



## **Apocalyptic souls: the existential (anti) hero metaphor in the *Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater, Peace Walker and Ground Zeroes* games**

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### **Abstract**

*In the present study, I drew a correlation between Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) existentialist theory and apocalyptic representations in the Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater, Peace Walker and Ground Zeroes video games (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2004, 2010 and 2014). In this successful franchise, the game's main character, 'Snake' personifies 'the knight of infinite resignation,' the 'tragic hero' in 'the infinite movement' towards the achievement of 'higher causes'. Also, Snake's mentor 'The Boss', who sacrifices herself in order to reconcile the world from its 1960's Cold War antagonism would represent another Kierkegaard notion called 'the knight of faith', who believes in his/her faith (the cause) above all things. Such character traits enrich both gameplay and game narrative and the overall experience by introducing philosophical inquiries to the player. The methodology utilized was a free-form semiotic framework with emphasis on the symbolic representations along with Kierkegaard's existentialism and other philosophical constructs as well.*

### **Keywords**

*Metal Gear Solid, philosophy, ethics, semiotics, video games, Kierkegaard*

### **Kierkegaard's existential knights: 'knight of infinite resignation' and 'knight of faith'**

One of the main tenets of the existentialism is the search for meaning in the human existence (Cf. Sartre, 1943). Danish philosopher, theologian and poet, Søren Kierkegaard

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(1813-1855) is considered one of the founders of Existentialism, even if he never used the term himself. For this study, I utilized Kierkegaard's concept of the 'knight of infinite resignation' --- an individual who endures the loss of love and aspirations in life in order to achieve self-fulfilment and transcendence.

As video games with very apocalyptic themes delve more and more into the narrative spectrum of human nature, it is essential to discuss themes of the apocalyptic breed, as they resonate deep within the human sense of mortality. Not only mortality of the human, but of the society as we know it --- whether that is democracy, capitalism or any other cultural or historical system. Apocalypse here is defined as the literary genre that collects accounts of the end of history. The collection of forms of destructiveness and anguish rendered in colossal battles among forces of good and evil. (Cf. Garrard, 2004).

Considering that, Kierkegaard's idea of 'knight of infinite resignation' is suggested here as a symbolism in my proposed existential metaphor for the 'apocalyptic soul' in the *Metal Gear Solid* video game series (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 1987-).

I analyzed the first three chronological titles of the saga: *Snake Eater* (2004), *Peace Walker* (2010) and *Ground Zeroes* (2014) directed by Japanese game designer and series' creator, Hideo Kojima. The main goal is to observe how existential symbolic metaphors can incite political, philosophical debate related to the narrative as seen in the characters' actions and experienced by players through gameplay. I focused on the series' first main protagonist, a CIA's special infiltration field agent codenamed 'Snake' and also in his mentor, the veteran war hero known as 'The Boss'.

The concept of knight of infinite resignation is found in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) written by Kierkegaard under the pen name 'Johannes de Silentio'. Kierkegaard exemplifies his idea with a certain tale of a princess and a man. Both are deeply in love for each other but cannot, for many reasons, stay together. The realization by these individuals for the impossibility of their love brings about the existential condition of the knight of infinite resignation. In which they renounce their love for the time being, as they judge it to be unnecessary in order to reach transcendence, which is the philosophical term for advancing from a previous existential condition into another. By doing so, they believe they can live without that love even if they both still feel it and yearn for it. (Kierkegaard, 1843). With his other concept, the 'knight of faith', Kierkegaard explores a variety of ethical outcomes towards the binding and sacrifice of Isaac by his own father Abraham, the shepherd. (Cf. Kierkegaard, 1843). In the account, Abraham, was commanded by God Himself to kill his own son as a test that would prove his faith in God's existence. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham's notion of faith, his *particular* action towards the human race or the *universal* (Cf. Hegel, 1807) was faulty by the impossibility of proving any validity of said faith that would benefit the human community. Through Kierkegaard's perspective Abraham fails the test and mankind as well. Abraham is Kierkegaard's knight of faith, as he had never transcended his misguided ethics. (Kierkegaard, 1843).

