game environments

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"Do you feel like a hero yet?" – *Spec Ops: The Line* and the Concept of the Hero

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Abstract

Working from a Folklore Studies and Cultural Studies perspective, I discuss the concept of a traditional hero-narrative as well as what makes up the hero-character. I then analyse the 2012 PC game *Spec Ops: The Line* as a modern contribution to hero-narratives, and as a conscious digression from them. My discussion of the hero-character is based on the work of notable Folklore scholars such as Propp as well as scholars from related fields, for instance Hourihan and Hosiaisluoma. I also discuss some particular aspects of analysing the narrative of a computer game – an interactive form of media – as well as briefly touching upon the intertextual context of *Spec Ops: The Line*. In my analysis, I come to the conclusion, that *Spec Ops: The Line* is a conscious subversion of the modern military hero-narrative; it at first sets up expectations of adhering to the genre and theme, which it then flaunts and actively criticises. The protagonist, Captain Martin Walker, starts out a heroic character, but soon fails this role. His final role in the narrative ultimately depends on the player's choices in the game's final chapter.

Keywords: hero, protagonist, villain, interactivity, narrative, military, gamevironments

Introduction

Much has already been written about the 2012 PC game *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager 2012) and its genre-critical subversion of the modern military shooter. However, while the game might be quite thoroughly discussed and critiqued in terms of its symbolism and genre-defiance, there are certain perspectives on the title, which have not yet been explored. One of these is looking at the game's narrative through the

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lens of the traditional hero-story concept, and analysing whether – and how – *Spec Ops: The Line* adheres to this type of narrative or not. I hope that this will show not just that the game subverts the concept of the traditional hero-narrative, but in fact how it achieves this, and how the developers have reworked the hero-narrative to tell the complex story presented in *Spec Ops: The Line*. As the character Colonel John Konrad at one point questions the player-character Captain Martin Walker about – the direct quote which I have included in the title of this article – one is indeed led to wonder whether Captain Walker truly is a hero or not.

I will first briefly outline a few theories about the concept of a hero in narratives, specifically such that are used by scholars of Folklore Studies. I then intend to apply these theories to *Spec Ops: The Line*, discussing whether, why, and how the main character, Captain Martin Walker, conforms to the role of a hero. Since I will be analysing a computer game – an interactive form of narrative media – I will need to take into account a few unique aspects thereof, primarily the interactivity itself and its effects on the narrative. I will discuss this, as well as the concept of intertextuality as it pertains to *Spec Ops: The Line*, before my analysis.

The Concept of a Hero

When thinking of the word *hero*, we often think of it as a fairly obvious one. Emergency personnel such as firefighters and EMTs who save lives are called heroes. Social and political figures who speak out on ethical topics and defend marginalised groups of people can be called heroes. In any given narrative there is often one or more heroes involved. Mythical tales like *Beowulf* or *Gilgamesh* feature heroic main characters. Contemporary genre-fiction novels and films often feature clearly defined heroes and villains, as do many games. In for instance *The Legend of Zelda* series the

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player-character Link is the hero, as he fights the evil that is threatening the realm, and this fight is the focus of each game's story. In the *Sherlock Holmes* stories the eponymous detective is naturally the hero, while his nemesis professor James Moriarty is the villain. There is an entire TV show titled *Heroes*, playing on the themes of the popular superhero graphic novel genre wherein the eponymous heroes are humans who gain supernatural powers.

However, is the term really that clear and defined? For example, is Henry Dorsett Case in William Gibson's (1984) *Neuromancer* a hero? He is the novel's protagonist after all, but he is also driven mostly by self-interest, and he does not display many obviously heroic qualities. On the other hand, Case does get entangled in the plot and ends up solving the mystery, and ostensibly even makes morally salient choices along the way. Defining him as a hero might be debatable, though he is clearly the protagonist – in casual parlance, "the hero of the story". In Tom Stoppard's (1966) absurdist play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the eponymous characters, while technically protagonists in some sense, are intentionally meant to not be the heroes of the story. One could ask the same question about several other principal characters of various stories, challenging their roles as assumed heroes merely by virtue of being the main characters of their stories. Because of this, I intend to make a few points about the meanings and interpretation of the word *hero*.

Dictionaries define *hero* in a few different ways, but they tend towards two main descriptions – an admirable person of exceptional courage and ability, or the principal character of a given story. For instance the Collins English Dictionary (2012) defines *hero* as follows:

1. a man distinguished by exceptional courage, nobility, fortitude, etc.

2. a man who is idealized for possessing superior qualities in any field

3. (classical myth) a being of extraordinary strength and courage, often the off-spring of a mortal and a god, who is celebrated for his exploits

4. principal male character in a novel, play, etc.

The aforementioned division into exceptional people and principal characters is clearly shown. A gender-bias towards male is also evident, though this is likely due to the feminine word *heroine* often being used for female heroes. However, a notable point on a hero-related gender-bias is also found in Margery Hourihan's (1997) analysis of heroes, which I will discuss further below. At any rate, the word could be interpreted as either of the two aforementioned meanings. There is also the logical connection that characters are often chosen as protagonists for a given narrative on account of them exemplifying exceptional qualities, thus making the two meanings somewhat conflated – a given character is heroic in nature because they are the hero of the story, and vice versa. In this text, I will primarily be discussing the concept as a noble person of exceptional ability, because that definition is most relevant and useful to my analysis. If referring to the main character of a narrative, I will primarily use the word *protagonist*, to distinguish the concept from that of a *hero*.

