

HEART OF DARKNESS

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Heart of Darkness is a LARP about lies people want to believe when the truth is too uncomfortable. It explores how banal motivations – mostly money – make people take part in genocide. It is a LARP about one of the worst slave states in human history.

Heart of Darkness is the story of two young officers who have returned to Belgium in 1902 after serving in the security apparatus of the Congo Free State. During a dinner party, they tell stories about their exploits in Congo. The stories are complete fabrications, as the reality is much, much worse. Play alternates between dinner scenes and flashbacks to Congo Free State.

No historical knowledge of the Congo Free State (nor Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness) is required. The LARP will begin with a short briefing on the subject. We are aiming for historical plausibility and a respectful take on the suffering of the victims, but every detail doesn't need to be accurate.

Content warnings: racism, slavery, talk of atrocities and violence, heteronormative relationships, “traditional” gender norms (misogynism), colonialism, “white man’s burden,” possibly addictions, and insanity.

Problematic content: There are no African characters in the game.

The design decision was made for three reasons. First, the game concentrates on the European colonialists and their hypocritical takes on the suffering of the native population. Second, I didn't think I, as the designer, would be qualified enough to set up a story from the Congolese perspective in a respective way. Third, the suffering caused by the rubber terror was so horrendous to the victims, that turning it into a LARP is a difficult prospect. (I like dark games, but there is a limit.)

Perhaps someone else will be inspired by Heart of Darkness to do a game about the Free State of Congo from the African point of view.

Historical inaccuracies: The role of riverboats in the rubber terror.

The rubber terror in the Free State of Congo was mostly carried out by the land-based district officials. They collected the rubber riverside, where the riverboats delivered it elsewhere. The riverboat crews knew of the atrocities, but rarely took part personally.

I've chosen to change history a little to use the riverboat as a symbol and storytelling device for the journey into a darker and darker state of mind.

Physical space

You can play the LARP in one room, but it works better if you have some extra space. If possible, you should have a dinner table with six seats for the scenes in Belgium. Then you should have a second space, where people sit on the floor "by the fire" in Congo. When you switch scenes, players physically move to help the transition. If space is not available, play the game without the transitive movement.

Background information

King Leopold II (of Belgium) was obsessed with the idea of a colony for a long time. His obsession finally bore fruit in the Berlin Conference of 1885. In the conference, the European powers and the United States of America sliced Africa into spheres of influence. They agreed on the rules for trade and other economic activities. No African representation was present at the table.

King Leopold II was a skilled diplomat, who played the great powers against each other. Thus, Germany, Great Britain, France, and the United States agreed to give Congo to Belgium. The Belgian parliament was not keen on colonization, and the area became King Leopold II's personal colony.

Officially, the Free State of Congo was overseen by a humanitarian association. Its purpose was to end Arab-run slave trade, civilize the natives, build infrastructure, and bring Christianity. This stayed as the official "truth" for decades.

It was said that the "Free State" meant that white men were free to do what they liked. For the Congolese, it meant brutal slavery. The area was split into districts run by corporations, all of which ultimately paid a piece to King Leopold II. First the exploiters were after ivory, but things changed radically when the global demand for rubber exploded. One thing the Congo Free State had aplenty was rubber vines.

The local population was forced to collect a tribute of rubber for a nominal payment. If they failed, the people were punished with beatings and worse. Cutting off hands and legs became a common practice. These were taken both from the workers and from their family members. They were smoked for preservation and became an unofficial currency the native troops had to show their European officers as proof of work done as ordered. Entire villages were burned. It has been estimated that the population of Congo was 20-30 million people at the beginning of the Free State. Half of them died under King Leopold II's "protection".

In 1896 Swedish missionary Edward Sjöblom published a scathing report describing the atrocities he had seen in Congo. There had been dark rumors before, but his report

started an international movement. By 1902 (where parts of the LARP take place), there have been an increasing number of publications in American and British newspapers on the subject. However, King Leopold II is waging an information war through bought writers, who deny all claims and spin conspiracy theories on their connection to the British industrial magnates.

Historically, the atrocities are revealed in full to the world in 1904-1905, as whole books of photographs start circulating the world. Some of these are published by Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle. For the this game, that is in the future.

