


Article

# Gaming the Heart of Darkness

Fruzsina Pittner <sup>1,\*</sup> and Iain Donald <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Humanities, University of Dundee, Dundee DD1 4HN, UK

<sup>2</sup> Division of Games and Arts, School of Design and Informatics, Abertay University, Dundee DD1 1HG, UK; i.donald@abertay.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: f.pittner@dundee.ac.uk

Received: 30 June 2018; Accepted: 27 August 2018; Published: 4 September 2018



**Abstract:** The history of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been one of adaptation and change. The enduring story is based upon Conrad's experiences in the Congo in the 1890s and was published as a novella in 1902. Since then, the story has been criticised for racism by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe and relocated to Vietnam by Francis Ford Coppola as *Apocalypse Now*, influencing computer games such as *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line*. In examining the adaptations of *Heart of Darkness*, we can consider how the story evolves from the passive reading of post-colonial narratives through to the active participation in morally ambiguous decisions and virtual war crimes through digital games: examining Conrad's story as it has been adapted for other mediums provides a unique lens in which to view storytelling and retelling within the context of how we interpret the world. This paper compares the source material to its adaptations, considering the blending of historical fact and original fiction, the distortion of the original story for the purpose of creating new meaning, and reflects on whether interactivity impacts upon the feeling of immersion and sense of responsibility in audiences of different narratives.

**Keywords:** storytelling; digital games; transmedia; literary adaptation

## 1. Introduction

From theatre performances of mythological themes and novels built upon arrays of folktales to the relatively modern term 'transformative works' referring to the plethora of fan-created work published online, audiences and creatives have proven the need for space to explore, complete, and re-imagine existing stories and the tropes and themes surrounding them (Coker 2017). With the emergence of new tools and technologies, the opportunities artists have to explore popular and obscure narratives and imagine them anew are ever increasing.

Stories of adventure and discovery (of faraway lands or the depths of human experience) have always had the power to induce curiosity and creativity. Sometimes regardless of their actual, often widely debated artistic value, certain narratives become powerful enough that their influence can be felt through multiple mediums over a significant period of time. What separates these works from others around their time can be attributed to multiple factors of varying significance: whims of the audience both past and present, message, controversy, academic debate, new themes and tropes and historical context (Jauss 1970). Classic and popular literature or stories spanning through multiple universes often see adaptations of varying fidelity and purpose (e.g., *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald [1925] 1994, or the Marvel Cinematic Universe).

Joseph Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* as a serial in Blackwood's Magazine in 1899 after visiting Belgian King Leopold II's Congo Free State in the 1890s. Since its debut, the novella has been a topic of discussion concerning the effect of colonialism on Africa and the general public's view of the colonies and their inhabitants—arguments about Conrad's work and its place in colonial

and postcolonial literature are still prevalent in academic circles. Beneath a story of adventure lies a narrative much scrutinised and discussed: while demonstrating a critical attitude towards western colonising efforts in Africa, the novella also tells a story of European values inevitably degrading in the oppressive atmosphere of the African jungle. This view—the effect of the other on widely accepted western morality—permeates not only the novella, but its subsequent adaptations from the big screen to the interactive.

*Heart of Darkness* has seen multiple different adaptations in a variety of mediums throughout the years since its release. From film *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979) to the release of well-known and critically successful computer games *Far Cry 2* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), these vary greatly in how closely they follow the original narrative, what kind of message they attempt to convey, and how they use the different tools of each medium to achieve that goal.

The process of adaptation takes the skeleton of its original source and layers new meaning on it based on its original connotations and any new context that is applied to it throughout. Different approaches (e.g., remakes, re-imaginings, reboots) are commonly used to achieve the same purpose: to use the source material, its relevance and context as building blocks to present the story through a new lens, add relevant historical and societal commentary or call upon well-known elements of the original work to underline its message, all by using the tools of their designated medium to their advantage. As Jenkins says in his 2017 essay (Jenkins 2017) ‘Adaptation, Extension, Transmedia’:

Anyone who thinks seriously about adaptation knows that each makes some unique contributions—in terms of their selection and interpretation of material and how they use the affordances of the new medium in ways unavailable to the original producer, if nothing else.

Retellings are naturally framed by the format, how the source material is considered at the time of its adaption, as well as by the new creators—the prevalent influence of the old adds to the depth of interpretation of the new, and through the process more nuanced meaning is created.

That *Heart of Darkness* has been adapted so many times and in such variety is unsurprising. The signature elements of Conrad’s writing: faraway settings, dramatic conflicts between human characters and the brutal forces of nature, themes of individualism, the violent side of human nature and prejudice all make for an intriguing world to build upon. Its themes are universal enough to be relevant in the context of the Vietnam War as seen in *Apocalypse Now*, and the novella itself with its historical background and wider literary impact still influences works such as the 2010 graphic novel adaptation. These can be considered traditional adaptations in a sense that they adopt a linear story into another linear medium: film or graphic novel, the audience is presented with a static narrative that is unchanged after its release regardless of the context they transplant the source material into.

