

**“THE SEA HAS NEVER BEEN FRIENDLY TO MAN.”
JOSEPH CONRAD’S TOPOI IN THE DIGITAL GAME
*SUNLESS SEA***

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to find connections between the digital game *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games, 2015) and Joseph Conrad’s novels, particularly the ones touching on the subject of sea voyage. *Sunless Sea* is an exploration role-playing game which focuses on the topics of sailors’ loneliness, dual nature of the sea, and above all, player’s inevitable failure. These tropes are shown not only in the narrative structure of the game, but also in its mechanics and design choices. I believe that the game is heavily inspired by the notion of maritime life created by Conrad, as indicated by the quote from *The Mirror of the Sea* opening the game: “The sea has never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness.”

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Sunless Sea*, digital games, cRPG, sea, sailor

Nothing appears from thin air, and neither has *Sunless Sea*, the game about exploration, sea, loneliness and failure. In this paper I will try to find connections between the image of the sea presented in the game and the one described by Joseph Conrad in his selected novels and short stories. I believe that his language of talking about mariners and their lives at sea is so deeply rooted in Western culture that it is being used even without realizing it. This image of the indifferent and brutal element has been reproduced in many texts of culture through the years and I also believe that in the case of this game it is shaped not only by the game’s narrative but also through its mechanics, such as speed of the ship, unexpected dangers or the way failure is designed. I will try to show that these ludonarrative elements are deeply connected with each other and are used to strengthen meanings produced by the game.

Sunless Sea is an exploration role-playing game (RPG) created by Failbetter Games studio and a part of a larger game universe, containing other titles such as *Fallen London* and *Sunless Skies*. The player’s main task is to safely guide the steamship from one harbour to another and explore the sea. The first sequences of the game are set in the “other” Victorian London which is visibly inspired by weird fiction, especially H. P. Lovecraft’s novels. For example, in *Sunless Sea* we start our journey in a dangerous city called Fallen London, we swim through dark and unexplored

Unterzee (which is the dark version of normal sea), filled with monsters and mysteries. However, I believe that *Sunless Sea* is also inspired by Joseph Conrad's writing, particularly his novels focused on sailors' lives, as indicated by the quote from *The Mirror of the Sea* opening the game: "The sea has never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness."¹

The interface of *Sunless Sea* is rather simple—we look from above at a steamship controlled by the player, which looks small on the big surface of the water. We can also see our crew members, possible actions needed for battles and the bars indicating levels of engine temperature and feeling of terror and hunger among the crew. But what is most important right now is our first impression caused by the game's aesthetic. In his early work about game design, Henry Jenkins wrote that "choices about the design and organization of game spaces have narratological consequences,"² and this is definitely the case of the *Sunless Sea*. Just one look at the screen assures the player about their real enemy in this game—the hostile sea, which normally looks almost indifferent. We start the game by choosing the Captain of the ship and his or her ambition—we decide if we want to focus on trading, exploring or conquering, thereby indicating our future method of playing *Sunless Sea*. Then we sail. And we keep sailing for a really long time, until something appears in our way (it can be an island, a monster, or an increasing feeling of terror among our crew). After spending a few minutes on the sea we will notice how dark and unwelcome it is: predominant colours are black and dark green; there is a lot of darkness around us, except for a small streak of light provided by our small ship or the nearest harbour; sometimes the only thing we can see is thick fog; and even the map we are carrying is unexplored (it reveals itself when we discover a new area); the speed of our ship is really slow, which we realize the moment we are far from any island or harbour, and our crew starts to get hungry or feel restless. From the very beginning we are able to detect these few themes—darkness, dangers, mystery, slowness—which tell us something about the nature of the unwelcoming sea presented in the game.