Further sources:

Wikipedia article on the Congo Free State

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congo_Free_State

Adam Hochschild: King Leopold's Ghost

Jouko Aaltonen & Seppo Sivonen: Kongon Akseli (in Finnish)

Starting the Game

Repeat the pitch to the players. If you don't know everyone, start by introducing yourself. Explain how in this game, most of the characters are morally rotten assholes. This makes it extra important to remember the roleplaying contract, where characters don't reflect the player's beliefs or personality. Then ask everyone to introduce themselves in turn.

You could then share the background of the historical setting with them in your own words. You can use the short blurb written on page 2 as a base for that. Adding more historical detail is good, but the explanation shouldn't take more than 10 minutes.

Safety rules

Before going further, you should agree on some safety rules with the players.

First, agree on content that stays completely off the game. My suggestion is to cut off all sexual violence. Rape and sexual slavery were common in the Free State of Congo, and there is no point in whitewashing the horrible history. However, I personally think sexual violence is hard to tackle in a LARP without it being tasteless. On an additional note, it is a subject that might have traumatic connotations for players. It is simpler and safer agree to keep it out of the game.

Ask every player in turn if there are any topics they'd like to leave outside the game. This is not a vote; the group must go with the limits set by the participants.

Second, we must speak a little about the racist language. Using the N-word was a common way to address Africans in the era of the game. However, the term itself is still in use and closely associated with present-day racists. My suggestion is that the

characters don't use the N-word when talking about the Africans (in a nasty manner). Instead, they can call them "savages" or "wild people". These terms capture the racist mindset without pushing the associations the other, worse terminology carry. Ultimately, the choice is up to the group as a whole, but this is my recommendation.

Third, agree on a way to pause the game if any player starts feeling too uncomfortable to continue. This could be a certain gesture – such as crossing arms on your chest in an X – or simply saying "PAUSE" loudly or the like. Agree on a method that works for all.

LARP Summary

Two young officers (Marius and Philemon) have returned to Belgium after serving in the Congo Free State. One of them (Marius) has just gotten engaged to the daughter (Zelie) of a rich family. The parents (Francois and Gervaise) have invited Marius for an intimate family dinner. They want to get to know the man who might become their son-in-law. Marius has brought in his friend Philemon, while the other daughter of the family, Hendrika, is also present.

While discussing things at the dinner table, Marius and Philemon recall events from the Congo Free State, where they served on a ship commanded by the terrifying Captain Vanderberghe. The military steamship was crewed by native soldiers with a handful of other white officers. These were the strange Doctor Pieters, the shady gunnery sergeant Smith, and the exotic engineer Pohja.

Play swaps between the timelines, and we play scenes in Congo and Belgium in turn.

Player Characters

You should print the characters two-sided in order so that, for example, one side is Marius Dumont 1902 and the other side is Marius Dumont in the Congo Free State.

If you have **five** players, leave out Gervaise Lambert / Henry Smith.

If you have **four** players, leave out Hendrika Lambert / Arvo Pohja in addition.

You need at least four players to play Heart of Darkness, but it works the best with the full six, if possible. Every character adds something to the dynamic.

You can let the players look at the printouts when considering which pair to play. You should give a short description of the character pairs to help them in their choice (and speed up the process.) You shouldn't spend more than five minutes picking characters. The characters are quite heteronormative to match the historical era, but the player and the character gender don't need to match.

Once the players have chosen their characters, have them read them through and then make the picks from the lists.

BELGIUM 1902

1st Lieutenant Marius Dumont, A "Hero" of Congo & a freshly engaged

You guess it was all worth it in the end. You and Philemon came back alive and made enough money to get a fresh start. It is all blood money, of course, but you try not to think about it... Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night, shaking and thinking you are back there.

You recently had another stroke of luck, as you got engaged with Zelie Lambert, the daughter of an influential banker. Her father's connections will surely be useful. You've taken your friend and fellow veteran Philemon with you to a dinner with her family. You hope it cheers him up. Philemon has been strangely melancholic lately. You are a bit worried about him.

Your primary goal during the dinner (pick order 1-3:)

Impress your Fiancée with stories of your (fictional) heroism.

Get your friend engaged with the Fiancée's sister.

Impress your future father-in-law somehow.

What you want to avoid at any cost (pick order 1-3:)

Bear moral responsibility for your deeds back in Congo.

Having anyone make a scene at the dinner.

Spoiling the image you have with your Fiancée and her family.

