

Konami art

## Back in 2001, Gamers Battled Fake News — In ‘Metal Gear Solid 2’

A ground-breaking video game predicted our present reality



Ajai Raj

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by [AJAI RAJ](#)

Before the 2016 election, before “fake news,” before social media — there was *Metal Gear Solid 2*.

Perhaps the most widely anticipated game in video game history at the time of its release in November 2001, the PS2 title was the sequel to *Metal Gear Solid* on the Playstation.

*MGS*'s heady blend of stealth action, authentic weaponry, neat gadgets and commentary on post-Cold War geopolitics and the implications of genetic engineering rightly earned it a spot in the pantheon of all-time great games, and one of the first games people think of when they make the case for video games as art.

*MGS2* shifted away from the original's focus on genetics and nuclear weaponry, instead providing not only commentary, but an interactive and at times jarring lesson about the perils and pitfalls of discerning truth from fiction in an increasingly digital world.



Much could— and indeed, has— been written and said about the themes of *MGS2*, enough to fill multiple books, if not an entire encyclopedia. Creator Hideo Kojima famously stated that he intended to “betray” his fans, albeit in a pleasant way.

The game is now older than many of its fans were at the time of its release, and diehard Metal Gear aficionados are still arguing about how “pleasant” that betrayal really was.

Not only did it involve a bait-and-switch from playing as beloved *MGS* protagonist Solid Snake to the effete, whiny and poorly acted rookie Raiden, but it also included a bisexual vampire, a woman who bullets simply couldn't hit and a jolly demolitions expert drinking wine through a bendy straw and skating around on rollerblades.

In the years since its release, it's been argued that *MGS2* was a postmodern masterpiece, and that the events of the entire game may have taken place in a virtual reality simulation. One devoted soul wrote a nearly 150-page paper about the characters, themes and events of the game and their real-world correlates, which are more numerous than one might imagine.

But I want to focus on one theme in particular — that of information, and how the information we're given circumscribes the context in which we think and act, even as we imagine ourselves to be independent actors with free will.

*MGS2* drives this lesson home in a way that makes it impossible to ignore. Not merely through walls of text and long cut-scenes — both of which also abound in the game — but through the way the player interacts with the game itself.

At a certain point in the story, Solid Snake, the hard-bitten super-soldier who's been assisting Raiden/the player in proceeding with his increasingly dubious mission, turns on Raiden and hands him over to the enemy for torture, and from there the game descends into a kind of inspired madness, warping into a meta-commentary on gaming and media and challenging the player's own motivations and agency.

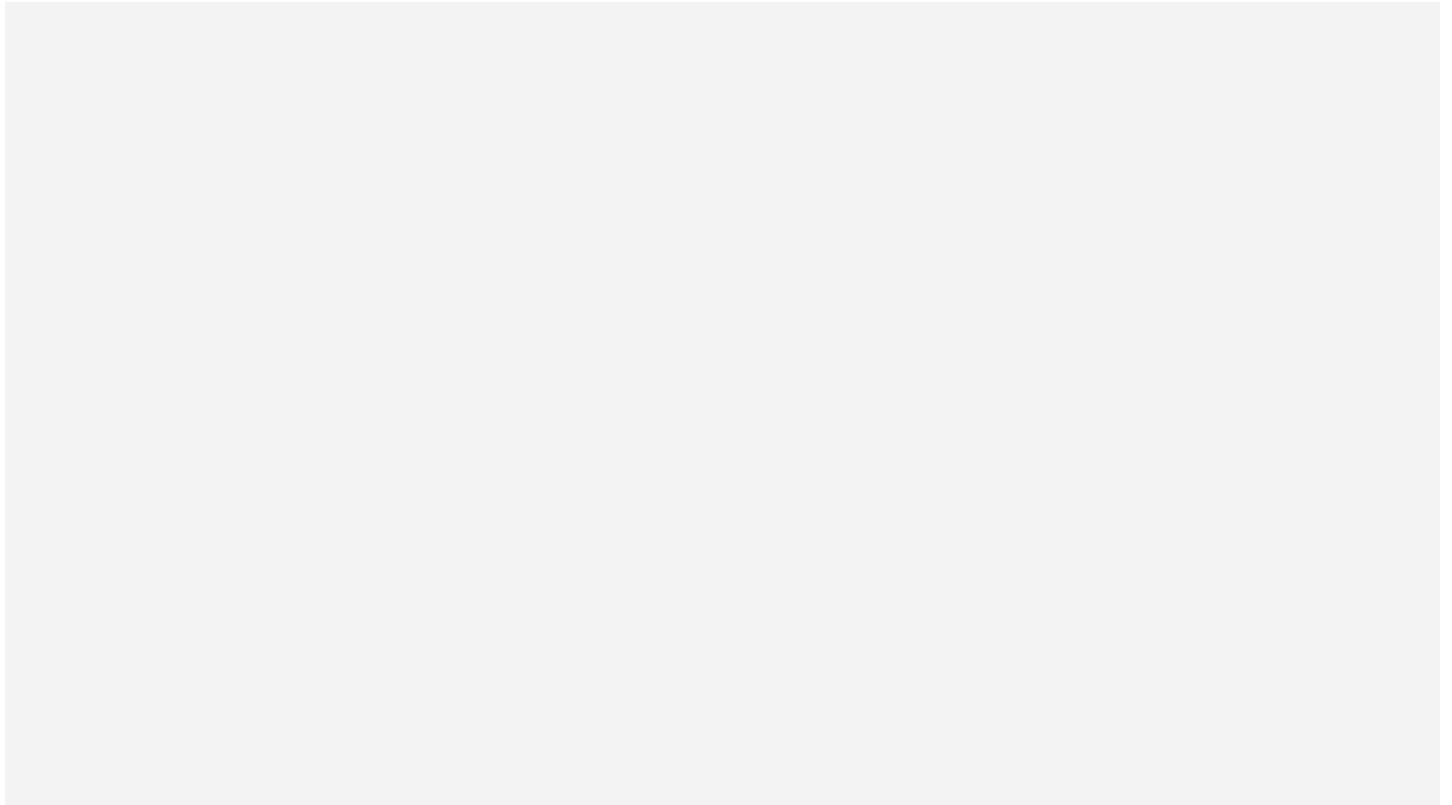
At this point, a brief synopsis is in order. The original *MGS* comprised an incident at a fictional, top-secret military base called Shadow Moses, an island off the coast of Alaska where a game-changing weapon called Metal Gear REX was being developed.

