Lions & Jackals: The Politics of Far Cry 2

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The utter savagery had closed round him – all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible which is also detestable. And it has a fascination too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination – you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender – the hate.

- Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

The sun rises over Saharan grass lands, draping shadows across a mercenary lying on the ground. By flames or gunfire, his enemies will give their blood back to Africa, one more murder within a maelstrom of violence. This is a modern day reimagining of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, "this is Far Cry 2."[116] Like the literary work before it, this Ubisoft Montreal developed game is of its time, depicting a popularly imagined version of politics and conflict.

The civil war taking place in Far Cry 2 is set in a nameless African state. This nation, racked by violence, is interchangeable with any number of war zones. The hostile situation envelopes the player. Patrick Redding, Narrative Designer on the game, had this to say about the locale: "The Savannah, the shanty towns, the jungle, the desert, all these settings carry built in shorthand. It's almost hard-wired into our genetics, so that when you walk through it… you feel it."[117] He is, in all likelihood, referring to the evocative power of the visual aesthetic. However, the environment also carries its own political "shorthand."

There is a common tendency to view Africa as a singular continent plagued with crisis, a politically confused mess of countries perpetually waging war and suppressing civil unrest. This belief is partly founded: "If violence is defined as the arbitrary use – or threat of the use – of physical force in order to achieve compliance, then it is obvious that most Africans are regularly suffering from it."[118]Numerous states have also faced brutal internal conflict, including Rwanda, Sudan, Angola, Burundi, Mozambique, Liberia, Congo, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Nigeria, among others. Amidst crisis, we rely on familiar beliefs about others. Thus, we have "been prone to explaining current events in Africa as a process of 'backwardness.'"[119]

Ubisoft exploits these popular notions and images of Africa, setting Far Cry 2 in a nameless country, to universalize the game's themes in a first-person shooter environment, depicting a political reality that is potentially applicable to any war zone.

Welcome to Africa

In creating a politically realistic environment, Ubisoft succeeds remarkably well. The political factions in Far Cry 2 are as interchangeable as the country in which they fester. They share characteristics with political movements and leaders found in real world conflicts. Even their names, the United Front for Liberation and Labour (UFLL) and the Alliance for Popular Resistance (APR), are outwardly pleasing constructions masking the organizations' more offensive activities. The UFLL and the APR mirror paradoxical monikers such as the All People's Congress (APC) of Sierra Leone - certainly not representative of "All People" during the country's eleven year civil war between the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

The commanders of Far Cry 2's UFLL and APR also reflect the real world tyrants we associate with violent struggles in Africa. Across numerous conflict zones, many political leaders developed a "cult of personality," a sort of self-created form of political worship. These individuals "consciously promoted an image of omnipotence" and personal endowment.[120] Oliver Tambossa, the APR leader, is adorned in medals and military attire, a constant reminder of his status and power. Perhaps he represents the likes of Idi Amin, ex-Ugandan dictator, who seldom appeared without military vestments and validated his ruthless control with militaristic propaganda, including frequent parades honoring himself.

An important aspect of a personalized leadership is "the extent to which the selected person is an embodiment of [their] community."[121] As a result, leaders commonly make claim to an imagined cultural authenticity. Both factions in Far Cry 2 conduct themselves accordingly, decorating their headquarters with "African" artifacts – most noticeably in Act 1. An APR poster features a roaring lion, Zebra skins rest on the floors, and the walls are adorned with shields and spears.

No real world despot embodied this trend more than Mobutu Sese Seko, dictator of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) for 32 years. Mobutu tried to "Africanize" Zaire, demanding citizens change their Christian names to more African titles. He changed his own (Joseph-Désiré Mobutu) to Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu Wa Za

Banga, meaning "the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake." He often wore a leopard skin cap as well, topping off his "Africaness."

Far Cry 2 draws upon common characteristics of African politics, which contribute to our perceptions about conflict in Africa. The protagonist of Far Cry 2 finds himself enveloped by a hostile and unwelcoming environment Western culture intimately associates with Africa. According to Redding, this setting gave Ubisoft Montreal "a reason for a modern day shooter – this isn't a sci-fi warrior, armoured-thing – this is real."[122] Thus, the games ideological themes become particularly resonant. At which point we should play close attention.

Into the Heart of Darkness

The land of Far Cry 2 produces a maelstrom of chaos and violence. Guns jam, fires spread unpredictably, and perpetually respawning enemies threaten the player at every turn. The game's protagonist descends into this anarchy in pursuit of the Jackal, mirroring the narrative from which the game was inspired: Joseph Conrad's The Heart of Darkness. A 1902 novella first published in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, this fictional work about Charles Marlow's descent into Africa in pursuit of the madman Kurtz has long been a Western literary classic. Heart of Darkness has inspired numerous works of fiction, perhaps most famously Apocalypse Now. Similarly influenced, Far Cry 2 is strengthened by the work, but also succumbs to the pitfalls of its progenitor.