Relationships

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (Your friend)

Zelie Lambert (Fiancée)

Francois Lambert (Zelie's Father)

Gervaise Lambert (Zelie's Mother)

Hendrika Lambert (Zelie's Sister)

CONGO FREE STATE 1894 - 1901

Lieutenant Marius Dumont, an imperialist officer

You arrived in Africa a little too late, just as the war against the Arab slavers came to an end. Luckily, a military steamboat upriver was looking for new officers, so you and Philemon marched into the dark jungles with a fresh batch of native troops under your command. You never stopped to wonder why an experienced captain had to recruit newcomers as his lieutenants...

Why did you come to Africa (pick order 1-3:)

You were looking for an adventure, like in the novels!

Looking for money as a way to buy a better life.

You were a true believer in the civilizing mission.

How the atrocities (will) change you (pick order 1-3:)

You lost your faith (in God, king, and/or civilizing mission).

You keep telling yourself you were just following orders.

No regrets. They deserved it. People just can't handle the truth.

Relationships

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (New Arrival)

Jean-Christophe Vandenberghe (The Captain)

Achille Pieters (Sawbones)

Henry Smith (Gunnery sarge)

Arvo Pohja (Steamboat engineer)

BELGIUM 1902

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet, a troubled veteran

You've been a mess since you came back to Europe. A part of you was left in Africa, buried somewhere in Congo, and you will never get it back. Back then, it was all lost in a sort of haze. Slavery, murder, mutilation, and torture...everyone around you treated it like it was the normal thing to do. Now, back home, people spout lies about bringing light to the darkness. All the light you brought were the torches you used to light up whole villages.

Now Marius has dragged you to this dinner, hinting that you too should get married. Could a marriage save you from the ghosts of Congo?

Your primary goal during the dinner (pick order 1-3):

Make romantic overtures towards Fiancee's sister Hendrika.

Guide the hosts into asking the right kind of questions about Congo.

Be absolved of your guilt, somehow.

What you want to avoid at any cost (pick order 1-3):

Having an emotional breakdown in public.

Keep lying about everything, all the time.

Remembering the worst thing you did.

Relationships

1st Lieutenant Marius Dumont (Freshly engaged friend)

Zelie Lambert (Freshly engaged)

Francois Lambert (Zelie's Father)

Gervaise Lambert (Zelie's Mother)

Hendrika Lambert (Zelie's Sister)

CONGO FREE STATE 1894 - 1901

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet, an imperialist officer

You came to Africa filled with hope and wonder. A whole new continent to explore and conquer - what more could a young man wish for? You were too late to take part in the war against slavers, but luck was with you. An experienced river captain needed new lieutenants. Thus you and Marius went upriver to join his crew with your fresh regiment of native troops. You never stopped to think why an experienced captain needed fresh officers right off the boat...

Why did you come to Africa (pick order 1-3:)

You really thought you were on a mission from God.

You devoured stories about the Conquest of the Americas as a kid.

There was absolutely nothing for you back home.

How the atrocities (will) change you (pick order 1-3:)

You became scared of yourself and what you were capable of.

There was no longer yesterday or tomorrow, only today.

You started really hating the Captain, whose fault it all was.

Relationships

Lieutenant Marius Dumont (New Arrival)

Jean-Christophe Vandenberghe (The Captain)

Achille Pieters (Sawbones)

Henry Smith (Gunnery sarge)

Arvo Pohja (Steamboat engineer)

BELGIUM 1902

Zelie Lambert, fiancée of a hero!

How your friends and cousins must envy you, now that you are engaged to a real hero. You are the luckiest girl in town! This dinner is a wonderful chance to flaunt him to your sister Hendrika. You really hope you get Marius and his friend to tell you about the wonders of Africa.

Your primary goal during the dinner (pick order 1-3:)

Get your Fiancé to tell about his heroic deeds!

Get the Fiancé's friend to share funny anecdotes about him.

Make sure your family is impressed by your Fiancé.

What you want to avoid at any cost (pick order 1-3:)

Having your family embarrass you before your Fiancé.

Hear anything ugly about the mission in Congo.

Have anyone disrespect King Leopold II.

