# Landscapes of Empire in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*

Soraya Murray

Game spaces are central to player experience. This has long been understood among video game designers and developers. It has even been explored in relation to the transformation of the lived world through gamification.[1] As video games have become more technically capable of rendering photorealistic detail, the formal impressiveness of game spaces have provided increasingly rich player and immersive experience. This has activated what might have been thought of as mere setting or background, inviting analysis formerly exclusive to the more foregrounded elements of character and action.

In-game landscapes are complex and indicative of larger cultural value systems, yet the cultural meanings of those gamescapes (or game spaces) have received little critical investigation.[2] My use of the term *gamescape* derives from Shoshana Magnet, who originally coined the term to signal "the way in which landscape in video games is actively constructed within a particular ideological framework."[3] One of her primary concerns is to

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1. See Patrick Jagoda et al., "Worlding through Play: Alternate Reality Games, Large-Scale Learning, and *The Source*," *American Journal of Play* 8 (Fall 2015): 74–100, and Jane McGonigal, *SuperBetter: The Power of Living Gamefully* (New York, 2015).

2. For some considerations of game space in earlier writings, see Murray, "High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing *Grand Theft Auto*," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27 (May 2005): 91–98 and "Race, Gender, and Genre in *Spec Ops: The Line*," *Film Quarterly* 70 (Winter 2016): 38–48.

3. Shoshana Magnet, "Playing at Colonization: Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game *Tropico*," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30 (April 2006): 142.

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communicate how the activated participation of the player is constitutive of the gamescape, while the gamescape also shapes the player's understanding such that the game's subsequent meanings are shifting and provisional.[4] That the term takes into account playable aspects, or in other words the actionable dimension of the game space, along with the player as active agent, is key to my own analyses. For my purposes, I use *game space* and *gamescape* somewhat interchangeably, keeping Magnet's definition in mind.

The world making of games is a paradigmatic form of contemporary visual culture that models the relation between player and space in very significant ways. As I will explore through the scholarship of Michael Nitsche and Mark J. P. Wolf, among others, within the study of video games the construction of space has been theorized largely from a formal perspective. However, when one turns a visual studies lens upon gamescapes in order to understand these landscapes as ideological, it becomes clear that these spaces naturalize a certain set of relations through a highly curated framing of the playable environment. This essay asks: How can the combined tools of formal game studies and visual studies provide new insights into game space and the potent cultural work these simulated sites undertake?

There are many mainstream games—the urban dystopic *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–) series (*GTA*), historical adventure franchise *Assassin's Creed* (2007–), or fantasy *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017)—which feature stunning gamescapes that are central to their popular appeal. As I am interested in a more background-oriented approach that reframes a critical address of representation beyond a typical focus on character and action, I have chosen to discuss the culturally loaded *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) and to give particular emphasis to its spatial features and constructed, ideologically weighted landscapes. *The Phantom Pain* was developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami Digital Entertainment in late 2015. I choose this mainstream stealth-themed game

4. Ibid., p. 143.

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for several reasons, including its status as an iconic title that resonates with mass audiences, its celebrated auteur game director Hideo Kojima, and its status as part of a legacy franchise (*Metal Gear*) dating back to 1987, undeniably one of the most successful and longest-running series in console game history. Additionally, *The Phantom Pain* uses the Fox Engine, a proprietary game engine developed by Kojima Productions notable for its advanced photorealism, rendering power, realistic atmosphere, and enhanced open-world capabilities that allow players to roam the game space freely.[5] After its release, *The Phantom Pain* was especially lauded for the freedom of engagement possible within its massive spaces, and critics identified it as a major technological benchmark for its detail and open-world potentials (fig. 1).[6] In terms of its gamescape, *The Phantom Pain* epitomizes the best that military-themed stealth action-adventure games have to offer in terms of the sought-after objective of a highly convincing world, and it generally conforms to the typical use of a game landscape as a theater for asserting dominion over space through the player's mastery of gameplay. Major military-themed titles like *America's Army* (2002), *Call of Duty* (2003–), and *Medal of Honor* (1999–) feature highly detailed spaces that reference lived-world locations and sometimes even actual historical battles, but beyond their overt impressiveness there is typically little attention paid to their landscapes as ideology. Lastly, the narrative and action of *The Phantom Pain* are initially set in Afghanistan in the mid-1980s—a critical aspect of its landscape formulation. As I will discuss, the choice to set playable military action in a space and time of fraught politics pointedly gestures toward historical outcomes evident in the present-day reality of seemingly perpetual war in the Arab world as an extension of the modern project of US empire.

Across its many titles released over the last thirty years, the *Metal Gear* series presents an epic, opaque saga of a powerful international shadow organization called The Philosophers—initially founded to prevent further global war after the devastation of World War I—and its subsequent splintering into hostile factions. Sited within actual historical conflicts, these stories feature hypermasculine super soldiers, cloning, stealth action, technowar, fantasy and the supernatural, hybrid human machines, shifting loyalties, double crossing, and a seemingly bottomless supply of conspiracy

5. See Toshi Nakamura, "Hideo Kojima: This Is What Fox Engine Is All About," Kotaku, 21 Mar. 2013, kotaku.com/5991640/hideo-kojima-this-is-what-fox-engine-is-all-about

6. See Peter Brown, review of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* by Hideo Kojima, GameSpot, 23 Aug. 2015, www.gamespot.com/reviews/metal-gear-solid-v-the-phantom-pain-review/1900-6416224/, and Rich Stanton, "*Metal Gear Solid V*—How Kojima Productions Is Blowing Apart the Open-World Video Game," *The Guardian*, 11 June 2015, www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jun/11/metal-gear-solid-v-phantom-pain-kojima-preview

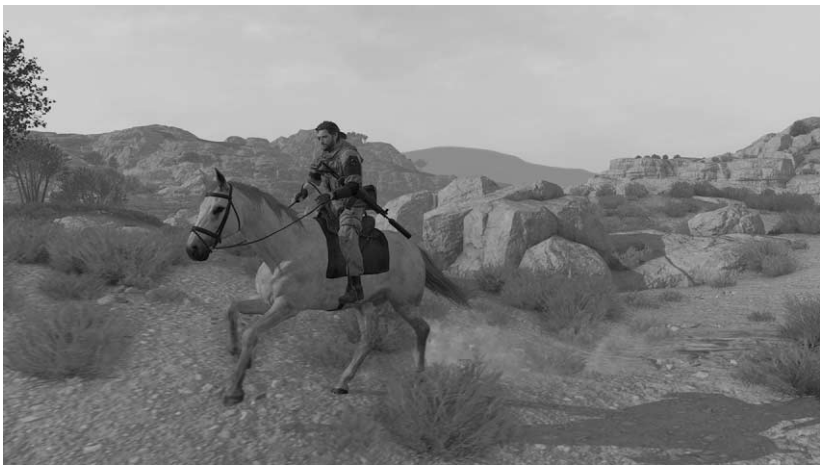

FIGURE 1. Snake on D-Horse in Afghanistan, a traversable open world. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, dev. Kojima Productions (2015). ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

theories. Even more complicated is the asynchronous telling of the *Metal Gear* epic, which pinballs between the Cold War and the present within the core games *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (2004), *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (2008), and *Metal Gear Solid V*, which was released in two parts: *Ground Zeroes* (2014) and *The Phantom Pain*.[7]

While squarely a military-themed series, *Metal Gear Solid* does not conform to the more bombastic first- or third-person shooter model in which the objective is direct aggressive dominance over enemies who wage constant assault. There is certainly a fetishization of the super soldier and advanced technological warfare, as evidenced in the Metal Gear (futuristic, bipedal, nuclear-armed, walking) tank for which the series is named. But there is more emphasis on tactics, stealth, and planning—as well as some whimsical departures from the typical tactical adventure toolkit, such as the "Quick-Deployment Personal Concealment System" (a cardboard box) that the game character Snake may engage as a hiding place. Notably, the games also contain long and frequent cut scenes—nonplayable narrative interludes that advance their storylines. This deviates from the conventional military

7. An excellent summary of the tangled web of *Metal Gear Solid* appears in Derek Noon and Nick Dyer-Witheford, "Sneaking Mission: Late Imperial America and *Metal Gear Solid*," in *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Video Game Play*, ed. J. Talmadge Wright, David G. Embrick, and András Lukács (Lanham, Md., 2010), pp. 73–95.

