CHAPTER TEN

METAL GEAR SOLID

Metal Gear Solid 4

In this chapter, I analyze *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (hereafter "MGS4"). I use some of the tools developed earlier. I will argue that in some respects MSG4 is a virtual tutorial on what it means to play video games and what sort of conversations they can set up.

It will be clear from this analysis that a discourse analysis analyzes language/worlds/games "in use", that is, as we humans use them in real contexts. We study how aspects of a game's design afford a certain sort of interactive conversation given a specific player's desires, values, and skills.

Story in MGS4

Seth Schiesel, lead video game writer for the *New York Times*, had this to say about *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*:

> I play games because of the freedom they afford. In contrast to a book or a film or a theater performance, a game lets me decide what happens next, or at least lets me operate under the illusion that my actions matter …. Metal Gear Solid 4 is not like that. Instead it is a linear narrative by the Japanese designer Hideo Kojima.

You, the player, are along for the ride. M.G.S. 4 is Mr. Kojima's world, and you

are just passing through for the moment while he tells you where to go next, what

to do and more or less how to do it.

Seth is a lot younger than I am and he does, indeed, know his game stuff. But, as I

argued earlier, game play is a matter of a conversation between a player and a game

world. Seth is reviewing not the game, but the conversation he had with it. I had a

different conversation with the game. Mine was great. Seth's not so great.

Despite all the efforts of Games Studies people to search for a grand unified category of

games, there is none. Different types of video games are different. Different types of

players are different. And the two interact in all sorts of different ways. There are no

grand theories to be had.

My conversation with MGS4 isn't yours and yours isn't mine. And mine isn't Seth's.

And that is the freedom I love in video games. That said, of course basic design features

of a game shape the conversation. And, indeed, Seth is discussing one of these design

features, namely the way in which MGS4 has a linear narrative that makes for more

linear sorts of play than Seth likes.

When I say my MGS4 isn't yours and yours isn't mine, I don't mean the obvious truth—

a truth about any media: different people have different interpretations. That ho-hum

truth is true of books, films, games and any and every use of language.

What I mean is that in my MGS4 game play I (Jim Gee) am Solid Snake, not you, not

Seth, not even the game's designer, Mr. Kojimar.

At the end of his review, Seth says:

> Of course, by the time those credits did roll, I was ready for the M.G.S. 4
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> experience to be over. Not that I hadn't enjoyed it. It was probably the best near-
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> future action movie I had ever seen. But I was ready to make some of my own
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> choices. In short, I was ready to play a game.

MGS4 indeed has very long, gorgeous, exciting, over-the-top by any standards cut

scenes. The final one lasts well over an hour. MGS4 is, indeed, a great action movie.

However, when I played the game the second time around, on a harder mode, I cut off all

the cut scenes and just played the game. There are players who even cut off all the cut

scenes the first time around.

I would argue that cutting off the cut scenes at least the second time around is what Mr.

Kojimar wants you do to. It is what the game is designed to have you do. In my view as

a gamer, MGS4 is one of those games that if you have played it only once, you haven't

really played "the game". It's because to play MGS4 "well", you have to be a good

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Snake and you are a better snake the second or third time around. That is, at least, the nature of the conversation I had with the game.

Seth's review brings up two vexed questions for gamers: What is the role of the top-down story in a game? What is the role of cut scenes? These questions are connected in that very often a game's top-down story is carried in part by cut scenes.

Some players love the stories in games. I don't. I can rarely follow them. For me, the game's story sets the scene, conveys emotions, and makes clear what things in the world and my actions in the game mean. I rarely put the whole story together, the way I would do with a film or a book. I care more about the player's story (my story). This I seem to share with Seth.

The story in a game, as we have said, helps determine the game's "universe of discourse". It tells us what is in the world, why it is there, what things mean, and the ways in which we can and cannot act in the world. We will see that the story in MGS4 plays this role in a striking way. It makes clear that Snake is different this time (in this the last game in the series in which Solid Snake will appear) and it makes clear that players need to think about how to be a "good Snake" under arduous conditions.

Let me start with one example of what I mean by thinking about being a "good Snake". In MSG4, unlike any game I can remember, playing well can sometimes mean playing

badly. Most anyone would think—especially if they are thinking of sports, say—that to play well is to get things right and do well. But this is not always so in MGS4.

