

Adaptation Odyssey: Tracing the Evolution of Postcolonial Narrative from Fiction, Film to Digital Gaming

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Dr. Fouzia Usmani

Assistant Professor in English

Women's College, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Shahin Fatma

Assistant Professor, ARKA Jain University, Jharkhand

Abstract

The vibrant advancement of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is observed in this essay through an ongoing process of modification and alteration. The novella, which first appeared in 1902 and was based on Conrad's experiences in the Congo in the 1890s, has subsequently been the subject of numerous adaptations that have sparked debates and criticisms.

As a Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe engaged in a thoughtful analysis of the novella, scrutinizing it for potential instances of racism. Conversely, Francis Ford Coppola fearlessly reimagined the narrative within the context of the Vietnam War in his film "Apocalypse Now." This cinematic adaptation, in turn, influenced computer game narratives, notably seen in Far Cry 2. The study follows the path from a detached and passive reading of the novella Heart of Darkness to an active involvement in morally dubious choices and virtual war crimes through digital gaming. The study reflects on whether the interactive nature of digital games impacts the audience's sense of immersion and responsibility, particularly within diverse narrative contexts. Additionally, the paper provides a unique perspective on storytelling and retelling by scrutinizing how Conrad's narrative has transformed across various mediums. A comparative analysis of the original source material and its adaptations explores the interplay between historical facts and fictional elements, examining how the narrative distortion generates new layers of meaning. Ultimately, this comparative exploration serves as a lens through which we can comprehend the dynamic relationship between adaptation, interpretation, and the evolving perceptions of our world.

Keywords: Heart of Darkness, Apocalypse Now, Far Cry 2, Postcolonial Issues, Digital Gaming, Adaptation

Introduction

From ancient performances in theaters rooted in mythological themes to contemporary expressions such as the burgeoning world of transformative works found online, both audiences and creators have consistently sought spaces for exploration, reinterpretation, and reimagination of existing stories and their associated subjects (Coker 2017). The emergence of novel instruments and technologies has widened the horizons for artists, providing unprecedented opportunities to delve into a myriad of popular and obscure

narratives and envision them in fresh and innovative ways. Narratives of adventure and discovery, whether unfolding in distant lands or delving into the depths of human experience, have always been wellsprings of inspiration for creativity and inquiry. Despite ongoing debates about their artistic merit, some narratives achieve a level of influence that resonates across various mediums over extended periods. The factors that distinguish these works—whether it be the preferences of audiences, underlying messages, controversies, academic discussions, incorporation of new themes and tropes, or historical context—all contribute to their enduring impact (Jauss 1970). Stories that span several universes and classic works of literature are often adapted with different levels of faithfulness and different goals in mind. Examples of this can be found in works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” (1925/1994) or the expansive Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Joseph Conrad’s 1899 serial in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, *Heart of Darkness*, chronicled his experiences during the 1890s while he was living in the Congo Free State, then ruled by Belgian King Leopold II. Since its initial publication, this novella has served as a central topic of discussion for issues pertaining to the effects of colonialism on Africa as well as public perceptions of the colonies and their residents. Regarding Conrad’s writing and its place in colonial and postcolonial literature, scholarly discussions are still ongoing. Behind the novella’s daring exterior, there is a plot under close examination that not only critiques Western colonial endeavours in Africa but also tells the tale of European values gradually deteriorating in the harsh African rainforest environment. This perspective, delving into the impact of the ‘other’ on traditional Western morality, is evident in both the novella and its subsequent transformations for interactive media and the cinematic experience. “Heart of Darkness” has seen multiple medium-specific adaptations since its first release. From the critically acclaimed computer game “Far Cry 2” (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) to the 1979 film “Apocalypse Now” by Francis Ford Coppola, these adaptations demonstrate a great deal of diversity in terms of their fidelity to the original story, the messages they aim to convey, and the ways in which they employ the unique tools inherent to each medium to accomplish their goals.

