UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: MALARIA AND ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE IN FAR CRY 2

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I: *Far Cry 2*, Orientalism, Ecocriticism

Since its release in 2008, *Far Cry 2* has been called many things: "immersive," a "rugged recreation of Africa," coercive, pessimistic, "unusually punitive," and an offering with "comprehensive moral unease." ([1]) One of the things it has never been called is "simple." The brainchild of Ubisoft Montreal, *Far Cry 2* is complicated: the game is fairly unforgiving but rewards second and third play-throughs, the ending and story seem thin but it is engaging enough to make one view morally repugnant choices as ordinary, and the characters are largely interchangeable except for a select few that are more skillfully drawn than either Vaas or Pagan Min in the sequels. Taking its inspiration from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and set in an unnamed African country that is quickly spiraling into bloody chaos, the game also has a complex relationship with Africa. Only rarely does the more troublesome aspect of imperialism ([2]) or cultural hegemony enter into the discussion. In fact, to my knowledge the only close analysis of *Far Cry 2* from a postcolonial viewpoint has been undertaken by Jorge Albor (2010) in the pages of this journal's sister publication. Concluding that the game "dismantles popular notions of foreign actors in conflict zones…while simultaneously bolstering a

contentious political ideology" that can best be described as "a doomed Africa, collapsing under incessant violence," Albor focuses on the political depiction of Africa (2010, pp. 206, 205).

I see the following examination as a companion to and extension of Albor's work. Whereas he takes *Far Cry 2*'s characters and their actions as objects of postcolonial study, I take the game's depiction of the setting itself as my object. Specifically focusing on the symbolic freight of malaria in the game, I find a link between in-game representations of malaria, the idea that Africa produces disease *ex terra*, and the larger Africanist ([3]) discourse which characterizes it as a dangerous and resistant place—a "dark" continent in every sense of the word. Because there is a pre-existing discourse about Africa from which *Far Cry 2* borrows and in which we must contextualize it, the only conclusion I can reach is that the game distills and reimagines elements of Africanist discourse, further propagating the conception and creation of an Africa that is dangerous and resistant.

II: Welcome to Africa, Enjoy Your Malaria

It may seem odd, I admit, to focus on malaria, especially to those readers who have played *Far Cry 2* and are aware of its relatively minor impact on the narrative and gameplay. I may seem odder still that I do not dispute the above characterization. Malaria *is* minor to the narrative and gameplay—but that is not all there is to a video game. Depending on one's point of view, a relatively unimportant item (a crucifix to an ancient Roman as opposed to a crucifix to a Christian, for example) can take on different levels of signification. So it is, I argue, with *Far Cry 2*'s malaria.

The game hints that malaria is more important than it lets on. Whereas it is relatively inconsequential to either the narrative or gameplay, *Far Cry 2* simply will not let the player forget about the disease. For instance, the game uses a novel visual approach to

communicate symptoms. In the introductory stages of the game, the wildly tilting field of vision and increased image blur do a nice job of conveying dizziness. When combined with frequent fade-outs and a soft focus/vignetting effect that represents tunnel vision, the player also gets a sense of a throbbing headache. After the introductory stages, however, visual representations decrease considerably, appearing only during the recurring bouts of malaria. In these instances, the screen fills with a sickly, mucus-yellow haze, and translucent protozoa appear around the field of vision (see Figure 1).

Malaria also sporadically affects gameplay. Known symptoms such as coughing and weakness/fatigue affect the player-character's stamina for sprinting or holding his breath underwater. Depending of the severity of the disease (conveyed by a scale of one to five in the game), every thirty to forty-five minutes of real time the player-character suffers a bout of illness that clouds the vision and makes simple actions like driving a car more difficult. Allowing the disease to remain untreated will eventually result in a fatal attack. Unless the player has undertaken a permanent death campaign of his/her own devising, this is not an issue because the player character simply re-spawns in the nearest Underground safehouse and is given a mission in order to earn medicine. At its worst levels, the disease is a minor annoyance, an element that forces the player-character to complete side missions. For the most part, however, it never reaches its worst levels because the medicine available in the game is very effective, so that malaria "renders the gameplay mechanic meaningless" and turns into "a frustrating distraction to the core gameplay" (Ryan, 2012).

Figure 1. A bout of malaria, featuring protozoa around the edges of the frame.