In his work *Kirjallisuuden sanakirja* (transl. 'Dictionary of Literature') Yrjö Hosiaisluoma (2003, 822-823) defines the word *sankari* (transl. 'hero') similarly, delineating the word into the formal protagonist of a narrative as well as an exceptional person representing noble values. He goes on, however, to emphasise that a hero is not always a good nor morally salient character, as an evil person or a formal *antisankari* (transl. 'antihero') can take up the role of principal character (Hosiaisluoma 2003, 56-57). This antihero is a principal character who fails to uphold

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heroic values, but acts out the part of a hero in a given narrative despite his own lacking qualities. Hosiaisluoma (2003, 738-739) further presents the concept *problemaattinen sankari* (transl. 'problematic hero'), a tragic character who in a morally greyscale world searches in vain for absolute ideals such as good and evil, a sense of belonging, or even just a cohesive identity for himself. The problematic hero, failing to find what he searches for, undergoes an existential crisis and experiences alienation from the world around him.

The Traditional Hero – a Brief Overview

Folklore Studies has a long tradition of focusing on structural theories in regards to narratives, that is to say the mechanical building blocks of events, which together form a given narrative. This is largely owed to Vladimir Propp (1928) and his seminal work on the subject in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. In this study, he analyses the various possible components of the classical folk tale, and among these components is the virtually omnipresent concept of the hero. This definition of a hero is essentially, what we would call the protagonist or the main character. However, Propp's (1928, 12) theory focuses on what he calls functions, which is to say actions performed by the characters as defined by these actions' significance for the narrative as a whole. Thus, the hero is defined through his or her actions in relation to the narrative, not unlike how other structuralist theories, for instance Roland Barthes' (1977) work, focus on actions first and characters only as defined through their actions. Since Propp's (1928, 9) functions are quite many and broad, and all of them are not necessarily present in a given narrative, I will not present each one here separately, but rather discuss them as they become relevant for my analysis. What is notable, however, is that while Propp's functions are all quite broadly defined so as to encompass any given tale, they do delineate a fairly strict set of character-relations, such as for instance the villain deceiving and/or causing harm to someone

close to the hero (ibid., 16-20). These relations, formed through the actions that make up Propp's functions, greatly aid in comparing a given narrative to his theory.

Since *Morphology of the Folk Tale* is specifically based on the study of folk tales, one could wonder whether the theory is even relevant when discussing modern popular culture narratives. However, in his forewords to *Morphology of the Folk Tale* notable Folklore scholar Alan Dundes (Propp 1928, xiv) points out that Propp's theory can indeed be applied not only to folk tales but also to literary fiction, film, television series, graphic novels, and so on. According to Dundes, Propp's theory suggests not only borrowings in content between various forms of narrative media, but also similarities in structure.

A theory somewhat similar to Propp's structuralist work is the comparative mythology scholar Joseph Campbell's much-debated concept of the Monomyth. However, as the validity and relevance of Campbell's work has been heavily criticised, it may not be fit to be used as a theory in and of itself. For instance, Robert Segal (1997) is among the foremost critics of Campbell's theories and their academic application, pointing out that the theory tries to be both too universal and too specific in its interpretations of meaning. The quite heavy leanings on Jungian psychoanalysis has also been pointed out as among the shortcomings of Campbell's theory. That said the Monomyth is interesting to note due to how some creators of popular culture narratives intentionally or unwittingly choose to adhere to it. For instance, George Lucas admits to having been inspired partly by Campbell's Monomyth in having modelled the original *Star Wars* trilogy after the hero's journey as presented by Campbell (Lucas and Moyers 1999). Therefore, while the theory itself may not be applicable or even useful in any direct way, it is relevant to note it as an incidental influence on various contemporary works of fiction.

Robert Segal (2000) also discusses the various types of heroes in his book *Hero Myths*. He mentions for instance mythical heroes such as the warrior Sigurd from the Icelandic Völsunga saga, historical figures perceived as heroic such as George Washington, and even popular culture icons such as Elvis Presley, who according to Segal become a type of hero in the eyes of people. While not closely related to my analysis, Segal's work is interesting to note because it discusses how actions lead to perceived heroism when one accomplishes great and noble feats, whether it is during a career as an entertainer and cultural icon or as a political and military leader in times of trouble. The concept of historical and military heroism is closely related to my analysis, as I hope to show in my analysis below.

The Hero as Value-Judgement

One way to define heroes in narrative is found in Margery Hourihan's (1997) *Deconstructing the Hero*, which is one of the theories I will be using throughout my analysis. Hourihan analyses traditional adventure narratives and presents a theory on how traditional heroes can be defined. She also discusses what these definitions and boundaries for the hero-characters represent – what social and moral values are found embedded into the framework of a traditional hero.

In her work Hourihan (1997, 58ff) purports that the traditional adventure-narrative hero is a representation of – and a maintainer of – the western patriarchal moral system, where the white, western-culture male is morally superior to the rest of the world. The traditional hero is usually young, white, a person of rational thought (as opposed to emotional sensitivity), and is a part of, or at least in service of, the western hierarchical form of society. He is often of noble descent or otherwise part of a higher stratum of society. As an example of a hero not born of nobility but still in

support of it, Hourihan (1997, 63) mentions Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*. The eponymous hero of the novel, while born into a poor family, ultimately comes to the realisation that the English Victorian class-based society is the natural and correct form of social existence. The hero supports and indirectly represents the "establishment" and those in power, despite not originally hailing from it himself.

