

Societal Horror

Social Commentary in Video Games



(*Bioshock* © 2K, 2007)

In 2K's 2007 masterpiece, "*Bioshock*", the player ventures through an underwater society that was birthed from an ideological necessity to prevent the influence of both American Capitalism and Soviet Communism during the height of the Cold War. However, the Laissez-Faire (a capitalist ideology in which the government has zero interference) Libertarian paradise of Rapture, the city founded by Andrew Ryan, has been turned into a hell-hole by addiction, corruption, civil unrest, and most of all, the lack of ethical regulations to prevent the abuse of several groups of people. The message of "*Bioshock*" is that a society built upon the ideology that humans can be free to pursue whatever business they wish, regardless of ethics or morality, are always doomed to fail.

Recently, however, I believe that there's a far more subliminal meaning to what Andrew Ryan and Rapture is depicting. It is depicting a society that has fallen apart at the hands of people within that society itself. Historically, great civilizations have always fallen thanks very much in part to their own citizens. The Roman Republic turned asunder thanks to the political violence that grew following the death of the Gracchi brothers. The Russian Empire was destroyed due to a starving population turning

against the ruling regime and adopting the Communist Manifesto; over 7 decades later, the USSR would be destroyed by the ever-present struggle of the people clamoring for a more democratic and capitalist government. Even now, American society is beginning to come under immense strain due to social problems still prescient today, under the guise of a factional struggle between Democrat and Republican; it has slowly become an unjust and corrupt system of governance that allows morally dubious people to gain positions of power.

What "*Bioshock*" is projecting onto the player is a realistic scenario where society has collapsed and has mutated into something wholly recognizable in some parts of the world today: complete and utter anarchy filled with factionalized militant forces. "*Bioshock*" is a shining beacon of a genre of Horror games I like to codify as "Societal Horror". Societal Horror games, as I call them, are video games that put forward complex and morally grey questions about politics, governments, and society at large; this genre is not quite unlike a social thriller.

I have selected a few games as examples for this new ideology of mine. They are meant to make you question your place in society, and what "society" as a whole actually means. I will dissect each one rather briefly, and leave further material for some to read in their free time. Prepare for spoilers for many of these games.



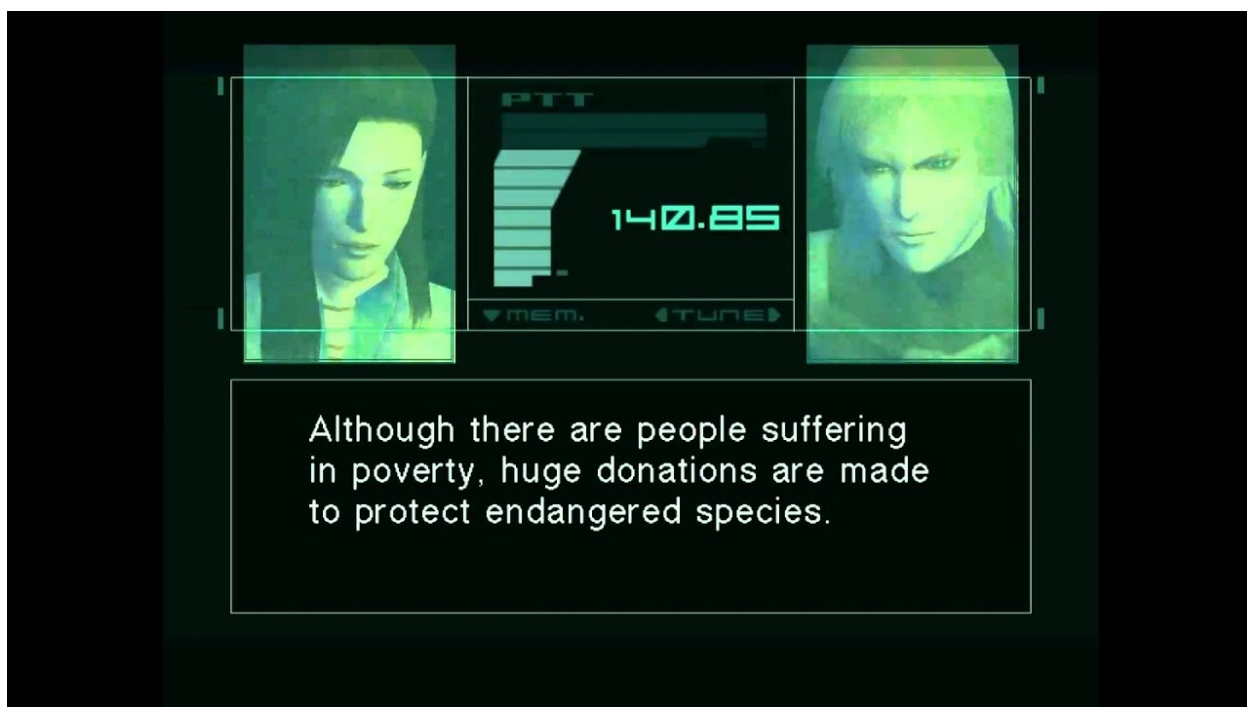
(*Papers, Please* © Lucas Pope, 2013)

