

MANUFACTURING CONSENT IN VIDEO GAMES— THE HEGEMONIC MEMORY POLITICS OF *METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN* (2015)

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Abstract: *In this article I argue that the structural conditions of global capitalism and postcolonialism encourage game developers to rearticulate hegemonic memory politics and suppress subaltern identities. This claim is corroborated via an application of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model to the Japanese-developed video game Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain. This case study highlights that the hegemonic articulations of colonial histories are not exclusive to Western entertainment products where instead modes of production matter in the 'manufacturing of mnemonic hegemony'. I also propose that the propaganda model, while instructive, can be improved further by acknowledging a technological filter and the role of the subaltern. Thus, the article furthers the understanding of the relation between production and form in contemporary technological phenomena like video games and how this relation motivates hegemonic articulations of the past in contemporary mass culture.*

Keywords: *cultural memory; political economy; video games; postcolonialism.*

Introduction—Playing the Cold War

*Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*¹ is an action-stealth video game that lets consumers play with Cold War colonialism in the Soviet-Afghan war and the Angolan Civil War. As the rogue US soldier 'Venom Snake', players do mercenary contracts for either the US or the Soviet Union. As part of this mercenary work, *MGSV* positions players as neutral between the warring imperialist interests, so that neither the US or the Soviet Union are seen as more legitimate than the other—i.e. both imperial nations in the game are part of the same hegemony with "a common interest in opposing military structures" (Kaldor 1991: 112). Players are tasked with building up Snake's own private paramilitary army called the 'Diamond Dogs' by taking up mercenary contracts in Afghanistan and Angola for either US- or Soviet-backed movements such as the real-historical 'União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola' (UNITA) and 'Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola—Partido do Trabalho' (MPLA). Player activities consist of procuring resources from Afghanistan and Angola, killing or capturing enemy soldiers for players' own gain, and destroying their military installations. The game's main narrative covers political themes such as the loss of language through cultural imperialism, the interests of colonial powers, and the dynamics of managing a paramilitary mercenary force, something of which I elaborate on later. Yet despite these relatively refreshing political themes in mass cultural entertainment, I claim that the game still 'manufactures mnemonic hegemony' in its Cold War depiction of Afghanistan and Angola.

¹ Hereafter referred to as *MGSV*.

Before proceeding, by memory politics, I refer to the political aspects of how individuals and collectives construct understandings of the past through culture (Erll 2011; Rigney 2016) where multimodal interests compete over the formation of cultural memory. Here, contemporary power relationships affect the dominant consensus of our recollection of the past; what Berthold Molden terms ‘mnemonic hegemony’ (Molden 2016). As he writes, “access to and control over the means of communication and diffusion of historical narratives are of utmost importance for the establishment and maintenance of mnemonic hegemony” (Molden 2016: 134). By manufacturing of mnemonic hegemony, I here denote the process where cultural expressions, such as video games, construct dominant cultural memory that, among other things, reduces already marginalized groups and counter-hegemonic ideologies to dehumanized monsters or antagonists (Hall 1997; Said 1979 [1978]), if not subaltern (Pandey 1995). The latter, especially, are represented with little agency, few capacities to express themselves, and fewer conditions for ethical consideration (Hartmann 2017). The subaltern are positioned within mnemonic hegemony² so that they cannot articulate themselves inside it (Spivak 2010 [1988]). Such positions of subalternity can be reinstated with the help of hegemonic cultural expressions. In mass media, the subaltern are often left without a voice or humanity (Beverly 2001: 54), if not explicitly depicted as dangerous monsters (Calafell 2015). As I argue, this mnemonic hegemony and the reproduction of the subaltern can be seen in the case of Afghanistan and Angola in *MGSV*. To account for this, I trace the game’s memory politics to the game’s context of production where capitalist and postcolonial structural conditions reign.

As a Japanese game, it is pertinent to inquire how *MGSV* affirms mnemonic hegemony of the Cold War. In my analysis of the game, I inversely follow Paul Martin’s (2018) reading of the Japanese-developed *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2009), where he argues that the game’s apparent white colonialist fantasies are a product of Japanese history and imperialism. In contrast, I read *MGSV* as a product of global hegemonic culture rather than only as a product of its origins. As Soraya Murray writes on *MGSV*, the juxtaposition between the game’s Japanese origins and its memory politics “becomes extremely complicated” (Murray 2017: 143) by virtue of the game’s affirmation of US mnemonic hegemony despite being created in Japan. *MGSV*, I argue, frames the Cold War proxy wars in Angolan and Afghanistan with little consideration to the memories of those most affected, and instead follows Western mnemonic hegemony. This, I argue, derives from its modes of production.