I believe that this first impression not only tells us a lot about the nature of the sea, but it is also a metaphor of a sailor's life. Analysing Joseph Conrad's works, Kieron O'Hara notices that "the sea is a classic symbol of the mighty, unrelenting world tossing tiny human societies back and forth,"³ and this is the position the players find themselves in—not knowing what awaits them in the dark spaces on unexplored map and reacting to unexpected events. What is more, the slow pace of the steamship can be exasperating, especially when we realize that the island we have just found cannot be explored at this stage of the game. From the very start the player is forced to confront their expectations of the imaginary sea voyage—at first everything is new and exciting and we wait for the big adventure, but then we are hit with the

¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea. Memories and Impressions* (London: Methuen & Co., 1907), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1058/1058-h/1058-h.htm>, p. 113.

² Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, ed. M. Wardrip-Fruin, P. Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003), p. 14.

³ Kieron O'Hara, *Joseph Conrad Today* (Exeter—Charlottesville, VA: Societas 2007), p. 87.

realization about the real nature of the journey. Describing his own experience as a sailor, Conrad wrote:

I saw the duplicity of the sea’s most tender mood. It was so because it could not help itself, but the awed respect of the early days was gone. I felt ready to smile bitterly at its enchanting charm and glare viciously at its furies. In a moment, before we shoved off, I had looked coolly at the life of my choice. Its illusions were gone, but its fascination remained. I had become a seaman at last.⁴

In *Sunless Sea* we have to spend long hours to swim through the Unterzee and discover its secrets but we will also be interrupted by unexpected forces and therefore forced to start our journey from square one. The slow movement of the ship and many defeats have a potential to discourage many players from starting the game once again. In relation to Conrad’s novels and their rather pessimistic overtone, O’Hara writes that “in the context of ideas of progress, we have to be pessimistic, the world will never match our hopes and plans, and hopes lead to disappointment.”⁵

The other aspect of the game’s structure is the literary design of the mechanics, which allows the player to experience in-game adventures as stories told by the game itself. For example, while approaching a mystery island we can read a tale about three brothers we encounter on Hunter’s Keep isle but it may not be revealed unless the player meets specific requirements. In a few cases one can return to a certain place and read the rest of the untold story with better luck and resources. This role-playing mechanics of telling stories and making choices corresponds with Conrad’s thoughts found in *A Personal Record*:

Everything can be found at sea, according to the spirit of your quest—strife, peace, romance, naturalism of the most pronounced kind, ideals, boredom, disgust, inspiration—and every conceivable opportunity, including the opportunity to make a fool of yourself, exactly as in the pursuit of literature.⁶

Indeed, in *Sunless Sea* we cannot predict the story a certain place or person holds until we encounter and interact with it—and there are plenty of these. There is also no guarantee that we will be able to discover all of the hidden stories which are connected to a particular game’s elements or the ambition of the captain chosen by the player.

At the very beginning of the game we are told that “now you’re a captain: now you belong to the Unterzee. But what were you before?”⁷—and we can choose a scenario constituting our past or leave it untold. At this stage the game presents various relationships that people can have with the ocean. Players can choose the profession (a poet, a criminal, a veteran, a priest) and ambition of the captain, which will determine the game’s goal: to learn and explore, to exchange goods and conquer, to find the body of a dead father. There are plenty of reasons why one would abandon

⁴ Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 118.

⁵ O’Hara, *Joseph Conrad Today*, p. 97.

⁶ Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/687/687-h/687-h.htm>, p. 67.

⁷ All quotes without references come from the game *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games, 2015).

a previous life and become a sailor, but there is one thing waiting for all of those who do: solitude. That corresponds to Conrad's work, about which Narain Prasad Shukla writes: "An image of a solitary swimmer left absolutely to his own devices occurs frequently in Conrad's fiction."⁸

The ship on a journey is an ideal lab-like environment, due to its state of isolation and separation from the outside world. There is an exemplary situation described in *Lord Jim*:

After the ship's lights had gone, anything might have happened in that boat—anything in the world—and the world no wiser. I felt this, and I was pleased. It was just dark enough too. We were like men walled up quick in a roomy grave. No concern with anything on earth. Nobody to pass an opinion. Nothing mattered.⁹