L.B. Jeffries on PopMatters discusses the game's design in relation to Conrad's story in his excellent piece, "Far Cry 2: The Heart of Darkness Game." According to Jeffries, the assortment of life threatening and anarchic elements serve "to create a similar environment to the one that Conrad was describing in Heart of Darkness."[123] From the Jackal's background, to the protagonist's malaria infection, to the interchangeable mercenaries, Far Cry 2 develops the corrupting influence of the violent landscape. "By making the game design so brutally hostile," Jeffries suggests, "the game is putting you through the same experience as Kurtz."[124]

In sharing thematic elements Heart of Darkness, Far Cry 2 with also shares its criticisms. Chinua Achebe, professor and novelist, famously criticized Conrad and his text in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness." Fittingly, either work could soundly receive many of Achebe's claims. Both seem to depict:

Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril.[125]

To be fair, the mercenaries of Far Cry 2 include non-Europeans. However, the portrayal of the civilian population is still superficial. The non-combatant civilians in the game exist in small, silent, and isolated groups only when the player has need of malaria medication. Besides the faction leaders, all the other inhabitants of the nameless country are hostile soldiers for APR or the UFLL. These natives, also mostly silent, appear almost rabid with violent animosity, seemingly having no agency of their own. How have the factions recruited these individuals? What are their motivations and political strategies? Do they buy into the war rhetoric? If so, why? What do their civilian friends think of the conflict?

Duncan Fyfe, writing about a similar concern, suggests that the lack of civilians makes this game "a military wet dream: there's never a civilian in that truck. Everyone has left and the country is made freely available for gung-ho wannabes to run around playing paintball."[126] In Achebe's words, "Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality."[127] The lack of humanity in Far Cry 2 seems to display a similar Africa – one in which violence exists as an inseparable part of the landscape and its inhabitants, an all too common myth with real world implications.

Illness and Ideology

The perpetually violent citizens bolster the narrative of Far Cry 2, enveloping the player in a dangerous environment in pursuit of the Jackal, the game's Kurtz figure. To their credit, both works criticize the idea encapsulated by Kurtz's statement, "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded."[128] The mercenaries and other foreign influences in Far Cry 2 are not unwitting visitors to a terrible Africa. On the contrary, they are infected with violence before hand, and the African environment merely accelerates the contagion. In positing such an affliction, and creating a Kurtz-like philosopher in the Jackal, the game extols a significant political ideology.

Like Kurtz's letters in Heart of Darkness, the Jackal's audio tapes dot Far Cry 2's landscape, revealing his thoughts on the war around him. From his perspective, violence has assumed a terrifying power. It has become an illness, one he too carries, able to kill a man with "the

realization of what he turned into."[129] This approach to violence posits an outlook similar to Conrad's fiction. That is to say, Far Cry 2 depicts, and perhaps validates, prominent perceptions of Africa as a carrier of disease, of contagion, of civilization spoiled.

The Jackal's ideology shares much with the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes:

Who gets the lion's share; that's what it's all about. Whether it's between children, or animals, or warlords. It's not that everyone wants a piece, it's that everyone wants the biggest piece. And the biggest piece doesn't go to the monkey, or to the giraffe. The biggest piece goes to the lion. Because the lion is the fucking king! That's how it works. It worked that way a million years before there were men saying otherwise. That's probably how it
should work.[130]

The nameless country of Far Cry 2 cannot be salvaged. No cure exists for the pervasive violence afflicting the nation and its inhabitants. The African soldiers, lacking agency, merely add fuel to the fire:

"They're blowing each other away for someone else's - for someone else: Tambossa, Mbantuwe, UFLL, APR. There is no popular resistance, no Liberty or Labor. There is no ideology at all. There is not even a desire to win."[131]

The Jackal's solution is to remove the 'invisible' refugees and let the country devour itself alive. Politically and culturally, many see Africa as an automaton, a golem created by colonialism, abandoned and doomed to carry out its wicked fate, becoming a perpetual maelstrom of violence and instability. On the world stage, this perception can justify inaction in the face of state failure or self-interested intervention, and shape the world's approach to many countries in need. The Jackal espouses this view of the world, one in which conflict is innate and incessant. Where Conrad could be called a "purveyor of comforting myths," Ubisoft Montreal could be called a purveyor of uncomfortable myths.[132]

It could be argued that the Jackal is a satirical figure, one whose opinion should not be trusted. Patrick Redding does say the game is "about one man's journey down the proverbial river into the Heart of Darkness, into the mind of a madman."[133] Facing a similar contention, Achebe states any effort Conrad might employ to criticize the narrator is "totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and

opinions of his characters."[134] The same argument can be levied against Ubisoft.

