Heuristic

How a 2001 video game warned us about the dangers of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering
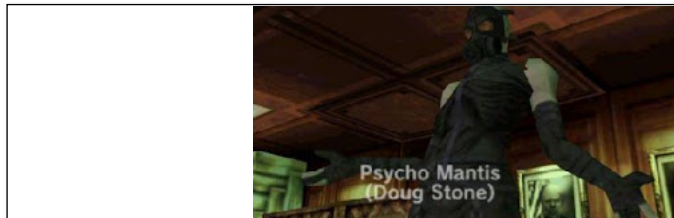
More than just a game: the video game character Psycho Mantis broke the fourth wall by speaking to the player. This is like writer Kurt Vonnegut's addressing of the reader him/herself in *Breakfast of Champions*. It served to remind us the limits of video game technology in disseminating information: no matter what, we're still players in a game.

The crises of the digital age have brought us concerns about information. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal raised concerns of privacy. Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election showed this power of information itself. Long before these events, a Japanese video game developer predicted these issues. Hideo Kojima would create a game in which the archenemy was none other than the American government itself in 2001. In what would become the first postmodern video game, *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* showed this dark side of science and technology. In today's discussion of gene editing and artificial intelligence, the message holds true. *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* for the Playstation 2 continues to be among the best messages about the dangers of our Information Age.
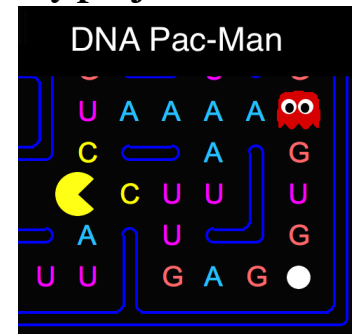
Video games as media help us understand ourselves in simulated universes. Like any work of fiction, video games teach us higher truths about the world but give the player a goal to achieve. In *Sons of Liberty*, the player uncovered a conspiracy of the Patriots. They were group that manipulates information to control the American government. Later in the game, though, the Patriots became encoded onto data itself. They were then manufactured into a computer program that controls human behavior. The way digital information replaced genetics shed light on current event concerns. Artificial intelligence and genetic engineering show these issues of control over nature and ourselves. The player progressed through the game finding the truths about these stories and uncovering the secrets. This challenge gave the player the control and power to make the right decisions. It set the stage for post-modern elements of truth and reality to come into question. There were other postmodern elements like deceiving the player into thinking they've lost and anachronistic characters like vampires. These elements set the stage of distrust and avant-garde, an unusual aesthetic form. The central themes allowed anyone to understand the concerns of this dual genetic-digital issue.

To introduce the theme of the game, I first look at the end. The game's protagonist

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Solid Snake proclaimed a dramatic monologue to the player him/herself at the end of the game. Throughout the game, Snake, a genetically engineered soldier, hunted the Patriots. At the end, he realized it was part of a simulation to test human behavior in a society of manipulated information. In his gritty, serious, yet determined voice, Solid Snake declared:

> Life isn't just about passing on your genes. We can leave behind much more than just DNA. Through speech, music, literature and movies... what we've seen, heard, felt... anger, joy and sorrow... these are the things I will pass on. That's what I live for. We need to pass the torch, and let our children read our messy and sad history by its light. We have all the magic of the digital age to do that with. The human race will probably come to an end some time, and new species may rule over this planet. Earth may not be forever, but we still have the responsibility to leave what traces of life we can. Building the future and keeping the past alive are one and the same thing.

We face a grim, dismal future with dire fears of climate change, nuclear war, and terrorism. If we don't live forever, then it might seem to make no difference for us to build a better future. But we must keep the past alive, as Snake emphasized. This history preserves a type of immortality of our work, even if life and humans themselves are temporary.

