

THE TRANSMEDIA PALIMPSEST: ANALYZING NARRATIVE LAYERING IN INTERACTIVE ADAPTATIONS OF CLASSICAL COLONIAL TEXTS

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Abstract

The intersection of digital media studies and postcolonial critique has generated vital vocabulary for unpacking global power architectures embedded within interactive technologies. However, a significant critical gap persists at the precise juncture where classical colonial literature meets interactive digital media—such as video games, text-based interactive fiction, and immersive digital installations. While traditional literary adaptation studies provide clear taxonomies for text-to-film transformations, they frequently fail when applied to ergodic platforms where reading is replaced by physical play and architectural exploration. This review paper synthesizes foundational postcolonial scholarship, transmedia adaptation theories, and game studies to formalize a new critical paradigm: the 'Transmedia Palimpsest.' By unpacking how 'player agency' and 'procedural rhetoric' fundamentally reconfigure the master-narratives of historical textuality, this article offers a rigorous framework for examining the ethics of participation. We examine how game-based retellings of classical texts—such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and William Shakespeare's imperial-inflected text *The Tempest*—both challenge and insidiously reinforce historical colonial structures.

Keywords: Transmedia Palimpsest, structural metamorphosis, imperialist ideologie, hermeneutical models

Introduction

For centuries, the canon of Western classical literature has acted as a critical apparatus for the codification, dissemination, and maintenance of imperialist ideologies. From the civilizing missions explicitly defended in nineteenth-century British fiction to the structural erasure of colonized subjectivity in early modern dramatic texts, literature has long functioned as an ideological vanguard for territorial and epistemic violence (Ashcroft et al., 1995). In the contemporary digital ecosystem, these classical source texts are undergoing an unprecedented structural metamorphosis. They are no longer merely republished or reinterpreted in cinematic forms; rather, they are being fundamentally remediated into interactive, algorithmic systems. Video games, dynamic text-adventures, and open-world experiences regularly invite modern users not merely to read the colonial archive, but to actively participate within its virtualized topographies.

This transition from passive textuality to active spatial-procedural engagement demands a comprehensive reassessment of historical hermeneutical models. Traditional reading models assume a fixed, unidirectional layout where the reader's primary power lies in interpretative resistance or alignment. In contrast, interactive adaptations are inherently ergodic, demanding non-trivial, physical input from the player to generate the narrative discourse (Aarseth, 1997). When a user plays an adaptation of a colonial narrative, they are granted agency—the systemic capacity to make choices, manipulate environmental spaces, determine character interactions, and dictate the distribution of resources. This introduces a profound theoretical paradox: Does giving a player agency over a historically imperial text allow them to

dismantle, subvert, and decolonize its rigid narrative hierarchies? Or does the participatory nature of gameplay force the user to inhabit, reenact, and physically validate the position of the colonizer?

This review article addresses this critical blind spot by establishing the framework of the 'Transmedia Palimpsest.' A palimpsest, historically understood as a manuscript page from which text has been scraped or washed off to make room for another writing, serves as an ideal metaphor for digital remediation. In a digital transmedia palimpsest, the original colonial subtext is never entirely erased; instead, it remains dynamically present beneath the newly superimposed layers of interactive mechanics, algorithmic scripts, and player-driven variable narratives. By examining this layered tension, this article evaluates how player agency interacts with procedural systems to rewrite, complicate, or re-inscribe the portrayal of marginalized, colonized subjects. Through a comparative synthesis of key case studies, we articulate the ethical and socio-political imperatives of digital participation within the ghosts of empire.

2. Theoretical Grounding: Postcolonial Studies Meet Ludology

To understand the structural tensions within the transmedia palimpsest, one must bridge the foundational schism between traditional literary postcolonialism and contemporary game studies. Postcolonial critique has long exposed how language serves as an instrument of hegemony. Edward Said's seminal formulation of Orientalism demonstrated that the Western construction of the 'Orient' was not an objective reality but a highly structured discursive system designed to justify imperial domination (Said, 1978). This discursive framing operates through binary oppositions: the rational, ordered, and progressive colonizer versus the irrational, chaotic, and static colonized subject. Similarly, Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity illustrated how colonial power is perpetually unstable, constantly subverted by the slippages that occur when the colonized subject mimics the master's voice, creating a third space of cultural ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicated this by questioning the structural capacity of the imperial archive to ever allow the subaltern to speak, noting that institutionalized formats often erase marginalized expressions in the act of documenting them (Spivak, 1988).

