


## CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* VISUALLY ADAPTED (2011-2024)

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**Abstract:** Adaptation has long been a foundational practice within Western culture, and in the contemporary moment, it functions as a central mechanism through which narratives are reshaped, recontextualized, and disseminated across diverse media landscapes. While adaptation is frequently associated with the transformation of novels into films, current scholarship increasingly emphasizes the expansive and multifaceted nature of adaptive processes. These processes extend beyond cinema into realms such as opera, theatre, radio, graphic art, digital games, and other transmedial forms, revealing adaptation as both a cultural norm and a creative strategy that underpins global literary culture. This paper investigates the broad spectrum of transmedial adaptations of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, focusing particularly on works produced since 2011. It argues that the novella's persistent relevance and adaptability stem from its narrative opacity, moral ambiguity, and symbolic density, which invite reinterpretation across time and medium. The study examines overt and covert transformations of *Heart of Darkness*, attending to the varied ways in which its core themes—colonialism, alienation, power, and the limits of knowledge—are reframed in contemporary media. These adaptations range from digital video games and graphic novels to experimental theatre and immersive opera productions, each engaging with the source text in distinctive and often subversive ways. By tracing these recent transmedial adaptations, the paper situates *Heart of Darkness* as a pivotal case study in adaptation theory, demonstrating how canonical literature is continually reimagined to reflect new cultural, technological, and political contexts. In doing so, it reveals the adaptive afterlife of Conrad's work as a lens through which to understand the shifting dynamics of media and narrative in the twenty-first century. The analysis ultimately highlights adaptation as a generative and evolving dialogue between texts, media, and audiences.

**Keywords:** adaptation, Conrad, transmediality, opera, theatre, video games, social media, Heart of Darkness

Adaptation has not only been a common practice for centuries but is a central process in Western Culture nowadays. Adaptive processes lie at the very heart of global literary culture. When adaptation is mentioned, the usual assumption is that one is discussing the conversion of book into film. However at present scholars demonstrate

how all-encompassing adaptations and the adaptation process can be.<sup>1</sup> It is an important practice in theatre, radio, graphic art<sup>2</sup> and digital games.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to Conrad, his works and *Heart of Darkness* in particular, have been transformed into all types of media in adaptive relationships that have been hidden as much as overt. The paper explores transmedial adaptations of *Heart of Darkness* in the widest range of media since 2011.

### *HEART OF DARKNESS ON STAGE*

There were three stage adaptations of the novella: in Poland, Bulgaria, and Britain after 2011. The Polish theatrical adaptation of Conrad's novella *Darkness* was produced as part of the Conrad Year 2017 by Monika Strzępka (director) and Paweł Demirski (text).<sup>4</sup> The performance was based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*. The time of the action is uncertain (19<sup>th</sup> century and present day), the scenery is dark, even black, evoking associations with the darkness of the jungle and nightmares. The authors juxtapose the themes of colonialism with contemporary slavery (corporate labour or credit dependency). This duality is reflected in the cast, where we can observe two Marlows – a man and a woman – and two Kurtzes – one from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the other from our time. Demirski explains this multiplication as follows: 'It's a procedure that allows us to play out the tension and conflict, but also the differences and analogies between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Conrad's reality from *Heart of Darkness* and contemporary man. It is a kind of historical twinning.'<sup>5</sup> The playwright points out that the colonisation described by Conrad still persists, manifesting itself in different forms and on different levels, even in everyday objects (telephone, furniture, clothes).<sup>6</sup> Another theatrical version of *Heart of Darkness* prepared in 2018 was a Bulgarian performance by Valeria Valcheva in Sofia. Similarly to Demirski in the interview, the director emphasises the novella's

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Thomas Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For the analysis of graphic adaptations of *Heart of Darkness*, see Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech "From Adaptation to Autonomy: Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' in French and English Graphic Novels", pp. 76-113.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London–New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The production was prepared for Warsaw's IMKA Theatre (premiere 3.02.2018) in co-production with the Żeromski Theatre in Kielce (premiere 13.01.2018). Set design, costumes: Arek Ślesieński, music: Tomasz Sierajewski, stage movement: Jarosław Staniek, lighting: Bartosz Nalazek. Cast: Magda Grąziowska, Joanna Kasperek, Anna Kłos-Kleszczewska, Andrzej Konopka, Jacek Mąka, Tomasz Schimscheiner.

