

AVILES OF
NATURE

THEATER

ALEXANDER

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Rules of Nature

A Critical Reading of Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

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Preface

To set out to discuss *Metal Gear* in any capacity is a tricky affair, the undertaking of which is fraught with pitfalls. To say that Hideo Kojima's works are complicated is a critical understatement of such grandeur that it probably doesn't need to be said at all. The *Metal Gear* series contains examples of truly effective design but these come hand in hand with a host of problematic material that earns the series just as much rightful condemnation as praise. Thus, when the time came and I said to myself that *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* was going to be the target of my first piece of extensive analysis, I admit to feeling conflicted.

Revengeance is a unique creature in the *Metal Gear* canon, however. Relatively free from the specter of Kojima's auteurial embellishments and idiosyncrasies, I find it removed from the negative baggage that would weigh down and dominate criticism of a work like *Guns of the Patriots* or *The Phantom Pain*. The series broke free from its father and took on a new shape. All the better for the series and all the better for players. *Revengeance* has an identity all to its own that goes a long way to alleviating my concerns regarding critical examination of *Metal Gear*. All that remains is to hope that you, dear reader, will follow me down the rabbit hole into a world full of cyborgs, samurai, superpowered senators and giant robots, and allow me to convince you that this melodramatic *mélange* has more to say than meets the eye.

Before going forward, I must pause to acknowledge those who have made this endeavor possible to begin with. First and foremost, I cannot even mutter the words "metal gear" or "analysis" without mentioning James Clinton Howell. 'Driving Off the Map' is a seminal piece of games criticism that widened my eyes to what analysis can be. It remains untouched and singular. His departure from examining *Metal Gear* in any further capacity is heartbreaking but I could not respect his reasons more. I hope that I might emulate even the smallest fraction of his insight, for what constitutes a small fraction for Mr. Howell is a deluge compared to the majority.

I owe many people further acknowledgements for the warm and kind reception I've received entering into videogames criticism. Chief among these is Zolani Stewart, whose friendship humbles me immensely. He is also the editor of this book and has spent countless hours aiding my endeavor. I couldn't ask for anyone better. Austin C. Howe, a *Metal Gear* scholar himself, showed equal gregariousness in welcoming me to the critical sphere. Lana Polansky continually challenges my understanding of texts and proved invaluable in formulating my list of defined terms for this piece. Brendan Keogh's friendship and enthusiasm likewise provided great inspiration. This work would not be possible without the existence of *Killing is Harmless*. I must also take time to thank Danielle Riendeau and Austin Walker. Without them, I'd be a fraction of the writer and person I am today. Beyond this, there are too many to name but I hold them all dear in my heart.

To the "real" Heather: I miss you every day and strive to be like you in all things. May your spirit give me strength and clarity of mind in this analysis and throughout life in general. I hope I make you proud.

-Heather Alexandra

Terms

Throughout this analysis, certain language will be used. To ensure all readers have common points of reference, we will define the following terms.

Ludic interaction will be used for various interactions that involve the game and player in a direct sense. Interactions that lead to feedback from the player avatar. These are dictated by the ability for player input or cooperation with the game itself. It will sometimes colloquially be called “gameplay” but might not always fit that definition. Rotating a character model, for instance, is ludic interaction removed from *Revengeance*’s traditional possibility space.

This will be contrasted with **Phrenic interaction**, which entails any engagement with the game taking place on a purely intellectual level. Semiotic processes are, as an example, purely phrenic interactions. Emotive experiences will be included in our holistic understanding of the text.

The **Text** is merely the game as a complete entity. This includes all ludic and phrenic experiences created as well as the game’s script and mechanics. **Mechanics** are the modes of interaction allowed to the player. The actions permitted by the game itself. Parrying, Blade Mode, Movement, et cetera. The **Script** is the literary writing of the game. Dialog, codec conversations, song lyrics and item descriptions.

Extra-Text refers to any influences outside the game space, including haptics and control options. It will also include any relevant blog posts or interviews. **Meta-Text** is any commentary on the text by the text itself, be it through the script or mechanics. For our consideration, these commentaries can be intentional or implicit.

Rarely, this work makes reference to **Actors**. All controllable persona are actors. This includes Raiden, Sam, and Bladewolf. Essentially, actors are “player characters”. This is an important distinction from a **Character**, which refers to any individual within the text. The objective of an actor is not always connected to their motivation as a character. For instance, an actor as controlled by one player might be attempting to get a high score while the character’s motivation is something else entirely. For instance, survival or revenge.

Form is a culmination of the individual facets of the text. It includes the mechanics as compared to previous games in the *Metal Gear* series, level design, structures, and ludic interactions. A **Scenario** is a vertical slice of the form as represented by an individual moment in the text. The size of this vertical slice may vary. A boss encounter is a scenario, as is an entire “mission”.

In this piece, we will refer to both *Metal Gear Rising* and *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. The former indicates the initial project worked on by Kojima Productions, the latter indicates the final text as completed by Platinum Games.

Note: This writing presumes heavy familiarity with the text and series.

Synthesis

"...we are creating something new through an exchange of ideas." -Hideo Kojima

To have a strong understanding of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, we must have a strong understanding of its development history. Formally, *Revengeance* cuts itself away from the rest of the series. While it retains some artifacts from its progenitors that linger on as vestigial organs, *Revengeance* sunders what we might consider the traditional *Metal Gear* form in order to stand as an entity unto itself. This is the result of coalescence between the idiosyncrasies of Platinum Games and Kojima Productions.

How *Revengeance* found its identity mirrors Raiden's own existential crisis within the text. In the game, Raiden is split between two extremes: his identity as Raiden, a traditional hero and his disassociated identity as "Jack the Ripper", a sociopathic killer. We may very well be tempted to see these extremes in Kojima Productions and Platinum Games. The former's games reward restraint in their ludic interactions. Patient sneaking or careful aim allows Solid Snake to thrive in the *Metal Gear* series. The latter's offerings favor bold and beautiful violence. *MadWorld* revels in bloodshed and *Vanquish* transforms gunplay into a chaotic, fetishized ballet of bullets. *Revengeance* takes the sensibilities of both studios, tosses them in a cocktail shaker, and distills something truly wonderful.

Revengeance is born from the terrible realities of videogame development. It is a game shaped by its struggle to exist. *Metal Gear Rising's* concept, featuring Raiden and the notion of ninja action, came about in 2008. Hideo Kojima had multiple ideas for potential *Metal Gear* projects but the concept itself was proposed by an unknown member of Kojima's staff*. The original concept called for a game set between *Sons of Liberty* and *Guns of the Patriots*. The idea was to give players the chance to engage in action sequences much like the fight Raiden has against the multiple GEKKO and Vamp at the end of *Guns of the Patriot's* second act. The whole world could be sliced and diced. "The concept was a game in which everything could be cut."†

With the foundation of a game in place, production began and the game was announced at E3 in 2009. A clear delineation from the rest of the franchise was made. Kojima promised a whole new experience than what the series had previously seen.‡ This was stressed by a change in the game's subtitle. What was once "Tactical Espionage Action" was now "Lightning Bolt Action". From the start, *Rising* always sought a design of its own but it could not completely escape from the *Metal Gear* form. The initial design allowing you to cut everything in the environment was paired with gameplay designed to evoke the feeling of a hunter stalking prey but the two philosophies could not truly merge. The underlying system for cutting everything stressed environmental destruction, whereas the traditional stealth of the *Metal Gear* form relied on geometry to hide behind. The close up nature of combat with a sword was difficult to reconcile with *Metal Gear's*

* Southard, Ryan. Metal Gear Rising Q&A. Kojima: [‘I’m Not a Katana Maniac Like Itagaki’](#). Nerd Reactor. 13 Dec. 2011.

† Yuji Korekao. "[INTERVIEW: The Truth Behind RISING](#)." 2 min, 50 sec.

‡ Hinkle, David. [Kojima Says MGS: Peace Walker Is His MGS5, Calls Rising a ‘different Kind of Action’ Game](#). Joystiq, 9 June 2009.

general focus on avoiding confrontations. These design (and arguably thematic) concerns are what lead to a slowly stalling development process within Kojima Productions.

