Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design

Providing virtual spaces in which players can maim and kill enemy combatants has long been a staple of video games, and continues to serve as the principal focus of public and scholarly apprehensions about the medium (e.g., Anderson and Dill, 2000; Irwin and Gross, 1995; Silvern and Williamson, 1987). Through a textual analysis of three key examples—Bioshock, Spec Ops: The Line and Grand Theft Auto V—this article seeks to highlight the capacity for ambivalent reflection in violent video games, and thus serve as a counterpoint to the widespread impression that they remain, at best, mindless entertainment and, at worst, a corrupting influence. Whilst there is good reason to maintain a degree of skepticism about concerns over the negative ‘effects’ of video game violence (e.g. Ferguson, 2015; Kutner and Olsen, 2008), the purpose of this study is neither to disprove nor directly engage with such concerns. Indeed, the safest claim one can make is that their evidential basis remains ‘mixed’ (Ferguson, 2015, p. E2). However, a textual analysis of the three video games in focus here reveals a complex engagement with violent play which stands in contrast to the blanket dismissals and vilifications still dominant in related discourses.

The process by which these three games were chosen was not rigidly systematic. Rather, they were each identified at the outset as well known examples of a particular video game type, outlined in further detail below, which share in a degree of narrative sophistication inviting closer examination. This, then, is not a strictly representative sample of violent games but, instead, a selection of three consummate examples. The examination itself rests on a ‘grounded’ theoretical approach in which ‘theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through
continuous interplay between analysis and data collection’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 273).
The resulting framework draws on film scholarship which has sought to understand a comparable trend in cinema in which ambivalent narrative contexts are counterpoised against graphic and exhilarating depictions of violence. Here, particular focus is devoted to McKinney’s (1993) arguments about ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ violence in cinema, Wood’s (1986) notion of ‘the incoherent text’ and Prince’s (1998) study of Sam Peckinpah’s oeuvre. In the section which follows, requisite attention is paid to the ludonarrative uniqueness of video games. In drawing crucial distinctions between violence in cinema and in games, the article focuses principally on Darley’s (2000) discussion of narrative ‘de-centering’ and the ‘active spectator’, and Bogost’s (2007) notion of ‘procedural rhetoric’.

To speak simply of violent video games, or indeed violent media more generally, is to deal in a category so ‘monolithic’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 26) as to be almost meaningless, and it is important to circumscribe the type of gaming experience under examination. Indeed, the capacity for players to commit, or be subjected to, violent acts exists across a range of genres and gaming experiences which lie outside the boundaries of this discussion—from the early text adventures which required ‘kill troll with sword’-like commands in order to progress, to similarly cerebral war strategy games such as the Total War and Command and Conquer franchises. The focus of this study is on the sorts of games most often cited in discussions of ‘violent video games’: that is, those kinesthetic combat experiences in which ‘players are rewarded for violent behaviors and repetition of those behaviors’ (Poole, 2015, p. 112).
Even within these definitional boundaries there exists such a diversity of gaming experiences as to render a term like ‘genre’ an overly loose form of categorization. Indeed, whilst the three games discussed here all share the central gameplay loop of engaging players in habitual and kinesthetic violence, they are, in other key respects, quite different from one another: *Bioshock* is a science-fiction first-person shooter (FPS) with character progression systems borrowed from role-play games (RPGs); *Spec Ops: The Line* is a more conventional military third-person shooter; and *Grand Theft Auto V* is a third-person ‘open world’ crime caper. As implied, there are a number of overlaps here but it is important to acknowledge that, within gaming circles, at least, the three games under examination would not be seen to represent some or other unified genre or category.

At a more fundamental level, however, and in a broad tradition stretching back to *Space Invaders* (1978), they can all be seen as video game expressions of what Joseph Campbell (1993), in his analysis of myth and folklore, described as the ‘hero as warrior’ narrative/archetype. The hero as warrior represents one dimension of Campbell’s somewhat labyrinthine ‘monomyth’: a transcultural Jungian model for understanding mythic narratives which remains as influential as it is contested. Whilst Campbell’s monomyth certainly leaves itself open to legitimate claims of ahistorical/acultural overgeneralization (e.g. Crespi, 1990; Segal, 1984), it nonetheless provides many useful tools for drawing connections, however loose and/or conditional, between the ‘thousand faces’ of heroic storytelling across literature, cinema and, in this case, video games.
Campbell’s (1993, pp. 337, 338) outline of the hero as warrior, one which has found countless diverse expressions in literature and cinema, and any number of video game shooters, action adventures and so forth, is as follows:

Many monsters… still lurk in the outlying regions, and through malice or desperation these set themselves against the human community. They have to be cleared away. Furthermore, tyrants of human breed, usurping to themselves the goods of their neighbors, arise, and are the cause of widespread misery. They have to be suppressed. The elementary deeds of the hero are those of the clearing of the field.

Violence is implicitly central here and, for anyone who has spent a modicum of time playing video games in which the core experience involves committing homicidal acts against waves of enemy combatants, Campbell’s notion of ‘the clearing of the field’ should be immediately familiar. Indeed, the multi-level, kinesthetic challenge conventions of many video games as a ludic endeavor seems to naturally lend itself, and vice versa, to this enduring narrative context in which heroes face off against increasingly formidable foes.

