UNWINNABLE WEEKLY

JEREMY VOSS • AMANDA HUDGINS • ROB RICH • KATRIEL PAIGE

JACK YARWOOD • JEREMY SIGNOR • JUSTIN KEEVER

How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Metal Gear Solid

By Jeremy Voss

I t's been a little over two weeks since I decided to write about my tortured and tumultuous relationship with the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, which I intended to explore while playing through *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. In that time, I've had so many different and conflicting opinions – often within the same paragraph – that I was tempted to just bail on the whole thing entirely.

As it stands right now, I'm 33 hours into *MGSV*, which – in and of itself – is 33 more hours than I ever intended to spend with it. I have no idea if I'm going to finish it; not just because other big-name titles are around the corner, but because the game tells me that I'm less than a third of the way through the story, which makes my head hurt.

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Before I begin – and I admit that I'm not sure that I know *where* to begin – let me admit my biases up front, so you know exactly what you're about to deal with. I am of the opinion that the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise is the most overrated franchise of all time – not just in gaming, but possibly in the overall history of popular entertainment. I say this without having played every game in the series, or even half of them, for that

matter; I'd played/watched a few hours of *MGS* on a friend's PS1, a few hours of *MGS2* when it was ported to the Xbox and I finished *MGS4* on the PS3 (which nearly gave me a nervous breakdown). Last year I took the requisite 20 minutes to "beat" *Ground Zeroes*, which was more than enough time to make me feel comfortable skipping *Phantom Pain*.

And then the reviews of *Phantom Pain* came out and...I mean...what are you supposed to do when you see nearly every single outlet in the industry call it not just the greatest *Metal Gear* game, but the greatest stealth action game ever made and one of the greatest games ever made? Am I supposed to just ignore that kind of breathless hyperbole?

Because part of my issue with the *Metal Gear* franchise is that – regardless of how much "fun" I might have - I've always felt that I'm on the outside of the world's largest and most elaborate private joke. I simply don't understand how people can love these games the way they do; I don't see what it is they're seeing and I am completely in the dark as to how they don't see what I so clearly see – which is that Kojima is indisputably the worst writer of dialogue in all of gaming. I can't chalk it up to poor translation – it's been awful always, and not just because the words are so dead and delivered with such heavy-handedness; it's also because his cutscenes are endless and tedious and ridiculous and there's no consistency of tone and it's impossible for me to gauge if I'm supposed to take any of this seriously.

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I used to compare Kojima to George Lucas, both megalomaniac auteurs whose visions were so single-minded and idiosyncratic – while being overwhelmingly popular and financially successful – that nobody in a working environment could ever possibly hope to tell them that they might be wrong. In the same way that nobody told Lucas that Jar-Jar Binks was a colossal, embarrassing mistake on every conceivable level, nobody has told Kojima that he simply can't write dialogue.

But now, having spent 30+ hours with *MGSV*, I'm now starting to wonder if he's more like Frank Zappa - a guy who is so committed to his vision of what his respective medium can and should do that he simply *doesn't give a shit what you think*. Zappa was a singularly brilliant composer and guitarist, and he also had a scatalogically absurd sense of humor – he was not afraid of being silly, even while he was melting your face off with guitar solos from outer space. Zappa also had a band that could literally play anything, and Kojima commands a programming army that is similarly equipped to handle just about anything you throw at it.

Kojima is an acquired taste (as is Zappa), and even though I'm enjoying *MGSV* I can't say I've wholly embraced it, but I must also acknowledge that a lot of this butting of

heads is totally my fault; I'm bringing serious baggage to my gaming sessions. I'm well-aware of how much I'm scrutinizing each and every moment of the game, always looking for the slightest thing to set me off. That isn't how I normally play games and if I hadn't decided to pitch this article I'm not sure I'd even be playing this game. But I did pitch this article, and I am playing this game, and I'm hyper aware of every single goddamned pixel and it's like looking into an infinite series of mirrors.

