Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain's Denial of Player Expectations: The War Game that Isn't

Abstract This chapter explores the means by which *The Phantom Pain* initially appears poised to be another offering in the military-style shooter genre, exemplified in the game's marketing materials, only to present players with a much different and unexpected set of realities. While the game contains the hallmarks of the shooter genre, including the ability to obtain an arsenal of sophisticated weapons and having the option to use lethal force to overcome all enemy forces, it instead privileges a stealth, or non-lethal playthrough. Indeed, excessive violence on the part of the player eventually alters the main character Snake's physical appearance, making him look like something akin to a demon. *The Phantom Pain,* through its denial of expectations, instead compels the player to consider the ramifications of violence and bloodshed rather than allowing him or her to revel in them.

Keywords Military-style shooter · Non-lethal · Violence · Trauma · PTSD

Metal Gear Solid V, as with all of the games in the *Metal Gear* series, presents many of the features of the military-style shooter that most gamers would expect, whether or not they are fans of or knowledgeable about the series at the outset. Like other military shooters, *Metal Gear Solid V* features combat, including gun battles and options to move through enemy territories using stealth, hand-to-hand combat, military-style

vehicles such as tanks and weaponized helicopters, and other aspects associated with warfare like open combat. Snake wears tactical gear, and, at least in *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain*, his adversaries have a military appearance. He fights XOF[1] guards at Camp Omega[2] in *Ground Zeroes* and a combination, primarily, of Soviet and XOF soldiers in *The Phantom Pain*. The game provides the player with specific missions to complete, each with clear tactical goals usually involving the infiltration of military strongholds and bases. Yet for all of its approximation of combat as it might appear in real-world wars and skirmishes, *Metal Gear Solid V* also presents a compelling dichotomy, a chasm between the performance of violence in the game, via the player embodying Snake, and the fallout of those actions in the fictive space. Moreover, the game's main characters, including Snake, enter the narrative already bearing the burden of past trauma, from physical to psychological wounds. As such, the game is less of a celebration of all-out violence or of defeating the enemy always and only by killing them all. Certainly, the player can choose to play the game in this fashion, sparing no one encountered. However, the in-game penalties for such actions dovetail with the ramifications on the characters themselves of living under the perpetual threat of violence.

The marketing campaigns for *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* follow a style that most people likely consider typical for a military-style shooter. For example, the first teaser for *Ground Zeroes* focuses exclusively on Snake, armed in his tactical gear, preparing to make his way into Camp Omega. The official trailer for *The Phantom Pain* showcases it as a game about and set in war. Some of the featured scenes include explosions, Snake aiming a gun at an enemy, and a Demon Snake briefly roaring in apparent fury[3]. Certainly, the games highlighted in the trailers appear to be filled with excitement, danger, and, importantly, the possibility of player-controlled bloodshed. Matthew Thomas Payne analyzes the marketing of most military-style shooter games in this way:

> Thus, the marketing campaigns for post-9/11 military shooters are overwhelmingly concerned with selling only select elements of military realisticness: sophisticated enemy artificial intelligence, military weapons and vehicles that function and look like the real thing, and combat that unfolds in authentic theaters of war, both historic and those "ripped from today's headlines." The games industry promises its dedicated and would- be consumers a near-real combat experience, irrespective of the gamer's personal play context. Said differently, a game that promises military realism

purports to tell one all they need to know about war with the goal of inoculating game play pleasures from the threats of simulation fever ("Military Realism" 310).

