

On Intentions and Goodness in 'Spec Ops: The Line'

Ryan Ayers

Professor Kiki Berk, PhD

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's novella 'Heart of Darkness' and its many interpretations approach central themes of madness and the uncertainty of man through a variety of differing settings. Each of these interpretations ask and present the viewer with questions of their own, or from the source, which influence the progression of each respective portrayal. Yager Development's particular rendition, "Spec Ops: The Line," questions the morality of one's actions in the context of their outcomes in contrast with their intentions. Is the goodness of the character's and player's actions determined solely by their outcome? By their intentions? Or by some combination of both? The questions posed in Spec Ops are presented through a series of choices made by the player that, while similar in generalized outcome, are vastly different in an emotional context which lends itself to another possible inquiry: Does the character's, and by extension, the player's emotional or psychological state have an influence on the morality an action? What is particularly interesting about this rendition of Conrad's classic is that it does not seek to give its own answers to these questions of morality. Rather, it leaves the message up to the interpretation of the player. This paper will seek to analyze and present a clearer image of morality in terms of the aforementioned factors using the conditions and presentation of "Spec Ops: The Line" as an example of the emotional investment an individual can have during life's many decision points.

It takes a strong man to deny what's right in front of him. And if the truth is undeniable, you create your own. The truth, Walker, is that you're here because you wanted to feel like something you're not: A hero. I'm here because you can't accept what you've done. It broke you. You needed someone to blame, so you cast it on me. A dead man. I know the truth is hard to hear Walker, but it's time. You're all that's left and we can't live this lie forever. (Williams 2012)

Coming up the stairs you see a man painting a ghastly image of a group of civilians, burning from the impact of a chemical weapon. The image however, is of a real event, an event that he caused. You know this because you saw the aftermath of it. Among many other atrocities, this event, causing the death of 47 innocent civilians, lies most heavily on your conscience. Approaching this man, he turns and asks you what you think of the painting, to which you respond with hate and blame. He did this, and he deserves to answer for his sins. By death, court martial, or any other means of punishment, he will atone for his crimes.

However, in response to your accusations, he points out the fact that he did not have any part in the activation of the chemical weapons, or any of the other incidents that you blame upon him. Those responsibilities lie entirely on you. You gave the order to fire the chemical weapons, you made the choice to shoot one of the two men put on "trial." You kept moving on, against your original orders, further into the ruined city of Dubai, trying to be a hero to those still living within the city. You were trying to be something that you are not, and it shows in the atrocities you so readily blamed upon him. The kicker, he is dead and has been for some time as you discover from his decaying corpse back along the pathway. The man you were speaking to in person and on the radio was just a delusion which you cast blame upon as you could not accept the truth behind what had transpired through your own actions. This delusion, representing the last rational part of your mind, gives you a choice to accept what you have done, or deny it. You can either destroy what remains of your rationality, or accept the truth.

"Do you feel like a hero yet?" (Williams 2012)

"Spec Ops: The Line" (referred to here as The Line) is a third-person shooter video game made by Yager Development, based off of and inspired by Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. The game's story attempts to delve into the morality of the actions that the player takes throughout the course of the game and rationally explain them to the player. While giving no direct analysis of the specific choices that were made by the player, the story allows for the player to continue along with their own beliefs until the end, where it makes the player rethink their actions; a manipulation of the player's cognition. The intention is to provide for a truthful representation of the morality behind the player's actions through their own revelations. It questions the players motivations, intentions, and state of mind during the many difficult events of the story.

There are no truly positive choices in The Line, only different levels of negativity. The game does not provide the player with any sense of false hope that they made the right decisions, nor does it intend to say that any goodness can come from these situations. There is no meter that tells you whether an action was good or bad; whether that actions makes you a good or bad person. Those judgments lie directly on the player. This is where some of the big questions come into play: Is the goodness of a person's actions determined solely by the outcome? Or is it based upon their intentions? Excuses provide for another confounding factor in these judgments as well. The character displays some very post-traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms throughout the game, which have a major impact on emotionality and how some events are perceived. Does this affect any the morality the player's actions? When confronted with these questions, the player creates is tasked with judging themselves and the ending they deserve based off of their answers to these questions. Player to player, these judgments vary greatly. This paper will attempt to pry into the truth behind these questions in The Line.

In order to really judge or attempt to understand goodness as *The Line* questions it, a definition of this concept must first be formed. But, in terms of philosophical theory, there is no single unified definition of goodness and many of the definitions that do exist conflict with each other. *The Line* itself does not attempt to outright define goodness, rather leaving that determination to the player. Whether or not the player competent to rationally define this will vary. It is of note that the player's character, Walker, portrays Kantian styled patterns of thought; his intentions are what defines him and his actions as good. The complexities involved in the explanation of an abstract concept such as this, make it rather difficult to discuss as an overall trait or state of being. On this account, goodness may be best understood through a division into two facets: goodness of moral character and goodness (rightness) of action. The former examines the good person while the latter is concerned with the good act.