The aforementioned representation of western society is usually achieved by setting up a duality between the hero and his foes (Hourihan 1997, 15ff). The hero's struggle of good versus evil is moulded to include whatever values are preferred, versus their diametric opposites. In Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* the young hero Jim Hawkins and his companions are described as gentlemanlike, properly behaved, civilised, rational and so on, whereas the pirates against whom they are pitted are described as filthy, violent, barbaric, irrational, and above all else foreign (Hourihan 1997, 146). Hourihan (1997, 118ff) goes on to discuss specific examples of opposite value-pairings, such as civilisation versus nature and primitiveness, rationality and scientific progress versus emotionality and chaos, or peacefulness and order versus violence and destruction. The villains of a given story are also often symbolic representations in and of themselves, such as wild animals or native tribes representing nature and primitiveness, magical beasts representing the "unreal" and the supernatural, or pirates and bandits representing lawlessness and immorality. As mentioned, the hero's opponents can also be ostensibly part of western civilisation, such as for instance Le Chiffre in Ian Fleming's James Bond novel *Casino Royale*; this type of villain symbolises a hidden force actively working to destabilise western society from within (Hourihan 1997, 144).

The concept of foreignness, for example as I mentioned regarding the pirates in *Treasure Island*, is more thoroughly discussed in for instance Julia Kristeva's (1980)

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Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, which talks about the concept of abjection –
the subjective horror towards something perceived as "other" or "foreign" – and its
psychological and literary meanings and applications. I would not be able to do
Kristeva's text full justice in this article, so I will simply point to it as further reading
on the topic of otherness and foreignness in literature.

The Hero as Moral Compass

A particular point Hourihan (1997, 98) mentions is that "[t]he darker side of the
hero's commitment to action is the naturalization of violence". Heroes will often
perform actions that are seemingly immoral or evil, but since these actions are
performed in the service of a noble cause, any moral quandaries surrounding such
actions are disregarded. Hourihan (1997, 104) mentions the demonising of the
hero's foes as crucial to being able to justify horrendous actions such as violence and
outright killing. When for instance James Bond kills dozens of the villain's henchmen,
the act of killing is not seen as problematic because it is directed at the enemy and
done in the service of good. The henchmen were helping further the villain's plot and
thus became demonised as allegedly valid targets, and furthermore Bond also mostly
only kills in ostensible self-defence. And of course, saving the world from various
megalomaniac plots is clearly a good cause. However, the problematic part of
immoral actions of the hero stems from less clear-cut scenarios, as I hope to present
in my analysis.

In an article in *Psychology Today* professor of psychology Carolyn Kaufman (2012)
discusses villains in fiction, as well as their ostensible motivations. Kaufman criticises
the notion of monolithic evil in fiction. Villains would according to Kaufman not
believe themselves to be evil, but rather see themselves as for all intents and
purposes good and just; any morally reprehensible acts they commit would be

reasoned to be necessary for their allegedly noble goals. Kaufman's article is primarily intended as a tool for writers of fiction to better understand how to write believable, multidimensional villains. On that note, many existing narratives lean heavily on the notion of a villain who realises they are the villain, or who at least acts out of some illogical desire to just watch the world burn. Even the aforementioned James Bond stories tend to revolve around the villain's plans for world-domination or similar megalomaniac goals of conquest or destruction. With that in mind, the moral rationalisation of a non-monolithic villain as presented by Kaufman's article would be eerily similar to how Hourihan describes a typical hero's moral rationalisation. Any immoral deeds, whether done by the hero or by the villain, could from a certain perspective be explained away as necessary in the quest for good, whether by the world around them in the case of the hero or by the villain themselves when rationalising their villainy. This implies that the believable, authentic-seeming villains discussed by Kaufman are not just the counterforce to the heroes, but rather a mirrored perspective where the character themselves think they're doing the right thing, but they end up committing evil deeds. This also brings to mind the somewhat well-known quote from Christopher Nolan's (2012) film *The Dark Knight Rises* by the character Harvey Dent, "You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain." The implication here is that even when you attempt to do good you will inevitably end up committing some evil deeds, and that these evil deeds add up over time to ultimately tarnish your heroism.

In his article "Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry", Arthur Thomas Hatto (1989, 223ff) discusses the concept of heroic ethos, which is to say the concept of what makes up a hero from an ethical and moral standpoint. Part of this is the act of elevating any atrocities committed by the hero into a sort of formalised violence, thus distinguishing it from conventional brutality – and thus also making it essentially

immune to any moral criticism. This is reminiscent of what Hourihan (1997, 96) says about heroic acts, in that they tend to require extraordinary effort to perform and thus become more admirable. Essentially, a hero's violence becomes noble not only because it is done in the service of a good cause, but also because it is seen as challenging, a test of the hero's worth. Hatto (1989, 228) also implies a sort of fairness or even an unfair situation to the villain's advantage, since if the hero's violence was committed easily or conveniently, it would be less heroic. Stabbing someone in the back or employing subterfuge to gain an advantage feels unheroic, because such acts circumvent a given challenge instead of meeting it head-on and overcoming it through exceptional ability.