The first game approached on this list is "*Papers, Please*", a small independently developed game that was released in 2013. In a sense, "*Papers, Please*" puts the player in the shoes of an immigration officer in the dystopian pseudo-Communist country of Arstotzka, which has recently ended a war with its neighbor Kolechia. Throughout the game, you must abide by the ever-growing complex and invasive rules of the immigration checkpoint. It's moreover a thought experiment for players to inhibit themselves in what a dystopian society looks like. The government is increasingly oppressive in scope, and times become harder for you, the player, to care for your family while doing the right thing.

What will you do? Take bribes to feed your family, with the risk of the government finding out? Help other countries' agents enter Arstotzka to undermine the dictatorial regime? What "*Papers, Please*" does is ask people to juggle between doing what they believe is the "right" thing, and what is the lawful thing, not just for the sake of themselves, but the sake of others. It gives the player a glimpse of what an oppressive and tyrannical regime forces the working class to do for the sake of their goals. It uses fear and the looming threat of familial death as a reminder for people to remain only loyal to the regime.

"*Spec Ops: The Line*", is another video game that toes the line between an anti-war game and a societal horror game. You play as a U.S. soldier sent into the Middle East on a tour of duty which devolves slowly into a chaotic mess. In truth, the twist to the game is that the player has been committing horrific war crimes merely because the game has framed reality in a differing light. You, the player used white phosphorus rockets on an entire group of innocent people because the game told you to do it; you, the player, never even questioned it. It follows the principle of the Milgram Experiment.

The [Milgram Experiment](#) was a series of psychological tests during the 1960s that framed questions regarding the susceptibility of people to perform questionable acts under the direction of an authority figure. Under the guise of reality, participants would quiz a hidden person in the other room. Attached to this person would be an electrical device that seemingly tortured the hidden person at increased intervals. At the behest of this authority figure who would be in the same room as the participant, they would continue to escalate the torture until they think they have killed the hidden person. While nobody died, the point was plain. If pressed hard enough by a seemingly trusted authority figure, people can be led to do questionably immoral things. The tests were in response to the biggest defense that several Nazi war criminals used during the Nuremberg Trials, that they were told to commit atrocities by their own superiors, or as it is otherwise known, "[just following orders](#)".



(*"Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty"* © Konami, 2001)

Perhaps nothing exemplifies Societal Horror better than the 2001 Konami masterpiece, *"Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty"*. The entire purpose of the game proper was to highlight manipulation of medium and fan-hype, via the first act of the game entirely playing out from the perspective of [Solid Snake](#), a veteran soldier, and twice retired [FOXHOUND](#) member. However, after the first act, you take the perspective of an entirely new character that had never been hinted or even introduced previously. Hideo Kojima, director and creator of *"Metal Gear Solid"*, used the surrounding publicity and major fan anticipation surrounding his sequel, to mislead and deconstruct his own game into the vision of his choosing. It showed that people could be easily misled and manipulated off nothing but what creators want you to see.

Within the meta of the game itself, Raiden, this new character, also serves as an avatar for the player as he too is manipulated by those around him from a position of trust. During some of the most intense moments of the game, it's revealed that the villain of the game is actually a freedom fighter that wants to free the United States and the world from the clutches of a secretive super-government known as The Patriots. The Patriots entire ideology is indoctrination through censorship and the selective passage of information in the digital age. Raiden comes to learn that he has actually been a pawn of the Patriots the entire time and that he was manipulated by them into believing that his mission was simply a hostage rescue crisis. It was a carefully

constructed recreation of the original “*Metal Gear Solid*”, for all intents and purposes, and like the player, Raiden is thrown for a loop when he finally understands what is happening to him. It comes from a legitimate tactic by most militaries including the U.S. Military. Soldiers in training are instructed and specifically trained to only follow orders and not think for themselves, placing them in as a cog in a military machine for the purpose of effectiveness and unthinking loyalty to one’s country. This specific ideology is addressed further in “*Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*”, where a predecessor of Solid Snake, known as Naked Snake, had to choose between his loyalty to his country, and his loyalty to his mentor turned Soviet defector. What does it mean to be blindly loyal to your country and what lengths will you go to prove your loyalty?