What *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line* provide in contrast to these other mediums is that they implement a linear story into a nonlinear medium using a genre (first-person shooter) in which the primary emphasis is not traditionally on deep storytelling. Through the games’ interactive nature, the role of the audience changes from passive spectator to active participant: players have the ability to significantly shape the story through their actions.

As opposed to many other games, *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line* also focus on hostile game mechanics and emphasise disempowerment systems that are designed to be part of their message. The games are not only difficult to play, but systems players can generally rely upon when playing similar titles (time investment results in character progression, reliable weapon system, regenerative health, etc.) are not in place anymore, or are altered to serve a different purpose. This results in a peculiar and frustrating experience that serves to emphasise the underlying message of Conrad’s original story.

Elements of adventure and other well-liked storytelling tropes present in the novella return to some degree in all four adaptations, striving to drive their messages forward while preserving select aspects of the original work forming a scale that ranges from works of faithful adaptation (*Heart of*

*Darkness—A Graphic Novel*) to those using the novella and its cultural footprint as inspiration that informs a separate story (*Spec Ops: The Line*). These archetypes—a journey upriver as a metaphor for the journey to the depths of the human self, war, violence, the brutal forces of nature, the overarching mission, the idea of home (Europe, America) as a counterpoint to these faraway places—are all prevalent in the pieces examined. Adaptations of *Heart of Darkness*, despite the variety in their medium, execution and fidelity to the original text, have, amongst others, something very important in common: they all attempt to deliver a message that goes beyond the experience of adventure, and into questioning whether violence, exploitation and following a system that enables those is worth the cost of lives and the crisis of identity that will inevitably follow on a personal, national, or global level.

This article examines Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and select subsequent adaptations: *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979), *Heart of Darkness—A Graphic Novel* (Anyango and Mairowitz 2010) and computer games *Far Cry 2* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) in search of recurring patterns, character archetypes and messages that prevail through these various interpretations. It reflects on the effectiveness of storytelling methods different mediums use and the messages these adaptations carry in comparison to the original novella, while considering how all stories blend historical fact with the original fiction and its new intended meaning, and how these morph or distort the source material.

## 2. Contextual Review

### 2.1. Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*

#### 2.1.1. Meaning and History

The Congo Free State is one of the most horrific and well-known examples of colonising efforts in Africa. Leopold II's laborious political manoeuvring resulted in a colony 76 times the size of Belgium, much of it covered by unexplored jungle and populated by indigenous tribes with varying degrees of hostility towards the newcomers on their land (Pakenham 1991). Accounts of the atrocities committed by trading companies and locals in their employ in search of first ivory and later rubber came to horrify the European population (Van Reybrouck 2010).

Conrad's journey to Africa fell around the time when the Congo's main source of wealth was still ivory and some semblance of order was still preserved, but the degradation and self-serving cruelty of the system was already beginning to very obviously show its teeth. Examples of mistreatment of the native population witnessed by the author himself are reflected in the text on multiple occasions (Hochschild [1998] 2012).

When stripped from the contextual history and response the novella received in the literary world, *Heart of Darkness* follows the recipe many other adventure stories do. It features exotic lands, violence, excitement, and the exploration of fragile human morality wrapped into the narrative of a journey both physical and metaphorical in nature: an Englishman joins a Belgian trading company in the Congo Basin where his job is to take a steam boat upriver to reach an outpost established on the edge of scarcely explored jungle.

Looking at the immediate undercurrent of meaning, however, the novella also tells of a man's first-hand experiences facing the results of European occupation in Africa and the effects of it on Europe and its agents in return. The narrator's experiences in the Congo shake him, and this starts the process of his questioning his views on the idea of colonialism and the relationship between Europeans and Africans, reflecting Conrad's state of mind after his own return from Africa.

Yet Conrad's intent in expressing the horrors he witnessed is still deeply tied to Europe's view of Africa, the colonies, their inhabitants and the difference between them and the 'civilised world'. This Eurocentric view, deliberate or not, permeates the novella and its adaptations to varying degrees in showing stories that all ask the same question in some capacity: What happens to civilised people when faced with the "dark places of the earth"? (Conrad [1899] 2017, p. 5).

### 2.1.2. Story and Structure

*Heart of Darkness* is structured as a story within a story. The narrator, Marlow, spends a night on the Thames in England in the company of several others. This scene acts as a frame for him to describe his past experiences on the Congo, much like Conrad is sharing his own story through this novella with his audience—Marlow is, in essence, a substitute for the author himself, through whom he can safely convey his message while simultaneously allowing him to distance himself from his own narrative. In this *Heart of Darkness* is really threefold. Marlow's story is nestled into his audience's view of him narrating it, witnessed both by his in-fiction companions and the readers themselves, and around it exists Conrad's own experience (Watt 1979).