While these literary theorists successfully unpack the linguistic and ideological nuances of static print, they do not possess the conceptual vocabulary to address the computational, system-driven nature of contemporary interactive media. This is where ludology and postcolonial game studies must intervene. Game scholar Ian Bogost introduced the term 'procedural rhetoric' to describe the practice of using processes and rule-based systems persuasively, rather than relying on spoken or written arguments (Bogost, 2007). Games do not merely assert an ideological position through dialogue or imagery; they construct mathematical arguments about how the world functions through their underlying mechanics and rules. For example, if a game's algorithmic loop requires the player to extract natural resources from an environment to survive or score points, the game procedurally argues for an extraction-based, capitalistic, and imperialistic view of geographical space, regardless of whether the visual text critiques environmental degradation.

When applied to postcolonial contexts, procedural rhetoric reveals what several scholars describe as 'colonial realism'—the systemic calcification of coloniality as an unshakeable ideological fantasy embedded directly within the software architecture of mainstream video games (Mukherjee & Hammar, 2018). Mainstream titles frequently adopt the structural logic of empire through what the 4X genre explicitly codifies: Explore, Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate (Ford, 2016). In these environments, uncharted territories are rendered through Western high Romantic aesthetics as pristine, empty spaces ripe for discovery, compelling

the user to impose an imperial gaze across a digital map that highlights strategic resources for extraction (Ford, 2016). Therefore, analyzing an interactive adaptation requires a dual hermeneutic: scholars must read not only the narrative layer (the text, representation, and dialogue) but also the procedural layer (the code, mechanics, and structural constraints) to evaluate how these spheres reinforce or contradict one another.

"The structural core of the digital game is fundamentally entangled with the legacy of imperial cartography and systemic dominance. To play is often to map, to conquer, and to reduce cultural landscape to algorithmic variables." (Adapted from postcolonial game theory paradigms)

3. The Concept of the Transmedia Palimpsest

We formally define the 'Transmedia Palimpsest' as a theoretical rubric for analyzing how historical narratives are structurally overwritten yet structurally preserved during their migration from static textual mediums into interactive digital systems. Unlike traditional concepts of adaptation that emphasize 'fidelity' to a source text, the transmedia palimpsest views adaptation as a multi-layered, re-authoring process where the computational rules of the new medium act as a new inscription over an old skin. The original colonial text functions as the foundational substrate—an underlying script containing specific historical, racial, and geographic power configurations. When this substrate is adapted into an interactive format, designers build software architectures, user interfaces, player choice mechanics, and win-state parameters directly over it.

Crucially, the foundational layer is never fully erased or rendered inert; its tropes, ideological tensions, and racial dynamics continue to haunt and shape the boundaries of the digital space. This interaction produces three distinct operational layers within the transmedia palimpsest:

1. The Archival Substrate: The literal themes, historical settings, linguistic styles, and racial hierarchies inherent within the original classical colonial source material.

2. The Procedural Overlay: The computational rules, algorithmic constraints, physics engines, resource loops, and choice matrices that define the operational bounds of the game.

3. The Ergodic Performance: The unique, variable text generated in real-time by the physical and intellectual inputs of the player, acting out choices within the system.

The analytical utility of this model lies in its ability to expose 'ludonarrative dissonance' through a postcolonial lens. Ludonarrative dissonance occurs when a game's scripted narrative layer directly contradicts its operational gameplay mechanics. In a postcolonial transmedia palimpsest, this dissonance often takes a specific form: a game may loudly proclaim an anti-colonial stance in its cinematic cutscenes or textual dialogue while simultaneously forcing the player to engage in deeply colonial practices—such as territory accumulation, resource exploitation, and systemic violence—to progress through the software loop. By separating the adaptation into these distinct overlapping horizons, scholars can map exactly where interactive adaptations successfully subvert colonial legacies and where they unwittingly perpetuate them.