The most frequent and least effective representation of malaria is exposition. Before the player even gets control, the antagonist (an arms dealer named The Jackal) makes the diagnosis. Following a short tutorial, our first handler reminds us that we have malaria and that it is dangerous. After a few more short tutorial missions, a kindly priest comments on how sick we are before giving us medicine. Exposition, by way of journal entries, also conveys the seriousness of the disease. For instance, when the disease is at its worst, the entry reads: "Shakes, sweating, fever. Convulsions are severe. Feel like I could die." At level three: "My fever's high. I'm vomiting. That's a bundle of fun. The joint pain won't go away. Add to that the head-to-toe shivers and I got myself a party." This is how we know that the player-character has malaria. Every symptom shown visually or through gameplay could be the result of getting a bad burger at the Kampala Holiday Inn Express, so it falls to spoken dialogue to make the distinction.

Narratively, malaria bookends the action of the game, but does not make an appreciable impact on the story itself. In the introductory sequences, as I've stated, malaria is stressed but

does not affect the relationship with The Jackal or the overarching mission at hand (to kill him). In fact, by the time the game progresses to the second map section it is fairly easy to reduce the sickness level to zero, but in the final point-of-no-return map section, it returns to level five no matter what it was before. Perhaps this makes sense: the severity of the disease leaves little hope for the player-character's future, making the choice to die easier. Its impact is blunted, however, by the but-thou-must loop of the ending. There is no way forward but to agree to The Jackal's suicide-pact plan, so the severity of the disease is almost incidental to the player-character's final doom.

The above description of malaria's depiction coupled with the complaints voiced by writers such as Ryan demonstrate pretty clearly that both the representation and function of the disease in *Far Cry 2* is ancillary at best. ([4]) But what I want to emphasize is that its thin representation and minor impact on gameplay actually ratchets up malaria's symbolic import: it simply has no other function. Because the game continuously reminds the player that his/her character has malaria but does little to show the disease through narrative or gameplay effects, it functions as a signifier of Africa, another example of the continent's danger and resistance to Western incursion.

To understand malaria's connotative force—in *Far Cry 2* and in the West, generally—consider that HIV/AIDS and lower respiratory infections are both deadlier medical conditions in Sub-Saharan regions (Rao, Lopez, and Hemed, 2006). For a game that is, as L.B. Jeffries (2009) observed, "incessantly hostile," the most dangerous option would seem inviting. Obviously, the connotations of HIV/AIDS and its relatively slow progression present challenges that an FPS developer would have little reason to tackle. These obstacles, however, do not apply to respiratory infection, so it was likely ignored because anyone anywhere can get it. A lower respiratory infection simply doesn't evoke Africa the way malaria does. This is the premise of my analysis. The

connection of malaria and Africa is a well-worn trope, contributing to and/or furthering an imperialist view of the continent that characterizes it as resistant and dangerous.

The problems with this representational connection are legion. Setting aside my earlier observation that malaria is not even the most common cause of death, there is still the false implication that malaria is somehow particular to Africa. Since malaria is almost unknown in the United States and Western Europe, it is easy to forget that in the past it was a real threat to every continent but Antarctica. In his *Ecological Imperialism* (2004), Alfred Crosby observes that malaria was still commonplace in the East of England and East Midlands well into the 1800s, and during the same era "was the most important sickness in the entire Mississippi Valley" (pp. 65, 208). ([5]) Even as malaria was killing people in England, however, Westerners such as Henry M. Stanley and Richard Francis Burton began to construct a symbolic complex that associated Africa's fecundity with malaria. Stanley (1872), for instance, reports on "sloughs of black mud," "over-tall grasses," and the "miasmatic jungle with its noxious emissions" (p. 81). Burton provides a telling description of Tanzania, so I quote him at length:

> Beyond the cultivation the route plunges into a jungle, where the European traveller realises every preconceived idea of Africa's aspect, at once hideous and grotesque…The black greasy ground, veiled with thick shrubbery, supports in the more open spaces screens of tiger and spear-grass, twelve and thirteen feet high, with every blade a finger's breadth…The foot-paths, in places "dead,"—as the natives say,—with encroaching bush, are crossed by llianas, creepers and climbers…frequently crossing one another like network and stunting the growth of even the vivacious calabash, by coils like rope tightly encircling its neck. The earth, ever rain-drenched, emits the odour of sulphuretted hydrogen, and in some parts the traveller might fancy a corpse to be

hidden behind every bush. To this sad picture of miasma the firmament is a fitting frame: a wild sky, whose heavy purple nimbi, chased by raffales and chilling gusts, dissolve in large-dropped showers; or a dull, dark grey expanse, which lies like a pall over the world. In the finer weather the atmosphere is pale and sickly; its mists and vapours seem to concentrate the rays of the oppressive "rain-sun."
(Burton, 1860, pp. 91-92)