I mean: nothing is accidental in a *Metal Gear* game. Every moment is meticulous in its construction. If you can see it, you were meant to see it – no matter how completely ridiculous it might be, whether it's Quiet's jiggling boobs or an enemy soldier's gastric distress. When you're escaping through a crumbling hospital in *MGSV*'s opening moments and you're staring at your companion's buttcrack through his hospital gown...well, that's what Kojima wanted you to see. You can't escape that view; you're too hobbled by your injuries to move as quickly as you'd like, or even to move your head all that well. Kojima begins his *Metal Gear* swan song by shoving an asshole in your face for 20 minutes.

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Here are the Metacritic averages for the *Metal Gear Solid* games (multiple scores indicate multi-platform releases):

Metal Gear Solid: 94
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty: 96
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater: 92
Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots: 94
Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker: 89
Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes: 75, 76, 80
Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain: 94, 96, 96

There will never be an entertainment product so successful that it achieves a 100% enjoyment rate; to try to attain such a goal would be ridiculous. I'll be the first one to admit that my personal favorite entertainment isn't necessarily in line with the rest of America's; I like obscure indie bands, art films and my two favorite TV shows of the last 10 years were cancelled because nobody else was watching them.

And yet! Say what you will about Metacritic, but that list above shows me a critical consensus that the *Metal Gear Solid* games are very, very, very good. One of the highest-scoring and biggest-selling franchises around. Each game is an Event – maybe not quite to the extent of midnight madness *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto* launches, but it's a singular moment where nearly every outlet and critic and person with a Twitter account has a laser-like focus on one thing and one thing only, and that is Kojima and the *Metal Gear* legacy.

This has always bothered me, possibly irrationally so, and I'm still struggling with the why part of it. Why should I care? There's plenty of other high scoring games that I know I'll never touch. I don't play strategy games, I'm afraid of MOBAs, I don't really go in for horror games, I don't particularly pay attention to most sports games and I'll probably never own another Nintendo console (and if I do, it's because my son will be old enough to want one).

The *Metal Gear* games at least speak a gameplay language that I understand. They're stealth games (which I'm already predisposed to like); they're action-adventure games (which I'm also predisposed to like); they're big-budget blockbusters with generally phenomenal production values (which I'll cop to having a soft spot for); I get this. I should, conceivably, want this.

But I find the story stuff *so bad*. Like, horrifically bad. Ed Wood bad. You-can't-possibly-be-serious bad.

I'm usually not one to dwell on a dumb narrative if the gameplay is compelling. I complain a lot about dumb storytelling, but I do try to push through if I'm having a good time. It's just that the *MGS* narrative is in a whole other league of awfulness; overblown, ham-fisted dialogue, stacked with meaningless acronyms, delivered with the utmost earnestness and sincerity. And I've always felt that I'm inside some sort of Truman Show whenever I play one of these games, where I'm completely and totally unable to reconcile the sterling reviews and Metacritic averages of *Metal Gear* games with what I'm actually seeing in front of my own face. Kojima really does think he's telling this incredible story, which – fine, whatever – but he also thinks he's really good at telling stories, and he just. Fucking. Isn't. His writing is terrible, his pacing is awful and even in *MGSV* – which is the most tolerable the story has ever been, mostly because it's hidden away on audio cassettes – his cinematic flair is sophomoric at best.

Kojima has always struck me as a frustrated filmmaker who never found his way out of game development and so he decided to go all-in on his cutscenes and make them as ludicrous as possible. Except – and this is the part that, again, I feel like I'm missing the joke here – his cutscenes are awful. They're all 30 minutes longer than they need to be and incredibly hyper-stylized without any particular rhyme or reason guiding them beyond being filled with as much nonsense as possible.

The first few hours of *MGSV* are refreshingly free of most of these long cutscenes and the ones that remain are much shorter, but the tradeoff is that they're almost all shot in one take...for no apparent reason. None of these long takes establish any tension or better illuminate the narrative; but they *do* call attention to themselves because you feel like you haven't blinked your eyes in a long time. Each of these scenes is practically screaming out – "Have you noticed that I haven't cut away from the action yet?"