Marlow's journey up the Congo River is hindered by the many hardships the landscape has to offer—both natural and led by the incompetence and lethargic attitude of the Europeans holding office on the riverbank. He learns of the mysterious Mr. Kurtz through his encounters with various characters from different steps on the hierarchy of the Company he is employed by.

By the time his reputation reaches Marlow through word of mouth, Kurtz ceases to be a mere trading-post commander, which he is by designation, and becomes somewhat of a legendary figure in the area through the power of his personality and apparent competence. He is, as described by the Company's chief accountant in the novella: "a very remarkable person" (Conrad [1899] 2017, p. 19). What this exactly means, however, Marlow must find out for himself.

The true depth of Kurtz's effect on those who have met him is uncovered piece by piece through the information Marlow slowly gathers. There are the facts of his birth, of his position, of the Company's high hopes for him. There is the often grudging but undeniable respect other officers pay him, even in his absence. There is his manifesto, his own words describing his comprehensive opinion on 'natives' that leaves Marlow unsettled and in awe at the same time. As he travels deeper and deeper into the jungle, Marlow's interest in Kurtz's larger-than-life figure slowly becomes an obsession.

The long-awaited and hard-fought final encounter, however, turns into something completely unexpected: in his long stay at the Congo, Kurtz succumbs to terminal illness in both body and mind, abandoning the morals of 'civilised society' to abuse his authority over the area's population to his own ends. The highly praised, upstanding, mysteriously grand figure of Mr. Kurtz turns into a horrific example of all that can go wrong with European ideals faced with the unforgiving, stifling and unpredictably *other* African jungle. Kurtz's widely quoted last words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad [1899] 2017, p. 69) underline this message with unsettling accuracy.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the controversy surrounding it, *Heart of Darkness* is still revered as one of the most significant literary works of its time, a story that stands out for its efforts in criticising western imperialism, exploitation, and the effect of those on the individual. Its weaknesses, its Eurocentric view of the world, its unwillingness to commit to the belief of equality and the other arguably questionable meanings it carries are not excusable, but are reflective of its historical context.

Regardless of its value and controversial undercurrents of meaning, however, the novella's influence is undeniable: as a commentary on colonialism, the darker side of human nature and violence as a justifiable means to an end, it has influenced academic discussion and creative work in a variety of fields for a variety of purposes ever since its release.

## 2.2. Linear Adaptations

### 2.2.1. Heart of Darkness: The Graphic Novel

The 2010 graphic novel by David Zane Mairowitz (text) and Catherine Anyango (illustration) follows the novella most faithfully out of all adaptations examined. The comic uses parts of the novella's original text, as well as excerpts from Conrad's own travel diary of his journey to the Congo for added depth to recreate the story (Faber 2010). By using Conrad's personal accounts, Mairowitz and Anyango effectively place emphasis on the relationship between the author and his narrator Marlow, while using the text to further enhance the effect of immersion within the piece (Whitlock 2007).

Visuals through the comic reflect the progressive downward spiral of Marlow's state of mind in the novella, the artwork grows grotesque and exaggerated as the story proceeds. Graphite greys and blacks, use of stark lighting, abstract shapes and close-up shots of faces magnified to the point of disturbing detail underline the atmosphere of *Heart of Darkness*, giving the original text another layer of emphasis on the unreal, the other, the nightmare-like quality of the narrative building to the end.

This adaptation adds an interesting piece of visual flavour to the connection between Marlow and Conrad: the Marlow depicted on the comic pages bears significant physical resemblance to portraits of Conrad himself. This small detail speaks volumes about the power visual representation can have in storytelling—with this decision the creators have immediately established a firm connection between the fictional figure and the author himself. With erasing the distinction between Marlow and Conrad, the comic does not allow the author to distance himself from his own narrative, making his message all the more prominent.

### 2.2.2. Apocalypse Now

Novel-to-film adaptations often divide opinion as to whether they honour (rather than alter or sensationalise) the original text, storyline, and characters. Adapting literature for film has been a popular tool for filmmakers since the emergence of the medium in the 20th century: taking established works of classic and popular literature seemed to be a recipe for potential success. These stories are, either directly or indirectly, already alive in the collective awareness of the audience and this pre-established sense of familiarity serves as a way for the filmmaker to build on the success of the original work and reach potential new audiences. As John Ellis in his 1982 article 'Literary Adaptation' describes:

The adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory.

*Apocalypse Now* is a film originally released in 1979, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and written by himself, John Milius and Michael Herr. Coppola's film is not a direct adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, rather it uses the skeleton of the original story and retains its basic structure to express a message much more relevant to his time. He puts the core narrative elements of the novella—a grueling journey upriver, moral deterioration, the dynamic between the narrator and Kurtz—into the setting of the Vietnam War (1955–1975).

The message he uses Conrad's framework for is not that far from the original: instead of imperialism, he uses the narrative to criticise the idea of the war. In his own words, as quoted by Kinder in her article 'The Power of Adaptation in *Apocalypse Now*' (Kinder 1979):

The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of *Apocalypse Now* was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war . . . I tried to illustrate as many of its different facets as possible. And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars.

