

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Metal Gear Solid 4*
Platform: Playstation 3
Genre: Stealth, Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 12, 2008
Developer: Kojima Productions
Publisher: Konami
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hideo Kojima and Shuyo Murata

Overview

In *Metal Gear Solid 4*, players take the role of Solid Snake, a clone of national hero Big Boss. Solid Snake is suffering from accelerated aging, and because of this appears much older than he actually is. Snake is tasked with trying to stop Liquid Ocelot, a former rival of Big Boss who used hypnotic suggestion to adopt the persona of a second, deceased clone of Big Boss named Liquid Snake.

Liquid Ocelot's goal is to take control of the Sons of the Patriots, a system that regulates all aspects of the economy and directly influences many people's daily lives. One part of the Sons of the Patriots is a global system that is used to monitor soldier's actions in order to regulate and control war zones under the pretense of "a safer, cleaner battlefield." The military side of the Sons of the Patriots system controls everything from gun ID locks to the monitoring and regulation of soldier's emotions in order to improve combat effectiveness and reduce the effects of PTSD via nanomachines. When Ocelot assumes control of the military part of the system, he gains the ability to disable the guns of forces that oppose him, and even shut off the nanomachines that buffer the effects of PTSD, resulting in seizures and sudden emotional trauma in his enemies. Using this new power, Ocelot aims to take control of the entire Sons of the Patriots system, in order put the entire world under his command, and reshape it to fit his ideals.

Characters

- **Old Snake** – The player's avatar. Old Snake, also known as Solid Snake, or Snake for short, is a clone of the legendary soldier Big Boss. He works under the order of Colonel Campbell, and has many allies in his mission, such as the technically minded Otacon, and the cyborg ninja Raiden. In *Metal Gear Solid 4*,

Snake suffers the symptoms of Werner's syndrome, resulting in a massively shortened lifespan and greatly aged appearance. Despite his limited estimated time left to live, he takes on the mission to stop Liquid Ocelot from taking over the Sons of the Patriot's system. Snake is a determined person, always ready to do what needs to be done to complete the mission. However, he isn't without a heart. He is fiercely protective of his friends, and has been known to crack a wry joke or two.

- **Liquid Ocelot** – Liquid Ocelot is a fusion of characters. He has the body of Revolver Ocelot, the one-time rival of Big Boss, who after the events of some of the previous games in the Metal Gear Solid series grafted the arm of Solid Snake's rival, (and fellow clone of Big Boss,) Liquid Snake, onto his own. Through this, and self-induced hypnotic suggestion, Ocelot "became" Liquid. His goal is to take over the Sons of the Patriots system, and ultimately impose his own control over the world. Easily identified by his cowboy boots and long silvery hair and mustache, Ocelot has a penchant for the dramatic, always making sweeping gestures and talking about grand concepts.
- **Hal "Otacon" Emmerich** – Hal Emmerich is Solid Snake's friend and longtime partner. He goes by the handle "Otacon," which is short for Otaku Convention. His nickname, along with his brown hair and round glasses, along with his turtle neck and lab coat all help push his "nerdy" character design. He is an expert in technology, and provides Snake with intelligence and gear. He spends most of his time aboard the Nomad, a large plane that carries his computers and serves as a sort of mobile base for the team.

Breakdown

Rather than going into depth on the story of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, this essay will analyze instead the ways that *Metal Gear Solid 4* delivers its narrative to the player, and the ways the game ties together the narrative and gameplay in interesting ways.

Metal Gear Solid 4 tells its story to the player constantly. While it often tells the story via the common method of cutscenes, *Metal Gear Solid 4* delivers the story to the player at nearly all times, even during gameplay. It uses many channels of narrative delivery, such as the codec conversations, voiceovers, item descriptions, and optional conversations. Some of these occur passively, such as the voiceovers, while others players need to opt into, such as the item descriptions, or the ability to call several characters via the codec at varying points in the game.