Adaptation involves building upon the foundational structure of the original source, adding layers of meaning that derive from its initial context, and ultimately reshaping the narrative within a new framework. Various approaches, such as reboots, reimaginings, and remakes, are commonly employed to achieve the shared objective of utilizing the source material, its relevance, and its historical context as the groundwork for crafting a narrative that offers a fresh perspective. This entails utilising the distinctive tools of each designated medium while including relevant historical and societal criticism or bringing back recognisable aspects of the original work to emphasise its message.

According to Jenkins’ 2017 essay, the process of adaptation turns into a dynamic investigation of the interactions between the creative medium and the source material, with each adaptation offering a unique perspective and interpretation,”Adaptation, Extension, Transmedia: Anyone who thinks seriously about adaptation knows that each makes some unique contributions”.

The selected format, the modern consideration of the source material during adaptation, and the viewpoints of the new creators all inevitably influence how retellings take shape. The original’s lasting impact enhances the retelling’s depth of interpretation and encourages the development of more complex interpretations via adaptation. Given the characteristic qualities in Conrad’s writing—exotic places, violent conflicts between humans and nature, themes of individualism, the darker aspects of human nature, and prejudice—the abundance of adaptations of *Heart of Darkness* is not surprising. From the Vietnam War in *Apocalypse Now* to the 2010 graphic novel adaptation, these universal ideas are still relevant in a variety of circumstances, demonstrating how typical linear adaptations convey a stagnant story. Contrastingly, *Far Cry 2* present an innovative approach by incorporating a linear narrative into a typically nonlinear medium—the first-person shooter

genre, not traditionally recognized for its profound storytelling. Given the interactive nature of these games, players wield significant influence over the storyline through their actions, transforming the audience from mere spectators into engaged participants. Unlike conventional adaptations, these games emphasise disempowerment systems that are essential to their message and use unfriendly game mechanics, making for a unique and difficult experience that emphasises Conrad's original plot. These adaptations range in authenticity, execution, and media, but they all include adventure aspects and well-known storytelling devices from the novella. These adaptations, whether loyal to the original material, as in *Heart of Darkness—A Graphic Novel*, or taking inspiration for a different story, like in *Far Cry 2*, have one thing in common: they aim to communicate ideas that go beyond simple adventure. Themes of exploitation, brutality, and the fallout from adhering to a system that permits them to reverberate throughout these various versions provoke contemplation about the value of such expenses at the individual, societal, and international levels. This examination of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the adaptations that followed explores reoccurring themes, character motifs, and the messages that are weaved across these various readings. The article examines how historical facts combine with original fiction to generate new intended meanings and alter or distort the source material. It also assesses the narrative efficiency of various mediums and the distinctive messages each adaptation delivers.

Among the most heinous examples of colonial endeavours in Africa is the Congo Free State. Through deft political manoeuvring, Leopold II established a colony 76 times larger than Belgium, with much of it hidden by uncharted jungle and populated by native tribes who varied in their degree of enmity towards the outsiders (Pakenham 1991). The European public was horrified to learn of the horrors carried out by traders and the people working for them, who were initially chasing ivory and then rubber (Van Reybrouck 2010). Conrad travelled to Africa during a period when the ivory trade continued to be the Congo's main source of income and some semblance of control was upheld. But the system's harshness and self-serving degeneration were already painfully obvious. The novella depicts incidents of abuse that the author personally saw (Hochschild [1998] 2012).

When taken out of its historical context and the literary community's reaction to the book, *Heart of Darkness* reads like a lot of adventure novels. Within the story of a literal and symbolic voyage, it explores frail human morals and features foreign countries, violence, thrill, and narrative elements related to travel. In the Congo Basin, an Englishman becomes employed by a Belgian trading company and is given the responsibility of operating a riverboat upriver to an outpost located at the edge of the little-known jungle. Beneath the surface adventure, though, is a story of a man facing the consequences of European colonisation in Africa and how those consequences have affected Europe and its spies in turn. The narrator's experiences in the Congo compel readers to engage in profound reflection, prompting a reassessment of their preconceptions regarding colonialism and the relationships between Europeans and Africans. This reflects Conrad's mental state after his return from Africa.

