

Normally Rascal

[Home](#)[My Work](#)[About Me](#)[Games](#)[Bookmark the **permalink**.](#)

Jan
8

The threat of sexual violence in Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes

by [stephenbeirne](#)

[This post contains some information and speculation surrounding Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes' marketing and age ratings that could be considered light spoilers.]

My heart dropped when I learned yesterday that Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes would feature sexual violence. I have to admit I've been a fan of the series for a long

 Search



Recent Posts

- [Suppose suppose](#)
- [Folklorists](#)

time, it's one of the few game franchises that even remotely interest me these days. There's something about the series that hits a very special place in my soul that otherwise, quite simply, hasn't been satisfied by any other game around. I love the mystery of a simple spy operation premise suddenly complicated by the introduction and foreshadowing of a bizarre cast of characters. I love the contrived storylines that everyone writes off as pretentious. I love the marriage of outlandish and pompous supernatural elements together with a plot founded on political intrigue, and how Snake's world-weary nihilism stubbornly continues in the face of all this wonderful mysticism and spirituality. I love how he stands around pointing his gun for ages while the villain postures and monologues and only then attacks, because Snake is a very patient man. It's all so desperately silly and intelligent and I can't resist it. I also enjoy playing it, I had to remind myself to include that.

But historically it's also been really bad for the representation of women. Hideo Kojima, *MGS*'s brainfather, has taken special care to make explicit in each game the sexualization, degradation and objectification of women in countless forms. I won't go over every example but we've seen female soldiers suffering from PTSD stripped down to skin-tight costumes as they writhe and bend seductively for the camera, there have been jiggle physics for you to play with a character's breasts, you've been able to peek and leer as your lady associate while she gets dressed, women have been constantly damselled and fridged, posters of underwear models are a series recurrence since the PlayStation days, if a woman is on-screen there's a good chance she'll take off her top before the scene ends, and so on. It's deplorable and it's entirely needless except to stoke the fires of misogyny in Kojima's mind and the fancies of the audience. His shitty attitude towards women have stained the series for a long, long time.

So given Kojima's reputation, when I read there would be sexual violence in *Ground Zeroes* my expectations were of the worst. It would be titillating, it would be entirely structured to be pleasurable to a voyeuristic camera and to you watching at home, it would show this woman her place in the narrative by violating her for entertainment.

- Notes on Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward
- Ye olde interactivity paradigm
- To know you're alone
- And you with it, speck of dust
- Level 99 Capitalist
- The Far Cry 4 Controversy: Banality is Good
- Intentionality
- Worldbuilding and Demon's Souls: Boletaria's present history
- Notes on Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes
- Parenthood

Categories

My Tweets

Meta

- Register
- Log in
- Entries RSS
- Comments RSS
- WordPress.com

Archives

I'm far from the only person whose expectations, informed by the standards of the franchise, were set to this.

The ESRB text describing the content in question said this of it:

*"The game includes an audio file in which a female character is sexually assaulted by male characters; while there is no visual depiction, sounds of ripped clothing and struggle can be heard. The words "f*k" and "sh*t" are heard in the dialogue."*

- [Gameranx](#)

At once the reassurance that the sexual violence would only take place in an audio file was a relief. It meant none of that camera work lingering over the female form that's familiar to the series. It meant the scene wouldn't be shot for the erotic pleasure of the viewer, unlike the scenes in *MGS4* where you defeat the Beauty corps members. It **doesn't** mean the sexual violence will be frightening rather than titillating, that the scene will be "OK" and "done well", by which I mean where we are expected to hate the attackers and root for the well-being of the woman. It is entirely possible for an audio file to be built around satisfying misogynistic urges, although to my knowledge it hasn't been a done thing in the *MGS* games. So my relief here is founded on an understanding of the series' history of degrading and objectifying women and the belief (or should I say faith?) that this falls outside those parameters. (This all being said, we'll only be able to tell the tone of the scene when the game comes out.)