Parallels between *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness* are unquestionable. The film's narrator, U.S. Army Captain Willard, is tasked to find and assassinate an errant army officer, Col. Kurtz. Marlow's Kurtz and Willard's Col. Kurtz also carry much the same message: a man of impeccable moral standing gone astray in the face of the horrors of African and Asian jungles in turn. His image looms over both narrators as they journey through a landscape of madness and violence made especially explicit and gruesome in the context of the Vietnam War. The viewer witnesses this slow collapse of integrity and sanity foreshadowed all the way from the film's introductory scenes and Willard's commentary underlined by haunting imagery of military violence to him committing war crimes in the name of the mission that is growing larger and larger within his own imagination.

The film characterizes Willard's mission as the epitome of hypocrisy—in the midst of senseless killings, the U.S. military is wasting energy and lives on killing one of its highest-ranking military officials. In that *Apocalypse Now* strives to spotlight the ironies that accompany the Vietnam War and western imperialism at large.

The film uses some of the same narrative devices the novella does: the image of a journey upriver, the hostile environment, the questionable actions of American officers holding positions along the coast, the discovery of self and how in the face of violence it can darken beyond recognition. The way Col. Kurtz is introduced makes use of the ambiguity of second-hand information (word of mouth, a military file, photographs, voice recordings) very much like *Heart of Darkness*. Through its imagery, the film conveys a very similar atmosphere to that of the novella: an overwhelming sense of decay, uncertainty, and paranoia in the face of the unknown.

It is interesting to note not only the parallels observed between the stories' plot, atmosphere, and the characters they feature, but a parallel in the underlying meaning of the film's message (Harrison 2012). Much like Conrad setting Africa as a counterpoint to European morals, *Apocalypse Now* primarily focuses on the war's effect on American ideals and identity and the effect of violence on the American consciousness, and much less so on Vietnam and its population itself. It uses the display of war crimes as a device to underline the characters' descent into moral and psychological decay. In that *Apocalypse Now* is not necessarily a story about the horrors of the Vietnam War—it is a story about how the war affects American soldiers who fight it in an environment so disquietingly unfamiliar with no real code of conduct to measure themselves and each other against.

### 2.3. Interactive Adaptations

Adaptation of linear narratives into interactive computer games pose some unique challenges. Games by their nature require a different kind of mindset for engagement; their audiences have different expectations towards the kind of experience they are to be presented with than those of film or other non-interactive mediums.

Games use player interaction as their primary tool to push a narrative forward. Hunnicke et al. (2004) define the three major components a game can be built and interpreted by as Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics. These describe, in essence, the cornerstones of game design and refer to a game's components as follows:

- the interactions a player has to perform while playing;
- the effects of those interactions on the game itself;
- the desired emotional response the player is to experience while engaging with the piece.

Based on this framework, the challenge of adapting a literary piece to this medium is clear to see. Developers must translate a story designed to be told in a pre-established order into game mechanics; either through a series of interactions the player can perform, or events within the game world that affect the gameplay itself; while preserving the message of the original narrative and making sure players hit key points through their progress to understand the story as a whole.

In the case of narratives that can be easily broken down into quest-like elements (e.g., heavily action-based stories or adventure stories), this is a relatively straightforward task. Where the narrative's focus is less on adventure and action and more on abstract concepts where there is no hero figure or easily exploitable string of plot points to be identified within the story, breaking it down into a series of interactions proves to be much less clear-cut (Cutting 2011).

Despite the hardships of taking linear narratives and translating them into a medium where a significant part of effective storytelling depends on the way individual players interact with the platform, computer games have a unique power to retell stories within a completely new context. Through giving up a measure of control to the audience, the meaning and message of these stories earn nuance with the actions players themselves take by taking charge of the narrative and through it experience a sense of shared responsibility (Kwastek 2013).

### 2.3.1. Far Cry 2

*Far Cry 2* is an open-world first-person shooter computer game, part of the *Far Cry* franchise published by Ubisoft. This game is the second in a series of five main games and several spinoffs, developed by Ubisoft Montreal and published in 2008.

After the largely technical focus of the first game in the series (Crytek 2004), *Far Cry 2*, while still putting a heavy emphasis on pushing the capabilities of the technology available at the time with a dynamic weather system, semi-open world and realistic physics, presents a great example of interactive storytelling in which elements of the gameplay and game world work together to create a sense of immersion into an overarching cohesive narrative. These technological advancements contribute significantly to the success of creating a game environment suitable for the story to be told.

*Far Cry 2* is not a faithful remake of *Heart of Darkness*. The novella serves more as inspiration, a story framework that is analysed and elements of it integrated into the game, using some of the same narrative tropes and devices: the message, the environment, the overarching mission, the moral ambiguity of its villains. These elements are observed, then altered to be effectively transplanted into the expected format of a computer game.