Relationships

1st Lieutenant Marius Dumont (Your heroic fiancé!)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (Guest)

Francois Lambert (Dear Father)

Gervaise Lambert (Dear Mother)

Hendrika Lambert (Annoying sister)

CONGO FREE STATE 1894 - 1901

Jean-Christophe Vandenberghe, a terrifying steamboat captain

George Moses Horton wrote:

Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief
This side the silent grave--
To soothe the pain--to quell the grief
And anguish of a slave?

Your answer to him would be a resounding **NO**. The world is spoiled by the soft-hearted fools, who fail to see how things work. The savages only respond to force. As the Good Book says, he who spares the rod, hates his son. The people of Congo are childlike in their ignorance, and your fatherly love towards them is harsh, oh yes, harsh indeed.

Why did you come to Africa (pick order 1-3:)

It is a place where a white man can fulfill their dark desires freely.

You are here to prove the supremacy of the white race.

You were certain it was your destiny.

How the atrocities (will) change you (pick order 1-3:)

You've become a complete nihilist.

There is no enjoyment as sweet as killing people.

There is only one god left in Congo - you.

Relationships

Lieutenant Marius Dumont (Fresh meat)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (Fresh meat)

Achille Pieters (Weak-willed sawbones)

Henry Smith (Gunnery sarge with potential)

Arvo Pohja (Reliable steamboat engineer)

BELGIUM 1902

Francois Lambert, a banker and father of the bride-to-be

You are not yet sure if the engagement was a wise decision. On the other hand, having an actual hero of Africa in the family would gain you more respect among the gentlemen's club. On the other hand, marrying Zelie to some elderly business partner had been financially sensible. Of course, Zelie is happy about the present state of things. Perhaps this dinner will help you in making up your mind for good.

Your primary goal during the dinner (pick order 1-3:)

Find out if Marius is as wealthy as you hope.

Question the Fiancé's friend to find out more about Marius as a person.

Have everyone praise the greatness of King Leopold II.

What you want to avoid at any cost (pick order 1-3:)

Have an uncivilized conversation and coarse language at the table.

Marry your daughter to a pauper.

Have anyone disrespect King Leopold II.

Relationships

1st Lieutenant Marius Dumont (Future son-in-law?)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (Guest)

Zelie Lambert (Freshly engaged daughter)

Gervaise Lambert (Wife)

Hendrika Lambert (Daughter)

CONGO FREE STATE 1894 - 1901

Achille Pieters, an unorthodox medical doctor

According to phrenological principles, the supremacy of Caucasian males is inevitable. After all, white people were the first to come out of Noah's Ark and changed the least from the antediluvian times, hence the name. Your experiments in this area have been inconclusive, though, especially as people are loath to give the skulls of their relatives to your research.

Africa will hopefully provide answers and opportunities to your scientific curiosity!

Why did you come to Africa (pick order 1-3:)

You had a new medical theory you wanted to test.

You were fleeing prosecution (were you really guilty?).

You really thought you could help the natives.

How the atrocities (will) change you (pick order 1-3:)

You think the Europeans are the true savages.

You smoke a lot of opium to numb yourself.

The Captain must be an embodiment of antediluvian evil.

Relationships

Lieutenant Marius Dumont (New Arrival)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (New Arrival)

Jean-Christophe Vandenberghe (The Captain)

Henry Smith (Gunnery sarge)

Arvo Pohja (Steamboat engineer)

BELGIUM 1902

Gervaise Lambert, a conservative lady and mother of the bride-to-be

You were so happy when Zelie got engaged to Marius. Your family would have a real hero in it, someone who had gone to the dark continent to teach the savages a lesson! Truly, such bravery and gallantry should be more common. You are so tired of reading liberal drivel about human rights in the newspapers. What next, voting rights for women?! Hah! Now, if only Hendrika would follow the example set by her sister...

Your primary goal during the dinner (pick order 1-3:)

Everyone to be happy and only talk about **nice** things.

Find out if Marius knows an eligible bachelor for Hendrika.

Find out if the romantic stories about Africa are true.

What you want to avoid at any cost (pick order 1-3:)

Have the engagement cancelled.

Have your racist views challenged.

Hear anything ugly about the mission in Congo.