The game was primarily directed by Hideo Kojima, a 30-plus years games industry veteran, who is regarded as an auteur (Green 2017; Higgin 2009b), a rare label in the landscape of blockbuster game development (Nieborg 2011). Co-workers close to Kojima have stated that he does not care about the money nor the budget of a project in order to ensure the execution of his vision (*NationFusion* 2015: 0:34:57). Such complexities of a non-profit-oriented auteur nuance my argument on the relation between production and form in *MGSV*. Therefore, my reading both challenges the perception of Kojima as a renegade auteur of the industry and the persistence of Western mnemonic hegemony in mainstream video game production.

² That is to say that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, the subaltern should not be tied to a nation-state, but seen as “fragmentary and episodic” (2002: 34).

MGSV is part of the popular *Metal Gear* series (Stanton 2015) spanning multiple video games since the first entry called *Metal Gear* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo [KCET] 1987). The series is developed and managed by Konami, and directed by Hideo Kojima and co-developed by hundreds of workers in each entry. The series emulates the US cinematic spy and action genre (Wang 2014), and it invokes political themes of espionage, military conflict, nuclear warfare, the Cold War, transfer of genes and memes, post-traumatic stress disorder, and child soldiers. In addition, contrary to the norm of mainstream military video games, the series has criticized militarization, nuclear armament, and governmental power structures (Keogh 2015). Yet, even though the game tangentially evokes the themes of Cold War colonialism and proxy wars, players are primarily tasked with rebuilding their military operations via extracting resources from Afghanistan and Angola, rather than, for example, assisting the imperialized peoples in them.

Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model

To understand the causes of *MGSV*'s memory politics of war and colonialism I apply the 'propaganda model' by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002 [1988]). They originally made several cases for how US news media is more about selling a product conforming to dominant narratives than about informing their readers about world affairs—something still apparent today (Edwards/Cromwell 2018), and something which applies to video games like *MGSV*. While theirs is not a theoretically exhaustive model, it is nonetheless instructive in determining some of the factors that motivate media to serve the interests of the ruling elites. Here, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is useful (Femia 1987 [1961]; Gramsci 1971 [1929–1935]), where the ruling classes do not necessarily employ means of coercion to enforce their ideology, but rather make use of culture to create consent (cf. Hall 1982: 86), while those in the margins, such as the subaltern, are 'culturally imperialized' (Young 2004) and made voiceless outside the established consensus. It is this manufacturing of hegemony and marginalization in US news media that Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) investigate by means of the propaganda model. Using case studies such as coverage of the Vietnam war (169), the elections in Nicaragua (134), or the Indonesian invasion of East Timor (33), they aptly identify how counter-hegemonic perspectives are filtered out in leading US news companies. In turn, what gets produced is 'propaganda' that in turn helps 'manufacture consent' about contemporary US imperialism (iix).

Herman and Chomsky characterize the propaganda model via the ownership filter; the advertising filter³; the sourcing filter; the flak filter; and finally the anti-communism and fear filter (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 6)—each of which I define in their respective sections below. They argue that these filters exclude those perspectives that challenge the dominant consensus. Or inversely put, these filters establish consensus regarding what the public at large considers to be common sense.

While Herman and Chomsky focus on news media, similar processes of filtering are relevant for other media industries, such as Hollywood film and US television programming (Alford 2015; D'Acci 2004; Molina-Guzmán 2016). Mass culture undergoes similar manufacturing processes that reproduce and re-affirm hegemony—

³ I do not include advertising as a filter in my application of the model to *MGSV*. Advertising is simply not present in this particular instance (Alford 2015).

the stories told, the perspectives included, the groups represented, etc. are framed by similar filters that preclude counter-hegemonic expressions.

Although there seems to be a sharp epistemological distinction between news media and popular culture, I argue that this line can at times appear blurry. Echoing the epistemological contentions by Hayden White (1990 [1987]), it is important to take narratives, including fictitious ones, seriously as a form of understanding of history. Robert Rosenstone (1995) has similarly argued that popular feature films leave a residue of knowledge in audiences' understandings of the past. Likewise, cultural memory studies (Erlil 2011; Rigney 2016; Reading 2016 [2015]) take popular culture very seriously in the formation of understandings of the past. Thus, it is important to consider different cultural forms due to their potential predispositions on how people see the world and others (Dyer 2002 [1993]). It is thus helpful to apply Herman and Chomsky's model to an analysis of mass entertainment in order to identify the factors that reproduce hegemony in, for example, video games.

The propaganda model encourages attention to frames of production that predispose or filter these products along ideological fault lines. As Nicholas Garnham argues,

so long as Marxist analysis concentrates on the ideological content of mass media, it will be difficult to develop coherent political strategies for resisting the underlying development in the cultural sphere in general which rests firmly and increasingly upon the logic of generalized commodity production (1979: 145).

