

AUTEUR THEORY IN VIDEO GAMES:  
RECOGNIZING HIDEO KOJIMA  
AND THATGAMECOMPANY  
AS AUTEURS IN THE  
VIDEO GAME MEDIUM  
A THESIS  
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## CHAPTER ONE-INTRODUCTION

“The critic Roger Ebert once drew a crucial distinction between video games and art: he said that the ultimate objective of a video game—unlike that of a book, film, or poem—is to achieve a high score, vaporize falling blocks, or save the princess. Art, he argued, cannot be won” (Parker, 2013, para. 1). This shows a longstanding stereotype about video games, that they are less important than other forms of entertainment. “The joke is, video games are inherently stupid. Once you realize that this is the fundamental underlying narrative of the culture with respect to video games, so much else starts to make sense...I refer to this condition as game shame” (Burgan, 2013, p. 93). But is there reason behind this shame? Even if this was true with the arcade games of the 80s, the medium has surely evolved beyond this criticism. Now on par with the budgets of Hollywood releases, the video game industry is producing games with financial success rivaling film. In 2016, American consumers spent \$30.4 billion on video game content; since just 2010, there’s been an almost \$10 billion rise in revenue (Entertainment Software Association, 2017). This is calculating just American consumers, a fraction of the overall consumers of the medium.

But Ebert does not question the financial worth of video games, only their artistic value. And while he later came to regret speaking out against video games, going as far as to admit that players could have art-like experiences from them, he believed that he could find no such joy because he did not want to play them (Ebert, 2010). That was his mistake. As Jenova Chen, co-creator of *Thatgamecompany*, writes in his 2006 thesis:

Video games are still recognized by the majority, who do not play video games, as shallow and aggression-provoking materials. The difference between watching someone

playing a video game, and playing a video game by yourself, is tremendous. The most efficient way to reduce bias and resistance from non-gamers is to create games they feel like playing. When a non-gamer can find a game they enjoy, they will no longer consider video games shallow (Chen, 2006, para. 4).

In the 90s, Dr. Janet Murray was a respected Shakespearean professor, someone with an academic sense of the word art, who had a building curiosity about the growing world of video games and their potential as alternative narrative forms. By the end of her studies, she concluded that “games hold the potential for more powerful moments of revelation that they currently make use of” (1999, p. 54). Dr. Murray recognized that there was more to video game medium than flashing pixels and violent gameplay. It was simply another media, one with the same capabilities for storytelling as film, music, or photography. Almost 20 years later, the industry has changed as radically as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) was from Pac-Man machines. What has not changed is the ability for the medium to demonstrate itself as art, if it is created by a skilled creator.

But my argument is not that video games can be art, for this has been debated for decades with little push to either side. Rather, I will proceed in assuming that my position is correct and expand upon it. For as much literature as there is, analyzing and praising various elements of video games, there seems to be a major void in the writing on the creators themselves. While the video game industry, much like the film industry, is primarily a collaborative effort, there are video game creators, exactly like film creators, whose voice rises above the mob. Like Hitchcock, Kubrick, and Chaplin, there are individuals whose identity is synonymous with their work, creators whose games are immediately identifiable with their

personal brand. While industry writers have debated and proven that the title of auteur can accurately be applied to creators of video games, so few individuals have been honored with the title. More so, academia has barely begun to use auteur theory to discuss the media, lagging behind industry sources by more than a decade. It's time for academics to begin recognizing the talent of specific auteurs working in the industry, individuals whose work personally contributes to a project in an industry more collaborative than filmmaking (Bogost, 2012). Looking at the video game industry, no two creators embody the title of auteur as much as director Hideo Kojima and the studio Thatgamecompany.

Beginning in the late 80s, Hideo Kojima is the writer and director of the *Metal Gear* franchise, one of the longest-running and most consistently-excellent video game series in the medium's history. Accredited for single-handedly helping create the stealth genre of games, the industry veteran Kojima is perhaps the most recognizable video game director; from his confident public persona to his iconic writing style, every project created by the man is immediately identifiable as his. An auteur working from inside the corporate structure, Kojima was fired from his parent company Konami in 2015. But now the world awaits, as his first game as a free director is slated for a 2019 release. There could not be a more opportune time to examine the career that has led him to this point.

Opposite of this, Thatgamecompany is a fledgling studio, formed by the success of a Flash-based game created for a master's thesis. Seeing a market flooded with conflict-based games built on the idea of empowering its players, Thatgamecompany wanted to use video games to explore more of the emotional spectrum. The company's founder and President Jenova Chen describes himself as "a video game evangelistic. I want people to love games, so

what I can do is try to make something that could potentially allow us, the game lovers, to share it with other people...so it's kind of like a gift...from the gamers to the ones they love" (Sky Q&A with Jenova Chen, 2017). Unlike Kojima, however, Chen is not a leader who pushes his agenda through his work; rather, he works as one of many parts in the studio's overall persona, one that has stayed as consistent as any individual auteur. And while Thatgamecompany has only released three games, each drew increasing praise from the industry. Also working on their next project due in the next year, it is no understatement that this studio may come to revolutionize the medium.

With both creators working to complete their newest games, now seems to be the perfect time for more discussion on these auteurs before academic literature falls further behind industry writers. A theory built around how critics study a work, auteur theory may be a perfect fit for this thesis. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate a lack of literature, a lack of criticism on this facet of the video game medium. In this thesis, I argue that there are auteurs working in the video game industry, auteurs who deserve academic recognition for their work, with Hideo Kojima and Thatgamecompany as my examples, I will adapt auteur theory to fit the video game medium, then utilize it to analyze both creator's libraries in preparation for their new releases.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

One of the older theories in film studies, and the chief theory used in this thesis, auteur theory got its start thanks mainly to Andre Bazin in his magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*. While starting as a mixture of older theories, along with a healthy dose of Bazin's personal opinions on auteurship (Bazin, 1957), the theory was picked up and solidified by American critic Andrew

Sarris. In his short article, *Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962*, Sarris defined the base of the auteur theory used today.

the first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value...The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value...A director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style...the way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels...The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art....extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material... the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning (1962, p. 562).

It is this definition of auteur theory that will be utilized throughout the thesis. Some critics will balk at the use of Sarris, calling his ideas outdated. Many will claim that auteur theory has been condensed and refined in the last 70 years, making Sarris' original writings on the subject limited in its use today. But this theoretical progress was almost entirely done to better suit the need of analyzing the auteur in cinema. For the use of criticizing the auteur in the video game medium, going back to the source of the theory will prove more enlightening than theories based too heavily in the discipline of cinema studies; much of the later auteur theory writings were, in fact, so specific to film directors that they couldn't be readily applied to creators of any other medium. Of course, some of this later work will still be utilized, but only writings that are applicable to this medium. In the case of Kojima, writings from the British Film

Institute will be especially relevant. They “gave birth to a more theoretically ambitious form of auteurism known as ‘auteur-structuralism’...this approach identified the style of a given director with a series of structuring oppositions that recurred throughout his or her oeuvre” (Wexman, 2003, p. 4). Discussed in detail in the thesis, Kojima’s products demonstrate a reoccurring narrative structure that this theoretical framework will highlight.

Coming from a French tradition of beginning analysis with the director, auteur theory claims that the creator’s fingerprint covers his work. The benefit of the theory comes with being able to draw poignant comparisons between works, in some cases going as far as to be self-referential. This is the aspect that keeps bringing so many theorists and casual fans back to auteur theory: even if the media itself may be less-than-perfect, audiences instinctively resonate with art when one can feel the personal touch of the creator within it. Thus, by analyzing and appreciating the auteur themselves, the viewer can better appreciate the art they create. It is with this lens that unclear motifs become charming references to older material, or strange visual styles become a familiar staple. “And this is where the *politique des auteurs* falls in line with the system of ‘criticism by beauty’; in other words, when one is dealing with a genius, it is always a good method to presuppose that a supposed weakness in a work of art is nothing other than a beauty that one has not yet managed to understand” (Bazin, 1957, para. 29). With the three characteristics of technique, personal style, and interior meaning (themes), I will illustrate the auteurship of Thatgamecompany and Hideo Kojima. While authorship has been written about in video games, most of this literature isn’t based around the idea of the game creator as the auteur. Academics have written about the Hollywood auteur’s place in the industry (Brookey, 2010), the player and writer coauthoring narrative (Wellenreiter, 2015), and

the player's role as the final author while playing (Wolf, 2008). But most writers stop right at the point of discussing creators as auteurs.

Unfortunately, there is considerably less literature from video game studies relevant to this thesis. As one of the newest digital media, video games were not the subject of much academic discussion until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; most of what was written viewed the medium under the lens of other fields of study, such as cinema and English analysis. The major issue with video game research for many years was the overabundance of literature covering the same topic: violence in video games correlating to violence in real life. "The number of research articles on the topic of violent video games begins to dramatically increase in the years after Columbine, continuing to soar to the present day (Markey, 2017, p. 37). "Research, however, "found that it was frustration, not violent content, that caused mild aggressive feeling. It didn't matter if a game was violent or not; if the game's goal was near impossible to achieve, people became upset when playing it" (2017, p. 173). While the fallout from school shootings raised fears about the medium, academia has proven this old rumor false time and time again.

Today most of the literature on video games cover one of two topics: what are the gameplay mechanics of the game (Ludology), and how players respond to the game. While not the original creator of the term, 'Ludology' was popularized by Gonzalo Frasca in 2003. Today Ludology is essentially the term for critical study of video games. A combination of different theories, the main point Frasca wrote, and his title, was the difference between video games: *Simulation vs. Narrative*. Where other art represents real life, allowing viewers to view a symbol of a real-life object, in video games, one interacts in a simulated scene created for the

player instead of merely viewing it. What sets Frasca apart from many other video game authors, and creating the critical flaw in his theory, is his insistence on not focusing on the narrative of the games. Looking at it as a foreign element from older mediums, Frasca and many traditionalists believed that a story only distracts from gameplay, the unique trait of video games and therefore the most important. Ludology is, however, still one of the founding theories of video game studies, and thus is important to consider for critical analysis. For this reason, rather than the main theoretical framework, Ludology will only be utilized sparingly as a cohesive school of thought to analyze game mechanics.

While the discussion on certain elements of video games has been thorough, there still exists a significant gap in literature. Not a complete lack of writing on the subject, however, simply a gap in academic literature. Video game magazines, online forums, electronic art articles: these are the authors writing about auteur theory in video games. Unfortunately, the gap in the literature comes not in the form of Kojima or Thatgamecompany's status as auteurs, but a gap in academic writings crediting any video game creators as auteurs. Industry writers have recognized Kojima's status as the de facto video game auteur since the 2000s (Diver, 2014), and Thatgamecompany has even had their titles featured in the Smithsonian Museum of Art (Baptiste, 2013). If there is such credibility for the auteurship of these individuals, then why have so few academics written on it?

The video game industry has built its reputation up slowly over the last five decades, and academia has noticed this growth. Professors at institutes across the country are studying the process of game-building compared to classic card and board games (Burgun, 2015), the differences between film and video game narrative structure (Pearce, 2004), and the social

circles that these games create (Gunkel, 2009). And this academic progress shows signs for great development in the industry. “It promises to broaden and deepen the discourse of the medium...In addition, if history is any indicator, it will also have a positive influence on the practice of creating games, just as the development of film theory in the sixties and seventies did on film craft” (Pearce, 2004, para. 2). Any media finds itself steadily increasing in quality when subjected to critical analysis, most of this comes from the result of educated artists understanding their medium more deeply. It seems, however, that video game creators receive less credit than their peers in other mediums.

While the video game medium itself is gaining notoriety in academia, there still exists a serious gap in literature: recognizing auteurs in the field. The creators of these games show equal artistic tendencies to directors of films, so why are they considered lesser? If the product of an industry is slowly gaining respect, why are we not showing equal respect for the creators of these products? The video game medium as art has been studied and documented, now is the time to expand on this progress and reach the next stage of study for the medium. There is 50 years of articles covering auteur theory in cinema, and now the writings of Bazin and Sarris will be used to cover another digital media. The past writings of both mediums will be the basis for the thesis, a springboard to prove not only that video game creators fit the definition of auteur, but also show the individual auteurship of Thatgamecompany and Kojima.

## CHAPTER TWO-AUTEUR THEORY

Coming from a French tradition of beginning analysis with the director, auteur theory claims that the creator's fingerprint covers their work. Just as a Picasso painting could only have been created by Picasso, as a result of his personal technique and aesthetic, a film highlights the personality and techniques synonymous with its director. The benefit of the theory comes with being able to draw poignant comparisons between works, in some cases recognizing when the auteur is being self-referential. This is the aspect that keeps bringing so many theorists and casual fans back to auteur theory: even if the media itself may be less-than-perfect, audiences instinctively resonate with art when we can feel the personal touch of the creator within it.

Part of the joy of a Tarantino film is feeling his excitement, his relish of each bloody scene; fans pick up on his excitement and it becomes their excitement, their joy. As a critic, one can see the formatting, the spacing of a scene from *Full Metal Jacket (1987)*, the linear appearance of a set, and tell that Kubrick was the man behind the camera. Thus, by analyzing and appreciating the auteur themselves, the viewer can better appreciate the art they create. "And this is where the *politique des auteurs* falls in line with the system of 'criticism by beauty'; in other words, when one is dealing with a genius, it is always a good method to presuppose that a supposed weakness in a work of art is nothing other than a beauty that one has not yet managed to understand" (Bazin, 1957, para. 29). It's with this lens that unclear motifs become charming references to older material, or strange visual styles become a familiar staple.

This chapter will allow us to perfectly understand the literature covering auteur theory, then to take this understanding and translate it onto the video game medium. While auteur theory seems to work with most media, the theory was originally designed to analyze cinema. Therefore, I must first make certain that the theory and medium are compatible before any extended analysis can begin. It can be said that author privilege over a digital text is even greater in the video game medium than in film. A film auteur has control over the script, the movements of the camera, the edited cuts between shots. But they only control what is on the screen, they have no control over their viewers. Not only does the video game creator control all aspects of the game, they also write the very laws of reality that the audience must play through. They can choose to make the sky red, to disregard gravity, to make your athletic character suddenly slow and weak. They control how and when one controls their avatar and the controls themselves. They decide the game one consumes, and how one will consume it.

Auteur theory isn't a theory of production, but one of analysis. An auteur doesn't think about auteur theory while they create; rather, they create works that demonstrate their personal touch when it is analyzed.

The purpose of the *Cahiers* critics was to elevate the films of a few directors to the status of high art. This introduction of popular cinema into a privileged aesthetic realm came after a decade of debate over what was then called mass culture, a phenomenon commonly dismissed with terms such as 'entertainment; and escapism'...The auteurs countered this discourse by treating gifted directors as transcendent figures who expressed timeless truths and who therefore merited serious critical scrutiny” (Wexman, 2003, p. 3).

As a scholar focusing on the video game medium, I empathize with the critics of *Cahiers*, trying to prove merit of a media that many judge as silly or foolish. This link will only prove to aid in this struggle to demonstrate the value of these video game auteurs, just as it assisted those French critics at showing the value of their favorite creators. In this age of helicopter parent companies and oppressive studio oversight, the auteur theory seems almost idealistic, a relic of the golden age of Hollywood. But the theory has evolved several times in the last 60 years.

People have been critiquing art based on the artist long before auteur theory was established. How many times has someone scoffed and walked past an abstract painting, only to publicly tout their love of the piece once they realize it was a Picasso or a Pollock? The identity of the author is often key to understanding and contextualizing a work. By having the identity of the auteur be the focal point of analysis, criticism comes from a position of understanding the context around the creation of the work.

### **AUTEUR THEORY'S ORIGINS**

Now one of the older theories in film studies, auteur theory was conceived over the course of about a decade. Its beginnings come from French critic, François Truffaut, and his concept of the *politique des auteurs*. Built around the basic philosophy that good directors made good films while bad directors made bad films, Bazin himself even admits that “I beg to differ with those of my colleagues who are the most firmly convinced that the *politique des auteurs* is well founded” (1957, para. 3). At the time of Truffaut’s writing, he was most certainly correct. It was Bazin’s article, however, that took the theory into the academic spotlight.

