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BACHELOR THESIS

The Moral Message of *Heart of Darkness* from the Point of View of Its
Contemporary Adaptations

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I hereby declare that the thesis The Moral Message of *Heart of Darkness* from the Point of View of Its Contemporary Adaptations is my own work, created under the leadership of my supervisor, using the works on the ‘Sources’ list. I also declare that this thesis was not used to obtain any other university degree, or the same university degree elsewhere.

Prague, 14 July 2017

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signature

I would like to thank PhDr. Tereza Topolovská, Ph.D. for her patient supervision and invaluable advice regarding my bachelor thesis, especially her immense help with its formal structure.

ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis compares Joseph Conrad's famous novel *Heart of Darkness* to its movie adaptation *Apocalypse Now* and to its video game adaptation *Spec Ops: The Line*. It is mainly focused on thematic similarities, since both adaptations are loose and modernized versions of the original story. In analyzing primarily the theme of imperialism in each of the select works, the thesis hopes to firstly uncover the reasons for updating the settings and plot for the adaptations, and secondly aims to identify the reason for choosing *Heart of Darkness* for adaptation in the first place. The indirect goal of this thesis is to affirm the cultural significance of *Apocalypse Now* and *Spec Ops: The Line* as independent works of art.

KEYWORDS

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, adaptation, imperialism

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce porovnává slavný román Josepha Conrada *Srdce temnoty* a jeho filmovou adaptaci *Apokalypsu* a videoherní adaptaci *Spec Ops: The Line*. Zaměřuje se především na tematickou podobnost, neboť obě adaptace jsou volnou a aktualizovanou obdobou původního příběhu. Zkoumáním hlavně tématu imperialismu v každém ze tří děl se práce jednak snaží odhalit důvod k aktualizaci zasazení a zápletky v adaptacích, a zároveň chce zjistit důvod pro výběr k adaptování zrovna *Srdce temnoty*. Nepřímý cíl této práce je potvrdit kulturní význam *Apokalypsy* a *Spec Ops: The Line* jakožto samostatných uměleckých děl.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Joseph Conrad, *Srdce temnoty*, *Apokalypsa*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, adaptace, imperialismus

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Introduction

Towards the end of the 19th century, Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad penned *Heart of Darkness*, a short novel inspired by his brief employment on a steamboat in central Africa. In the decades following the book's initial publication, *Heart of Darkness* went from a fairly overlooked piece of writing to a classic of the English prose.

Over time, *Heart of Darkness* influenced numerous literary works and had been adapted and retold not only within literature, but across various formats, ranging from radio plays and theater performances to comic books, film and video games. Among these derivative works, the most notable – with regards to their relative fame and critical acclaim – are the 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now*, and 2012 video game *Spec Ops: The Line*. The two are noteworthy also for the fact that they are both loose modernized adaptations of the original story, meaning their plots and settings are updated to better fit the respective times of their release.

John Milius, co-author of the script for *Apocalypse Now*, expressed that his motivation for drafting the original screenplay came to him when he had heard in university about all the previous failed attempts to adapt *Heart of Darkness* for film. Yager Development, the developers of *Spec Ops: The Line*, chose *Heart of Darkness* mainly because they wanted to challenge their players with moral quandaries similar to the ones readers may experience when opening a copy of Conrad's novel. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to identify exactly those types of quandaries. By the process of comparison, this thesis will try to ask itself what kind of ethical questions are presented in *Heart of Darkness*, and which of those were carried over into the adaptations.

Since at face value the two adaptations deviate so extensively from the original, this thesis will first need to distinguish the major thematic connections of *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Spec Ops: The Line*. In order to do that, the central themes of *Heart of Darkness* will need to be identified. A variety of secondary sources – mainly critical analyses of the novel – will help narrow down the most often discussed points of the book's critique and study. The conclusions of the secondary literature are going to be essential in determining those themes that forward the moral messages of the novel.

The hypothesis of this thesis is formed on the premise that the defining theme of *Heart of Darkness* is the theme of colonialism. It supposes that this is the theme that presents the ethical questions in the original. This theme will therefore become the main subject of comparison. However, as the term ‘colonialism’ is often used interchangeably with the term ‘imperialism’ in most of the secondary sources, this thesis will concentrate on the theme of imperialism as the broader category. In other words, the term ‘colonialism’ will be treated as a time specific product of imperialism. The adaptations will be analyzed for portrayals of imperialist consequences similar to the results of 19th century colonialism.

Therefore, the main focus of the thesis will be to examine how the theme of imperialism is represented in both the movie and the video game adaptation. It will look in detail at those narrative aspects that convey the theme of imperialism in the updated contexts. It will also be interested in other, format specific techniques which strengthen the theme. Lastly, the thesis will be concerned with the possible decisions that may have led the creators of the two concerned adaptations to shift their setting and alter the plot of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Part of the premise is the belief that the book’s other major themes and motifs – chiefly darkness, madness, the unknowable, and the primordial and primitive – do not only run parallel to the supposed main theme of colonialism (and, by extension, imperialism), but reinforce it. Part of the analysis of the two adaptations will then be to discover whether the same secondary themes and motifs exist in the movie and the game. If they do, the thesis will take note whether they also contribute towards the overall message of the adaptations.

Considering both adaptations were critically successful despite their major narrative deviation, this thesis believes the success stems from reliably capturing the essential moral and philosophical subjects of the original. By the thematic comparison, it aims to isolate the moral aspect common to all three works, and explain the cultural importance of this aspect, even in the new contexts.

Heart of Darkness: the Foundational Pre-text

Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad was a Polish-born British novelist, living between the years 1857 and 1924. Throughout his childhood, various reasons caused his family to move around Poland often, before tuberculosis took the life of both of his parents. Young Conrad was placed into the foster care of his uncle. Despite his interest in geography, Conrad was not a good student and became a financial burden for his uncle. That is probably why he eventually sent Joseph to Marseilles to set him up for a maritime career, envisioning that his nephew will become a sailor-merchant. Conrad did, and this career proved to be formative to his life as a novelist.

Although Conrad would later become a British citizen and write exclusively in English, he did not learn the language until the age of twenty. Several of his biographers, including Zdzisław Najder, note that this influenced his writing profoundly, with the syntax and grammar of his prose being reminiscent of Polish and French at times. His seafaring life then inspired many of the plots and details of his fiction, although perhaps the most impactful journey he underwent was not at sea, but rather on a steamer in service on the African Congo River. In the biographical introduction in *Joseph Conrad Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, Ross C Murfin discusses the number of similarities between Conrad's trip to Africa and the trip one of his characters, Charles Marlow, undertakes on the same river in *Heart of Darkness*. Murfin mentions that because of these similarities, "it may be tempting to think of the novel as thinly veiled autobiography (...) but it may also be treacherous" (Murfin 13). In the same breath he however points out that it was during this trip that Conrad developed a disdain for European colonial trade.

Heart of Darkness and Its Critical Reception

The aforementioned *Heart of Darkness* is Joseph Conrad's most well known novel. It was first published serially in the 1899 issues of *Blackwood's Magazine*. Despite eventually becoming his seminal literary work, the reception of *Heart of Darkness* was lukewarm upon its first release. For years, the novel had been criticized mainly for its vagueness of language. Frank Raymond Leavis in particular, building on the reviews of

such authors as E. M. Forster and John Masefield, notes Conrad was vague and foggy mainly “when he steps back to philosophize” (Murfin 100). The problem he sees with the original novel lies mainly in adjectival obscurity of the text. Leavis hypothesizes that Conrad’s overreliance on highly abstract words is supposed to mask the author’s lack of clear intent for his metaphysical descriptions and passages. He views this as a particular problem of the text, as these adjectives stifle the “thrilled sense of the unspeakable potentialities of the human soul” (Leavis as quoted in Murfin) rather than enhancing it.

