – to modify their god-given bodies and paid a price. The game never ever calls into question if any of them actually deserved a bullet to the head.

On the other hand in The Line, your character is the one deciding what to do and when, you aren't following orders, you are giving them. And there are many many occasions, where your actions in combat result in explicitly unjustified killing. Some inhabitants of Dubai are just scared of you, follow wrong orders... some aren't even involved in hostile activity and you still kill them.



In both games we get confronted with morally ambivalent proposals. In Bioshock we repeatedly encounter Little Sisters and are asked to either save them or harvest them, including respective button prompts. The moments of moral decisionmaking are encapsulated, have a clear beginning and end and are reserved for special characters. There are no accidents in Bioshock.

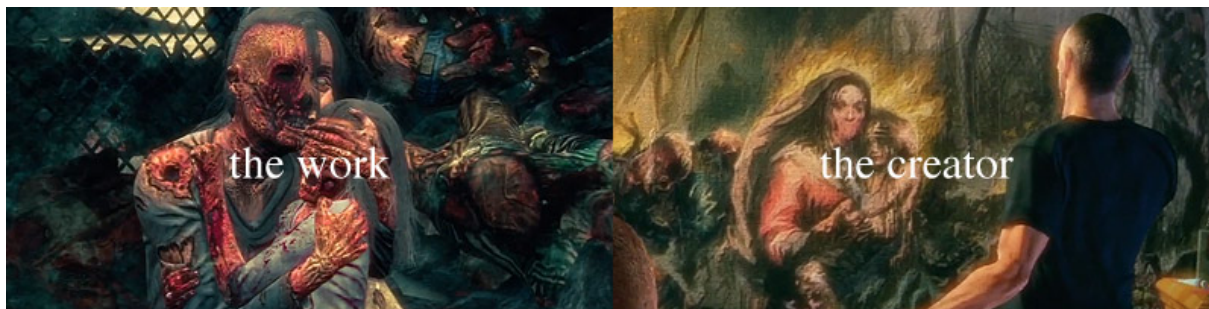
In The Line the moral choices are much more organic and varied and are triggered via basic game mechanics, like shooting or moving. Also even the predetermined next steps in many missions get treated by NPCs as morally questionable. Your partners often disagree with your avatar's orders and Konrad explicitly reprimands you for your actions over the radio.

The Revelation

After witnessing the horrors, after surviving endless onslaughts of enemies, after countless kills we performed to get here,

we finally meet the creators.

Konrad and Ryan are both indulging themselves in recreational activity (Konrad paints, Ryan plays golf) and both are calmly expecting us and both are well kept and look healthy. (In contrast to the citizens they rule over, who live in the dirt, suffer, die, starve and kill.) We have to go upstairs to talk to them. All this symbolizes how much they are above things.



When we meet Konrad, the creator idea gets accentuated by him painting a previous scene of game, with additional religious imagery no less.

Then Ryan and Konrad drop expositions bombs and this is where it gets interesting.

The revelation in Bioshock:

Ryan discloses to you, that you are a brainwashed agent. You are conditioned to follow commands, which start with “Would you kindly...,”. He philosophies about free will and how free will makes you a man, not a slave. “A man chooses. A slave obeys.” Then the man chooses to force you to beat him to death with his own golf club, by saying “Would you kindly kill.”

The revelation in The Line:

Konrad turns out to be already dead for a long time and the Konrad you talked to all day and who is now right in front of you is a hallucination. A figment of your mind, which conveniently provided a villain for you, so you could go out on a violent power fantasy rampage and feel like a hero doing it. He reveals, that the decisions you made are meaningless and the only thing you could have done to not perpetuate the horror and not become a monster yourself is stop marching on.

The Judgement

In Bioshock you kill your creator and have as much responsibility for this kill as you have for all the others before... none. You then move on to break the mind control, because this is where your responsibility lies. At least this is the road the game leads you on. You have no say here. You continue to follow the voices in your radio until the credits roll, just that they now don't use the “would you kindly” phrase anymore.

The Line gives you a choice. Do I wait until the Konrad-figment shoots me, do I shoot him or do I shoot myself? It's your choice, you can die right here or go out scott free. Though how much of this is not just happening in your head, since you have been talking to a ghost the whole game is another issue.

Gooooooooooooood Morning, Dubai!

I woke up.