In these two examples, Africa is overly fertile, with "over-tall grasses" and "greasy," "veiled" vegetation. It is wild and its flora so chaotic and aggressive that it strangles the one cultivated crop, the calabash. This image of strangulation is especially interesting, considering how the very air itself seems to suffocate each author. Stanley complains of the jungle's "noxious emissions," while Burton describes both the sulfuric stench that smells like a rotting corpse and the "pale and sickly" atmosphere in even the best weather. Nothing in their description of the air is positive. "Noxious" at best denotes harm and at worst denotes poison. "Sulphuretted hydrogen" is what we now call hydrogen sulfide (swamp or sewer gas), which is poisonous and smells like rotten eggs. Furthermore, the atmosphere of the jungle landscape is depicted in terms of sickness and death: "pall" (2005) denotes a darkening or gloominess (but also connotes death since its now-obsolete use was to denote the cloth spread over a coffin), "pale" (2005) denotes a loss of color (which can also mean growing dim), and "sickly" provides the source of that dimness.

Figure 2. The "Heart of Darkness" map area of Far Cry 2.

Far Cry 2 is not so overt as Burton or Stanley. It never explicitly identifies jungle areas as sources of disease, but it does imply that parts of Africa are miasmic sloughs. Scenes such the one shown in Figure 2 are common in the game. The hazy jungle foregrounded by standing vegetation on each side and water lilies (none with flowers) covering the opaque, olive drab water seem to create a faithful representation of Burton's "mists and vapours" and "veiled" ground. The vision clouded by the sulfur-yellow haze during sick flashes (see Figure 1) seems a direct descendant of this earlier significatory complex: it is a spot-on visual representation of Stanley's "noxious emissions" and Burton's "odour of sulphuretted hydrogen."

To further link African jungles to sickness, both Stanley and Burton use a form of the word *miasma*, which had a particular connotation in the nineteenth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a miasma (2001) was "formerly believed to be the carrier of various infections, esp. malaria." Burton and Stanley produced popular texts about Central Africa, and in their work we can see the beginnings of two assumptions—first that African fecundity is associated with unhealthy air and second that this unhealthy air spawns disease, specifically malaria. *Far*

Cry 2 never uses the word, but its depiction of malaria is reliant on the miasmic theory of disease. Instead of showing the foul air wafting up out of vegetation, the game ties it directly to the symptoms, showing the sickly yellow haze only during a bout of the disease with which it is connected. The protozoa that crowd the edges of the screen further establish this haze as the result of malaria. This creates something like a causal symbolic chain in which the disease is directly linked to the sulfur-yellow haze, the haze itself linked to miasmic air, and the air linked to Africa.

Such a reading is not too far-fetched. Malaria, we should remember, is an infectious disease, so it is an easy transition from the reality of an infectious disease *associated with Africa* to the symbolism of an *infection by Africa* via the disease. ([6]) Going well beyond associating the disease with a particular setting, *Far Cry 2* envisions malaria as an extension of Africa, a means by which the hostile land invades and overcomes the Western encroacher. Though it is subtle, the game's depiction of malaria is a significant (in both senses of the word) indicator of how the West in general sees the relationship of Africa and malaria.

The purpose of malaria in-game is to signify the hostility and danger of Africa, of the place itself. That it is, above all, dangerous is one of the first lessons we learn about *Far Cry 2*'s Africa. The initial cinematic depicts depopulation, raging wildfires, and militia checkpoints that seem to outnumber noncombatants, all three of which suggest that Africans themselves are dangerous or that the player is operating in an Other world whose new rules he/she must learn. With malaria, however, things are different. In the scene, the player-character—a veteran mercenary sent to kill The Jackal, one of the most dangerous arms dealers in the world—barely survives the cab ride to the hotel. He passes out in the cab, wakes up in a hotel room staring at The Jackal, passes out, wakes up in the middle of a firefight, fights, and then passes out again. In addition to the political statement uncovered by Albor, malaria's connection

to Africa suggests a geographical statement in the game: militias and fires begun by Molotov cocktails are certainly a danger, but Africa, not Africans, is also dangerous and is actively trying to kill the player-character. What the game does is not merely to evoke Africa with malaria, but to employ it as a metonymic representation that signifies Africa. In doing so, *Far Cry 2* participates in a well-worn trope that has been used to justify an imperialist view of the continent as resistant and dangerous.

III: Neo-colonialism, Orientalism, Representation

The following section will be of interests mostly to those who are unfamiliar with postcolonial theory; those with a working knowledge of Edward Said's ideas in *Orientalism* are invited to skip to the next section.