By the end of 2010, the project was shut down and would not be revived until Atsushi Inaba of Platinum Games discussed its future with Kojima at the start of the next year. A partnership was formed; Kojima Productions would have general control over the story (through writer Etsu Tamari) while Platinum Games would shift the title toward their signature style of fast paced action. One major change, based on a request from Platinum Games, was a change in the game's setting to after *Guns of the Patriots* to allow more creative freedom.

The result is a game that stands among Platinum's strongest actions titles while offering the *Metal Gear* series' most biting social commentary since *Sons of Liberty*. A sublime mixture of the overstated and grand with the subtle and contemplative, featuring as much hyperviolence and trash metal music as laments about the state of America and existential questions about who we really are.

Soul

"What would an AI know about freedom..." - Raiden

In outlining the major theme of each of his works, Kojima has written the following:

"Gene→Meme→Scene→Sense".

A major struggle in *Metal Gear Solid* was that of its characters fighting what they felt were genetic predispositions to certain behaviors. Psycho Mantis maintains that everyone is possessed by the "selfish and atavistic desire to pass on one's seed," and Liquid Snake claims that "you can't fight your genes". The game rejects these notions by the end. "Humans can choose the life they want to live," Naomi asserts. Still, the ineffability of genetics in dictating behaviors is something appealed to time and time again in the game. Your genes are your fate; they control you and make you what you are. Even if you can choose the life you want, you are always at the mercy of your genetics to some degree. The important thing is finding peace with that and understand what is or is not in your control.

With *Sons of Liberty*, we encountered the power of memes in forming an individual. The flow of excess digital information threatened the Patriots* because the gross minutia of unregulated opinion seemed poised to overwhelm the American zeitgeist. Raiden has no clear background for the majority of *Sons of Liberty*. He is instead caught in a self made double helix loop that sees him emulate Solid Snake. He lacks a true identity of his own until he breaks free from the Patriots' control by slaying Solidus Snake and literally cutting his past away in a climactic sword fight. More than ever, the *Metal Gear* series was increasingly stressing the importance of identity and the incredible difficulty of fighting the forces that formulate one's consciousness and facticities. You can break free but only after intense, costly struggle.

Snake Eater introduced the third slippery serpent that controls people's fate: the scene. This is best expressed through dialog between Naked Snake and The Boss:

The Boss: People aren't the ones who dictate the missions.

Naked Snake: Then who does?

The Boss: The times. People's values change over time. And so do the leaders of a country. So there's no such thing as an enemy in absolute terms. The enemies we fight are only in relative terms, constantly changing with the times.

Here, the forces that push its characters to carry out acts against their will do not come from

* The Patriots are complicated to explain, even by *Metal Gear* standards. They are a shadowy group that controls American politics. They are first founded and run by many characters from *Snake Eater* including Big Boss himself until a philosophical difference drives him away. Eventually, they're comprised of sentient AI constructs that manage the country in secret.

within themselves. It is not genetic material nor inherited memories. It is political apparatus and government. The final confrontation between Snake and the Boss occurred because the times demanded it. The scene was painted by outsiders, by Kruschev and Johnson, by the CIA and KGB. The characters of *Snake Eater* were subject to the vicissitudes of prevailing political systems that dictated the orders they would receive and were absolutely required to carry out. In some ways, the game is more pessimistic than what came before. There is no rejection, no hope of breaking free once the scene is established. The script is written, the stage is set. History is cruel to its actors.* A force to be resented, a collection of systems to dismantle.

Come *Guns of the Patriots*, the final determinant for a person's behavior is their sense of self and the sense of their surroundings. This is something expressed throughout many ludic interactions in the game. A small circular sensory ring forms around Snake while sneaking, cluing the player to enemy movement in the game space. The player hunts down Naomi in an extended scouting sequence that relies on spatial awareness and navigation, culminating in a boss fight with Laughing Octopus, a fight demanding the player again react to the world around them. This ludic reactivity overlaps with phrenic interactions that call upon the player to examine the tropes of the series on a grand scale and how they affect both the player and characters. This is achieved by presenting preexisting tropes in highly exaggerated forms.† Through contemplations of these images and a stress on one's sense of place in the world, one may finally follow through on the promise made at the end of *Metal Gear Solid* and choose the life they want to live. It is framed as requiring intense self awareness. A sense of who you are and who you might be.

Combining all of these things, I posit that we get the perfect single word to summarize the force that *Revengeance* is concerned with: Soul. Understanding "Soul" as the confluence of one's genetic background, accumulated knowledge, historical context, and self awareness, it is a curiosity that while *Revengeance* does ask us to examine the soul of its protagonist, Raiden, it also deeply concerns itself with the soul of another character in order to express its theme: IF Prototype LQ-84i, or "Blade Wolf".

Blade Wolf is a robotic weapon deployed against Raiden in Abkhazia, who is defeated and turned into a sort of sidekick for the duration of the game. Initially a creature at the mercy of his violent programming, further interactions reveal an individual with true intelligence, personality, and soul. An examination of Blade Wolf shows a game space where Kojima's four previous themes merge to produce characters both formed by the malevolent forces investigated in previous titles and their reactions against these forces.

Within the *Metal Gear* series up to this point, players have encountered artificial intelligences. The fractured forms of the Patriots' AI consciousness address Raiden directly at the end of *Sons of Liberty* and their persistently running functions fuel the conflict at the core of

* To quote Venom Snake in *The Phantom Pain*: "The times define the politics. When you've grabbed their tail, they turn a bite your hand."

† Any member of the B&B Corps provides a good example. Crying Wolf wields a rail gun like Fortune's from *Sons of Liberty*, her emotional state is tied back to the Sorrow from *Snake Eater*, and she has Sniper Wolf's codename while also being fought in the same location as the second Sniper Wolf boss battle in *Metal Gear Solid*. The recurrent structural elements are amplified and presented for the explicit purpose of forcing the player to re-examine the construction of boss characters within the series.

Guns of the Patriots. Yet, even noting the posturing, self aware AIs of *Sons of Liberty*, Blade Wolf comes off as a unique individual in the series' canon. The question of Wolf's intelligence and fundamental personhood plays into a host of larger questions to be examined later on: once we are self aware, how must we conduct ourselves? What morals guide an individual? In *Revengeance*, we see Wolf move from a mere weapon to a thinking, feeling creature and it is this growth that allows the game to comment on the forces that shape individuals comprehensively.

To start, we must note that Wolf has no genetic history to which he is bound. He is an artificially created machine. In lieu of genetics, Wolf is instead chained down by subroutines and programming. He is a thinking creature, possessing a unique AI interface, but Wolf is still partially governed by his background as a machine. He cannot fully emulate human behaviors, for lack of some innate biological imperatives:

Blade Wolf: ...as DARPA-funded military research, I was rarely treated as anything more than equipment.

Raiden: Makes sense. You were made to be a weapon.

Blade Wolf: On the other hand, some of them treated me like a pet, or as a child. Just as a parent passes on their memes to a child, so I was exposed to numerous influences. Memes I encountered on the web and through ebooks had their effects, as well. As my mind grew, the weaker memes were sifted out, and the stronger ones endured. The resulting collection of memes is what you would call my intelligence.

Raiden: Same as any of us, huh?

Blade Wolf: In a way, yes. However, I lack the instinctual skills your genes grant you.

In this sense, Wolf must break from a different relationship with genes: his lack. It marks him as a different type of created beast than, say, Solid Snake. To this end, his substitute for a genetic background is a basic functionality as formulated through mimesis of taught behaviors that will eventually give way to true intelligence shaped by learned behaviors. Initially, Wolf does not express notions of feeling. He instead speaks of training forming the backbone of his intelligence and, thus, his identity. This is no different than any of the socialization that we face in the real world; we too are trained when we are young. The only difference between Wolf and Raiden in this regard is that this process was Wolf's only formative variable. Wolf's lack of a biological nature is something Raiden highlights in discussion with Doktor:

Raiden: He seems happy enough...but I don't know. Can a machine really be happy? Maybe he's just being directed by his programming to behave that way.

Doktor: And what is wrong with that? If something you do for someone else is appreciated, it makes you happy. It's a perfectly normal reaction, one that applies whether you're man or machine...You can define "intelligence" however you like, but personally, I see no reason not to say Wolf has it.

