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"Don't worry, it's a game! It's a game just like usual."— *Metal Gear Solid 2*, the Military-Entertainment Complex, and Memetics in the Digital Age

Abstract

The adage "it's just a game" is commonly used to dismiss video games as simple entertainment incapable of having any meaningful impact on their audience. However, it only takes looking at the latest *Call of Duty* game's record-breaking profits to see that video games, especially franchise wargames, are a major part of modern American culture. Considering that wargames rarely look outside a narrow, US-centric perspective of war, understanding them within a wider context of militarized entertainment can shed light on how this context intersects with their cultural influence. The influential military stealth/action-adventure video game franchise *Metal Gear* is a rare example of a wargame franchise that presents a critical perspective of both war in general and U.S. nationalism in particular. This franchise occupies a unique position within and yet aware and critical of the military-entertainment complex: a reciprocal and mutually beneficial, though not necessarily direct, relationship between the U.S. military and the entertainment industry. This paper will examine the game *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* and its portrayal of the military-entertainment complex. This line of inquiry reveals how the game challenges the player to think critically about their position within the military-entertainment complex by using fourth wall-breaking parallels between the player and

the player character, Raiden, as well as how the game situates its discussion of these issues within a wider context of U.S. nationalism and digital information. *MGS2* is an illustration of how video games can discuss complex topics and shape people's perspectives, demonstrating the importance of considering them critically instead of allowing their influence to remain unchallenged behind the assumption that "it's just a game."

Keywords: Metal Gear, video games, military-entertainment complex, franchise wargames, memetics

Introduction

If you want to understand the significance of video games in the United States, look no further than the latest *Call of Duty* game. Including presales, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (2022) made over $800 million in the first three days of its release—over double the box office record-holding opening weekend of *Avengers: Endgame* (Hume). The game's financial success demonstrates video games' economic power and—perhaps more importantly—their cultural reach. Mike Hume, editor of *The Washington Post*'s video games and esports department *Launcher*, writes that "it's well worth thinking of Call of Duty beyond a mere 'video game' and more as a cultural touchstone," as much a part of American culture as the NFL. Despite their reputation as frivolous or even harmful, video games have become widespread and culturally influential. Suraya Murray, associate professor in the Film & Digital Media Department at UC Santa Cruz, agrees with Hume's assessment. She describes a "gulf between the notion that games are the lowest of low culture and their simultaneous explosive expansion as a global form of visual culture" (7), arguing that video games are important cultural artifacts that—like other forms of culture—both shape and reflect the society that creates them. There is therefore a dual

importance to studying video games. Games like *Call of Duty* have millions of players and thus influence millions of people, so it's valuable to understand what perspectives they influence people toward, in what ways, and for what reasons. Reflecting on video games can also reveal aspects of our own society that are otherwise hidden behind normalization, as Murray points out. "Such insights," she explains, "may accord us more agency as stakeholders within a given context, in a given time" (15). Despite their reputation, video games are culturally influential and thus valuable subjects of study.

Video games' influence is especially important to examine in light of how many games depict real-world events, usually from the US military's perspective. To take one example, *Call of Duty* is rife with real-world geopolitical events used to evoke a strong emotional response, and because most franchise wargames puts players in the role of US military soldiers, the emotional response will likely be favorable to the US military. Both Hume and games critic Ed Smith point to a level in *Modern Warfare II (2022)* where players take on the role of a missile that kills the Iranian general "Ghorbrani," whose appearance resembles an actual Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, who was killed by a US drone strike in January 2020. "Ghorbrani's" assassination is designed to focus players' attention on the dramatic gameplay, creating strong affect at the expense of critical consideration of the events—and, by extension, those events' real-world counterparts. Such depictions can also go beyond merely uncritical and become what Charlie Hall, journalist and editor at gaming news site *Polygon*, calls "a fictional contortion that bends toward propaganda." Hall discusses how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) mentions a road called "the Highway of Death" where civilians were bombed while fleeing a war zone. This is the name of a real-world event in the Gulf War in which the U.S. allegedly committed war

crimes against civilians, yet *Modern Warfare* attributes the atrocity to the game's Russian antagonist (Hall). Shifting the blame redirects negative affect from the US to its geopolitical rival. What does it mean that such a "cultural touchstone," as Hume says, uncritically supports the US military?

Franchise wargames' positive depiction of the US military can be contextualized in the reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship between the military and the games industry known as the military-entertainment complex. There is a shared history between the games industry and the US military—early video games evolved from and alongside military-funded war simulators; the two entities share ideas, technology, and personnel; and the military even released an official video game, *America's Army*, in which players go through simulated basic training and whose website includes a link to the Army recruitment page. However, as Lenoir and Caldwell point out in their book *The Military-Entertainment Complex*, this relationship is not always direct or intentional. They argue the most significant driver of the military-entertainment complex is that positively portraying the US military solves practical economic and game design problems, creating a common interest between the military and the games industry. With digital technology reshaping how information is spread, Lenoir and Caldwell note that "the production and modulation of affect became central to the capitalist enterprise" (92); attaching positive affect to a product makes consumers feel more connected to it and thus more likely to spend money on it. For franchise wargames, positive affect comes from making war feel fun and largely heroic. As Lenoir and Caldwell point out, realistic depictions of war are deeply unpleasant and thus run counter to the goal of producing positive affect—even when wargames depict traumas, "they are framed as situations that demand a heroic (and violent) response rather than as situations that call

the exercise of that [state] violence into question" (88). Games can also use military technology as progression rewards, which motivates players to continue investing time in a game (Lenoir and Caldwell 97). The reward structure positions cutting-edge or near-future military technology as desirable, and the technology often provides an advantage in combat, which encourages players to consider it "cool." Though this process, positive affect becomes attached to the game—including the parts of it that mirror the real world, like guns and drone strikes. At the same time, positive depictions of the US military and its technology is normalized by their omnipresence in franchise wargames (and other media), constructing the US military's perspective as "just the way things are."

This influence on people's perspectives is especially potent and significant to investigate in games because it is presented in a format where players may not be aware their perspective is being shaped at all. Murray argues that "playable culture" like franchise wargames are "just that: a way of playing with culture and playing with politics – potentially without any kind of moral and ethical buy-in" (13). The assumed cultural and rhetorical vapidity of video game obscures their ability to influence people's perspectives and makes it easier for players to uncritically accept a positive perspective of the US military. Influencing players toward the perspective of the US military is a side effect of the games industry's ludic and economic conditions, but the influence being unintended does not make it any less potent.