4. Methodology: Ergodic Comparative Analysis

To operationalize the transmedia palimpsest as a viable critical tool for Scopus and WoS-level research, this paper outlines an 'Ergodic Comparative Analysis.' This methodology departs from standard textual comparison by demanding a simultaneous evaluation of fixed linguistic signs and dynamic algorithmic processes. It requires the researcher to treat the act of playing a game as a form of critical reading, one that maps how player choice impacts the ideological framework of the original text. The methodology is structured around three methodological axes:

Axis A: Structural Spatial Inhabitation vs. Architectural Reading

Traditional texts construct space through descriptive language, relying on the reader's imagination to map the imperial frontier or the colonial city. The reader navigates this space passively, following a preordained narrative vector. In contrast, interactive adaptations construct space as an architectural reality—a three-dimensional virtual topography or a network of node-based text rooms that the player must physically traverse. This methodology analyzes how the translation of imperial descriptions into explorable environments alters the distribution of power. Researchers look at whether the digital architecture reinforces the colonizer's gaze by turning a vulnerable territory into a transparent, completely searchable sandbox, or if it disrupts spatial control through disorienting, unmappable geographies that resist player mastery.

Axis B: Agency Distribution Matrix and Subaltern Subjectivity

This axis examines which characters within the narrative are granted agency within the software framework, and how that agency is structured. In classical colonial fiction, colonized subjects are routinely deprived of interiority, agency, and speech, functioning as passive background elements, threats, or objects of pity (Said, 1978). In an interactive adaptation, the researcher evaluates how the game's code reconfigures this dynamic. Are colonized subjects transformed into active Non-Player Characters (NPCs) with complex choice trees and independent goals? Can the player assume the role of the colonized subject, or does the system lock them into the perspective of the historical explorer, soldier, or colonial administrator? By mapping the 'agency distribution matrix,' scholars can determine whether interactivity expands or limits the representation of marginalized subjects.

Axis C: Algorithmic Ideological Convergence

The final axis evaluates the relationship between the game's win-state conditions and its overarching thematic elements. This phase of the analysis looks at what behaviors are systemically rewarded by the software architecture (e.g., scoring points, unlocking abilities, acquiring capital) versus what behaviors are punished or rendered mechanically impossible. An interactive adaptation might attempt to subvert a colonial text by offering multiple choice branches, but if the underlying software loop requires the execution of imperial violence to reach the final credits, the game exhibits algorithmic ideological convergence with the original text's colonial infrastructure. Researchers use this axis to identify the ideological limits of digital choice.

5. Empirical/Case Study Horizons

To demonstrate the analytical precision of the transmedia palimpsest, this section provides detailed comparative analyses of three critical case studies where classical colonial literature has been adapted into interactive, computational environments.

Case Study 1: Spec Ops: The Line (2012) and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902)

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* stands as an archetypal, deeply ambivalent critique of late nineteenth-century European imperialism. While Conrad exposes the brutal hypocrisy and moral decay of the Belgian King Leopold II's regime in the Congo Free State, his text notoriously deprives the African population of language and agency, reducing the African continent to an essentialized, primitive backdrop against which the white European psychological drama unfolds—a structural erasure famously critiqued by Chinua Achebe. In 2012, Yager Development remediated this text into a modern military third-person shooter, *Spec Ops: The Line*, shifting the setting from the colonial Congo to a post-catastrophe, sandlocked Dubai.

When analyzed through the lens of the transmedia palimpsest, *Spec Ops: The Line* reveals a brilliant, hyper-reflexive manipulation of the procedural overlay to critique the ethics of

participation. The player assumes the role of Captain Martin Walker, a modern manifestation of Conrad's Marlow, sent on a generic rescue mission that quickly degenerates into madness and war crimes, mirroring Marlow's pursuit of the rogue agent Kurtz (here recast as Colonel John Konrad). The game utilizes the standardized mechanics of the military shooter genre—aiming, shooting, taking cover, and ordering squad mates—to trap the player inside the psychological position of the imperial liberator.