<sup>5</sup> Izabela Szymańska, interview "Paweł Demirski o optymistycznym nihilizmie i spektaklu 'Ciemności.'" <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/254306/pawel-demirski-o-optymistycznym-nihilizmie-i-spektaklu-ciemnosci> [accessed: 3.06.2023]. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>6</sup> Szymańska, interview "Paweł Demirski."

contemporary relevance, relating it to the current migration crisis,<sup>7</sup> among other things. Valcheva has created a miniature “Conradian community” consisting of a musician, a set designer and five actors. These seven people on stage are a contemporary ensemble of actors telling the story of ‘Heart of Darkness’ using farce, cabaret and ritual theatre so that the audience can “hear, feel and see.”<sup>8</sup>

The theatrical adaptation I wish to examine in greater detail is the London theatrical performance *Heart of Darkness* created by imitating the dog company and co-produced by Marche Teatro.<sup>9</sup> The producers accentuated the contemporaneity of Conrad’s fiction “a tale of lies and brutal greed and of the dark heart which beats within us all.”<sup>10</sup> In the short blurb they inform the viewers that the 19<sup>th</sup> century story was “re-sited in a timeless Europe, in a forsaken landscape lost to the destructive lust for power, it emerges as a tale absolutely for our time” (imitating the dog). While acknowledging that it is a Conrad’s story, they appropriate it as their own to produce a continuation “exposing the dehumanisation that paved the way for the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and countless horrors yet to come” (imitating the dog).<sup>11</sup>

The production combined live performance with digital technology. The actors are on the stage while above them the audience can see from one to three screens with various films, clips, photos projected onto them. Due to the hanging projection screens the performance resembles an animated cinemascope graphic novel. The digital component is an integral part of the play from the very beginning. The actors create a live film on stage using cameras and green-screen backdrops which, “when combined with backgrounds, overlays and images, creates a framed, graphic-novel style film.”<sup>12</sup> Co-artistic director Simon Wainwright explains the company’s unusual design process:

First and foremost, it is the way in which the design and technology is viewed by the company as the machine by which we tell the story. The apparatus we use on stage, be that flats and props or screens and projectors, is always incorporated right at the start of the process – at the same

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<sup>7</sup> For the interview with director Valeria Valcheva and an analysis of the spectacle see Margreta Grigorova, Petya Tsoneva “Conrad’s Artistic Returns: Perspectives on a Bulgarian Debut in Staging ‘Heart of Darkness,’” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies* 14 (2019), pp. 35-59.

<sup>8</sup> Grigorova, Tsoneva, “Conrad’s Artistic Returns, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> The production was supported by Arts Council England, Lancaster Arts at Lancaster University and Theatre by the Lake. It was on UK tour in the 2018/2019 season (in Aberystwyth Arts Centre Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Cast, Doncaster, Tron Theatre, Glasgow, The Dukes Lancaster, Northern Stage, Newcastle, and York Theatre Royal, among others).

<sup>10</sup> See: imitating the dog, *Our work: Heart of Darkness*, <https://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/project/heart-of-darkness/> [accessed: 1.09.2023].

