

Look at What You've Done: Exploring Narrative Displeasure in Video Games¹

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“Each time I saw them hurt, I shared their pain as if I was hurt myself. Even pains they pretended to feel I did feel. Hyper-empathy syndrome is a delusional disorder after all: there’s no telepathy, no magic, no deep spiritual awareness.

There’s just the neurochemically induced illusion that I feel the pain and pleasure that I see others experiencing.”

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

Anyone who has ever enjoyed a sad song when they were sad can understand that enjoying an experience does not always involve joy or any similarly positive emotions. Sometimes people want to be sad. This certainly isn’t limited to music either. The existence of haunted houses, horror films, tragic plays, tear-jerker novels, and many other mediums and industries all rely on the idea that, sometimes, people want to experience negative emotions like fear and sadness.

Within that wide range of experiences that tend to induce negative emotions, a relatively unexplored type is the video games that often aim to make players feel (primarily) guilt or sadness with the diegetic implications of their gameplay actions. Even when these games force players to be complicit in questionable or even obviously morally bankrupt choices, they then present moments of slowed or halted gameplay that seem to accuse the player of wrongdoing in way that seems to say, "Look at what you've done!" Examples of this include *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), and *SOMA* (2015). Each explore this same seemingly accusatory moment in different ways.

¹ Contains heavy “spoilers” for *Spec Ops: The Line*, *SOMA*, and *Bioshock Infinite*.

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2
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By building off of the caring and trusting aspects of BDSM power dynamics, I highlight a previously unconsidered submissive reading style in which negative emotions such as fear, guilt, and sadness can be enjoyed in a light and emotional sadomasochistic style without control by highlighting creator intent, fan reactions, and “Look at what you’ve done” narrative choices. In this essay, I discuss enjoying games that aim to make players experience such emotions and benefit from a sort of unspoken contract in which players submissively accept those emotions. Furthermore, this paper illustrates how these same games, by intentionally violating and subverting those unspoken expectations, ultimately highlight the presupposed presence of this submissive style of sadomasochistic narrative engagement.

Enjoying Negativity

Before discussing each game and their particular ways of subjecting players to negative emotions, it is pertinent to discuss previous writings on enjoying negative emotions. In his 1985 article *Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fictions*, John Morreall offers that, not only in fictions but in real life, negative emotions are very much enjoyable as long as they are limited. He asserts that we need to be able to maintain control of the situation to enjoy it, otherwise an enjoyable fear may turn to an unenjoyable terror. Since we can control small amounts of negative emotions, we can “cultivate” small amounts of melancholy and enjoy focusing in on ourselves and what is important to us while sad (Morreall 100). We can even enjoy the embodied feeling of crying. Morreall mentions that we can enjoy small amounts of physical pain in real life, such as touching a small cut for the mild pain it produces. However, he draws a line at control, the line where the pain is great enough that we lose control of our body and we cannot stop it. He asserts that the fear we can run from can be enjoyable while the terror that makes us freeze and unable to move cannot be enjoyed. Since real emotions and sensations can get dangerously out of control, fictional worlds are a safe space to experience these emotions without consequence. Here, we can fear a killer or monster knowing that we are ultimately safe. Supposedly, even if we do feel out of control, we can just put down the book or look away.

By focusing on control as what allows pleasure, Morreall does not account for more than one type of viewer. Deriving pleasure from fictions that evoke emotions like sadness, fear, and guilt can depend on the feeling of control for many; however, alternative reading styles do not rely on control. For instance, pleasure can be

experienced in a trusting submissive style. Morreall comes close to acknowledging this when he mentions that one reason emotions do not become too strong to enjoy is that we know an author or other artist created this experience to be appreciated in some way. However, he still overemphasizes the importance of control: “Part of the artist’s job is to present that situation in such a way that we can stay in control while feeling negative emotions” (Morreall 101). Yet, one way of enjoying fear or sadness is not to trust that we will be able to feel we are in control but rather simply to trust that the situation will be overall enjoyable, even if any given sensation is not. Submitting, simply giving up control and passively trusting whoever is in control, can be enjoyable too.