The cutscenes are one of the main ways the game delivers the story, however, and while high in budget and excellently choreographed, they suffer from their extended length. This is likely due in part to *Metal Gear Solid 4's* goal of tying together the narratives of the previous entries in the series, which requires the game to at least make an attempt to fill in players on relevant details that they may not have experienced, if they haven't played the previous games in the series. Unfortunately, this is a very difficult thing to do, as Metal Gear Solid games are notorious for their length and complex storylines, and many people new to the series found *Metal Gear Solid 4's* story to be

fairly convoluted. The length of these cutscenes is one of the most frequent of complaints leveled at the game. *Metal Gear Solid 4* attempts to alleviate this problem slightly by moments where the player can mash the X button in order to see flashbacks from previous games or events, as well as moments where the player can hold a button to change the camera angle to that of Snake's perspective. Some of the lengthier between-mission cutscenes can actually be played, with the player controlling the small Mk. II robot and exploring the Nomad while the characters interact with each other in the area. While not ideal, it does help slightly to maintain the player's investment in some of the more drawn out cutscenes. Some cutscenes are done in a very novel way, however. These scenes split the screen, and have the player actively playing the game, while the other section of the screen plays a cutscene. These scenes are interesting and creative, but are hit and miss with their execution. For example, one of the more frustrating instances of this is a scene where the player has to fight off waves of enemies while a high intensity fight scene between two characters takes place on the other half of the screen. Unfortunately, the player can't watch this scene because of the need to focus on surviving the waves of enemies.

In addition to the issues with the cutscenes, the story itself suffers under the weight of the series' history. *Metal Gear Solid 4* attempts to tie together all of the narrative threads from the previous games, which results in a narrative with many parallel and divergent stories rolled together into a very convoluted and potentially difficult to follow story. Newcomers to the series are likely to be overwhelmed and confused by the constant bombardment of references to previous games. It should be noted that the co-writer for this entry in the series is a different person than the one that co-wrote the previous three games in the series, which may account for some of the differences in how the writing is handled from previous games.

On the other hand, while the story and cutscenes have their flaws, the cutscenes themselves are very well done. Not only are they expertly written, voice acted, scored, and choreographed, they also sidestep for the most part a common problem in many video game cutscenes. While some games are jarring in how unlike the cutscenes the gameplay actually ends up being, *Metal Gear Solid 4* brilliantly succeeds in making the game and the cutscenes feel like they take place in the same world. Most of the actions the player sees Snake do in cutscenes are similar to the things that the player can do in the game, and all of the items shown in cutscenes are items that the player can obtain and use in game. Sometimes when an item is used in a cutscene, the player will actually see it directly affect Snake's health bar. Something that is also important to the consistency between cutscenes and gameplay is the fact that the cutscenes are rendered in game, using the game's engine. This means that whatever camouflage Snake is wearing before the cutscene persists into the scene itself, and makes the graphics during gameplay identical to that of the cutscenes, helping to further the feeling that all of the events are taking place in the same world. *Metal Gear Solid 4* takes full advantage of this, too, with some cutscenes, such as the opening cutscene, transitioning smoothly directly from cutscene to gameplay, with no loading screen or camera cut to the actual game.

Metal Gear Solid 4, while perhaps justifiably criticized for its excessively long cutscenes, does do many interesting things in terms of integrating design and narrative. One of the more interesting examples is the psyche bar, a new twist on the popular stamina bar, made famous in *Metal Gear Solid 3*. Now, instead of a stamina gauge that

decreases over time that must be refilled by eating, there is a psyche gauge that monitor's Old Snake's mental fortitude in a given situation. In addition to this, there is a small indicator below this meter that displays stress as a percentage, and works in conjunction with the psyche gauge for a very detailed and interesting system. There are a large number of things that can influence the stress meter and in turn the psyche meter, both positively and negatively. Obviously, things like being shot at and taking damage tend to be stressful, but interestingly, things like low oxygen content due to altitude, or discomfort from lying around in the hot sun can also raise Old Snake's stress. Meanwhile, things like certain comfort foods, resting in the shade, listening to relaxing music, successfully staying hidden, calling Snake's personal psychological counselor, or eating warm food can bring Snake's stress back down and his psyche back up. A low psyche causes your health to regenerate more slowly, and affects Snake's aiming. This psyche mechanic even extends over into cutscenes, where when a disheartening event happens, Snake may lose some of his psyche, which can be recovered by the player mashing a button if they're quick. The psyche and stress mechanic adds a lot of depth to Snake, helping him feel like a real person, along with the myriad small details present in the game, such as the many small contextual animations for Snake, and the variety of unique ways he can interact with the environments at points.