The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and even

progresses from one film to the next. It is recognized that there do exist certain important films of quality that escape this test, but these will systematically be considered inferior to those in which the personal stamp of the auteur, however run-of-the-mill the scenario, can be perceived even infinitesimally (1957, para. 27).

Politique des auteurs boils down to the idea that, in one's career, there will be aspects of one's work that come personally from the auteur; these personal aspects will grow and evolve as the auteur grows and evolves as an artist.

In Bazin's writings, however, there was another agenda at work. World War II saw a period of time where Europeans had restricted access to American films, an obvious side effect of the conflict. During this time, rather than lament, European film critics simply moved on, focusing their efforts on fellow European directors. But soon much of the literature coming out began discussing the drop in quality from Hollywood and its directors. Disagreeing with this stance, "the purpose of the *Cahiers* critics was to elevate the films of a few directors to the status of high art" (Wexman, 2003, p. 3). The magazine's position was that many American directors showcased high levels of skill, more than worthy of discussion and approval in Europe.

Much of Bazin's role in shaping auteur theory came from his stance that not all directors are auteurs. "So this conception of the author is not compatible with the auteur/subject distinction, because it is of greater importance to find out if a director is worthy of entering the select group of auteurs than it is to judge how well he or she has used the material to hand" (Bazin, 1957, para. 26). Auteur theory implies, if not outwardly demands, that the creator is one of great skill with a career of works that are worth examining critically. At the time,

Hitchcock and Ford were two of the most common auteurs mentioned by name. It goes without saying that these two fulfill these requirements.

One point that Bazin made clear in his article was his stance on aging artists. “A great talent matures but does not grow old” (Bazin, 1957, para. 24). This was a time where many critics were beginning to disparage the later works of many of the original auteurs, such as Wells and Chaplin, by claiming that their later films didn’t match the quality of their first classics that made them stars. Bazin accredited this not to the directors, but to the critics. “We should say that when we think we can discern a decline it is our own critical sense that is at fault, since an impoverishment of inspiration is a very unlikely phenomenon” (1957, para. 24). While I believe Bazin to be a tad apologetic, I understand his stance. Oftentimes a career will be scorned when no work in a director’s library matches their first great success. But how much of that original wonder was genuinely superior to later works, and how much of it is the audience being dazzled by their first taste of that auteur’s presence? By the end of an auteur’s life, the flavor of their films becomes one too familiar to audiences, deadening them to the joys of the creator’s work.

Bazin did incredible work, building upon Truffat’s elementary philosophy on the value of a talented director. But it was more than five years later that auteur theory found its name and a home in the United States; fitting, considering that the theory was first approached as a way of analyzing American directors. American critic Andrew Sarris was perhaps the most vocal supporter of the *politique des auteurs*. With his writings on it in 1962, he also became the one to dub the term auteur theory. Admitting that Bazin and *Cahiers* did more to create the theory than Truffat, Sarris was the one who assembled auteur theory as it is known it today. Perhaps

his most important addition to the theory, aside from the name itself, was Sarris' three points for a critic to base their auteuristic study from.

The first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value...The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels...The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material...It is not quite the vision of the world a director projects nor quite his attitude toward life. It is ambiguous, in any literary sense, because part of it is imbedded in the stuff of the cinema and cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms" (1962, p. 562).

Finally, definite characteristics to look for in analysis. This list actually functions in a few important ways. First, it names guidelines that a creator must demonstrate to qualify as an auteur. Second, these are the characteristics that will be examined in this auteur analysis. It is important to also note that the first and second premises are called criterion of value. Not only are these the marks of an auteur, these are aspects of a quality film. Sarris, going back to the *politique des auteurs*, states that containing examples of auteurship is a path for directors to create quality works.

The first of Sarris' premises is the most straightforward: "the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value" (1962, p. 562). A facet of the theory since Truffaut, auteur theory

was always intended to be applied to skilled directors. An unskilled director would be too preoccupied struggling to create their film to add the type of personalized content and style that auteur theory looks for. After all, if one cannot learn the basics, how could they hope to be a master of their craft?

Sarris' second characteristic of the auteur is "the distinguishable personality of the director" (1962, p. 562). Think to the auteurs mentioned previously, Tarantino and Kubrick. Both of these artists' work was defined by the personal styles of the author. Imagine *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) being made by the other director. Given the personal role each director had, I doubt that either film would have been as successful. In many cases, the best auteurs seem to be the ones with the most distinct, unique styles. Sarris makes a point that often the directors with the strongest styles are able to impart their personal touch onto a film where they have no control over the script. By having their involvement limited in other aspects of the film, the auteur is forced to demonstrate their style as an auteur only through the visuals.

This distinguishable personality is often the first element recognized while conducting an auteur study. It is also generally the easiest element to isolate in an auteur's film. "Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (1962, p. 562). These characteristics will be a main focal point as I analyze Kojima and Thatgamecompany. In cases where it is difficult to find the personality of the director in a library of work, it is likely that this director is not an auteur.

Interior meaning is the focus of Sarris' third premise, which he quickly links to mise en scene. True to form, most auteurs have distinct manners of arranging their scenes, or taking

their shots. This goes beyond the technical competence of the first premise. This calls to the way a master can make perfect use of the frame to evoke the greatest possible reaction from the audience, the ability to divulge as much of the auteur's character through the layout and booking of a scene. Kubrick was known for his sterile, lifeless sets that immediately tuned audiences in on his uncomfortable frequency. Sarris himself states that "the stuff of the cinema cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms" (1962, p. 562), but this condition of auteurship will still be utilized in later chapters.

"The three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an auteur." (1962, p. 563). Here, Sarris makes an important statement. While each premise is crucial to being considered an auteur, it is the innermost circle that transforms a director into an auteur. The ability to master mise en scene comes from a mastery of both former premises. Without technical production skills, combined with a personal style, it would be impossible to become an auteur and leave one's mark through setting alone.

Looking at these concentric circles, it's apparent to the metaphor that fewer and fewer creators have the ability to earn a place within the inward circles. A video on BuzzFeed is usually shot and produced with a high level of skill, satisfying Sarris' first premise of auteur, but these videos show little to no style or personality of their creator, demonstrating a lack of auteurship over their work. Michael Bay has shown the technical prowess to direct a multitude of films, and these films often display his style of directing with an overload of special effects

and explosions. But he never demonstrates the final premise, that last step towards becoming an auteur, due to a lack of ability to design a scene into a reflection of himself and his work.

### **GROWING PAINS**

Unfortunately for Sarris, however, his theory would be a target for many other critics of the time. Pauline Kael, an American critic herself, would serve as Sarris' chief rival during this period. Seeing auteur theory as both lackadaisical and pretentious, Kael's argument against the theory, while elegantly written, lack cohesion. "Criticism is an art, not a science, and a critic who follows rules will fail in one of his most important functions: perceiving what is original and important in new work and helping others to see" (1963, p. 6). She continues her attack, referring to auteurists as uncreative critics looking for an easy pass on reviews. "Their desire for a theory that will solve all the riddles of creativity is in itself perhaps an indication of their narrowness and confusion... They wanted a simple answer, a formula" (1963, p. 21). But much of Kael's issue seems to be with the idea of a theory itself, stating many times that the best criticism come without rules, but rather the writer's intuition. This is well and good simply as a reviewer at a local paper, but academic analysis requires a rigid backbone that Kael seems desperate to denounce.

More than this, Kael's arguments seem less pointed at auteur theory and more at everything the theory surrounds. In her various attacks on the quality of contemporary American directors, Kael's issue seems to be with the state of American cinema, not the theory applied to it. With passing criticisms of Warhol, Kael, clearly coming from an elitism point of view against anything she declares as too consumerist, seems to have either the gall or the lack of self-awareness to describe auteur theory as elitist. But combining this with her flagrant

personal attacks on Sarris and his peers, at one point referring to them as “intellectually handicapped” (1963, p. 22), Kael does little to damage auteur theory. Instead, in her critique, she gives Sarris the opportunity to strengthen his side.

Sarris wrote again on the theory, this time in an attempt to combat rival critics pitted against his theory. Most of his defense comes from attacking his critics, but the meat of the article comes in Sarris further defining auteur theory’s role in critical analysis. “The auteur theory is ultimately a critical theory, and not a creative theory” (Sarris, 1963, p. 30). Always meant as a lens for the critic’s use, the theory is the progression of thousands of years of artist-based criticism. “However, the auteur theory was never intended as an occult ritual...Research and analysis are indispensable for sound auteur criticism” (1963, p. 28). What Sarris calls for is research into the patterns of an auteur, knowledge of a director’s entire library. It is only by having seen the collective works of an artist that the critic can begin analyzing a film in relation to the artist and their work. One cannot view *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) once and assume they can write an auteur study on Tarantino. Auteur theory is “a pattern theory in constant flux” (1963, p. 28), so one has to be up-to-date on the auteur in question. Part of the theory, after all, is gauging the changes in an auteur and their style over the progression of their career, so it is natural that this would entail observing a fluid development of the artist. To study Tarantino as an auteur, one would first watch *Reservoir Dogs*, followed by the rest of his library of works.

Still, Sarris credits auteur theory as one of the critic’s best tools in analysis. “I would say at this point only that the auteur theory comes closer than any other to providing sufficient information on the meaning and style of the cinema.” (Sarris, 1963, p. 30). Auteur theory cannot be utilized to view a single film, nor is it a theory that may be thrown about without

previous knowledge and research. Used in the correct context, however, “auteur theory is the most efficient method of classifying the cinema: past, present and future” (1963, p. 28). But unknown to Sarris, the theory would suffer from a lack of rigid definitions of expectations.

Auteur theory continued to draw fire from many members of the academic community, much of this stemmed from the loose basis that Bazin and Sarris founded the theory upon. “The auteur theory grew up haphazardly; it was never elaborated in programmatic terms, in a manifesto or collective statement. As a result, it could be interpreted and applied on rather broad lines; different critics developed somewhat different methods within a loose framework of common attitudes” (Wollen, 2013, pg. 77). The lackadaisical framework behind auteur theory held it back significantly in the eyes of academia. Fortunately, critic Geoffery Nowell-Smith soon revolutionized the theory with his creation of auteur structuralism. Quick to admit that “the concept of authorship provides a necessary dimension without which the picture cannot be complete” (1973, p. 10), Nowell-Smith took his criticism on a new path when he suggested that critics begin looking more closely, beyond the simple stylistic choices of the auteur.

One essential corollary of the theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author’s work are not always those that are most readily apparent. The purpose of criticism becomes therefore to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs, which may be stylistic or thematic, is what gives an author’s work its particular structure (Nowell-Smith, 1973, p. 10).

Auteur structuralism took root as the leading branch of auteur theory, most likely due to it bridging the theory to structuralist theory that was becoming more and more popular. Most importantly, it added depth to what was always considered a shallow resource for critics. Now, instead of simply looking at how a director's films looked the same, now one could analyze "a series of structuring oppositions that recurred throughout his or her oeuvre.... allowed the auteur-structuralist critics to practice a descriptive mode of analysis that moved them beyond the impressionistic declarations of value that characterized Romantic auteurism" (Wexman, 2003, p. 4). Still, just as the original auteur theory was a loaded gun for uninformed analysis, auteur-structuralism had the same danger.

Here is a danger...that by simply noting and mapping resemblances, all the which are studied (whether Russian fairy tales or American movies) will be reduced to one, abstract and impoverished. There must be a moment of synthesis as well as a moment of analysis...In this way, texts can be studied not only in their universality (what they all have in common) but also in their singularity (what differentiates them from each other)" (Wollen, 2013, p. 93).

While there have been developments in the theory since then, these are the major movements inside the philosophy. Yet these early writings, especially Sarris', will serve as the bulk of our theoretical framework. Some critics will balk at the use of Sarris, calling his ideas outdated. Many will claim that auteur theory has been condensed and refined in the last 70 years, making Sarris' original writings on the subject limited in its use today. But this theoretical progress was almost entirely done to better suit the need of analyzing the auteur in cinema. For the use of criticizing the auteur in the video game medium, going back to the source of the theory will

prove more enlightening than theories based too heavily in the discipline of cinema studies. Much of the later auteur theory writings were, in fact, so specific to film directors that they couldn't be readily applied to creators of any other medium. Of course, this later work on auteur-structuralism will still be utilized, but only writings that are applicable to the video game medium. In the case of Kojima, "this approach identified the style of a given director with a series of structuring oppositions that recurred throughout his or her oeuvre" (Wexman, 2003, p. 4) will be especially relevant. Discussed in detail in the thesis, Kojima's products demonstrate a reoccurring narrative structure that this theoretical framework will highlight.

The majority of complaints of auteur theory comes from not from problems with auteur theory, but with criticism that auteur theory is not what the critic wants it to be. It is no help to directors themselves, giving no clues on how to create one's own works. "The auteur theory is ultimately a critical theory, and not a creative theory. The artist does not worry about technical competence, personality, or interior meaning, nor about imitating nature or the objective correlative, nor about form and content" (Sarris, 1963, p. 30). Auteur theory is not a scientific theory based off of Freudian thinking. It cannot give insight into every aspect of a film. Bazin and Sarris were quick to admit that auteur theory, when cited by many amateurs, could simply be used to excuse poor directing as a personal touch. "Unfortunately, some critics have embraced the auteur theory as a short-cut to film scholarship. With a 'you-see-it-or-you-don't' attitude toward the reader, the particularly lazy auteur critic can save himself the drudgery of communication and explanation" (Sarris, 1962, p. 563).

But by combining the theory with well researched analysis, especially when combined with other theoretical frameworks, auteur theory is one of the most direct forms of analyzing

art. With the three characteristics of technique, personal style, and interior meaning (themes), I will be proving the auteurship of Thatgamecompany and Hideo Kojima. While the auteur has been written about in video games, most of this literature isn't based around the idea of the game creator as the auteur. Academics have danced around the subject skillfully, but most writers stop right at the point of discussing video game creators as auteurs. It is my desire to fill this gap in literature.

### CHAPTER THREE-VIDEO GAMES

Auteur theory was specifically designed to analyze film. Before such a medium-specific theory can be migrated to a new media, it is important to fully understand this new media, video games. In doing so, I will address the similarities and key differences between the two mediums, allowing me to alter the way I use auteur theory in this study. This will prevent a series of pitfalls later when moving on to critical analysis. After all, one would be foolish to take critical theory on comic books and apply them to a study on Jane Austin's novels without some adjustments.

Video games will soon be 50 years old, and yet they are still young compared to television, film, radio, and other comparable digital media. While they have grown from a niche market into a powerful economic industry, video games are still in their infancy in terms of academic study. Much like other media, most of the early studies on video games applied the theories and techniques from earlier art forms, with mixed success. But with the growth of video games and the continued critical advancement in the industry, it becomes more important than ever that academic studies on the subject treat it as its own original media, not an offshoot of cinema or animation. After all, film was originally studied under the same guise as theater and written prose before the unique facets of cinema were understood by academics. The literature on any medium blossoms once theory is specifically crafted to suit that medium. One of the difficulties of academically critiquing video games is the lack of a definitive rubric from which to grade them. With the vast number of games coming out every year, combined with dozens of genres all containing rules and mechanics unique to said genre, it is challenging to find a set of rules or guidelines that apply to all games. "Different interactive

systems are trying to achieve different things, and few critics are expert enough in all of them to provide useful insight for any of them” (Burgan, 2013, p. 16). Most industry writers simply state whether they enjoyed the game while playing it. While seeming like a flimsy tool to use, the point of a video game is to be playable, enjoyable, and replayable (giving players a reason to later replay the game). But perhaps with the addition of academic theory to support it, one can find a more specific guide to criticism while keeping it universal enough to include the entire medium.

Film, in its infancy, tried to emulate theatre by staging long, static shots of a room. Today, these attempts to blend mediums together looks clunky in hindsight. Like film, much of video game history has been spent trying to emulate other, more established mediums. Kojima himself, as will be discussed later, is obvious in his attempts to make his games feel and play like a Hollywood blockbuster. In a similar vein, Japan led the movement of a specific type of video game called “visual novels,” a combination of the dialogue options and choice-making of video games mixed with the text format of written prose; the final result is much like reading and playing your way through a book. And while this has had its own level of success, the visual novel has not found its foothold in the global video game market.