Wolf's abiological nature calls into question moments where he seems to express emotion but if we understand human behavior as a series of reactions to stimuli, Wolf functions no differently than any other character in the space. Indeed, if we boil everything down, he's just bits of code like any other entity in the game's files. This is certainly significant when considering the larger plot of the game. Raiden and his opponents are living weapons, not particularly different than Wolf in their function or even in their behaviors. Ludically, this is enforced through gameplay. The controls for playing as Wolf or Raiden or Sam do not fundamentally change for any actor. They are all killing machines and there is no significant extra-textual differences at play such as altered control schemes. Codec conversations engage the player in phrenic interaction that leads them to see very little difference between Wolf compared to any human character. The game then backs up this thesis by not fundamentally altering the way that Wolf plays. Every controllable actor has the same modes of interaction available to them. There are minute differences but the general actions remain the same.

As time progresses, we then see that Wolf also does not behave differently on an emotional level. When Raiden makes his singular assault through downtown Denver to attack World Marshal's headquarters, Wolf is quick to point out Raiden's antagonism and lawbreaking.* When complemented on how he is developing beyond the weapon he was created to be, Wolf states that he is "pleased to hear [Raiden] say that." Near the end of the game, he outright states that he does not "feel good" about what is to come; this echoes statements by Courtney early in the game. She does not "feel great" about how Raiden must rip the spines of his enemies out to absorb their energy and replenish health. Wolf does not feel good about the ensuing violence of *Revengeance's* endgame. It is taken for granted that Wolf, as a growing intelligence that can respond to the world around him, can feel just as much as anyone else might. Wolf can make value judgements the same as any other member of the team.

What is really being said through Wolf? Chiefly, we have an example of the proposed theme of the game: "Soul". A soul is formed through experiences; it is a sum total of many factors and innumerable struggles. Wolf is a created weapon no different than how Solid Snake was a created weapon. He is intelligent, moving from imitation and reenactment of mimetic information to self chosen behaviors; he outright states that he chooses to support Raiden because he feels he owes a debt and claims the ability to create his own directives during the game's climax in Pakistan. Wolf is partially a victim of the time he lives in much as Big Boss was in *Snake Eater*. In this case, it is a chaotic period of violence following the economic upheaval caused by the collapse of the war economy in *Guns of the Patriots*. It is a time that demands sophisticated weapons of war. However, he achieves sentience on the same level as any other actor we control through a sense of self awareness and understanding of what surrounds him.

* "...your approach has proven most antagonistic. You are now a criminal. A public enemy. A police-killing vigilante."

The Kojima cycle of “Gene→Meme→Scene→Sense” creates a process that gives Wolf his “Soul”. The larger question that will be posed by the text is the value of such a thing. If the Soul is the supposed providence of humanity and an artificial creature can achieve such a state, what actions are innately human? Can idealistic notions of morality survive in a game space dominated by blood, violence, weapons, and conflict? Has modernity rendered the venerated beliefs of the past completely obsolete? To answer these questions, we must move onwards to examine the philosophical struggle between Raiden and “Jetstream” Sam.

A Tool of Justice

"One sword drawn keeps another in the sheath. Sometimes, the threat of violence alone is a deterrent. It's an ancient code the samurai lived by." -**Raiden**, quoting George Herbert.

In his seminal treatise *Heiho kedensho*, swordsman Yagyu Sekishusai Munenori states the following:

"It is missing the point to think that the martial art is solely in cutting a man down. It is not in cutting people down; it is in killing evil. It is the stratagem of killing the evil of one man and giving life to ten thousand."^{*}

Munenori's philosophy is at the core of *Revengeance*. The struggle between "The Life Giving Sword" (活人拳, Katsujinken) and "The Death Dealing Sword" (殺人拳, Satsujinken), as manifested through the attitudes and fighting styles of Raiden and Sam, remains in play throughout the entirety of the game. Raiden maintains a thin balance between the warrior he believes himself to be and the killer that the game world demands he become. There is only one difference in kanji between Katsujinken and Satsujinken. The single character difference between "living" (活) and "killing" (殺). There is only a hair thin membrane between "Raiden" and "Jack the Ripper".

At the start of *Revengeance*, Raiden is a man focused on presenting himself as a modern samurai, filtered through the lens of Munenori's Life Giving Sword. He exists in a self-contained ideological bubble, a type of artificially maintained image, not unlike his attempts to emulate the myth of Solid Snake during *Sons of Liberty*. The script highlights this in a variety of ways during his first cutscene; he actively quotes George Herbert to Prime Minister N'mani and makes a generalization implying Katsujinken was the defining philosophy for the majority of samurai. He insists that Maverick is a "private security provider", a way to distance his work from traditional PMC's, and hides his cyborg body by wearing a suit and tie. The professional image of "Raiden" is a meticulously projected one.

It is in the shedding of his suit that we have our first indication of the superficiality of this image. Various layers that constitute the image of "Raiden" will be shaved away as his ideals are tested. Even the image of his original cyborg body, a relic from *Guns of the Patriots*, shows a desire to cling to a past that no longer exists. The modern world is moving faster than Raiden can keep up. The initial confrontation with "Jetstream" Sam in *Revengeance*'s first chapter is a crash course in conflicting attitudes towards violence. He clashes with Raiden in nearly all possible ways. Raiden's color scheme contains strong hints of blue, Sam's contains red. Raiden's hair is light, Sam's is dark. Raiden's sword is cold, dispassionate steel, Sam's is engulfed by flames during their battle. Raiden's sheathe merely holds his sword, Sam's has a built in trigger that can launch

^{*} Pg. 102. Yagyu Munenori's *Heiho kedensho*. William Scott Wilson's translation, © 2012, Shambhala Publications.

launch it forward as if out of the barrel of a gun. Raiden keeps his codename, but Sam is only ever called by his given name. Every design detail of Sam's character paints him as a foil to Raiden and it is further stressed by the power differential between the two. Regardless of how skilled the player is or how proficient Raiden is, it is impossible to best Sam in the boss fight.

Sam acknowledges that Raiden is self trained and skilled but that something is diminishing his capabilities. "Now I see. You deny your weapon its purpose. It yearns to bathe in the blood of your enemies...but you hold it back." Sam then manages to cut out one of Raiden's eyes, an act that physically calls to mind the naivety and blindness Sam sees in Raiden's declaration that his sword is a "tool of justice". For Raiden, his weapon is a means to an end. For Sam, it is the end.

In examining Munenori, translator William Scott Wilson notes that the Death Dealing Sword meets an opponent head on while the Life Giving Sword encourages an opponent to attack first.* This understanding of the two philosophies is expressed in the opening ludic interaction of the fight with Sam: he does not initially attack but he does slowly approach Raiden, walking head on into danger. He will make the opening strike of the encounter if not first provoked by the player. Sam's technique is the Death Dealing Sword even outside the script. When the time comes, he meets Raiden's charge firmly, staring down his opponent and overcoming Raiden's technique by blasting his own sword from his gun-like sheathe.†

The battle necessitates a change to a new cyborg body that Raiden uses for the rest of the game. Its visual design is darker and marks another move away from the image that Raiden presented at the start of the game. There is also a shift in the UI. What once was modeled after *Guns of the Patriots* interface is changed to something exclusive to *Revengeance*. Mechanically, Raiden becomes more reliant on drastic violence. Player's can now perform a "zandatsu", entering Blade Mode to slice enemies in half and rip out their spines to collect energy and health. It is a ludic interaction akin to "bullet time", allowing players to meticulously cut foes to pieces. Zandatsu is comprised of two kanji: 斬, meaning "cut" and 奪, meaning "take by force". The mechanic incentivizes the player to meet their enemy head on and butcher them. Still, Raiden insists on a difference between his ideology and Sam's. He stresses this in conversations with Courtney and Kevin in Guadalajara. He calls Sam's Sastujinken "basically the polar opposite of my sword of justice" and extols Munenori's Life Giving Sword, insisting it is the use of a necessary evil. For the image of "Raiden" to hold, it is critically important that he asserts the purity of his ideals.‡

Yet, this image cannot hold. After learning of the abduction and abuse of children by World Marshal, a rival PMC with Senator Armstrong as its de-facto CEO, indoctrinating them for violence in the "Sears Program", a program named after the very man who forced him to fight as a child

* Munenori, pg. 65.

† Gameplay as Sam is also about facing enemies head on. He has no stealth kill.