I do want to mention the presence of so-called trickster-heroes in traditional folklore. These characters, usually wily young boys, do indeed overcome their foes – usually giants, trolls, or the Devil – through trickery and deceit. However, these are seen as a separate sub-genre of folk tales, and these heroes are clearly depicted as physically feeble but cunning youths being resourceful in the face of otherwise impossibly monstrous opponents. Conventional, adult heroes who fight opponents they are supposed to overcome in fair and noble confrontations are expected to not resort to trickery in order to retain their heroic nobility.

Interactivity and Narrative

When discussing the narrative of a computer or console game, there is a unique dimension not present in other forms of media – interactivity. Computer games are by definition an interactive medium, and even the most narrowly linear game storylines will offer some modicum of interaction for the player. Nick Montfort (2007, 176) also notes this aspect in his article on analysing narrative in digital media. So

how would one go about discussing a narrative, if the narrative is prone to change due to player interaction? This is especially important when conducting any kind of structural analysis, as the structure may vastly change in response to the player's actions.

To answer that question one has to first understand how interactivity can affect the narrative in a game. The Finnish gaming journalism magazine *Pelit* has featured a pair of articles about narrative in games (Ilomäki 2014a, 2014b) in which an expert panel of gaming journalists discuss various forms of interactivity and their possible effects on a given game's narrative. The articles divide a game's content into the pre-written narrative part and the interactive part, which they dub representation and simulation respectively. These two are said to exist in strict opposition to each other, where the simulation as enacted by the player interferes with the representation as envisioned by the game's narrative designer. Ian Bogost (2006, 67), professor of interactive computing at Georgia Tech, also notes that storyline and gameplay mechanics do indeed inevitably interfere with each other.

The aforementioned articles (Ilomäki 2014a, 2014b) discuss three broad categories of interactivity as follows: very limited or no interactivity, a compromise of some interactivity, and full interactivity in regards to the narrative. The first category would best be exemplified by for instance *To the Moon* by Freebird Games (2011), as the player essentially only presses buttons as prompted and nominally controls the given character from point A to point B; the narrative will play out exactly alike every time. The second category represents the design solution found in a vast array of games, for instance the popular *Bioshock* by 2K Games (2007), where the player is offered some freedom and options, but these are mostly focused on how exactly to overcome the non-narrative combat-segments the player is presented with. This type

of game's narrative will mostly play out as pre-written by the developers, though it often features some token choices the player can make, typically presented as "moral" choices of some sort. This category is probably the broadest and fuzziest, as it would logically encompass anything from the aforementioned *Bioshock* franchise to something as narratively interactive as *The Witcher* series by CD Projekt RED (2007). However, the same point persists in both extremes of the category – there is a pre-written narrative structure, which is to some partial extent influenced by the player's choices. Lastly, the latter category contains games which essentially forgo any formal "representation" – any pre-written narrative – altogether. Many of these games rely on procedural generation of content, and lack an actual storyline altogether, save for a possible framework-story to motivate the character's adventures to come. The player is often, in a sense, allowed to create entirely their own narrative as they go, whether in abstract mimicry of real-world history as in for instance *Civilization V* by Firaxis (2010) or in a mock-up of frontier survival as in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) and similar survival-type games.

80

Of these three broad categories, *Spec Ops: The Line* belongs to the second one, that of only some interactivity, and exists quite solidly in the less narratively interactive end of it. The game contains a pre-written set of events and encounters which you cannot deviate from, and most of the input you are given pertains only to the combat-encounters which intersperse the largely non-interactive narrative segments. There are a few exceptions to this, but they are of the token moral choice type, which have little to no bearing on the outcome of the narrative; the stern exception is the very last set of choices, which I will discuss more elaborately in my analysis.

Intertextuality

An important concept for *Spec Ops: The Line*, and thus for my analysis as well, is

intertextuality. Briefly put, intertextuality is the idea that any given work of fiction exists in context to other, related works of fiction. One could say the works exist in communication with each other in a sort of dialogue across different texts – across different works of fiction – thus forming an intertextual relation. For instance, Graham Allen (2000) does a thorough and succinct job of outlining intertextuality as it applies to narratives and works of fiction in particular.

The point of main importance, however, is that *Spec Ops: The Line* exists in several intertextual relations at once. It is a conscious reworking of the narrative found in Francis Ford Coppola's acclaimed film *Apocalypse Now* as well as being heavily influenced by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (Laughlin 2012), which places the game in an intertextual relationship to both the film and the novel in question. The general theme of a "journey into the darkness of the human condition" could be said to be present in all three, and they even seem to make small conscious nods at each other. For instance, *Apocalypse Now* keeps the name Kurtz for the supposed antagonist, like the antagonist in *Heart of Darkness*. *Spec Ops: The Line* has in a similar role the missing Colonel named John Konrad, which one could say is a nod to the author of *Heart of Darkness*. However, *Spec Ops: The Line* is not a narrative set in the Vietnam War nor in 19th-century Africa, though it is still a military-themed narrative akin to *Apocalypse Now*, specifically one taking place in a roughly present-day time-period. It leans heavily on elements of military hero-stories, as I'll discuss later.

Furthermore, it is of course a computer game, a third-person modern military shooter to be precise. A central focus in *Spec Ops: The Line*'s usage of the concept of a hero derives from this role as a part of the vast selection of military shooter games available on the market today. I will also briefly discuss this when analysing the

narrative.