It is useful to consider the production of games as part of a large-scale commercial culture industry within a capitalist economic system with colonialist roots (Fron et al. 2007; Kerr 2017; Mukherjee 2017) if we are to fully grasp Garnham's 'underlying development' of, in this case, cultural memory. Thus, when applied as a lens to analyze games, the propaganda model contributes to existing scholarship on the politics of video games, the relation between production and form, and, echoing Garnham's statement above, uncovering the materialist processes that produce hegemony.

The Political Economy of the Video Games Industry and Games Analysis

In this section, I qualify why Herman and Chomsky's model is relevant to the games industry and the analysis of games. Similar to their claim that ownership of news media is largely concentrated among few vertically-integrated companies (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 14), so too does the games industry consist of a few major companies that by and large have remained static over the last thirty years (Kerr 2017). This consolidation of cultural and economic power has resulted in fewer titles with ever-bigger production budgets amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars excluding marketing costs (Nieborg 2011). One consequence of these large financial investments is that the games industry relies more and more on retaining their consumers within their digital eco-systems (Joseph 2018). As a result, homogenous game designs that encourage constant and repeated activity with behavioristic rewards have become a mainstay in these products (Nieborg 2016; Stenros and Kultima 2018; Sotamaa/Karppi 2010)—something *MGSV* also is culpable of. Meanwhile, these expensive projects are made possible by the labor of predominantly young and often apparently naïve software

workers in precarious employments (Kerr 2017) who are driven by an easily exploited passion that game companies use for major surplus profits (Woodcock 2016). These companies concurrently make use of global production networks in countries with lower wages and worse working conditions that allows them to exploit cheap, outsourced labor for maximum profit towards the global power centers (Thomsen 2018). Emanating from this context of production, the perspectives and ideologies included in these products conform to the acceptable consensus for entertainment where female characters are sexualized for assumed straight audiences (Lynch et al. 2016), and their racialization favors white Eurocentric hierarchies (Srauy 2019 [2017]; Higgin 2009a; Williams et al. 2009). As studies have shown, US white heterosexual men in their 20s and 30s dominate the characters available in games (Shaw 2015a; Williams et al. 2009; Gray 2014), while the conveyed ideologies and possibilities for action are very much in line with imperialist logics (Mir/Owens 2013; Lammes 2010; Mukherjee 2017; Ford 2016). Thus, the propaganda model and its attention to the ideological implications of modes of production, help us in understanding why mass cultural games are the way they are. In order to illustrate the significance of the political economy of video games on mnemonic hegemony, I now proceed to apply the filters of *ownership*, *sourcing*, *flak*, and *anti-communism and fear* to *MGSV*. I do not include the filter of *advertising* in my analysis, since *MGSV* does not explicitly rely on advertising revenues as its business model.

Ownership

Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]: 3) define the filter of ownership as the size, concentrated ownership, ownerwealth, and profit orientation of dominant mass-media firms. They argue that fewer, but larger actors own more and more of mass media, while their revenue and amassing profits take precedence over all other aspects. The result, Herman and Chomsky argue, is that ownership filters out perspectives or considerations that challenge or threaten the position of the owners or the function of the mass media as a business.

Applying the ownership-filter to the production of *MGSV* one can highlight the internal power hierarchy of Konami as a company and how its business culture influences not only the game's memory politics but also its workers. Konami Holdings Corporation is the company that owns and funds the development of the *Metal Gear* series since its inception in 1989, with the subsidiary Konami Digital Entertainment as responsible for digital game development and publishing. Since the increase of game development budgets, Konami has consolidated its businesses to fewer, but more expensive projects, until a change of executives allocated resources to less risky financial investments with higher returns in mobile and arcade platforms. This was evident back in 2010 when Konami's low-investment mobile games proved to be financial successes. It resulted in a restructuring of the company to focus on projects with lower costs and higher profit-margins (Pearson 2015). Thus, *MGSV* proved to be the final blockbuster budget project greenlit by Konami, until upper management cut the development short and rushed the project's release in September 2015 following its multiple delays. This rush also resulted in a public controversy between the director Hideo Kojima and Konami, where the former was legally barred from speaking to

anyone outside the company, while his name was erased from the marketing of the game (Parkin 2015).

The exact production costs of *MGSV* are unknown, but according to the Japanese financial newspaper Nikkei (2017b), the total amount was ~80 million USD already six months prior to release; a high, but not uncommon, amount for mainstream blockbuster projects. *MGSV* ended up shipping six million copies in the financial quarter of its release that resulted in 771.8 million USD in revenue and 210.8 million in profit for Konami Digital Entertainment (Pearson 2016). The biggest markets for *MGSV* proved to be US and European consumers (Grubb 2015; *PAL Charts* 2015), while the home market of Japan only had seven percent of total sales (Romano 2015). This means that *MGSV* has likely been tailored and developed with the intention to sell in territories where digital game consumer markets and circulation networks have already been established to the degree that a hundred million dollars project is sustainable for Konami. Given the conditions of the ownership filter, it is likely that *MGSV*'s memory politics were made appealing, uncontroversial, and comfortable for such markets to consume.

