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An Analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* as an Adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has elicited numerous responses over the course of the 20th century. One of the most famous of these is *Apocalypse Now.* In 2012, echoing Coppola's adaptation, Yager Development made *Spec Ops: The Line.* This thesis argues that this game, published by 2K Games, is a strong, effective adaptation of Conrad's novella. Furthermore, the game makes the themes of *Heart of Darkness* (such as masculine exclusivity and the excesses of imperialism) into something personal and accusatory, by making the player complicit in a process of degeneration similar to that of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now.*

Acknowledgements

"I was watching from the point of view of the observer, not realizing that I was on the journey too. Now I am at a place, I don't know quite how I got there. It feels strange and foreign. I can't go back to the way it was."
—Eleanor Coppola on the filming of *Apocalypse Now*

"Do you feel like a hero yet?"
—Col. John Konrad, *Spec Ops: The Line*

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (*HoD*) has often been billed by critics as a timeless work and a considerable stepping stone in the development of colonial and post-colonial literature. Since the novella was published in 1899, it has enjoyed an extremely rich reception, both critical and popular, and has been praised for its take on the travelogue, and, albeit with hindsight, for its pioneering forays into what would be called modernism. From the late 1970s onwards, it was subjected to more politically oriented interpretations and criticisms. Some of this will be discussed in greater detail over the following pages, but this thesis is mainly concerned with the relationship between Conrad's novella and a recent product of popular culture, namely the video game *Spec Ops: The Line,* which was developed in Germany by Yager Development and published by 2K Games in 2012. A brief examination of *The Line* (*TL*) reveals the following: it retains a strong relationship to Conrad's work, with a narrative and a game-design philosophy that is noteworthy for the ethical difficulties it presents for the player. The medium of *TL* raises questions as to the experiential effects achieved by playing the game, contrasted with those of reading the novella. All of this, naturally, within the rather restricted format of a 30-point thesis.

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this thesis is to analyse *TL* as an adaptation of *HoD.* This will be done in a process that discusses the novella's academic status and summarizes some its most common interpretations, and I will do the same for the game. The thesis will examine the politics of both novella and game as well as their ethical dimensions. Fundamentally, the underlying questions are: what changes when the story of a person's fall into madness and savagery in a fictionalized version of the Belgian-controlled Congo Free State becomes a video game action narrative set in a post-apocalyptic Dubai? How does the one experience differ from the other? How can they be interpreted? What are their primary effects? While unconcerned with fidelity debates, I hold that the themes of *HoD,* those of inhumanity and irreconcilable otherness, are retained by the game, and become intensely personal and accusatory. In this way, *TL* is remarkable for how it uses some of the thematics and symbolism of *HoD* in adapting them to an interactive medium. It is also noteworthy for how it re-contextualizes these themes into, amongst other things, a depiction of post-traumatic stress disorder, a critique of Western neo-colonialism, masculinity, the excesses of the video game industry, and the idea of harmless virtual killing.[1] As with *HoD, TL* also has its problems that can be seen to have an adverse effect on its effectiveness in highlighting ethical issues.

Structurally, the thesis is divided into two parts. The first, consisting of two subsections,

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[1]   I am indebted to Brendan Keogh's *Killing is Harmless* (2012) for this idea.

concerns itself chiefly with *HoD*. The first subsection deals with prior criticism of the novella and briefly discusses its thematics. The second focuses on the political aspects of both the novella and the game, in terms of their treatment of the Other and gender. There are many similarities here that deserve attention. The second part consists of three subsections. The first subsection discusses the justification for placing emphasis on *TL* as a "literary", narrative game. The aim here is also to familiarize the reader with certain aspects of game theory relevant to *TL* and the debates surrounding it. The second explores the game as an adaptation of *HoD*. The third and final subsection is a more general exploration of the ethics of both works and how they overlap or differ from one another, including a discussion on self-reflexivity and the perceived responsibilities of the reader/player in *HoD* and *TL*. It should be noted that while the thesis is divided into two parts, each discussing text and game respectively, both are often discussed interchangeably in each subsection, depending on the topic, and the way in which both works overlap in regards to that topic.

Motivation

As I began to engage closely with *TL*, I found it to be a remarkable adaptation of Conrad's story, as the experience of playing is enriched by the ethically challenging narrative. The player is held accountable for brutalities in *TL* that in *HoD* are a result of the actions of others. In Conrad's novella, these horrors are quite distant from the reader in historical, geographical, and narrative terms; not so in *TL*. This nearness is partly why I have chosen to write this thesis, another is to show that we can identify a literary quality in *TL* that is otherwise generally absent from the interactive medium.[2] As an interactive experience, *The Line* is, to the best of my knowledge, quite unique. It is a new way of conveying what Conrad did a century ago. This makes it a significant work that I believe is worthy of attention.

Methodology

The underlying methodology of the thesis is a close analysis of the textual and narrative dimensions of both texts. As there are two primary sources being compared, this analysis is structured in a "compare and contrast" fashion. In theoretical terms I draw on several schools and approaches, as the material inevitably demands a multidisciplinary endeavour. From literary theory, there is a debt owed to reader-response, adaptation, and terminology from the field of narratology.[3] Regarding the

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[2]   This is not to be understood as a statement that games can only be 'good' or 'profound' if they have a literary dimension, but that *TL* contains one such literary dimension that happens to make it particularly interesting in the context of *HoD*.

[3]   This is taken from Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004), Linda

interactive medium, I have aligned myself primarily but not exclusively with the camp of narratology[4] in tackling the narrative aspects of *TL*, and I employ some basic game design principles and philosophy in the relevant subsection. The approach that is most dominant in this thesis regarding the game is one that assumes that *TL* ought to be analysed for its inherent narrative experience, treating it as a companion text to *HoD*.

Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), and generally from Gerard Genette's observations on the structure of narrative.

[4]   Here from Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations* (2006), not to be confused with literary narratology. Narratology in the terms of video game studies expresses itself as an approach towards studying games from a literary perspective, that is, discussing them in terms of their narrative aspects in a general sense, rather than focusing on their formal constituent elements (game rules, mechanics, software programming and so on). This is examined more closely in Part 2.

Part 1: *Heart of Darkness*

Subsection 1: Criticism of *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness is a work critics have been discussing, and are most likely to continue to discuss, for generations. Owing to the subjective, modernist qualities of its narrative, criticism of the work continues to be carried out in all manners of ways and from many important perspectives. Certain canonical interpretations have been established. One holds that it is a modernist masterpiece, another, often overlapping with the first, that it is anti-, if not post-colonial. The former is an uncontroversial assertion, but the latter deserves more attentive scrutiny, as has been offered by critics such as Chinua Achebe. That said, most critics agree that on a basic level the novella serves as an attempted critique of the "civilizing mission" of European imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[5]

The biographical context of *HoD* offers some insight. In *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad,* Andrea White in "Conrad and Imperialism" traces the origins of at least a part of Joseph Conrad's attitude towards imperialism, as many Conradians do, to his own experiences as a youth of the Polish upper class in a time of aggressive Russian expansion into Poland (Stape, 181). She and Owen Knowles (7) also make note of Conrad's early enthusiasm for and willingness to partake in the colonial adventure taking place in Africa. This would result in the disastrous 1890 expedition up the Congo river, an experience that appears to have made Conrad reconsider his commitment to the dominant narrative of European ventures in Africa being a force for good. Andrea White, Cedric Watts, and many other critics mention the awkward situation Conrad was in. He was an avid anglophile, and, at the same time, a victim of imperialism. The idea is that this resulted in a conflicting dual identity in the author, that of an Englishman, partaking in imperial glory, and that of a Pole, himself and his family being victims of tsarist persecution. In "Conrad's Influence," Gene M. Moore described the narrative voice of his works as coming from "a condition of radical and multiple otherness" (238), further suggesting that Conrad was not quite at home in either Polish, English, or his own times, being both on the periphery of empire, and at the heart of it. This had presumably awarded him a unique perspective on imperialism, enhancing the thematic quality of his texts on the subject.

Thematics

What follows is a brief overview of some critical responses to Conrad's novella. The first, from

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[5]   The period in which, amongst other things, Africa was parcelled out by several competing colonial powers.

Cedric Watts, comes from his article "Heart of Darkness". In it, he makes the claim that the novella thematically anticipated many of the human disasters of the twentieth century (Stape, 50). Along such lines, Conrad is often viewed today as a pioneering, forward-oriented modernist author. As with many such innovative works, his has their roots in the classics, Virgil and Dante among them (Lothe, 174-6), as well as in the more prosaic travel literature of the period. While *HoD* is not uncontroversial, it has certainly lodged itself in the history of literature and public imagination as one of the great classics of the 20th century, and it returns to us constantly in the form of ever new representations, covert and overt, in popular culture.

While it is certainly a stretch to insist that the novella is prophetic, the novella is replete with the kind of metaphor, symbolism, and tone that would become commonplace decades after publication. Dichotomies weigh heavily on the novel's thematics, such as the contrast between light and dark, Europe and Africa, present and primordial past, civilization and savagery, here and there, us and them, and Same and Other. The impression is that there is an attempt to state that the difference between one and the other is less than it seems. The once savage and "dark" Britain is now the heart of civilization as Marlow's contemporaries would define it, Kurtz fell from the grace afforded him by his white skin into brutality and madness because of his idealism, Marlow identifies – grudgingly, one imagines – with the Africans, and so on. Paradoxes abound, and Watts summarizes them in this way:

> Civilization can be barbaric. It is both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement to be vigilantly guarded.
>
> Society saves us from corruption, yet society is corrupt.
>
> Imperialism may be redeemed by 'an idea at the back of it', but imperialism, irredeemably, is 'robbery with violence'.
>
> Brotherhood transcends racial differences, but 'we live, as we dream – alone'.
>
> The truth should be communicated, but women should be denied it. Communication of the essential is impossible.
>
> Morality is a sham. Without it, human beings become sham humans.
>
> Awareness is better than unawareness. We may become aware that it is better to be unaware, and we may even learn that ignorance is bliss. (1996, 47)

As can be seen, the defining boundaries between Same and Other are clearly delineated in both terms of race and gender, which in the past half-century has motivated a wide range of political criticisms. Proto-egalitarian and non-interventionalist sentiments can be observed in the novella,

however. It states that whiteness and a wealth of good intentions are no guarantees against a descent into darkness. Whether or not Conrad's employment of these themes coalesce into a coherent critique of imperialism is the crucial point of contention.

Spatial and temporal dynamics are thematically central in *HoD*. Its story is related to us through a frame first set by a narrator that is obliviously patriotic: "The seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (2006, 5). It is being told on a boat on the Thames estuary, which is in the heartland of imperialism in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Marlowe's dour narrative voice then takes over, flipping the imagery from gilded bombast into something relatively prosaic and gritty as it relates his past experiences in Africa. It an ironic device, one of many in the novella. It underlines and makes visible the unthinkingly patriotic tone of the unnamed frame narrator. Illusions of patriotic grandeur are dispelled as the narrative unfolds, but the story is shared within an exclusively homogeneous context. Marlowe's audience are all men, presumably of similar class status, and white (part of a constellation of issues that makes a political reading of *HoD* troublesome for today's readers, and makes it vulnerable to a wide range of criticism).

In Marlow's story, the journey from river station to river station affirms his strength of character. Kurtz, held up by his peers as a virtuous and progress-oriented person, is revealed as a degenerate. Kurtz's descent into savagery can be explained by his impurity of purpose. Louis K. Greiff's article "Soldier, Sailor, Surfer Chef: Conrad's Ethics and the Margins of Apocalypse Now" (1992) explores the portrayal of the ethical and moral dimensions of the main characters, and how they differ from one another in the novella and *Apocalypse Now* (*AN*). In *HoD,* what makes Marlow a virtuous character, and a surviving one at the tale's end according to Greiff, is his single-minded adherence to and dedication to his profession, seamanship. By contrast, Kurtz's haphazard and vague range of talents and professions is chaotic and unfocused. This is a major contributing factor to his "hollowness" and eventual destruction:

> to this day I am unable to say what was Kurtz's profession, whether he ever had any—which was the greatest of his talents. I had taken him for a painter who wrote for the papers, or else for a journalist who could paint—but even the cousin […] could not tell me what he had been—exactly. (2006, 71-72)

The protagonist's purity of purpose does not survive in the novella's later adaptations. Both Willard of *AN* and Martin Walker of *TL* are unfocused, confused or misdirected in some way, each having more Kurtz in them than Marlow. In the case of *The Line,* Walker (and by extension, the player) very much *is* Kurtz.

Heart of Darkness and Popular Culture

Despite *HoD's* prevalence as a piece of reference material in popular culture, it has to date only one direct film adaptation, *Heart of Darkness*, directed by Nicolas Roeg in 1993. On the other hand, one can hardly mention *HoD* and adaptations in the same breath without invoking Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, a great case study of how adaptations may succeed – or fail – to capture the richness of the source material. Elaine Showalter, author of *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the* Fin de Siècle (1992), constructs a commentary on *AN*'s reception among Conrad scholars that, while acerbic, is entertaining:

> Conrad specialists were both reluctant to give over the authority of their sacred work to a mere filmmaker and obtuse about the meaning of both film process and a Vietnam experience that might not be representable through modernist techniques. It was a spectacular display of academic snobbery. (1992, 99)

In an issue of *Conradiana*,[6] scholars denounced it as "fraudulent and glib" and "altogether confusing." Again, Showalter:

> Defending their Conrad against Coppola, the Hollywood hack who had previously made *The Godfather,* the academics compared the film to Disneyland, a "Horrorland" of wretched excess in contrast to Conrad's elegant modernist "restraint." (Ibid.)

If nothing else, this proves that *HoD* was to be an especially difficult work to adapt to a visual medium. Orson Welles made an unsuccessful attempt, and Coppola's adaptation was the result of a gruelling effort – one that evidently did not see much love from some of Conrad's acolytes.

However, while the novella's literary quirks, its ambiguities, the framing of the narrative, character complexities, and especially the emphasis on Marlow's inner voice make it difficult to transpose into another medium without fundamental alterations, there are a wealth of pop-cultural responses and references. Most often, isolated themes and motifs from the work are addressed. The perils of losing one's humanity by trying to impose a particular standard of humanity upon others is a popular, recurring motif, and what occurs when human beings are divorced from the controls of society is another – as explored in other celebrated literary works such as *Lord of the Flies*. Incidentally, Linda J. Dryden notes that Golding had Conrad partly in mind while writing *Flies* (Armstrong, 502-3).

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[6] *Conradiana: A Journal of Joseph Conrad Studies,* Vol. 13, 1981. The following quotes are from pages 37 and 41, respectively.

Subsection 2: The Politics of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Line*

Some of the innumerable responses to Conrad's novella are very passionate. Chinua Achebe's assault on *Heart of Darkness*'s worth as part of the literary canon concerning Africa and Postcolonial literature is the most famous of these. Controversially, Achebe denounces Conrad as a racist. His "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" (Armstrong, 336) states that Conrad is guilty of using Africa merely as a backdrop, a prop, to stage the story of a white man's mental degeneration (344). Africa becomes "a foil to Europe […] a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (337). Achebe describes *HoD* as "an offensive and deplorable book" written by "a talented, tormented man" (345). In short, Achebe finds Conrad's critique of imperialism and his race politics seriously wanting.

Achebe's essay is valuable for many reasons, one of which is that it illustrates that *HoD* is far from being an uncontroversial work. There is still room for similar debates today, as *HoD* continues to be adapted in increasingly different forms, each of them inheriting some troublesome aspect or other from their ancestor. I will offer an overview of some of this controversy, and also mention how these issues relate to those of *Spec Ops: The Line.* But before that, there is a paragraph in the novella that I feel can be read as an anticipation of, and an attempt to frame, the scrutiny and criticism it would receive following its publication:

> But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (5)

The "spectral illumination of moonshine" is the scrutiny of critics, the "meaning of the episode" is in the "haze" and the "misty halos", who are made clear and concrete, "visible", through debate and discussion. It is a rather poignant passage in a work that has inspired a considerable amount of controversy.

Marlow makes few value judgements on what he sees in the novella, and while he is horrified by the depravity he observes in the Congo, there are no attempts to construct an alternative. Except for in a few cases (in one offering a starving black man a biscuit, and in another, sounding off a ship's horn to scare away a crowd of Congolese to avoid them being massacred), Marlow is staunchly non-interventionist. Like the Magistrate in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians,* Marlow often refers to the fact that the natives are *essentially* human, not enemies,

criminals, or rebels: "by all the stars these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you" (16). They are essentially human, but not fully so, as implied from the repeated references to their bestial nature.

Unlike the European characters the indigenous people are given no agency. The racist vocabulary of the early 20th century is used liberally. There might be some sympathy there, but the humanity Marlow shares with the Congolese is only through a "distant kinship" (51). Marlow distances himself from the "wild and passionate uproar" (36) that in an invasive sense must be made a claim on to be felt, as when the helmsman affixes Marlow with his dying gaze, where there is a sense of annexation, of a forced seizure of the brotherhood of humanity shared between them.

Some of the most dehumanizing rhetoric, for instance "you know with them it's hard to tell [their age]" (17) may be ironic, as it is reflected onto whites just before; "seeing a white man on the path [the black taskmaster] hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity […] white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be" (16) does something to signal that Conrad is playing with the racist tropes, perhaps in an attempt to ridicule them. But as with the matter of colonialism and its civilizing mission, Marlow may despise the status quo, but they offer no alternatives. And ironic bigotry, read with the eyes of a bigot, is still bigotry – the parody is ineffective if it is not understood by those it parodies. Admittedly, demanding that Conrad should have reached into the future for a sanitized vocabulary to use in his novella is unreasonable. He did, after all, live within a totalizing hegemony where there was little room for alternate perspectives.