shooter, for which long instances of suspended gameplay would generally be considered interruptive to the desired action.[8] Kojima is also known for his self-reflexive in-jokes that reveal his obsession with cinema, deeply satirical and irrational elements, and witty violations of expected game conventions such as the direct address of players. In their in-depth analysis, Derek Noon and Nick Dyer-Witheford deftly capture the generative contradictions at work in the *Metal Gear* series:

> What distinguishes *Metal Gear* from other action games is the way it articulates and amplifies the schizophrenias within warrior masculinity—the tensions between deadly craft and automated battlefield, between soldierly autonomy and the engineered subjectivity that battle space demands, between loyalty and the lying systems in whose service it is activated; and also, in its reflexive address of gaming practice, between the pleasure of virtual war play, and the horror of the system in which such play is implicated.[9]

While the game is an iconic tactical stealth-action adventure within a speculative fiction narrative, my analysis brings the space itself (rather than the hero or the action) to the fore. I show how the constructed landscape models a particular kind of relationship between player and the in-game space, which is in turn connected to the lived-world reality that informs it. Moreover, within the context of video games, I wish to explore W. J. T. Mitchell's query in relation to ideological constructions of land, from *Landscape and Power*, which "ask[s] not just what landscape 'is' or 'means' but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice." He explains:

> Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. Thus, landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which "we" (figured as "the figures" in the landscape) find—or lose—ourselves.[10]

8. See Rune Klevjer, "Cut-Scenes," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York, 2014), pp. 301–09.

9. Noon and Dyer-Witheford, "Sneaking Mission: Late Imperial America and *Metal Gear Solid*," p. 92.

10. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Introduction," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. Mitchell (Chicago, 2002), pp. 1, 2; hereafter abbreviated "I."

Mitchell's remarks regarding still imagery, in which landscape is constructed *as* a cultural medium—as opposed to merely rendering the thing-in-itself—takes on heightened significance when considering game space. As a *playable* space, it lends itself even more to what Mitchell refers to as "the 'dreamwork' of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance."[11] In games, particular kinds of fantasies are enacted within a fully realized simulation that purports to be given and inevitable, though it is not. And for third-person perspective games, the configuration of a playable character in the frame repeats the paradigmatic situation of the figure within the pictorial landscape, albeit a dynamic one in which we, too, lose and find ourselves. In games like *The Phantom Pain*, the contextualization of landscape becomes vital for what it *does*, in terms of understanding how setting (just as much as spectacular action) may drive meaning. Additionally, the "givenness" of the game's site as constructed landscape shapes relations to space that echo a set of ethical relations to the lived world.

That playable game spaces are thoroughly purposeful landscapes has already, in the beginnings of game studies, been key to the way they are discussed. Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire made a similar assertion about in-game environments:

> Game worlds are totally constructed environments. Everything there was put on the screen for a purpose—shaping the game play or contributing to the mood and atmosphere or encouraging performance, playfulness, competition or collaboration. If games tell stories, they do so by organizing spatial features. If games stage combat, then players learn to scan their environments for competitive advantages. Game designers create immersive worlds with embedded rules and relationships among objects that enable dynamic experiences.[12]

Jenkins and Squire refer to the literal construction of game space, to what has subsequently been thought of as world building. Here, it is important to emphasize that while game worlds are highly constructed and purposeful in their design, players sometimes engage with those built worlds in ways unintended by designers. Open-world games with their expanded affordances are especially disposed toward these unexpected opportuni-

11. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, p. 10; hereafter abbreviated "IL."

12. Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire, "The Art of Contested Spaces," in *Game On: The History and Culture of Videogames*, ed. Lucien King (London, 2002), p. 65.

ties, purposes and intentions. So, both elements are at work simultaneously; the space is a totally constructed environment with each element having embedded rules and relations, while those elements and their relations may also be innovatively repurposed by players.

While effective strategies for game-space development are key for immersive game play, open-world games also speak to the complexities of power in light of current social and cultural anxieties. The constructions of game landscapes are revelatory in this regard because they model systems of engagement that betray values, priorities, ethical positions, and biases. Though different from novels, films, songs, television shows, and plays, games similarly possess meanings that shift with cultural context, as well as the myriad subjectivities brought to their interpretation by user experience. In their highly influential *Game Cultures*, Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy remark on the centrality of cultural context for an understanding of how space functions in games: "Although games and play take place in their own time and space, this 'location' is intimately related to the wider cultural landscape. . . . It can be argued that we can only understand the game space through its relation to the non-game space."[13] The importance of understanding this situatedness of meaning within a culturally inflected time and space cannot be overstated. Dovey and Kennedy also make reference to the notion of a "cultural landscape," which implies not only literal space created within a game, but more importantly, its connective relations to the lived world. Likewise, McKenzie Wark in his *Gamer Theory* characterizes lived experience as ever more impossible to disentangle from the logics of a game space, writing:

> Whether gamespace is more real or not than some other world is not the question; that even in its unreality it may have real effects on other worlds *is*. Games are not representations of this world. They are more like allegories of a world made over as gamespace. They encode the abstract principles upon which decisions about the realness of this or that world are now decided.[14]

The important work of Wark, Dovey, and Kennedy constitutes a distinct intervention in games scholarship that gestures toward a critical cultural approach to games. Their work opens up potential, but with the increasing complexity of game representations, and technological capacities, this avenue of inquiry deserves greater expansion.

13. Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (New York, 2006), p. 28.

14. McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), p. [14].

Central for my overall approach is Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire*, which is extremely useful for thinking about the tension that the serious study of games faces within disciplines like visual studies. Operating from the assumption that video games are global media culture, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's writing examines video games' political, cultural, and economic force, as well as their potential. Their analysis springs from the interventions of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who use the term *empire* to name the "emergence of a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military and communicative components combine to create a system of power 'with no outside.'"[15] Importantly, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter make a strongly contextual critique of games as sited within, and reproducing, a dominant social order. While it is not my intention to specifically focus on a post-Marxist critique of games, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's groundbreaking work has been an influence in terms of understanding games within the context of global capitalism and the turn toward neoliberal economic values. If, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter effectively argue, video games are the product of Western empire, then the degree to which visual and critical studies persist in neglecting them as a serious object of study and site of urgent critical intervention seems odd.

This essay, then, invites the reader to ponder the multiplicity of the term *landscape* in relation to the world building that is manifested in games, larger cultural landscapes, and the connectedness between these possible spaces. As a part of a larger project of modeling how cultural analysis of the image can be generatively brought to game studies, I read *The Phantom Pain* for meanings conveyed through its playable landscapes. Bringing together game studies and theorizations of landscape representation, this writing enacts a critical framework for understanding how video games as visual culture always make a set of claims about land, space, and place.

### *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*

*The Phantom Pain* begins in 1984, in a remote hospital in Cyprus.[16] The story finds the once-great hero Snake (also known as Big Boss or Boss) compromised. He has recently awoken from a nine-year coma; he is highly traumatized, disoriented, his body riddled with shrapnel and scars. He has

15. Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis, 2009), p. xix. See also Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

16. For this and subsequent references to *The Phantom Pain*, see *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, dev. Kojima Productions (2015).

lost one eye and his left hand has been amputated. The legendary character is clearly past his prime. In his weakened condition, he is far from battle ready; he is initially only able to crawl, using his elbows to drag his atrophied body.

In the beginning of the game, Snake wears only a pair of scrubs. The player must control him as, without a weapon or even shoes, he navigates a besieged hospital with the aid of a mysterious guide. After traversing a maze of corridor-based engagements with human enemies and the destructive supernatural entities that pursue him, he (and the player) are confronted with a grand landscape, a steep and sweeping expanse of hills and valleys. Snake is rescued, patched up, outfitted with a bionic hand, and departs for Afghanistan to rejoin the private mercenary network of prior *Metal Gear Solid* games (fig. 2). The player completes a series of missions in order to build and grow the mercenary group the Diamond Dogs and their stronghold, which was destroyed in a previous game. The narrative and gameplay that follow contain elements of horror and fantasy in addition to more typical conventions of the tactical-military genre such as missions, strategy, stealth, increasingly spectacular weapons, combat, scavenging, and navigation.