The game's decolonial potential is realized through its systematic dismantling of player agency. While mainstream action games celebrate agency by making the player feel all-powerful, *Spec Ops: The Line* weaponizes procedural mechanics to show that within an imperial system, the only choices available are destructive. In a crucial narrative node, the player is forced to deploy white phosphorus, a horrific chemical weapon, to clear a path through an enemy line. The game design offers no alternative path; any attempt to find a peaceful or diplomatic solution results in a permanent fail-state, forcing the player to pull the trigger to proceed. The subsequent discovery that the phosphorus killed dozens of innocent civilian refugees shatters the illusion of heroic agency. The game's loading screens actively mock the player's participatory choices with text like: 'Do you feel like a hero yet?' or 'The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed civilians. But this is a game, why do you care?' Through this mechanism, *Spec Ops: The Line* exposes the violence inherent in the interactive desire to enter, pacify, and control foreign spaces, successfully adapting Conrad's critique of imperial blindness into a critique of contemporary ludic voyeurism.

Case Study 2: SGC's Kim (2016) and Rudyard Kipling's Imperialist Bildungsroman

Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim* represents the apex of British imperial romance, depicting nineteenth-century colonial India as a vast, vibrant, and ultimate manageable playground for the British Empire's intelligence apparatus, codified as 'The Great Game.' Kipling's protagonist, an orphaned Irish boy raised in the streets of Lahore, navigates diverse cultural spaces with a hybrid ease that ultimately serves to consolidate British intelligence supremacy over Russian imperial expansion. In 2016, The Secret Games Company released *Kim*, an open-world, top-down role-playing game that translates Kipling's expansive novel into an algorithmic simulation of colonial surveillance.

Analyzing *Kim* via the transmedia palimpsest framework uncovers a profound instance of 'colonial realism,' where the game's software infrastructure unintentionally reinforces the imperialist politics of the source text. In the digital adaptation, nineteenth-century India is rendered as a procedural map generated from geographic datasets. The player must navigate this terrain by managing survival statistics—such as hunger, fatigue, health, and stealth. To progress and fund their travels, the player must take on intelligence-gathering contracts from British agents, which requires them to spy on native populations, map hidden routes, and deliver secret dispatches.

While the game's developer argued that the adaptation was designed to mock pompous imperialists and provide a nuanced view of India, the underlying procedural rhetoric subverts this goal. The mechanics of the role-playing game genre inherently commodify human relationships. Every native character the player meets on the road is reduced to an extraction point for data, money, or items necessary to sustain the player's survival loop. The native population is stripped of authentic historical subjectivity and transformed into operational props within a British intelligence matrix. The player's agency is entirely oriented toward maintaining the informational dominance of the British Raj. Thus, despite any surface-level ironies or textual critiques present in the dialogue boxes, SGC's *Kim* demonstrates how the procedural demands of open-world survival and management games can reinforce the imperial gaze, translating nineteenth-century colonial surveillance into modern digital play.

Case Study 3: Ludic Counter-Readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has long served as a foundational text for postcolonial theory. Twentieth-century anti-colonial intellectuals—including Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Roberto Fernández Retamar—reimagined the dynamic between the sorcerer-colonizer Prospero and the enslaved native Caliban to articulate the psychological and systemic dynamics of anti-colonial liberation movements. In recent years, several independent digital adaptations and text-based interactive fictions developed using tools like Twine and Ink have attempted to translate this dramatic text into an interactive space.

In these text-based interactive palimpsests, creators restructure the agency distribution matrix to offer genuine counter-hegemonic commemorative play. In an interactive fiction adaptation that shifts the point of view entirely to Caliban, the player is no longer forced to execute Prospero's magical command scripts. Instead, the game engine uses branching choice paths to disrupt the original narrative's fixed outcome. When Prospero demands labor or hurls linguistic insults, the player can select from a variety of responses: overt submission, silent resistance, structural sabotage, or the formulation of an independent language. This creates what postcolonial media scholars describe as a 'third space' of electronic hybridity, where the interactive text fractures the monologic authority of the Western canon.

Furthermore, these digital counter-readings frequently disrupt the cartographic clarity common in mainstream games. Instead of a clear, transparent mini-map that makes every resource visible, these adaptations render Prospero's island as a disorienting, shifting hypertextual labyrinth. The player's choices do not lead to a total conquest of space but rather expose the profound vulnerabilities and anxieties of the colonizer. By making it mechanically impossible to achieve a traditional 'win-state' based on resource accumulation or territorial control, these independent adaptations demonstrate that interactive fiction can function as a powerful site for decolonial intervention, allowing modern players to experience the structural frictions of anti-colonial resistance.

