

Game Narrative Review

Your name (one name, please): Chance Lytle
Your school: Carnegie Mellon University – Entertainment Technology Center
Your email: clytle@andrew.cmu.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: October 2018

Game Title: Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
Platform: PS4 / Xbox One / PS3 / Xbox 360 / PC
Genre: Tactical Espionage Operations
Release Date: September 1, 2015
Developer: Kojima Productions
Publisher: Konami
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hideo Kojima, Shuyou Murata, Hidenari Inamura, Etsu Tamari

“There are no facts, only interpretations.”

Overview

Metal Gear Solid V is a sloppy, unfinished, lying dream of a game. It is the mainline conclusion to the *Metal Gear* series, but ends up a spin-off without a “5”. You play as the action hero Big Boss, but end up as the punished Venom Snake. It is an example of slow art: its narrative truly emerges through meniality and movements through contradictory loose ends, phantom pains the player willingly submits to. You nitpick tens of hours of passive audio logs designed to be consumed and stretched over a non-existent user-made mission mode, desolate, repetitive FOB matches, and half-assed veneers over mission reruns. You unearth cut content and hidden lines deep in the game’s files, delve into meaningless patch notes for maintenance updates, and chase nuclear numbers that are nothing more than thrown bones from a larger skeleton. You participate in communities that squabble over transphobia and conspiracies just to try and eek out meaning from an empty sailor’s promise of global cooperation for some peace of mind—all while searching for more hints of hope when nothing is found. Most of what has been said about the game has been negative or reductionist, rightfully placing its core gameplay as best of the series, but those speakers continually tempered the criticism toward its overall design with numb, ironic repetition that ignores the game’s unique expression of narrative in the unlikely blank spaces above. These blanks are dependent on player effort. The game’s expression of its themes does not stop when it ends. Embracing the game in its own delirium, truly open to feeling the narrative beats both in and out of play, lets it shine as the black star of the series, highlighting its inconsistently yet persistently deep pathos toward conflict.

That is not to pedestalize an emotive, romantic approach as the way to understand *Metal Gear Solid V* and its narrative. Objective cut content, botched expectation setting, and piecemeal sales strategies still mar the stories of both the separately released prologue *Ground Zeroes* and the main *The Phantom Pain*. The whole experience remains flawed yet ends up realizing its themes through those difficult cracks and gaps in ways a traditional narrative could not through cutscenes, systemic or environmental storytelling, or straight text alone. These cut, gaping holes in its construction create a unique dialogue between what is experienced in-game and out, communicating ideas also both in-game and out. *Metal Gear Solid V*'s main story complements the extratextual pain and disappointment that has permeated all discussion around it; regardless of intentionality, it becomes a unique expression of game narrative that subverts cinematic expectations in favor of dramatic agency. Players make their own sub-narratives from created contexts by way of playing with audio tapes and mission structures. They create them from extratextuals like forum arguments and trailer bullshots. All are far from fact, unique experiences independent from the game proper, yet all directly tie into the primary narrative, the same as any other character's arc in the story. By harmonizing player narratives with the game's narrative, it accomplishes something only possible through video games. *The Phantom Pain* tells an undeniably, yet hardly single-minded, human story of the possibilities of revenge.

Characters

To keep a complicated and long Breakdown section in check, all relevant motivations and personalities are presented in this section rather than later. Use this as a guide to better interpret the actions and information detailed in the remaining sections' plot analysis.

Individuals

Punished “Venom” Snake a.k.a Big Boss is sometimes little more than a player insert. He lacks much dialogue, comparatively exaggerating his and the player's shared actions while contrasting previous protagonists in the series. At the story's end, the player is revealed to have not been playing as the legendary Big Boss of the previous games, but as a body double. They were lied to all along. Venom Snake was a soldier in Big Boss's private military force before its destruction by the antagonist XOF in the *Ground Zeroes* prologue. He was robbed of his identity out of convenience for the true Big Boss through nine years of hypnotic suggestion and brainwashing. He is used to rebuild a new military force to defeat XOF and is intended to be a blank slate that reflects his mold, but multiple cracks in his programming show throughout the story.

Compared to the vengeful, deceiving true Big Boss, Venom is a well of empathy. Sentimentality and mercy are at his core, dissonant with the man he is meant to be playing the part of. Venom rescues child soldiers rather than recruit them, saves wild animals instead of eating them; he knows when to put down the gun rather than become it. In the end, only two moral choices are left up to his and the player's actions: the decisions to shoot Quiet and Skull Face themselves. However, these two choices are

actually largely outside the control of Venom and the player. Venom is the center of the narrative in making the player feel lied to, controlled, and unforgiving by allowing them to sympathize with a figure, like them, also playing a part in a story that isn't truly his. To illustrate Venom's fractured state of mind properly, he will be referred to as both Big Boss and Venom. For clarity, the original Big Boss will always be labelled "true."

Benedict "Kazuhira" Miller is the driving human force that pushes the player toward revenge. After the post-*Ground Zeroes* nine-year gap, he is revealed to have been captured and tortured, losing an arm and a leg. His refusal of prosthetics allegedly acts as a reminder to take his revenge against those who took the previous Mother Base and its fulfilled vision of the future away. He gave everything to build a vision already once before, and was dedicated to it and his partner who made it with him, the true Big Boss.