‡ We should note these ideals come from pop cultural sources as much as anything else. Raiden lacks any real teacher. Sam has formal training under his father, who ran a dojo in Brazil. Where his enemy has ties to a standing tradition of martial combat, Raiden only has a manufactured amalgamation of various ideologies, techniques, and role models. Mimetic notions of "samurai".

soldier in the Liberian Civil War (George Sears aka “Solidus Snake”), Raiden removes himself from Maverick to go on a violent rampage through Denver in order to reach World Marshal’s corporate headquarters and disrupt the plan. The individual that clung to the notion of “private security provider” now readily assaults a residential city, cutting down waves of law enforcement.

At the center of it all is Sam, ready to point out how Raiden’s tool of justice is shifting into something untenable. “Solve everything with violence, is that it?”. Raiden’s ideology lacks practicality. He reduces the world into a black and white picture. He is the good samurai against the evil corporation. Certainly, World Marshal is vile and the America of *Revengeance* is a nearly irredeemable nation but in this new scenario, Raiden’s notion of violence as a deterrent against evil becomes increasingly muddled. Sam is glad to point this out with barely contained glee when Raiden reaches World Marshal’s headquarters. Raiden is not fighting nameless soldiers in an overlord’s army and the player is not merely killing NPCs. These are soldiers who fight to send money back to their families, who struggled to find a place in the world after an IED took their leg in war and World Marshal offered them a prosthetic and a new chance at life. Sam forces Raiden to listen to his enemies’ thoughts. This moment is the height of phrenic interaction and meta-textual commentary in the game; all previous actions must be recontextualized. As the player’s enjoyment at *Revengeance*’s sublime combat is invoked, Raiden’s belief that his samurai code gives him the moral high ground begins to give way. He is not the protector he thought he was. The modern world is too complicated to allow it. This moment causes the suppressed “Jack the Ripper” persona to manifest in Raiden, revealing what was always at the center.

More pieces shift to highlight this alteration in Raiden. A focus on the color red occurs. The energy gauge now turns red and the player can enter Ripper Mode, gaining the ability to trigger a massive damage spike. Raiden remains in this mode for the duration of the boss fight with Monsoon, stressing the change. In the next scenario (R-04 “Hostile Takeover”), the player automatically unlocks the Desperado Body, a body customization with red highlights. Raiden is closer than ever to embracing Sam’s philosophy.* Back at the start of the game, banter with Sam includes the call for Raiden to “admit you’re a killer”.

Raiden finally does so in a codec call to Courtney:

Raiden: You caught all that. Guess I was Jack the Ripper all along. All that talk about justice, and here I am, just another killer.

It is easy to see this as an admission of defeat, an indication that the Death Giving Sword has won against the Life Giving Sword yet Munenori notes that “To think only of winning is sickness. To think only of using the martial arts is sickness.”† While the raw focus of Raiden’s new identity as Jack the Ripper affords him a deadly strength, it is a type of martial sickness.

* Indeed, Sam’s DLC reveals that the motorcycle Raiden uses to escape Denver belongs to Sam. A similar usurpation comes in the formation of a relationship with Bladewolf. Raiden appropriates Sam’s possessions and allies throughout the game, reaching a height with the reclamation of the Murasama blade.

† Munenori, pg. 126.

The manifestation of the Death Giving Sword is a move towards honesty on the part of Raiden but it cannot be the final step in his journey towards self actualization.

Raiden encounters Sam for a final time on his way to the Solis launch base. Here, a key distinction shows that Raiden has not completely abandoned his ideals. Sam notes that “the war is the big payoff” in regards to World Marshal’s plan to incite world wide violence. For Sam, a world of conflict is ideal but, as noted by Munenori, it is a world full of sickness. This notion of a world for warriors can be traced as far back as the original *Metal Gear* and Big Boss’ “Outer Heaven”. Here, World Marshal is a sort of corporate Outer Heaven. Sam isn’t supporting World Marshal because of the money that comes from lucrative contracts. He says it is a matter of “ideals”. Raiden’s ideals still hold strong; he will protect the world from the sickness of war. He will do so through violence but he will shoulder the sickness himself in order to spare others. Even as “Jack the Ripper”, he’s not strayed from this mission.

The song that plays in the boss fight against Sam is called “The Only Thing I Know For Real”. In it, the singer notes that he has lost memory of his name and is losing his identity. “The only thing I know for real: there will be blood-shed.” They don’t even know the reason they are holding their weapon. Sam’s sword is called the Murasama blade. It calls to mind the weapons forged by the famous sword-smith Muramasa Sengo. His swords were often thought to hunger for blood, even to the point that they would drive their wielders to commit suicide. Sam’s sword is the end of his identity and the end of his humanity. All he knows is that he must fight or die.

The end of the battle holds one more revelation about Sam: only his right arm is artificial. Everything else is flesh and blood. The player sees Sam lose this limb in his final boss battle with Artmstrong during the Jetstream DLC, and it is a defeat that drives him to despair. Sam is left alone with the encroaching threat of artificial body augmentation creeping up his arm like a progressive cancer. In *Guns of the Patriots*, Raiden struggled with having his body forcibly made cybernetic but through a connection to comrades like Solid Snake, an abiding love of his wife Rosemary, and a reunion with a son he thought miscarried, he finds solace from the battlefield. Sam cannot; he seeks to lose himself in battle. His death plays like an assisted suicide. “Kill me before I kill myself.”

Raiden will take up the Murasama blade in order to defeat Armstrong at the end of the game but unlike Sam, he will not be bound to it. The final cutscene see Raiden return to a newly forged copy of his original sword, which was broken in the fight against Armstrong. He noticeably fights with both eyes open once again. Raiden consigns himself to wade through the battlefield and his symbolically reforged blade is more pragmatic than before. However, the principle of Katsujinken is not destroyed. It is transmuted in Raiden’s clash with Sam. The modern world has tested Raiden and forced him to evolve but it has not broken him. Instead, he emerges from the struggles of the game as a more authentic individual than he’s ever been within the series.

Causes They Do not Understand

"So this is how they felt..." -Mistral

In *Revengeance*, antagonists serve as dark reflections of Raiden, each of them with important thematic ties to his personal history. In cutting them down, there is a violent and cathartic cleansing of the accrued gout of Raiden's past. Each encounter with the Winds of Destruction is a crucible through which Raiden confronts what he was, what he is, or what he might become. Mistral's primary role in the text is to ease the players into the cycle of image appropriation and remixing that occurs during each boss encounter. Mistral's search for a purpose on the battlefield is a deliberate recollection of Raiden's own search, achieving efficacy through references to previous titles in the series. Her demise is a warning to Raiden, a potential fate he might face.

In *Sons of Liberty*, Raiden spends all but the end of the game as a pawn of the Patriots. He believes himself to be a highly skilled FOXHOUND commando, trained on a regimen of VR mission, blindly following orders. It is not until the interjection of Solid Snake into his life that Raiden begins to find the strength to assert himself. A virtual veteran, his battles were artificial and lacked substance. In meeting Snake, he not only course corrects to fight real battles but also fights for reasons that he chooses. Mistral calls to mind this pattern. Mistral is a member of the "Winds of Destruction", a special group of cyborgs within Desperado Enforcement, LLC*. When they first meet, she compares her past to Raiden's. He fought in the Liberian Civil War and she lived through the Algerian Civil War. After, she joined the French Foreign Legion before taking on PMC contracts. Her battles were real but she had no purpose for fighting them. The ability for her weapon to morph into a whip calls into mind the image of a task master. Both characters have pasts defined by service to nebulous overlords. Raiden fought due to the manipulations of the Patriots, Mistral for whoever held her contract.

In a formal sense, Mistral recalls other images in the *Metal Gear* series. Mistral's character artist Yonghee Cho noted that "In previous MG titles, most female characters follow the formula of a mysterious, alluring femme fatale with a tragic past. I wanted to design Mistral in the same mold."[†] There is a stable of such characters in the series but Mistral calls to mind two individuals specifically. On a visual level, her design merits comparison to the multi-armed Screaming Mantis of *Guns of the Patriots* but the game's script intentionally sets up a meta-textual comparison between Mistral and Sniper Wolf, a boss character from *Metal Gear Solid*. Compare the two monologues:

Sniper Wolf: "I was born on a battlefield. Raised on a battlefield. Gunfire, sirens and screams... they were my lullabies...But then, he appeared. Saladin. He took me away from all that."