Some film directors are more skilled at the one-shot long take than others and some of those shots have become legendary – Scorcese's Copacabana scene in *Goodfellas*, Welles' opening shot in *Touch of Evil*, Park's hallway fight scene in *Oldboy*, Cuaron's car chase in *Children of Men* and the twelve-minute opening of *Gravity*, etc. But as far as I can tell, Kojima's long-takes in *MGSV* don't serve any purpose. They are clearly intentional, but they don't seem to mean anything. Those film shots that I mentioned above take your breath away; *MGSV*'s long-takes make you struggle to keep your eyes open. He's doing it because he wants to, which I suppose is a creative right that he feels he's earned, but to me it's endlessly distracting and, eventually, repellent.

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"Repellent" is a strong choice of word, but I used it because (a) it's true, and (b) it illustrates a larger concern of mine. I've spent years of my life loathing the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, which is a sentence that I fully acknowledge is ridiculous. Why should I care if the *Metal Gear Solid* games are stupid? Why should I allow myself to get bent out of shape over a piece of digital entertainment that nobody forced me to play? I'm nearly 40 years old, with a wife and a child and a mortgage and a whole bunch of other things that fulfill me and enrich me; why did I willingly spend $60 to play *MGSV* when I knew I was going to nitpick it to death?

I'm not even sure I can pinpoint when it was that my hostile allergic reaction to *Metal Gear* began. Like I said earlier - I played *MGS* for a few hours in late 1999 at a friend's apartment; we did some sneaking, we watched some endless codec scenes, I got drunk and went home. I played *MGS2* on the Xbox because I never owned a PS2; I don't recall how far I got. All I know is that somewhere between putting that game down, and then picking up and finishing *MGS4* on the PS3, I lost all semblance of rational thinking about the series. I got into some pretty intense forum arguments during *MGS4* and I eventually wrote a few thousand words about my experiences at my blog because nobody else was talking about the things that were bothering me so much.

(True story: towards the end of *MGS 4*, there was a cutscene between two characters – I can't remember who they were or what they were talking about except that the scene was absurdly long and melodramatic and awful, and my wife had come into the room to see what was going on and promptly left, laughing…and then came back 45 minutes later to see *the same conversation* continuing along, and literally said out loud "Will you two shut the fuck up already?")

Most of the time, it doesn't occur to me to think about *Metal Gear* at all beyond the brief window of hysteria that accompanies each new release. Is the issue even that I hate *Metal Gear* or that I'm so confounded by the fact that other people can't see what I see? Why should that bother me so much? Is it that I need to understand the joke? Is it that, at the end of the day, the game knows it's a joke? Is the game's ridiculousness part of its appeal? Do the hardcore Kojima fans look forward to seeing how ridiculous each new game can be?