Ever since Leavis’s critique, various authors responded with their own contrastive takes on *Heart of Darkness* in this regard. Albert J. Guerard upholds the idea that the novel is meant to be “a dream of self-discovery” (Murfin 101) and as such requires a certain degree of vagueness. Without it, he proposes, the story would not connect as easily (if at all) with its readers. Bruce Johnson further deepens the dialogue about Conrad’s choice of words by proposing that the civilized Europeans feel disconnected from nature that steadily drifts away from them, leading to an increasing difficulty to explain the nature using their language. Kurtz defies that idea “by pretending that language is an adequate tool for understanding complex truth” (Murfin 105). It would be in this idea that Marlow’s enshrouding descriptions are honest at least, if not actually capable of finding the truth. David Thorburn then adds that this “adjectival insistence which has so disturbed Leavis and others is for the most part an essential aspect of the novel’s meaning” (Thorburn 117).

Of all the studies concerned with Conrad’s use of language in *Heart of Darkness*, the one pivotal to the subsequent analysis in this thesis is *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*, published in 1957 by Thomas Moser. In it, Moser expands mainly on the ideas of Albert J. Guerard, when he says that *Heart of Darkness* is “principally concerned with the theme of self-knowledge” (Moser as quoted in Murfin). He further cements the idea of the reader’s experience mirroring that of Marlow’s by insinuating “that Marlow in the jungle is like the reader in the text” (Murfin 102). “By holding back information and moving forward and backward in time, Conrad catches up and involves the reader in a moral situation, makes the reader’s emotion follow a course analogous to that of the characters” (Moser as quoted in Murfin). He also reintroduces an older take on the novel as “a work critical of racist European imperialism” (Murfin 102).

Anti-imperialism, Murfin sums Moser up, is integral to the book's symbolism, and is told mainly through the perplexing imagery, as well as through its color dualism. The latter actually reverses the conventional standard of light standing for virtues and darkness for vices. More specifically, "whiteness means falsehood" (Moser as quoted in Murfin) and therefore the pure intentions of the white colonists hide their dark methods.

Chinua Achebe's Critical Take

Not all authors viewed the novel as entirely anti-imperialistic and critical of the European colonialism. In 1975, a Nigerian novelist and professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Chinua Achebe, published *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*, which was an essay based on his lecture delivered at Amherst. In it, Chinua Achebe criticizes Joseph Conrad's novel for its portrayal of Africa and its residents. He notices how rarely African characters appear or speak in the book and how their behavior tends to be animalistic and savage by nature. More importantly, he draws attention to Conrad's insistence of things and people staying in a place they belong: "For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance" (Achebe). While this sense of belonging somewhere is one of the major themes and driving motives in the book, it also leads to a one-dimensional portrayal of African characters.

Ultimately, Chinua Achebe's essay puts forward an idea that *Heart of Darkness* may not be a great work of art for its depersonalization of Africans. He goes on so far as to be disquieted that *Heart of Darkness* is considered among the greatest novels in the English language, and that literary critics insofar had not paid much attention to this aspect of Conrad's storytelling.

Whether or not Achebe's point of view can be agreed on, it is undeniable that for a novel set in Africa around the end of the 19th century, there is a considerable lack of African people. The question is why did Joseph Conrad decide to skew his attention so much towards the two strangers in this continent – the narrator Charles Marlow and the rogue ivory trader Kurtz, both of clearly European descent – and pay little to no attention towards genuine African characters?

Chinua Achebe proposes Africa and its natives serve "as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar" (Achebe), in line with what he views as

needs of Western psychology. Achebe's reading of the novel projects Africa as an uncivilized counterpart to Europe, an image used for contrastive purposes. He asserts that Joseph Conrad's portrayal of the continent and its people is born out of racism. He also draws parallels between Joseph Conrad's personal views and the views of the main character and narrator, mentioning that were they not directly linked, the author would have probably provided "an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters" (Achebe). While he also recognizes that Africa is used as merely a setting for the story of the novel, he criticizes the book for the very same point. Chinua Achebe argues that reducing Africa to a mere setting of *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes its denizens. He concludes his essay by pondering whether this racism is not ingrained in the general sentiment of Western society of his age, as it certainly was ingrained in the general sentiment of the English at the end of the 19th century.

The Novel as an Anti-imperial Text

An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" became one of the most influential critiques of the novel, with Nicolas Tredell believing criticism of *Heart of Darkness* can be divided "into two epochal phases: before and after Achebe" (Tredell 71). Not all agreed with Chinua Achebe's conclusion of his essay, e.g. professor Cedric Watts of University of Sussex argues in favor of *Heart of Darkness* by not only illustrating the various ways in which Joseph Conrad subverts white European ideals of his time, but also by reminding the reader of all the passages where Conrad imparted upon the natives more than just patronizing characteristics. Watts even draws several parallels between Conrad's novel and *Things Fall Apart*, a book authored by Achebe. He concludes that "both writers protest against man's inhumanity to man, and their definitions of that inhumanity are strikingly congruent" (Watts 206).

Cedric Watts and Thomas Moser were certainly not alone to view *Heart of Darkness* as an anti-imperialistic, anti-colonial novel highly critical of the white men in Africa at the turn of the centuries. Adam Hochschild calls the book "one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature." One of the chapters of his book, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, recounting the exploitation of the Belgian controlled Congo Free State from several different

perspectives, speaks of the self-contradictory relationship Joseph Conrad had with imperialist Europe, and sees this paradoxical view distilled in the character of Kurtz, who is “both a murderous head collector and an intellectual” (Hochschild, chapter 9). Although Hochschild spends the majority of this chapter highlighting the similarities between Kurtz and his possible real-life inspiration, Léon Rom, he concludes that the character of Kurtz has an almost documentary quality to him, because he possesses a “telling feature of the white penetration of the Congo, where conquest by pen and ink so often confirmed the conquest by rifle and machine gun” (Ibid).

The discussion about both the anti-imperialist qualities of the book, and about its alleged racism, also caught the attention of Patrick Brantlinger. In his 1985 essay *Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?*, Brantlinger delves into the various critical takes on *Heart of Darkness*. He acknowledges the standard anti-colonial readings, quoting Benita Parry’s words as one of the most definitive examples: “Conrad’s writings [are] more destructive of imperialism’s ideological premises than the polemics of his contemporary opponents of empire.” He continues on to say: “Conrad universalizes darkness partly by universalizing fetishism,” and Europeans fall to darkness, because they have their own idols to worship – “ivory, money, power, reputation” (Brantlinger 371). Yet, Brantlinger reminds his readers that this scorn of the colonists can only work if the novel establishes a form of darkness, of idolization, that the European form of fetishism can be equated to – and Conrad chose the savagery of the Africans, inevitably dooming his text to become racist against them.

