In early June, at the E3 convention in Los Angeles, I attended a demo for a game called Splinter Cell: Blacklist. In the demo, I watched the Splinter Cell franchise’s long-established hero, Sam Fisher — operating somewhere in Middle Eastania — enter a tent, kill two gentlemen, and grab a third. Sam asks this third gentleman where a certain colleague of his might be. The gentleman declines to answer, so Sam sticks his knife into the gentleman’s clavicle. The gamer is then given an onscreen prompt to twirl around his controller’s joystick, which in turn twirls around Sam’s knife in the gentleman’s wound. The screaming gentleman gives Sam the info he needs — and, suddenly, it’s “moral choice” time, for Sam has to choose whether to kill or knock out his freshly tortured victim. Let’s review: a moral choice — after an interactive torture sequence.

We’ve arrived in a strange emotional clime when our popular entertainment frequently depicts torture as briskly effective rather than literally the worst thing one human being can do to another — yea verily, worse even than killing. Inflicting pain and suffering on a captive human being because one person feels like it and the other can’t stop it … is this not what we’re told awaits sinners in hell? Is this not the domain of Satan?

I left the Blacklist demo sick and infuriated, which was a shame, because the person introducing the demo was a game designer I admire and have long wanted to meet. I really wanted to ask this man how he felt, demo-ing that. Ask the programmers and artists, too, how they felt, bringing that moment into this world. I wanted to ask them all what the deal is with this industry we’re a part of. I didn’t. Couldn’t. I know people who’ve been tortured. Someone I know was tortured because of something I wrote about him — a cold little bibelot I’ll take with me to my grave. I described my Blacklist experience to some gamer friends, a couple of whom thought I was overreacting. Overreacting to a blithe, shrugging presentation of the very definition of human evil, all in the name of “entertainment.” I spent a couple days feeling ashamed of being a gamer, of playing or liking military games, of being interested in any of this disgusting bullshit at all.

When a child grabs a playmate’s toy, or defends himself violently against someone else who is grabbing the toy from him, you show both children what warrior energy is used for by immediately protecting the victim of the aggression, innocent or guilty. Then you help the little warriors see clearly what happened and how they feel. "That made you mad. That anger helped you feel strong. You may need that strength someday when there is nobody else to help you. But you didn't need it here. You can get your toy back without hurting someone.”

Preschool teachers constantly repeat the convenient shorthand "Use your words" when a child gets aggressive. The overriding message is that aggression is bad. It doesn't recognize
the healthy aspects of aggression. Unrecognized, the healthy drive frequently goes over to
the dark side.

— Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*

III.

Shooters are very popular and thus very profitable. Except when they're not. Very potentially profitable, I should say. Storytelling games with great characters and thoughtful scenarios are popular, too, but they're also very rare because they're exceedingly hard to make. Many, many developers have tried to craft a shooter with great characters and thoughtful scenarios and most of them have miserably failed. One possible explanation for this: A shooter works by effectively training its players to ignore things like great characterization and thoughtful scenario-making. As Matthew Burns puts it: "[I]t is extremely difficult — maybe impossible — to come up with a story and characters that, when placed within the context of most current video games, don't feel inherently silly." I agree with Burns, but I didn't always. I used to think the solution to the problem of what I wanted from video games was "better writing," which was good news, because I'm a writer! But "better writing" isn't the solution. The problem is, in fact, way deeper. I'm not sure it's a problem you solve so much as figure out elegant ways to avoid. The person who finally figures out how to make the game many gamers seem to believe they want — the action-heavy shooter with great characters and thoughtful scenarios — is basically going to be the Twelfth Imam of mass entertainment, and by that I mean we'll all be waiting for this figure's appearance, and his or her game, for a long, long time.

IV.

Not all shooter violence is violent per se. As the game critic Erik Kain notes, "killing people in video games is actually just solving moving puzzles." Which is a true, smart, and helpful way to think about video-game violence. However, most puzzles don't bleed or scream. Why do gamers want their puzzles to bleed and scream? And why on earth do they — do we — also want our bleeding, screaming puzzles to be embedded within a nuanced story?

V.