* Like World Marshal, Desperado is also at Armstrong's beck and call.

† Cho, Yonghee. [Ruminations on Character Design](#). Platinum Games. 11 Jan. 2013.

Mistral: “I lost my whole family, everything. But I butchered those fuckers, my family’s killers. That’s when I realized: I am a killer, too. And a good one at that. I slaughtered dozens in Afghanistan, in Iraq. ...I was adrift, without challenge, without purpose. At times, I even envied my prey. At least they had a cause to die for. And then, I met him...

As a Kurd, Wolf wandered through cultural violence. In Algeria, Mistral was caught in the crossfire of her own war. Wolf found purpose when Big Boss found her and she joined FOXHOUND. Mistral found purpose when Armstrong found her and she joined Desperado. There’s even an overlap in how they feel about their enemies. Sniper Wolf is said to fall in love with her targets; Mistral holds a deep envy for her “prey”. In death, they both reach an epiphany. Wolf understands that she was not waiting to kill but to be killed. Mistral discovers that she was not yearning to simply fight but to die for something she believed in.

Mistral’s theme is called ‘A Stranger I Remain’. “I’ve finally found what I was looking for. A place where I can be without remorse. Because I am a stranger who has found an even stranger war.” Mistral was a wandering stranger* as a mercenary but it is in Armstrong’s convoluted war politicking that she has found a purpose. Dying, Mistral makes a confession: “Je t’aime de tout mon coeur.” I love you with all my heart. Dolzaev believes she is speaking of him but she is truly speaking of Armstrong, the man who gave her purpose. It is too little, too late. Mistral is a tragic figure, only truly understanding the value found in devotion to an ideal in the quiet moment before she dies.

The idea of fighting for one’s beliefs is a running thread throughout the series. Otacon painfully asks Snake what he’s fighting for during the Shadow Moses Incident in *Metal Gear Solid*. In the same game, Grey Fox admits that “fighting was the only thing I was good at but at least I always fought for what I believed in.” Protagonists in the series struggle with an understanding of why they are fighting. In *Snake Eater*, Big Boss does what his country orders him to do, culminating in the murder of his mentor, The Boss. Only after this deep personal tragedy does he set out to fight for his own beliefs. Raiden struggles with this issue in *Sons of Liberty* as he discovers that he’s been nothing more than the Patriots’ pawn; meeting Snake puts him on the road to creating his own set of morals and values he believes in.

This questioning and lamentation is picked up by *Revengeance*. Armstrong, the game’s true villain, hates how the commodification of war has turned soldiers into individuals who “fight for reasons they do not understand. Causes they don’t believe in.” Raiden will echo this sentiment at the end of the game long after he has cut down Mistral while also slicing his way through a host of foes with reckless abandon.

* Mistral’s weapon is a transforming polearm called “L’Etranger.”

Lunatic

"Who saves the weak from the man who saves the weak?" -**Monsoon**

By the time I reached Monsoon on my first playthrough of *Revengeance*, I'd killed two hundred and seventeen enemies. Not all of these were humans but everything in my path was cut down and diced into bits as I rushed through Africa, Abkhazia, Guadalajara, and Denver. I, like Raiden, had a mission to complete. The enemies were in my way and thus, needed to be killed. That was just how things worked. I was the "good guy".

If Mistral represents the misfortune in taking so long to find a cause to fight for, Monsoon is the danger of single-mindedly devoting yourself to an ideal. He believes in a highly established natural order. The wind blows, the rain falls, and the strong prey on the weak. This state of affairs cannot be fought. The only thing to do is to embrace it. It is an inversion of Raiden's philosophy. For Raiden, the powerful exist to protect the weak. Yet, he cuts down hundreds of foes who are undoubtedly weaker than himself. "You ever think about them? When you're chopping them into hamburger?", asks Sam as Raiden approaches World Marshal's headquarters. This moment is a call out to both Raiden and the player, a meta-textual bombshell marking a major turn in how the game approaches its gleeful gore-fest.

Monsoons are weather phenomena caused by reversing winds and this scenario sees Raiden's dramatic change into "Jack the Ripper". In the script, Monsoon's monologue to Raiden combines with Sam's reproof and causes Raiden to break, leading to a major personality crisis that permeates the rest of the game. It seems no mistake that this shift is finalized by Monsoon. There is a critical moment in *Sons of Liberty* when Raiden is told why he was selected for the Patriot's S3 Project:

Colonel: Raiden, there are also reasons behind your selection. Solidus raised plenty of other child soldiers. Do you know why we chose you over them? It was because you were the only one who refused to acknowledge the past. All the others remember what they were, and pay for it daily.

Rose: But you turn your back on everything you don't like. You do whatever you like, see only the things you like, and for yourself alone.

Raiden denies his past and shunts it off to the side. "I don't want to share my past with anyone. I just want to forget about it." Raiden wants to leave Solidus and the Liberian Civil War behind him. In *Revengeance*, his past is brought up with great frequency. His reputation as "Jack the Ripper" follows him everywhere. The Winds of Destruction invariably call him Jack more than they call him Raiden, bringing up a past he has done hard to repent for and replace with his new life. Monsoon is the other side of his coin. He doesn't deny his past; he lets it define his entire being.

Monsoon is from Cambodia, a victim of the Khmer Rouge. He specifically makes reference to Phnom Penh, likely meaning the 1975 capture of the Cambodian capital.* The lessons he learned in that conflict? First, that the world runs on one overriding principle: “Kill or be killed.” The second, “That this world, and all its people, are diseased.” To this end, Monsoon rejects institutions like religion as centers of guidance and states that all individuals are ruled by the memes they learn or are taught through life. Monsoon is a living testament to the lessons of the past, marking him in stark distinction from Raiden. At least until Raiden embraces his own past.

A further section down below will explicate on the nature of meme theory but for now it suffices to say that Raiden has always been tied to the notion of mimesis, either through *Sons of Liberty* and his quest to break away from his past (as represented by Solidus) or in *Revengeance* with the dissolution of his hard grasped ideals (as represented in the struggle between his sword and Sam’s). The assault on Denver is the moment where Raiden shifts away from dishonesty and embraces the Death Giving Sword in a way that even his enemies were not prepared for. It is a shift that is equally terrifying for the player; no longer are they playing as the hero. They are now playing as a man who craves blood.

Raiden: I told myself that this was about justice. About protecting the weak. But
I was wrong.

Monsoon: Then you admit it?

Raiden: I learned young that killing your enemies felt good. Really good...I was born to kill. The bit about my sword--than “means of justice” stuff? I guess I needed something to keep “the Ripper” in check when I was knee-deep in bodies...Pain. This is why I fight.

On a broad level, it is essential to look at Raiden as he always has been constructed: a representation of the player. In *Sons of Liberty*, he boasts that hundreds of VR training missions make him feel like a legendary mercenary and contends that his virtual training is indistinguishable from the real thing.† Here, again, Raiden stands in for a subset of players: “hardcore” gamers that were raised on a diet of action games from a young age. From arcade beat’em ups to CRT light gun shooters and next gen multiplayer competitions, players are trained to find intense pleasure in the domination of foes.‡

Revengeance is both equally enamored with that very same satisfaction and deeply concerned about where it comes from. Here, folly is found in good intentions. Raiden wants to rescue those

* This, incidentally, marks Monsoon’s age as much older than the player might imagine. *Metal Gear* has a strange relationship with age. Characters’ backgrounds are largely thematic constructs meant to stress symbolically resonant historical crises in order to comment on the long standing nature of war as an overwhelmingly destructive and transformative force.

† Solid Snake is not impressed by this. “War as a video game. What better way to train the ultimate soldier?” A damnation written into the script by Kojima to deride the failure of players to grasp the ways in which *Metal Gear Solid* was fundamentally about just how taxing and terrible it would be to actually be the hero of an action movie pastiche.

‡ This statement is an admitted generalization in service of the broader point.

wronged by World Marshal. He wants to protect the weak. However, pursuing this ideal is not simple; protecting the weak involves a lot of killing and the violence can be intoxicating. Even players will find themselves addicted to the thrill of combat. There is an amazingly captivating rhythm to *Revengeance*'s combat. Advanced combos, perfect parries, and well timed Blade Mode canceling can make the game achieve hypnotic levels of spectacle. The wicked violence of a zandatsu is a glorious sight. These are things that players take as granted for the game. They accept that they must engage in hyperviolence in order to proceed and give little reflection on their deeds until the game humanizes their enemies and changes their hero into a bloodthirsty killer.