However, Conrad's goal in describing the atrocities he saw is still inextricably related to Europe's view of Africa, the colonies, their people, and the divisions between them and the "civilised world." Whether deliberate or not, this Eurocentric perspective permeates the novella and its adaptations to differing degrees, raising a central query: "What happens to civilised people when they are faced with the dark regions of the earth?" (Conrad [1899] 2017, p. 5).

Heart of Darkness is written as a narrative inside a story, with numerous characters, including the narrator Marlow, the narrator, spends a night on the Thames in England. Similar to how Conrad tells his own story to the audience, Marlow uses this scene as a framing technique to describe his prior experiences in the Congo. Marlow serves as a kind of stand-in for the author, allowing Conrad to safely deliver his message while keeping some distance from his own story. *Heart of Darkness*,

therefore, adopts a triple structure: Conrad's own experiences envelop Marlow's narrative, nestled within the framework of Conrad presenting it, observed by both his fictional companions and the readers (Watt 1979).

As Marlow journeys up the Congo River, he encounters numerous challenges, stemming from both natural obstacles and the foolish actions of European officials stationed along the riverbank. Marlow gradually unravels the mystery surrounding Mr. Kurtz through his interactions with a diverse array of individuals in the Company's leadership. By word of mouth, Kurtz's fame spreads to Marlow, where he is regarded by the Company's chief accountant as a truly exceptional individual, having evolved from a simple trading-post commander to a legendary character in the area (Conrad [1899] 2017, p. 19). But via material obtained by Marlow—facts about his birth, rank, the Company's lofty ambitions, reluctant respect from other commanders, and his stance on natives—the actual extent of Kurtz's impact on individuals who have met him gradually becomes clear.

Marlow becomes fixated on Kurtz's extraordinary persona as he delves deeper into the wilderness. The eagerly awaited resolution takes an unforeseen twist when Kurtz, having forsaken the moral norms of civilization to exploit his authority over the native population, succumbs to a fatal illness during an extended sojourn in the Congo. In the harsh African bush, the once-grand and well-liked Mr. Kurtz becomes a horrifying illustration of European values gone awry. Kurtz's final, frequently cited words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad [1899] 2017, p. 69), eloquently capture this transition. *Heart of Darkness* remains a highly regarded literary masterpiece in spite of, or maybe even because of, the controversy surrounding it. The novella's critique of Western imperialism, exploitation, and its effects on people is evident despite its historical context and Eurocentric viewpoint. Despite its significance and the contentious interpretations it has sparked, the novella's impact as a critique of colonialism, the darker facets of human nature, and the justification of violence persists. It continues to shape scholarly discussions and remains a wellspring of inspiration for artistic endeavors since its initial publication.

The novel's visual components reflect Marlow's spiral into insanity, with artwork become increasingly hideous and exaggerated. The use of stark lighting, abstract shapes, close-up shots, graphite greys and blacks, and other visual aspects that accentuate the other, the fantastical, and the nightmare-like quality of the story as it approaches its end all contribute to the overall tone of *Heart of Darkness*. This rendition makes a visually stunning choice in how Marlow is portrayed in the comic, which is quite comparable to Conrad's representations. This decision underlines the author's message by blurring the lines between Marlow and Conrad and preventing the author from withdrawing from the narrative by forging a strong relationship with the fictional character. Opinions often diverge over whether novel-to-film adaptations honour the original text, narrative, and characters authentically, or if they twist or sensationalise them. Filmmakers have routinely employed the literary adaptation technique for the big screen since the 20th century in an attempt to profit from the popularity of well-known contemporary and classic literary works. Whether they are creatively altered or faithfully adapted, these stories are already part of the audience's collective imagination. Filmmakers are able to leverage on the popularity of the original work and maybe expand their audience base thanks to this pre-existing familiarity. John Ellis explores this phenomena in his 1982 paper on *Literary Adaptation*, examining the complex dynamics and factors that must be taken into account when adapting written narratives for the big screen. The adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory.