Some months prior to *MGSV*'s release, Nikkei also published a report on Konami's labor practices and how employees were harassed and bullied by upper management (Pearson 2015). Not only did the public gain insight into how Hideo Kojima was treated with the erasure and silencing of his contribution to the project, but the report uncovered stories of how underperforming employees had to clean up garbage at Konami's fitness clubs; computers were disconnected from the Internet to have workers focus on their task at hand; e-mail addresses were random strings and letters that were randomly reshuffled every month to prevent people outside the company to contact or 'poach' their labor; and lunch breaks were monitored and their total minutes revealed internally to co-workers in order to increase peer-to-peer surveillance. These were just some of the revelations that the Nikkei report unearthed, displaying the company's exploitative and oppressive working conditions.

Two years later in 2017, Nikkei once again reported that Konami was using its influence to obstruct former workers at the company from e.g. getting health insurances; Konami also "files complaints to gaming companies who take on its former employees" (Nitta/Tani 2017b; Nitta/Tani 2017a). Other examples include warning other gaming and media companies against hiring ex-workers; closing business due to pressure from Konami; not being allowed to put Konami experience on their CVs with legal threats; monitoring the social media activities by employees and punishing them accordingly if they step out of line. Despite warnings of how these labor practices might hurt the success and future of the company, Konami has shown record operating profits in 2018 (Valentine 2018), thus confirming what many already knew: Profits and healthy labor practices often do not go hand in hand.

In *MGSV* itself, one 'mechanical aspect' (Aarseth/Calleja 2015) of particular interest to this article is the ability to capture and extract enemy soldiers and prisoners for players' own employment. The game motivates players to do so based on the skills that the characters in question possess—proficiency in combat, intelligence, base development, and a host of other factors related to functioning of the player's home-base. The mechanic of capturing and enslaving soldiers for the players character's ludic benefit is something that Mukherjee touches upon in his article on slavery and video

games “where the protagonist is a free man and has the agency to change the destiny of those who are enslaved” (Mukherjee 2016: 245). Leigh Alexander (2015) aptly observed the parallels between this ‘free man’ managing his enslaved subjects and the managerial position afforded to players and the labor conditions at Konami. As such, the ownership filter here highlights abhorrent labor practices that in turn result in a game where player actions mirror comparable forms of exploitation.

Thus, ownership and the function of business are the foundation for not only the development of *MGSV* but also the virtual game world the workers produced. The owners of Konami have a vested interest in making products that yield high profit, so they produce playable memory politics that are in line with the preconceived beliefs of their consumers, as I also illustrate later. Furthermore, the structure of Konami and the way they treat their employees show how internal labor practices affect the product at the end where the game system of capturing and managing workers reflect comparable labor conditions.

Sourcing

Herman and Chomsky define the sourcing filter as how news media acquire information to produce articles and news segments to sell to audiences (2002 [1988]: 18–19). In US contexts, government and corporate leadership make up the predominant sources of information for journalists. This means that news media reporting needs to correlate with what their sources claim—contesting or opposing them could result in a loss of access to the information that news media needs in order to do their reporting. Therefore, they are more likely to reproduce what these sources state—i.e. an elite consensus—rather than critically engage with the information. While sourcing in news media is significantly different in video games, I propose that sourcing also constitutes a viable tool to understand the limited perspectives and beliefs of the developers at Kojima Productions. For example, in *MGSV*, the developers used sources for the landscape of Afghanistan and Angola, the historical information about the Cold War struggles in these places, the material culture of the setting, and so forth. Thus, while Herman and Chomsky refer to government sources in journalistic reporting, I move the concept to refer to the perspectives and inspirational sources that inform the development of *MGSV*’s memory politics.

One instance of sourcing that filters out dissent, is its reliance on Hollywood narrative conventions that align with US interests. The game director Kojima has previously stated that he wants to shift that focus away from Hollywood (Parkin 2014). Yet *MGSV* clearly follows the genres and cultural associations established in Hollywood cinema. From Kiefer Sutherland—famous for his role as Jack Bauer in the US military propaganda show *24* (Cochran/Surnow 2001–2010; 2014)—as the voice actor for the game’s protagonist, to the hiring of Harry Gregson-Williams (composer of several pro-military films such as *The Rock* (dir. Michael Bay, 1996) and *Spy Game* (dir. Tony Scott, 2001)), to the use of hour-long ‘cutscenes’, to the reliance on Hollywood camera aesthetics, to its military fetishization (Stahl 2009) with the game’s detailed emphasis on the weapons, US military lingo, and military vehicles, *MGSV* and the entire series are known for mimicking US popculture. Moreover, its virtual Afghan landscape mostly consists of rocks, sand, stony hills, guard posts, military bases, and a couple of clay houses. Here, Murray aptly writes, “the formal aesthetic sensibility of the game [...]

mirrors the Afghan landscape of the American cultural imaginary” (Murray 2017: 166–167). In fact, Hideo Kojima revealed in an interview that parts of the depicted Afghanistan was inspired by the landscapes of Jordan (*Metal Gear Wiki* 2018), thereby echoing the “‘Orientalist’ mode of representation” (Šisler 2008: 207), where Middle Eastern and Arabic countries are flattened in meaning and nuance.