Spec Ops: The Line

Spec Ops: The Line (2012) is as already mentioned a third-person modern military shooter. Developed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games, it made quite an impact particularly among gaming journalists when it was released; critics praised it for diverging from the norm of military shooters, and even for "making the player think", so to speak. For instance James Portnow (2012a, 2012b), in a two-episode set of the video-series *Extra Credits*, showers *Spec Ops: The Line* with praise for proverbially getting inside the player's head and subverting their expectations – and for challenging the validity of those expectations altogether. In a review of the game for IGN, Mitch Dyer comes to a succinct verdict as follows:

> "Spec Ops isn't about a war, protecting the world, or defeating some evil threat – it's about you, the effects of your actions, and events that are out of your control. The sum of Spec Ops' unexpected story is an army shooter that makes killing people mean something." (Dyer 2012)

The gist of critics' praise is essentially that *Spec Ops: The Line* is a direct criticism of its supposed genre of military action games. As mentioned, the game's narrative is a conscious reworking of Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* which itself is considered a subversion of the war-hero film genre. For instance John Hellman (1982, 429ff) talks about how the film is also more like a subversion of the hard-boiled detective narrative than a conventional war film.

The narrative of the game is as mentioned essentially linear and non-interactive, though the player is afforded a binary choice on a few occasions. The outcomes of

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the action-sequences, where the player-character fights various enemy soldiers, do not affect the storyline beyond a simple success or failure to advance the game. The game features heavy narrative elements such as flashback-sequences as well as visual and auditory hallucinations experienced by the player-character. When referring to the various parts of the narrative I will employ the chapter-numbering as given by the game.

The plot is set in a roughly modern-day period, where Dubai has fallen into crisis due to exceptional sandstorms, and has been all but evacuated. An officer of the US Delta Force, Colonel John Konrad, has gone missing along with his entire battalion, The Damned 33rd, after their mission to assist with the evacuation ended. The player-character, Captain Martin Walker, is sent out as part of a three-man recon squad to locate Konrad and his men. As they survey Dubai, they encounter armed resistance from both raiding locals as well as what proves to be US soldiers apparently gone rogue. Along the way they find out that Dubai is in even worse chaos than they suspected; members of the 33rd battalion are seemingly trying to impose military rule over the ruined city, CIA agents are present and working with the locals to stop the 33rd, and Konrad has completely vanished. As Walker and his men grudgingly agree to assist the CIA agents and continue their search for Konrad, they become more and more disillusioned with their task, and Walker in particular seems to stray further and further from the original mission.

They come upon various atrocities in the warzone that is Dubai, and Walker even ends up committing a few questionable acts himself. Notable among these is the white phosphorous scene in chapter 8, which is discussed in both journalistic reviews and academic studies of the game (for example Portnow 2012b and Keogh 2013: 10). Walker and his men, while clearing a path through the vanguard of the 33rd towards

83

their next objective, are faced with a heavily guarded gate. They opt to employ a mortar they find, along with its white phosphorous rounds; this type of incendiary grenade is quite controversial, and is seen as somewhat reprehensible to use in real-world engagements. This is largely due to the grievous chemical burns caused by it, as well as the tendency for remnants of the ordnance to linger buried in soil or structures long after a given engagement is over, with the risk of self-igniting when re-exposed to oxygen. Despite this, Walker and his men see the mortar as their only option. While shelling the soldiers, they however mistake a group of refugees for just more soldiers, and end up shelling them alongside the men of the 33rd. When the trio then discover their horrible mistake, they are mortified, and begin to seriously doubt their actions. Walker, however, still insists that they must press on and not abandon their mission.

They do establish what appears to be contact with Konrad, via Walker finding a radio through which Konrad seems to speak to him, taunting Walker for his actions. It later turns out that the CIA agents' plan was in fact not to save the remaining civilian population of Dubai, but rather to wipe out both the 33rd and the civilians so as to cover up the entire incident, out of fear of political backlash were the events to become public. Walker and his men have then already become complicit in this as they ended up working with the CIA agents. As Walker, despite his mounting mental instability, continues on his desperate quest to find Konrad, the men under his command, Lieutenant Alphonse Adams and Staff Sergeant John Lugo, each meet their demise one after the other. In the end, Walker finally reaches Konrad, but realises that Konrad has been dead the whole time. The radio through which he believed he had communicated with Konrad has in fact been broken, and much of the whole narrative turns out to have been Walker's own delusions.

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Analysis

The narrative in *Spec Ops: The Line*, while linear, is riddled with unreliable narration; for instance, Walker's increasing instability leads him to experience various hallucinations. Some of these visions are immediately communicated to the player as non-real, such as the sudden burning inferno and the walking corpses in chapter 12 (in reference to the white phosphorous scene in chapter 8), or the face of the by then already deceased SSgt Lugo on an enemy soldier in chapter 14. However, some of these hallucinations decidedly amount to unreliable narration where the player is deceived alongside Walker, such as the voice of Konrad on the radio throughout the game from chapter 8 onwards, the hanged men in chapter 9 who seem to be alive, and even the final dialogue with Konrad in chapter 15, where the entire set of delusions is revealed to both Walker and the player to have been false. I will attempt to analyse these false experiences from the perspective of how they ultimately turn out to be, that is to say false products of Walker's deranged mind.

