**'Needs to Be Done': the representation of torture in video games and in *Metal Gear Solid V***
**Introduction**

In 2013, Hideo Kojima presented the trailer of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, which portrayed multiple characters enduring torture and physical violence within the fictional military and political context that, together with its stealth game mechanics, became the franchise signature. In the wake of a similar controversies in the same year around the inclusion of a playable torture sequence in other games, the media and the specialised press strongly reacted to the contents of *The Phantom Pain* trailer. Kojima responded to accusations on the exploitative nature of these images stressing their importance for the expressive growth of the medium. Crucial to the journalists' concern and in Kojima's apologetic reply was the exclusion of any playable element in the torture sequences. By analysing the torture cut-scenes in relation to the interrogation game mechanics in which Snake, the protagonist, uses torture techniques in order to retrieve intel from the enemies, the chapter complicates the controversial understanding of the representation of torture offered by the trailer. Fundamental to this is the contextualisation of the *procedural rhetoric* of the game within the poetics developed by Kojima throughout the *MG* franchise. Drawing from Elaine Scarry's seminal work on this topic, I propose a reading of *The Phantom Pain* that short-circuits its initial exploitative lure.

**'Needs to be done'**

At E3 2013[1] Hideo Kojima presented the trailer of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*.[2] While the game had previously been introduced to the media at similar industry events,[3] here Kojima offered to the public a longer look on his work, displaying extended gameplay sequences and revealing the game's Cold War geopolitical setting during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Following the E3, an extended "Red Banned" version[4] of the trailer was released online, containing unseen footage from the cut-scenes[5] which provided insights on the story and characters featuring in the fifth chapter of the franchise. The trailer was met with strong reactions among the specialised press who commented on the gross and brutal nature of its imageries and tropes, questioning the ethical character of these contents.[6] Of particular interest were the first three minutes of the latest trailer featuring 'several scenes containing graphic torture and violence,' in which a

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[1] The E3, also known as Electronic Entertainment Expo, is one of the biggest yearly gatherings in the video game industry.

[2] Kojima Productions, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, Playstation 4, 2015.

[3] A teaser of the game was first released in December at the Spike Video Game Awards 2012, showcasing early sequences of the game. The game was then officially announced in March at the GDC 2013, by Kojima himself, with a stunt: the designer entered the conference stage covered in bandages, initially hiding his identity like the protagonist of the game.

[4] Unlike the previous version presented at the E3, the trailer has been rated and PG 18. See KONAMI, 'Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain' E3 2013 RED BANNED Trailer (Extended Director's Cut), *YouTube*, 11 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMyoCr2MnpM (accessed 05 May 2018).

[5] Cut-scenes are pre-edited sequences used in video games to deliver narrative elements that help to contextualise the activities required to the player by the game.

[6] See Brian Ashcraft, 'This Nine Minute *Metal Gear Solid V* Trailer Is Pretty Gross,' *Kotaku*, 11 June 2013, https://kotaku.com/this-nine-minute-metal-gear-solid-v-trailer-is-pretty-g-512658946 (accessed 05 May 2018) and John Funk, 'Extended Metal Gear Solid 5 trailer adds scenes of brutal torture,' *Polygon*, 11 June 2013, https://www.polygon.com/2013/6/11/4419914/extended-metal-gear-solid-5-trailer-adds-scenes-of-brutal-torture. (accessed 05 May 2018) More concerns around the use of violence on military prisoners have been raised in relation to another instalment in the series, *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes* (Kojima Productions, Playstation 3, 2014). The game functions as a prequel to *MGSV* and was used also as a tech demo. It was particularly criticised in relation to a collectable tape which contains the recording of a prisoner being raped. Cf. Ria Jenkins, 'Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes Fails to Portray Sexual Violence Meaningfully,' *The Guardian*, 09 April 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/apr/09/metal-gear-solid-ground-zeroes-sexual-violence (accessed 05 May 2018)

woman and two men are tortured in the context of military violence on prisoners, using electrocution, batons and water boarding.[7]

The first torture sequence opens on a soldier operating a charging cell. The camera pans over two cables connected to metallic rods, generating sparkles and smoke on contact. Composition and editing emphasise the threatening nature of the tools, anticipating the initiation of the torture sequence and, consequently, the experience of pain. The anticipation of pain is thus extended in time through a display of the tools associated with it, foretelling its exaction.

These images are further complicated by the subject under interrogation: a barely-dressed woman whose face is covered by a black bag as she is being tortured by a group of male soldiers. Later in the trailer the character is revealed to be Quiet, a sniper soldier who, after attempting to kill the protagonist, Venom Snake, joins ranks and becomes part of his PMC (Private Military Company), the Diamond Dogs.[8] Together with the controversial torture tropes, the sexualised portrayal of Quiet was a matter of concern to the press with regards to the representation of women offered by the game, anticipating the accusations of misogyny faced by the video game industry since Gamergate in 2014.[9] The camera frames Quiet tied to a chair, her clothing comprised of a leather bra and gloves, worn out stockings and military boots. A masked soldier approaches Quiet, pointing two metal batons directly to her chest, and electrocutes her, causing her body to shake in convulsions. The camera pans down, seemingly censoring the image of pain, only to then reveal her feet spasmodically tapping against the floor before returning to the initial framing. Adding to the problematic character of these images is their spectacular quality. As a red light fills the interrogation room, the use of lens flare effects and the presence of luminous refractions against her overexposed skin imbue these images with gloss and plasticity, producing a sensuous experience for the viewer. The spectacle of the tortured body is, in fact, informed by the digital nature of these artefacts and invites the viewer to engage in a sensual 'surface play' characteristic of digital imagery.[10] While the sexualisation of the character aggravates the sequence, the sensuous engagement with these images becomes a crucial instance to make visible the problematic structure of power embedded in Quiet's torture scene, requesting the interrogation of their politics and the role of the player in *The Phantom Pain*. Also in the second and third torture sequences the victims have their face covered by a black plastic bag: while the first one is beaten up with a rifle and then shot to death in a military camp reminiscent of Guantanamo, the second undergoes waterboarding in an interrogation room.[11] The covered face of the three victims is an important signifier of the power relations that are central to the structure of torture. This image literalises what Elaine Scarry terms, in her seminal investigation of *The Body in Pain*, the 'inexpressibility of physical pain,'[12] also negating on a visual level the victim's gaze, consequently placing both the torturer and the spectator in a safe position. In feminist theorist Laura Mulvey's terms, the *gaze* of the viewer spectates the event, as a voyeur who cannot be looked back and cannot be seen.[13] But the viewer's positioning in pre-recorded material from the game