<sup>11</sup> Since each actor/actress plays many roles in this spectacle it is not possible to assign them to particular protagonists. This is the cast: Laura Atherton, Morgan Bailey, Keicha Greenidge, Morven Macbeth, Matt Prendergast.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Wainwright, “Heart of Darkness – Simon Wainwright on our Approach to Production Design”, <https://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/2019/02/15/heart-of-darkness-simon-wainwright-on-our-approach-to-production-design/> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

time we choose the text or think up the narrative concept. It is never applied after or thought of *around* the text. It *is* the text, it *is* the story, it *is* the meaning of the piece.<sup>13</sup>

Wainwright observes that *Heart of Darkness* is regarded nowadays as “both outdated and un-presentable”, hence the major issue for the director and the actors was “how do we tell this story now, in 2019?” He claims that the video, sound and set design (along with the text and performance) are “the machine by which we negotiate these questions.”<sup>14</sup>

Conrad’s story of the river journey is changed to a road journey and relocated from Africa to a devastated Europe; Kurtz is not in the Belgian Congo but in a bombed-out building on the edge of London and Marlow is not a sailor but a private detective from Kinshasa, and she is a black woman, not a man. As co-artistic director Andrew Quick clarifies “we are reversing or creating as parallel version based on Conrad’s original. We keep some of the plot and tone, but it is a radical re-imagining.”<sup>15</sup> And adds that this story is a “condensed version of our actual process – our journey into our heart of darkness, if you like, – the heart of darkness of its making.”<sup>16</sup> Significantly, both artistic directors foreground that the play is about representation, about the process of its creation because in this way they unravel their contemporary struggle with the nineteenth century text.

This visually rich spectacle operates on three layers: the first one is based on the novella’s plot, the second portrays the rehearsals for the play and the third refers to German concentration camps and World War Two. In general, the planes are separated, the viewer knows that the action takes place in changed circumstances but in several cases they overlap creating a multi-layered amalgam of references and connotations, posing an immense challenge to the audience.<sup>17</sup>

## ***HEART OF DARKNESS ON STAGE 2: OPERA***

Tarik O’Regan adapted *Heart of Darkness* into a one-act chamber opera which premiered in the UK in 2011.<sup>18</sup> The version staged in the US in 2015 at Opera Parallèle

<sup>13</sup> Wainwright, “Heart of Darkness.”

<sup>14</sup> Wainwright, “Heart of Darkness.”

<sup>15</sup> Steve Pratt, “‘Heart of Darkness’ – Steve Pratt interviews co-artistic director Andrew Quick,” <https://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/2018/10/29/heart-of-darkness-steve-pratt-interviews-co-artistic-director-andrew-quick/> [accessed: 3 June 2023].

<sup>16</sup> Steve Pratt, “Heart of Darkness.”

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the semantic and structural layers, see Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech, “Contemporary Reimaginings of ‘Heart of Darkness,’” *Perspektywy Kultury* 45 (2024), no. 2, pp. 299-312.

<sup>18</sup> Royal Opera House, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111020223221/http://www.roh.org.uk/whatson/production.aspx?pid=17248> [accessed: 3.06.2023]. Linbury Theatre of the Royal Opera House in London on 1 November 2011: directed by Edward Dick; English-language libretto was composed by artist Tom Phillips, based on Conrad’s novella.

(realised by Z Space in San Francisco, California),<sup>19</sup> adds Matt Kish's images, which he prepared for the illustrated edition of *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>20</sup> Frédéric O. Boulay, VIDEO image designer, and David Murakami, media designer, have created a multi-media performance in which the visual medium is used to both visualise and tell a story that is verbally condensed in the libretto. The characteristics of different media are interwoven and effectively used in the opera to influence the audience intellectually and aesthetically.

The initial idea of adapting Conrad's story into an opera was hatched after O'Regan saw the Redux version of Francis Ford Coppola's 2001 film *Apocalypse Now*<sup>21</sup> (also based on Conrad's book<sup>22</sup>). Work began in earnest in 2002 and went through two development companies (American Opera Projects and the joint ROH2/Genesis Foundation Opera Genesis initiative) before premiering at the Royal Opera House.<sup>23</sup>