So I'd like to take a bit to talk about sexual assault in games, because it's something that comes up usually in response to developers making a mess of it and fans blithely welcoming it uncritically. Bear in mind that I'm a man of privilege, my words come from a certain place of social advantage that might be slightly informed but in absolutely no way overrules the lived experiences and opinions of people closer to the reality of the subject. If this is grounds for my dismissal in your eyes, that's OK. If not, please don't carry onwards anything I say as a tool to contradict the opinions and

- August 2014
- July 2014
- June 2014
- May 2014
- April 2014
- March 2014
- February 2014
- January 2014
- December 2013
- November 2013
- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- May 2013
- March 2013
- February 2013
- December 2012
- November 2012
- October 2012



experiences of people who know better than me.

The subject of sexual assault in games sets off alarm bells for a lot of people—it's so seldom done with the respectability and sensitivity it deserves, though there must be a few examples I don't know of somewhere that are tolerable, if not acceptable. This industry can be summarized by [Crystal Dynamics' Ron Rosenberg smacking his lips](#) over a scene in *Tomb Raider* where Lara almost gets raped. It's used to victimize, to sensationalize and demean women. It's used violently and pornographically, as a gag, as a beat to move along the plot, as a quick exit for a backstory, as shorthand for a character's villainy then forgotten by the next scene.

Many critics feel games just shouldn't try to feature sexual violence in any form, that the industry has lost the right to try to tackle that subject since it is one demanding a finesse that is near universally lacked. In there it's implied that one day the industry might grow to a point where it may be able to handle it competently, and then we might give the benefit of the doubt. To anyone wondering what a competent handling of sexual violence might look like, though, and how it differs to what is currently offered by the medium, I might suggest casting over to *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*.

This TV show centres on a New York police unit specialized in investigating sexually-based crimes. Every episode opens with such crimes being called heinous, and most episodes involve the tracking down of a serial rapist or apprehension of a child molester. The criminals are invariably abusive and horrible, but their actual crimes are very seldom shown on-screen. Instead we see their aftermaths—traumatized victims, bereaving families, shocked investigators, impassioned to track down the criminal and bring them to justice.

The process is arduous and frustrating, obstructed by a broken uncaring system and distanced societal responsibilities, but this is the goal of the audience's participation of the show: to see justice delivered to the people committing these crimes. Not to see

incidents of sexual assault or the torturing of women. The crimes aren't framed to eroticize and titillate; instead they're shocking, unpleasant, deplorable. The same thing that would be presented as pornographic by, say, Sade, would be villainized in *SVU*. The main cast of characters and the show's framing favour the victim in every incident, it respects the realities of these subjects that people are going through every day and be respectful and caring towards them. At the end of the day it's entertainment, but the thing you're looking to get out of it is stories of victims becoming survivors and finding justice.

In many ways *Law and Order: SVU* presents a fantasy of the world (one where justice occurs in nearly all cases). And it's far from perfect in everything it presents. There are many arguments against it, such as that it encompasses torture porn, in that sexual crimes against women serve as a source or premise for entertainment for the audience. This is another view that relates to the games industry: many people hold that you simply shouldn't feature sexual assault in fiction structured for entertainment, as it's exploitative of real trauma present in the world. Content like that can easily prove to be triggering and damaging to people who absolutely do not deserve to have that on their plate, day after day. This is an absolutely fair and valid stance to have on the subject. I don't share it personally (my thoughts more align with those here) but it's one we should be considerate of and respect, so while I say *Law and Order: SVU* might be a useful guideline on how to include sexual assault in fiction, please know it's not all cut and dry.

Returning to *Ground Zeroes*' audio file, another thing is it also doesn't mean sexual assault will be justified within the structure of the narrative. Through *Ground Zeroes*' marketing we've been introduced to a character named Quiet, a mute sniper whose dress is largely only torn stockings and a bra. Last September, we heard how her design was based off a desire for a "more erotic character", later 'corrected' to have meant unique and sexy. A song and dance was made about how vehicles and guns can be sexy too, but the fact of the matter is here is a female character designed by men

for a series that typically objectifies women, dressed in a way compatible with objectifying traits described by a culturally prevalent male gaze. Her character design is in no way comparable to the sleek aesthetic of a truck. It hits all the cultural boxes of objectification and sleaze.

Kojima's attempts to assuage our expectations were dashed by the enormous contradiction that was his track record. He did, however, have this to say:

"But once you recognize the secret reason for her exposure, you will feel ashamed of your words & deeds."

