



**OKAY,  
HERO**

**REID MCCARTER & EDWARD SMITH**

**WITH ASTRID ROSE**

# OKAY, HERO

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....5

## METAL GEAR SOLID

A Terrible Spectacle – Reid McCarter.....9

Where Have You Gone, Big Boss? – Edward Smith.....13

## METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY

The Island Coming Home – Reid McCarter.....20

A Nightmare You Can't Wake Up From – Edward Smith.....25

## METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

Saluting the Grave – Reid McCarter.....32

The Boss(ed) – Edward Smith.....37

## METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS

Resigned to the End – Reid McCarter.....44

Please Tell Us It's Good – Edward Smith.....49

## METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER

A Plea for Peace – Reid McCarter.....56

Death by Numbers (or: How I Learned to Stop Counting and Love the War)  
– Edward Smith.....61

## METAL GEAR SOLID V: GROUND ZEROES/THE PHANTOM PAIN

The End of All Worlds – Reid McCarter.....65

Hi-de-o! I Think They've Got Your Number! – Edward Smith.....70



# PREFACE

REID MCCARTER & EDWARD SMITH

The first *Metal Gear* came out in 1987. The first *Metal Gear Solid*—a more sophisticated continuation of the storyline started by its two predecessors—was released just over a decade later, in 1998. There’s a large gulf between these two periods, culturally, technologically, and, in terms of the series’ fiction, dramatically. Greater fidelity allowed *Solid*, which released on the PlayStation’s memory-rich CD-ROM-enabled platform, fully voiced radio calls and cinematics, whereas past entries were constricted by comparatively primitive cartridges and cassettes. One of the last great leaps forward afforded by new videogame consoles, the format provided an opportunity for its creators at Konami—led then and throughout the bulk of the series by Hideo Kojima—to create a story of greater narrative complexity. *Metal Gear Solid*, expanding in both scope and cultural nuance, was a departure from the steroidal bravura of ‘80s action movies that so heavily influenced the first two *Metal Gear* games. Without completely discarding its roots, *Solid* built upon them to create an action game whose most fantastical elements and over-the-top action sequences were coupled with interrogations of the cultural context that gave rise to Rambo and *Commando*, *Bloodsport* and *Die Hard*.

The late 1990s in which *Metal Gear Solid* released was also an era of rapidly changing global culture. Widespread adoption of home internet and the looming millennium were fertile ground for conspiracy theories to spread—fevered interpretations of UFO cover-ups, secret societies, and nefarious government plots becoming new religions with which to replace old faiths in “reliable” social order, leadership, and the nature of truth itself. (It’s no surprise that the ‘90s produced both *The X-Files*

and Carl Sagan’s *The Demon-Haunted World*.) *Solid* is a paranoid, tech-fantasy thriller whose politics are inflected with a grounded cynicism wholly appropriate for this era. Drawing on the best aspects of the older games, its soldiers aren’t musclebound armies-of-one fighting for patriotic victory, but an international hodgepodge of disillusioned, physically and psychologically battered husks trying to navigate their alienation—from governments, from their own technologically-altered, nanomachine-ridden bodies, and from, grandiose as it sounds, truth itself—through convoluted interpretations of post-national ideologies.

It birthed a singular videogame series that continued to limp forward for decades, its increasingly tired (but still consistently profitable and well-received) entries gradually contradicting, besmirching, and doubling back upon the visions of the original. Nevertheless, with every addition to its dysfunctional family of games, each new *enfant terrible*, *Metal Gear Solid* accrued complexity, its initial challenges to military might, the information age, and what it means morally to be a soldier developing into self-referential, masturbatory, and—for the enthusiastic critic—frustrating and irresolvable questions about fandom, sexism, and the value of trash entertainment.

The reason this book focuses on *Metal Gear Solid* while ignoring its MSX and NES ancestry is owing to the sheer range of material and likely interpretations available across the core *Solid* games. *Metal Gear Solid*, *Sons of Liberty*, *Snake Eater*, *Guns of the Patriots*, *Peace Walker*, and *The Phantom Pain* offer so many points for discussion that debates of the two primordial *Metal Gear* games, both relatively simple pastiches of Reagan-era Hollywood action fare, would inevitably read as thin or hamstrung—especially considering that *Metal Gear Solid*, in several large and small ways, is a re-imagining of *Metal Gear* and *Metal Gear 2*, and the events of Snake’s 8-bit adventures are referenced and re-capped constantly throughout his entire polygonal era. Also, as critics we are interested in the nuances of presentation and performance—the artistic disciplines videogames have inherited from cinema, literature, and theatre, and how they have been reworked. Pixelated, closed-captioned, and using a palette of between five and ten colours, the MSX *Metal Gear* games do not lend themselves as willingly to the specific sort of discussions that we want to host, about style, character, and aesthetic. We start with *Solid* because it feels like the first game (and the PlayStation like the first platform) on which Kojima and Konami had access to the bevy of tools sufficient to fulfil their vision. (It is also, as a side note, the first *Metal Gear* game that both of us ever played.)

That game, Snake’s first adventure into the third physical dimension, possesses enough story and character to justify an entire book. Such is the case with all of the “*Solids*.” With every new addition, *Metal Gear Solid* has stretched its influence across videogame culture, siring, just like the series’ anti-hero Big Boss, innumerable imitators and acolytes, some of them benign, some of them less so. At the same time, in the 17 years between its PlayStation debut and the release of its concluding chapter in 2015, the world of *Metal Gear Solid* expanded to address myriad contemporary and

## PREFACE

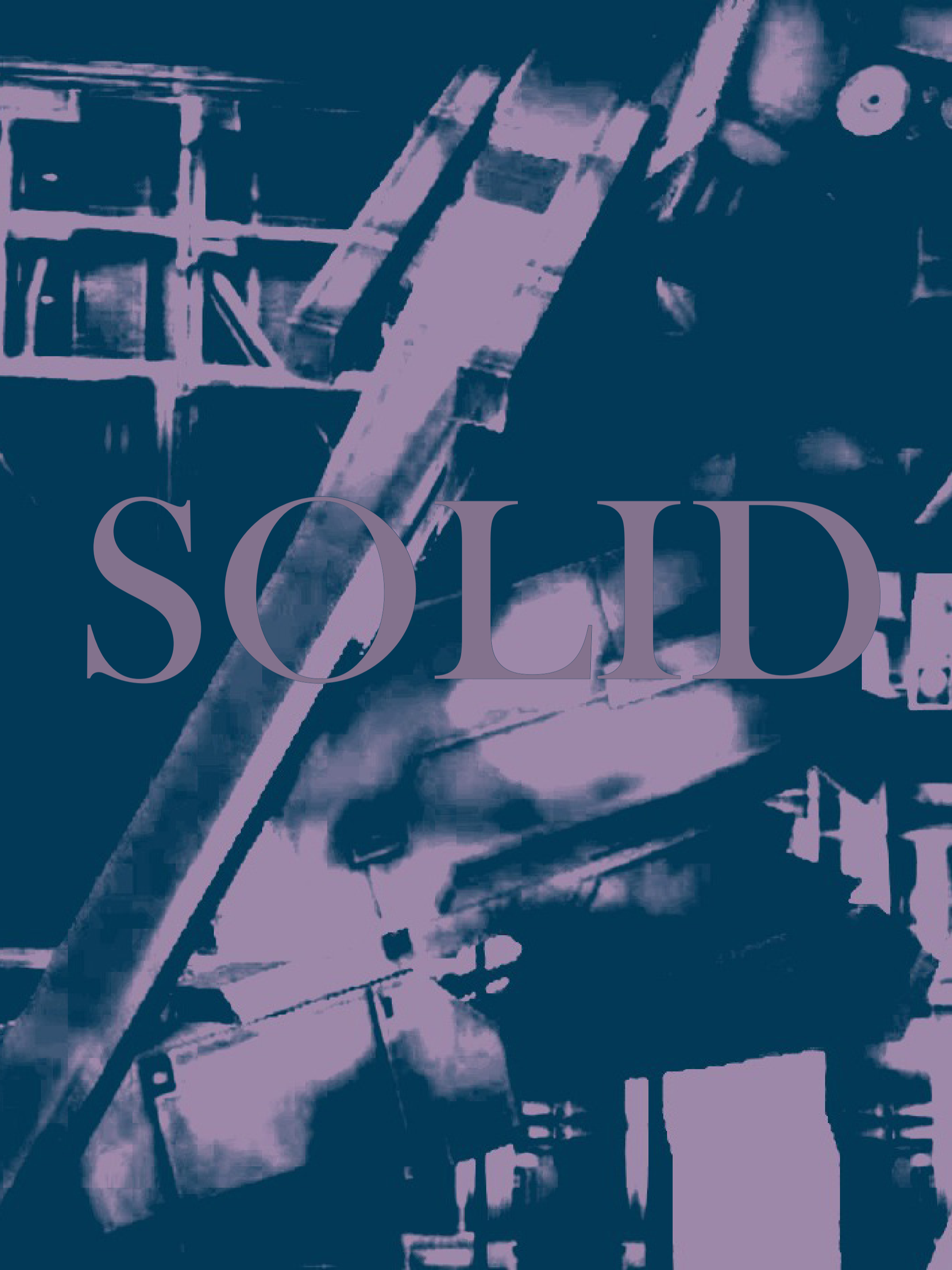
historical events. *Sons of Liberty*, particularly in hindsight, is a parody of America at the turn of the millenium, on the brink of its war against terror. *Snake Eater* excavates the nuclear age and the Cold War to postulate the fragility of national identity. *Peace Walker* wonders whether information threatens us, while *Guns of the Patriots*—deliberately or otherwise—imagines a future starved for meaning. *The Phantom Pain* brings it all together, reflecting on the mythology of both military and political power and the *Metal Gear Solid* series' own reputation. It ponders whether anything created by Kojima and cadre can really be believed and what it means to depend on something that's outside of your control. It's the game that best surmises why we chose to write *Okay, Hero* in the first place—to attempt to quantify and put into words *Metal Gear Solid*'s true, fundamental nature.

Though the decision to focus on the six main *Metal Gear Solid* games was made early on, exactly which aspects of the games we would discuss, and who would discuss them and why, were questions that recurred throughout the writing of *Okay, Hero*. These essays are based on what we believe are the more interesting, less evaluated elements of *Metal Gear Solid*. For precisely the same reason we have chosen to write about, for example, sado-masochism in *Snake Eater* or the allegories to 9/11 in *Sons of Liberty*, we have chosen not to write about—at length, anyway—the evolution of *Metal Gear Solid*'s sneaking mechanics.

As well as our own knowledge and what we find personally fascinating, the following pages represent our attempt to de-mystify—to clarify *Metal Gear Solid* while at the same time looking through and interrogating its reputation as a great game series and its creator's reputation as a great artist. We avoid discussions of playthroughs and events that happened specifically, organically to us whilst playing *Metal Gear Solid*; though personal, each essay is based around moments and sequences that are inarguably present in each *Metal Gear Solid* game, and available for any player to experience. Considering the series is acclaimed, and promoted, on the basis of the cohesion of its artistic vision, our ethos is to focus exclusively on what the makers of *Metal Gear Solid* have decided to include in their games, and to then debate the possible meanings surrounding those decisions.

Abstract, disparate, and variegated while at the same time cohesive, satirical, and auteured, the series is a contradictory knot of meanings, begging to be untied. As critics we naturally place value on clarity and perspective. We hope, with these essays, to have laid at least some important aspects of *Metal Gear Solid* out flat—to have untangled the series' meanings and symbols, flourishes and flaws. But regardless of having achieved that aim, it's been immensely satisfying, pulling on both of its ends.





# SOLID



# A TERRIBLE SPECTACLE

REID MCCARTER

Solid Snake is, we are told repeatedly in *Metal Gear Solid*, too old for this shit. Snatched up from his self-imposed Alaskan exile, Snake sits naked in some black ops briefing room, long tangled hair hanging over a tired face and a voice like gargling mucous asking questions about the nature of the latest threat to humanity he's required to put a stop to. It's only later—zipped into a rubbery “sneaking suit,” hair freshly clipped, and bandana tied around his forehead—that Snake looks anything like a capable warrior, bucked up for one final mission. Any sense that the fight he's agreed to undertake is meant to be an exciting adventure, though, doesn't last for long.

From its opening onward, *Metal Gear Solid* frames war as something to get through, rather than an exciting prospect in and of itself. A middle-aged man pulled out of early retirement infiltrates a nuclear weapons disposal base dubbed “Shadow Moses” in order to rescue two aged bureaucrats held hostage by a group of freakish special forces soldiers called FOXHOUND. Strung up on sci-fi nanomachines and an inner-ear radio implant, Snake is otherwise unarmed. A cross between a mid-series John Rambo and a haggard Snake Plissken, he scavenges the supplies necessary to outwit and outmaneuver a larger, well-armed force. It's unequal combat—a counterterrorism operation defined more, in play and plot both, by attempting to avoid death, not inflict it.

Nobody, excepting rookie soldier Meryl Silverburgh (who we're reminded, constantly, is very naïve), looks younger than their mid-thirties—over the hill for athletes and,

presumably, elite soldiers. Partially due to the influence of lead artist Yoji Shinkawa's heavily shaded concept work and the impressionist blurs of the PlayStation's low-resolution character models, *Shadow Moses* and its inhabitants are washed out and tired-looking, faces heavy with shadow and movements made geriatric by the game's ancient animation rigging. *Solid's* cast isn't energetic and primed for battle. They're a group of women and men who look like they're dragging themselves through the motions.

Even those scenes where players are provided the game's most thrilling action—*Metal Gear Solid's* many one-on-one fights against the members of FOXHOUND—are capped off with long monologues in which dying villains describe their tortured pasts to Snake. Sniper Wolf, after the second of two tense shoot-outs, dies from a bullet to the gut, choking and coughing blood as she relates an autobiography of growing up amidst the atrocities inflicted on Kurds like herself by Saddam Hussein's government throughout [the late '80s and early '90s](#). Wrapped in leather straps, skull ringed by a line of stitches, Psycho Mantis begs sympathy while describing killing his dad and burning his unnamed Soviet village to the ground. His psychic powers showed him the true thoughts in other people's minds; he couldn't stand knowing that his own father despised him and wanted his son dead. These characters aren't pure evil the player is blankly happy to have stamped out. They're sad figures, trapped in a bygone time. The list continues through hulking Inuit Vulcan Raven, whose visions of the past and present of all those around him situate him as a Grim Reaper figure, and the almost comically out-of-time Revolver Ocelot, who concludes a showdown with Snake by promptly getting his hand chopped off by the most important enemy in the game, the ninja Gray Fox.

Essentially a ghost haunting the events of the entire game, Fox is a walking corpse whose body is held together by advanced technology. He's a constant reminder of the brutality of war and the indifference of the military industrial complex that brought him back from death. (His introduction, a horror movie short where a metal corridor is splashed with buckets of gore and a quaking soldier is impaled on a sword held by invisible arms, paints him literally as some demonic poltergeist.) In his relationship with this tortured specter, Snake is turned into a character out of *Macbeth*. Before the events of the game, he and Gray Fox were friends, set against one another in a battle that forced Snake to kill someone he cared for. Fox returns to remind Snake of the consequences of his actions, lurking in the margins of *Solid's* main plot points like unresolved trauma made flesh (and metal).

Everyone, from hero to villains, is desperate and traumatized. It isn't surprising when it's revealed that, of the terrorists' two demands of the US government, they're much more desperate for the corpse they need to reverse-engineer a cure for the biological weapon killing them off one-by-one than the billion dollars that would assumedly advance their cause so much more. This is fitting because playing the game itself is a process of survival, too, Snake crawling and hiding to avoid finding

himself in open combat where guards swarm him like angry bees, either shooting him to bits or forcing his limited supply of ammunition to run out in an attempt to fight back. Though he collects a considerable arsenal of high-tech weaponry and gadgets, ranging from a remote-controlled missile launcher to electronics-jamming grenades, Snake is always outnumbered in his mission—very much alone against a trigger-happy, ruthless opposing force. There’s very little to suggest that the fights he ends up in are glorious or empowering.

This isn’t to say the game doesn’t find any joy in the aesthetics of war. A constant theme throughout the long-running series, *Solid* is at odds with itself regarding the apparent paradox of how nasty combat actually is and how baseline cool it can look on its surface. Snake, again, is a combination of ‘80s action icons (aged as he may be) and prone to occasional, Bond-esque one-liners. (After taking down a Russian gunship piloted by his clone, Liquid Snake—an over-the-top scenario in and of itself—he grunts, “That takes care of the cremation” and walks away from the flaming, exploded helicopter wreckage with back turned.)

Rather than undermine *Solid*’s apparent distaste for war, though, its embrace of spectacle and fetishization of military gear and lingo ends up making the game feel altogether more honest than it may otherwise have been. There’s something truthful in what could almost be a shame-faced admission that, yeah, the trappings of combat are exciting and fascinating even though the phenomenon of combat itself is inherently tragic. Years before videogames would try to rectify a love of bloodthirsty action with self-pitying (or, worse, audience-admonishing) condemnations of violence itself, *Metal Gear Solid* was portraying an inner struggle it was humble enough to leave to subtext and thematic discordance. A war game where characters spend entire scenes discussing the apocalyptic potential of nuclear proliferation—where even the villains describe how their early life lead them to villainy—says more about the paradoxical struggle of the modern pacifist condition than any of the tortured, holier-than-thou parlour tricks of meta games like *Spec Ops: The Line*, *BioShock*, *Hotline Miami*, or *Undertale*.

*Solid*’s willingness to embrace its contradictions shows an understanding of its audience—presumably those comfortable enough to play uninterrupted hours of videogames—and, if you’re willing to reach a bit further, a time capsule of the brief moment contemporary to its 1998 release where those same demographics could feel like war was far enough removed from daily life as to be an object of academic fascination alone. There’s something to this tonal messiness that defines an entire psychology, *Solid*’s lamentations on war’s tragedy speaking to its audience’s minds while its willingness to relish in military aesthetics and combat action appeals to the heart we’d rather deny.

As the series continued, *Metal Gear Solid* would elaborate on this theme, finding the fullest expression of its questions in the excellent follow-up *Sons of Liberty* and the

closest it comes to a despairing answer in final game *The Phantom Pain*. But before any of these, *Solid* presented a relatively understated and comparatively unassuming version of its enduring themes simply and clearly. It set the tenor for years of games that, regardless of their particulars, always returned to the anti-war, war-loving inconsistencies that make the series so compelling.





# WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, BIG BOSS?

EDWARD SMITH

The *Metal Gear Solid* guard exists in a state of constant perplexity. Confronted with a cardboard box, or the sound of knuckles rapping against a wall, his invariable response is an out-loud, incredulous “huh?”, the punctuation of which manifests physically above his head, comically exaggerating his bafflement in a turquoise Got Milk?-billboard-size font. The 200 square feet of warehouse that the guard endlessly, circuitously patrols represents his entire universe. The guard’s earth is chipped concrete. His suns are poorly maintained, dully luminescent strip lights. And the blinking LED on the front of the elevator on the other side of the room is but a distant star, hinting perhaps at other worlds, lived in by other guards, on floors below and above. Confused, angry, and enisled, when the *Metal Gear Solid* guard sleeps, as we often catch him doing, he dreams of unbendable single-ply paper, and human hands made of teddy bear stuffing. He wishes for little but the straightforward life.

The cause of all the guard’s complaint—the reason he feels perpetually and aggravatingly uncertain—is, quite appropriately, given the time in which he lives, both opaque and obvious all around, but yet still unknown to him. In Hideo Kojima’s imagined 2005 Shadow Moses Island, the White House Situation Room, America, Russia, as a matter of fact the entire world’s implied military and media systems, are not what they appear. In this world, even your own DNA can betray you, eliciting a fatal heart attack should you just so happen to possess the right (as in wrong) intangible and unknowable combination of alleles. In this world, the incomplex moral fables that once gave societies meaning—the big Enlightenment projects, Capitalism and Marxism, left and right wing, the East versus the West—are mostly dead. They remain

only in spectral or zombified forms, the military industrial complex, for example, being a less tangible remnant of the unified, American, post-war future that never ended up happening—as established and then restated through *Metal Gear Solid*'s recurrent breaking of the fourth wall (a device/idiom to which the game, during an early sequence when players have to literally destroy a wall, makes a knowing, *meta*-metatextual reference), this is a *postmodern* world where information is subjective, facts contradict each other, ideologies are diffuse, and the plain truth is as hard to find as, say, an elite secret agent hidden inside a cardboard box; a world where above everybody's heads there perpetually hangs a gigantic, incredulous question mark.

Modern national legends, of the type which predominated both American and Russian politics throughout the previous century, particularly in the Us Versus Them eras of the Second World and Cold Wars, are embalmed in Shadow Moses Island's various tombal buildings. A storage facility for the US's deteriorating, unused '60s nukes—here, plutonium cultivated in anticipation of a showdown between political, military systems that never occurred, comes to quietly, painstakingly deplete. Otherwise, the island is populated by living, breathing oxymorons, people whose very existences undermine popular knowledge, or at least what constitutes popular knowledge in the world of *Metal Gear Solid*. Gray Fox, who is supposed to be dead, is actually alive, held together by a robotic metal suit. Kenneth Baker, the archetype of the aspirational, American self-made man, turns out to be a crook; conversely, the Middle Eastern terrorist Sniper Wolf, whose ethnicity and vocation, in modern America, would betray her as a hate figure, is a sympathetic and soulful warrior-poet. And then we have Hal Emmerich, the pacifistic young scientist whose research, unbeknownst to him, is being used to make WMDs; and Decoy Octopus, a former member of an American special forces unit called FOXHOUND, whose ability to mimic the appearance, voice, and even blood type of any other person belies the very concept of an authentic, consistent human being. There are plastic key cards that can change shape, guards who can turn invisible, and the very walls and floors of Shadow Moses are lined with laser traps and pitfalls. Things aren't ever as they seem.