Video games' warping perspective of reality fits into a larger context of technology and new forms of digital information influencing people's perspectives. Penny Von Eschen, Chair of American Studies and Professor of History at the University of Virginia, draws a line from how *Call of Duty* "undermines participant senses of historical/political reality" (244) to the 2008

McCain presidential campaign's erosion of the idea of objective truth, which was itself a precursor to the Trump campaign's destabilization of democracy (233). Von Eschen touches on similar ideas to Phillips and Milner's analysis in their book *You Are Here* of how the internet unleashed a flood of digital mis-, dis-, and malinformation—what they collectively call information pollution—which reinforces "ideological silos" that undermine shared ideas of reality (3). The similarities between Von Eschen's and Phillips and Milner's analyses of shared truth point to the military-entertainment complex as a source of information pollution. Like how Phillips and Milner describe information pollution shaping people's fundamental view of the world without their conscious knowledge, franchise wargames adopt the US military's perspective and thereby influence players toward it. Video games are important to understand in this context because they are often overlooked as meaningful texts, and this lack of awareness makes it harder for people to recognize how games influence their perspectives; as Murray says, "the faulty idea that video games are unimportant galvanizes their power" (15). It is vital to understand how video games interact with digital information pollution in order to find alternatives from the military-entertainment complex's normalized, uncritical portrayal of the US military.

This paper will examine a rare example of a wargame franchise that takes a critical perspective on the US military. *Metal Gear*, created by Hideo Kojima[1] and published by Konami, is a stealth action/adventure franchise that includes 23 games across 31 years, most prominently the *Metal Gear Solid* series. The franchise pioneered the stealth genre, was one of the earliest

[1] Attributing the creation of a game—let alone an entire series—to a single person is an oversimplification that obscures invaluable and often underappreciated contributions from countless other people. I use this language here for the sake of simplicity and because Kojima is known for having unusually high creative control on his projects—a rarity for video games that makes him one of the few industry figures who can be considered an "auteur"—so his creative intent is valuable to consider for analysis.

action series to heavily feature narrative, and is often included among the best games of all time (Perry et al., Wikipedia). *Metal Gear* is far more critical of both war in general and the US military specifically than is typical for the military-entertainment complex, and intentionally so. In his podcast *Brain Structure*, Kojima explains that part of his initial goal for *Metal Gear* was to provide context that allowed players to think critically about combat, rather than make enemies whose only purpose is to kill or be killed (Spotify Studios). Like other franchise wargames, *Metal Gear* often grounds itself in real-world events, but it reverses the military-entertainment complex's focus on positive affect over questioning wider contexts in order to explore implications outside the US military's positive portrayal. In an interview about *Metal Gear Solid V*, Kojima says, "Hollywood continues to present the US army as being the good guys, always defeating the aliens or foreigners… I am trying to present an alternate view in these games" (Parkin). Present an alternate view he did; *Metal Gear Solid V* features a Guantanamo Bay-like detention facility run by the US military from which the player rescues tortured prisoners (including a 13-year-old) who sob in relief as they're freed. Contrast this portrayal, which creates negative affect attached to the US military and its treatment of terror suspects, with how *Call of Duty*'s Highway of Death deflects alleged US war crimes onto the country's geopolitical rival. *Metal Gear* frequently challenges the military-entertainment complex's portrayal of the US military, which makes the series valuable to examine as a counterpoint to most franchise wargames.

Metal Gear games are not the only ones to be critical of the military-entertainment complex, but the series strikes a unique balance between criticism and popular appeal. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a notable example that many scholars have identified as subversive, and Lenoir and

Caldwell specifically note that its criticism is more focused and direct than *Metal Gear*'s. However, despite praise from critics, *Spec Ops: The Line* had an underwhelming sales performance. Its critical and unflinching depiction of the trauma of war created strong negative affect attached to the US military and the military-entertainment complex itself, challenging their typical depictions, but the corollary is that the game was emotionally unpleasant. By breaking what Lenoir and Caldwell describe as the "primordial coupling between violence and positive affect," *Spec Ops: The Line* became less appealing to consumers and thus had a limited reach for its criticism. *Metal Gear* breaks this trend: it is more critical than others with similar influence and popularity. The series has a wildly varying tone, which can be jarring but also counterbalances the negative affect of more accurately depicting war. Kojima describes intentionally adding humorous elements to break up tension, using them as an alternative source of positive affect that is important to keep players engaged through games that can take tens of hours to complete (Peckham). *Metal Gear* also does not fully break away from Lenoir and Caldwell's "primordial coupling," putting it in a unique position within the military-entertainment complex while simultaneously aware and critical of it. *Metal Gear*'s combination of criticism and popularity makes it a strong source of insight on the military-entertainment complex.

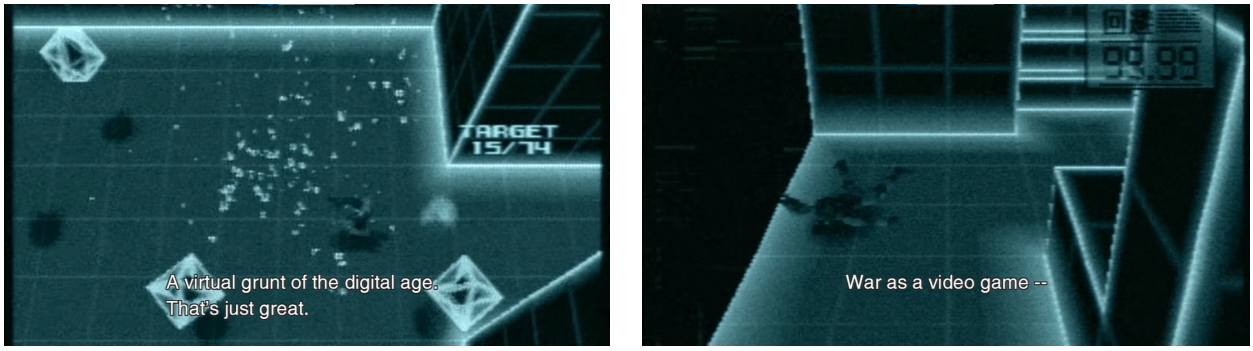
For the sake of scope, this analysis will be limited to the game *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (hereafter *MGS2*), which was chosen for its popularity and influence, direct criticism of the military-entertainment complex, and resonance with Phillips and Milner's analysis of digital information pollution. The inquiry is guided by the question "How does *MGS2* challenge the military-entertainment complex?" It will begin by examining how parallels between the

player and the player character, Raiden, encourage the player to think critically about their own position within the military-entertainment complex. Next, it will discuss how the parallels become stronger as *MGS2* breaks the fourth wall, providing players with a direct illustration of how video games can affect their perspective. It will also show how *MGS2* places the military-entertainment complex within the broader context of how U.S. nationalism shapes and weaponizes digital information. Finally, it will consider how *MGS2*'s ending invites the player to think critically about and break away from the military-entertainment complex. This analysis aims to use *MGS2* as a case study to illustrate the importance of thinking critically about video games and how they can affect people's perspectives.