Kaz is told that the player is not the true Big Boss after his rescue from torture, while the player and Venom remain in the dark. He often lashes out when Venom does not share his vengeful spirit. How could Venom truly feel the loss of a dream between Kaz and Big Boss, if he was only a grunt in the organization? Further, Kaz has connections to Cipher, XOF's parent org, having worked with them in the previous game to build Big Boss' and his shared vision, no matter the cost. Yet he still vilifies Cipher as a whole, not just its rogue faction XOF. Overall, Kaz does much covertly in the name of these shared visions and dedicated partnerships. It turns out that he has secretly accepted a role as Venom's handler in Cipher's play to willingly sustain a fantasy of revenge against a constructed evil Cipher. After its completion, he hopes to use his fake Big Boss and Diamond Dogs to eventually strike back at the true Big Boss and Cipher for abandoning and using him. Venom personifies a second phantom pain to Kaz, a phantom of the once-friend true Big Boss. Kaz becomes lost in this pain and its invented role play, his bitterness, accusations, and apathy outside of vengeance advancing every mission. To him, the lines between the two Big Bosses and between Cipher and XOF end up emotionally blurred.

Revolver "Shalashaska" Ocelot is a triple agent whose allegiances are too confusing to sort out in brief summation, but in short, he remains most loyal to the ideologies of the true Big Boss. He was responsible for brainwashing Venom, and even hypnotizes himself to forget his own work, fully believing Venom is the true Big Boss. His main purpose is as Venom's second handler, ensuring the true Big Boss is covered up and protected for both his own and Cipher's reasons. Ocelot is always in full control and never lets on. Always direct, unless manipulating. Gameplay wise, he is the primary intel contact. He uses his mechanical and narrative status as a glorified database to misdirect Venom and the player from any true answers with a meaningless haze of newspaper facts and plant trivia. Ocelot contrasts Kaz by always having a handle on reality and a bigger, idealized picture, hypnotized or not.

Skull Face is the exaggerated, cartoonish, villain of the week. Born in Hungary as an ethnic pseudo-minority, his mother tongue was isolated from the countries and communities surrounding it. Fitting, as he himself is isolated to only *Metal Gear Solid V* in the series. When his home was occupied by the Soviets, he was forced to speak their

language and disfigured in an intense fire. He seeks to take revenge on those who use language as a tool of subjugation, wanting to eliminate and replace them with a more “human” form of communication. Further, Skull Face devoutly believes that a common language, here English, is a shackle narrowing the different cultures of mankind from truly uniting into a “one” that celebrates its individuality. Man can be set free and on a path different from the democratic nation-state-based standard that has permeated the world. He wishes the crushing nationalism would be replaced with universal nations of language itself no matter the cost, be it through torture or nuclear fire. However, this ideology is coming from a guy wearing a black masquerade literally named Skull Face. Where do the brutal methods and absurd complexity end? They add up to make Skull Face a surreal character with an inconsistent tone, perhaps a trademark of the series. In the game’s story, he comes to resent his superiors at Cipher, and turns XOF rogue to destroy both them and their ideal figurehead, Big Boss, to implement his new order through language-manipulating parasites and giant mechs.

Quiet is an optional character, but the story loses dynamism without her. She comes as an XOF assassin in the game’s opening only to be burned by gasoline and Big Boss’s lighter, but later returns in a sniper boss battle to be captured (or killed) by him and brought to Mother Base. As her name implies, she is quiet and apparently mute, infected by a parasite that would kill her if she were to speak English. It is revealed near the end of the game that she was sent by Skull Face to eliminate Mother Base with this strain, driven by her desire for revenge against Big Boss’s fire, but couldn’t bring herself to kill him after experiencing his mercy. She turns her imprisonment into joining Diamond Dogs. Quiet does not lash out against their justified distrust toward her post-capture. She is accepting of her new home and slowly integrates no matter her pain until she is fully accepted and loved as one of their own. Recruits draw posters of her, fanart. Big Boss and Quiet further bond through gameplay synergy and body language. Against the constant backdrop of rambling monologues and controlling language, both literal and figurative, she is a tacit reprieve for Big Boss. Together they communicate directly and purely, free from the cycle of revenge and language that supposedly drives them both. The fluid menu selections from her in the field go hand in hand with how naturally the two interact in cutscenes. As one of the final missions, Quiet completes her rejection of that cycle, choosing to sacrifice herself to save Big Boss, the man she initially wished to kill. By “[choosing] the language of gratitude”² over revenge, her example to a pained Big Boss finalizes the story’s warnings of cyclic conflict.

Factions

Diamond Dogs is a private military organization formed from the remnants of *Militaires Sans Frontières*, Kaz and Big Boss’s prior faction. It is the protagonist’s faction, based on an oil platform in the Indian Ocean called Mother Base. Comprised of volunteers and recruits, the force grows with the player as the game progresses. The soldiers treat Big Boss warmly as a father figure, sardonically enforced by a cynically apparent cult of personality and 1984-style propaganda. Yet, their misguided admiration is hard to not love back for both the player and Big Boss. Mother Base is the setting of many tragedies for the latter, but the largest two are its parasitic outbreaks. Resulting from Skull Face’s experiments, the base is swept by a wave of outbreaks that leaves the player limited to

watching the numbers and names of soldiers transform into Killed In Action markers on their screens. More fuel to strike back against Skull Face.