To illustrate my point, it is helpful to think of another real-life example. If I am on a plane with turbulence, I am not in control of that situation in any way. I have no possible way to influence the flight. However, while I may feel some fear, I do not feel terrified despite not being in control. This is because I trust the pilot to perform his job of flying while I enjoy the ride. This is not to say that everyone on a plane would feel this way, but certainly some passengers would feel terrified. My point is this: while Morreall’s assertions highlight one popular way of enjoying what we might term “negative” emotions, another more submissive way of enjoying these emotions is also possible. Pleasure can be found in submitting control as much as it can be found in having control.

This submissive trust may even be as simple as trusting the person in control will ensure that we will ultimately be okay. If that trust is present, it is okay to take pleasure in not needing to be in control and simply being at the mercy of whatever intense emotions are presented. To better explore this idea, I draw a parallel between this more submissive enjoyment to the dynamics of BDSM (Bondage, Dominance, Sadism and Masochism) play and sadomasochistic dynamics more generally.

I do acknowledge that BDSM is often sexual, but it is important to note that neither sadomasochism nor BDSM play are inherently sexual. While the term BDSM may bring to mind sex-centric representations from popular media such as *Fifty Shades of Gray* (2015) or Rihanna’s *S&M* (2011), BDSM play is actually commonly used without involving sex. In *Ace of (BDSM) Clubs*, Lorca Sloan emphasizes “BDSM as practices that produce relationships by foregrounding, manipulating, and enacting scripts that delineate consent and power” (551). Sloan then proceeds to present the stories of many asexual (ace) identifying individuals who engage in BDSM practices as a healthy way to set boundaries and encourage

emotional bonding instead of engaging with it as a sexual kink. Since the safe execution of these practices involve so much trust, vulnerability, and accountability both on the part of the dominant partner (dom) and the submissive partner (sub), this necessarily becomes a space in which either participant can veto whatever they want before the experience begins (Sloan 554). With ace individuals, this typically entails establishing that no genital contact will be involved. Instead of enjoying the sexual sensations that BDSM is so strongly associated with, it is instead used to foster connections, trust, or the commonly reported closeness between participants after a scene (Jozifkova 5).

Even distanced from sex, it is critical to establish other norms of these dynamics. Even though inflicting pain can be seen as rough and careless, these roles (especially the dom) are often characterized by being caring or even nurturing. Some even strongly prefer to avoid the word pain as many may describe sensations as “strongly stimulating” instead of painful (Jozifkova 1). Inflicting pain or stimulation involves “warm up” in which lighter stimulation is presented before the harder and more intense hits so the more intense sensations aren't so rough and jarring (Alexander 126). BDSM play often involves a period of “aftercare” in which more tender and painless soothing behaviors take place to relax after the stronger stimulation (Alexander 126; Sloan 551). Additionally, these engagements involve a pre-established “safe word” that the sub can use to immediately stop the experience if needed. In a traditional BDSM dynamic, this small level of control is never given up. It is these traditions of safe and caring practice that make BDSM a space in which both participants can positively experience very strong emotions and sensations that are typically considered negative.

While it is these caring and boundary-setting practices that I want to draw attention to, I also want to emphasize that sadomasochistic dynamics do not have to involve actual BDSM practices. Lynn Chancer articulated the idea that sadomasochism is not restricted to the bedroom in her book *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*. As her title echoes, she points out that sadomasochism can actually occur in the form of “a very particular but common social relationship based on power and powerlessness, domination and submission” (Chancer 3).² A sadomasochistic dynamic can be present without the formality or safety-net-like

² While I believe the sadomasochistic dynamic as a type of dynamic involving dominant and submissive roles is incredibly useful, I do not believe that almost any power dynamic is sadomasochistic as she does. I use Chancer's idea of the sadomasochistic dynamic with a much smaller scope.

functions of BDSM. Utilizing these aspects of BDSM and sadomasochistic dynamics, I propose the aforementioned “submissive reading style” in which some readers may enjoy negative emotions linked to giving up control in a light and emotional sadomasochistic engagement style that mirrors some BDSM practices.

In the context of fiction, it is these boundary-setting, trust-intensive dynamics that are echoed between a reader (submissive role) and a writer of fiction (dominant role) who chooses to kill a character and presumably make the reader sad. Often that sadness we feel after a character dies will be justified or soothed by something akin to aftercare. For example, a death often accomplishes something narratively or may have been a sacrifice to let their friends live, etc. In a submissive reading style, an unspoken contract exists between the author and the reader very close to what Morreall proposed. However, instead of the contract involving a feeling of control over the experience, the contract highlights how the negative emotions will not be unenjoyable or too rough without warm-up sensations. At the least, it is assumed some form of aftercare will occur. Another assumption involves the ability to put down the book or stop engaging as a sort of “safe-word.” Boundaries can be found in the fact that, even if half of an entire cast of beloved characters is killed off, typically some form of warm-up of smaller negative sensations occurs before that more intense negative sensation, and subsequent narrative aftercare, such as a death accomplishing some purpose like saving others’ lives or instigating needed change.