With the acknowledgement that England prior to Roman occupation was also "one of the dark places of the earth" (5), Marlow opens a door to some self-reflection. But the statement is part of an appeal to the civilizing mission, as it is the Romans Marlow considers responsible for bringing civilization to England. And, of course, the Europeans in Africa (a perpetually dark place in the western imagination) are comparable to the Romans in this regard, according to him. The connotations, while clearly part of an attempt to construct ironic commentary,[7] are unfortunate. This and the rest makes the attempts at ridiculing or satirizing the European ideological position in regards to race and imperialism seem ineffective in the original purpose: to undermine them. In the middle of all this, no dialogue is established between Marlow and the Other,[8] who remains distant and faintly menacing throughout the novella.

The above is a serious counterargument to the assertion that the novella is not racist. But

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[7] Students of Roman Britain in Conrad's time would perhaps be aware of the brutalities committed by the Roman conquerors that is to have driven Boudica and the Iceni to revolt. Read that way, the ironic, unsympathetic parallel between the Europeans in Africa and the Romans in Britain may become even more clear to a contemporary readership.

[8] I wish to clarify my use of the term "Other" in the thesis. It is a reference to a group or class of people that in a general sense is made "not us" through how they are presented in narratives. A synonymous term might be "out-group". The suffering of the Other is made distant from the Same, because they are not fully human. Thus, the ignorance of their suffering, or the infliction thereof, is made easier, and in some cases a source of entertainment.

whether or not it is racist or sexist or containing any other expression of prejudice or oppression does not mean that the novella loses its worth. The novella is tremendously important, not because it spells out how colonialism or racism is undesirable, but because it provokes us into engaging with these concepts ourselves. By employing ambiguity and ambivalence concerning these issues, succeeding generations are allowed to formulate their own opinions on the work's politics. The distasteful and problematic aspects of the novella must still be discussed, as passionately as is felt necessary by individual critics, but it does not mean that the novella should be consigned to obscurity because it is not perfectly ideologically correct.

Achebe's article presents Conrad as a gifted author who was tragically ignorant of his own racism, creating a novella in which full humanity is largely denied to the Congolese. This is done by a Westerner who is entirely preoccupied with relating a drama between two white men. Like Achebe said, Africa becomes a kind of caricatured backdrop to this story, and when the indigenous peoples are discussed, it is often to highlight their closeness to a menacing, oppressive darkness, themselves being black and thus marked in a very bodily way by that darkness. Furthermore, Achebe comments on Conrad's tendency to repeat "black" and "darkness" to a high degree. The references to blackness of skin and inner darkness occur at a frequency reaching beyond that of merely establishing symbols, and into what for Achebe labels a troubling obsession. In essence, the Congolese are reduced to clever literary metaphors. Dissenting voices to Achebe's charges are prevalent, predictably amongst the old guard of Conradiana, but also amongst writers who, like Achebe, are from the African continent. Andrea White brings up Es'kia Mphahlele who is to have said about Conrad that he was one amongst very few "outstanding white novelists who portray competently characters belonging to cultural groups outside their own" (Stape, 179). White makes the case that

> although Marlow uses the racist language of his day, he is more alive than his listeners –
> or readers, presumably – to such an invasion's absurd outrageousness, [referring to
> Marlow's reversal of colonialism, in which Africans lord over Europeans] one
> 'naturalized' by the engravings in daily illustrated newspapers of the inevitable string of
> black carriers accompanying white 'civilizers' through swamps and along jungle paths in
> 'darkest Africa'. (191)

Whether or not *HoD* is a valuable if flawed effort by a white man to understand and to codify this understanding of colonialism as a primarily negative phase of modern history, or a work fundamentally broken by its inability to present Africans as other than living relics of man's supposed prehistory, is a question of perspective. One such perspective, held by Watts, Mphahlele, Showalter, and others, assumes that *HoD* must be given credit for its negative framing of colonialism as exploitative and a tool of oppression, and that the novella's most racist excesses are

unfortunate, but not fundamentally capable of corrupting *HoD* as a critique of colonialism. Another perspective, that of Achebe, Torgovnick, and Carey-Webb, holds that Conrad utilizes just the same kind of derogatory tropes in depicting Africans as the worst of that time's bigoted, hallucinatory literature, which seriously undermines its message.

The echoes of the sordid pseudo-anthropology that dominated the fields of studies on Africa from before Conrad's time up until fairly recently are still present in how the West is contrasted with Africa today. Consider the treatment of the case of Tjostolv Moland and Joshua French in the Norwegian media. A discussion of this is featured in "Heart of Darkness Reinvented? A Tale of Ex-Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (Bangstad & Bertelsen, 2010). With this in mind, the use of the DRC in the popular imagination (and what is implied by that, Africa as a whole) as "a space without a place" (8) and with all the implied imagery of frenzied barbarism it brings, still has the power to conjure up the spectre of African savagery in the Norwegian (and by association, the Western) mind just as well as *HoD* once did. Considering that the language and imagery of Conrad's novella is similar in form if perhaps not in purpose to the colonialist discourse of its time, the longevity and power of the aforementioned language and imagery may serve to reinforce prevailing attitudes and cultural narratives about Africa even as the novella challenges us to question the very same.However, it is, as noted above, not only due to its political aspects that *HoD* can be celebrated. Showalter notes that while she believes it is a "protest against Leopold's exploitation of the Congolese", it is also noteworthy for its "eloquent pessimism, psychological complexity, and symbolic style" that has made "his [Conrad's] story the most enduring monument of *fin-de-siècle* disillusionment." (1992, 95)

A further moderating voice in this debate can be found in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). Here, Said's analysis of Conrad can be summarized as essentially praising Conrad for criticising imperialism and trying to bring its worst excesses to light, while simultaneously criticising his inability to suggest a world not dominated by imperial, colonialist powers. This is due to Eurocentric thought, which posited Europe as the pinnacle of human progress, and the yardstick to which other societies and cultures must compare themselves. Said argues that, for Conrad, imagining a world in which there was no empire, or a world containing alternatives to European rule, was impossible. It may have been a system he resented deeply, but: "As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them." (1994, 34)

Despite these shortcomings, the novella is presented as powerful and effective *because* it is a work of essentially imperialist, colonialist fiction (26), and from this position, the ambivalence and ambiguity that defines *HoD* bespeaks an author who was practically tearing the narrative apart in order to express what was, to him, inexpressible. At the very least, Conrad attempted to refer to a

world outside the imperialist world-view, and did so in a manner that assaulted several European assumptions about itself and its role in the affairs of other nations. Despite being complicit in using language that could function as a legitimisation of imperialism, the novella makes serious attempts to deconstruct and demolish the core fiction that was used to justify the excesses of colonial exploitation: that it was for the good of the colonized. As would later be expressed in an arguably more palatable fashion by Coetzee, the idea that empire destroys even the imperialist is present in *HoD*.

Gender in *Heart of Darkness*

Another aspect of what makes *HoD* so vigorously debated is its depiction of female characters. Two 1990 essays comment on this. The first is "Primitivism and the African Woman in Heart of Darkness" by Marianna Torgovnick, the second is Jeremy Hawthorn's "The Women of *Heart of Darkness*." Three central characters are identified: Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's fiancée (also referred to as the Intended) and what is often read as Kurtz's indigenous mistress, the African Woman. Firstly, Marlow's aunt is the character who helps granting Marlow an audience with his future employer, who takes him on as a steamship captain and sends him to Africa. Marlow's first characterisation of her reads as follows:

> I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job! Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration and also a man who has lots of influence with,' etc. etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy. (9)

The same aunt is mentioned as having a fierce adoration of Marlow, considering him "somewhat like a lower sort of apostle" (12) and a potential bringer of civilisation to "those ignorant millions" of the African continent, and as someone who has let public discourse as to the beneficial nature of colonial adventurism to the colonised get the better of her: "in the rush of all that humbug [she] got carried off her feet." What emerges from this characterisation is the sense of a sheltered, idealistic and passionate individual – warm, but naïve, who considers Marlow's impending journey into "the darkness" as something like a fun excursion. Conrad's anglophile tendencies may be divined in this famous scene. In the company office, Marlow remarks that "There was a vast amount of red [on the map]—good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there" (10). The red is, naturally, those territories under British control.

The implication being that only the British colonies are above reproach. It may be an earnest statement, or a Swiftian, ironic jab at the selectively anti-colonialist notion that England was the only truly moral colonial power. As to that point, Allen Carey-Webb[9] provides an objection:

> Despite their critique of colonial rapacity, in confrontation with "the horror" there is a willing blindness, a capitalist devotion to mechanical work that takes the place of any critical analysis. While *Heart of Darkness* and *Tarzan* oppose the brutalities of Belgian colonialism, both seem to accept and perhaps even admire the more "restrained" and "effective" British version. (1992/93, 128)

What Hawthorn identifies in the aunt and the Intended is the Victorian patriarchal practice of shutting women out of the male sphere, which is to have reigned everywhere but the home. Research from scholars such as Francoise Basch[10] suggests a more nuanced reality. Puritanism may have been the ideal for the bourgeois/aristocratic woman, but the reality for the rest of the population was full of working women and prostitutes experiencing fewer restrictions than otherwise assumed. In the words of Florence Boos, "idealization and censorship distort sexual reality" (1976, 1). But these gender divisions are visible In *HoD*. Its gender politics result in the sheltered, idealistic, naive, and devoted figures of the aunt and Intended. The Intended, especially through her extreme isolation and death-like stasis, is seen by Hawthorn as a sort of deathly figure. The following quote is elegant proof of this notion:

> The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus. A high door opened—closed. I rose. She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. (73)

This describes a ghost in an environment oppressed by tombs and headstones, not a living character. Victorian standards of sexuality were supposedly highly puritan, and the Intended plays handily into the revisionist characterisation of the highly gendered society at that time. But Conrad was describing more than his vision of the oppressed, non-sexual women in his society, pining for the nubile mistresses of the African interior – he was setting up another clever metaphor, a contrast, which becomes clear when comparing the Intended with the African Woman, the third female character of note in the novella. Hawthorn holds that she simply serves as the counterpoint to the Intended, as a living, vibrant, and sexual being compared to the hopelessly sterile Intended. He adds that "what the novella gives us is not what Conrad the man thought about women, but Conrad's artistic insight into the way in which gender divisions enter into the duplicities of imperialism"

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9   In " 'Heart of Darkness, Tarzan', and the 'Third World': Canons and Encounters in World Literature."
10   A notable work from this author in regards to the discussion of the revisionist version of Victorian gender relations is *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel*, published in 1974.

(414).

It is easy to accept Hawthorn's assertion that "the ideological thrust" can only be uncovered through the use of readily apparent, polar dichotomies in a work otherwise dominated by vagueness and ambiguity. As a stylistic choice, it makes sense to draw attention to core themes by making them stand out, free of obfuscation in the work. However, I am not entirely convinced that "Conrad's artistic insight" can be adequately used as a shield against accusations of sexism or outright misogyny. Watts holds that Conrad was an author in the same vein as Jonathan Swift and Voltaire, the implication being that the satirical or darkly ironical edge of *Gulliver's Travels* and *HoD* is enough to excuse them from such accusations (Stape, 47). But as intimated earlier, someone can purport to criticise something, yet still be complicit in discrimination.

Conrad is viewed as a primarily masculine writer by Torgovnick and Hawthorn, a writer of exclusively male-oriented fictions. Perhaps the same dynamics of blindness or incapability of imagining an alternative to imperial hegemony that Said discussed can be extended to Conrad's depiction of women in *HoD* – as either anti-sexual, pure, spiritual beings or unrestrained, savagely passionate, sexual creatures, in a discourse dominated by what Hawthorn calls a distinction between feminine ideal and masculine action (410). In that way, Marlow's statement that "They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it" (48) gains meaning not only as an expression of strict gender divisions, but also of the idea that women are so naïve and hopelessly ignorant of "the real world" that any structure or system they build would fall apart as soon as they met with reality. It can certainly be argued that dynamics of gender in Conrad's time were informed by a similar ideological framework as the imperialist world-view.

As for a critique of Conrad's use of his female characters as dichotomous symbols, Torgovnick finds a distinction between pure spirit in the Intended and pure body in the African Woman. Torgovnick expresses some confusion as to why they can't be both spirit *and* body, fully realised persons. Even the black steam engine fireman that looked like a dog in a "parody of breeches and a feather hat" (36) is a character of some (patronizing) complexity on the surface. This may lead to the same sort of alienation from the text that Achebe felt. Showalter (1992) paraphrases a statement by Nina Pelikan Straus in a 1987 article:[11] "The peculiar density and inaccessibility of *Heart of Darkness* may be the result of its extremely masculine historical referentiality, its insistence on a male circle of readers" (96). And just like Achebe, Torgovnick accuses Conrad of using Africa and the "primitive" as a scene upon which to explore the foibles of Western society: "the primitive responds to Western needs, becoming the faithful or distorted mirror of the Western self" (401). By not being Europe, Africa helps the European discover his primordial nature. Conversely, the women of *HoD* seem to exist to define the masculinity of the male characters just

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[11] From the journal *Novel*, vol. 20, 1987: 124

by contrast, the Intended so pure and sterile that Marlow can't help but tell her that famous lie at the end of the novella so as to not sully or break her idealism. "It would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (77).

Marlow's cool-headed focus and discipline is emphasised when compared to his aunt's wild, undirected enthusiasm for the civilizing mission, and Kurtz's inhumanity and self-debasement may stem partly from the unspoken relationship between him and the African Woman. Even her ultimate fate during the chaotic scene of the steamboat's departure from Kurtz's river station, where the pilgrims have their "little fun" (67) by firing on the crowd massed at the riverbank, goes unmentioned, a source of considerable bewilderment for Torgovnick.

Naturally, the importance of mentioning her survival or death depends on what way her character is interpreted. However, it is difficult not to read her as Kurtz's mistress. And as a focalized subject, she is clearly held up as a symbol not only of Kurtz's "gone native"-ness, but of Africa itself. The best reason I can imagine for her fate being left undisclosed is either as a knowing reference to the taboos surrounding miscegenation or simply the desire to avoid charges of obscenity from contemporaries. There were serious concerns about inter-racial relationships in Conrad's time, leading infamous figures such as Thomas Dixon (the author of several texts that were later adapted in 1915 as *The Birth of a Nation*) to write that the "foundation of racial life and civilization" (Rogin, 176) was at stake. Censorship of occurrences of inter-race romances have historically been a preoccupation of guardians of cultural morality. Conversely, leaving out the details of her relationship with Kurtz, and making unknown what happens to her during the shooting, draws attention to itself. It has the effect of further giving the character an air of taboo and mystery. Tying the imagery of Kurtz taking the African Woman as a mistress to the exploitation of Africa by Europeans is a good metaphorical device, but I agree with Torgovnick when she challenges it as repeating an unfortunate colonial stereotype (403). It is reminiscent of the sort of flowery characterisation of Africa as a virginal, female space invaded and raped by European self-interest; a well-meaning but patronizing generalization. To conclude that Kurtz stands in as a symbol for Europe's desires for Africa doesn't require much conjecture: "I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (59), and the imagery is repeated on page 73: "I had a vision of him on the stretcher opening his mouth voraciously as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind." After all, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz." (49) Thus, Kurtz can also be read as all Europe in a colonial adventure abroad, ready to consume everything it sees, matter, body, and soul.

Masculinity in *Heart of Darkness*

Showalter describes *Heart of Darkness* as somewhat of a crown jewel in the constellation of what she terms "male quest romances". These include "themes of the male muse, male bonding, and the exclusion of women" (1992, 83) that coalesce into a style of male fictions for men, emerging at the turn of the century. This, she claims, was a "complicated response to female literary dominance, as well as to British imperialism and fears of manly decline in the face of female power." (Ibid.) Showalter defines the male quest romance in the following way:

> In various ways, these stories represent a yearning for escape from a confining society, rigidly structured in terms of gender, class, and race, to a mythologized place elsewhere where men can be freed from the constraints of Victorian morality […] in the jungles […] of this other place, the heroes of romance explores their secret selves in an anarchic space which can be safely called the 'primitive.' Quest narratives all involve a penetration into the imagined center of an exotic civilization […] [the] heart of darkness which is a blank space on the map, a realm of the unexplored and unknown. For *fin-de-siècle* writers, this free space is usually Africa, the "dark continent" […] (1992, 81)

She continues, suggesting that the quest romances are "allegorized journeys into the self" (ibid) whose frame structures most often involve male narrators conveying the story to an implied male readership, or quite simply to a male audience present in the story, as is the case with *HoD*. This perspective is valuable, as it positions *Heart of Darkness* within a genre of fiction that is interesting for being an explicitly and deliberately male form of expression. To simplify matters, "maleness" in fiction for a period before Conrad's time can be generalized to have been "the norm", the default perspective from which works were assumed to be written, and that no such special, "defensive" emphasis of maleness was necessary. Though seen as a response, perhaps in support of the status quo, to a heightened consciousness of women and women's experiences in society and writing, male quest romances may not have been inherently misogynist. However, they excluded women from meaningful participation. Thus, *Heart of Darkness* may be a difficult work to approach due to its emphasis on the male experience. A similar dynamic can be seen in the video game industry. Although women have always played a part in shaping the video game industry since its conception, their roles have often been a silent, and sometimes silenced, one.

The Other, Communication, and Solipsism

According to Said, and with reference to Paul B. Armstrong's "Reading, Race, and Representing Others", the impossibility of understanding the racial or sexual Other is an important theme in the

novella. Conrad captures the theme elegantly but frustratingly, as he makes no attempt to develop it beyond that point. The novella appears to be an earnest effort to frame the inability to define the alien by those who live in a world that imagines that the alien cannot possibly be as profound as the familiar. Armstrong claims that one of the greatest stylistic forces of the novella is solipsism (430) and the failure of one-way communication: "understanding otherness requires an ongoing reciprocity between knower and known through which each comments on, corrects, and replies to the other's representations in a never-ending shifting of representations." (Ibid.) *HoD* is not the final product of such a process, as Marlow mostly has conversations with himself or to a sedate audience that does not offer much commentary on the tale.