The libretto, written by Tom Phillips, uses only text from the novella and Conrad's notes from *Congo Diary*.<sup>24</sup> The running time of the opera is 75 minutes and involves a 14-piece orchestra.<sup>25</sup> It includes 12 sung roles, which can be performed by just eight singers.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Joshua Kosman, "Opera review: A shadowy plunge into 'Heart of Darkness,'" *San Francisco Chronicle* (2 May 2015), <https://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Opera-review-A-shadowy-plunge-into-Heart-of-6238205.php> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: The Illustrated Edition*. Illustrated by Matt Kish (Portland, Oregon-Brooklyn, New York: Tin House Books, 2013). Kish's rich, imaginative drawings and paintings mirror Conrad's original text. Kish's introduction provides context for his approach, describes his relationship and challenges with Conrad's work, and sheds light on his own creative process. At the back of the book, an index lists the sentences and phrases that inspired each of the one hundred original artworks.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Service, "Off the map: 'Heart of Darkness' gets the opera treatment," *Guardian* (31 October 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/oct/31/heart-of-darkness-opera-oregan?newsfeed=true> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

<sup>22</sup> For an examination of the film's script's intricate story, see Robert Hampson, "Colonialism, Anti-colonialism and Decolonisation," in *The Resonance of Joseph Conrad in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2025), pp. 68-84.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Pritchard, *Review: Heart of Darkness*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/nov/06/heart-darkness-tarik-oregan-review> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

<sup>24</sup> Programme booklet for Opera East/ROH2 premiere (1 November 2011), "Heart of Darkness programme notes by Tarik O'Regan and Tom Phillips," reproduced at: <http://www.heartofdarknessopera.com/> [accessed: 3.06.2023]. Pritchard, *Review: Heart of Darkness*.

<sup>25</sup> The *Chroma Ensemble* was directed by Oliver Gooch. The staging was prepared by Edward Dick, set on Robert Innes Hopkins's deck-like structure, which by the end of the show has been inundated by the water lapping around it. George Hall, "Heart of Darkness – review," *Guardian* (2 November 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/nov/02/heart-of-darkness-review?newsfeed=true>; Rupert Christiansen, "'Heart of Darkness' Opera Review," <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/8868031/Heart-of-Darkness-Royal-Opera-House-review.html> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

<sup>26</sup> Marlow – Alan Oke (tenor), Kurtz – Morten Lassenius Kramp (bass), the Intended/ the river woman Gwenneth-Ann Jeffers (soprano), Manager/Secretary – Siphon Fubesi, Chef Accountant/Helmsman – Paul Hopwood, Harlequin – Jaewoo Kim, director of the Thames boat Njabulo Madlala, Doctor/Boilermaker – Donald Maxwell, *Heart of Darkness*, production details at <https://web.archive.org/web/20111020223221/http://www.roh.org.uk/whatson/production.aspx?pid=17248> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

The opera was designed from the outset to be “short and small,” but emotionally and dramatically large-scale. Writer and broadcaster Tom Service described the creators’ approach as “mirroring the disproportionate power of Conrad’s slender book.”<sup>27</sup> In an interview O’Regan confessed that the opera adapts the novel by shifting the dramatic focus towards “the nature of storytelling” and the “preservation of secrecy.” Furthermore, he admits that “What was most interesting for me was the nature of storytelling,” and adds that “The most important thing in the book and the libretto is that we see the lie that Marlow tells.” Charged with delivering the dead Kurtz’s letters to his fiancée, Marlow tells her that Kurtz’s last words were her name; in fact, they were: “The horror, the horror.”<sup>28</sup> O’Regan reveals that

One of my favourite lines in the book is when Marlow says, ‘It seemed to me as if I was also buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets’ [...]. And that’s the drama of all this, that he is finally able to say, ‘I saw all of this,’ and the real tragedy is that he also kept it a secret. And it’s in that gap between the truth and the narrative of the truth where our piece of drama can fit. That’s what music can do; it can amplify the ambiguity of the story.<sup>29</sup>

Another critic, Joshua Kosman in his review of the production highlights the immersive nature of the opera. One of its sources is involving the audience directly in the course of events.<sup>30</sup> As the critic reports, even before entering the auditorium, viewers walked through an art installation designed to immerse them in the world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century African ivory trade. “Giant iconic tusks lined the walls and corridors. Once inside, some audience members were seated directly in the seats designed to play the scenes”<sup>31</sup> then they were given the tusks, which lay in their laps throughout the opera. The opera opens with two scenes: first we see an aged Marlow is recollecting his journey in Africa, next, a fragment of a mysterious encounter many years earlier, whose meaning only becomes clear at the end.