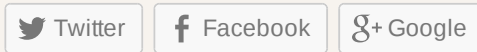
– Kotaku

Which many people are now adding to the presence of sexual violence in speculation that Quiet dresses the way she does because she was raped. In other words, here is possibly a female character who was sexually assaulted to such an extravagant degree that it would impact her character being totted around for the arousal of the player. Here is sexual assault being used as the justification for a character's erotic appearance. Here is sexual assault being used for a backstory. That is, if this speculation is on the money, which, in my mind, seems likely. I wish I didn't have to side-eye a game I've been looking forward to for years, I wish I didn't have to hold at arm's length a series I so want to love, but there you go.

When it comes to sexual violence in games, the key thing is to examine it structurally, how it's framed within the scene, by the camera, how it's spoken about by the other characters and according to what we're expected to think about these characters, what the character's narrative arc is going for, its placement in the context of the story and the fictional world—there are many, many factors that determine tone and meaning and dictate what a piece of fiction is trying to say through the things it includes. While I can trust *Law and Order: SVU* to have a good head on its shoulders when talking about sexual violence, I've been given every indication to think the worst of *Metal Gear Solid*. I hope to god it ends up proving me wrong.

If you liked this post, please consider helping me continue my writing by [visiting my Patreon](#) and supporting me with your patronage.

Share this:



Loading...

Related

Notes on Metal Gear Solid V:
Ground Zeroes
In "Design"

This Week I Read - A
peaceful, angry year
In "This Week I Read"

This Week I Read: Intent
and Interpretation
In "Feminism"

This entry was posted in [Media](#), [Sexism](#), [Video Games](#) and tagged [Ground Zeroes](#), [Law and Order SVU](#), [media](#), [Metal Gear Solid](#), [sexual violence](#), [videogames](#).



← [Best Games of 2013 – Moirai, Imscar...](#)

[This Week I Read – A peaceful, angry ye...](#)

12 comments on “The threat of sexual violence in Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes”



This Week I Read: A peaceful, angry year « Normally Rascal says:

January 8, 2014 at 10:15 pm

[...] tooting my own horn again, I articulated my feelings on the news of sexual violence in the upcoming Metal Gear Solid: Ground Ze... with reference to Law and Order: SVU as a good structural [...]

Reply



Leo says:

January 13, 2014 at 9:31 pm

Kojima is a far smarter auteur then people usually credit him for, and this text feels accusatory, one-sided and even snobbish without much evidence to back your opinions. And also SVU is degrading and fetichist, a turgid, exploitative piece of work that trivialize sexual assault for cheap, disposable entertainment. Worst still, it gets away being all of that thanks to its supposedly “humanizing” portrayal of the victims. Please reconsider this way of though, because, while well-intentioned, it can provoke more harm than good (and also give MSG2 a replay! it adresses such concerns like the simplification of media and discourse quite head-on).

Reply



stephenbeirne says:

January 14, 2014 at 11:46 pm

Not sure what further evidence is needed—if you’ve played the games you already know what it is I’m talking about. It’s the stuff like what I describe in the second paragraph. If you have the experience of the previous games, I don’t know how you could presume the best for Ground Zeroes, especially while off-handedly rebuking SVU for showing far more sensitivity and nuance than anything by Kojima’s hand.

Reply



Leo says:

January 17, 2014 at 3:50 pm

Hey, first of all, thanks for your response!

I think reading the past Metal Gear as experiences derogatory to one

gender or the other is a quite limited view; not only it has characters like Big Boss, Meryl, Fortune, Mei Ling, Olga or Sniper Wolf, which are varied, interesting and capable, and in no way defined by gender roles (also, Olga's hairy harmpits in MSG2 is by far the most subversive thing I have ever saw a game doing in relation to genre representation).

The thing the Metal Gear series does, however, is play with audience expectation, especially in relation to the holywoodian sensibilities it plays with; which is why its representation of women might seem a little bit skewed and exploitative in some moments. But the respect it shows to these characters makes me think it something else.

Which brings me to my seconde point, which is sex; the MSG series tackles sex as a tangible, real thing, unlike many games that . Cahracters have impulses and desires, even in the hyperaugmented movie-pseudo-reality they inhabit. It is a game that dares to play with sexuality and sexyness in idiosyncratic ways, not confirming to the tropes of gratuity in the games industry, but making their own (it is an auteur game, after all). Even what could be deemed "problematically", like The Beauty and The Beast unity, is still open to interpretation (like a character like Bayonetta, they fight with their sexuality, and I honestly find that to be empowering, rather than trite).