Brantlinger mentions the opinion of some scholars that Conrad “was consciously anti-imperialist, but (...) he unconsciously or carelessly employed the racist terminology current in his day,” but himself arrives to a different conclusion. “Conrad knew that his story was ambiguous,” Brantlinger writes, “he stresses that ambiguity at every opportunity, so that labeling it anti-imperialist is as unsatisfactory as condemning it for being racist.” Brantlinger reintroduces the impressionism¹ of the book, but unlike Guerard or Johnson (who associate this impressionism with a dream-like understanding) considers it a sort of nihilism. “Conrad inscribes a text that, like the novel itself, cancels out its own best intentions” (Brantlinger 382).

¹ Patrick Brantlinger uses the term despite considering it inadequate, mostly because it was originally used by Fredric Jameson, to whom he reacts

***Apocalypse Now* – the Movie Adaptation of Conrad’s Novel**

Apocalypse Now* as an Adaptation of *Heart of Darkness

Apocalypse Now is an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, based on the script of Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius. Rather than a direct adaptation, the movie is a loose and modernized version of Conrad’s story. Instead of being about the late 19th century gentleman Charles Marlow and his trip to the heart of Africa, it follows Captain Benjamin Willard, a member of the U.S. Military, who is sent on a mission to assassinate Colonel Walter E. Kurtz. Kurtz went rogue during the Vietnam War and assembled a private Montagnard army, with which he established a foothold deep within the Cambodia jungle. Capt. Willard is escorted by a small group of soldiers on a PBR (military designation for Patrol Boat, River) up a Vietnamese river, eventually reaching the temple occupied by Kurtz and his men. There, Willard is captured. While initially being held captive, he is soon set free and remains in the temple for days, before he decides to kill Kurtz and return to the boat, taking the (at this point) last surviving member of his crew with him.

Francis Ford Coppola, the Man behind the Movie

Francis Ford Coppola is an American director hailing from Detroit, Michigan. Born on April 7, 1939 to a family of Italian immigrants, Coppola was interested in theater and film from an early age, the former of which he pursued in school before finally deciding to shift his interest to cinema and earn the Master of Fine Arts degree at University of California, Los Angeles School of Theater, Film and Television.

Coppola would become a boundary-pushing movie artist, being one of the many directors of the New Hollywood movement – a group of young film creators “who took the primary authorial role away from studios and into their own hands” (Saporito). Works produced by this wave of filmmakers were often made on lower budget when compared to big Hollywood productions, and also shifted the creative process from the hands of studios and executives into the hands of the directors, who were not afraid to take risks and choose new topics and approaches. Francis Ford Coppola decided to bypass the Hollywood system entirely by founding his own studio American Zoetrope.

When Coppola was in his thirties, he achieved successes not only as a director, but also as a screenwriter for the films *Patton* and the first two *Godfather* movies, all of which won at least one Academy Award. It was the profit from these movies that allowed him to co-fund more of the activities of his company American Zoetrope. Most notably, he used his personal finances and assets to revive a previously shelved project – a movie based on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, entitled *Apocalypse Now*.

The movie was originally supposed to be directed and shot by George Lucas in Vietnam while the actual Vietnam War was still raging. In part due to Lucas’ involvement with other projects at the time, partly because of safety reasons, principal photography initially fell through. When Francis Ford Coppola decided to direct the movie himself, the Vietnam War was over and the studio closed a deal with the Philippines government instead. The Philippines officials provided a filming location and also genuine military equipment. As seen in the documentary *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, the movie faced numerous difficulties during production, which led to extra weeks of shooting and going over the original budget. Coppola also had to come up with a new ending on set, as the original ending in the script did not meet his vision. Even the initial screenings of the film varied in their last scenes as a result of Coppola’s indecisiveness.

The Critical Reception of *Apocalypse Now*

Although *Apocalypse Now* “was far from universally acclaimed when it was first released” (Rainey), with critics citing the various production problems as having affected the overall quality of the movie and complaining about the openness of its messages and about its heavy literary reliance towards the ending, the film gradually came to be considered a classic. Movie critic Roger Ebert considered it “the best Vietnam film, one of the greatest of all films,” and included it in his listing of Great Movies. It appeared in both 100 Greatest American Films lists published by the American Film Institute and it was labeled the best movie of the last 30 years by the London Film Critics’ Circle in 2009, as well as receiving multiple nominations and awards across the various movie award shows and film festivals.

One of the film’s frequently debated aspects is its tone. Frank P. Tomasulo writes: “*Apocalypse Now* might be categorized as both a pro-war movie and an anti-war movie

in that the film's cinematic and political ambiguity both conceals and reveals a national ambivalence toward the Vietnam War." His essay *The Politics of Ambivalence: Apocalypse Now as Pro-war and Anti-war Film* attempts to resolve the two perspectives. It arrives at a conclusion that the film is effectively depoliticized for its use of literary and mythical allusions, and that the real life conflict is no more than the movie's coat of paint. Still, his essay is important for listing arguments for both the anti-war and pro-war readings.

First of all, the movie's ambiguity is viewed as a strategy employed by Francis Ford Coppola to have his film potentially inoffensive to both the militant and the peace-loving public. However, while Tomasulo mentions that this strategy worked in Coppola's previous movie *Patton*, it is undermined in *Apocalypse Now* by the involvement of the script's co-writer, John Milius. In particular, he cites the scene of the helicopter raid as working "to further a pro military, pro-war interpretation" (Tomasulo 149).

On the other hand, the essay looks for explicit anti-military messages in the film, oftentimes finding them on a symbolic level. As an example, Tomasulo provides the many scenes in which the U.S. soldiers end up without leadership; framing of Willard in the first scene; "subtly linking [Manson's apocalyptic rampage] with the Vietnam debacle" (Ibid). Absurdity of certain scenes is also viewed as a component of the anti-war and anti-military criticism.

Although Tomasulo's essay is aimed primarily at discussing the movie's overall tone, it also stops to note numerous similarities between Willard and Kurtz, recounting the many scenes which portray them as mutual doppelgangers, but also alluding to a metamorphosis-like quality to Willard's journey upstream, at the end of which is the character of Kurtz.

Spec Ops: The Line – the Video Game Based on Heart of Darkness

Yager Development

Yager Development GmbH (typically shortened to Yager) is a game development studio based in Germany. It was founded in 1999 by a small group of five coders and artists, but since staffs more than one hundred and thirty developers from twenty different countries. Despite the relatively long existence of this studio, as of 2017, they list only three projects on their official website. The most notable of the three is *Spec Ops: The Line*, published by 2K Games, Inc., and co-developed with Darkside Game Studios, who supplied the multiplayer portion of the game. While technically belonging to a series of games under the Spec Ops brand, the game is a standalone installment with virtually no ties to the rest of the series, other than its genre and format.

Spec Ops: The Line as an Adaptation of Heart of Darkness

On the surface, *Spec Ops: The Line* is a story of three Delta Force operatives tasked with investigating the fate of the 33rd Infantry Battalion in sandstorm-devastated Dubai. The 33rd had been sent to evacuate Dubai shortly after cataclysmic sandstorms hit the city. The military unit was led by Colonel John Konrad, whose transmission expressing the failure of the evacuation is the last to be picked up outside of Dubai. The player then assumes the role of Captain Martin Walker, who leads Staff Sergeant John Lugo and Lieutenant Alphonso Adams into the heart of Dubai to learn more news of Colonel Konrad and potentially retrieve him and the survivors of his unit. The mission goes awry when the soldiers of 33rd turn against the protagonists and become the game's main enemies. The player then joins forces with the handful of CIA operatives who were in the area to stop the 33rd from seizing control of the city. Captain Martin Walker alone eventually manages to get to John Konrad, whom he had been previously talking to over the radio, only to find out the Colonel had been long dead and his voice was merely a figment of Walker's imagination.