## **HEART OF DARKNESS ON INSTAGRAM**

The initial transmedial adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* was produced by animator Sascha Ciezata. He first launched a multimedia graphic novel featuring daily episodes on Instagram and later developed a graphic novel based on this animation.<sup>32</sup> Ciezata is an independent Los Angeles-based animator and filmmaker. His first ani-

<sup>27</sup> Service, “Off the map.”

<sup>28</sup> Service, “Off the map.”

<sup>29</sup> Service, “Off the map.”

<sup>30</sup> Kosman, “Opera review.”

<sup>31</sup> Kosman, “Opera review.”

<sup>32</sup> Sascha Ciezata, *Heart of Darkness. A Graphic Novel* (Los Angeles: Its Alive Animation, 2015). Unfortunately, Ciezata’s Instagram account @darkheartnyc where he posted the videos is unavailable (*Heart of Darkness* videos. 7pm PST/10pm EST on Dark Heart NYC Instagram [accessed: 14.02.2015]) but his *Heart of Darkness* Official Trailer can be viewed on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/118775686> [accessed: 1.09.2023]).

mated short was *When Lynch Met Lucas* which turned out to be an online success; also he did an animation for a documentary called *The Sheik*. Conrad's novella was his first attempt to turn a classic book to a graphic novel which he called "a challenge" (Animation Insider). The 15-second clips (chapters) were posted through his Instagram account in daily episodes on from 14 February 2015. This social media-based graphic novel retold the adventures of Marley, a rodent cartographer modelled after Marlow. The story takes place amid the stormy New York during Hurricane Sandy,<sup>33</sup> throwing little Marley into the dark tunnels below the city's streets. Marley the rat undertakes the task to find the Rat King, Kurtz on behalf of the New York City Trade Company. He journeys along the fast-flowing river in flooded subway tunnels. Ciezata explains how he came up with the idea of transforming the novella into an animation:

*Heart of Darkness* was something I first conceived three years ago when I was living in New York [...]. I was doing animation there for a documentary and riding the subways to work. I always wanted to adapt the story to NYC<sup>34</sup> but couldn't figure out how to make it work live action. Everything came together when Hurricane Sandy struck Manhattan, in 2012, and the city literally went dark for a week.<sup>35</sup>

Ciezata believes that "The episodic nature of *Heart of Darkness* makes Instagram the perfect distribution platform with daily 'episodes,' turning it into a kind of social media graphic novel," and hopes that "one day [he can] turn it into an animated feature film."<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, in 2017, Ciezata chose to create his animation of *Heart of Darkness* in instalments on Instagram, paralleling Conrad's serialization of his novella in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899.<sup>37</sup> Each instalment featured a quasi-realistic style, blending the animation with actual photographic imagery of New York City and its subway system.

In the opening clip, the "frame narrator" started the story with the following words:

Far below these bustling streets another world exists. The vast network of subway lines serve as our trade routes. All the detritus of the Worlds Metropolis serves as our currency. And in a city populated with some 8 million people, business is always booming... (A video posted by Heart Of Darkness (@darkheartnyc) on Feb 14, 2015 at 7:07pm PST).

And the protagonist introduced himself as follows:

They call me MARLEY. I'm a navigator and cartographer for the Trade Company. I go to places other Rats wouldn't dare, mapping abandoned tunnels and the like. It's a hazardous profession, but I have a nose for adventure... (Be sure to check back here tomorrow and watch Marley's

<sup>33</sup> New York City was severely affected by Hurricane Sandy on 29-30 October, 2012 when its subway system as well as all road tunnels were flooded (CNN).

<sup>34</sup> New York City.