Space in *The Phantom Pain* is defined by its cinematics and naturalistic physics; the game's scenery is marked by impressive technological feats that allow for free traversal of the terrain and offer myriad opportunities for small and large engagements in a highly articulated photorealistic en-

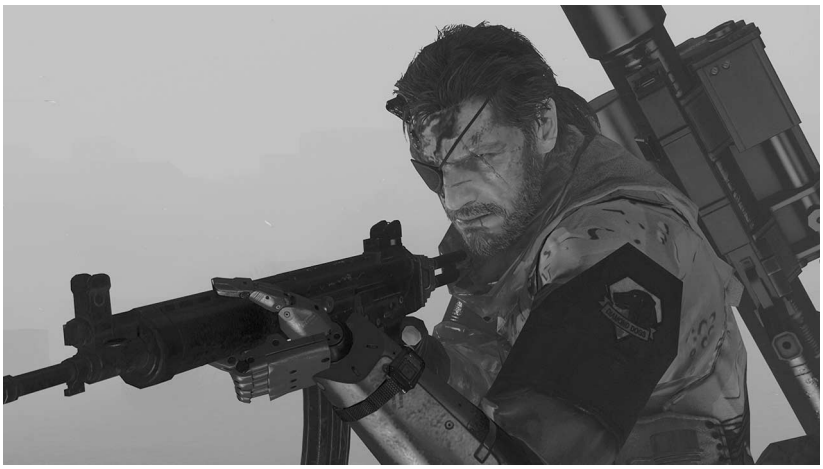

FIGURE 2. Snake the mercenary. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.* ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

vironment. In the early stages of gameplay, one can run, charge, duck and cover, climb, dive, and use an array of weaponry as well as engaging in hand-to-hand combat. An instructive voice-over suggests that it is up to the player to decide whether to handle missions with stealth or aggression, but it is quickly apparent that a combination of these will produce the best results. As the player spots good places to hide or stash downed enemies, observes the passage of time in terms of most opportune moments to launch a mission, and uses the harsh weather—namely, sandstorms—as cover from the enemy, the natural and built elements of the game space become critical. Snake's first mission is to conduct reconnaissance and use the resulting intel to rescue an old ally being held in Soviet-controlled Afghanistan. This mission is set in a mountainous, craggy landscape that is dry and harsh, with ruins dotting the landscape and brushy valley regions. One engages with the space from a third-person perspective with occasional first-person perspective when necessary for gameplay. The action is seen from a floating-camera-eye perspective, mostly above and behind the player character's figure. Particles of dust, droplets of water, and Snake's blood when he is injured all gather on that window, providing the sense of being in an action *film* (a mediated experience) as opposed to being immersed in the action-adventure itself.[17] The aural components of the game confirm this, as one can hear a rustling noise that imitates wind resistance against a microphone when running or on horseback, suggesting *mediated* sound. Each mission or episode has its own title sequence, another reference to cinema. The figure-ground relations are such that the playable character is usually fairly small and dead center in the image, which in filmic terms might convey a sense of entrapment or diminutive relation to the land. However, the practical function of this is that the player may see the character being controlled, as well as roughly 180 degrees of the surrounding space (fig. 3).

In episode 3, "A Hero's Way," Snake's mission is to capture or eliminate a Soviet Spetsnaz Commander known for his brutal scorched-earth campaigns against guerillas in the region, particularly the mujahideen. Once deployed, Snake must cover a great deal of ground in order to reach the zone in which his target may be found. The lengthy duration of traversing the space and the changing light across the environment provides indexical reference to the passing of time and a sense of distance. The land is immediately striking for its specific type of terrain: arid, brush covered, severe. Using the advantages of the ruins dotting the area, the high ground for re-

17. See Will Brooker, "Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the 'Cinematic,'" *Cinema Journal* 48 (Spring 2009): 126.

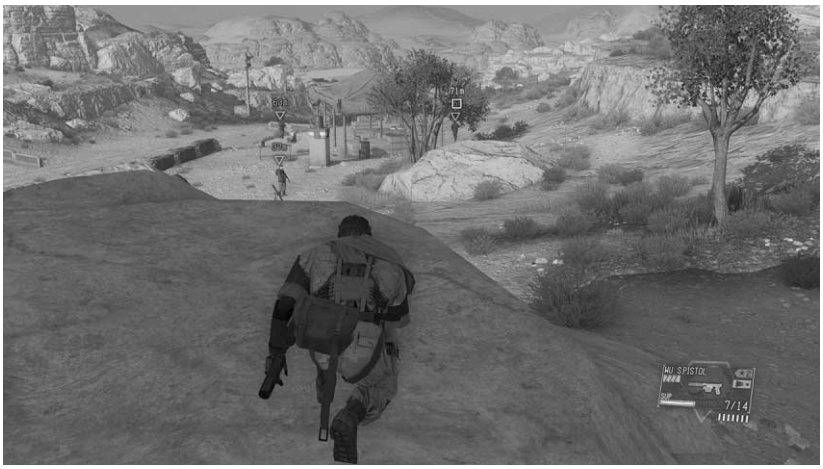


FIGURE 3. Snake surveils. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.* ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

mote visual identification of foes, as well as the cover of night, this game configures the land strongly in terms of its use value for the completion of objectives. The space is, however, startlingly devoid of local people, eliminating the possibility of friendly fire or collateral damage. The land yields resources like medicinal plants and raw diamonds but is just as easily a site of unexpected danger, such as animal attacks or passing Soviet trucks filled with enemy soldiers. Interior spaces similarly contain details that lend a certain texture and authenticity to a notion of militarized Afghanistan as it has been represented in the news media.

Scavenging leads to the discovery of useful intel as well as objects that can help reconstruct and fund home base or Mother Base, a repurposed oil rig in the Seychelles (fig. 4). This remote site, accessible by helicopter, presents a starkly different environment that consists of the rig jutting from an azure, oceanic horizon seemingly at a remove from any shore. It is as sun-drenched as Afghanistan in the day but with a completely separate visual texture and quality of space: it is technicolor instead of beige, definitively industrial. The megaconstruction (whose color is initially orange but is ultimately customizable) is a stark contrast to the desert and, though militarized and severe, offers a welcome reprieve filled with comrades who venerate Snake as Big Boss. Exploration of its spaces reveals all manner of useful supplies as well as providing remote support and upgrades while in the field. The detail is painstaking, enlivened, and offers a great variety of possible interactions.

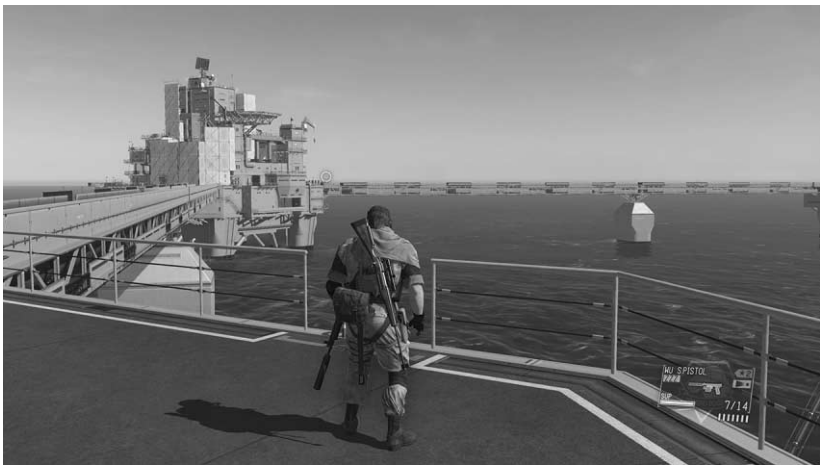


FIGURE 4. Mother Base. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

The various simulated landscapes of *The Phantom Pain* give the appearance of a more immersive or "real" experience.[18] In relation to his discussion of another military-themed game, *Spec Ops: The Line*, Matthew Payne has indicated that this idea of the real in games is a slippery proposition at best because naturalistic imaging is falsely confused with authenticity and realism:

> Realism—understood as a set of claims about the world—is not necessarily synonymous with verisimilitude, or a media technology's ability to re-present worldly sights and sounds. And yet, the entertainment industry purposefully conflates the war game's ability to render photorealistic graphics and surround sound with broader notions of experiential realism.[19]

In this critique of militainment, Payne contends that the photorealism of the imagery and immersive aural elements of these games provide a formal fidelity, while often eliding larger and much more problematic realities of war that tend to be far less cinematic. *The Phantom Pain* lapses into moments of fantasy and horror so exaggerated as to be impossible to conflate

18. For an excellent overview of realism in games, both fidelity to naturalism (aesthetics), and congruence with the lived world (functional realism), see Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, "Realism, Spectacle, Sensation," in *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (New York, 2006), pp. 124–67.