"I-I didn't mean to hurt anybody..." "No one ever does Walker." (Williams 2012)

Goodness of action is the main focus of *The Line*. The game's story is a journey through a world of gray where the player is not told of the righteousness of their actions. Players are thrust into many scenarios, sometimes with little to no knowledge regarding the situation, where the right choice is unclear. It is here where the player is tasked with making a decision on what to do based off what little information they have. *The Line* attempts to manipulate situations and present them to the player through a very Kantian style of thought where the player is tasked with determining what the right thing to do would be. Once an action is taken, the player is rarely debriefed on their decision, leaving the player to trust that their decision, independent of outcome, was based on a moral high; their actions were the same that any other person would have taken. As Kant has stated, "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (Kant 1785)

The Line does not stick to this form of thought throughout however. During one of the ending scenes of the game, the player is confronted by the main antagonist of the game over their actions throughout the campaign. In his description of those events, the antagonist presents a new view to the player; the view that the outcomes the actions taken by the player throughout the game are what defines the goodness of the character's actions. Through the maelstrom of violence, anarchy, and emotional strain, the player should have been able to discern that their actions were not those of a moral person; they were rushed, messy, and driven by wicked or immoral motivations. This line of thought runs contrary to what Walker and the player believed throughout the game and serves as the climax of the story. The scene's intentions were to suddenly blast the player with a different view and cause some form of doubt behind their rationalization for their actions throughout (Pitts 2012). This doubt, cast at the very climax of the game, is pivotal in the player's final choice; to deny that the morality of their actions are defined through their results, or through their intentions.

'What happened here was out of my control...' 'Was it? None of this would've happened if you just stopped. But on you marched. And for what?' 'We tried to save you.' 'You're no savior. Your talents lie elsewhere.' (Williams 2012)

Intentions are driven by a variety of factors, however The Line mainly focuses on the player's motivations as a driving force. What motivates the player to take the actions that they are taking? There are many possible answers to a question like this. The player could be making their decisions based off of what they see as the moral route; in accordance to their virtue. The player's psychological state can be brought into question here. Walker clearly demonstrates an enormous amount of post-traumatic-like symptoms including flashbacks, hallucinations, blaming, and aggressive behavior (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs 2014). During an ending

scene, it is revealed to the player and Walker that many, if not all of the difficult choices made by the player were done so during hallucinatory events. None of it was actually real. Could a person in this mental state really make sound decisions? In this case, yes they can. Because the player does not actually suffer from any of these psychological breaks, the decisions made can generally be thought of as actions of a sound mind. Along with this, Walker never displays signs of psychologically clouded judgment, only in emotionality is his judgment hindered.

This does not account for a player's emotional state, in which they can be feeling a certain way that affects how they perceive or go about an event. This actually hurts the aforementioned Kantian approach to goodness of action however, as it provides a motivation other than good intention. Decisions made from an emotional context are impulsive and done so to ease a bad feeling or bring about a good one; something that Kant declares as not having moral worth (Kant 2004). Because of this, many of the player's actions can be brought back into question due to the drastic nature of some of the situations they encounter. Those that were made through an emotional drive are now judged as not of moral worth and, again due to the nature of the game and the events involving choice, are most likely violent. For example, the player is at one point given the choice to either shoot and kill a man trapped under a truck before he burns to death in a pile of oil or let him burn. This man also, only minutes ago betrayed everything he told you and destroyed the entire water supply of post-apocalyptic Dubai. Of course, Walker and the player are going to be angry with this man, which is highly influential in the choice they make. No matter what choice the player makes in this scene, it will be immoral; motivated by raw emotion and irrational thought.

The player could also be motivated by personal gain. As Konrad, the antagonist, puts it: to be a hero. This particular motivation is hinted at several times throughout the game. In several

loading screens the player is presented with a line of text asking them if they feel like a hero or mocking them claiming that everything will be alright since this is all just a game; they will eventually be the hero. Konrad gives several examples of such behavior in his monologue. For example, going back to the beginning of the game, it is restated that Walker's initial orders were only to locate any survivors, relay the information, and then leave. However as soon as Walker saw that people were in trouble, he went forth in a seemingly valiant attempt to save them. Several other scenes are presented in which Walker uses language indicative of him trying to be the people's savior in a war-ridden Dubai.

The line of reasoning put forth by the game is able to effectively demonstrate that, at least for the protagonist, the main motivation behind the decisions that were made was a desire to be a hero. A manifestation of Nietzsche's famed concept of will to power. "A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength--life itself is will to power..." (Nietzsche 2009) Being seen as a savior or hero to someone is to be seen as person who could overcome and accomplish something dire that another could not. In the case of *The Line*, this something is the tyrannical rule of the rogue American soldiers encountered throughout the game's story. This action is how Walker and the player display their strength and become a hero to the civilians in Dubai; an empowering position to hold. Once this revelation is made however, the player's goodness of action is brought right back into question for the same reasons emotionality does; motivations through some form of personal gain deems an act not of moral worth. (Kant 2004) This is another obstacle in the way of accomplishing something in the game that can be considered of good moral worth.

"Spec Ops: The Line" never actually gives the player any real answers to the questions it asks them. Were they right in the actions they took? Do they deserve to be punished for what happened. Rather, it presents the player with two main paths of reasoning to determine this for

themselves; the outcomes of any situation are determinant, or the intentions of the player determine the goodness of an action regardless of the outcome. Due to the delivery of this ultimate choice, reasoning varies greatly between players since no interpretation will exactly be the same. However, these judgments can be vastly different post-mortem. Given what has been determined throughout this paper, one can infer that the player has not taken a single action in good will. Essentially, there has been no goodness of action as defined by the game's Kantian approach. Some actions were taken through direct ill-will due to an emotional influence at the time of action, and what remains were motivated by, at the very least, a will to power. Taking the other approach, meaning that the goodness of action is defined through the outcomes of said actions, every action has had a negative result and therefore been bad. It seems that "Spec Ops: The Line" ultimately does not care to definitively answer the big questions it asks, opting to give use these questions as driving points for only the events contained within the game. It does not matter whether or not the outcome of action or the intentions of an action are given more weight in the judgment of goodness; the answer will always be the same. The game takes a grim outlook on goodness of action as it results in a conclusion where such a concept is impossible in a situation such as the one in Dubai.

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