Perhaps the most important part of “*Metal Gear Solid 2*”’s entire purpose is in the finale, with the reveal of the Patriot’s plan to, once again, censor information and spread only what they deem to be “truths”. What is transcribed in this game was a horrifically real prediction of what the world would become with the advent of internet information through the next two decades. With the growth of the internet, trivial information would continue to grow at an exponential rate, it would be easily accessible, never going away, and utterly useless to much of the human race. Specific groups would start to formulate around the idea of an echo-chamber, where their ideas are enforced and incongruent beliefs are pushed out in favor of what they believe. What “*Metal Gear Solid 2*” predicted was the advent of the “Fake News” ideology. Hideo Kojima predicted the rise of a more extreme political world where people become entrenched in their own bubble, filled with half-truths, untruths, and lies. This transcription of the entire section of what is talked about scarily echoes our current world and how far we’ve fallen since 2001:

“Colonel: The mapping of the human genome was completed early this century. As a result, the evolutionary log of the human race lay open to us.

Rose: We started with genetic engineering, and in the end, we succeeded in digitizing life itself.

Colonel: But there are things not covered by genetic information.

Raiden: What do you mean?

Colonel: Human memories, ideas. Culture. History.

Rose: Genes don’t contain any record of human history.

Colonel: Is it something that should not be passed on? Should that information be left at the mercy of nature?

Rose: We’ve always kept records of our lives. Through words, pictures, symbols... from tablets to books...

Colonel: But not all the information was inherited by later generations. A small

percentage of the whole was selected and processed, then passed on. Not unlike genes, really.

Rose: That's what history is, Jack.

Colonel: But in the current, digitized world, trivial information is accumulating every second, preserved in all its triteness. Never fading, always accessible.

Rose: Rumors about petty issues, misinterpretations, slander...

Colonel: All this junk data preserved in an unfiltered state, growing at an alarming rate.

Rose: It will only slow down social progress, reduce the rate of evolution.

Colonel: Raiden, you seem to think that our plan is one of censorship.

Raiden: Are you telling me it's not!?

Rose: You're being silly! What we propose to do is not to control content, but to create context.

Raiden: Create context?

Colonel: The digital society furthers human flaws and selectively rewards the development of convenient half-truths. Just look at the strange juxtapositions of morality around you.

Rose: Billions spent on new weapons in order to humanely murder other humans.

Colonel: Rights of criminals are given more respect than the privacy of their victims.

Rose: Although there are people suffering in poverty, huge donations are made to protect endangered species. Everyone grows up being told the same thing.

Colonel: "Be nice to other people."

Rose: "But beat out the competition!"

Colonel: "You're special." "Believe in yourself and you will succeed."

Rose: But it's obvious from the start that only a few can succeed...

Colonel: You exercise your right to "freedom" and this is the result. All rhetoric to avoid conflict and protect each other from hurt. The untested truths spun by different interests continue to churn and accumulate in the sandbox of political correctness and value systems.

Rose: Everyone withdraws into their own small gated community, afraid of a larger forum. They stay inside their little ponds, leaking whatever "truth" suits them into the growing cesspool of society at large.

Colonel: The different cardinal truths neither clash nor mesh. No one is invalidated, but nobody is right.

Rose: Not even natural selection can take place here. The world is being engulfed in "truth."

Colonel: And this is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper."

This entire transcription from "Metal Gear Solid 2" describes the rise of social media and the negative effects it has on the current society at large and the spread of misinformation and mistruths under the guise of "real truth". Millions of people are

manipulated into believing what they choose to believe, not because it is really true, but because it is convenient for them to do so rather than go through the cognitive dissonance of challenging said beliefs. Objective truth has been lost to the war between special interests pushing out their version of what is “truth”. In America, we have the liberal “truth” and the conservative “truth”, both perpetuated by the media and major players in the government. Since 2016, the rise of Trumpism presents itself as another version of this manipulative “truth” perpetuated by leaders of the far-right of American politics. It is simply another type of “truth” that is mired in half-truths, misinformation, and even outright lies. Yet we humans as a species continue to fall for these truths because we don’t have the strength to question them. We choose to let ourselves become overly entrenched in the mire of those that are manipulating our thoughts."

Are our thoughts even our own, though? That’s perhaps the most terrifying thing that *“Metal Gear Solid 2”* brings to the table. What thoughts and ideas do we have that are truly original? It’s a pertinent question that leaves room for much debate. For those that are willingly manipulated by the media and the major politicians, taking them at their word. Are their thoughts truly what they believe, or what they were told to believe? “Truth” becomes muddled in the manipulation and manufacturing of predicated thoughts by those in a higher position. It is similar to many other beliefs, such as philosophy and religion; personal beliefs are generally based on what others have told us what is true and what they themselves believe. It is Societal Horror at its core, the realization of the fabrication of the self and the society around you.