The solipsism of *HoD* is not an unintended side-effect of the way the narrative is framed, an accident, or a case of Conrad forgetting to relate the experience of the colonized. As Armstrong suggests, I believe it is an intentional and strategic decision. Through constant pontification and circular hermeneutics, repeatedly coming *close* to establishing a dialogue with the Other but always refusing it at the last minute, preferring instead to project his homespun prejudices onto the situation, Marlow becomes an example of the uselessness of the one-sided monologue in characterising the Other, and of the hopelessness that arises from the attempt when there is no mutual intelligibility:

> . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and   penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone . . . . (27)

Were the above demonstrably ironic, the novella would gain new meaning altogether. Marlow would perhaps be characterised as a comical cynic, existing in a self-constructed fantasy where he attempts to erase the negative consequences of his participation in the ivory trade by his hypocritical pontifications over the uselessness of trying to change the system. The irony would come from the fact that he is already changing it, for the worse, by being a part of it.[12] But there is no such irony. Conrad's relationship to the Other mirrors the relationship between modernity and Conrad. He is too distant in several ways for the politics of *HoD* to be easily dissected according to current ideological schemes. Of course, easily dissected is synonymous with simple, and if the novella was simple it would have been forgotten a long time ago. If by no other criteria, it is highly valuable for its status as a pioneering text and for the quality of the prose. I do agree with Armstrong, however, when he cautions that the canonization of *HoD* may have damaged it, by "converting the text from a potential interlocutor into an unquestioned cultural icon or […] a set of

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[12]   I am grateful to fellow student Karl-Christian Swane Bambini for suggesting this.

clichés which are too well known to give rise to thought" (444). More than one transformative idea has been de-clawed by turning it into doctrine or mantra. This is why, in conclusion, *HoD* is both fascinating and troubling. The narrative trundles on, Marlow's lack of commitment demanding that we engage with our own prejudices to form independent judgements on what is being discussed at any given moment. If we refuse, or lack the required knowledge, we can only be left with a sense of frustrated discomfiture at the almost but not quite progressive nature of the novella, or worse yet, unwittingly assent to the genocide that lurks between the lines of the novella, that of Leopold II's Congo Free State. As stated by Torgovnick: "The words flirt with a radical critique of certain Western values, but stop short. *Heart of Darkness,* like Marlow, goes only so far" (402). It is up to us, the interpreters, to take it further.

That scholars indicate that *HoD* has become a literary cliché, and the words "the horror, the horror" a groan-worthy, weary meme of post-colonial literature is a sign that the novella requires debate, re-mediation, and re-contextualization to dislodge itself from its cage of reverence before it can be approached and fully appreciated by a new generation. This requires earnest and open scrutiny. The fact that an element of any given work is found to be problematic is not a demand for it to be ignored so as to avoid any unpleasant, "irrelevant" discussion and for the academic apparatus surrounding it to be ridiculed (Carey-Webb, 126). The demand is for the honesty and courage to not only celebrate the work for what makes it sophisticated and worthy of its place in canon, but also to discuss its less savoury aspects, and in that way, to resist or reject them.

To close the note on canonization, there are some general points made by Attridge that may be relevant to *HoD.* He claims that canonizing works of literature as it has been traditionally done aids in reducing what may be very specific references to political or social injustices to universalizing allegory. That is, making what may be simple if not cleverly occluded statements with a definite object of reference (and derision) into nebulous commentaries on "the human condition", thus making them less effective as engaged, ethical literature.

The Politics of *The Line*

At first glance, *TL* is an adaptation of *HoD* clothed in a familiar veneer of video game slaughter, drawing more than a little inspiration from the visual and auditory dimension of *Apocalypse Now,* whose reliance on spectacular special effects violence has drawn ire from critics (Keiths, 2007). In the game, gender and the Other are featured in a similar fashion to *HoD*. However, *TL* features some noteworthy differences.

Similar to the title of *Heart of Darkness,* which may be read as a reference to the core of

human evil and geographical terror in the story, Yager's *Spec Ops: The Line* is a reference to two things. Firstly, that it is the latest entry in the *Spec Ops* series of games. This is a curious choice, as the last title of the *Spec Ops* franchise was released a decade before *TL*. In any case, the subtitle "The Line" refers to a boundary that waits to be crossed, suspended in stasis until it so happens. The protagonist, along with the player, will cross many boundaries throughout the game's narrative. Transgression is of course a famed aspect of video game tradition and history, one that has made the industry the target of more than one moral panic over the last half century.

While rule-breaking may be a way in which to motivate or provoke change and development, the video game industry has not traditionally been concerned with that sort of progress-oriented transgression, and can be seen as backwards when it comes to certain issues. For instance, questions and critique aimed at gender representation in games, for instance, repeatedly inspires furore and resistance. In recent memory, the backlash[13] against feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian's fundraising campaign to support a series of videos offering a basic analysis of sexism in games is a case study of vicious misogyny amongst online commenters, illustrating the necessity for such a project. It is, however, worth mentioning that the campaign became an unprecedented success, and the resulting analysis both interesting and worthwhile. The result, a video series titled *Tropes vs. Women*, can be found on her Youtube channel, *Feminist Frequency*.

In any case, the traditional perspective holds that the industry is primarily an arena for male entertainment. Feminist media criticism of video games, such as Sarkeesian's, frequently reveals the same issues as when examining the popular film industry – the default perspective is virtually always assumed to be male, with the associated masculinity complexes frequently configuring women as prizes, objects, or lacking in agency, whose perspectives are uninteresting or make for unmarketable games. In reality, however, gender among players has almost completely reached parity. In America, 45% of players are female. This is according to a 2013 report by the Entertainment Software Association titled "The Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry" (3). In summary, the practices and attitudes described above make little sense unless viewed as a vestigial relic of the industry's history as male-dominated. The mechanics of capitalism and marketing have played their part in the enforcing of these tendencies, but much progress has been made in recent years. Several recent, high-profile games include female or minority characters exhibiting agency, and offer favourable depictions of non-heterosexual relationships, for instance.

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[13] As discussed by Oliver Moore, "Woman's call to end video game misogyny sparks vicious online attacks." theglobeandmail.com, 11.07.2014.

Games and the Other

Xenophobia has been a considerable force in shaping games, as it has any other forms of media. A considerable number of shooters and war games released in the West since 9/11 have featured the dreaded middle-eastern Other as a favourite choice of enemy. *TL* is deceptive here, with its setting of Dubai in ruins, caught in an apocalyptic sandstorm. Familiar tropes are hinted at, with its location promising safely and comfortably alien enemies to dispatch, and the exotic and unusual setting evokes the typically Orientalist image of the mysterious, all-encompassing desert engulfing the city. Dubai is symbolic of capitalism, progress, and international cooperation (or decadence), and is an outpost of Western influence. The city is being overwhelmed by a primordial chaos that, through repeated references to Middle-Eastern instability and turmoil in popular culture, is imagined as so typical of the region. Naturally, the prevailing pop-cultural narrative of our times dictates that the only possible saviour and hero-figure available is the white male soldier from America, who arrives in the form of Captain Martin Walker, the player-controlled protagonist of the game's narrative.

Within an hour of starting a new game in *TL,* the game ceases to follow the traditional script for military shooters. This is when the enemies change from hostile Arab/Other refugees to US soldiers, and they remain that way for the rest of the plot. It constitutes an abrupt tonal shift that moves the game away from its tentative place in the action genre and into horror. *TL* makes the attempt to avoid using caricatures of people from the Middle East, and generally succeeds. While most speak Farsi, and their English is heavily accented, there are doubts as to their demographics. Dubai is a fairly culturally diverse city, and some refugee fighters may be immigrants or tourists trapped in the city, forced to arms to defend themselves against their erstwhile saviours in the 33rd. The large proportion of foreign temporary residents in Dubai, especially South-Asian labourers, must make up a significant proportion of the faction's members. However, this is never made important or discussed at any length during the course of the game, having the effect of simplifying the refugee demographics into an exclusively Arab group. The visual cues usually employed by the videogame industry to signal "Arab, Hostile, Other" such as beards, turbans, religious imagery and other "terrorist" regalia are subdued. Instead, depictions of the native in *TL* is reminiscent to that of fighters from the "Arab Spring", urbanites thrown into a war for survival and self-determination. Nevertheless, the Other of *TL* are its Arab or otherwise foreign characters, of whom there is not one with more than two speaking lines beyond typical battlefield chatter. The refugees quickly recede into the background of the plot as soon as the Americans become the sole antagonistic force in the narrative, becoming a drama between white men, as in *HoD*.

There is the question of what either work is attempting to directly criticise (if that is what they are doing) and how this affects the portrayal of the native Other. If we accept that *HoD* is in

part a criticism of the civilizing mission of European colonial powers at the beginning of the 20th century, from the perspective of a European, then it is sensible to portray the mental and physical hardship it brings to the coloniser (as well as the colonised, preferably), configured as a cautionary tale. Less time is devoted to characterizing and including the Other and their perspective, which in a narrative partly about the European abuses of the indigenous peoples is unfortunate and ugly, but not altogether distasteful.

Similarly, if we cautiously accept that *TL,* as an adaptation of *HoD,* criticises contemporary American interventionism in the Middle East from a Western perspective, then it is also sensible to focus the narrative primarily on the experiences of the occupying American forces. Some "screen time" is reserved for the refugees, especially when they lash out at Walker and his men after their actions have ensured that no one will escape Dubai alive. But the story is not about them directly, so otherwise what they do and what happens to them is largely ignored.

A less authoritarian alternative is that neither *HoD* or *TL* is attempting to directly criticise anything; rather, they both present a series of difficult, ambiguous situations that demand that the reader or player make some judgement or interpretation of what they are being told, shown, and what they do, that can be viewed as critiques of certain practices in the industry or in popular culture. Nevertheless, as with *HoD,* the Other in *TL* is incomprehensible, threatening, and largely without voice. The very first encounter between Walker and the refugee survivors gets spoiled by mutual suspicion, despite Lugo's attempts to establish a dialogue. The situation unfolds in the following way: they whisper to one another, identifying parts of the environment to be used to effectively kill the refugees should they turn hostile. Tragically, the refugees overhear this, misunderstands, believes Walker and Adams are planning on how to kill them, and reacts with a pre-emptive attack. Communication, even though both sides comprehend each other, is impossible.

When the natives are given agency, it is "backstage" and mentioned in passing, or used to harm Walker. For instance, near the end of the game, the civilian inhabitants of a camp previously guarded by the 33rd decide to lynch Lugo, the character that was at first most sympathetic towards them. The mob murders him for a reason, as the act is carried out in retribution for his participation in actions that will result in their deaths. He has assisted in not only killing their guardians in the 33rd, the few who still believed in Konrad's mission, but also for unwittingly destroying the city's water supply. However, these reasons are not immediately apparent to Walker or perhaps even the player, and to some it can seem like they killed him simply because they are unruly and savage Others. Portrayed as being less helpless than the Congolese in *HoD,* the depiction of the foreign Other in *TL*, while not overtly chauvinistic, can suffer from a lack of attentiveness. As with *HoD,* perhaps the game refuses to humanize its Other as much as it does its Americans because to do so would be to neuter its portrayal of jingoistic or colonial power fantasies as an exclusively one-way

communication that numbs the capacity for ethical thinking.

Similar to Paul B. Armstrong's argument on solipsism in *HoD,* Walker does the same as Marlow in refusing the idea that communication with the Other is possible or desirable. Lugo and Adams both insist at several points to renew negotiations with the refugees. Each time, Walker flatly refuses. Walker's imperialist assumptions as an American special forces soldier and his massive hero complex precludes the possibility of viewing the Other as anything but a potential threat. In essence, Marlow and Walker make the same mistakes, though through different means.

While the non-American refugees remain generally Other throughout the game,[14] the opposing Americans are Same. They curse Walker and the player in English, their expressions of fear and pain are in English, Walker's occasional dialogues with them reinforce the idea that they are there to help the civilians, though the morality of how this aid is carried out is very much in doubt. Crucially, their faces are often left uncovered – the subaltern refugee fighter population wear masks and scarves more often than the Americans. As Brendan Keogh states in his critical reading of the game in *Killing Is Harmless* (2012),

> *TL* refuses to let me other [sic] the 33rd troops when I start fighting them. Of course, it is
> worth noting that while the enemies I face become less othered as the game proceeds, the
> Arabic people are never less othered themselves but merely replaced with more relatable
> Western enemies. (23)

Keogh makes the point that there is at least one way in which the foreign Other is given a human or sympathetic aspect from the very beginning – they are called *refugees*, not terrorists or guerillas. However, they are also labelled as "insurgents" after the numbing nomenclature of the War on Terror, a vocabulary that has become pervasive in games. In any case, the point should also be made that the game is not "about" the War on Terror, neither is it "about" any specific conflict or engagement within the context of that war. In a very real sense it is not "about" the Middle East. Set in Dubai, it already occupies a liminal space between West and "East", which makes simple allegorical allusions to the War on Terror (for example) difficult to identify. Payne makes an eloquent characterisation of the spatial politics of *The Line*:

> […] the game's opening menu screen previews its spatial politics by displaying an upside
> down American flag in the foreground and a lost civilization behind it […] they [Delta]
> explore a series of spaces typically absent from mid-East military shooters. Instead of

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14 There are a few notable exceptions that can be uncovered by especially attentive players in which the "natives" are clearly and strikingly humanised. For instance, in an early section of the game, the player can find drawings made by the children of the refugees and tourists trapped in Dubai. The scenes depicted in these simple drawings range from the mundane to the grisly. This simultaneously characterises the refugee faction as parents (and thus human) and not exclusively as hostile, enemy combatants, while also lending their insurgency an air of legitimacy, as the American soldiers in the drawings are carrying out atrocities against the civilians and their children. However, these drawings are rather difficult to find and are not remarked on by any of the characters in the game.

fighting tribal militants in mountainous outposts, or dueling enemy combatants across bombed-out city streets, the player traverses the sandblasted and abandoned opulence of Western civilization: a TV studio, an aquatic coliseum, luxury hotels and spas, an aquarium, etc. (7)

Women in *The Line*

As is the case with *HoD,* women in *TL* are marginalised. None of the main characters are women, and when women appear in the game, it is as victims of violence. The most haunting of these victims is a woman and her child killed in the white phosphorous attack carried out by Walker; horribly burnt, the charred corpse clutches the corpse of the child to its breast, covering its eyes with a crumbling, claw-like hand. Walker fixates on this image. It reappears much later, in the form of a hallucination. Right before the game's end, Walker finds "Konrad" in the process of painting a picture in which the mother and the girl are still burning amidst a scene of human chaos and terror. However, the flames are positioned as coming from behind their heads, akin to the halo of a saint in religious iconography. The woman has a thin veil draped over her head, and the rest of her dress is reminiscent of a depiction of Mary Magdalene. However, in this painting, the mother is missing a mouth, as her lips have apparently been fused shut by the searing heat of the white phosphorous. Compared with Kurtz's painting in the Brickmaker's office, several contrasts are revealed:

> I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister. (25)

This depiction of "progress" as blind, indiscriminate, and sinister can be taken as saying much about Conrad's opinion on the civilizing mission of colonialism. The painting in *TL* is, perhaps, a reference and response to it. Here, the subject matter is not colonialist progressivism, but a depiction of the victimisation and horror caused by it. Conrad described the force of colonialism in Kurtz's painting; *TL* depicts the results of the 21st century version of that force in Konrad's painting. Progress is blind in the novella, in the game's incarnation the victims, almost holy in their innocence, are silenced; without a mouth, the burning woman cannot protest. *TL*'s use of women, as in *HoD,* is rife with stereotypical symbolism. They, like the refugee group in which they are a part, are afforded little voice. This naturally opens the game to a variety of criticism, but the painting in Kurtz's penthouse suggests that the developers were aware of what they were portraying and how they were doing it. Furthermore, I argue that the exclusion of female experience is part of the game's thematic messaging – it is exclusively male-centric because it is exclusively targeted at men. That is, the game is constructed explicitly to convey a 21st century version of the quest romance,

only in a deliberately self-reflexive way that undermines the male quest romance and the power fantasy that often accompanies it.[15] And though the women of *TL* do not speak verbally, the extremely graphic depiction of the burnt mother and child can be seen as a statement: "Because of you, the player, I have become this."

Showalter notes that *Apocalypse Now*, though anti-war, had similar issues as *HoD*: "many elements of the film and of its production reflect the unconscious imperialism and sexism of male quest romance." *TL* has this problem as well, based as it is on both *HoD* and *AN*. However, as with its critique of the male power fantasy found in war games, the spectacular, wrenching fall of its protagonist serves implicitly as a comment on the quest romance's modern cognate in film and video games. Many of them are arenas of virtual fantasy in which men (and women) can escape the constraints and pressures of society, sometimes involving a bit of savagery in virtual hearts of darkness, or just assume new roles; not so much to explore the self, perhaps. However, most such games traditionally relate a male experience, focused on what men do to one another. Women are present, but in secondary, supporting roles. *TL* is the same, but is unrelenting in its depiction of Walker's victims, be they men, women, or children. Rather than voyeuristic, it is accusatory. They are not only Walker's victims, they are also the player's.

Showalter notes in *Sexual Anarchy* that Marlow and Kurtz can be seen as two sides of the same coin. In fact, Orson Welles is to have intended his film to have Marlow *be* Kurtz in a twist ending (1992, 96). In *TL,* this is almost literally so, as the true degenerate monster at the game's end is its own protagonist. Since Walker is so obviously a pastiche of the typical macho action hero, yet fails so fundamentally at this sort of masculine heroism, the male exclusivity of the game calls attention to itself. The effect, though the typical player may not be aware of it, is an interrogation of masculinity in games. The homosocial soldier band in *TL* that is represented by the three members of Walker's Delta Force team is the site of much conflict. Though they are generally loyal, they become agitated, suspicious, and combative towards each other and their superior after Walker pushes them to use white phosphorous against their own countrymen and civilians. Male dysfunction is the theme, rather than the male bonding experience as is typically found in depictions of the band of brothers found in popular culture.