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Wolfe, "Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' Gets Animation Treatment on Instagram," Animation World Network.Com, <https://www.awn.com/news/conrad-s-heart-darkness-gets-animation-treatment-instagram> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

<sup>36</sup> Wolfe, "Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness.'"

<sup>37</sup> David Finkelstein, "Decent Company: Conrad," *Blackwood's, and the Literary Market. The Conradian* 41, no. 1 (2009), pp. 29-47.

adventure continue). (A video posted by Heart Of Darkness (@darkheartnyc) on Feb 14, 2015 at 7:11pm PST)

Each clip ended with some type of cliff-hanger. For example: “This particular #NYC #urbanlegend is very real, I assure you! Lucky for me I’m quick witted and nimble on my feet. This came as quite a shock to my pursuer. Of course, I didn’t make it completely unscathed. When I came too I discovered my fur had turned completely white! #tobecontinued.” (A video posted by Heart Of Darkness (@darkheartnyc) on Feb 15, 2015 at 6:58pm PST).<sup>38</sup> The suspenseful episode endings remotely echo the cuts Conrad introduced in his serialized version of *Heart of Darkness*. Obviously, the new medium required different creative decisions.

## DIGITAL GAMES AND *HEART OF DARKNESS*

I have identified two digital games that resonate with *Heart of Darkness: Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line*. Due to the article’s limited scope, I will focus solely on the latter. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a third-person shooter where players can take cover, vault over obstacles, and engage enemies using various gadgets.<sup>39</sup> The player assumes the role of Captain Martin Walker, who is dispatched to Dubai with an elite Delta Force team for a reconnaissance mission. As the story unfolds, Walker’s mental state deteriorates; he experiences hallucinations and gradually confronts the harrowing realities of war.

The company took inspiration for the setting and story framework from various media, including Conrad’s novella and Coppola’s film. The game was designed to be “physically opposing,” causing players to question their assumptions about treating war in a digital game as entertainment and forcing them to make a variety of morally ambiguous decisions.<sup>40</sup> The player faces moral choices throughout the game that can impact the lives of both soldiers and civilians. These choices influence the dynamics between the protagonist, Martin Walker, and his squad, leading to varied reactions from his team. The game visually represents Walker’s escalating mental and physical turmoil; as his combat gear deteriorates, he experiences visual and auditory hallucinations, and his methods of executing enemies grow more brutal.<sup>41</sup> His commands to his team shift from calm and authoritative to increasingly agitated and ragged. Initially, his kill confirmations are professional, but they evolve into a more psy-

<sup>38</sup> Sami Emory, “‘Heart of Darkness’ Gets an Animated Update on Instagram,” <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qkwv7p/heart-of-darkness-gets-an-animated-update-on-instagram> [accessed: 3.06.2023].

<sup>39</sup> *Spec Ops: The Line. Digital Game*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spec\\_Ops:\\_The\\_Line](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spec_Ops:_The_Line) [accessed: 3.06.2023]; developed by Yager Development and published by 2K. Included with the game is an online multiplayer mode, developed separately by Darkside Game Studios, allowing players to engage in both cooperative and competitive gameplay.

<sup>40</sup> The game was a commercial failure, nevertheless, it has garnered a cult following in the years after its release.

<sup>41</sup> Fruzsina Pittner, Iain Donald, “Gaming ‘The Heart of Darkness,’” *Arts* 7, no. 46 (2018).

chotic tone. Similarly, loading screens that start with helpful gameplay tips gradually turn more antagonistic toward Walker's decisions, and sometimes break the fourth wall by addressing the player directly.