I want to pause in my discussion of malaria in *Far Cry 2* to point out some of the larger contours of colonialist and imperialist thought as it pertains to the above discussion and below conclusions. Said's *Orientalism* (1994), which is largely responsible for the rise of post-colonial studies, defines Orientalism itself as:

> the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient…In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.
> (Said, 1994, p. 3)

As a "corporate institution," Orientalism is not a plan hatched by some evil Westerner, but is instead the product of a way of thinking about the East. This viewpoint, Said later states, is a "textual attitude," appearing in discourse (a particular set of rules and traditions that form the way we think and talk

about specific subjects) in the form of histories, novels, movies, anthropological studies, and even laws. For the purposes of this study, the corporate nature of Orientalism, the textual attitude of the West, and the West's authority over the Orient form the core ideas of postcolonial theory, though, to be sure, there are other elements of Said's work and other theorists that might just as readily apply.

Orientalism is corporate in that one cannot point to a single individual as the culprit. It is fragmented, diffused throughout the West, and it is no more (or less) a product of Napoleon's writings about Egypt than it is Mankiewicz's 1963 *Cleopatra*. Instead, it is a form of soft power, for Orientalism "is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction…but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains" (Said, 1994, p. 12).

Since most Westerners have never been to Africa, our way of seeing it has largely been textual, and this, for Said, is the mechanism by which Orientalism is propagated. He explains how the "textual attitudes" of this discourse grow to such dominance that they crowd out other ways of seeing the Orient. Walker Percy (2000) gives us an excellent example of this textual attitude: he posits a hypothetical Midwestern couple getting lost in Mexico and stumbling on a small village in the midst of a corn festival. Instead of experiencing the festival directly, the pair experiences a "rather desperate impersonation" because they view the whole affair as a performance of the "real" Mexico. Taking the hypothetical further, Percy imagines the couple speaking to an ethnologist friend and telling him of their experience; this is, Percy argues, "not to share their experience, but to certify their experience as genuine" (Percy, 2000, pp. 51-54). For both Percy and Said, the textual attitude, the ability to know Mexico, Egypt, or Uganda without ever having set foot

in the country, is based in what has already been said and written about it.

The textual attitude, if it propagates over the years and decades, allows those who hold it to gain authority over the place that is known. For example, Napoleon conducts an expedition into Egypt with over one hundred scholars, and they produce the *Description de l'Égypte* about (among other things) its social and governmental structure. The Rosetta Stone allows Westerners to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Egyptologists write books about the language. Howard Carter rediscovers Tutankhamun's tomb, and Egyptologists write books about Egyptian material culture, kingship, and burial customs. In these three examples, Western experts are seen as having gained more knowledge about Egypt than the Egyptians living there. And this knowledge, argues Said, "because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" (1994, p. 40). That is, the textual attitude—because those producing it have intellectual or political authority over whatever aspect of the Orient is being discussed—fashions *an* Orient for those in the West that may or may not bear any resemblance to any *real* Orient. Believing that we know it through what has been written about it, we treat it, think about it, and speak about it accordingly.

IV: Conclusions and Implications

Just as there is an Orientalist discourse about the Middle East and Asia, there is a discourse in the West about Africa. This Africanist discourse, if we might call it that, functions in the same manner as Orientalist discourse and has a history and scope to match it. Beginning with Pliny (1st cent. CE), "experts" have made "authoritative" statements about the continent. The Hereford mappa mundi (14th cent. CE) is a cartographic statement that separates Africa from Europe and places monsters in the former. Georg Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1830) makes

historical statements by concluding that Africa has unequal historical footing as compared to the West. Burton and Stanley (1860s and 70s) make eyewitness statements about the character of the landscape. In *Races of Africa* (1930) Charles G. Seligman makes anthropological statements and divide the different "races" of the continent by skull size, hair type, language, primitiveness, etc. Lastly, Albert Schweitzer's many interviews (1950s-60s) make spiritual statements which classify Africans as less spiritually mature than Westerners. Taken together, this discourse creates, in the minds of Westerners, an Africa that is a "metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril," which leads to "the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world" (Achebe, 1977, p. 788). Once Africanist discourse has been thoroughly shaped by the experts, it begins to seep into less "authoritative" but more impactful texts. After the cartographers and historians come Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Florida's Africa USA theme park (1953), *The Gods Must be Crazy* (1980), *Outbreak* (1995), and a flurry of films about African socio-political conflicts in 2005 and 2006 (*Lord of War*, *Blood Diamond*, and *The Last Kind of Scotland*). By 2008, the scene has pretty well been set: what Africa looks like and what Africa *is* was established before *Far Cry 2* was ever released.