This is a world where reasonable assumptions about anybody or anything are eventually all rendered moot, owing to increasingly complex information and technology. It represents the end of knowledge, the type of postmodern, perpetually self-reconfiguring society described in 1979 by French historian Michel Foucault, whereby new versions of understanding—new discourses—simply transpose old, without any of them ever being proven objectively true or false. In Foucaultian postmodernity, all truth is relative; disembedded from traditional, face-to-face means of communication, individuals are free to credibly distribute *their* versions of knowledge to anyone and everyone, creating a world where, if enough people share and are convinced of a discourse, that discourse is assimilated into everybody's reality. Here, the once-loyal members of FOXHOUND have gone rogue: soldiers without a war, their actions have become singular and apolitical, and they've turned

on their countrymen. Similarly, the once-hardline communist Revolver Ocelot is now a mercenary, one who's secretly in bed with the highest echelons of the US government, which in turn is represented by Colonel Roy Campbell (who isn't actually a colonel) and a Secretary of Defense and a president who are in fact the masterminds behind FOXHOUND's terrorist plot. Actuality no longer exists and "facts" consume each other. The supposedly renegade terrorists are being run by the American national interest, which is being run by the president, who is being run by Ocelot, one of the terrorists. And so on.

Enter into this opprobrium Solid Snake. Dispatched to Shadow Moses to single-handedly eliminate the FOXHOUND terrorists, Snake is subjected to several other peoples' versions of "information," their discourses, which are all successively exposed as false. The Colonel's orders—to rescue Baker and Donald Anderson, the supposed chief of DARPA—are part of a cover-up, in order to have Snake infect them both with a lethal, latent virus called Foxdie; emphasising an all-round absence of reliable narrators in *Metal Gear Solid*, the Colonel's misinformation is itself predicated on misinformation, since "Donald Anderson" is actually Decoy Octopus in one of his genetic disguises. The advice, medical treatment, and sexual advances delivered by Dr. Naomi Hunter hide her other, more complex agenda: to assassinate Snake on behalf of her inscrutable benefactor. Similarly, Master Miller, Snake's mentor, is in fact the terrorist leader Liquid Snake, providing the agent with "intelligence" only so he may remain alive long enough to unwittingly activate the eponymous Metal Gear superweapon on the terrorists' behalf; late in the game, Snake realises that rather than having defeated them squarely in battle, Liquid had ordered the other FOXHOUND commandos to effectively sacrifice themselves to Snake, so that he could assist in bringing their plot to fruition without realising.

Several minor pieces of information are also subject to doubt. Snake is told that in order to activate Metal Gear, he'll need three card keys—in reality, he only needs one. Baker says that Meryl's Codec frequency can be found on "the back of the CD case." In Snake's possession—in the player's in-game inventory, at that time—is an item called the MO Disc which is a *CD* placed clearly, provocatively, inside of a *case*. However, what Baker is referring to is the back of the box of *Metal Gear Solid itself*, beneath the promotional blurb on which there is a screenshot of Snake in Codec conversation with Meryl, where you can clearly see her frequency. Another postmodern flourish, which would later come to typify Kojima's (increasingly opaque, often blunt and frustrating) style, this puzzle also illustrates Foucault's idea of interpretative discourse, whereby knowledge, as expressed through words, is subjective, and truth is hard to discern and to verify. What Baker tells Snake is the literal truth—Meryl's frequency *is* on the back of the CD case—but our experiences, as players of videogames and users of videogame inventory systems, combined with our acquired language (because we're probably more used to calling this "CD case" the "box" or the "game box") leave us in a confusion, sifting through the in-game item menu, perhaps trying to find a button to flip the MO Disc item over somehow.

As opposed to the idea of the unifying, instructive ideologies of the 20th century, the truth we're provided here is incomplete and comprehensible only via the language of one individual. We do not simply receive and then act upon it. We subject it to our own considerative process, and only after that is complete are we able to verify and use the truth as actual knowledge.

The other effect of this being: like the rest of his ostensible comrades, for the brief period between checking the back of the box and dialling Meryl's frequency in-game, we know something that Snake doesn't. The *Metal Gear Solid* CD case doesn't exist to Snake. Like Ocelot, under orders from the president, Psycho Mantis, who can read people's minds, and Naomi, agent of an omniscient shadow government, we have access to a means of gaining information and truth that Snake does not—in this moment, because he cannot access knowledge (Snake exists only in the game world, and so cannot physically handle and read the *Metal Gear Solid* CD case) and therefore cannot begin to interpret it either, he is powerless, whereas we, who can do both, acquire the power to move events forward. In this world, it becomes the people with knowledge, the ones who have access to and the means to interpret it, who also have the power: emphasising his strength over his cloned brother, before their final confrontation Liquid goads Snake with “You're the only one who doesn't know!” And so *Metal Gear Solid* (both for Snake and us as an audience, because despite being privy to Meryl's Codec frequency we spend the majority of the game trying to keep up with and untangle its ever-twisting plot) is an effort not just to stop the FOXHOUND terrorists, but to discern what's actually happening here; to interpret and affirm out of conflicting truths some kind of genuine knowledge.

Which contextualises why Solid Snake, throughout *Metal Gear Solid*, asks more questions than an annoying five-year-old nephew. If I quote directly from his conversation with the DARPA chief, just for an example, our protagonist begins to sound like a West Coast surfer bro, intoning even statements of fact with an affected, interrogative upward inflection:

“Revolution?”

“Rex?”

“Baker?”

“Second-floor basement?”

“Metal Gear?”

“Psycho Mantis?”

“Card keys?”

“Black project?”

But it’s actually *because* Snake is *Metal Gear Solid*’s hero that he speaks like this. As well as defeating FOXHOUND and Metal Gear Rex, in order to become the master of his own world, he has to confront the misinformative system that allows those things to exist in the first place. A convenience of Kojima’s dialogue, used as feed lines to help introduce his game’s varying and immense quantity of exposition, Snake’s questions are also what denominate him as the progressive, evolutionary, and free-willed hero of his own time, an individual who both refutes the modern dynamic of passively receiving information and embraces the postmodern, eudaimonic goal: to forge from conflicting and *parti pris* truths your own unique identity. The child of two quasi-fathers—Big Boss, the legendary soldier from whom he discovers he is cloned, and Gray Fox, his friend, mentor, and idol—by the end of *Metal Gear Solid*, Snake has rejected both of their imposed identities. Unlike Liquid, who attempts to continue Big Boss’s legacy by establishing the mercenary nation called Outer Heaven, and Fox, who exists on reality’s periphery, declaring he “has no name” and is “neither truly alive nor truly dead,” Snake, at the game’s end, tells Meryl he is going to find “a new way to live.” In this, Naomi encourages him over the Codec: “Loving each other, teaching each other, that’s how we can change the world,” she proclaims.

And so, Snake finally embodies another, latter, and more optimistic postmodern ideal, tended by the literary theorist and philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, and [conveniently summarised here](#) by the University of Auckland’s Michael Peters: “Educational theory should seek to critique and dethrone existing metanarratives ... at the same time it must respect the culturally specific formations of plural forms of oppression at the intersection of class, race, and gender as they make up a set of fragmented social bonds.”

Big Boss, the “greatest soldier who ever lived,” embodies the metanarratives of the 20th century. Owing to his near-mythical exploits during the Cold War, he has become a popular social hero, whose persona ideologues (like Liquid, like FOXHOUND) use to rally behind. His absence, and the death of the unifying, common morality that it represents, hangs heavy over *Metal Gear Solid*, reminiscent of Simon and Garfunkel’s post-nuclear-age lament: “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you.” Gray Fox is Big Boss’s figurative opposite, a fugacious sort of half-person whose split loyalties (he guides Snake through an electrified booby trap, then, five minutes later, challenges him to a fight to the death) and physical translucence represent a rejection not just of *traditional* identities but *all* identities. Lyotard believed that postmodernity—as classified by a society’s access to more information; its increased ability to communicate—could empower women, the poor, and ethnic minorities, any of those peoples left disenfranchised by the 20th-century’s Enlightenment. To be subsumed by the postmodern, to allow oneself to be overwhelmed with information, to the point of conceding to the sea of discourses those high ideals of identity, knowledge, and concomitance, like Fox does, is to fail to

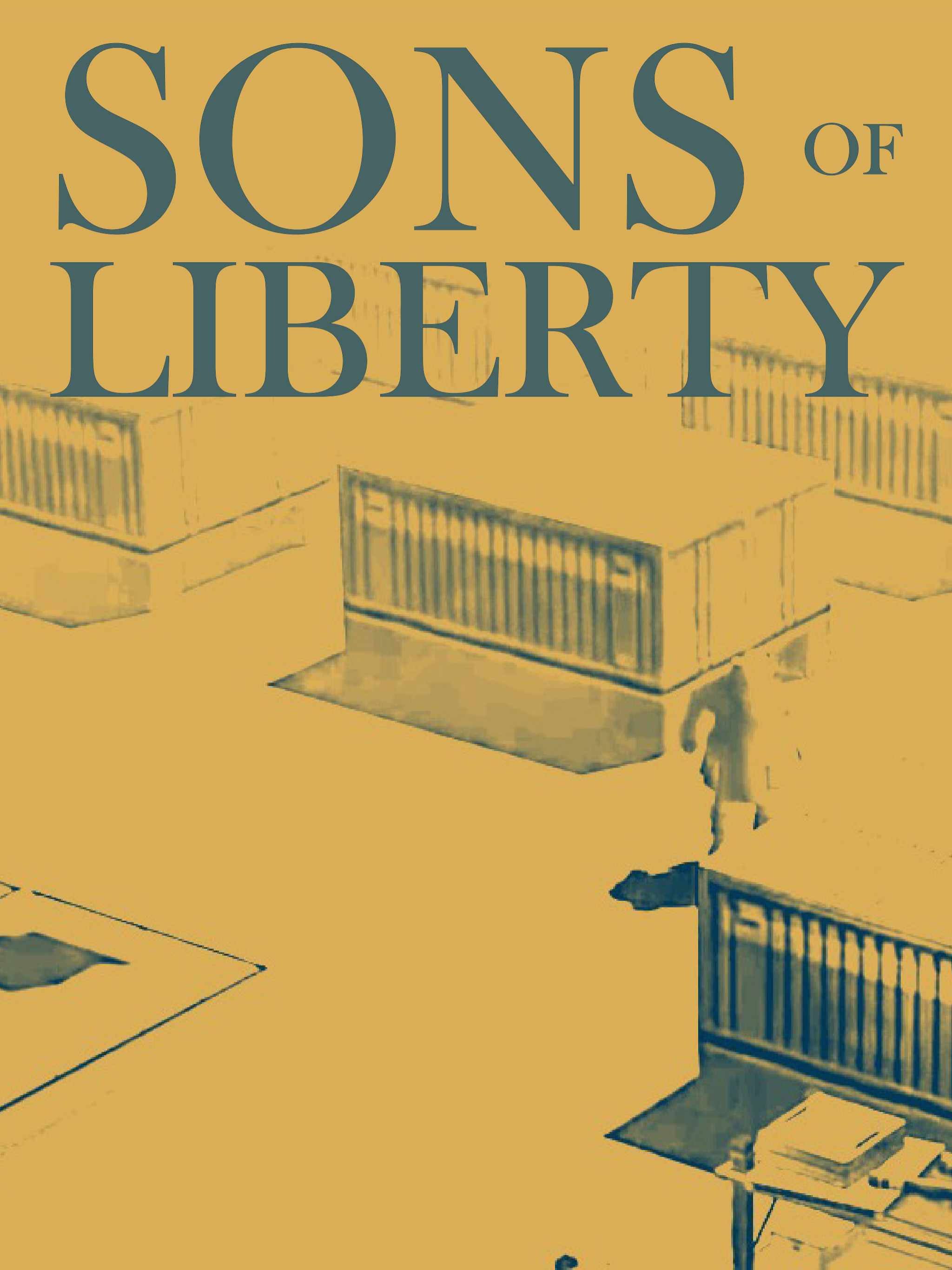
substantiate one key element of the postmodernist vision: a world wherein the death of simple and comforting metanarratives also fertilises the growth of new ways of thinking; where, freed from old politicians' games, society can engage with different, hitherto under-attended aspects of itself, and lend identity to peoples previously denied it. It is this fuller vision of the postmodern that Snake ultimately becomes. He doesn't join the postmodern game, nor does he reject it outright. Armed with information, he succeeds in enfranchising a new personal modality.

A 20th-century elder statesman in the 21st century, Big Boss's ideological dream fails. Gray Fox, whose self-selected *nomme de guerre* "Deepthroat" references his challenging of ruling political classes, is killed—and since he is unable to form out of his conflicting identities (is he Gray Fox? Deepthroat? Frank Yager?) a cogent, new, and communicable identity, a knowledge set, the game's postmodern world leaves him behind. Fox does not wield contradictory information into a new form of self; rather, in his closing monologue, he resigns himself to being an "undying shadow in the world of lights," a misfit and sectarian, who is helpless to create anything solid from the new, illuminating discourses.

Snake, however—*Solid Snake*—is the more hopeful combination of these two men and their respective sensibilities. In *Metal Gear Solid's* closing scene, after being subjected to The Colonel, Naomi, Ocelot, and Liquid; Fox, Baker, and Anderson; the Secretary of Defense Jim Houseman and, ultimately, the very leaders of America and Russia, and all of their contradictory discourses; Snake is resolved to live a "new way of life," in which he will "teach and love." The restrictive and prescriptivist narratives of old, embodied not just in Big Boss and Liquid, but his own genetics, Snake transcends them all—after surviving the FOXDIE virus, and with encouragement from Naomi, he determines to ignore whatever is coded into his DNA, and whatever existence may try to force upon him, and to just *live*. Simultaneously, he leaves Shadow Moses equipped with an increased and richer understanding of his world. Acutely aware of the shady and divergent forces that govern his society, Snake nevertheless establishes his identity by declaring that he has his own name, which is David, and is prepared, even enthusiastic, to enter into reality. Suitably, *Metal Gear Solid's* final image is one of peace. As David watches a family of caribou grazing upon a snowfield beneath the Alaskan sunrise, he appears to be, finally, at one with his world. With the knowledge of Big Boss, Gray Fox, and dozens of other contemporary influencers assimilated, he is born again and re-Christened, the citizen *nonpareil* of his own postmodern future.



# SONS OF LIBERTY





# THE ISLAND COMING HOME

REID MCCARTER

**M***etal Gear Solid 2's* virtual recreation of the New York City skyline was altered before the game came out, just two months after the 9/11 attacks. It's the only aspect of the game that was able to be reworked in response to current events. Otherwise, *Sons of Liberty's* creators had made something without the context of the exact course on which American culture was just setting out that autumn. That the game feels so fully like a reaction to the beginning of a new age in global politics might be read as coincidence, but it's more likely the result of its makers paying attention to what was already on the horizon.

A lot has been written and said about *Sons of Liberty's* eerily prescient story. The deceptively straightforward set-up—Raiden, a young special operative, is sent to neutralize a terrorist group holding the American president and an offshore oil cleanup facility hostage—soon gives way to a maelstrom of unexpected twists centred on topics like digital information control, the erosion of Western democracy, and the impact of the internet on social evolution. But it's *Sons of Liberty's* commentary regarding an America on the brink of a self-shattering cultural crisis that resounds most strongly in the present day. This last point, hammered into the player through a final scene set atop the ruins of a newly decimated Federal Hall in Manhattan, speaks to the horrors that roiled the United States' collective gut on and after September 11th, the game seeming to forecast new wars, political trends, and shifts in international power structures just as they were beginning to take shape.

The crisis that kicks off Raiden's mission involves a shadowy cover-up concerning the

enormous, gleaming metal clean-up facility that spiderlegs into the ocean off the coast of New York City. Aside from the prologue, which is set on the rain-lashed decks and swaying holds of a naval tanker, and the final hour of the game, *Sons of Liberty* takes place entirely on this facility—called, improbably, the Big Shell. Removed from land and populated only by soldiers and their hostages, the Big Shell is an island removed from the workaday reality of the city—and country—it belongs to.

As soon as Raiden infiltrates the Big Shell, *Sons of Liberty* assumes an otherworldly quality. He encounters “Dead Cell”—a group of terrorists who, even by the standards of the previous game’s psychics, cowboys, and giants, are enormously strange. One, Fortune, is capable of supernaturally deflecting bullets. Another, Fatman, glides around on roller skates, drinking red wine through a straw as he plants explosives. Then there’s Vamp, a seemingly immortal, shirtless Romanian who, as his name suggests, drinks his enemies’ blood, runs up vertical surfaces, and can’t be killed, even after taking bullets to the head. A cybernetic ninja shows up and Solidus, formerly the *American president* George Sears and now leader of the terrorists, puts on an octopus-armed power suit. Revolver Ocelot, returning from the previous game, is frequently possessed by the dead man’s arm he had grafted onto himself following the first *Metal Gear Solid*. As Raiden contends with these villains, he learns, too, that the entire operation he’s been tasked with is a sham: there was no oil spill and the Big Shell, stretching deep beneath the water’s surface, is actually a gigantic robot called Arsenal Gear housing a sophisticated artificial intelligence program. His mission handlers are also synthetic agents of a world-controlling group called the Patriots.

By the time *Sons of Liberty* approaches its finale, heaping disorienting reams of exposition that combine the above plot revelations with summaries of memetic theory and digital-era sociology, everything has begun to feel like a dream. This isn’t accidental. The Big Shell, though solidly physical in its clearly numbered struts and well-ordered, highly functional layout, might as well be a manmade island. Using water as a recurring motif, the game’s introduction involves the prologue’s sinking tanker giving way to Raiden sneaking onto the Big Shell from the murky sea, climbing onto a structure whose ad-hoc metallic supports place it just above, but always surrounded by the waves. Reinforced by imagery of precarious civilization beset on all sides by the chaos of the sea, the sense is that the Big Shell—and Raiden’s mission aboard it—is one of isolation from the real world. Though his mission is of the utmost importance (there are nukes, of course, because this is *Metal Gear*; and an information-controlling super robot), the violence involved with subduing a terrorist threat is kept just offshore from the rest of the world. If the battles and bloodshed taking place on the Big Shell are stopped there, they won’t affect the mainland. The metaphor of an America always able to keep the rest of the world’s issues at arm’s length, is made clear enough.

If this seems like a stretch, the rest of the game works hard to suggest an America-centred interpretation. From its subtitle (“Sons of Liberty”) down to its setting—

not in an isolated Alaskan weapons disposal base, the Soviet wilderness, a remote jungle, or an abandoned battlefield, but 30 kilometres from the United States' most populous city—the focus on American politics is tough to ignore. The Illuminati-esque Patriots are described as an extension of the country itself (“As long as this nation exists, so will we,” says the AI), born of post-war America's unchecked growth in global power. Their villainy, which is defined by a digital censorship plan that paternalistically allows the Patriots to become arbiters of what information will be curated and passed on to future generations, is a particularly 21<sup>st</sup>-century manifestation of imperial might. Like modern America, they dictate which moral values and historical facts are allowed to proliferate across the world.

Raiden, who has been manipulated by the Patriots into blindly advancing their agenda, was chosen from a group of child soldiers for his role because, to paraphrase, he was a young person who refused to atone, learn, or face up to his violent past. The perfect arm for imperialist might, Raiden is selfish and blind to his own history—a model citizen who, if the plan had worked, would provide a basis for the Patriots' ideal soldiery and citizenry. Before he's wised up to what's going on, Raiden is the perfect agent of modern American hegemony: he's ignorant of his own history, blindly loyal, and willing to keep external threats at bay by following violent orders just beyond the sight of the mainland.

*Sons of Liberty's* final act sees the Big Shell, its wars previously confined to foreign lands, literally come crashing down on the homeland as its robotic core activates, driving Raiden and the villain Solidus through the streets and buildings of Manhattan. For the first time, the dream's remove vanishes. The violence of a distant battlefield comes to New York City in a startling, unexpected moment of violence. Even its colour palette, which consisted of gentle oranges and blues on the Shell, changes to a harsher, grubby landscape of collapsed stonework to reinforce the sense of having finally woken up.

There's a nihilist matter-of-factness to the game's foresight at this point, but one that doesn't linger through its conclusion. Raiden, breaking the pair of handcuffs he had been trapped in and preparing to fight the terrorist leader amidst the smoking rubble of Federal Hall, listens to a summary of what his enemy wants to accomplish. Solidus, the main villain of the game, understands the Patriots' designs and his hijacking of the Big Shell is meant to undermine them. Its destruction, timed to take place on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009—200 years to the day since George Washington was sworn in as the first US president on the original Federal Hall's steps—is meant to kick off a new era for the nation. His group, named the Sons of Liberty after the early revolutionaries of 18<sup>th</sup> century America, also wants to violently overthrow those who would seek to exercise complete control over ordinary lives. Rather than the British, he imagines a new republic free of the Patriots' tyranny. Solidus is not a hero, even though his aim is basically sound. He manipulates others, torturing and killing civilians and acting in part on a desire to free himself of Patriot control as a way to grow his own power.