The Phantom Pain's marketing campaign in some ways follows this sort of prescribed structure only to defy it in the gameplay and narrative. *Metal Gear Solid V* certainly features forward-looking and compelling technology, such that it would have been incredibly advanced for the decades in which the games take place and that even today offers interesting iterations on modern technology. However, while the games are placed in largely familiar locations—especially *The Phantom Pain's* extended campaign in Afghanistan—the narrative again defies expectations by setting the story in the 1980s and deliberately focusing on Soviet actions in the region rather than on nameless, faceless "terrorists" of Middle Eastern origin. The setting is at once as foreign as it is seemingly familiar. Soraya Murray notes of the overall expectations one generally has of a military game, "Within the shooter genre, the so-called military shooter subgenre typically consists of weapon-based combat from a first- or third-person perspective, tactical use of a squad, stealth, and a cover system" (38). Her definition is a good starting point, but many other categories of games may use all of these elements and yet not conform to the category of military shooter. An example of this is the *Mass Effect* series, which allows the player embodying Shepherd to direct at least two squad members to take specific actions, and more members of his or her team during the game's "Suicide Mission." The player, embodying Shepherd, uses tactics, weapons, and use of cover to overcome enemies and in many instances, the player must defeat all enemies in order to move to the next section of the game. Perhaps an expansion of this definition would take into account that these specific types of military shooter games also specifically attempt to create or re-create the experience of the player being in military service, to give the player a pseudo-experience of being a soldier. In the case of *Metal Gear Solid V,* the combat experiences are at once akin to, yet disconnected from, actual military service. Given that the Diamond Dogs espouse the philosophy that governments exploit their military servicemen and servicewomen, the narrative sets up a disconnect between the player and what true military service might really mean.

Murray's definition provides an overarching set of traits by which to categorize games as military shooters, yet games like *Metal Gear Solid V*

also deliberately subvert the format by presenting the player with all of the tools necessary to kill while privileging non-lethality instead. Even though *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* contain violent and gruesome sequences, such as those concerning the rescue of Paz in *Ground Zeroes,* an event considered in detail later in the book, both games privilege a player using non-lethal means for every mission, such as knocking out opponents, putting opponents to sleep with tranquilizer bullets, or ghosting, meaning the player sneaks through enemy compounds and areas without detection. Despite offering the player non-lethal options, Hideo Kojima's narratives leave it up to the individual player to determine the shape of his or her in-game fictive space. However, *The Phantom Pain*, in particular, does not allow a player with a non-lethal play style to avoid the narrative's larger exploration of issues involving violence, trauma, and atrocity. Indeed, the game's most violent and uncomfortable sequences—found especially in the Prologue, in "Mission 31: Sahelanthropus," and in "Mission 43: Shining Lights, Even in Death"[4]—are specifically designed to be so, to manipulate the player into the position of having to examine both the causality and ramifications of violence. If the player chooses to embark on a more deliberately lethal playthrough, with the consequence that Snake's body count becomes high, then the shrapnel that has remained embedded in his head grows outward like a devil's horn and his face is covered in blood that cannot be washed away.[5]

   What players would have no reason to realize on an initial playthrough or without additional information provided in advance is that the game secretly tallies all of the player's casualties through the accumulation of Demon Points. The game's status screen never reveals to the player how many Demon Points have been accumulated. The only clue that this tally is occurring is a change in Snake's appearance as he moves from one stage to the next.[6] Granted, it takes 20,000 points to reach each of the two Demon tiers. The first tier finds Snake's shrapnel "horn" growing longer, and the second finds it longer still and with Snake covered in blood that remains even after he showers. Finally, there is an option in the game for Snake to develop a nuclear weapon. That action alone awards 50,000 Demon Points, the highest total related to any single action in the game, and thus moves the player to the worst Demon Points level, one that would take a great deal of concerted effort on the part of the player to reverse. Despite Snake's attitude regarding the development of a nuclear weapon indicating that having such a weapon would serve as a deterrent, the narrative concludes that such an intention

is hard to uphold, and anyone—even the Diamond Dogs—might easily turn despotic with such a weapon in their control.