In MGS4 Snake is sick, old, and tired (due to intentional gene manipulation of Big Boss's clones, of which Snake is one). He regularly grunts and holds his back in pain. He has to inject himself with a special medicine even to keep going at all.

There is a moment in MGS4 where Snake has to remember a code. Surely forgetting the code is not getting things right and doing well. But when Snake (my Snake, me) forgets the code—hey, I'm 65 years old—it becomes part of the story. Otacon is already worried about Snake's physical and mental deterioration—as is Snake—and this just confirms, as he acknowledges, for him and Snake both, that things are getting worse, as indeed they are.

When I was playing the game second time round, Snake (I) got the code right and Otacon was relieved. Which way is right? Which way is "well played". Who is the better Snake? My Snake the first time around is not even my Snake the second time around. I fashion him anew each time.

So when I play badly—not remembering a code, messing up on sneaking, or miss getting a perfect head shot—when I have to make do and recover after my mess up—am I playing well? Am I playing Snake as the sick and tired old man he is in MGS4? Or am I playing well when I and Snake rise above all the pain and succeed in fine fashion—as a

hero like Snake would do—save for the fact that even in some of the cut scenes in MGS4 he doesn't do it here? Which way is being a good Snake for this game?

You see THAT is what it is all about for me: being a good Snake in this specific game. And this is a game that ends when Snake's father (Big Boss) tells him that the world no longer needs any Snakes, therefore: "Go be a man". What does it mean to be a good Snake? What does it mean to "to be a man"? What is the difference?

These questions are set up by the game's story and the way it sets up the game's universe of discourse. In this case, the world contains a transformed Snake, an old and dying one. This sets up, for me, an interpretive framework that makes the story and game play interact as I think about playing the game well, but as both an old deteriorating Snake and old deteriorating man. I can intersect my own real-world identity as an old man with Snake's identity as an aging hero crawling to his last stand.

I have been struck by how little much of the commentary about MGS4 on the Internet (most of it written by people a good deal younger than me) makes of Snake's age and condition in the game. But, for me, this was the first video game I had played where the hero was my age. Solid Snake has always been one of my heroes in video games. He was before always the young, strong, virile superhero. Now he is more mortal, more a "man" (human).

Snake's condition—that this is his last act as Solid Snake—makes us reinterpret lots of the *Metal Gear Solid* game world. Things and acts in it take on new nuances and emotional meanings now that Snake is a wounded warrior faced with his own limitations for the first time.

X-Ray Vision

As we argued, video games are not really (just) pretty pictures ("eye candy"), but "signs" to be "read". We must look through the rich details of a game's graphics to see just those details or aspects of the world that are relevant to action, goals, and problem solving. Another way to put this is that gamers see the relevant details and aspects of the game world as "signs" with meaning, just like words in a language.

To play well you must read the signs well. In MGS4 reading the signs well means being a good Snake. What's that mean? Well, let's take a quick tour through MGS4—because MGS4 makes a big deal (indeed) out of reading signs.

MGS4 regularly plays with the medium to get the player to reflect on the fact that he or she is playing a video game. Let me just say that MGS4 constantly "goes meta" in the sense that it makes you **think about** the fact that you are playing a video game (the meta level) and does not let you just play it and forget about it.

Remember those great film-like cut scenes? In some of them we see rain or ice on the

camera lens. This makes us well aware that the action is being filmed. But wait, it can't

be being filmed, there is no camera, this is a video game.

It's a regular film technique to do stuff like this (showing muck on the camera lens) to

make the viewer aware the action is being filmed and filmed from a certain perspective.

It calls direct attention to the medium (film) as a medium, rather than seeing the medium

as a transparent window onto the world.

But Mr. Kojimar is calling attention to the wrong medium: this is a video game and not a

film and there is no camera. He is, perhaps, calling wry attention to all the controversy

about how games should not be movies (ala Seth) while they get more movie-like all the

time.   And, of course, he is signaling, as well, what genre of Hollywood film he wants

you to compare his cut scenes to, i.e., avant garde action films.

But no matter why he is doing it, Mr. Kojimar is surely telling us to pay attention to the

signs—to the rain and ice on the camera. He wants us these signs to signal the fact that

this is all artificial, not real, not even a transparent window onto the world, even a fantasy

world. It's a video game pretending to be a movie, knowing all the while it's a video

game.