MGSV’s sourcing also highlights its gender dynamics. A series already known for its use of female characters as sexualized for a male gaze (*GamesRadar* 2015), the *only* female character in *MGSV* is a *mute* sniper called ‘Quiet’ who dresses in a bikini, ripped stockings, and a thong. Kojima excused the visual design by claiming that he wanted to challenge fans when they dress up (‘cosplay’) as Quiet (Thomsen 2015). However, the game highly emphasizes her as a sexual object with camera zoom-ins on her cleavage during cutscenes, stripping animations during helicopter rides, and a gratuitous shower-scene shown in first-person perspective for assumed straight male consumers. This sexual objectification is exacerbated with violent misogyny in one scene where Quiet is electrically tortured and sexually assaulted while the camera lingers on her cleavage. Thereby, as Gandolfi and Sciannamblo write, *MGSV*’s gender politics forms “a war imagery characterized by (a) the exploitation of women and (b) an employment of female body as a tool to fulfill the visual pleasure of the male gaze” (2019 [2018]: 331). Quiet, the *only* female character in the game’s narrative, is unable to speak, is strongly objectified for heterosexual male gazes, and has to undergo sexualized violence. Although a thorough gender analysis of *MGSV* is beyond the scope of this article, from my reading it is clear that the misogynist dynamics in the game relate to the gender politics at Konami and the patriarchal aspect of Japanese society with its conservative and oppressive gender structures. The Western games industry has had decades of structural sexism that marginalizes and oppresses people who do not identify as cis-men (Ochsner 2019 [2017]; Fron et al. 2007), and this structural force is intensified in Japan by its patriarchal contexts (Fujihara 2014; Okabe 2018) with one instance of a female employee at another Japanese game developer attempting suicide due to sexual harassment (Ashcraft 2012). As such, the sourcing for how women are represented in *MGSV* rely on hegemonic views of the history of women in warfare and media, as well as a misogynistic games culture, industry, and dominant patriarchal segments of Japanese society.

Finally, the sourcing filter also relates to how the notion of the subaltern are effectively voiceless in the manufacture of consent. It is precisely those who can never be articulated that are excluded from constructions of cultural memory such as in *MGSV*. As I show later, the peoples of Afghanistan and Angola are hardly, if ever, represented in *MGSV*’s virtual playground. It could reasonably be assumed that the developers simply did not include or consider what Angolan or Afghan peoples of today think about the imperial proxy wars in the 1980’s and so implicitly were made voiceless or non-existent. Their subalternity also extends to counter-hegemonic perspectives such as decolonization and anti-imperialist ideology, which are also precluded for players. This is made explicit in an audiotape in the end of the game where one character informs Venom Snake that

[t]he civil war will keep burning on whether we accept this job or not. Another East–West proxy war, with the communist MPLA on one side and the

capitalist-funded CFA on the other. An endless seesaw of blood and violence played out in the hands of the superpowers. [...] For us to survive, we need to expand our organization, and get strong enough that no one can threaten us. So, our only option is to fight, and grow, and fight, and grow (Otness 2016).

The game's narrative thereby forces players to circumvent an anti-imperialist play, by positioning the Angolan Civil War as a perpetual struggle without any real sides. Mukherjee, following Edward Said, identifies such foreclosures of anti-imperial imagination, where "both the geopolitical and the identity maps are 'adjusted' by the colonial hegemonic system" (Mukherjee 2018: 515). It is not possible for *MGSV* to grapple with the complexities and contradictions of imperialism in Angola or Afghanistan, and therefore it has to resolve its tensions by reverting back to its mnemonic hegemony. Once the game's narrative ends, players in *MGSV* are therefore left without any resolution to the war for independence in Angola or Afghanistan—any alternative histories and avenues of anti-imperialism are foreclosed by the tyranny of realism (Shaw 2015b). In that sense, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model can be further complicated with reference to how groups and counter-hegemonic ideologies are left out and rendered voiceless via the process of sourcing. In *MGSV*, it appears that the peoples of Angola and Afghanistan are effectively without centrality or agency, and counter-hegemonic commemorative play (Hammar 2017) is not possible.