The issue comes from a lack of actual gameplay, strangled by an overemphasis on the text-based narrative. All of these examples demonstrate the same problem: by emulating other media, authors sacrifice elements of what make video games a unique medium, diluting the final product. “One of the lessons we can learn from the history of film is that additive formulations like ‘photoplay’ or the contemporary catchall ‘multimedia’ are a sign that the medium is in an early stage of development and is still depending on formats derived from

earlier technologies instead of exploiting its own expressive power” (Murray, 1999, p. 67). As its own unique type of storytelling, with wildly different interests than most other narrative forms, video games must be studied and analyzed with medium-specific theory if the field wishes to grow. The goal of this chapter will be to look at the unique traits of video games, understand the medium, then to analyze the vital differences between it and cinema before moving forward with auteur study specific to the medium.

### **WHAT IS A VIDEO GAME?**

Merriam-Webster defines a video game as “an electronic game in which players control images on a video screen” (Video Game, 2017). Of course, this definition only gives the most basic understanding of a video game. Most adults can understand what a video game is. *Pong* (1972), *Super Mario Brothers* (1985), *Doom* (1993), *Pokémon* (1996), and *Wii Sports* (2006) are all video games that have become normal parts of pop culture, and most Americans have played one of these titles at least once. When one thinks of video games, the Atari and Nintendo Entertainment System come to mind, small boxes surrounded by a tangle of cords between it and the television. The smooth plastic of the controller fitting in one’s palms, fingers moving almost subconsciously towards the various, colorful buttons; the thrill of watching Pac-Man eat those last few ghosts, securing the high score by just a few points; the disappointment of turning a corner too quickly and getting shot by an opponent while playing online. Most people have a working idea of what a video game is but, academically speaking, what is a video game?

Keith Burgan argues that most video games are incorrectly labeled (2013). He divides these games into four categories, from most to least inclusive, each new category adding

features of the category before it, making each more complicated than the former. The first category, most video games are actually interactive systems, mere simulations the audience can play inside. Next come puzzles, which are simulations that add problems for the player to solve on their quest to complete a goal. Third is contests, where developers add competition as an element, so rather than just having a generic goal to accomplish, the player must now surpass an opposing force to win. Finally, Burgan's definition of a game: a simulation featuring problem solving and competition, whereas the player must now make decisions on how they will play (2013).

Based off of these categories, an example of what Burgan would call a video game would be the *Call of Duty (CoD)* franchise. A First-Person Shooter (FPS), the game revolves around its online multiplayer, where players control nameless soldiers as they attempt to kill other players for points. Whichever team has the most points at the end of the round wins. What makes *CoD* a game is the decisions that a player must make as they play. What type of gun will they take into the round? Will they decide on a shotgun with heavy damage but a limited range, or choose a well-rounded weapon like an assault rifle? Will they try and engage other players head on, or attempt to use stealth to get a competitive edge? Are they willing to aim at the head, risking some shots missing for the chance at inflicting more damage, or will they fire into the chest for consistency? No answer is necessarily right or wrong, it all depends on the manner one wishes to play. These are the decisions that separate *CoD* from a flight simulation or *Guitar Hero (2005)*.

## **TRAITS OF VIDEO GAMES**

With a more stable definition of a video game in mind, now I move to the components of the medium. Clearly, video games are a purely digital media, reliant on a computer system or game console to process the software and a video screen to display the game. Most consoles have a controller included, featuring joysticks and buttons that allow the player to navigate the game. In the game, the player will generally control an avatar that serves as the player's representative as they play. This avatar can be a protagonist made by the game creator, such as Mario in *Super Mario Brothers*, while other games allow the player to create their own avatar in whatever image they wish, an option becoming more and more popular.

A difficult element to master when playing a new video game is figuring out the controls and mechanics, the rules of the game, and the methods given to play the game. There are, after all, about 17 individual inputs on a controller for current game consoles when looking at the various buttons, joysticks, and touchpads. Even if two games potentially have identical controls, the objectives and mechanics of the two games are likely to be different. This, however, is often offset by video game creators' desire to assist players. Much like the film industry has standard practices (avoiding jump cuts, using montage to tell a story, etc.), the video game industry has created standards for what a player should expect when they start a game. Most games follow a similar button layout, whether that be a general one or a genre-specific one. In almost all games, the primary button (bottom button on the right) makes one's character jump, while the left joystick is for movement and the right joystick is for controlling the camera angle. Looking at FPS games, the right trigger is the primary fire button in almost every case, with the left trigger being either a secondary fire or a zoom-in tool. With any

experience with video games, one can usually sit down and figure out the general controls of a game within the first couple minutes.

Much like how most games will have control schemes similar to one another, games will often recycle mechanics, allowing experienced players to quickly jump from title to title with little issue. For example, don't fall over the edge because the fall will kill one's character. When fighting a boss, aim for the glowing red weak points. If one encounters a surplus of healing items and ammunition, they are probably about to walk into a difficult sequence. As Dr. Murray writes, "I perform these actions not because I have read a rule book, but because I have been prepared to do so by exposure to thousands of stories that follow these patterns" (1999, p. 192). Knowing that past games have conditioned players to act in certain ways, most contemporary games will take advantage of this to allow players to more quickly begin playing the game on a competent level.

Looking past the physical components, the key feature of video games is the goal of the medium. Unlike most other digital media, whose objective is to deliver a narrative, the main goal of a video game is to be operated (played) by a user (player).

The first and most important thing to know about games is that they center on PLAY.

Unlike literature and film, which center on STORY, in games, everything revolves around play and the player experience. Game designers are much less interested in telling a story than in creating a compelling framework for play. At its highest level, the function of narrative in games is to engender compelling, interesting play (Pearce, 2004, para. 5).

This runs counter to the most basic of critical cinema theory, which were built upon the idea of creating a story from random sequences of film. With video games, however, the key to a successful product is making sure the player enjoys playing.

This brings up the biggest difference between video games and other digital media: the level of interactivity video games offers the user. When one watches a DVD, they can pause the film, put on subtitles, even have commentary from the director play in some cases. Different audiences will even perceive the film in different ways, allowing the same narrative to deliver individual meanings and themes depending on who watches it. But this doesn't change the actual film itself; the DVD won't alter its series of events depending on how the audience is viewing it or who that audience is. No matter what the audience does, the film *Citizen Kane* will be the same film, whether watched in theaters on its release or in a present-day living room on Blu-ray. When one listens to the radio, they can choose whether to actively listen to the audio or to have it in the background passively as they engage in another activity (usually driving). The listener can change the volume of the radio, or even what station they listen to, but this is the extent of the audience's control. While the audience can choose whether or not to actively view and engage mentally with the media, they cannot become active participants in it. This is a component of most digital media, the role of the audience as passive viewers of a narrative they cannot control.

People have watched film for more than 100 years now and will continue to do so for centuries to come, but many viewers find themselves wishing they could affect what they see. Video games fill this demand as images on screen being controlled by the player for entertainment. Character models, a plot, interesting graphics, and fun combos are all aspects

added onto this standard of what a video game is, but it is important not to forget this basic definition. At its core, a video game is just a digital media that viewers actively engage in shaping the events that take place on screen. This is not a negative. Rather, it is a different take on viewership and audience's role than cinema studies are used to. Keep in mind, none of this makes video games an inferior or infantile media, as stereotypes would try to suggest. Looking back on the Merriam-Webster definition, it seems to have a rather academic grasp on the medium, spelling out the most important aspect of video games: the active participation of the player.

### **VIDEO GAME CREATION**

With a grasp on the medium itself, now one must delve into the process of creating a video game. After all, it would be difficult to analyze auteurs without understanding how they craft their art. Given the complex nature of coding and rendering a video game, the average studio taking hundreds of people to operate, I will ignore these processes. They, unfortunately, tell more about the technology available to creators and less about the creators themselves. Much more important to this thesis is focusing on the game building mechanics seen: what decisions does the auteur make while crafting a video game?

Simulations provide simauthors with a technique that narrauthors lack. They are not only able to state if social change is possible or not, but they have the chance of expressing how likely they think it may be. This is not just by stating info (93% change of winning) but rather by modeling difficulty. This technique is also transparent: it is well hidden inside the model not as a piece of information but as a rule. Narrative may excel at taking snapshots at

particular events but simulation provides us with a rhetorical tool for understanding the big picture (Frasca, 2003, p. 3).

Rather than just controlling the make-up of a scene, as a film director would, a video game creator decides every facet of the world players are immersed in. The race of the protagonists and enemies, the weapons used in the game, the way physics and gravity function, these are all variables that the auteur can choose to tweak in their quest to design a perfect world. Every element the player can experience, ranging from those that are visible like art style to the transparent coding never witnessed, was made by someone for a purpose.

'Jaffe was somewhat famously unpopular with his programming team *on God of War*, because he kept insisting on seemingly contradictory changes,' Pruettt said in an e-mail to Wired.com...Jaffe's insistence on doing things his way resulted in a critically acclaimed masterpiece. 'If the engineers had been able to push back ... the results might have been easier to develop but would have almost certainly been less fun to play' (Scheier, 2011, para. 10).

Working in the corporate structure, the auteur must fight for their vision to make it into the game, just as in cinema, but the end result is often worth the increased personal struggle.

These decisions are, for this medium, the primary way to identify auteurship. Co-founder of Thatgamecompany, Jenova Chen summarized his design process in three steps.

In the field of game design, there are three fundamental conditions:

1. As a premise, the game is intrinsically rewarding, and the player is up to play the game.
2. The game offers right amount of challenges to match with the player's ability, which allows him/her to delve deeply into the game.

3. The player needs to feel a sense of personal control over the game activity (2006, para. 2).

Here, Chen summarizes the basics of game design, his short list of what matters most when crafting a video game. But even these three steps alone are difficult enough to follow, as many failed game creators could tell. Examining these points, one can see the priorities of the auteur in this medium.

Chen's first step, having gameplay be up to the players while being rewarding, feels like it should be an unspoken rule. Make sure the game is fun for players to play. Make sure the boat floats. Make sure the bomb disposal expert isn't colorblind. Although this seems to state the obvious, Chen is correct in labeling this as his first rule of game design. Due to the active nature of the medium, creators are more pressed than other media to make certain that the audience is engaged at all times. If one gets bored while watching a television show, they can either skip that episode or browse on their phone during the slower parts. This isn't an option in video games, where walking away during a boring section will simply lead to a lack of progress, keeping the player stuck there until they find the determination to grind through.

The most common way of accomplishing this is by making the gameplay more fun. After all, the chief appeal of any video game should come from the act of playing the game.

Discussed earlier, having a narrative in place is another way of giving players agency while they progress. After all, completing level after level of *Super Mario Brothers* may become tiresome without the hope that Mario's princess will be there for him to save in the next castle. I will come back to this subject again when discussing narrative in more detail. In the end, however, I believe that video games come with an inherent level of fun. As Dr. Murray explains, one of the

most enjoyable facets of a video game is being immersed in a world different than our own.

“We enjoy the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it” (1999, p. 98). Allowing a player to grow and explore in a new environment is a time-tested joy found in video games, one that still hasn’t seemed to diminish in the last 50 years.

While there are many ways of making a video game enjoyable for the player, the medium relies heavily on the second and third points of Chen’s list to become a great game. Chen’s second step, “the game offers right amount of challenges to match with the player’s ability” (2006, para. 2), was actually the basis for his master’s thesis. He refers to this concept as “Flow theory,” or Flow. In video games, the idea is that a game’s difficulty should curve according to the player’s skill level. Originally the product of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s book on optimizing happiness, Flow will be important to proving the auteurship of Kojima and particularly Thatgamecompany. “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we make happen” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p 3). The author’s framework is that humans are not truly happy unless they are engaged in an activity of their choice that pushes their individual limits but does not exceed them. Chen’s thesis was that he could utilize Flow Theory to create a better video game. The emphasis of the theory states that the perfect way of taking players into the zone is to perfectly balance the difficulty of the game with the gaming ability of the player, making an experience neither boring nor frustrating.

What makes the theory difficult for creators is that each player's ideal difficulty is different. A child playing video games for the first time will need to play at an easier difficulty than a college student whose been playing for more than 20 years. Even two players with similar experience will have different takes on a game's difficulty based on their individual strengths; a player with fast reflexes but poor planning may find FPS games easy but struggle with turn-based strategy games. Another issue is the added difficulty of controls and mechanics that programmers might not be aware of. Originally the end product of Chen's thesis, *Flow* (2007) was the real-life application of the Flow theory (Chen, 2006), which will be addressed later. While *Flow* was intended to be a simple game, one accessible for even new players with a low ability, the control scheme of the game were challenging to figure out. Not only did this add an extra layer of difficulty to the game, it took away the "personal control over the game activity" (2006, para. 2) that Chen was seeking, destroying any sense of Flow with the game. Creating Flow for a player, while initially sounding like a simple task, has numerous variables that affect its success or failure.

A heated debate currently brewing in the video game community, one at the heart of my discussion on Flow, is centered on difficulty. Last year, a platform/shooter named *Cuphead* (2017) was released. Selling more than a million copies in less than two months, the success of the Indie game has swept through the industry, making it one of the premiere games of 2017. Alongside its old-fashioned cartoon aesthetic, the game is most notable for its unforgiving difficulty. While many video game reviewers have made notes on this difficulty, a loud-spoken community has come out against this notion. On the contrary, the group's message seems to be 'The game isn't too hard, you just aren't good enough to play it.' As most games are

created with a wide audience in mind, there are few titles with the goal of being as controller-breakingly difficult as possible. Yet these titles have a dedicated following of players who have grown bored of the low-bar set up by most developers. For them, their ability outclasses the difficulty of most games they play and they quickly become bored; only when pushed to their limits by a game like *Cuphead* do they find their personal Flow while playing. These players have been outspoken, not just in their support of the game, but in their anger against those who would classify the game as too difficult. They consider the lowering of difficulty in the industry a negative, a result of newer gamers not understanding how the medium is supposed to be played. But this has inversely made it so that a casual player is unable to find their Flow while playing *Cuphead*, their anxiety of the difficulty overcoming their abilities making many cast the game aside. With Thatgamecompany being known for easy-to-play, assessable gameplay and Kojima being infamous for punishingly difficult mechanics and boss fights, both auteurs see Flow theory from radically different perspectives. I will be using the theory of Flow to analyze Kojima and Thatgamecompany's work in later chapters.

### **PLAYER'S ACTIVE ROLE**

Perhaps it is Chen's third point, giving players a sense of control, that is the most difficult in execution. As discussed, video games distinguish themselves from other digital media by giving the audience an active hand in shaping the events of the game. In video games, this is called agency, "the player's ability to impact the story through the game design or gameplay" (Bycer, 2014, para. 2). One of the foundations of most contemporary video games, it is understandable that players in their role as active participants want their actions to affect the game as they progress. "The interactor is not the author of the digital narrative, although

the interactor can experience one of the most exciting aspects of artistic creation-the thrill of exerting power of enticing and plastic materials. This is not authorship but agency” (Murray, 1999, p. 153)

Luckily, there are many ways for video game auteurs to create agency in their work. One of the most common in recent years has been adding diverging storylines into the game’s narrative. In the first level, a player may have a decision between killing the village witch or setting her free with a warning. Depending on the result, the player may be able to call upon the witch’s aid at a later time, but all while incurring the wrath of the villagers who’ have dubbed them as a villain. There are also many games where one’s actions can affect the physical world. If, while traveling, one stumble upon and destroy a den of monsters, two results can occur. The first is that these monsters won’t be there later to impede progress. The second, and more in the theme of true agency, is seeing villagers and travelers begin taking that path again, now that the danger has been dealt with. Having a concrete effect on the video game makes players want to continue playing, to further see how their actions can shape the landscape around them.

If a player doesn’t feel like an active force in the virtual world of the game, it is likely that they will not be playing for long, no matter how excellent the other elements are. Instead, they may play a game they have full agency over, or simply go watch television and enjoy a stronger narrative while remaining passive. But there is a limit to the power a player can have over the game. The auteur must set limits on the player’s possible actions, as to keep the integrity of the game. Making sure the avatar cannot walk through walls, having water be a barrier that must be crossed on a boat, preventing the player from killing the final boss in the

opening minutes. All of these are decisions that limit a player's sense of control but are vital to controlling the pace of the game.