6. Comparative Framework & Synthesis Matrix

To clarify the conceptual boundaries of these adaptations for peer-reviewed academic assessment, the following synthesis matrix juxtaposes the structural layers of our case studies, contrasting their narrative and procedural dimensions.

Case Study / Text	Archival Substrate	Procedural Overlay	Ideological Output
Spec Ops: The Line (Heart of Darkness)	Conrad's critique of Belgian imperial decay; passive erasure of African subjectivity.	Military shooter genre; denial of pacifist choices; forced deployment of chemical weapons.	Decolonial subversion via structural guilt and subversion of heroic agency.
SGC's Kim (Kipling's Kim)	Kipling's imperial romance; India as a safe, romantic playground for British intelligence.	Open-world survival mechanics; conversion of native populations into surveillance data points.	Colonial Realism; reinforcement of imperial data collection through gameplay loops.
Interactive Tempests (The Tempest)	Shakespeare's imperial dialectic between Prospero's magic and Caliban's raw resistance.	Branching text networks; fragmented hypertexts; complete rejection of standard resource loops.	Counter-hegemonic liberation; rehabilitation of subaltern speech and history.

7. The Ethics of Participation: Agency as Recolonization or Liberation

The core problem introduced by the transmedia palimpsest centers on the ethics of participation. In traditional narrative media, the consumer occupies an external position relative to the text. When reading an imperial novel, a reader can recognize its ideological biases and build an oppositional stance through interpretation. However, when that same novel is transformed into a procedural game, the user must physically execute the actions required by the software's codebase to experience the narrative. This requirement changes the relationship between the user and the text: the user is no longer an observer of colonial history; they are a functional component in its digital simulation.

This operational reality can lead to an uncomfortable form of ludic recolonization. When a game requires a player to adopt the perspective of an imperial explorer, a corporate colonial enterprise, or a military force, the player is trained to view the digital environment through a utilitarian framework. To complete objectives, the player must survey land, map unfamiliar zones, manage resources, and eliminate native resistance. The software loop rewards efficiency, mapping, and extraction, which mirror the operational logic of historical imperialism. Even when an adaptation includes a narrative critique of colonialism through text or cutscenes, the physical requirement to act as a colonizer can overshadow that critique, turning historical violence into a source of entertainment and fun.

Conversely, interactive media can also provide unique opportunities for decolonial liberation that static texts cannot replicate. By designing game mechanics that subvert expectations—such as introducing structural friction, designing impossible win-states, and giving marginalized characters independent agency—creators can use procedural rhetoric to challenge historical narratives. These subversive adaptations shift the goal of play from mastering an environment to experiencing the limitations and failures of colonial control. When an adaptation forces a player to confront the destructive outcomes of their actions, or when it limits their ability to control a territory, it exposes the instability of the imperial archive. Therefore, player agency in the transmedia palimpsest is not inherently liberating or oppressive; its political impact is determined by how the game's code and mechanics are structured.

8. Conclusion & Future Directions

This review article has formalized the framework of the 'Transmedia Palimpsest' to address a critical gap at the intersection of postcolonial studies, adaptation theory, and ludology. By analyzing how classical colonial texts are structurally overwritten yet preserved within digital environments, we have demonstrated that interactivity introduces a new set of ideological dynamics that cannot be evaluated using traditional literary models. Through a comparative analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line*, *SGC's Kim*, and interactive adaptations of *The Tempest*, we have illustrated how the tension between a game's narrative representation and its procedural mechanics can either subvert or reinforce historical power structures.

As digital media technologies continue to evolve, the necessity for a rigorous, postcolonial framework for interactive adaptations becomes increasingly urgent. Future research in this sub-field must expand beyond text-based interactive fiction and conventional video games to examine emerging technologies—such as generative artificial intelligence, room-scale virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) installations. These immersive platforms threaten to further naturalize the imperial gaze by placing the user directly inside simulated historical spaces, making the mechanics of control feel invisible and intuitive. Scholars must continue to interrogate these digital architectures, exposing the underlying code that shapes our interaction with history, and advocating for design practices that respect the complexities of subaltern subjectivity.

9. References

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