Monsoon's boss fight demands a high technical mastery from the player. Parries are crucial, as is skilled use of Blade Mode. The player needs to strike Monsoon's face plate to trigger a phase where they can do damage. It is another one of the game's contrasts. In becoming "Jack the Ripper", Raiden turns off his pain inhibitors, allowing him to feel combat. Monsoon's body, in contrast, splits into many parts, avoiding attacks. It expresses just how different "Jack" is, even from his enemies. Monsoon's philosophy demands that the weak defeat the strong but he avoids true pain in combat. Jack craves violence and pain. The player satiates this lust throughout gameplay. Performing well enough in combat, which might be seen as the player being deeply in sync with Jack, elicits fear from Monsoon. Jack (and the player) are too ferocious for the game space to accept as normal.

For the duration of Monsoon's fight, Ripper Mode—the high damage period of combat representative of Jack's blood lust—is triggered. There is no choice. Every time after this, if the player wants to enter Ripper Mode, they must engage in the extra-textually aggressive action of pressing in the two analog sticks, metaphorically stabbing their controller. They choose to become a killer in a kinesthetically cogent manner. The game demands a shift in physical behaviours in equal measure with phrenic interaction.

Monsoon's battle theme is called "Stains of Time". It is a fitting requiem for Raiden's honor. The song speaks of someone standing in a rainstorm much like the one that falls over Denver as the two cyborgs duel. The elements wash away sorrow and anger but the rain will not stop until they've washed away dreams themselves. In the chaotic battle between Monsoon and "Jack", Raiden's ideals and dreams are washed away by the natural order Monsoon extols so much. There is nothing but blood and pain. Monsoon dies, content to return to the earth and certain that his ideas, his memes and life lessons will live on through "Jack".

The Selfish Gene

"They are the culture. They are everything we pass on." -**Monsoon**, on memes.

'Soul' discussed the *Metal Gear* series' deep concern with the various forces that shape an individual. No one in the series is left untouched by the horrific crucible of war. From controllable actors to enemies and even codec support staff, *Metal Gear* uses war and violence as a means of examining the ways in which identity is maintained or formed in the most extreme of circumstances. *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* started this examination with considerable aplomb. Through the transformation Outer Heaven resistance leader Kyle Schneider into the mercenary Black Ninja and the shifting allegiance of Gray Fox, the game showed how values alter on the battlefield. In *Metal Gear Solid*, Otacon struggles to find the logic behind the chaos around him and attempts to understand the ideals driving individuals like Solid Snake or Sniper Wolf. The series has always been fascinated with ideals and how they are created. This reaches an apex in *Sons of Liberty*.

A major conflict at the core of *Sons of Liberty* is Raiden's search for identity. He struggles on two fronts: his pursuit of an inherited ideal of "Solid Snake" and the attempt to emulate that standard as well as a struggle to break away from his existence as a creation of Solidus Snake, forged in the fires of the Liberian Civil War. The theme of the game is memes. Richard Dawkins defines memes in his book *The Selfish Gene* as follows:

"Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation."^{*}

A meme is a self replicating idea that moves from individual to individual and is disseminated into the larger culture as a whole.[†] An example within *Revengeance* is the meme of revenge itself.

Kevin: A guy sees his countrymen killed by terrorism, so he becomes a terrorist and retaliates. It's an infinite loop.[‡]

As replicating units, memes contain both positive and negative purposes. They perpetuate things as innocuous as fashion trends and as harmful as racial stereotypes but they can teach positive values. Additionally, they allow for a figurative type allow for

^{*} Pg. 192. Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. 1989 ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989. Print.

[†] The primary example Dawkins uses is the concept of "God". Ignoring how trite this example is, we should note that the crux of the argument is that "God" as a meme has a higher innate survival value in the meme pool. Certain memes are fleeting, others are pervasive and rooted.

[‡] Etsu Tamari went on to help write *The Phantom Pain* after *Revengeance*. The cyclical nature of revenge is a major motif in that title as well. Referring to Greco-Turkish relations, Ocelot notes that "Once you spark something like this, it's impossible to control. Both sides build up grudges like debt, without the foresight to see that each act of revenge just fans the flames."

a figurative type of immortality. With offspring, your genetic potency diminishes over each generation. Strong memes, strong contributions to culture, allow for a longer legacy than raw genetics. “Socrates may or may not have a gene or two alive in the world today, as G. C. Williams has remarked, but who cares? The meme-complexes of Socrates, Leonardo, Copernicus and Marconi are still going strong.”*

In the *Metal Gear* series memes are the strongest formative entity in existence. The power they contain is enough to give credence to the notion that the Patriots, as self described in *Sons of Liberty* are “the very discipline and morality that Americans invoke so often.” It is what makes their plan of mass censorship essential in their eyes; an extensive culling of the meme pool is necessary not only to literally preserve themselves but the very systems and beliefs that allow them to exist.

In *Revengeance*, Raiden is haunted by the meme of “Jack the Ripper”. He’s a story as much as person. One of the major struggles that Raiden faces in his conflict with World Marshal is if he will act in a way that will reinforce the strength of that meme within the larger meme pool. Worse still, it is a recreation of his training under Solidus Snake which is forced on helpless orphans by World Marshal. Not only is the meme of “Jack the Ripper” alive and well, it threatens to replicate on a massive scale. It is as Monsoon notes: “Expose someone to anger long enough, they will learn to hate.”

The Sears Program is an echo of the presumed purpose of *Sons of Liberty*’s S3 plan: to create a soldier on par with Solid Snake through a simulated incident that would force the subject to become such an individual through direct imitation. Solid Snake Simulation. While this is not the real purpose of the S3 Plan (truly standing for “Selection for Societal Sanity” and the Patriots’ aforementioned information censorship), it is important to note that the *Metal Gear* series repeats formal elements constantly in a self referential and meta-textual loop that effectively turns those elements mimetic in their own right.†

Incidentally, Raiden is an amazing example of a mimetic element of *Metal Gear* thriving in the series’ extra-text ever since initial trailers for *Sons of Liberty* omitted his presence in the game entirely. The ensuing outrage, particularly among western fans, is a part of gaming history. Raiden himself was a symbol intentionally pointing towards notions that would alienate players. He was a highly emotional rookie markedly distinct from the grizzled Solid Snake. In *Snake Eater*, the character of Raikov‡ shows up as Volgin’s homosexual lover and selecting “I like MGS2!” before starting the game would have Naked Snake start off wearing a Raiden mask.

* Dawkins, pg. 199

† This is, for instance, one of the reasons why *Metal Gear EXCELSUS* appears at the end of the game with little fanfare. This is a *Metal Gear* game and the form, as understood by the player, demands the presence of a metal gear unit.

‡ Raikov is visually identical to Raiden. He is presented as cruel but fey. It’s one of the series’ lowest and most uncomfortable choices. The series struggles with homosexuality and bisexuality in general. For instance, the depraved knife wielding “Vamp” did not earn his code name because of his penchant for drinking blood. It is meant to refer to his bisexuality.

In the lead up to *Guns of the Patriots*, Raiden appeared in a 2005 Tokyo Game Show trailer in which he tries to supplant Snake as the game's lead, portrayed largely as the bishōnen* that western audiences saw him as. It took his embodiment of the "Cyborg Ninja", a series long trope, in *Guns of the Patriots* for him to break free from this mimetic image.

Within texts or outside, Raiden is subject to the insipid influence of mimetic mutation. In *Revengeance*, part of that mutation comes from the struggle between the Life Giving Sword and Death Dealing Sword but it also rests elsewhere. While Raiden might be cutting down symbolic manifestations of his own self as he defeats the Winds of Destruction, each defeat seems to form new memes that he carries throughout the game. In defeating Mistral, he rejects his aimless past and asserts the value of his ideals. In confronting Monsoon, he defeats a mirror of his violence yet inherits the poisonous memes of despair, rage, and hate that give rise to "Jack the Ripper" once again. Defeating Sundowner offers a decisive blow against a symbol of what Raiden might have become in the post Patriots world but also sees him play into the cycle of revenge that Kevin warns of in their conversation. Each victory sees memes culled and stronger ones take firm root in the game's meme pool.