Relationships

1st Lieutenant Marius Dumont (Future son-in-law?)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (Guest)

Zelie Lambert (Freshly engaged daughter)

Francois Lambert (Husband)

Hendrika Lambert (Daughter)

CONGO FREE STATE 1894 - 1901

Henry Smith, a British gunnery sergeant with a shady past

You thought the Empire was cruel at times, but it holds no candle to these Belgians. If the Captain didn't terrify you so deeply, you might consider deserting. Now, you plan to just make the best of the bad situation. If only there was a place offering proper kidney pie in the whole bloody country.

Why did you come to Africa (pick order 1-3:)

You wanted to forget.

You were escaping an unhappy marriage.

You had a huge gambling debt.

How the atrocities (will) change you (pick order 1-3:)

If not you, then someone else had done them.

Congo is Hell and you are one of the devils.

You just want out.

Relationships

Lieutenant Marius Dumont (New Arrival)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (New Arrival)

Jean-Christophe Vandenberghe (The terrifying captain)

Achille Pieters (Strange sawbones)

Arvo Pohja (Weird steamboat engineer)

BELGIUM 1902

Hendrika Lambert, an inquisitive maiden

Mama thinks she protects you by policing what you can read, but it has only made you curious. You secretly read semi-illegal liberal and unionist newspapers when you can find some. When you can't find any, you eavesdrop on conversations. People speak about horrible things done in Congo, slavery and even worse, that seems to be at odds with the official truth about a civilizing mission. Your sister is a fool, and you are worried Papa is giving her away to someone terrible.

Your primary goal during the dinner (pick order 1-3:)

You've heard some terrible stories about Congo, are they true?

The Fiance has obviously a secret of some sort – what is it?

Did they really abolish slavery in Congo?

What you want to avoid at any cost (pick order 1-3:)

Not being heard.

Having everyone evade the difficult subjects.

Losing your sister to a bad man.

Relationships

1st Lieutenant Marius Dumont (Freshly engaged to Zelie)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (Guest)

Zelie Lambert (Freshly engaged sister)

Francois Lambert (Distant Father)

Gervaise Lambert (Conservative Mother)

CONGO FREE STATE 1894 - 1901

Arvo Pohja, a Finnish steamboat engineer

Finland is a country of a thousand lakes and well known for the small steamboats that form the main transportation in the country. When the Congo Free State started forming a fleet of riverboats, they sent recruiters to directly hire Finnish engineers and pilots. You were one of the fifty or so to join. Too bad you are stuck with these fussy Belgians now and haven't had a proper sauna for years.

Perkele.

Why did you come to Africa (pick order 1-3:)

You were young and needed the money.

You went drinking in Stockholm and woke up in Congo.

Someone dared you to go.

How the atrocities (will) change you (pick order 1-3:)

It is still better than the conditions at home!

You keep telling yourself you are not responsible for anything happening outside the boat.

You are afraid of becoming just like the Captain.

Relationships

Lieutenant Marius Dumont (New Arrival)

Lieutenant Philemon de Smet (New Arrival)

Jean-Christophe Vandenberghe (Horrible captain, who might be a witch)

Achille Pieters (Scholarly sawbones)

Henry Smith (Sneaky gunnery sarge)

Setting up the game

In case you get confused, the characters are paired:

Marius (Belgium) / Marius (Congo)

Philemon (Belgium) / Philemon (Congo)

Zelie (Belgium) / The Captain (Congo)

Francois (Belgium) / The Doctor (Congo)

Gervaise (Belgium) / The Gunner (Congo) (Drop if only four players)

Hendrika (Belgium) / The Engineer (Congo) (Drop if only five players)

After everyone has chosen their characters, read the descriptions and made their choices, it is time for setting up the LARP. This mainly includes creating relationships between the characters. It can take an hour or so.

This is a creative exercise where you, the Game Master, should act as a facilitator. Your job here is to enable the creativity of the players and help them build the foundations for an interesting experience. You should offer them ideas, but don't push your own views too hard.

Questions for the Players

Players should come up with relations between each character. Ask each player to define the starting situation for their character. Pick two characters in turn, then have the players create an interesting relationship.

Marius (Belgium)

How has Marius fared in Belgium? Did he come back with wealth, or is he destitute?

What is Philemon's and Marius' relationship like once they came back?

How did Zelie and Marius meet? How long have they known each other?

What does Francois think of the future son-in-law? Why did he approve the engagement?

What has Gervaise been telling her friends about Marius?

Have Hendrika and Marius met? How did it go?

Philemon (Belgium)

How is Philemon doing now that he has returned?