Violent video games, as broadly defined in relation to Campbell’s hero as warrior, have evolved in three key and complimentary respects since Space Invaders. First, the gameplay systems underlying the violent action have become ever more complex, with core shooting (and melee) mechanics increasingly bolstered by other systems, such as the RPG character progression systems previously mentioned with respect to Bioshock. Second, advances in graphical and audio technology have enabled more realistic depictions of bloodshed, an evolution on which growing
public and scholarly concerns over the effects of violent games have fed. According to Jenkins (2006, p. 26), the third evolution is as follows:

Like all developing media, the earliest games relied on fairly simple-minded and formulaic representations of violence... As game designers have discovered and mastered their medium, they have become increasingly reflective about the player’s experience of violent fantasy.

As Jenkins suggests, narrative content in violent games has naturally developed alongside the increasing sophistication of their gameplay systems and audio-visual renderings. However, Jenkins’ more specific claim of a trend in which game designers ‘have become increasingly reflective about the player’s experience of violent fantasy’ begs a more critical evaluation, one in which specific examples are considered. First and foremost, however, it requires a more thorough exploration of what Jenkins alludes to in his suggestion of a more ‘reflective’ engagement with violent play. Here, an orienting comparison is useful.

**Ambivalent violence in cinema**

Whilst it necessary to tread with caution, and adequately differentiate, when drawing comparisons between two very different media—a key concern to which I return in the next section—analyses of violent films provide a constructive foundation for this inquiry into Jenkins’ claim of a ‘reflective’ turn in violent game design. Indeed, however much films and video games might differ in certain fundamental respects, ‘the commonplace understanding of video games, as is apparent in the term itself, is inevitably tied up in the primacy of the visual image’ (Atkins,
Furthermore, the evolution of the video games medium has seen designers adopt an increasing range of formal techniques and narrative tropes from cinema, making comparisons between the two increasingly natural. Such comparisons are particularly salient here because contemporary concerns over graphic depictions of violence in video games echo enduring concerns over similar content in films (Murdock, 1997).

Cinema has a long history of violent hero as warrior narratives, a history similarly marked by increasing formal sophistication and ever more graphic depictions. Whilst there is little consensus on its deeper psychosocial underpinnings (Zillmann, 1998), the manifest appeal of such films lies in the vicarious thrill of witnessing ‘barbarian heroes and villains who slash, shoot, and machine-gun their way to the things they want, all that without accepting societal impositions… that restrain normal mortals’ (Zillmann, 1998, p. 180). However, whilst unreflective Manichean narratives in which heroes engage in an unrestrained ‘clearing of the field’ remain popular in cinema, the medium has also seen the emergence of works which, to some degree or another, have sought to problematize the gratification inherent in the form.

McKinney (1993) discusses this distinction between the simple and complex in terms of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ representations. Weak violence, of which 1980s action films of the ‘Schwarzenegger School’ can be seen as exemplars, offers ‘the kind of disconnected, uncommitted movie mayhem… marked by its lack of pluralities’ (McKinney, 1993, p. 19). In Commando (1985), for example, the mounting body count of faceless enemies, culminating in the hero’s slaying of the supremely evil antagonist, serves as an unadultered and ideologically reductive ‘power fantasy’. In the name of entertainment, viewers of such heroic slaughter-fests
are expected to leave at the door any apprehensions they might hold about violence in the real world. Strong violence, on the other hand, conveys self-reflexive ambivalences towards its own gratifying properties: ‘Strong violence enables—and often entails—shifts in one’s moral positioning… The audience is both acted upon and made to act by acknowledging its role in the fulfillment of a wish it barely knew it had’ (McKinney, 1993, pp. 21, 22).

Various discussions of key works attest to this discomforting ambivalence of ‘strong’ violence as cinematic entertainment. In his retrospective of the once notorious and now widely-lauded A Clockwork Orange, French (1990, p. 87) points to this as the defining logic of Kubrick’s ‘ultra-violence’: ‘The fights in the movie are both balletic and frightening. We are involved and repelled because the camera presents us with Alex’s point of view, while the stylization distances us from events’. Of the more recent and similarly acclaimed Mad Max: Fury Road, Ehrlich (2015) suggests that director, George Miller, operates along similar lines of grace and savagery: ‘But the key to this symphony of twisted metal is how the film never forgets that violence is a form of madness’. Botting and Wilson’s (1998, p. 111) study of Quentin Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs interprets the film’s infamous torture scene as a ‘seduction and thwarting of the audience’ which ‘appears to have been designed precisely to produce… disturbance between desire, morality and the law’. Finally, Wood (1986, p 54) sees the conclusion to Scorsese’s Taxi Driver as a deadening statement of uncertainty about the hero’s bloody exploits: ‘The effect is a kind of paralysis. Being unable to achieve any clear, definitive statement about the hero… the film retreats into enigma’.
Wood’s discussion of *Taxi Driver* can be found in his seminal film studies essay, ‘The Incoherent Text’, and it is worth outlining in some detail here. Wood’s (1986, p. 46) starting point is that art ‘has as its goal the ordering of experience, the striving for coherence’. However, for Wood (1986, p. 47), all works of art also inevitably contain ‘areas or levels’ of incoherence due simply to the immense range of influential factors, both psychological and sociocultural, which lie ‘beyond the artist’s control’. A work of art becomes an ‘incoherent text’, and thus also an intriguingly difficult one, when it is marked by ideological self-conflict, when ‘the drive to toward the ordering of experience has been visibly defeated… Here, the incoherence is no longer hidden and esoteric: the films seem to crack open before our eyes’ (1986, pp. 47, 50). Through this lens, *Taxi Driver* becomes a perplexed reimagining of the hero as warrior narrative. Indeed, Travis Bickle is at once Campbellian archetype and sociopath, and his inordinately gruesome crusade to rescue teenage prostitute, Iris, from the clutches of her pimp, Sport, is ultimately valorized by a society indifferent to the moral complexity of what actually transpired. In *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese appears at once to justify violence, revel in its base appeal, and indict violence in all its forms, the total effect of which being, as Wood puts it, ‘paralysis’.