A few shooters I regard as having handled violence as well as can be reasonably expected, given the medium's distinct strengths and limitations:

1. *Metro 2033*: Killing stuff is depressing as hell. Enemies don't die easily. A lot of them are scared, freaked out. The world is not at stake and you're just pushing through enemies because you have to. At one point you wipe out three guys sitting around a campfire. When they're dead, you see that one of them had a guitar, which you're now free to strum.

2. *Far Cry 2*: Here the enemies roll around and cry for their mothers after you've shot them. The game never comments on what you're doing — not internally, not externally — and so you're a monster, mostly, that does monstrous things. All the while the game just stares back at you with lidless, reptilian eyes. It doesn't care how you feel.

3. *Half-Life, Half-Life 2*: Killing as physics: gravity guns, energy balls, etc. The bad guys are evil, masked, and inhuman. You never wonder which of them watered the flowers back at base. I think I'll hurl a toilet at that one over there …
4. BioShock, BioShock 2: A game that presents a bunch of dynamic systems by which to inflict violence (lightning, mine traps, killer bees, harpoon guns, freeze rays) in an incredibly atmospheric setting. A simple formula and a great one. It's violence as opera, essentially, and also a sneaky critique of power fantasies.

5. Bulletstorm: Here's a planet of psychopathic nutballs — go to town. Killing these guys isn't the point. Killing them with style is the point. This is violence as an exhilaratingly blank canvas, a pure puzzle-performance killing game.

6. Halo, Gears of War: Both franchises have figured out that the slaughter of unpleasant, genocidal alien bogeymen turns out to be a delightfully qualmless way to spend one's leisure time.

7. Kane & Lynch 2: Violence as aesthetic misery. The characters are awful. The people you're killing are awful. The world is awful. The guns are sloppy, i.e., awful. Everything's awful. It's not fun, not at all, but it is both hideously absorbing and completely numbing — kind of like what I imagine being inside a psychopathic mind amounts to.

VI.

At least half of the above-mentioned shooters did not enjoy overmuch commercial success — a fact, I suspect, that speaks for itself.

VII.

We who are on perpetual watch for a morally nuanced shooter — we unicorn and jackalope hunters — have had our eye on Spec Ops: The Line for quite some time. Developed by Yager and published by 2K Games, Spec Ops: The Line had what I gather was a troubled development cycle. In the mid-aughties, a Rockstar-helmed attempt to revive the tarnished Spec Ops brand was canceled. Yager, a European developer with no track record, was later asked to do what one of the planet's greatest developers couldn't: come up with an acceptable Spec Ops game. When Yager's version was delayed, I heard whispers that the game's ambitions were too much for a new studio to handle — and ambitions Yager appeared to have in spades. For one thing, Spec Ops: The Line is an attempt to retell the story of Conrad's Heart of Darkness; for another, the developers repeatedly spoke to the press about delivering a story that went beyond military-game jingoism and fun core loops of killing and shooting. They described how they wanted to create an experience that drove home how complicated modern combat scenarios can be. They promised genuinely awful and truly dreadful moments. Death, they said, would have some weight in this game.

Those of us who love to feel miserable about video-game killing started paying attention. I'd rather drive a nail into my own hand than play another so-called realistic military shooter — and yet when another so-called realistic military shooter comes along, I play it anyway. I guess I find these games insanely irresponsible and also somehow irresistible, which is what I most hate about them. Couldn't you argue that the men and women who make Battlefield and Modern Combat and Call of Duty are making the world a demonstrably worse place? I think you could. Sometimes I wonder how they sleep at night. Sometimes, when I can't sleep at night, I play Call of Duty.

VIII.

Shooters are obviously some kind of power fantasy, centered, as they are, upon enacting, over and over again, one of the gravest moral steps a human being can take. They're obviously a form of vicarious
experience, allowing even the yellowest among us to feel a facile familiarity with combat. They're obviously tapping into a deep and possibly even evolutionarily vital part of the human mind, in which power asserted becomes advantage gained. And unlike most of humanity's previous attempts to replicate such dynamics within rule-based confines — like, say, jousting or rugby — no one gets hurt. It's quite possible that shooters reveal that somewhere inside every human being is a shadow human being, one who kills and takes and does what he or she pleases. A lot of people who love shooters play them, they say, "to blow off steam." That's not why I play shooters. I play shooters because I like the pressure, the pressure of learning what to pay attention to in a realm where the ordinary governances of human behavior have been lifted. I like shooters, I suspect, for the same reason I used to like doing hard drugs. They allow my shadow self to emerge and play. For me, shooters aren't about blowing off steam. They're about taking in steam.