Captain Martin Walker is at first glance a conventional hero – white, male, representing not only western civilisation but also the US Armed Forces, which is to say upholding the hegemonic social order, as discussed by Hourihan (1997, 58). This ties in to various other narratives where a protagonist is in the service of the military – usually the US Armed Forces – and turns out to be the hero who rescues his comrades held as prisoners of war, or who thwarts the villainous enemy leader's plans, and so on. Walker is assumed at the beginning of the game to be exactly this – a heroic soldier doing his duty in service of his country, and by extension in service of the western world. His mission is a rescue operation, and Konrad's original task was assisting with the evacuation of the storm-riddled Dubai, both noble and heroic endeavours.

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The enemies Walker encounters are at first locals, armed looters who by Hourihan's (1997, 118) theory represent the opposite of western civilisation – the "foreign" and "other" – compared to Walker. As they are engaged in armed looting, they also represent a disruption of social order. Later Walker faces US soldiers who have gone rogue, which represent an active force from within western society working to destabilise social order (Hourihan 1997, 144). Walker's use of deadly force is at first portrayed as done in self-defence, as well as being further justified through the naturalisation of violence when performed by the hero (Hourihan 1997, 98). It can even be seen as ritualised (Hatto 1989, 228) because Walker is a soldier on a mission, and his enemies are ambushing him from unfair vantage points, and in general creating unfair situations to make the hero's trials more challenging and thus more heroic. Walker also explicitly performs noble deeds in striving to reinstate a semblance of order to Dubai or at least to save the remains of the population, thus further solidifying him as a hero through his noble actions. However, this heroism ultimately breaks down piece by piece throughout the narrative.

From a more structural viewpoint, Walker is "called to action" and "leaves home" as per Propp (1928, 23) by virtue of being sent on a mission to Dubai by his superiors, and is "tested to prepare the way" (ibid., 24) by suddenly finding himself and his men under fire from hostile forces, and he even "acquires the use of a magical agent" (ibid., 27) by virtue of agreeing to help the CIA agent Riggs that he and his men encounter. The magical agent in this case takes the form of "a character placing itself at the hero's disposal", which is a common version of the function according to Propp. But from here onwards the similarities break down or become subverted.

The "magical agent" turns out to be false and in fact villainous, as Riggs in chapter 10

reveals that his goal actually was to eliminate any survivors, rather than save the civilians. Riggs' usage of the civilian forces as an expendable resource – quite literally as cannon-fodder – in chapters 7 and 10 also solidifies him as an immoral, villainous entity. Walker having been deceived by him to do his bidding would actually place Walker into the role of the victim, not the hero, as per Propp's (ibid., 15-16) "the villain attempts to deceive his victim [...]" and "the victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy". The deception-functions when understood as Riggs deceiving Walker also imply that Konrad, leading the 33rd gone rogue, is not the villain as Walker imagined him to be, but that Riggs is the actual villain – which fits together with the fact that Konrad is later revealed to have been dead all along.

Walker's Violence as Unheroic

If Riggs is to be seen as the villain, Propp's (1928, 32-33) "the hero and the villain join in direct combat" and "the villain is defeated" end up quite flatly subverted when Walker finds Riggs pinned under a burning wreckage after the crash with the stolen tanker trucks at the end of chapter 10. The player is given the choice of either having Walker execute him or let him burn to death. Riggs dies no matter what the player chooses, and the only impact of the choice is whether Walker retains the single remaining round in his firearm for the next combat-scene. It is however implied that granting Riggs a mercy-killing as opposed to letting him burn to death is the morally noble choice. None the less, this mercy-killing could also be argued to be vengeance enacted upon the villain, though it takes on a rather hollow tone since there is no heroic trial or confrontation for Walker to surmount before finally vanquishing the villain (Hourihan 1997, 96). The entire confrontation with Riggs is nothing like the challenging struggle between the hero and the villain, and the unfair situation with Riggs severely wounded and pinned under the burning wreckage robs Walker of any heroism when he takes revenge on Riggs.

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Another scene where Walker's violence ends up un-ritualised is the aforementioned white phosphorous scene in chapter 8. Though the narrative purports that it would indeed be virtually impossible to storm the gate that the soldiers of the 33rd are guarding, and using the mortar and its white phosphorous rounds is literally the only available option given to the player in order to proceed, the act of using the mortar nullifies what would have been a heroic challenge for Walker to overcome. He and his men employ tools to eliminate what would have been a ritualised engagement, a heroic challenge against seemingly impossible odds. Compare this to how various war films depict the hero and his comrades defeating staggering or even nigh-impossible odds, by sheer virtue of their exceptional abilities and noble cause. One example of this is *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998), where the protagonists succeed in the eponymous quest to save Pvt James Ryan, accomplishing this through the horrors of Omaha Beach during the D-Day invasion and the dangers of still-occupied France. It is also crucial to note that in *Saving Private Ryan*, the various violent acts committed are portrayed as heroic and difficult, requiring bravery, skill, and cunning to achieve. Walker's incendiary bombing of the gate is not only unheroic because he ends up killing countless refugees, but also because he simply eliminates a heroic challenge and opts to not brave the challenge at all. Adding to all this is of course the moral quandary of white phosphorous munitions, the use of which even against military targets is questionable at best.