Now lets talk SVU; it had, as far as I know, 14 seasons, with a medium of 22 episodes each; this gets about 300 episodes, each with their own plots. Thats a lot of fake rape, and in my opinion, that do a job of trivializing, and worse still, exploiting such a sensitive topic. While the show might opt for a naturalistic approach, it still entertainment, painting the cops as typical movie heroes (conflicted and "flawed", but with hearts of gold and stunning looks) and the criminals as heartless inhuman entities. It nihilistic approach, combined with its structure and sensitive topics, manage grab attention and pull heartstrings as adept as a mexican soap opera. I watching it makes me sick, for the way it takes real issues and commodifies then into trite, cheap entertainment. And, you know 14 seasons? They seem to be doing fine with that formula.

(also, I urge to read this article, because it shows how Kojima is smart as an author, and should be given the benefit of doubt:

http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/126148/Analysis_Socially_Awkward__How_Metal_Gear_Solid_2_Predicted_Facebook.php)



Leo says:

February 21, 2014 at 3:58 pm

It's been, like, I don't know, a month? I still waiting for your answer. Though after reading a bit of the things you write and read, I'm hard pressed to think that, as a lot of people of call themselves "progressive" on the internet, your interests lie not in debate, but repeating stuff and agreeing with people that have opinions the same as yours. Oh, Americans.



stephenbeirne says:

February 21, 2014 at 4:50 pm

Hi Leo. Well first of all I'm not American, I'm Irish. I'm not sure where your latest comment came from but it's hardly warranted.

Secondly, I didn't reply until now because I didn't really see how a reply was warranted. I understand many people have problems with Law and Order:SVU, I took care to explicate that in the article. Still, though I understand those interpretations of the show, I disagree with them. I don't find it to be exploitative or insensitive to its subject matters on a whole.

Inversely for MGS, there isn't a threshold of 'being art' where an author's work suddenly becomes irreproachable. No about of 'Eva owning her sexuality' excuses how male gaze-y her entire character presence is literally all the time. That's not even getting into the problems with saying a fictional character has agency beyond that of its creator. The Boss and Olga don't cancel out all the peeping and creeping that punctures the length of each game. And on and on. You admit it's all open to interpretation—well, this is mine.

Again, I like the MGS games. I really like them. But it doesn't do any good to pretend they're without fault, or that Kojima is artistic to the point of being beyond human.



Living says:

January 14, 2014 at 7:47 am

While I agree that it's likely that Kojima's tin ear for tone is going to sabotage his intentions for the character, it's absolutely pointless to think about until you can react to the work itself.

You're not CNN. You're not Kotaku. You don't have to guess. Don't confuse "release cycle journalism" for actual thought/criticism. There's plenty of actual stuff out there to react to, don't waste your time.

Reply



mgsfan says:

January 22, 2014 at 6:42 pm

It won't be quiet on the audio file in ground zeroes as quiet wasn't in peace walker it'll be Paz Ortega most likely the audio of her being implanted with a bomb which is shown in red band trailer.

Ground Zeroes is basically a peace walker epilogue while phantom pain is actual the game that introduces all the people from phantom pain trailer.

Reply



This Week I Read – A peaceful, angry year « Normally Rascal says:

January 24, 2014 at 11:32 am

[...] tooting my own horn again, I articulated my feelings on the news of sexual violence in the upcoming Metal Gear Solid: Ground Ze... with reference to Law and Order: SVU as a good structural [...]

Reply



mgsfan says:

January 24, 2014 at 6:51 pm

Stefanie Joosten is not in the metal gear solid V ground zeroes opening credits since konami has shown the actors names involved with mgs5 gz it is logically reasonable to either be from Paz before a bomb is implanted inside her, or a random female p.o.w. we save from camp omega as even peace walker had female pow's & soldiers.