Critical Reception of *Spec Ops: The Line*

Spec Ops: The Line was released in 2012 to nearly universal acclaim, but poor sales. Critics praised the game's graphic design and strong focus on the narrative,

commending it mainly for its mature approach to storytelling when compared to other games of the genre. It was primarily the game's narrative that also earned it several awards at the end of its release year. Despite that, critics still found the game flawed in some regards. The one consistently criticized aspect of the game was its combat. Most reviewers felt that the gameplay mechanics, i.e. the interactive aspects of the game, were outdated and oftentimes poorly designed and inadequately implemented.

James Portnow and Daniel Floyd theorized that the gameplay experience is actually deliberately shabby in order to reinforce the narrative of the game. In an episode of their internet show Extra Credits, a show aimed at examining the peculiarities of video-game design, it is argued that "the banal gameplay is used to give [the player] a sense of the uncanny," creating intentional cognitive dissonance² – a mental state which the game itself openly mentions in its loading screens. The feeling the player feels during the shooting sections "is meant to give [the player the] psychic disconnect that the main character is experiencing" (Extra Credits). This is meant to channel the player's attention to the exploration of posttraumatic stress disorder Yager tries to present in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

Upon release of *Spec Ops: The Line*, reviewers readily pointed out how critical the game is of other games in the same genre. Chris Franklin sees the game's criticism as extended to "American military adventurism" (Errant Signal). In an episode of his online show Errant Signal, Franklin poses that certain characters and imagery are used to admonish the player about the U.S. political climate that leads to the creation and success of modern military shooters. "[*Spec Ops* is] making the implication that games which celebrate violence and moral absolutism (...) are intrinsically linked to a culture that engages in destructive military adventurism" (Ibid).

Similar point is raised by Nick Morwood, who compares the small scale operations of Delta Force and the CIA in *Spec Ops: The Line* to real life activity of the U.S. military post the September 11 attacks. He also further solidifies those aspects of the game that set it apart from other games within the genre and make it a decisively anti-war game, building upon Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. Morwood sees the brunt of the

² "Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance etc" (McLeod)

anti-war message not only in the game's disquieting graphic depictions of death, but also with the player's involvement in causing death. Like many, he views the event of chapter 8, commonly dubbed the "white phosphorus scene", as "a scene of utter abjection, inducing feelings of self-disgust in the player" (Morwood 118).

The matter of interactivity and how it translates into the events that transpire in the narrative of the game are called into question at this point. Morwood is not the only one to be critical of suddenly not having a choice, in a game that so frequently mentions there is always a choice – many reviewers have felt it a detriment to the game as well. A counter-point can be seen in Johannes Fehrle's essay *Gaming into the Heart of Darkness: Adapting Conrad/Coppola*, where Fehrle demonstrates that the lack of choice in this instance is part of the game's commentary.

Adaptations

Loose and Modernized

Apocalypse Now and *Spec Ops: The Line* stand independent of the novel that inspired them in many respects. Loose, as they are often called, these adaptations do not seek to achieve the textual fidelity tight adaptations accomplish by retaining the overall plot, characters and setting. Loose adaptations are linked to their originals by maintaining their spirit and themes, and may actually serve as more faithful adaptations this way, as thoughtless retelling of the same plot in a different format may lead to a disregard of the media's strengths and vices, and result in an inability to retain the original themes and messages.

It is not difficult to see how easily this can happen to an adaptation of a book such as *Heart of Darkness*, taking into consideration Joseph Conrad's infamous "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" (Leavis as quoted in Murfin). Transferring it directly into media highly visual or interactive would be nigh impossible. Omitting it would be counter-productive, as the novel's haziness is a significant part of its meaning. Thus, both concerned adaptations likely chose to alter the story components to present a different narrative with similar goals, but, curiously enough, also both decided to update their settings.

Apocalypse Now and *Spec Ops: The Line* are not only loose adaptations of *Heart of Darkness*, they are also modernized adaptations, with their story happening roughly at the time of their respective release dates. Like the original novel, they are tied to greater geopolitical circumstances. Imperialism is one of the running themes through all three works, but whilst in *Heart of Darkness* it is tied to the European colonial efforts, both in *Apocalypse Now* and in *Spec Ops: The Line* imperialism is presented through the lens of contemporary military activity of the United States of America abroad. More specifically, the movie's plot is moved to Indochina, whereas the game's story happens in the Middle East.

With both adaptations being ostensibly so different, it feels natural to first establish the connecting elements of the three stories. The following two chapters will consequently discuss the various analogous features in each of the adaptations, as well as the features that unequivocally tie them to the original. They will do so in order to

illustrate the minimal narrative reliance both adaptations have on the text that had been their primary inspiration, but they also hope to emphasize the key details of the original that were kept, so that these can later be used as part of the examination of the thematic interconnection of the works.

Explicit Links between the Novel and the Movie

Like *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* follows a protagonist on a boat trip upstream into parts of a jungle far beyond the jurisdiction of the institution that had sent him, to terminate the leadership of a self-appointed god of a group of local tribesmen. The surname of this deserter is the same in both works – Kurtz – but in the movie, he is given both a first name and a military rank. Both characters are brilliant men and natural leaders, highly effective in what they do for their respective organizations. The chief difference between the two is that the Kurtz of the book is not officially treated as a defector and continues to work for the company until the boat arrives. Either way, both are to be relieved because their method is deemed “unsound”. In both works, the protagonist quietly remarks he sees no method.

There is an interesting form of concord between the two main characters and narrators of both works, in that they are both captains. But Willard, the film’s protagonist, is Captain only in military rank and is restrained from full command of the ship. This can be seen as an extension of Marlow’s inability to pilot a steamer for full months because of the various initial setbacks. Both Marlow and Willard then guide the audience through the story with their narration, mulling over Kurtz and piecing together his character from a collection of reports.

Other characters in the movie have their minor inspirations in characters of the novel, but the third most strikingly similar to his predecessor is the photojournalist, who resembles the young Russian nicknamed harlequin. Both are extravagantly dressed, both admire Kurtz, both talk incessantly in streams of frantic soliloquies. The photojournalist repeats more direct quotes or slight paraphrases of his prototype’s dialogues than any other character in the movie.

Few scenes are translated directly from the book to its film adaptation. In fact, the only explicitly matching scene is the arrow attack on the boat, even if is not identical. Like in the book, a hail of harmless looking arrows showers the PBR, in response to

which the crew of the boat opens fire on the natives on the banks. One of the sailors is impaled by a spear during this skirmish. As a matter of fact, this scene is seemingly mirrored twice in the movie, as mere moments earlier (discounting the Redux cut), another character is killed by an attack from the banks, only this time the arrows are swapped for flares and the spear for regular gunfire.

In a roundabout nod to the original, the film version of Kurtz recites poetry, much like the harlequin in *Heart of Darkness* said Kurtz does, but the poem Colonel Kurtz reads is none other than “The Hollow Men” by T. S. Eliot. This modernist poem includes allusions to Joseph Conrad’s novel, including a verbatim quote from *Heart of Darkness* in one of its two epigraphs: “Mistah Kurtz – he dead.” Both incarnations of Kurtz die before the end of the narrative, and both speak the same four words before their demise: “The horror! The horror!”