While I believe it useful and productive to highlight the parallels of how aftercare, safe-words, and warm-up work in BDSM contexts and the analogous aspects of fiction I have highlighted here, I also want to emphasize that these are rough analogies and not meant as exact or literal comparisons. However, they nevertheless highlight and help create an understanding of a submissive reading style in which readers, viewers, or players allow an author to subject them to a series of negative emotional sensations. These parallels to warm-up hits, aftercare, and safe words provide consumers of such experiences a safety net that allows them to disengage if and when needed. This type of submissive sadomasochistic enjoyment can help explain why and how tragedies and other negative fictions are so commonly enjoyed.

The idea of a narrative contract that negotiates engagement with negative emotions is not necessarily unfounded. Ewan Kirkland notes that this idea is especially prevalent regarding survival horror video games in his essay “Storytelling in Survival Horror Videogames”:

Survival horror play entails a narrative contract between player and game-text. In exchange for channeling their interactive energies along the defined route, the game promises the player this pathway will produce an experience which is thrilling, exhilarating and terrifying in varying pleasurable and unpleasurable measures. (76)

While this is very close to the sadomasochistic narrative contract I explore, one notable caveat is that the dynamic I propose is not limited to survival horror games nor does it necessarily have to involve anything that seems pleasurable. However, the most interesting aspect of this unspoken contract is when the traditional boundaries and trust involved in this dynamic are violated by stories or games like those this essay will focus on. Exploring how these norms are subverted in turn helps illustrate the expectations that were broken.

In Games³

Due to the dimension of interactivity and play involved in games that is not seen in other fictions, it is important to specify what sort of negative experiences I am focusing on. An obvious type of negative experience in games is gameplay failure. In his book *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul writes extensively on how and why we may enjoy failure in playing games. The emotions and experiences that are derived from failing in gameplay (i.e., being frustrated after the player-character is repeatedly killed) are not what I will be discussing here and are a different dimension of gameplay experience. Instead, I will be focusing on narrative choices that tend to invoke negative emotions from players due to scripted diegetic implications of the player's actions on the narrative world. While failing in gameplay is frustrating, it is often non-diegetic as the player can try again without impacting the game's story by doing so. However, when a character messes up within the narrative and the consequence happens permanently, this consequence

³ Notably, any discussion of narrative is complicated when video games are brought into focus. In an attempt to acknowledge the debate around narrative within video games without delving into it here, I'd like to clarify that my purpose here isn't to contribute to the discussion of if games are inherently narrative; rather, I only intend to highlight how a specific subset of narrative elements are utilized in certain games.

may invoke another set of negative emotions for totally different reasons than non-permanent gameplay failure would.

This, which I would call narrative consequence, is part of what Juul calls “fictional failure.” He defines fictional failure as a type of failure that “befalls the character(s) in the fictional game world” (25). However, he presents total fictional failure as a sort of oddity that players need to be deceived into participating in. This is due to the idea that the interactive experience of playing a game is more personal. In other words, since the player controls the player-character, they are performing the actions the player-character performs. The player-character’s actions are then the player’s actions and choices. Since the player is responsible for those actions, the diegetic consequences for the player-character’s actions are the player’s fault even if the player is forced to make those choices. Juul notes that this makes tragic game endings, where the player is responsible for suffering, awkward and would make a game that plays like the story of *Anna Karenina* in which “the protagonist undergoes many painful experiences, through concrete effort managing to make the protagonist commit suicide and knowing all along that this is the goal of the game” something that players wouldn’t want.