What does Philemon think of Zelie? How about the other way around?

Why did Francois invite Philemon to the dinner?

Have Gervaise and Philemon ever met? If not, what was the first impression?

Have Hendrika and Philemon ever crossed paths before?

Zelie

Is Zelie looking forward to the marriage? Why?

What is the relationship between Zelie and her father like?

How about the relation between the daughter and the mother?

Is Zelie the elder or the younger sister? Did the engagement change her relationship with Hendrika?

Francois

Does the family benefit from colonialism? How does Francois feel about Congo?

Why did Francis and Gervais get married back in the day? How is their relationship?

How does Francois feel about his other daughter? What about the other way around?

Gervaise

Is the mother a romantic regarding Africa? What are her views on colonialism?

What is the relationship between Gervaise and Hendrika like?

Hendrika

What do the illegal publications claim about the Free State of Congo?

Suggestions you can use:

Two characters have met before under compromising circumstances.

Someone is bankrupt and hopes the dinner will help somehow.

Two characters share a secret.

There is a petty rivalry between the characters.

Hate or love at first sight.

One character is lying to another about something.

A romantic is badly misled about the Congo Free State.

Marius (Congo)

What was your first impression of Africa? Did it disappoint or excite you?

Did you and Philemon come to Congo together or only meet on the way there?

Does Marius admire the Captain at first? How does the Captain treat him?

Do the Doctor and Marius get along? How do the Doctor's scientific pursuits fit this?

How do Marius and the Gunner see each other? Do they play or drink together?

What is the relationship between the Engineer and Marius like?

Philemon (Congo)

Did Philemon have any doubts when coming aboard the ship for the first time?

How is the relationship between Philemon and the Captain different from the relationship with the other Lieutenant?

What do the Doctor and Philemon think of each other?

Does Philemon ever spend time with the Gunner? Why or why not?

Did he have anything in common with the weird Engineer?

The Captain (Congo)

What is the name of the ship, and what is her most prominent feature?

Why did you recruit the Doctor? Why did the Doctor join the crew?

Do you have something in common with the Gunner? Does the Gunner agree?

How do you find the strange Engineer? What does he think of the Captain?

The Doctor (Congo)

What kind of research do you conduct, exactly? Are you actually a proper doctor?

Do you have a vice or a virtue you share with the Gunner?

Is the Engineer just a phrenology specimen for you?

The Gunner (Congo)

What drove you to the colony? Have you told anyone about it?

You and the Engineer are both not Belgians. Does it unite or separate you?

The Engineer (Congo)

What kind of strange habits do you practice?

Suggestions you can use:

Someone feels guilty about the atrocities they commit.

Two characters have opposing views about the natives.

A character has irrational beliefs.

Two characters have a secret business between them.

Friends-to-enemies or enemies-to-friends arc.

Someone is being taken advantage of by someone else.

A character believes in the civilizing mission despite all the brutality.

During the setup phase, make sure no player is overshadowed. The stronger narrative connection the players make with each other, the better game it produces. After you've finished the setup phase, you might want to have a break before the actual game. The game should be an intensive experience, so my suggestion is to run it without any breaks.

Congo & Belgium: Scenes for the Game

The game consists of 10-13 scenes. Each scene is designed to last 10-15 minutes. If you spent about an hour setting up the game, this means the game as a whole lasts about three and a half hours. The 30 minutes left for the promised four hours of play contain both buffer if things take longer and time for debriefing.

You should signal the change of a scene with a sound that cut through the discussion between the players. You can use a theme song you play loudly, if you like. I personally got an annoying dinner bell I ring loudly. The clanging is too loud (and did I say annoying?) to ignore.

When you switch a scene, ask the players to move physically between the dinner table and the "riverside fire". This helps in transitioning between the characters.

It is up to you whether you want to play some NPCs, such as native troopers in Congo or servants of the Lambert family during the dinner. You don't need to; you can just concentrate on the scheduling and changing scenes.

Rule #1 regarding the gameplay: I believe in you, fellow Game Master!

You don't need to follow my script to the letter. Trust your instinct. You don't need to clock every scene exactly. You can end a scene any time, if someone gives a killer line or something dramatic happens to make the cut more interesting.