Far Cry 2 greatly succeeds in creating a hostile narrative and environment, with a cast so deeply entrenched in the conflict, that the Jackal's world completely immerses the player. Redding has this to say in regards to the game's politics:

"We're not trying to say, 'Oh, the trouble with people today is they're not willing to do really terrible, evil, monstrous things in order to accomplish the greater good.' This isn't like some neocon wet dream, right? The idea is that we don't pretend like we know the answer."[135]

Unfortunately, by not putting forward an alternative answer, the game constructs a narrative that confirms the Jackal's beliefs. At which point, the prominent portrayal of a doomed Africa, collapsing under incessant violence, is all too palatable.

Conclusion

Achebe went so far as to call Joseph Conrad a "thoroughgoing racist."[136] The point of my discussion is not to criticize Ubisoft's creation as a neoconservative blight on the medium. On the contrary, Far Cry 2's successfully designed and fully realized world, with its pervasive hostility, negates the construction of an alternative framework for understanding violence. It first creates a politically realistic landscape, and then succumbs to the same flaws as its literary double. Just like Heart of Darkness, Far Cry 2 dismantles popular notions of foreign actors in conflict zones (and first-person shooters in this case), while simultaneously bolstering a contentious political ideology.

This need not be intentional. In a comment on an earlier version of this article, Far Cry 2 Lead Designer Clint Hocking mentioned that technical limitations partly explain the minimized presence of civilians in the game. Also, in such an emergent and violent scenario, the presence of civilians would pose ethical quandaries and potentially result in an Adults Only rating.[137] Regardless, the depiction of the nameless African country and its political fate is still present.

While I personally find the Jackal's world view and its real world equivalents deplorable, its presence in the game does not ruin the experience. Like Heart of Darkness, Far Cry 2 is a cultural artifact of its time. The game's tacit message is a testament to the power of the medium. Accordingly, I can appreciate it as a video game while also understanding it within a larger discourse of politics. Again, Narrative Designer Patrick Redding sums up this thought nicely:

Maybe 80% of our players are just like, 'Yes, this is great fun! I'm blowing stuff up and burning things.' Maybe only a small piece of that message gets through. And if that's the case, that's fine. We've still built a really good shooter. But what we're saying is, for that percentage of gamers who are affected by these things, and who think about these things, we want it to be there. [138]

Redding and his team succeeded. Far Cry 2 is a brilliant, consistent, flawed, dangerous and terribly burdened work of art. Like Heart of Darkness, it should be considered a classic and receive all the praise and all the scrutiny it deserves.

ENDNOTES

117 Lead Designer Clint Hocking on the game's inspiration: "The original Far Cry is The Island of Dr. Moreau, astory of a mad scientist that has unlocked the inner savagery in man and created literal monsters. But at the same time HG Wels was writing Moreau, Joseph Conrad was writing Heart of Darkness, which actually has very similar themes. It's about someone in the jungle that has discovered and is leveraging man's inner madness, and become a metaphorical rather than literal monster. This is Far Cry 2." See EDGE Staff, "FEATURE: Far Cry 2's Heart of Darkness," EDGE Magazine, 2008, http://www.edge-online.com/magazine/feature-far-cry-2s-heart-darkness?page=0%2C2

118 Patrick Redding, Interview with Luke Guttridge, "Patrick Redding on Far Cry 2," Play.tm, http://play.tm/interview/21585/patrick-redding-on-far-cry-2/2/)

119 Patrick Chabal, and Jean-Pascal Daloz, Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 77.

120 Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works, 50

121 Michael Brattonm and Nicolas van de Walle, Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transition in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 65

122 Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works, 55

123 Redding, Interview, Play.tm

124 L.B. Jeffries, "Far Cry 2: The Heart of Darkness Game," PopMatters, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/column/71590-far-cry-2-the-heart-of-darkness-game/

125 Jeffries, "Far Cry 2," PopMatters

126 Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," criticism to Heart of Darkness, by Joseph Conrad (W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 253

127 Duncan Fyfe, "War Crimes," Hit Self-Destruct Blog, http://www.hitselfdestruct.com/2009/03/war-crimes.html

128 Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 252

129 Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 50

130 Far Cry 2, Ubisoft Montreal, 2008.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 253

134 Patrick Redding, Interview with Chris Remo and Brandon Sheffield, "Redefining Game Narrative: Ubisoft's Patrick Redding on Far Cry 2," Gamasutra, http://experiencepoints.blogspot.com/2010/06/fate-and-frontier.html

135 Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 256

136 Redding, Interview with Remo and Sheffield

137 Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 257

138 Clint Hocking, comment on "Lions & Jackals," Experience Points Blog, http://experiencepoints.blogspot.com/2010/06/fate-and-frontier.html

139 Redding, Interview with Remo and Sheffield

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