The second occurs after the villain's demise. Big Boss is forced to execute his own soldiers to prevent a second, accidental outbreak from spreading to the mainland. Overall, this mission serves as a reminder of the required duties if a soldier chooses to live as a gun. They alone are responsible for choosing peace. This is the question Venom wrestles with the most. After the game, Big Boss leads the organization to become Outer Heaven, a fortress in southern Africa used to launch the true Big Boss' ideal of a soldier's paradise, protecting those who choose to live as guns.

Cipher is the organizational front for the series-long antagonists The Patriots. They are a clandestine group resembling the Illuminati. Their purpose is to fulfill the dying will of the legendary soldier The Boss, the mentor of the true Big Boss. Founded by the leader Major Zero and the true Big Boss, among others, the latter split with the organization after secret cloning experiments of him were revealed, contingency plans for conserving him as a figurehead. The remaining members interpreted the legendary will as to make a world without borders; Zero aims to accomplish this by obtaining complete control of global communication and manipulating it through an Artificial Intelligence network. Cipher is largely a metonym for Zero himself.

While Major Zero was involved with the CIA prior to founding the Patriots, he commanded two units: FOX, a black ops unit including Big Boss, and XOF, a support unit headed by Skull Face. When Zero departed the CIA, he brought XOF and Skull Face into his new sphere of influence under the Patriots. Giving them a black budget, they remained a clean-up and research crew. Skull Face experimented with parasites to fulfill The Patriots' goals, but Zero eventually stopped the program, tasking his XO with other, more important duties. By the end of *Ground Zeroes*, Skull Face rebels with XOF at his command. He makes it his mission to realize his experiments and usurp Cipher to implement his interpretation of the Boss's will, a world connected by language and mutually assured destruction.

Breakdown

Each *Metal Gear Solid* game carries an associated, single word "theme" from the development team. For *V*, it breaks tradition to have two: REVENGE & RACE, the combination authorially intending to mean the cycle of revenge and misunderstanding between members of different races, languages, or cultures. Throughout the game, much narrative is dedicated to the chains of retaliation and revenge that can bind mankind together; language, another primary topic, when used in communication like this, can be independent of words. The villains promote this raw communication of retaliatory conflict instead, such as Zero's ideal of controlled proxy wars or Skull Face's of mutually assured parasitic destruction. The player navigates tactical espionage action to challenge these ideals throughout Afghanistan and Central Africa while balancing housekeeping base building mechanics on Mother Base. During certain missions, *MGSV* further plays with the themes of every other game of the series, from offhand musings on *MGS*'s

genetics to utilizing *MGS2*'s information control and manipulation from a different angle to twisting its direct predecessor *Peace Walker*'s discussion of global PEACE through nuclear deterrence onto the antagonist. To say the game's narrative is unfocused would be an understatement, but the word that permeates it the most, shared among all interpretations, is revenge. Nearly every character, inside and out of the game, sustains loss. To best summarize the game's narrative would be to fold the countless losses and manipulations experienced by the characters into those felt by the players' derived from the story's missing pieces, loose ends, and ambiguity.

The basis of the game is striking back at the shadowy Cipher for the loss of the old Mother Base nine years ago during the *Ground Zeroes* prologue. It was a home, personally built from the ground up in *Peace Walker*, the original *Metal Gear Solid 5*³. The soldiers there were individually named and individually recruited by the player. To have it swept away in an opening cutscene by a clearly defined enemy is incredibly frustrating and provides an easy source of hate for the player, Big Boss, and Kazuhira Miller. The player awakens as Big Boss in a hospital, recovered from a nine-year coma resulting from the incident, but missing his left arm and with 108 pieces of shrapnel inside them. These are physical reminders of what happened to him and his past life. Moments later, they are rescued by Revolver Ocelot to begin building a new organization, Diamond Dogs, on a new Mother Base. The game weaves contract missions for real-life inspired forces such as the Mujahideen in Afghanistan and environmental groups in Central Africa with Diamond Dogs' efforts to track down and exact revenge on the original enemies: Skull Face, XOF, and their parent Cipher—all believed to be a singular enemy.

The story proper begins with rescuing Miller from Soviet imprisonment in the middle of the Soviet-Afghan War. Attacked by an XOF unit prior, Miller has lost his right arm and left leg before being passed on to the Soviet invaders by the time Big Boss reaches him. This only further fuels his lust for revenge against XOF, best summarized in one of the game's most quoted monologues: "Why are we still here? Just to suffer? Every night, I can feel my leg... And my arm... even my fingers... The body I've lost... the comrades I've lost... won't stop hurting. It's like they're all still there. You feel it, too, don't you? I'm gonna make them give back our past!"⁴ There is a deep initial sympathy for the rose-tinted comrades from games past. Missions and operations throughout Afghanistan lead the player to discover the man who took their history away, Skull Face, and the first part of his master plan masquerading as R&D for the Soviet Experimental Design Bureau: the creation of a bipedal, nuclear-equipped tank named Metal Gear Sahelanthropus, an evolutionary ancestor to the mechs featured in the rest of the series.