Intertextuality in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Far fewer literary allusions are used in *Spec Ops: The Line*, to a point of virtual absence. The story still follows a male protagonist on a journey through a jungle, albeit a concrete one. Instead of a river, Martin Walker navigates sand-filled streets mostly on foot, although the game’s linear game design guides a player much like a stream would. Walker also keeps Marlow’s role of captain via his military rank. Although the player character doesn’t pursue a man named Kurtz, the surname of Colonel John Konrad may be seen as a combination of Kurtz’ and Joseph Conrad’s last names³. Regardless, the name remains as one of the strongest intertextual references to *Heart of Darkness*. The book’s cheery harlequin also appears in the form of the Radioman, but both the Radioman’s mannerism and appearance seem to match the photojournalist from *Apocalypse Now* more closely.

Save for a short set up at the beginning of the game, and the brief epilogue sequence, Martin Walker does not narrate the story like Marlow does, but the increasing number of hallucinations the player witnesses along with him reminds the player they are, after all, experiencing the story through Walker’s eyes. In light of the twist ending revealing Konrad’s previous death, and the violent option to remain in Dubai as its new leader, Walker can be seen as not only representing Marlow, but Kurtz as well.

³ The surname is also one of Joseph Conrad’s Polish names, as it appears without its transliteration.

Imperialism

Colonialism vs. Imperialism

It has been hinted at, in the introduction to this thesis, that the terms ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ are used completely interchangeably in the secondary literature. This poses a particular problem, because the narratives of both adaptations do not involve any colonists, but rather the U.S. military. Using the term ‘colonialism’ is therefore out of question when discussing similar themes.

Henceforth, imperialism will be understood as “the extension or imposition of power, authority, or influence” (*Merriam-Webster*) upon others. The theme of imperialism will be treated as superordinate to the theme of colonialism, which will be considered as the 19th century specific variant of imperialism.

The Running Theme

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.” That is what Joseph Conrad had written into the mouth of his character Marlow, and what has since been repeated as one of the distinguishing anti-colonialist, and, by extension, anti-imperialist sentiments of *Heart of Darkness*. Taken out of context, it may not sound very resolute. Yet, both Francis Ford Coppola and Yager Development seem to have considered this interpretation as the right way for their respective adaptations.

Notwithstanding the fact that the creators of both the movie and the video game confirmed *Heart of Darkness* as a source of inspiration, in order to call *Apocalypse Now* and *Spec Ops: The Line* adaptations of Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel, the thematic bonds have to be convincingly delineated between all three texts. Since imperialism was identified as one of the persisting themes across all three concerned works, it will thereupon become the starting point of the thematic analysis. The thesis will focus on the individual scenes, story events, character behavior, imagery and other features of both adaptations that evoke the theme, or which are partially connected to it.

Signs of Imperialism in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Before the actual story of *Spec Ops: The Line* starts, its player is confronted with a starting screen displaying a camouflaged sniper overlooking a desert landscape filled with high-rise buildings. As the player then proceeds to launch the game proper, this starting screen turns into the opening scene, as a helicopter carrying the three protagonists flies by and engages hostiles in the aerial space above the portrayed city. The starting screen is thus established as a “paratextual” (Fehrle 236) part of the in-game world and is mentioned here because of the conflicting imagery it depicts. The lone soldier is sat next to a flag of the United States of America and he is listening to a tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner”, the U.S. national anthem. Not only do these national symbols identify the soldier as an American, they are also strong indications the city is under U.S. oversight. As the player later learns, that city is Dubai.

When Delta Force arrives, it is unclear what happened in Dubai after the storms, but it becomes increasingly more obvious the lost 33rd Infantry Battalion took control of the city. The Delta Force operatives see this as a clear transgression of the unit’s liability, especially as they are confronted with a squad of American soldiers rounding up civilians. Furthermore, armed Emirati seem to be acting under the orders of the Central Intelligence Agency. What initially seemed to be a conflict solely between the local population and American soldiers turns out to be a conflict between the 33rd and the CIA.

As Walker enters Dubai, he already suspects that the 33rd is acting in violation of their orders, but assumes they do so in order to aid the evacuation efforts. His respect for his former commanding officer John Konrad blinds him to the possibility of the entire battalion acting against their mandate and he keeps shifting the blame to various factions and individuals. Only after the white phosphorus scene is he finally able to blame Konrad. The fact that Walker later hallucinates Konrad’s voice strongly suggests the guilt from accidentally killing a group of civilians at The Gate mentally broke him, but the point is about more than Walker suffering from PTSD. Like the 33rd, Delta Force is also acting against their orders and pushes further into the city at Walker’s insistence. Although Walker himself describes their mission as “locate survivors; leave the city immediately,” it is his orders that ultimately lead to the deaths of everybody in Dubai.

Apart from the obvious power struggle of the various U.S. factions over control of the city, the imperialist theme is also conveyed through a perceived Americanization of the place. United States flags are more common than any United Arab Emirates national symbols; most of the signs and inscriptions are in Latin script and written in English, including the anti-American graffiti messages. Soldiers of the U.S. military are by far the most frequent non-player characters encountered. The Radioman had also set up speakers all over the city and plays Western rock music.

Signs of Imperialism in *Apocalypse Now*

Americanization is a considerable part of the anti-imperial message in *Apocalypse Now* too. John Milius, co-writer of the original script, described how the filmmakers felt that “the [strange U.S.] culture was influencing, sort of seeping into Southeast Asia” (*Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*), and how they decided to incorporate this viewpoint into their story. Surely enough, the movie’s Vietnam seems more of a home of the Americans rather than the Vietnamese. It also feels safe, in spite of the alleged war that is supposed to be taking place there – the Nung River is void of any combat from its mouth all the way to the Do Luong Bridge, the gateway to Cambodia.

The theme of imperialism, or rather anti-imperialism, may be seen as far less pronounced in *Apocalypse Now*, mainly because of the film’s surreal rendering of the Second Indochina War. But there are enough scenes to showcase that whatever happens in Vietnam, happens by the decisions of the U.S. military officers. When the soldiers want to surf, they take Vietnamese land. It takes Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, not the fellow Vietnamese, to take pity over a dying communist soldier. But just as quickly as Kilgore offers help, he turns his back on the mortally wounded when distracted. Captain Willard similarly wastes the life of an innocent woman because his mission takes precedence.

Kurtz and the mission to assassinate him are another extension of the theme. Colonel Kurtz is depicted as a competent military leader, promoted to his rank after orchestrating and executing his own mission in Vietnam, all without previous clearance. When he does it for the second time, and puts together his own small army deep within the jungle, the U.S. officials want him dead. Willard questions the official reasons for his assassination, which state that Kurtz is charged for murder, and it is implied the

military does not want to terminate Kurtz' command for the violation of his duties, but because they fear him as their competitor.

Imperialist Intentions and Their Impact on the Narratives

If it had been mentioned at the start of this chapter that Marlow's anti-imperialist quote does not sound particularly convincing, both *Apocalypse Now* and *Spec Ops: The Line* undeniably portray the destructive imperialist actions at their worst. Of course, their imperialism does not equal colonialism. The updated and real-life inspired settings do not allow Americans to be portrayed as forthright colonists, even if they come close.