Such a contradiction—that of the intersection between good intent and the corrupting possibilities of power, especially martial might—finds expression in military shooters more generally. Matthew Thomas Payne considers how traditional military shooters, especially those centered on multilayer campaigns, deal in conflicted ways with violence, noting:

> Combat video games wherein one can shoot their friends and be shot at, however fantastic and absurd the depiction of violence, is mediated play that threatens to force gamers into a consideration of actual shooting and actual dying. Thinking about taking another's life demands deep and personal introspection—an activity that is most certainly not within the commercial purview of military shooters. It is this experiential externality that the marketers of combat games must guard against, lest their products be seen as raising unpleasant, complicated, and ultimately less profitable questions or feelings for their audiences ("Military Realism" 309).

Certainly, the image of a Demon Snake covered in blood and an ever protruding/growing shrapnel horn serves as an example of the "fantastic and the absurd" in the game. However, it need not be the case that the taking of a life contains more weight when players shoot at and kill one another in the in-game world. In the case of *The Phantom Pain*, the absurdity of Snake's Demon appearance, its sheer grotesquerie, serves as a constant visual reminder on screen of the player's choices. Snake's appearance proves hyperbolic without also being alluring—it is off-putting and a vivid response to the player's actions. Instead of the player killing another player and then moving on to the next mission, or the next casualty, the player embodying Snake lives with his transformed appearance and must then actively and consciously play in a non-lethal fashion, or choose other actions that are designed to be either more altruistic or peaceful in the game to affect change.

Using non-lethal methods accumulates counter points to the Demon Points, that is, Heroism Points, which can eventually revert Snake to his normal appearance and thus allow the player an opportunity, if she or she so desires, to reshape Snake's experience, and therefore his or her own. The game further incentivizes the player to use stealth and non-lethal takedowns in either all, which is possible, or most situations,[7] as all subdued or knocked out enemies can be brought to Mother Base and recruited into the player's own army.[8] The player can opt to utilize

a transportation device, known in-game as a Fulton recovery balloon, to take possession of large enemy weaponry, such as tanks, rescue animals, and send recruited enemy soldiers to Mother Base. Therefore, a careful and stealthy player can eliminate enemies and their weapons simply by removing them from the battlefield and adding them to Mother Base's resources. This choice of recruiting and salvaging, rather than killing and destroying, leads to bonuses and power-ups, which enhance Snake's skills and make the game easier to play. The player also receives rewards for bringing animals to Mother Base, where they are housed in an animal sanctuary and protected. Although it never makes complete narrative sense why the Diamond Dogs would want to devote part of their base to the housing of various animals, the existence of this option privileges compassion and guarding the innocent. This is further examined in the game's use of companions who can accompany Snake on missions. The player can have one companion with him or her, and more choices for this companion unlock as the game unfolds. The player is awarded positive points for keeping that companion safe. For example, if Quiet is selected as the player's companion, sending her into a dangerous situation but not ordering her to evacuate if she encounters enemy fire can lead to a loss of Heroism Points.[9] Kojima privileges player choice and offers that in *Metal Gear Solid V*. However, the player's game world consistently provides visual and gameplay feedback reflecting those choices.

Regarding its exploration of the fallout of continual violence and bloodshed, M*etal Gear Solid V* possesses much in common with *Spec Ops: The Line*, much more so than it has in common with other traditional military shooters like the *Call of Duty* franchise. Considering some aspects of these games foregrounds a discussion of the specific narrative and gameplay choices available in *Metal Gear Solid V*. Matthew Thomas Payne explores a structural storytelling difference between other popular military shooter franchises, like *Call of Duty* and *Spec Ops: The Line,* arguing:

Yet the key, affective difference between *Spec Ops'* handling of its remote shelling and firing rounds from the safe remove of the AC-130 gunship in *Call of Duty* (and, indeed, other games like it) is what comes next. Instead of simply progressing to the next firefight, the player traverses the burning battlefield and witnesses first-hand the consequences of their actions. The few U.S. soldiers who are still alive scream in pain, many begging for death. The game leaves it up to the player to kill the injured or leave them to their wounds ("War Bytes" 276).