Prince’s (1998) study of Sam Peckinpah’s oeuvre as an apex of artistically valid ‘ultraviolent movies’ lends further shape to this article’s point of comparison. According to Prince (1998, p. 229), Peckinpah’s unprecedentedly graphic and highly influential depictions of bloodshed were informed by the ambivalent engagement outlined here:

> By aestheticizing violence using dynamic montage editing and complex temporal manipulations… Peckinpah portrayed screen mayhem as sensuous and kinetically
appealing. Yet by situating that violence in a narrative context marked by despair, melancholy, and suffering and by placing a bad protagonist at the center of the narrative, Peckinpah aimed to alienate viewers from their own excitement and enjoyment…

Reflecting on controversies surrounding *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah (cited in Prince, 1998, p. 228) himself saw his use of violence as a form of truth telling, one to which the achievement of a brutally compelling realism was integral: ‘I didn’t want you to enjoy the film, I wanted you to look very close at your own soul.’ Here, the director’s juxtaposition of ‘sensuous’ style and ‘melancholic’ (Prince, 1998, p. 225) context aims ‘to prod viewers into a recognition of their own moral and emotional relationship to that violence, of their complicity in it by virtue of their tacit decision to seek out violence’ (Prince, 1998, p. 228).

**Entry into the (violent) image**

Examining the extent to which video games might offer the kind of ambivalent engagements with exhilarating violence identified in cinema requires a clear attentiveness to the former’s unique dimensions. There are essentially two interrelated starting points for understanding what sets video games apart from cinema as a vehicle for narrative and representation: the notion of video games as a ludic phenomenon, or video games *as games*, and the accompanying notion of interactivity. In the emergent field of games studies, much debate has focused on the extent to which video games should, first and foremost, be seen as a ludic, rather than narrative, phenomenon (Simons, 2007). Indeed, whilst the heated tensions which once marked this debate
have abated (Wesp, 2014), consensus on how to define the field’s central concept remains (fascinatingly) elusive.

To briefly summarize my own open position, whilst Juul (2005, p. 224) is right to argue that ‘narratives are basically interpretative, whereas games are formal’, the distinction works more in the abstract than it does across the increasingly diverse contemporary landscape of what we, perhaps now loosely, call ‘video games’. Moreover, to quote Swalwell and Wilson (2008, p.3), any understanding of contemporary video games which fails to recognize the increasing inseparability of narrative and gameplay ‘is suggesting a definition and a range of enjoyment in gameplay far narrower than that used by players, journalists, and industry professionals’. The emphasis here is thus broadly on video games as a ‘fictional form’ (Atkins, 2003), and the three case studies can each be seen as clear examples of ‘those that borrow heavily from literary and cinematic conventions in the construction of something that resembles a game/fiction hybrid’ (Atkins, 2003, p. 22). It should also be noted that to examine the use of violence in any video game is to essentially engage at the levels of narrative and representation; otherwise, the experience is little more than an innocuous interaction with pixelated objects.

Conversely, the notion of interactivity, of the ‘passive’ spectator becoming the ‘active’ player, is equally crucial to understanding even the most story-driven video game. Darley’s (2000) formulation, in which he highlights the paradox inherent in the passive spectator/active player dichotomy, provides the most useful basis from which to proceed. According to Darley (2000, p. 151), however much a game might aspire to narrative sophistication, narrative itself is always, to some degree or another, ‘de-centered’ against the medium’s instrumental ludic precepts. In turn,
any notion that the player possesses a more ‘active’ relationship with video games than does the spectator with cinema rests on a narrow, ‘kinesthetic’ understanding of ‘activity’:

Players are often perceived as being more active than viewers are, yet, this is only true – or at least with respect to the computer game – in a vicariously ‘physical’ sense… interactivity in the computer game involves a kind of relative or regulated agency: the constraints of the game allow players to choose between a limited number of options. However, such ‘active participation’ should not be confused with increased semantic engagement. On the contrary, the kinds of mental processes that games solicit are largely instrumental and/or reactive in character… passive spectators of conventional cinema might be said to be far more active than their counterparts in newer forms. (Darley, 2000, pp. 163, 164)