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[15]   A fuller elaboration on this idea can be found in subsection 3.

Part 2 – *Spec Ops: The Line*

Subsection 1: The Game

As a video game, Yager's *Spec Ops: The Line* poses some challenges to a primarily literary analysis. Nevertheless, considering the nature of this particular game, they should not be insurmountable. Here I will briefly paraphrase the game's narrative, and discuss why I have chosen to approach it in a particular way.

The plot of the game is broadly similar to that of its literary predecessor. The protagonist is special forces Captain Martin Walker, who is in search of Colonel John Konrad, the game's Kurtz figure. The drama is set in the city of Dubai, here engulfed by a massive sandstorm that cuts it off from contact with the world. Prior to the events of the game, Konrad is returning from deployment in Afghanistan. Learning of the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Dubai, he decides to desert and to take his division (the 'Damned' 33rd) into the city in order to assist with its evacuation. These efforts end catastrophically, and Konrad commits suicide as his men begin to turn on the refugees and each other. The army is swallowed by the desert and disappears. The scenario is highly implausible, but the setup is effective enough in framing the following.

The game's plot, taking place six months after the above, takes many digressing paths from the task of finding Konrad. Accompanying Walker are the two other members of the Delta team he leads, John Lugo and Alphanso Adams. These offer commentary on events as the plot unfolds. The initially boisterous camaraderie progressively breaks down into contempt as Walker's actions become increasingly brutal. Within ten minutes of the beginning, Walker discovers deceased US soldiers, and decides to divert completely from the original objective, which was to establish contact with survivors in the city and then evacuate. He opts instead to try to save, and later kill, Konrad, not realizing that he is already dead. In this way, Walker deserts his duty and his purpose. Instead, he leads Delta into increasingly bloodthirsty engagements that ends in the deaths of both his men and the loss of his sanity.

The climax of the drama and the turning point of the narrative comes when Walker fears a massacre of the local civilian refugees by US soldiers. He forces Lugo and Adams to accept his decision to carry out a white phosphorous attack on an American position in order to stop this massacre, at a place named the Gate.[16] The attack not only immolates the soldiers, but also the civilians they were trying to protect from Walker and his men. This pushes Walker over the edge,

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[16] This is perhaps an allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*; past the point of the atrocity at the Gate (of hell), all hopes for an orderly resolution of the terrors of Dubai must be abandoned.

and he projects his monstrous decision onto the 33rd, claiming that they forced his hand. He decides to kill them all, including Konrad, who instead of having been betrayed by his men, is now believed to still be leading them.

The rough gist of the plot is that every good-intentioned decision Walker makes ends in horror. Walker initially idolizes Konrad, as the two share a history of having fought in Kabul – but Walker later blames him for the events for which he is himself responsible. Walker becomes an unreliable focalizer. The player sees (and directs) Walker and his actions from an over-the-shoulder perspective during play, but the reality Walker experiences is shown to be different from that which Adams and Lugo sees. The player can find scraps of information and clues as to the context of the various disasters that have befallen Dubai hidden in the environment. They take the form of different texts such as newspaper clippings, recordings, and material objects, some of which elicits a response from Walker himself. Despite this added information, the situation in Dubai remains confused, as several factions are present in the city. The CIA are nefariously determined to wipe out all human life in the city as to hide US involvement in UAE territory. Despite this, they have persuaded groups of militant refugees to attack the 33rd, and succeed in manipulating Walker to their ends. The 33rd are split between their mission to aid the refugees and the harsh demands of survival, and trusts no one; this mistrust sparks the violence between the 33rd and Walker.

After the white phosphorous attack, Walker slips into delusions. One of the most striking of his hallucinations is Konrad's voice, emerging from a broken walkie-talkie, that Walker brings along until, at the finale, it is revealed to him that it has never even contained batteries. "Konrad" continually taunts and questions Walker's decisions as the narrative unfolds.[17] Walker's fellow Delta operatives begin to have doubts about their actions, but especially about Walker's. He always dismisses their concerns, at first because of his need to save the refugees and the 33rd. However, after the while phosphorous massacre and every atrocity after that, his goal ultimately becomes to "kill everything that moves" (2012). At the end of the narrative, Lugo and Adams are dead, the 33rd has surrendered, and all the civilians spared from Walker's rampages are doomed to die of thirst. Walker himself is grievously injured, but makes it to Konrad's penthouse apartment, where he finds Konrad painting the scene of burning civilians from the phosphorous attack. "Konrad" welcomes Walker, and reveals his own desiccated corpse to him. "He" pushes Walker to see the truth behind his hallucinations, which seemingly justified many of his actions – now, shown to him and the player in flashbacks, it is apparent that they were not. Walker is given a choice: suicide or to continue living, knowing he has become a monster.

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[17]   A plausible interpretation of this hallucination is that "Konrad" is a manifestation of Walker's conscience, projected from memory to subjective reality. There, Konrad is a symbol of Walker's greatest aspirations (to be an honourable man, as he imagines Konrad to have been) and his anger (at the resentment felt from the revelation of his idol as a fraud).

The game from there on has four endings, two of which end in Walker's death, and two in his survival. He escapes the city in only one of these endings. All have interesting implications as to the interpretation of the overall narrative, but the common theme is that Walker, even if he physically survives the ordeal of Dubai and returns home, is still destroyed. In one ending, when asked by a US soldier how he survived, he replies: "Who said I did?" In another, he dies, killed by his erstwhile rescuers, while the player hears the voice of Konrad echoing from the past: "Home? We can't go home. There's a line men like us have to cross. If we're lucky, we do what's necessary, and then we die. No... all I really want, Captain, is peace."

Critical Reception

There is as of yet a limited amount of scholarly material discussing the game, but interest appears to be growing. While the game's reception from the media's dedicated press was generally positive, and it was reviewed well, it is not universally considered profound or successful, and suffered commercially. Keogh (2012) includes a compilation of criticism aimed at the game in his book, ranging from positive to negative. Especially scathing are the accusations of manipulation and "cheap, bulls**t guilt tactics" (Corey, 2012)[18] raised by some. The implausibility of the narrative's events was difficult to overlook for others. Generally, *TL* is praised for its narrative, but criticised for its uninspired gameplay.[19] A scholarly response can be found in Matthew Thomas Payne's "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in Spec Ops: The Line" (2014). The essay discusses some of the same issues as this thesis, though it focuses primarily on the game's critique of the concept of the war game, and the effects it achieves through that critique. Brendan Keogh's *Killing Is Harmless* (2012) is another response to the game. It is a "close reading" of the narrative, a catalogue of its symbolic content, and a discussion of the play experience.

Ludology vs. Narratology

In recent years, there has been a debate in the field of game studies as to how to approach video games and games in general from an analytical standpoint. Two camps have emerged, the narratologists and the ludologists (Bogost, 67). In brief, the narratological perspective holds that games may be analysed as any other narrative medium, such as literature or film, whereas the ludological perspective is rather more formalist and interested in the particular ways in which video

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[18] "Spec Ops: The Line Second Opinion", Gamecritics.com
[19] Gameplay is here understood as the kinaesthetically pleasing aspect of a well-structured and programmed video game.

games function differently compared to other media. Bogost points out a crucial distinction when using the term "narratology" in *Unit Operations*. The narratologists featured here are not those of the kind that might be familiar to literary narratologists, like Genette or Todorov (68). Rather, in the terms of video game criticism, it is a widely encompassing label covering those interested primarily in the way in which video games can convey a narrative. Such individuals may originally come from various fields, be it literature, film, theatre, and so on, and represent a general analytical approach or attitude, rather than a specific theory or method. The camp of ludology has a rather more organized platform from which it analyses games. One example is the *Game Studies* journal, to which luminaries such as Espen Aarseth have made many contributions.

Ludology may require some further elaboration. My particular notion of ludology has its roots in Gonzalos Frasca's "Ludology meets Narratology: Similitudes and Differences between (video) Games and Narrative" (1999),[20] which is a source of some of the debate between the two groups. Ironically, Frasca's objective was to find a compromise. Regardless, in the article the concept of "ludus" is described as an "activity organized under a system or rules that defines a victory or defeat." In most games, physical or digital, the players are made aware of the rules of play before play takes place. This is the framework within which the game and the play experience exist: the ludus. After that, play takes place, and the conditions for victory or defeat are eventually met. With video games containing a narrative component, Frasca makes a connection between ludus and the idea of "possibles narratifs" from Claude Bremond's *La Logique du Recit* (1973).

Bremond's idea is this: a "willing agent" (the protagonist or character within a story) is faced with tasks that may be accepted, resulting either in abstention or acceptance. The latter results in a passage to action, where the task is accomplished or not, resulting in either a victory or defeat for the agent. This is remarkably similar to what takes place in games with a narrative component. Within the ludus, the protagonist (controlled by the player) is faced with a set of tasks that must be performed in order to progress. The player/protagonist accepts, play takes place, the tasks are either completed or failed, victory or defeat is had, and so on. The sequence or scene is repeated if wanted or necessary.

In literature, however, an author crafting a story may choose to use Bremond's ideas to chart out the chain of events and choices that make up many possible permutations of plot in a story being written, but will eventually settle on one causal chain of actions to be represented in the finished work. In a video game, ludus determines the available possible actions that the player *may* take. For Frasca, the conclusion is as follows: "we cannot claim that ludus and narrative are equivalent, because the first is a set of possibilities, while the second is a set of chained actions" (1999). It may technically be so, but with the current literary wisdom placing stress on authorial

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[20]   I refer to the online version of the article.

exegesis and subjective interpretation, there may be less of a difference between the two as Frasca originally envisioned; each reading of a literary work may produce variations within a story (or a completely different one) for the individual reader, much like each play session of a video game may produce variations within a game's narrative, if it has one.

Narrative's Superior Position in *The Line*

In short, the overarching debate between narratology and ludology focuses on whether or not video games should be analysed as vehicles for narrative, or examined primarily in terms of their formal features. My position is a pragmatic one: my particular way of analysing *TL* is close to a narratological analysis only because I believe it is primarily a "narrative game", in that the emphasis is on conveying themes and meaning through the events of the game as in other kinds of linear texts. However, I am also supportive of the notion that the "narrative" nature of *TL* is as much contingent on its formal properties, its simulational, "ludic", or game elements, as the fact that it attempts to convey meaning through a plot. By that, I mean that the narrative of *TL* (and its thematic contents or "meaning" or however it may be defined) are in many ways conveyed so effectively because the game is of the shooter genre. Shooters allow the players to perform outlandish feats of heroism and violence. The contrast between the heavy-handed subject matter taken up by the narrative and the ridiculous action-film gameplay made possible by the ludus can be read as an effective way to highlight the dissonance in the concept of killing for fun. I assert that *TL*, like all games, can be analysed purely for its "simulational", formal constituent elements and what effects they have on the play experience, the reading. This thesis does not focus much on the game's ludic aspects and their implications for the narrative, however.

I should perhaps clarify what I mean when I call *TL* a narrative game. As I see it, games have at least two overlapping qualities: one is the software, the game engine, which determines the ludus. The other is interactivity, making a player's experience in meeting the software one that is tangible. Many games, such as those of the puzzle variety (the classic example is Tetris), do perfectly well with only these two qualities. What separates *TL* from that category is a third quality overlapping with the first two, its narrative elements: protagonists, antagonists, plot beats as in cinema, a narrative progression, a chain of events making up a plot, chronology, and so on – the building blocks of a *story*. Many games have this quality to them, without necessarily drawing much attention from academic analysis, or indeed, having stories worth such attention in the first place. In the case of *TL*, I could go one step further and claim that *TL* is a "literary" game. That is, a game with qualities signifying (or trying to signify) a certain artistic or cultural significance above

other games. One reason is that it is a game in which the gameplay mechanics are in a subordinate position to the game's narrative dimension – the objective of the game is primarily to convey a narrative. The other is that *TL*'s mechanics and story are crafted in a particular way as to invite interpretive scrutiny.

To elaborate further, taking the narrative out of *TL* would leave behind a functional game, albeit one that is very lacking in motivation and is derivative in terms of gameplay. At its core, *TL* is what may be referred to as a "third-person shooter". While genre is not an uncontroversial topic in game studies, for the purposes of this analysis, the label will suffice. This genre, as the name suggests, allows the player to control a character from a third-person perspective. "Shooter" denotes content of interest, as such games are generally expected to feature a great deal of shooting. This does not, however, suggest anything as to the narrative content of the game other than it being some kind of "action" narrative.

In terms of game mechanics, *TL* is functionally identical to Epic's *Gears of War* from 2006, in its emphasis on cover-based gunplay. In the temporal terms of the games industry, six years is an epoch. Some efforts have been placed putting *TL* apart from *Gears*, such as being able to issue simple commands to your team-mates, a staple feature in many team-based or cooperative shooters. The use of sand to hinder or incapacitate the enemy is also an innovation, but is sparsely used. But these were far from central to the game's marketing. Instead, efforts appear to have been spent mostly on creating the game world and assembling the narrative. As noted by writer Walt Williams in an interview in *Polygon* magazine;

> we wanted to shred your average guy […] and by the time you get to the end we really wanted to express as strongly as possible what can happen to the psychological state of somebody who goes through these horrible events. (Russ Pitts, 2012)

The audiovisual elements of the game must also be taken into account. The player is free to move throughout the game world within the boundaries of the its levels, the pre-determined areas of play, where the designers have placed several elements of spatial storytelling. Colour is used to deliberately signify different moods and Walker's psychological development. Pristine, cool blues (the sky, skyscrapers, the Persian Gulf) are contrasted with vivid, warm orange, tan colours (the sand, the sun, its reflection off the skyscrapers). These vibrant, "living" colours are later contrasted with murkier, less fertile shades of colour such as brown, black, and grey as the game progresses, signifying decay, madness and death as the protagonist descends further into the figurative darkness of the plot. Expressive graffiti and other signs play a large role in the game's more explicit visual messaging. There is a complexity and intensity to these images that open them up to interpretation.

Here is a passage by Brendan Keogh, referring to an unusual depiction of Lady Liberty in the game:

> At first I see it as Lady Liberty with her arms stretched out by her side like Christ, showing where the nails went into her palm. In her left hand is her torch, but instead of a flame it is topped in a human skull. In her right hand, where should be a *tabula ansanta* (a tablet inscribed with the law) is an AK-47, as though the only law is violence. She is draped in an American flag with the stars blacked out.[21] Through her head is an arrow. It's as though America has replaced the laws of liberty with a saviour complex and violent interventionism—violence their law and death their light—and, in the process, America has managed to shoot itself in the face. (35)

The image is found sprayed on a wall shortly after Walker and his companions have begun to kill American soldiers early in the narrative, and is furthermore a short distance away from the scene of a grisly execution – presumably carried out by the CIA. This level is where it is made clear that *TL* is making a departure from the standard found in other military-themed shooters.

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[21] The image of a mutilated or modified US flag is repeated in the game at several points. The US flag, with its stars painted over or cut out, comes across as being a symbol of the 33rd, or of Konrad.

Subsection 2: *The Line* as Adaptation

My greatest theoretical debt in this subsection is to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2nd ed, 2013). She theorizes and engages with the phenomenon of adaptations as products and processes while challenging the notion that adaptations are necessarily second-rate desecrations of a semi-mythical, idealized source text. Containing discussions on the "Who, What, Where, and How" of adaptations, the book stands as an impressive exploration of not only the theory, but also the practice, of adaptation.

Video game adaptations of *Heart of Darkness* are rare, and, depending on the definition of adaptation one chooses to employ, possibly non-existent, with one salient exception in the case of *The Line*. Most "Conradian" games have more in common with the visceral spectacle of *Apocalypse Now* than with the thematics of *HoD* directly. In virtually all cases where games are based on another work, emphasis on narrative is second to the importance of gameplay. As the emphasis on play and entertainment is of paramount importance to the vast majority of games, the subject matter of *HoD* carries over poorly to the medium. In most cases, saddling the player with guilt or nebulous sensations of horror at the evil present in themselves and others rarely does service to the market success of a video game. The video games industry, as is the case with other instances of industrial art,[22] often prefers to "play it safe" as profit concerns and the dictates of publishing companies govern what is deemed suitable content and tone. Ian Bogost describes the industrial environment as of 2006 as that of a "cutthroat corporate ecosystem" (*Unit Operations,* 179) in which developers of large-scale, blockbuster games are reliant on risk-averse publishers for development funding and marketing. This ecosystem remains largely unchanged today, save for promising developments in the small-scale, self-publishing industry.

When Bogost wrote the above, game development costs were in the tens of millions; now they have eclipsed a hundred, with Scottish company Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), costing 115 million USD according to a Business Week publication. The games industry is currently outspending Hollywood. With sums like that at risk, and with profit concerns held first and foremost, publishers will often intervene in the development of games that they perceive as steering in an unprofitable direction, be it in tone, subject matter, or gameplay.

With *TL,* part of the game's critical acclaim comes from its attempts to subvert the accepted standard of what is suitable, and whether or not market-oriented concerns of providing an entertaining product (entertaining in the sense of "joyful play") needs to be the sole motivating factor for the creation of games.

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[22] This is a term that is explored, if not coined, by Ian Bogost. It will be revisited later in the thesis.