What occurs in *Revengeance*, particularly in the final acts, has very little to do with actual martial prowess. The clashing of swords is deafened by a battle of ideals, a maelstrom of phrenic interactions that demand that Raiden change as much as the player must. Memes replicate and propagate without the consent of the receiver. They sneak into our minds and take root in the darkest shadows without our consent. Confronting Armstrong will radically challenge Raiden's understanding of the game world but in the final acts, the game itself is implanting themes and statements in the mind of the player. What occurs on a microlevel in the script balloons out towards the player. In a brutal condemnation of modern America and the soaring Social Darwinian speeches of Senator Armstrong, *Revengeance* moves from attacking Raiden to attacking western players.

* 美少年, lit. "handsome youth" or "pretty boy".

This Barren Wasted Land

"If America's gone to shit, you're just another maggot crawling in the pile!" - **Raiden**, to Senator Armstrong.

The moment Sundowner draws his blade across N'mani's throat, *Revengeance* starts its vicious condemnation of the western world. The warmongering western forces left to take up power after the Patriots' dissolution prove unable to let go of the insidious "war economy", opting to sow discord around the globe into order to line their pockets with blood money. "Africa's just gettin' a bit too peaceful," Sundowner declares as if he has any right to decide world affairs. "What about all the good things war has done for us? Jobs, technology, a common purpose..." Without war as a backbone, the West is listless. Without conflict, it has no clue how to function. The West's prosperity explicitly comes from exploiting the developing world. It comes from violence and dominance.

Revengeance makes use of hyperbolized characters and symbols in service of this thesis. Sundowner is the first. Born in Alabama, Sundowner joined the army after high school because his family could not afford college. In the military, he participated in the 1989 invasion of Panama that deposed Manuel Noriega, the Gulf War, as well as tours in Iraq and Afghanistan during the War on Terror. Sundowner's military history deliberately invokes the image of modern American interventionist rhetoric and the violent cost that comes with it.* Beyond that, Sundowner is brash, large, boisterous, and petulant. In battle, he wields the crudest weapon in the core game: a pair of blades that can form a type of giant pincer that he uses with glee to decapitate foes. He also makes use of a large shield. The image: a thoughtlessly cruel war monger who both finds pleasure in violence while also shielding himself from any real harm. "I'm fuckin' invincible!", he cries arrogantly during his boss scenario. Sundowner is a big bully befitting the image of post 9/11 America. In donning a large trenchcoat, he recalls *Sons of Liberty's* Fatman, another childish student of destruction whose name references America's most drastic act of violence in any war: the nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.† In his entire construction, Sundowner's rhetoric and visual design begs examination of America's long standing reliance on war.

Sundowner is not alone as a character meant to provide broad caricature of American war philosophy. There is another Winds of Destruction member that we only meet in the Bladewolf DLC pack: Khamsin. Khamsin is a former Marine and veteran of the Gulf War who accompanies Bladewolf and Mistral during Desperado's operations in Abkhazia. Dramatically arguing with Bladewolf near the end of the DLC, he makes a grand statement:

Khamsin: Buckle the fuck up, little doggy. Remember this, we're bringin' freedom here if it kills us. Or better yet: them."

* Since my birth, there's been at least seventy five notable American military operations. The war in Afghanistan alone has cost the lives of over three thousand coalition soldiers from America, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and other nations alongside an estimated sixteen to nineteen thousand civilian casualties. The statistics from the Iraq War are even more chilling with over four thousand coalition deaths and possibly upwards of one hundred and twenty thousand civilians.

† Fatman was the name of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki.

Khamsin is possibly more vicious a depiction of American warmongering than even Sundowner because he actually believes in the rhetoric that Desperado is feeding him. He believes that the mission in Abkhazia is about spreading freedom across the world but he doesn't care how this is done. If it kills him, so be it. If it kills the very people he's trying to liberate, that's inconsequential. He is the cold, uncaring stone of "liberation" caving in the skulls of his enemies. Visually, the images of imperfection continue. Khamsin is only cyborg from the waist down; his torso rests in large mechanical suit of little finesse, all the while wielding a giant axe as his weapon. A self appointed executioner that tramples through warzones in blind* devotion of an ideal.

The absolute zenith of exaggerated imagery comes with the arrival of Metal Gear EXCELSUS in the game's final scenario. Quite possibly the largest metal gear unit within the series, EXCELSUS breaks through the earth and arises to confront Raiden like a demon from the depths of hell itself. It lacks any of the possibly subtlety of previous metal gears. Metal Gear REX may have been a powerful weapon but its true danger rested in the ability to covertly launch nuclear attacks from any point on the globe thanks to its railgun. REX was essentially a fusion between an ICBM platform and a tank. EXCELSUS is a mechanical singularity meant to overwhelm emergent technologies such as cyborgs through excessive force.

Doktor: "Once cyborg tech began to advance, though, small-scale UGs were no longer so effective. Against an adversary of the same size, a cyborg with human-level decision-making skills... Well, it will always have the advantage. So, as the theory goes, why not make UGs giant again? Overwhelm the cyborg with sheer firepower. That was the idea that lead to Excelsus."

Raiden: "Like you said: overkill. But it's still no good in urban combat, right?"

Doktor: "Correct. Assuming you weren't intending to raze the urban city in the process, anyway."

Raiden: "What do you mean?"

Doktor: "...It could smash whole houses without even breaking stride!"

Raiden: "And what? It's just, "Sorry. but fuck you, civilians?" I mean, even if they were "just" knocking down houses, the media'd have a field day."

Doktor: "I sincerely doubt they care. If a US soldier dies in combat, it's nation-wide, front page news. If civilians in Wherever-stan are killed in an air-strike, nobody gives a second thought."

* Khamsin's boss fight contains a notable ludic interaction. He kicks up concrete and forms barriers that Bladewolf can skulk behind in order to maneuverer around Khamsin, where a stealth attack can be used. His blindness to his own hypocrisy is ludically reinforced by making him the only boss where such an interaction occurs.

The very purpose of EXCELSUS is careless destruction. It is meant to crush cities to rubble, blast away resistance with massive plasma cannons, and not give a damn about whoever is caught in the crossfire. In Denver, Sam notes that “No matter how many Mexican kids we cut or Africans we bury, the first world looks away. No one gives a shit. Not the media, not the politicians. Certainly not the average Joe.”* EXCELSUS is first world callousness personified in cold, unfeeling steel. This propensity towards callous wastes of life is a major crux of the villains’ plot. Raiden’s assault on the Shabhazabad air base occurs because he believes World Marshal is there to assassinate the president. Instead, those soldiers exist to be killed and held up as martyrs of a terrorist attack, inciting the anger of the American public and pushing the nation into another war on terror. Raiden astutely notes “The media and the public won’t be able to resist. Remember WMDs in Iraq?”†

Even noting *Snake Eater*’s repurposing of Cold War personalities and politics, this is the most explicit any *Metal Gear* text has been about incorporating real world events into their plot. *Ground Zeroes* might comment on prison camps like Guantanamo Bay and *Metal Gear Solid* may have referred to the START II treaty but both games also used highly fictitious elements that made the game world feel self contained and removed from the world of the player. *Revengeance* incorporates recent history. It is a choice that gives the political commentary much more bite. It doesn’t fuck around with analogies. If it is going to make a statement about media complicity leading up to the Iraq War or talk about the generally self absorbed nature of the American populous, there’s not going to be any dissembling. The game presents the message and then expresses it in ugly detail. It will talk about the first world not caring about anywhere else and then it will show you a picture of social media where a user tells Uncle Sam that they “need to put a boot up Pakistan’s ass”. The masses are bloodthirsty, unthinking, and reactionary.

The glue that holds everything together is United States Senator Steven Armstrong, the game’s true antagonist. The *Metal Gear* series demonizes politicians. From *Metal Gear Solid*’s duplicitous Secretary of Defense Jim Houseman to just about every politician in *Snake Eater*, the series has no issue with presenting government as fundamentally tainted. It is such a recurring theme that it would be very easy to call the series anarchistic. Through Armstrong and Raiden’s reactions to him, we find the series’ most open and honest damnation of political structures.