Raiden and the Player: Implicit Parallels

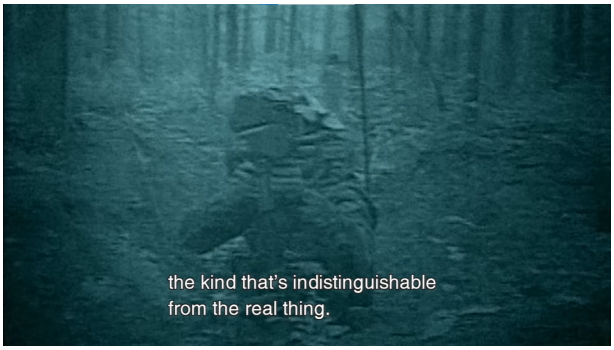
Raiden was created to have a lot in common with the player. He is a rookie soldier with no field experience who was purposefully designed to be less impressive than *Metal Gear Solid*'s previous protagonist Solid Snake; in an interview with the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, Kojima explains that he created Raiden so "new players could play [him] and it would make sense that they weren't the ultimate bad-ass" (GamesIndustry International). The player sharing a similar skill level with Raiden means means it is easier for them to relate to him. Intentionally building a connection between players and their in-game character is common in interactive mediums, which can build a strong connection to characters because the player is directly controlling and interacting with the world through them, but creating a new character specifically to more closely parallel the player suggests this connection was especially significant for *MGS2*.

Building on this common ground, *MGS2* equates Raiden's training—which was all done in virtual reality—to the player's (potential) experience from its prequel *MGS1*. The most immediate parallel this sets up is that both Raiden and the player have only experienced war through simulation. Raiden's role as a more fallible protagonist then suggests that simulations were not able to fully prepare him for combat, questioning the ability of digital technologies to accurately portray war. The game gets much more direct, though; when Raiden is explaining his training to Solid Snake, their conversation plays over footage of bonus "VR" levels from *MGS1* (see Fig. 1). In this discussion, Solid Snake expresses scorn at the idea that VR training is effective, arguing that it downplays real-life consequences and therefore gives participants an artificial affinity for war: "War as a video game-- what better way to raise the ultimate soldier?" Through Snake, *MGS2* argues that video games—including *MGS2* itself—show a version of war that makes players more likely to think more positively of war and the military. This is a direct criticism of the military-entertainment complex. Yet, at the same time, *MGS2* is citing a work in its own series as contributing to that inaccurate portrayal, so that clear criticism is complicated by the game's contribution to the issue it is challenging. This complexity is an excellent illustration of *Metal Gear*'s nuanced relationship with the military-entertainment complex.



(Fig. 1.1 and 1.2: footage of *MGS1* playing during discussion of Raiden's VR training. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

It is also notable that the footage of *MGS1* missions is contrasted with real-world footage of military training (see Fig. 2). Stamenković et al., in their analysis of *MGS1*, point out that the game uses real-world documentary footage as a rhetorical tool when discussing real-world issues to encourage its audience to make connections from the game to their own lives (18). This supports the idea that Raiden and Solid Snake's discussion of simulated military training is intended to reflect the real world military-entertainment complex. Furthermore, combining this with Kojima's statements on how Raiden was created to mirror the player, *MGS2* can be interpreted as not just arguing that wargames present a misleadingly sanitized perspective of war but also suggesting that, like Raiden, the player themself has been misled in a way that extends beyond games and into real life. In much the way that Lenoir and Caldwell describe military-based entertainment "encouraging viewers to step into the shoes of real soldiers" (23), *MGS2* places players in the shoes of Raiden—but simultaneously places Raiden in the role of a subject within the military-entertainment complex, allowing the player to reflect on their own situation.



(Fig. 2.1 and 2.2: footage of real-life military exercises playing during discussion of Raiden's VR training. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

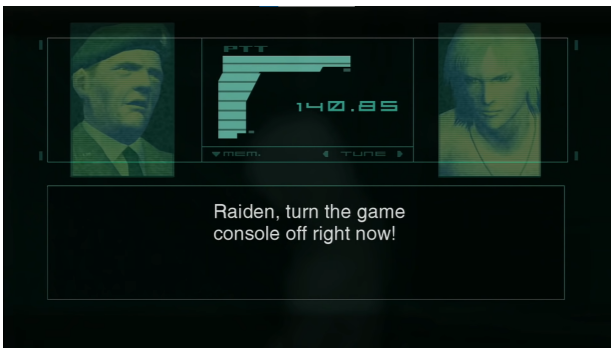
Breaking the Fourth Wall: "Solid Snake Simulation"

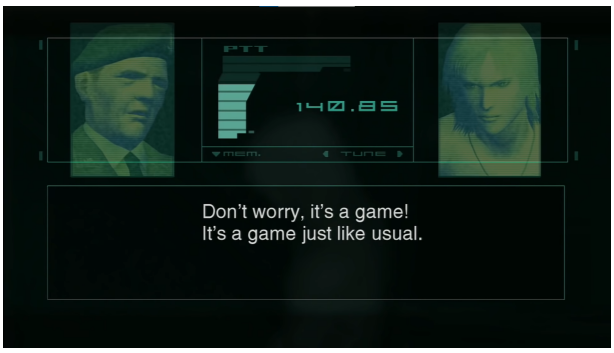
The Raiden/player parallels become more explicit as *MGS2* continues, especially when the game begins breaking the fourth wall. *MGS2* sometimes bends the fourth wall or makes self-aware references to its medium, such as Colonel Campbell—Raiden's commanding officer, who gives orders via video call—instructing Raiden/the player to "press the SELECT button" to answer calls and occasionally mentioning the mission playing out according to a "simulation." These references reinforce similarities between Raiden and the player, but in a subtle, somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner. If a player is not already convinced video games can meaningfully affect them, they may not think further about their parallels with Raiden, so critical discussion of the military-entertainment complex like the conversation between Snake and Raiden remains contained within the fiction of the game's narrative.