However, this account of “fictional failure” fails to consider differing player engagement styles in two ways. First, while Juul is right that there is no commercially successful *Anna Karenina*-type game that informs the player of the painful experiences and suicide up front, games like *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) exist that use deception to push the player to commit atrocities and eventually kill the player-character after the deception is revealed. While that conceit is not included on any promotional materials for the game, many players who pick up the controller may already know the plot of the game and see through the deception from the start. For these players who have had the ending “spoiled” for them, this game is an *Anna Karenina* experience, yet they still actively choose to engage with the game to experience it.⁴ Second, a player engagement style like the emotional sadomasochistic engagement I established earlier destabilizes this account of fictional failure. If a player can enjoy experiencing intense negative emotions like guilt and sadness, “fictional failure” is less of a deterrent and instead becomes a draw.

However, Juul’s account of fictional failure is useful because it not only specifies a sort of failure in which the player’s actions have diegetic consequences,

⁴ This is how I played the game, knowing I would be made to feel I was the monster in the end and have to kill myself. Yet, I enjoyed this game and especially the controversial ending.

but also because of its emphasis on the role of complicity. While I maintain that it is not a deterrent for an *Anna Karenina*-type game, complicity does indeed make the player feel bad for their actions with a combination of guilt and sadness in a way that mediums other than games cannot. It is this complicity, which is typically strengthened by the deception that is experienced by players who play without knowing anything about the game beforehand, that gives games like *Spec Ops: The Line* their emotional strength. In these moments when the deception is dropped and the game emphasizes the player's complicity and responsibility for the diegetic consequences of their actions that I call the "Look at what you've done!" moment. Even if the deception isn't effective, complicity is a necessary part of these moments. While this moment is often unsettling and an undeniably negative experience, it can still somehow be enjoyable and has earned several games a fair level of praise and fame.

"Look at What You've Done!" Games

To better establish the "Look at what you've done!" moment (hereafter abbreviated as LWYD), it is necessary to look at instances of it. The LWYD games I will highlight here are *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *SOMA*.

Spec Ops: The Line. The first of my list, *Spec Ops: The Line*, uses LWYD moments to subvert the norms of First Person Shooter (FPS) games to communicate a moral message to its players. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a 2012 FPS game developed by Yager Development and published by 2k Games. The player, who leads a three-man team called Delta Force as Captain John Walker, is tasked with confirming the presence of survivors in a partially evacuated and ruined Dubai that is plagued by the worst sandstorms it has ever seen. Things quickly go downhill as Delta Force is attacked by the American 33rd battalion and have to fight their way through Dubai. The game almost immediately begins questioning the player's actions as Captain Walker's teammates Lugo and Adams voice their concerns with killing fellow American soldiers and eventually with killing civilians. However, when Delta Force finds the executed team of the commander of the 33rd battalion, it becomes clear that Commander Konrad and the 33rd have gone rogue and taken over Dubai. As the game progresses, the player is presented with progressively worse moral choices, including being forced to massacre not only enemy soldiers but also a group of 47 innocent civilians with the illegal chemical weapon white phosphorus and eventually destroying Dubai's water supply.

As Captain Walker, and the player by extension, commits a list of atrocities and war crimes, Walker becomes more easily agitated and on edge. Meanwhile, the player is presented with lines such as “this is your fault” in the loading screens. At the end, after Lugo is hanged by civilians and Adams dies in a last stand against the 33rd, Captain Walker reaches and confronts Konrad only to realize that Konrad has been dead the whole time. Through a series of flashbacks, the player is shown that a number of the previous scenes were overlaid with hallucinations that Walker created to help deal with the trauma of the horror he was facing and committing. It emphasizes that everything Captain Walker has done was actually his own fault and consequently the player’s fault. The game ends with “Konrad,” who turns out to be Walker’s reflection in a window, telling Walker to kill himself. Walker can shoot his own reflection and either continue to live in Dubai or go back to America, or he can shoot himself in the head.

In gaming communities, many players regard this game as excellent because of its narrative choices and subversion of FPS tropes. This game and its subversive plot have inspired many fan-created video essays and reviews on YouTube. Popular video game commentary video essay series and review videos such as *Zero Punctuation*, *Extra Credits*, *Errant Signal*, and more have created content about this game. These video essays have all made the point that *Spec Ops: The Line* has average or passable gameplay mechanics, one even going as far as calling it “unfun” to play.⁵ Instead, they emphasize that the game is aware of the FPS norms that it uses and that it then points out what is wrong with those norms.