European colonists and American soldiers control and dominate the spaces they quite literally invaded, and each setting becomes worse for it. Good intentions seemingly underline all of their efforts; but these efforts are also driven by greed, selfishness, fear and madness. Nowhere is it more evident than in Kurtz' eloquent report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, where the agent talks convincingly of uplifting the primitive locals, before his frantic postscript concludes: "Exterminate all the brutes!" Colonel Walter E. Kurtz has an impeccable service record and decides to win the war for the Americans – on his own if he must. Lastly, both Captain Walker and Colonel Konrad come into Dubai to help, before they commit atrocities in the name of good. In the end, they all come into conflict with people of the same ideals.

Still, the position of *Heart of Darkness* as a decidedly anti-imperial novel has been disputed in the past. This thesis already listed Chinua Achebe as the most vocal critic to refute Conrad's condemnation of colonialism. Achebe tried to call attention to Conrad's supposedly racist depiction of African natives, mentioning Western racism as one of the primary tools of "the evil of imperial exploitation" (Achebe). In order to dispel this notion, the following two chapters will go into detail about the individual portrayals of natives in the select adaptations, before the thesis will confront them with the novel's portrayal of natives and attempt to find the unifying reason for their similarities or discrepancies. Then it will discuss the related topic of the choice of settings before moving onto the last part, where it will discuss how the common features, theme of imperialism, and portrayals of places and their locals come together to contribute toward a common message of the three works.

The Portrayals of Natives

In Apocalypse Now

Within the updated setting of the 1960s Vietnam, the movie follows the treatment of the native population almost spotlessly. Much like in *Heart of Darkness*, the Vietnamese soldiers and civilians get very little space in terms of dialogue. The only legible original line of dialogue spoken by a Vietnamese person is delivered by a South Vietnamese soldier in a brief argument with Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore. Even then, the soldier insults a dying fellow countryman, calling him a “dirty VC”, and is ultimately dismissed by the lieutenant colonel. A single village is portrayed in the movie, that being the settlement raided by a helicopter attack, while in reality, Vietnam of the Second Indochina War was a densely populated country, with rivers being purportedly “lined with settlements” (Dinh).

While Vietnamese soldiers are discussed in dialogue as the general enemy force, their film portrayal is hardly more flattering than the portrayal of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. For one, Vietnamese soldiers are never referred to by their nationality in dialogue and every U.S. soldier instead calls them Charlie, a nickname originating from the phonetic transcript of the abbreviation for Viet Cong forces and Vietnamese Communist forces in general. The Vietnamese can be seen clinging to a fence of a U.S. military camp to watch the American show, or dunked in water by a passing boat, but they never become more than background characters. The only person to speak of Vietnamese soldiers even remotely favorably is Kurtz, but even he only admires them for their unrelenting and brutal methods of fighting. In the last scenes of the movie, natives can be seen worshipping Kurtz like a god-like figure, and later bowing to Willard, recognizing him as Kurtz’ replacement.

Native civilians have a prominent role in a single scene of the movie – as the five protagonists move upstream, they run into a sampan, which the captain of the ship orders a search of, in spite of Captain Willard’s protests. The supply boat is manned by a handful of Vietnamese, one of which tries to hide a dog. Her brash move triggers the young Clean to gun down all the Vietnamese. Despite the natives having some agency in this scene, it is mostly just their death that is used to illustrate the growing paranoia, madness and tense relationship within Willard’s group.

In Spec Ops: The Line

Chronologically the first group of enemies the player and the Delta Force encounter are the Emirati Refugees. Already, the local natives have a more active part in the story than in the previously discussed works, as they communicate with the Delta Force in both English and their native language Persian. Not only that, they eventually engage in a firefight with the player's group, whether provoked by the player's actions, or by their own mistrust of Delta Force. Armed Emirati Refugees then become an enemy type for the first three chapters, before the narrative shifts, and various American factions become the primary antagonists. Dubai citizens thus shortly become background characters in this work as well.

It is mostly civilians that appear throughout the story from that point onward. One of the earliest mentions of them is a collectible indicating there are children still trapped in the city. Much later in the game, a group of Dubai's citizens can be seen salvaging water from broken water tanks, with one of them explicitly addressing Walker as the player character walks by, telling him to "get the fuck out of here," and grumble the words "fucking Americans..." once the player moves away from him. By far the most space in the story is given to the civilians in chapter 13, which sees the death of John Lugo by the hands of an angry mob, who hang him. During Walker's attempt to revive the fallen soldier, the mob does not disperse, cornering the remaining two soldiers instead. The gameplay mechanics allow for three distinct actions at this point. If the player threatens or kills some of the civilians, the rest will run away. If they do nothing, the mob eventually stones Walker to death.

Intelligence that can be gathered throughout the campaign speaks of other natives, and mainly of their activities before the events of the game's narrative. From these recordings, the player can learn the citizens of Dubai split into multiple factions after the sandstorm hit. Some Emirati side with the 33rd Infantry Battalion, while some are supported and armed by the CIA to fight the 33rd as a local insurgency. One of the intelligence items even speaks of wealthy Emirati knowing of the storm beforehand and evacuating the city, while also being responsible for muting the news of the impending catastrophe.

When put into juxtaposition with the works that have inspired *Spec Ops: The Line*, the presence of natives as an acting element is considerably more noticeable. The Emirati

Refugees being an early enemy type, the player character comes in contact with a considerable number of natives and in order to progress the story is forced to kill them. While the high number of insurgent refugees is mainly conditioned ludically, not narratively, their deaths later become a major theme of the work. The length of the medium also plays a part in making the natives appear to be involved more prominently in *Spec Ops: The Line*, as the percentage appearance does not seem much higher than either in the novel or in the film. Arguably, they do not seem to suffer from any dehumanizing portrayal, but they are not given many more character traits beyond hostile and angry either.

Natives as a Foil to the Europeans and Americans

Upon comparing the portrayal of natives in each of the works discussed in this thesis, a pattern of intentional reductionism seems to emerge. Natives are typically relegated to the roles of background and minor characters. They rarely have any names, and if they do, they are mentioned only in passing. If they are given enough agency to steer the plot, they only ever do so to develop the main characters in some way, or further flesh out one of the narrative themes. Chinua Achebe considers the depiction of Africa and its people to be set up as a foil to Europe and its citizens, and this view can then be extended to the movie and the video game as well.

Authors like Achebe and Dinh would criticize this portrayal, because they believe it leads to a great deal of depersonalization of the otherwise very real ethnicities. Both authors challenge the objective qualities of the works for this portrayal; Chinua Achebe alarmed by the uncontested popularity of what he essentially views as a racist novel, while Linh Dinh takes umbrage with Coppola's statement, that his movie "is not about Vietnam – it is Vietnam" (Coppola in *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*).

The 1975 essay and the 2001 article may be both right and miss the point. Professor Achebe successfully demonstrates all the ways in which Joseph Conrad failed at portraying Africans with any sort of relatable human characteristics. However, simplistically as it may sound, *Heart of Darkness* was never meant to be for an African reader. As Cedric Watts points out in his rebuttal to Achebe's essay, Conrad's novel was first published "in 1899, when Victoria was on the throne, when imperialistic fervour was extreme and the Boer War was soon to begin." It is in this historical context

that this subversive novel is first introduced to the readers of the British Blackwood's Magazine.

This point is not raised to disqualify anyone from reading and evaluating *Heart of Darkness* as a piece of literary art. It is raised to reintroduce the cultural environment which Conrad's novel enters. It is not unreasonable to assume that Joseph Conrad presupposes his readers to share the chauvinistic views of the era. Conrad may have found the most effective method of communicating his story of deconstructive criticism to the average gentleman of 1899 to be speaking directly to his sensibilities. In other words – if reducing the African characters to the Western idea of barbaric brutes means that these characters become a direct mirror to the wandering European, so be it.