With Ocelot and Miller providing operational support, the story winds its way to Central Africa. More contracts and intel lead to uncovering the second part of Skull Face's plan: the eradication of the English language. Using near-extinct parasites, the world would be infected. Upon speaking the language that matches the strain of an entrenched parasite, painful symptoms would appear and quickly lead to death. Mother Base is hit by a wave of these infections, causing the death of any recruited soldier that spoke Kikongo. As this new loss further drives the players towards Skull Face, he is allowed his own monologue

that ties the two parts of his plan together: “*Sans Lingua Franca*, the world will be torn asunder. And then it shall be free. People will suffer of course, a Phantom Pain. The world will need a new common tongue. A language of nukes. My Metal Gears shall be the thread by which all countries are bound together. In equality. No words will be needed. Every man will be forced to recognize his neighbor. People will swallow their pain. They will link lost hands. The world will become one. This war...is peace.”⁵ These ideals stem from his desire to avenge his childhood and homeland. Instead of absolving his vengeance, he is committing fully to the means which brought it about. Eventually, Diamond Dogs corners Skull Face and his Sahelanthropus in Afghanistan and overcome all odds to eliminate them both. Miller take’s Big Boss’s hand in his own as they exact their revenge on the now crippled, dying Skull Face. The player can make the choice to pull the trigger themself.

Only three missions after this success contribute to the games’ main story: a final mission on Mother Base, the closing of Quiet’s arc, and the reveal of the true Big Boss. The latter will be our next focus, with the other two discussed under Characters. All illustrate different choices of vengeance or peace in response to pain and loss.

The object of the player’s vengeance is gone. XOF is reduced to stragglers. Metal Gear Sahelanthropus is secured. Chapter 1 concludes. What is there left for Big Boss and the player to do? Various contract missions come Diamond Dogs’ way, there is an occasional cutscene, and always, always more base development to do. The quiet time in the arguable post-game of Chapter 2 gives players room to think and frustration to motivate some to search for something more. The increasingly grating and repetitive monotones of Miller and Ocelot over the radio codec become enough a reason to quit as any at this point. Yet, out of the blue, in the middle of side mission repeats and empty challenges, a mission appears on the player’s UI labelled “TRUTH.” There is no diegetic reasoning behind Big Boss selecting this mission, it is just there. It is a replay of the game’s introduction in a hospital. It is revealed the player is not Big Boss, but a body double of the true one. They receive tens of tapes all at once that allegedly reinforce this. Venom and the player’s free will is invalidated as it comes to light all they have done was set up by the true Big Boss and even Cipher in a mutually beneficial deal. Skull Face and XOF were a cancerous outgrowth of Cipher needing excised. The true Big Boss needed some cover. So, he chose a set-up that would selfishly guarantee him protection and invisibility: a Cipher body double to do this dirty work. Cipher, read Zero, sentimentally wished to keep him safe undercover in hopes of turning him back to The Patriots. It is up to the fake Big Boss and the player to make the most of the last forty some missions and fifty some hours as they come to increasingly disorienting realizations about fighting a shadow war for controlling masters, potentially invalidating global peace through their own nuclear proliferation, and committing empty revenge lead on by others. Both Venom and the player had no control, and received no simplified appeasement for closure or understanding, just hollow words of reward from the true Big Boss, trying to make their brainwashing a gift. The subversion of both a character’s self-actualization and the player’s own agency alerts them to how they’ve lived as a nothing more than a gun for the game. It charges them with truly chasing the responsibility of peace and meaning through their own methods in the face of the confusing hypnagogic mess.

Venom, now a fake duplicate, chooses to continue living that lie; it is left ambiguous to how much of a mix his decision is between brainwashing and choice. The traits that make him different from his mold stand as enough reason to him to continue utilizing the shared legend and cache of the name Big Boss. He maintains his empathy, mercy, and compassion. Even after that final mission, multiple gameplay modes and side missions are still available. One mode involves invading other players' Mother Bases to steal crew, materials, and nuclear weapons—things they need to improve their gameplay. The nukes are beneficial to have as they deter invasions through difficulty hikes, so players produce them. Players can also steal and disarm them to make invasions easier. There is an in-game tracker of all the nuclear weapons on all the games' servers. Yet to be actually triggered⁶, there is a hidden cutscene that plays when the number reaches zero. Venom's monologue in that scene defines the spirit of the game and his choice to continue as Big Boss.

Throughout the series, various characters seek to fulfill the will and final wish of Big Boss's mentor, the Boss, a main character of *MGS3*. Cipher has their own interpretation, Skull Face, Big Boss, and many others, their own as well. They seek theirs through conflict and subjugation—Cipher pursuing a world of controlled information, Skull Face through mutually assured destruction, and the true Big Boss an antithesis where soldiers and wills are not tools for others—but all do not carry what the Boss truly meant in her dying words: to leave the world as it is. The true Big Boss's adverse ideal is especially ironic and despicable as he continues to exploit his phantom Venom as a tool for the remainder of his life. When the as-of-now unachieved nuclear disarmament is met, Diamond Dogs dedicates a monument to that will and the protection against global nuclear destruction. Venom has broken from his original's rejection of the Boss's will. Venom quotes her: "We have no tomorrow, but there's still hope for the future"—no pessimism or derision. He comes to realize that "[s]omeday the world will no longer need [Diamond Dogs]. No need for the gun, or the hand to pull the trigger."⁷ Instead of using nukes, doppelgängers, and a cult of personality for mercenaries to follow, Venom tunes his humanity with those around him. A soldiers' paradise does not exist anymore than a human one, free of nuclear retaliation. In a twist of fate, the hypnotically implanted false memories of the Boss grew in the shattered mind of Venom instead of withering as they did in the true Big Boss's. Venom accepts the responsibility of bringing the messy past with him into the light of the future. He chooses to remain, despite the empty revenge against Skull Face or the deceit of the true Big Boss, in support of a better tomorrow, something that he may not even "see in [his] lifetime."⁷ However, ingame, this scene remains unplayed. The global nuke count has never dropped to zero. The ironic shackle on Venom's will is player cooperation. Only when every player on every console or computer cooperates to rid the servers of nukes will it play out. The narrative offloads setting its main character on a path of mercy to the collective playerbase. One can only flourish when all are healthy. It is left up to the players to write their own stories outside a constant retaliatory cycle of developing new, stealing existing, and deactivating old nuclear weapons. A cycle of revenge. This is the final beat of the story left in the released files of the game.