Quoting Conrad's *Last Essays*, Allan H. Simmons says that "although the sea is never friendly, an unstable and unpredictable element, it affords a simpler environment, 'untroubled by the sound of the world's mechanical contrivances and the noise of its endless controversies.'"¹⁰ The laws of the sea are not the same as the laws guiding people on the solid ground, mostly because nobody can judge these temporary communities or in some cases will never find out what happened inside them. As Galina Dubova writes: "The image of the sea is formed in relation to the sailor, which functions firstly to establish moral codes and to question their universality."¹¹ She also mentions that "the sea is capable of providing a mariner with both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. It can be both a source of trouble and chaos, representing danger, as well as of human aspirations, providing the seaman with work, and challenges."¹² Sailors must face dangers and situation no one is prepared for, and this is why finding oneself on the wide sea can not only reveal one's true nature, but also tests boundaries of one's morality in the face of danger.

In *Sunless Sea* there is an event called "Starvation walks the ship," which appears in the game when the hunger bar is full. It is followed by the description: "Day by day, you all grow weaker. Each sip of fresh water is carefully rationed. Zailors¹³ squabble over scraps of leather. Each morning, bodies are found stiff and cold." The player has two choices—throw the bodies of dead sailors into the sea or eat their remains. And as Kim Salmons writes, in Joseph Conrad's times "cannibalizing an already dead member of the crew was, if slightly disgusting, outside of criminal law."¹⁴

⁸ Narain Prasad Shukla, "Braving the Seas: The Swimmer Image in Conrad's Fiction," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 11 (2016), p. 87.

⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5658/5658-h/5658-h.htm>, p. 103.

¹⁰ Allan H. Simmons, *Joseph Conrad in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 246.

¹¹ Galina Dubova, "Language and Ethics in Joseph Conrad's Sea Prose," *Vakki* 38 (2011), p. 71.

¹² Dubova, "Conrad's Sea Prose," p. 72.

¹³ In all the words connected with the sea in the game letter "S" is replaced with "Z" (e.g. Zailors, the Zee, Zubmarine, the Zong of the Zee, and so on).

¹⁴ Kim Salmons, "Cannibalism and the Greely Arctic Expedition: A New Source for *Falk*," *The Conradian* 36, no. 1 (2011), p. 60.

So, will we expose our crew to starvation or will we try to save them? And what is most important, will our conscience allow us to do so? Are we ready for the consequences of these actions?

I believe that this theme of testing is strictly connected with the design of a failure in the *Sunless Sea*, which the player is constantly reminded of. The game starts not only with a quote from Conrad, but also with words from the authors: “Explore. Take risks. Your first captain will probably die. Later captains may succeed.” “Lose your mind. Eat your crew,” says the slogan from one advertisement. *Sunless Sea* is a very hard game to play, mostly because of its RPG mechanics, which sometimes randomly decides if something terrible will happen to the ship or its crew. Most of the time, the fate of the crew rests in the hands of the player, who can choose what to do in certain situations and keep an eye on the bars responsible for the crew’s wellness. But we are reminded that the choices we make are not always easy ones—for example, next to the possible options there are warnings written in red letters, such as a “tough” or “high-risk challenge.” We can also come across a powerful monster that we cannot overcome and therefore we have to start the voyage once again. *Sunless Sea* has prepared a large range of terrible turns of events waiting for the player. This design of failure is therefore a really simple way of showing how hard it is to consider every factor that will ensure the success of our mission. And even if, or rather when, we start the journey again, sailing from the Fallen London, we have to choose a new Captain and the entire map we discovered during our previous voyage disappears—the game generates a new map each time, ensuring that every journey is different and, therefore, we cannot prepare for anything that will happen.