[7] John Funk, 'Extended Metal Gear Solid 5 trailer adds scenes of brutal torture,' *Polygon*, 11 June 2013, https://www.polygon.com/2013/6/11/4419914/extended-metal-gear-solid-5-trailer-adds-scenes-of-brutal-torture (accessed 05 May 2018).

[8] In the game, the player is given the option to spare or execute Quiet immediately after her capture. In the first case, the character becomes one of the 'buddies' available to the player as a support during the missions.

[9] See Patricia Hernandez, 'Three Theories As To Why *Metal Gear Solid V*'s Sniper Is So, Um, Sexy,' *Polygon*, 09 July, 2013, https://kotaku.com/three-theories-as-to-why-metal-gear-solid-vs-sniper-is-1276826053 (accessed 05 May 2018).

[10] Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: surface play and spectacle in new media genre* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[11] This scene was later revealed to be part of the story of the prequel to *The Phantom Pain*, *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes*.

[12] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

[13] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen*, 16/3 (1975), 16-18.

does not reflect the status of the player. There is a divide between the experience of the trailer and that of the game which mirrors the difference between spectator and player. In his seminal account on nature of cybertexts, Espen Aarseth highlights the distinction between the pleasure of linear media, and that of *ergodic* (from the Greek έργον: "work" and οδός: "path") texts: the 'risk of rejection.'[14] In fact, Aarseth notices that, unlike films and books, video games can be failed, as they require from the player a non-trivial effort to be traversed.

[**Insert Fig 1** Quiet's electrocution scene from the trailer]
[ **Insert Fig 2** A prisoner's waterboarding in a military camp]

As from its title, *The Phantom Pain* is explicitly invested in the confrontation with sufferance. The game goes as far as to provocatively play with its incommunicability, particularly through the character of Quiet, whose name embodies the impossibility of expression. As announced by the trailer intertitles, Quiet's name reflects her mutism as she has been 'deprived of her words.' This detail contributes to the complexity of the torture sequence, as she cannot fulfil her role of informer in the interrogation. Later in the game, Quiet reveals she carries the "vocal cord parasite" that the PMC Cypher intends to use to take over Anglophone countries. The virus, which the game's anti-hero Skull Face intends to use to take vengeance over the hegemonic power of western culture, is triggered by the use of the English language and can spread through speech. On the one hand, as noted by the press, the sequence invites questions around the politics of torture as represented in the media. On the other hand, the fetishization of the tools connected to pain as well as that of the female body reveal the nature of torture as something more than an unlawful excess in 'intelligence interrogations.'[15] The US military field manual for the collection of intelligence published in 2006, provides a list of 'prohibited actions' in relation to interrogation techniques that include waterboarding and electrocution. Through the adoption of a vocabulary that separates the lawful and unlawful gathering of intelligence, also here language is used to control and discipline the body, displacing the focus from the pain experienced by the subject interrogated during "torture," to the importance of the information gained through "interrogation." Using the terminology developed by Scarry, the problematic status of the trailer reveals torture as the 'production of a fantastic illusion of power' and its assertion.[16] For Scarry, the incontestable and absolute reality of physical pain reifies and materialises the exhibition of power that represents the true purpose of torture:

What assists the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power is an obsessive, self-conscious display of agency. On the simplest level, the agent displayed is the weapon.[17]

Crucially, the reification of power is a statement of the *agency* of the torturer, which can only be uttered through the pain exhibited on the body of the tortured. In visual terms, the agency of the torturer is vicariously shared with the spectator via camera, who takes part in the event as a witness through the photographic apparatus. The problematic relationship between torture, its representation and fruition is not exclusive of video games which are

[14] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 2 and 4.
[15] Anon., *Field Manual 2-22.3: Human intelligence collector operations* (Washington DC: Headquarters: Department of the Army, 2006), 5-21.
[16] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 28.
[17] Ibid., 27

only an instance of wider discourses on media violence. But if the camera works as a proxy for the spectator, who is safely complacent to the event, how does the designed experience structure the agency of the player in video games? The interactive nature of the video game medium requires us to rethink the relationship between the viewer – now player – and the text. The concept of agency is fundamental to video game aesthetics, often used to discuss "interactivity" while avoiding the conceptual vagueness of this term, and is understood more specifically as 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.'[18] Agency translates in the player's ability to make choices that impact the virtual environment, which are afforded by a designed experience. Adapting Scarry's 1980s theatrical metaphor of the 'production room,' the structure of torture can be understood through video games as an experience designed to provide a feeling of agency to its user. Nevertheless, as stated before, the ergodic nature of video games can frustrate the player with failure.