A bipedal, nuclear-equipped battle tank capable of launching a nuclear strike from anywhere in the world, Metal Gear REX was a terrorist's dream. And indeed, terrorists had infiltrated Shadow Moses with the intention of stealing and activating REX.

Hero Solid Snake was sent in to rescue a couple of hostages and disable REX. In the process, he ended up defeating his twin brother, Liquid Snake, and learning that both he and Liquid, along with the entire terrorist army Snake had been fighting, were genetic clones of Big Boss, the ultimate soldier.

In the game's post-credits sequence, the player learns that one of the villains, Revolver Ocelot, has been secretly working for the president of the United States the whole time to orchestrate the terrorist plot. Confused yet? Hold on.

*MGS2* begins four years after the Shadow Moses incident, on an oil tanker making its way up the Hudson river, off the coast of Manhattan. Solid Snake, since Shadow Moses, has become an anti-Metal Gear activist. Since Revolver Ocelot sold the specs for REX on the black market, Metal Gears are a dime a dozen.



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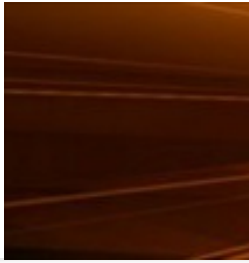
Solid Snake infiltrates the tanker, which is said to be housing a new model of Metal Gear developed by the Marines. His mission is simply to obtain photographic evidence of the new Metal Gear. But this being *MGS2*, nothing is as simple as it seems.

Rogue Russian terrorists hijack the tanker, and after Snake finishes taking photos of the new Metal Gear prototype, the amphibious Metal Gear RAY, Revolver Ocelot shows up along with a Russian colonel, to announce that they're taking RAY for themselves.

Ocelot proceeds to then betray his Russian colleagues, killing the colonel and the Marine commander and hijacking RAY for himself. Snake presumably dies, and, as has been Ocelot's plan all along, photos of Snake aboard the tanker are used to pin the terrorist label on him. From being a hero after Shadow Moses, Solid Snake is sold to the public as the terrorist who sank an oil tanker, causing the worst environmental catastrophe in history.

Fast forward to two years after that, and the second chapter in the game begins. In the aftermath of the "oil spill" from the first chapter, an environmental cleanup facility called the Big Shell has been erected, ostensibly to contain the disaster.