As FPS norms are so commonly brought up in the fan analysis and reactions to this game, it is important to understand what those norms are. In an essay titled “In Search of More Than Just ‘A few lines of snappy, expository dialog’” Zachary Holtzman and Christopher Varlack trace the shift of the narrative style of one the most iconic and representative FPS game franchises, *Call of Duty*. Holtzman describes the early games of the franchise as games that tried to portray war in a relatively historically accurate manner that players could use to experience what World War II was like via simulation (80). However, in an attempt to set itself apart from other FPS war games of the time, *Call of Duty* began to focus on its mechanics and prioritized the feeling of the controls and playing the game over portraying

⁵ Spec Ops: The Line - II: What Does It Mean to be a Hero? - Extra Credits, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=cJZlhcCA2lk>.

well-developed characters and historically accurate battles. With the fifth game in the series, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), a “one-man-army” mentality becomes more prevalent as the game rewards for the prestige that came from killing enemies alone rather than focusing on achievement as a result of teamwork (Holtzman 85, 89). A dehumanization of enemies into targets to shoot and gain points from was brought into center stage. This shift towards a dehumanizing killcount as objective is epitomized by the “Nazi Zombies” game mode in which the enemies are literally not human in addition to being Nazis, making them a faceless horde of inhuman evil targets to mow down without remorse. Over time, presenting the player with foreign and dehumanized enemy hordes to fight through became the norm for FPS games in general.

When fans praise *Spec Ops: The Line* for subverting norms, it is this tendency of dehumanizing the enemy and presenting the player as a hero who earns prestige via killcount that it refers to. A comment by YouTube user “Stralock Jenkins” seems to best capture the reaction of a player who this subversion has worked on,

For me, the most powerful line was when Conrad said "You did have a choice! You could have stopped!" All through the game, I felt terrible for killing all those people, but justified it as "Well, I can't beat this any other way. The game is forcing me to kill people." But when he said that, I realized that the thought of not playing a game where I butcher civilians never even crossed my mind. (Stralock)⁶

Based on an interview with the lead writer for the game, Walt Williams, this fan reaction seems very much in line with authorial intent.

Video games have for so long been like, “Look, war is when you go in and kill people who deserve to die, because they are destroying the things that you love—and have fun.” [...] We wanted them to think about why is it that I sit down and play a war game for fun. (“Official 2K UK”)

To make players question the normative behavior of why they will kill for fun, the game attempts to make the player feel bad for the actions of their gameplay using

⁶ This comment is on the video “Spec Ops: The Line - II: What Does It Mean to be a Hero? - Extra Credits” by YouTube channel Extra Credits.

a huge number of what I call the “Look at what you’ve done!” (LWYD) moments. Throughout the game, characters constantly question what the player is doing as they play, and the game culminates in the climatic suicidal encounter with Konrad.

Other than the ending chapter, the most iconic LWYD moment is after the player is forced to use the white phosphorus bombs to progress. The player uses a screen to target enemies to kill with the white phosphorus in a way reminiscent of *Call of Duty*’s iconic airstrike missions. That screen reduces human enemies to white blobs to be targeted and wiped out. After, the player is forced to walk slower than normal through the ruins of the area they just massacred (with the running mechanic disabled) as soldiers either lay dead or screaming as they die around them. Finally, the player is presented with the group of 47 dead and mummified civilians that they had mistaken for enemy soldiers. Lugo and Adams are openly outraged and blame the player-character for not stopping. The game seems to say to the player, not only the character they are controlling, “look at what you’re doing and what suffering you are causing by simply doing as you ‘have to.’” Clearly, this is supposed make players feel sad and guilty, especially as the end so pointedly emphasizes that the player could have simply stopped at any point.

Spec Ops: The Line is useful for understanding the role complicity plays in effective LWYD moments. Other games make similar narrative choices but do not actually have the player perform the actions they have to face the narrative consequences for. This point is best made by highlighting the main difference between the endings of *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Bioshock Infinite* (2013). The end of *Bioshock Infinite* presents the player with a very similar, but crucially different, conflict. The player character, Booker, is revealed to be an alternate-reality version of the main antagonist that is responsible for the horrible things that Booker had been fighting against, and in the end Booker is encouraged to commit suicide because of the diegetic implications of that fact. However, *Bioshock Infinite* accuses Booker of atrocious actions that the player-character has committed off-screen in the past of the narrative world, not for actions that the player has committed as they play. In other words, *Bioshock Infinite* does not make the player complicit in the atrocities that it accuses them of. The LWYD moments that I propose involve complicity that is derived from playing.