Among the naïve soldiers, terrorists, and imperial tyrants, though, the most frightening realization is that, with or without the Patriots, the ideals spread by an internet-enabled, globalized modern world will mutate from the starting point of American hegemony regardless. The form may change, but the seed will always remain the same: global culture, Made in the USA. There is no controlling it, no matter how advanced the AI. The Patriots, as representatives of American power, are simply outdated and it doesn't matter what happens once their immediate plans come to an end. The Big Shell crashes into New York City, ending the sense of security that an exceptionalist America once enjoyed. The terror the nation has wreaked on the world through its imperial policies comes home to roost. Unsurprisingly, coming from a videogame made by Baby Boomer Japanese creators, *Sons of Liberty's* sci-fi vision of America's forcible break from a long period of nationalistic isolationism is seen as an inevitable horror.

Raiden kills Solidus and Federal Hall burns, the grand experiment of the American project smoldering in the face of a horrific wake-up call that brings it into the modern world. If it was made even a few years later, it's likely that the game would end on a sourer note than it does here (2008's *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* would find, but ultimately dismiss, some of the cynicism *Sons of Liberty's* finale lacks). Instead, the story concludes with hope. Raiden, forced into a fight with Solidus by a Patriot plot that means his death will cause the simultaneous termination of an innocent child, understands that literally allowing the next generation to come and improve on the situation he finds himself in involves learning from the nightmare from which he's waking. The future only exists—and this isn't too dramatic in our nuclear age—if he moves forward, reckons with his history as a Patriot pawn, and defeats Solidus. He has to take his destiny into his own hands, as a citizen and a victim who's been duped into following the orders of the powers that be. His options are either to die in despair and self-defeat or fight in an imperfect system to kill Solidus, hunt down the Patriots, and help forge a brighter, more equitable future for himself, America, and the world at large.

In order to drive home that these lessons are not just for the benefit of the game's characters, the game's final scenes involve prior hero Solid Snake and the newly triumphant Raiden dressed in their ludicrous sneaking suits talking while surrounded by everyday New Yorkers—police officers rushing to cordon off Solidus' resting place and businesspeople restarting the constant Manhattan foot traffic. Outsized, technicolour cartoon characters that they are, their concluding thoughts on the inherent good of free will—regardless of how it manages to be expressed under the control of those forces that guide our governments and access to information—are brought home to the real world. The cartoon villains and heroes of the Big Shell are synthesized, however bizarrely, with more familiar sights, forcing audiences to reckon with the message they're communicating.

The polygonal characters vanishing, the game transitions to real footage of the

George Washington statue outside Federal Hall. Raiden promises his partner Rose that, whatever else may come and no matter how awful the modern world may be, he'll work to bring ideals like compassion and poetry into the future. It's a fairly pat ending, but its optimism, 17 years later, is more than welcome. As decades have passed, America sliding into a popular politics seemingly insistent on destroying the world through a determined refusal to look inward, its island nation drifts closer and closer to the global shores. The only real hero in *Sons of Liberty's* story, Solid Snake, sums up the point well enough as the game fades out over video of the Statue of Liberty, that rusted beacon of the United States' romanticized destination as international shelter from the injustices of the world: "Building the future and keeping the past alive are one and the same thing," he says, a concept that, if embraced back in 2001, would have led us to a different, better world today.





# A NIGHTMARE YOU CAN'T WAKE UP FROM

EDWARD SMITH

**I**n my most commonly recurring nightmare I've done something, something I don't realise or remember, and it's made everybody I know hate me. Sometimes I'm at work, and neither my colleagues nor my students will speak to me; that is, until the boss tells me to go to her office, wherein several people, some I recognise, some I don't, shout at me that I'm useless at my job, and that whatever terrible, indefinable (to me, at least) thing it is that I've done, it's totally my fault, and the result of my being a selfish and defective kind of a person in the first place. Other times, I'm in the kitchen (it's always the kitchen) of my father's house and the entirety of his side of the family, including those members of his side of the family who are now dead, are screaming at me to leave and that I've ruined their life. In this version of the nightmare I attempt to answer back, to state my case, but my voice doesn't work; it's like the air inside my lungs is too thin to vibrate my vocal chords and no sounds come out my mouth.

It's not as visually stark as my other recurring nightmares, but the feelings of panic and fear generated by this are much more intense. It isn't a murderer or a mechanical fault in a plane or a mile of seawater above my head; here, something that I've done or something that I am, which although I can't perceive or verbalise it, is what's going to kill me, by making everybody I know hate me so much that I'm going to kill myself. The monster in this nightmare isn't me, as such, but it is an aspect of me, or it's my sum loathsomeness, which because in the nightmare I can't see or conceive it, I can't stop it, so it is going to grow and make me more loathsome. In fact, my not being able to understand it, the other people in the nightmare, be they colleagues,

uncles, or whomever, they interpret my not being able to understand it as wilful on my part, like I know exactly what about me is loathsome, or what loathsome thing it is that I've done, to make people rightfully hate me, but I refuse to confront it, or even worse I know all about it already and I'm actually *proud* of it, which makes both it and me yet even more loathsome. In this nightmare, I can't speak to defend myself, and my silence both makes people more incandescently angry (and their attacks more ferocious as a result) and lends to their attacks an exponentially increasing, kind of cyclical credibility, as in, my not saying anything to their accusations makes me look like I don't care if I'm the kind of person they're accusing me of being, which makes me look like I actually am the kind of person who they are accusing me of being, and the kind of person who deserves to be shouted at in this way, which accusation I also can't respond to, and so on. In this nightmare, I make everything worse, for other people and myself. I call it the nightmare of myself.

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At the end of *Metal Gear Solid*, after confronting and defeating his two competing father figures, Solid Snake is able to come to terms with who he really is and what he wants to be. The game's final scene shows him reclaiming his first name and avowing to live life in "a new way". In *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, that is exactly what he's doing. As a member of an anti-Metal Gear activist group called Philanthropy, he answers to no government, and his actions—such as infiltrating a US Marines' tanker during the game's prologue—are impelled only by his personal sense of right and wrong. This opening sequence affirms Snake's new idea of himself, or rather, of *Himself*. In the first shot, when he is shown walking through New York City, he is wearing a raincoat draped over his head and shoulders, and we are unable to see his face; he starts sprinting, and throws the raincoat off, but by using a "stealth camouflage" unit, one of *Metal Gear's* many technological *deus ex machinae*, Snake turns himself invisible, and we once again cannot clearly see who he is. Suddenly, however, he leaps off of the side of the George Washington Bridge. As his translucent form falls through the air, cutting through an indistinct soundtrack, thus far comprising low, synthetic sounds, there comes a rising and mournful chorus, its religious, almost funereal bent seeming to suggest that Snake is about to die. Instead of plummeting into the Hudson River, though, he crashes dramatically down onto the tanker's aft deck, with the impact destroying his stealth camouflage unit. When he stands up, we can finally see Snake, in the flesh and unobscured. He is not dead; rather, the indeterminate, outline version of Solid Snake—in *Metal Gear Solid* figurative, here literal—who did not know his own identity, has been killed. Snake has transcended from a half-formed to a fully-formed man, substantiated here before our eyes.

The effect of this scene is redoubled owing to both the year of and circumstances around *Metal Gear Solid 2's* release. By this time, 2002, four years after the original game, Solid Snake has become one of videogaming's most recognisable characters. His popularity among audiences, accrued since his appearance in *Metal Gear Solid*,

gives him status, and he's presented to us like we should already know who he is; in his previous incarnation Snake was introduced as a generic-seeming action hero, unfamiliar to every young game player who hadn't owned a Microsoft MSX. Now, following *Metal Gear Solid's* success, Solid Snake has *trademarks*—his bandana, sneaking suit, and slow, dramatic rise from crouching to standing announce him, in a similar way to James Bond each time he proclaims his famous “the name's Bond...”

Contrary to his appearance in *Metal Gear Solid*, Snake here is characterised as possessing a pronounced sense of Self. Throughout *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, however, Self becomes an increasingly fraught concept. The game's subtitle, which references a colonial group that battled British taxation and the game's terrorist antagonists, hints thirdly at Snake's experiential state: having distanced himself from prescribed ideas about Self (a separation which is itself referenced in *Metal Gear Solid 2's* introductory cinematic, when we see a [snake slither out from the inside of a nucleic double helix](#)), he has subsequently become a product of his own freedom of choice—a “son” of his personal “liberty.” As a result, rather than the anxiety of not knowing who he is or what he believes, Snake now confronts the nightmare that who he is is flawed; that the identity he's strived to cultivate is itself doubtful, even loathsome, and that he, himself, and his personal ideals are not right. In his struggle, with identity and the question of whether the choices he independently makes are correct, or moral, he is far from alone—almost all of *Metal Gear Solid 2's* characters are at war with themselves.

Here we have Olga Gurlokovich, a Russian soldier and expectant mother, whose shot of her with one hand pressed concerningly against her womb, the other holding a military walkie-talkie, singularly captures her internal conflict between her personal and professional lives and their respective demands. Then there's Peter Stillman, the bomb disposal expert who fakes having lost a leg in an explosion in order to cover for the fact that the explosion was actually caused by his own incompetence. Otacon, the likeable milquetoast from *Metal Gear Solid*, we learn here is estranged from his stepsister because he slept with his stepmother, which drove his father to committing suicide by drowning himself in a swimming pool; as a result, the stepsister Emma is almost literally paralysed with aquaphobia, and misses Otacon—Hal—so much so that she repeats his name in her sleep.

More abstractly, Revolver Ocelot is haunted by the memory of Liquid Snake, whom he betrayed six years earlier. On occasion, Liquid's arm, which has been grafted onto Ocelot, will, in the vein of *The Hands of Orlac*, awaken and take control of Ocelot's body, prompting him to scream, in a preposterous and comic literalisation of guilt, “get out of my mind, Liquid!” In one sequence, in order to enter the highest-security section of “Big Shell,” the faux seawater treatment plant where the majority of *Metal Gear Solid 2* takes place, Raiden, a secret agent and the game's central hero, must disguise himself as a soldier. A single wrong move here—hanging around for too long, bumping into a guard, accidentally pressing the “Weapon” button and so

unequipping his gun—will result in Raiden getting spotted and killed, and an instant Game Over. The person he's looking for, though, is a Secret Service agent named Richard Ames, whose only known identifying feature is that he has both a bad heart and compensatory pacemaker, the result being a sequence that presents rather starkly four ideas: identity is precarious, being doubted or seen through will be disastrous, and that people's flaws are a significant part of what distinguishes them, and people know and remember other people largely by what is wrong with them.

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This nightmare of self is different from my own. In mine, whatever it is that is wrong with me has already been discovered by other people. In *Metal Gear Solid 2*, to varying extents, the characters are still afraid of being found out. My nightmare is that everyone already knows me and detests me because of it; Stillman, Otacon, Gurlovich etc.'s nightmares are that if they ever reveal to others who they honestly are, then it *could* ruin them. Nevertheless, we are both trapped within ourselves. I cannot, in my nightmare, speak to defend myself, and the impression of me that other people have is fast and immutable anyway. I'm stuck being someone everyone I know hates. The characters in *Metal Gear Solid 2* are also trapped inside aspects and assumed versions of themselves, held hostage by either their positions, their predilections, or the lies they've told about who they are. Contrasted with *Metal Gear Solid*, where the information landscape and conflicting ideas of Self present a Boschian kind of personal hell, where nothing makes any straightforward sense, the nightmare of *Metal Gear Solid 2* is an over-certainty, and abundance, of Self. The characters understand acutely who they are and what they've done, and they're terrified of anybody else finding these things out.

Read in the language of dreams, the game's water motif (Big Shell is in the middle of the ocean, Emma has to swim through its flooded computer core, the tanker sinks into the Hudson River) suggests pressure, weight, and the threat of being overwhelmed. I recall another of my own nightmares, which you don't have to be Sigmund Freud to know is about my anxiety over pouring myself out to people, where I ejaculate but it just keeps on going, turning first from semen into semeny water, and then into just water, gradually filling the room I'm standing in until it's past my knees and then my chest and then finally over my head so that it submerges me completely. Of all the body's sebums and fluids, my sperm feels like it's the most personal, or rather, least anonymous. Other people may have my blood type, but nobody else in the world possesses, or can autonomously, glandularly produce the prostatic ingredients for making another me, i.e. in this nightmare, I'm drowned in something that is very intimately mine; I'm drowned in myself. *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s characters, frightened by their lies and by the consequences of their own decisions, are drowning in themselves as well. In the game's most fitting image, a battle against Vamp takes place over a moon pool filled with highly oxygenated water. If you fall into it, he explains, you will sink, and never be able to get out.

But *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s nightmare of Self is rendered yet even more starkly, considering that, for the most part, we are seeing it through the eyes of Raiden. He's one of the few characters in the game whose identity is indeterminate, or at least something like indeterminate. When he first appears, he is wearing a mask that covers his entire face. People refer to him using varying names—before abruptly changing his codename to Raiden, the Colonel originally addresses Raiden as “Snake,” whereas Rose, his girlfriend, calls him by his (appropriately generic) first name, Jack. And his appearance is androgynous. With his shoulder-length blonde hair and rubber catsuit that accentuates his legs and buttocks, Raiden possesses a physical sex appeal that is archetypally feminine. His fast running speed; high, graceful forward cartwheels; and the way he veers from side-to-side and rounds corners, in the formation of a perfect sine wave, are the bodily expressions of this fluidity. Even the American president, whom Raiden is tasked with rescuing, confuses him for a woman, asking him incredulously “you're ... a man?” and then, for confirmation—as is apparently the privilege of American presidents—grabbing him by the crotch.

Who Raiden is, and what right he has to be considered a soldier, or a boyfriend, or even one of the good guys, are also called variously into question: Snake ridicules him for having no live combat experience, and for only ever being tested in virtual reality; as his mission unfolds, Rose begins to question if Raiden is really the man she fell in love with, and whether she can continue to tolerate his emotional reclusion; and Stillman initially suspects Raiden is actually a double-agent working on the side of the terrorists. Even the military dog tag that Raiden wears does not bear his actual identity; at the beginning of *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s Big Shell chapter, we're invited to type whatever name, age, and place and date of birth that we like into a computer, and, exemplary of director Hideo Kojima's postmodern humour, it is finally revealed that actually these details are the ones inscribed onto Raiden's tag. He's a character lacking in basics of Self, whose irresoluteness, and either willing or unwilling resistance to possible definitions of who he is, place him in contrast to the people around him, who even if they don't like it, nevertheless do know who they are.

When it's eventually, dramatically revealed that the entire Big Shell mission has been designed as a testing platform for the new “System of Societal Sanity,” which allows the US government to monitor and manipulate public information, the AI responsible for the System's implementation contacts Raiden, explaining he was selected as the test's subject because he embodies an important aspect of the nation's public consciousness, specifically its refusal to accept responsibility for its actions: “Every time something goes wrong, you turn around and place the blame on something else. ‘It's not my fault!’ ‘It's not your fault!’” This is meant as a taunt, but in the world of *Metal Gear Solid 2*, where everybody is drowning in Self, Raiden's self-denial, and his evasiveness, become accidental virtues—they allow him to float above it all. It's actually almost tragic when at the end of the game he throws away that misnomial dog tag, patches things up with Rose, and resolves to, in his own words

slightly paraphrased here, “pass something along to the future.” But nevertheless, and satisfactorily, although Raiden has for himself a numinous moment, what he actually ends up accepting, like a true hero, is a burden; a burden others around him are unable to bear, the burden of Self.

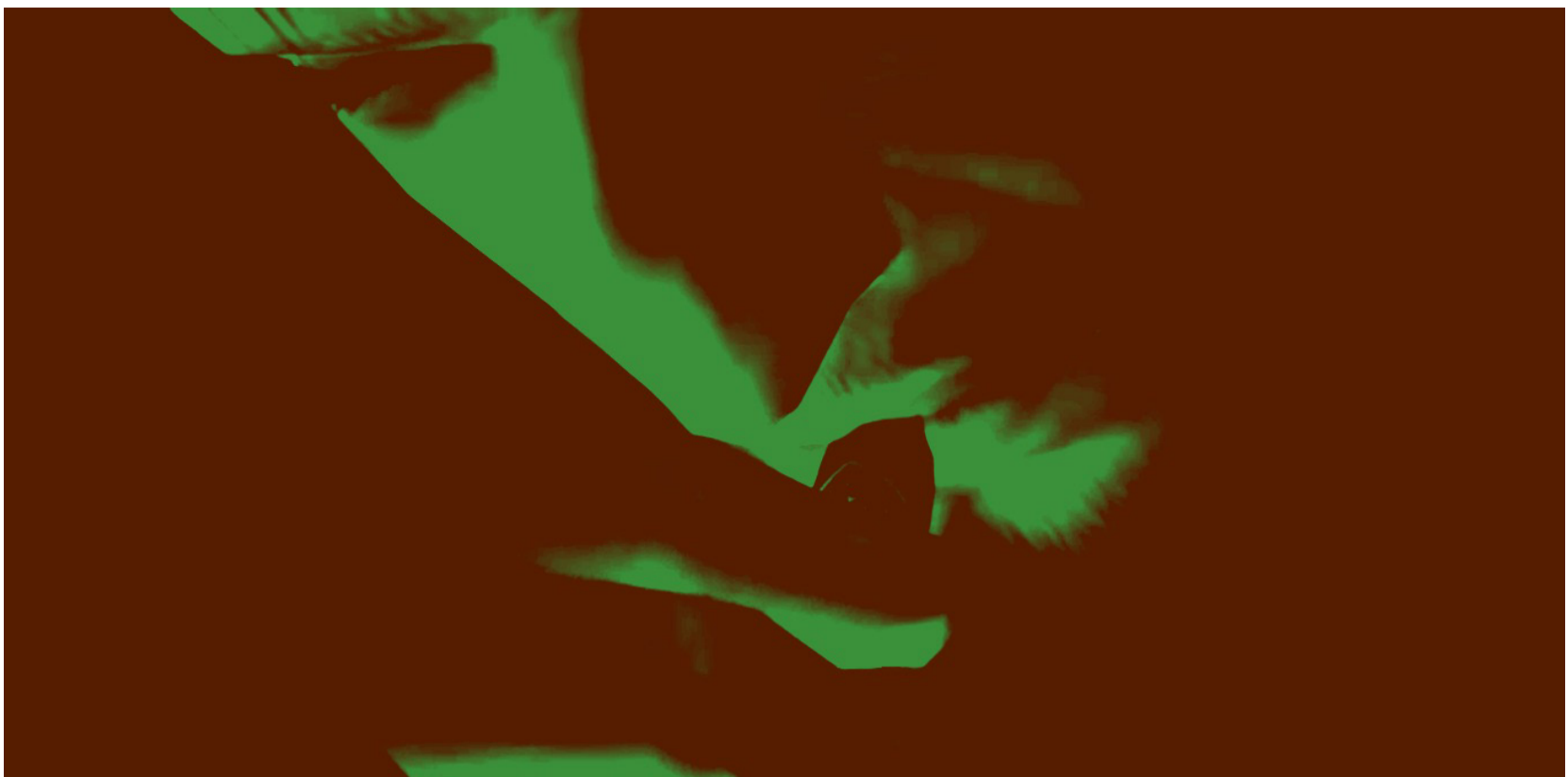
In *Metal Gear Solid*, Snake’s establishment of his own identity represents his transcending. After dozens of people and the systems of thinking they represent have attempted to manipulate and control him, Snake finally, independently, pronounces who he is, and breaks free. Raiden, however, when he embraces Self and embraces life, given how much the other people he’s encountered during his transformative first mission are suffering, seems to be willingly entering a new personal hell. Shortly before rescuing Emma, Raiden tells the Colonel that being on board Big Shell, where he’s surrounded by Ocelot, Otacon, Stillman, et al., is like “being in a nightmare you can’t wake up from.” It’s this nightmare of strong emotions, having to live with your decisions and the possibility that you might hurt and make people hate you—and be hurt by and hate them back—that Raiden embraces, the nightmare of living as a person. The nightmare of Self. This action is courageous and noble. To be able to handle the complexities of Self, and to volunteer to manage them, as Raiden does, takes strength. Appreciating this struggle is worth it and in and of itself demands a seriously developed *joie de vivre*.

But it seems as if Raiden’s dream of being a complete and life-living person eventually fails. Though he ends *Metal Gear Solid 2* on the crux of Selfhood, telling is his subsequent appearance in *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*. Set several years after *Metal Gear Solid 2*, it sees Raiden separated from Rose, estranged from his infant son, and, à la *Metal Gear Solid*’s Gray Fox, transformed into a half-man, half-robot supersoldier, subsisting on reality’s fringe. It implies that, despite his optimism and his willingness to accept life and take on his Self, he has been defeated by both of those things, made to withdraw, and become something less human, more perduring than flesh.





# SNAKE EATER



# SALUTING THE GRAVE

REID MCCARTER

The *Metal Gear Solid* series is all about moments of world-ending crisis. In the first two games, this comes through convoluted scenarios involving nuclear weapons and information-controlling supercomputer AI. While both present doomsday scenarios that are just plausible enough to work within the game's version of reality, they're also described through the insulation of science fiction, their walking nuclear bombs and amphibious, mountain-sized robots a step or two removed from what we can easily conceive of as possible in our actual world.

In *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, though, this sort of abstraction is replaced with a greater reliance on actual historical events. Set in 1964, *Snake Eater* revolves around a top-secret mission where American CIA agent "Naked Snake" is deployed to a remote stretch of wilderness somewhere in the former USSR. His mission, at first, is simply to retrieve a Soviet scientist hoping to defect to the West. After an unexpected betrayal by his mentor, "The Boss," (an implausibly-named World War II hero and, apparently, "mother of the American special forces") and the detonation of a miniature nuclear warhead by a colonel loyal to Leonid Brezhnev, Snake is left half-dead and on the hook for a military blunder bad enough to push the Soviets to the brink of declaring war on the United States.