Again, Darley’s characterization of video games as being principally ‘kinesthetic’ and ‘goal-oriented’ is more or less accurate depending on the game in question. Indeed, traditional lines of prioritization between the medium’s ludic and narrative dimensions are very much blurred in contemporary games such as *Journey* or the similarly existential *Dear Esther*, both of which possess a relative scarcity of challenging puzzles and so forth, and even less in the way of frenetic gameplay. However, the characterization very much applies to the type of game being examined here, one in which the appreciation of narrative and representation competes with the more imminent demands of mastering the game’s visceral combat. In drawing comparisons with cinema, the semantic shift from ‘kinetic’, with respect to films, to ‘kinesthetic’, with respect to
games, is crucial: in the cinematic interplay between exhilarating violence and narrative contexts, the viewer is essentially confronted by two aspects of the visual-narrative plane; in video games, on the other hand, the visceral dimension of onscreen violence is enacted by the player who, to quote Darley (2000, p. 164) once more, has been given a kinesthetic ‘entry into the image’.

In viewing gameplay as a discrete aspect of video games, Bogost’s (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric is helpful. Evaluations of the medium’s capacity for meaning-making and ‘semantic engagement’ are often informed by an implicit view of gameplay as a sort of ideologically neutral, or empty, backdrop against which narratives, meanings and other interpretable aspects of a more traditional text might (or might not) emerge. For Bogost (2007, p. 340), gameplay itself is a form of rhetoric in which, whether consciously or unconsciously, a given game’s ludic systems inevitably convey a worldview: ‘We must recognize the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality. Processes influence us... the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions’. Here, Bogost offers a view of formal gameplay systems comparable to film studies’ understandings of ‘realism’ in cinema in which ‘the mechanical imitation of nature’ (Arnheim, 2006, p. 158) is always underpinned by an ‘implicit ideology supporting and structuring a given work’ (Wood, 2006, p. 46). With respect to this study, it is thus important to engage in a ‘different kind of literacy’ (Atkins, 2003, p. 61) in which gameplay systems are no less suffused with meaning than the more explicitly rhetorical dimensions of narrative and representation.

Before proceeding with the case studies, it should be noted that this article makes no claims to being the first to highlight the complexities in violent game designs. To give a few key examples
relevant to this discussion, Bertozzi’s (2014) analysis of ‘shooting games’ identifies a number ‘positive potentialities’: from the capacity to foster strategic thinking, to the increasing tendency of game designers to confront players with moral choice. BioShock has been the focus of much work, most notably Aldred and Greenspan’s (2011) discussion of the game’s ‘ambivalence toward technology’ and Hocking’s (2009) critique of its ‘ludonarrative dissonance’. Also, Hitchens et al (2013) provide a wide-ranging survey of the FPS in order to highlight the often overlooked diversity of narrative contexts in this enduringly popular yet much-maligned genre. However, the tendency in such studies is to view violent gameplay as a basic setting in which other, more worthwhile aspects of design are seen to emerge. This article seeks to differentiate itself along lines similar to those outlined by Prince (1998, p. 8) in his study of Peckinpah:

I do not wish to imply that the treatment of violence is the only thing of importance in his films. Indeed, a remarkable network of additional concerns runs through the films and gives them an unmistakable structure… However, as I have previously noted, an apologetic orientation tends to characterize Peckinpah’s most sympathetic critics, who acknowledge that the films are violent, but then quickly add that the films are about much more than this… Let us meet the violence head-on…

The case studies

Irrational Games’ BioShock (2007) is often cited as an example of narrative sophistication in game design. Set in Rapture—a dystopian underwater city founded on, and ultimately undone by, a sort of hyper-allegiance to Randian objectivism—BioShock is an FPS/RPG hybrid in which the player engages in bloody combat as the narrative teases out the mysteries of the city’s
downfall and the hero/avatar’s true purpose. Whilst *Bioshock’s* setting is fantastical, and it provides players with an increasing range of quasi-magical ‘splicing’ powers by consuming a substance known as ADAM, the game is also firmly grounded in conventional FPS gunplay. Indeed, magical combat upgrades aside, *Bioshock’s* RPG dimensions are deceptively insubstantial: exploration of its dystopian environments is strictly limited within the boundaries set by its linear narrative; there is no means for social interaction between the player and the occasional non-hostile characters he/she encounters along the way; and the game very much operates according to the ‘shooting gallery’ logic of the conventional FPS.

Central to both the game’s narrative and its ludic systems are the player’s recurring encounters with Rapture’s Little Sisters and Big Daddies: ghoulish young girls and the large, ostensibly monstrous sub-humans in ‘Diver Dan’ suits who serve as their minders. Each level places the player in a different part of the city, and in each distinct area resides a number of Little Sisters and their Big Daddies, along with the hostile and deranged remnants of Rapture’s citizenry known as ‘splicers’. The Little Sisters scour the levels for ADAM which they ‘harvest’ via hypodermic needle from the corpses of ill-fated splicers which lie scattered across the environments. Indeed, ADAM is the manifest reason for the city’s collapse: increasing use of the state-sanctioned substance ultimately rendered each augmented citizen hopelessly addicted and completely mad.