Another strength of *Metal Gear Solid 4* is the integration of items that tie the story to the moment to moment gameplay. Every item that is used in a cutscene is an item that can be used by the player, and oftentimes has a narratively relevant function. For example, the small robot, called the Mk. II, can be remotely controlled by the player in game, and serves as a sort of long distance avatar for Otacon during cutscenes. Another powerful example is the syringe Snake acquires. This syringe suppresses the effects of nanomachines, and is used in the cutscenes by Snake to prevent himself from having frequent seizures at inopportune moments. Throughout the game, repeated use of it during cutscenes visually shows the player that Snake is developing a tolerance for its effects, as evidenced through the smaller and smaller amount of psyche it restores to Snake. The player can even use this item themselves during gameplay to raise Snake's psyche bar. However, just as throughout the game it loses its potency as Snake develops a tolerance, so too does the effect in game reduce with repeated uses. Ultimately this item even needs to be used offensively, in order to kill a boss, and again in another boss fight in order to break the control of an enemy that attempts to possess Snake through his nanomachines. Most bosses in the game also drop their weapon once they've been beaten, and one of them even needs to be beaten through the use of their own item, acquired during the battle. There are a variety of consumable items too, such as energy drinks and ramen noodles, which can have a variety of large and small effects, like the ramen noodles not only recovering Snake's health and psyche, but also warming his body in cold environments and reducing his stress. Some of the items even play into his accelerated aging. For example, he'll even develop back pains from crouch walking for extended periods of time, reflected in his periodic grumbling and stretching of his back. This can be alleviated through things like a compress for his back.

A more controversial implementation of this is through the product placement. In some cases, the product placement can feel like it improves the immersion, making the world in the game seem more like ours. For example, Otacon uses Mac computers to do most of his work, which means that the computers he uses in game are based on real

computers. On the other hand, some feel jarring and out of place, like the energy drink product placements, or the usable iPod Snake has at his disposal. Interestingly, though, Metal Gear Solid as a series is quirky enough that it never feels too far out of place. It oftentimes just feels like one of the strange idiosyncrasies fans have come to expect from series creator Hideo Kojima, right alongside many tiny details and Easter eggs and bizarre, unexplained super powers for bosses.

The feeling of a detailed, lived in world that the items, cutscenes, and details help to enforce is made even more effective thanks to some of the themes touched upon in the story that are implemented in a way that directly effects the player during gameplay. In the story of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, one of the concepts touched upon often is the idea of an economy driven by war. This war economy, created through the Sons of the Patriots system, has given rise to the green collars, the war profiteers. These themes are used directly in the form of the war price mechanic, which will be covered later.

Strongest Element

One of the strongest elements of the game is its strong availability of options afforded to the player, in terms of how they receive the narrative to how they participate in it. This availability of options for how the player receives the story is exemplified in several ways. For example, players can opt into additional dialogues with characters via the codec to learn more about events in the game as they happen. Another example has the player pressing buttons during cutscenes to trigger flashbacks to previous events, or to control the camera angle and zoom during them. It even blends into the gameplay, such as during several cinematic gameplay sequences. These gameplay sequences include a cinematic motorcycle chase through Europe, which if a player chose to, they could even set the controller down and enjoy it as an action packed cutscene sequence with dramatic camera angles, rather than actively playing and shooting at enemies. Other examples of gameplay sequences include the split screen cutscenes that allow the player to continue playing that were mentioned earlier.

This availability of choices is also manifested directly in the gameplay, in a few ways. While some games give the player “choice” by giving them a binary set of options that triggers paths on a branching narrative or dialogue tree, *Metal Gear Solid 4* gives the player choices in a more subtle and thematic manner. *Metal Gear Solid 4* allows the player to get to their mission’s destination and to do so how they see fit, allowing them to define how they’d like to approach stealth on their own terms. Some games do something similar, allowing players to choose either the stealth approach or the guns blazing approach, but few have quite the range of degrees to which a player can adhere to one strategy or another that *Metal Gear Solid 4* has, and even fewer have as many economic and gameplay consequences and thematic implications. In *Metal Gear Solid 4*, the player can stealthily kill all the enemies before moving on, or they can choose to go for a non-lethal run instead. Or they can even choose to try to sneak by everyone without even being seen. Or they can go in dead on and engage directly in a loud firefight, fighting their way to the objective.