Up until this point, *Snake Eater* is fairly standard *Metal Gear*: a tough-as-nails special operative infiltrates a stronger enemy force's headquarters, discusses trivia with a cast of radio support characters, and learns of the existence of a fantasy superweapon (in this case a nuclear-equipped tank called the Shagohod) that must be stopped at

all costs. Following The Boss's defection and Snake's medevac removal from the battlefield, though, *Snake Eater* recommits to a more grounded basis in the real world.

Though the Shagohod remains dangerous and there's a faction of cartoonish enemies to be defeated, the moment of crisis that *Snake Eater* centres on isn't a science fiction doomsday device: it's the possibility that the ever-fragile nuclear stand-off between the Western and Soviet powers might escalate into full-scale war. As Snake recovers from the injuries sustained during his first, ill-fated mission, he's briefed on another, even more important one. The Soviets, who detected an American presence during his previous trip that coincided with a nuclear attack on one of their research facilities, contact the White House with pretty reasonable threats to declare war. A cinematic shows Lyndon B. Johnson and Nikita Khrushchev trying to deescalate the situation. Khrushchev can't appear weak, lest his soon-to-be-successor Brezhnev take advantage of the situation to grab power, and demands a swift American response. Johnson promises he'll send a CIA agent back into the USSR in secret to take out Brezhnev's supporters, kill The Boss, destroy the Shagohod, and restore the balance of power. Snake is told that accomplishing all of this will fall on his shoulders. If he fails to cooperate, the CIA will have no choice but to execute him in the hopes of at least offering the Soviets a good enough scapegoat to avoid war. Though the details are wholly fictional, the scenario is realistic enough. A single misstep in the constant espionage of the Cold War powers threatens to boil over into a third, nuclear-armed world war.

It would be easy for *Snake Eater* to simply evoke post-war history as a way to lend gravity to its frequently ludicrous story of superpowered spies and global conspiracy theories. But, instead, it uses its historical setting as an opportunity for greater commentary on the cynicism of the political climate in which it takes place. As Snake journeys through the muddy swamps, thickly forested jungles, and concrete research facilities of the game's Soviet wilderness, he's plagued by concerns over his place as a pawn in the doomsday game being played out by his country.

The Boss's defection gnaws at him. Each time he sees his former mentor, her stoicism and determination to work toward the interests of his enemies force him to doubt his allegiance. Each encounter with The Boss seems to end with Snake mangled and broken. When she first announces that she's working with the Brezhnev faction's Colonel Volgin (a scarred giant characterized by a love of violence, libertine sexuality, and an ability to toss lightning from his fingertips, Volgin is Red Scare propaganda made flesh), The Boss pops Snake's limbs from their sockets, snaps his bones, socks him in the gut, and tosses him off a rope bridge. Later, she beats him up some more and crushes his hand under her horse's hoof. Their most memorable encounter sees her watching on as Snake's face is pulped under Volgin's fists and he's strung up by his wrists to be repeatedly electrocuted, waterboarded, and made to helplessly watch a one-sided Russian Roulette game play out that ends with his eye getting shot from his skull. The physical torture that accompanies her appearances in the

game is mirrored by the psychological anguish Snake undergoes when he sees The Boss—to him a paragon of self-sacrificing patriotism; the model soldier—seeming to have so ruthlessly betrayed the West for the East. Every time they meet, he emerges both more disillusioned and physically battered, his burns, cuts, and bruises outward manifestations of the damage being done to his sense of purpose.

*Snake Eater's* finale makes good on this questioning by revealing that The Boss's supposed defection was a cover story. The renowned soldier was actually working undercover to find and steal a vast sum of wealth kept by Volgin and was marked for death only when she, still forced to hide her true mission, appeared to have aided the Brezhnev faction by detonating a nuclear weapon. Snake learns this only after completing his mission by killing her—something she let happen in order to protect her American masters and ward off a nuclear war. He knows that she will be remembered in the West only as a dangerous traitor to her country. Both of them were puppets, manipulated to serve the interests of their nation.

More than just an indictment of blind patriotism, *Snake Eater* undercuts any belief that the Cold War was fought over political ideologies—communist versus capitalist—to show its characters locked in a battle over wealth. The Philosopher's Legacy, a vast sum of money accumulated by a trio of global superpowers, is the real motivating factor behind Colonel Volgin, The Boss, and the American government's actions. In the game's fiction, the Legacy is a vast sum pooled by three Allied nations—the United States, China, and the Soviet Union—during the Second World War, appropriated by Volgin's father during the post-war scramble for power, and hidden across the world through bank transfers detailed in a microfiche Volgin possesses. The idea is to use this money to finance the Shagohod and other military projects that will end the Cold War by making the Soviet Union powerful enough that it no longer needs to maintain the peace of mutually assured destruction with the West.

The Philosopher's Legacy, its financial (and thus political) power spread across the globe, is as clear a metaphor for post-war imperialism as there could be. Each of its bits of data point toward a different bank or a one-off transaction that, brought together in aggregate, create enough financial power to provide its owner with sufficient hegemonic influence to end the Cold War as the victor. A small sum tucked away in a Swiss bank may not look like much on its own, but combined with hundreds of similar amounts, its owner can become wealthy enough to control the world. In the same way, Soviet or Western success in influencing the outcome of revolutions in Angola or Vietnam or Cuba (or Korea or Algeria or Zaire or Bolivia or Afghanistan or Tibet or any other nation trying to determine its own political structure) are “inconsequential” only in isolation. Each proxy war, the real-world superpowers funding and counterfunding one another into never-ending bloodshed, add up to larger control over geography, resources, and, of course, the wealth that comes from empire. The outcome of one war may not seem important, but the outcome of several could change the balance of global power. American Cold Warriors like

Dwight D. Eisenhower used this idea to define “the domino theory” of Southeast Asian control and leaders like John F. Kennedy cited it in bringing his country into Vietnam; it can also be called, more simply, the maintenance of empire.

It’s fitting that it takes The Boss’s death to awaken Snake—soon to be awarded the even more ridiculous title of “Big Boss” by a polygonal version of Lyndon B. Johnson himself during the game’s conclusion—to how Cold War *Realpolitik* of this sort functioned. Far from working to protect the supposedly inviolate ideologies of democracy and capitalist economics from Soviet threat, the United States spent the Cold War working to expand its global sphere of influence by fomenting revolutions and upheaval in nations whose new leaders, no matter how brutal, were sympathetic to American interests. Despite contemporary propaganda, securing power at the expense of foreign populations was imperial pragmatism. This path, no matter how it’s dressed up, has continued to define American foreign policy (and popular Western presumptions about foreign policy) in large part ever since. The Cold War, as much as it resembled an intractable war of political ideology, is better defined in the old moulds of traditional imperialist warfare. Just as in the First and Second World Wars and the centuries leading up to them, the West and the East were competing not for a victory of rivalling visions for governmental systems, but for wealth and resources. Adding world-destroying nuclear weapons to the mix only increased the stakes to give this old mode of conflict a fresh new form, terrifying enough that both sides increased in stature to monolithic ideological titans.

The supposedly simple heroism of defeating WWII fascism vanished anew with the Cold War, replaced with a miasma of relativist global combat fought to achieve nothing but a maintenance or extension of power—even if it was couched in comforting myths of “us versus them,” “East versus West.” Ingrained in our culture, we’ve reinterpreted these ideas to less traditional, more ideologically baffling 21<sup>st</sup> century wars, using religious faith as a catch-all to describe the enormously complex political and cultural history that led, say, to the Taliban or, more recently, the Second Cold War battlefields that birthed ISIS. Telling a story that illustrates the path of the Cold War to contemporary global politics makes *Snake Eater* a suitable prequel to both *Metal Gear Solid 2*’s War on Terror-era apocalypticism. *Metal Gear* returns to this well again and again before sputtering to a half-hearted conclusion with *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, looking at the Cold War as the genesis of its political and cultural evils from different angles without ever again finding the simplicity of *Snake Eater*’s message.

Still, looked at without knowing what’s to come, there’s a sound, satisfying conclusion in the game’s cynical finale. Naked Snake is awarded the title of “Big Boss” for his service, even after he’s found himself manipulated by an American government he so desperately wanted to believe in. He begrudgingly shakes President Johnson’s hand, but is unable to do the same to the various cabinet members looking to congratulate him or the photographers trying to get him in frame for a press shot. Snake leaves

## SALUTING THE GRAVE

behind a political façade nobody involved believes in and goes, instead, to The Boss's grave in Arlington Cemetery. There, amidst the bodies of so many who gave their lives in conflicts great and small, perhaps not knowing how cynical the stakes they died for may have been, he salutes his fallen mentor's headstone and weeps in recognition of how much is lost in service to lies. His role model—a character the game refers to as a “true patriot”—is dead and disgraced for her loyalty to a nation that cares so little for the grand purposes over which it claims its wars are fought. As Snake stands there, unsure what comes next after losing faith in what he thought he knew about the world, he reflects the *Metal Gear* series' relationship with historical truth itself.





# THE BOSS(ED)

EDWARD SMITH

Ian Gibson called it “the English vice:” my native land’s preoccupation with sexual punishment, flogging, and flagellation. It goes beyond simple masochism. This isn’t just about being whipped, spanked, or paddled. It’s about being penalised and belittled, made to feel ashamed of your own sexual desire. Beginning with the infamously prudish Victorian Era—to this day, whenever you read that word, “Victorian,” you think of disapproving, governessy madams and outraged gentlemen—what Gibson traced was an English sexual desire for admonishment, a love of the shame of arousal, a being turned on by the idea of being caught being turned on. English Society prides itself on reserve and dignity, thus involuntary arousal and its discovery and exposure are the ultimate taboos; the boys of independent and preparatory schools, subjected regularly to degrading corporal punishment, naturally grew into men whose favoured sexual fantasy was getting caught with a stiffy by matron and then penitentially caned before the whole class. It wasn’t so much the pain, the forced nudity, or even the stern woman in uniform—it was the humiliation, the degradation of your image and subversion of the power normally afforded to you by your social class. The experience, novel and invigorating to those wealthy enough they were typically above the law and beyond reproach, of doing something wrong and being caught and penalised for it.

Beginning in 1914, James Bond author Ian Fleming attended Durnford, a Dorset prep school described by his biographer, Ben McIntyre, as “epitomising the strange British faith in bad food, plenty of Latin, and beatings from an early age.” After that, Fleming was a student at the independent Eton College and then Sandhurst

Military School.

It sounds salacious and conjecturable, what I'm driving at here, but if you require evidence—either of Gibson's "English vice" or Ian Fleming's subjection to it—the James Bond novels and films strike me, no pun intended, as incontrovertible. To wit, Bond in the first book, *Casino Royale*, tied to a chair while the villain Le Chiffre whips his testicles; Bond in the second book, *Live and Let Die*, tied to a boat by his wrists and then dragged behind it as it sails over a coral reef; Bond in *Goldfinger* tied to a table while a laser beam crawls up towards his, once again, testicles; or Bond in *Thunderball*, tied to a massage machine that appears to be sodomising him unconscious. *From Russia with Love* essentially literalises this English sexual bent for cruel and unusual punishments, its chief antagonist a Kremlin plot to film Bond having sex and then release that film to the public, thus ruining Bond's (and by extension the British government's) gentlemanly reputation. The excitement of this story is implicit in the joint threats of exposure and shame; Fleming's novel encapsulates the peculiarly British thrill of being caught, as we say, with one's trousers down. As such, although James Bond often embodies powerful, masculine sex and sex appeal, he is also, by virtue of being used by his author to live out fantasies of masochistic punishment, a pathetic figure. Each of his sexual trysts is rooted in and based upon an especially intimate kind of self-deprecation—the premise that being aroused, and betokenly engaged with your own perfectly human nature, is somehow amoral and grounds for castigation, even death. In other words: I feel sorry for James Bond, or rather, for Fleming. I feel like the sexism and homophobia innate to his work are the—not excusable but at least traceable, if you like, agnated—symptoms of a mortal shame, almost fear, of all sexuality, and that being turned on by his own disgrace is basically a coping mechanism, or even a kind of imploration or apology.

*Metal Gear Solid* is inspired heavily by James Bond. Either in its trivialities, like the unlockable tuxedo costume in the first game, or its macroscopic, central tenets—the mythical figure of the lone secret agent; the thrills of stealth and spying—Fleming's influence is writ bold across the whole series. If you were trying to convince somebody to play *Metal Gear Solid* who hadn't played it before, you'd probably say "do you like James Bond? Then you'll like this." Alongside stealth, gadgets, and Cold War tension, other quintessentially Bond-esque features, like Fleming's sexuality, by the extent of his affect, seem to also bleed into *Metal Gear Solid*. The first game sees Solid Snake, stripped to the waist, tied spreadeagle, and being electric-shock-tortured by a Russian provocateur who, according to his previous victim, "loved every minute." The second game features an identical sequence (only this time with asphyxiation, as opposed to electrocution) alongside a raft of striking, sometimes slapstick visual invocations of "English" sexual deviance. Raiden being urinated on, or yelled at by his girlfriend for looking up a woman's skirt, or having his clothes stolen from him and being forced to run around in front of his enemies naked, pitifully cupping his groin, are all abbreviations of the Flemingian appetite for humiliation.

The third game, however, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, progresses far beyond simply referencing Bond and its creator. Set in the 1960s ('64 to be precise, the same year *Goldfinger* was released, and when Ian Fleming died) it's a veritable homage to the entire *Bond* series. The knockout gas gun, which players obtain halfway through the game and which comes disguised as a cigarette case, is an amalgamation of gadgets seen in *Thunderball*, *The Man with the Golden Gun*, and *The Spy Who Loved Me*. Norihiko Hibino's theme song, with vocals by Cynthia Harrell, could easily pass for a John Barry/Shirley Bassey collaboration; its accompanying title sequence is an acknowledging pastiche of the work of *Bond* title designer Daniel Kleinman. *Metal Gear Solid 3* also adheres to the narrative and action-scene structure of the *Bond* films: first a cold opening, then titles, then the story proper—ending on a coda, wherein the hero and his newfound, femme fatale lover finally consummate their sexual tension.

*Snake Eater* isn't an exact duplicate but certainly the game's introductory sequence, which sees secret agent Naked Snake fail his mission, get beaten almost to death, and let the villain escape, maps closely to the beginnings of *Bond* films *The World is Not Enough* and *Die Another Day*; the love scene between him and Russian double-agent Eva, when she throws his bleating radio onto the fire, much to the consternation of Snake's handler, Major Zero, and everyone back at mission command, referencing closely the "cheeky" endings of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, *Moonraker*, and *For Your Eyes Only*, also, absent only a pun regarding Snake's tumescence (which is odd, the absence, considering how easily his codename allows it). Most tellingly, and in typical metatextual *Metal Gear Solid* style, at one point *Snake Eater* announces Hideo Kojima's love for *Bond* outright. During a radio call, Zero asks Snake if he's ever seen 1963's *From Russia with Love*, and begins waxing lyrical that "007 is the biggest thing to come out of England since the Mayflower." Essentially a mouthpiece for Kojima, he offers to build Snake a gadget pistol, shaped like a jungle snake, and—seeing as this is 1964—ends by conjecturing "I wouldn't be surprised if they made twenty more of those movies!"

In Ian Fleming, Hideo Kojima seems to have a kindred creative spirit. As writers they both combine research and lived-in spy stories (the mundanity of MI6 office life as depicted in Fleming's books; the Cold War politics and gruesome survival mechanics underpinning Kojima's *Snake Eater*) with magic. Their fiction is irresistible, because it makes fantasy and the extraordinary feel, reassuringly, like they're parts of reality. And where Fleming popularised the spy genre, first in books and later in films, Kojima is renowned for popularising stealth mechanics in videogames; recalling Fleming's third book, *Moonraker*, wherein Bond never even fires his gun, and the sections in both *Metal Gear Solid* and *Metal Gear Solid 2* that outright prohibit weapon use, on pain of "game over," it's plain that both writers prefer to deploy violence sparingly and for lasting effect. What truly unites them however, at least at the point of analysing their works as an audience member, is their mutual proclivity for, or rather possession of, sexual shame—specifically, depictions of bondage-themed and non-consensual sexual experiences, enhanced by self-deprecating psychology. It's why, in

every *Metal Gear Solid* game, a character pisses themselves. Involuntary, humiliating, and infantile, it's precisely the kind of behaviour that'd earn the (gratifying) wrath of a schoolmarm—it encapsulates Kojima's, like Fleming's, taste for punitive women.

Hence The Boss. Blonde-haired, dressed in an outfit to show her cleavage, and revealed to be Revolver Ocelot's mother, The Boss is prototypically female. She is also, as the most revered soldier within the US Army, commander of a special forces unit named the Cobras, a master of martial arts, and highly authoritative, an aspect concisely defined by her codename. It's more than a little distasteful to regard The Boss, who at times is one of the *Metal Gear Solid* series' most convincing and empathetic characters, as merely an exercise in her creator's sexual indulgence, but as Snake's mentor, she routinely occupies the role of strict schoolmistress; at essentially their every meeting, she admonishes the agent for his poor performance, takes away and disassembles his weapons (rendering him, in a militaristic sense, "naked," impotent), and then beats him up. In one sequence, like a castigative, aloof teacher, abandoning her pupil to the discipline of his parents, she quite simply tells Snake—who she's once again disarmed and pugilised—to "go home." In another, when Ocelot is torturing the kidnapped Eva via a legerdemainic game of Russian Roulette, The Boss snatches his pistols away and slaps him around the face, a stern mother punishing her son for playing inappropriately with girls by confiscating his favourite toy. Where her antagonistic cohort possess superpowers (Volgin can conduct electricity; The Fear turns invisible and runs on water; The Fury appears to be some kind of modern Vulcanus, physically and spiritually composed of fire) The Boss's dominion stems from her raw, corporal power. She commands both absolutely and physically, embodying a vital component of the Flemingian/Kojiman sexual fantasy in her superlative ability to administer withering pain using her personal mettle alone. In essence, she doesn't require magical qualities in order to justify her status; she is an elder, superordinate woman and therefore, so far as her author is concerned, to be respected, feared, beaten by, and desired.

In a game by Hideo Kojima, whose women characters are typically beautiful but troubled fallen angels, awaiting redemption in the form of either Snake's love or death at his hand, The Boss is exceptionally self-possessed. On the contrary, Hideo Kojima abases the women in his games so constantly that it is impossible to imagine him admiring The Boss, or rather, writing her character with admiration in mind. Like Fleming's femme fatales, who'll tie Bond up and punish him for the sin of imagining and wanting sex with them, and are then either killed off or—as is the case with Pussy Galore, who in Fleming's novel *Goldfinger* is explicitly gay, and in Guy Hamilton's film adaptation has her queerness merely, cheekily implied—mated with and domesticated; transformed into yet another of Bond's adoring floozies, The Boss serves a function, conducive to the fulfilment, or at least the depiction of, Kojima's specific and masochistic fantasy.

That is, he has a thing for spying on women. In *Metal Gear Solid*, the first time Snake

sees Meryl, it's from the ventilation duct above her prison cell; unbeknownst to her, Snake is watching her do sit-ups on her bed. Later, and owing to her distinctive (and deliberately, Kojima-designed) hip adductions, in order to recognise Meryl in her guard's disguise, Snake must surreptitiously gaze at her buttocks: upon positive identification, he follows her to the women's toilet, where he catches her in the middle of undressing. These perversions—"perversions" in the literal, guy-hanging-around-the-changing-room-of-a-women's-clothing-shop-with-mirrors-discreetly-affixed-to-the-toes-of-his-shoes sense of the word "perversion,"—continue into *Metal Gear Solid 2*, evident in both the aforementioned upskirting and Olga Gurlovich's wet tank top, which she wears during the prologue. Skip to *Metal Gear Solid 4*, and each boss fight, against the preposterously symmetrical members of the Beauty and the Beast unit, begins and ends in a crescendo of voyeuristic camera work, Kojima's lens oozing over the women's breasts, behinds, and crotches, all encased in iridescent latex. *Metal Gear Solid V* features an extended sequence where "Venom" Snake and the entranced soldiers of his private army watch the sniper, Quiet, take a shower. Nevertheless, the most transparent example of Kojima's "gaze" (in the Laura Mulvey sense of the term) occurs during *Snake Eater* itself. During his initial rendezvous with Eva, Snake glares, satisfactorily, down towards her chest, at which point players are prompted to press and hold the R1 button. If they do, it offers them a quick shot from Snake's point of view—a mid-close-up of Eva's bust. A couple of minutes later, the process is repeated: the morning after their first meeting, Snake groggily awakens to see Eva, standing at the window, still in her underwear, and by pressing R1 we're now able to stare at her backside.

Such titillations, clandestinely gathered, create an illicit atmosphere; a *sense* of *naughtiness*. Through his game Kojima seems to live out the fantasy of a peeping Tom—horny but embarrassed, sexually desirous but keeping it a secret—and we, as his audience, are forced to do the same. A section towards the end of *Snake Eater*, wherein we must escort a wounded Eva past a search party of enemy guards, is really only completable once we knock her out with our tranquiliser gun, the result of which becomes her talking (and our overhearing her talking) in her chemically-induced sleep, about her sexual fantasies, first of Snake, then The Boss, and finally her own dog. Here, *Snake Eater's* ludic challenge is easily surmountable once we commit perverted acts; in this way, by making it conducive to other gain, whether we're predisposed to it or not *Snake Eater* encourages within us, and wants to gain our approval of, its director's apparent style of perversion. To advance to the next stage, act like a creep. And within that framework, in presence of that particular psycho-sexual mien, it's impossible not to regard The Boss—aptly named like a dominatrix—as another part of the fantasy; the completing part of an elaborate roleplay. Most of the women throughout *Metal Gear Solid* are written in order to be perverted not with but *at*. The Boss is somewhat different, insofar as she provides, rather than an additional voyeuristic opportunity, a voice of forbidding, governessy semi-maternalis, the climactic and erogenous punishment for Snake's/Kojima's/our prurience. But by that measure she is still a construction. She is still used by her

author, and in order to deliver the consummation of his, an historically male fantasy.