This tactical imbalance is repeated in chapter 12, where Walker and his men attempt to reach a functioning broadcast tower. They pre-emptively clear the building of the majority of opposition by sniper fire, during which the character known as Radioman keeps taunting them over the PA system. Radioman makes sarcastic notes about Walker's actions, actively humanising the soldiers Walker is surreptitiously killing,

throwing comments like "That guy? You shot that guy? I liked that guy…" or the sarcastically-spoken "He had a wife and kids! Won't somebody please think of the children?!" This humanisation of the enemy counteracts the legitimisation of the hero's violence as per Hourihan (1997, 104). Furthermore, once Walker and his men have reached the tower and broadcast their distress call, they are forced to flee in a helicopter with a side-mounted machine gun. As they escape, Walker mans this M134 Minigun, an infamous action film staple notably seen in for instance *Predator* (McTiernan 1987) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron 1991). The weapon is notably far more high-powered than conventional handheld firearms, despite the fact that Blain Cooper in *Predator* does employ one as though it was actually man-portable. Though Walker does at first provide only suppressive fire to cover their escape, he goes on to completely obliterate any remaining soldiers on the roof of the building, and even – somewhat unrealistically, perhaps – wrecks the entire top of the tower with machine gun fire. When Lugo worriedly questions the necessity of this destruction, Walker laconically remarks "It's not about what's necessary. It's about sending Konrad a message." This escape would otherwise have been an element of the hero's journey as per Propp (1928, 36-37) and "rescue of the hero from pursuit". However, as it is presented it puts Walker firmly in a position of superior power as he mows down his enemies with helicopter-mounted machine gun. In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, the weapon is wielded by the eponymous cyborg antihero who does not receive a heroic valorisation of his violence in the scene in question, and in *Predator* the character Cooper employs the weapon against a vastly superior extra-terrestrial creature. The latter case implies that the use of such a weapon is morally justified due to the opponent being so powerful. Walker, however, has already managed to escape in the helicopter and his enemies are basically powerless on the roof of the building. The balance of power is shifted far too much in Walker's favour, and the violence becomes unheroic.

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Walker's Heroism Ultimately Denied

While Walker is "branded" according to Propp (1928, 33) as a result of the tanker crash in chapter 10, suffering vivid wounds to his face and arm, this has little resemblance to the process of marking him as the hero in the eyes of people, as such a branding of the hero should. The visual change is in fact a shift away from heroism rather than towards heroic status; Brendan Keogh (2013, 11) notes as follows:

> By transitioning the player's character – and by extension the player's embodied perspective on the game's world – from a clean-cut, self-assured soldier to a destroyed, self-defeated man, *The Line* works to counter the claims of ethical superiority – of the West as the world's 'good guys' – that military-shooters perpetuate.

This visual changes in Walker, discreetly visible throughout the narrative but primarily apparent after the tanker crash, sets Walker up as no longer the heroic soldier, but a broken, wounded warrior without a noble cause to fight for. Keogh (2013, 11-13) also notes the auditory changes in Walker's dialogue, where it becomes more ruthless and violent as the game progresses, well as in the shouts of enemy soldiers, which become more fearful and desperate. This emphasises the breakdown of the hero-villain duality (Hourihan 1997, 15), as not only does Walker become less and less of a hero but his enemies become progressively more human and less demonised through otherness.

Walker keeps insisting that he is doing the right thing, but as the narrative progresses, these assurances start to seem more and more desperate and hollow. He even tries at several points to convince his men that the CIA agents' controversial use of civilians as cannon-fodder is necessary, such as in chapter 10 where Walker

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answers Lugo's question about their original mission with "This isn't about finding Konrad. This is about doing what's right." Slipping from his noble purpose as a soldier on a mission – an upholder of western civilisation's ideals – causes him to no longer encompass the concept of a hero as per Hourihan (1997, 85).

Walker's misguided attempts to find absolute goodness in a morally grey spectrum resemble how Hosiaisluoma (2003, 738-739) describes a problematic hero. He becomes a tragic character who is disillusioned with – and alienated from – the world around him, seeking in vain for purpose and identity where none can be found. The entire sequence of events which make up *Spec Ops: The Line*'s narrative reads like an inversion of a hero's story – the would-be hero finds out his noble quest and seemingly heroic actions have led him astray and caused more harm than good.

The final chapter, and the game's final choice given to the player, is multi-layered and ties in with the optional epilogue segment. After meeting and arguing with the hallucination of Konrad at the top floor of the hotel in chapter 15, the player is given the choice for Walker to either shoot the image of Konrad appearing in a mirror, or for Walker to take his own life. If suicide is chosen, and by implication a sort of acceptance of responsibility for the suffering Walker has caused in Dubai, the game ends promptly. It is worth noting that if the player does not make a choice fast enough, the game will automatically choose for Walker to commit suicide; the game could be said to imply the burden of guilt being too heavy to carry, unless the player actively chooses to defy the taunting vision of Konrad.

