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# The persuasive aims of Metal Gear Solid: A discourse theoretical approach to the study of argumentation in video games



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## ABSTRACT

The paper is aimed at proving the hypothesis that multimodal construction in video games can follow specific discursive aims in the process of persuading game players. In order to prove this, we have performed a multifaceted analysis which elaborated the ways in which different modalities in a representative video game combine so as to convince the player to act, play, and perhaps think accordingly. The multimodal approach employed in the paper combines the notion of discourse aims and the rhetorical and argumentative structure of Metal Gear Solid (Kojima, 1998), and analyses different narrative strategies and verbal cues, as well as the overall interface, control, and gameplay. The results suggest that verbal and textual cues combine with audio-visual elements and highly specific gameplay strategies in order to refrain the player from killing enemies. This might indicate that video games are likely to possess a great persuasive power, as they are both multimodal and highly interactive.

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## 1. Introduction

The current study aims to approach the video game Metal Gear Solid, a cult Hideo Kojima's video game released in 1998, with a multimodal discourse theoretical perspective in order to examine its persuasive power and rhetorical strategies. Metal Gear Solid is known for communicating a set of intriguing political and socio-cultural messages and a rather complex socio-political narrative, which incorporates various real-world military and geopolitical issues (Iovanovici, 2010; Noon and Dyer-Witthoford, 2010). Seen as a typical example of the genre of stealth games in which the usually unarmed players are motivated to avoid their antagonists through hiding and stealth rather than fighting them (Den of Geek, 2013; IGN, 2015), Metal Gear Solid can generally be seen as providing a particular view of warfare and the use of, or rather dispense with, weapons in game fights in favor of a more peaceful dispute and confrontation with the enemies. We hypothesize in this paper that the video game and its multimodal construction follows specific discursive aims of persuading the players to follow this specific position and to convince them to act and play accordingly. We think that it is mainly the particular discursive structure of the game and its specific multimodal, often seen as

filmic (Parkin, 2014; Stanton, 2015; Wolf, 2012), design which features particular rhetorical strategies and argumentative patterns which, in a second step, go beyond the usual context of playing the game and might furthermore affect the recipients' attitude in general.

For the analysis of these strategies and patterns, we contextualize this paper within the context of multimodal discourse analysis and, in particular, the context of multimodal argumentation. Multimodal discourse analysis, an approach which deals with how meaning is constructed and conveyed using different semiotic resources and modes (and frequently different media) of communication, has taken different courses in the last two decades and is still evolving as an exceedingly interdisciplinary research field in the humanities and beyond (cf. Bateman et al., 2017). Our paper attempts to contribute to adding video games to the wide array of popular multimodal texts such as magazines (e.g., Conradie, 2011; Machin and Thornborrow, 2003), films (e.g., Prince, 1993; Bateman and Schmidt, 2012; Wildfeuer 2014), comics (Bateman and Wildfeuer, 2014; Saraceni, 2000; Stainbrook, 2003; Stamenković and Tasić, 2015), media and mass media (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; van Dijk, 1985), or other types of audio-visual texts (Page, 2010), which have all been approached in ways similar to the study of verbal texts and their meaning-making attributes. With the aim of finding out more about the multimodal construction of meaning in Metal Gear Solid, the paper also aims at adding a new perspective to existing studies of video game discourse (e.g., Aarseth, 2014; Aarseth et al., 2003; Bell et al., 2014;

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Cover, 2006; Ensslin, 2012, 2014, 2015; Gee, 2014; Paul, 2012; Pérez Latorre, 2015; Rhody, 2010; Rutherford, 2010; Ryan, 2006; Toh, 2015a, 2015b).

A further and rather new branch within this context is the study of multimodal argumentation which takes as a starting point the fact that contemporary argumentative communication draws critically on visual and multimodal entities and that these entities play a significant role in the construction of rhetorical patterns and the argumentative structure of media artifacts, promotional material, and in the general context of politics, for example. The interest in the notion of a 'visual argument' has thus been growing continuously and a number of recent publications on this topic confirm the up-to-date status of the argumentative analysis of multimodal texts (cf. Birdsell and Groarke, 1996, 2007; Hill and Helmers, 2004; van Belle et al., 2013; Kjeldsen, 2015; Rocci et al., 2016; Tseronis and Forceville, 2017).

For the analysis of several scenes and situations from *Metal Gear Solid*, we will use a combined approach focusing, on the one hand, on the notion of discourse aims (cf. Kinneavy, 1971) and, on the other hand, on the analysis of the multimodal meaning-making patterns as well as the rhetorical and discursive structure of the video game. In our opinion, Kinneavy's theory of discourse provides adequate tools for the analysis of discursive aims in video games as modern media – for three main reasons: (a) his detailed account of the persuasive aim, which is in the focus of our article, (b) the fact that he linked the referential aim to reality and describing the world around us in a scientific or nearly scientific way, and (c) the fact that Kinneavy's own examples include non-linguistic elements, which can be seen as an early attempt to approach what today is addressed in multimodal analysis. The article will first cover different aspects of military and geopolitical themes as elaborated within the realm of video games, which will be followed by an overview of the features of *Metal Gear Solid*, as a prime representative of video games that encompass geopolitical issues. We will then present the basis of the theoretical framework for our analysis, with Kinneavy's theory of discourse and multimodal discourse analysis being its main strongholds. The central part of the article presents our methodology and analysis, which ought to cover elements constructed by different semiotic resources as they combine in persuading the player against war and warfare.