One of the chief stumbling blocks to mature digital storytelling is the difficulty of establishing expressive conventions for the interactor's use of language. If we give the interactor complete freedom, we lose control of the plot. But if we ask the interactor to pick from a menu of things to say, we limit agency and remind them of the fourth wall (Murray, 1999, p. 191).

It is here that one sees the fine line that must be walked. There are video games that do not set restrictions on players, allowing them almost free reign throughout the game. Most of these, however, are simulations, rarely complex enough to be considered a full video game. The video game auteur, however, must design a world that the player is then dropped into. The simulated world must be self-reliant, operating independently once it leaves the studio. And unlike the film, where the sequence of actions and events never changes, a video game be able to function no matter what the player chooses to do. If a player wishes to jump off of a bridge instead of walking across it to reach a new area, then the game needs to be coded to either kill the avatar upon impact or have an area under the bridge for the player to explore. Designing in an active medium like video games means preparing for any actions the player wishes to make. This is, after all, a reason why people like playing video games, for the sense of empowerment and control they feel as they choose how to proceed.

This act of limiting player's possibilities is one of the core mechanics that an auteur must decide, but it is not just a tactic used in preproduction. Changing the possible options for the avatar throughout the game is another way the auteur can manipulate the player's experience.

It is common in video games for the player to lose many of their resources throughout the game. In the *Metal Gear* series, the protagonist is often captured by the enemy and interrogated. In these scenes, the player is helpless as the once powerful, armed super soldier is forced to work without any of his gear. In a film, this scene would be filled with high-angle camera movement and gloomy music, conveying to the audience the protagonist's grim, powerless situation. In a video game, however, the audience does not need the theme of powerlessness overemphasized. The player instantly understands and reacts accordingly when they realize that the gear and guns they had been collecting the last six hours are all gone. When repeatedly pressing the fire button without the avatar firing off rounds, even the newest of players will comprehend the situation. With this medium-specific strategy, the video game auteur has manipulated the play style the player must engage in (the option of "going in guns blazing" taken off the table), and the emotional state of the player. Once the mighty hunter, the auteur has now made the player the vulnerable prey.

An example of limiting options for effect comes from *Undertale* (2015), an Indie game that was critically acclaimed for its humor and revitalization of the 1990's style Role Playing Game (RPG) genre. Throughout the game, the player's avatar is confronted by monsters, but has the choice of whether to fight them, or to befriend them and show mercy. This continues until the end of the game, where the player must confront the King of Monsters. Right before this fight begins, the King pulls out his weapon and attacks, not the avatar, but the game's option menu, destroying the icon for "Mercy." This has two effects. The first is a purely mechanical one, stopping the player from having the option to use "Mercy" in this particular fight. The second effect is the intended emotional effect of the player. To see the King physically take the option

of peace away before the battle has an impact, letting one immediately understand the nature of this fight is different than any of the others. This type of interaction between the player and the creator is only capable in an active medium such as video games.

Looking back at these three steps of Chen's game design, these points seem to astutely summarize the most important aspects of creating a fun, functional video game: making sure the gameplay is fun for the player, keeping the player in the zone by balancing the game's difficulty with their skill level, and allowing the player a feeling of agency as their actions affect the game around them. While all great creators incorporate these three factors in their game, part of this auteur study will focus on exactly how Kojima and Thatgamecompany choose to bring these values into their works.

## **NARRATIVE IN VIDEO GAMES**

Touched on earlier, now comes academia's most controversial topic surrounding the medium, narrative's place in video games. As discussed, narrative is at the heart of almost every digital media except video games. In games, the emphasis and primary goal of the media is to be played, so narrative is not essential to this and can actually detract when utilized ineffectively by the auteur. While the structure of these narratives is not wildly different than those found in cinema and other mediums, its role in games has to be fundamentally different as a result of the player's active nature. Knowing this, it is not surprising that the literature around narrative's use in video games is wildly divisive. There are academics that believe that the practice only serves to dilute what makes games unique, while others argue that the inclusion of a narrative can serve to strengthen the audience's emotional ties to the work. "It is very important to understand that narrative has a profoundly different function in games than

it does in other narrative-based media. In games, narrative structures operate in a comparable but at the same time diametrically opposed way to that of traditional narrative” (Pearce, 2004, para. 4). To Pearce, the narrative of a game is created both inside and outside the game, with many elements being open to interpretation by the player, but even if a narrative is not noticed, the game as a whole is still able to function. The player will simply miss “contextual framework” (2004, para. 8) for the media. So it’s vital in this study to also focus on the narrative of these games; this will be the key point used in proving that video games are a drastically different medium than most digital entertainment media due to the active nature of the participant, so this affects the way narrative is utilized.

Many scholars are against narrative being used as a backbone to video games, but with an established narrative comes on of the industry’s most daunting tasks: finding a way to incorporate that narrative in the game. After all, why look at the plot of a video game when one could focus on the gameplay, the unique aspect that sets the medium apart from the rest of digital media? The chief complaint from these pro-play scholars lies in narrative’s ability to take away the active role of the player.

The key to game narrative is that it is, by definition, incomplete. It must be in order to leave room for the player to bring it to fruition. This is one of the primary flaws of applying literary or film theory to games; the authorial control, which is implicit in other genres, tends to undermine the quality of the user experience (2004, para. 10).

Note that Dr. Pearce states that this narrative control “tends” to undermine the players’ experience. This is not a guarantee every time a game has an established story. The issue comes from the limited ways in which to add this narrative into the game without disrupting it

completely. “Those who are interested in making a story-based game essentially are left with the three options below. Cutscenes...Allowing the story to trump interactivity...allowing interactivity to trump story” (Burgan, 2013, p. 22). The chief reason many critics are against strong narratives in video games is the result of it watering down the player’s experience. After all, as some think, why would one play a game to discover a deep story when they could just read a book? And, to a point, I understand this stance. Look at Burgan’s three options and picture a scene at the end of a video game. Imagine the noble hero has finally vanquished the dragon and saved the princess. Burgan’s first option would have the gameplay end as the dragon dies, beginning a cutscene where the player watches their avatar be honored in the King’s throne room, a crowd cheering in the background. While this delivers the end of the narrative, it makes the player’s experience become a passive one. But these cutscenes are more than problematic for many scholars. “Many players find cut-scenes to be egregiously interruptive to their play experience. It seems counterintuitive to use passivity as a reward for play” (Pearce, 2004, para. 17). From a pro-play outlook, taking this active role away in the final moments is problematic.

Options two and three would have the player control their avatar as they kill the dragon, then go to the throne room themselves to receive their reward. In option two, one would walk into the throne room, but then have their options limited as they were forced in-game to stand there and accept their reward. Again, this forces the experience to become a more passive one. Option three, the player has full control over their character during this scene. But the player may choose to attack the King as he tries to honor them; while this keeps the player’s experience an active, engaging one, it ruins the narrative set in place. In this situation, all three

options risk either destroying the narrative set in place or to take away the player's agency in the final scene.

The main reason most scholars seem against narrative study in video games comes from the same source: because most theories of narrative structure all come from literary and cinema studies, they aren't applicable to video game analysis and should be discarded. This is, however, an inherently flawed way of viewing video game study. If the study of different mediums looked only at signature factors, then one could not study theories of color and spacing in any mediums besides painting. These academics would do well to remember that cinema theories on narrative came originally from literary studies. It also took several decades before film academia caught up to the growing medium. In a similar light, the time has come to begin taking theory from other digital media and exporting it over to video games. This entire thesis is built around this idea, so why hold back from also delving into a narrative study as well?

"To me- a teacher of humanities for the past twenty-five years... the computer looks more each day like the movie camera of the 1890's: a truly revolutionary invention humankind is just on the verge of putting to use as a spellbinding storyteller" (Murray, 1999, p. 2). As Dr. Murray suggests, recent video games have proved that the medium is more than capable of being used as a medium for storytelling. "New narrative traditions do not arise out of the blue. A particular technology of communication- the printing press, the movie camera, the radio- may startle us when it first arrives on the scene, but the traditions of storytelling are continuous and feed into one another both in content and in form" (1999, p. 28). While it may seem fundamentally different than the narrative structure of other mediums, most games still follow

the same narrative patterns as other media. One consistently sees an introduction, building tension, climax, and epilogue; only with video games, the player has to actively engage in the game to progress in the narrative.

Looking critically, video game narrative, with the audience's active role as participant, is nothing new. This concept of the viewer being able to affect the series of events in their entertainment began picking up serious traction in the 1980s. Choose-your-own-adventure books came out in this decade, allowing the reader to flip through the book, the story determined by which choices the reader made along the way. Charles Dickens died writing his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The story of a murdered young man, Dickens passed away before the ending was written, making the true murderer lost to time. Since then, the story was revived by Broadway, with an interesting twist: the audience, at the end of the musical, votes to decide who the murderer is from the cast of remaining characters. Even film got in on the novelty. In 1985, *Clue* premiered in theatres, a murder-mystery/comedy based off the board game (*Clue*, 2018). With its release, audiences quickly realized that multiple endings were shot and released to different theaters, to try and emulate multiple options from the board game. All of these are examples showing "linear narratives straining against the boundary of predigital media like a two-dimensional picture trying to burst out of its frame" (Murray, 1999, p. 29). As entertainment media evolved, audiences evolved to want a more active voice as a viewer.

To me, story is a tool, but not the goal of video games. In the past, when you say "entertainment" -- I mean, we care about entertainment more than story -- so "entertainment" in a sentence, basically, it's food for feeling. If you are hungry, you go

to eat; if you are thirsty, you will drink; and if you feel sad, you want to do something to entertain yourself; or even if you feel too high, you want to do something to calm yourself down. So I think story, or narrative, is a very powerful vessel to carry emotions. If you follow a story of a young boy growing up and avenging his father, that is a lot of investment, so when the revenge happens, the feeling that you have is much deeper than you feel if right at the beginning the boy kills the villain, right? (Chen, 2008, p. 4)

Narrative in video games, while used to draw players in with the promise of a deeper emotional tie, isn't necessary to the medium or to enjoy the game as a player. *Pac-Man* doesn't have story or plot attached, but that doesn't stop players from enjoying the act of guiding the yellow avatar across the map while avoiding ghosts. In the *Call of Duty* series, when playing online against other players, teams may be divided into American soldiers fighting against German troops, but that aspect of the multiplayer mode is all but irrelevant; what matters in these matches is the objectives and mechanics of the game, shooting and killing the enemy team to score points.

But in these cases, the appeal is only as deep as the gameplay allows. In *Metal Gear Solid (1998)*, the narrative core of the game gives the player emotional investment in every action. Yes, like in *CoD*, the player is shooting at a target on the map. But instead of some nameless, faceless enemy, now they are taking on a foe because they watched their comrade get shot down in a cutscene just minutes before. "Since digital-game technology allows for stories in games, more and more games include them. Some video games that are considered the greatest of all time not only include story but are actually based on story. Games like *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time*, *Final Fantasy VII*, and *Metal Gear Solid* set the standard

for modern video games” (Burgan, 2013, p. 21). What all of these referenced video games have in common is a deep, driving story that gives the player a reason to continue playing. While not necessary to the game, adding this layer of personal involvement will allow the media to resonate more deeply with the player, and isn’t that the end goal of entertainment?

Do not forget agency, which I find is strongly enhanced by narrative. One of the easiest ways of showing a player’s impact on the world is through its story. Once the player fights a boss, the story progresses because the player chooses to defeat the enemy. Everything that happens after that in the narrative is due to this action the player took. These narratives help give context for a player’s actions. Seeing a small man run through a castle corridor, avoiding fireballs and stomping on turtles doesn’t seem to make much sense. But in the context of *Super Mario Brothers*, the player understand that Mario is trying to rescue the Princess, and this better helps them understand the mechanics of the gameplay.

The plot events in electronic games and MUDs closely resemble these epic themes, because they draw their material from genres like fantasy, science fiction, and comic book heroics that are very close to the folktale tradition. The more filmic CD-ROMs rely on later formulaic genres such as the murder mystery or the horror film. Genre fiction is appropriate for electronic narrative because it scripts the interactor (Murray, 1999, p. 192).

So, acting as a player in a given narrative, one acts based off of the information they have from the plot. “I perform these actions not because I have read a rule book, but because I have been prepared to do so by exposure to thousands of stories that follow these patterns” (1999, p. 192). While one may not necessarily know the correct method of finding the murderer in a

Detective/Mystery video game, they know from watching other Mystery media that they should look around for clues and talk to witnesses. The game may or may not tell them this directly; but from the narrative, one can put themselves into the correct state of mind to begin looking for game mechanics that match these assumptions.

“A good story serves the same purpose for adults, giving us something safely outside ourselves (because it is made up by someone else) upon which we can project our feelings. Stories evoke our deepest fears and desires because they inhabit this magical borderland” (1999, p. 100). With video games taking the closest role to allowing viewers to immerse themselves into this magical borderland. Narrative to be one of the marks that separates a good video game from a great video game, and one’s method of storytelling is a primary step in determining auteurship. Given both of these beliefs, it would be foolish to ignore narrative study while moving ahead in this thesis.

### **AUTEUR’S ROLE IN VIDEO GAMES**

As discussed in the previous chapter, many academics have written off auteur theory in recent years, the result of film becoming more and more of a collaborative effort, and with more oversight from studio heads making decisions. It would appear at first glance that video games would be in a similar situation, due to the large number of people it takes to create a game. It is incorrect, however, to see the auteur as the complete and total creator of their works. Instead, “conceptualize the author as a contradictory movement within a collectivity rather than as a homogeneous, autonomous, and totalizing subject.” (McCabe, 1999, p. 37). From the many people behind the production of art, the auteur is the one voice discernable

from the mass. Like most other mediums, the video game auteur can control the narrative they tell, such as the characters and the script, but also if they wish to tell that story in-game or with cutscenes.

But it's the unique aspects of the video game medium that give its auteurs true creative control. While a film director decides the characters shown, the dialogue they will say, even the angles the camera will portray those characters, they can only control what the audience views on the screen. With video games, the auteur decides the coding of the game itself, the mechanics that make up the game, the controls the player must use, and the agency that fuels the player to continue playing. The auteur decides if the game takes place on Earth or a totally alien planet; both are just as real in the medium. The auteur decides the impact gravity has on the physics of the game, and whether it can hold down the player's avatar. The avatar's skills, the possible actions they can make, the tools they have access to, even whether or not the avatar can jump, all of these are aspects of the game the auteur can mold to fit their ideal.

To put into perspective the increased authority of the video game auteur compared to the film auteur, look at the building of a single scene. In this comparison, imagine a sequence from a James Bond story: Bond has snuck into a secret laboratory, but has walked into a room filled with guards that he must now take out in an intense fistfight. If this was featured in a movie, the auteur must decide on the costuming and appearance of the characters, finding the perfect location, deciding the color scheme of the characters and the scenery, the positioning of each character in the room, and then choreographing the fight sequence with the actors. Once the scene is set, it must be shot. This means deciding on the position of the cameras, the angle that the cameras will shoot from, and which moments of the fight will be highlighted

from these various angles. Finally comes the editing process, deciding which of the hundreds of shots will be used at each moment in the sequence, how long a shot will be featured before cutting to another, and how audio will be incorporated to fully immerse the audience in the scene.

For the video game auteur crafting the identical sequence, the first question is whether to make it a cutscene or a playable section of the game. If the auteur decides that the scene of Bond beating up evil henchmen should be a playable sequence, the differences between film and video games become quickly apparent. They must decide how difficult the creator wants the fight to be for the player. “Essentially, the process of game design can be broken down into two parts. 1. Adding rules to a system. 2. Balancing those rules” (Burgan, 2013, p. 37). While Burgan makes it sound like a simple process, these two steps involve shuffling the entire code of the game around to fit the desired difficulty. If it is an early struggle in the game, the fight will most likely be an easy one. But if it is closer to the end of the game, then the auteur will most likely decide to make the battle a difficult one. This means deciding how many guards Bond will have to fight, how much damage it will take to incapacitate each of the guards, and how much damage the guards themselves can deal to Bond. This means deciding if the player will have access to healing items once the fight starts, rationing both these items in the room itself and whether or not the player had an opportunity to collect any leading up to the fight. Will these be the same type of guards the player has encountered earlier in the game, giving them previous knowledge on strategies to defeat them, or will these henchmen have different attacks, confusing and possibly defeating the player as a result of their unique statistics and attacks?