One may wonder why anyone would chose to play a game which condemns the player to almost endless failure. But the truth is, failing is the important feature of most games—we learn how to master the game and stay motivated to become better at playing it. Analysing the connection between games and the feeling of failure, Jesper Juul writes:

Though we may dislike failure as such, failure is an integral element of the overall experience of playing a game, a motivator, something that helps us reconsider our strategies and see the strategic depth in a game, a clear proof that we have improved when we finally overcome it. Failure brings about something positive, but it is always potentially painful or at least unpleasant. This is the double nature of games, their quality as “pleasure spiked with pain.”¹⁵

Moreover, this feature of failure is here connected with a rather pessimistic view of life at sea. Similarly, in Conrad’s work most of the stories focus on difficulties and hard choices that sailors are condemned to during their service: “Sometimes the extreme event occurs, and our actions ‘happen’ to us, and our lives are changed. Under pressure from such events, and from our ties of community and work, we find out what we are.”¹⁶ In other words, most of these are simply tragedies: the images of anti-heroic characters who cannot act nobly at all (*Lord Jim*), dealing with the hunger

¹⁵ Jesper Juul, *Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 9.

¹⁶ O’Hara, *Joseph Conrad Today*, pp. 98-99.

and taboo of cannibalism (*Falk*), facing loneliness (*Nostramo*), falling ill in the middle of nowhere without medication (*Amy Foster*), realizing one's weakness (*Heart of Darkness*), feelings of powerlessness while confronting destructive forces of nature (*Typhoon*), and so on. These stories show that there are more worries and obstacles than one would expect at the beginning of the journey. They also bring up the topic of death at sea, which is a rather common ending for Conrad's characters. The awareness of constant danger and possible death is an inherent part of mariner's condition: "Afterwards, with the course of years, risk became a part of his [sailor's – M. K.] daily work."¹⁷ And this is not only a very lonely way of leaving this world, but also an event almost meaningless for the indifferent sea, which does not care about humans trying to survive and accomplish something significant from their point of view. *Sunless Sea* tells us so as well, when we fail our mission and simply choose another captain for our abandoned ship stating that "A new captain will continue your legacy."

Playing the part of the captain of the ship and feeling responsible for the fate of the crew and success of the mission may help someone realize how lonely and hard this kind of life can get. If we swim through the sea with the lights on, monsters and hostile ships may spot and attack us. And if we decide to avoid that and our steamship stays too long in the dark or we have not arrived at the harbour in a long time, other dire events may occur. One of them is "Recurring nightmares," which can lower the player's statistics, saying: "Your Nightmare will come upon you from time to time, inspiring Terror. Gain Restful Nights at your Lodgings to help you resist it. If you defeat it, you may gain a Secret." This event shows that during the long nights of an even longer journey the sailor has a lot of time to be with themselves and learn about their inner life and real fears that will manifest sooner or later. The captain can also lose his mind while engaging in an activity of smuggling, which will lead to "a series of random events [...] happening, causing you to start opening Mirrorcatch Boxes¹⁸ uncontrollably, getting a Wound every time and increasing this quality even further. If you don't stop the chain reaction quickly by getting rid of all the boxes [...], you will die."¹⁹ Moreover, the player cannot predict which action will cause the character to break and fall into madness. This theme of destructive loneliness constantly appears in Conrad's novels. In *Lord Jim*, for example, one character says:

Each of them—I say each of them, if he were an honest man—bien entendu—would confess that there is a point—there is a point—for the best of us—there is somewhere a point when you let go everything (vous lachez tout). And you have got to live with that truth—do you see? Given a certain combination of circumstances, fear is sure to come. Abominable funk (un trac epouvantable). And even for those who do not believe this truth there is fear all the same—the fear of themselves.²⁰

¹⁷ O'Hara, *Joseph Conrad Today*, p. 74.

¹⁸ A trade item which can be found in the game.

¹⁹ Description of an in-game event "Menaces: Yearning, Burning" found on fan-made website *Sunless Sea Wiki*: https://sunlesssea.gamepedia.com/Menaces:_Yearning,_Burning.

²⁰ Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 125.