19. Matthew Payne, "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31 (Oct. 2004): 267.

with the real. It evokes certain spaces but does not replicate them. Its affective qualities of space, place, and mood invoke an impersonal mechanical vision, even as it elaborately stages the irrational and psychological. The experience of moving through *The Phantom Pain*'s Afghanistan is not faithful to the actual Afghanistan. But what concerns me here is how the highly mediated space of the game simulates particular ideas about a lived place while it traffics in ideology—and does so as an extension of power.

For example, throughout the game, spaces are visually treated as uninhabited, except by occupying Soviet soldiers. In the clusters of buildings and rundown mazelike villages through which one engages in semiurban warfare, the depiction of these spaces implies that they no longer contain Afghanis engaged in their everyday lives. These locations have been taken over by the Soviets and are now outposts for the enemy. The treatment suggests a very instrumental approach to the gamescape in which the elements primary to gameplay are highlighted and inessential ones are omitted. This is significant because it eliminates ugly complications that may arise from the presence of noncombatants and displaces the sense that civilians are routinely injured and killed as a byproduct of such military engagements in the lived world. A result of this approach within the game is the simulation of a likeminded instrumentality in relation to its lived counterpart. And, while the site of the game is treated as politically nonparticular in its representation, in fact Afghanistan in the 1980s is highly culturally loaded for the United States. The excessive repetition of the game's episodes (mostly: creep into enemy territory, stealthily abduct a human asset, return to base) takes place in a site that has strong current political and cultural resonance for the US with national traumatic dimensions. The impulse toward reenactment is not without critical significance and is tied specifically to the landscape in which it occurs.

That *The Phantom Pain* is a Japanese video game does not lessen the reality of its complex engagement with American anxieties and the forms of critique taking place. What potential criticisms of US dominion over space may be built into a simulated scenario of Snake in his initial setting of 1980s Afghanistan? Snake is a normatively rugged white male hero, an American-born private military contractor who operates beyond nation-states. He is set against a backdrop in which Soviets are constructed as adversaries, and as will become clear, his role would generally conform to a US-aligned position. Given the fraught relationship between Japan and the United-States in modern history, the Americanness and Japaneseness of the game's themes become very complicated.

In fact, significant argument has been made that the superficially Americanized aspects of Japanese-produced video games sometimes belie deeply

nationalist concerns. For example, scholars such as Paul Martin have drawn on the postwar history of Japan as a means of contextualizing the Japanese social imaginary around the nation's fractured sense of itself in the wake of World War II.[20] Its Allied-forces-penned Constitution of Japan imposed, among other things, democratic reform and notably renounced Japan's right as a sovereign nation to wage war. In a postcolonial analysis of *Resident Evil 5* (2009) as a transcultural text, Martin engages the fact that the game appears Western in its racial and colonial themes. Yet, under the surface, the video game refers to Japan's colonial past and its sense of national sovereignty in the wake of World War II. Martin identifies how, under the surface, a black/white binary representation such as the one presented in the African-based zombie apocalypse narrative of *Resident Evil 5* can mobilize a notion of "strategic hybridism" (via noted Japanese media and cultural studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi's concept) or "the supposed essential Japanese ability to take in, adapt, and control foreign cultural influences."[21] In this, the game can open up a perceptive dialogue that accounts for a deep Japanese intracultural struggle for recognition that may not be self-evident on the more superficial levels of the video game's evident representations.

Many mainstream games like the *Metal Gear Solid* and *GTA* series appeal overtly to the representational logics of an American audience, likely due to the global popularity and cultural cache of American film. *Metal Gear Solid* creator/director Kojima's self-described fascination with American movies is apparent in his video games and is featured in his public facing profile on social media, such as his official Twitter page.[22] During an interview at the Tribeca Games Festival, the director even described how Snake's iconic bandana is a reference to the one worn by Michael (played by Robert De Niro) in *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1978).[23] Rockstar Games's *GTA* franchise offers jaded renderings of fictionalized American cities—stereotyped versions of places like Los Angeles, Miami, and New York. But it is important to remember that the cofounders of Rockstar, brothers Sam and Dan Houser, are English and highly influenced by

20. See Paul Martin, "Race, Colonial History and National Identity: *Resident Evil 5* as a Japanese Game," *Games and Culture* 13 (Sept. 2018): 1–19.

21. Martin, "Race, Colonial History and National Identity," p. 4.

22. Hideo Kojima, "HIDEO_KOJIMA (@HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN)," Twitter, twitter.com/HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN. Here, he describes himself as "Game Creator: 70% of my body is made of movies."

23. Hideo Kojima and Geoff Keighley, "Tribeca Games Festival Keynote with Geoff Keighley," YouTube, 29 Apr. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=939&v=lrJSmijNf7I

filmic representations of American crime stories.[24] Their Rockstar Games offices are dispersed across numerous locations worldwide. As I have argued elsewhere, their visions are deeply critical and satirical of American culture.[25] Likewise, it is possible to read *The Phantom Pain* as Japanese, while simultaneously accepting the inextricably tangled nature of Japan/US relations and the game's engagement with American historical traumas. As with *GTA*, it is hard not to see the stinging critique present in *The Phantom Pain*, even while it may also mobilize strategic hybridism. In a political and historical reality in which the Soviet-Afghan conflict has proven pivotal to the current post-9/11 moment, it is no accident that this charged site was selected as a major gamescape for *The Phantom Pain*—a point to which I will return.

## Game Spaces and World Building: Formalism

Scholars of digital media in general and game studies in particular have engaged with notions of space from the moment gaming technology permitted even the most rudimentary spatial representations. Much early writing has been organized around defining what makes games formally distinctive from other media. Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* foregrounds the ability to render navigable space as a key asset of digital media.[26] Lev Manovich has identified eminently traversable space as a "key form" of new media.[27] In the same year as Manovich, Espen Aarseth declared: "The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent—or, perhaps, *implement*—space."[28] Henry Jenkins has argued for "an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects."[29]

24. See inputoooo, "Massive New Dan Houser interview," *Grand Theft Auto IV*—Message Board, gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/933037-grand-theft-auto-iv/42696636. This interview of Dan Houser by Chris Morris was originally published on the *Variety* blog, 19 Apr. 2008. Also see Dan Houser, "Dan Houser Interview: Rockstar Games's Writer for *GTA 4* and *The Lost And Damned*," interview by Nick Cowen, *The Telegraph*, 29 Jan. 2009, www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/4373632/Dan-Houser-interview-Rockstar-Gamess-writer-for-GTA-4-and-The-Lost-And-Damned.html

25. See Murray, "High Art/Low Life."

26. See Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York, 1997), esp. pp. 79–83.

27. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), p. 252.

28. Espen Aarseth, "Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games," in *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, ed. Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa (Jyväskylä, 2001), p. 154.

29. Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p. 121; hereafter abbreviated "GD."

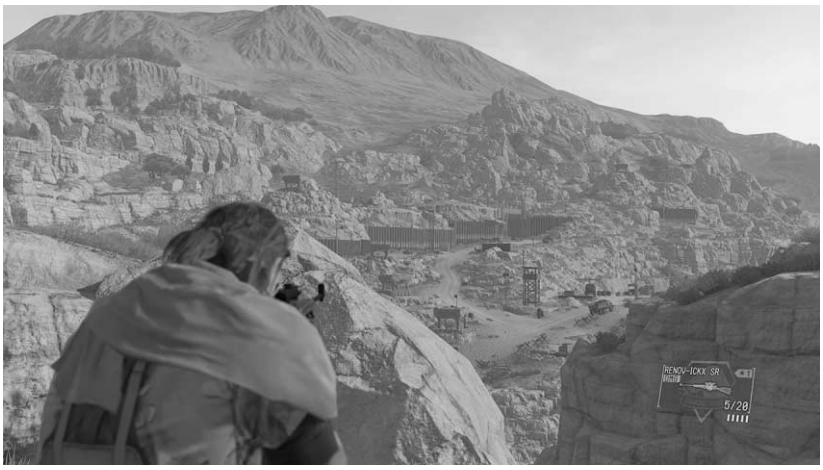


FIGURE 5. Observing from a distance. Snake in the foreground is blurred, while the focal point at a distance is sharp, emulating a conventional lens. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

In his "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Jenkins describes game consoles as "machines for generating compelling spaces" and in earlier writings has even gone so far as to suggest that these simulated spaces compensate for disappearing lived-world territories of play ("GD," p. 122).[30] These spatial stories, Jenkins argues early on, are "pushed forward by the character's movement across the map" and telling these stories well becomes about "designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution" ("GD," pp. 124, 125).