IX.

What follows are some of the notes I took during my play-through of Spec Ops: The Line:

- Needs to be less glib.
- If you're gonna do verisimilitude, goddamn do verisimilitude.
- This is kinda dumb.
- Sand stuff sort of cool.
- Actually no dumber than the average action film and compared to most shooters it's Luc Besson.
- Chatty commandos. Chattiest ever.
- OK, Spec Ops: The Line. That was interesting. Challenge accepted! Will take you more seriously.
- "The story is ludicrous." — Maude Lebowski
- How many games have you played in which you drop white phosphorous on American soldiers?
- Some environments are genuinely cool.
- Oh wait, did the load screen just define "cognitive dissonance"?
- I mean, come on, but do shooters even need villains?
- Now it's just pandering.
- One of the main bad guys is a Rolling Stone reporter??? Jane's Defence Weekly would be better.
- That was clumsy but genuinely interesting. Huh.
- OK, this maybe actually does something.

X.

Spec Ops: The Line adheres more closely to the story of Apocalypse Now than Heart of Darkness, though Apocalypse is itself an allegorical retelling of Darkness. Here's the main problem with trying to retell the story of Heart of Darkness in a modern setting: It's going to make zero sense. The story of Spec Ops: The Line involves an American colonel who disappears with his battalion in Dubai after six months of sandstorms have made the city uninhabitable. In Conrad's time, a man could plunge into the heart of a jungle and raise a private army and go mad. Today, too, this is quite possible. What's distinctly impossible, in both Conrad's and our time, is for a battalion of American soldiers to go missing for six months in a major urban center, disaster-struck or no. A battalion can contain as many as 1,500 soldiers; there's simply no way that many people, connected by that many avenues of communication, could
"disappear." Also, sandstorms could plague Dubai for six years without the American military getting involved. This game seems to have never heard of the Red Crescent or have thought terribly deeply about the geopolitical framework of the modern Middle East. Finally, Spec Ops: The Line would have us believe that the best way to find a missing battalion of American soldiers in an abandoned city would be to send three guys in to look for them.

It all sounds really dumb, right? And for a long time, it is pretty dumb. The dialogue is snappy, if way too glib, and the gameplay ranges from acceptable to quite good, but the game's initial setup is so preposterous that you find yourself wishing it were all staged on another planet or, at the very least, in some invented Middle Eastern city. That's the great benefit of sci-fi: Halo's Master Chief never has to deal with the problems of a familiar bureaucracy. When Marcus Fenix of Gears of War says his comms are down, you don't doubt him. When Mass Effect's Commander Shepard drifts out of radio contact, you accept this. Stories don't have to be plausible, but they do have to be convincing. For a long time, Spec Ops: The Line is neither.

XI.

We were told the deaths would have some weight in Spec Ops: The Line. I took that to mean that it wouldn't be a shooting gallery that incentivizes killing with achievements and trophies and that it would lack exploding heads. Spec Ops: The Line has all these things and more. Hundreds if not thousands of enemies fall at the feet of its three forward-pushing heroes. The game is filled to its gunwales with shooter ridiculousness. The most terrifying enemy in the game, for instance, is a guy with a knife. He runs at you, with his knife, across a battlefield whistling with small-arms fire. Your squad mates will alert you to the knife guy's presence, which is never not hilarious. Everyone's got automatic weapons and the dude with a knife is the single most terrifying enemy onscreen. From a design perspective, I know why this is so. I know why melee weapons are eight times more deadly than rifles in most shooters. It's about balance. Provided that a shooter is not taking itself too seriously, I accept dumb balancing conventions. But when a game is asking you to think about what onscreen killing means, and why any of us like to engage in it, the appearance of Terrifying Knife Guy bursts any fragile bubble of contemplation.