(Fig. 3.1 and 3.2: The AI "Campbell" breaking the fourth wall. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

That changes when, near the game's climax, Raiden realizes Campbell is actually an AI controlled by the Patriots, the faction masterminding the game's plot—at which point "Campbell" begins glitching and spouting "nonsense" that directly addresses the player and orders them to stop playing (see Fig. 3). Soon after, the game itself beings "glitching." In one section, a garbled version of the Mission Failed screen that says "Fission Mailed" pops up while the player is still alive, and the game continues in the corner that normally shows Raiden's death (see Fig. 4). Raiden is not directly affected by the "Fission Mailed" screen, so the "glitch" can be seen as the AI interfering directly with the player, enforcing its orders to turn back. Sven Dwulecki, analyzing rhetorical techniques of the *Metal Gear Solid* series, defines fourth wall

breaks like the AI's threats and the "Fission Mailed" screen as immersion fractures: intentional breaks of the player's immersion to directly deliver a rhetorical point (162). Immersion fractures are particularly memorable moments in games—which makes them rhetorically powerful (Dwulecki 163). Here, *MGS2*'s rhetorical point is emphasizing video games' power to influence players in real life. "Campbell" telling the player not to worry because "it's a game" implies games are trivial and cannot meaningfully affect people. Coming from an antagonist—one directly addressing the player, no less—it invites the player to challenge this assumption. If the player listens to him and stops playing, they were just affected by a video game, disproving Campbell's point. Otherwise, by actively chooses to disobey Campbell and keep playing, they refuse to accept "it's a game" as synonymous with "it doesn't matter"; even if they are largely ignoring the narrative as Lenoir and Caldwell point out can occur with complicated plots in franchise wargames (33), spending their time playing the game means, on some level, it has value for them. Either way, the player's actions undermine the assumption that games cannot affect people.



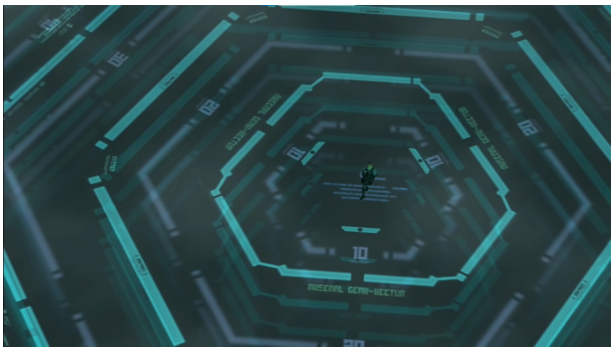


(Fig. 3.1 and 3.2: The AI "Campbell" breaking the fourth wall. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

(Fig. 4: “Fission Mailed” screen with the game continuing to play in the top left. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

The immersion fractures also take the Raiden/player parallels out of hypothetical territory. Both Raiden and the player are being ordered by a computer program—the Patriots’ AI, which is also a meta-narrative representation of *MGS2* itself for the player— to stop investigating further, and the player likely shares Raiden’s confusion, putting them in a similar emotional state. The player is now experiencing *MGS2*’s narrative *with* Raiden rather than *as* or *through* him. As Dwulecki says, “In a subtle manner, the player is persuaded to alter her reference frame from the digital towards the real world” (165)—*MGS2* wants the player to know they aren’t safe from being manipulated like Raiden just because they're on the other side of the fourth wall. *MGS2*’s fourth wall breaks force the player to confront the assumption games don’t affect people and brings Raiden and the player into explicit parallel.

The game/reality line is further blurred by the reveal of the S3 Plan, a military training program that mirrors real-life *Metal Gear Solid* games. There are three explanations of S3 in *MGS2*'s climax that each reveal a deeper layer of the plan. The first explanation comes from antagonist Solidus Snake (not to be confused with Solid Snake), who explains S3, or Solid Snake Simulation, as "a development program to artificially reproduce Solid Snake, the perfect warrior" through VR training. Raiden's VR training, which recreated *MGS1*'s plot and VR missions with him in the role of Solid Snake, was orchestrated as part of S3. The explanation takes place in a new environment with a digital aesthetic (see Fig. 5), which emphasizes the blur between game and reality as well as between Raiden and the player. That blur intensifies when antagonist Revolver Ocelot reveals S3's scope goes beyond VR: all of *MGS2*'s plot was an orchestrated recreation of *MGS1*'s plot, intentionally repeating plot points (such as a virus and a mysterious ninja) in order to recreate the circumstances that shaped Solid Snake into an effective soldier. While S3 was designed to mirror *MGS1*, Ocelot's explanation reveals S3 doesn't just mirror *MGS2*: it *is MGS2*. The equivalence is emphasized when he says, "Everything you've done here has been scripted -- a little exercise set up by us." The phrasing is purposefully ambiguous about who "us" refers to. On the literal level, Ocelot is referring to the Patriots, the group he works for and the creators of S3; however, "us" can also be interpreted as the game designers, with the "exercise" being *MGS2* itself. The meaning is especially blurred because of the earlier immersion fractures—as Dwulecki says, the player's frame of reference has shifted to the real world, which makes it easier to interpret ambiguous discussions of "simulations" and "scripted" exercises as breaks in the fourth wall. (This remains a common theme throughout the rest of the game.)

