

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Metal Gear
Platform: MSX
Genre: Stealth
Release Date: July 7, 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hideo Kojima

Overview

When FOXHOUND agent Gray Fox goes missing inside of the rogue military nation-state Outer Heaven, it's up to the player as rookie soldier Solid Snake to infiltrate the base, rescue Gray Fox, and find out the meaning behind the agent's final message: "METAL GEAR..."

Characters

- **Solid Snake** – A rookie FOXHOUND agent sent on his first mission by his commanding officer Big Boss. In order to successfully infiltrate Outer Heaven, he will have to use stealth, rather than brute force
- **Big Boss** – Solid Snake's commanding officer and, unbeknownst to Snake, the leader of Outer Heaven. The player is able to contact Big Boss via radio over the course of the game for hints—which eventually grow to be more dangerous than helpful as Big Boss attempts to lead Snake into traps.

Breakdown

When one thinks about elegant design in a game, they often think of games with well-constructed patterns and systems that are experimented with as the game goes on. Whether it's *The Legend of Zelda*, with its simplistic-yet-mysterious dungeon progression, or *Braid* with its strict set of rules from which the game's puzzles emerge, we consider consistent, pattern-based design to be what all games should strive for.

The original *Metal Gear*, released for the MSX2 in 1987, throws these rules out the window—along with plenty of its own rules—and is all the more successful because of it.

The game opens with the player character, Solid Snake, arriving in Outer Heaven, a rogue militarized nation-state which he must infiltrate in order to save the captured FOXHOUND operative Gray Fox and find out what is being built in Outer Heaven. “Take action not to be discovered by the enemy,” the player is told. And thus, armed with only a pack of cigarettes (which makes Solid Snake’s health decrease upon using) and a codec by which they can call their commanding officer Big Boss, the player begins their mission.

The late-80s low-quality “Theme of Tara” signals the start of this mission, its ominous tones deterring the player from wanting to venture any further into this green-and-gray pixelated vision of the distant militarized future that is 1995. This fear is instilled into the player not only from the graphics and audio, but from the game design itself; if an enemy so much as sees Solid Snake, they’ll gun him down, forcing the player to start all over from the beginning of the floor that they’re on. The game doesn’t *want* the player to stick around. They’re not supposed to be here, after all; they’re an intruder. An infiltrator.

A Snake.

To help us analyze and give context to the themes of infiltration in *Metal Gear*, it’s important to understand Hideo Kojima’s philosophy towards creating it.

The development of Metal Gear began with a simple mission: create a combat game for the MSX2. Due to technical limitations, however, this was impossible for Kojima’s team to do. How does one complete an impossible mission? Taking it on in a straightforward, traditional manner wouldn’t work—there’s no sense in bashing your head against an impenetrable wall. Making oneself stronger than the obstacle would be a long, hard process, and making the obstacle weaker would be out of the question... but changing one’s *perception of the situation* would allow them to take what they once thought was an impossible mission and turn it into one that, while still hard, might actually be achievable.

This is exactly what Kojima did. He made a game centered around combat, but with a twist. It isn’t the act of combat which makes the game interesting; it’s the fear of combat. The player wants to avoid the deadly act of combat at all costs for the purpose of self-preservation. Whether it was an intentional theme of the game or not, the means by which the player weaves through the enemies’ defenses very closely resembles Kojima’s method to creating a “combat game.”

Changing one’s perception of an impossible situation can lead to hope.

And the player is given a glimmer of hope, too... even in the most unlikely of places. As the ever-droning, ever-present Theme of Tara progresses to its end, the song increases in tempo, becoming more adventurous and heroic-sounding, giving the player just enough courage to press on and continue their mission before it loops back to its demoralizing first notes.

The basic gameplay is simple: don't get caught by guards. A guard will spot the player when Snake crosses over their invisible line of sight, which projects in a straight line out from their sprite in the direction that they're facing. Doing this will cause the game to go into the alert phase, in which all on-screen guards will hone in on Snake's location and attempt to gun him down. Snake doesn't have enough health or ammo to allow the player to realistically fight back, so avoiding this alert phase is very important.

