Love Letters to India?: Adapting Colonial Fiction in The Secret Games Company's *Kim*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, several interactive examples of adapted Kipling have appeared. These include Kipling-inspired console and computer games such as *TaleSpin* (Capcom 1991), *TaleSpin* (Sega 1992), *Disney's The Jungle Book* (Eurocom 1994), *The Jungle Book: Groove Party* (Ubi Soft Montreal 2000), *Walt Disney's The Jungle Book: Mowgli's Wild Adventure* (Ubi Soft Entertainment 2000), *The Jungle Book* (StoryToys 2013) and *Kim* (The Secret Games Company 2016). Nonetheless, unlike the literary and audiovisual afterlives of Kipling's considerable output of fiction and poetry, which have been the object of serious work, the interactive adaptations of his literary texts have received very little or no attention at all from either Kipling or video game scholars. Although this might be understandable in the case of the handful of multiplatform game adaptations of Disney animated films and TV series that are, in turn, based on Kipling's *Jungle Books*, as these interactive target texts seldom go beyond featuring characters from their source material, such neglect is possibly more regrettable when it comes to *Kim*, an open-world top-down role-playing game adapted from the 1901 novel of the same name which was released by the indie micro-studio The Secret Games Company (SGC) in 2016.

Much like instances of the 'Conradesque' such as *Far Cry 2* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), SGC's *Kim* arguably offers itself as a useful case study to explore pressing issues concerning the process of adapting literary texts for an interactive medium and the representation/simulation of imperialist ideologies in video games (Hand 2014, 184–85; Fehrle 2015; Pittner and Donald 2018). Interestingly enough, according to the British game designer and founder of SGC Jeremy Hogan, Kipling's *Kim* is first and foremost 'a love letter to India' that 'mocks the pompous imperialists' (Wawro 2016). Whilst the first part of his appreciation simply echoes that of other readers (see, e.g., Lerner 2008, 12; Wilson 1977, 130), Hogan's description of the novel as a lampoon of British colonialism seriously conflicts with the interpretation of the same text provided by reputed literary critics such as Patrick Brantlinger, who rather reads it as 'an imperialist adventure tale' (Brantlinger 2011, 126). In light of these divergent understandings of the book, and in light of Hogan's self-proclaimed caution 'not to lionize or whitewash British imperialism' nor to 'shy away from representing its ugly sides' in the game (Wawro 2016), it seems particularly compelling to investigate how the portrayal of nineteenth-century British rule in India is remediated from Kipling's to SGC's *Kim*.

If *Kim* the novel reads as the imperialist representation of 'an Indian paradise' (Montefiore 2007) or as 'a nostalgic homage' in which 'the dazzling whirligig of a sumptuous, chaotic India functions in the interests of empire' (Watson 2015, 30), then I set out to assess the extent to which *Kim* the video game might present itself both as a metaphorical British 'love letter to India' and as one which is addressed from the colony back to the metropole. In her scholarly discussion of the computer game (to the best of my knowledge, the only one published thus far), Lindsay Meaning has recently argued that the game adaptation reproduces colonialist attitudes and practices that are depicted in the book and occasionally foregrounds others that are only implicit in the novel (Meaning 2020). Expanding upon Meaning's procedural rhetorical analysis, this work-in-progress paper will revisit SGC's *Kim* through the lens of 'imperial play' (van der Merwe 2021). In doing so, it will also highlight the importance of several overlooked non-player characters (NPCs), including those adapted from Kipling's 1880s short stories. As it will be suggested through a 'multimodal discourse analysis' where 'procedurality' is regarded 'as a semiotic mode' (Hawreliak 2019, 228), marginal NPCs such as Lispeth (from the homonymous short story and reappearing in *Kim* as 'the Woman of Shamlegh') and Peachey Carnehan (from 'The Man Who Would Be King') seem to complicate the remediated representation of British colonial rule in the game, hinting as they do at their own ambivalent source texts.

My still ongoing exploration of SGC's *Kim* intends to make a contribution to at least three research areas. By interpreting a fairly recent example of adapted Kipling, it aims to contribute not only to charting the contemporary reception of his literary works, but also, more broadly, to video game adaptation studies (Elkington 2021; Flanagan 2017; Thomas 2022) and postcolonial game studies (Mukherjee 2017; Mukherjee and Hammar 2018). As a scholar 'trained in both literary and game studies' (Hutton and Barr 2020, 754), I will discuss SGC's *Kim* as case study in order to make an attempt at a necessary cross-pollination between literary and game criticism from a postcolonial perspective, which is likely to be of particular relevance to other academics investigating the intersection of literary texts and video games or the ideological import of video games set in colonial India.

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