If we consider the kinds of mediated "seeing" that are possible in *The Phantom Pain*, we see that one's understanding of space is directly related to how the virtual camera is made to image a particular moment in the visual representation of the game, which in turn is tied to the presumption of a preexisting filmic visual literacy in the player/viewer.[31] Specific camera angles may evoke particular known filmic and televisual genres, or expressive cues (fig. 5). Additionally, elements such as directional sound and a sophisticated

30. See Jenkins, "'Complete Freedom of Movement': Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces," in *From Barbie to "Mortal Kombat": Gender and Computer Games*, ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), pp. 262–97, and Jenkins and Squire, "The Art of Contested Spaces."

31. The notion of the in-game camera as fundamentally mediating engagement with game space is discussed in Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), p. 182.

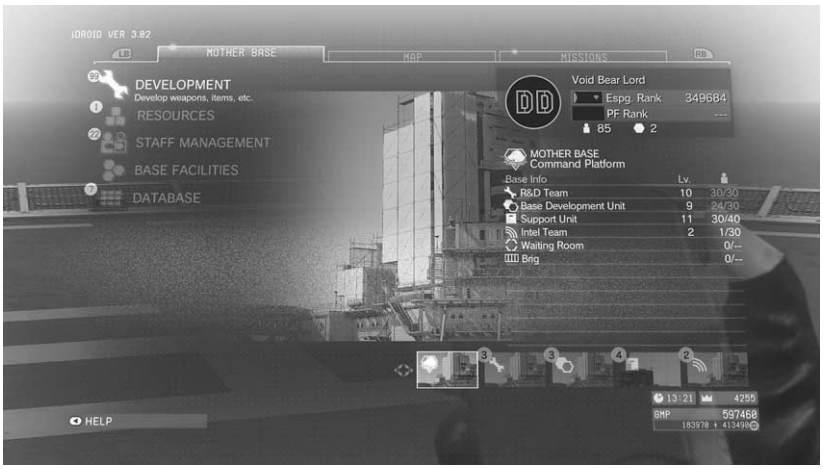


FIGURE 6. Snake's iDroid Device. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.* ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

aural environment contribute to the rendering of a convincing sense of spatial experience. Nondiegetic sound like background music may alert the player to pending danger, indicate that a combatant is near, or simply provide atmosphere or emotional affect. In other words, these elements in combination help to relate a sense of being there or of sustained presence within the environment.

The game objectives configure a relation in which the player is persistently placed in a bureaucratic orientation of management and collection that becomes part of the culture imparted through engagement with the game.[32] One of the major ways in which players may engage with *The Phantom Pain*'s space is through the collection of potential resources like ammunition, intel, manpower, and raw materials for use at Mother Base. While completing missions like this, one accesses the heads-up display on the player's screen that allows for the marking of enemies and locations, commands, alternative screens that image relevant maps on the in-game iDroid smart device, menus of available weapons for selection, active weapon status, crosshairs for particular weapons, measures of relative distance, and mission updates (fig. 6). This is just some of the information overlaid onto the in-game visual space. As with many military-style action stealth games, *The Phantom Pain* offers a tremendous amount of information that a player

32. This rationalizing, managerial bureaucratic mode is excellently discussed in Paolo Pedercini, "Videogames and the Spirit of Capitalism," Molleindustria, 14 Feb. 2014, www.molleindustria.org/blog/videogames-and-the-spirit-of-capitalism/

must constantly absorb and negotiate in order to succeed. In addition, development of Mother Base and persistent management of its resources are a constant background consideration during missions. Effective management results in additional resources in the field, such as the ability to conduct remote strikes on a marked target.

On the iDroid, layers of menus and submenus drive management of one's resources. For example, in the management of Mother Base, one sees under that tab on the iDroid screen options: "customize, development, resources, staff management, base facilities" (for construction and expansion of the base) and a database. Choosing Base Facilities, a submenu appears with different aspects of the Mother Base Command Platform, which provides information for your combat units, research and development teams, the base development unit, support unit, intel team, medical team, waiting room, sickbay, and a brig. Many of these can in turn be managed. In separate tabs one can look at a map of the immediate gameplay territory or select from unlocked missions. The highly individuated levels of selection suggest extreme personalization and asset micromanagement to the point of absurdity. All of these aspects are elements that make up the multilayered space of the game and contribute to its bureaucratic orientation.

As a franchise, *Metal Gear Solid* represents sophisticated and coherent world building that has allowed the brand to thrive for more than a quarter of a century.[33] In this regard, it can be thought of as highly accessible, simulated, and convincing in its consistency across numerous titles. Wolf, who has written extensively on game worlds and how effective world building occurs across many forms, contends that playable spaces themselves demand critical attention. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds* connects the spaces of games to the development of other kinds of world building, such as can be found in literature, tabletop games, dollhouse play, building sets, role-playing games, and the like, as well as in text-based adventures and graphical adventure games.[34] He groups these disparate but—according to him—connected phenomena under what he calls the "imaginary world tradition," suggesting that what players of games experience in the simulated

33. See Wolf, "Building Imaginary Worlds: An Interview with Mark J. P. Wolf (Part Three)," interview by Jenkins, Confessions of an Aca-Fan, 6 Sept. 2013, henryjenkins.org/2013/09/building-imaginary-worlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-three.html

34. See Wolf, "Worlds," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Wolf and Perron (New York, 2014), p. 126 and *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York, 2012). For an excellent additional explanation of world building, see Wolf, "Building Imaginary Worlds: An Interview with Mark J. P. Wolf (Part One)," interview by Jenkins, Confessions of an Aca-Fan, 2 Sept. 2013, henryjenkins.org/2013/09/building-imaginary-sworlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-one.html and "Space in the Video Game," in *The Medium of the Video Game*, ed. Wolf (Austin, Tex., 2001), pp. 52–75.

spaces of playable media finds its precedent in thousands of years of human storytelling and play:

> The notion that "things could have been otherwise than what they are" is the idea behind the philosophy of possible worlds, a branch of philosophy designed for problem-solving in formal semantics, that considers possibilities, imaginary objects, their ontological status, and the relationship between fictional worlds and the actual world.[35]

Conceptualizing mainstream games like *The Phantom Pain* in relation to a philosophical exercise that mobilizes "possible worlds" suggests a melancholic or wishful reenactment of problem solving within allegorical spaces, especially when they are connected to lived national traumas. Wolf suggests that by better understanding these "secondary worlds" we may gain insight into our own "primary world."[36] This insight gestures toward a well-understood "given" from the perspective of visual and critical studies. Namely that which affectively pricks the emotion of a viewer/player issues from mastery of form but surely also from cultural resonances.

For example, the actual world comes crashing into *The Phantom Pain* through its setting in Afghanistan, which has overdetermined signification for a present-day US audience. *The Phantom Pain* is set in 1984, during the historical moment now known as the Soviet Union's Vietnam War—named so because of the Red Army's unsuccessful ten-year attempted invasion of Afghanistan and the sense that this conflict contributed directly to the erosion of the Soviet Union's power.[37] During this clash, the Soviet Union engaged in a war against the mujahideen, sending upwards of 118,000 Russian troops to the region by the time at which the game commences.[38] The United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan collaborated in the funding and training of the mujahideen, who were successful in forcing a Soviet retreat by 1989. In the wake of the actual conflict, the political and religious Taliban movement arose from within the mujahideen. And it is the Taliban who later

35. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, p. 17.

36. Ibid., p. 15.

37. See Richard Cohen, "The Soviets' Vietnam," *The Washington Post*, 22 Apr. 1988, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1988/04/22/the-soviets-vietnam/5e7fde43-6a0c-46fb-b678-dbb89bcb720b/; "Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Vietnam," *Al Jazeera*, 23 Apr. 2003, www.aljazeera.com/archive/2003/04/20084101138424207 60.html; "The Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan," *PBS NewsHour*, 10 Oct. 2006, www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/asia-july-dec06-soviet_10-10/; and Neda Atanasoski, "Restoring National Faith: The Soviet-Afghan War in U.S. Media and Politics," *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity* (Minneapolis, 2013), pp. 102–27 (hereafter abbreviated *HV*).