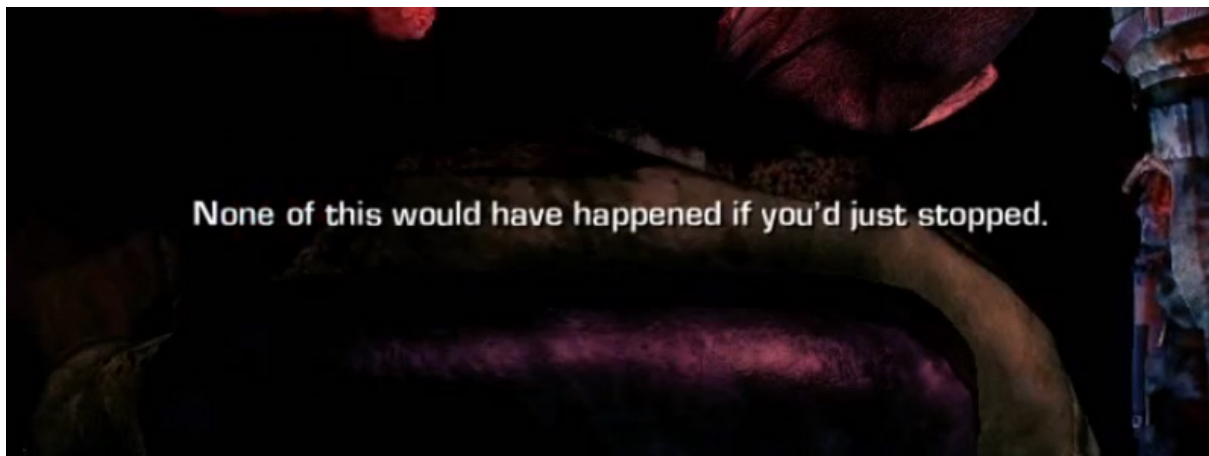
Both games guide you through a hypothetical extreme situation and let you express yourself within the limitations of the game mechanics and campaign design. Both games define spreading destruction as a method for survival and finally a path to redemption. They conveniently give you an already damned world and god-character to blame it all on, so you can feel like a hero.

It's a diligent construct to rationalise “shoot-first-ask-later”-mentality in a medium which is nowadays technically able to treat those issues with way more thought, than it cares to do. But Spec Ops:The Line has the guts to let this construct fall apart.

When I first played Bioshock, it flashed me. What you say, I was blindly following orders and haven't even noticed it? The experience Bioshock gave me actually changed my relation with games. A bit at least. I now no longer just accept the orders barked at me in radios and head sets. I'm now self-conscious as part of the system. I understand now that game devs in general expect me to respond as reliable to button prompts, level design, enemy units ect as they expect it from their KI or GUI. And sometimes I actively try to undermine that... see what happens.

In hindsight though the delivery was kinda clumsy and very much on the nose. After all they pulled a rabbit out of a hat without establishing the hat first. It was an answer without a question. And the fact, that the resolution was much as dictated to me as the criticized earlier commends where... Well, the game did not give me a framework to actually benefit from what I have learned in that moment. The game did not let me put their lesson into practice.

Today – thanks to Spec Ops The Line – I know now, that it is not the game's job to allow me to do what I think is right... it's mine. Like Konrad said:



And like Ryan said: A man chooses. A slave obeys. After that revelation in Bioshock I could have chosen to stop playing. It would have been the only way to no longer be a slave.

Video games are many things. Some are quick tests of skill and brains about arranging colored squares into groups, just fun, some are sport simulations, rather trivial, ...and some are interactive hypothetical situations regarding ourselves, our societies and norms.