The player discovered true allegiances, backgrounds, and motives of characters throughout the game. In crafting a narrative about the power of technology, there were two tragedies that illustrate different flaws. The first was the President George Sears, a genetically modified clone. Sears became a terrorist, the game's primary antagonist. This tragic fall is like the Roman Emperor Nero's road to tyranny, though debatable. Nero sought to twist truth and history. The fall happened as the Patriots preserved their power in attempting to murder Sears, who wanted to fight for the freedom of information. They did this through the GW System, which announced the tragic themes such as: "Not even natural selection can take place here. The world is being engulfed in 'truth.' And this is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper."

The second tragic fall came with Raiden. A rookie who idolized Solid Snake and worked to kill Sears, Raiden represented the player. Raiden's existential tragedy came as he realized his own military support were not real people. They were only programmed computers. Only at the end, as he threw away his dog tags that have the player's name on them, did he find freedom from the information that controlled him.

Sears believed life was predetermined by genetic information. He believed he must re-write history and become a terrorist. Nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as he wrote in *The Birth of a Tragedy* would describe it as a Dionysian view of freedom. It broke from common notions of the way a president would act. As Snake proclaimed, we need to develop these new ideas of thinking to address the tyranny of those who control information. These could have represented our fears of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Sears' discovery, as though he were only a pawn in a game, forced him to into these realizations. He understood that old-fashioned ways of thinking lead to a sort of obsolescence of information. It's like the conflict between today's news sources and forms of journalism preserving truth and justice against bots on social media pretending to be human. These existential tragedies described these trials of the digital age. The GW system's name itself referenced George Washington. Sears confirmed this allusion by declaring independence of a new nation on the day, April 30, George Washington took office. It served the themes of existential crises brought to the United States by genetic engineering and artificial intelligence.

Raiden, rather, represented the player, as he was guided through the story by others. He relied on what's others tell him the same way we, consumers of information do. It's our methods of making sense of a twisted, confusing world. Raiden loved war games

and thought he knew what to do because of this. This also paralleled the player thinking he/she knows what to do by what the game tells them.

"I'm just a man who's good at what he does: killing," Solid Snake explained. He recognized that he's forced to kill as a result destiny itself, a necessary evil, and still believed there's never a right part in murder.

In a deconstruction of the video game genre itself, we question the reality that video games create. French philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Limited Inc* described this deconstruction. It discerned fiction from non-fiction. The same way we test truth from fake news and post-truth politics, Derrida argued to ask "What is non-fiction?" Taking Solid Snake's speech for granted, Raiden asked this question to free himself. I believe that, if the player found this existential freedom from their own voids of truth and reality, then they, too, won. Coming to terms with the truth of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, we find freedom. Modern computers today make decisions in their own contexts, and the current trends of genetic engineering push the limits of our precision to change ourselves. The truths are only there insofar as we create them. Solid Snake continued this theme in another monologue:

> The memories you have and the role you were assigned are burdens you have to carry. It doesn't matter if they were real or not. That's never the point. ... There's no such thing in the world as absolute reality. Most of what they call real is actually fiction. What you think you see is only as real as your brain tells you it is. ... Listen, don't obsess over words so much. Find the meaning behind the words, then decide.

At the time of game's release, these events paralleled the U.S. military actions. The involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq and creation of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp showed these themes. Given the realistic themes of the game, it's difficult to not draw comparisons of society through them. For today's issues, I believe *Son's of Liberty* illustrated modern fears of the privacy and technology as a whole. We find meaning behind words the same way we uncover our destinies. This is even if they're predetermined by genetic engineering or produced by computers. Raiden's decision to choose his own destiny parallels this, as a genetic-digital duality would.

Postmodern art, as Solid Snake explained, views reality with a smug smirk. It invites the audience find the meaning of words, language, and art themselves. Questioning everything, the player wondered what sort of dark monsters lurk in what's real and what isn't. Truth in the Information Age may be elusive. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica and Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections show this. Solid Snake may have been pessimistic and cynical with his world views, but we can at least take solace that we can understand them. We have the power to meander through the difficulties of truth itself.

at 11/17/2018
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