Although *Metal Gear Solid V* does not offer scenes of suffering or choices parallel to those found in *Spec Ops: The Line*, it does share structural similarities in terms of its willingness to consider the consequences of violence and its perpetual toll over many years. Given that *Metal Gear Solid V* features an older cast of primary characters, with Snake in his forties during the time of *Ground Zeroes* and then in his late forties in *The Phantom Pain*, and Revolver Ocelot and Kazuhira Miller in their thirties during *Ground Zeroes* and their early forties during *The Phantom Pain*, all of them have had years to consider the weight of all of their actions. As will be explored in Chap. 5, Miller comes to have increasing and obvious psychological problems contending with the violence he has witnessed, especially with the destruction of the Militaires Sans Frontieres.

The Phantom Pain utilizes player perspective to deepen the horror of the game's opening chapter and uses a switch in perspective from the first to the third person at specific points throughout the rest of the narrative to underscore moments that especially align with the game's exploration of trauma. The game is mostly played in the third-person perspective, save for sections such as those in the opening Prologue mission, which begins in a disorienting first-person perspective before switching to the third person.[10] After that switch, the mission is punctuated by brief flashes in the first-person perspective, drawing the player's attention to specific moments of atrocity as Snake attempts to flee the hospital. Thus, although *The Phantom Pain* uses perspective switches to underscore specific emotional notes in the narrative, these shifts need not markedly alter the overall manner in which a player becomes immersed in a game. Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca assert, "What is more surprising is that video games seem to work equally well in both the first- and third-person perspectives. Nor is there any indisputable difference between the experience of playing the two" (159-160).[11] This proves to be an especially compelling point when considered against the game designers' specific choice to switch perspectives during this one particular—and crucial, given that it is the player's introduction to this fictive space—section of the game. Holger Pötzsch envisions shooter-style games, regardless of perspective, as having four different layers to them, which he describes as filters: "On the basis of what has been said so far, the following filters predisposing player experiences and performances at the level of both procedural and narrative rhetoric of the F/TPS[12]-genre can be identified: (1) the violence filter, (2) the consequence filter, (3) the

character filter, and (4) the conflict filter" (160). Of special note here for this particular analysis of *The Phantom Pain*, Pötzsch's thoughts concerning the consequence filter prove especially useful:

> The consequence filter determines the range of short- and long-term consequences of violence and warfare that are depicted in F/TPS-games. The genre severely de-emphasizes negative long- and short-term impacts both at an individual and collective level. As such, the consequences of severe acts of violence usually exclude such features as crippled player- or non-player characters, severely traumatized characters, or protagonists suffering from PTSD. Also negative effects at a societal, economic, and political level including unintended blowbacks of military endeavors are normally deemphasized this way reiterating understandings of war as efficient and surgical operations without individual or collective long-term costs (Ibid).

The Phantom Pain's deliberate and sometimes disorienting shifts in perspective can therefore be read as important symbolic choices designed to highlight the idea of the consequence of violence on Snake, and perhaps by extension on the player him or herself as an embodied subject. The shift to the first person moves the violence in those moments closer to the player's own field of vision, as Snake is not on screen to serve as an extra buffer. The shifting perspective can also be considered as a manifestation of Snake's own psyche. The narrative reminds the player that certain moments, such as the horrific slaughter that takes place in the hospital during the game's opening Prologue mission, become indelibly etched into Snake's memory. It would be naïve to think he simply bears witness to all of this violence without also bearing a lasting mark. Soraya Murray argues of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s exploration of the toll of violence, "It demonstrates the erosion of American militarized masculinity through inglorious conflict, with a corresponding commentary on the use of violence within the context of shooters; in fact, these are its most discussed interventions" (39). *The Phantom Pain* takes a different angle on the toll of violence by focusing on and juxtaposing events against the overarching philosophy of the Boss and the Diamond Dogs, considering the concepts of a "war without end," a free and voluntary paid private army, and the insidious cost of a life surrounded by threats and violence.