38. See "Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Vietnam."

harbored al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, who claimed a direct link to the 11 September 2001 World Trade Center attacks.

While the audience for this game may know little of the specifics of the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–1989 described above, the more recent 2001–2014 US-led war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom—Afghanistan) that came in response to the 9/11 attacks was an unprecedented mediatized event and remains a raw national trauma.[39] Although there are some instances of chronological inconsistency within the game, there are specific references to key US interventions. For example, in one episode, Snake is tasked with recovering a weapon called a Honey Bee from hostile forces: a tactical ground-to-air missile launcher. The shape and size of the fictive weapon meaningfully resembles the actual handheld Stinger antiaircraft missiles that the United States is known to have provided to the mujahideen and that were decisively effective against Soviet planes and helicopters.[40] The choice of this particular historically-laden detail in the game is certainly self-conscious on the part of designer Kojima, intended to agitate cultural imagination and national feeling about a particular place. Truly, in consideration of game spaces, formal concerns quickly become inextricable from the cultural dimensions of world building.

## Studying Game Space in a Cultural Context

While game spaces—like video games in general—are vastly understudied from a critical cultural perspective, some groundwork has been laid. In one exemplary analysis, Jenkins and Mary Fuller make implicit connections between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century New World travel narratives and the organization of game space.[41] Addressing what they call the spatial logic and cognitive mapping of games as digital spaces, Fuller and Jenkins deconstruct the language around space and the framing of game worlds within the logic of "heroic metaphors of discovery." The coauthors argue that the rhetoric around computer software and innovation reproduces similar colonial paradigms and frontier ideologies, producing a vision in which "virtual reality opens new spaces for exploration, colonization, and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were

39. Communications scholars Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright have characterized the spectacular nature of the event itself and its subsequent perpetual news media representation in the aftermath; see Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York, 2009), pp. 252–55.

40. See "Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Vietnam."

41. See James Newman, *Videogames* (New York, 2013), pp. 109–10.

worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining."[42] *The Phantom Pain* encourages a particular set of relations to the land. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska analyze the mobilization of linear perspective and its connectedness to the player character, in terms of the action of the game and the "impression of a world that is centred on, and revolves around, the position of the player and/or the player-character."[43] *The Phantom Pain* conforms to this principle; the virtual camera generally floats behind and slightly above the player character, and the space depicted is most frequently that which would be in front of the character. With Snake placed in the middle of a space organized around a Cartesian logic, the player that controls him operates within a highly curated manipulation of rational perspective. The player is in turn absorbed into this perspective, located and instantiated within this logic.[44] In a presentation on the relationship between the language of the garden and the space of nature in video games, Eugénie Shinkle identifies how world building in games is shaped to communicate and guide through the strategic use of positive and negative space and cues that signal openness and blockage within the space. This importantly identifies the design of the space respective to the tendencies of the player to respond to it in particular kinds of ways. But these cues, which are initially formal elements, give rise to more complex cultural logics. As Shinkle argues, these are communicated through a discourse of landscape:

> Like the perspectival foundation on which it is constructed, landscape representation is a paradigmatic form; a means of inscribing deeply-held cultural attitudes into an apparently neutral space of representation. Viewing a landscape is, of course, not a natural way of seeing, but a visual habit that transforms experience. And landscapes, in turn, are not simply representations of particular states of nature, but created contexts within which politics and ideology take shape. The discourse of landscape—its definition, its conventions, its history—authorizes a specific cultural vision of nature, and its

42. Mary Fuller and Jenkins, "Nintendo® and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue," in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1995), pp. 59, 58.

43. King and Krzywinska, "Gamescapes: Exploration and Virtual Presence in Game-Worlds," in *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, p. 101.

44. See Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," in *E-Flux Journal* 24 (Apr. 2011), www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/. Steyerl writes: "linear perspective also performs an ambivalent operation concerning the viewer. As the whole paradigm converges in one of the viewer's eyes, the viewer becomes central to the worldview established by it. The viewer is mirrored in the vanishing point, and thus constructed by it. The vanishing point gives the observer a body and a position."

> political potency is, in part, a function of its ability to naturalize this vision, to conceal deeply rooted cultural sensibilities behind a screen of benign realism.[45]

She applies this logic to the landscapes of games, which in turn become spaces that borrow from the preexisting discourse of landscape. Within these highly concentrated ideological sites, which are often taken to be realistic representations, players enact relations to the world. But this "screen of benign realism" that Shinkle identifies constricts the potential range of activities and engagements with space to relations like domination, penetration, goal orientation, and control.

Calling video games a form of "landscape representation that communicates ideas about how the world is and how it should be," Michael W. Longan looks to the simulated terrains as mirroring aspects of the lived world. His represents one of few analyses of the relationship between landscape and game space and takes as its task an understanding of games as tools for learning about the lived world. Longan states that games potentially reveal the "often hidden social processes behind the production of real world landscapes"; he calls attention to the scholarship around landscape based in visual studies that takes for granted the already mediated, ideological nature of representing space.[46] Longan argues both for an understanding of games as containing deeply moral considerations embedded in the very instantiation of their landscapes and for a need to develop more sophisticated understandings of those representations.[47]

While formal questions of building a better game space or convincingly rendering a world are key to successful game development, games are also examples of visual culture. Although separate from other media forms, games do call upon preexisting literacies and traffic in more than the spectacularly technological. Development of some of the most sophisticated games in both the mainstream and alternative or indie contexts display a nuanced relationship between the environment created and the affective relations to the player, between the concerns of the actual world and the in-game space. As King and Krzywinska and Longan argue, this research

45. Eugénie Shinkle, "Gameworlds and Digital Gardens: Landscape and the Space of Nature in Digital Games," unpublished paper presented at World Building: Third Annual UF Games and Digital Media Conference, University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla., 1 Mar. 2007.

46. See Michael W. Longan, "Playing With Landscape: Social Process and Spatial Form in Video Games," *Aether* 2 (Apr. 2008): 23, 24–25.

47. Longan especially references Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison, Wisc., 1998) and *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, ed. Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (New York, 2000).

underscores the entangled relations between the lived world and the game world. Truly, the rule-based worlds of games are landscapes that model value systems and ethical considerations not only on the level of action but within the gamescape itself. As a means to better understand landscape as a cultural construction rather than an objective vision, and the embedding of value systems and rhetorical elements within manifestations of space in image-making practices, the next section explores landscape representation and cultural power from a visual-studies perspective.

**Theorizing Game Space as Ideological Landscape**

In the discourse of landscape representation, scholars such as Kenneth Clark, Denis Cosgrove, Malcolm Andrews, John Barrell, Ann Bermingham, Jay Appleton, and others have made major contributions to understanding the power of these visual texts to shape and galvanize social, cultural, political, and even ideological perspectives.[48] For the purposes of this analysis, Mitchell's work on imperial landscape is insightful, particularly his consideration of the "secondary representation" and the "predatory" gaze upon a place ("IL," p. 10). He describes how representations of the land in Western imaging practices as they emerged in the seventeenth century were specifically connected to social engineering around imperialist expansion into the West.[49] This is particularly useful for thinking about gamic representations, since his theorization both points to notions of mediation and instrumentality in landscape (that seem to accompany game spaces) and also accounts for the centrality of the experiential in formulating a sense of space.

Calling upon a history of scholarship on the development of landscape painting and its penchant for particular kinds of representations, Mitchell asserts these images are always already "secondary representations" ("IL," p. 14). That is, nature is itself mediated by cultural constructions around its meaning before it undergoes a secondary transformation in the process of representation. Drawing from a history of scholarship around landscape representation that includes the work of Appleton, Bermingham, and Clark among others, Mitchell explains that landscapes are central to the con-

48. See Kenneth Clark, *Landscape Into Art* (New York, 1976); Cosgrove and Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape*; Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (New York, 1999); John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840* (New York, 1983); Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley, 1989); Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (New York, 1975).

49. When I say social engineering, I am referring to it in the sense of political science (meaning, the use of mass culture to influence social attitudes), not of computer security and hacking.

struction of particular ideologies about the land, nation, and social identities that shore up the functionings of cultural power (see "I," p. x).[50] Key to Mitchell's analysis is his understanding of "place," "space," and "landscape," which he defines as a "specific location," a "practiced place," and a "site encountered as an image or 'sight,'" respectively ("I," p. x).[51] Like Mitchell, I presume the notion that these three concepts operate in tandem; as Mitchell puts it, they dictate "a process of thinking space/place/landscape as a unified problem and a dialectical process ("I," p. xi)."