The interactive character of video games is often identified as the source of the ethical problem with these representations, for it establishes a more direct form of engagement between the object represented and the player. Responding to the accusations around the exploitative nature of the trailer's images, Kojima reassured the press that the player would not be able to interact with torture sequences, and that these would only feature in the cut-scenes. Implicit to this argument is the assumption that the lack of interactivity can safeguard the structure of the representation. Moreover, Kojima stressed the importance of the adult contents in these sequences for the expressive development of video games as a medium, stating: 'it's something that needs to be done.'[19] Crucial to Kojima's apologetic reply was the exclusion of any playable element, consequently allowing the designer to retain control of the player's experience:

As the expressiveness of video games goes up, if you want to go beyond that it's not something you can avoid. Of course, not all video games have to do this, and in my case it's not something that I want to go through. If the violence will give new emotions that are important to the game, I want to put it in there, especially with this game where one of the main topics is revenge. I don't want to walk around that.[20]

Despite Kojima's explanation, commentators questioned in what way the lack of player's interaction during these sequences could suffice to sanitise their imagery: 'I do wonder why the scenes in *Metal Gear Solid V* aren't interactive (especially if they have been in the past). Isn't that the whole point of games or whatever?'[21] Reinforcing the critics scepticism was the fact that *The Phantom Pain* was not the first chapter of the *MGS* series featuring episodes of torture. Previous examples are found in *Metal Gear Solid*[22] and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*,[23] in which it is the player-character to be placed in the position of the victim. In the first instalment of the series, the protagonist, Solid Snake, is tortured on an electrocution bed. Here the player is required to press one of the control buttons in order to regain strength between the shockwaves inflicted on the player-character. The torture is

[18] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace*, updated edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017 [1997]), 159.
[19] Martin Robinson, 'Metal Gear Solid 5's torture scene will be non-playable,' *Eurogamer.net*, 20 July 2013, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-09-20-metal-gear-solid-5s-torture-scene-will-be-non-playable (accessed 02 February 2018).
[20] Ibid..
[21] Patricia Hernandez, 'Kojima: Waterboarding, Torture 'Needs To Be Done' in Games Like MGS,' *Kotaku.com*, 20 July 2013, https://kotaku.com/kojima-waterboarding-torture-needs-to-be-done-in-ga-1357627385 (accessed 02 February 2018)
[22] Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, *Metal Gear Solid*, Playstation, 1998.
[23] Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, Playstation 2, 2004.

not only physical, but also psychological. Ocelot, the torturer, warns Snake that any attempt at resisting the interrogation would lead to the death of his partner, Meryl Silverburgh. The player is presented with the choice of completing this stage in two ways: by managing to refill the strength bar in order to survive Ocelot's torture or, alternatively, by surrendering the information. Despite Ocelot's warning, it is the latter option that leads to Meryl's death at the end of the game, implicitly punishing the player for taking the easy way out.

Of particular interest in this sequence is the intense physical effort required from the player to complete this stage and to survive the torture. Through the controller, the representation of torture in the game is tied to the haptic experience of the player. The stress and fatigue experienced by the player while relentlessly pressing the buttons on the controller formally mirrors the physical pain endured by Snake during the electrocution. In this way, the game attempts to convey the distress of the player-character to the player. Appealing to the interactive nature of their representation, video games require an engagement that is not exhausted by the interpretative work of a viewer and, instead, involves also a process of 'configurative performance' through which the text is fundamentally reconfigured by the player at each iteration and with each gameplay.[24] Video games do not exist without the performance of the player, and the trailer – a para-textual form that instructs the viewer's reception of the text – is not able to provide a satisfactory account of the gameplay experience. On the one hand, video game trailers constitute important objects for the development of authorial discourses that guide the fruition of these artefact as art.[25] I argue that *The Phantom Pain* trailer instructs the player on the unjust and unreliable nature of interrogation techniques, that is then reflected also via procedural rhetoric in the game. Conversely, trailers produce an opaque and partial understanding of the game which excludes an essential part of the play experience and opens them up to potential criticism.[26] Criticising the visual-centric understanding of video game aesthetic that populates industrial as well as academic discourses, Graeme Kirkpatrick calls attention to the invisibility of its form, which he argues emerges only through the analysis of its material apparatus, particularly in the controller:

No one talks about pressing 'X,' then 'circle,' then 'triangle' and no one feels that this is what they are doing, unless they are bored with the game, following a 'walk through' or using a cheat for the first time. Good play is about feeling and its seems that being able to feel what we are supposed to be feeling is, at least partly, a function of *not* looking at or thinking about our hands.[27]

The non-mimetic nature of the button-pressing activity on a physical device critically informs the representation of violent iconography in videogames, as the interpretative activity of meaning-making is faced by countless iterations of player's performance. For Kirkpatrick, such repetition generates a 'cynicism' in the player who, unlike a spectator or a reader, does not enter a 'willing suspension of disbelief' and instead constantly negotiates her critical distance from the text, being reminded of its ludic nature by the presence of the interface.[28] Such distance is registered, for example, in the 'ridiculousness' that characterises video game action whenever the player is explicitly required to press buttons,

[24] Markku Eskelinen and Ragnhild Tronstad, 'Video Games as Configurative Performance,' in Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 195–220.
[25] Ewan Kirkland, 'Discursively Constructing the Art of Silent Hill,' *Games and Culture*, 5/3 (2010), 314-328.
[26] The promotion of video games in the past relied more extensively on the use of *demo* (short for demonstration) that allowed the player to play a portion of the game representative of the whole experience.
[27] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 9.
[28] Ibid., 41.

leading to an 'eruption of a representation of the controller onto the screen.'[29] The emergence of the interface on screen makes video game form visible during the excess or the failure of player's performance, as for example in *Metal Gear Solid* torture sequence. For game critic Steve Pool, the hyperbolic action that is characteristic of the series generates a 'humorous self-consciousness' that deconstructs the heroic and celebrative tones of its military fiction, making *Metal Gear Solid* an anti-war game.[30] Poole's analysis of the game is mostly focused on its narrative aspects, but the author notices how the game stealth core mechanics produce a non-violent alternative to conflict solution.[31] Similarly, Nick Robinson argues that 'the game offers a mainstream example of the consistent use of *procedural rhetoric* to offer a social critique of militarisation.'[32] Based on of Ian Bogost's influential work on *persuasive games*,[33] Robinson draws attention to the importance of analysing video games procedural rhetoric from a socio-political point of view outlining both the complicity of the video game industry in promoting ideas of permanent warfare that serve the interests of the military-industrial complex, as well as individuating the potential for critical engagement through these artefacts.

Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as 'the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.'[34] Using Bogost's approach to analyse the procedural rhetoric of *The Phantom Pain*, the problematic representation of torture offered by the trailer is complicated in the game. In fact, despite Kojima's statements, the game deploys some interrogation mechanics that allow the player to take part in torture sequences. By framing the procedural rhetoric of the interrogation mechanics within the context of Kojima's authorial discourse on the military-industry complex and on the warfare economy, as enunciated by the trailer, the game can provide a space for the critique of what Scarry terms 'the structure of torture,' as much as an instance of its spectacularisation. Through the use of intertitles in the trailer, the heroic undertones generally associated with military narratives are deconstructed and deflated. The intertitles are juxtaposed with the images of torture previously analysed and provide a list of tropes associated with the rhetoric of military heroism (the nation, ideology and justice) preceded by the locution 'not for.' The last caption makes explicit Kojima's meta-critical intention by deconstructing the ideology of war-games and revealing the futile motive that generally moves the characters in these games: 'only for revenge.' Before proceeding with the analysis of the game, the press' initial response to the *Phantom Pain* trailer needs to be understood as the result of the ongoing difficult relationship between video games, violence and media culture.


**Triangulating torture: video game violence, the military-game complex and the procedural rhetoric of the War on Terror.**

The alarming response to the trailer mirrors larger concerns with the representation of military violence in video games and, more broadly, the relationship between games and violent behaviours. Similar concerns had, in fact, been raised in relation to games such as

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[29] Ibid., 107.

[30] Steve Poole, *Trigger Happy: video games and the entertainment revolution* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004 [2000]), 195, 394.

[31] Ibid., 395

[32] Nick Robinson, 'Videogames, Persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or embedding the military-Entertainment Complex?,' *Political Studies*, 60 (2012), 504-522 (115).

[33] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: the expressive power of video games*, London: MIT Press, 2007.

[34] Ibid., ix.

*Splinter Cell: Conviction*[35] and *Grand Theft Auto 5*,[36] both of which display a variety of torture scenarios – here perpetrated by the protagonists and performed by the player – that have been alternatively criticised as unnecessary excess, as well as being appreciated for their subversive potential.[37] The representation of torture in video games is framed within concerns around the normalization of military violence on civilians and the militarisation of society, as for example in the infamous 'No Russians' mission from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*,[38] in which the player unwillingly takes part in what turns out to be a group of terrorists attacking an airport. More broadly, these preoccupations are a reflection of the criticism moved against the representation of violence in video games *tout court*, especially accused of exceeding the affect generated by other media.

Found at the centre of this arguments is, generally, video games' alleged capacity of directly influencing players' behaviour by desensitising or even instructing a conditioned response. During the past two decades, video games have been one of the most studied media with regards to issues of violence. Such studies have generally been motivated by 'regular bursts of public concern in relation to violent games' that periodically catch the interest of the public opinion: *Death Race*[39] in the 1970s, *Mortal Kombat*[40] in the 1990s and more recently *Grand Theft Auto III*[41] in the 2000s.[42] The reasons behind these controversies are to be found also in the relationship between the heightened perception of violent contents in video games and the understanding of these artefact as toys for children. In a compelling account of the debates around violent games, Gareth Schott notes how particularly in the wake of the Columbine shooting in 1999 and the 2011 Norway Attacks, the video game medium has been 'placed under political and media scrutiny over the role it plays in the incitement and intensification of youth violence.'[43] Schott also identifies as part of the problem the fundamental misconception of video game as a medium, which becomes apparent from the inappropriate methods often adopted to analyse their violent contents. In particular, empirical approaches have drawn most attention in their attempt to demonstrate or disprove a correlation between behaviour inside and outside the games. Many studies relied, for example, on subjects evaluating pre-recorded gameplay footage and edited cut-scenes from the games, without providing the opportunity to engage through play. Schott highlights how in the cases in which participants engaged with playing the games, '[they] learned that "violence" is contextualized and that players are presented with choices' in terms of subscribing, resisting and subverting violent contents.[44] Despite the recurring episodes of media panic, scientific proof on direct relationship between playing games and violent behaviours remains inconsistent.[45]

One of the major flaws in these arguments is the assumption of a causal link between in-game and outside behaviour which stands for a broader misconception of *play*. The

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[35] Ubisoft Montreal, *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, Xbox 360, 2010.

[36] Rockstar Games, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Playstation 3, 2013.

[37] Cf. Tom Bramwell, 'Is the most disturbing scene in GTA 5 justified?,' *Eurogamer* (16 July 2013), https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-09-16-is-the-most-disturbing-scene-in-gta5-justified (accessed 05 May 2018), and Peter Tieryas, 'GTA V's Missions Are The Ultimate Thrill Ride,' *Kotaku* (27 August, 2016), https://kotaku.com/gta-vs-missions-are-the-ultimate-thrill-ride-1785818905 (accessed 05 May 2018).

[38] Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, Playstation 3, 2009.

[39] Exidy, *Death Race*, Arcade, 1976.

[40] Midway, *Mortal Kombat*, Arcade, 1992.

[41] Rockstar Games, *Grand Theft Auto III*, Playstation 2, 2001.

[42] Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susuana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: the essential introduction*, third edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 274.

[43] Gareth Schott, *Violent games: rules, realism and effect* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 1.

[44] Ibid., 8.