Consumption of ADAM as the means by which players gain access to an increasing range of magical powers to compliment their conventional weaponry is integral to meeting *Bioshock’s* increasing challenges. Furthermore, the addition of this game-defining magical component very
much amplifies the power fantasy nature of the FPS genre, and in a manner which echoes ‘the values underlying Randian rational self-interest’ (Hocking, 2009). At the start of game, players are led to believe that the only method of procuring the substance is to harvest it from Little Sisters and thereby kill each vessel. Not long after, however, an alternative option is offered: players have a choice to either harvest the Little Sisters for maximum ADAM, or to rescue each girl for some, but much less, return. This moral choice of ‘rescue’ or ‘harvest’ has been widely discussed in both games journalism and games studies (e.g., Russell, 2014; Aldred and Greenspan, 2011).

What has been missed in such accounts are the intriguing ambivalences inherent in encounters with the no less central, and even more *iconic* in gaming circles, Big Daddies. In order to engage with a Little Sister, the player must first defeat her Big Daddy, and the ensuing combat situations provide each level with its most difficult challenges. Crucially, as menacing as each Big Daddy appears, these formidable foes are, along with their Little Sisters, the only non-hostile characters with whom players can interact during the game. Indeed, if the player approaches a Little Sister too closely, her accompanying Big Daddy will simply adopt a highly threatening posture and then push the player harmlessly away from the child’s immediate vicinity. Combat can occur only after the player first attacks the Big Daddy, and designers cleverly ensure that the minder’s presence is bulky enough, and always sufficiently placed between the player and Little Sister, so as to make it seem physically impossible—rather than simply not permitted in terms of programming—to interact with the latter before dispensing with the former.
As central recurring antagonists, The Big Daddies are both atypically passive and, moreover, deeply pitiable. Indeed, whilst the need to procure ADAM compels the player towards hostile engagement, they are brought to life in such a way as to solicit empathy. Should the player choose to passively follow the movements of the Big Daddies and Little Sisters as they wander through Rapture’s various levels, he/she will inevitably bear witness to what can only be described as a poignant relationship. In an at once grotesque and tender evocation of the archetypal ‘adored little girl and doting father’ (Jenkins, 2015, p. 17), a Big Daddy will usually be found trudging dutifully behind his Little Sister as she gleefully chats away to him in search for ADAM. At other procedurally-determined moments in the pair’s digital performance, the Little Sister will choose to briefly abandon her Big Daddy and go exploring by crawling into one of the many air vents that rest in the walls of Rapture. Separated from his charge, the now endearingly maladroit guardian becomes clearly distressed, emitting deep and mournful moans as he knocks on one air vent after another until she answers his calls.

Whilst the sympathetic depiction of Big Daddies as recurring antagonists has certainly elicited pangs of guilt from some players (e.g. GameFAQs, 2015), such contextual detail might just as easily be lost on others seeking a shallower kinesthetic engagement. However, in its narrative climax, a bait-and-switch turn of events in which the player’s heroic purpose is rendered counterfeit, *Bioshock* ultimately demands that players question the nature of their endeavors as both narrative hero and video game player. To summarize, the essential plot leading up to this narrative ‘twist’ sees the hero, Jack, make his through Rapture in order to defeat the city’s Randian patriarch, Andrew Ryan, and rescue Atlas who, via shortwave radio, serves as Jack’s benevolent guide throughout the game. When Jack finally reaches Ryan, the latter explains that
the entire quest has been a ruse aimed at seeing the hero execute Rapture’s leader in order to make way for the even more nefarious Atlas. Here, the ‘would you kindly’ phrase which has prefigured all of Atlas’ directions up to this point is revealed by Ryan to have been an auto-suggestion technique designed to inculcate mindless obedience.

In the moments leading up to the execution, control of Jack is wrested from the player as Ryan borrows Atlas’ auto-suggestive phrase and makes him perform various actions against his will—each deliberately rendered so as to maintain the now pseudo sense of player control. In a final act of Randian defiance aimed at lending similar pseudo agency to his own inevitable demise, the non-interactive sequence then ends with Ryan ordering Jack to ‘kill’. The execution itself, in which Jack strikes Ryan repeatedly on the head with his own golf club until it is finally lodged in his skull, is the most brutally violent moment in a characteristically brutal gaming experience. In narrative terms, the sequence very much functions to ‘alienate viewers from their own excitement and enjoyment’ by removing any virtuousness from the hero’s actions in preceding events. In gameplay terms, it acts as a critique of notions of video game agency by suggesting that the ‘active player’ of Bioshock is only ever complying with a limited set of violent gameplay options. Hocking (2009) argues that, in breaking the ‘fourth wall’ between narrative and gameplay, Bioshock’s climax ‘openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief” and ‘all but destroys the player’s ability to feel connected’. Moreover, for Hocking, this dissonant gesture represents a critical weakness in the game’s otherwise laudable design, one which almost led him to ‘abandon the game in protest’. Echoing Wood’s thoughts on films which ‘seem to crack open before our eyes’, the passion of Hocking’s response is arguably more
important than its content, suggesting that *Bioshock* is better understood as confrontational art, rather than as straightforward entertainment.

*Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) is one of a number of ‘military shooters’ which, with varying degrees of success, sought to replicate the immense popularity of Infinity Ward’s military FPS franchise, *Call of Duty*. Whilst it was critically praised on release, and has since achieved veritable cult status, *Spec Ops: The Line* failed to capture the attention of consumers at the time—a failure which designers and journalists alike have since attributed to the publisher’s decision to market the game as a *Call of Duty* clone rather than focus on its unique merits (e.g. Pitts, 2012).