Thus, the main themes explored in *Fear and Trembling* are sacrifice, faith and transcendence. Transcendence for both knights, notwithstanding, depends on their capacity to endure the pain and the suffering of renounced objectives, paths and hopes. (Kierkegaard, 1843). Snake and The Boss exemplify these characteristics in the *Metal Gear* games by attempting to transcend their apocalyptic conditions as soldiers fighting in an unending nuclear crisis. They had renounced their own love and life goals for what they believe to be right cause for mankind.

### **Apocalyptic Souls: Snake and The Boss - the Existential (Anti) Heroes**

*Metal Gear* (and its subsequent added 'Solid' moniker) is an action game franchise that explores the notion of stealth and espionage where the player should infiltrate bases or covertly execute objectives in order to advance in the game.

The chronological narrative in the gameworld starts mimicking a fictional Cold War's 1960's-like alternative scenario that evolves into a nihilistic future world where war became business and routine in a dystopian capitalistic society.<sup>i</sup> When we first meet 'Snake'<sup>ii</sup> in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (2004), chronologically the first episode of the *Metal Gear Saga*, he is already a renowned United States Army Special Forces operative. By the age of fifteen Snake met his mentor, 'The Boss', 'The Mother of America's Special Forces'. By that time, The Boss is a seasoned United States war hero celebrated as the defining factor for United States and the allies' victory in the Second World War.<sup>iii</sup>

The Boss' relationship with Snake becomes the central part of *Snake Eater's* narrative and it will carry over, in distinct ways, to the two subsequent instalments, which are also directed by Kojima: *Peace Walker* (2010) and *Ground Zeroes* (2014). The Boss is like a surrogate mother, friend, war comrade and creative partner to Snake<sup>iv</sup>. He deeply respects, admires and loves her. She is absolutely the most important person in Snake's life and responsible for what he becomes in the future of the series.

As the game progresses *The Boss* is confronted with a situation that forces her to join the enemy and break bonds of loyalty with the U.S. Forces:

**The Boss:** Space exploration is nothing but another game in the power struggle between the US and USSR. Politics, economics, the arms race - they're all just arenas for meaningless competition. I'm sure you can see that. But the Earth itself has no boundaries. No East, No West, No Cold War. And the irony of it is, the United States and the Soviet Union are spending billions on their space programs and the missile race only to arrive at the same conclusion. In the 21st century everyone will be able to see that we are all just inhabitants of a little celestial body called Earth. A world without communism and capitalism... that is the world I wanted to see. But reality continued to betray me.<sup>v</sup>

The concept of 'apocalyptic souls' is derived from Kierkegaard's knights --- of infinite resignation and of faith (Kierkegaard, 1843) --- and it represents the existential *pathos* lived by Snake and The Boss throughout the course of these games. Where human annihilation, atomic bombs and ultra-militaristic political mindsets are prominent.

*The Boss* is the first 'apocalyptic soul'. Despite the fact that she is a survivor of innumerable experiments and warfare, she is still willing to sacrifice herself for the world if necessary. Just as Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith', she would self-relinquish any life's passions, dreams, desires or love for the conviction that the world can be one again. As she changes sides, her relationship with Snake takes a critical turn: not only she has defected to the Soviet Union, but it also turns out that Snake is the CIA-selected operative ordered to infiltrate Russian territory to find and eliminate her. Like the princess and the man in Kierkegaard's example, *The Boss* and Snake gave up their love believing that their individual purposes, in Philosophy, the particular (cf. Hegel, 1807) will lead them both to transcendence. They would finally fulfil their ethical duties with the world, which in philosophical terms would represent the universal (cf. Hegel, 1807). Thus, Snake is the second apocalyptic soul, the equivalent of Kierkegaard's knight of infinite resignation. Snake still loves *The Boss* but had resigned himself to the fact that they must fight. Now, Snake and *The Boss* should cross paths one last time as the world hangs by a thread on the brink of a nuclear crisis. Snake then commences the mission, 'Operation Snake Eater', which is also the name of the game itself:

**The Boss:** One must die and one must live. No victory, no defeat. The survivor will carry on the fight. It is our destiny... The one who survives will inherit the title of Boss. And the one who inherits the title of Boss will face an existence of endless battle. I'll give you ten minutes. In ten minutes, MiGs will come and bomb the hell out of this place. If you can beat me in less than ten minutes, you'll be able to escape in time. Jack, let's make this the greatest ten minutes of our lives!<sup>vi</sup>