[45] Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies: games in culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 90.

importance of play and its role in the definition and fruition of games has long been debated in game studies and represents one of its pillars. Johan Huizinga's seminal work on this topic calls attention to the nature of play as a distinct activity: 'play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course.'[46] Similarly, Roger Caillois defines play as always '*separate* from real life.'[47] More recently, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman proposed the influential metaphor of the *magic circle*, firstly coined in Huizinga's work, to describe how play is defined within specific space and time, boundaries, which also contain its social implications and consequences.[48] While the rigidity of this model has been challenged by scholars suggesting the permeability of such boundaries, the concept of the magic circle still provides a useful metaphor to understand the distinct nature of play.[49] By subscribing the rules of a game – whatever they may be – participants enter its magic circle (a sports field, a cardboard, an abstract social interaction) with a clear set of expectations of what these rules involve and the reassurance that consequences will be kept within the game itself and should not affect the rest of the player's life. Even when presented with extreme situations, including the representation of torture, the borders of the ideal playground separate the application of rules inside and outside of it, as the events taking part within it are consequently always understood as part of the game, an activity to which all the participants willingly subscribe and which is distinct from daily life. Of importance to both Huizinga and Caillois' arguments on play and culture are its *voluntarily* nature and its dependency on *rules*, which are negotiated among players who, in return, willingly subject themselves. Notably, there are a number of constraints that apply to what qualifies as a willing subscription, and theories of play often stress also the importance of the *unproductive* nature of games, which implies both the self-reflexive purpose of the activity (one plays for play's sake) as well as the absence of external motivation that may influence the player's intention to engage (money motivates professional athletes who consequently cease being players and become professionals). In one of the most compelling attempts at summarising theories of play, ludologist Jesper Juul provides the following definition:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.[50]

In light of these considerations, debates around video games and violent behaviours need to account the contractual nature of rules, the separation of the game environment, and finally player's awareness and willingness in taking part. Nevertheless, things become slightly more complex in the shift from traditional games to the video game medium. According to Juul, unlike other forms, the specificity of video games resides in their dual nature as both real and fictional objects: 'To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.'[51] Juul argues that, due to the strong representative quality of the medium, video games cue the player to make assumptions based on their real world knowledge in

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[46] Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 10.
[47] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001 [1958]), 8.
[48] Kate Salen, Zack Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 95.
[49] Cf. Mia Consalvo, 'There Is No Magic Circle.' *Games and Culture,* 4/4 (2009), 408-417.
[50] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: video games between real rules and fictional worlds* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 36.
[51] Ibid., 1.

order to interpret in game events.[52] Hence, rules and fiction are interdependent as players will make assumptions on their real life experience in order to interpret the fictional aspects represented in the game.[53] In video games, rules are often not formally presented, as opposed to traditional games, and these texts rely on representation to inform the player of their context, allowing her to infer and learn necessary actions and appropriate behaviours. For example, in shooter games players are normally provided with fire weapons while the action is framed in hostile environments. Drawing from her knowledge of war and conflicts, the player will probably assume violence to be involved in armed conflict and that death would be part of such experience. Eventually, through trial and error, the player will learn that in order to beat the game, she needs to shoot *all* the enemies on screen, progressing through the levels. In the passage from "before" to "after" learning the rules of the game, the player will have partially negotiated her understanding of the fictional context of war that will now possibly involve a lot more killing than previously expected. The problem here is not the likelihood of the player going on killing spree, as the act of killing remains always fictional and it is understood as such within the borders of the game. For Juul, what is "real" about the game is the rule dictating that, in order to win the war, the player must shoot all the targets, and not the representation of killing itself, which is instead always perceived as "fictional." Consequently, fundamental to the study of video games is the understanding of how they shape players' interpretation of fictional events through their ruled-based representation. Continuing the example provided before, at stake here is the ideological nature of war as an event addressed exclusively through military conflict.

In his analysis of *America's Army*,[54] developed by the US army, Robinson highlights how while providing a relatively accurate simulation of armed conflict in terms of both the science of warfare (weapons and vehicles simulation) and the ROE (Rules Of Engagement'), the game still promotes an 'uncomplicated view of war and militarisation' through its story and gameplay.[55] Moreover, the analysis of *America's Army* procedural rhetoric exposes its enforcement of the ROE through a system of punishments and rewards which admonishes the use of friendly fire and behaviours against the army's code, eventually leading to the suspension of the subversive player from the game session.[56] On the one hand, the game factually trains the player as a virtual soldier. The first version of the game was directly developed by the US military for training purposes and was then commercialised in 2002.[57] Compliant players' behaviour is rewarded with a "Honor Score" through which the player can achieve higher military ranks, being appointed in charge of a team and experiencing higher levels of agency. On the other hand, the game's constant foregrounding of authenticity is problematic in light of the false premise of equal fighting conditions, that cast two teams of players against each other in a fictional conflict between the US army and other foreign military forces. In fact, the members of each team see themselves and their teammates as part of the titular *America's Army* while visualising their opponents as a foreign force.[58] Through this system, not only does the game portray a unilateral account of the war (both parties believe to be acting as US forces), but it also

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[52] Ibid, 168.
[53] Ibid.
[54] United States Army, *America's Army* (v. 3), Windows, 2009.
[55] Nick Robinsons, 'Video Games, Persuasion and the War on Terror,' 512.
[56] Andres Sundnes Løvlie, 'The Rhetoric of Persuasive Games: Freedom and Discipline in America's Army,' in Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe and Dieter Mersch (eds.), *Conference Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games 2008* (Potsdam: University Press, 2008), 70-91.
[57] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 75.
[58] Cf. Andres Sundnes Løvlie, 'The Rhetoric of Persuasive Games.'

portrays each conflict as perfectly symmetrical, *persuading* the player of the equality of means and resources between the two sides at war, consequently incrementing the perception of its legitimacy. Through its game mechanics and its uncomplicated focus on action (the game presents little narrative, mainly in the form of mission briefings), *America's Army* simulates conflict scenarios that are always resolved through military intervention suggesting that such approach is always both necessary and effective. Crucial to the discussion on the representation of torture, is what Robinson identifies as the game's 'sanitized portrayal of war' which omits the causalities and sufferance of those (soldiers and civilians) injured in the battlefield.[59] Unlike the sanitized war of *America's Army*, through the representation of torture and pain, *The Phantom Pain* foregrounds disparity and dramatizes sufferance, questioning the overall ideology of the conflicts that inhabit the game world.