The story is set in a modern African country affected by a serious military-political conflict. The player is tossed between two warring factions—the United Front for Liberation and Labour (UFL) and the Alliance for Popular Resistance (APR)—with an initial contract to assassinate a local weapons dealer called the Jackal. After a short, armed skirmish, the player will end up running errands for one faction or the other, gaining reputation and currency in the area with the final goal of reaching the Jackal acting as the overarching driving mission.

Through diverse quests—both those that advance the plot and repeating errands aimed for collecting arms and currency in exchange for malaria medication—the player is forced to adopt increasingly violent behaviour as the story progresses. These missions are designed to be morally ambiguous and follow the idea of moral deterioration heavily present in all of Conrad's adaptations.

The game's main theme—violence—is the gameplay's driving force. Within the context of a first-person military shooter, which is by and large designed around the concept of war and combat, at first glance this is not an unusual mechanic. But the role of violence in *Far Cry 2* is different in that the narrative makes the player aware of it, its effect on the player character, his environment, his in-game companions and the progressively destabilising political situation that unfolds as the story moves ahead. In the end, it is the game's proposed main antagonist who calls out violence to be what it is: a disease, a plague that infests people and causes immense destruction both within the person and in their environment. This manifests quite literally with the player character's illness and the carnage the player causes throughout the game.

Gameplay mechanics emphasise this continuous destructive spiral: weapons degrade and jam over time, enemies respawn on the road and in camps the player has previously cleared out and weather conditions force the player to change tactics in similar situations. All this is underlined by the player character's malaria—dizzy spells affect him at random intervals (often midcombat) and the game forces the player to run special errands in order to top up his medication and survive. These mechanics are designed to work against the player and create a highly stressful environment, reminiscent of the atmosphere permeated by frustration, incompetence, and helplessness Marlow faces in the Congo jungle, successfully integrated into the flow and set mechanics system of a modern first-person shooter (Jeffries 2009).

Instead of nominating one Kurtz-like figure as antagonist, developers chose a more ambiguous approach in creating a character who embodies the disintegration of morality in all of *Heart of Darkness*' adaptations. At first glance, the Kurtz of *Far Cry 2* is the Jackal—a weapons dealer the player is tasked to assassinate as his first and most important overarching mission. The ambiguity of second-hand information plays an important role in this interpretation of the narrative as well: through running errands for the journalist Reuben Oluwagambi who is writing an account of the armed conflict in the area, the player collects cassette tapes through which the Jackal shares what is essentially *Far*

*Cry 2*'s equivalent of Kurtz's manifesto in *Heart of Darkness*. The character archetype of a journalist documenting the deeds of the 'Kurtzes' appears in the novella and in *Apocalypse Now*.

As opposed to meeting him at the end of the story in the shape of a final shakedown mission, however, the player encounters the Jackal multiple times during the game—he is, in fact, one of the first characters the player talks to when he first arrives in the area. The Jackal appears at key turning points of the plot, going as far as taking care of the player in his illness and offering him valuable advice. This is where the clear identity of *Far Cry 2*'s Kurtz becomes questionable.

The Jackal is introduced to the player gradually, each encounter revealing more of his personality, views, and goals. Much like Kurtz in the novella, the player is never quite sure where the Jackal's character lies. With this, *Far Cry 2* introduces its final boss only to throw him in the player's path over and over again, slowly revealing his views to be aligned with the player character's goals after all. At the third in-person meeting, the Jackal wakes the player up with the words: "Wake up. I used to be you." This neatly underlines the shift of the Kurtz-identity from the Jackal to the player: through his increasingly effective violent behaviour, morally questionable decisions and the influence he cultivates in the war-torn country, the game's deliberately hostile design puts the player through the same experience as Kurtz, causing their integrity and identity to shift and deteriorate.

In this it is easy to see *Far Cry 2*'s Kurtz as both the Jackal and the player himself—by leading the player to be the narrator and the villain at the same time, the game effectively highlights its message in the consequences of violence and war through the player's actions themselves, placing the responsibility for those consequences on the player's own shoulders.

### 2.3.2. Spec Ops: The Line

*Spec Ops: The Line* is a third-person military cover-based shooter designed around the idea of violence, war and their effects on those who fight it similarly to *Far Cry 2*. The game was developed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games in 2012.

While *Far Cry 2* was praised at the time of its release as an impressive technological feat, the gameplay of *Spec Ops: The Line* is in line with a regular third-person shooter of its time, with all the successful and less successful combat and exploration mechanics included. What sets this game apart is its story: Yager Development had free reign in designing the game's narrative, as long as they kept the game's genre and mechanics in line with the rest of the series released between 1998 and 2012. The narrative the game lets the player explore is a surprising critique of war and entertainment that idolises war, laden with subtle symbolism and irony (Raycevic 2017).