Stefanie Joosten the actress playing Quiet will only be in Phantom Pain. I'm surprised people are making a big fuss of an audio log without looking at context of Pacifica Ocean aka Paz Ortega she knew her objective by being sent by Cipher to get Big Boss to be a deterrent for Cipher but Big Boss refused therefore Paz started to launch nukes on eastern seaboard of US, but BB destroyed her launcher before she could fire. In GZ Paz is treated by XOF as a failed agent that turned against homeland. It helps your case more when you actually know the story context & overall context of canon. So the assault wouldn't technically be under military as CIA isn't military.

Reply



Notes on Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes « Normally Rascal says:

April 17, 2014 at 4:14 am

[...] My reservations have been vindicated. MGS games have always featured torture. They have also always featured sexism. GZ ups the dramatic/action movie ante by exacerbating sexist values that were already present, by introducing or elaborating on sexist narrative techniques. It's not that rape within fiction is taboo or always sexist, it's that GZ uses the above two narrative components needlessly, to make it more edgy, more gritty. It's competing with itself and with a market of edgy gritty action games, whereas, it doesn't really have to. [...]

Reply



Earthan says:

April 27, 2014 at 1:44 pm

Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault/Rape. Seriously I'm going to criticize films which sensationalize the way sexual abuse is presented in media, so bail if that's going to fuck you up.

Also spoiler warning. I haven't played Ground Zeroes, but I've read about the ending, and I'm going to be talking about it.

This article sums up exactly how I feel about Ground Zeroes. I'm pretty upset and I feel somewhat betrayed by Kojima for sinking to this level of shock-based storytelling. Even Olga and The Boss were ogled by the camera, even The Boss unzipped her bodysuit in the end, even Mei Ling was sexualized, even (apparently) 15-16 year old Paz was sexualized and objectified.

So I should have thought it's only a matter of time before he uses sexual assault as a cheap plot device. He doesn't respect women's experiences. He respects that they're capable of impressive feats, but he doesn't give a shit about their stories. The only MGS death-speech that focuses on Big Boss is Sniper Wolf's. Eva/Big Mama's life revolves around Big Boss and Solidus. I should have seen it coming.

Paz having a bomb sewn into her body surgically does not bother me, metatextually. It's horrifying, invasive, and despicable, and serves the story's purpose. Having a second bomb in her vagina or anus is unacceptable. It's overtly sexual and unnecessary. The audio-file eroticizing Paz being raped in a prison camp is beyond bad taste, it's a betrayal of Kojima's responsibility, as a storyteller and a human being, to do no harm to his audience.

I'm not even saying, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm not even saying that finding an audio file which reveals that Paz was violated while imprisoned is necessarily the problem (though it is a serious risk and burden to take on, and I think you need to make sure you know where your Big Boy Pants are if you're going to open this can of worms). I'm saying that we could find that out without being subjected to a sensational, eroticized sound file which is meant to turn the audience's own body against them by instigating feelings of arousal in relation to an inhuman crime.

When filmmakers and television do this, it's audience-rape. Facing the audience with something terrible, but presenting it in a way which the human brain is hard-coded to be sexually aroused by- Is there a significant difference between physically manipulating someone's body to betray them in this way, and merely doing so mentally? If a grown man discusses sexual acts with a child, but never touches them, if an adult forces a child to view pornographic materials, but never physically harms them, that adult is still a child molester. So why should we treat a director who does that to his audience, any differently?

I am certain that when the recording was made, the goal was to foster revulsion in the player- but this can be done without making the audience themselves feel dirty, or somehow complicit in the crime, which is what this kind of voyeuristic bullshit does.

Right now I'm really mad at Kojima, but more than that I'm saddened. This is exactly the kind of thing which recontextualizes all those other misogynistic examples throughout the series. Examples which I've always kept in my mind as the grains of salt to somewhat counterbalance my hero-worship of Kojima as a creative role model. But how can I keep replaying and enjoying MGS games, when every instance of objectifying sexualization now

appears to be a lead-up to sexual assault?

I feel as though Kojima has taken the series away from me, ripped the game discs out of my hands, off my shelves, and tossed them out the window into a sewer, voiding them of what value they otherwise possessed. Yeah I'm upset.

Sorry for the long, and late, comment. I hope you don't mind I included information that's out now that the game has been released, like about Paz.

Reply

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Blog at WordPress.com. | The Quintus Theme.



+ Follow

Follow "Normally Rascal"

Get every new post delivered to your Inbox.

Join 98 other followers

Enter your email address