A natural question to ask at this point is whether or not *The Line* is a true adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. Hutcheon's examples of video game adaptations often revolve around "franchise" or "licensed" games, such as the various *Harry Potter* games, which have a clear, undeniable relationship to the novels. However, such games are often only superficially related to the property on which they are based, focusing on a particular aspect of literary or filmic texts that make for good interactive entertainment. Often, the setting and a rough paraphrase of the textual narrative is transposed into the game, while the game itself focuses primarily on set-piece moments from the texts on which they are based. None of the actual prose of *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, survives in the many action and strategy games based on Tolkien's works. These games most often attempt to recreate the spectacular battles in Peter Jackson's trilogy. Something similar is at work in *The Line,* and so the threads linking *TL* and *HoD* can appear tenuous at times. I am thinking of *TL* being set in Dubai, featuring a cast of military action-hero characters, and making other similarly fundamental departures from the novella. I hold, however, that it is an adaptation, one that stands in the same category of adaptation as *Apocalypse Now.* It is a transcoding, translation, a paraphrase (2013, 16) of Conrad's novella. The motivation for making such an assertion comes from the sheer weight of *HoD*'s thematic content that survives in *TL*.

There are no title cards suggesting that *TL* is based on *HoD*. Although the game is often discussed as an adaptation of *HoD*, and advertised on Steam[23] as having a narrative "reminiscent of Apocalypse Now and Heart of Darkness". The phrases "based on" or "inspired by" Conrad's work do not appear in the game. Instead, the game's relationship to the novella is, for the most part, discrete. In comparison, acknowledgement of the game's relationship to *AN* is explicit, as the game's visual dimension draws much from Coppola's film.

The superficial evidence of *TL*'s relationship to its filmic and literary ancestors is the following: John Konrad is both the prescribed Kurtz of the narrative, but also a reference to Joseph Conrad. Konrad is a Colonel, a reference to Colonel Kurtz in *AN*. Martin Walker is a reference to Marlow, both sharing the first three letters of their names (**M A R**). He is also a reference to Captain Willard, the protagonist of *AN*, noting the first letter of their last names (**W**). Willard, interestingly, is played by none other than **Martin** Sheen, who is referenced by Cpt. **Martin** Walker of *TL*. As a further nod to the novella, Willard and Walker are captains, though of an entirely different kind than Marlow. These little bits of trivia are fun to discover and demonstrates that a superficial referentiality towards the other texts can be found in *TL*. However, the game offers much more than a "short intertextual allusion" (170).

The descent into savagery embodied by a person lost on a delusional crusade depicted in

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HoD is an important theme explored in *TL*. The fundamental difference is that "the horror" of Kurtz's inhumanity comes from Walker and the player's actions, not from Konrad. The effect of this change is profound. Instead of being a story of another person's self-destruction as filtered through the consciousness of a focalizing protagonist, which is then read and interacted with by the reader as in *HoD*, *TL* is a very different experience. It is a player-driven destruction of the narrative's protagonist and a deconstruction of the play experience itself, a reflection and critique of similar games. Just as Walker can be said to be the "true" Kurtz of *TL*, the player may also be compelled to consider his or her own Kurtzian nature at the game's end. After all, if all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz, all popular culture contributed to the making of what is thought to be the "male gamer" – a conceptual entity to which *TL* poses some uncomfortable questions.

There are a number of significant differences between novella and game, however. In the majority of the game's plot, the overarching objective is closely reminiscent of that of Marlow's river-boat journey to locate Kurtz. Ultimately, Walker must find Konrad. *TL*'s plot splits off from this goal several times early on, but the latter half of the narrative focuses solely on it. Marlow's development from admiration of Kurtz to trepidation is a more understated, rational, and ambivalent one than that of Walker, who, after the white phosphorous massacre, makes the switch from awe to hatred very quickly. Otherwise, there are a great number of departures from the "form and matter" of *HoD*, and, as mentioned earlier, the game readily references *Apocalypse Now*. For instance, the Harlequin Russian in *HoD* and the manic freelance photographer in *AN* coalesces into Robert Darden, a manic propagandist and DJ known as the Radioman. in *TL*, his character is introduced at a very early stage compared to the other two works. In *TL,* Darden's appearance and personality are also closely reminiscent of his cinematic counterpart in *AN.* Where the details of that character's relationship with Kurtz is left relatively open, a close relationship between Darden and Konrad is revealed through gathering optional "intel" items in the game world. This relationship seems more stable and warm than Kurtz's relationship to the Harlequin Russian in *HoD*, as a taped recording has Konrad refer to Darden as a friend and as a sympathetic figure. As with Kurtz and the Russian, it is nonetheless likely that the honeymoon bliss was brief following the collapse of law and order in Dubai.

But unlike both *Apocalypse Now* and *HoD,* the Radioman is in frequent communication with the protagonist as soon as they become aware of each other, deriding Walker and his men for what they do as they journey through the city. While his exact role in the drama between the 33rd, the CIA, and the refugees is unclear, Walker fixates on the Radioman as an adversary, giving both Walker and the player an antagonist that they will try to defeat. When this defeat comes, it is a shocking surprise. Delta enter his studio, Darden surrenders amicably and converses with Walker and his men. Lugo, previously the boisterous comedian and diplomat of the team, unexpectedly

shoots Darden in the head after having a bonding conversation with him about radio equipment. It is a subversion of a traditional video game trope – the mid-narrative henchman "boss" acting as the gate-keeper to the final confrontation with the villain. In this case, it is never exactly clear whether or not Darden is an enemy, or merely a verbally antagonistic third party to the drama. It was Darden who assembled the various emergency beacons and communications stations throughout the city, evidence of his deep involvement in the attempt to save its civilian population. After the 33rd began to unravel, Darden's purpose appears to have shifted. Instead of facilitating communication, he plays protest songs like *Hush* and announces various goings-on in the city, and oscillates between lambasting the refugee fighters and Delta for their actions, and joking about the travesties taking place within the city's boundaries. It is not all a comedy, however. At several points, Darden directly challenges Walker for his decisions, posing difficult questions as to his purpose and motivations in the city. Walker dismisses him in every such confrontation.

Several protest songs from Vietnam can be heard in the game, further suggesting what Hutcheon would call a "palimpsestuous intertextuality" (2013, 20) between *AN* and *TL*. Visual elements from the film are also featured in the game, such as attack helicopters that menace the skies over Dubai, in one case attacking Delta while a bombastic opera score blasts from the Radioman's speakers.[24] One of the first things the player hears after starting a new game is the rhythmic beating of a helicopter's rotating wings, before attack helicopters swoop in, filling the screen, firing at each other. The allusion is unsubtle, establishing a close relationship to *Apocalypse Now*'s opening scene from the first second of play. Further allusions to Coppola's film occur throughout the game.

Another important deviation from *HoD* concerns the game's perspective. Conrad's novella is viewed as an example of early modernist fiction, not least in how it is framed as a told story, coloured throughout by Marlow's reflections, experiences, and biases. It poses interesting ethical challenges for the reader, as they must either accept or reject Marlow's observations, because it is compromised by his experiences and world-view. His story is, taken holistically, neither prescriptive nor proscriptive. The clearest ethical imperative in the story is related to a sense of purity of purpose. Marlow is influenced by imperialist hegemony, and its narrative is inextricably woven into the fabric of *HoD*. The novella is heavily tinged with interiority, as the only mind we are allowed to glimpse directly and with any certainty is that of Marlow himself. He appears averse to describing the minds of others; hence Paul B. Armstrong's charge of solipsism concerning the politics of the novel (2006, 430). *TL* seems very different in a number of respects, with its third-person perspective, inclusion of multiple characters, and ostensibly narrator-free plot. But on closer

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[24] Unlike *AN*'s famous *Ride of the Valkyries* scene, not only is Delta the target of the vicious attack (unlike unnamed and faceless Vietnamese), Darden is humming, out of tune, along to the music as the rockets fly. In *TL*, this makes a complete farce out of what in *AN* is one of its most enduring scenes of senseless destruction.

examination, it maintains a stylistic similarity to the interiority of *HoD* that is really quite clever, perhaps even manipulative.

False Objectivity in *The Line*

It will be necessary to establish some basic game design theory in order to explain the interiority of *TL*. Most shooter games have for a majority of the genre's history been FPS, or first-person shooters. Played from a first-person perspective, players in these games are inserted directly into the role of the main character. While the player character often has an identity and history within the game world's story (a space marine, a soldier, a bespectacled theoretical physicist), it is perhaps more accurate to describe this character as an avatar, a vehicle through whom the player can become a powerful individual in an immersive other-environment. To cite Ian Bogost's *Operative Units*: "The FPS game engine was born from the market opportunity to perpetuate the power fantasy among a videogame market almost entirely dominated by young men" (2006, 63).

There is clearly an element of subjectivity and role-playing to the FPS, as players are quite literally placed in the role of another character. Some developers have attempted to capitalize on this fact, rendering the player character/avatar mute so as to allow the player to interject their own responses to and interpretations of various situations, free from bias or focalization from the character they control. This allows players the freedom to create their own sense of interiority by removing a layer of interpretation between player and the game world. Other FPS games have player characters who perform much like a modernist narrator, commenting on events as they happen, having interior monologues, and reflecting on their experiences in a stream-of-consciousness mode. *Dear Esther* by The Chinese Room (2012) may be the most recent example of this sort of FPS storytelling. It simulates a lonely exploration of a barren island in the Hebrides. The player guides the narrating protagonist through the environment, frequently triggering clips of narration in the form of letters being read aloud by the protagonist. Together, these readings form a story of the protagonist mourning the death of his wife. It ends in his suicide as he leaps from the top of a radio-mast, or the leap is symbolic of his escape from sorrow. Each time the game is played from the beginning, the game shuffles the order in which the various clips of narration are played, changing the nature of the story. In this way, each play-through invites its own interpretation, as the overall sense of the narrative varies, depending on the order these readings are conveyed to the reader.

It is clear that the most "stylistically correct" perspective in a hypothetical, rigorously faithful video game adaptation of *HoD* would likely be that of the FPS, without perhaps the

emphasis on shooting. Lengthy excerpts of material from the novella could simply be repeated by "Marlow" as the player is guided up the river and into the African interior, seeing, as it were, the events of the novel "through Marlow's eyes". It is difficult to see that such an outing would be a commercial or critical success, however. While experiencing the novel's plot vicariously might be interesting to a number of people, being unwaveringly strung along a pre-set path, with little possibility to interact with or influence events, would frustrate many players who are accustomed to being given at least an illusion of choice and agency in all but the most linear games.

Conversely, if the player is given the freedom found in other video game adaptations of popular media, the narrative cohesion that binds the novella together will unravel, losing its effectiveness. There is also the question of how the literariness of the novella should translate into interactive form. In the attempt to satisfy the standards of contemporary video game design and deliver an engaging experience, the narrative would have to be enormously simplified, its various themes reduced to one or two core ideas. It is hard to envision who would be pleased by such an adaptation, least of all one that attempts to make the struggle to comprehend the inhumanity of Leopold's Free State and the historical phenomenon of colonialism appealing subject matter for video game consumers. In this scenario, form, audience, and contexts are at odds with each other, if we apply Hutcheon's terminology.

TL's third-person focalization is at first glance an entirely different approach. Instead of having the "camera" inside the head of Walker, it hovers around him, keeping him in view, while focusing on where the player directs the camera. Walker exists in a state of physical alterity from the player, as the player silently controls Walker through the other-world of sand-swept Dubai, being always an extradiegetic observer of his actions and their consequences. Walker observes and comments on events around him as they occur, counteracting the typical role-playing position of the player in the FPS, ostensibly resulting in a greater objectivity as to how the player regards Walker, as a distanced, though interacting observer of both his behaviour as dictated by the player, and in cutscenes.[25]

The most descriptive visual metaphor I can imagine is that of a puppet master controlling unknowing but "thinking" puppets. However, while it is true that the third-person perspective distances the player from Walker, this is a false objectivity. While Walker is far from being a narrator in any traditional sense, he is obviously the "filter" through which we perceive the reality of the narrative – so instead of seeing him as an unreliable narrator, we may call him an unreliable focalizer.

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[25] This is video game terminology for what in other media is called a film clip or vignette, i.e. brief sequences where control is taken from the player to show actions taking place in the diegesis of the game, either made by the characters, or happening to them. Typically a game will begin with a cutscene establishing the characters and the drama around which the game is constructed. The denouement of a game, after the climax has been resolved through play, is also typically delivered in the form of a cutscene.

Firstly, there is the glimpse of a narrative frame in the game. After an explosive *in medias res* opening section involving an action-filled helicopter chase weaving through the skyscrapers of Dubai, Walker narrates the following lines, full of swagger and Hollywood bravado:

> Was John Konrad the greatest man I ever served with? Well, I dunno. There was this one time in Kabul when he dragged my bleeding carcass half a mile to the evac chopper, so maybe I'm biased. But the facts don't lie. The man's a fuckin' hero. (Yager, 2012)

There is a clear allusion here to the patriotic appeal of the frame narrator early in *HoD*. This also signals that it is through Walker's perspective we will view the events of the narrative. After the introduction, the player controls Walker and arguably sees things as he and his men sees them, with focalization from Walker coming primarily through his verbal interpretations of the reality that surrounds him, and the decisions he makes for the player in cutscenes. While the player controls Walker, his colleagues also interpret the situation around them, influencing the player's interpretation of the environment. For instance, in the early parts of the game, Lugo repeatedly interjects with some witty quip or other, lending brevity to the situation. Not only does the game resemble many other typical action narratives at this stage; it is intentionally clichéd, further drawing the player in with promises of the familiar.

However, after the white phosphorous massacre, Walker becomes delusional. Contrary to the objectivity suggested by the third-person perspective, the player is also subject to his hallucinations. The style is reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's 1998 film adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson's deliriously subjective *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The player must interpret events as they come to pass through the lens of Walker's madness, just as the viewer must interpret events in *Fear and Loathing* through the lens of Raoul Duke's substance use.

When the truths behind Walker's hallucinations are shown through flashbacks near the end of the game, the interiority of *TL* is made completely clear. The reality the player and Walker sees earlier in the game is not the reality of Lugo and Adams, who are clearly shown to be disturbed by Walker's erratic behaviour. However, cracks in the objective framework begin to appear much sooner than this; as the plot catches up with the helicopter chase that introduces the player to the setting at the very beginning of the game, Walker breaks the illusion of the fourth wall in a poignant exchange:

"Wait. Wait, this isn't right!", Walker exclaims as bullets fly. Lugo interrupts, referring to Walker's atrocities: "Well, it's too late now." Walker responds: "No, I mean we did this already!" Adams asks "What do you mean?" and Walker then shouts "Ah fuck it! It's nothing! Just shake these fucking guys!"

Such exchanges, and the repeated hallucinatory episodes, can be interpreted in several ways.[26] What is important is that this and other incongruous events are there to establish a feeling of unreality and subjectivity that forces the player to unwillingly (or unwittingly) observe and react to the projections of Walker's embattled psyche. While *HoD* is not as dramatic when Marlow makes his brushes with madness, it nevertheless guides his views of other people, and we are constrained and guided by his biases, interpretations, and prejudices. For instance, his experiences in the Congo Free State have clearly disturbed him; when he returns to Brussels he has difficulties in relating to his fellow Europeans, resenting them for being petty-minded and ignorant of the injustices taking place in the world, like Gulliver experiencing difficulties in adjusting after returning to England from his fantastic adventures. Marlow is disgusted by the people of the "sepulchral city" when they feign ignorance of their own inner ugliness, which lurks within like corpses inside beautified tombs. But despite having been touched by what he saw, he does not become a delusional lunatic ruled by his own post-traumatic stress. On the other hand, while Marlow blasts his fellow Europeans for their depravities, he himself is participating in the ivory trade, about which he is pointedly silent – thus, we may also be able to speak of projection in *HoD* as we do in *TL*.[27]

We are naturally free to make our own interpretation of not only the trauma Marlow experiences, but of *all* his experiences as they appear in the work. No one reading of *HoD* is the same, and neither is any playthrough of *TL*. So while technically dissimilar, the framing of perspective in *TL* results in much the same sense of subjectivity and unreliable reality caused by the intensely personal perspective in *HoD*, but here it is contrived in a way that is both unsettling and well executed.

The game is also manipulative. The writers of the game were not satisfied merely with killing what is supposed to be the primary antagonist months before the events of the game even begin, rendering the entire effort pointless. In order to progress, the player is forced to carry out decisions Walker makes (independent of the wishes of his men and the player) that have dire consequences for all involved. As I have noted, the illusion of choice is an important theme in *TL*. The same does not seem to be true in *HoD*. Marlow chooses to be true to his ordered path in life as a sailor and little else, and survives. Kurtz chooses to embrace chaos and is destroyed.

Medium specificity and audience expectations can be used to explain why *TL* places so much emphasis on choice where *HoD* does not. As stated before, video games often feature the possibility of altering the direction of the plot in some way, and this possibility is seen as a selling point. A game is viewed as more appealing if the player has the agency to fundamentally impact the

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[26]   Some view it as a sign that everything taking place after the helicopter crash is in fact a depiction of Walker's soul languishing in some kind of purgatory or hell.

[27]   Again, many thanks to fellow student Karl Kristian Swane Bambini for this perspective on Marlow's role in Conrad's Congo.

game world. But as player choices are ultimately without consequence in *TL,* I believe it can be interpreted as a critique or parody of the shallowness of player agency in video games. I will return to this later, but my conclusion is that there is a hollowness to these choices that, through repetition, teaches the players that they have no real agency in the course of the game's events.

Conrad's Hollowness in *The Line*

In *HoD,* Kurtz is described by Marlow as "hollow at the core" (58) and variations of this statement occur a number of times. This metaphor for people's innate inhumanity finds no verbal repetition in *TL*. Instead, a far more literal interpretation is offered. Mannequins begin to appear in the game as it lurches on towards its frenzied climax, first in locations where one would expect them to be, but later in places that make little sense. Their placement appears to have no logic; they are not posed to construct a scene, for instance. They are simply there, and stand silently by as firefights rage around them. If they are hit, they crumble.

The most bizarre mannequin-related scene in the game is when, caught alone, Walker is trapped in a room full of them and with a "heavy", an enemy soldier wearing a suit of bullet resistant armour. The lights suddenly flicker and the screen distorts, and each time the light comes back, there is a mannequin where the heavy used to stand. This sequence continues until all the mannequins have been shot to pieces and the heavy can no longer "inhabit" them, allowing the player to focus enough fire on him to bring him down. The scene is eerie, confusing, and disorienting, the flashing lights and camera distortions spoiling the player's aim.