In this interpretation of Conrad's motives, the natives of Congo truly do become dehumanized versions of themselves. It is for the purpose of the story they are emptied of personality and become pure literary tools. Whether motivated by his real-life experience with his trip to Africa or not, Conrad writes of nebulous darkness which resides in the heart of the continent, where it permeates its denizens and anyone, who would spend enough time there. *Heart of Darkness* is a work which debunks the “myth of inevitable progress (...); the myth that is necessarily morally superior to ‘savagery’; the myth that imperialism is the altruistic matter of ‘weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways’” (Watts). The Africans may be portrayed as brutes, but despite that, there is nothing about their ways that should terrify the reader. On the contrary, it is through Kurtz and to a lesser extent through Marlow that the reader may discern the perverse aspects of Western civilization.

This becomes more apparent in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. By the Americans, Vietnamese soldiers are never referred to other than as “Charlie” or “gooks”. A boat of innocent civilians is slaughtered by the group of protagonists out of recklessness – instead of helping a wounded survivor, Willard executes her in order to continue in his mission. Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore's unit raids a village with a juvenile demeanor. The natives are collateral. The actions of U.S. soldiers are horrific on their own. By maintaining focus on the Americans, Coppola makes sure the viewer can never relate to anyone else, and therefore naturally reflects on the actions of the American soldiers.

Spec Ops: The Line does not marginalize its native characters as much as *Apocalypse Now*, nor does it portray them as Conrad's stereotypes. However, the Emirati do start as

archetypes. For the so-called ‘modern military shooters’ of the time leading up to the game’s release, Middle-Easterners were often the stock enemy type. The studio Yager Development picked their setting to be similar to the settings of other games of the genre. The player is expected to find nothing out of the ordinary about fighting these enemies, before the narrative delves deeper into their back-stories. It is this sudden twist that is the game’s tool of making the player question Walker, and, by extension, themselves. The video game does not need to focus the player’s attention towards the trio of protagonists narratively, because it forces his or her perspective by its mechanics. It therefore uses the fates of the natives to solicit an emotional response.

In this view, the factual country the story takes place in becomes irrelevant for any of the three works. In spite of that, the existing locations are picked deliberately to address the particular audiences. *Heart of Darkness* picks colonized Africa, because it wants its British reader to immediately identify with the Europeans in the book. The native Africans are played straight, as savages, but unlike Kurtz’ case, there is nothing wrong with them. That’s why the reader starts questioning their own values and ideas of European society. Likewise, mere four years had passed between the end of the Vietnam War and the release of *Apocalypse Now*, and the average American viewer would automatically align their view with the U.S. soldiers. When all the horrors of the war originate with them, the viewer is denied any alternatives in terms of characters. Finally, the player of *Spec Ops: The Line* is forced to act as the U.S. soldier Martin Walker and kill the natives as archetypal enemies, before the game expands on these native characters and makes the player reflect on their very own actions.

Fictionalization of Real Places

When Patrick Brantlinger attempted to extract the anti-imperialist message of *Heart of Darkness*, he identified the subversive tendencies of the text, but conceded that “the subversion is incomplete” (Brantlinger). While this subversion most certainly is incomplete if one looks at the book as fiction rooted in the real world, this position cannot be as easily maintained when the novel is taken as forthright fiction – more specifically, if Congo and the Congolese are thought of without real-life connotations. The novel itself may not contain anything explicit to invite this reading, but in light of its two adaptations, this interpretation becomes increasingly likely.

The previous chapter hoped to prove that the minimized presence of natives in all three narratives steers the attention towards the protagonists, the nations they represent and the backgrounds they come from. However, it also touched on the partly arbitrary nature of the locations the stories take place in. While these locations cannot be entirely random due to the preconceived notions they are supposed to engage with, they are also under no obligation to portray the settings accurately and with complexity.

The Vietnam of *Apocalypse Now* is, in the words of the character Lance, a Disneyland of U.S. military war effort. The Nung River is fictional, and as such can host all the important set pieces of the script. Therefore, the central characters partake in a helicopter attack on a surfing location, encounter a Bengal tiger in a hunt for mangoes, watch a cabaret show, and dine at a French plantation, all on the banks of the same river. The craziness of these events is matched only by their implausibility. The Vietnamese presence is negligible along the entire length of the Nung River. The Americans do seem to be in a firefight with them at Do Luong Bridge, which is described as the last military outpost on the river. Not that the audience gets a chance to see the Vietnamese. Instead, Do Luong Bridge is portrayed as an anarchic spot filled with explosions going off like fireworks into the concealing night.

The setting is even more consciously fictionalized in *Spec Ops: The Line*. Although Dubai remains a place lifted from an actual geographical map, the sandstorms that had hit it seem magnified beyond anything remotely realistic. Not only were these storms able to cause massive damage to the buildings and fill the streets with dunes, they continue to loom over Dubai during the game's plot, entire six months after their initial strike. The storms are described in-game as being able to "blast paint off a car, shatter glass, tear (...) flesh and fill [ones] lungs." Despite this description, they never pose any immediate threat to the player character, even when they occur during play. The storms allow helicopters to fly around Dubai's clear sky, but apparently not beyond the city limits. A sandstorm wall surrounds Dubai and prevents outside communication.

Furthermore, except the specific setting in the largest city of the United Arab Emirates, essentially no other details of situationality (to borrow the linguistic term) appear. Even though the player character moves through hotels, restaurants and malls, the majority of these buildings do not bear any visible names and they are mentioned in dialogue only by generic, utility names such as The Nest, The Gate, or The Radio

Tower. Street signs are absent; interchange signs display only general directions. Not even the city's highest skyscraper, clearly inspired by Burj Khalifa, is ever referred to as anything but "the tallest tower".

For Walker, Dubai is turning more and more into his personal purgatory with every step he takes. He suffers so many hallucinations it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish them from his surroundings. The prime example of this is the immaculate penthouse apartment overlooking the devastated Dubai at the end of the game. Similarly, the Nung River is personal to Willard and the small squad of soldiers with him. On the rare occasions they meet another boat, the encounter results in violence (even if merely symbolic), as if the protagonist's PBR attempted to oust its competition. Conflict with allies and even nature is a recurring motif, rendering the film's Vietnam a hostile place on its very own, irrespective of the war.

In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the player is not allowed to see Dubai without the effects of the sandstorms. They enter a place twisted for the purpose of the narrative – oppressive, hopeless ruins threatening to consume everybody. *Apocalypse Now* also disconnects its Vietnam so far from reality that no spectator can take its depiction seriously. Considering this, it becomes clear that the creators of both adaptations considered the setting to be wholly ineffective when fleshed out as a real place, and instead agreed that *Heart of Darkness* works best as Guerard's proposed "dream of self-discovery" (Murfin 101). As a piece of cultural heritage, Conrad's Congo is a place vaguely familiar, a place Europeans only think they know, and it is this falsely constructed Wonderland, this product of Western hubris, which produces the mysterious darkness, the horror Kurtz whispers of in his dying breath.