**Buy 'Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty'**

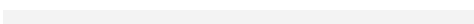
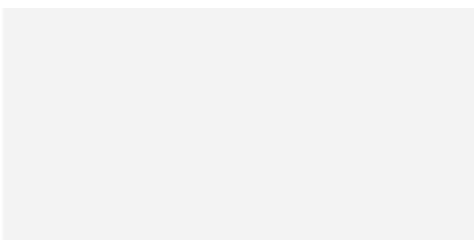
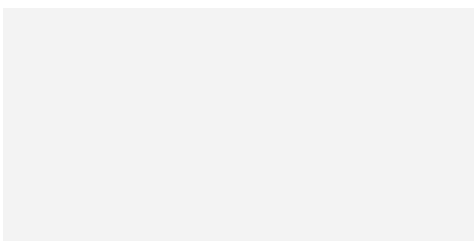
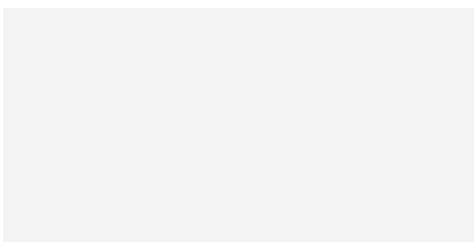


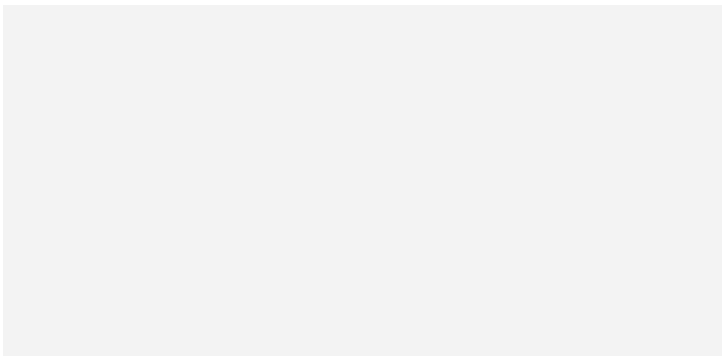
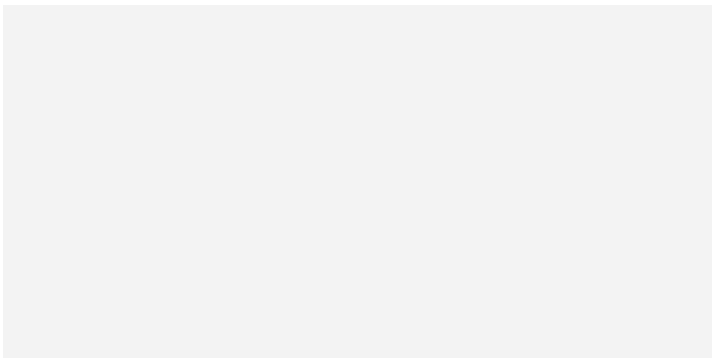
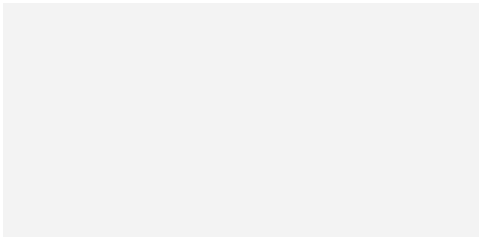
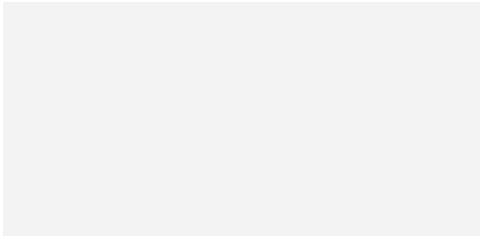
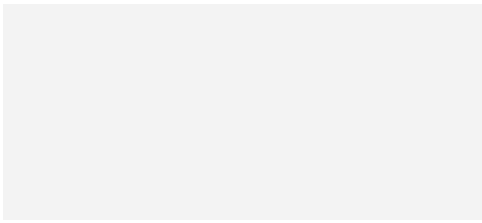
But of course, terrorists have seized the facility and taken a number of hostages, including the president. Raiden is sent in to take out the terrorists — whose leader claims he is Solid Snake — and rescue the hostages. As you might imagine, it gets pretty convoluted from there, so suffice it to say that nothing is as it seems. Solid Snake is not the terrorist leader, and isn't even dead.

The true leader is the previous president, George Sears, also known as Solidus Snake, the third clone of the aforementioned Big Boss. The Big Shell is a cover for the development of a new Metal Gear called Arsenal Gear, modeled after a joint Navy/DARPA project called Arsenal Ship that never saw the light of day. And more importantly for our purposes, Raiden is not who he thinks he is, and he does not serve the interests he thinks he serves.