And how will Bond fight in this situation? Will his attacks come in the form of punches, kicks, various grappling techniques? How effective are these attacks on this room of guards? Is there a time limit placed on how quickly the player must clear the room? Will one of the guards activate an alarm, calling in more guards, if they aren't knocked out fast enough? Are there hazards in the room that make the player's fight more difficult, whether that's spikes on the floor, electric fences to avoid, or simply a bench in the middle of the room that is perfectly placed to take away the avatar's mobility? All of this must then be coded into the game, rendered, then play tested make sure the player's experience matches what the auteur wants. Only then does the creator make similar decisions as the film auteur, such as lighting and wardrobe.

This demonstrates the different levels of involvement from a film creator to a video game creator; while the former certainly has many tasks to complete, the latter has considerably more work to do. This is due to the fundamental differences between the two mediums. The film director must walk the audience through a narrative, scene by scene, giving them glimpses at the most important moments in the narrative world they construct. The video game director must set up a self-sufficient world where the player can walk through the narrative themselves.

None of this is to say that the road to auteurship is a simple one for video game creators. While there are more opportunities for the video game auteur to influence their work, the industry has many obstacles to first overcome.

In videogames, it's far less common to see a creator's work evolve in this way. In part, this is because game makers tend to have less longevity than other sorts of artists. In

part, it's because games are more highly industrialized even than film, and aesthetic headway is often curtailed by commercial necessity. And in part, it's because games are so tightly coupled to consumer electronics that technical progress outstrips aesthetic progress in the public imagination. Where there are game makers with a style, it has often evolved over long durations... Hideo Kojima's development and refinement of the stealth action games of the Metal Gear series, characterized by solitude, initial weakness, cinematic cut-scenes, and self-referential commentary (Bogost, 2012, para. 6).

Understanding video games as a medium, especially comparatively to cinema, is vital to an auteur analysis of Kojima and Thatgamecompany. The most important difference between video games and other digital media is the active nature of the consumer: one doesn't listen to or watch a video game, they play it. This creates a demand from the consumer for a game that players want to keep coming back for. A game could have a story that rivals the epics of Homer, but if the gameplay itself is boring or difficult to execute, most players will drop the game and move on to something else. The key is to remember that the value of the work is decided by the work itself, not the medium of the work. Video games are not inherently stupid as many would assume; these same critics would say the same of film if the only films they had seen were Michael Bay's *Transformers* series. Understanding the fundamentals of video games, we can now begin analyzing them with auteur theory. We shall begin with the man who may very well be the medium's first true auteur, Hideo Kojima.

## CHAPTER FOUR-HIDEO KOJIMA

In an industry where anonymous authors hide behind a wall of cold coded-text, one face immerges, brimming with personality and confidence: Hideo Kojima. “Hideo Kojima's development and refinement of the stealth action games of the *Metal Gear* series, characterized by solitude, initial weakness, cinematic cut-scenes, and self-referential commentary” (Bogost, 2012, para. 7). Equal parts realistic and fantastic, one minute will have players hiding in a closet to avoid a guard's gaze, while the next has them fighting against psychic assassins. The realistic side of the game seems at times to only exist as a foil to the spontaneous madness Kojima's projects are filled with. Inspired by Hollywood films, Kojima's writing is unique to the medium, with lengthy cutscenes packed with heavy dialogue and thematic discussions of political topics grow in number as the series progresses.

As a game designer, he is known for subverting audience expectations, willing to push mechanic boundaries that either leave players confused or become genre standards accepted by the industry. His idea of a war game was “to run from the enemy” (McManus, 2006, p. 19), which may seem counter-intuitive to the very idea of a war game to some. But Kojima's first decision as a director was rule-breaking, controversial, and divided most of his superiors at Konami; his career would be composed almost entirely of similar decisions, all eventually being recognized as strokes of genius. The rest of the world would soon realize this as well, as *Metal Gear* would almost single-handedly create the stealth-action video game genre and become one of the longest running, most successful video game franchises in history. Long after Kojima dies, his gameplay and designs will continue to be converted and adapted by other creators, hoping to create something as special as he did.

An important note, I will only be covering some video games that Hideo Kojima has written and directed, omitting four titles: two were halfway through his career and did little to add to the analysis, one was a portable game of lesser impact, and the final was created to serve as a prequel to another game and thus diminishes its importance. He has been involved in other games, from producing to doing game design, but I am only considering a game to be a Hideo Kojima game if he has both directed and written the script. This still leaves him with a respectfully large library to analyze, all of which comes together to create the auteur identity the video game industry had recognized for decades.

### **Metal Gear**

Kojima's time at the Konami company was coming to an end in the late 80s, and the man had little to show for his time there, as he had yet to be trusted with his own project (2006). After several rejections from his superiors, one man with seniority at Konami believed in Kojima's idea of running from guards, giving him the four-week timeframe where he designed *Metal Gear* (1987). The player takes control of Solid Snake, a rookie agent of the elite Government military group FOXHOUND in the year 1995. Snake is sent to investigate Outer Heaven, a terrorist organization with some type of weapon of mass destruction, after a colleague named Gray Fox went missing in his infiltration of the group. Guided on by Foxhound's leader, Big Boss, Snake makes his way through the base, freeing POWs and defeating Outer Heaven's elite mercenary team. Allowing himself to be captured early on, Snake escapes from the compound's prison with Gray Fox, who informs Snake of Metal Gear, a tank-like robot capable of launching nukes from any location.

Deeper into the game, Snake finds Dr. Pettrovich, the man who created Metal Gear. After rescuing his daughter, he tells Snake how to destroy the weapon. The closer Snake

draws to Metal Gear, however, the worse Big Boss' advice becomes, at multiple points leading Snake straight into traps. By the end, it is revealed that Big Boss is also the leader of Outer Heaven. With resources from FOXHOUND and Outer Heaven's new weapon, his goal of toppling Western world powers is cut short by Snake. Mentor defeated and Outer Heaven's base exploding in the background, Snake calls in to FOXHOUND reporting his success.

While this plot is rather simple by today's standards, especially Kojima's, the narrative is among the most complex from the late 80's, a time when *Duck Hunt (1984)* was still top-of-the-line. The game itself has a narrative that dictates the actions being taken, a backstory that gives a history to the narrative before the game, a cast of characters that communicate and have changing relationships, and even a plot twist; compared to the rest of the industry at the time, it is groundbreaking. More importantly, it tells a young Kojima that his style of writing translated into this new medium.

But while I see glimpses of the writer Kojima would become, *Metal Gear* fully shows me the game designer he is today. Game mechanics, the level layouts, the environmental design that Kojima will use for the rest of his career. This is clearly the initial work of the designer that Kojima would become. The gameplay is based around learning the guards' routes, staying out of the way of those routes while exploring, and backtracking to find keycards and items every time Snake finds a new obstacle in his way. This was mainly done to extend the length of the game, given the limited storage on game cartridges of the time, and is a strategy Kojima would incorporate for many of his earlier titles.

Unfortunately, it does lead to some tedious sequences as I was forced to return to old areas multiple times, all while being just as stealthy and careful as the first. Even by the end of

the game, each group of guards still posed a threat. Still, the keycards especially play an important role: restricting the player's progress into the game unless completing the specific task to earn the next keycard, usually defeating a boss. Design-wise, it forces players to stay with Kojima's narrative if they wish to explore further into the game's levels, giving the designer more control over the player's actions while giving the player a sense of agency within the game.

As will become one of Kojima's trademarks, the difficulty in the game is stifling. While the random guards the player avoids are weak enough to be easily dispatched, the boss fights are another matter. Ranging from enemies that are more heavily armed all the way to defeating helicopters and the Metal Gear itself, the real challenge of *Metal Gear* comes from these tests of endurance. This difficulty, however, can be overcome, not with skill, but with tactics. The game, even more incredible given its age, highlights fighting smarter rather than harder. The first boss of the game comes right as Snake escapes capture, with the player possessing no items. Rather than attempt to fight Shotmaker barehanded, Kojima places Snake within reach of a storage room, containing all of his equipment and weapons. Defeating the boss is easy after replacing one's weapons, but they must be smart enough to recognize they are not equipped at the start of the battle. This precedent of fighting smarter over fighting harder would continue in all of Kojima's future titles.

One issue with the game is the difficulty in finding what I was supposed to be doing throughout. While freed POWs or FOXHOUND agents would give advice and hints throughout, many of the secrets to the game, including vital hidden rooms that look like ordinary wall panels, must be hunted down by meticulously exploring the environment.

There are also sections that are overly complicated for no reason other than to increase the difficulty. In the battle with the Metal Gear itself, the player has to place explosives on its right and left leg in a specific, 12-step order; messing up at all forces the player to start over. This aspect of the game is annoying, but forgivable for a game more than 30 years old. Given its age, *Metal Gear* is as historic to video games as *Star Wars (1977)* was to blockbuster films. The game defined the gameplay and mechanics used in almost every stealth game created after it. It also shows a strong starting point for Kojima's career to jump off, but he would not wait long. Only a month after the game's release, a fan on a train asked Kojima about a sequel to the man's new favorite game. The next day, Kojima submitted the script to his superiors for *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake (1990)* (McManus, 2006).

### **Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake**

Set four years after the first game, *MG2* features a group of mercenaries who stole the world's last nuclear weapons, while also kidnapping a scientist with a formula to replace oil. With advice over the radio from FOXHOUND Commander Roy Campbell, Solid Snake sneaks through the facility to retrieve the formula and stop the nukes. Once there, Snake learns that the leader of this army is actually Big Boss, who survived the final battle of the last game. After multiple betrayals and the death of a female agent, Snake defeats his old comrades who've gone rogue and revived the Metal Gear program. Against the odds, Snake is able to defeat Gray Fox and Big Boss, then escape the facility with the formula for the new oil substitute. Solid Snake, once again the savior of the world, retires from FOXHOUND, his nightmares from the previous game silenced.

Mechanically, *MG2* improves on almost every category. Guards are more difficult to sneak past now that they are programmed to turn their head and to see in a cone, rather

than a line, in front of them. To balance this, a mechanic added is the ability to distract guards with sound, giving players trying to sneak through the game more options besides just staying out of their preset rotations. Kojima also included the ability for Snake to kneel or crawl on the floor, giving him further mobility to avoid foes while also making the 2D game have a 3D feel. There are also several puzzles throughout the game that are more cerebral compared to those in *Metal Gear*, ranging from baiting a pigeon to translating a tap code into a radio frequency. I appreciate these sections of the game, again adding another layer to a multi-structured video game. While *Metal Gear* would have been a fine game just as an action/shooter, the addition of the stealth element is what made it iconic. Likewise, *MG2* is made better with its healthy mix of puzzles for the player to stew over, especially compared to the *Metal Gear* system of simply making every puzzle a wall they had to find and blow up.

A mechanic I especially enjoyed was near the end of the game, where a fire forces the player to drop all their items or risk Snake catching ablaze. This forces the player to finish the game with only the resources they can salvage mid-fight against Big Boss, both amplifying the danger he posed and the feeling of elation when defeating him. Mentioned earlier, this way of enhancing emotion while exerting control over the player is a method only available to the video game auteur. One unfortunate mechanic that reappears is having to backtrack long amounts of time for either weapons or keycards; the worst case is having to go back and take a second, hidden keycard from a boss that only serves to stall out the last part of the game. Still, even this does little to tarnish the otherwise stellar gameplay.

While, from a game design standpoint, Kojima showed impressive growth, the true achievement for the auteur is the evolution of his writing. While the script in *Metal Gear* was impressive for its time, *MG2* has a dynamic narrative even by contemporary standards, containing everything from surprise character returns to shocking betrayals. More than that, this is the game where I see Kojima addressing themes that appear in all of his titles: themes of denuclearization, of soldiers only having a place on the battlefield, the struggle of veterans being lost when they finally make it home. Coming from the opposite end of the spectrum, this is also the video game where I begin to see Kojima's sense of humor expressed in his script. In one section, Snake is confronted by Running Man, the self-described fastest mercenary alive. To prove his point, he shows off his speed by running a lap around the warehouse, only to tire himself out and be left panting through the rest of his dialogue. This humor, as much as his dark themes, will go on to be major elements in his writing. Overall, *MG2* is everything that *Metal Gear* was, and more. It has more mechanics, is more fun, and showcases more of Kojima as a creator.

### **Metal Gear Solid**

When creating *Metal Gear Solid (1998)*, his first game on the PlayStation console, Kojima finally has the computing power necessary to create his greatest landmark video game. This is mainly important for two reasons: he can vastly increase the options his AI possess (making his boss battles more difficult to predict and defeat), and he can finally have fully animated cinematic cutscenes. Both of these are key factors in the game's lasting legacy. Set six years after *MG2*, *Metal Gear Solid (MGS)* has Solid Snake once again coming out of retirement to save the world. Terrorists have gone rogue and taken over a facility housing Metal Gear Rex, a new model capable of launching nuclear weapons while being

immune to radar. Throughout the game, Snake learns that the terrorist leader, Liquid Snake, is his twin brother, and that both men are clones of Big Boss created by the military. The game ends with Snake, unknowingly made a carrier for a military-created virus, infecting and killing Liquid. Again, the day is saved, and Snake rides off into the sunset to never be seen again, until the sequel.

In terms of gameplay, *MGS* just plays like a 3D-version of *MG2*, in the best of ways. The stealth mechanic is identical, but the challenge of staying hidden has changed with the game's new perspective; while there is now danger of being seen by guards on all sides, the increased mobility allows the player more options to getting out of a patrol's path. Boss battles, however, are on a new level of difficulty. Each battle is more intense than the previous games thanks to the PlayStation's ability to render such large models, with Metal Gear Rex in particular looking gigantic. More importantly, Kojima seems to realize the value of an interesting villain, making each of the boss battles with FOXHOUND agents being rememberable ones. From Snake's clone brother to a shaman carrying a chain gun to a psychic, my level of interest was peaked far greater than with the lesser bosses of previous games, like Shotmaker and Running Man. One of his methods of keeping these boss fights interesting is Kojima's use of out-of-game mechanics to surprise his players. While fighting Psycho Mantis, a psychic who throws bookshelves at Snake with his mind, it is impossible to hit him, owing to his ability to read Snake's mind. But with advice from Campbell, after the player switches controller ports, Mantis loses his abilities and the fight. While hardly a mechanic that took the industry by storm, it shows the auteur's outside-the-box method to his game design.

An interesting note is that *MGS* references the previous two games in many ways, including recreating certain puzzles and boss encounters. Whereas most auteurs would wait until later in their careers to be self-referential, Kojima can barely wait until the third game in his iconic series to do so. While some of these are subtle, like Snake having another gunfight while trapped in an elevator, the most impressive among them is the character Cyborg Ninja. Revealed in the end to be the character Gray Fox in disguise, several references are made before the big reveal: both games feature a forced fist-fight in the boss battle, Fox calling Snake in both games with advice under the synonym “Deepthroat” to warn him about landmines, and reoccurring speeches about a soldier’s role in society. It feels like a statement from Kojima, a final nod to the *Metal Gear* games, moving onward to his *Metal Gear Solid* line mirroring the switch to the new PlayStation console.

While the gameplay and mechanics changed little from his last work, *MGS*’s biggest evolution is in its narration. Kojima worked on the script for almost five years (2006). Many of the themes arising from *MG2*, especially the themes of denuclearization and soldiers feeling out of place outside of the battlefield, are pushed front and center. While these were touched on in the previous game, they now dominate the narrative, coming as the motivations to many of the characters. I especially see the theme of genetics, a legitimate scientific moral debate at the time, play out in the final moments of *MGS*. For a series based around warfare, these themes being argued shocked me, again reminding me of how sophisticated Kojima’s writing is when compared to his peers.

Most important to Kojima’s auteur image, this game is where the *Metal Gear* games finally begin feeling like Hollywood Blockbusters. Cinematics in *MG2* were just text boxes

appearing over the screen, character models just standing there while this happens. Even in the same generation of games as *MGS*, most cinematics cutscenes are dull, showing character models blankly staring at one another as the camera wildly rotates around the scene. The cutscenes from this game, however, feel like scenes from an action film. There is professional-grade voice acting for each character, and the editing of each cinematic feels focused on establishing mood. *MGS* is simply being written and executed at a higher level than its contemporaries. It could easily be adapted into a James Bond film, and this facet will follow Kojima.