In gameplay terms, *Spec Ops: The Line* is an entirely conventional shooter. The third-person ‘cover-based’ defense mechanic takes its cues from the highly influential sci-fi shooter franchise, *Gears of War* (2006), but the overarching formal structure follows the even more seminal *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007). Shooting gallery sequences are interspersed with cinematic, but only marginally interactive, ‘set piece’ moments, and intermittent expository cut-scenes serve to move the narrative forward. ‘Turret’ sections, remote missile strikes and other gameplay tropes established in *Modern Warfare* are also integrated at certain points in order to break any
potential monotony in the core on-foot gunplay. Indeed, the derivativeness of *Spec Ops: The Line*’s gameplay was generally seen by critics as the game’s principal failing, expressed in comments ranging from ‘solid, if somewhat familiar, gameplay’ (Sheard, 2012) to ‘heartbreakingly conventional’ (Gallaway, 2012).

*Spec Ops: The Line* is exceedingly gruesome and, like all meaningful war films, often difficult to sit through. Across its narrative, the player is exposed to, and forced to take part in, various atrocities, and the boundaries between nightmare and reality increasingly dissolve in the environmental design as ‘the horror’ (Conrad, 2007, p. 98) unfolds. Put simply, *Spec Ops: The Line* is the violent video game equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder. The game ends with Walker discovering that, much like Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, he has been Konrad all along: a psychic dissociation aimed at negating the guilt of being a war criminal. During these end sequences, Walker is met by Konrad’s apparition who, after explaining his illusory nature, offers the choice to either commit suicide and end the madness or ‘kill’ the alter-ego and maintain the psychosis. Depending on which option is chosen, the game then ‘branches out’ towards five possible conclusions. For players who choose suicide, there is a brief final shot of the now deceased Walker slumped on the ground, accompanied by a recording of his voice repeating words spoken by Konrad at the outset. For player’s who choose to kill Konrad’s apparition, an epilogue follows in which Walker is met by US soldiers and the player is given one final option to either violently resist their calls to disarm, or stand down and be placed into custody.

Of the five possible conclusions, only one provides a sense of redemption. To achieve this outcome, Walker must first kill Konrad’s apparition and, then, when confronted by the military
escort, surrender his weapon. The narrative concludes with a relatively comforting scene in which Walker rides in the back of a jeep whilst the sympathetic driver asks how he survived the horrors of Dubai. Importantly, however, this ending is pure delusion. According to designers (Garland, 2012), fade-ins were employed throughout the game in order to distinguish hallucination from reality, with white fade-ins denoting a shift into the former and black fade-ins a shift into the latter. The fade-in preceding this final redeeming sequence is white. The ‘true’ conclusion is for Walker to commit suicide, and one way of achieving this grim outcome is for the player to simply do nothing during the final encounter with Konrad and let the alter-ego commit the act. Indeed, principal writer, Walt Williams (cited in Garland, 2012), has suggested that a player’s refusal to continue playing *Spec Ops: The Line* at any point during its increasingly macabre narrative represents an ‘unofficial’ but nonetheless legitimate way of ending things.

The sentiment expressed here by Williams reflects the game’s self-reflexive, almost anti-commercial spirit. Indeed, *Spec Ops: The Line* is as much a critique of violent video games as it is of the immorality of modern warfare. Here, the derivativeness of gameplay is indispensible to the game’s raison d’être: like all good satire, *Spec Ops: The Line* is necessarily grounded in a caricature of the archetype it aims to critique. Indeed, too much innovation of the basic form in the name of making the game more appealing would have arguably undermined the designers’ higher purpose, one which echoes Peckinpah’s statement that ‘I didn’t want you to enjoy the film, I wanted you to look very close at your own soul.’ This critical approach to the military shooter genre is perhaps best exemplified by the ‘White Phosphorus’ level in which the player takes control of a mortar cannon and unleashes the eponymous napalm-like substance onto enemy combatants.
Inspired by *Modern Warfare*’s ‘Death from Above’ level which sees players similarly commandeer a missile launcher via the black-and-white video screen of its remote targeting apparatus, ‘White Phosphorus’ acts as a critique of the process by which ‘we stop thinking about the enemies as Soldiers and instead see them as glowing dots that need to be turned off’ (Williams cited in Garland, 2012). In both sequences, the player is given a birds-eye view of the environment as the camera shifts from one section to another, highlighting various enemy soldiers and vehicles to fire upon. In *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, the sequence is then followed by one in which Walker surveys the devastated landscape on foot, only to find that he has ‘unknowingly’ burnt to death a large number of civilians, along with the military unit charged with protecting them. The protracted horror of ‘White Phosphorus’ culminates in a lingering shot of the charred remains of a mother embracing her child. To quote Williams (cited in Garland, 2012): ‘And it hits Players in the gut... They don’t get teleported to the next location. They have to face the human cost of their actions’.

