

video games. I know this question has been asked before, but shouldn't it be a little worrying that so many games revolve around the slaughter of hundreds?

Spec Ops: The Line is one of the few games that provides an actual commentary on that history of violence. It doesn't slap you on the wrist for enjoying violence like you might expect, but instead makes you feel and think about issues like death, war, and the uncomfortable decisions that soldiers have to make. It's not the lighthearted, easygoing adventure that most games try to create, but if you've wanted a little more meat to your game stories, this will provide exactly what you want.



STORY

Rather than pay lip service to realism like most modern military shooters, *Spec Ops* embraces surrealism. Approximately six months before the game opens, a massive sandstorm falls on Dubai, trapping the city's civilians and the 33rd Army Company that was sent in to help evacuate them. The American military assumed that the soldiers and civilians were lost to the storm, until a message finally escapes the swirling maelstrom from the U.S. Army Colonel John Konrad. You play as Captain Walker, leader of a Delta Force team sent in to make contact with Konrad and aid with the evacuation of civilians.

If the setup sounds familiar, there's a reason. The game's developer, Yager, hasn't been coy about evoking *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* as inspirations for this game. They did an excellent job adapting those themes to a modern combat setting. *Spec Ops* paints Dubai as an otherworldly dimension, where human savagery and war have twisted reality to drive men insane. As Captain Walker, you will do some seriously fucked up things and make a few terrible decisions. Some parts of the game seriously disturbed me, to the point that I had to put down the controller and walk away for a bit. I haven't felt something like that since playing *BioShock*.

It's not all grim terrible death, though. If *Heart of Darkness* makes up half of *Spec Ops*' tone, the other half is pulled from modern Middle Eastern war movies like *Jarhead* and *Three Kings*. The game's main cast of three soldiers are thoroughly believable, and there are some great lines of dialogue in the game. One of my favorites is near the beginning — shortly after one of the soldiers delivers some insult, he retorts by saying

“If I wasn’t a hardened killing machine, that might’ve hurt.”

In tone and story, *Spec Ops* provides some stellar writing and a lot of food for thought. Imagine *Silent Hill* with guns and you’ll have a good idea of where this game goes. There are even a few critical points of story decision in the game’s campaign, which provides incentive to play the game over again to try out different paths. Overall, *Spec Ops* provides one of the best story experiences of the last few years. Yes, it’s really that intense.



GAMEPLAY

From a story perspective, *Spec Ops* is outstanding, but mechanically speaking, it’s a competent but unremarkable cover-based shooter. If you’ve played *Gears* you know exactly what to expect here, which is a bummer considering how progressive the story aspects are. You can snap to cover, vault over, sprint out – it’s the “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it” approach. *Spec Ops* does vary a little in that damage thresholds for you and your enemies are far lower than in most games. That means you’ll die quickly out in the open, but you can rack up a quick body count from a good position. Your squad also adds a little variety to the gameplay, as you can command them to attack a specific target or to throw flashbangs at your enemies when you get locked down in cover. Effectively targeting your squad mates can make certain encounters much easier, and they do a great job of holding their own weight and staying out of the way. You can make it through the game easily by yourself though if you don’t want to mess with it.

Sand also works into combat encounters in a few ways. Occasionally, enemies will huddle near a sand embankment that’s held up by glass or another breakable prop. Smash the glass and your enemies will be buried in a massive wave of sand. It’s a cool touch, but these situations don’t occur often enough in the game to be a reliable gameplay mechanic. Sandstorms will occasionally roll through outdoor firefights as well, making it nearly impossible to see and causes your accuracy to drop through the floor. Fighting in a sandstorm is intense, but again, doesn’t happen so often that it’s a notable mechanic.



VISUALS

Spec Ops may not immediately blow you away with technical brilliance, but this is one of the best looking games of the year. Blues and oranges frequently provide contrast, both in the obvious sand / sky sort of way, but also in artfully providing visual transition between indoor and outdoor environments. Nearly every environment in the game echoes the surreal nature of the story, including posh hotels that are now vacant and covered with sand, and horizons filled with skyscrapers that are starting to lean and crumble under the constant storm. The game also captures several iconic war movie moments where you have to marvel at the beauty and terror created by the weapons of man. It may sound a little hoity toity, but that really just speaks to the fantastic job Yager did in crafting the game's visuals.



SOUND

Despite the Nolan North burnout that some gamers have been feeling, I have to give it to the game's main cast which also includes Christopher Reid and Omid Abtahi. This game is superbly voice acted, establishing characters that are believable and enjoyable. So many game stories fall flat because of bad writing or bad acting, but both are on point in *Spec Ops*. The music in the game also deserves some props. Most of the tracks mix together the overdriven grunge of 90s rock with psychedelic guitar riffs from the 60s, which elegantly represents the game's combination of a Vietnam surrealist trip with Desert Storm-era combat.



MULTIPLAYER

With a standard set of modes and unlocks, *Spec Ops*' multiplayer is functional but unremarkable. The fragility of players I mentioned earlier make sticking in cover mandatory, which also makes deathmatch and team deathmatch silly. If you're caught in the open, you're basically dead, so everyone just ends up hiding in cover and staring at each other for minutes at a time.

The objective-based modes work a lot better, since there's a pressing reason for players to leave the safety of cover. The "Buried" mode tasks you with destroying three enemy points while protecting your own, with a final point appearing after the first three are destroyed. This mode allows you to flex some tactical muscle to cut off your enemies and lay ambushes, since you know what they'll be attacking. Uplink adds a splash of intelligence too — you have to both control your own communication array and hold a point on the map to accrue points. If the enemy team sabotages your comm array, you can't gain any points until you take it back.

The rules definitely reward communication and intelligent thinking, which is generally lacking in online multiplayer. Still, that isn't enough to make the multiplayer offering of *Spec Ops* stand out in a notable way. It's possible that the multitude of perks — all of which that can be leveled individually — will add some unique spice to the game, but in my handful of hours online it all felt rather vanilla.



BOTTOM LINE

If you just want to click your brain off and shoot some guys, *Spec Ops* is not for you. That's ok though, gamers looking for that can find it in, well, almost every other game ever made. *Spec Ops* is unique in its intelligent treatment of adult themes. If you want a different take on the war game, I can't recommend *Spec Ops* enough.

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