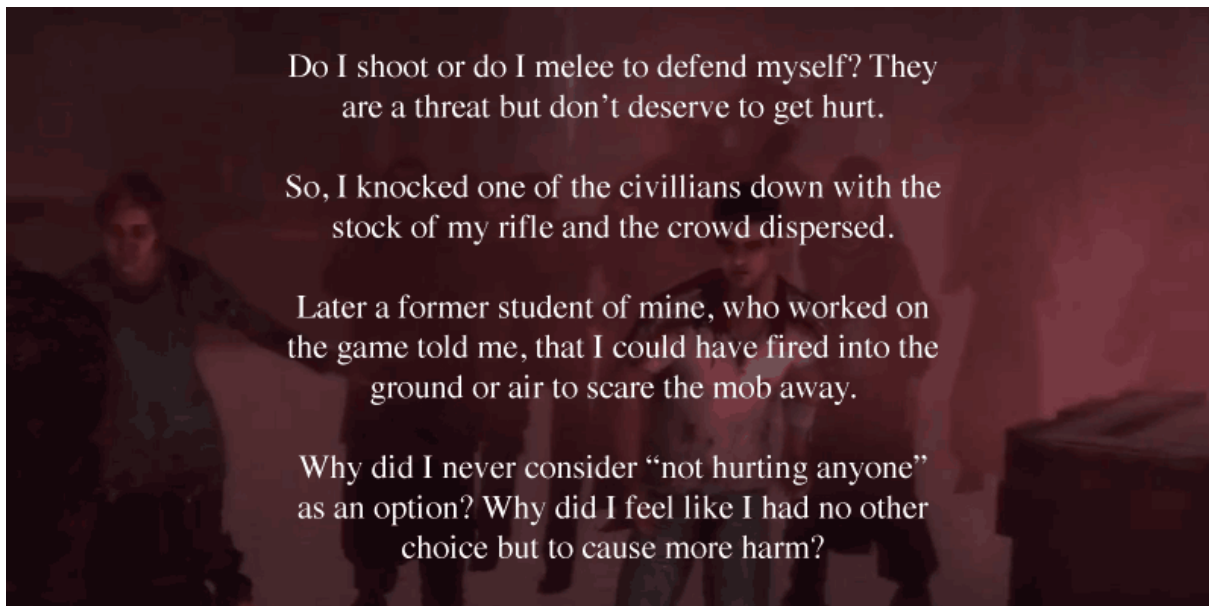
How many games made me do things in this hypothetical space, which I didn't feel like doing? How many kills did feel odd to me, even within an exaggerated fictitious war scenario, but I still marched on? How many days did I spend just mindlessly following waypoints, screen prompts and nice voices? How many times did I accept pretty girls void of any personality as a bribe to save the day? In how many games did I reluctantly accept racial stereotypes as just what the enemy looks like?

I know. Everything is fictional. All happens in a virtual space. But how long are we going to let games tell us to do things we don't want to do? ...to accept rewards we don't want to have? ...to accept ideas we reject?

Where and to what degree do we accept this bullcrap outside of games?

I'm fed up. To be honest with myself, I kinda already was for a long time. I'm still going to enjoy a good mindless carnage, exploitation and brick-stacking. But games, that only work when I turn my brain off and only work when I turn my morals off... I'm fed up with me playing by their rules.

I'm fed up with harming people as my only option:



I'm fed up with moral choices, which in the end amount to nothing but a narcissistic exercise:



One specific moral choice situation in The Line was nothing more than a hallucination.

Spec Ops woke me up... by pointing the finger at me for playing along. ...for keeping on pressing buttons, even if I didn't approve of the results they triggered. ...and for not pressing the one button I may have should.



Cheers.

Related posts:



10 THOUGHTS ON “A MAN CHOOSES A SLAVE OBEYS”



Juan Francisco

on **July 11, 2013 at 6:30 am** said:

I'm really sick of people pointing out that there's not much of a choice on The Line. The point of the game is reinforced by this, because at the time I first played it I nor most of you minded if there was or wasn't a choice, even Walker says it

Lugo: "There's always a choice"

Walker: "No there's not"

The game forces your hand in the same way as any other tiresome military shooter does, which, and I repeat, was the point



someone

on **October 11, 2012 at 4:17 am** said:

"SSo nothign should ever be made to ask the tough questions, you should be absolved of all responsibility in what you consume?"

If the game is so awful that people shouldn't be playing it, then why make it in the first place?

"We need more things that ask of us if simply following instructions should override our better judgement."

And what is the alternative? There isn't one. You either use the phosphorous or you sit there until the end of time.

"The Line appears to be a title that actually tries to reconcile in-game actions with its narrative, which isn't that common."

You kill hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers in Hollywood action scenes and get an achievement for headshots. Taking a bullet to the face is fixed by sitting behind cover for a while. Truly, the game shows the horrors of war.



JRC

on **October 11, 2012 at 2:16 am** said:

Thank you for this very thought-provoking and well written article.



UnSubjectg

on **October 10, 2012 at 4:06 pm** said:

A good article.

I haven't yet played Spec Ops: The Line, although it is on my list.

The Line appears to be a title that actually tries to reconcile in-game actions with its narrative, which isn't that common. For instance, in Red Dead Redemption, the narrative plays you as a reluctant gunslinger being manipulated into doing things you don't want to do (you don't want to be a killer anymore, you want to be a farmer) but the game has you kill opponents by the hundreds without batting an eye. (By the end of my play through, I'd popped two of the "Kill 500 enemies with..." achievements, so my 'reluctant' cowboy had killed well over 1000 people!).