Similarly to *Far Cry 2*, *Spec Ops: The Line* takes inspiration from both Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* in its distinctly American military setting and themes of war. This time the story takes place in a speculative Middle East where the city of Dubai is hit by natural disaster and is buried under a wall of sand. The area still populated by civilians and affected by heavy wind, sandstorms, riots, and limited resources is controlled by a deserted U.S. army battalion under martial law, led by PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) troubled Colonel John Konrad.

The player enters the scene as the captain of a special forces unit sent to this no-man's land with the mission to find out what exactly happened to the planned evacuation attempt and to figure out the meaning of Col. Konrad's cryptic last radio broadcast:

This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai ended in complete failure. Death toll . . . too many.

As Captain Martin Walker and his team fight their way deeper and deeper into the city, hindered by enemies and hostile environmental conditions, the true depth of the horrifying events and the acts the deserted 33rd Battalion committed against the civilian population slowly come to light. The game's story then shifts from that of a straightforward shooter to a narrative that takes the player down the path of destruction: the player must fight the protagonists' own people-turned-antagonists by this disaster-hit city, operating under constant threat from the environment, committing war crimes and



still being unable to protect civilians and those from his own squad. The game's aesthetic reflects this downwards spiral well: scenes become progressively darker in colour and lighting, and the player character Martin Walker's appearance gradually changes to reflect the rough conditions that affect him both physically and mentally.

The mechanics that make this environment a hostile and stressful territory to explore further enhance this feeling of disempowerment. Where most games set the player up for forward momentum, gaining skills and becoming more powerful with experience, *Spec Ops: The Line* does the opposite. The traditional video game hero (the strong, masculine figure of a soldier) is declining into a tragically flawed and mentally unstable person. The sandstorm that buried Dubai serves as a chaotic force of transformation, turning the player's expectations for the narrative, the mechanics, the experience of a game to its reverse: a personal journey into madness with the game's mechanics ready to complement it.

*Spec Ops: The Line*, rather than taking direct plot points from either *Heart of Darkness* or *Apocalypse Now*, uses references and subtle visual and textual symbolism to replicate and push further the environment set as an example by Conrad. The game's Kurtz-figure is Col. Konrad, whose name is a direct reference to that of the novella's author. His intent to help, turned and twisted in the face of disastrous conditions, is very much in line with the novella, the film, and their treatment of Kurtz. As the player explores the game world, he is continuously harassed and taunted on broadcast by a character titled the Radioman who serves as the game's chronicler archetype familiar from *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Far Cry 2*.

These concrete allusions to the original story and its subsequent adaptations are underlined with subtle visual and textual cues indicating distress and the deterioration of the situation: the game's main menu displays the American flag upside-down as a sign of distress, and in the loading screens—where other games would generally display tips and useful information for the player to see—*Spec Ops: The Line* taunts the player with lines recounting the crimes they commit in-game. With this the responsibility of the player themselves for the consequences of Walker's actions becomes clear to see.

As with *Far Cry 2*, *Spec Ops: The Line* is not a faithful game adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. It takes the novella's initial meaning that is further explored by Coppola in *Apocalypse Now* and using the tools and narrative elements of the previous adaptations effectively tells its own story of madness and psychological decay. The game and *Apocalypse Now* both allude to a narrative of American military identity crisis—their protagonists' (eventual) mission is to fight their own side with no reliable chain of command to control the situation—placing the story in a setting relevant to both their audiences at the time.

On the surface, *Spec Ops: The Line* caters to a specific audience (players of military shooter games) and, with its seemingly patriotic themes, so does *Apocalypse Now*. Yet using the medium of film and game respectively, they both make clever commentary on war and violence against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and a fictional Middle-Eastern military conflict. This disintegration of identity can also be observed when reading *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow, although not exempt from the prejudices of his time, starts questioning the legitimacy of the colonisation of Africa, and in consequence what he believes to be the true European ideals of morality.

By fulfilling players' preconceptions about military shooter games and turning them into a plot device that further drives the point home, *Spec Ops: The Line* takes full advantage of the medium—starting from the main menu through loading screens to the actual gameplay itself, every element works together to make this game a unique and fascinating example of effective video game storytelling.

### 3. Discussion

Paul B. Armstrong, editor of the Fifth Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness* (Armstrong 2017) says in his introduction:

One of the peculiarities of great literary works is that they have a life that goes beyond what their authors originally intended.

The message *Heart of Darkness* carries is something literary historians, critics, and novelists have debated, analysed, and re-interpreted over and over since its publication. For where it sits within history, both in literature and in the movements of the economic and political powers of the world, it stands out as a piece that criticises the system ultimately leading to its birth. Yet a very important point to consider when reading *Heart of Darkness* is that Conrad—voluntarily or involuntarily—still falls into setting Africa as a counterpoint to Europe, its jungles and local population capable of eroding the moral standards it stands for (Said 1993). He sets the two continents in opposition: one of history and civilisation, another one of an impenetrable wilderness and a sense of oppressive separation (Achebe 1977).

In a sense, Conrad's criticism of imperial efforts is blind to many of the injustices it carries. Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist in his article 'An Image of Africa: Racism' in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1977) says:

Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth.