## 2. Military and geopolitical themes in video games

The incorporation of real-world military and geopolitical themes and referents into video games and their narratives, of which *Metal Gear Solid* is a prime example, is by no means a recent development. Ever since the medium's inception, traced by some researchers to computer projects developed at US universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Stanford University in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, 2009; Mantello, 2012; Power, 2007), video game developers have never shied away from depicting war and combat, even if such depictions have not always been presented in high definition graphics as they are today. In fact, one of the earliest instances of the medium is often considered to be the space shooter *Spacewar!* (Russell, 1962), developed by a team of MIT students lead by Steve Russell. In the decades following *Spacewar!*, as technology advanced and the medium became internationally popular (and commercially viable) as a vehicle of entertainment and narrative, game developers increasingly began to embrace and exploit real geopolitical events and entities for story purposes, blending them with concepts and ideas from the domains of armed combat and military conflicts already present (but also ever-evolving) on the mechanical level, particularly in

the genres of first-person shooter (FPS), real-time and turn-based strategy, and action-adventure games. Such a combination has proven particularly lucrative: one of the most prolific FPS franchises, Activision's *Call of Duty*, has amassed over US\$10 billion in sales as of 2014 (Poeter, 2014), while the entire *Metal Gear* series of games has sold in excess of 40 million copies (Beck, 2014).

Having in mind their staggering sales figures and popularity, what is worrying about these and similar franchises is the fact that their narratives have been not only thematically inspired by actual conflicts, but also often constructed with the help of experiences and expertise of those who took part in said conflicts – “black ops soldiers and paramilitary contractors” (Mantello, 2012:270). While such partnerships might result in a factually richer ludic experience and greater immersion, they are inherently problematic from narrative, discursive, and didactic standpoints, due to the fact that the resulting games often end up “favor[ing] the status quo for commercial reasons and because those relying on assistance from the military or from veterans may face editorial constraints imposed by these advisors” (Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, 2009, as cited in Schulzke (2013:213). In this regard, war- and military-themed FPS games drawing on actual global conflicts and military operations, both contemporary and historical, are a particularly unsettling example due to their presentational bias: the player typically experiences these games solely from the perspective of Western soldiers (Schulzke, 2013), especially during the games' narrative-driven single-player campaigns.

To claim that this stance is common to all FPS video games – or, for that matter, all games about modern warfare – would be reductive and doing the medium as a whole a disservice; there are video games which seek to examine, subvert, and/or outright criticize militaristic ideologies and the notion of unconditional Western supremacy.<sup>1</sup> However, the sheer number and commercial popularity of games whose treatment of real-world geopolitical power relations stops at their decontextualized and dehistoricized replication, and, by extent, enforcement, represents a distressing trend. According to Power (2007), when it comes to games centered around romanticized portrayals of war, “the simplification of cultures and history is in itself a form of violence” (p. 286). Enacted on the ludic and narrative levels alike, this violence, as well as the games which feature it, is in dire need of debate within the field of game studies. The striking absence of cultural analyses of this nature, noted by Boellstorff (2006) nearly a decade ago, has been somewhat alleviated in recent years, aided in no small part by game-specific analytical frameworks and ideas, such as Bogost's (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric. Machin and van Leeuwen dedicated a chapter to video game war discourse in their *Global Media Discourse: A Critical Introduction* (2007). In the book, the authors present the main topics of media globalization theory, and apply these to specific case studies of media globalization. One of these case studies, called “Discourses of war” (pp. 74–104), investigates discourses in *Black Hawk Down* (both the movie (Scott, 2002) and the game *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (NovaLogic, 2003)), which is followed by a comparison with *Special Forces*, the *Hezbollah* game. In the process, the authors employ parts of van Leeuwen's (1996) 'social actor' analysis to discuss how the key belligerents (the US soldiers, Aidid, the Habr Gedir militia and the Somali civilians) are represented – here they apply the notions of deletion, individualization and collectivization, names and titles, and categorization. Machin and van Leeuwen (p. 86) developed a 'quest' discourse schema that organizes

<sup>1</sup> One such example is *Spec Ops: The Line*, a third-person military shooter which, according to Keogh (2013), functions as “a reaction against the totalising myths of technological and ethical superiority that military shooters and their players uncritically perpetuate” (p. 14); another is, by its author's own admission, the *Metal Gear* series as a whole (Parkin, 2014).

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