All of these carry thematically weighted consequences, as well as allow the player to determine what stealth really means to them. And these decisions have practical consequences on a broader scope too, tying into the game’s war economy mechanic,

briefly mentioned earlier, which ties into the story's themes of green collar workers and war as an economic engine. In several of the situations that Snake is thrust into, there is a battle already taking place in the area between two factions that Snake is not affiliated with. Because of this, if the player wanted to, they could choose a side to assist, gaining that side's favor and weakening the patrols of the other, perhaps creating more ideal conditions for sneaking, rather than trying to fight or sneak by both of them. The way the player decides to tackle this directly impacts the war price in that region, which is a mechanic that determines how cheap or expensive making use of the store is for Snake. When the fighting in an area increases (meaning when the player starts killing lots of people and intensifying the fighting in the area) the war price goes up, due to increased demand. However, if the player were to make the arguably harder choice and avoid open conflict and killing, the war price will stay low. So not only are there thematic implications to how the player approaches each situation, there are also economic consequences that directly impact the player. Meanwhile, no matter how the player decides to accomplish the objective, the story remains the same. This means that two different players could have a very different and personalized experience with the game, even though they both experience the same general story.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the biggest issues Metal Gear Solid faces is the overwhelming task of tying together all of the disparate stories of previous entries into the series into one big conclusion. While *Metal Gear Solid 4* actually manages to accomplish this challenging task to some degree, it results in a very messy, busy story arc, with many different tangents and parallel plotlines that are convoluted and confusing. It makes the assumption that the player recognizes a majority of the characters, and if a player hasn't played previous games in the franchise, they will likely be struggling to make heads or tails of the crazy events that are frequently referenced. And while many of the story elements are optional, some things like the cutscenes, while technically able to be skipped, doing so would result in the player missing out on important information needed in order to make sense of the objectives of the player at any one point.

Highlight

Perhaps the most impactful moment in the game comes towards the end. In order to accomplish the mission, someone has to travel through a hallway filled with intense microwaves. Snake, dying of a variety of causes, in addition to his artificially rapid aging, decides to take on the task himself. Even before he gets to the hallway, Snake is in bad shape. And once inside, the hallway is scorching hot from the radiation, and the player rapidly finds Snake slowing down as the heat, exhaustion, age, and stress quickly get to him. The player soon has to hammer on the X button in order to continue crawling at a glacial pace, while the screen cuts itself horizontally in two, showing the events occurring elsewhere in the game at the same point in time. As the player is only pressing one button, the player's attention is free to wander between the two screens, allowing them to see the struggle all of the supporting cast is going through while Snake desperately tries

to put an end to the crisis. The hallway is extremely lengthy, so soon the player begins to empathize with Snake's struggle in a very real, physical way, as their arm begins to tire. Reaching the end of the hallway is as desperately relieving to the player as it is to Solid Snake. This scene is extremely immersive, and is a creative way to layer so much tension and intensity on simply pressing a single button repeatedly.

Critical Reception

Metal Gear Solid 4 received extremely high praise consistently in its critical reception overall. Interestingly, and somewhat paradoxically, however, the game received both praise as a strong conclusion to the series, and for being emotionally resonant, while at the same time receiving most of its criticism being aimed towards its story, both for its complexity and the lengthy cutscenes.

One review by Dave McCarthy of IGN, which gave the game a 9.9/10, praises the technical innovations in terms of storytelling, saying "Split-screen techniques add a new cinematic dimension – and the literally strength-sapping climax in particular takes interactive storytelling to new heights."

Oli Welsh of Eurogamer.net has both positive and negative things to say about the story in his review, at one point describing the game as "Flawed, intractable, unspeakably tedious at times, and yet blessed with the incredible production values, imaginative design, and a brilliant, brave willingness to think and do the unexpected and impossible."

On the other hand, long cutscenes are not new to this entry in the series. Will Tuttle of gamespy.com defends them in his review, which gave the game four and a half out of five stars. While he admits that the game suffers from being a bit confusing at times, he points out that the cutscenes have always been long in the *Metal Gear Solid* series, and that the cutscenes in *Metal Gear Solid 4* are especially well done.

Kevin VanOrd of gamespot.com has glowing praise for the narrative design of the game, saying in his review that *Metal Gear Solid 4* is an "example of storytelling prowess within its medium, combining gameplay and narrative so slickly and beautifully that it's impossible to extricate one from the other." In his review, Kevin makes the point that the cutscenes and gameplay feel so smoothly integrated into one another due to the technical decision to render all of the cutscenes in engine, allowing for a smooth transition between the two. His review gave the game a solid 10/10.