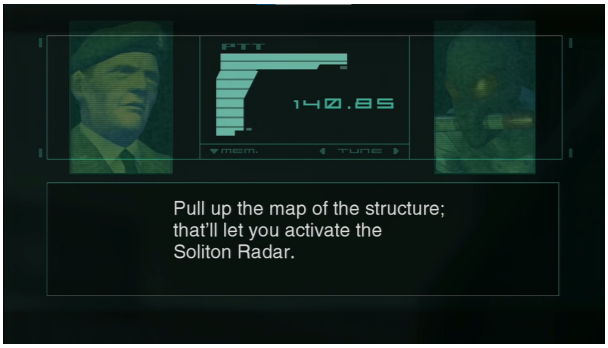



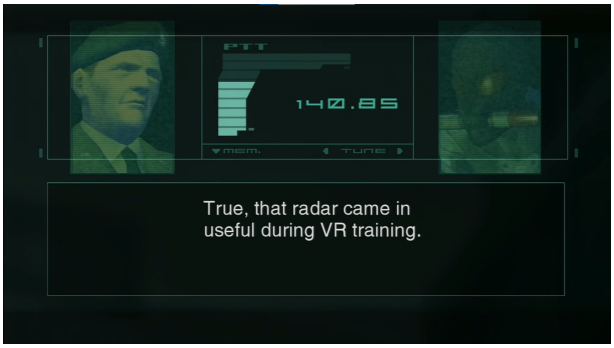
(Fig. 5.1 and 5.2: Raiden in a digital-looking setting during Solidus' explanation. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

The ambiguity means the subject of S3 can be Raiden, the player, or both; their roles are no longer distinct. Solid Snake is the player character in *MGS1*, so by playing through the events of *MGS1* as Snake, Raiden essentially took on the role of a *Metal Gear Solid* player. Conversely, in the context of immersion fractures that established how video games can affect the player regardless of how "real" they are, the player takes on the role of a subject manipulated by the military-entertainment complex into performing (simulated) violence. *MGS2* asks the player how, if simulations of *MGS1*'s events shaped Raiden into a soldier, how are *MGS1* and *MGS2* (and other wargames)—which, as video games, are simulations of the same (or similar) events—shaping the player? Unlike previous discussions of Raiden/player parallels in relation to the military-entertainment complex, the explanation of S3 provides an explicit answer: wargames like *MGS1* influence the player toward becoming a soldier.

Ocelot's explanation also emphasizes how S3 and *MGS2* shaped Raiden and the player's actions by presenting events from the perspective of gamified, simulated war. Because Raiden

had no real-world training, his only exposure to combat was through S3's VR missions, which means he sees events through the lens of his VR training. Similarly, the player sees events as part of a video game. In both cases, their perspective encourages solving problems within certain parameters and using certain tools, mimicking approaches that were successful in VR training/*MGS1* and/or other wargames the player is familiar with (see Fig. 6). It also motivates them to take the role of a soldier in order to complete stated objectives. Tanner Higgin, in his analysis of *MGS2*, observes that "[the Patriots], much like game designers, are committed to creating spaces of potential actions that suggest outcomes, but do not prescribe them" (257). Video games are designed to make the player *want* to play them. They offer both implicit and explicit rewards for completing objectives, ranging from VFX when hitting enemies to publicly visible achievements and, ultimately, winning the game. These rewards tap into affect, which unconsciously shapes the player's behavior (Lenoir and Caldwell 96)—completing game objectives feels satisfying, so players want to complete tasks presented as objectives.





(Fig. 6.1: Campbell explaining the Soliton Radar, a key tool introduced in *MGS1*. Fig. 6.2: Raiden remembering the Soliton Radar from his VR training (which was modeled after *MGS1*).) Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

S3 extends this gamified perspective to war. As Lenoir and Caldwell explain, in the process of making their objectives feel satisfying, wargames typically emphasize (and often fabricate) positive aspects of war such as heroics and satisfying challenge while downplaying negative aspects like brutality or lasting trauma (88). As a result, positive affect from completing objectives becomes attached to conducting military missions. Gamified war therefore influences the player to want to do military missions, ostensibly as part of a game, although that influence is (as has been discussed) not confined to games—the U.S. military uses gaming as a recruitment tool, from creating their official video game *America's Army* (Nieborg 63) to sponsoring *Call of Duty* esports teams (Cox). S3 made Raiden into a real (within the game's narrative) soldier by first shaping him as a virtual soldier; it shaped the player into a virtual soldier, suggesting it and other wargames also have the potential to shape the player into a real soldier—or at least someone who thinks more favorably about completing military missions than they would have otherwise. As Ocelot says, "Given the right situation, the right story, anyone can be shaped into Snake." By controlling the perspective from which Raiden and the player see events, the Patriots and the game designers are able to shape their actions toward completing military missions without directly controlling them.

S3's control is reinforced by *MGS2*'s lack of agency. S3/*MGS2* often provides moment-to-moment agency, such as multiple lethal and non-lethal options for Raiden/the player to defeat or bypass enemies. However, allowing them to make these small-scale choices distracts from how the Patriots/game designers control the wider context in which those choices occur. Unlike *MGS1*—which has two possible endings depending on the player's actions—*MGS2* has a linear story, denying the player agency in the overall narrative. As digital humanities researcher

Jordan Youngblood notes, “even the best players of *MGS2* may discover themselves lacking any real control over the game, no matter how well they can navigate the playable scenarios” (217). A linear story adds meta-narrative weight to S3’s control; the parameters of *MGS2*’s code are a real-world manifestation of the in-story parameters created by S3, limiting Raiden’s actions twice over and allowing S3 to reach across the fourth wall. S3/*MGS2* does not have the same literal control over the player that *MGS2*’s code has over Raiden, but it still shaped their actions. In a simple sense, *MGS2*’s parameters led them to press certain buttons on their controller; more abstractly (and taking into account *MGS2*’s fourth wall breaks), the parameters led them to complete (simulated) military missions using a set range of approaches, which is exactly what S3 did to Raiden.

The lack of player agency Ocelot points out is also a purposeful use of procedural rhetoric to challenge the military-entertainment complex. Ian Bogost introduces the concept of procedural rhetoric in *Persuasive games: the expressive power of videogames* as a way “to make claims about *how things work*” (29) through processes, especially processes executed by computers (like those within a video game). According to Bogost, “each [piece] in a procedural representation is a claim about how part of the system it represents does, should, or could function” (36). When S3 presents war from a gamified perspective to create a context in which its subjects want to conduct real and/or simulated military missions, it makes a procedural argument that the real-world system they represent—the military-entertainment complex—does the same. Higgin points out this use of rhetoric makes the overall arguments more effective because "[the player] is not only told she is being controlled but she is meant to feel and intuit it" (253). On its own, S3 manipulating Raiden simply suggests to the player they are being

manipulated by the military-entertainment complex. By creating a relationship in which the player themself is manipulated in parallel with Raiden, then making that shared manipulation the center of the game's plot and connecting it to real-world circumstances, the player experiences *MGS2*'s arguments much more viscerally and gains a deeper understanding of how the military-entertainment complex not only *can* affect but *is* affecting them.