MGS4 constantly makes references to earlier MGS games as games. It constantly makes

reference, as well, to the fact that you are playing a video, even a violent one, and even

suggests that maybe such games are training you for real violence and, hey, maybe you shouldn't be doing this. This is a wry comment on the controversies over video game violence. MGS4 even makes several references to the fact that you are playing on a Play Station 3. The signs that you are playing a game are rubbed in your face.

Some specific examples that I love—and there are many in the game: Snake ends up in exactly the place where in an earlier game he fought and defeated a tank by throwing grenades into it. I remember. I did it. Did it well, if I say so myself. But Otacon tells Snake that he has checked with an expert and the expert tells him that no individual could defeat a tank that way. It's impossible. He asks Snake how it did it; he marvels that he did it—how did he do it? Maybe it was just a game, not real. Snake just grunts.

Another example: Deep into the game, Otacon tells Snake that the disk needs to be switched. Asks him if he sees a second disk. Snake says no. Otacon says something like, oh, I remember, this is Play Station 3 with a blue ray disk technology. We don't need to switch disks any more like in the old days. He then marvels at the wonders of new technologies and Snake tells him "to get a grip".

Here is another example: One level starts off with the exact 2D game level from an earlier game. This is a level I remember very well indeed. I have even used screen shots from it in my talks. You (re-)play the old game a bit and then all of a sudden, it stops and you see that Snake was having a dream. Hey, he dreams video game dreams.

Yet another example: During those gorgeous cut scenes a little "x" comes on in the corner of the screen every once in a while. If you keep pushing "x" on the controller you see flashes of scenes from earlier games—scenes thematically connected to what you are seeing in the cut scene. The cut scene is totally realistic looking, but the flash back is out of an earlier game and, thus, looks much more "primitive".

This juxtaposition of realism and less realistic graphics from earlier games surely tells the player that no matter how realistic MGS4 looks—thanks to that wonderful Play Station 3 technology—it is still a video game and, in core respects, not different than the earlier games, games which were worse as "eye candy", but good as games. But then it can't be the graphics that make a game and the superb graphics of MGS4 aren't what makes it a great game.

Indeed, MGS4 is one of the most realistic looking video games in history. But it regularly undercuts that realism to underscore that you are playing a video game—and not just a video game, but an MGS game. Not only do we get all the references to the earlier games. We also get decidedly unrealistic conventions (carried over from the earlier games) like a question mark or an exclamation point showing up over an enemy's head when he thinks he has discovered Snake (the question mark) or when he definitely has discovered Snake (the exclamation point). If question marks and exclamation marks are not signs to be read, I don't know what are.

So throughout Mr. Kojimar makes it clear that gamers have to "read" signs: signs like the water on the camera, the question and exclamation marks, the flash backs to earlier games, the wry comments on the fact that you are playing a game and that what Snake has done earlier (and, therefore, probably now, too) can't be real. Why this obsession with signs and reading signs?

Two reasons: First, reading signs of a certain sort in a certain way is what you have to do when playing any video game. This is what we earlier called "X-Ray Vision".

Second: This—reading signs in a certain way—is ESPECIALLY what you have to do in MGS games in a SPECIAL way, not just because they are stealth games, but because that is one of the things Snake is good at (reading signs) and you are supposed to be a good Snake.

We have come to the heart of the matter. Snake is the ultimate video game character because he lives, breaths, and acts in the virtual world of MSG games just the way good video game players are supposed to play any video game. And what does THAT mean?

It means that Snake looks for affordances, just like savvy gamers do. In a deep sense Snake is playing a video game. So this does sound weird, so let me hasten to tell you what I mean.

O.K., imagine you are playing a video game (actually playing, not watching a cut scene). What do you do? Well, you could just rush off and button mash, but that is, in most good games a good way to a bad result. No, you pay close attention to your environment so that you can discover how and where aspects of that environment can serve as affordances for you to accomplish goals, given the effective abilities Snake (and remember his abilities are attenuated in this game) has and you have.

In MGS4, the goals you accomplish are a) Snake's goals (the ones the game tells you he has); b) goals you have set for yourself as a player (e.g., to finish in under 9 hours); and c) what I call Snake/Jim goals. Snake/Jim goals are ones that Snake can have (they are allowed but not determined by the game design) and that you have chosen to have for the way you want to play Snake (e.g., killing no one).