Maybe that's what I'm missing. Maybe these games actually are more self-aware than I'm giving them credit for. My biggest problem with *Metal Gear* – beyond the utterly amateurish execution of its completely batshit insane narrative – has always been that, for me, I could never figure out just what the hell the tone of the experience was intended to be. Was I somehow supposed to be swept up in this beyond-convoluted science
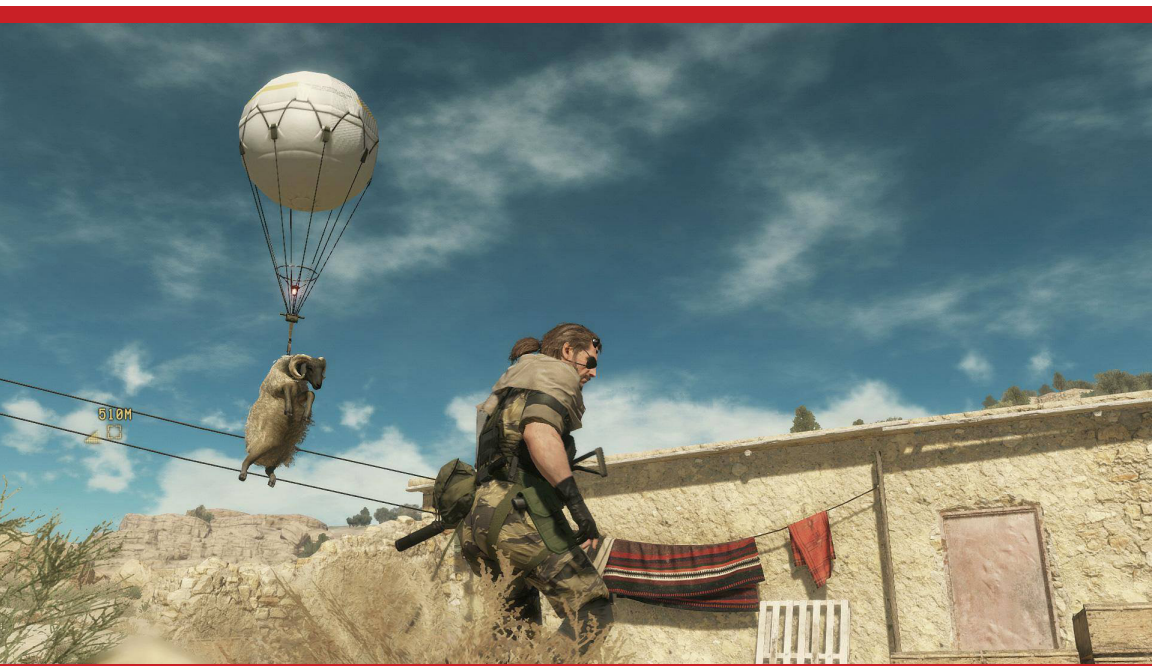
fiction story, without being distracted by comically named and dressed characters who took themselves so completely and utterly seriously? It's not impossible for tension and silliness to co-exist – see Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's Cornetto trilogy as a brilliant example of movies that aren't afraid of being silly while also being completely kick-ass. But *Metal Gear*'s tone never reconciles these two wildly different planes.

And yet, in a strange way, it's precisely this quality that makes the *Metal Gear* games unique in games - and certainly among AAA blockbusters. Most cinematic games these days are hyper-real. And then there's *Metal Gear*, a game that calls attention to its existence as a game nearly every 5 minutes. I mean, the Fulton extractions alone in *MGSV* are so completely over the top that you can't help but admire just how willingly silly the game is allowing itself to be. Successfully clearing out an outpost is tense at times, and then attaching the sedated and stunned bodies of enemy soldiers to a giant balloon that suddenly FLINGS them away into the stratosphere is fucking hilarious, and the game knows it, and takes that moment and fucking goes for it.

As a perfect example of the tone issue I'm talking about, let's talk about Side-Op Mission 51 - Extract the Wandering Mother Base Soldiers 01 for a second, because I'd just finished it after writing that last paragraph and it's bewildering.

This optional mission tasks you with recovering one of your fellow soldiers that

somehow survived the old Mother Base explosion (presumably the same one that put you, Snake, in a coma for 9 years minus one arm) and has been spotted wandering aimlessly in the desert. There's a pathos in this mission; you're trying to do something honorable for a lost soul, a fellow brother in arms, who's having some sort of PTSD fever dream from being lost in the wilderness for all this time. Right?