Mitchell never specifically identifies video games as a medium of expression, but his concept of "secondary representations"—as necessarily formulated cultural constructions by virtue of having remediated already mediated natural occurrences—is especially germane in relation to playable media. This is because of the nature of games as utterly constructed, both on the level of literally "simulat[ing]" a sense of space and place and because they are the secondary manifestation of code, which is technical but also necessarily cultural.[52] Likewise, in relation to games, "landscape is best understood as a medium of cultural expression," and representations of that landscape (in this case, gamescape) reveal "ways of seeing landscape, but as a representation of something that is already a representation in its own right" ("IL," p. 14). They have at several points in their process of production already been mediated through multiple layers of cultural intervention. The visual power of so-called photographic realism in games may obscure this, and their technical frameworks may naturally invite formal approaches. However, it is vital to hold in mind the concept of video games as at least second-order representational formulations. This is one of the ways in which games are quite literally culture—that is to say, they are necessarily formulated cultural constructions.[53] This is evidenced in

50. See also Appleton, *Experience of Landscape*; Clark, *Landscape Into Art*; and Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*.

51. While I will not rehearse the full body of literature here, Mitchell's terms are connected to a larger discourse on constructions of space and place, including key texts like Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, 2011); Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York, 2011); and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977). I do not claim the constructions of space and place are consistent across these texts and find Mitchell's particularly useful for the current purposes.

52. In mention of the technical system of code that is also a cultural system, I am making reference to D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), p. 345. Harrell, while not the originator of the idea that technical systems are cultural systems, has in this text written the most sustained engagement with this subject as it directly relates to video games.

53. This is a central argument of Murray, *On Video Games*.

their landscapes, and so it is possible to look to in-game landscapes themselves for insight into the cultures in which they originate.

Most importantly, Mitchell ties the gaze upon the land, via Appleton, to "the eye of a predator who scans the landscape as a strategic field, a network of prospects, refuges, and hazards"—a mode of looking that is eerily concomitant with the opportunistic eye of the shrewd player ("IL," p. 16). These definitions and concepts are a useful means of thinking through a paradigmatic example of an immersive game space that presents itself as aesthetic, but that must be carefully observed and understood affectively in terms of what Mitchell calls the "violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye" ("IL," p. 29). Within *The Phantom Pain* itself, there are specific and elaborate ways of looking at the landscape; one is always scanning for prospects. One is able to observe the enemy from a distance via in-game binoculars. Seeing them through this technologized vision (which is a doubling again of a view of a simulated space through the enhancement of simulated binocular vision) permits the identification of enemy soldiers and then the marking of combatants with a red triangle. Once classified as enemies, soldiers with markers can always be seen and their distance from the player is noted numerically in meters. In short, they no longer possess the element of surprise, a key advantage for the player during engagement. Significant objects of interest are noted as well, and observation of the space often reveals additional intel through remote communications that will provide clues to the player about their mission and best strategy.

Within this scenario, observation carries with it a kind of dominion; it is opportunistic. Seeing, while no guarantor of success, maps territory and hostiles as well as key targets. Scavenging for intel may become as (or even more) important than the hunt for objects, and it begins to take on bureaucratic dimensions when elaborate schemas of collection of information and resources (like raw diamonds, processed materials, fuel, medicinal plants, specialists in bionics, and translation) directly allow for Mother Base to be expanded and the main character's abilities to be enhanced. Gameplay even allows for micromanagement of Mother Base's resources and redistribution of individual recruits, per their special abilities. Under categorical types of engagement with Mother Base such as development, resources, staff management, base facilities, and database, a player enhances their functionality in the field through the strategic use of resources. Eventually, one's income to the base is enhanced through various indirect means, such as the establishment of a "Merc Deployment Unit Function," which allows the player to dispatch mercenaries to other conflict zones for profit. Managing and allocating all these hoarded resources can begin to feel like work. This complex need to multitask and simultaneously understand the game

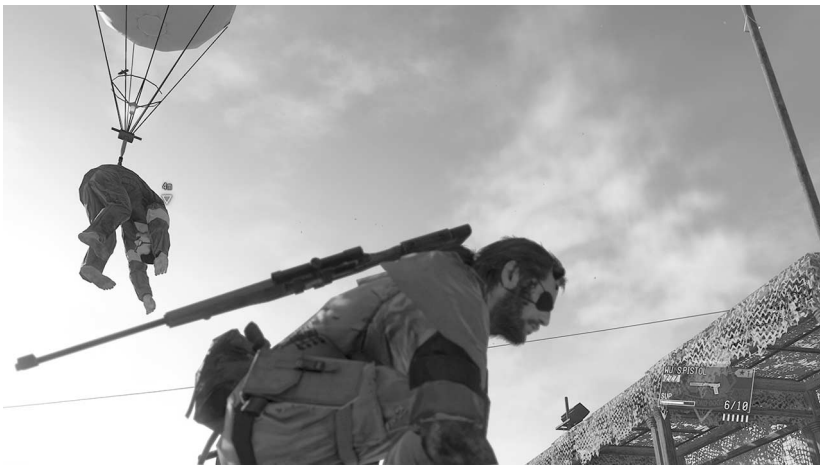


FIGURE 7. Snake activates Fulton Recovery Device. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.* Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

through various visual references (on the ground during active play, through the iDroid screen that presents a map and multiple tabs and pull-down menus for the activation and administration of various resources and via the binocular view) presents a quintessential twenty-first-century multiplex management strategy. In their overview of how values are communicated through games, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum effectively argue that even these seemingly neutral diagrams contain values and politics.[54] In relation to the simulated Afghan landscape, a map becomes a complex representation of potential objectives and notions of progress.

In *The Phantom Pain* the landscape as an already mediated site of the game further undergoes a second mediation of playable engagement, which allows the experience to come into being. The experience is activated in particular ways and encourages seeing the landscape from a particular perspective. For example, as I have previously described, one's relation to the game space is largely tied to the impulse toward collection. This is evidenced in a core game mechanic that uses a Fulton Recovery Device—a balloon apparatus to which one may harness collected assets like animals, objects, and tranquilized enemies (fig. 7). Once attached, it quickly inflates and then spirits the package back to Mother Base. One cannot set aside the cheeky humor of seeing a befuddled, partially tranquilized enemy or wild animal dangling from the harness and yelping with confusion as

54. See Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014), pp. 68–69.

they are harmlessly yanked straight up into the sky and out of the frame. This has a startling visual effect, and with repetition it conveys an offhand technological and physical mastery over a lesser prey. It makes light of Snake's dominion over anything he can collect, and demonstrates the quintessential satirical humor for which Kojima is known.

Also, Snake as a character introduces a highly technologized and militaristic intervention onto the landscape of Afghanistan (and later in the game the Angola-Zaire border area), one that normalizes engagement with a space in a seemingly distanced way. That is, while there may be a pressure to complete objectives, the onscreen emissary of the player possesses a cool affect, a dispassionate relation to the undertaking. As in many military games, the primary character is often relatively inexpressive both verbally and physically. With his back mostly turned to the player, facial expressions do not come into play; the iconic masculine stoicism that typifies such representation compounds this nonchalance. And of course, as I have mentioned, the territory of the game is often mediated by in-game technologized vision enhancements—GPS mapping, binoculars, or weapons scope—that foreground mechanized and, by implication, rationalized looking.

### *The Phantom Pain*'s Afghanistan as Ideological Gamescape

With respect to the portion of the game presented in the Northern Kabul region, the landscape is consistent with popular news imagery and films that present a certain bracketed vision of the place as bombed out, arid, and asynchronous with modernity. For example, the limited US news reportage from the conflict at the time suggested that without modern weaponry, Afghan freedom fighters are "eighteenth-century [men] fighting a twentieth-century war" (quoted in *HV*, p. 118). In another example, documentarians Hilda Bryant and Richard Pauli describe the landscape of Afghanistan as "mud holes of an ancient people pulverized by heavy Russian artillery" (quoted in *HV*, p. 119). For the sake of agitating for anti-Communist intervention in the region, "many reports showed the Afghans to be a mountain-dwelling, medieval, and tribal people facing a faceless military machine" in the form of the Soviet Union, with its superior technological force (*HV*, p. 119). The formal aesthetic sensibility of the game, as has been described, mirrors the Afghan landscape of the American cultural imaginary: a rocky, arid, brushy, unforgiving, sun-beaten, and brutal from a sensorial perspective.