In the aftermath of *Snake Eater's* events, *Snake* survives his ordeal: against his will he was forced to finish *The Boss's* life. She went down in history as a war criminal. *Snake* was torn apart by his own actions more than by any enemy inflicted torture of his years as a United States Army special field agent. He is still loyal to the memory of *The Boss*, as he believes that *The Boss* was devoted to her purposes of justice and freedom to the end. Even when she was betrayed by same country she had sworn to protect. *Snake* then pays homage to *The Boss* by saluting her grave at an empty, ghostly graveyard. Like Kierkegaard's knight of infinite resignation, *Snake* renounces his life's desires and her love for *The Boss* replacing it by a universal purpose that would fulfil his existence. He is now ethically committed to the world. *Snake's* next military enterprise is not for his own sake. It is directed to a world where soldiers should protect individuals from the suffering caused by the injustices of an increasingly militarized society. To keep his memories of *The Boss's*, however, he wears her bandana as a symbol of that love.

The next time we see *Snake*, he is a rogue warrior with allegiance to no country, as the leader of the '*Militaires Sans Frontieres*' (MSF). The MSF is a mercenary army active in 1974, ten years after the 'Operation Snake Eater,' as seen in the events of *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* (2010) a Sony's Playstation Portable video game.

The *Peace Walker* from the game's title is a robot-tank developed by *Snake's* enemies as a nuclear deterrent. The robot's AI is based on the total collection of *The Boss's* consciousness, designed by a scientist, a woman known as *Dr. Strangelove*<sup>vii</sup>. The

doctor believes The Boss' AI to be the only one capable of authorizing a nuclear launch through a cognitive assessment of the situation using the best variables possible. Dr. Strangelove then, captures and tortures Snake, as she thinks he is the real villain for having killed *The Boss*. Strangelove wanted Snake to confess what were *The Boss'* last words to him in order to know if she died as a traitor or the hero Strangelove believed in. Snake refuses to cooperate, as he knows Strangelove needs this last piece of information in order to complete the robot's AI and make it operational (i.e. able to launch nukes). In defiance, Snake embraces his purpose by denying Strangelove any information about The Boss. In a self-destructive manner, Snake accepts his existential condition as a character and says:

"I was made to fight, I am a gun".<sup>viii</sup>

*Peace Walker's* narrative, at first glance, seems to signalize *The Boss* as a traitor. In the conclusion, however, we discover that: 1) this information was classified and Snake did not share it or he did not want to disclose it, and 2) Snake is not sure if he shares the same 'faith' with *The Boss* anymore. In the end, Snake refused to lie down to die in furtherance of creating a situation where no more lives would be sacrificed, as The Boss believed. Snake decided to die fighting for the cause, resigning himself to be 'the gun' that the weak and oppressed needed. In the last scene, he releases *The Boss'* bandana, the memory of her that he wore during the entirety of the game's campaign. Snake had finally transcended The Boss.

In *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* (2014) -- a short-length prequel to *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, and the last instalment to be directed by Kojima -- Snake has become the commander of *Mother Base*,<sup>ix</sup> a mercenary outpost off the coast in the Caribbean Sea. In this game, Snake's mission is to rescue former allies from an enemy compound. *Ground Zeroes* brings the player to a game location symbolically inspired by the real-world U.S. Guantanamo Bay detention base to sell the message of the cruelties of war that damages souls, hearts and minds. The themes of apocalypse are emphasised by every grim image of prisoners being held in cages. The detainees are nameless with bags concealing their identities. Torture and cruelty took place there. Emerging from the shadows, an unidentified enemy torments Snake's friend and disappears into the stormy night. Meanwhile, an upcoming inspection of Mother Base by the United Nations (UN) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) authorities can trigger yet another nuclear crisis if Mother Bases' weapons of mass destruction were found.