### *The Phantom Pain*: haunting the procedural rhetoric of torture

The topic of torture and its representation in video games is generally debated within the context presented above: the effects of violent games in our society, the entertainment-military complex and the persuasive power of War on Terror procedural rhetoric. Mark Sample offers one of few scholarly accounts specifically dedicated to this issue. The author's analysis of *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* and *24: The Game* specifically addresses the political dimension of "torture-interrogation." Describing some of the mechanics of *Splinter Cell* (for example the chokehold manoeuvre in which the player-character approaches enemies from behind trapping them with his arm) Sample suggests that the game 'presents the phantasy that perfect information is always the outcome of coercive interrogation.'[60] Drawing from Scarry, the author calls attention to the power-centric nature of torture in these games, which enforces a language that casts the torturer as a seeker of truth against the tortured who hides it, ultimately recognising the self-referential nature of the process and stating: 'Torture produces the truth of pain, the truth of power.'[61]

Coherently with the post-9/11 scenarios, in *Splinter Cell* and *24*, the player must use torture to retrieve information necessary to progress in the game, and the interrogation techniques in both titles constitute one of the core mechanics of the game. In *24* (based on the homonymous TV show), the torture-interrogation is the culmination of some of the levels and is also thematised as a crucial tool in the battle against terrorism. Here, the torture mechanic involves finding a balance between sympathy and coercion in order to reach an ideal 'Cooperation Zone' in which the victim finally reveals the missing intelligence. Such a scenario unveils the procedural representation of torture as a puzzle in which the player is in charge of finding the right piece of information. The puzzle-like structure reveals the assumption that all the pieces are always available to be found. Sample's analysis of *24* concludes that the game reinforces the narrative according to which torture is not only an effective means to gain intelligence but also one that is 'repeatable and scorable, possible to quantify and evaluate according to predefined rubrics.'[62] Hence, while the mechanics of *Splinter Cell* produce a narrative on the effectiveness of torture-interrogation, *24* denies the incommunicability and language-resistant reality of pain by requiring the player to engage with its data in order to find the perfect amount that would grant cooperation. Finally, both games overwrite the reality of pain by empowering with agency the interrogating player-

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[59] Nick Robinson, 'Video Games, Persuasion and the War on Terror,' 512
[60] Mark L. Sample, 'Virtual Torture: Videogames and the War on Terror,' in *Game Studies*, 8/2 (2008).
[61] Ibid., n.p.
[62] Ibid, n.p.

character and the player through a narrative of necessary counter-intelligence and successful interrogation.[63] Sample's proposition is that of a 'counter pedagogy' based on alternative forms of play that undermine the procedural rhetoric of torture.[64] Nevertheless, such a redemptive possibility does not come in the same games that produce this logic, but rather through the subversive play of others such as *The Sims*,[65] a simulation game that allows the player to micro-manage the life of a household and its inhabitants. While the game does not encourage or even motivate the use of torture within its logic, its voyeuristic procedural experience invites – within a sandbox structure – the player to literally "toy" with her characters, occasionally placing them in impossible and often sadistic situations. Reporting the experience of a player who trapped two sims in a self-enclosed indoor space, Sample comments on the rapid deterioration of the two characters' psycho-physical conditions. While being monitored by the game interface, which is normally used to ensure their well-being, the two characters panic in anguish, as a fire accident causes one to die while the other survives standing on a paddle of urine left by the victim. Drawing from Giorgio Agamben's work, Sample argues that the game illustrates 'what happens when the state of exception becomes the rule,' as rights are suspended by the institutions and the use of violence is normalised.[66] For example, games such as *The Sims* can unveil the perversion of torture by excluding the military narratives that generally motivates it. Similarly, Eddo Stern's *Tekken Torture Tournament* is a modified version of the famous fighting game in which the player is required to wear a set of electrodes on her arm that release electric charges every time her player-character is hit by the opponent.[67] Again here, the aesthetic quality of the video game is foregrounded by the emergence of the interface which, in return, makes visible its procedure and forces the player to critically engage with it. In his account of the military-entertainment complex and the ideological power of procedural rhetoric, Robertson endorses Bogost's conceptualisation of the 'possibility space' which he identifies as an opportunity for political activism, not only through subversive play (like in Sample's work) but also through the development of ad hoc 'critical games.' Such is the case of *serious games* and other independent productions aimed at raising critical awareness through gaming as, for example, Molleindustria's *The Best Amendment*.[68] The game satirises on the use of armed violence as deterrent to violence: the actions of the player are mimicked by each new wave of enemies leading to an escalation and requiring ever increasing means of destruction. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Bogost, although potentially effective, such games generally reach a niche of players and often compromise their ludic elements in virtue of their political message.[69] Robinson's third proposition is the development of critical awareness through a political analysis of mainstream games, such the *MGS* series.[70] While Robinson recognises the scarce number of such titles, implicit in his argument is the idea of a hermeneutics of games that holistically considers procedural rhetoric in the context of their narration, creating a possibility space for their critique. For Bogost, the 'possibility space' is a semiotic grey area in which the game's rhetoric can be explored through play engaging with the procedures of the game and raising critical

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[63] For an analysis of the narrative justification to torture in post-9/11 cinema cf. Berenike Jung, *Narrating Violence in Post-9/11 Action Cinema, Terrorist Narratives, Cinematic Narration and Referentiality* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 34-15.

[64] Ibid. n.p.

[65] Maxis, *The Sims*, Windows, 2000.

[66] Ibid, n.p.

[67] Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, 'An Interview with Eddo Stern,' in *Videogames and Art*, Second Edition (Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 215-223.

[68] Molleindustria, *The best Amendment*, Windows, 2013.

[69] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, ix, x.