What is also worth mentioning here is how the game presents the simplest path to a successful mission. *Sunless Sea* confronts us with the statement that “the nostalgia, the romantic yearning for a more heroic past, is mixed with the realistic appraisal of man’s universal imperfection, an understanding that all men are base and that ‘into the noblest cause men manage to put something of their baseness,’”²¹ as do Conrad’s novels. I believe that the player will find it hard to act in certain situations thinking about the best way of reaching the goal, because of the common belief of what is good and what is bad. For example, when one of the sailors “[...] has run mad! She roams the ship, cudgel in hand, smashing comrades to the deck. She cries: ‘He is angry! Oh, he is angry!’” we can decide to choose a high-risk challenge, which is either capturing her alive or trying to talk to her, or we can settle for a straightforward one and “shoot her dead,” which (unlike the first option might) will not cause more troubles and is “the only safe thing to do.” This event shows that we can risk the safety of our crew and future of our mission by acting morally, correctly and nobly, but it would be easier to reconsider our moral codes and allow the lesser evil for the better cause.

Then the question arises: is it better to play the game as a morally corrupt person? Or maybe no matter how we start the game—as a noble or a wicked captain—eventually we will end in the same place, because the challenges appearing on our path are too hard, and risking the failure of our mission at this point of the game means losing too much? *Sunless Sea* uses this unambiguous mechanics to show how easy it is to cross the line, simply because there is an easier option and we do not want to expose our mission to failure. And Joseph Conrad’s novels, likewise, do not leave any understatements in that matter, because: “As readers, we gain an insight into the condition of the human heart and discover that in our deepest nature, we are all savages. The horror is man’s alienation from others and the capacity for evil.”²² Therefore, *Sunless Sea*, just as Joseph Conrad’s books, gives the impression that staying noble on the sea is almost impossible. Even if we choose the righteous path, the ocean will not treat us any more gently. On the contrary—life will get more difficult.

Exploration is another theme both appearing in the game and connected with sea voyages in Conrad’s work: “In his novels and tales, the swimmer evolves into a universal symbol of a relentless crusader, an untiring venture into distant lands, and an explorer of the fateful unknown.”²³ As I wrote before, we start the game with only a little fragment of the map, the rest of which will reveal itself through our journey—one of our main goals is to uncover it. But the exploration also means discovering unfamiliar lands and species and our attitude towards the unknown. It is widely known that one of the main issues taken up by Conrad in his novels is the matter of colonialism. The most discussed example is *Heart of Darkness*, which focuses not

²¹ Andrea White, “Travel Writing and Adventure Fiction as Shaping Discourses for Conrad,” in *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 108.

²² Malika Rebai Maamri, “The Human Factor in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” in *Hearts of Darkness: Melville, Conrad and Narratives of Oppression*, ed. Paweł Jędrzejko, Milton M. Reigelman, and Zuzanna Szatanik (Zabrze: M-Studio, 2010), p. 146.

²³ Shukla, “Braving the Seas,” p. 92.

only on the conqueror's feeling of superiority over Africans, but also "the corruption and degeneracy of all men. Conrad's letters from the Congo reveal that his experience there left him with a distrust of all humankind: 'Everything here is repellent to me... Men and things but above all men...'"²⁴

This topic is also present in *Sunless Sea* but is not represented through direct human relations, and the player always has a choice how to act during these encounters. For example, we can come across a Blemmigan (which is the dark version of jellyfish) Colony and choose to observe it and learn, or kill the creatures and discover they can only be used as dye. What is meaningful here is that if we fail the observing challenge, nothing bad will happen to us or our crew, but if we fail at the assault challenge we may lose some crew statistics. Furthermore, while visiting Sovereign Island inhabited by monkey nobles, the player can gain an audience with the Emperor and decide to respect him by returning the bow or simply remain still, because: "you will not demean yourself before mere monkeys." We have to remember, however, that each decision we make can go wrong, and this mechanics shows above all that there is no guarantee of success when it comes to the contact with unknown customs and beings.