Part of the reason for Conrad's prejudices lies within the context of his time, his view of Africa and its inhabitants is by no means a unique opinion. Yet acknowledging that *Heart of Darkness* with all its virtues and its arguably controversial elements influences the view of Africa in the eyes of the rest of the world puts its message and effect into perspective. Being adapted several times through several different mediums serves to carry that message further.

Ellis (1982) in 'The Literary Adaptation' talks about the cultural memory of literary works. This phrase calls attention to a pattern that emerges through each adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* and indeed, broadly speaking, any extended universe based upon adapting and re-adapting literary or other narrative works. The novella's cultural memory can be interpreted to include all adaptations of it: from novels inspired by it to the deliberate rework of the narrative into a new setting, these leave footprints—impressions which add to the commonly understood concept of *Heart of Darkness*. In that, each adaptation has the potential to influence further rework of the novella, adding to this interlocking network of narratives the same way other iterations have previously done: the novella's setting and protagonist–antagonist relationship appear in *Apocalypse Now*, discussion around Conrad's work influences visual depictions of characters in the graphic novel, the film's visuals and military setting reflect in *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line*.

It is interesting to observe the evolution of Marlow from serving as a character argued to be the author's substitute through each of the novella's subsequent adaptations, both static and interactive. From his straightforward appearance in *Apocalypse Now* as Captain Willard through the emphasis Mairowitz and Anyango put on the connection between author and narrator to collapsing author, narrator, and antagonist into the player in *Far Cry 2*, these vary greatly in how they interpret Marlow in moral standing, contextual relevance and his function as 'protagonist' in an interactive setting.

Kurtz goes through a similar transformation visible especially in *Far Cry 2*, where the narrative reveals the player to be, in a sense, the moral successor to the game's Kurtz-character, the Jackal. By blurring the line between protagonist and antagonist, the game takes an unexpected approach to emphasise one of the novella's fundamental questions: what happens to a person when faced with the incomprehensible, relentless, and violent forces of nature and human beings?

*Apocalypse Now* and the graphic novel—although vastly different in approach and fidelity to the original material—stand as examples of straightforward linear adaptations that both view and respond to the novella in ways unique to them. While the film transplants the narrative to an entirely different setting, the graphic novel provides subtle commentary through its visuals while using the original work to recreate the story as accurately as possible within its format.

Games add another layer of depth to the retelling of Conrad's story by putting the narrative in a context in which the audience ceases to remain a passive observer and through interacting with the games, becomes complicit in how they unfold. Both games lean on this sense of shared responsibility. They offer choices to the player that come with serious consequences and through dialogue (*Far Cry 2*: e.g., the Jackal encounters) and in-game visual and textual cues (*Spec Ops*: e.g., loading screen taunts) makes the player aware of the active part they play in shaping the games' events. In this, interaction and the audience's expectations towards video games as a medium are used as tools to deliver the message.

In the field of postcolonial game studies, *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line* are part of a canon of games that portray—in one way or another—colonial spaces and narratives. Souvik Mukherjee (2018) in 'Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism' talks in some detail about identity tourism in *Far Cry 2*, the role of the coloniser and colonised in video games and the importance of meaningful representation that takes history and its meaning into consideration. Murray (2018) explores this in a wider context of video game criticism: she highlights the importance of video game analysis and critique that leads to meaningful change in thinking within the games industry.

While *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line* are successful examples of adapting a linear story to an interactive medium (both in a narrative delivery and in a commercial sense), what counts as traditional video games do not necessarily make a suitable vehicle for literary adaptations in general. Often the requirements of the market and the expectations of the players make it difficult to successfully transplant certain narratives into computer game form—sacrificing elements of story to the benefit of well-balanced mechanics and vice versa; marketability; intellectual property rights and other, often unexpected obstacles might make literary adaptations as games an unattractive decision for game developers and publishers. Yet interaction is a powerful tool that is capable of inserting audiences into stories in a way no other medium can: with due consideration, it could be a valuable platform to use in fields from education through academia to entertainment in preserving, reclaiming, and re-imagining classic and contemporary narratives through a new lens.

Looking past the boundaries of traditional game development, artworks, and interactive pieces on the borders of mediums and genres, pieces between comics and film, literary text and games, comics and games do not always meet with the same set of expectations games such as first-person military shooters do. Storytelling mediums that use techniques from literature, film, games, and art based on the unique requirements of the original literary work have the potential to be more flexible—breaking outside the set requirements of one medium can be a powerful tool to discover new means of effective storytelling (Jenkins 2003).