Additionally, the narrative choices that *Spec Ops: The Line* makes seem to imply an ideal player will abide by a sadomasochistic narrative contract. The player is seldom in actual control as the choices the game presents the player with do not actually impact how things play out. The only real choice the player can make that

will allow any control over the horrible events of the story is if they decide to stop playing. This is especially relevant when looking at the extremely limited level of control involved in the pivotal LWYD moments like the aforementioned white phosphorus scene. If the player is not willing to abide by the terms of the unspoken sadomasochistic contract and play submissively, the player may be more likely to not have an enjoyable experience. Sometimes a player may realize they have no choice in how the scene plays out and get frustrated by the lack of control. This is clear when looking at negative reviews and players complaining about these moments on forums. The following excerpt from the complaints of Giant Bomb forum user "Beaudacious" about the white phosphorus scene illustrate this:

The first thought that pops into my head is they're all prisoners, but I can't exit the control center until the tank is blown up. So I blow up the tank by aiming at the edge of the bridge on its front. [...] Then I go through the cut-scene and see all the refugees I killed. This orchestrated scene is suppose [sic] to impact me emotionally?

An article discussing the same moment on the website *PCGamer* echoes these ideas:

I tried not to hit them, but I was always going to. [...] the fact remains that I didn't kill those civilians—Yager forced that outcome. While the aftermath still makes me uncomfortable, the fact that I was aiming around the civilians absolves me of guilt as a player—and I'm not sure that was the intent. (Roberts)

In both cases, neither of these players were willing to play submissively and accept the experience as presented. As shown by negative reviews complaining about a lack of control and positive reviews praising the message the scene intended to send, the white phosphorus moment has an ideal player who is willing to submissively accept the negative emotions that the creators were trying to invoke. Accepting when the creators decide to dominate how the events play out seems to allow players to have a positive experience with the consequential negative emotions like guilt. This is not dissimilar to the way that the dynamics and expectations in a BDSM context, like a sub trusting the dom, can allow someone to experience intense emotions in a positive way. Naturally, if someone is not okay

with working within that comforting framework, they may be more likely to have a bad time.

Even when a player takes on a submissive role, is the player commands a safe-word-esque type control in the ability to pause the game or take a break, but such control is only temporary and does not impact the narrative world. While some aspects of this may be unintentional, *Spec Ops: The Line* also breaks the terms of a sadomasochistic narrative contract in a way that may make the moral message of the game more memorable. The intent to make the player think about the game and the negative emotions even when they put down the game violates the built in safe-word function of pausing or putting down the game. In this game, stopping playing is not a way to escape or control some of the emotions the writers intended to evoke. In another breach of the narrative contract, even though “good practice” with sadomasochism involves warm up and aftercare, most of the game consists of emotional warm up but then offers no metaphorical aftercare for the final emotional hit. Given, this is a largely an unspoken convention, but it may still be expected that there would something to help the player down from the intense emotion that it intends to subject them to. By going against this convention, it instead leaves the player to think about what they have done and the game more generally. This may explain the amount of fan discussion about the game, in which players talk about what they have done and why they did it serving as a sort of supplemental emotional aftercare.

Notably, it is these moments which intentionally that break these expectations that seem to stand out the most. The moments that intend to break the safe word function by making players think about the game even after they put down the controller and the moments that have nothing akin to aftercare are the most discussed moments of the game. Their subversion of that unspoken contract makes them stand out, and I contend that if these expectations didn’t first exist on some level then this game would not stand out like it does.

SOMA. While FPS norms were the primary reason for *Spec Ops: The Line* to use LWYD moments, this narrative choice also exists outside of the influence of those norms. In *SOMA* (2015), a survival horror game developed and published by Frictional Games, the player is Simon, a twenty-something male who was recently in a car crash that necessitates an experimental brain scan. When Simon closes his eyes for the brain scan, he wakes up in a mysteriously empty and foreboding environment devoid of other humans but full of broken machines overflowing with structure gel (an oily black substance). It is revealed that this is PATHOS-II, an

underwater research center scattered across a portion of the floor of the Atlantic Ocean nearly 100 years after the day of Simon's brain scan. Simon's brain scan was used as a prototype for artificial intelligence and a method of scanning human consciousness into a digitized copy of its human counterpart. While it is unclear that Simon is robotic when the player first awakens, it turns out that, as a default that comes with this AI software, a copy of Simon's consciousness was loaded into a diving suit in the ruins of PATHOS-II long after the world faced an extinction level disaster from the impact of an asteroid. With the help of Catherine, the digitized consciousness of one of the crew members of PATHOS-II, Simon sets out to find the ARK, which is essentially a massive hard drive that the human-version of Catherine had used to place the crew's digitized consciousnesses into a simulated Edenic world for the last remnants of humanity to live on in after they die.