All these refrains, monologues, and revelations are but one way the game covers its primary narrative themes. The effects of gameplay and its contexts have been apparent throughout the main story. The climactic fight against Skull Face being non-diegetically broken into several manually-selectable missions, the subdued, seemingly random, appearance of the truth tapes, and more all take advantage of standard game interfaces and expectations to feed the story's frustrations and confusions, but they are just the tip of larger ludic devices. There are deeper expressions of narrative through non-traditional gameplay elements that involve the player more literally, similar to the responsibility of nuclear disarmament. With this in mind, viewing the game as incomplete is disputed, but it dovetails well with these expressions to create a full reading. The player certainly wades through replays and remixes of old missions as ones that show something new slow to a trickle following Skull Face's defeat; the padding gives way to obvious cut content and unfinished production videos only released on special edition DVDs⁸, teases of things left undone. These traces were complemented with advertising and interview promises of being the series missing narrative link, a sense of closure as the traditional director finally moved on to new projects and the series timeline supposedly made a closed circle to the first *Metal Gear* from 1987. This led to the game's themes uniquely coloring discussion around it as these implicit promises were broken. Undoubtedly, meaning can be applied to these interesting pieces, missing or not, of the game, leading to these deeper devices. They complete the game's discussion of revenge. The two largest uniquely ludic narrative methods that come from *The Phantom Pain*'s incompleteness are the way its audio tapes have evolved into context machines and how the community around the series festers in the wake of its release.

As much as the audio tapes are condolence, they are also solely disembodied fragments handed to Big Boss and the player by others. In *Ground Zeroes*, the player located their main target by solving an audio clue puzzle from a tape. They listen to the sound effects behind the words, closely and carefully. As *Ground Zeroes* was a prologue tutorial chapter for the main game, this segment serves as an introductory lesson on listening. Players must purposefully turn on their in-game Walkman to go on their adventures to the tunes of 80s pop and long, exposition-heavy audio tapes far from the main story path. These tapes and corners of the game's world hide secrets if the player is willing to find them hidden or suppressed. As they traverse further around the two maps' disparate landmarks, segments of audio begin to contradict themselves, clashing with previous information or seemingly retconning meaningless things. Questions are raised by the player as Big Boss diegetically and jarringly takes the information at face value, unfazed. In listening to these tapes on their own time, so to speak, the player digests the presented information differently. Their gameplay contexts begin to inform their interpretations of the story's knotted narrative beats. Associations are made between certain lies and where they're told, between revelations and the tank columns rolling next to them. By introducing ambiguity and cycles, the tapes encourage this way of thinking. The narrative provided in them becomes unique and non-deterministic. A player's interpretation of what they're told is affected by when and how they listen to it in a scrambled heteroglossia. *The Phantom Pain* lets its players give the story texture as they go. However, this contrasts with a true possibility of the tapes: they are selected lies being told to control the brainwashed Big Boss.

After every mission, the player returns to the Aerial Command Center (ACC) a helicopter quasi-loading screen with game menus and management options. Pictures of Big Boss's adventures gradually fill up the walls, linking together and shuffling around like a conspiracy map with each new addition, on par with the player's pace through the audio tapes. A poster of Quiet is added to the helicopter's wall if you rescue her, a map of Africa on the ceiling when you get there, and so on. There is another meaning for the acronym ACC: anterior cingulate cortex, a section of the brain that handles ethics, morality, and pain sensitivity⁹. The largest piece of shrapnel in Big Boss's head sticks right out of this area, a scar earned from the explosion that kickstarted his coma and brainwashing. That explosion occurred in a helicopter departing from *Ground Zeroes*'s story area. The ACC transition menu is his safe haven, synonymous with the last place he was truly who he used to be, and is a place for him and the player to piece together thoughts and meaning from all provided input. Combining his diegetic planning with player menu selections harmonizes the two as they weave through the game's increasingly surreal story of revenge together. Sitting in the same helicopter time and time again leads to some of that story's quirks sticking out from the rest. Some are diegetically known and some not. A boss enemy and his burning horse remain unexplained. Psychic powers are brought up and dropped. XOF and Diamond Dogs share ties: in a near final mission at Skull Face's base, shipping containers from Mother Base with Diamond Dogs logos can be seen in the background, labelled as C-212, an anti-psychotic drug. A certain crew member warns of nearby traitors in an offhand remark drawn to attention by giving it its own cutscene. A certain *Ground Zeroes* tape has the line "Give her the shot already!" spoken by Kazuhira Miller as he stands directly next to Skull Face¹⁰. The main narrative stands to reason that these men never worked together and were always diametrically opposed and bound by revenge or mutual destruction, not cooperation. Diamond Dogs never worked with XOF, psychic powers don't exist. Yet that tape, this single line, these shipping crates, and countless other coincidences, exist. Are they hints of deeper sinister intentions of those who control Big Boss? Under scrutiny, countless blank spaces of coincidences, like those of cut content, blur loyalties, suspicions, and understandings. The reveal of Big Boss's brainwashing places further stress on these points. The game's narrative can become an inexplicable and contradictory hallway twisting back on itself, dependent on what tapes, what coincidences, and what characters the player chooses as lie or truth. But, there must still be one single truth.