Such is the paradox of male sexual submission, or more specifically the idea of the female dominant in the mind of the male sexual submissive. The women are desired to be in charge, but to be in charge *to the man's specification*; not to do what they want to do, but rather what the man wants them to want to do. This idea of male-led and male-qualifying sex and fetishism is apparent right to the end of *Snake Eater*. It's revealed The Boss is actually a triple-agent, whose defection to the East and execution by Snake were both parts of an elaborate ploy to steal an enormous fortune called the Philosopher's Legacy and return it to the United States. She is successful, but as occurs and has always occurred, great women are expected to exist behind and help sustain great men, so historical credit for the mission is given to Snake himself; The Boss plays a dominating role, but the events, the drama, the "roleplay" are finally owned, and remembered to have been contained and controlled by a man, who is suitably awarded the title of Big Boss, reflecting his superiority even over the woman who was apparently in charge. Destroyed by The Boss' death, Big Boss avows to betray his government and fulfill her dream of establishing a free nation for disillusioned soldiers, catalysing the events of the entire *Metal Gear Solid* series. But even this seemingly respectful, deferential action on The Boss's behalf suggests power being taken from a woman and given to a man. Like the dominatrix feigning outrage to the orgasmic rapture of her client, what's supposed to be The Boss's passion and fantasy actually becomes Big Boss's, and her will just an element of his—even more so, as unlike the dominatrix, who is at least getting paid, The Boss receives no reward for her service.

And so at the centre of *Snake Eater* there seems to lie a self-interested and prohibitive conception of sex—that it's only computable, and approvable, when it's to the gratification of the man. The tragic romance embodied between Snake and Meryl, Otacon and Wolf, Raiden and Rose is substituted for relationships that are more physical and transactional, culminating in ways which evidence low, male opinions of women: either they will take everything you have and leave you, like EVA, or their power, should they have any, is only useful insofar as it applies to you, a rubric as illustrated via The Boss. All of this is presented so purposefully that being able to enjoy *Metal Gear Solid* after *Snake Eater* becomes contingent on thinking or agreeing with it yourself; after this point in the series, my suspicions about Kojima's character, and whether he is more qualified in book learning about nuclear treaties and regional conflicts than experience with other people, especially women, begin to set in, and playing his subsequent games ironically becomes itself a guilty pleasure.

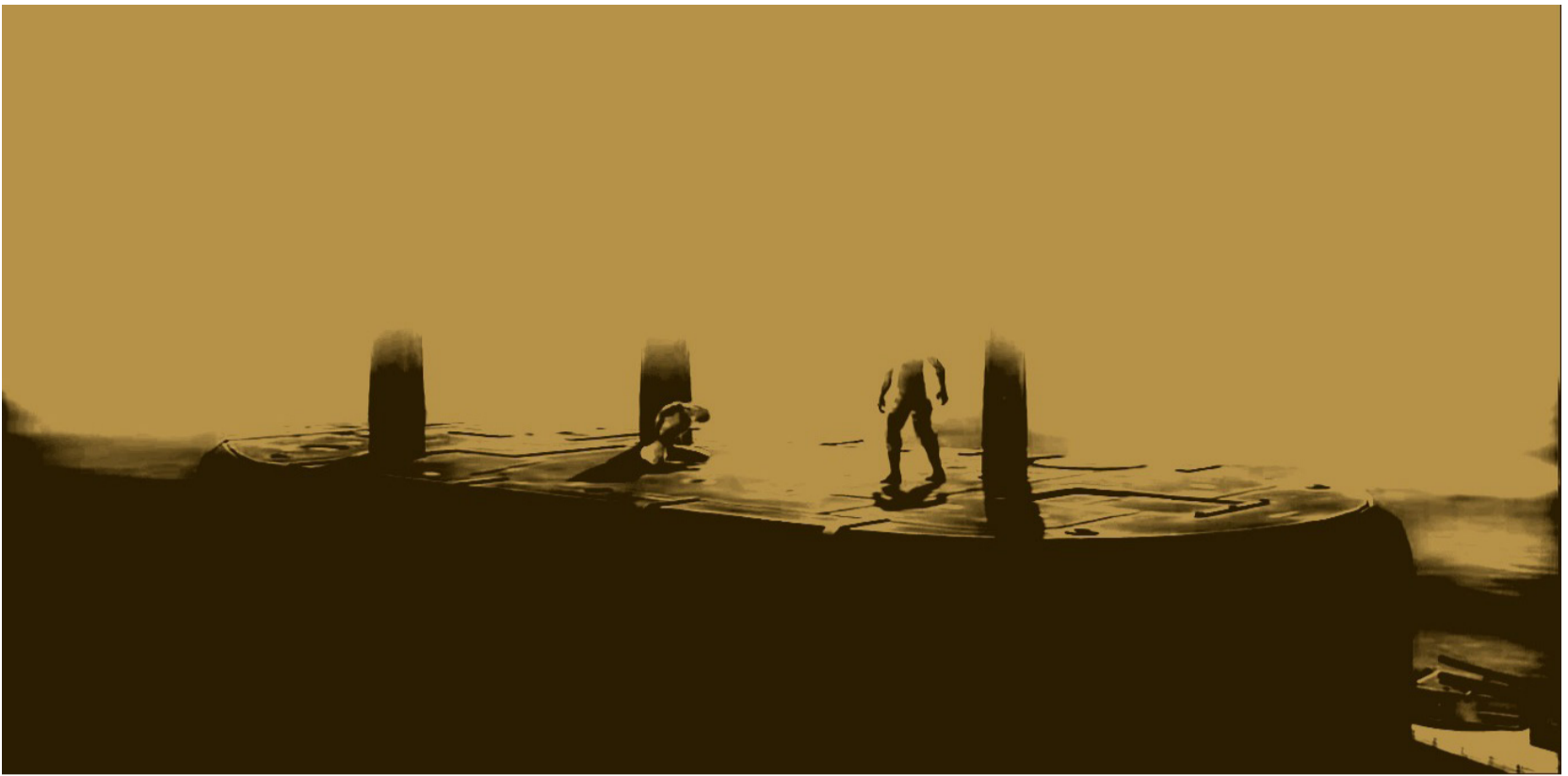




GUNS

OF THE

PATRIOTS



# RESIGNED TO THE END

REID MCCARTER

For a certain segment of pop culture audiences, “plot holes” are the worst possible creative sin. Fought over on message boards and social media, used as a tactic to dismiss art or entertainment wholesale, the humble plot hole, for some, is capable of completely overwhelming any other aspect of a given work, sucking all conversation into its dead-end, go-nowhere void with the power of, well, a black hole.

*Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* is a game for these kind of people. It is a veritable pavement roller, steaming down the street while filling in any possible plot hole left behind over the previous decade of the series, knocking down the proudest monuments to its own legacy along the way. By the end of the game we know things like: Raiden’s son’s name, what Colonel Campbell got up to after the events of the first *Metal Gear Solid*, what Olga’s daughter looks like, what characters from the *Snake Eater* prequel were doing in the decades that came after its ‘60s-set conclusion. None of this is necessary for anyone but Wikipedia page writers. It’s all, essentially, trivia for those who despised the open-ended questions asked by the previous games—for anyone who needed to know who the series’ *Patriots* really are (down to their names) and where each and every character’s life took them after *Sons of Liberty*’s conclusion.

This over-explaining tendency continues in all the following *Metal Gear* games, but only in *Guns of the Patriots* is the process treated with such soul-sucking weariness.

The game starts promisingly enough. Set five years after *Sons of Liberty* ended, Solid Snake is now a prematurely old man whose aching, decrepit body is dragged

through a science-fiction future by a high-tech, muscle-enhancing bodysuit. In *Guns of the Patriots*' opening scene, he infiltrates an insurgent group in an unnamed Middle Eastern nation, hiding among the dead and living bodies of much younger combatants who are still able to find excitement in fighting. A splash screen with staccato sentence fragments spells out the premise: "In the not too distant future. On a tired battlefield. War has become routine." Snake, voice more mucosal and tortured than ever before, monologues that "war has changed," that "it's no longer about nations, ideologies, or ethnicity." In the firefights that fill the opening act's dusty, blown-out neighbourhoods, we watch a facsimile of real-world combat, the 2008 videogame immediately calling to mind the contemporary Iraq War, which, five years in, was still sacrificing thousands to its intractable battles. Something vital seems to be happening.

"It's an endless series of proxy battles fought by mercenaries and machines," Snake says. "War—and its consumption of life—has become a well-oiled machine." As if this wasn't enough, he adds: "The age of deterrence has become the age of control ... All in the name of averting catastrophe from weapons of mass destruction." As predicted in the games before *Guns of the Patriots*, the world is now engulfed in never-ending war, fought not over ideology or religion or nationalism but solely as an occupation. The post-"post-imperial" senselessness borne of the Cold War, detailed in *Snake Eater* and elaborated upon in *Metal Gear Solid* and *Sons of Liberty*, has come to pass. As these games tracked the history of modern politics through the late '90s to the current day, using the Cold War as a foundation for its appropriately cynical commentary, they were all leading toward *Guns of the Patriots*' initial images. Sequel after sequel to a series of war games, each one releasing into a cultural landscape more unbelievable than the last, culminate in a supposed finale (two more entries were soon to come, despite promises otherwise) whose absurdity and chaos reflects both late '00s sociopolitical nihilism and a game studio succumbing to the allure of its own legacy.

Snake's back aches as he crouches in alleyways, the player applying usable compresses to her tired character while APCs rumble down streets, helicopters circle overhead, and rival forces of vaguely defined rebel groups and private military company forces shoot and bomb each other to death across level backdrops resembling a matter-of-fact digitized *Guernica*. Added to his usual ability to hide in shadows or crawl across the ground to evade enemy detection, Snake is now able to use the cacophony of a battlefield to stealth his way through the game. Soldiers are distracted by the life-and-death struggle playing out around them, which allows the aged spy to sneak past them. In past games, industrial vents, corridor blind spots, thick patches of grass, and murky river water were the tools Snake counted on to stay out of sight. Now his environment is furnished, too, by an ecosystem of snipers and tanks, mortar explosions and, in one memorable instance, the attention-grabbing demands of a group execution. It's as if combat itself is part of the world's natural landscape.

War has become so routine in *Guns of the Patriots* that the game barely even feels the need to name the international locations in which these battles are fought. Snake treks through unnamed Middle Eastern and South American nations and the spy-haunted streets of an “Eastern European” city. We accept, in the first two of these, that war is simply such a regional constant that getting into specifics hardly matters. Why, the game seems to ask, should it even bother to name these countries and cities when, during its 2008 release (and still, of course, now), entire swathes of the globe were defined more by their “dictators,” “cartels,” “socialist rebels,” “Islamic extremists,” and “terrorists” than their landmarks, culture, and history? Since the West and East ran roughshod over Latin America, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe to the point that their unique qualities collapse into a general perception only as “foreign hellhole,” their names have, presumably, become unimportant.

This nauseatingly apt vision of the world echoes throughout the game. Snake, in his mission to locate and defeat the Patriots whose designs have created a future of nonstop war, is no longer fighting a distinct enemy but the concepts of War and Governmental Avarice itself. He’s for truth and peace; they’re for deception, manipulation, and death. The Patriots, birthed from the noxious id of the American psyche, have developed into a self-governing artificial intelligence that keeps the world in a constant state of self-perpetuating warfare. (“[They] are America, the world’s greatest military power,” a war profiteer named Drebin explains at one point.) Founded by the radio support staff that aided Big Boss (or “Naked Snake”) during *Snake Eater*, the cynicism of the Cold War scramble for global domination has now reached its logical conclusion: fighting for the sake of fighting as a business. Why claim a territory to extract its worth in resources or geographic strategic value when combat over areas of control can continue forever, generating money for those who profit from the existence of the military-industrial complex?

Snake’s victory over the Patriots—destroying the AI that enforces their will by manipulating economies and culture, killing or watching die every living member of their group—is meant to be a victory over modern warfare itself. Even as he’s tainted by having been made by them (lest we forget, Snake is a clone who was created as part of a Patriot plot), pulled into their conflicts, and infected with genetic viruses that enforce their will, Snake eventually triumphs by overcoming his birth, his history, and his body itself to defeat their outward manifestation. The good soldier, always trying to do what’s right from within scenarios that don’t make any sense at all, goes into combat for the last time to thwart the very concept of formalized war. He’s a character whose righteousness is meant to embody the ideals of “just” or “heroic” warfare. Significantly, he’s prematurely aged, too. His body, deteriorated by the same sci-fi tech that made him a preternaturally skilled soldier, creaks under the weight of impossible contradictions—a professional murderer who’s also meant to be admirable. Throughout the game, Snake becomes an ever more tragic figure. He performs action movie choreography followed by images of him wincing at the pain this causes his creaking joints and aching back; he tries to deliver the same old

one-liners, but they emanate now from a liver-spotted, wrinkled throat; he shoots enemies down with style before once again needing to hobble forward in agony, limping onward toward his inevitable decrepitude and death.

When Snake attempts suicide in *Guns of the Patriots*' bait and switch epilogue, there's a chance for the game to make good on everything it seems to be communicating. There's a welcome horror to a once-iconic character, symbolic of so much martial baggage, gagging on the barrel of a pistol once he's defeated the Patriots and all they stand for. But *Guns of the Patriots*, in a move indicative of its ultimately timid narrative priorities, pulls back to reveal that no, Snake didn't follow through with his decision—that he, in fact, will be able to live out the rest of his brief life off-camera. The ending of the game is fanatically devoted to the idea of renewal. At its very worst, it strings out scene after scene of thread-tying conclusions showing characters like the deeply traumatized, cybernetically ravaged Raiden reconnecting with his family and embracing his young son. It shows Meryl getting married to a fellow soldier while the rest of her squad applauds. Sunny, a child whose future was stolen by the Patriots and their eternal war, learns to embrace a new kind of life and makes her first age-appropriate friend. Even as characters discuss, too, the notion that the defeat of the Patriots is only a temporary ceasefire in the greater, unending war that defines human history, the game wants to wring optimism from this fact.

The contradictions of this—a game that starts with a cruelly truthful acknowledgement of the senselessness of late '00s warfare and motions toward a bittersweet ending where even Snake, “the good soldier,” kills himself in recognition that he's part of a nightmarish system—and the sunshine conclusions it works toward are baffling and impossible to reconcile. Their only explanation is *Guns of the Patriots*' neediness—its desire to make fans of the series content by not bumming them out *too much* or leaving behind plot holes in what was meant to be the very last *Metal Gear* game.

The cast is stuffed with returning characters whose purpose in the plot is only to spark a sense of familiarity; the cut scenes are long enough to feel grander than any previous entry to the series; the callbacks to old locations and tricks (like a playable recreation of the first *Solid*'s Shadow Moses and a bloated late-game scene that repeats Psycho Mantis' mind-reading, controller-rumbling schtick wholesale) are all meant to make *Guns of the Patriots* feel enormous in scope and satisfyingly “complete,” narrative consequences be damned. There's a sense of something like parody as the non-interactive cinematics increase in length, toying with the player by dusting off all the old action figures—Raiden, now with cyborg legs! Vamp, complete with nano-speed! Meryl, in tacti-cool vest!—so they can have their requisite starring scenes. It appears, too, in the game's assortment of boss fights against The Beauty and the Beast Corps (a similar desperation for teenage male approval surfaces in the fact that beneath their military exo-suits, each “Beast” is a moaning supermodel who writhes toward their murder in skin-tight latex). Once defeated, each character is revealed to have a backstory so horrific it makes the war-torn pasts of previous *Metal*

*Gear* villains seem downright humble. When a post-fight radio call tells Snake that, say, Laughing Octopus was forced to torture and kill her family while being made to laugh aloud at the same time or that Screaming Mantis ate the bodies of death squad victims under the instruction of a hallucinatory insect borne of her breaking mind, it's hard to take even the most outré of the game's material seriously anymore.

By the time *Guns of the Patriots*' finale rolls around, its climax followed by a conclusion followed by an epilogue, followed by a 45 minute mid-credits denouement and then, exhaustingly, a brief afterword, the audience may feel that the game's creators are intentionally toying with their supposed need to see every possible plot thread snipped up and every potential hole in the fiction well and truly patched over. This tendency saps the liveliness of the game's best moments by matching them with dutiful exposition—by coupling the daring premise of a videogame hero made old and suicidal with nostalgic appeals and cheap optimism meant to save it from the too-dark conclusion it's obviously working toward in its best moments. The only lasting joys to be drawn from the tonal whiplash are metatextual theories regarding a team of designers tired of designing *Metal Gear* games, which is a way of saying that actually playing the thing is almost never joyful at all.

This is what's really disappointing about *Guns of the Patriots*. It's a game that, despite its good ideas, is more concerned with appealing to longtime fans and its own sense of importance than it is with telling its story the way it begs to be told. In that way, it preempts two more increasingly unnecessary entries to the *Metal Gear* series—*Peace Walker* and *The Phantom Pain*—by showing that even the most creative artists will eventually find themselves stuck within the boundaries of a restricted palette.





# PLEASE TELL US IT'S GOOD

EDWARD SMITH

If *Metal Gear Solid 3* genuinely depicts the thrill of masochism and the weird pleasure of humiliation and being caught in the act of doing something sordid, then the fact that playing its two sequels feels itself a guilty pleasure might be considered a deft postmodernist joke. I enter *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* averted of the possibility its creator (or creators) are sordid, and that playing their games is treasonous against my principles regarding women, sex, and what qualifies for good entertainment. Nevertheless, I *am* playing: I'm enough enthralled by *Metal Gear Solid's* story, aesthetic, and characters that, even aware of its shamefulness—the fact that, “caught” playing it, I'd feel pathetic attempting to give any sanitary explanation as to why—I must and want to continue. And so part of me starts to really, strangely admire Kojima and team. Perhaps *Metal Gear Solids 1, 2, and 3*—especially *3*—are all part of an elaborate set-up to make me finally, personally, physically as well as intellectually understand the nature of its creators' concupiscence. Maybe all of the sex stuff in the first three games represents a kind of pledge and a turn, and then *Metal Gear Solid 4* the prestige, and while I've been led by this series to believe one thing, i.e., that it's sexist and teenage, it's been furtively inculcating another, that enjoying something when you know you shouldn't makes it feel doubly good—thus, in a remarkably apt and multi-layered flourish of postmodernity, the makers of *Metal Gear Solid* have successfully manipulated my perception, performing precisely the role of their eponymous Patriots while also remaining, again like their Patriots, entirely unsuspected. Maybe everything in *Metal Gear Solid* means something.

Except *Metal Gear Solid 4* is, rather than postmodernity's product or even its executor,

its victim. In 2008, ten years after the original game's release, the weight of opinion, expectation, and preceding reputation have overwhelmed *Metal Gear Solid*. Compared to the gravity of its own history, the series possesses zero autonomy and is subordinate to influences. Like Solid Snake, Raiden, and Naked Snake at the start of their previous, respective adventures, it has no conception of disobeying orders or of challenging assumed truth. One of these influences is its own lore. Several characters from previous *Metal Gear Solid* games, whose stories felt neatly finished, are here inexplicably returned, perhaps for the sole purpose of bridging trivial and infinitesimal gaps in plot. Vamp, who was shot in the head (twice) and drowned in the ocean (twice) is brought back, owing principally, it would seem, to a couple of lines in *Metal Gear Solid 2* about how he is impossible to kill—which he isn't, it's later proved. Raiden, another star of *Metal Gear Solid 2*, whose existential uncertainty created a tantalising, befitting shred of doubt at the end of the game, now returns in the guise of a Gray Fox-esque cyborg ninja, in the process both obliterating one of his main characteristics that made him engaging—his vulnerability—and needlessly reminiscing a character whose thematic relevance has passed. And as if bound by rubric, to resolve any question about *Metal Gear Solid*'s plot that could possibly outstand, the writers of *Guns of the Patriots* also bring back Dr. Naomi Hunter (tedious the first time around, let alone here), Eva, and Big Boss, whose trio serves exclusively to reprise, annotate, and account for every one of the series' artistic licence usages.

The way aesthetic beauty, good drama, and even a basic, coherent narrative are intruded upon by such fact-checking and fictional track-covering is most present in *Metal Gear Solid 4*'s climactic scene. Solid Snake's suicide—towards which the entire game has been building, and teasing, and emotionally preparing us for—is aborted in favour of a thirty-minute, clarifying address from Big Boss, explicating how it was actually, he, Ocelot, Eva, and The Patriots, working off-screen, who incited most of the series' major moments. Having thus painstakingly deabstractified all their own (often wonderful, or at least, formerly often wonderful) visual and narrative abstractions, *Metal Gear Solid*'s creators still feel intellectually or artistically exposed, or arraignable. The self-important, nasal voice of the online forums—"Noticed something about Ocelot's backstory...", "BIG MGS4 PLOT HOLE. CAN ANY BODY EXPLAIN..."—rings loudly in their ears, and they're impelled to wheel in, quite literally wheel in, a ludicrous deus ex machina, in an attempt to federate the plots of all of four of these enormous games.

