
The Consolation of Reciprocity: the Metal Gear Saga DVD

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Few people contend that the Japanese video game industry supports its overseas consumers better than island locals. The Metal Gear Solid series usually stands apart from regional favoritism. Kojima Productions and the erstwhile KCEJ West studio have released each Metal Gear Solid game across different console regions while also giving each region's copy an advantage over the other two. Take Snake Eater as an example. The NTSC version received the first market release; the JPN version received extended gameplay support in the form of extra camouflages available via Network Adapter download and Japanese retailers; and the PAL version received the much-loved European Extreme difficulty along with Duel Mode.

The even distribution of advantages runs contrary to the trend most games follow. Japanese versions typically receive more complete storylines, extra bosses, or extra gameplay modes. The same happens with peripheral marketing. The Metal Gear series has upheld its reputation as an innovator with the release of the first volume of the Metal Gear Saga DVD. The DVD itself is a unique item that straddles the fence of public relations marketing and genuine fan enthusiasm. It deserves attention for these qualities as an example for Japanese game developers to follow as they move forward.

Metal Gear Saga is the brainchild project of Ryan Payton, new International Manager of Kojima Productions. Payton's name appears in the credits as writer and director, and he is responsible for the vision that appears in the DVD. Payton executes the project in a way that feels like an experiment in the ideal future for video games expressed by Hideo Kojima in his 30 September 2005 HIDEOBLOG entry.

Players should be able to enjoy new games for the pleasure of playing through the story by themselves, for the variation in content that leads to more replay value with others, and for the excitement of watching the plot of the game as though it were a film.

[...]

The third disc of Subsistence hasn't been created to view in the same way that one might

watch a movie. The creation is intended to be a game that one can watch as though it were a movie — but, nonetheless, it remains a game.

We mustn't put our minds in the service of rigid categories, such as would lead us to say, "Games are for playing; movies are for watching; in this, they are distinct from each other." Hereafter, playing and watching will be required of an audience via the same medium ([Kojima, 30 September](#)).

You should watch Metal Gear Saga on your actual PS2 hardware. You interact with the DVD contents through the same technology that brings you into the games, and you can more clearly feel the blurred media distinctions expanded upon in HIDEOBLOG. The Konami logo appears. The Kojima Productions intro clip from their official website runs. Then the Metal Gear Saga pre-menu sequence plays. When you hold the PS2 controller in your hands, the whole startup feels as though it might have been the intro for an actual game. The presentation connects watching Metal Gear Saga and playing a Metal Gear Solid game by association.

The contents thereafter present a unique documentary on both the storyline and development of the canon Metal Gear games. Documentaries usually require more direct narration than any other film genre, and a director must deal with the problem of footage during this narration. Television audiences expect a film to adorn plain information with relevant visuals; the form of the medium demands it too. Many directors force visual content into the film, much as a poet writing a sonnet might force insincere phrases into his poem for the sake of fulfilling the rules of the form. Documentaries lose crucial momentum when they meet this challenge poorly. As a director, Payton solves the formal problem with conscientiously edited footage from each Metal Gear game. One particularly well executed segment shows a visual progression through Metal Gear, Metal Gear 2, Metal Gear Solid, and Sons of Liberty — and then rewinds the footage along with the narration to the storyline events of Snake Eater. Importantly, the footage and the narration don't fight for the viewer's attention. The seams where one footage selection cuts to another occur in time with the rhythm of Jack Merluzzi's narration. Payton has paid attention to the unity of the film's construction, and the various parts of the film fit together organically.

Metal Gear Saga uses game footage for the majority of its visual content, but Payton does not depend upon it alone. Had he done so, Metal Gear Saga would have perhaps been possible as a fan creation using video captured on a personal computer from a PS2. Payton uses the special resources available within Kojima Productions to make Metal Gear Saga more than a patchwork of screen captures. We see game footage give way to vintage packaging for the MSX2 games and Metal Gear Solid, and we also see exclusive interview footage that features Kojima himself. Previously unreleased Shinkawa illustrations appear with the classic Metal Gear Solid gloss. The shading moves organically as though the picture were held under water — or as though the subject had been animated under a sky with low, fast moving clouds. These directorial decisions make Metal Gear Saga feel like one of the longer Codec sequences from Sons of Liberty.

Original computer animated sequences stitch the chapters together. These sequences provide structure for

the familiar game footage, and they have been designed with the aesthetics of the Metal Gear Solid series in mind. They seem like a synthesis between the designs of Snake Eater and Sons of Liberty. Text zips vertically down the screen at the beginning of each chapter, and a pause-frame viewing reveals an extended version of the timeline seen at the end of Snake Eater. The text is loosened from the pure "vintage CIA document" motif, rotated slightly as a 3D object, and given some shadow effects. The white background then less suggests white document paper, and instead it becomes a milky VR ether.