Part of what makes this interesting is that the game encourages the player to be stealthy not by giving them a direct fail state as soon as they're caught, but by giving the player an incentive to not want to trigger the alert phase. While the alert phase is essentially a slightly looser version of a fail state (since it often leads to a game over anyway), the feeling that the player gets from being caught is different and more meaningful. They don't feel like they lost the game; they feel like they've genuinely been spotted by enemy soldiers. We might take this for granted now, since it's a staple in today's stealth games, but at the time, this would have been a big step up in immersive game design.

Taking a slow, strategic, roundabout approach to tackling problems is at the very core of the game's typical gameplay loop; there's almost never a point where the player won't care about being spotted by soldiers. However, the feeling of constant adaptation to adversity goes deeper than this.

Metal Gear is filled with scripted sequences and one-off puzzles which require the player to attain new items or perform goofy tasks to pass. Early on in the game, there's a gas room which can only be navigated through by finding a hidden gas mask. One design choice that's important to note here which further reinforces the game's goal to never give the player an in-your-face fail state is that the player doesn't immediately get a game over upon setting foot in the gas room; their health simply decreases until the player dies from their health bar reaching zero. Once again, this small change to the way fail states are represented in-game makes the player feel even more invested in their mission.

The gas room is only the beginning, though. At one point, the player must parachute off of the roof to reach a particular area that's otherwise blocked off. Jumping off of the roof with no parachute will lead to the player splattering on the ground below, dropping their health to zero and giving them a game over—another example of an interesting implementation of fail states. The game could have just prevented the player from jumping off of the roof with no parachute, but allowing them to do so creates a more immersive game world.

Another really cool moment which reinforces the game's committal to both interesting fail states and making the player do new things is when the player is captured by the enemy and finds out that, to escape, he must punch the walls and find a weak one that he can punch through. Again, there's no game over for not figuring this out. The game is content to let the player sit in that small jail cell for the rest of their life.

Little moments like parachuting off of the roof and breaking out of jail add to the cinematic nature of the game. The player's constant adaption to new scenarios makes

them feel like an action hero in an 80s' movie. Whereas a game like *The Legend of Zelda* would have the player go through eight similar dungeons, *Metal Gear* has them crawl through a gas room, parachute off a roof, break out of jail, journey across the desert, wait in an elevator, and memorize an attack code in order to kill a giant robot—which of those two makes you feel like a resourceful badass?

The relationship between the player and the game is like that of two dueling swordsmen facing off against each other. When the player zigs, the game zags. For every adaptation the player makes, the game throws something new at them. There's nothing inherently unique about this approach to game design—any good game will attempt to do this—but *Metal Gear's* ability to tie in its narrative makes the feeling so much more impactful.

By the time the player reaches the final building, the game is straight-up lying to them. Upon encountering an enemy ambush, Big Boss calls Snake and tells him to “Get in the truck on the right!” After following the recommendation of their trusted commander and entering the truck, the truck drives the player all the way back to the beginning area, forcing them to work their way all the way back to where they were.

“How annoying,” the player thinks. “Perhaps I made a mistake? Or did Big Boss make a mistake? I'm not sure.” They get past the ambush, reach the next room, and receive another call from Big Boss: “Enter the door on the left.” The player enters and finds themselves teetering on the edge of an instant-death bottomless pit.

At this point, a resourceful player who has truly grasped the concept of staying one step ahead of the game will stop taking Big Boss' advice. As they make their way towards the final battle with Metal Gear, the calls keep coming. Big Boss even goes so far as to speak directly to the player. “Solid Snake! The mission is over. Turn off your Playstation Vita and stop playing.”

But despite their commanding officer turning against them, the player is still able to find hope—they just have to look hard enough. Towards the very end of the game, the player is able to contact Jennifer, the third and final resistance member. Unlike Schneider and Diane, the other two resistance members who tend to give pretty un-useful advice outside of a few key moments, and Big Boss, who is outright deceiving the player at this point, Jennifer is a huge help, and her presence is a godsend. Her advice is actually helpful! In my opinion, the best example of player adaptation, indirect fail states, and finding a ray of hope to illuminate the darkness comes into play during the final battle.