The Patriots and "Selection for Societal Sanity"

The final and most accurate explanation of S3 comes from the Patriots, *MGS2*'s ultimate antagonists, and it emphasizes the military-entertainment complex's ability to shape its subjects' perspectives. S3 actually stands for "Selection for Societal Sanity." Rather than training soldiers, its primary purpose is to shape subjects' perspectives by controlling and manipulating information; Raiden and the player's training was a test before the Patriots implemented it on a societal scale by filtering all information on the internet. As the Patriots explain, "The S3 is a system for controlling human will and consciousness. S3 is not you, a soldier trained in the image of Solid Snake. It is -- a method, a protocol, that created a circumstance that made you what you are." The explanation is accompanied by footage of *MGS1*'s Game Over screen and *MGS2*'s Fission Mailed fourth wall break, both of which are experienced by the player rather than the player character, further emphasizing the player's position as a subject of S3 alongside Raiden. The Patriots' description of S3 also aligns with the concept of procedural rhetoric, i.e. a process (particularly one run by a computer) that creates something persuasive. Again, S3 is equated to *MGS2* itself—and, more broadly, digital aspects of the military-entertainment complex like video games—which persuasively shape subjects' perspectives.

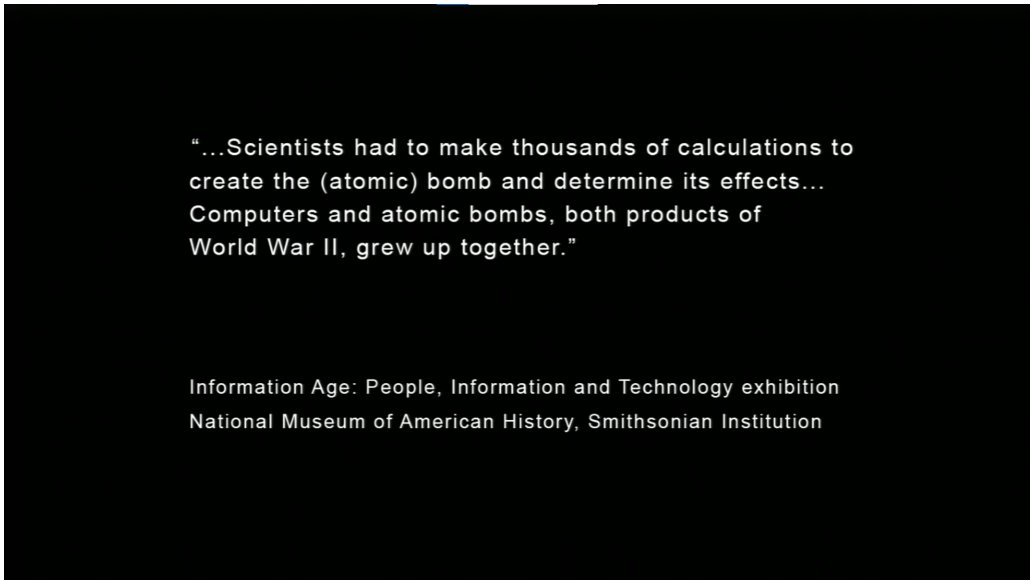
S3 shaped Raiden and the player's perspectives to lead them to complete military missions, but the important aspect was not the military missions—it was S3's ability to shape its subjects' actions by controlling the perspective from which they viewed events. This depiction of the military-entertainment complex is more nuanced than the initial explanation of S3 as a tool to train soldiers—and more accurate, according to analysis by Lenoir and Caldwell. They note that military-entertainment complex media "serve as vehicles for the militarization of the popular imagination" (47), normalizing the U.S. military's methods and technologies so that people "are predisposed to accept them as simply the way we conduct war today" (47). Higgin observes Raiden is "representative" of people influenced in this way (262), a reading supported by the Patriots' description of Raiden as "a perfect representative of the masses we need to protect." Additionally, Raiden—as the player character—is quite literally the player's representative in the game, emphasizing the player's manipulation on an immediate, personal level as well as on the societal scale of the military-entertainment complex. Higgin summarizes the relationship emphasized by S3: "[Whereas] Raiden is trapped within and shaped by the [S3] simulation, the modern player is ensnared within the seductive mythologies and trappings of the war video game which accustoms her to a world of conflict" (265). The Patriots' explanation of S3 argues the capacity of the military-entertainment complex to train potential recruits is overshadowed by its capacity to shape the *context* in which people think of war.

S3's purpose is to shape humanity through the control of memes, in the original sense of the word: units of culture that spread by imitation from person to person. As Limor Shifman explains in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, the term "meme" was originally coined by biologist Richard Dawkins as a cultural counterpart to "gene." "Like genes," she explains,

"memes are defined as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention," and "only memes suited to their sociocultural environment spread successfully" (9). While *MGS2* never uses the word "meme," characters describe information with genetic terms (eg. "Unlike an intron of history, I will be remembered as an exon"), and the Patriots directly explain the concept in relation to history: "We've always kept records of our lives… But not all the information was inherited by later generations. A small percentage of the whole was selected and processed, then passed on. Not unlike genes, really."[2] The Patriots posit digital technology like the internet will produce massive quantities of information with no regard for quality, leading to an accumulation of junk data and "selectively reward[ing] the development of convenient half-truths." In many ways, this mirrors observations by social media researchers twenty years later about information disorder, a state where dis-, mis-, and malinformation become so prevalent that it is difficult to distinguish true and false information (Wardle and Derakhshan, cited in Phillips and Milner). The Patriots argue this new information ecosystem will result in a loss of shared truth as people "stay inside their little ponds," avoiding forums where their understanding of "truth" might be challenged; once again, this mirrors modern observations about ideological silos, in which people with opposing viewpoints (particularly political ones) are exposed to such different information that they "struggle to agree even on basic facts" (Phillips and Milner 3). These silos are strengthened by the internet's flood of bad information (Noble, McIntyre, and Tripodi, cited in Phillips and Milner). The Patriots are concerned information pollution and its consequences will inhibit humanity's memetic evolution because

[2] Later *Metal Gear* games invoke memes by name, such as the character Liquid Ocelot in *Metal Gear Solid 4* describing part of *MGS2*'s plot as a plan to "free us from the control of the Patriots' memes." (And don't even get me started on Raiden's spin-off game, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, which cites Dawkins by name and contains the dialogue "Memes. The DNA of the soul.")

when people withdraw into ideological silos and stop engaging with other ideas, memetic natural selection will no longer be able to occur. The Patriots' goal is to use S3 to "wade through the sea of garbage [i.e. information pollution] you people produce, retrieve valuable truths and even interpret their meaning for later generations," processing massive quantities of information and manipulating it to shape people's perspectives. S3 does not solve information pollution; it simply makes the Patriots its sole producers so they alone can shape memetic evolution. In essence, S3 is a plan to control humanity's digital memes.