Metal Gear Saga's original opening sequence has also been designed according to this aesthetic. Gameplay and cutscene clips play on square tiles that float across the screen, and these squares move on planes that are rotated into 3D like the timeline text. It creates a sense of floating through VR space while selecting among digital options. Ichiro Kutome has matched the box art design with the animated sequences designed for the film's structure. Everything is presented in simple, unassuming black with gray shading on top of a pearl background. The design motif accepts and reinterprets what the Metal Gear saga has become since the PSX Metal Gear Solid. The total work feels enameled: it is solid and it shines.

Metal Gear Saga's content quality makes it an excellent example of the type of secondary marketing products we might hope to see in the future. Payton wrote the script in collaboration with Kojima Productions guru Hidekuni Shida. The collaboration is significant because each man belongs to a different generation in the game industry. Console video games took real command of both gaming and youth culture during the 1980s when the Nintendo Entertainment System established a market presence apart from personal computer games developed for the Commodore=64, Apple IIe, Apple Macintosh, and IBM compatible platforms. The 24 February 2006 Hidechan! Radio podcast revealed that Payton is twenty-four years old. Payton belongs to the generation that grew up with console games, and his perspective influences Metal Gear Saga in important ways.

By consequence of his generation, Payton had likely been a fan of games before starting his career in the industry. He is one of many young figures rising within Japanese and American corporations who have begun to work with franchises that were among their first influential gaming experiences. Metal Gear Saga has an energetic interest in its material. It has a sense of admiration that is often lost in folks whose identification with a franchise as *work* (rather than *play*) has dulled their sense of wonder. These men may be dedicated to the games, but they are not properly fans. These are the people who often change game franchises in the name of "fanservice," ironically to the dismay of real fans.

The term "fanservice" typically expresses an idea opposite the term's implications. It typically means "selling out to popular affectations in a game series' design or storyline, usually at the expense of those qualities that made a series important to its fan base." A cruder term for this definition is "market whoring." Developers too often forsake the dynamic qualities of their game franchises in order to make their product relevant to a broader, more casual, more homogenous audience. They presumably operate upon the idea that they will create more capital, but in reality they create more resentment among their original fan base. Metal Gear Saga comes from a perspective that emanates sincere pleasure with the Metal Gear mythos, and the rise of fans into creative control of canon products may mean that we will see more sincere work in this area.

While Payton provides the fan-centered enthusiasm, Shida provides the equally necessary expertise that makes Metal Gear Saga solid. In the 12 October 2005 entry of HIDEOBLOG, Kojima remarked that Shida knows more about Metal Gear than most of a given game's development staff.

I have entrusted the remainder of the third disc's direction and structure to Mr. Shida. I also had requested that he write and edit the L Book that accompanied the limited edition of MGS3. The man knows more about MGS3 than even the MGS3 staff. He might be the only person after myself who knows the game so intimately ([Kojima, 12 October](#)).

Payton has likewise described Shida's expertise on the subject.

He knows the Metal Gear world better than anybody, almost as much as Mr. Kojima. [...] This is really like the canon of Metal Gear. It was checked over by Mr. Shida, which gives it authenticity I think ([Berghammer](#)).

Each man has supplemented what the other may lack, and the collaboration has generated the pith of Metal Gear Saga. Shida's participation has assured the integrity of the content where Payton's knowledge may lapse. Payton recounted one such instance in the same interview.

He knows all of the name spellings. I almost had an error in Saga where I called the young Ocelot from Snake Eater, I said he was Adamska Shalashaska. But according to Mr. Shida those are his two different names. It's not a full name, Adamska Shalashaska, they're actually individual names. Sometimes he's called Adamska and sometimes he's called Shalashaska. Shalashaska's not his last name. So he fixed that ([Berghammer](#)).

No one would blame Payton for the error. While fans love a game series, they don't devote professional attention to canonical order. Shida provides this reliable support. On the other end, Shida may know every answer a fan would want but that doesn't mean he knows the questions they want to ask. Payton's creative control over Metal Gear Saga places the point of view closer to the fanbase, thus giving the DVD a double authenticity.

Metal Gear Saga is important in a third, broader context. Everyone in the NTSC and PAL audiences of a given franchise knows the frustration bred from the lack of marketing attention directed outside the eight islands. Differences between Japanese and Occidental cultures somewhat account for the lack of attention, and these differences are too large for the scope of this essay. For now, it suffices to acknowledge that the problem exists, and that efforts like Metal Gear Saga can play a significant part in its resolution.