As Snake rescues his comrades, the unknown enemy attacks Mother Base and the MSF's soldiers. The sole survivors of this conflict are Snake's second in command, Kazuhira Miller<sup>x</sup> and Snake himself, who had his body (and sanity) damaged in the process. This last incident had only confirmed what Snake already knew: *The Boss'* ideal was a lost errand, a foolish fantasy. She dreamt of a world made whole again, where soldiers would not have to give up their lives as she did. She wanted to eradicate the "scene" that was the main theme in *Snake Eater*. On the other hand, we testify that Snake's ideal is a 'world of soldiers' fighting for freedom wherever they are needed, with

absolute resignation to this end. These main protagonists cannot simply be explained based on political, economic or social factors. Instead, the self-destructive behavior of each protagonist can be explained based on the individual choices that each of them makes. They were clashing over their self-destructive, altruistic and existential philosophies, their apocalyptic souls.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, characters like *The Boss* and *Snake* with their existential quests, remind us of the importance entertainment media could have if considered with the purpose to put the player in a privileged perspective to experience fictional events that call attention to real problems of our world, such as the state of many nations' militarism, ethics, politics and apocalypticism. Games like the ones in the *Metal Gear Solid* series at least try to highlight these issues through philosophically-charged themes. These games are inevitably generating important discussions that are necessary to our ever-increasing politically-interested, but yet philosophically-alienated society.

Decisively, the characters of *Snake* and *The Boss* as portrayed in the *Metal Gear Solid* games analysed here, would perfectly comply with the Kierkegaardian's type of existential perspective. Their causes (their faiths) are mostly illogical and self-destructive ones. According to Kierkegaard, faith is not open to any kind of intellectual inquiry. (Kierkegaard, 1843). These characters' motivations, fear of failure and unfruitful attempts to fit in this apocalyptically-infused gameworld (their reality) are conceivable only through an existential approach.

Finally, Kojima's (anti) heroes, *Snake* and *The Boss*, the 'apocalyptic souls' in the *Metal Gear Solid* games, believe they are fighting for a better world in order to transcend the apocalypse. However, they are unsure of the real outcome of their fights. That happens because the 'Times' or the political contexts and therefore, the military allegiances and situations, 'the reality' as represented in these games are always in motion. As such, *Snake* and *The Boss* were constantly "betrayed by reality", as *The Boss* had previously described. As fictional and existential characters, they are reminders of the real apocalyptic horrors of warfare. And, as long as the apocalyptically narratological appeal of their stories remains relevant, their fight against the ultimate end is far from finishing.

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<sup>i</sup> This is the culmination of the narrative events as seen in the last chronological game of the series, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> *Snake* is also known as 'Jack' in the game. As showed in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2004).

<sup>iii</sup> As seen in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2004).

<sup>iv</sup> They have developed a new fighting technique together called the CQC-close quarters combat. As revealed in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2004).

<sup>v</sup> The Boss explaining to Snake her fidelity to the 'Times'. The notion of the 'otherness' of the real can be well explained in the semiotics of C.S. Peirce (1839-1914) by his concept of 'Secondness'. As observed in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2004).

<sup>vi</sup> The Boss' last words to Snake. As seen in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2004).

<sup>vii</sup> One of the main characters in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* and clear reference to Stanley Kubrick's black satire film of 1964, 'Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.' In *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* (2010), Dr. Strangelove wants to rebuild her object of love: The Boss. She hates Snake and wants revenge against him, but first she needs to know everything Snake knows about The Boss in order to complete Peace Walker's cognitive database. As seen in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2010).

<sup>viii</sup> Snake's decisive line of dialogue as portrayed in the scene where Dr. Strangelove tortures him. As seen in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2010).

<sup>ix</sup> "In addition to mercenaries and former government soldiers, [Mother Base] is also home to researchers and other civilian personnel. Together, they form a group without borders, ideologies or isms, with no regard to age, gender, nationality or race."—Militaires Sans Frontières briefing. As seen in *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2014). Retrieved from: [http://metalgear.wikia.com/wiki/Metal\\_Gear\\_Solid\\_V:\\_Ground\\_Zeroes](http://metalgear.wikia.com/wiki/Metal_Gear_Solid_V:_Ground_Zeroes) .2015.08.01.

<sup>x</sup> Another important character in the *Metal Gear Saga*. As seen in *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima Productions, 2014).

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