(Fig. 7: The opening screen of *MGS2*'s main narrative. Screenshots taken by Inigo Macey, game footage from SourceSpy91.)

Digital memes are the thematic core of *MGS2*, placing the military-entertainment complex in context as one aspect of digital technology's broader impact on society and entanglement with the U.S. military. The main part of *MGS2*'s narrative opens with a quote from the Smithsonian Institution's Information Age exhibit (see Fig. 7), which "explores how

information technology has changed our lives—as individuals and as a society" (*Smithsonian*). The quote notes how computers were developed in a military context and played a crucial role in creating nuclear weapons, underscoring the fundamental interconnectedness of digital technology and the military, suggesting they cannot always be cleanly separated, and positioning digital technology as an extension of military power. Opening with this quote establishes the entangled relationship between digital technology and the military as an important concept for the rest of the game. Also, while it's not stated directly, the "military" here is not abstract—the U.S. was the first country to develop nuclear weapons, and the only country to use them in war.

The theme manifests in *MGS2*'s narrative like many themes in *Metal Gear* games do: as a giant robot. The series' titular Metal Gears are giant bipedal, nuclear weapon-equipped robots, and the main objective in all previous *Metal Gear* games was destroying a Metal Gear. As Stamenković et al. discuss in their analysis of *MGS1*, Metal Gears are a focus for *Metal Gear*'s anti-war, and particularly anti-nuclear, rhetoric. *MGS2*'s Metal Gear is Arsenal Gear, which is notably different from other Metal Gears; it is magnitudes larger, and while it still has nuclear weapons, its most significant threat is its onboard AI, which runs S3. Whereas previous Metal Gears were thematic representations of the danger of nuclear weapons, Arsenal Gear represents the danger of militarized information control. *MGS2* draws attention to the significance of digital information, particularly the dangers of it being used by those in power.

The final element needed to contextualize S3 is an understanding of its creators, the Patriots, who are an embodiment of U.S. nationalism. The Patriots are a clandestine organization that secretly controls the entire U.S. political system. Although the concept is rooted in anti-Semetic conspiracy theories, *MGS2* (at least partially) departs from these roots; rather than a

hostile external force, as in many conspiracy theories, the Patriots—as their name suggests—are an embodiment of U.S. nationalism. S3 is run by an AI embodiment of the Patriots, which claims to be "the very discipline and morality that Americans invoke so often. … As long as this nation exists, so will we." The Patriots are presented as an integral part of the United States, subverting the typical conspiracy trope of a foreign, parasitic "other". The Patriots can also be read as embodying U.S. nationalism by being what Phillips and Milner call a deep memetic frame: an "ideological way of seeing and being" (Phillips and Milner 11). The Patriots AI describes itself as "[a] kind of consciousness" that evolved in the White House over hundreds of years, similar to how life first evolved from the oceans. The description lines up with the concept of a fundamental way of interpreting the world (Phillips and Milner 20), and its parallels to genetics point to the relevance of memetics in shaping this perspective. *MGS2* does more than subvert typical military-entertainment complex perspectives by making the U.S. "the bad guys"—it pits the player against the underlying ideology that shapes and empowers the country.

Reading the Patriots as a deep memetic frame draws attention to how *MGS2* discusses the relationship between nationalism and digital information pollution. S3 is a tool that manipulates digital information "not to control content, but to create context," as the Patriots explain. Deep memetic frames create the context in which people interpret information, which means the Patriots are attempting to use digital memes/information to make themselves, the deep memetic frame of U.S. nationalism, the only context through which people can see the world. This reinforces the Patriots' hegemonic power, shutting out any alternative perspectives and eroding subjects' abilities to think independently. *MGS2* uses a similar memetic framework to Phillips and Milner's research, which points to U.S. nationalist deep memetic frames as contributors to

the internet's current information pollution crisis (citation?). By placing the deep memetic frame of U.S. nationalism in an antagonistic role, *MGS2* encourages the player to think critically about its influence, particularly in the context of digital information. In reality, this relationship is not so direct as in *MGS2*—Lenoir and Caldwell point to the Bush administration's failure to control the narrative about Iraq War as an example of how the U.S. government is not all-powerful in its ability to shape subjects' perspectives—but similarities are certainly present. *MGS2* came out just a few weeks after the passage of the Patriot Act, a law which increased the U.S. government's power to monitor digital information for military purposes; although the degree of control is meaningfully different, the comparison to *MGS2*'s Patriots almost makes itself.[3] The U.S. military's official video game *America's Army* also came out less than a year later and is perhaps the most direct example of video games being used as military training tools (Nieborg). If U.S. nationalism is indeed shaping people's perspectives of war in ways that influence their actions via tools like the military-entertainment complex, as *MGS2* and many scholars argue, then alternative perspectives are important for people to make decisions with greater agency—particularly when it comes to topics as significant as war, which quite literally have life-and-death consequences. *MGS2*'s discussion of how the deep memetic frame of U.S. nationalism shapes digital information to reinforce its power draws attention to the dangers of nationalism manipulating information and perspectives in the digital age.

Resolution of S3

[3] Game development cycles are multiple years long, so the name "the Patriots" was chosen before the Patriot Act was created.