Simon and Catherine aim to launch the ARK into space to ensure its safety. However, as they search for it and bring it to the launch zone, the WAU (the main antagonist) and its mutated and seemingly conscious machines get in your way. The WAU was a life-support and security system installed in PATHOS-II that has gone horribly awry. It was intended to keep humanity alive but turned out to have a flawed understanding of what it meant to be alive. That led it to sustain life in any crew member near death by incorporating machine elements and structure gel into their bodies to keep them alive even though this state of being caused pain and suffering. Additionally, it also created digital copies of the crew and uploaded them into various machines around PATHOS-II, which led to the corrupted machines that seem to be at least somewhat conscious, roaming the halls of and exteriors of PATHOS-II.

According to its website, *SOMA* is "an unsettling story about identity, consciousness, and what it means to be human" (SOMAGame "Info"). In a way similar to *Spec Ops: The Line*, it uses LWYD moments to prompt the player to think about the moral questions behind the gameplay and story presented. However, the way it delivers them is a bit different. Instead of being told that your actions are bad, the player is left to decide for themselves and is even often left with open-ended lose-lose choices that are so morally unclear that they have instigated many fan discussions.

While the three most prominent instances of LWYD are all clearly presented and remarked upon by both Simon and Catherine, a majority of the moments that the player is intended to question are a part of what Henry Jenkins calls the "embedded narrative" (126). As Ewan Kirkland notes, in the context of survival

horror games, this tends to involve not only the “narrative texts scattered throughout the game environment,” but also the sort of video game *mise-en-scène* of the broad composition of the survival horror game space that include visual and audio elements of implied storytelling (70). Almost immediately after Simon wakes up in PATHOS-II, he finds robots who think they’re human embedded in abject growths on the walls. Their presence is a completely skippable element of the game space. Even when the game does force players to interact with them, it’s often not commented on. Early on, to provide power to a door, Simon needs to pass through to progress, the player is forced to unplug one of these seemingly conscious robots and watch it scream as it loses power and fades into death. While the game doesn’t explicitly say it, this moment can easily be read as pointing to the narrative consequences of the player’s actions.

According to an interview with Aaron Clifford, an artist involved in the creation of *SOMA*’s environment, this sort of “horror” derived from player interaction with this environment seems to have been the intent:

We’ve tried to concentrate on making the horror more psychological and deep rooted, stuff that will stick with you when you put down the controller. So we’re not concentrating so much on “boo-scares” and stuff like that, but it’s more stuff that will, yeah you know, make you ask questions like the morality of your actions in the game and stuff. (“John Wolfe”)

While not as extensive as more infamous examples such as *Dark Souls* (2011), the game also offers the sort of embedded narrative that allows players to find and read/listen to journals to learn more about what has happened to the world and the crew so that the suffering that occurred has more meaning. This sort of embedded and optional narrative information in games has been the core of several “lore hunting” fan communities, such as the *Dark Souls* community, who have come together to present their found evidence and speculate on the “complete” narrative they suggest (Ball). Notably, even though the *SOMA* lore almost exclusively presents intentionally sad information, a community of fans have come together to “lore hunt” and create videos explaining hours of embedded content.⁷ This could be seen as a way to counteract the “maze-like linearity” that is typical of survival horror stories (Kirkland 74) by offering players agency in the chance to explore and

⁷ One YouTube channel alone has a five part several-hour-long explanation of the “lore” of *SOMA*. <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=SItdkukIAU>.

even fill in gaps in the story rather than simply following the prescribed path. Without considering the idea of a sadomasochistic engagement though, this agency would not explain why players willingly subject themselves to more of a story that intends to make players melancholy at best.