Flak

Herman and Chomsky define the filter of flak as the individual or organized negative responses to a media statement or program (2002 [1988]: 26). This occurs when a news media outlet experiences heavy criticism for publishing controversial news stories. The 'flak' refers here to the attack and discrediting of the outlet or individual journalist in question, which often forces the outlet to withdraw such reporting. In response, news media must build up barricades, spend resources on legal defense, and protect advertising that might get withdrawn because of it. Flak therefore serves to demotivate or force news outlets to refrain from reporting on stories that might entail controversy, especially from actors with power and wealth at their disposal.

This is evident in the games industry where game publishers want to avert flak as much as possible. The optimal objective for companies is to rely on hegemonic depictions in order to sell their game, but simultaneously appear as neutral and unassuming as possible in engaging with cultural zeitgeists (Campbell 2018). This becomes palpable in the marketing of blockbuster games, where developers, executives, and PR downplay or completely absolve the inherent politics of their games, while the imagery and narrative in the promotional material clearly highlight these politics (Pfister 2018). Inversely, flak also happens when social criticisms related to gender, sexuality, or race mobilize reactionary consumers to harass developers and critics, especially if the initial critics are women and minorities (Massanari 2017; M. Salter 2017; A. Salter/Blodgett 2012). Here, game companies try to avoid the ire of these reactionary consumers by ignoring the ongoing harassment campaigns, while continuing to center white American male protagonists and marginalizing white women and people of color in their products. Game companies thereby avoid flak by adhering to the established status quo with what appears to be the acceptable form of ideology—i.e. US

politics with white heterosexual men as the driving force, while other perspectives and identities are left in the margins and made subaltern.

This adherence to the status quo and avoidance of flak is seen in the landscape of *MGSV*. Its version of Afghanistan is empty and devoid of civilians—they are effectively subaltern. As Pötzsch (2017 [2015]) highlights in his research on the representation of conflict in war games, civilians in war games are usually ‘selectively filtered’ out. This way, the genre can “systematically structure player experiences in a way that glorifies warfare and soldiery and that suppresses unpleasant, yet salient features and consequences of military and other violent conduct” (157). Afghanistan and Angola are in a sense a place outside of reality, where players can adopt the role of the invader who enters the life-less war zone to accrue wealth and personnel in a ‘Just War’ (Donald 2019 [2017]). Flak filtering enables *MGSV* to convey the view of military conflict as clean, honorable, and just, with the subaltern being both silent, passive, and ultimately absent. There is no loss of innocent life and little consideration of the peoples of Afghanistan. Instead, its virtual playground only represents Soviet-backed Afghan soldiers and Mujahedeen, and never US military operatives, thereby reproducing the hegemonic innocence of US imperialism. As Mukherjee writes, “the images of the orient are always being manufactured and only represent things that colonial imperialism wishes to show and see” (2018: 515). Indeed, *Venom Snake* only faces Soviet soldiers or private military forces without national affiliations, thereby making it possible to avoid controversy for Konami. One could easily imagine the flak that they would have received if the game allowed players to assassinate CIA operatives or to assist the Angolan people rise up against the foreign invaders. While the game does address the imperial interests of foreign forces in Angola via small audio-clips, this commentary is unfortunately relegated to optional cassette tapes that players might accidentally pick up in the virtual landscape and listen to at their own discretion. As such, the game makes the topic of imperialism optional, if not accidental. Like the aforementioned phenomenon of game publishers both relying on cultural imagery to promote their product and denying the politics of such imagery, this allows Konami to have their ‘Cold War proxy war cake and eat it too’, so to speak. As Murray argues,

[t]hus, the game’s evocation of colonial powers is not reflected upon by the game’s narrative or its mechanics [...]—they are simply a comfortable narrative contextualization to construct opposition for the US player-character (2017: 162).

In the game’s depiction of Afghanistan, Murray’s point is seen when there is no sign of technological progress or civilization beyond military installations, thereby reproducing the depiction of colonized countries as uncivilized and conflicts only struggles over land without people or infrastructure (2017: 150). In a sense, Murray argues, “[...] Afghanistan is configured as in need of intervention” (2017: 167). Players have to travel via helicopter from their offshore military base to the deserted Afghan landscape to eliminate opposition, procure resources and personnel, and conquer territory. As such, the game invites players to ‘intervene’ in the sense that these activities are unlabored and worthless until players arrive to procure and activate their use-value (researching

equipment, staffing at the base, buying new weapons, etc.) without consideration to what such ‘extractivism’ entails for the local population.