Darkness as Emptiness and the Damaging Force of Imperialism

Ross C Murfin, when he sought to compile major contemporary analyses of *Heart of Darkness*, wrote a chapter briefly summarizing the critical history of the novel. In this chapter, Murfin offered snippets of Joseph Conrad's correspondence, which reveal that the author himself considered his book "to be about the immorality of whites in Africa" (Murfin 98), even if it remains ethically ambiguous and borderline nihilistic. Marlow does not return to Europe to preach about the evil ways of his fellow whites in Africa. But he does return a changed man. For he had witnessed "the horror."

The true meaning of Kurtz' last words elude us, to this day. We have our ideas, certainly. We associate the words with the primal savage urges alluded to throughout the novel, the utter foulness of Kurtz' deeds in the jungle. And it seems like an extraordinary set of circumstances to produce them. But in reality, it takes very little. Effectively, it takes literal nothing.

Hollow – that is how Marlow describes Kurtz at one point. He talks of the whispers of the wilderness speaking clearly to Kurtz, because they can resonate within his hollow core. It is the same emptiness to allow the twisted imperialist beliefs take root. Each incarnation of Kurtz is presented with a power vacuum, a seemingly lawless land to conquer and uplift. Each one does so to pursue a noble cause – whether it is to gather more ivory than any other agent, single-handedly win a war for their country, or maintain order in the aftermath of a catastrophe. In these ungoverned lands, the titular darkness hangs over the places not as a menacing power, but as a terrifying potential.

The Kurtzes and Konrads may be brilliant men, but they are still only one of many. Besides being characters, they are also symbols and embodiments of their respective cultures. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz," Marlow mentions. In *Heart of Darkness*, there are dozens like him. And they are not only the colonists – even Marlow's aunt parrots imperialist goals. If it was not Kurtz, someone else would take his place. This is evident when Willard dethrones Colonel Kurtz and becomes the new god of the Montagnard army. This is evident when Walker follows in Konrad's footsteps and causes the deaths of hundreds.

Marlow does not become the new Kurtz. In his aloof and ironic approach, he is able to remain a mere witness. But he realizes that the hollow dark core is within him, as it is in everybody. Willard too is far too passive a man to remain in Kurtz' position. Still, he recognizes there is no difference between his superiors and Kurtz. He also knows what it is like to decide someone's life – out there, where no one can stop him. Only Walker takes the initiative. Only Walker lies to himself that what he does is driven by justice, until he finds out Konrad has been his personal scapegoat.

However, the journey is not only Marlow's. Joseph Conrad wants his readers to take the trip with him. What Thomas Moser had suggested, "that Marlow in the jungle is like the reader in the text" (Murfin 102), is re-created in both adaptations by granting their audiences only one perspective, and by updating their setting to approximate that perspective to that of the target recipient. They go on to show that the dark, self-justified ideals of imperialism did not die out with the end of colonialism, and are instead still present in young soldiers who turn Vietnam into a "rock'n'roll war" (Milius in *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*), they are still present in the "American military adventurism" (Errant Signal). Both Coppola and Yager further make sure to involve the viewers and players directly, either by framing their grandiose scenes "so as to excite the viewer viscerally" (Tomasulo 149), or having the player control the protagonist and therefore being at least symbolically responsible for his actions.

In civilization, those hollow cores of people are not empty. They are filled with preconceived notions. And when these notions involve real, but faraway places, they resonate all that louder. As long as the locals of these places remain the savages of our colonial literature, the Charlie of our war movies, the generic Arab soldiers of our video games, this chauvinism will ring true. The audience will happily believe the exotic stories of primeval dark corners of the world, where righteous men lead virtuous battles.

The issue is that these arrogant notions do not harm only the objects of one's latent contempt – they become a self-destructive maddening force. Once let loose, in the illusory hollow spaces, they consume a person, like they consume the embodiments of Kurtz, and, in the adaptations, the protagonist's allies alike. *Apocalypse Now* and *Spec Ops: The Line* expand on the idea of the fight with oneself, already underlying *Heart of Darkness*, through a fight with an enemy that is the same as oneself. Apart from reintroducing the story to contemporary audiences, the adaptations point out that the

darkness of the Earth did not disappear when the last dark places on the map were filled in. The story of *Heart of Darkness*, whatever format it may be in, does not preach about our evil ways, but it does let us witness “the horror.”

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, a goal was set to identify those moral quandaries of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness* that were kept when the story was transferred into two adaptations of said novel – the movie *Apocalypse Now* and the video game *Spec Ops: The Line*. These adaptations were identified as the most significant (at least within their respective formats) because of the praise and attention they have received in the past. Because these adaptations are so different in terms of their settings and plot points, the thesis sought to achieve its objective by comparing the treatment of the same themes across the three works.

The premise was that *Heart of Darkness* presents its ethical issues through its theme of imperialism, among other, supporting themes. The hypothesis was that by examining the implementation of these themes in the select adaptations, the uniting message could be extracted. Along with its primary aim, the thesis also hoped to determine the reasons for shifting the narrative to contemporary contexts.

The theoretical basis of the thesis is formed partly on the three concerned works and the details of their creator's biographies, partly (and more importantly) on the critical background of each text. The focus is on the various analytical studies concerned with the themes of the works, the motifs of the works, and strategies used to convey both within the works. Since *Heart of Darkness* is the foundational text of the thesis, most studies presented are related to it. The most thoroughly covered is Chinua Achebe's essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*, as it represents a turning point in critical analysis of Conrad's novel and contains an important discussion relating to the theme of imperialism.

Both *Apocalypse Now* and *Spec Ops: The Line* eventually achieved a nearly universal acclaim, despite the issues they must have faced when adapting a novel such as Conrad's. In combination with the small number of explicit aspects to have gotten carried over to the two adaptations, it prompts a discussion of their faithfulness to the original. It is clear that the fidelity must be mostly thematic.

Indeed, the key theme of imperialism has a distinct presence in *Spec Ops: The Line*, where the U.S. military intervention leads not only to total American control of Dubai, it also results in a conflict of three American factions. The local insurgents present in

the narrative become mere extension of one of the factions. Further supporting the theme of imperialism, the city is portrayed under considerable effects of Americanization. This is something the game shares with the movie – the parts of Vietnam displayed in the film are chock-full of Western culture. The Vietnamese communist armies are a passive force in *Apocalypse Now*, leaving the Americans to decide everything about the war.

This rolls into the unflattering portrayal of natives in each adaptation. In fact, the portrayals seem to share the same problems that were once outlined by Chinua Achebe's essay about *Heart of Darkness*. However, the flat and patronizing portrayal was kept for a narrative reason. By minimizing the presence of the natives, in tandem with depicting them in stereotypical or archetypical manner, all three works streamline the audience to unwittingly identify with the Westerners. This is achieved in combination with the contemporary settings, and the assumption that the audiences are Westerners themselves.

The updated settings are likewise made purposefully unrealistic in order to create a space that is technically empty and lawless. This, in turn, leads to the immoral implementation of imperialistic ideas, as all involved characters who are capable of exerting their will share these ideas. Because each text already constructs its story to involve its audience, the readers, watchers and players are all, at least partially, incriminated. The adaptations therefore serve as reminders that the imperialist tendencies did not manifest only by colonialism in Conrad's time, but that they persist in Western civilization at large, as evidenced by the meddling military actions abroad.

The story of *Heart of Darkness*, whether told by Conrad or retold by Coppola or Yager, is not necessarily a story of anti-imperialism, although the theme of imperialism is an important part of its message. Instead, *Heart of Darkness* is an important reflection of the self-destructive force of the ideals of civilization when these ideals are no longer bound by their own rules.

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