Mannequins are not the only objects inclined to turn into something else in the game. During play, your enemies wear the faces of Walker's comrades twice, first when Walker zip-lines from one building to another, landing on an enemy soldier. The soldier falls to the ground and struggles to shoot Walker. Walker (and the player) hesitates to kill him, because the soldier has taken the appearance of Adams. The second time something similar happens, it is near the end of the game. After Lugo has been lynched by a mob of angry refugees, Walker and Adams attempt to enter a door. Before they can do so, it explodes and out comes Lugo, guns blazing, berating Walker for leading him to his death. It is difficult to avoid being killed here, and if you lose, "Lugo" is gone the second time you play the scene, replaced by a heavy.

The recurring motifs of the hollowness and impermanence of the identity of the characters in the game are among its most fascinating aspects. Konrad is not the only hollow man (in fact, the argument could be made that he is more of a "full" person than Walker); virtually every character is. And this is not restricted to the characters. The play experience may also be seen as hollow, since

your choices have no impact, and the gunplay is stale and formulaic. The men of The Company and the inhabitants of Brussels all frustrate Marlow when they pretend that they have no darkness within them, no hollowness. The Africans frighten and fascinate him, wearing their darkness on their skin both figuratively and literally. Kurtz is worse, the darkness within him turns into a total absence of moral light, a hollowness of the soul, that threatens to consume everything and horrifies Marlow. Even Kurtz himself finds the horror lying within him before he dies. This hollowness is activated by the madness of the Congo Free State, sustained by the supposed bestial nature of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, Marlow pulls himself out of there and returns to Europe, with the conclusion of his experience being that he can now safely recount his story to a sedate audience on the Thames.

Walker's hollowness is not only the result of horrifying trauma. He brought it with him into the game's narrative from long before the *now* of its plot. Walker's relationship to Konrad during their deployment in Afghanistan is a gap in the game's backstory that is never fully elucidated. Walker acquired his immense respect for the Colonel there, but even the experience of war that reduced him to a "bleedin' carcass" was not enough of a lesson in the gritty realities of asymmetric warfare to dissuade Walker from making decisions in *TL* as if he were a cowboy, or some other pastiche hero-character. This informs the psychology of not only himself, but also of the player during the game. At each crossroads, Walker shrugs off his orders and embarks on a crusade to save someone, to play the hero. Each attempt ends in disaster, and it is too late when he realises that he is no hero, and that the standards of heroism in films and games do not apply to reality.

The player is challenged to develop in similar ways during play, in that the game functions more or less as a subversion of the structure of the typical "male power fantasy". To summarize briefly: both Walker and the player attempt to force artificial notions of masculine heroism on Dubai, the result being total mayhem and the collapse of all semblance of order and justice. The mirror image of himself that Walker confronts at the end of the game is not that of Martin Walker, a disciplined Delta Force operative, but a ghoulish killer, burnt by hellfire and bathed in blood, the transformation into which can be seen by the player as Walker's character model becomes increasingly bloodied and scarred as the game progresses. The following quotation from writer Walt Williams is illuminating:

> Seeing gamers go into the experience hoping to have a fun, shooty bro-romp through a middle eastern environment […] killing soulless, villainous enemies who are difficult to relate to (and thus easy to pull the trigger on), and then slowly finding themselves falling down the rabbit hole into a darker, more contemplative, more surreal, and character-driven experience has been amazing for me. (2012)

The riverboat scene in *HoD* where the boat is cloaked in mist, with the desolate wail of the Congolese sounding off in the distance, is an excellent example of Conrad's ability to construct a

scene of an otherworldly, atmospheric quality. In like manner, *TL*'s white phosphorous episode is ghastly and appalling. It gave me a sense of frustration and having been "betrayed" or manipulated by the game's creators, as I was essentially forced to carry out a dreadful act without being told the consequences beforehand. Of course, such a reaction was more an indictment on the state of player agency in games in general than on the manipulativeness of Yager. Up to playing *TL*, in almost all games with player choice as a feature, I had been conditioned to expect to be hand-led through the decisions I was expected to make during play, with their consequences, rewards and penalties explicitly laid out as to allow me to carefully choose the most appealing path to take. It is a detached calculation of risk and reward. This minimization of unpleasant surprises appeals to the instincts of someone who plays games for fun, as in this way, the choices they make are always well-understood, well-reasoned, and with no nasty consequences down the road to spoil the simulation of being a hero. When *TL* disrupted that conditioning, it made me feel uncomfortable, frustrated, and uncertain whether or not what I was doing was right – which is exactly the emotional thrust found in the core of *TL*. It models, with some skill, the kind of barely informed, hasty decision-making that often ends in disaster in combat situations; there is little room for heroism.

Minor Imagery of *Heart of Darkness* shared by *The Line*

Shortly after Marlow first arrives in the Congo, he remarks with some discomfiture on the metal wreckage of a boiler and other railway machinery littering the roadside: "The thing looked dead as the carcass of some animal" (15). Shortly after arriving in Dubai, Delta comes across the shattered hulk of a crashed jumbo jet, the sands surrounding it littered with deceased tourists, luggage, and parts. The aircraft is gutted and its exposed metal frame shines white in the sunlight, the scene similar to one of a desiccated carcass in the desert. In either work, the imagery of artefacts associated with modernity and progress lying in ruin can be seen as a foreshadowing of coming blasts against the dominant cultural narrative. In *HoD*, the decay of the European machines and the Europeans themselves could be a reflection of the anxieties surrounding malaria, going native, and other "corrupting influences" of colonial adventurism. The same may be observed in *TL,* as Delta, the "good Americans", erstwhile bringers of progress, democracy, freedom, and justice to the uncivilized corners of the Earth, find themselves and everything they bring with them, including their ideals, destroyed by the chaos of Dubai. They are caught up in a war between forces they barely understand, and their well-intentioned interference produces nothing but further misery.[28]

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[28] There is an added narrative level at play in the game. Hard-to-find intelligence documents and recordings made by Darden before he became the Radioman reveal that the elite of Dubai downplayed the severity of the approaching sandstorms so that they could escape the city without a panicking middle- and under-class impeding their flight, leaving them stranded in the doomed city.

The repeated references to mysterious, ominous drums beating out of the darkness of the jungle in *HoD* finds an interesting modern parallel in *TL*. The Vietnam-era protest songs played over the radio is remarked upon by Walker's colleagues as eerie and "weird." Later, Walker and the player learns that this is the doing of the Radioman, but up to that point the drums and the rock music are two contrasting motifs, both mysterious and haunting in their application. To Marlow, the drums may be an uncomfortable reminder of the darkness of the land itself, beating like a heart. The reason for the drumming is unknown. Again, one cannot know the Other in *HoD*. What the protest music signifies to Walker is also unknown, but the players may draw their own conclusions. From my perspective, it highlights the contradictions and tensions of the game. It alludes to the War on Terror as being yet another Vietnam. The fact that the lyrics are English and the tunes familiar changes the metaphor from unintelligible Otherness in *HoD* to an uncomfortable Sameness in *TL*. There is a disconcertingly paradoxical dimension to it, as music associated with a dedicated pacifist movement flows out of speakers as the player participates in bloodshed.

The journey from light into darkness is there in both works. The journey itself is not simply represented as a horizontal trek along the Congo river in *HoD*. Before setting off to Africa, Marlow says "I felt as though instead of going to the centre of a continent I were about to set off for the centre of the earth." (13) Falling into the earth's core literally takes place in *TL*. Walker navigates not only horizontally through the landscape of a broken Dubai, he descends – in one case by way of a gruelling fall – from the lofty heights of its luxurious skyscrapers, into the darkness beneath the desert, deeper than logically or physically possible. Walker even slips into Hell in a hallucination in which everything is bathed in fire and Konrad taunts him from his tower in the distance. At the opening of *HoD,* the prose is littered throughout with references to light, the sun, and illumination. The opening of *TL* has the player admire the scene of Dubai in the distance, gleaming beautifully in the sunlight. The darkness becomes emphasised after the tonal shift – in *HoD,* when Marlow takes over the narration, and in *TL,* when Walker begins to fight Americans. Marlow's riverboat is at one point swallowed by fog. Walker commandeers an attack helicopter, which after a long chase is engulfed by a sandstorm and crashes. What the darkness represents in both works can be many things, though I have no doubt that one of them is the prosaic notion of human savagery lurking just beneath the skin. Though Marlow finds Kurtz's living shade waiting for him in the lowest circle of hell, Walker must ascend from that lowest point, up through the tower, where at the top he will find Konrad's ghost. Marlow approaches Kurtz from a position of moral and mental stability; Walker has debased himself so completely that even Konrad appears as a better man.

Subsection 3: Ethics, Effects, and Reflexivity

Spec Ops: The Line merits a discussion of the ethical dimension of both itself and its relation to *Heart of Darkness.* Both present ethical challenges to the player or reader. In the case of *TL,* the common interpretation (such as in Keogh's and Williams' view) is that players are tasked with reconsidering their casual commitment to entertaining themselves with simulated violence. This simulation of violence is usually constructed by supplying a caricature of the Other, a group who has to be blasted apart to win the day. *TL* contains a reversal of that trend, in that you kill those who are Same. It may also be a critique of the neo-colonial tone of contemporary mass culture, but I do not hold the belief that *TL* spells it out for the player, nor that *TL* necessarily does all the above particularly well. I hope to construct an argument for viewing *HoD* and *TL* as similar works not only because one is an adaptation of the other, but because the experience of reading or playing shares fundamental similarities – that the objective or effect of both works is to bring the reader from a state of ignorance into something that, while perhaps not representing clarity, enlightenment, or insight, is certainly a state of being disturbed – a condition that demands contemplation and from which understanding may be reached independently and by one's own reasoning.

This section, then, will focus on the following aspects: the ethical responsibility of the reader/player, player agency in *TL,* and some aspects of the game's narration, as contrasted with that of *HoD.*

The Singularity of Literature and Its Implications for Games

Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004) contains a wealth of useful notions as to the ethical dimension of literature and the act of reading. It also happens to focus on an author who is quite Conradian (a label Coetzee would nevertheless dislike, perhaps). Coetzee's works often feature depictions of colonialism, empire, the periphery thereof, boundaries and relationships between self and Other (abusive or otherwise), communication, miscommunication, and so on. These are depictions that require a degree of "unpacking" by the reader in order to be fully appreciated. Coetzee, I would claim, achieves with a greater degree of sophistication and reflection what it appears Conrad attempted to in *HoD,* as Coetzee deals in many cases with the same themes. Certainly, in the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians,* Coetzee portrays the difficulties of comprehension and communication between Same and Other in a way that is not exclusively introspective, as is the impression in *HoD.*

Attridge defines this unpacking or interpretation as part of the event of literature. In this

perspective, literature is not a noun, but a verb—something that happens to the reader during a reading. The reader is not a "free-floating subject but […] the nexus of a number of specific histories and contextual formations—who brings the work into being, differently each time" (2004, 9). Attridge notes that

> I do not treat the text as an object whose significance must be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through. (39)

He goes on to say that he had a distinct *experience,* not a reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This configures an intriguing reworking of the vocabulary and conceptual frame surrounding literature, which opens it up to the suggestion that such an experience may also take place in a more visual, auditory, interactive medium. However, this experience is, in Attridge's understanding, unique to literature and part of what defines it, making literature singular and exceptional in society, not least for its ability to evoke otherness and self-reflection in a dynamic way. With texts ultimately considered interactive, the impression might be that video games would be somewhat like the highest form of that kind of textual interactivity.

What is active and what is passive even in one form of media varies greatly, however. There is, for instance, a substantive difference between Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and one of James Davis' *Garfield* strips: one invites interpretation, the other does not. I posit that approaching *TL* with a passive or disengaged attitude will spoil the experience fundamentally. Without interpretation, *The Line* is simply a poor game – one that utilizes "bulls**t guilt tactics" and derivative mechanics. Even with a more active interpretive involvement, however, it employs many of the tactics used by other developers to whitewash violence and death. The fantastic war spectacle of *Apocalypse Now*, usually considered anti-war, made it hard to digest for some (Keiths, 2007). The game thus contains contradictions that it may be difficult to reconcile. Much of the violence in *TL* is merely a genre convention, however flimsy an excuse that may be, but when the game truly wants to disturb the player with its violence, it strips away the spectacle and glamour in what I will argue are effective ways.

Ethical Demands of Literature

The interactive nature of text, then, places some ethical demands on literature, and not least on literature depicting some manner of injustice or oppression. As the reader's experience of that text is what ultimately conveys a sense of meaning, it demands ethical thinking from readers. J. M.

Coetzee seems to choose, most often, simply to portray these controversial aspects frankly, while also involving things commonly viewed as challenging or taboo as a means to frame, anchor or supplement his writing. Such topics, like torture, or the inherent contradictions of agency and consent in sexual relationships between coloniser and colonised, appear in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace,* and in *From the Heart of the Country* (all works containing a great many transgressive themes, such as fratricide, fetishisation of rape, etc.). While bleak, disturbing or provoking in their own right, these novels contain no explicit value judgements aside from those which their characters make, and those may often be as useless or disengaged as those made by Marlow in *HoD*. This has lead to Coetzee becoming a controversial figure in South Africa, as a white man who, while often writing about injustice, is not sufficiently *engaged* through his writing in the injustices of the society in which he has lived, according to his critics. The following quote from Coetzee is illuminating as to his thinking:

> No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because (I parody the position somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. (36-7)

This seems to me to have a general applicability. Not all works depicting narratives taking place within oppressive regimes or times of political upheaval need necessarily to be *about* or contain commentary on the large- or small-scale dynamics of such issues. It may simply be about whatever the book is depicting, which may contain its own set of meanings and symbolisms, perhaps entirely disconnected from those of the troubled society in which the story takes place. However, it is understandable that this matter-of-fact, prosaic approach to writing stories taking place within the confines of an extremist apartheid state or any other deeply troubled society should invite irritation and criticism, especially when coming from an individual nominally from the subjugating, dominant group from which repression and violence often descends. Especially when it is taken for granted that all writing is political; certainly, the realities of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa makes political involvement not only a necessity, but a matter of livelihood and dignity for a large portions of its citizens.

To expect that *HoD* should deliver a set of concise condemnations of the abuses of European imperialism in the Congo Free State and the African continent in general is futile. It is also a historically anachronistic expectation. In any case, such explicitly political works do not necessarily

make for strong literature. I believe it is useless to demand that *HoD* be engaged literature, literature that seeks to provoke readers into ethical action, as it is traditionally understood. Rather, *HoD* is the depiction of a series of challenging, problematic themes, events, and characters, in a specific chronological and political context, presented in such a way that it allows for a large degree of interpretation and contemplation through seeking to be a disturbing or disquieting experience. As Attridge would have it, neither *HoD* nor *TL* are entirely allegorical. While they have allegorical applicability (for instance, *HoD* and Leopold's Free State, *TL* and the War on Terror), they both function like his conception of literature, which "invites an ethical response" rather than allegory, which "announces a moral code" (64). I believe few such announcements are to be found in either *HoD* or *TL*.

In the case of *TL,* there is the caveat of more obvious "reader" participation in shaping the events to be interpreted. The ethical action, if any, is expected to come from the player, who must digest the experience and translate it into interpretation and opinion. This ad-hoc approach to ethical involvement and "illumination" comes with a price, which is the increased chance that the reader will not understand. Such a method of appealing to contemplation has a significant chance of failure in the cultural context of the video games industry.

Games Culture and Criticism

In material terms, the games industry is so intimately embedded in the modes and aspects of certain branches of pop culture entertainment that it resists the influence of other cultural modes, such as those to be found in literature, including analysis, deconstruction, and criticism, as it is understood there. This may make the ethically interpretive mental space that makes *TL* a rewarding experience hard to enter for many players. This is not to say that giving games an analytical, interpretive community is as simple as transplanting the traditions and methods of literary studies into those focusing on games, which is a narratologically biased position that privileges narrative over simulation. Neither do I make the claim that games have no "serious" or analytical interpretive community in place already, as several journals such as *Game Studies* exist and are making important contributions to the field. As with written works or film, there are several canons within the interpretive communities devoted to games, some of them cherishing games seen to be containing a literary aspect, while others celebrate games for being excellent simulations. Many do both. Players have their own analytical, interpretive approaches and philosophies when it comes to games, sometimes overlapping with those in literary circles, others similar to film theory, and so on. I will argue, however, that the video games industry – and the particular consumer culture that

comes with it – is inherently unreceptive to much of any sort of analysis, finding it pretentious. By its very nature as an entertainment industry being inclined to produce goods for public consumption, it demands that games just be "fun", whichever way "fun" can be defined, as to not upset shareholders or the target demographic by complicating the creative development process or the reception rituals practised by games journalism and reviewers. Ian Bogost (2006) puts it succinctly:

> In the spirit of the Hollywood film industry, the ESA's (Entertainment Software Association) unspoken ligature between 'entertainment software' and 'video and computer games' reveals contemporary culture's inherited ideology for games: they are amusements, distractions that have no place provoking thought. (114-5)

This means that social commentary and critical reception outside of accepted rituals and review procedures (as established by the games magazine industry) are generally dismissed as fussy, hostile, and as "being too serious". The magazines purporting to offer professional and unbiased commentary on the industry is often indistinguishable from games marketing, which, in turn, is firmly in the sphere of influence of the games publishing companies. Developers making large games with impressive market penetration are almost totally dependent on the publishers for funding. The publishers, in turn, must appease stockholders and demand that the developers conform to market demands as they (or their market analysts) interpret them. The industry is thus inherently conservative and dominantly anti-intellectual, with many development studios experiencing limited freedom of expression in the face of commercial concerns. Naturally, exceptions do exist, as with the relationship between 2K Games and Yager, and increasingly in the self-publishing games market.