Now myself, I find it deeply weird and out-of-the-blue when Big Boss announces that essentially everything that has happened within the *Metal Gear* universe has been the doing of *Major Zero*, the mission commander from *Snake Eater* who, at least in that game, the only one in which he appears prior 2008 and the release of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, serves as a tertiary and kind of functional character; he's like M, Charlie, or Al Calavicci, plain- and one-dimensionally explaining what's going on, and perhaps throwing in the odd joke for colour, but definitely never mentioning anything like, for example, his having a plan for world domination. Imagine getting to the end

of Patrick McGoochan's *The Prisoner* and it being revealed that the whole Island scheme and Number 6's imprisonment were all masterminded by "shopkeeper" or "policeman" from one scene in episode three. Having both already revived the majority of the *Metal Gear* cast and used them as exposition vectors, when Zero rolls out, again literally, I feel as if I can practically hear *Guns of the Patriots*'s writers rifling through the character biographies that they've printed out and stacked on their desks, trying, in a panic, to find whoever the hell might be left on their bench to fill the convenient, unitary-creating role of the arch-villain, and in their crunch time delirium deciding upon (using only italics for emphasis seems insufficient here) **Major Zero**. The story dictates he's a hundred and something years old, and as such paralysed, deaf, and unable to speak. But as already established—as intensively, vehemently, relentlessly already established—*Metal Gear Solid* is a world populated by robotic ninjas with synthetic blood who can cut off their own arms and still feel no pain, and vampires who'll survive being shot in the head. Zero's vegetative state seems less a result and more a convenience of his character, a way for his writers to recuse him and themselves from having to justify exactly why, and how, he's suddenly the series' ultra-fiend, but still use him to fill that purpose: if this character were able to talk, and answer questions from the other characters around him, it would demand writing speeches and dialogue, speeches and dialogue that could create yet even more plot holes, plot holes which for some reason would then themselves have to be filled, and so Zero, monolithic, symbolic and silent, serves as the altar upon which all the burdens of explaining this series' story can be redeemed—onto whom anybody's questions, about who did this and why that happened, like when someone might placatorily try to explain an inscrutable tragedy is part of God's plan, can be redirected. But nevertheless, despite how his character is intended, seemingly as a device for preventing people calling *Metal Gear Solid* fragmented or incomplete, his appearance in *Guns of the Patriots* exemplifies the game's central weakness, and how far the series as a whole has declined from its initial clarified and examinatory positions on society and postmodernity.

The original game presented a nightmare of information, wherein no one truth nor one falsity had the power or veracity to dispel another, a world where the only thing that supplanted Snake's confusion was additional confusion. It was by breaking free of received knowledge and deciding on an identity of his own, based on what *he*, not others, thought was real, that Snake was substantiated into a hero of his postmodern age. But here, in *Guns of the Patriots*, although the game's writers attempt to allay their contrived and inexplicable lore, and so escape the cycle that they've created of baffling piece of information superseding baffling piece of information, they make their attempt through recasting Zero as the villain, itself contrived and inexplicable. Solid Snake is liberated from postmodern ennui only once he decides he no longer requires explanation, that he will, in Naomi's words, just "live;" on the contrary, *Guns of the Patriots*' writers remain supplicants to discourse, attempting to validate their and their works' position with even greater fabrication. They are operating on the terms set by postmodernism, or at least postmodernism's system of information

as grimly prophesied by Foucault and Lyotard. Again, their dilemma is depicted through Snake's failure to commit suicide. Where he initially seeks to kill himself, thereby ending the prevailing metanarrative about him, that he's a great hero, he remains alive, to be subjected to yet more contradictory and inscrutable "facts," whose only true purpose are to disguise the fallibility of the previous "facts." In that sense, *Metal Gear Solid 4* is not postmodernism's observer, or critic, but its adherent—whose adherence is tragic, because it used to be criticised and resisted.

Testament to it being consumed by itself: the myriad references, both to previous *Metal Gear Solid* games and the in-jokes and audience reactions that they've inspired, contained throughout *Guns of the Patriots*. Regardless of it being inherited from its predecessor's and from people's—i.e. players' and critics'—expectations, this game is enamoured with its own identity, gleefully adducing, at any and all opportunity, the material responsible for making it. Previously, and in reference to Big Boss, Liquid taunted Snake by telling him he would eventually become "just another dead clone of the old man;" Otacon tearfully lamented that his family "must have the curse of nuclear weapons written into our DNA." The implication of both these quotes, and also the greater theme of the game in which they appear, *Metal Gear Solid*, is that assumed identities are poisonous, a precept beautifully illustrated in the character of Decoy Octopus, who by masquerading as him contracts and dies from a bloodborne virus meant for the DARPA Chief.

By contrast, *Metal Gear Solid 4* seems to relish and regularly deploy, to generate laughs, gimmicks, and self- and audience-indulgent nostalgia, its own accrued image. At least within videogame culture, during the ten years between the first game and this, characters like Psycho Mantis, Liquid Snake, and The Sorrow have grown famous. Shadow Moses is an eminently beloved location and its inept, incontinent guard Johnny Sasaki a notorious running joke. Significant moments from the series have been shared, argued, and written about; *Guns of the Patriots*' two entry requirements—one explicit, its 15+ age-rating, the other implicit, that its entangled premise demands a thorough knowledge and experience of the preceding three games in order to be understood—dictate that in all likelihood everyone playing has lived and been invested into the *Metal Gear Solid* series long enough that they have their lists of favourite quotes, set-pieces, and boss fights prepared, an expectation of audience that the game expressly strives to meet. The aforementioned characters, and their respective kinds of visual/performative catchphrases, are all given cameos: psychic bosses The Sorrow and Mantis appears as poppets, flanking the also-psychic boss Screaming Mantis, while Johnny is promoted to a main character, who promptly and serviceably soils himself virtually every time he's on screen. The game's fourth act takes place inside the ruins of Shadow Moses, and sees Snake repair the destroyed husk of Metal Gear REX and use it to fight Ocelot, in a Metal Gear RAY. During this section we also return to Otacon's lab, find the remains of Liquid Snake's Hind-D, and are regaled with snatches of dialogue from all the original game's characters. At the staircase between the snowfield and the blast furnace, where on the PlayStation

version of the original *Metal Gear Solid* you would have to change discs, Otacon calls to joke about it: “Oh, wait, we’re on a PS3™ system!” his subtitles read, trademark symbol included. “Wonder what they’ll think of next!”

There are so many more. As well as consolidating its entire accumulated fiction, *Guns of the Patriots* serves to recall all of the moments that helped to make *Metal Gear Solid*, in the Hollywood sense of the word, *big*, thus forming an extended “best of,” which by referencing and recreating it, seeks to canonise the series itself. This logic culminates in a final battle between Snake and Ocelot wherein the backing musical score, the on-screen health bars and heads-up displays, and the two men’s respective fighting styles change to successively, visually commemorate graphics and set-pieces from each of the past *Metal Gear Solid* games, resulting in an on-the-fly kind of mashup-cum-celebration of the series’ entire aesthetic. Contrary to Liquid (and the first game as a whole’s) exhortations, here’s a tribute to inherited status, a convivial and self-memorialising display of loving heritage.

Every game that continues existing beyond a certain quantity of years, or iterations, accrues fan expectations, things that the people who play it want and by the virtue of their time and money invested feel justified in getting. That isn’t unusual. But that *Metal Gear Solid 4* gives into these expectations—more than gives into them; relishes in them; relishes in the fact that they exist; thanks and seems to reward the fans for *having them*—is counter to what, at one point, felt like its series’ sometimes overarching, sometimes ambient philosophical air. Describing this as “selling out” would make it sound too motivated. Something like “by this point the series has lost its way” would imply there was once a singular vision that impelled the creation of the *Metal Gear Solid* games, which given the way *Guns of the Patriots* has to scabble together a narrative from ill-fitting pieces is evidently untrue. Salesmanship requires ego. Doing creative work with disregard, or at least proportionate, as in like *tertiary at best* regard for fan expectations, takes confidence. So with its persistent, sedulous appeals that it keeps making to its own fandom, *Metal Gear Solid 4* feels—rather than cynically or monetarily motivated, or even self-indulgent—quite scared, like the people writing it are becoming unconvinced regarding the possibility of their legacy, and are haggling to save their series’ face. It’s like we’re back to the beginning.

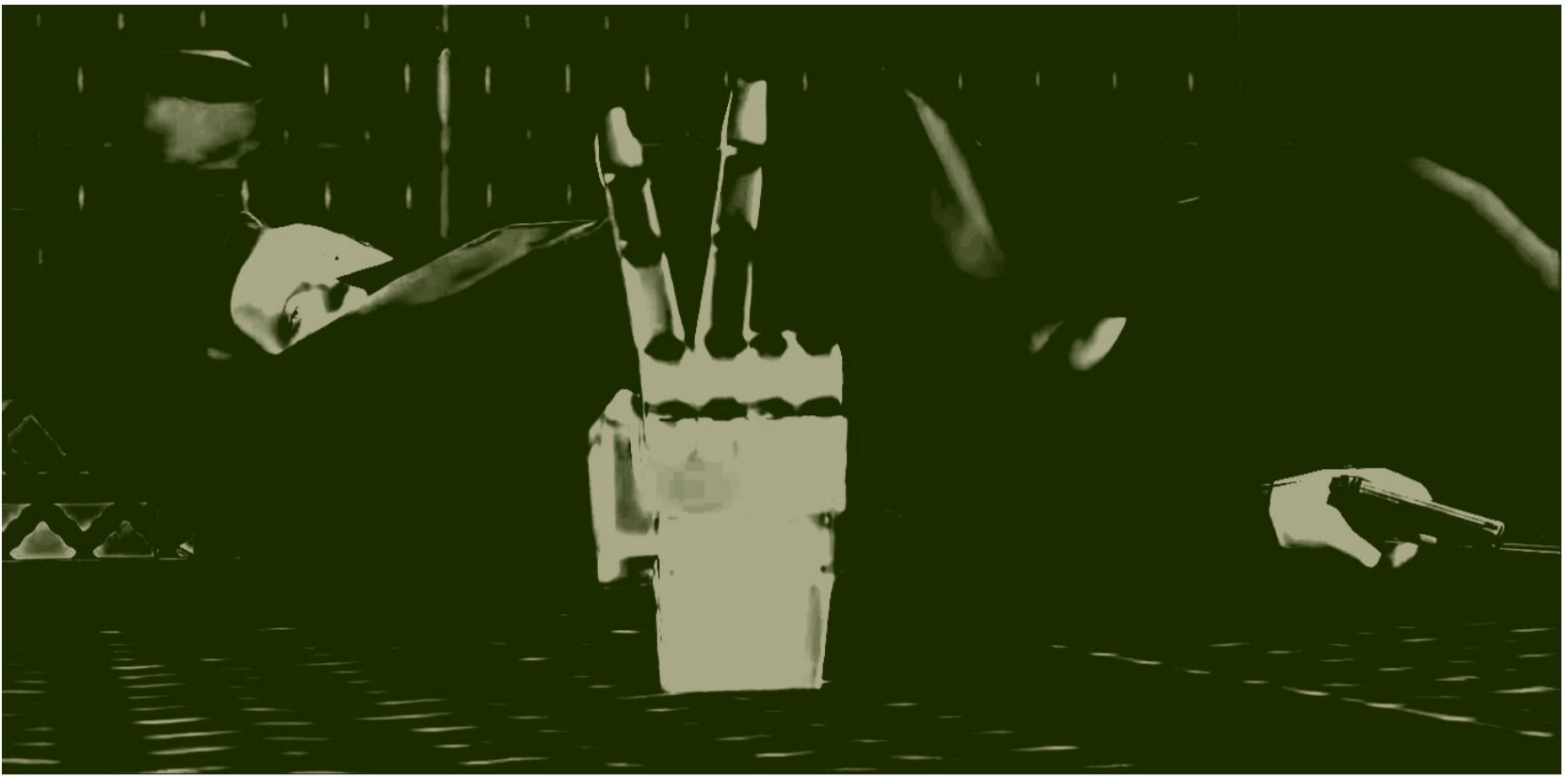
*Metal Gear Solid* and *Metal Gear Solid 2* further abstractify the experience of feeling uncertain about oneself and one’s place in the world. *Metal Gear Solid 4* also aches with inhibitions, but there’s no resolution at the end, no attempt to carve out, finally boast, or even say something about the existence of personal identity. It’s timid, this game. Like the myriad clones or acolytes of Big Boss in *Metal Gear Solid*, it relies overly on established history and presentiments to endow it with meaning. Like the neurotic, traumatised, and dissembling cast of *Metal Gear Solid 2*, it’s worried about what people will think of it. I’d love to say that this is intentional, that *Guns of the Patriots* is the weakest of the series’ six core games *on purpose*, because it’s making this sweeping, mega, metatextual point: acting only the way people think you ought to

and never finding the courage to be yourself are bad. But I doubt it's that involved. *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* throws everything it's got at keeping its fans happy, and either answering or pre-empting the asking of any questions regarding its narrative integrity. Its creators have lost their grip on postmodern theory, and their work has become subsumed by exactly the type of identity crises it formerly condemned. With all of that in view, Big Boss's parting and conclusive words start sounding more like a plea. Embracing Snake for the first (and last) time, he stares into the eyes of his quasi-son, the man he's made, and says "This is good, isn't it?" In his words you can hear also the makers of *Metal Gear Solid*, looking to what *they've* made—the fans, followers, and expectants—and asking, in a tone less rhetorical, much more pleading, "This is good, isn't it? Please, please tell us it's good."





PEACE  
WALKER



# A PLEA FOR PEACE

REID MCCARTER

**M***etal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* stars a pair of characters named “peace.” This is perfectly in line with a series that has featured a cast made up of people who, given enough time, you can almost forget are regularly referred to by codenames as ridiculous as “Solid Snake,” “Big Boss,” “Revolver Ocelot,” and “Solidus Snake.” But it’s notable in its thematic insistence: a game set in a relatively grounded (for *Metal Gear*, anyway) 1974 Central America where CIA and KGB agents compete for regional dominance, *Peace Walker*’s principal characters also include Paz Ortega Andrade and Kazuhira Miller, whose given names are Spanish and Japanese for “peace” respectively. Players can roll with one of the game’s primary antagonists being a CIA agent called Hot Coldman because his name, at the end of the day, is as bluntly absurd as the series is known for. But two characters with plausible names, who insist on reminding the audience that these names translate to “peace,” is something else. It’s a sign of *Peace Walker*’s overwhelming preoccupations. “Peace” is in the title of the game, in the name of the game’s mechanized doomsday weapon (also called Peace Walker), and in the cast itself. Loading screens show peace symbols, characters flash the “V” sign—peace is everywhere.

*Peace Walker* was released in 2010, coming roughly 12 years after the series’ initial plea for nuclear abolition—the most apocalyptic threat to world peace—was made crystal clear in the haunted, haunting, but ultimately optimistic first *Metal Gear Solid*. Over the three sequels that preceded *Peace Walker*, the world did not improve on this front. Sabre-rattling over Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and America’s invasion of Iraq, justified to international media as the appropriate response to the

invented threat of the nation's fictional Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), lay behind numerous regional conflicts, informing others more subtly.

Throughout *Peace Walker*, Snake/Big Boss is embroiled in one of these kind of battles. He and right-hand man Kazuhira “Kaz” Miller lead their incredibly named *Militaires Sans Frontières* (MSF) forces to Costa Rica. Their goal is to thwart rogue CIA agent Hot Coldman's plan to build a nuclear-equipped robot dubbed Peace Walker in a pacifist Central American nation. Coldman wants to increase the efficacy of nuclear deterrence by creating Peace Walker, whose artificially intelligent brain will immediately retaliate to an enemy's nuclear belligerence—a robot that wouldn't hesitate to strike back like a potentially empathetic human being, to guarantee the eye-for-an-eye principles of Mutually Assured Destruction theory. He wants to demonstrate this concept by firing a live nuclear warhead to show the world Peace Walker's capabilities. The logic, in its own way, is as sound as the irony is clear. Snake and Miller's MSF is a kind of militant libertarian corporate army, promising to, as Kaz puts it, “provide military force to whoever needs it, wherever they are, regardless of nation or ideology.” They're approached by a pair of Costa Ricans—Paz and an undercover KGB agent named Ramón Gálvez Mena—who have learned of Peace Walker's construction and know that Costa Rica, which has no standing army, cannot stop the CIA from constructing a weapon within their borders. Snake and MSF set out to remedy this by employing their forces to stop Coldman and destroy Peace Walker.

Paz, among all the characters, stands out within this premise. Having witnessed the United States' ruthless implementation of dictatorial puppet regimes and other imperialist policies across contemporary Latin America, she still fervently believes in a peaceful future. For the bulk of the game, players believe she's named after the concept of peace—that she's an unflaggingly optimistic, bright-eyed student whose youth shows hope for a post-nuclear world, even amidst the myriad injustices of her surroundings. *Peace Walker's* 2010 release, though, comes with historical hindsight. We know that in the decades that follow the game's 1974 Cold War setting, the problems of this era will only become more insoluble, ruthless, and terrifying in the form of new global conflicts boiled down to eternal wars on “terror,” “drugs,” and a nebulously defined “extremism.” It's fitting, then, that the climax of the game involves Paz revealing herself to be an agent of Cipher—the shadowy, totalitarian group of proto-Patriots started, confusingly, by Major Zero who now uses the codename Cipher. We also learn that Paz is not Costa Rican, nor a teenager, nor committed to a concept of peace other than the dystopian pacifism enabled by Cipher's complete global dictatorship.

Paz's betrayal is meant to feel like a slap in the player's face. *Peace Walker's* creators seemed to have engineered her pre-evil character to be exactly what they assumed their straight male audience would consider wholly endearing.+ She's young and pretty, intelligent, but still naïve enough to be condescended to, and completely devoted to

the pursuit of a peaceful world. When she's revealed as a villain, proudly proclaiming that her real name is "Pacifica Ocean" for whatever reason, and attacking Snake in a hijacked Metal Gear robot prototype, the idea is that peace itself is a tainted concept. Its future is uncertain, its purity hiding a darker, more violent reality.

Though these scenes come far too late in an overlong game to be dramatically shocking (the effect is closer to checking a long-winded movie's runtime to see there's still an hour left), they're clearly meant to prompt a sort of outrage within the player. Paz, the most blatantly "good" character in the game, has turned out to be evil. It's easy to be fooled by her turn because the rest of the story has a sincerity to its arguments—the CIA is evil; the KGB is a different, but no less potent evil; Snake himself is morally compromised. There's an insistently humanist bent to *Peace Walker* that's largely absent from the games that precede and follow it. It spends a great deal of time detailing the actual historical background of its setting, giving characters like the Nicaraguan Sandinistas (FSLN) Amanda and Chico room to explain the injustice of American imperialism in Latin America while Snake listens on with a sympathetic ear the audience is encouraged to emulate. It devotes its radio play tapes (a version of the other game's codec conversations) to surprisingly thorough descriptions of Costa Rican history and politics, the legacy of larger-than-life American mercenary William Walker, who attempted to colonize Nicaragua in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and whose legacy included the US-installed, atrocity-committing National Guard the Sandinistas fight to overthrow. Conversations between the characters lead to topics as seemingly secondary to the concerns of a sci-fi tinged action videogame as the imperialist origins of the Latin American drug trade, the validity of arguments put forth by Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, the revolutionary practices and philosophy of Che Guevara, and the post-humanist potential of AI as an arbiter of future warfare. Even for *Metal Gear Solid*, a series unafraid of incorporating real-world concepts into its world and dialogue, it may seem like a bit much.

None of this feels as extraneous as it may sound, though. *Peace Walker*, more than any other entry to the series, comes across as an earnest plea for peace. This doesn't mean it's unsophisticated—like the rest of the series, it's still a game that recognizes the complexities of the modern world, from culture to politics. But it's so clear about what it's willing to identify as just and unjust that it forsakes the usual metatextual cleverness for a borderline romantic cry for hope in a seemingly hopeless world.

*Peace Walker*'s enemy grunts and arch villains are largely made up of CIA paramilitaries and American intelligence directors mad with unquestioned power and manipulative KGB agents willing to shape history no matter the human cost. (A late-game twist whose details are too convoluted to fully explain reveals many of the game's events were orchestrated by the USSR, who hoped to use a nuclear holocaust to foment Latin American communist revolutions and a staged murder meant to frame the CIA for killing Big Boss, thus turning him into a new Guevara figure.) There's no dodging the issue: Snake and the MSF are fighting to stop the Americans and, later,

the Soviets, from ruining a region of the world they've already hurt enough.

Some of the ways this is expressed are among the most bizarre in *Metal Gear* history. If it wasn't clear already that *Peace Walker* is unenthused with Cold War brinkmanship, it directly references Stanley Kubrick's war-satirizing *Dr. Strangelove* with a character named ... Dr. Strangelove. She's an albino AI scientist who apparently received the name from colleagues who used it as a roundabout homophobic insult. (She also wears circular shaded glasses at all times. The unruly hand with a mind of its own, however, was already used in a different *Metal Gear Solid* game.) In one of its strangest moments, Snake puts a gun to the 12-year-old Chico's head when the boy says he's so ashamed of betraying his Sandinista comrades under torture that he wants to die. When Chico asks for his life to be spared, Snake holsters his weapon, calls him "un hombre Nuevo" in a deliberate evocation of Che Guevara, and recruits him as a child soldier. He gives him a quick reminder, though, not to smoke cigars or cigarettes until he's older. Snake, settling into his Big Boss role, is portrayed as morally warped, but still concerned for the well-being of others, audience reaction be damned. While it shows a hardened soldier threatening a young boy with execution and relenting by allowing him to take up arms for his cause, *Peace Walker* still wants us to remember that even his most monstrous behaviour is coupled with a weirdly honourable desire to protect the kid from a nicotine addiction.