[70] Nick Robinson, 'Video Games, Persuasion and the War on Terror,' 515.

awareness.[71] Bogost, in fact, defines games' rhetoric as based on procedures. Describing the nature of procedures (both digital and non-digital), he highlights how their structure, which is generally transparent, emerges whenever we fail at performing, forcing us to formally engage with them in order to understand what went wrong.

We often talk about procedures only when they go wrong: *after several complaints, we decided to review our procedures for creating new accounts*. But in fact, procedures in this sense of the word structure behavior; we tend to "see" a process only when we challenge it.[72]

As in *Splinter Cell*, the player in *The Phantom Pain* can also actively take part to the interrogation of enemies in order to gain intelligence, only this time the procedural rhetoric opens a possibility space for the player. In fact, the information obtained is never essential and is accessible also through other means. This mechanic is initiated by approaching an enemy from behind and can be triggered in two ways: by pointing a gun at the enemy's back, or by trapping him using the iconic chokehold technique. Although the intelligence obtained through it can facilitate the game progression, by disclosing the enemies' position or allowing the collection of resources that can be used to develop or improve tools and weapons, the information is repetitive, formulaic, and hardly (if ever) critical. In addition, such information is generally always available through other means. For example, Snake can choose to enlist his pet D-dog as "Buddy" for the mission, which automatically identifies the location of targets, enemies and resources in his proximity without alerting the security. Although apparently trivial, such an alternative is essential in the economy of the game procedures which relegates the interrogation mechanic to one of many options. More importantly, reflecting its action-stealth generic formula, the game rewards the player for completing each mission with minimum causalities, granting extra points whenever Snake manages to traverse the enemy lines undetected. Of course, this system does not completely prevent the use of violence. Snake can develop a number of non-lethal weapons such as tranquilizing guns and rifles, but also some less conventional ones, such as a modified version of his bionic arm that releases a stun charge. Each engagement with the enemy, including the use of the interrogation mechanic, involves the risk of being detected and consequently loosing precious points at the end of the mission. The choice of adopting a non-violent approach to action is also reflected, on a larger level, in the relationship between Snake and his army, extending the repercussion of the player's agency through the implementation of managerial mechanics. In fact, according to the heroism score obtained by the player, Diamond Dog's soldiers will either celebrate or fear Snake, developing for the player an affective dimension that attaches each choice taken on the field to their outcome. Similarly to *The Sims*, this affective dimension is monitored through a 'Staff Morale' index that determines the soldiers' attitude inside the Mother Base and that has repercussion on strategic elements, such as soldiers' performance and efficiency on the field during "Dispatch Missions" in which they are sent around the world to collect resources.

Hence, Bogost's theorisation of procedures, their invisibility and their foregrounding through instances of failure can be productively informed by Kirkpatrick's aesthetic critique of video game form and its affective nature. Kirkpatrick stresses how the visual-centric discourses that dominate video game aesthetics can be partly attributed to the invisibility of their affective labour, which instead is present in the minute-by-minute

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[71] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 42.
[72] Ibid., 3.

gameplay through the execution of patterns and actions via joypad.[73] In this sense, Kirkpatrick's approach can be used to expand Bogost's procedural rhetoric from an exclusively cognitive level to one including also the aesthetic dimension. Video game form, as noted by Kirkpatrick, is first and foremost comprised of patterns that shape rhythmic performance. Such patterns are dictated by the procedures which rule the game and its mechanics. Hence, through the analysis of procedural rhetoric, the inner workings of the game can be not only *understood* – as suggested by Bogost – but also *felt* by the player. The interrogation mechanic in *The Phantom Pain* offers a lethal and a non-lethal option to conclude the interaction. Accordingly, the player can decide to stun the hostage, who will then pass out for about five minutes, or alternatively execute him. In the first scenario, the enemy will eventually regain consciousness (the time window varies from thirty seconds to thirty minutes) alerting the rest of the camp, consequently leading to tighter security which determines an increased level of difficulty for the completion of the mission and lowers the chances to obtain a high score. In the second case, the killing of enemy soldiers results not only in a lower score, but can potentially activate a hidden mechanic in the game. In her study on the representation of PTSD in *The Phantom Pain*, Amy M. Green comments on this invisible procedure based on "Demon Points" which are assigned to the player for each fatality:

The game's status screen never reveals to the player how many Demon Points have been accumulated. The only clue that this tally is occurring is a change in Snake's appearance as he moves from one stage to the next.[74]

When the player reaches a predetermined threshold of points, the player-character appearance changes, as the metal fragment on his forehead takes the shape of a horn and his clothes turn covered in blood. Snake's dark double also affects the morale of the troupes, activating a chain reaction that extends from the single action on the field to a strategic and managerial level.

[**Insert Fig 3** Snake performs a chokehold on an enemy while the interrogation interface emerges over the characters.]

In this sense, similarly to the torture sequence in the original *MGS*, the interrogation mechanic in *The Phantom Pain* confronts the player with choosing between an immediate solution and the release of the tension – represented by the use of interrogation techniques to gain information and the execution of the enemy which trades heroism points for an easier experience – and the possibility to access the same information in a different way, without the interrogation or at least avoiding kills and keeping the stealth score intact. The tension between the possibility of success and that of failure, between the efficiency of certain means and the effectiveness of others, makes these choices meaningful to the player who is prompted to reflect on her agency, as the procedural rhetoric of torture is complicated not only on a cognitive, but also on an affective level. During the execution of the interrogation, the player is never safe, and risks being detected while approaching the enemy, all in exchange for a trivial reward. Through the aesthetic analysis of the interrogation mechanic, the focal point of the torture interaction is no longer the need for

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[73] Graeme Kirkpatrick, 'Controller, Hand, Screen: aesthetic form in the computer game,' *Games and Culture*, 4/2 (2009), 127-143.
[74] Amy M. Green, *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder - Trauma and History in Metal Gear Solid V* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 18, 19.

intelligence, but the release of the performative tension of the player and her power over the game world. Scarry argues that, through torture it is not only the victim's body which is manipulated, but that her whole world dissolves, reduced to a room and overwritten as a signifier of torture itself. The world of the tortured and her pain become a manifestation of the torturer's power and agency.