However, if Walker continues to deny his insanity and shoots "Konrad", the player is presented with an epilogue of Walker later sitting amidst the ruins of Dubai while a USAF rescue force arrives. The last remaining choice afforded to the player is whether

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Walker submits to the rescue force and is taken into custody as a victim of apparent psychosis, or if Walker opens fire on the soldiers and subsequently either dies at their hand or continues to live on as a deluded, self-appointed ruler of the ruins of Dubai. Having gone this far off the rails of any conventional hero narrative, this choice is complicated to analyse. However, my interpretation is that the arguably most noble and still vaguely heroic course of action is to deny Konrad's taunting and shoot his image, but submit to the rescue force, thus defying the voice in his head but admitting that Walker is a damaged man, a decidedly problematic hero. This is not unlike the ultimate fate of Captain Benjamin Willard, the protagonist of *Apocalypse Now*, who also undergoes a similar sequence of disillusionment and alienation. Walker committing suicide mirrors Konrad's fate as a failed hero, an antihero, where his shortcomings of character and failing abilities prove to be his undoing.

However, were the player to take the most controversial route and first deny Konrad's accusations by shooting his image, and then opening fire on the rescue force, the sequence places Walker sternly in the role of the villain. He has through the course of the game begun to see Konrad as a villainous figure gone rogue and as a self-appointed warlord. Thus, when faced with the revelation that this idea of Konrad has been a figment of his imagination, instead of surrendering himself to the care of capable people he then embraces this role of the villain, and commits himself to following in the footsteps of his twisted perceptions of Konrad.

At the end there are none of the typical closure-like functions, particularly no "liquidation of misfortune or lack" (Propp 1928, 34) wherein the objective of the hero's adventure is accomplished and the problem or threat is eliminated. Dubai remains a desolate wasteland for the foreseeable future, and whatever people are still trapped in the ruins are likely to suffer and die due to Walker's reckless actions

while acting on Riggs' deceitful orders. There is also no form of the final function that is "the hero is married and ascends the throne" (ibid., 41) which signifies the hero receiving his rewards for the arduous journey and the tasks he has completed. One could even wonder whether Walker is a sort of "false hero" (ibid., 39, 41) who makes false claims in the hope of masquerading as the hero, but who is inevitably unmasked and proven to be unworthy of adoration.

Spec Ops: The Line as a Modern Military Shooter

As noted earlier in regards to intertextuality, *Spec Ops: The Line* is technically a modern military shooter. As I have mentioned, this is a topic that has been widely covered by both academic and journalistic texts already, so I won't delve too deeply into it. However, while *Spec Ops: The Line* as mentioned doesn't follow the narrative pattern of its genre to completion, it achieves its dramatic narrative effect partly through at first appearing to be a conventional military shooter, and only later in the narrative going off to rails. The player's expectations at the start of the game are evoked because the narrative implicitly points to other games in the genre, such as the massively popular *Battlefield 3* (EA DICE 2011) or *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward 2011). Both titles were released just a year before *Spec Ops: The Line*, as part of their own established franchises. For instance, *Battlefield 3* depicts a mostly non-interactive narrative where the player is tasked with overcoming various combat-oriented challenges along a dramatic plot of military unrest, political manoeuvring, the threat of terrorism, and so on. The various characters the player gets to control are straight-up heroic or at least dutiful soldiers, and the plot focuses on a hunt for a group of definably villainous characters. The way Konrad is initially portrayed by Walker in *Spec Ops: The Line* is setting him up to be the military officer gone rogue, not unlike the rogue CIA asset Solomon in *Battlefield 3*. However, as this perception of Konrad proves to be Walker's own delusions, the game has at first

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constructed the illusion of a conventional military hero narrative, then subverted the expectations of the player completely.

A notable element in the gameplay of *Spec Ops: The Line* which reinforces a kind of symbolic fall from grace for Walker is, as for instance Portnow (2012b) notes, how there is no keyboard command for climbing upwards or even one for jumping. The only available vertical direction to traverse is downwards. This is fairly remarkable for a game set in as three-dimensional an area as the ruins of Dubai, with its tall skyscrapers through which you journey. It is, however, crafted into the game in a fairly subtle way, as any upwards travel that Walker and his men undertake is hidden from the player's view via consciously-placed scene-transitions, where the game fades to black and fades back, where the player then finds Walker and his men at a new location, sometimes covering jarring amounts of vertical space. Thus the player only gets to experience downwards climbs, riding cables downwards from one tall building to the next, and even falling into the substructures of buildings as floors collapse. The player is led on a journey down into the proverbial darkness of the human condition.

94

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, my analysis concludes that Captain Martin Walker of *Spec Ops: The Line* exemplifies one of several non-heroic archetypes, depending mostly on the player's actions in the two final narrative choices. This narrative subversion of the assumed expectations of the player is emphasised by the game's identity as a modern military shooter as well as the narrative's theme of modern military action. One would indeed expect the player-character of such a game to be a more conventional hero, and the narrative to conform more to typical hero-story

structures.

Walker appears at the beginning of the narrative for all intents and purposes a noble hero, but begins to slip from this path as the game progresses, and ultimately he abandons it altogether. What is clear is that Walker is ultimately not a conventional hero in any sense, but rather some form of subversion or even inversion thereof. Depending on the choices made by the player in the last chapter, Walker might take his own life and resign himself to the role of an antihero, a failed attempt at heroism. Would he, on the other hand, choose to live on but surrender willingly to the rescue force, he becomes a problematic hero, a victim of his own unrealistic ideals, in echo of Captain Benjamin Willard of *Apocalypse Now*. However, should Walker choose to defy the rescue force's orders to surrender, he lives or dies decidedly a villain, whether killed at the hands of his former comrades-in-arms or alive somewhere in the ruins of Dubai.

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