As we have seen, an affordance is something in the environment that you can use to accomplish a goal, but it is only an affordance if you have the skill to use it. So to pay attention to affordances means to pay attention to how your skills match up with aspects of the environment to take advantage of them as affordances for your goals. Using MGS4 as an example, you have to pay attention to the skills Snake has. These are the skills the game designers have given him (e.g., using his camouflage outfit to meld into the environment). Snake's skills actually change on different difficulty levels and even change in different contexts of the game (e.g., when he is overstressed in MGS4).

You also have to pay attention to your own skills as a player. For example, say you are just no good with the timing of the grab command and, thus, no good at grabbing enemies from behind (this sucks for you because you must do this in one of the boss battles in the game). For you, enemies with their back to you are not an affordance for grabbing and you will engage them in some other way (shoot them, sneak past them, get the Mark 3 to distract them).

Finally, you have to pay attention to the skills you choose to use in being your own kind of Snake. Even if you are good at sniper rifles—and so far away enemies are affordances for sniping—you might still choose to sneak by all enemies, giving up sniping as an option. You choose not to let far away enemies be affordances for your sniper skills, because you want to be a sneaky Snake.

So playing video games as a savvy gamer is matching skills to aspects of the environment that can become affordances to carry out goals. In MGS4 this means carefully observing the environment to find good hiding places, vantage points for stealth attacks or sniper shots, paths around enemies, or weak spots in a boss's attack, and much more, all with due regard for your own skills as a player and what sort of Snake you want to be and can be (given those skills).

Mr. Kojimar, the game's lead designer, is well aware of all this, even if he would not use my language. In MGS4 he gives Snake a device that just shouts out my affordance theory: it's all about matching your skills with your environment.

Snake has a special suit that allows him to meld into his environment so well he becomes camouflaged and virtually invisible. With the suit, every part of the environment is an affordance for Snake to disappear.   Without the suit he cannot do it and no part of the environment offers him any such affordance.

Now, you may think my analysis here is too fanciful. However, Mr. Kojimar devotes one level of MGS4 to a tutorial on the matter. In this level, Snake has to use his "Solid Eye", a device that gives him hyper vision where he can see foot prints, enemies, and other "signs" (like where loot such as ammo and rations are on the ground) clearly, even in bad light conditions. Raiden tells Snake that he must track the people who took Naomi, all the while watching out carefully for enemy soldiers.

Snake says he really has no tracking skills (oops, that's a problem). Therefore, nothing in the environment is going to be an affordance for Snake to track.

Raiden comes to the rescue. He gives Snake a tutorial on how expert trackers—like Native Americans—use all their senses to pay attention to every little sign (e.g., broken twigs, heavier or lighter foot prints, the distribution of the weight shown by a foot print, sounds, disturbances however small in the environment).   He tells Snake he must read the signs carefully (see, it's all about reading signs). After the tutorial, Otacon coaches Snake through the whole thing.

So Snake (and you) learn to pay very close attention to the environment (with the aid of the Solid Eye tool) to read all the signs, no matter how subtle, to use them as affordances to know where to go—which path out of many choices to follow—so you can pursue Naomi's kidnappers without being seen. Snake is getting a lesson and so are you the player, a lesson on tracking and, I argue, a lesson on playing video games, at least games like MGS4. Because, after all, Snake is usually good (though not this time) at reading the signs to use his environment to his advantage—it's his "super power"—and you need to be, too, if you are going to be a good gamer and a good Snake.

I must say that my Snake was not all that good at tracking. And remember he said he wasn't. And he is just learning. And he is old (so am I) and sick and tired. So this is another case where not doing well is doing well (being Snake as he is). But he gets through (not all that badly, for Snake or for me or for my Snake, I must say—especially the second time round and remember I said above that the second time round is important, though I haven't gotten to that yet).

So that's what good gamers do: match skills to the environment to create affordances for accomplishing goals. So Snake and I both got a lesson from Raiden, Otacon, and Mr. Kojimar on the whole theory. But above I said Snake was special because his whole being as Snake—what he does, what he is—is acting in just this way, as a good gamer. It is like he is playing a game and that's why Otacon keeps telling him—and you—that he is (and you are) playing a video game.