My own opinion on the narrative design of the game is a bit mixed, but overall positive. I feel that while the game struggles under the long history of the series, it does a surprisingly good job of tying things together, for the most part, though at the cost of general cohesion. The story is a daunting thing for newcomers of the series to follow, and even series veterans, but the way in which it is told is very cinematic and dramatic, and the periodic experiments in narrative delivery add some welcome diversity to the game. For those really willing to dig into the story, there is a ton of information to be found. For those that aren't, the story might become a bit frustrating to follow at times.

Lessons

- Sometimes less is more. Some of the most frequent criticisms of *Metal Gear Solid 4* are about the convoluted storyline, extremely lengthy cutscenes, or both. *Metal gear solid 4* suffers from the “everything but the kitchen sink” approach to its narrative.
- Sometimes more is good. *Metal Gear Solid 4* employs a variety of methods to ensure that the player is constantly experiencing the story, even while playing the game. In doing so, it helps to maintain a consistency in the in-game world, and maintains a stronger narrative immersion.
- There’s something to be said for an established style. *Metal Gear Solid 4* can be very quirky, sometimes to an absurd degree. However, few reviewers cited this as a negative aspect, often because there is to some degree an expectation of this because of Hideo Kojima’s previous games, with a penchant for absurd bosses and strange plot devices present throughout them. However, this expectation doesn’t exist for many series. The main takeaway from this point is that playing upon the expectations of existing fans of a series can help to make them feel at home in the new game, even if the new game is a big departure from the previous games in the series, as is the case in *Metal Gear Solid 4*.

Summation

Metal Gear Solid 4 remains one of the most critically acclaimed games on the Playstation 3. It is one of the most ambitious projects of that generation of consoles, and remains an impressive testament to the series in terms of technical accomplishments, presentation, and gameplay, and even to this day is fairly divisive among its audience about what it does well and what it does not. While critically acclaimed, many long-time fans of the series were irked by changes to the gameplay and some of the ways the story was presented, as well as the story it was presenting. But none of that changes the huge impact it made when the game first released. While the game originally never was expected to exist, with Hideo Kojima originally envisioning *Metal Gear Solid* to be a trilogy, it never the less serves as a strong finale to an historic series. However, this is most certainly not the end of *Metal Gear*. *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, a spinoff game, *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, and *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* have already released since *Metal Gear Solid 4*, and *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* is currently being hotly anticipated by many fans.

Every main *Metal Gear Solid* game that Hideo Kojima has worked on carries with it a theme that can be summed up in one word. In *Metal Gear Solid*, that word was gene. In *Metal Gear Solid 2*, that word was meme. In *Metal Gear Solid 3*, the word was scene. For *Metal Gear Solid 4*, the word is Sense, as in someone’s understanding and perspective of the world that can no longer be communicated to others once that person dies. This is manifest throughout the story in many ways, and much of the problems and conflicts that occur during the game are a result of characters misinterpreting another deceased character’s will and dream for the world in their own way, having no way to ask that person what they really wanted to pass along. To some degree, this concept even plays out between different people playing the game, as every person that plays determines their own interpretation of stealth. While one person could play as and see Snake as the ultimate soldier, a heartless killer who leaves no survivors, another player

could see Snake as doing only what he has too, leaving untouched conflicts that they aren't a part of, and changing only what they must. And yet another player could see Snake as trying to fix the problems in each area he visits, perhaps trying to cut down on violence in an area by choosing a side and helping them tip the battle in their favor.

After the credits of *Metal Gear Solid 4* roll, Otacon tells Snake that he will travel with him, keeping testament and bearing witness to the final few years of his life, to carry on his legacy, and preserve his message for future generations. Hideo Kojima has expressed his desire multiple times to leave behind the franchise, but time and time again he seems to be pulled back to the series. He never even planned for there even to be a fourth game, originally expecting the series to end with *Metal Gear Solid 3*. And even at the end of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, which seemed to try so hard to kill one of the most important characters in the series, it feels like something is keeping him back from ending Snake's life. This feels similar to the hesitation and reluctance to end the series itself, which must have at least partially been the reason for *Metal Gear Solid 4's* existence in the first place. And while there are myriad possible reasons for this, such as the series monetary value, the fans and their rabid appetite for new games, Hideo Kojima's own love for his creations, and who knows what other factors, we can never really know Kojima's own sense on the topic without asking him directly. Thankfully, Hideo Kojima still is able to share with us his own understanding and perspective on the world, and from the sound of it, he still has plenty to teach us.