The Line as the Anti-Blockbuster Game

One of *TL*'s most fascinating aspects is its attempt to buck the above trend by being unorthodox, and generally unconcerned with appeasing the usual target demographic for shooter games. To which degree it succeeds or fails to be profound, itself being a commodity meant to compete with and to be consumed like other pieces of entertainment software, is another matter. Bogost makes the assertion that games are, or may be, examples of "industrial art", a "creative process that participates in the market economy" (73), that exists to be enjoyed rather than interpreted, which fits the above description. Though industrial art by its very nature is inexorably couched in and moulded by capitalism, it may also be enjoyed as art, as objects to be interpreted, if the consumer is so inclined. Ultimately, there is room for resistance and interrogation when consuming a piece of

industrial art that the producer or artist may not have envisioned or expected during its creation.

Seen from this perspective, *TL*'s shortcomings can be explained, if not excused, in simple terms. The game had to make a profit for 2K Games and Yager, it had to compete with similar-looking games that nevertheless were designed to do completely different things. Yager could not alienate its target demographic and thus the game had to be marketed and, crucially, made in a particular way, while in reality the game has very little to offer its target demographic other than stretches of stale, formulaic gameplay amidst moments of obscenity and horror – something that undoubtedly alienated many. It carries the veneer of an action-filled blockbuster game, while attempting to reject that status. Were it to solely focus on the visceral filth of modern warfare, it would skirt dangerously close to "gore pornography".

HoD can be approached in a similar way, as it takes an issue (European excesses in the Congo Free State) and attempts to turn it into an arena where reader interrogation can take place. It parodies patriotic appeals to imperial glory and relates a harrowing experience that, while influenced by interiority and solipsism, invites an ethical response. Obviously *HoD* and *TL* belong to very different genres, but the experience of reading and playing them share similar patterns and seek to achieve similar effects.

The Failures of *The Line* and *Heart of Darkness*

The narrative style of *HoD*, the highly introspective mode, makes everything outside of Marlow alien and unknowable. It has limited applicability as a normative statement on the excesses of colonialism because of this. The genre conventions of *TL* and its nature as a game can similarly make its observations on war and heroics seem hollow or even hypocritical. On one hand, the player is told by the game's loading screens (the developers' chief arena in which to convey messages directly to the player) that the game's events are all their fault, implying that they should abandon the game if they hope for any kind of happy ending. On the other, progress through the game's narrative and set-piece[29] battles is entirely predicated by the player engaging in (and winning) adrenaline-fuelled, spectacular firefights of the kind that is at home in any of Hollywood's B-list action catalogue. While these mixed messages are likely to be intentional, and another set of the Conradian ambiguities at play in the game, it seems to be a counter-intuitive angle from which to present war and combat in a sober light. Then again, the fights deteriorate from movie magic action set-pieces to vicious, gruelling clashes over the course of the game, while mechanically remaining

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[29] A "set-piece moment" is where developers will craft an especially impressive or weighty scene with carefully pre-planned events to be triggered by the player characters as they move through the game space. Characters can typically still be controlled while these events are taking place. These may be contrasted with cutscenes, where events take place while control is taken from the player.

the same. This makes it difficult to make the case that *TL*'s use of shooter violence is directly at odds with its "message". There is also the interpretation, subjective though it may be, of the game's use of very conventional and "boring" mechanics, rules and genre tropes, e.g. the "cover shooter" concept almost entirely copied from Epic's *Gears of War* (2006), which is the governing ludic framework of *TL*.

This is either deliberate, to make the game's narrative aspects stand free from ludic distractions, or Yager quite simply made a poor game with a veil of hypocritical scorn for its intended audience lazily draped over its mechanics. My opinion leans in Yager's favour, however. That is to say, I believe that the various dissonant aspects of the game are choices made intentionally to enrich or ground the experience in an ethically questioning style, utilizing a measured amount of typical action-game indicators and glorification of combat usually found in the genre, only to abruptly turn around and push the player's face into a good deal of unpleasantness in order to "whiplash" them into a contemplative space. Cognitive dissonance is, after all, described with a dictionary definition in the text of one of the game's loading screens, so it is very much a theme employed directly by the developers. However, there is also the possibility of happy accidents, and that *TL's* core premise is fundamentally flawed, no matter how much the developers try to make it seem like contemplative, incisive social commentary. Finally, while not being a fault of the game itself, the capacity for *TL* to surprise and shock players diminishes the more it is discussed openly, and the more the players do not conform to the intended audience. Players who come into the experience with no foreknowledge of its twists will arguably have a more profound or persuasive experience. Minority or women players will likely not have had the same experiences that shape the identity of the "white male gamer" that *TL* seems intended for. On the other hand, players having some experience with the texts adapted in *TL* may find it a very interesting ordeal, and players who do not conform to its core demographic may interpret the experience in unexpected ways that benefits the discussion surrounding it. It is not as if there is nothing worthwhile in *TL* for individuals outside of the cultural category of the gamer.

The Fundamental Paradox of *The Line*

The game has one inherent paradox, and it may be difficult to reconcile it to the satisfaction of its critics. This paradox is that the game demands that players use a certain means to progress through its levels while also punishing and ridiculing them for it. In *HoD,* readers cannot change Marlow's behaviour or influence the course of events in any meaningful way aside from reading and superimposing their own interpretation on what they see in the text. The reader is not directly taken to task for what Marlow or Kurtz chooses to do. This is different in *TL*. On multiple occasions, the

game accuses the player of indifference to violence and of glorifying war, in a series of provocations of varying severity, while simultaneously providing incentives to experiment with a variety of weapon configurations and ways in which to incapacitate enemies.

A notable incentive is that the game awards the player achievement badges for, say, a certain number of head-shots or enemies killed with a particular weapon, amongst other things. Achievements are a ubiquitous feature in games, and a source of added enjoyment for many players, but in the case of *TL* it is curiously incongruous to encourage the player to be inventive and effective at dealing death, while playing a game purporting to critique bloodshed. Interestingly, several of these achievements – mostly those for reaching milestones in the game's narrative for the first time – involve references to other canonical works and pop cultural classics through the use of titles like *A Farewell to Arms, Three Kings, The Great Escape, Deer Hunter* and, referencing Conrad directly, *The Horror*. Other incentives involve tactile feedback on skilful actions in-game. Head-shots, for instance, result in a brief slowing down of time in order to display the gory result of the shot, which may be appealing to some players and distasteful to others. Perhaps the most crucial, basic incentive, is that the players are rewarded for clearing a scene of enemies by giving them narrative exposition, thus progressing the story of the game.

TL's nature as an interactive experience suggests a crucial difference from the "static" textual aspect of *HoD*, with special reference to its multiple endings, but it is in fact also very linear, as there is rarely more than one way in which players can progress through the narrative. How to deal with any particular firefight is naturally up to the player, but the conditions for success remain the same throughout the experience. Player agency is the operative concept. Put simply: kill all enemies in the scene to proceed, watch a cutscene propelling the narrative forward with no player input, enter a new scene, kill all enemies, repeat until the credits roll. Were the player truly given freedom to make ethically questionable choices while controlling Walker, it would be a different matter. For instance, if there was a choice between using the white phosphorous and a less horrifying means of resolving the conflict at the Gate, one that did not lead to civilian deaths, but the player still chose to use the phosphorous bombs, the accusatory tone would be less bewildering. In that hypothetical, the player was presented with two means to solve a problem in a chaotic situation but chose recklessly with devastating consequences.

More player agency would also signal a greater ludic dimension to *TL* – on the face of it, the narrative is guided by Walker's recklessness and hero complex far more than it is any fault of the player's. There is the metanarrative notion that the act of participating in and supporting the video game industry, by purchasing an action game, deserves scrutiny, as individuals playing *TL* are more than likely to have supported publishers of jingoistic war games such as Activision and EA in the past through purchasing titles from franchises such as *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor*. Thus, they

have supported styles and narrative practices *TL* seeks to critique. It is likely that the primary consumers of such games are *TL*'s intended audience – though whether or not they are a suitable audience is another matter entirely. In fact, the most meaningful choice for a player hoping for a peaceful resolution to the situation in the game's setting, and to avoid possible discomfiture, is simply not to play the game, which makes very little sense commercially. However, being subjected to discomfort and fear as a source of excitement and titillation is a prominent feature of the horror genre. Seen that way, *TL* is a very successful horror title.

By refusing to stop the play session before the game ends, the player is at fault for Walker's actions. By striving, with Walker, for a heroic conclusion to the crisis, Walker and the player are both to blame for the consequences. However, when and if the players have reached the end of the game's narrative, they are free to either dismiss the experience, or to use it in whatever way they wish. They can interpret the narrative in one way or the other, or examine their attitude to power fantasies, or what ever as a response to their experience of enduring *TL*. In that sense, the experience of *TL* is not entirely unlike self-flagellation – the discomfort brings with it a kind of reward.

The Masculine Power Fantasy

TL engages with and deconstructs the so-called masculine power fantasy quite effectively. Chris Crawford's *The Art of Computer Game Design*, written in 1982, may be antediluvian in the temporal perspective of the video game industry, but it introduces four principles of game design that are still relevant: representation, interaction, conflict and safety. The first three principles will not be discussed here, but the fourth is primarily what allows for the power fantasy aspect of games, as well as of films and literature. Here, Crawford states that

> Conflict implies danger; danger means risk of harm; harm is undesirable. Therefore, a game is an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations. In short, a game is a safe way to experience reality. More accurately, the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models. (12)[30]

In many games, particularly of the shooter variety, the player is insulated from physical harm while engaging in fantasy scenarios in which they are very powerful and defeat many enemies. Often, while the player may be defeated in a given scene, they need only try again and use different tactics to succeed. Sometimes, particularly in games played in the third-person perspective, the

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[30]   Taken from the 1997 online edition.

protagonists' appearance may change somewhat to reflect the physical hardships they have endured during the game's narrative. Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2002) did this well, as the eponymous prince's clothing becomes increasingly tattered when he navigates traps and difficult duels with enemies over the course of the game's different levels. But such characters rarely appear to *suffer* from these hardships, supporting the notion that the player's avatar, in mechanical and narrative terms, is nearly invincible and, depending on skill, practice, and the boundaries set by the developers, capable of anything. Walker quite obviously suffers from the injuries and burns he receives, as his movement in response to player input is impeded by a limping gait by the end of the game, not to mention the reality around him being deformed not only by his disastrous heroics, but also by his heavily impaired mental state. Walker becomes insulated (or insulates himself) from his guilt through hallucinatory episodes and projections of personal guilt onto others.

The astounding feats players perform in video games are usually of the traditionally masculine variety. Extraordinary martial skill, heroism, strength, patriotism and soldier's grit are celebrated traits. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009) for example, relates an adrenaline-fuelled experience of war in Afghanistan, Russia, and the US that is arguably a manifestation of a typically conservative, jingoistic and masculinist interpretation of the American experience post-9/11. America herself is humbled through an invasion by sinister Russians (the classical Other, substituting the Arab variety that by 2009 had become a cliché) led by menacing ultra-nationalists and terrorists, and only the military might of the United States can possibly stop them, aided by the characters controlled by the player. For the sake of variation it also throws in a gruesome false-flag terrorist attack in a Russian airport in which the player may participate as a sort of CIA double-agent, in order to establish the villainy of the "bad" Russians. Unfortunately, the principal antagonist constructed in that event gets lost in a bewildering flurry of player characters, villains, and other instances of virtual ghastliness. The airport episode thus feels pointlessly indulgent, as its point gets lost in the unfocused plot. *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (Infinity Ward, 2013) takes it even further, containing a quasi-fascist subtext: in the future, the South American continent in its entirety, its countries assembled into the menacing Federation, seeks to give America a beating. The Federation does this by capturing an American orbital super weapon (named Odin), firing it on the US, and by occupying the country. Despite this, and the game's attempt to construct a narrative in which the Americans are now the weaker part in an instance of asymmetric warfare, the player character and his square-jawed, anglo-saxon allies, organized into teams named after Norse mythology, are so powerful that, during play, they utterly and comically crush the foreigners. Umberto Eco (1995)[31] claims that in traditional fascist doctrine, the enemy must be feared and ridiculed at the same time, a dynamic that can be detected in *Ghosts*. The surviving protagonists,

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[31]   Eco's "Eternal Fascism: fourteen ways of looking at a blackshirt", taken from themodernworld.com.

after the South-American invaders have been dealt with, are all rugged white men, with women or minority characters either dead, out of the scene, or mowed down by the protagonists. A mitigating factor may be these games' high emphasis on their multi-player modes – metrics from various sources suggests that far fewer players complete the single-player campaign compared to those participating in multi-player. But that does little to change the fact that the narrative parts of these games contain troubling themes and implications, the closer examination of which is typically resisted. This is disappointing, considering the relatively sober treatment of war and its casualties in the series' earlier games, such as the original *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007).

Crawford's safety principle seemingly only covers physical safety. Repeated exposure to this kind of discourse, disguised as harmless entertainment, may have an effect on how a player relates to the real-world implications of warfare, the military, nationalism, race, gender and so on, outside of play. In other words, it is conceivable that they may be ideologically persuasive or harmful through being a part of a cultural context that normalizes aggression and prejudice, or at least the acceptance of such in popular culture. These games and the activity of playing them are nevertheless often defended, justly or no, by appealing to their status as distractions from reality, as entertainment, not serious, fun, and as a valve for pressure relief. It is within this ecosystem that *TL* must compete for attention.

Games, Aggression, and Prejudice

The persuasive power of games (and films and music) is a controversial point. Discussions on the topic can stray close to the way in which players and the games they play are sometimes derided for promoting aggression and violence in news media during moral panics. It is a reflexive scapegoating mechanism in the absence of the willingness or wherewithal to legitimately challenge the ultimate causes of such violence. Furthermore, claiming that video games and other pop-culture artefacts are so powerful that they can influence ordinary people into becoming violent or bigots is to submit to the ideological over the factual, to strip consumers of the agency and intelligence to reject such messaging. De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) is a valuable reminder that the public is not always shepherded by sinister cultural elites. According to him, readers are not moulded by what they read. Rather, they mould what they read, to suit their own purposes: "the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control" (170). Janice Radway observed much the same in her study of readers of harlequin romance novels in 1984: instead of being unwittingly forced further into domesticity by the somewhat patriarchal or male-dominant focus of many of these novels,

women expressed the reading experience in this way:

> Romance reading, as Dot herself puts it, constitutes a temporary "declaration of independence" from the social roles of wife and mother […] these women reserve a special space and time for themselves alone. As a consequence, they momentarily allow themselves to abandon the attitude of total self-abnegation in the interest of family welfare which they have so dutifully learned is the proper stance for a good wife and mother. (60-61)

In this way, what was thought to be a tool of patriarchal indoctrination was experienced by its readers as an avenue for rebellion, fantasy and relaxation.

While aware of this, I do argue that games currently have an important place in the pop-cultural collective memory of many people at different ages, and, as such, games may contribute to or dissuade from anti-sociality in a general way. I also hold that they are one impulse among many. I am, in any case, not suggesting that "blame" can be laid squarely on games, or the people playing them, as there are many composite causes of anti-sociality that originate far outside of popular culture. Players can definitely make their own space for resistance and personal meaning-making within games, as they can with literary texts. But there are also strong ideological currents present in many games, and some of them are troublesome. Games may not have magic powers of persuasion, but when such ideological currents are detected by large numbers of players already convinced of their veracity, or by adolescents in the early process of shaping their world-view, I am not so certain that there is no effect.

There is some recent research that discusses the role of games in shaping aggressive or othering tendencies amongst players. One such is a 2010 report by psychologists Tobias Greitemeyer and Neil McLatchie that claims to offer new proofs.[32] This report came from two experiments, one attempting to measure dehumanization (in the nomenclature of this thesis, othering), and the other attempting to measure aggression amongst players. In the case of the first experiment, it was found that members of out-groups, such as immigrants, were seen as non-human and were othered by participants to a greater degree after playing violent games than after having played games deemed prosocial by the researchers (2011, 661).

In the second experiment, participants were asked to write essays that were to be marked by other participants. The participants did not know that it was the researchers themselves who were in fact doing the marking. After having written their essays, the participants were then assigned to play either a violent or a prosocial game, after which their essays were returned with very discouraging and provocative marks. They were then asked to rate this fictional participant. The result, the

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[32] "Denying Humanness to Others: A Newly Discovered Mechanism by Which Violent Video Games Increase Aggressive Behavior." *Psychological Science,* 22.5 (2011): 659-665. Cf. your footnote references above (with such info missing)

researchers concluded, was this: "Participants who played the violent video game judged the other participant less positively than did participants who played the neutral video game" (663). The population size (100, all of whom were students) may have skewed the results, but for the purposes of establishing a correlation between playing certain kinds of games and how they can influence aggression and prejudice, the study is nevertheless valuable. The games used were also fairly primitive in terms of graphics and explicitly violent content. It is conceivable that more visceral games would produce greater differences in the results of the test groups.

Another study, from the University of Maryland, recorded the reactions of 361 youths between the ages of 14 and 17 to stereotypical depictions of gender in games, male as well as female.[33] Admittedly the study has a serious methodological problem, in that the participants did not actually play the games. Instead, they were given visual descriptions of them by the researchers in lieu of screenshots, due to parental concerns. For this reason, and for the fact that games are a small part of a greater cultural context in which harmful attitudes may develop in adolescents, the researchers were wary of suggesting a causal relationship between the playing of games and attitudes towards gender stereotypes. Nevertheless the study contains some insights worth mentioning. After examining the reactions from the students to the games, it concludes that the findings "indicate that more frequent playing of video games is associated with greater acceptance and less critical evaluation of gender stereotypes" (2009, 192).

