

Metal Gear Solid 5 Remains To Be The Most Conflicted I Have Ever Been On A Game

We are now roughly 7 years removed from the release of Metal Gear Solid 5 (MGS5) and even after all that time the dichotomy of that game's quality leaves a lasting impression in my mind that I will likely never fully make peace with. On one hand it features some of the most refined gameplay ever programmed into a third person action game. On the other hand, it seems to be at odds with many of the traditional Metal Gear trappings that have defined that franchise since its inception in 1987 on the MSX2. With rumors and speculation about a potential reboot or a remake constantly in the air I see no better time to look back at the last proper entry in the series and analyze what worked, what didn't, and potentially what could have been.

Let's actually start with the question of "what could have been" since it's actually the element of this game's legacy that I think the least about. The development of MGS5 cannot be separated from the turmoil behind the scenes. The full details are foggy even to this day but what we do know is that Kojima and Konami were going through a very hostile break up. Delving into detail about the dispute warrants its own article at some point but for now the important thing to take away from all of this is that MGS5 would forever remain unfinished. Sure, the game released but it literally does not have an ending. At some point new missions run out and the player is tasked with completing "remixed" versions of older missions until the game presents the final tasks required to trigger the credits to roll. Remnants of what could have been do exist within the special edition Blu-ray and show the work in progress of cut scenes from an unfinished mission 51, but that conclusion, sadly, is... and likely forever will be... unplayable. Usually such a mangled ending would warrant harsh criticism and a severe knock to the game's score but despite the full vision of the game never being realized, it feels unfair to hold any of this against the game itself, with any anger or vitriol exclusively reserved for Konami and the corporate vultures that not only stood in the way of an artist completing their work, but continued to pick at its corpse after launch with the type of egregious microtransactions that are typically only found in free-to-play mobile games. Given all this context my brain has long since partitioned this ending from the game itself, to the point that I often forget that any of these problems tarnished the ending at all; a feat of mental gymnastics that is likely assisted by my actual issues with the game. While none of the aforementioned amputations of the ending content can fairly be attributed to Kojima's directing, my apathy to its absence absolutely can be. You see my issues with the game are baked into its design and direction as a whole, and would be present even if Kojima had been given the time and resources to finish his work as intended.

So, if it's not the botched ending that bothers me why would I be conflicted on the game? After all, if I am judging the game by what is present and not "what could have been,"

then it seems like there shouldn't be too much to complain about. What issues could I possibly have? Well before I go into what did not work for me, I would like to take some time to give this game its flowers and talk about what it did well. I do think in some ways this game is an absolute masterpiece. The gameplay and open world elements are polished to perfection. So much so that I would go as far as to say that this game that came out in 2015 is still the best playing action game ever made and there are elements of its open world design that have yet to be replicated or surpassed. And while much of the groundwork for the gameplay was laid in the prelude that released a year prior, "Ground Zeros," for the sake of this article I will be referring to these 2 releases as one product. Metal Gear Solid as a franchise has never suffered from poor controls and even the antiquated isometric limitations of the first 2 entries have aged surprisingly well. However there has always been a rigidness to the gameplay; Snake often feels stiff to control, and dynamically moving between states of stealth and action have always felt like an afterthought. Given that most entries in the franchise are capital "S" Stealth games, you could perhaps attribute this shortcoming to an intentional design choice, rewarding the player for approaching missions with the intended degree of caution. Such leeway is harder to grant MGS4 considering it featured a focus on dynamic encounters that accommodated for player choice in its gameplay design. To its credit, the gameplay and controls were by no means bad, and it felt like a revolutionary step forward to have viable action gameplay interlaced with Metal Gear's traditional stealth trappings. Still, it was hard to shake the feeling that everything was just too ridged and cumbersome, with basic moves often requiring overly complex button sequences more akin to a fighting game combo than routine actions that are meant to be performed in the heat of battle. All of this frustration is gone in MGS5. The gameplay and movement has been refined to a level of invisibility. While The Phantom Pain features just as many, if not more, gameplay elements as MGS4 did, its complexity vanishes after only a short time with the controller. It's easy to get into a flow state, seamlessly moving in between precise stealth gameplay and heart pounding action sequences. The player has so much control over Snake and every action feels responsive and smooth to execute, resulting in an experience where the player never feels cheated out of success due to an inability to employ the action they were attempting to pull off. Jumping backwards into prone, firing off a headshot, then rolling sideways through a small gap, and sprinting off into cover leaving the rest of the base scrambling to hunt you down is exactly the kind of complex and exhilarating sequences that players have dreamt about performing since the series humble beginnings on the MSX2. Everything feels so second nature and provides the level of control that makes you appreciate how far video games have come, but it doesn't just stop there. The phenomenal game play is complemented by exquisite open world design. Bases and villages feel real and grounded while also providing the exact architecture and layouts required to capitalize on all of the tools at your disposal. The result is a perfect playground that never feels like just a "video game level," or breaks the immersion of the mission at hand. In fact, much of the "game elements," that typically pulls back the curtain and reminds me I'm playing a video game are slyly removed or hidden from Metal Gear Solid 5. For example, no one ever spawns on the map. When you load into the open world everything already exists within it, including enemies. If guards call in additional support those reinforcements actually drive or fly over from another base already on the map. It's the type of things that has always felt like a pipe dream of world design but is finally not only present here, but pulled off perfectly.