While certainly not as successfully sobering as the Kubrick it references, the game has a welcome complexity to its earnestness, too. At first, Costa Rica is described as a kind of pacifist paradise—a nation that wrote peace into its constitution after a brutal civil war and thus learned its lessons better than the rest of the world. With time, though, *Peace Walker* makes clear that the country faces its own problems, centring discussions and aspects of its plot around the fact that Costa Rica is inherently vulnerable to exploitation by foreign powers. During the game's first finale (before the additional, bonus value finale involving Paz's betrayal), the robot Peace Walker, controlled by the AI of *Snake Eater's* The Boss, destroys itself in a moment that aptly mixes *Metal Gear's* love of high melodrama with *Peace Walker's* melancholy humanism. Instead of launching its nuclear payload, the machine trudges into a lake to destroy itself, slowly submerging underwater while playing a recording of a soothing, childlike song. Dr. Strangelove, looking on, sees a profound message in this and the last wish of the series' legendary soldier, The Boss—to sing a message of hope even from within the metallic trappings of a combat weapon. She says, "There's no peace to be found, anywhere. And so we can only keep on hoping ... Hoping for the illusion we call peace." Saccharine, sure, but neither as inherently cynical as the other *Metal Gear* games, which despair in war's inevitability, or as blindly optimistic as to suggest that peace is easy to achieve.

Instead, the game wants to relitigate common arguments for and against violent foreign policy, modern militarism, and state neutrality or outright pacifism before suggesting that, within all of these arguments, one thing should never be lost: a

desire to look above the details and remember the human cost of war alongside the basic desire to work toward peace as an unattainable but inherently valuable ideal.

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+ *It's impossible to talk about Peace Walker without talking about the off-putting conservatism of its views of women and sexuality. Dr. Strangelove, for all the nuance of her character elsewhere, is portrayed as a predatory lesbian straight out of a gay panic fable. During the part of the plot where she's employed by the game's villains, Snake learns that Strangelove tended to a captured French ornithologist named Cécile (who later joins Snake's forces) by bathing her by hand. Later, a radio call produced with the tenor of the softest core erotica describes Strangelove manipulating Paz into allowing her to massage her body with sunscreen. She's also described as vindictively hating all men—until, that is, the story dictates that she fall in love with male scientist Huey Emmerich.*

*Elsewhere, Paz is introduced as having been sexually assaulted by American CIA agents while an incredibly ill-conceived cutscene mechanic is introduced that allows players to zoom past her clothes to see the underwear beneath. Peace Walker also includes a “dating” mini-game in which Snake can spend time alone with characters on a beach, including Paz. Snake can grope her, have sex with her obscured within a two-person cardboard box, or simply watch her run away from him in her underwear. It is only at the very end of the game that it's revealed Paz is actually not 16, even though she looks younger.*





# DEATH BY NUMBERS

(OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP COUNTING AND LOVE THE WAR)

EDWARD SMITH

Shoot a soldier in *Metal Gear Solid* and his angular, polygonal body, with its prismatic hands and grey smears for eyes, will slump irregularly to the ground, rapidly blink in and out of existence for a second, and then disappear forever, leaving in its wake—like the Pacific Chinook Salmon, which dies after laying its eggs—a rotating box of bullets, or hovering Ration, for you to collect. Do the same in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, and a sequence of numbers will appear, mathematically detailing precisely how much damage you have dealt. Incapacitate an enemy via a tranquiliser dart and you can extract and add him to the ranks of Mother Base, headquarters of your own private army. Your actions during missions award insignias and “Heroism Points.” Combat resources can be bought and sold. And after every deployment there follows a numerical summary of performance, and material expenditures and gains.

Set in 1974, *Peace Walker* implies that beneath war’s chaos lies sense. Viewed in a certain way, pulling the trigger of your gun becomes an input; soldiers keeling over, output; and both data to be added to the grand, arithmetical spreadsheet detailing your overall military effort. You may not be playing specifically to earn more points and accrue further statistics, but alongside the abstract satisfaction of winning a battle sits this tangible, intractable other pleasure—being able to look back at having made progress, all entailed by various sets of information.

During the Vietnam War, in his attempt to both rationalise and curtail the American Army’s dauntingly ascendant Killed In Action count, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara began a military-wide initiative to retrieve, quantify, and analyse

battlefield data. Units deployed, miles of land captured, bodycount. Dubbed “an IBM with legs” by his critics, McNamara’s belief in numbers—what he sought to gain from an encompassing, statistical audit—is best summarised in an article by Kenneth Cukier and Viktor Mayer-Schönberger from the May 2013 edition of the *MIT Technology Review*:

“Only by applying statistical rigor, he believed, could decision makers understand a complex situation and make the right choices. The world in his [McNamara’s] view was a mass of unruly information that—if delineated, denoted, demarcated, and quantified—could be tamed by human hand and fall under human will. McNamara sought Truth, and that Truth could be found in data.”

As detailed elsewhere in this book, the characters of *Metal Gear Solid* are also, often, searching for truth. It comes in various forms—the truth of an ideology; the truth of an identity; a sense of psycho-sexual revelation, whereby a lifelong fetishistic itch is finally scratched and a true self exercised. Truth in the form of data, however—conceptually—appears fraught with peril. In *Guns of the Patriots*, all of the soldiers in all of the world’s largest armies and private military companies are digitally linked both to one another and a communicable master computer, the premise being that their personal combat information can be recorded and analysed in real-time. This in turn assists in monitoring and manipulating the “war economy,” a self-perpetuating global system that translates conflicts into transactions. As civil tensions are observed increasing in nation X, the war economy, sapiently, responds with deployment—or input, investment—of force Y. Both these forms of quantifying war, though, are ultimately corruptible: the IT binding the soldiers together is hijacked by Liquid Snake to turn the war economy to his own advantage, and it’s only owing to their destruction that anybody—Snake, Meryl, et al—can go on to live happily. Similarly, the S3 program in *Sons of Liberty* represents an attempt to collate and stratify *all* data about *all* aspects of society. Raiden is selected as its guinea pig because, informationally speaking—according to his file—his personality embodies the mindset of the body politic; susceptible to orders and rejectful of contradictions, Raiden serves the S3 program as a vertical slice of the population’s mentality, a replete, single byte of data from which all others may be extrapolated. Eventually, however, although the program’s test is deemed partially successful insofar as Raiden completes his given mission, it also fails: less obedient and more individualistic than the S3 predicted, Raiden gains knowledge of its existence and goals, and resolves to live un beholden to received ideas. Essentially, what *Metal Gear Solid* implies is that where human beings succeed—in being independent, thoughtful, and proactive—data fails. The war economy measures bloodshed and carnage. The S3, subservience. But there can be no metric, for Self.

In the game’s climactic moments, the eponymous Peace Walker, a walking tank equipped with nuclear missiles and designed to retaliate against whichever of the two

Cold War superpowers aggresses first, is activated, tricking the American military into believing that the USSR is about to strike. The tank's on-board computer, however, is integrated with a digitised version of The Boss from *Snake Eater*. Recognising what is about to happen, she overrides Peace Walker's controls and walks the tank into a lake, destroying it. Impressing once again in the *Metal Gear Solid* series that human behaviour is not reducible to figures, and broad, national systems are flawed in their thinking, this moment, when coupled and compared with the number-tracking and score-building mechanics of *Peace Walker*, undermines the core precept of military micro-management. The process of curating data about troops deployed, targets destroyed, and enemies killed is predicated on the existence of war: no war, no data to curate. If military statistical management concerns the hunt for Truth, what *Peace Walker* suggests is that there is a grander, *truer* truth that such statistics will never be able to reflect, that human beings, at the individual level, don't want to fight and kill each other. In theory, the Peace Walker tank should do its job. It has a computer. It operates based on algorithms. It is statistically bound to launch its payload. But beneath those things that can be counted is the will and innate capacity for peace embodied in a single person. This semi-paradox, of the uncountable overruling the countable, is something McNamara himself discovered. In Errol Morris's documentary *The Fog of War*, he explains that while working for the Air Force's Office of Statistical Control during World War II, he learned that 20 percent of aircraft dispatched to bomb Germany turned around before reaching their targets. For the dispassionate procedure of data analysis, the explanation was incognisable:

“... the form—I think it was called a 4-1A or something like that—was a mission report,” he describes. “And if you aborted a mission you had to write down why. So we get all these things and we analyse them, and we finally conclude it was baloney. They were aborting out of fear.”

Nevertheless, it was the truth. Likewise, the final, inexplicable, and “off-data” behaviour of The Boss reveals something true. As she nobly throws herself into the lake, the rest of *Peace Walker*'s grading and number-crunching becomes suddenly satirical, serving to contextualise the absurdity, and cold-blooded pragmatism, of the concept of combat analysis. Moreover, it suggests that data, as well as dehumanising the cost of war, perpetuates it. The American government, acting solely on accountable information and refusing to listen to Snake's importuning to stand down, almost unleashes nuclear war; if the Peace Walker tank acted purely on hard inputs, it would fire its missiles and destroy the world. And so, as well as missing the greatest truth about war, that the people on the ground, in their hearts, do not want to do it, combat data—as presented in *Peace Walker*—is fallible and dangerous because it will always encourage a combative strategy. If your every readout of results relates to destruction, killing, and other war-related practice, it becomes impossible to view the world on any alternative terms, and individual people, whom the game suggests are the ones genuinely possessing truth, will keep dying.



T H E

PHANTOM

P A I N



# THE END OF ALL WORLDS

REID MCCARTER

**M***etal Gear Solid V* is meant to disorient. Aping the tripod-free vérité of Greengrass-style handheld action movies, even the most sedate scenes are filmed as if shot by a war reporter, swaying and crouching from danger in one instant, swinging from subject to subject in another. There's some logic to this movement. Each drunken shift in focus or aggressive zoom is meant to inform the player's view of the events unfolding in front of her. As a man is screamed at by an angry mob of justice-seeking soldiers or a pressed crowd of hospital patients clamor to escape a room strafed by machine gun fire, the audience's attention is pulled from anguished face to dead-eyed executioner, or between the dark red blood pooling a tiled floor and a nearby doorway that might provide escape. The point of the game's camera movements, it seems, is to reinforce a constant sense of confusion and bewilderment without losing the player entirely to meaningless chaos (or to have her put the controller down to vomit).

This is a stylistic choice that makes a lot of sense for *Metal Gear Solid V*—both within its standalone prologue, *Ground Zeroes*, and the full game itself, *The Phantom Pain*. *V*'s story is concerned with the descent into villainy of legendary soldier Big Boss, using both his and his psychologically manipulated body double (*The Phantom Pain*'s player character, Venom Snake) as fulcrums on which a lengthy, often tonally confused tale of numbing violence and fractured identity is supported. In *Ground Zeroes*, Big Boss infiltrates an American-run, Guantanamo Bay-styled black site in Cuba called Camp Omega, rescuing two compatriots—*Peace Walker*'s Chico and Paz—from the covert force torturing them for information. Though successful in his mission, his

return helicopter is later blown apart and he's rushed to hospital, falls into a coma, and awakens nine years later.

This sequence of events both introduces the game's preoccupation with filth and torture and sets the stage for *The Phantom Pain's* delightfully bizarre opening act. In it, the player looks through Venom Snake's eyes as he regains consciousness in a Cypriot hospital ward. The radio plays a cover of David Bowie's "The Man Who Sold the World," nurses in white-skirted scrubs and paper hats hum along to the melody until they realize their patient is moving. A doctor explains that Snake now has shrapnel permanently pressing on his brain, that he's being hunted by the proto-Patriots special forces of Cipher, and that he needs facial reconstruction surgery to hide from them. He says it's now 1984—that nearly a decade has passed. The doctor is then strangled with piano wire by an assassin who is soon set afire by Snake's roommate, a man whose face is wrapped entirely in bandages. Both the bandaged man and Snake speak in the same voice. They refer to themselves as "Ahab" and "Ishmael" as they escape the paramilitary force massacring the hospital staff and patients in search of them. There's a hallucination of a giant flaming whale erupting into the nighttime sky and a desperate horseback chase where a man clothed in flames violently pursues Snake on a white unicorn.

There is almost nothing to hold onto in *The Phantom Pain's* opening hours. All of it is misdirection and confusion, disquietingly underscored by the grimy industrial noise and sparse bass synths of its soundtrack and the visual horror of dozens upon dozens of gruesomely executed civilians. The player guides Snake out of the hospital-turned-abattoir while being bludgeoned over the head with new, seemingly disconnected and, occasionally, contradictory facts. Those who have played the many games preceding *The Phantom Pain*—even (or especially) those who have cataloged and internalized the encyclopedia of fiction those games contain—are put even further out to sea than complete neophytes. Context says that Venom Snake *is* Big Boss, but why does the man in bandages speak in Big Boss' voice, too, then? The flame-enveloped giant who stalks the hospital and repeatedly attacks Snake sure looks like he's wearing the same clothes as *Snake Eater's* Colonel Volgin, but then again, that character died in a game set two decades earlier. Complicating matters further is the doctor having explained that Snake's injured brain leaves him prone to hallucinations. Nothing seen or heard in the hospital escape can be taken at face value.

The structure of the game comes into focus soon after. The player is introduced to the rinse and repeat systems that see Snake performing a ludicrous number of bite-sized, nearly plot-free missions across a stretch of rural Afghanistan and the Angola-Zaire border area, and the disorientation of the first act temporarily vanishes. Snake is told to build up his private army on the floating, Big Shell-esque struts of "Mother Base." He takes mercenary work from international clients that involves rescuing, executing, or sabotaging those involved with the Soviet-Afghan War and the Angolan Civil War. Each soldier he extracts is convinced to join his "Diamond Dogs" forces

and the money he earns is used to build up Mother Base's facilities and develop new weapons. There's a clarity to the simple goal of gaining enough strength to take on the agents responsible for nearly killing him and his forces at the end of *Ground Zeroes*.

Before long, entrenched in the grind of seemingly endless combat, the Cold War battlefields of Afghanistan and Angola/Zaire+ become as familiar as neighbourhood streets. The well-armed guard posts dotting rocky, South Asian hills or occupying deserted towns; the bombed out villages nearly reclaimed by Central African swamps; and the ever-present thumping of gunships or crack of distant small arms fire become eerily normal. As Snake, the player acclimates quickly to the dystopia of nations whose civilians have fled their homes or taken up arms in wars stirred and partially fought by foreign powers. She, too, is only visiting these lands for plunder—to empower herself by guiding Snake to the resources needed to make Mother Base's statistic-tracking numbers higher and its arsenal stronger. There's nothing of the outré horror of *Ground Zeroes*' Guantanamo stand-in—an inky blur of inhumanly shackled prisoners kneeling in muddy cages exposed to the pouring rain or secret underground cells stained with rust and blood. Instead, there's a sense that *The Phantom Pain*'s battlefields, when explored on a yet another mission, have evolved into a new ecosystem where the brutish introduction of military materiel is as natural a feature as shrubbery and the voices of soldiers and the call of their weapons belong alongside bird song and rumbling thunderstorms.

When *The Phantom Pain*'s story returns in short cinematics, so do brief reminders of just how nightmarish a prospect this vision really is. The complacency of routine is superseded by the shock of seeing child soldiers in cages, Angolans strapped to dirty-looking gurneys in congested medical tents for ghastly experimental procedures, or suspected spies having their limbs cracked apart in Mother Base's menacingly nondescript, aptly named torture facility Room 101. Here, the player is both forced to remember the ghoulish cost of wars that have become aesthetically familiar, and spun around in the confusion of the cutscenes' surreal cinematography. She is made to look at the Cold War setting with fresh eyes rubbed clear of repeat experience and able to see, again, that the natural states of Afghanistan and Central Africa are not meant to be war-torn and bloodied. Their appearances within the repetitive missions, now as disquietingly “normal” as the background hum of the '00s televised War on Terror (an effect furthered by the TV show trappings of the game's missions, credits bookending each visit to the battlefield), is brought back to its origin point, no longer *signifying* the brutality of war but forcing the player to view that same brutality in its naked, wretched original form. The cutscenes are LiveLeak footage of the War in Afghanistan's rotting corpses while playing the game itself—the bulk of what the player actually does—is more comparable to the forgettable, sanitized routine of the nightly news' reporting of the multi-year conflict. It's a remarkably modern effect for a game set in the 1970s and '80s.

Cast in this light, it becomes clear that the Guantanamo-style setting used in *Ground*

*Zeroes* is meant to merge both the present-day and postwar 20<sup>th</sup>-century history into a single, continuous reality. The outrage aimed at Cold War imperialism in every game—but most especially *Snake Eater* and *Peace Walker*—merges to include the direct results of global politics too often thought of as safely removed from the present day. In it, the immediate association of Guantanamo Bay's injustices precede the Cold War itself, 21<sup>st</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century wars flipping around into a cyclical nightmare. Strict historical chronology is less important than continuity. What was done in the past is felt immediately in the present and, in the game's fiction at least, vice versa. *Ground Zeroes*, referencing both the in-fiction origin point of Big Boss' nihilistic embrace of war and the physical location in Manhattan where the War on Terror began in earnest, isn't the start of our terrifying modern condition (as explored in *Sons of Liberty* and *Guns of the Patriots*), but a logical next step following the postwar superpowers' global ravages. Everything the series has touched upon, its earliest fictional events starting with the Second World War, has created the world we live in now. The depairing vision portrayed by *Guns of the Patriots'* futuristic, ideology-free battlefields is the only tomorrow the games can imagine. Past and present are one, merged both within the *Metal Gear* timeline and our own world. If this makes us feel as disoriented and vaguely nauseous as *The Phantom Pain's* opening act and its cinematic direction intend, it's well deserved. This apocalyptic joining of the bygone and modern, the real and the fictional, is perfectly suited as the final chapter of the *Metal Gear* series. Appropriately, given decades exploring modern war within its fiction, the end of the games should feel like the intellectual end of the world. Rationale, meaning, and time itself are obliterated, made nonsensical to any thinking that could order them into something digestible. The brain fails and the gut, roiling at generations of horror, wins out. (What better place to start this last chapter than *Ground Zeroes'* Cuban black site, Camp Omega?)

The only problem, though, is that it's a finale that doesn't need to exist. What works in *Metal Gear Solid V* is undermined again and again by the clear sense that its creators either didn't want to make this game, were tired of the series' fictional baggage, had no idea what larger point to make using their tortured characters, or were simply succumbing yet again to their own worst impulses. As strong as its use of setting and style may be, it's also a game that indulges *Metal Gear's* consistent misogyny with almost self-parodying fervor. Aside from Paz, who appears in *Ground Zeroes* only to be beaten and sexually abused and, in a particularly puerile note, die when a bomb hidden within her vagina detonates, there's only the sniper, Quiet. As the lone prominent woman in *The Phantom Pain*, the development of Quiet's character comes a distant second to showing off her polygonal body, barely covered in a bikini and fishnets due to a fantastic plot contrivance. (Its most noxious moments see the camera fixated on her lava lamp-animated chest while she endures torture and an attempted sexual assault.) Alongside an apparently unconscious dehumanization of women, the series' oft-criticized heavy-handed plotting is served up here in a ludicrous form: unlockable cassette tapes that can be played while Snake is on missions, frequently interrupted by radio calls, and almost guaranteed to be difficult to pay attention to

unless the player sits in the helicopter or stands in one place to impatiently hear them out. The cinematic scenes and any other plot elements are rarely shown, perhaps six or so hours of them spread out over at least five dozen hours of plot-free missions. Like *Guns of the Patriots* before it, the game seems to be *daring* the player to give a shit about what's happening. Paying attention to the story is a herculean task—one that everything else about the game confounds through its design.

By the time *The Phantom Pain* remembers to end, it's difficult to find coherence in its twist revelation that the player character assumed to be Big Boss is, in fact, a brainwashed body double. The strands of meaning drawn from the numbing brutality of Snake's bite-sized entries to the battlefield and the ending's revelations are flung so far apart from one another that any commentary on the hallucinatory merging of fact and fiction represented by the protagonist's double identity is buried beneath the rest of the game's weight. The most charitable reading available—that Snake's identity crisis reflects the postmodern disillusionment and obfuscation of historical truth posited by its confusing, horrific battlefields—feels even more pointless when compared to the same trick pulled in *Sons of Liberty* with the similarly misled Raiden (another soldier in search of an identity stolen from him). It's a weary reveal that goes nowhere, offering no further exploration of Venom Snake's character by allowing players to see where he takes this knowledge other than to the evil ends the devoted know occur when he stars as the original, 1987 *Metal Gear*'s hastily-defined villain.

The series has said everything it has to say about modern war. At *V*'s late date, it's only capable of repeating itself with novel stylistic flourishes. Even here, in its collapsing of historical eras and the line between reality and fiction, the game represents a sad end not only for history, but for the series itself. In it, the past returns to the present and the present informs the past. It's a dire vision that would be boldly upsetting if not for the more immediate failures shown by the inhumanity displayed in its view of women, and an inability to follow its messages to any coherent conclusion. What we're left with instead is something that merely gestures toward its message as if making a point is as satisfactory as having something to say about it. That's a metatextual grimness that *Metal Gear Solid V* surely didn't intend on—but it achieved anyway.