This inattention becomes apparent in a number of ways, and the most significant deficiency lies in language translation. Three main problems consistently appear on this front: low quality English writing, inadequate attention to cultural gaps between Japan and the Occident, and the limited amount of material

made available for translation. The first problem is by far the most frustrating to any lover of English writing. Translation work within the video game industry apparently runs on the idea that anyone who can interpret Japanese can also communicate well in English. This is plainly untrue. Many English translations that come from both native Japanese speakers and adepts to Japanese grammar would fail the most basic elementary school grammar exams. Some may remark that the awkward, aloof language spawned from these efforts are a quaint hallmark of video game culture: Engrish. While Engrish is justifiable as an affection, it is unacceptable as a standard for native-speaking English language audiences. There is no dignity in professional incompetence. Advocates of video games as "the most advanced medium of the twenty-first century" will point to the evolution of all elements of video games since the 1980s, and yet the English language quality remains shamefully poor.

Another translation problem exist beyond the relatively simple technical fallacies of bad grammar. Many translations either omit or oversimplify the cognitive qualities of the Japanese language. To spin a couple of old saws together: the letter may be willing but the spirit is weak. Cultural values are embedded in every language in the world, and the differences between languages signify more than shifts in pronunciation, spelling, and written characters. Language differences signify changes in recognized relationships between ideas, persons, and events. Sometimes these differences are drastic, especially between Japanese and English. Japanese culture thrives on a variety of ideas that are alien to Occidental cultures, and these nuances require talent and hard work to craft into sensible English. Kenneth Rexroth's translations of Japanese poetry provide a sterling example of English translations of Japanese text, and his efforts show that it *can* be done. Again, a translator's incompetence may mar his work, as can laziness. Even linguistic arrogance can lead a translator to censor cognitive aspects of Japanese language from the English rendition. Ignoring the real work of communicating these meanings between languages disrespects more than the English audience. It disrespects the facts that Japanese culture can be appreciated, that cross-cultural communication is crucial to our 21st century awareness, and that the original Japanese contents were worth reading in the first place.

The third (and most often recognized) problem is the limited amount of material that Japanese corporations consider for translation beyond Japan. Japanese corporations frequently limit the efforts put forth to make secondary media available to their non-Japanese audiences. Relevant secondary information books only see Japanese releases, and fanbased message boards almost immediately swell with translation requests. These information books include the materials published in association with the Silent Hill series, the Fatal Frame series, and Capcom's killer7. Official English websites often must settle for less than one-third of the Japanese content updates. Sometimes the information released exclusively on Japanese websites contains information necessary to apprehend the plot of the game, such as the Victim Files on the Silent Hill 4 website. Some websites (such as Capcom's English site for Haunting Ground) even forecast the appearance of more content several months after the actual release. They are clearly abandoned, and the abandonment applies to the English language audience as well.

Metal Gear Saga stands as an example of a secondary media product that circumvents each of these problems perfectly. The issue of language translation is nullified because the script's text was written initially in English. While discrepancies should be resolved in translated projects, Metal Gear Saga takes

the best approach and builds the content with its roots already in the language. This approach mostly cuts through the second problem, because only Kojima's interview has been translated into English. The development method used to create Metal Gear Saga moreso minimizes the room for error. Payton speaks Japanese excellently (as can be heard on a number of the Japanese language Hidechan! Radio podcasts), and he has also worked with Shida. The relationships and ideas that have led to the creation of the Metal Gear mythos are undeniably Japanese, and these can become better rendered into English through the attentiveness of professionals like Payton and Shida.

Most importantly, Metal Gear Saga has been planned and pursued as a secondary media product for non-Japanese audiences. When the DVD was announced, Metal Gear fans across English language message boards thanked fortune for one of the few instances that Japanese gaming corporations paid attention to them. The video game industry should use Metal Gear Saga as an example for their relationships with audiences in the future. The non-Japanese consumer base may settle for inadequate market attention while game systems cost \$200 brand new and games cost \$50. The technological future of the video game industry, however, will result in much higher retail prices. Gamers can expect to see game systems sell for \$400 brand new and perhaps games for \$80. Western cultures — especially American culture — tend to regard financial transactions as meaningful beyond the moment when capital is exchanged for goods. A purchase is a contract of mutual support. The greater costs required by these contracts between consumers and game corporations will lead consumers to expect higher quality support than they have received in the past ten years.

As the situation stands, non-Japanese gamers can still feel lucky that they're receiving something exclusive. They are nonetheless still preparing themselves for future disappointments after Metal Gear Saga. As the 6th century philosopher Boethius wrote in The Consolation of Philosophy, "For why does Fortune with her fickle hand deal out such changing lots?" It is unfortunate that the non-Japanese gaming audience does not understand the power of consumers in a capitalist marketplace. We should realize the possibility of a certain consolation based on reciprocity: we should expect quality attention as a consumer base. Metal Gear Saga is one of the best examples of such reciprocity to appear yet, and it should be valued for the ground it breaks.

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