I didn't quite know what to expect, but I went in with my own emotional stakes after
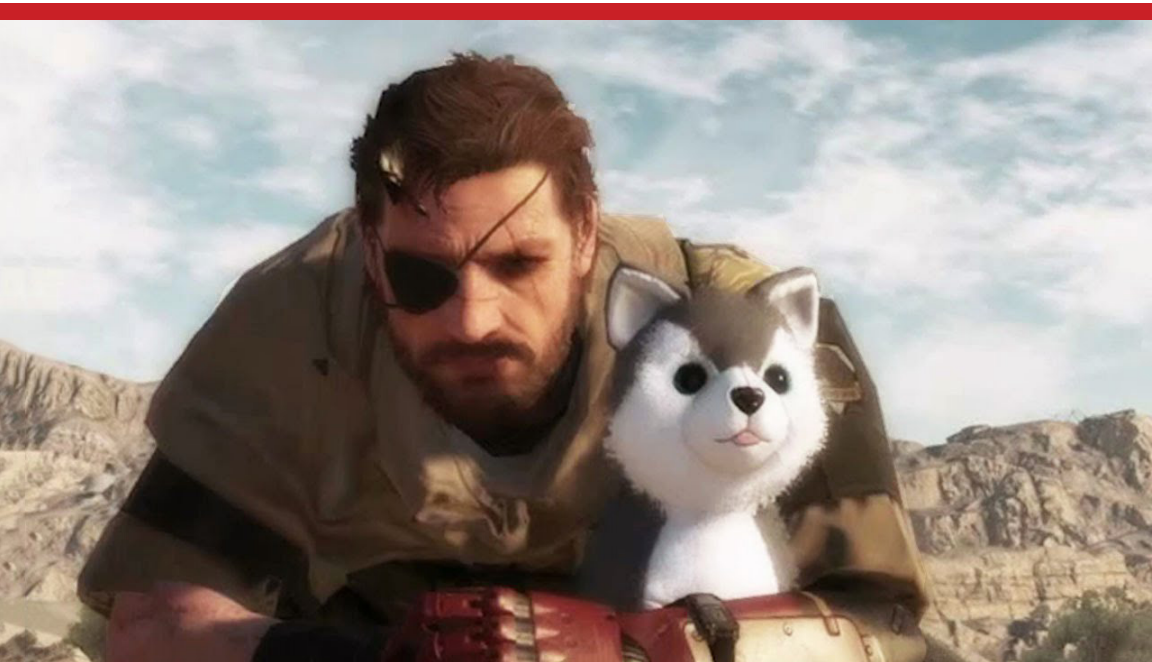
being briefed on the scenario. What ends up happening is that you get to the part on the map where this guy is supposed to be, and...he...kinda runs around flailing his arms in a comically insane manner. He's not damaged, he's not spooked; he's a cartoon zombie. 8 tranquilizer headshots later, he finally passes out; I attach him to the balloon; he flies off into the air with what sounds like a Wilhelm scream (maybe I'm imagining that part, but it might as well be).

Now this whole thing took 5-10 minutes. Not a huge investment of time or energy on my part, and given that it's an optional mission, it's certainly something that perhaps not every player is going to bother doing. That the mission exists at all is neither here nor there; it's the manner of its execution that I'm trying to grapple with. I went in expecting a certain kind of gravity – the game is not shy about telling you how serious things are and the other extractions I've done have been tense and strategic and difficult

to pull off. The narrative setup for this made me feel bad for the guy I was trying to save. And instead, it was simply, utterly silly. I'd be willing to accept that maybe the animations were a weird glitch, except they're part of the game; videos of that mission are on YouTube and show the same thing I saw. Everything is intentional, nothing is accidental.

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I don't know how to answer these questions. Sometimes these things just are, and there's no rational explanation for them. I will always be on the outside of *Metal Gear Solid*'s joke and it will always bother me that I can't figure out the punchline. I have come to appreciate Kojima's very specific brand of genius, even if it doesn't appeal to me in the slightest. And the truth is, the game parts of *MGSV* are really good! It's absolutely one of the best stealth games I've ever played. Scoping out an outpost and conquering it without setting off any alarms is exhilarating and the fact that the game allows me to improvise when everything turns to shit is just as thrilling. I might be in a sudden firefight with some soldiers and then I'll see Quiet's laser sight settle on my enemy and BLAM – he's toast and I can breathe a quick sigh of relief and finally set off the C4 that I'd put down 10 minutes before. Each mission feels different, even if I'm doing a lot of the same things, and the fact that it still feels fresh after all these hours is certainly a testament to Kojima doing *something* right.

Maybe it's good that the series is over now. Kojima can finally move on to something new, and I can move on with the rest of my life and we can live in a world with love and rainbows and we'll all sing and dance together in peace and harmony and only listen to cheesy 80s pop music if we really want to. 🎺