Rockstar Games’ *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTAV*) (2013) is the latest installment in a franchise which has long been subject to public vilification for its violent and antisocial gameplay. Concerns surrounding the hugely popular and critically acclaimed series are understandable: each game places the player in control of a criminal trying to get ahead in the underworld, and when not engaged in the ‘story missions’ through which this career path unfolds, the player is free to wander the city in search of more self-directed illicit fun. Indeed, the *GTA* franchise has been central in popularizing what is now known as the ‘sandbox’ format in which much of a game’s enjoyment lies beyond its conventional narrative and in the player’s free-hand
interactions with the environment and its programmed inhabitants. In the virtual world of GTA, sociopathic behavior is more or less expected: players can maim innocent civilians, cause traffic disasters and generally lay waste to their hearts’ content.

Sympathetic appraisals are quick to point out that, as the franchise has developed, players have been given access to an increasing range of both benign and illicit activities in which to take part (e.g. Sicart, 2009, pp. 104, 105). Indeed, in GTA V, the player can hypothetically choose to spend more time playing tennis, doing yoga or going to the cinema than instigating the sort of city-wide chaos for which the franchise is notorious. Also, much like other installments, whilst it is possible to steal ambulances, police cars and taxis, it is also possible to then use such vehicles by responding to emergency calls, apprehending criminals and ferrying citizens across town, respectively. However, a procedural rhetorical reading of GTA V reveals a level of disingenuousness to arguments which place the ethical burden on the player rather than on the game. Put simply, the socially acceptable activities are not as engaging as the antisocial ones, and this reflects the dull social conformity with which the former are conceived in the transgressive fictional world. Doing Yoga, for example, amounts to a series of ‘quick time’ button presses while the avatar remains fixed upon a yoga mat and cliché sitar music plays in the background. The tennis simulation, whilst providing a relatively higher degree of player agency, is a similarly basic and uninspiring.

However, GTAV’s narrative imbues this franchise-typical procedural antisociality with a marked sense of morality and social conscience. The player is given control of three protagonists between whom he or she is mostly free to switch at any point: Michael, a disenchanted ex-crim
with more than a passing resemblance to Tony Soprano; Franklin, a black gang member in the
vein of the earlier *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas’* (2004) protagonist, CJ; and Trevor, a
psychotic ex-accomplice of Michael’s and arguably the most disconcertingly comedic character
ever brought to life in a video game. According to principal writer, David Houser (quoted in
Stuart, 2011), Michael, Franklin and Trevor were meant to embody the vices of greed, ambition
and insanity, respectively, with each character tragically in thrall to the corrupting sway of the
‘almighty dollar’. Counterpoising itself against GTA’s interactive mayhem, the narrative alludes
both to the ‘crime doesn’t pay’ tradition of mobster films such as *The Godfather* (1972) and
*Goodfellas* (1990), and to related sociological analyses which explain deviance as a product of
unequal access to the ‘American Dream’ (e.g. O’Kane, 2009). Indeed, Michael, Franklin and
Trevor are clearly positioned as representatives of historically disadvantaged sociocultural
groups—Italian-Americans, African-Americans, and the entrenched Anglo underclass,
respectively—who ‘want what American society offers and expects of all—success—yet they
are prevented from legitimately achieving this goal’ (O’Kane, 2009, p. 26).

On completing the game, the player is also offered a wryly judgmental ‘psychiatric evaluation’
in which the sum of actions and decisions is critiqued by Michael’s apparently omnipotent
psychiatrist. Having played the game myself to the end, I can report the following: ‘Likes to use
people’; ‘Yoga? No. Murder? Yes!’; ‘Only robs with good reason - or with some reason’; and,
finally, in the interests of full transparency, ‘Possibly worst psychopath I have encountered’. The
evaluations are surreptitiously calculated throughout the game and, whilst there is considerable
room for variation between one evaluation and another, there is no way of avoiding an amusingly
damning character indictment. Conscious of its own notoriety, *GTA V’s* final gesture acts as both
an acknowledgement of the game’s cultural status and a satirical critique of everyone who has chosen to play it.

Indeed, *GTA V* sees the franchise become explicitly self-reflexive, placing both gaming culture and, by implication, itself into the firing line of its ‘monstrous parody of modern life’ (Stuart, 2013). During Michael’s establishing cut-scenes, the player is introduced to his son, Jimmy: a spoilt, overweight teenager with hip-hop affectations who spends most of his time in his bedroom smoking marijuana and playing the violent, *Call of Duty*-inspired video game, ‘Righteous Slaughter’. In one sequence, the volume on Jimmy’s bedroom television is so loud, and his ‘trash talk’ to other online gamers so misogynistic, that it disrupts Michael’s downstairs enjoyment of a film. A confrontation between Michael and Jimmy soon ensues in the latter’s bedroom, with the frustrated father smashing a nearby chair into his son’s television screen as he implores the young man to ‘do something’ productive with his life.