This extractivism is also seen in the case of Angola (which the game’s narrative refers to as ‘Africa’, thereby continuing the colonial tradition of reducing countries and borders created by colonial powers to an entire continent as seen in hegemonic discourses in other media (Wainaina 2019 [2005])). The Angolan geographical landscapes in *MGSV* vary between jungle, swamp, plains, and mud with the occasional military bases, guard posts, mines, and an oilfield, echoing the Western stereotypical depiction of sub-Saharan African countries as conflict-ridden nature only populated by military forces and resources to be appropriated (Bonsu 2009; Himmelman 2012). Yet while the game explicitly depicts the colonial powers, such as South Africa and the Soviet Union battling over Angola, this proxy war is seen as a senseless war between equally opposing sides—i.e. players are not encouraged to reflect upon the victims of proxy wars, the effects of colonialism on the population, national sovereignty, and so forth. Instead, the use of these colonial settings serves as a form of ‘window dressing’ to ‘spice’ up the imagined players’ activities. As Murray argues, “as a *playable* space, it lends itself even more to the ‘dreamwork of imperialism’” (2017: 138, her emphasis). Thus, space in *MGSV* follows Edward Said’s classic definition of imperialism as “thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others” (Said 1994 [1993]: 7). Yet these ‘others’ in *MGSV* are never really present—i.e. they are effectively subaltern, as established earlier.

Flak, it seems, entails that *MGSV*’s colonial politics are made comfortable and inoffensive for players to play with. There is sparse critical commentary on Cold War imperial interests, the virtual spaces are selectively sanitized from the horrors of war and instead created as spaces for plundering, and finally the people of Afghanistan and Angola are reduced to colonial stereotypes, if not entirely erased. It speaks to the contemporary hegemonic discourse on colonial history that this game’s simulation of proxy wars are considered inoffensive and playful by consumers and media alike, and that anything subversive or indeed counter-hegemonic would likely face flak.

To be fair, *MGSV* also depicts Angolan child soldiers, yet they also serve as a part of the (Western) visual imagination of sub-Saharan Africa with children holding US- and Soviet-exported rifles. The dynamics between colonizer and the colonized is exacerbated when players have to rescue a group of enslaved Angolan child soldiers from a local diamond mine, and escort them to a landing zone for helicopter extraction. Afterwards, the children are ‘liberated’ in the sense that they now live on the offshore military base where they will learn “to read and write, do basic jobs”, thereby giving them “a chance at a real life” as Venom Snake puts it during a cutscene. Subsequently, the player-character is able to capture other Angolan child soldiers and send them to the player’s homebase. While it is unusual for a game with this relatively high budget to include ‘African’ child soldiers—something which is perceived as controversial by mainstream Western entertainment companies and audiences—the game does not comment or elaborate on their politics. The children simply exist in the game as a superficial nod to the topic of ‘African’ child soldiers—they hardly ever have a unique name or receive any form of individual characterization with little to no dialogue. It is simply not possible for players to free them or release them, but instead the choice is

either to let them continue being child soldiers or imprison them on a remote base to, mechanically, function as value for better player abilities.

This mechanical reduction of child soldiers, similar to the mechanical function of slaves in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Hammar 2017; Mukherjee 2016), also speaks to the technological filtering where realist simulations in video games simply are too complex to produce and therefore confer limitations on game developers. In order to be competitive and meet state-of-the-art production values in the games industry, thousands of workhours are required to develop animations, textures, rigging, lighting, voice acting, motion capture, script writing, bug-testing, and many other aspects of contemporary mainstream video game development. As such, the technological filtering of video games entail that realist simulations are both costly and difficult to produce, thus excluding non-essential narrative expositions, such as the complexities of child-soldiers. We see this in *MGSV* where narrative expositions are relegated to simple voice-clips between different characters that can be acquired in the game world as the aforementioned cassette tapes and played as simple audio files for players, something that is relatively cheap to put in a game. This is a cost-saving measure that cuts back expenses and reduces the labor complexities of storytelling in video games, and it thereby filters certain viewpoints that are deemed unimportant by the developers or that can only be reproduced according to the algorithmic nature of video games. As such, it can be reasonably assumed that technological impositions matter in the manufacture of consent as well, insofar as the medium affects our ability to interpret and configure (Shaw 2017). Here, I am referring to the technological conditions of media that shape the manufacture of consent to a degree that perhaps Herman and Chomsky did not account for. Contemporary popular video games are simply very difficult, and therefore costly, to produce. Moreover, we can reasonably assume that the algorithmic nature of video games imply that their meaning-making has to conform to this algorithmic condition, as Alexander Galloway (2006) for example argues on the simulation of history in video games: All meaning is subjected to the logic of code, e.g. “the transcoding of history into specific mathematical models” (Galloway 2006: 103). The intrusion of technological constraints and affordances do ‘filter’ what perspectives are possible, both on a practical level (political economy of game production) and an ontological level (algorithmic nature of video games).

Anti-Communism and Fear

Herman and Chomsky define the filter called ‘anti-communism and fear’ (2002 [1988]: 29) as an othering of dissenting opinions that are framed as intolerable and unreflectively regarded as a threat. Given the ‘Red Scare’ in the US during the Cold War (Haynes 1995), they refer to the silencing tactic of being labeled a ‘communist’, an unacceptable position considered beyond the pale in US contexts. The filter of anti-communism and fear thus refers to positions and labels that are considered *a priori* reprehensible by the established hegemonic discourse. The filter is mostly employed as a rhetorical device to exclude counter-hegemonic perspectives from even being entertained or engaged with. Basically, Herman and Chomsky’s filter refers to a fundamental form of radical othering of someone with the objective to delegitimize their perspectives.