The image of the sea presented in the game is clearly equivocal. On the one hand, it provides almost endless possibilities, such as leaving the troubles behind, seeking redemption, escaping the law, searching for adventures or wealth. But on the other hand, it is a site of confrontation with nightmares, forces of nature, difficult decisions and death. The sea can be exciting, but also terrifying. And, as Joseph Conrad wrote, only the moment we discover the brutal and indifferent side of the sea the real seaman do we become, because the welcoming visage of the sea is a fake one.²⁵ *Sunless Sea* clearly shows us that there is no way of escaping the danger located both outside and inside the steamship. And it is hard to judge which one of them—monsters or ourselves—is more terrifying or harder to overcome. Conrad's stories explicitly show that recognizing one's true nature is the hardest challenge, one that we will never be ready for. Moreover, if the sea "cannot be understood in human terms: 'the ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory,'"²⁶ then we should accept that:

The sea—this truth must be confessed—has no generosity. No display of manly qualities—courage, hardihood, endurance, faithfulness—has ever been known to touch its irresponsible consciousness of power. The ocean has the conscienceless temper of a savage autocrat spoiled by much adulation. He cannot brook the slightest appearance of defiance, and has remained the irreconcilable enemy of ships and men ever since ships and men had the unheard of audacity to go afloat together in the face of his frown. From that day he has gone on swallowing up fleets and men without his resentment being gutted by the number of victims—by so many wrecked ships and wrecked lives. Today, as ever, he is ready to beguile and betray, to smash and to drown the incorrigible optimism of men who, backed by the fidelity of ships, are trying to wrest from him the fortune of their house, the dominion of their world, or only a dole of food for their hun-

²⁴ Maamri, "Human Factor in *Heart of Darkness*," p. 145.

²⁵ See Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 118.

²⁶ Simmons, *Joseph Conrad in Context*, p. 245.

ger. If not always in the hot mood to smash, he is always stealthily ready for a drowning. The most amazing wonder of the deep is its unfathomable cruelty.²⁷

The moment we put our trust into the sea, we are dead. Treating it as our ally will lead, at best, to disappointment. There are quite a few elements in the game that seem to be aimed precisely at making the player realize that the sea is an uncontrollable force. Some of them are random events that may occur at any time, such as the appearance of nightmares, monsters or lifebergs (living icebergs) we have to fight or run away from. Others, maybe even more persuasive, are the Gods of the Zee: Storm, Salt and Stone. What is interesting, the gods—just as the sea—have dual nature. Depending on their actions and choices the player can come across a blessing or a curse from these gods, which once again shows that humans are helpless in the face of the forces of nature and can only react to what fate throws at them.

This specific image of the sea—deadly and yet seducing—is clearly inspired by Joseph Conrad’s novels as indicated by the aforementioned quote at the beginning of the game. The sea presented in the game is not only a metaphor of human life (small beings lost in an unknown world, unsure of their next step and defenceless against the elements), but it also creates a lab-like environment separated from the whole world and its laws. The ship is a place where we can test our limits and moral boundaries, because the rights and laws we are so used to on the mainland cease to apply at sea. The latter shows the true nature of human beings finding themselves in extreme situations such as loneliness, madness or starvation. As players, we will have to accept that we cannot escape the dangers of the sea—if we try to stay in the light, the sea monsters will try to attack us, but the moment we turn the lights off, the notifications will show that the terror on our ship starts to increase. We will have to face ourselves, our true nature and hidden fears, which can lead to endless nightmares and insanity.

I believe that mechanics of failure used in *Sunless Sea* can extract the essential aesthetics of Conrad’s stories the way it could not be done in another medium. By always challenging the player, they might be the most accurate way of revealing the true nature of the sea, as described by the author. The design of failure not only teaches us how to get used to losing but also shows that the game is almost impossible to win if we are not morally corrupt. The RPG mechanics of the game make it clear—you can be a good person but the task will be much harder to complete and you will probably fail trying to achieve it. But if you decide to change your moral boundaries and bend the rules, you will likely find yourself on the easier path, which will ensure your success. It is certain that the player’s journey will not be a pleasant one, and they will have to sacrifice some lives to reach their goal. But the sea, indifferent towards human suffering, will not even notice it.

²⁷ Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 115.

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