Most importantly, consistent with the US conflict reportage of the real Afghanistan at the time, *The Phantom Pain* configures its game space of Afghanistan, as *in need of intervention.* In her research on humanitarian militarism and its connection to postsocialist imperialism, Neda Atanasoski has

discussed the strange transfiguration of Afghanistan in the American popular imagination (see *HV*). Particularly, the construction of Afghanistan as a site in need of humanitarian intervention has morphed from a sense in the 1980s that communism and inhumanity must be fought into a post-9/11 ideology of rescuing innocents (especially women) under the burden of repressive fundamentalist Islam. In her essay on US media representations of the Soviet-Afghan War, Atanasoski writes:

> The contradiction between the messianic overtones of President Ronald Reagan's foreign policy promising a postsocialist future and the place of Islam and Muslims in that future came to a violent head after 9/11. Currently, the memory of U.S. military and humanitarian aid to the mujahideen has become an alibi for the perpetual military occupation of Afghanistan. The implication that humanitarian investments unaccompanied by U.S. military oversight fail to properly "discipline" Islam frames the necessity for U.S. imperialism in the Middle East. . . . Throughout the Reagan presidency, the Afghan freedom fighters were enfolded into a U.S. narrative of secular progress, which would bring about a free world, as well as into a messianic narrative of deliverance from Communist oppression. . . . Yet because of the objectification of the mujahideen for the purposes of a U.S. global vision, after the fall of the Berlin Wall they themselves came to embody the totalitarian and oppressive evil once associated with Communist ideology. [*HV*, pp. 103–4]

Atanasoski discusses how, despite an enforced Soviet media blackout that rendered the conflict largely a war "hidden" from most of the press, those images and news reports that did enter into the US largely framed the American role as one of necessary moral intervention into a progressing communist imperialist expansion (see *HV*, pp. 115–16). The blackout suggested a new heart of darkness for a colonial imperialist power (the Soviets), a moral darkness that the United States might battle in order to cover up its own stench of past imperial violence in Vietnam. Through humanitarian intervention against the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan, the US could publicly redeem itself by fighting against totalitarianism—even though, as Atanasoski well argues, US actions in Vietnam and the USSR's actions in Afghanistan were similarly imperialist. However, with the defeat of the Soviet Union in the region, the US ceased its militarized humanitarian aid, leaving a war-torn country in turmoil. The rise of the Taliban occurred in the vacuum of this "hollow ideal" of American humanitarianism (*HV*, p. 127). In an impressive act of ideological acrobatics, the US transformed the guerilla freedom fighters they

once covertly backed into the enemies of freedom and democracy in the world (see *HV*, p. 102). Atanasoski ultimately contends that, paradoxically, the "buried memory of the Soviet-Afghan War reaffirms U.S. morality in the Middle East in the present" (*HV*, p. 105).

Set upon this fraught theater of war, the moral, aesthetic, emotional, and sensory dimensions of gameplay in *The Phantom Pain* are overdetermined by a morass of complex relations. Whether or not an individual player is aware of the historical details, these affective elements nevertheless circulate in the cultural imaginary, manifesting themselves in popular films and other media imagery.[55] These contribute to a feeling that is connected both to the visual trigger of the imaged place and to the traumatic weight of the 11 September attacks. It was Afghanistan toward which the US first directed its military arsenal with the aim of invading in order to root out the Taliban, who were believed to have harbored bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The game's setting, then, is a landscape. It is a simulated and controlled version of something that was itself previously mediated through the dominant Western image-making machine in order to signify in particular ways. Those significations, as I have described them, include a complex cultural fear and fascination with Afghanistan that has existed for forty years and that forms a flash point for affective engagement. This simulated landscape also constitutes a way of conceptually framing the space so as to bracket and domesticate the historical into a particular understanding and then to invoke intervention via the medium's interactivity.

*The Phantom Pain*, with its spatial features and gamescape, presents a particular view of a particular world, activating dynamic landscapes from which we may discern cultural imperatives that subtend the visual logics of representing so-called naturalistic views of the land. Through play, it reveals a highly ideological rendering of Afghanistan in the mid-1980s, the particular historical moment at which the Taliban came into being—eventually giving rise to al-Qaeda. Within the possible world of *The Phantom Pain*, Afghanistan is configured as in need of intervention, through its affective connection to representations of actual events and settings. This is the extension of a historical rupture initiated by US intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s and complicated by a fraught web of unintended consequences, including but not limited to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. Its representations are not a given, nor are they natural, but constitute a complex calibration of rich significations within which it becomes possible

55. See for example the description of *Charlie Wilson's War* (dir. Mike Nichols, 2007), a film that describes the US involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War, in *HV*, pp. 102–3. Or see the 2013 military film *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, 2014), which relates the experience of Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell and his team in Afghanistan in 2005 during a failed reconnaissance mission.

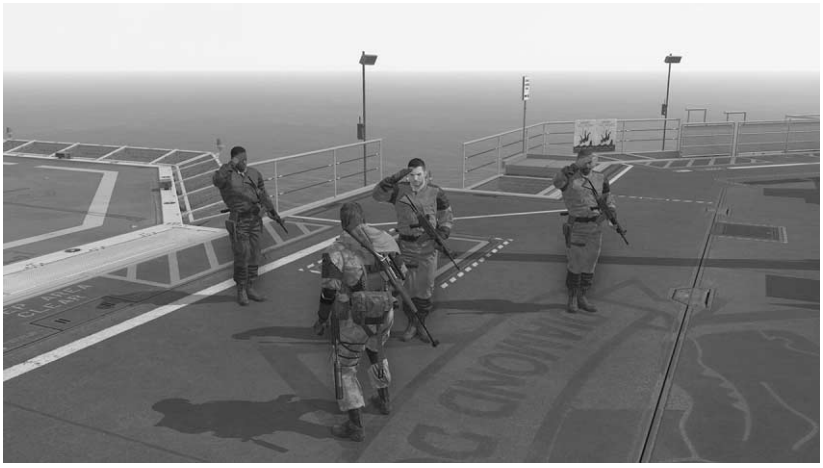

FIGURE 8. Snake, also known as Big Boss, and the Diamond Dogs. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. ©Konami Digital Entertainment. Screenshot by Jacob Weidner.

to enact an array of relations to that history and its ambient effects. The landscape of *The Phantom Pain* with its experiential force might be thought of as Mitchell's "'dreamwork' of imperialism," which reveals the utopian vision of a "perfected imperial prospect" while also trafficking in "fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance" ("IL," p. 10). As are the many forms of landscape that came before them, games are social and cultural tools and may, particularly in relation to lived spaces, even convey notions of national expansion.[56] As practiced forms of place, the spaces of games in which players move often tend toward a predatory vision of the gamescape, in the sense that the space is observed from a privileged position and often assessed in an ongoing, activated manner for its use value or exploitability for success within the rule-based system of play.

For *The Phantom Pain*, one of many potential examples, the complex engagement with a troubling, fraught history of the US in Afghanistan forms the affective and literal ground upon which the game is built and enacted. It is impossible to fully understand the game outside of its social, cultural, and political context. The game space is configured as bureaucratic and seen through the violent predatory gaze, which reconfigures the land as something to be exploited and disciplined by Snake and his Diamond Dogs (fig. 8). Notions of progress toward goals in the game are linked to core game

56. There are some games that show awareness of this landscape dynamic and self-consciously seek to make intervention, such as Jonathan Blow's highly successful and acclaimed alternative game *Braid*, dev. Number None (2008). See, for example, Jagoda, "Fabulously Procedural: *Braid*, Historical Processing, and the Videogame Sensorium," *American Literature* 85 (Dec. 2013): 745–79.

mechanics of predatory seeing, mapping, claiming, and managing. Game worlds encourage ways of thinking about and inhabiting particular spaces, and while they do not entirely dictate our understandings, they can be persuasive, particularly when they aspire to naturalistic and historical realism. Because they literally operate in the background, we may not always notice the ways in which these game worlds function as ideology. They may seem deceptively given and inevitable, though in fact they present highly curated worldviews with weighty social or cultural power.