Filmed by Francis Ford Coppola and released in 1979, "Apocalypse Now" was co-written by John Milius, Michael Herr, and Coppola. While not a direct adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart*

of *Darkness*, the film skillfully uses the novel's general plot to convey a message that is incredibly relevant to its day. Coppola deftly blends key aspects from the novella—such as a horrific trip upriver, moral decay, and the nuanced relationship between the narrator and Kurtz—into the stormy backdrop of the Vietnam War (1955–1975). Opting out of Conrad's imperialism-focused methodology, Coppola used this narrative framework to investigate the concept of war itself. As to Kinder's 1979 article *The Power of Adaptation in Apocalypse Now*, which cited Coppola's creative ambition, the picture aims to provide audiences with an immersive experience that embodies the horror, madness, sensuality, and moral quandaries that are intrinsic to the Vietnam War. The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of *Apocalypse Now* was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuality, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war. Through this revolutionary translation, *Apocalypse Now* honours Conrad's literary masterpiece while also exploring the moral implications and subtleties of a very different but no less significant historical and cultural context.

When *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness* are compared, there are clear connections between their stories. U.S. Army Captain Willard, the movie's main character, and Marlow are both on a mission to find and kill Col. Kurtz, a rogue military official. Both Kurtz characters—one from the novella and the other from the movie—represent a guy who, while having a seemingly perfect moral code at first, falls victim to the terrifying trials of the jungles in Asia and Africa. Kurtz's ominous presence casts a shadow over the narrator's trip through violent and insane settings, culminating in a terrifying decline into moral and psychological degradation. In a masterful portrayal of hypocrisy, *Apocalypse Now* underscores the ridiculousness of the U.S. military's deployment of resources to assassinate one of its highest-ranking officials in the midst of a campaign of pointless murders. The movie turns into a moving critique of the paradoxes surrounding both the Vietnam War and western imperialism in general. *Heart of Darkness* is captured in the film through the use of novella-like narrative techniques, such as the trek upriver, a dangerous setting, and the dubious conduct of American officers. Col. Kurtz's introduction, which depends on oral history, military records, voice memos, and images, is a mirror image of Conrad's use of ambiguity. The film's underlying message is noteworthy; it's similar to Conrad's comparison of African morality to that of Europe. *Apocalypse Now* explores how violence impacts the American consciousness by focusing on how the war affects American ideals and identity. The presentation of war crimes serves as a means of emphasising the characters' decline into moral and psychological degradation. The movie turns out to be a comprehensive investigation of how the Vietnam War alters American soldiers in a strange and ethically dubious environment rather than a simple story about the horrors of the conflict. Moving on to interactive adaptations, the difficulty is in adapting linear stories for computer games, which are player-driven. Games require a distinct method of interaction that combines dynamics, physics, and design. Developers must convert the story's predetermined order into game mechanics as part of the adaptation process to make sure players understand important plot moments while maintaining the original narrative's purpose. This approach becomes more complex for stories that are more concerned with abstract ideas than with action and adventure. Computer games have a special potential to tell stories again in a different setting, despite their difficulties. Games instill meaning and subtlety through player actions by handing power to the audience. This fosters a sense of shared responsibility and lets storylines take unexpected turns.

The 2008 release of *Far Cry 2*, the second game in the *Far Cry* series by Ubisoft, stands out as a notable improvement over its predecessor. While the first game was mostly concerned with technical improvements, *Far Cry 2* makes a daring move by fusing cutting-edge technology with compelling narrative. The game has realistic physics, a semi-open environment, and a dynamic weather system, all of which combine to create a seamless story that draws players into an engrossing gaming experience. *Far Cry 2*, as opposed to a faithful adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, takes cues

from the novella's narrative devices and themes, including the location, the main quest, and the moral complexity of its protagonists. The player moves between the United Front for Liberation and Labour (UFLL) and the Alliance for Popular Resistance (APR), two opposing organisations engaged in a military-political battle set in a contemporary African nation. The player's initial mission is to kill the Jackal, a local arms dealer.

The interactive narrative of the game is told through a variety of objectives that require players to engage in more violent ways as they go. The primary theme, violence, dominates both the gameplay and the narrative, having an impact on the player character, friends, and the political environment. The major enemy that is being suggested describes violence as a sickness, a scourge that infects people and causes damage. This is seen in the player character's illness and the mayhem they cause in the game. With weapons deteriorating, opponents resurfacing, and weather conditions posing challenges to players, gameplay mechanics further emphasise this negative theme. The player character's battle with malaria adds another level of suspense and vulnerability, reflecting Marlow, the protagonist of the book, who feels frustrated, inept, and powerless in the Congo bush.