Armstrong is the senator of Colorado, a former University of Texas football star, Navy veteran, and prime candidate for the next presidential election. It is also his plan, aptly named Operation Tecumseh‡, that comes to fruition in Pakistan. It is his dream to create a world of chaos and conflict. He pilots EXCELSUS and he fights Raiden in the last boss scenario. Armstrong is a villain of amazing grandeur and another major symbol of violent Americana. Raiden delivers a vicious assessment.

* I feel compelled to raise up Raiden’s codec team as a counter point. Both Courtney and Kevin are Americans who certainly give a shit. The difference is that they embrace a larger political ecosystem by working with Boris (a Russian) and Doktor (a German). The reason the “average Joe” doesn’t care in *Revengeance*’s politics is because they don’t look beyond their own national borders to the rest of the world.

† Bear in mind that the *Metal Gear* universe is not one in which George W. Bush was ever president and also a setting where Arsenal Gear crashed into and destroyed a large chunk of Manhattan in *Sons of Liberty*.

‡ During the American Civil War, Union general William Tecumseh Sherman’s March to the Sea was a campaign wherein he fought from Atlanta to Savannah; he not only destroyed major military targets but burned down civilian property and ravaged their infrastructure. It is one of the most prominent examples of scorched earth military policy.

Raiden: “Typical politician. Big promises, but all talk...All you care about is lining your own pockets. That, and your approval ratings. You’ve got no principles, just like all the rest.”

Solid Snake was always weary of politicians and the chain of command; he’d been used and manipulated throughout his entire life into fighting other people’s battles. Raiden’s assessment of people with political power goes beyond Snake’s justified skepticism. It is pure anger and vitriol. The system is rotten and betrays the ideals it was based on. It’s broken. It’s “gone to shit”. *Revengeance* stands firm in ferociously attacking the failure of first world governments. Shockingly, Armstrong agrees. The system is so vile that even the antagonist finds it reprehensible.

Armstrong: “Fuck all these limp-dick lawyers and chicken-shit bureaucrats. Fuck this 24/7 internet spew of trivia and celebrity bullshit. Fuck ‘American pride’. Fuck the media! Fuck all of it! America is diseased. Rotten to the core. There’s no saving it. We need to pull it out by the roots. Wipe the slate clean. BURN IT DOWN!”

Both Raiden and Armstrong clearly believe that America has not lived up to the promise of its ideals. The issue is not if America is poisoned; the issue is how to cure it, if it can be cured at all. Armstrong’s assessment is negative. There is no panacea to cure America’s moral rot. Instead, he opts to sow chaos in the hopes that conflict will transform the country into a land where power will not be centralized in the hands of politicians, who he sees as weak, but rather in the hands of the people. Specifically, he hopes that “the weak will be purged and the strongest will thrive, free to live as they see fit”. For America to be great again*, it requires a Social Darwinian culling that will transform it into a “winner takes all” hellscape.

Raiden might agree with the general philosophy that centralized power is fundamentally misplaced, as evidenced by his own condemnation of politicians but even at the end of the game, the idea that the weak must be purged clashes with his idea that the strong protect the weak. A great society is one where those of ability act in service to a greater whole. He and Armstrong are doomed to disagree regardless of whatever initial common ground they share or bond they build in combat. Raiden calls Armstrong “batshit insane” but also directly quotes him in discussion with Boris in a post credits scene. Killing Armstrong holds a symbolic image of note: Raiden rips out his heart and crushes it. The organ is coated with nanomachines. It pounds with life but it is still artificial and unnatural. In crushing it, Raiden does away with a passionate foe corrupted by imperfect beliefs.

Perhaps the greatest condemnations of all are actually removed from ludic interactions or the more overt sections of the script. They are found in the lyrics to two songs: “Collective Consciousness” and “The Hot Wind Blowing”. “The Hot Wind Blowing” is Khamsin’s theme and focuses on the blind obedience of soldiers:

* Note that *Revengeance* was released before the advent of Donald Trump’s nightmarish 2016 presidential bid.

Just like the buffalo
Blindly following the herd
We try to justify
All the things that have occurred

Here I am
Dirty and faceless
Waiting to heed your instruction

The buffalo image evokes ideas of wanton destruction and desecration. During westward expansion, thousands of buffalo were killed for their meat and hunted to the point of near extinction. Today, they are a near threatened species but by the turn of the twentieth century, the recorded number of buffalo sat at around three hundred total. The lyrics combine this historical image of American carelessness with ideas of blind obedience. *Revengeance* goes to great lengths to talk about the complexities that draw people into war when it forces the player to listen to NPC character thoughts and motives during the Denver scenario. However, it also offers a prognostication where soldiers wait for orders, follow them without question, and only try to justify their actions after the fact.

The song Collective Unconsciousness plays during the battle with Metal Gear EXCELSUS, focusing more on the general populous.

Display obedience
While never stepping out of line
And blindly swear allegiance
Let your country control your mind

Live in ignorance
And purchase your happiness
When blood and sweat is the real cost
Thinking ceases, the truth is lost

The song makes demands of the public. Obedience to the country entails giving up your mind and swearing allegiance. There's no questioning anything. The word "blindly" is used again, as it was in "The Hot Wind Blowing". The lyrics make an equivalency between soldiers and the public. The same thing is demanded of both: ignore the real cost of their happiness, justify the actions that granted it. The public's solution is to engage in gross product consumption. Combined, the songs create a dark picture and call out the worst aspects of first world behavior.

Revengeance's politics are overt and brutal, befitting the grand scale of its ludic interactions. Etsu Tamari's script is more acerbic and open than Kojima's work. The series always has been opposed to political structures and more concerned with the power of individuals but *Revengeance* attacks these institutions with an unrestrained glee. This zeal turns *Revengeance* into a very necessary piece of political commentary and one of gaming's best.

Conclusion

"History will decide who's right. End of story." - **Sam** to Raiden before their final duel.

The first time I finished *Revengeance*, I was incredibly conflicted. The final beat felt sour: Raiden, on his own, waging a personal war against the remains of World Marshal. It was a fate full of terrifying implications. Here was Raiden, a man who spent the game and the series struggling with a sense of self, and his fate was to wage a seemingly unending shadow war. To wander, ronin-like, around the world in a life of perpetual combat. *Guns of the Patriots* showed how draining this type of existence could be; Raiden's nature as a wanderer led to a despondency and self loathing that was awful to behold. I was genuinely glad to see him reunite with his wife and son. At the end of *Revengeance* it seemed like Raiden was losing a comfort that he'd earned through desperate struggle over multiple titles.

I was thinking about it all wrong. Yes, he is losing his comfort. Yes, he is consigning himself to a dangerous life as a vigilante. However, he is not having his old life taken from him. He is sacrificing it in service of others. Throughout *Metal Gear*, individuals living on the battlefield often do so because they feel no other place where they belong. It is the only place where they find value. It was largely self effacing and the height of this self effacement was Big Boss. One of the most important moments in the series is the moment in *Guns of the Patriots* when he sees Solid Snake for the first time since their final battle at the end of *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*. I am convinced that the other is Raiden's choice to take up his sword to fight his "own war" at the end of *Revengeance*.

Big Boss fought to reaffirm his value and lost himself in the process. We see this process play out with Sam during the course of *Revengeance*. What marks Raiden's decision as important within the larger context of the series is that his choice to continue to war his own war is just that: his own. Primarily, *Revengeance* is about the use of violence as a means to facilitate self growth and foster authenticity. In *Sons of Liberty*, Raiden continually acted in bad faith. By the end of *Revengeance*, he's reached a truly genuine state of existence.

Revengeance is not just a story about a man grappling with his own violence; it is a story about a man accepting who he is, with all the good and bad that might entail. Where I initially was dismayed to see Raiden return to violence after such a terrible crucible, I now see a decision to be honest to oneself. The game is a series of scenarios leading to a state of true self actualization. Along the way, Raiden sheds away layers of dishonesty, cuts down personifications of his bad faith, and takes up his sword against political systems that deceive and beguile. The process is bloody and brutal but ultimately worth it in order to create an individual true to their principles. Raiden has achieved self mastery.

Would that it could be so for all of us in this life. To find out own paths, hopefully less violent than Raiden's but nonetheless honest and authentic. To find comfort with ourselves and our imperfections. To walk into the future with confidence. To make this barren, wasted land just a little less barren.