When new game releases begin bearing down with these unexpected twists and turns, players turn to each other. The assurance and rhythms created by those understanding and playing the same computer games as you are found in message boards and instant chats. Upended feelings toward both new entries in a series and their prior legacies can be reconciled as a player works their way through them at the same pace as others, steadily checking in along the way. Often, reactions can be negative. Conspiracy theories, of course, flourish in an uncertain, fragmented environment like this. For *V*, the feelings of betrayal, be they from cut content, broken promises of bringing the series full circle, or blatant contradictions, intensify longtime fans' desires to seek out answers to the game's questions and loose ends, no matter how out there their search can get.

The coincidences and blanks in the narrative only make the cause feel more righteous, regardless of entitlement, as if they were intentionally left there for the truest of the true fans to find. The communities and discussions that formed around the game's release have created some of the craziest and most convincing narratives from the provided fragments, but focusing on any one is useless. As Kaz is lost in a constructed vengeance toward the true Big Boss once Skull Face is gone, some communities continue pulling on incomplete threads ignoring what is around them. They are certain there is a distinct truth lying beneath the layers of interpretation and resignation, scraping for satisfaction from what has yet to be told. But, the story is told. A whole, universal truth is nowhere to be found.

The game's final mission opens with the same Nietzsche quote that opens this analysis: "There are no facts, only interpretation." A single truth is subjective despite appearing objective. The definition of truth derives from its language. Each player can and should have their own absolute interpretation, influenced by the loose ends, not dominated by them. It is not the narrative or its words that define themselves, they are open ended, but the parts of them the player finds meaning in that do. The game's communities have come to express one of its largest themes, being trapped in an endless cycle of words and retaliation, but the game provides all the tools it sees fit for them to combat this phantom pain. The purpose of the game's interactivity, its purpose of being presented as a video game, is to solidly tie this extratextual, communal expression back into the main narrative. Their language should be determined by the vocabulary they construct through play. As an interactive medium, the lost communities are not meant to repeat endlessly, but always be able to come back for another mission, another new experience in the open world and in the legend of Big Boss. *The Phantom Pain* creates an interpretive context for its players to find closure where there is none in its unfinished nature and undone work.

When combined as *Metal Gear Solid V*, *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* illustrate the nascent abilities of the current and coming generations of players to be able to write their own, individual stories and histories. As Venom chooses to contribute to the legend of Big Boss, the player does as well. The core emergent, systemic gameplay, necessitation of reflection on time spent listening to tapes, and the focus of the main narrative on the dangerous cycle of static retaliation all support this. Chasing revenge and empty foxholes leads to nothing new. The games' other, contradictory, primary theme expresses the danger of and susceptibility to being lost in the inconsistencies and lies of this context. With their eyes on Kazuhira, players can see a man lost in revenge and lost in betrayal. With unending nuclear trades, repetitive theorizing, and content that will remain forever unfinished, it is clear it will never be game over. It is up to the player to find the meaning behind the losses and joys found throughout and take them into themselves as they continue on, not becoming lost in chains of retaliation and revenge.

Strongest Element

The audio tapes are the game's primary way of storytelling, a carry-over from *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, a game for a mobile console. They made sense there, after the seventh-generation of home consoles ran them into the ground after 2007, because

you could carry your PSP with you to listen as you went, turning one tape on for one bite-sized mission or as simple background audio on a commute. They were world building. In *V*, their purpose has evolved. They act as a pressure release valve for the perpetual hate and yearning brought on by the lack of closure in the game, something for invested players to use as comfort. The lack of cutscenes and cut plot threads is extremely felt, but it serves a purpose as the game encourages the player to instead take these companions into the open world and make their own contexts for them from their provided one in a sea of systems playing together. They ask effort of them. The lengthy tapes are an auditory accompaniment as players uncover content frustratingly buried in side operations, replay main story missions, or wait between missions in the ACC helicopter hub. Connecting each tape to a different scenario uniquely embeds their narrative elements into each player. Everyone can listen to them at different times. Discovering the revelations of Paz's final tapes over a Mother Base sunset, laughing at the hamburger production schemes of Kazuhira Miller while searching for a rare African animal—these are definitions of writing your own history in the game's world, different from anyone else's. In spite of the lies and constraint from the true Big Boss and his unseen dominant plotline, the players make a story of their own by painting their own emotional landscapes. Absorbing story beats that are not physically exposed to them, the players provide the tone and continuity of the primary narrative.

The immersion required to live these tapes and what they say is made easy through gameplay and systemic situations, not a built world or constructed narrative language. This elevation above environmental storytelling or exposition dumps into a combination of both and more is an achievement in and of itself that is only strengthened by the tapes' dual-purpose design of playing into the games' conspiracy threads and ability to be endlessly reinterpreted. By putting responsibility onto the players, the tapes can make each players' emotional setting for the narrative be wildly different, rewarding (but not fulfilling) those who dig while the traditional story satisfies those who don't.

Unsuccessful Element

The game's narrative is most felt in the moments, days, and weeks spent repeating similar missions and cycling through the same arguments as it challenges the player to fill in the blanks of their phantom pain and events on their own. Yet the experiences that provide the core narrative and tools to do this with are sparse and inconsistent; the game's main story beats are split up and cross-eyed. As much as the quiet time is important for reflection, these beats lack urgency and pacing.