Raiden, a soldier trained exclusively in V.R. who feels like he's "some kind of legendary mercenary," is in fact a pawn of the Patriots, a shadowy organization that secretly rules America. In the game's latter sequences, Arsenal's on-board artificial intelligence, G.W., reveals to Raiden that his entire mission has been a proof-of-concept that people can be manipulated into believing and doing anything, by giving them the right information.

This functions not only as a rebuke from Kojima to a certain type of *MGS* fan, who only wanted to do bad-ass soldier things without thinking about the deeper meaning of its themes, but as a critique of the way people consume media. This critique was remarkably prescient, encompassing social media before social media even existed.





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Arsenal itself is the core component of a system of widespread information control, intended not only to keep the powers that be insulated from scrutiny, but also to protect humanity from itself by preventing society from drowning in a flood of trivial and false information, all masquerading as truth.

Compare the dialogue above to an except from [this story by Carole Cadwalladr in \*The Guardian\*](#), about how public opinion can be, and is, modeled and manipulated.

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*Johan Bollen, associate professor at Indiana University School of Informatics and Computing, tells me how he discovered one possible edge: he's done research that shows you can predict stock market moves from Twitter. You can measure public sentiment and then model it. "Society is driven by emotions, which it's always been difficult to measure, collectively. But there are now programs that can read text and*

*measure it and give us a window into those collective emotions.”*

*The research caused a huge ripple among two different constituencies. “We had a lot of attention from hedge funds. They are looking for signals everywhere and this is a hugely interesting signal. My impression is hedge funds do have these algorithms that are scanning social feeds. The flash crashes we’ve had — sudden huge drops in stock prices — indicates these algorithms are being used at large scale. And they are engaged in something of an arms race.”*

*The other people interested in Bollen’s work are those who want not only to measure public sentiment, but to change it. Bollen’s research shows how it’s possible. Could you reverse engineer the national, or even the global, mood? Model it, and then change it?*

*“It does seem possible. And it does worry me. There are quite a few pieces of research that show if you repeat something often enough, people start involuntarily to believe it. And that could be leveraged, or weaponised for propaganda. We know there are thousands of automated bots out there that are trying to do just that.”*

*The war of the bots is one of the wilder and weirder aspects of the elections of 2016. At the Oxford Internet Institute’s Unit for Computational Propaganda, its director, Phil Howard, and director of research, Sam Woolley, show me all the ways public opinion can be massaged and manipulated. But is there a smoking gun, I ask them, evidence of who is doing this? “There’s not a smoking gun,” says Howard. “There are smoking machine guns. There are multiple pieces of evidence.”*

*“Look at this,” he says and shows me how, before the U.S. election, hundreds upon hundreds of websites were set up to blast out just a few links, articles that were all pro-Trump. “This is being done by people who understand information structure, who are bulk buying domain names and then using automation to blast out a certain message. To make Trump look like he’s a consensus.”*

*And that requires money?*

*“That requires organization and money. And if you use enough of them, of bots and people, and cleverly link them together, you are what’s legitimate. You are creating truth.”*

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This goes much, much deeper than Donald Trump. Information control has been a tool of power for all of human history. It’s only in recent decades, with the advent of networked computers and digital technology, that it’s been possible on such a large

scale.

The *MGS* series has always been astute in focusing on the ones wielding power as the real villains. Consider, as one example, the fact that the White House doctored EPA press releases post-9/11 to mislead the public about the true danger of the toxic dust created by the catastrophe, which led to thousands of cancer deaths among first-responders.

This deliberate deception has caused more deaths than the original disaster, but public opinion was shaped to elide that fact and justify the Iraq war, which has claimed nearly 200,000 civilian lives.

But who talks about any of that anymore? We move on to the next thing, whatever everyone else is talking about. The victims we claim to care about one week are shunted down the memory hole the next, left to deal with the long-term consequences, their suffering useful only as rhetorical fodder for cynical, opportunistic politicians.



So what is the solution? Just as the original *MGS* wrapped up its sobering story on the perils of genetic engineering with the hopeful message that we are more than the sum of our genes, *MGS2* ends with a speech from Solid Snake about how, in a sea of dubious information and agenda-driven narratives, we each have the duty of finding the truth for ourselves and passing on what's worth knowing to others.

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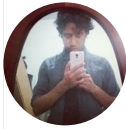




27 claps



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WRITTEN BY

**Ajai Raj**

Comedian, writer, once called "The Thinking Man's Donkey Kong" by Nintendo Power magazine.

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