The adolescent perspective is central to the discussion, as games including masculinist stereotypes (e.g. *Call of Duty*) such as characters with exaggerated bodily proportions that are likely to be objectified or stereotyped negatively (such as *World of Warcraft*, *Dota 2*, *League of Legends*), are often played by adolescents as a social activity with friends as much as it is for personal enjoyment. As the study suggests, with reference to child psychologists D. N. Ruble and C. L. Martin (1998), negative gender stereotypes are "being formed and transformed during this period of development" (171).

To conclude this brief discussion, it appears there is some justification for concern. The above study suggests adolescents playing games frequently are simultaneously less equipped to detect, or less willing to reject, negative gender stereotypes than peers who play such games less often. With the results in the first study showing a tendency towards higher aggression towards out-groups following the playing of violent games, a discussion on the contribution of video games on the consciousness of both young and adult players may still be relevant, without invoking moralistic judgements or asserting simplistic causal relationships between the two.

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[33] "Do Stereotypic Images in Video Games Affect Attitudes and Behavior? Adolescent Perspectives." *Children, Youth and Environments* 19.1 (2009): 170-196.

The Line as Rejecting the Power Fantasy

The Line begins by luring players in with promises of the familiar at first, and then veers off in the opposite direction. John Konrad's accusation at the end of the game that "you're here to pretend you're something you're not – a hero" is not only aimed at Walker, but at the player as well, and that notion can be seen at work throughout the game. The prescribed function of war games today is entertainment and tension relief, positioning the player in the middle of an extravagant power fantasy in which he (the default perspective is male) is nearly invulnerable, an unstoppable Herculean hero, and the very essence of militaristic machismo. He ploughs through hundreds of faceless and typically foreign enemy combatants (that are neatly categorized as Other). The perspective is often first-person – you do not see your character except for his hands and the weapon he carries, which serves to place the player further in the centre of the events, as if they were experiencing and influencing them. This functions to bridge the gap between reality and simulation and establishes experiential verisimilitude in some aspects, while rejecting it in others. For instance, the player model is not rendered in the game world because the player is seeing through his eyes, injuries are invisible, save for a red glare or splash of blood on the screen to signal that the player is taking damage, from what direction, and so on. The spectacular aspects of armed conflict are thus preserved, while its deleterious effects are erased or marginalized, in a way conceived to be primarily attractive to a male audience. There are, of course, exceptions. Some games following the power fantasy model feature female or minority protagonists, but they are vanishingly rare.

Crawford's safety principle can be extended to cover emotional or empathetic safety. In war games, the player is rarely tasked with dispatching enemies they care about, as they are menacingly Other. In *Call of Duty*'s multi-player mode and in the single-player campaign, the character models on both sides often have their faces covered, perhaps to preclude a sympathetic response to their deaths so as not to get in the way of the entertainment. It should be noted, however, that real-world militaries often do the same for different reasons; covering the faces may be a case of establishing verisimilitude rather than manipulating player psychology. *TL*, while also employing this to some degree, often leaves the faces of the American soldiers Walker must fight uncovered. They speak English, hurl accusations of murder and war crimes at Walker during firefights, cry for help as he kills them, thus staking a claim to a shared cultural and human Sameness between them and Walker. This may unnerve the player, as the black helmsman unnerved Marlow. You are, in fact, not killing anonymous evildoers – you are killing men who are committed, in their own way, to do what is right; at first to protect the civilians, then to punish Walker for killing them, and then to desperately fight to survive.

Experiential Effects

Finally we arrive at the question: how is the *experience* of reading *HoD* and playing *TL* different? A great deal of narrative, genre, and mechanical differences and similarities have already been examined. The following discussion will therefore limit itself primarily to the emotional and experiential effects of *TL* as compared its literary predecessor. The primary difference between the two, and the most compelling emotional drive in this regard, is reader culpability and guilt. In *HoD,* the reader is an observer, a fellow audience member who listens as Marlow relates his tale. The readers are culpable and guilty only insofar as they are members of and participants in Western cultural hegemony, and not all readers of *HoD* are culpable in this regard. In *TL*, you are there, you guide Walker and stand by as his (and your) decisions lead repeatedly to disaster. You struggle on in the vain hope that somehow, at the end of the journey, you can still be a hero. This is what drives Walker; Marlow is motivated because he is a captain and sailing up the river is what a captain does. He has a purity of purpose and behaves in accordance with his profession and goals. He is ethical (Greiff, 1992) despite his participation in the ivory trade. His greatest ethical breach is lying to the Intended, and his greatest expression of vice is his intense desire to hear Kurtz speak. Captain Walker is a war criminal, almost totally unredeemable – and the player becomes his accomplice.

In TL, The sense of culpability is enhanced by the audiovisual and tactile sophistication of the experience. The art direction and environment design take the players into an immersive other-reality, and while repetitive and numbing, the firefights are each an arena in which various experiential effects may be achieved each time they are played. The players may choose to stay at range and shoot the enemy from afar, which is also the less brutal option, or they may take risks and engage them in hand-to-hand duels; a successful kill done in this manner is rewarded with more ammunition, with which the player can kill more soldiers. This is of course a more visceral experience, at first satisfying, and later excessive. As the game progresses, Walker becomes gradually more unhinged and violent in incapacitating enemies in this fashion, reflecting the deterioration of his mental state. It is a noticeable change, and it becomes uncomfortable – it is no way for a self-styled hero to behave.

Marlow's character arc can be expressed as a curve. It starts at neutral, dips into something akin to a depression, but after he reaffirms his sanity following his time in Brussels, it begins to rise once more, the final lie notwithstanding. Walker's is an exponential dive, beginning at a high point, dipping slightly, and then plummeting into an inferno, and all the while the game is pointing almost gleefully at the player, as if saying "look at what you did!". Reading *HoD* is, in comparison, entirely safe, while playing *TL* is the functional equivalent of being called a bad person. At the end, the players can either a undergo a sacrificial sort of redemption through making Walker commit suicide,

removing him from the world of the game, or they can indulge completely in the monstrosity by murdering Walker's rescuers. The moderate solution – surrender to the US army scouts – does little to assuage Walker's gruesome actions, as he himself implies that he has not truly survived his experiences.

In the end, all the decisions Walker and the player believe they have made in the pursuit of justice are shown to have been totally inconsequential. The choice between executing a water thief or the soldier that, in a fit of rage, killed the thief's family for his crime, or yet, to attack the enemy snipers watching over the bizarre scene and thus to break free of having to make the choice, makes no difference. We are shown by Konrad's spectre that all Walker did was shoot one of two corpses dangling from a sign, Lugo and Adams staring in disbelief at the absurd behaviour of their leader. On another occasion, the player is faced with the choice of either rescuing a potential informant, currently under torture by the 33rd, who can aid them in getting to Konrad, or some refugees who are being punished by the 33rd for rising against them. Going after the informant ends in all the civilians being shot, and the informant perishing before he can divulge anything useful – there is no real choice, as an attempt on saving the civilians instead of the informant ends in their deaths anyway. One outcome is as uselessly gruesome as the other. When Lugo is murdered by the angry mob in the refugee camp, the player can choose between firing into the crowd, killing dozens, or dispersing them peacefully. Either way, their death is assured. Walker has helped CIA agent Riggs, who against Walker's wishes destroyed the last supply of potable water in Dubai. The end result is identical; the civilians die, or will eventually die. All decision-making in the game is meaningless except as a source of aggravation and despair.

The futility of choice in *TL* is a reflection of choices in games in general, as only very rarely has there ever been a game where the available choices amounted to much more than those found in "choose-your-own-adventure" novels. That is, choices are binary, simple, and ultimately constrained by the rules of the simulation or the narrative. Nevertheless, even if games may give the appearance of freedom or agency, and may emulate them well, few explore these limitations. *TL* does so, in a way that is bleak, derisive, and frustrates the player.

Self-Reflexivity

As Delta fight their way into his building, the Radioman exclaims with laughter: "Ah jeez... where's all this violence comin' from, man? Is it the video games? I bet it's the video games." This satirical expression of medium-specific self-awareness is neither the first nor the last such reminder in *TL* that what is being experienced, after all, is a video game. As such, it is an artefact of popular culture

with all that entails. However, as a game, it violates the assigned purpose of the medium; it isn't "fun", it restricts the players' choices and seems to revel in doing so, and players will generally not end their sessions feeling entertained. It does not resolve tension; it invokes it.

Walker's bewildered statement during the return to the helicopter chase scene that this has all happened before may at first seem an incongruous, perhaps pretentious breaking with the fourth wall. But when so much of Walker's experience in Dubai is hallucinatory or virtual, the contrast between "virtual reality" or the simulation of events in the game and the reality of the player's physical presence outside it becomes blurred. By this, I mean that the players become invested in the experience the more it refers to itself as virtual. Virtual experience, by its very definition, is safe, not being real. By doing so it opens up a safe space by assuring the players of the unreality of the experience, that it is fine to emulate heroism and to kill for entertainment – and then closes on the players like a bear trap, challenging them emotionally and empathetically.

There is also the juxtaposition between the serious and the ludicrous at play in *TL* that emphasises its *game*-ness, and the incongruity of what is taking place within its framework as a game. The narrative is very serious, whereas the ludus is mostly uninspired and tedious. Certainly, it is a lacklustre simulation of "the horrors of war", as the players need only take cover long enough for the most critical wounds to heal as if by magic, after which they are free to participate in further awkward gunplay. Even death is merely a stumbling block; there are no real consequences for actions taken by the player in mechanical terms, you either succeed or you don't, while the narrative will (figuratively) lecture the player at length on how terrible it all is. Players can blow themselves up with grenades, throw themselves off skyscrapers, and turn the whole experience into a farcical joke by refusing to act according to the rules of the game. They may skip the cutscenes (as players unimpressed by game narratives often do), and any number of things that disrupt the narrative flow and undermine its ability to convey meaning in that particular play session. Still, they will not be significantly able to alter the game's narrative.

In most games, the contrast between serious narrative and farcical ludus is a result of media limitations, and the incongruities that arise from these limitations are often accidental. Worse, this can result in weakening both the narrative and the ludus of such games. Developers may want to tell a compelling, profound story, but are unable to effectively convey the themes of that story because the ludus does not accommodate for it, and players are reminded that the game is not a *story*, but a *game*. Stories can be serious, games are generally not. A familiar example, *TL*'s ludic encouragements for the player to engage in carnage, while narratively trying to convey the idea that "war is hell", may at first glance seem extremely dissonant. However, this works as a part of *TL*'s messaging because so much of the experience revolves around exploring such dissonances and ambiguities.

Somewhat like *HoD*, *TL* has a dual dimension. Conrad's novella is split into a frame narrative and Marlow's tale. *TL* also has two levels. The first is Walker's (compromised) reality, where he experiences his hallucinations and, until the bitter end, views himself as justified in his actions, as a hero. These justifications are supported by his hallucinations, in which Konrad eggs him on. But what at first seems like taunting lies from Konrad, as attempts to project Konrad's guilt on Walker, turns out to be statements of the obvious on the second level. Furthermore, it is Walker that is the one projecting guilt onto Konrad. The second level is the reality shared between Adams, Lugo, and the 33rd. The player can come to the realization that Walker is insane early in the game's narrative and thus view him from that level long before the game forces the player to do so. But the end result is the same, Walker (and the player) come to the unpleasant realization that they failed in what they came to this place to do: to be a hero.

Walker's character at the end of the game can be seen as an amalgamation of many influences, literary as well as filmic. First of all he is the generic white soldier-hero, "an easy projective surface for players at the beginning of the game, indistinguishable from countless other likeable if unremarkable heroes of American war games" (2014, 8). He is the bombastic frame narrator from the beginning of *HoD*, and he is a solipsistic character, like Marlow. He experiences the journey of Captain Willard from *Apocalypse Now*, only in reverse. In the film, Willard initially emerges as an obviously troubled individual, who goes from a state of misdirected, chaotic hopelessness to one of new-found purpose as he triumphs over Kurtz (though there is much ambiguity around whether or not that triumph is truly meaningful). Walker brought the trauma of Kabul with him to Dubai, and in that sense his sanity is always in doubt. But the insanity manifests itself differently as the narrative progresses, giving the player a gallery of several Walkers to observe, to sympathise with, or to reject. He is like the player; he is in Dubai to be a hero, to set things right by the judicious application of firepower, to punish the villain. Only, contrary to many such virtual experiences, they cannot happen in the Dubai of *TL*. Walker is a two-dimensional hero character, inserted into a world that does not tolerate two-dimensional hero characters. The horror in *TL* is, after all, taking place somewhere in reality. *TL* seeks to critique the deliberate transposition of brutality into entertainment by promising the familiar, but delivering an interrogation. This interrogation is at first indirect, seemingly aimed towards Walker, but quickly becomes focused on the players. They are reminded that it is a game all along, which is perhaps why the experience can be so strange and intimate – something supposed to be fun refuses to be. Not only that, it tells the players they have done something wrong in expecting to derive fun from its subject matter.

Marlow's tale in *HoD* is wrapped in and coloured by its frame. The extradiegetic narrator seems to inhabit a vastly different mental space than does Marlow. The contrast between that swelling pride and Marlow's sober tone does several things. The tonal whiplash and the irony it

invokes is an effective way of grasping the reader's attention, and the same can be observed in *TL*. The retrospective story-telling of Marlow establishes that, without a doubt, a *story* is being told, a virtual experience is being related to the reader. Even during the chaos of the ambush on the river there is, at least in the minds of the genre-savvy, the assurance that Marlow will escape with his life. If he doesn't, who is then telling the story on the boat? It also opens for the possibility that Marlow is embellishing his story. After all, while he despises lies, he is happy to indulge in them when it would otherwise be altogether "too dark" (77). He could very well be omitting some crucial detail, and that could be a key to open up further experiences. And although the Thames at the story's end seems to flow into "the heart of an immense darkness" (ibid.), thus bookending the tale with a sombre, apprehensive tone, the drama of the subject matter (discounting recent neo-colonial adventures with which some parallels may be drawn) is far removed from us, temporally, geographically, and even in terms of the language. Its politics are dated, and to many, exclusionary. While there are many doubts around whether or not literature can or even should have a direct impact on society and its politics, I fear *Heart of Darkness* may now be too distant to effectively communicate its valuable appeals to self-interrogation and reflection. Like *Apocalypse Now* in the 70s, *The Line* may at this moment in time be the closest we now have to the experience of *Heart of Darkness* available and readily comprehensible for a consuming public.

Conclusion

Alison Landsberg has sketched out a theory called prosthetic memory (2004). A brief summary of it may read as follows: "Memories" foreign to your own mind, particularly those of harrowing historical events and tragedies, may be encoded into and transmitted from one group to another through a medium that is then internalized by the observer through experiencing that memory second-hand. This is meant to have the effect of engendering empathy across divisions of gender, sex, race, class, and time. Ultimately it is thought to be possible to "change how one sees the world and one's place in it" (101) in this way, creating "the potential for a progressive, even a radical, politics of memory" (143) through consumption of mass culture commodities like films or games, or visits to experiential museums and so on.

The theory is compelling, but, I believe, also flawed. Landsberg herself is uncertain of its applicability, noting that it is utopian (155). What is being transferred cannot truly be called memories. Memories are encoded into symbols by one entity, which must be observed, read, or interacted with and then interpreted by another in order to attain meaning. We may more safely call this meaning knowledge of another's trauma. This knowledge may result in an empathetic reaction, or it may be ignored and have no effect. But as noted by James Berger, a critic of the theory, a true transmission of memories "would require a fundamental change in human neurology" (2007, 604).[34] Such knowledge may just as well have the capacity to engender prejudice – consider *Birth of a Nation* (Griffiths, 1915), how it revitalized the Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta during the 20's (Gossett, 340), and how it gave new life to the myths of Northern excesses in the South during Reconstruction, myths involving battalions of black soldiers raping and pillaging their way through Confederate towns, newly freed slaves capturing voting booths and disenfranchising white voters, while corrupt carpetbaggers stalk the land. *Birth of a Nation*, as much a "prosthetic memory" as *Schindler's List*, *Roots*, or *12 Years a Slave*, has had a lasting impact. *Birth* helped the historically revisionist Lost Cause narrative of the US Civil War to survive well into the 20th century (Franklin, 433) and likely beyond.

However, the theory is interesting because the basic idea is that mass-culture commodities can have an explicit ethical component. *The Line*, with its attempts at demanding that the player make reflections on what they have done in the crumbling virtual world of Dubai, is not merely a commodity. It is an attempt to persuade the consuming public. This is done not by conveying another character's experience of the horror, but by making the public a part of the horror, complicit in it, in a process of deliberate alienation:

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[34] In "Which Prosthetic? Mass Media, Narratlion, Empathy, and Progressive Politics."

> … [Yager's] game is not about the pleasurable fusion between Capt. Walker and the player; it is about the unrelenting friction between the two. Instead of coaxing the player into identifying with the main character and enjoying the co-creation of an immersive fantasy, the player's actions make them guilty of war crimes. *Spec Ops* is no military fantasy. *Spec Ops* is a humanitarian nightmare. (Payne, 14)

The playing of *TL involves* the participation in a subjective experience. At first it is one that comes across as objective and separate from its troubled protagonist. But in reality it is as if the players were a part of Walker's mind – until they become distanced from him through Konrad's revelations. Due to the active role played by the player of *The Line*, we may here be able to speak of a memory formation, of a kind of trauma, that may contribute to the creation of an empathetic, political response. It may not necessarily be radical or even progressive, as Landsberg calls it. It may simply take the form of a wilful rejection of this kind of experience. But it may also have an impact on the collective memory of its players, and through cultural osmosis, other people. *Spec Ops: The Line* offers a new way of experiencing *Heart of Darkness*. Furthermore, it does so in a way that challenges several practices in the medium to which it belongs, making it not only a remarkable adaptation of Conrad's celebrated novella, but also a new way in which to fashion interactive experiences that may serve to provoke debate, contemplation, and which may, at best, inspire some players genuinely to consider other perspectives than their own.

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