Absent urgency is a common symptom for open world games, but *The Phantom Pain* compounds it with confusing menu boots and irritating stakes. After most missions, the player is booted back to the ACC selection menu. This is generally convenient, but sometimes disrupts exploration. At its worst, such as the ends of missions 28 and 30, players are forced into awkward cliffhangers during climactic moments as the menu system decides they must select the next mission manually. This complete break in immersion not only allows but welcomes menu distractions to ruin the tension. Notifications and research updates, which are normally positive, clutter the player's view as they scramble to get to the next mission's icon. For other missions, players are

dragged into them when they may not want to be. Parasite outbreaks on Mother Base present nagging number drops that annoy the player to hurry up and complete their story rather than encouraging the overarching idea of caring for your soldiers. Even with clumsy mission starts and ends, what is in them remains great, but their frequency is also messy.

Even though the game is very much like a dream, with repetitive actions triggering a Tetris effect that patterns their view of the game and its breaks in logic, important actions are not often presented while the iron is hot. The pacing out of key moments and missions is seemingly random. Skull Face's key monologue being juxtaposed with an awkward three minutes of silent driving⁵, the final Truth mission appearing without foreshadowing, and other mistakes make the repetitive missions leading up to the end of the game all the more of a slog in retrospect. Locking story missions behind unrelated standalone contracts lowers their importance when the players gets to them. As with most things in *The Phantom Pain*, the intentionality of the frustrating and boring segments can be argued, but the game's pacing is missing thematic bridges where some could be.

Highlight

“Phantom Limbs” is the rescue op for Kaz, the first proper mission of the game. They are given a pile of audio tapes, a horse, and a large open world to tackle as they see fit. This is the type of breeding ground for everything good about *The Phantom Pain*'s narrative. The expositional tapes can roll as the player experiences their own unique infiltrations and emerging stories beneath saving Kaz from the Soviets, learning about the world and making narrative connections interactively. Everyone will remember and experience this story chunk differently. The overlying rescue mission's writing itself is great support, as well. Finding a comrade from the previous game maimed and broken provides a deeper emotional base for the mission rather than any other faceless target like in other missions. Kaz's reaction at seeing his old friend, asking him to say his catchphrase “Kept ya waiting, huh?” for old times' sake, immediately and viscerally sets up the antagonists through their actions' effects. The player and Big Boss are introduced to both the Soviets and an elite XOF unit while learning the ropes here, both important factions later on. The combined world- and system-building is fluid and weaves together best here as the game introduces itself to the player and its sets its overall methodology.

Critical Reception

“However, where Phantom Pain's gameplay systems are far richer and meatier than any the series has ever seen, its story feels insubstantial and underdeveloped by comparison . . . This is doubly disappointing in a series known for (sometimes clumsily and exhaustively) exploring its subject matter. The opposite is true here though. The Phantom Pain brings up topics like the personal cost of revenge, child soldiers, and torture to name a few, but it has positively nothing to say about any of them other than that they exist. . . .”

Its lack of story focus is sure to be divisive for the Metal Gear faithful, but the resulting emphasis on my story, my tales of Espionage Action, easily make it my favorite in the series.”

– Vince Ingenito for *IGN*, August 23, 2015; 10/10

Here the reviewer focuses on the true narrative of the game, that of the player as Big Boss. They take the straggling plot threads and elements as things to be risen above by the systemic, gameplay driven player narratives, instead of weaving the successful parts of them into the latter. The criticism of the abandoned plot threads stands up.

“Kojima was aiming to break some kind of taboo [with the game’s narrative] that would’ve been so intense that it could cause him to leave the industry. Despite that, I can’t really put my finger on what it might have been here, unless it was the literal phantom pain felt by the player. It would be as if Kojima had deliberately, with all intents and purposes, aimed to make an experience that could satisfy mainstream audiences while leaving more hardcore fans feeling for something that wasn’t there.

At this point in time, it is too easy to chalk up anything underwhelming he does as some kind of fourth-wall breaking masterful ruse, but between the quotes, the misleading words on the trailers, and the misdirection from his own interviews and tweets, it’s all so hard to let that explanation go. . . The problem for looking at this game in the future is figuring out how much of that is intended versus how much of that was an unfortunate accident.”

– George Weidman for *Super Bunnyhop*, September 21, 2015; no score given

From a longtime fan like George, the cynicism toward *V* being so different is understandable. All of his critiques are supported and get to the heart of the logic holding up the communities who wish to keep searching for closure. In the end, the unknown surrounding the game is the most interesting topic that cannot be discussed, especially from a review standpoint. He highlights the difficulty of letting ambiguous authorial intent influence a review of features so frustrating.

Lessons

- **Let the Legend Come to Life:** *V*’s open world is a mechanic playground, designed to encourage system-driven interactions in stealth gameplay. It does the same with its narrative threads. It lets players synthesize their own moments, such as by passively contextualizing their audio tapes or choosing viewpoints in a conspiracy, instead of being directly told them through hours of cutscenes or directly shown them in gameplay set pieces. By giving players multiple tools to explore the narrative’s storytelling, each experience will be built differently and interactively, more so than with mediums like film or literature with more formalized, linear languages. In Big Boss’s words, the player will have “written [their] own history”¹¹ and context with the provided dialogue, characters, interactions, and world.
- **Embrace the Extratextual:** Most post-release discussion of the game centers around the lack of closure, pain of cut content, and loss of expectations. Regardless of if the creators knew the game would be released seemingly

unfinished and lead to this, these communities rhyme with the phantom pain featured in-game and create a rich platform for criticism and cooperation. Further, all pre-release advertising fed the idea of Big Boss's legend, before the game let the players write it themselves, literally. Narrative power can come from more than just what is in-game; understanding how players will experience and most importantly share an interactive story can be as valuable as telling one in a vacuum.