### **Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty**

One of the biggest arguments in video game literature from the early 2000s was the debate of narrative vs. simulation (Frasca, 2003). Coincidentally, the plot of *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001) consists of the protagonist fighting his way through what is essentially a simulation of the events of *MGS*. Two years after the prequel, Solid Snake finds himself investigating the Navy's new Metal Gear model. Unfortunately, Ocelot, Liquid Snake's right-hand man from the prequel, returns and steals the Metal Gear, all while presumably killing Snake. While the auteur is known for pulling the wool over player's eyes, *MGS2* now plays out Kojima's most diabolical trick: 45 minutes into the game, after possibly killing off the character, it is revealed that Solid Snake is not the protagonist. Instead, players control Raiden, a young FOXHOUND recruit with hundreds of hours of VR (Virtual Reality) training, but no real-world experience. Led by Campbell via Codex, the young man must rescue the President while preventing the terrorists from high jacking the internet and censoring information for their benefit. By the end of the game, however, two plot twists occur. The first is that the entire terrorist attack was orchestrated to recreate

the events of *MGS* in an attempt to train Raiden to become an even greater soldier than Solid Snake, with “Campell” being an AI guiding Raiden all along. The second twist is that the mastermind behind the attack was actually the President, Big Boss’ secret third son, working to destroy an Illuminati-esque organization known as the Patriots. But as always, the day is eventually saved.

In terms of gameplay, *MGS2* feels like a more polished, more advanced version of *MGS*. Bosses get bigger and more difficult to defeat, while the guards are now programmed to use group tactics such as flanking to kill Raiden. But the most important mechanic added to *MGS2* is the option of not killing one’s enemies, with the new addition of the tranquilizer gun. A trend that would carry into Kojima’s future games, as well as becoming a standard mechanic in many video games today, the nonlethal option offered players a new style of gameplay: while not killing enemies is more challenging, due to limited sleep darts and the gun’s low rate of fire, the game rewards players for taking the moral high ground in the form of higher scores and in-game collectables. While the series would utilize this more strongly in future titles, the seeds were planted for one of the franchise’s most iconic mechanics.

Looking at the game’s script, I can see Kojima delving deeper into his auteur persona than his past works. But while I see this as him becoming a stronger, more confident creator after his success, not all of his fans agreed with focused direction of his writing. “Although some have praised Kojima’s script, others considered the plot to be ‘incomprehensible’ and overly heavy for an action game” (*Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, n.d., para. 27). Starting, like *MGS*, as a narrative against rising nuclearization in the military, the story quickly turns into a philosophic conversation about information in the

digital age. Is the endless, frivolous news feed bad for Americans? Would they be better off having it censored and controlled, or should individuals be allowed to decide for themselves what is important? The seemingly unrelated themes of nuclearization and internet control both appear at the forefront of the games but have an obvious origin point. Both themes are Kojima exploring the ever-changing nature of warfare, as it has transformed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century from the nuclear arms race to a war over information. As always, Kojima stays true to his vision while adapting his presentation, producing a work consistent with his old titles while evolving it into something greater.

Seemingly off-topic, it is important to understand the conditions around the game's release. Unfortunately, audiences will never play the original *MGS2*. Just before its release, the 9/11 terrorist attack occurred, shocking the world. Kojima, mortified, wanted to shelve the game, as its original script included the Twin Towers and the additional dialogue naming the President as a terrorist (McManus, 2006). Konami, thinking more about the hard line, cut these parts of the game, but still released the title. Again, in Kojima's career he sees Konami and its wishes superseded his own, even in regard to his project. But this tells me so much about Kojima as a man. Though he is aggressive in bringing real-life examples of war and suffering to light in his games, he is willing to kill off his game to save his American audience any distress. This is the action of a kind man, a trait I did not expect to find from the same designer who seems to take such delight in forcing players to fight the same unfair boss battle dozens of times.

### **Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater**

I consider *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (2004)* to be Kojima's best work, mainly because he is able to use his signature traits to his advantage but doesn't overuse them to

the point of throwing off the game's balance. Set in 1964, FOX agent Naked Snake is sent to Russia to prevent a Soviet defector, Volgin, from starting WWII. More importantly, he must assassinate his mentor The Boss, who betrays Snake and the United States mid-mission to join Volgin. Working through miles of forest surrounding the compound, Snake is able to defeat The Boss' mercenary team, Volgin's rocket-powered nuclear tank, and eventually The Boss herself. The game ends with a series of double and triple crosses, before ending with Naked Snake being renamed Big Boss, the antagonist from *Metal Gear* and Solid Snake's father.

The gameplay and mechanics of *MGS3* only have one groundbreaking innovation but it is a vital one, the camouflage system. With this being Kojima's first game set outside an urban environment, the player must use various camouflage patterns and face pants to match the individual terrains Snake encounters, ranging from tropical forests to snow-capped mountains. Now, not only do players have the option of running out of the way of guards' patrol patterns, one can also hide in plain sight, waiting for them to pass. Ironically, for the *Metal Gear* game innovates stealth the most since the original, *MGS3* is the first of the series where I felt satisfaction with going in guns blazing. With the addition of new types of weapons, most notably the shotgun, there is finally the capability for the player to feel like a one-man army, slaying guards with abandon. An element that appears in future games, it was nice to finally feel that there were two viable playstyles.

The most impressive design element of the game, however, is the selection of boss fights, many of which are the most interesting in Kojima's library. Not only does each have an entertaining backstory and gimmick associated with them, but they feel distinct from one another. One moment Snake is locked into a dual with hornet-harnessing The Pain, the

next he is fighting The Fury, an astronaut with a jetpack wielding a flamethrower. In one particularly memorable moment, Snake must fight The Sorrow, the spirit of The Boss' lover. In this fight, the player must avoid the ghosts of every enemy they have killed throughout the game so far, giving one reason to try a nonlethal playthrough of the game next time. The final fight, Snake pitted against The Boss, encompasses all other elements of the gameplay: with both characters camouflaged, one must sneak carefully to avoid being detected by The Boss and her superior firepower while making sure that she does not disappear into the environment. Bosses can also be taken down nonlethally, gifting these pacifist players with new camo patterns to use. Perfecting a trademark of Kojima's games, the boss battles of *MGS3* are much of what elevates the title beyond his other video games.

From a narrative standpoint, the game is also Kojima's best work. Genuinely feeling like a Summer Hollywood blockbuster, the plot flows quickly, Snake rushing from one challenge to the next, all while feeling connected to his mission. Kojima's usual tactic of feeding misinformation to his audience plays out beautifully here, with the spies around Snake feeding him enough lies to confuse both protagonist and player. Admittedly, every new *Metal Gear* game, I think I have grown wise to the plot twists, only to be fooled again in the final moments. While I was surprised at the final betrayals of certain double agents, I was stunned by the final twist: The Boss staging the whole event, from her betrayal even to giving her life, to ensure America's safety. Most importantly, however, is how grounded the script feels. While *MGS2*'s ending felt bogged down with a 20-minute explanation of Kojima's deep themes behind the game, this game keeps its messages simple. Borders between countries only leads to more war, only further dividing those on either side. By focusing solely on his narrative, Kojima had produced his strongest writing yet. There is a

strange irony while playing *MGS3*, watching characters despair over a conflict between Russia and the United States they think will never end, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Kojima's various themes, there is always an obvious anti-war message. Seeing the Cold War, a rivalry that almost seems unreal today, spoken of in the same manner as the contemporary wars discussed in previous *Metal Gear* games feels like commentary from Kojima, that any war may feel necessary and justified at the time, but will be seen as foolish and avoidable in the future.

### **Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots**

Coming off of his greatest success, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (2008) was Kojima's first game on the PlayStation 3 console, giving him the technological capability to take his franchise to the next level. The last of the series to use Solid Snake as the protagonist, the game feels like the end of an era.

In the year 2014, the restriction of military intervention on foreign soil has been eased which fuels the need for private military companies (PMCs) to fight proxy wars for business purposes. nanotechnology has become prominent...the nanomachine system "Sons of the Patriots" is used commonly by the PMCs. The five largest PMCs are owned by the Outer Heaven mother company with Liquid Ocelot as the CEO. Amassing an army insurrection by taking control of the system. With the world once again in crisis, Roy Campbell deploys Old Snake to terminate Liquid Ocelot once and for all (Metal Gear Series, n.d., para. 13).

While *MGS4* will stand as some of Kojima's strongest gameplay, it does serve as one of his least innovative. The mechanics seen are mostly those tested in previous games, from the close quarters combat to the camouflage system. In this game, however, it feels that they

are all perfected, each element of gameplay elevating another; this feels like a game made by an auteur who had reached a peak in his career, with no intentions of being anywhere but the top of the industry. And while I would have enjoyed seeing more fresh content from the game, I can hardly fault Kojima for sticking to the tried-and-true formula that seemingly only works for him. *MGS4* may have changed its mechanics the least in the series' history, but this should only reinforce how strong said mechanics were back in *MGS3*.

Unfortunately, the focal point of analysis on this title must be on its narrative. Simply put, Kojima has finally committed the sin every video game fundamentalist is afraid of: the narrative distracts and detracts from the gameplay itself. The issue comes from the cutscenes. While Kojima is known for his extensive use of cinematic cutscenes, some admittedly longer than necessary, the auteur took this too far in *MGS4*, where there is a total of about nine hours of cutscenes inside a 20-hour game. At one point, there is 70 straight minutes of cinematic with no gameplay. While this is consistent with Kojima's style, it is hard to argue for this amount of time spent where the player is essentially a passive viewer. This would not be an issue in a film or book but taking the active role from the player for this long in a video game is less forgivable. With this, Kojima demonstrates the consistent traits of his auteurship, but at the cost of the core characteristics that embody his medium. *MGS4* feels like it has elevated each signature element of the *Metal Gear* franchise, with the oppressive narrative being one of the unfortunate side effects of this.

### **Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain**

The first work of Kojima's on the PlayStation 4, *Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain* (2015) is also his last game created for Konami. One can also see this last title's debut as one of the strongest arguments that Kojima's presence in a video game is instantly recognizable. Rather than announcing the game to the public in a normal fashion, Kojima released a teaser trailer for *MGS5* simply titled *The Phantom Pain*, using the name of a fake studio with no references to himself or the *Metal Gear* franchise; it still took little time before fans pieced together that they were seeing the next Kojima title, eventually forcing the creator to admit his attempted deception (Kain, 2012). If there ever was a clear sign of Kojima's undeniable auteurship, it is this reception by the fans. Even without being told, people could recognize what they saw as belonging to the director. As usual, the plot of *MGS5* revolves around an infiltration mission, this time being conducted by the returning Big Boss, the protagonist Naked Snake from *MGS3*.

Upon awakening from his coma, Big Boss is forced to flee the hospital he resided in as it is attacked by XOF yet again. He is then recovered by Ocelot, who reintroduces him to the world and a new MSF known as the Diamond Dogs. Big Boss, taking up the new moniker of "Venom Snake", rescues his wounded friend Miller from Soviet forces occupying Afghanistan. The two decide together to take revenge on XOF and Cipher by building up the Diamond Dogs to fight back against the growing influence (n.d., para. 14).

What I find interesting is that Kojima's last *Metal Gear* game, rather than moving forward with the narrative world he has created, chooses to go back in time to the events of Big Boss after *MGS3*. Even after so many games, Kojima uses his last work to flesh out his world, to give backstory and context to his past works.

As was the case with *MGS4*, Kojima's newest title keeps most of its gameplay and mechanics intact, choosing to allow the upgraded technology of the new console to give players a newer, more attractive version of the same gameplay. The biggest change, perhaps the only one worth mentioning at this stage of analysis, is the move to an open world format. In video games, since the 2000s, open world video games, where instead of a small and limited space the players can explore and interact with a large space filled with many gameplay options, have become an industry norm. But this is the first Kojima game where I have seen this stance taken, as players in the past have been limited to exploring the facility they were sent to infiltrate. There are, however, multiple ways to interpret this dramatic change. Perhaps it was implemented on Konami's request in an attempt to jump onto the open world bandwagon with many other publishers, or it was requested to try and drive the future of the *Metal Gear* franchise in a different direction. I personally believe the most likely answer comes from Kojima himself. Seeing what the rest of the industry had done with the open world option, I think Kojima simply wanted to overcome a challenge he had not faced yet. He is a creator constantly evolving, and I see this as just another example of him challenging himself to grow.

What is most important about *MGS5* is not the game itself, but what happened backstage during its production and release: Konami aggressively phasing Kojima out of the company, and minimizing any recognition he would receive for his titles (Sarkar, 2015). Even the final box art was changed for *MGS5* to not include the logo for Kojima Productions, his personal studio. Konami, seeing the rising trend of mobile games and understanding the great cost of creating a traditional, console-based video game, began a series of company-wide changes, one of which was the decision to drop their most recognizable

employee. Much of the original writings on auteur theory discuss the relationship between auteurs and the companies they work for. Often, the dynamic between the two is dominated by the needs of the company, with the creator being forced to demonstrate their auteurship while appeasing these corporate needs. In other words, most auteurs function despite the company they work for, not because of a symbiotic relationship between the two. In this case, Konami decided that their corporate needs outweighed the benefits of keeping Kojima employed and released him, burning almost every bridge with him on the way out. Even knowing this, as I look at *MGS5*, I do not see a disgruntled director at work, low-balling his own product to get back at the company that wronged him. While this process occurred over the span of several months, this did not affect Kojima's final game, at least not compared to most auteurs in his position. Kojima remarked multiple times during the production that he was still "100% involved and will continue working on *Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain*" (Sarkar, 2015, para. 18). Even while being pushed out the door, Kojima cannot help but make every title he created be his best possible work, not for Konami's benefit, but for his integrity as an auteur.

### **Shared Traits**

What makes Kojima so unique as a video game auteur is his ability to so deeply shape the gameplay and narrative of his works while staying inside the Konami Company. An auteur working from within corporate limitations is nothing new (in fact, it is the very reason auteur theory was first created), but no one had demonstrated these traits to such a degree within the video game medium. There are other video game creators known for being driving forces in their companies, Nintendo has essentially been maintaining itself off of three or four of these men, but none have both the instant recognizability or the

consistency of Kojima. Bazin notes that “great talent matures but does not grow old” (1957, para. 24). Kojima is a clear example of this. His auteur persona, one that is still evolving today after 31 years, is observable in almost every element of his games. Looking at the common characteristics between these games, one can find what it means to be a Kojima production.

The first aspect that must be addressed while analyzing Kojima the auteur is looking at Kojima the writer. Flying in the face of fundamentalists that value video games as simulation over narration, fans understand that the heart of every Kojima game is his narrative. Even just glancing at his narrative structure, there is a formula utilized in most of his works. Each Kojima game begins with lengthy exposition, followed by dropping players straight into the action, often with little warning between. The first boss fight is its own form of tutorial, an impressive-looking yet easy to defeat character, preparing the player for how challenging future boss battles will be. As the player progresses, generally around the game’s halfway point, one is captured and interrogated by the enemy, surviving and learning more information as a result. Upon escape, after recovering one’s items, the game’s difficulty will increase until the final battles. The final bosses of a Kojima game follow a pattern: watch a lengthy cutscene where the player realize they have been fed misinformation the entire game, destroy the giant Weapon of Mass Destruction being piloted by the villain, and finally engaging the protagonist’s mentor in the final battle. This exact order is used in four of the first five *Metal Gear* games and is the backbone of all of Kojima’s narratives. Approaching these stories, he purposely strives for a singular plot and cast in his games. Rather than the usual choice of an unassuming protagonist, the *Metal Gear* series has pronounced, defined characters taking the lead. While this does not allow

the player as much opportunities to emotionally place themselves onto their avatar, it serves to further distance Kojima's work from other games in the industry.