It is perhaps this level of excellence with so many of the gameplay elements that makes its shortcomings sting so hard for me. In some ways it is the culmination of 28 years of refinement, resulting in the most authentic Metal Gear experience modern technology could provide. And yet... Metal Gear Solid 5 is by far my least favorite game of the main line entries, and as the credit rolled the only emotion I could muster was profound disappointment in its execution. Metal Gear Solid is my favorite franchise in video games, and nearly everything that made me fall in love with those games are absent from The Phantom Pain. Metal Gear has always been a franchise with story at its forefront. Past games were unapologetic in their presentation, with lavish cut scenes, and complex narrative threads taking center stage. This focus on story and particularly the length and frequency of the cinematic sequences were not without its criticism, however it was also quintessentially the DNA of Metal Gear. Even with decades of hindsight, looking back it is hard to imagine how the story could exist without these elaborate displays. Metal Gear has always tackled complex political topics and dared to be critical of institutions and ideas that most media, especially games, would never dare to cover. This coupled with a tapestry of interesting characters living in a complex and well-developed world has delivered one of the most memorable and distinct fictional sagas in all of video games. This is a history MGS5 cannot separate itself from, despite its attempt to try. In contrast to its predecessors The Phantom Pain seems to be actively trying to relegate its narrative to the background, and almost afraid to be subject to the same criticism that people who failed to understand the point of past Metal Gear games have always attempted to leverage against it. Much of the story in MGS5 are relegated to audio logs, and the theatrical displays that have become a staple in the franchise are few and far in between. This change in the delivery of the story could perhaps be excused under different circumstances, after all the direction of the series so far does not preclude the creator from trying something different, however such a departure would feel far less awkward in a sequel that had the luxury of separation from the established lore. However, despite brandishing the numeral V, this game is set in the middle of the series' established timeline and the narrative choices it makes cannot be separated from the impact of its surrounding elements. Many of the most crucial and interesting unknowns that this entry was supposed to illuminate are brushed over without much care or pageantry, often being buried in the myriad of audio logs. This would still be disappointing, although more forgivable, if the story was clearly forging its own path in an effort to separate itself for the sake of a new audience by being its own stand-alone entity. This is oddly also not the case. The game expects the player to be fully caught up with the lore and almost requires the player to listen to every audio log to fully understand the scenarios it presents. It's an identity crisis that is pervasive across all of its narrative elements. The game's fear of never fully wanting to commit to a narrative style is also a hindrance to some of the more mature elements the game attempts to incorporate. Child soldier programs, the exploitation of civilians in war torn regions, and the other complex topics are given a promising set up without a satisfying arc or conclusion. Moments of brilliance pepper the lengthy run time with some of the best cinematography and shot composition in the franchise but a lack of consistent narrative presents works against these achievements at every turn. Often times with prequel projects it can be easy to dismiss failed attempts on a basis of narrative irrelevance, and remove them from the canon without affecting the other instalments. This would allow me to enjoy MGS5

in a vacuum, appreciating the gameplay and disregarding its disappointing attempt at a cohesive Metal Gear Story. Sadly, this is also not the case. At the end of MGS4 for the entire franchise felt like it reached a satisfying conclusion with all questions answered and all loose ends tied neatly together... then came Metal Gear Solid Peace Walker (MGSPW), a game that expanded on elements of the game's lore that never felt like it needed to be expanded upon, but presented enough interesting details about that time to justify its elaboration. And while MGSPW felt like a worthy addition after the credits rolled it also presented the issue of new questions that begged to be answered; the story was no longer tied up. This put extra pressure on Metal Gear Solid 5 to deliver; after all, if the story was going to be opened up, if the franchise was going to continue, then it needed to be worth it, and it needed to justify why MGS4 was not the end of the saga. This failure to adequately fill in a gap of the story that didn't really ever need to be created is the lasting Legacy of The Phantom Pain to me.

In some ways the fact that the game didn't have an ending makes its narrative failures easier for me to accept. If the game had a proper conclusion the lack of narrative cohesion would have been even harder to get over. Conversely if the story had been better told the lack of an ending would have haunted my mind for an eternity. Looking back now it feels like I played a canceled prototype of what MGS5 could have been. I remember it for its gameplay and that alone. It exists to me as a phenomenal action experience, but a terrible Metal Gear project, and the most conflicted I have ever felt about a game.