The appropriation of the world into the torturer's arsenal of weapon is a crucial step in the overall process of torture for […] it is by the obsessive mediation of agency that the prisoner's pain will be perverted into the fraudulent assertion of power, that the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power.[75]

The metaphor of the world is literalised in *The Phantom Pain*, as the interrogation takes place on the field and the player gathers information on the virtual world, mapping it in order to to achieve control of it. The torture-interrogation mechanic mirrors the structure of torture as it becomes a manifestation of the player's agency over the world through the tortured body. Nevertheless, unlike the agency of the torturer inside Scarry's production room, player's agency in the game is, by definition, never safe as the procedural rhetoric of the game reminds her of the possible consequences. The uncertain place of torture within the procedural rhetoric of *The Phantom Pain* does not emerge only through its mechanics but also from its representation. In fact, mirroring the formulaic character of the intelligence obtained, the interrogation is represented in a comic book style, substituting the vocal response of the victim with a suffocated mumbling sound that is then translated via subtitles. Scarry notes how, in torture, the relation between the "question" and the "answer" is falsified: the former is offered as the just 'motive' of the interrogator, while the latter demonstrates the 'betrayal' of the interrogated.[76] In *The Phantom Pain*, the disparity between Snake's ability to voice his questions and the victim inability to respond reveals the power relationship embedded in the structure of torture, making the interrogation a rhetoric (and occasionally parodic) exercise of power that does not really reward the player neither on a ludic nor on an aesthetic level. If the procedural rhetoric of torture-interrogation in *24* is a puzzle, that of *The Phantom Pain* is constructed as a wheel of fortune providing trivial information which is often not worth the effort required to perform it. On the other hand, when properly retrieved, intelligence can grant "Heroism points" to the player, which increase Snake's rank at the end of the mission. Nevertheless, as in any other game, even here the player's gamble is never safe and the retrieval of the information is not assured, as the interrogated characters occasionally refute to collaborate stating: 'I got nothing to say to you.'

Like Quiet, Snake's victims have all been deprived of their words. They embody the tale of oppression through linguistic hegemony and power to which, in the game, Cypher responds with the "vocal cord parasite," created to sterilise the ideology of the English-speaking world and to bring balance among countries. The ability of languages to shape power relationships is at the centre of *The Phantom Pain* since its opening credits and it is made explicit through Emil Ciorian's quote: 'It is no nation we inhabit, but a language. Make no mistake; our native tongue is our fatherland.'[77] The speechless mumbling of the

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[75] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 45.
[76] Ibid., 35.
[77] Translated in English in *MGSV: The Phantom Pain* from the original: Emil Cioran, *Aveux et anathèmes*, (Paris: Gallimard, Arcades, 1987), 21.

non-playing characters feeds in to *The Phantom Pain*'s parable of language, information, power and pain. One of the ending screens informs the player about the number of languages represented in institutional places of power: 'There are an estimated 7.100 languages spoken in the world, but only six are designated as official languages of the united nations. One of these is English, and although it is the dominant lingua franca of modern times, less than 5% of the world's population are native speakers.' Like in a torture chamber, Skull Face's world has been dissolved through language, unable even to express – in the English-reformed world – the loss of his country, his culture and his mother-tongue. It is through pain's resistance to language that Scarry individuates the analogy between torture and war: 'its absolute claim for acknowledgment contributes to its being ultimately unacknowledged.'[78] For Scarry, both these phenomena exceed our linguistic moral capacity. Yet such reluctance makes us vulnerable to the power of the institutions that can represent it: the news, military manuals, medical accounts. The press' reaction to *The Phantom Pain* trailer and Kojima's apologetic intervention constitute an example of the discursive resistance of torture. In fact, just like the game, the trailer represents an instance of spectacularisation of pain as much as an opportunity for its critique. The concept of the phantom pain describes the feeling of pain located in a missing part of the body. In *The Phantom Pain*, the missing limbs of Sake and Miller (co-founder of the Diamond Dogs) become reminders of the sufferance experienced by these characters in the endless cycles of war continuing with each new game. The game's storyline declares the ideological and rhetorical nature of these conflicts, playing between hyperbolic celebration and meta-critical awareness. During a cut-scene after Cypher's defeat, this interplay culminates in Miller's speech: 'We hold our rifles in missing hands. We stand tall on missing legs. We stride forwards on the bones of our fallen. Then, and only then, are we alive. This "pain" is ours, and no one else's. A secret weapon we wield, out of sight. We will be stronger than ever. For our peace. […] Still, doesn't feel like this is over. …And I will never be whole again.' But the nominal pain haunting the game title is, most importantly, that of the player. Echoing Miller's words, when the game seems to be finally over (one of the characters wears a jacket decorated with the sentence "Never Game Over"), the player is given again a choice: to quit the game or to repeat once more all the missions, with minimum variation and for an uncertain outcome.[79] It is only after endless repetition and endless choices seemingly granted by the game, that the player discovers the rhetoric nature of this exercise in power. The very concept of agency is, in fact, interrogated by the game when the player finds out –through a secret ending – that her player-character, Punished (Venom) Snake, is only a clone of the original, a soldier who saved Snake's life at the end of *Ground Zeros*, taking his place as expandable diversion in the war against the world's PMCs. In the end, like Punished Snake, the player is stripped of her agency: left unable to voice her frustration, her (virtual) world dissolved by the procedural rhetoric of the game.

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[78] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 61.

[79] On the meta-referential character of the *MGS* series cf. Bruno Fraschini, *Metal Gear Solid: l'evoluzione del serpent* (Milano: Edizioni Unicopoli, 2003).