That *Heart of Darkness* still has such an effect on adventure stories that strive to explore the depth of human morality is not surprising. Stories of the wonders and horrors of newly discovered lands, faraway settings, and strange people have always had the power to pique curiosity in storytellers and audiences alike. Paired with themes of violence, the terrible force of nature and the fallible nature of human beings, Conrad's narrative sets the scene for an intriguing world. Using real places and real events as material to retell this story in new ways relevant to the audiences at the time (the Vietnam War, the futile interventions of America in West African conflicts, the political situation in the Middle-East), these stories about human nature and its weakness against meaningless violence and the brutality of nature stay relevant and powerful even today.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, F.P. and I.D.; Investigation, F.P. and I.D.; Supervision, I.D.; Writing—original draft, F.P.; Writing—review & editing, F.P. and I.D.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Achebe, Chinua. 1977. An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'. *Massachusetts Review* 18: 251–61. [CrossRef]
- Anyango, Catherine, and Zane Mairowitz. 2010. *Heart of Darkness—A Graphic Novel*. London: SelfMadeHero, ISBN 978-1-906838-09-6.
- Armstrong, Paul B. 2017. Introduction. In *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, 5th ed. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. ix–xxi. ISBN 9780393264869.
- Coker, Catherine. 2017. The margins of print? Fan fiction as book history. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 25. [CrossRef]
- Conrad, Joseph. 2017. Heart of Darkness. In *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, 5th ed. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 3–78. ISBN 9780393264869. First published 1899.
- Coppola, Francis Ford. 1979. *Apocalypse Now*. Beverly Hills: United Artists.
- Crytek. 2004. *Far Cry*. Montreuil: Ubisoft.
- Cutting, Andrew. 2011. Interiority, Affordances, and the Possibility of Adapting Henry James's The Turn of the Screw as a Video Game. *Adaptation* 5: 169–84. [CrossRef]
- Ellis, John. 1982. The Literary Adaptation. *Screen* 23: 3–5. [CrossRef]
- Faber, Michel. 2010. Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad, Adapted by Catherine Anyango and David Zane Mairowitz. *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/25/heart-darkness-conrad-anyango-mairowitz> (accessed on 28 June 2018).
- Fitzgerald, Francis Scott. 1994. *The Great Gatsby*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, ISBN 9780140620184. First published 1925.
- Harrison, Rachel V. 2012. Up the Congo River into Cambodia: Literary and Cinematic Journeys to The Dark. *Asian Affairs* 43: 49–60. [CrossRef]
- Hochschild, Adam. 2012. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. London: Pan, ISBN 9781447211358. First published 1998.
- Hunicke, Robin, Mark LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek. 2004. MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. Workshop on Challenges in Game AI 1–4. Available online: <https://cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/pubs/MDA.pdf> (accessed on 28 June 2018).
- Jauss, Hans Robert. 1970. Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory. *New Literary History* 40: 7–37. [CrossRef]
- Jeffries, L. B. 2009. Far Cry 2: The Heart of Darkness Game. *Popmatters*. Available online: <https://popmatters.com/71590-far-cry-2-the-heart-of-darkness-game-2496045809.html> (accessed on 28 June 2018).
- Jenkins, Henry. 2003. Transmedia Storytelling. *MIT Technology Review*. Available online: <https://technologyreview.com/s/401760/transmedia-storytelling/> (accessed on 28 June 2018).
- Jenkins, Henry. 2017. Adaptation, Extension, Transmedia. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 45. Available online: [http://salisbury.edu/lfq/\\_issues/first/adaptation\\_extension\\_transmedia.html](http://salisbury.edu/lfq/_issues/first/adaptation_extension_transmedia.html) (accessed on 28 June 2018).
- Kinder, Marsha. 1979. The Power of Adaptation in Apocalypse Now. *Film Quarterly; Berkeley* 33: 12–20. [CrossRef]
- Kwastek, Katja. 2013. *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, ISBN 9780262019323.
- Mukherjee, Souvik. 2018. Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism. *Games and Culture* 13: 504–20. [CrossRef]
- Murray, Soraya. 2018. The Work of Postcolonial Game Studies in the Play of Culture. *Open Library of Humanities* 4: 13. [CrossRef]
- Pakenham, Thomas. 1991. *The Scramble for Africa 1876–1912*. London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, ISBN 0297811304.
- Raycevic. 2017. Spec Ops the Line . . . 5 Years Later. Available online: [https://youtube.com/watch?v=8dzstxE\\_5Rc&t=741s](https://youtube.com/watch?v=8dzstxE_5Rc&t=741s) (accessed on 28 June 2018).
- Said, Edward W. 1993. Two Visions in Heart of Darkness. In *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, 5th ed. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 361–68. ISBN 9780393264869.
- Ubisoft Montreal. 2008. *Far Cry 2*. Montreuil: Ubisoft.

- Van Reybrouck, David. 2010. Congo under Leopold II, 1885–1908. In *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, 5th ed. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 107–23. ISBN 9780393264869.
- Watt, Ian. 1979. Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness. In *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, 5th ed. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 320–61. ISBN 9780393264869.
- Whitlock, Gillian. 2007. Autobiographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics'. *Modern Fiction Studies* 52: 965–79. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Yager Development. 2012. *Spec Ops: The Line*. Novato: 2K Games.



© 2018 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).