Shortly before the final battle, Jennifer asks you to rescue her brother from “Coward Duck.” She tells you that, if you accidentally kill her brother during the battle, she'll never forgive you and will never speak to you again. This gives the player a real intrinsic incentive to save her brother; Jennifer is a genuinely helpful character, and losing her companionship and advice would be devastating. The player can kill her brother and the game will go on, but they'll never receive the two pieces of advice which turn the final battle from an impossible mission to a walk in the park.

The brother gives the first piece of advice upon being rescued: “During your escape, take the ladder on the left.” It isn’t clear what this means, but the player trusts him.

Soon afterwards, the moment of truth arrives: the final battle against Big Boss, set to a countdown timer that ticks down rapidly. It’s clear upon meeting Big Boss in the boss room that defeating him AND escaping before the timer runs out will be near-impossible—with only a few short minutes before the base explodes, it’s going to be a very, very close call. The player doesn’t even have any surefire way of defeating Big Boss, and Schneider and Diane are no help in figuring that out. The only person they have to call is Jennifer, who arms the player with knowledge which both gives them a fighting chance against Big Boss and, in my mind, perfectly summarizes every one of the game’s themes in one sentence:

“You can extend the time limit by using a cigarette.”

In that instant, the most useless, detrimental item in the game, the one that’s been with the player throughout the entire adventure, becomes the strongest weapon in Snake’s arsenal. The player uses the cigarette, doubles the time limit, and inevitably defeats Big Boss.

They enter the next room, which has three ladders in it. They climb the one on the left as per Jennifer’s brother’s instruction, ascending up, and up, seeing that the other two ladders didn’t reach the entire way and would have caused the player to lose more precious seconds, the only force keeping Outer Heaven from detonating in a fiery explosion.

They reach the top of the ladder and escape the military base. Snake runs towards the camera, making sure not to look at the explosion behind him to ensure that he looks as badass as possible, and collapses from exhaustion.

“This is Solid Snake...

Metal Gear’s destruction is a success.

Operation Intrude N313 finished!

...Everything is finished.

I will come back now.

...Over.”

Mission Impossible:

Complete.

Strongest Element

I feel as though *Metal Gear*'s strongest element is the length it will go to surprise the player with new scenarios, even going so far as to break the fourth wall towards the end of the game.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful element of the game is the pacing after reaching the Second Building. Escaping the First Building is a great accomplishment, and naturally, the player will be ready for something new after leaving that first area of the game and crossing the desert—but, in a moment that completely contradicts the game's awesome tendency to bring in new elements, the player is only greeted with another artistically-identical area upon reaching the Second Building. After playing for a bit more, they'll soon realize that there *is* indeed more cool, surprising stuff to come, but I was personally really unmotivated to continue playing the game upon reaching the Second Building.

Highlight

The best moment of the game for me was when you finally find out what the Cigarettes do—learning that your useless item that you've had since the beginning of the adventure actually contains great power is such a wonderful twist that even *The Wizard of Oz* did it.

Critical Reception

Since *Metal Gear* was released back in '87, there aren't really any reviews of the game from reputable sources—but one needs only look at the legacy that this game has left behind, and the critical reception to the *Metal Gear* series as a whole, to understand how influential this game's ideas have been to our industry.

Lessons

- Surprise is a wonderful thing! In fact, it's quite possibly the strongest storytelling tool there is. Surprising someone in a plot is an awesome thing to do, but if you can surprise someone through gameplay (how cool was it when you escaped Lon Lon Ranch with Epona in *Ocarina of Time*!), then you're really using the power of games to do something rad.
- You don't need a ton of dialogue to stir up emotions in the player. *Metal Gear* has very little in the way of explicit story—there are no collectable journal entries explaining the king's dying wish or three hour long cutscenes about the philosophy of war economies—but all of the items, characters, and little bits of dialogue that *are* there all support the theme of being a spy who has to think on his feet and question everything.

Summation

Metal Gear is a fantastic game that, despite not having been developed using the most advanced technology, is able to instill incredibly powerful emotions in its player by relying on the principle of “less talk more rock.” Its twists are delivered through

gameplay and atmosphere; the middleman of plot is cut down so that, instead of having to rely on external characters or story beats to feel something, the player experiences the story firsthand—and that’s why the “writing” in *Metal Gear* is still worth examination to this day.