XII.

Little by little, things get more interesting in Spec Ops: The Line. The first thing you notice is the performance of Nolan North, who plays the game's hero, Captain Martin Walker. In the beginning of the game, Walker sounds like yet another sunny-voiced agent of slaughter, not unlike Uncharted's Nathan Drake, whom North also plays. By the end of the game, Walker's appearance has degraded (he's missing an ear; half his face is burned off) and North's in-combat barks and incidental dialogue begin to sound scarcely unhinged. Suddenly you understand why North was cast: to allow Nathan Drake to go insane. You understand, too, that Spec Ops: The Line knows exactly what it's doing. All the exploding heads? They're not, in fact, a sad concession to What Gamers Want — or at least they're not only that. The game is perfectly aware that it's incentivizing killing. It wants to. It's aware that the "moral choice" moments it gives you amount to nothing. If, say, you decide to save the CIA agent rather than the civilians, it doesn't matter. They're all going to die no matter what. There's a big reveal in Spec Ops: The Line — a few of them, actually — and while they're not perfectly executed, not by a long shot, they're thought-provoking and, by shooter standards, quite brave.

Remember all the ridiculous setup conceits I was complaining about earlier? Quite a few of them wind
Tom Bissell reviews *Spec Ops: The Line* and explores the reasons why we play sh...

up getting worked out by the game's strange, audacious ending. In fact, *Spec Ops: The Line* concludes with you not having any certainties about what just happened. Indeed, the very last moment of the game — a game in which I did terrible, unspeakable things — left me as bewildered about pulling an imaginary trigger as I have ever felt. When I first heard of *Spec Ops: The Line*, I had no idea what "line" its title might be referring to. A zip line? Some modern-day Maginot Line? A comms line? It's referring, hearteningly, to something else entirely. Unlike most shooters, *Spec Ops: The Line* wonders what kind of person likes virtual killing enough to spend hours engaged in it. It bothers to ask, "Aren't we all a little sick and crazy to want this?" That this is a genuinely provocative thing for a shooter to do probably says more about shooters than it does about *Spec Ops: The Line*. But I'm not complaining.

**XIII.**

A few years ago, I was working on a shooter (now canceled) set within an inglorious American war infrequently visited in the video-game space. In truth, the game wasn't precisely a shooter, which was, I suppose, part of the problem. One idea that came up was to completely remove any kind of feedback loop when shooting. By that I mean you wouldn't have any idea whether or not your shots were hitting their targets. You'd just fire into the jungle and hope for the best. Maybe you'd find some bodies later, if you bothered to look. That would be your feedback loop: dead bodies. Combat would be somewhat randomized, in that it would always sort of be going on in the background. Everything was supposed to be tense at all times. The NPC's with you could die at any moment and, once you lost them, they were gone; the game's story was going to be designed to function without them.

As a thought experiment, it sounded incredible: a war game that functioned like a survival horror game. The goal was to make a real war game, something that felt cruel and strange and oppressive, but also genuinely exciting when it had to be, because every combat vet I know, including my shooter-hating father, has described how beautiful and oddly life-affirming combat can sometimes feel. Seven years ago I was embedded with the Marine Corps in Iraq. One night, coming in late to Baghdad, the chopper I was in briefly took fire. I saw the whole thing out the open back of the chopper — these gorgeous green spears of tracer-fire light shooting up at us. The chopper banked hard. While the world below me spun, I remember seeing, down below, a single palm tree gorgeously on fire. It didn't occur to me to be scared until much later, but at that moment all I could think was how exciting and beautiful it was to be sitting there, strapped in, taking fire. I hoped this moment, somehow, would find its way into our game.

Later, of course, I was wise enough to wonder how many people would even want to play a game with no shooting feedback loop. It was possible then and it's possible now that I take shooters too seriously. I don't wring my hands after Indiana Jones has killed his 30th Nazi of the morning, after all. Maybe, in the end, "blowing off steam" is the only kind of experience a shooter needs to enable. The shooter is merely a vent. OK. I suppose I can accept that. But I just went and looked into the vent of my apartment's air conditioner. You know what? It was filthy.