Likewise, you can modify the scenes as you like. However, if you change a lot (such as, say, moving the story to Brazil), please treat the game as a derivative work inspired by my game. Give me credit for inspiration, but put the game itself under your own name. This is creatively honest regarding both of us. That is what the Creative Commons license is for, after all.

Tips for running the game

Listen to the players for verbal cues. If someone at the dinner talks about the darkness of the jungle, maybe that is an excellent place to cut into Congo etc.

Modify the next scene based on the last one. For example, if a Congo scene has strange superstition in it, put the topic of religion as a subject at the next dinner scene.

If the energy levels in the game seem low, you can input drama. For example, maybe Zelie receives a letter from someone detailing Marius' crimes in Congo.

If someone gets less spotlight than the others, throw them a ball at the start of a scene. Make them the active character who starts it.

Scene I: Welcome to the Dinner (Belgium)

Marius and Philemon arrive at the Lambert household. Welcoming drinks are served – ask Mr. or Mrs. Lambert what they are. Start with a small speech from Mr. Lambert, as the banker welcomes the guests at the table.

Scene II: Welcome to Africa (Congo)

The dinner reminds Marius and Philemon of another encounter a few years ago. They've just arrived in Congo and the Captain of the riverboat welcomes them to his command crew. How does the Captain welcome them?

Scene III: Exotic Salad (Belgium)

An exotic salad featuring fruits from the colonies is served. Someone wants to hear about the humanitarian efforts in Congo.

Scene IV: First Taste (Congo)

Tomorrow, the ship will arrive at a village that has failed to fill their rubber quota. Reprisals are being planned at the evening fire. The Gunner explains how it is usually done, and then the officers plan their morning raid.

Scene V: Ivory Bowls (Belgium)

Starter soup is served from ivory bowls. The ivory is from Congo. Someone asks a difficult question about the economics of colonialism.

Scene VI: The Aftermath (Congo)

Skip this scene if you are running late.

Months have passed, and the ship is deep upriver, far away from civilization. They've just destroyed an entire community. They were rebellious and punished for it. The village is burning in the background, and there are some screams, as the soldiers are finishing the job. Some of the officers are horrified about what they've just done. The Doctor has questions for the rest of them.

Scene VII: Smoke Break (Belgium)

Skip this scene if you are running late.

This is a split scene. The men are smoking cigars in a smoking salon. Francois has a question to Philemon. The women have, meanwhile, a moment away from men. They use it for a heated discussion.

Scene VIII: The Missionaries (Congo)

The ship has been tracking slaves fleeing upriver for weeks. They've found a French mission that is harboring natives escaping the rubber terror. There are a few white monks and nuns there. The Captain wants to attack the mission and punish them all. Killing white nuns and monks fills some of the officers with uncertainty. There is a discussion about what they should do. How does the Engineer feel about this?

Scene IX: Main Course (Belgium)

Grilled meat is the main course. The smell reminds Marius and Philemon of unsavory events in Congo. Zelie asks Philemon to tell something about Marius' exploits in Congo.

Scene X: The Last Straw? (Congo)

The Captain has gone completely off the rails. His insanity is so dark and devilish, that it is scaring everyone. This is a split scene.

The characters who think the Captain is evil incarnate are plotting his demise in the dark. The loyalists are listening to his insane ranting as he explains an epiphany he's had. The players decide whether their character is a plotter or a loyalist.

Scene XI: Dessert

The dessert is served: ice cream, crème brûlée, and dessert wine. An unfortunate truth comes out in the open.

Scene XII: O Captain, My Captain (Congo)

This scene leads to the Captain's death. He is devoured by the darkness and dies soon after. How does it happen and why? We'll play to find out.

Final Scene: Cigars & Goodbyes (Belgium)

The dinner party is over. The guests are leaving. Do they go in peace, or does the evening end in a scandal?

Epilogue & Debriefing

Have a short epilogue: ask each player to describe in turn how their characters lives turn out after the events in the game.

Have a small debriefing, where each player should talk about their character in the third person to distance themselves from the characters. Ask each player to give gold stars to each other. That is, they should bring up their favorite scene, line, action, or something else that the other player did during the game. Encourage them to say nice things about each other; that way you can end the game with a nice feeling despite the dark themes. Thank each other for the game.

And finally, if you enjoyed the experience, you can always leave me a note. I'd be happy to hear how your version went.

Thank you for reading and playing.