The most prominent example of LWYD in *SOMA* is when Simon encounters the WAU. Near the end, Simon is in possession of corrupted structure gel that the player has the option to use to kill the WAU. This is the most discussed choice in the game, and fans argue both sides of this unpleasant situation. Reddit user “1-1is0” summarizes the pro-WAU side of this argument while pointing out that both outcomes are negative:

the meaning of the ending changes greatly because by killing WAU you have guaranteed that humanity will die and have also killed all the people WAU was keeping alive in a dreamlike state, and also killed all the backups WAU had stored. So in short by not killing WAU you are not a genocidal mass murderer, just a serial murderer. (1-1is0)

On the same discussion, Reddit user “gamefacevids” explains the anti-WAU side of this argument, “Killing the WAU will allow real life to evolve, once again, on the Earth. If you don't kill the WAU it will infect everything, forever”. It is apparent that no matter which side players take to justify whatever actions they take, they tend to create and discuss justifications that conflict with the other side. Either way, the game intends to make you think about the diegetic implications of your choice to kill or spare the WAU. Either way, it urges you to look at what you've done and what you're about to do.

As discussed earlier in this essay, a similar sort of unspoken contract has been previously mentioned by theorists in reference to horror games. To reiterate what theorist Ewan Kirkland wrote, horror games often involve an unspoken contract in which, “In exchange for channeling their interactive energies along the defined route, the game promises the player this pathway will produce an experience ...” (76). Naturally, a player's enjoyment may be tied to whether they are willing to accept the terms of that contract.

However, realizing that in-game choices do not impact the way the plot unfolds is a popular may leave players feeling they had no power over the game. This is similar to the trend of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s negative reviews

in which players realize that no matter what they do, the negative events still happen. Looking at *SOMA* reviews, it becomes clear that players who are not willing to be submissive to what the creators have dictated are the ones that report having not enjoyed those moments. A representative example can be seen from Reddit user Kairah, who despite reporting otherwise enjoying *SOMA*, said, “Why even give us choices if they don't mean anything? I don't need completely plot-altering changes to be satisfied here, just something.” Players who are not willing to play submissively and accept the creator's choices tend to report not enjoying it. However, the surplus of positive reviews seems to indicate that many players were able to take advantage of a submissive playing style to enjoy the game.

Ultimately, *SOMA* shows these morally accusatory LWYD moments can be used to inspire fan discussion, lore-hunting, and continued engagement after playing the game. As artist Aaron Clifford stated, this was the intent of making narrative choices like this, to make situations “that will stick with you when you put down the controller” (“John Wolfe”).

Conclusion

Even when abiding by a sadomasochistic narrative contract, all these games on some level benefit from going against the normative assumptions of the player. By using the complicity of play to make players look at what they are doing, the games can create the experiences that gave them their reputations. This type of experience fully intends to evoke emotions typically considered negative like guilt, sadness, or even fear. Whether a player can enjoy these experiences largely hinges on how they play and if they feel in control. For many, these experiences may be unenjoyable as the game takes away control and makes them play the role of the irredeemably bad and morally wrong. Some may enjoy this by simply trusting the creators of the experience and going along for the ride even when it seems negative by engaging in a sadomasochistic play style. However, even the expectations of the players within that sadomasochistic narrative contract are often betrayed as games attempt to make the player feel these emotions even after they pause or put down the game entirely. These games which betray the rules of even the sadomasochistic engagement stand out because they aim to make a player reconsider what they know about what they're doing.

Turning to an unlikely source may provide some insight into why these games are so beloved despite subjecting players to these experiences. In a 1971 article titled "That's Interesting," sociologist Murray Davis asserts that academic articles are deemed interesting and receive public attention when their theories "deny certain assumptions of their audience" (309). While games and academic articles are vastly different, this sort of perspective may be helpful. The games discussed here all go against and deny certain assumptions of their audience and end up provoking thought much more than a game that does not. This pattern goes beyond simply being interesting, but instead conceptually highlights how LWYD moments go against unspoken assumptions of gameplay and stand out for it. Even if the experience hurts the player emotionally, these games teach the player a lesson about war games, what it means to be human, or simply a fresh take on the morality of just doing what you're told to do.

In conclusion, looking at fan reactions, creator commentary, and narrative choices that use player complicity to create a "look at what you've done" moment to illicit negative emotions in an enjoyable way can help further an understanding of the variety of ways that players engage with the diegetic implications of play. While play styles that involve the player feeling in control or simply completely disregarding any story are well established, considering a previously unexplored light and emotional sadomasochistic play style without control can provide insight into the design and fan reception of games like *SOMA*, and *Spec Ops: The Line*.

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