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+ *Zaire is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but is referred to by its former name throughout this piece to reflect Metal Gear Solid V's historical setting.*





# HI-DE-O! I THINK THEY'VE GOT YOUR NUMBER!

EDWARD SMITH

Circa August 2015, a month before it was released, I explained to a friend how I planned to write about *Metal Gear Solid V*. “Everyone’s just going to talk about how great it is,” I remember saying. “It’s going to get all these ‘game of the year’, ‘pushing the medium forward’, ‘showing why games matter’ kinds of plaudits. So what I’m going to do is, I’m going to take a month out of my usual work, I think, and take notes on it scene by scene, and then I’m going to really give it both barrels. I’m really going to take it to task.”

Also around this time the professional auspices that I was operating under involved mainly either my own cynicism, or a growing belief that I had in the potential appeal, entertainment value, and profitability of an online persona I was cultivating; a style of writing and authorial voice that I’d been practising my whole career. I’d recently started a column on Kill Screen called *Shut Up, Videogames*, and was trading heavily in a voice of indignation, righteous-takedown-of-gaming-culture way of writing. In *Metal Gear Solid V* I saw an opportunity to shock readers with my ire; here came a promising new chapter in a gaming institution which by destroying I could use to springboard a name for myself. If up until now I’d been practising with my hatchet, then here was the job to match.

The game, however, when I actually played it, turned out to be not bad. Not “not bad” in the sense that it was kind of good, or that despite several flaws the experience of it, regarded in gestalt, was ultimately quite enjoyable; not “not bad” in the way that “not bad” can sometimes be deployed as a compliment: *Metal Gear Solid V* was

stultifyingly, paralytically, demotivatingly not bad, not bad in a way that denuded me of my passion to write about it so totally that it seemed almost spiteful, the not-badness. It was as if the game's makers, aware of the fact I was planning to criticise their work, had taken the concept and quality of being not bad and somehow weaponised it, like chemically engineered a strain of Not Bad so potent that it was capable of completely neutralising its victim's enthusiasm. Suddenly I felt indifferent; rather than convinced that by "taking down" *Metal Gear Solid V* I might expose, and be lauded (and paid) for exposing, something at videogaming's heart, it was obvious, and seemed like it always ought to have been obvious, that it was better to simply ignore it. It was like not-badness of its particular kind, if I gave it any attention, had the potential to accrue strength and significance and then spread itself into other games, and other game-makers. And then, reassured there was something about them that was seriously culturally viable, the entire gaming industry would continue producing nothing except these kinds of 100-plus-hour-long open-world shooters, and the whole thing about *Metal Gear Solid V* that seemed so objectionable in the first place would become more widespread. And so it made more sense, if what I was trying to do was to convince people this wasn't worth their time, to just let it go.

Essentially, I think, what had happened: I had written (in my head) a response to *Metal Gear Solid V* that was based entirely on what I *thought* the game was going to be, an idea, and to an extent, because I was looking for something I could self-aggrandisingly tear to pieces, an ideal of it that was rooted both in its pre-release materials and my own expectations of the *Metal Gear Solid* series at the time. Particularly after *Guns of Patriots* and also the unveiling of Quiet, *The Phantom Pain*'s ludicrously *undressed* sniper character, whose design, the more her creators had tried to explain and defend it, had become even more ludicrous, then frustrating, then typical of games, I felt like I had the measure of this new *Metal Gear Solid*. From my perspective, the *Metal Gear Solid* games' successive worsening over the past seventeen years was correlative with an increase in both the critical attention paid to director Hideo Kojima and a general, industry-wide celebration of his style. Just as I had started to believe in and follow my own online persona, it felt like Kojima, the more he had been talked about and had bestowed upon him the rank of genius, the more he had started to believe in his own press, and attempt to play up to it. Compared to 1998, when I'd been in awe of the first game's originality and daring, owing to its creeping derivativeness and every-game-a-new-low appeals to fandom—how it'd continued playing, with increasing and seemingly oblivious enthusiasm, on its same stories, mechanics, and predictable in-jokes—by 2015 I had come to actively resent *Metal Gear Solid* for still existing. In this very male, very possessive way, because I had played *Metal Gear Solid* and been aware of Hideo Kojima for a lot of my life, I'd taken the series' decline personally. When the greater, popular attention started to have a noxious effect on the games' and Kojima's quality, it felt like something was being taken away from *me*; I had a sense of ownership towards *Metal Gear Solid*, and was bitter about the reality that not only did other people want, and were entitled to, a piece of it, but it was prepared to stoop in order to give it to them.

I've experienced this feeling, or something like it, a lot throughout my life. I don't worship idols, but I do worship their output; though I feel capable of reminding myself that the *artist* is flawed, and human, and probably wouldn't spit on me if I were on fire, probably owing to insecurities regarding my *own* talents and chances of *my* ever making it big with anything, I obsess over and mentally anoint any great *art*. For me, great art is Godly, in the Old Testament sense. It's instructional and emboldening and affirming, but also has the power to humiliate and threaten. As well as being comforted and given purpose by it, I find myself intimidated in its presence, and the knowledge of the existence of this superior, unfathomable creative power which it implies. By loving it, spending a lot of time with it, and endorsing it among friends, I think what I'm essentially trying to do to great artwork is appease it. Extremely paranoid that I'm not good enough to produce anything like it myself, by both understanding and publicly, socially demonstrating that I understand it, I aim to strip the artwork of some of its mysterious power, while also proving to myself I'm on its level, and could hypothetically be accepted onto whatever higher plane from which it originates. The dangers of this mentality are significant and, probably already to you, apparent. By fearing and trying to assuage it through thoughts and words, I end up with a distorted view of what art is trying to achieve, and feeling a lot worse about myself. Art becomes, in my mind, an exercise in the artist's power, a device by which one demonstrates their strength, and I, its viewer, reader, listener, or player, a kind of passive subordinate—at best art's recipient; at worst its grateful, unctuous acolyte. Renouncing my faith, as it were, in *Metal Gear Solid*—deciding it wasn't worth believing in, or even worth the process of questioning whether or not I believed it in it anymore; an anti-spiritual crisis, whereby I was settled on the apostasy but also settled on *not being unsettled* by the apostasy—felt, like *The Phantom Pain* itself, extremely anticlimactic. It's really only in hindsight that I start to suspect this was the reaction the game expected from me and from others who were similarly dogmatic about it all along. With respect to the character I had started to play in my own videogame criticism, the totem that Hideo Kojima and his work had become by this point, and the pitfalls of idolatry, specifically as it occurs in pop-culture fandom, *Metal Gear Solid V* offers several bleak and even shrewd observations. I'd never go so far as saying the game is not bad on purpose. Crediting it with that level of intent and self-awareness would be falling prey to the apostolic mentality of which it's ultimately cautionary, and would also overlook and help critically civilise its other, unconscionable aspects, like for example Quiet. But *The Phantom Pain*'s tedium—mechanically, in context and in conjunction with some of its central narrative conceits—results in a videogame that seems concerned, almost regretful, about its own fame. Scattered and verbose, *The Phantom Pain* eulogises *Metal Gear Solid* and the mythos of art and the artist at a suitably, almost satirically low speed. Its heroes are indiscernible and distant and the level of unenthusiasm which it generates through play becomes part of its point.

Although as a player you don't find out about this until the game's latter hours, the first thing *The Phantom Pain* does, during its opening section, is dispose of the *Metal Gear Solid* series' most-reputed protagonist. Big Boss, the American special forces hero

turned international mercenary and leader of the private army Diamond Dogs, has one of his soldiers surgically reconstructed to look exactly like him and hypnotically implanted with all of his memories in order to elude his would-be assassins. This soldier, codenamed Punished “Venom” Snake, awakens from a coma and into the player’s hands, believing himself to be the actual Big Boss; throughout most of the rest of *The Phantom Pain*, some of his comrades, the mercenaries working for him and most importantly us, the audience, believe it as well. It’s only towards the game’s climax that we realise we’ve been deceived. Big Boss “created” Venom Snake in order to have him perpetuate his vision of a world dependent on war, that would thusly always value and honour soldiers, on his behalf whilst he was hiding.

The Diamond Dogs’ complicity in this project and their ascription and loyalty to Big Boss and his vision is evident in how sedulously they behave towards Venom Snake, the man that they believe to be him. When Venom wants to practise his close-combat techniques, Diamond Dogs soldiers will line up, stand at attention, give a salute, and politely ask if they can “help him train,” before being thrown viciously by him onto the ground and knocked unconscious. After they’ve recovered and stood back up, they will salute again and thank Venom Snake for allowing them to participate—to the point of humiliating themselves and risking breaking bones, they are dedicated to and grateful for being a part of his project, his development. As players, we are also dutifully committed to helping fulfill Big Boss’s dream. Throughout *The Phantom Pain*, as we complete missions, side-missions, and ambient tasks like collecting fuel tankers and vehicles, we’re rewarded with in-game currency that can be used to improve and expand Mother Base—Diamond Dogs’ headquarters and the cornerstone of Big Boss’s empire. Like the mercenaries themselves, we become committed to helping propagate Big Boss’s power. Also like the mercenaries, we do so unaware that our benefactor is misleading and manipulating us: they think they’re working for Big Boss directly; we think we are him, and acting completely of our own—and by proxy *his*—accord. We are each instrumental in circulating his ideas and legend without realising that neither are exactly genuine: contrary to in-game mythology, Big Boss is not the ultimate, near-invulnerable epitome of a soldier—he’s weakened and fighting from the shadows rather than the frontlines—and his ideological victories are largely only possible due to the actions of others.

In *Metal Gear Solid V*, Big Boss exists mainly through iconography. Fallible and imperfect, he maintains his authority through the creation of a buffer image, a romanticised, public-facing version of himself whom both the Diamond Dogs and the player can more readily accept and rally behind. “Venom” Snake is a device. He’s an idealised image quite literally designed to sell ideas. is actual nature—false, manufactured, and useful for convincing people to follow, and to in various ways invest—attends very closely an (admittedly cynical) notion of celebrity.

On which note, the popularity of the *Metal Gear Solid* series has often relied on the viability of Hideo Kojima himself as an artist. In the world of videogaming, where

visions are formed by consensus and art seems to be made by companies, he's occupied a position that's still fairly rare: that of the auteur. Without Hideo Kojima, it's often felt like there can be no *Metal Gear Solid*. Considering he claims to have gotten the idea for the series from playing hide and seek with his son; the first game features music and imagery from another of his projects, *Policenauts*; and a tweet from 2013 where he shares an image of his breakfast (eggs benedict) and writes "looks like boobies when shaking the plate. lol;" *Metal Gear Solid*'s mechanics, aesthetics, and sexual politics seem to flow directly out of the man himself. Even more so considering his occasional cameos in the games, how each one opens with "A Hideo Kojima Production" inscribed against a black background, and the fact that prior to its development fans sent him letters threatening to kill him if he didn't personally direct *Gun of the Patriots*, it's fair to assert that Kojima, in the popular, videogaming-world consciousness, is bound inextricably to *Metal Gear Solid*. To its Diamond Dogs, he is Big Boss. So—it being assumed and accepted that it's at least partly a direct channelling of Kojima's own beliefs, and that its continued existence and popularity are couched in the maintenance of his own celebrity-artist status—deliberately or otherwise, what *Metal Gear Solid V* insinuates, by making the observations that it does about Big Boss and Venom Snake, is that the Kojima whom series fans admire and respect is a false Kojima. It's evident that he fills his games with self and personality. It's evidential that their success and artistic credibility are the results of that same self and personality. So, if *The Phantom Pain* is encouraging us to question and be distrustful towards idols, and Kojima often speaks his own mind in his games, and Kojima himself is—in the world of games, at least—an idol, it follows that what he's saying is that we should, if not distrust him exactly, then distrust the image that we have of him, the one that has been promulgated and re-inscribed since 1998. The Big Boss/Venom Snake dichotomy aside, Kojima's warning against celebrity-worship and what seem to be his views on the fragile, dubious nature of icons, are illustrated variously throughout *The Phantom Pain*. Laura Brannigan's "Gloria," the lyrics of which imply the fragility of image ("Glo-ri-a!/I think they've got your number!/I think they've got your alias!/Which you've been living under!") replays throughout. Explaining how, among the Afghan rebels, he has earned the nickname "Shalashaska," Revolver Ocelot first explains that it derives from "sharashka," a word associated with the Soviet Secret Police and their efforts to imprison and control weapons scientists:

Snake: "Forced research? That's not much different to what we do here."

Ocelot: "Diamond Dogs is different. Everyone here believes in you. Regardless of where they're from or why they're here, they revere you, and they're fighting because it was their choice."

"And if it wasn't, they'd leave?"

"Who knows? That's our reality here, whether it's real or not. If there's

another truth I don't want to know it. All that matters is, that's the concept that's taken shape in their heads.”

Juxtapose this with the latter half of Ocelot's story, of how “sharaska” developed into the appellation “Shalashaska:”

“A Shashka is a sword ... the Russian Empire had a general by the name of Fyodro Arturovich Keller and his bravery earned him the nickname of ‘Russia's Greatest Shashka’. Someone must have known about that because somewhere along the line ‘shashka’ got stuck on the end of ‘sharashka’ ... by the time I got to hearing about it the pronunciation had wound up as ‘Shalashaska’.”

These two conversations reflect on the idea, prevalent throughout *The Phantom Pain*, that cultivated and mediated popular images can be used to transfigure one truth into another. Although Venom himself admits that Diamond Dogs commits the same amoral acts as its enemy, that doesn't matter, and becomes ignorable, even permissible, just because the soldiers' belief in him/Big Boss is so ardent: the concept has taken shape in their heads. Similarly, admiration and renown—the relationship between followers and followed—is depicted here as predicated on conflation and misinformation. “Shalashaska” is the product of different words and stories being shared among people; its etymological roots are in history and truth, but by being increasingly used and talked about they have accrued invented, neologic syllables and pronunciations, resulting in a moniker and associated image of an individual, Ocelot, produced by gossip. What's being expressed in *Metal Gear Solid V* is the power of *talk*. As well as creating cognomens and associated legends, if it's directed and managed—if you can integrate talk with agenda—it can be used to civilise and aggrandise you; it can turn Diamond Dogs' forced labour program into an approvable part of a grand, romantic world vision and Revolver Ocelot, a nationless mercenary loyal only to Big Boss, into a symbol of Soviet force. Kojima, in this moment, appears to acknowledge that the success of him and of his work are at least somewhat the products of talk. He also seems to suggest that that talk might not have been entirely accurate, that he feels as if his and *Metal Gear Solid's* reputations are not strictly earned. Up until *The Phantom Pain*, his postmodern flourishes have been typically trivial and onanistic, references to himself and to his games that have served chiefly to distillate a popular conception of what he, Hideo Kojima, is about. Now, however—arguably for the first time—he seems to be depicting and describing himself negatively, disassembling rather than fortifying the notion that what his fans believe and love about him is in fact all true.

And then Kojima and *The Phantom Pain* go further. More than just inaccurate, and—either by accident or incident—conducive to propaganda, talk, the means by which he and his work have become successful, are shown by Kojima to be destructive, specifically to those who create and share in them. In the game's middle section, it's

revealed that a lethal parasite, which attaches to its victims' lungs and causes them to inflame and rot, is spread through speaking. When it first enters the body, the parasite lies dormant in egg form on its victims' vocal chords, and only through sustained use of and exposure to speech is it able to grow and eventually hatch. *The Phantom Pain* offers a narrative explanation for the virus' cultivation and dissemination—engineering it so that it responds only to English, the game's villain, Skull Face, intends to use the virus to eliminate English as the global *lingua franca*, providing other languages and their related cultures and societies the opportunity to gain more equal footing on the international stage.

In context of Kojima's ostensible self-criticism, however, or rather his criticism of the idea of himself that has spread owing to his work, fans, and press, the parasite accumulates a metaphorical relevance. It insinuates that the more you talk, the more you place yourself at risk. In relation to celebrity or popular artist worship, it suggests that by expressing or continuing to express appreciation, or even just vocalising interest, you potentially put yourself in harm's way; having and sharing passionate belief in an artwork or an artist means you may end up disappointed, that is, hurt. In *The Phantom Pain*, ascription to Big Boss, Diamond Dogs, Mother Base, even Ocelot is presented as precarious and likely fuelled using deceit. Talk, the vector by which that ascription is communicated and empowered, is likewise dangerous—literally, the more that the mercenaries effuse about their hero, the closer they draw to death. My own expectations regarding Kojima and *Metal Gear Solid V* may have been dismal, but they were still nevertheless founded upon the popular conceptions about both that I had shared, and seen shared, for almost twenty years. That same process of sharing strengthened my belief that man and game would behave how I had always known them to, and that by excoriating both of them I would be able to feel better about myself. Like the parasitic mercenaries of Diamond Dogs, however, I fell prey to talk. By producing and imbibing discussion of Kojima and *Metal Gear Solid* for so long, I had nourished and matured a presentiment within myself that could only be satisfied—rectified—if they were exactly as I anticipated them to be. But they weren't. Big Boss is not entirely Venom Snake; “Hideo Kojima” is not entirely Hideo Kojima, is not entirely *Metal Gear Solid*. And so I found myself let down and despondent, which is to say: if the Diamond Dogs die because they keep talking about this mythical, non-existent ideal of Big Boss, by believing that the popular concept of Hideo Kojima—and the fabricated, game critic character that I had started to play in my writing—were both real, I ended up feeling considerably worse off.

*The Phantom Pain* seems to anticipate, and lament, this happening. As much as Venom Snake unwittingly positions his followers to be dispirited, even destroyed, by their following of him, he also attempts, in his own, vacillating way, to protect them: though primarily it's to add them to and to strengthen their private army—to create more supplicants to the Diamond Dogs' cause—Snake, Ocelot and Miller, the third Dogs prelate, endeavour to capture rather than to kill enemy soldiers. Would-be

progenitors of a new world order, they are also its patriarchs; scarred, battered, and ageing, Venom in particular figures in stark contrast to the fresh-faced young recruits with whom he's often battling, the ones who we, as players, are rewarded more in-game points for tranquillising and re-housing to Mother Base than shooting.

Big Boss and Solid Snake; Solidus and Raiden; The Boss and Naked Snake—throughout the *Metal Gear Solid* series Kojima has depicted parents and children, or at least, pseudo-parents and pseudo-children, as locked in conflict with one another. And although the most prominent of these troubled, inter-familial relationships neatly and optimistically resolves when at the end of *Guns of the Patriots*, Big Boss and Snake make their peace, the corpus of *Metal Gear Solid* entails ongoing, irresolvable domestic discord. Otacon drives his father to suicide; Raiden slays Solidus; Naked Snake is forced to execute his surrogate mother The Boss. Though references to children in *Metal Gear Solid* are commonly prefixed by “the terrible,” the games repeatedly depict them as burdened, struggling to live with or even attempting to repair the sins of their mothers and fathers. Parents, and parental institutions, like governments, militaries, and nations, are commonly the cause of all complaint; starting with the original *Metal Gear Solid*, wherein nobody understands what's going on or even who they are, it's the offspring of such forbearing organisations—sometimes spiritually, sometimes literally parental—who find themselves both abandoned and struggling for betterment. Soldiers, agents, and scientists in *Metal Gear Solid* bear the moral weight of their unregenerate benefactors, and in lieu of their guidance are forced to contend with society, the future, life, and death by themselves. The close of *Guns of the Patriots* marks the possibility of a change to this dynamic. It's at this moment, at the canonical end of the entire *Metal Gear Solid* story, that a parent, Big Boss, finally appears not only to explain himself to his child but apologise. As he describes how all the series' events have been a direct result of his own machinations, he shifts some if not all of the onus from Snake, Otacon, and the rest of the generation that has been struggling in his wake onto himself; where Solidus would sooner fight Raiden to the death, and The Boss, on orders of her own dysfunctional parents-in-spirit, the American government, agrees to die rather than unbosom her “son,” Big Boss ultimately offers contrition and a share of the responsibility. He disposes of his own image. He allows his son to see him as a person, not a figure, and in doing so, liberates Snake. By admitting flaws—empathetic, common flaws—Big Boss humanises himself and thus obliterates his own iconographic form; whether it was positive or negative, something to live up to or something to oppose and attempt to conciliate, since that form, that ideal, that harsh, unreachable, paternal authority no longer exists, Snake can experience life freed from its pressures. Big Boss concedes imperfection. In that concession, he frees his son from his long shadow.

Venom Snake has not reached that point. Though he recruits rather than kills them, and to that extent fits the profile of a more responsible parent, he nevertheless is doing so to help continue instantiating the leaderly image of Big Boss. The in-game redemption between creator and created will come, canonically, later; but in reality,

by the release of *The Phantom Pain*, it has already been demonstrated, and Kojima seems to be using its lesson to, rather than re-explain it, finally tell us something sincere about himself instead. The father of *Metal Gear Solid*, by presenting the father of Diamond Dogs as false and morally dubious, appears to be telling *Metal Gear Solid* fans, critics, and players alike that they ought no longer to revere him—or at least not follow him based on his image. *The Phantom Pain* implores for the possibility of a mutually-beneficial separation: if we stop believing in the legend and fervour around Kojima and *Metal Gear Solid*, we may find ourselves less disappointed by them; if the fanaticism around him disappears, Kojima won't have to continue doing things to maintain it—like make more *Metal Gear Solid* games. Even after the first one he said he would like to quit.

And so, in *The Phantom Pain*, Kojima does not only take the place of Venom Snake/Big Boss; he takes the place of Big Boss at the end of *Guns of the Patriots*. Translating the message delivered from Big Boss to Snake into a message from himself to his own following, it's a natural sequel, whereby postmodern breakage of the fourth wall, the most prominent, distinctive part of Kojima's style, is finally, ironically, used to express something honest.



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