Being Human

To be a good gamer is to be a good Snake; to be a good Snake is to be a good gamer. But remember, Snake's father told us that after our heroic accomplishments in MGS4, the world needs no more Snakes — "go be a man". Perhaps, Mr. Kojima wants us to stop gaming and go out and change the world.

No, that's not what he means, I think. Or, at least, not all that he means. In "Self, video games, and pedagogy" Jenny Wright (to appear) compares heroes in Native American myths and heroes in role-playing video games. She says: "[t]he sense of achievement you gain from becoming an expert manipulator of any environment is addictive and affirming".

Being a good gamer and being a good Snake in fact requires the core skill, not just of heroes, but of "a man" or "a woman" — of an effective, efficacious human being — and that skill is: becoming adept at gaining and matching skills with different aspects of the environment to use them as affordances to accomplish important goals.

To play GMS4 well means to be a good Snake. And that means to be a good gamer. And that means to be a hero. And that means to be a thoughtful human. Pay attention to those affordances.

Every hero, every human, has different skills, different desires. Every hero, every human, matches skills and desires to environments to accomplish goals differently. Every player plays Snake differently. My Snake is not yours, yours is not mine. My life is not yours, yours is not mine. My excellence is not yours, yours is not mine. As long as we are trying

to play well, to honor Snake, to be good Snakes, the best we can, we are all the hero crawling to the last boss to become "a man", "a woman", "a human".

But why does Seth have to play MSG4 a second time and maybe a third too? Because each time around, you're a better Snake.

And why are all those gorgeous cut scenes there? Just to tell you that Snake is a hero and what sort of hero he is. Snake IS a hero and YOU can't let him down.

But, remember, too, the best Snake (in fact the one you have to be on the hardest level of the game) is a sneaky non-lethal Snake, the Snake that always leaves the Hollywood action movie in favor of disappearing unseen, unheard into his environment, all the while accomplishing his goals [On "The Boss Extreme Difficulty" level, you must complete the game in under 5 hours with no alerts, no humans killed, and no continues, while using no health replenishing items and foregoing the Octocamo stealth suit].

Being a sneaky Snake is hard this time around, in MGS4, the final game. Snake is old. So am I. So it's ok to make mistakes. But we play again. Make less mistakes. Snake and I get better — perhaps, too, just a bit younger.

And why is it ok to cut off those cut scenes? Because I know Snake already and have long wanted to be him and have been him now four times. I see he is old now. But he is still my hero.

Here is my personal reflection, after playing the game, on the fight with the boss "Crying Wolf":

I have tracked her unique prints in the snow (and they said I was no good at tracking!). But I am far away. She does not see me or hear me. She does not know I am here. But I know she is there. I wait. The world is covered in wind and snow and ice and mist. It is a pure white out. There is no visibility. Then all of a sudden the mists part. I have waited patiently. I am ready. My silenced sniper bullet hurls through the air for a perfect head shot. Unseen. Unheard. Crying Wolf is defeated. I have been a good Snake. Even though I am old. Oh, but I will be a better Snake next time around. I'll use non-lethal ammo. I'll just stun her and quietly move on.

Avatars

This analysis makes clear what sort of avatar Solid Snake is in this game for me. His body is old and weak, its physical skills attenuated. His identity is as an aging hero making a last stand before he becomes just a man. The tool-kit he gives the player contains his Strong Eye, his camouflage suit, his radar, and several other devices, most of which have to do with reading the environment.

We have argued that people in the real world confront and interact with each other and with the world not directly, but in terms of a social identity we have also referred to as an avatar. When we are acting out an avatar, in a game or in real life, we are being a "kind of person".

The "kind of person" Solid Snake is in MGS4 is defined by the game's story, cut scenes,

the earlier games, and my own play in those game and in MGS4. An avatar is an odd

thing in many ways. Solid Snake is not me, but I play him and when I do, he and I meld

in a certain way. It is not his goals or mine alone that determine how "we" play, but the

both of us together determine how we play. The game allows "us" (Snake and I) to

create what I have called the "player's story", my own unique history as Snake/Jim.   In

the next chapter I will argue that avatars (social identities) in the real world behave the

same way. All avatars involve what I will call in the next chapter a "projective identity".