- **Support The Focus** The mess of *The Phantom Pain*'s narrative is a convolution of player fear, an 80 million dollar budget, and quantity-over-quality episodic writing. It is a deviation from the norm such that it manages to express its primary themes of revenge and recovery so uniquely despite the surrounding spaghetti story; it still allows many threads, from child soldiers to proxy warfare, to languish as unfinished, unfocused grace notes and empty story beats alike. The supporting elements of a narrative should aid the primary through ways it cannot do itself, such as through unique perspective changes, examining echoes of consequences, or pushing into minutia. *The Phantom Pain* fails to create engaging supports for its central narrative, and instead forces many primary beats to be picked over after the fact.

Summation

Metal Gear Solid 5 is a layered, textured, unique dream of a game. It is the end of the Kojima era for the *Metal Gear* series. It is a love letter to continuing a story. You epitomize tactical espionage action. With its doublethink and diversity, it leaves rooms for players to craft their own legend for the series' bloodline, narratively and mechanically. It can be theorized as virtual reality therapy for a PTSD-stricken soldier. As the lies of a demon née role model never to be believed. As a straight story of revenge and loss. No matter the result, the thread-chasing, inconsistent nature of the game ties players together as they make what they make of the series, sharing it among each other. Big Boss becomes not just one man, one character, or one player avatar, but a platform for work and remembrance. *The Phantom Pain* contrasts the direct fan service of the series' previous finale with change. It underwrites its own ambitions and underwrites the expectations set upon it with wide, detailed mechanics and new forms of narrative content designed to let original stories be unexpectedly born. The game's loose fever dream lets the legend of a series live on in its players instead of a direct conclusion more fitting of a film or novel by elevating its emergent gameplay. In something only possible through games, the players themselves become the storytellers when their gameplay contexts tie into the narrative's themes. They interpret its breadcrumb trails and wander its sea of contradictions, taking the phantom pain of loss and closure with them, as the combined narrative encourages them to move on.

"I hope I'm not the only one who looks back on those days with happiness. There's more to remember than hatred and rage [. . .] I can tell you what you are really feeling. The real emotion that is locked away at the bottom of your heart. Let it fly out. Let it guide you. Live. I think it's my job to tell you that. That is why I exist. So this tape is the last one. Once you are done listening to it, I am one phantom limb that will be gone for good. My flesh, my bones, joining the silt on the ocean floor. But do not forget . . . As long as

*you remember me, I will always live within you. Not a phantom limb or a phantom anything. As part of your heart. I will always be your angel of peace. So I know exactly how to finish. Say peace!"*¹²

Notes

- 1 Tach. User-created missions were cut from the game.
- 2 Audio Tape. Quiet [7]: Quiet's Message.
- 3 Ashcraft. The number was dropped for marketing for a portable console.
- 4 Mission 1: "Phantom Limbs" Ending cutscene.
- 5 Mission 30: "Skull Face" In-game cutscene.
- 6 Alexandra. The event was triggered accidentally due to an overflow error.
- 7 Nuclear Event Cutscene.
- 8 Ashcroft. A workprint cutscene was released alongside the games' Definitive Edition.
- 9 Zhou. Another in a long list of coincidences, the ACC brain segment is an area of research for phantom pain treatment methods.
- 10 Audio Tape. Chico's Tapes: Chico's Tape 7 - March 15, 1975: Bargaining with Paz (Final Recording).
- 11 Mission 46: "TRUTH – The Man Who Sold The World" Ending cutscene.
- 12 Audio Tape. Paz's Diary (Continued) [5]: Entry 5

Bibliography

Alexandra, Heather. "After Years of Player Warfare, Metal Gear Solid V Secret Ending Triggered Prematurely." *Kotaku*. February 13, 2018. Accessed October 26, 2018. <https://kotaku.com/metal-gear-solid-v-s-nuclear-disarmament-ending-was-tri-1822742864>.

Ashcraft, Brian. "Konami Has No Plans To Finish MGSV The Phantom Pain's Mission 51." *Kotaku*. September 01, 2016. Accessed October 26, 2018.

<https://www.kotaku.com.au/2016/09/konami-has-no-plans-to-finish-mgsv-the-phantom-pains-mission-51/>.

Ashcraft, Brian. "Metal Gear Solid Peace Walker Was Originally MGS5." *Kotaku*. June 21, 2013. Accessed October 26, 2018. <https://kotaku.com/5478831/metal-gear-solid-peace-walker-was-originally-mgs5>.

Tach, Dave. "You Can Create Your Own Missions in Metal Gear Solid 5." *Polygon*. September 05, 2013. Accessed October 27, 2018. <https://www.polygon.com/2013/9/5/4699130/create-your-own-missions-in-metal-gear-solid-5>.

Zhuo, Min. "Cortical Depression and Potentiation: Basic Mechanisms for Phantom Pain." *Experimental Neurobiology* 21, no. 4 (December 2012): 129. doi:10.5607/en.2012.21.4.129.