Lupin Chevalier

on **October 10, 2012 at 8:53 am** said:

"A game or movie that is designed to be turned off should not be made. The developers should instead go flip burgers or something."

SSo nothign should ever be made to ask the tough questions, you should be absolved of all responsibility in what you consume? Also there's a difference between making you ask a question and indulging in delight at something.

Film's like Hostel and those you mention seem to glorify in it's subject, while The line was specifically designed to have a moment of realisation at what you are doing and thinking and have done without question.

We need more things that ask of us if simply following instructions should override our better judgement, Choosing not to indulge at the same time is a perfectly valid choice, and one that was pointed out by the game itself at the end, but as the author mentioned a solution not usually allowed was implemented in the game, the one of simply firing into the air, but the habit of not being given such an option was not even attempted.

There is value in media that asks you why you are doing thigns, not condemning but asking you if you are really okay with what you are doing and what it means.



someone

on **October 9, 2012 at 9:25 pm** said:

"When I first played Bioshock, it flashed me. What you say, I was blindly following orders and haven't even noticed it?"

This is not meaningful, because you are not given any choice in the matter. You are effectively watching a movie.

STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl punishes you with a false ending if you're impatient and rush to Pripjat as soon as possible (which is what I did, and didn't know until years later that I had been tricked). That is meaningful, because it's the player's own fault. He could have paid more attention and visited a certain someone. But no, gotta go fast.

"Today I thanks to Spec Ops The Line I know now, that it is not the game's job to allow me to do what I think is right... it's mine."

You can only do what the game allows you to do.

"In how many games did I reluctantly accept racial stereotypes as just what the enemy looks like?"

They're not "racial stereotypes." Muslims in the Middle-East are 99,99 % non-white. It's completely incidental and nobody's fault, so I don't know why you're even bringing it up.

"Why did I never consider "not hurting anyone" as an option?"

Why would you have? They became enemy combatants the moment they killed your squad mate, started throwing rocks at you and prevented you from leaving. They had a chance to back down and leave, but they didn't. What made them any different than the hundreds of soldiers and insurgents you had mowed down before?

"Spec Ops woke me up... by pointing the finger at me for playing along."

I've never heard the developers point the finger at themselves for making the game in the first place. I think that if you watch movies like Hostel, Irreversible or The Human Centipede, there is something wrong with you and people should really be wondering why you aren't turning off the movie, but The Line never goes anywhere near that far, and the game's constant nagging about Walker making all the wrong choices is not backed up by the story as well as the developers think it is.

A game or movie that is designed to be turned off should not be made. The developers should instead go flip burgers or something.



Sean Phillips

on **December 31, 2012 at 11:37 am** said:

The game is not designed to be turned off, it is designed to point out that the player is the one who chooses to play the game (all games). It's a reminder that if a game is asking you to do something you don't want to do, for no good or given reason or purpose, you can always turn it off. You are not a slave to the mechanics, despite any intentions on the developers' parts. And so of course the whole point of the "why did i never consider not hurting anyone?" question is that the game has given you no reason to beyond the very uncomfortable feelings.

Also, the demographic makeup of Dubai is more diverse than "99.99% middle-eastern". In fact, as of 2009, Arabic people

made up only 17% of the population, with a slightly higher number tracing lineage back to Iran, and the vast majority being made up of Asian peoples. And given that the game takes place in the future (albeit the very near one), one would expect even further diversification.



Roach
on **October 8, 2012 at 8:31 pm** said:

The "Enemies" in games are not seen as people.
Most of the time enemies are just a gameplay mechanic (even in Multiplayer games).

i think it is veeery difficult to design an enemy that isn't a mechanic.
Especially thousands of them.



Roach
on **October 8, 2012 at 8:08 pm** said:

Really awesome Article.
Now that you pointed it out. i should have stoped playing spec ops.
The whole game i thought "I dont want to do this" "I dont want to hurt anyone" but i didnt stop.
Maybe im too familiarized with the concept of killing people in virtual worlds. thats just sad.



Anjin Anhut
on **October 8, 2012 at 8:14 pm** said:

Hey... yeah, maybe we are. I for example have no clue whatsoever how many kills I perform in any firefight of any game, except it tracks it for me. 10 guys, 20 guys, 50 guys? I don't feel bad or something but I really believe that games could technically and conceptually treat the issue waaaaaaaayyyy more thoughtful and impactful than they most of the time do. I think it's time to make more games where enemies are more than disposable targets.