Another part of Kojima's writing that never waivers in his work is the themes he builds his stories around. The specific themes change from game to game, but the overall message never alters: war is a terrible thing that continues to adapt, even in the span of one lifetime. Each game covers a different element of war, from the effects it has on the surviving children to those profiting off war economies. Like Snake, Kojima grew up watching war itself change from the aftermath of WWII into the nontraditional conflicts of the Middle East today, and both seemed constantly disgusted by the increasingly impersonal nature of the violence. It does not take long to see Kojima clearly harbors a strong anti-war stance.

"One time when I was still a grade-schooler he [his father] took me to a film called *Night and Fog* ('55)...it was a movie in which America and Germany were fighting, supplies ran out and there were many wounded, so many that they couldn't continue to wage war. Because of that and armistice agreement was reached for one day's rest, or so the story went. My child self couldn't understand that I do remember talking to my father about it. He said 'If people talk to each other and reach an understanding, there wouldn't be any war. Wouldn't that be great?'

(McManus, 2006, p. 24)

Kojima's father lived through two separate wars, WWII ending while he was just 15. His generation would go on to set the anti-military tone that shaped Japan for decades afterwards. Kojima has expressed that much of his anti-war mindset was inherited from his father.

Knowing this, in Kojima's work it is easy to find the dual themes of glorifying and condemning war; oftentimes, both mindsets will expose themselves in the same cutscene. Kojima, being an intelligent man, recognizes how other media portrays war as this noble pursuit for a better world, showcasing the soldier as the epitome of heroes. Kojima himself, admittedly, is often guilty of this, with many cutscenes merely showing two opposing soldiers poetically debating the noble nature of violence moments before trying to kill one another. But he differentiates his works by simultaneously, and systematically, observing the results of this violence. While fighting a war may save civilians around the world, the first sacrifices are often the peacekeepers themselves. In Kojima games, characters die. They die often, and usually still full of regrets and aspirations. Generally, every character that dies in the series has a cutscene dedicated to their dying monologue, rewarding players efforts of defeating a boss with helpful information and character-building discussion between the two fighters. But the greatest theme of the series is criticism of nuclear deterrence. The central plot point of the franchise, the Metal Gear robots themselves were originally designed in-game as a nuclear deterrence, a technological advancement designed to save the world from itself. Of course, these deterrents are seized by terrorists and used to start the wars they were made to stop. Clearly, a Japanese director has more than enough reasons to push an anti-nuclear agenda, but with current events being what they are, an analysis of nuclear war narratives seems as timely as it does important.

Deeper under the surface than his obsession with war, a theme Kojima himself admits to in his works is that of patricide. "Perhaps because my father died when I was in eighth grade, I never got over some sort of father complex. Therefore all the games I've

made up until now have been paternal stories. I've made nothing but games about killing fathers" (2006, p. 25). More than a joke, every game Kojima had created at the time of that interview was directly tied to a character killing their mentor or creator, usually as the final boss. Throughout the early *Metal Gear* games, Solid Snake defeats Big Boss, his commander and secretly his father, before moving on to kill the memory and legacy of his father when fighting his brother in *MGS*. And while in *MGS3* this evolves into a case of matricide over patricide, Kojima's protagonists often find their last test is killing their predecessors.

Interestingly, given the dark nature of the themes in his library of works, what I see since *MG2* is his sense of humor. Whether it be bosses pathetically crippling themselves during a fight or random guards humiliated by bathroom-related hijinks, the tension in the *Metal Gear* franchise is often cut by its creator's weird sense of humor. Perhaps the best example of this is the character Ocelot in *MGS3*. The young version of a reoccurring villain, Ocelot is embarrassingly handled throughout the game. At multiple points, Ocelot will have the upper hand in a battle, only to throw it away while attempting to stylishly kill Snake. His punishment for these blunders ranges from mild, simply being knocked unconscious, to extraordinary, being uppercut by a motorcycle. Eventually, the young commander rids himself of his military-grade squadron and tactics, instead taking the gimmick of juggling revolvers for sport mid-battle. While he never quite manages to intimidate the player, he is always good for laughs.

A problematic element of Kojima's auteur persona is his lack of empathy with his female characters. More than once, interchangeable female soldiers have the duty of being wounded in front of the protagonist to inspire anger and bloodlust in them. Often, these segments are bookended on each side by cutscenes where they express insecurities about

whether they are good enough to be a soldier. And while Kojima has written strong, powerful women in his later games, especially The Boss in *MGS3*, the majority of the women in the *Metal Gear* franchise only serve as objects for Snake to protect and avenge. This ties in to several gender equality issues both in Japan and the video game industry itself, and unfortunately rears its head often in Kojima's early works.

While the narratives in his games occasionally take precedent over the gameplay itself, Kojima is first and foremost a game designer and creator. As such, one must also analyze the mechanics at work inside his titles. Perhaps one of the easiest aspects to overlook, Kojima's greatest achievement is the gameplay itself he originally created. Copied by almost every stealth-based game since, Kojima's mechanics in *Metal Gear* are among the most influential in the video game medium. The idea of a soldier hiding from enemies rather than engaging in a frontal assault, while a simple one, was the first step in creating the gameplay that has defined Kojima's style for the last three decades. Since then, in each of his titles, this cat-and-mouse game is further perfected. Whereas *Metal Gear* introduces the idea of hiding out of guards' sight, *MG2* adds the option of crouching under their line of sight; from there, whether it be the addition of tranquilizer darts or camouflage or even dropping porn as a distraction, each title adds to the methods a player could use to avoid detection. It is rare to find a trait so synonymous with an auteur that grows and evolves so consistently in a career as Kojima and his stealth mechanics. Without it, Kojima's career may never have taken off, but without Kojima, this type of gameplay may never have been executed by a developer.

One of the most unique mechanics used by Kojima is that of the unreliable narrator. From the first *Metal Gear*, where Big Boss tries to lead the player into traps as the secret

antagonist, to *MGS2*, where the once reliable “Colonel” transforms into a failing AI towards the end of the game, Kojima has shown that one of his favorite methods of playing with player expectation is to deliver this misinformation from a source the player would never question. This is not a new subject in literature and cinema, where authors have used the strategy for years. But in video games, a medium built upon the idea that the game will guide the player in the proper direction, being given misinformation is something truly unique to the *Metal Gear* franchise. In terms of the game’s narrative, this element makes sense. A secret agent would, generally, go into an operation with limited information, but given its place inside the video game industry, this mechanic is among Kojima’s most bizarre.

Another often utilized mechanic in Kojima’s video games is the burden on players to think outside the box. Where a traditional game may point the player towards an enemy and say “Go kill them,” Kojima will present the player with a nigh-impossible battle and ask “How can you bring this in your favor?” In *MG2*, Snake is stripped of all weapons during his final battle with Big Boss, forcing him to find an aerosol can and a lighter to use as his only tools. After this, Kojima left options for players to find more inventive ways of defeating enemies than the usual method of shooting them down. Oftentimes, my favorite moments in these games is finding strange strategies to challenging situations. I was having trouble defeating Vulcan Raven in *MGS*, a giant of a man carrying a chain-gun, until I realized I could trick him into chasing me straight into a series of landmines. In *MGS3*, there are two boss battles that allow players alternative win conditions. The Fear, an inhumanly fast man wearing an invisible suit, is difficult to take down with gunfire, but tricking him into eating rotten meat will end the battle instantly. The End, the 100-year old inventor of sniping,

requires patience to out-snipe in an hour-long battle. Or, after saving my file mid-fight, I could set my console's date two weeks into the future, where the game tells me then that the veteran passed away from old age during the wait. Not affecting the overall game, these little moments were the ones that I remembered more than I did any harrowing life-or-death gunfight.

The combination of all of his mechanical elements, high difficulty is expected in every Kojima game. Whereas Chen and Thatgamecompany push for Flow, the point where challenge meets ability, Kojima looks to have little interest in this theory. Rather than tweak his designs to allow less experienced players a chance to grow, the *Metal Gear* games force players to rise to the challenge, or taste defeat with no mercy from their creator. In *MGS*, I spent two hours losing to the same boss, over and over again. But instead of feeling frustrated, as Flow theory would suggest, I saw it as Kojima testing me. While I was killed repeatedly, each attempt got me closer to the final goal of defeating my enemy until, with enough attempts and hours of experience, I saw my foe's health bar depleted. In my life, few video game moments have been as satisfying as that, because I knew I had truly earned the victory. This is the give and take of Kojima's games. They may be frustratingly difficult, but this only makes the final reward feel sweeter.

Perhaps the most eye-catching facet in this auteur's works is his reuse of material. In so many of Kojima's games, I see puzzles, level layouts, and boss fights that are repeated throughout. Generally, I would associate this as a symptom of industry demands; similar to how Disney would reuse animation frames between their films, game designers would adapt past levels designs on new projects to save time. In Kojima's case, however, I believe it is simply another example of his self-referential nature. Most of these cases of repeated

challenges are used in the same context as the original: a repeated boss fight is against the same characters as the original, a puzzle involving an electrified floor introduces the same item to both protagonists, even characters referencing past conversations with other people. The character of Cyborg Ninja in *MGS*, discussed earlier, references himself from the previous game in most of appearances, from repeating codenames he used in the past to recreating the circumstances of the boss battle. The biggest example of this is the narrative of *MGS2*, where it is revealed that the events of the entire game were a recreation of *MGS* in an attempt to train *MGS2* protagonist Raiden into replacing Solid Snake. Seeing as how personal Kojima seems to feel about the projects he makes, and how seriously he takes the narratives he crafts, it does not surprise me that the auteur could not help himself in wanting to make homage to his early works whenever possible.

Going back to Sarris' fundamentals of auteur theory, Kojima seems to embody each trait mentioned (1962). His technical prowess as a developer is universally acknowledged, with many of his early mechanics and concepts becoming the building blocks of the stealth-action video game genre. His personality, unlike many creators in his field, is immediately readable within the first 10 minutes of his work. It is this auteuristic trait that industry writers first recognized, and it remains the circle of Sarris' circle that he most personifies. And finally, more than perhaps any other action games on the market, Kojima video games all have a deep, personal interior meaning. Throughout his various projects, he has never strayed from showcasing the horrors of war, and its lingering effects on those who survive it. With mastery over the skills of his trade, a personality that is generously applied to each game, and a message that persists across 30 years, Hideo Kojima appears to be Sarris' ideal auteur.

## Death Stranding

Something to keep in mind is that most of the shared traits in Kojima games may instead simply be traits shared among the *Metal Gear* franchise. But while many would argue that the two are indistinguishable, Kojima is defined by more than just his work on this one series. Looking ahead, there will be no greater test to this than *Death Stranding (TBD)*. His first game created after leaving Konami, *Death Stranding* finally gives a glimpse of what a Kojima Production video game is like without his creativity being limited by a company model. With the blinders and reigns torn off, industry writers are universally excited to see how fast this horse can run now that it is free. As Corrigan wrote almost 30 years ago, it is the auteur's name that is the selling point of the art. "He or she has rematerialized in the eighties as a commercial performance of the business of being an auteur" (1990, p. 47). This appears to be the case here, as the hype building around the new release seems entirely centered around Kojima.

While the three released trailers show cinematic cutscenes, there is no actual gameplay, so it is difficult to tell what the game will play like. Worse, the cutscenes themselves only show confusing video that, without any context from Kojima, seem to make no sense. Still, I am excited about what I have seen so far from *Death Stranding*. With appearances in the trailers from Norman Reedus, Guillermo del Toro, and Mads Mikkelsen, all talented men that Kojima has either worked with before or shown desires to, this looks like a video game that Kojima has heavy personal involvement in. Even with as little to go on as one has, it still appears that Kojima's grave themes will resurface in this title as well. From the panning shots of beaches covered in dying whales, man's effect on the environment looks to play a prominent role in the narrative. Given the constant images of

babies juxtaposed by skeleton soldiers and the name *Death Stranding*, it appears that the game will revolve around the idea of life vs. death, a surprisingly universal theme from Kojima. It may take until the end of 2019, but fans will finally see how Kojima functions after being fully removed from the franchise synonymous with his name.

## **Conclusion**

Few aspects of art show as much ownership as the way an auteur tells a story. From Quentin Tarantino's realistic small-talk to the indescribable humor of Woody Allen, the flow and content of a script is generally one of the first places one looks for an auteur's touch whenever they served as a writer. Much the same as the previously mentioned directors, Kojima's narratives are often the clearest sign of his presence. With a writing style entirely unique to his medium, every script he has written has been regarded, for better or worse, as ahead of its time. What makes Kojima such a recognizable auteur in the medium is the consistency of his games' mechanics and themes. It's difficult to play through a Kojima-made video game and not be able to recognize its creator, they are just that different from the rest of the industry. From his overarching themes of war and its horrors, to his personal brand of humor slapped on to break the tension, to the unforgiving mechanics a player must master to progress, every *Metal Gear* game has the director/writer's fingerprints all over it. Kojima described himself in an interview: "From that perspective my job is that of providing games as a service...I believe 'a creator with an auteurist approach' is a more apt description of myself" (Biggs, 2017, para. 5). Critics around the world, for the last two decades, have agreed.

Kojima's place in this thesis is that of the individual artist working inside the confines of a studio, much like the film directors of Hollywood. He demonstrates the ability

of a single auteur to heavily influence the creative work while working alongside a crew. More so, Kojima has shown that his name and personal brand amounted for more of the success of his games than his parent company. And like many auteurs before him, Walt Disney and Andy Warhol for examples, Kojima uses his media presence to present and reaffirm his auteur persona to the public. In this way, not only is his name become more famous, but the marketability and economic value of said name increases accordingly. The study of this auteur now serves two purposes: an example of a creator working inside a hostile parent studio, and the creator once they have left said studio. Seeing all of Kojima's career is akin to looking at the history of home video game consoles, one can see the end of the 8-bit era of Pac-Man all the way to games still deep in development. Kojima's is a career defined by consistency. He consistently evolved his craft when presented with new technologies to test, he consistently portrayed the same themes and messages throughout three decades of scripts, and he consistently left audiences dumbfounded that he fooled them yet again.

**CHAPTER FIVE-THATGAMECOMPANY**

One of the reasons there is so little discussion on video game auteurs is due to the technology of the medium outpacing those that creatively work in it. “In videogames, it's far less common to see a creator's work evolve in this way. In part, this is because game makers tend to have less longevity than other sorts of artists.” (Bogost, 2012, para. 6). This makes it increasingly more important to study these auteurs while they are in the peak of their careers, otherwise their works may not be appreciated until they have lost relevance. While Kojima served as an established auteur in the field, Thatgamecompany is an example of a budding studio perhaps just a few years from fully blooming. More so, Thatgamecompany will further juxtapose Kojima as a demonstration of a studio acting as auteur. Much like the Hollywood studios during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Schatz, 2010), Thatgamecompany functions as a group of individuals working cohesively towards a single creative style. Thatgamecompany is tiny compared to other video game studios with only 24 members, this allows the team to function as a single auteur in a greater capacity than any other company in the industry. Jenova Chen, the company's President, receives the most personal attention as the company's public face for interviews, but unlike Kojima, he is a single cog in the greater machine that makes the studio. It is the combined efforts of the entire staff, along with the miraculous ability for them to all work together on the same auteur vision, that categorizes Thatgamecompany as an auteur studio. While the auteur theory was originally theorized to discuss the individual creator working inside of a larger studio, there is no reason it could not also be used to analyze the auteurship of creative studios. In this capacity, Thatgamecompany is the perfect candidate for study as the industry's premiere Indie studio.

Thatgamecompany's work stands out due to how radically different it is from anything that exists in the industry. From the reoccurring themes of environmental awareness, one rarely seen in video games, to the company's goal of programming nonviolent gameplay, their trilogy of games from Sony Computer Entertainment seems to run against all the current norms in the medium. Critics were quick to note this, just as they were ready to praise the company for making the equivalent of an arthouse game. This chapter will focus on their works, and what the common patterns among them tell about the studio.

## **FLOW**

The PlayStation 3 console adaptation of *Flow* (2006) is a vastly improved version of the Flash-based game Chen made for his master's thesis. "Play as one of 5 creatures, each in a unique environment. Lose yourself in the crisp 'deep blue' and use the SIXAXIS wireless controller for an organic experience that will allow you to glide, flit, and fLOW through the universe" (Thatgamecompany, n.d., para. 2). Beginning the game in a light filled pool of water, one plays as a single-celled organism eating other organisms while avoiding the same fate. As they eat, they grow, allowing the avatar to eat larger organisms and resist being eaten by the smaller ones. The avatar and enemy organisms are made up of various glowing marks on their bodies. While there is some variety, most of the creatures resemble millipedes composed of a trail of these glowing segments. As one eats these marks on enemies' bodies, they dim. Once all the lights have dimmed, the organism explodes into smaller, bite-sized plankton for the player to consume.