In *Far Cry 2*, malaria is a single cog in the game's discursive relationship with Africa, and the game itself is a single cog in a larger Africanist discourse. It is a testament to the power and ubiquity of that discourse that few have noticed that *Far Cry 2*'s Africa is just *an* Africa. Unsurprisingly then, even fewer have thought to ask why none of the choices for player-characters are native Africans or why players see no structures like Kenya's Uhuru Gardens or why the player-character gets malaria instead of a respiratory infection. Most of us (including me, for at least four years) do not notice anything amiss because the Africa in

Far Cry 2 is the Africa we expect. It has been reinforced by the authority of our works in the West, our own textual attitude toward the continent, and the corporate nature of the discourse itself.

This is what makes seemingly insignificant game elements such as malaria truly significant. Because the vast majority of those who play the game have never been and will never go to central Africa, we depend on Africanist discourse to "know" it. *Far Cry 2* relies on this discourse to make an image of Africa, but it also contributes to that discourse, making statements about the continent to a demographic that other media may never reach. It adds its voice to KONY2012 videos, movies about Somali pirates, jokes about Nigerian scams, and fear-mongering news stories about ebola to stitch together an Africa that invites a certain kind of thinking—and therefore action—on the part of the West. This Africa invites pity, intervention, aid, and exploitation instead of the sort of partnership, cooperation, and understanding that we might extend to Australia, Israel, or Sweden. That is the real legacy of *Far Cry 2*, and for as long as Africanist discourse continues, it is our legacy in the West, too.

Endnotes

([1]) See Robin Burkinshaw. (2008). Far Cry 2: Who am I? *roBurky*. Retrieved from http://www.roburky.co.uk/2008/11/far-cry-2-who-am-i/; Edge. (2008). Far Cry 2's heart of darkness. *Edge*. Retrieved from http://www.edge-online.com/features/feature-far-cry-2s-heart-darkness/?page=0%2C2; L.B. Jeffries. (2009); Mitch Krpata. (2008). Going native. *The Phoenix, Boston*. Retrieved from http://thephoenix.com/Boston/recroom/71835-far-cry-2/; Alec Meer. (2014). Another Life, Another Time: Far Cry 2 Revisited. *Rock Paper Shotgun*. Retrieved from www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/02/14/far-cry-2-retrospective/; and Iroquois Pliskin. (2008). Seeing Africa, Down the Barrel of a Gun. *Versus CluClu Land*. Retrieved from

http://versusclucluland.blogspot.com/2008/12/seeing-africa-down-barrel-of-gun.html.

([2]) When I use the terms *imperialism* and *colonialism*, I am following a specific set of definitions. They are drawn from Edward Said, who defines imperialism as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" and colonialism as "a consequence of imperialism" and "the implanting of settlements on a distant territory" (p. 9). See Edward Said. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

([3]) Although I am aware that Toni Morrison has previously used the term "Africanist" in *Playing in the Dark* as a position phrase and a call to action, Edward Said's concept of Orientalist discourse leads me to adapt and adopt the term with a less positive denotation (see section III). See Toni Morrison. (1991). *Playing in the dark.* New York: Vintage.

([4]) One can clearly tell from interviews with the game developers that the malaria of *Far Cry 2* is not what they had in mind. Redding discusses disfigurement, vomiting, etc. as outcomes of the disease in the latter stages of the game, which may mean that some of the elements were cut pre-release. Be that as it may, my concern in this examination is not what the designers meant to create or what they thought they were doing. Just as *Far Cry 2* cannot be held up as evidence of some malignant racism on the part of the developers, their intentions cannot mitigate the effects of game on those playing it.

([5]) That threat is no longer with us in the West because of our widespread use of insecticides such as Paris Green and DDT. Africa, Asia, and equatorial portions of South America, however, did not enjoy such large-scale eradication programs before DDT was slowly phased out between 1968 and 1984 amid health concerns. We are essentially safe from the disease because we

used insecticides that are now considered unsafe and that developing nations are strongly encouraged to avoid.

([6]) As a sort of third-party confirmation of this reading, I would point out that Redding (2008) himself supports it. Although he likely would not share my postcolonial interpretation, when he states that *Far Cry 2*'s malaria is "not just a parasite, but…the literal possession of the infected by the land itself," Redding is explicitly connecting malaria to Africa and its geography. See Redding, P. (2008). *GDC 2008: Slides for "Do, don't show"* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from http://holesinteeth.typepad.com/blogginess/2008/03/gdc-2008-slides.html

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