In addition to the game's particular selection of player perspective, the varying means by which the story unravels is important to consider. Narrative is revealed directly by playing through the various main and

side missions, which are fully voiced,[13] and also through an extensive catalog of cassette tapes, which contain everything from mission briefings, to insights into the larger mythology of the *Metal Gear* series, to more information on individual characters through recorded conversations between characters, or characters reading intelligence briefings filling in the historical context of the game. Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca explore the idea of how the player interacts with a digital story by considering how "the player experience of narrative resonates with Gordon Calleja's more recent concept of 'alterbiography,' defined as the 'active construction of an ongoing story that develops through interaction with the game world's topography, inhabitants, objects, and game rules and simulated environmental properties.' Calleja is also influenced by Iser and talks about how the scripted narrative inspires and becomes a part of the player's alterbiography, creating narrative involvement" (255). Brendan Keogh asserts of his own experience playing *Spec Ops: The Line*:

> What I got out of it most were questions about the shooter genre itself—the questions that other shooters either willfully ignore or simply don't think to ask. Is it really okay to be shooting this many people? Does it actually matter that they aren't real? What does it say about us, the people who play shooter after shooter, the people who have a virtual murder count in the thousands of thousands, that these are the games we enjoy playing? What does it say about us, as a culture, that these are the kinds of games that make so much money? (Kindle locations 106–111.)

The questions and issues brought to Keogh's mind by *Spec Ops: The Line* readily apply to *Metal Gear Solid V*. The player considers the idea of consequence and the idea of whether or not events *matter* in these games by experiencing the narrative content across a number of different forms, from dialogue to listening to audiocassettes containing mission briefings. By filling in details and providing a strong sense of narrative and historical place, *Metal Gear Solid V* compels the player to think about consequences both in-game and as they relate symbolically to events in the post-9/11 landscape.

In *The Phantom Pain,* interactions with these narrative extras are requisite on the part of the player to allow him or her to experience the narrative in its entirety. Much as it might be if the events of *The Phantom Pain,* however farfetched, were real, someone in Snake's position

would not simply have situations explained to him by some omniscient participant. Instead, as he does in the game, and therefore as the player does via embodiment and agency, Snake learns about the world—one he has been absent from for nine years while he has been in a coma—not only through direct interactions with other characters but also through vast intelligence files, some of which are available at the game's start and others that unlock as the player completes missions and obtains more context and information about Skull Face's machinations.[14] Matthew Thomas Payne argues:

> Contemporary video war games are typically advertised as offering players ever-increasing levels of visual and aural realism and computational verisimilitude. However, because simulation fever … is latent in all games and is of particular concern to titles that trade in simulated violence, military-themed games must be packaged in such a way that celebrates acceptable technological or aesthetic attributes— elements like algorithmic sophistication or an attention to historical accuracy—while sidestepping issues that might spur critical reflection about war games' inability to model the social reality that attends to worldly conflict ("Military Realism" 306).

The focus of Matthew Thomas Payne's article is *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, although he applies the concept more broadly to military-style shooters. *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* both manage to avoid falling into the very problem Payne discusses: the deflection of conversation about social realities. By contrast, those social realities build to become the scaffolding on which the games' narratives build. It is perhaps through the games' balancing of historicity and ahistoricity and their embracing of the bizarre—elements like the appearance of the Man on Fire and the Floating Boy—that serve to anchor the narrative in a conversation about violence, trauma, and PTSD. The next chapter considers the colliding concepts of history, historicity, and fictional space as *Metal Gear Solid V* contends with them, presenting a sobering treatise on modern warfare and violence.

NOTES

1. The XOF is a branch of Cipher's forces. XOF is not an acronym, but is "Fox" spelled backward. FOX was a black ops branch created by the CIA only to eventually be dissolved. The Militaires Sans Frontieres included

the FOX logo on their uniforms for a time. In *The Phantom Pain,* the FOX logo is one option the player can choose for Mother Base's flags.