"Spec Ops: The Line" notably challenges traditional gameplay and the significance of player actions. To foster ethical gameplay, players must be empowered as ethical agents; while the game encourages this role, the ultimate choice rests with the player to reflect on their actions.<sup>42</sup> An ethical player consciously moves beyond mere enjoyment and uses gameplay as a means to understand the world, including ethical and political issues. The game itself presents a complex dilemma. As players engage more, they become increasingly enmeshed in the soldiers' narrative and their own complicity in the actions required to keep playing. This complexity arises from the ethical dilemmas presented, such as the choice of whether to use white phosphorus against the troops of the missing Battalion blocking Captain Walker's progress. This is a false choice, as acknowledged by the game's dialogue; refusing to take this action means players cannot advance, as defeating the troops through other means is impossible. To continue, players must commit this atrocity, resulting in a moment of realization: to pursue the narrative of heroism, they must engage in heinous acts.<sup>43</sup> A second area where ethical cognitive friction emerges is through the systematic deception of players by the game itself.<sup>44</sup> As players advance, they increasingly come to understand that they are not merely in a game world but rather in a reality shaped by Captain Walker's mind, with his paranoia and obsessions manifesting throughout the environment. Typically, players are encouraged to trust the coherence of the game world, but in *Spec Ops: The Line*, they gradually realize that what they perceive is a projection of the protagonist's psyche. This realization reflects Walker's descent into madness, leading players to question their actions and perceptions within the game. Thus *Spec Ops: The Line* allows players to shift from passive viewers to active participants, providing substantial influence over the storyline and enabling players to directly engage with its ethical and narrative dimensions.

Obviously, *Spec Ops: The Line* is not a direct adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. Instead, it draws on the novella's core themes, which Coppola further explored in *Apocalypse Now*, to craft a unique narrative of madness and psychological breakdown. The game as well as the film explore American military crisis, when their protagonists ultimately confront their own side without a stable chain of command. This in turn creates a setting that resonates with their respective audiences. On the surface, *Spec Ops: The Line* appeals to fans of military shooters, yet the game provides a sharp critique of war and violence, using a fictional Middle Eastern conflict as backdrops. This theme of identity loss also appears in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow, though not free from the prejudices of his time, begins to question the le-

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<sup>42</sup> Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), p. 116. In this paragraph I am drawing on Sicart's analysis.

<sup>43</sup> Sicart, *Beyond Choices*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>44</sup> Sicart, *Beyond Choices*, p. 119.

gitimacy of Africa's colonization and, by extension, the supposed moral ideals of Europe.<sup>45</sup>

When analyzing adaptations of *Heart of Darkness*, we see a shift from passive reading of post-colonial themes to active participation in morally complex choices and simulated wartime actions in digital games. This paper demonstrated how the original story was altered to convey new meanings. Notably, these adaptations have progressed toward deeper immersion. The question arises if interactivity enhances immersion and a sense of responsibility for various audiences. Most artists consider graphic novels as traditional adaptations because they translate a linear story into another linear medium. In film or graphic novels, the audience receives a static narrative that remains the same after its release, regardless of context. By contrast, *Spec Ops: The Line* incorporates a linear storyline within the nonlinear, first-person shooter game. The digital game transform the viewer's role from a passive observer to an active participant, giving players meaningful control over the story's progression and, consequently, over the moral and narrative consequences of their choices.<sup>46</sup>

The transmedial adaptations of *Heart of Darkness* analysed in the paper are innovative in their approach, shaped by the unique features of their respective media. Hutcheon describes adaptation as having a dual nature, functioning "both as original texts in their own right and as adaptations,"<sup>47</sup> and further suggests that "adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, a process of both interpreting and creating anew."<sup>48</sup> The social media graphic novel, the theatrical performance of *Heart of Darkness* and interactive digital games serve as prime examples of this cultural process. Simultaneously, they fit within a transmedia storytelling framework, which Matthew Freeman describes as "a system of building variation on sameness."<sup>49</sup> These adaptations do not simply retell the familiar narrative; they reimagine and reinterpret it for a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience.

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<sup>45</sup> Pittner, Donald, "Gaming 'The Heart of Darkness.'" Pittner and Donald provide a thorough comparison of the novella with its adaptations in film, graphic novel, and digital games. I've recapitulated some of their conclusions.

<sup>46</sup> Pittner, Donald, "Gaming 'The Heart of Darkness.'"

<sup>47</sup> Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Freeman, *Historicizing Transmedia Storytelling* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 8.

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