In *MGSV*, the anti-communism and fear filter is seen in the main villain ‘Skullface’. He is a disfigured main antagonist who wishes to eradicate the English language because of US cultural imperialism (cf. Phillipson 1992). His plan is made possible with the fantasy element of parasitic spores that make people lose their language. Skullface also intends to arm all nation states with nuclear weapons to allow for MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) and nuclear deterrence between all nations. His plans are ultimately foiled by Venom Snake, who then executes Skullface. In a way, his motivation echoes the anti-imperialist movements and positions in the 1970’s against the US cultural imperialism via products and culture such as Disney (Mosco 2009 [1996]: 91–92; Dorfman/Mattelart 1975). In this way, Skullface arguably represents a position that would otherwise be viewed favorable by those opposing cultural imperialism via language. Yet by framing anti-imperialist ideologies, such as the linguistic ramifications of cultural imperialism, as being beyond the pale and associated with disfigurement, *MGSV* very much filters out such positions.

Similarly, *MGSV* also evokes the disease-ridden exotification associated with the colonized people of the Global South (cf. Fanon 1963 [1961]; Said 1979 [1978]; Stronach 2006). We see this when enemy soldiers turn into mindless husks who are then controlled by *MGSV*’s antagonists. This same virulent control of colonized people mirrors the way the zombie genre has been used as ‘a surface upon which humanity reflects anxieties’ (Boyer 2014). The ‘subaltern zombie’ of the ‘exotic and dangerous Africa’ is a symptom of colonial consumers’ anxiety about the colonized lands reminiscent of the colonial imagination of the African continent as wild and disease-ridden (Kiple/Kiple 1980).⁴ In one segment of *MGSV*, bedridden Angolan children are medically experimented on in a decrepit, dirty make-shift hospital ward, which highlights this cultural imagery of ‘Africa’ as a plague-ridden space that needs intervention from the white savior, Venom Snake. The infected children and soldiers are both without a voice and without agency, thus they are the ultimate subaltern who literally cannot speak.

As such, the filter of anti-communism and fear highlights on the one hand how anti-imperialist ideologies are represented as beyond the pale via the disfigured villain Skullface, while the spaces of especially Angola are reminiscent of white colonial imaginations of sub-Saharan Africa as disease-ridden and inhospitable. Therefore, *MGSV* propagates an already existing image that shores up a cultural consensus among Western players regarding anti-Western ideologies and the lands and peoples of Angola (‘Africa’) and Afghanistan.

Conclusion

MGSV stands out as a game that simulates colonial imaginations of the proxy wars in 1980’s Afghanistan and Angola. Players are able to traverse these spaces without consequence for local populations and with hegemonic imagery that reduce these spaces to entirely militarized spaces where enemy soldiers can be captured and enslaved. It follows US mnemonic hegemony as evidenced in the portrayal of Angola as a disease-ridden, hostile environment; in how its populations are turned into mute monsters unable to articulate their struggles; in how these countries solely exist for players to

⁴ A similar image of ‘Africa’ is also seen in the aforementioned case *Resident Evil 5* that invoked similar dynamics of race and colonialism (Harrer/Pichlmair 2015; Geysler/Tshabalala 2011).

extract resources from; in how children are uncivilized soldiers meant to be saved by foreign interventions; in how both Afghanistan and Angola can be invaded and left without any consequences to their spaces and inhabitants. Despite being made in Japan, *MGSV* reiterates hegemonic ideas that one typically finds in European and North American imaginations, including patriarchal notions of womanhood seen in the character Quiet. It is therefore edifying to notice a non-Western collective of individuals producing a game that reiterates the Western mnemonic hegemony. Via my application of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, I have shown that the ownership filter brought attention to the profit-maximizing and exploitation of workers at Konami. The sourcing filter drew out the game's Hollywood influences, patriarchal gender norms, and exclusion of subaltern perspectives. The flak filter showed the erasure of counter-hegemonic ideas and the reinforcement of US mnemonic hegemony in order to avoid controversy. Finally, the filter related to anti-communism and fear showed how the game antagonizes anti-imperialist and subaltern approaches to the memory of the Angolan and Afghan Civil Wars. Finally, I have indicated venues of interest to an improved propaganda model, such as technological filters and notions of the subaltern. In turn, my article potentially serves as a case study to explain how relations of production frame form. War games, and arguably video games more broadly, are part of and reproduce a hegemonic system that reinforces Western consensus on cultural memory related to 21st century colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism, and ultimately, can be traced back to the political economy of video games.

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