2. There is a degree of ambiguity in *Ground Zeroes.* Camp Omega is described as an American black site, yet XOF agents, led by Skull Face, appear to freely come and go. Therefore, it is possible that the ground forces Snake must subdue, sneak past, or kill are a combination of the two.

3. The scene with Snake appears to be a bit of deliberate misdirection. It is actually a scene in which Snake has no choice but to shoot a number of Mother Base soldiers who had become infected with the Wolbachia parasite. The two trailers for the games mentioned here can be viewed at these sites: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3J9_L2Tg6k and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sExY86uB3To.

4. The events in these missions are considered at length in further chapters.

5. Owing to specific narrative events that are examined later in their own right, the player will end "Mission 43: Bright Lights, Even in Death" with Snake having a devil's horn.

6. *Segment Next* has an in-depth guide to Demon and Heroism points here: http://segmentnext.com/2015/09/04/mgsv-phantom-pain-heroism-and-demon-snake-guide-decisions-to-get-hero-points/. *PC Gamer* provides additional information on the system here: http://www.pcgamer.com/metal-gear-solid-5s-hidden-karma-system/, including a link to an extensive breakdown of points related to nearly every action, lethal and non-lethal, that the player can take.

7. The incentive to play non-lethally is not something that is universally forced on the player. Because the player can accumulate a number of Demon Points before Snake's appearance changes, and thus a visible penalty is incurred, the player does have agency to act with a combination of lethality and stealth. Some missions offer optional objectives that are necessarily lethal should the player carry them out. For example, in "Mission 6: Where Do the Bees Sleep," the player has an optional objective of destroying a gunship, an enemy helicopter. Certainly, if the player is not interested in this, or prefers lethality, that is left open as well. In my own playthrough, I acted with just this sort of combination. Stealthy takedowns become easier as the game progresses and the player unlocks better and more accurate weaponry capable of dealing a stun bullet and better stealth gear.

8. During the game, Snake encounters specific enemies known as Skulls. They have been genetically modified and are formidable foes. Snake has the option of killing them or fleeing from them in most missions, and I think, though I have been unable to confirm, that killing Skulls does not count toward the penalty given for killing enemy soldiers.

9. Companions cannot be killed by player inaction. Instead, after the companion has sustained a high level of damage, Ocelot angrily intervenes and evacuates the companion from the mission zone.

10. First-person perspective, as the name implies, finds the player exploring the game world as if he or she is really in it. This means that when a player wields a weapon, he or she sees a hand in front, as though it were the player's own limb. Third-person perspective, by contrast, finds the game's camera focused behind the player and, often, above the shoulder of the player's avatar. This means that for the entirety of the game, the player sees, in full, the character he or she embodies in the game. The in-game camera will often enable the player to rotate perspective, meaning that he or she can pan around that avatar, affording a full 360-degree view.

11. I am a lifelong gamer and have played from both perspectives. On a personal note, I concur that my level of immersion or my sense of interest in a game's narrative has never depended on whether I am playing in first or third person. I would argue that although first person places the player more directly within the fictive space—given that the player "sees" the world as though through his or her own eyes—this creates a different form of immersion than those games wherein the player views his or her avatar on-screen in third person. However, this does not mean that this different perspective lessens the narrative impact or even provides a significantly different experience.

12. First/Third Person Shooter.

13. This means that as the player moves through the world he or she hears snippets or conversations or cries for help and other immersive elements, rather than only having dialogue appear as subtitles on-screen.

14. *Ground Zeroes,* a much shorter game with a narrower narrative scope than *The Phantom Pain,* contains fewer of these extra elements, but most notably provides an encyclopedia containing entries with some background on characters, including Snake, Chico, and Paz, for those new to the series.

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