Far Cry 2 chooses ambiguity over a typical nemesis like Kurtz, portraying Jackal as a figure who personifies the breakdown of morality. The Jackal is progressively revealed to the player over several encounters, exposing his nuanced personality, opinions, and objectives. The unambiguous identification of the game's Kurtz is called into question by this purposeful unravelling, which blurs the distinction between protagonist and adversary. The Jackal's words, "Awaken. "I used to be you," emphasises the change in storyline by bringing the player character's objectives into line with the Jackal's opinions. Far Cry 2 essentially puts the player in the role of both the antagonist and the narrator, reflecting the effects of violence and conflict through an antagonistic game design. The game effectively places the blame for these outcomes squarely on the shoulders of the player by making them undergo the same moral decline as the protagonist, resulting in a compelling and thought-provoking gaming narrative.

When discussing Heart of Darkness, Paul B. Armstrong, editor of the Fifth Norton Critical Edition, notes that great literary works often take on a life of their own apart from the writers' original intentions. Novelists, reviewers, and literary historians have debated, dissected, and reinterpreted Heart of Darkness's topic ever since it was published. The novella explores the system that gave rise to it against the backdrop of literary history, global political and economic forces, and both. It is imperative to acknowledge that Conrad, whether intentionally or not, use Africa as a counterbalance to Europe by depicting its jungles and native populations as capable of subverting the ethical values that Europe is supposed to uphold. Despite Conrad's criticism of colonial aspirations, several critics—including Said and Achebe—believe that this resistance upholds some injustices and symbolises an oppressive divide. "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth".

Conrad was not alone in his perception of Africa and its people at the time, which helps to explain some of his justification for his bias. When one admits that Heart of Darkness affects how the world perceives Africa despite its merits and occasionally controversial elements, it takes on a deeper significance and larger impact. Its message is further disseminated by its numerous adaptations for various media. Ellis (1982) addresses the cultural memory of literary works in *The Literary Adaptation*, a notion that applies to all Heart of Darkness adaptations as well as other stories that are rewritten. All of the novella's adaptations are ingrained in popular culture and have contributed to the concept of Heart of Darkness as it is known today. As demonstrated in *Apocalypse Now* and the graphic novels *Far Cry 2*, every adaptation modifies the story and creates an intricate web of tales.

The way Marlow has changed over time—from being seen as the author's stand-in to adopting different personas in later adaptations—allows for a variety of readings regarding his moral

character, contextual significance, and function as a protagonist in interactive environments. Kurtz undergoes a similar metamorphosis; in *Far Cry 2*, in example, the player assumes the role of the Jackal, the game's Kurtz-like character. A central topic of the novella—how people react to terrible, unfathomable forces—is well addressed by the game by obfuscating the distinction between protagonist and adversary.

Currently, they represent instances of linear adaptations that analyse and react to the novella in a distinctive way, despite their differences in approach and adherence to the source material. Another layer is added by video games such as *Far Cry 2*, which involve the player in the story and make them complicit in the events that are taking place. These games convey a potent message about shared responsibility by utilising audience expectations and involvement. *Far Cry 2* adds to the canon of postcolonial game studies by examining colonial settings and narratives and highlighting the significance of significant representation and historical analysis. However, due to player expectations, market demands, and other factors, classic video games might not always be appropriate platforms for literary adaptations. However, games' interactive features provide a powerful means of drawing viewers into stories, which makes them important venues for the preservation, reclamation, and reworking of both traditional and modern tales. Extending beyond traditional game production, interactive works at the crossroads of genres and media, such those that combine literature, comics, film, and games, offer the freedom to experiment with novel approaches to storytelling. *Heart of Darkness* continues to have an impact on adventure stories that delve into the complexities of human morality by retelling its story in ways that are relevant to modern audiences by utilising actual events and locations. These tales' continuing significance comes from their examination of human frailty in the face of senseless violence and the brutal elements of nature, which makes them relevant even in the modern world.

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