Ultimately, Raiden fails to defeat the Patriots. Even defeating the final boss was part of the Patriots' plan, taking the highly unusual step of leaving the game's biggest antagonist—the Patriots—entirely successful, denying the player a sense of accomplishment at what is usually the most triumphant point of a game's narrative. By having Raiden and the player fail to escape S3/*MGS2*'s influence, even after they become aware of the systems' manipulation, *MGS2* further underscores their position as subjects in the military-entertainment complex. Youngblood argues that "*MGS2*'s mission *is* failure… even the failure of a game to 'end' and the real world to begin" (221). This failure underscores the power of the military-entertainment complex; when Raiden and the player fail to break out of S3 and *MGS2*'s influence, it emphasizes that they have similarly failed to break out of the military-entertainment complex's influence in the real world. As the Patriots tell Raiden (and the player), "You accepted the fiction we've provided, obeyed our orders and did everything you were told to. The exercise is a resounding success." By playing a franchise wargame, even a subversive one, the player's perspective had already been shaped by the military-entertainment complex enough to accept war as a video game. Existing within and accepting the game's parameters meant Raiden and the player respectively had already lost.

However, Raiden and the player's shared failure also creates an opportunity to break away from the military-entertainment complex. *MGS2* communicates this via Solid Snake, who appears after the final boss fight give to Raiden advice on moving forward with the knowledge of S3's control (see Video Clip 1). Snake directly brings attention to the lack of agency Raiden and the player have in S3 and MGS2 when he says, "I know you didn't have much in terms of choices this time." This has a similar purpose to Ocelot's explanation of how the events of the

game were "scripted," but the key difference is that Snake follows up by offering a way to regain agency: "But everything you felt, thought about during this mission is yours. And what you decide to do with them is your choice…" This provides the first potential avenue to meaningfully escape the influence of S3 and *MGS2*. Snake's advice plays over real-life footage of New York City, which—recalling Stamenković et al.'s analysis—encourages players to make connections to real life. The footage may be especially effective because it contains scenes of everyday life, which creates a more explicit connection to players' experiences in comparison with the game's typical military and technology-focused footage. Snake's advice is also an immersion fracture; his ambiguous use of second-person, combined with Raiden not being on screen as the real-world footage plays, can certainly be read as a "direct address of the [player]" (Dwulecki 162). This underscores that *MGS2*, through Snake, is making an important rhetorical point to the player. Youngblood applies Jack Halberstam's queer understanding of failure to Raiden, who she calls a "locus of failure." This is important in the context of queering failure—for Halberstam, failure is not a negative experience but rather a "way of being" that "confronts norms of human behavior… and destabilizes systems of hierarchical knowledge" (Youngblood 214). This means Raiden—having failed to defeat the game's ultimate enemy—is a locus not only of failure but of destabilization. By telling Raiden and the player to "[c]hoose [their] own legacy," Snake challenges them to take advantage of this destabilization to think outside the systems that have been manipulating their perspectives, S3 and *MGS2*—and by extension, the military-entertainment complex that they represent.

Video Clip 1: Snake's advice (0:00 - 0:30)
(Transcript by El_Greco, provided for ease of reference.)

Snake: I know you didn't have much in terms of choices this time. But everything you felt, thought about during this mission is yours. And what you decide to do with them is your choice...

Raiden: You mean start over?

Snake: Yeah, a clean slate. A new name, new memories. Choose your own legacy. It's for you to decide. It's up to you.

MGS2 immediately presents an opportunity to act on this advice when Snake draws attention to Raiden's dog tags, creating an opportunity for Raiden to symbolically break free from the systems that have controlled him and offering the player a chance to do the same. The dog tags are revealed to have the player's name and other information they entered at the beginning of the game. When questioned by Snake, Raiden says he's never heard the name and declares, "I'll pick my own name...and my own life," then throws the dog tags away (see Video Clip 2). Embracing self-determination is a moment of destabilization: it confronts the player's control over Raiden, then challenges *MGS2*/the player's systems of control by rejecting their authority over him. Higgin also identifies this moment as a disruptive action, applying Judith Butler's concept of "rupture," defined as an act that not only disobeys but actively challenges systems of control. The parallels between Raiden and the player have been the core of *MGS2*'s arguments about the military-entertainment complex, particularly the procedural arguments made by S3 and *MGS2* shaping Raiden and the player's perspectives. By destabilizing his relationship with the player, Raiden also disrupts the control of these systems. Throwing the dog tags symbolically enacts Snake's advice to challenge the perspectives of S3 and *MGS2* and instead choose his own identity. As part of this action, Raiden also directly acknowledges the player's existence through their name on the tags he has been carrying the entire game, a culmination of their parallel/overlapping relationship. Raiden's explicit reference to the player is the most direct

breakdown of the barrier between the game and real life—which, according to Dwulecki's analysis that the intensity of a fracture corresponds to its impact (163), creates the most powerful immersion fracture and thus most powerful rhetorical moment of the game. Raiden breaks away from S3 (and *MGS2* with it, since the rest of the game is cutscenes with no player control over his actions) when he and the player are most strongly connected—and in doing so, in one final parallel, he invites the player to do the same and break away from both *MGS2* (by ending the game) and the military-entertainment complex/U.S. nationalism's memetic control.

Video Clip 2: Raiden's dog tags (0:30 - 1:17)
(Transcript by El_Greco, provided for ease of reference.)

Snake: By the way, what is that?

[Snake notices Raiden's dog tag. Raiden takes it off to look at it.]

Raiden: Dog tags?

[The dog tag says the player's name and birth date and whatever else the player entered in the first node.]

Snake: Anyone you know?

Raiden: No, never heard the name before. I'll pick my own name...and my own life. I'll find something worth passing on.

[He throws the dog tag as far as he can.]

MGS2 is a case study in how video games can discuss significant topics and encourage players to think more critically about them. Philips and Milner point to botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's observation that narrative is a key tool for making the perspective changes necessary for tackling problems like information pollution (8). Ian Bogost suggests that video games, through their use of procedural rhetoric, are particularly effective at presenting certain

perspectives (135). Together, these ideas point to video games like *MGS2* as tools that can help address large-scale problems that require new ways of thinking. Video games are by no means all-powerful— *MGS2*'s discussion of the military-entertainment complex, particularly in relation to information pollution, was in many ways ahead of its time in 2001, but the problems it predicted developed anyway. Awareness is a first step toward addressing problems, not the entire solution. Despite these limitations, however, *MGS2* is an excellent illustration of how video games can affect players' perspectives on significant topics like U.S. nationalism and digital information. *MGS2* shows how video games can challenge hegemonic perspectives and draw attention to their influence. It reminds us—as players, academics, and members of a society increasingly shaped by video games—that video games can meaningfully shape people's perspectives. We need to think critically about video games and refuse to hide behind excuses like "Don't worry, it's a game! It's a game just like usual."

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