Each *GTA* installment has had its own particular point(s) of controversy, such as the hidden ‘hot coffee’ sequence in *San Andreas* in which CJ enjoys marginally interactive and, for the graphical capabilities of the time, explicit sex with his girlfriend. With *GTA V*, controversy has largely centered on a gruesome torture sequence in which the psychotic Trevor interrogates his victim in order to glean the identity of a crime witness. Trevor’s gleefully sadistic, Tarantino-esque interrogation occurs during one of the game’s story missions, and there is no way to either evade the sequence or moderate its intensity to any great extent. Placed in ‘control’ of the deranged avatar, agency is reduced to a choice between different torture devices, followed by a series of quick time button presses in order to commit the various compulsory acts. Torture victim
advocacy groups joined together in public condemnation of this sequence, arguing that the game ‘crossed a line by effectively forcing people to take on the role of a torturer and perform a series of unspeakable acts if they want to achieve success…’ (Best cited in Hern, 2013). However, putting to one side the extent to which it can be seen as a satirical commentary on the questionable use of such tactics in America’s war on terror, the sequence functions in much the same way as *Spec Ops: The Line’s* ‘White Phosphorus’ and Jack’s execution of Ryan in *Bioshock*. Precisely in ‘forcing people to… perform a series of unspeakable acts’, this unavoidable moment of horror serves to undermine the complacent enjoyment of violence which *GTA V* elsewhere encourages.

**Conclusion**

The three video games discussed here all share in a degree of ambivalent reflection about violent play, inviting the sorts of close examinations long directed towards violence in cinema. To recapitulate, the central recurring antagonists in *Bioshock’s* dystopian sci-fi adventure are portrayed in such a way as to solicit empathy from (observant) players, and the game’s climax raises questions about their exploits as both violent narrative hero and violent gamer. *Spec Ops: The Line* operates in a similar, albeit more severe, manner by ultimately framing its ‘hero as warrior’ narrative as the psychotic misadventure of a war criminal. Here, both modern American warfare in the Middle-East and the effort to render it as video game entertainment become ‘a form of madness’. As the latest installment in a perennially vilified franchise, *GTA V* counterpoises the franchise’s familiarly antisocial gameplay, and ever-evolving parody of the contemporary American metropolis, against a moralistic and socially-conscious crime narrative. More importantly, in its depiction of the nihilistic teenage gamer, ‘psychiatric’ indictment of the
player and deliberately odious and compulsory torture sequence, GTA V demonstrates a selfreflexive and provocatively critical understanding of its own notoriety. In all three games, the
core gameplay in which players are rewarded for repetition of violent behaviors is juxtaposed
with narrative-contextual aspects which, as McKinney (1993, p. 17) argues with respect to strong
violence in cinema, ‘acts on the mind by refusing it glib comfort and immediate resolutions’.

However, in the more overtly ‘multidimensional’ (Nicholls and Ryan, 2008, p. 170) medium of
video games, the juxtaposition of exhilarating violence and ambivalent context plays out in a
more fractured manner than in the relatively flatter visual space of cinema. Whilst the three case
studies convey an ambivalence towards violence which, it is argued here, ‘shakes everything up,
reforming the entire fictive environment around itself’ (McKinney, 1993, p. 17), the violence
itself comes into being through the plane of gameplay which, to some extent, follows its own
quarantined logic. Indeed, however much designers might problematize violence with tools
derived from the fictive plane, such gestures are very much de-centered against an overarching
procedural rhetoric which essentially solicits the unreflective embrace of heroic mass slaughter.
There is, in a sense, an irreconcilable two-way challenge operating here: whilst emotionally
‘uncommitted’ violent play is questioned by designers throughout their respective experiences,
the rhetoric of gameplay offers its own kinesthetically relentless negation.

This inherent disjuncture between kinesthetic gameplay and ambivalent context amplifies the
tension of McKinney’s strong violence to a level comparable with Wood’s incoherent text.
Indeed, built into the very framework of these video games is ‘the failure to establish a
consistent… attitude to the protagonist’; an intrinsic narrative-gameplay discord wherein each
game ‘cannot believe in the traditional figure of the charismatic individualist hero, but it also
cannot relinquish it’ (Wood, 1986, p. 53). *Spec Ops: The Line* comes closest to fully
relinquishing the hero as warrior archetype but, even here, the gameplay appeal of the
archetype’s conventional video game manifestation is retained amidst the horror of the game’s
narrative iconoclasm. As staunch ludologists such as Juul or Eskelinen (e.g. 2001) would argue,
these (violent) video games are ultimately games first and foremost, however much their
respective designers might seek to question certain conventions of the form.

This, it should be noted, is not a criticism of the games’ capacities for ambivalent meaning-
making, merely a recognition of the medium’s innate multidimensionality. Indeed, the intrinsic
incoherence between exhilarating gameplay and ambivalent context informs each game’s most
potent expressions of the latter: moments in which designers break the fourth wall and appeal
directly to players as players. In the brutal execution of Ryan in which designers wrest control
from the player whilst maintaining the illusion of agency, *BioShock* disrupts conventional
structural distinctions between what is interactive and what is not in order to emphasize its point
about thoughtless complicity. In its blatant mimicking of *Modern Warfare*’s ‘Death from Above’
sequence, *Spec Ops: The Line*’s horrific ‘White Phosphorus’ engages at a meta-textual level in
which a working knowledge of video game tropes is indispensible to a full appreciation of its
cultural critique. *GTA V*’s psychiatric profile speaks largely for itself in this fourth wall respect: a
‘grace note’ of wry indictment for actions hitherto performed as Michael, Franklin and Trevor. In
these moments, each game reminds players of their complicity in violent entertainment, and with
an explicitness of which Peckinpah, seeking the same dialogue with his viewers, might have
been envious.
References