The pool is divided into several 2D planes, each with its own group of creatures and food for the player to eat and grow. Each level has two circular cells, one with a blue target

around it and one with a red target. Eating the red cell makes the avatar delve deeper into the pool, while the blue pushes the player a level closer to the surface. The ability to go back is useful at times, because the size and numbers of aggressive creatures increases the deeper into the pool they are. The level ends when, after traversing down enough levels, the player finds and eats the “egg” at the bottom of the pool. From this egg sprouts a new organism the player has unlocked, with five total creatures being featured in the game.

While traditionalists, such as Burgan, would be repulsed by the idea of gameplay not being the focus, the game’s strongest aspects come from the atmosphere of *Flow*. Everything in *Flow* synergizes together to make a peaceful, relaxing atmosphere. The muted light shining from above casts a beautiful tone through the water as one plays. As the player progresses, the game gets darker, further away from the light at the surface; but to compensate, the player’s avatar gets more and more beautiful the longer the level goes on. These beautiful and iridescent organisms floating in the pool are simply gorgeous once they start growing: each food source adds a different type of appendage to the avatar, making each player’s final organism a tad different than anyone else’s.

Perhaps the most relaxing element of the game is the music. Each creature has its own distinct background music, all of which is beautiful, ambient choral harmonies. The most impressive aspect of the music is the way the player has agency over it. As one plays, every organism eaten adds chimes to the music behind you, which seem to blend perfectly to the background tones. As they eat, the organism’s body segments glows momentarily, starting at the organism’s mouth and works down its body. As each segment glows, it emits a chime, making each meal a lovely sound-and-light show. The bigger the organism is, the longer the tones last as it works its way down the body. By the end of a level, each meal is a

small symphony, these chimes taking about 10 seconds to work down the body. While this seems like a small detail, it is the culmination of these small details that create the atmosphere that makes up the majority of *Flow's* charm. It is almost vital that this calming atmosphere exists, remembering that *Flow* was originally created to function as a real-life example of Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's Flow theory in the video game medium. The core mechanics of the game were outlined by Chen in his thesis, all intended to keep players in the zone, balancing the game's difficulty with the player's abilities:

Minimal control opens the door for casual gamers and non-gamers, control the balance between speed and turning leaves space for hardcore player to master, wide range of gameplay from simply swimming around to strategical evolving and intensive fighting for survival...minimal penalty, no Flow breakers (Chen, 2006, para. 2).

This list clearly demonstrates Thatgamecompany's dedication to Flow theory, a theory that leads to a more entertaining, satisfying game for its players. The goal of this list is clearly to create a video game with little-to-no skill needed for entry players, yet a high skill ceiling for experienced players wanting to truly master the game.

There are a series of mechanics Thatgamecompany included that further Chen's goal of perfect Flow within *Flow*. One essential example of this is how the game deals with the death of the player's avatar. When one is defeated in any other game but *Flow*, the game would generally punish the player with a GAME OVER screen, followed by making the player go back to a predetermined spot in the game and continuing from there. In some cases, this spot is the beginning of the fight one had just failed, while other games may have the player return to the beginning of the section they had started. In *Flow*, when the avatar

is eaten by a larger creature, the player is quickly propelled back to the level above, where generally it is safe enough for the player to recover before diving again into danger.

Sticking to the premise of “Minimal penalty, no Flow breakers” (2006, para. 2), even failure is little more than a 10-second inconvenience. By not breaking up the player’s experience on account of this failure, one is free to stay immersed and continue enjoying *Flow*.

Unfortunately, *Flow* has one element that leaves the game’s calming atmosphere and *Flow* dead in the water: the controls. While Chen was hoping that “minimal control opens the door for casual gamers,” the studio instead created a system difficult for even advanced players to learn. The game begins by telling you the control scheme: “Tip the controller to move, press any button for a boost, press Start to pause” (Flow, 2006). Three controls to learn, that’s the level of simplicity Thatgamecompany was going for, controls simple enough to explain in 15 seconds. And while the controls are simple, they are also unresponsive and do not allow for any fine-tuned control over the avatar while one plays. While tilting the controller may seem more simple than utilizing a joystick, it is similar to having to paint a fine image with broad strokes; while it is easier, it is frustrating trying to make small, precise movements.

In an ironic twist, the buggy controls lead to the anxiety Chen worked so hard to avoid. “If the challenge is beyond that ability, the activity becomes so overwhelming that it generates anxiety” (Chen, 2007, p. 3). Most of the game’s frustration comes from the controls, and being stuck chasing food that is both more maneuverable and faster than the avatar. In the many studies on correlation between video games and violence, experts “found that it was frustration, not violent content, that caused mild aggressive feeling. It didn’t matter if a game was violent or not; if the game’s goal was near impossible to

achieve, people became upset when playing it.” (Mackey, 2017, p. 173). For a game created to be calm and soothing, I was extremely frustrated with *Flow* by the end of my fifth creature’s adventure, almost all of which came from my inability to accomplish such simple tasks due to the controls. They were, without a doubt, the weakest aspect of the game.

Another flaw of *Flow* is the lack of content and replayability, how much a player would want to replay the game at a later date. I unlocked all five creatures, completed the associated levels, and went through the game’s credits. This took about two hours. The gameplay of these two hours, while fun, was repetitive when playing as the last two organisms, because, though the avatar itself was different, the gameplay never changed. It is a relatively short game with five levels that all resemble one another, and because of how frustrating the controls were, I am not eager to return to it. Overall, I enjoyed *Flow*, immediately recognizing Chen’s ideals at work in the background. In terms of blending music and visuals for aesthetic effect, the game is still years beyond most of the industry. The problem is that it is not as fun as it is beautiful.

## **FLOWER**

Coming out three years after its predecessor, *Flower (2009)* is, in almost every way, the game *Flow* was trying to be. With feedback from *Flow*’s notable strengths and upsetting weaknesses, Thatgamecompany found itself able to improve upon their formula in every element of design and execution. *Flower* has players controlling perhaps the medium’s most unique avatar: a gust of wind. The gameplay revolves around the player controlling a breeze as it blows through flowers, picking up petals from each of them as it passes. As one forces more flowers to bloom, this will bring color and life back to the surrounding grass, as well as making more flowers sprout from the ground, opening paths for further

exploration. Blooming a circle of flowers surrounding a rock formation may transform the rocks into a beautiful, natural sculpture, all while fresh grass and flowers shoot from the ground all around it. Following a trail of flowers down a path may break down the stone wall at the end of path, opening the next area for exploration.

The game is divided into six levels, each of which starts with the player looking at a flower, which will drop a single petal upon the player pressing any button. As the level continues, that single petal grows into a parade of colors as each new flower deposits its petal into the wind. Aside from looking beautiful, being larger also helps gather more flowers, sweeping past groups rather than have to individually fly into each one. The level ends with the trail joining a spinning column of petals that serves as each level's end point, where all the petals join together to plant a new flower. "The game exploits the tension between urban bustle and natural serenity. Players accumulate flower petals as the onscreen world swings between the pastoral and the chaotic. Like in the real world, everything you pick up causes the environment to change" (Thatgamecompany, n.d., para. 2). This, aside from looking gorgeous, delivers a satisfying agency as one transforms a lifeless field into a botanical garden with practically no effort.

One element of the game I found particularly ingenious was how the game kept the player on track. In a video game with no real direction, no dialogue or text to tell the player what to do, *Flower* has the potential to be a confusing, frustrating game. But every time the player's actions affect the environment, a short cinematic cut scene shows the results. The camera then cuts back to the original point of view- third person directly behind the first petal- but points the player towards the recent change; the developers show the player what has changed in the environment and then subtly point them in the direction of where

to go. In my time playing *Flower*, I was only lost three times, and was always able to find my way back quickly. For a game as open and unrestrictive as this one, that is an impressive feat on Thatgamecompany's behalf.

*Flow's* greatest strength was the calming atmosphere the game induced, from the beautiful visuals to the musical chimes that blended background music with sound effects from the gameplay. Once again, I believe *Flower* has surpassed its predecessor in even this category. One element that stayed just as consistent was the use of music throughout the game. The score of the game is wonderful, light, and fanciful, exactly the background music one would expect from a video game about flowers. Just like before, the player can influence this score with their actions. Similar to eating food in *Flow*, a chime rings out and mixes with the soundtrack whenever the player makes a flower bloom. Just as this created a beautiful melody when these chimes ran through the body of a fully-grown organism, flying through a trail of a dozen or so flowers results in a wave of percussion mixing in so perfectly with the soundtrack it sounds planned. I noticed that each color of flower has its own distinct percussion behind it, so flying through a patch of red, yellow, and pink flowers will result in a small but diverse symphony.

It seems almost unnecessary to point out, but *Flower* is visually gorgeous. While *Flow* was an attractive game, with many elements coming together to please the eyes, *Flower* blows the older game away. Aside from the technological improvements that allow for the newer game to have stronger graphics, the identity of *Flower* is what allows it to look so attractive. Most of the game, the player is staring at flowing grass, lifelike flowers, and petals dancing in the air like a Disney cartoon. In one particular level, where the player must bloom flowers at night, the color scheme changes from sunny plains to a blue-toned

iridescent glowing one; seeing grass begin to glow blue, looking like the Andromeda Galaxy, was simply breathtaking.

While the newer game improved on the formula in many categories, where this game truly surpasses its predecessor is in its controls. *Flower's* controls function almost the same as those from *Flow*. Utilizing the motion control sensors in the controller, the player controls the movements of their breeze by tilting and turning the controller itself rather than using joysticks to control movement. I was not blunt on my opinion of *Flow's* controls, I believe they were worst part of a good game. *Flower*, however, was able to take the clunkier system from its predecessor and perfect it. The controls are even more simple than before. Whereas *Flow* monitored movement on the X, Y, and Z axis, *Flower* only operates on the Y and Z axis. While this leads to wider turns than the previous game, the controls allow for more controlled movements in-air and at aiming for specific targets. Dr. Murray wrote that “one form of agency not dependent on game structure yet characteristic of digital environments is spatial navigation” (1999, p. 129). In *Flower*, thanks to these easy to learn controls, I am able to agree; simply flying through the fields, gazing at the landscape around my avatar, was the most fun I had playing the game. While there were moments of frustration I felt after just barely missing the last flower in a line, forcing be to turn around and try again, it was nothing compared to the anxiety *Flow's* controls gave me.

Perhaps the most prominent example of Thatgamecompany's growth, *Flower*, unlike *Flow*, actually has a narrative it is attempting to tell: flowers dreaming of the greater struggle of nature being encroached on by urban development. As discussed, many academics are torn on the subject of narrative in video games. Traditionalists generally prefer games to not include narratives, as the story often takes away from player's agency

and gameplay overall. Those coming from other fields of study usually prefer video games with narrative, as it allows them to use narrative-based theory from their subject of expertise. Given that I have already addressed how *Flower* is superior in terms of gameplay, I would consider the additional narrative to be proverbial icing on the cake.

The first three levels of *Flower* are all about the beauty of the natural environment the player sees and creates, giving witness to the jaw-dropping visuals of the game. Clearly, the first half of the game is about demonstrating just how beautiful a natural landscape can be. Near the end of the fourth level, however, an electric pole in the distance shorts out, catching fire to the grass and the surrounding area. The luminescent beauty the player had just created is burned away, charred into terrible black scenery. Even the most basic enjoyment of the game, the tactile wonder of flying through grass, is ruined; the scrapping noise as the petals float through the burnt grass only highlights the destruction the fire caused. The fifth level is where the tone continues to darken. Rather than just blooming flowers and giving life to the surrounding area, now the player must struggle to avoid power lines and survive the man-made carnage around them. By the end of the level, the player must navigate a maze of metal structures, all of which damage and shorten the trail of petals when touched. In one sequence, new structures begin rupturing out from the canyon around the player, with there being no where one can run to escape this industrial Hell. As this level ends, unlike the rest, the game fades to black as you approach the column of spinning petals, the player unable to join with it.

The final level reopens right where the last one left off, the player inching towards the endpoint. Once there, as usual, the petals converge into a single flower. The petal from this flower, however, breaks through the industrial prison around the player with no

difficultly, prompting the objective of this last stage: getting rid of the corrupting structures and filling a city with natural life and color. It is important to note that this process does not destroy the city. By introducing nature, the city seems to only improve as the player flies through it. Ruined buildings repair themselves, gray walls are suddenly painted beautifully, and a once drab city quickly fills with beauty. After this trail of petals rebuilt this city, after seeing all the color return, after destroying every piece of the terrible metal from before, the city itself blooms. The giant metal tower in the middle of the city, the symbol of everything evil in the game, transformed into a beautiful, flowering tree. As the cinematic rolls at the end of the level, the last sight for the players is a single, small flower, growing between the cracks in the sidewalk. *Flower* doesn't have an incredibly deep narrative. There are no characters aside from the city itself and the flowers, but there is a clear story being told. Thatgamecompany was able to tell a narrative, evoke both calming emotion and despair, all without the use of any dialogue or text. In any medium that is an impressive feat, let alone a medium traditionally considered better without a story.

Looking at the total product, *Flower* leaps and bounds above *Flow*, due to it being objectively better in almost every category. The game is better looking, has vastly superior controls, and even showcases the merits of Flow theory better than the game named after it. Perhaps the most telling sign of *Flower* ranking above the other is its replayability. Unlike the earlier game, I want to go back and play *Flower* again at some point, whether it be to collect all of the "secret flowers" the developers hid in each level, or just to enjoy the beautiful aesthetic and calming gameplay. In less than three years, Thatgamecompany not only proved to the industry that emotional, calming video games had their place, but that

the young studio wouldn't let past successes get in the path of future products. Good thing too, because they would soon be on their way to creating their greatest work.

## JOURNEY

*Journey* was a chance for Thatgamecompany to further build upon the formula they had near-perfected in *Flower*, but more importantly, it was their shot at perfecting a new element of the new, arthouse-type of video game. To Jenova Chen and the rest of the studio, they wanted to further push what could be done in terms of emotion-driving gameplay; simultaneously, they wanted to add a multiplayer element, an aspect seemingly contradictory to the touching, single player narratives they were trying to craft. *Journey* came out during the rise of social games, games built around a multiplayer experience. But most of these types of games include an action or adventure element. Unsatisfied with this status-quo, Thatgamecompany's goal was to create a social game where one can make emotional connections with other players, rather than one built upon conflict (Chen, 2013). While *Flow* was a test of making games accessible to new players, and *Flower* was about created a peaceful emotion new to video games, *Journey* was about trying to make a deep, impactful emotion between two players (Chen, 2012). The studio's way of accomplishing all of these goals at once was as much innovation as sticking to their basics: by making a video game intended to be beaten in one sitting.

*Journey* is one of the few cases where a game's core appeal isn't in its gameplay. This is not an attack on the gameplay or a criticism, just an observation that the real beauty of the game is evenly split between the game being played and the story being told. The game itself functions as "interactive systems, which can be defined as *possibility spaces defined by explicit rules*" (Burgan, 2013, p. 3). The player controls a small, humanoid

creature shrouded in red cloak as they travel through a desert to climb a mountain. This avatar can walk, speak in musical chirping noises, and gains flight abilities ranging from a small hop to soaring about 50 feet up. In game, the player explores and traverses several simulated biomes, ranging from deserts and ruins to the snow covered top of the mountain, each of which constitutes as a new level of the game. In many areas, there are puzzles that must be solved to progress further into the level, generally utilizing the avatar's chirp ability to affect various objects in environment. At the end of each level, a cinematic cutscene advances the narrative before the player continues.

Looking at Burgan's definitions, he would most likely end up calling it a puzzle game, due to the problems that the player must solve throughout. How do I get to the mountain? How do I cross this broken bridge? How do I free these animals? But I argue that *Journey* still fits the classification of a game. While there are only a few decisions to make in the course of the game, I would argue that those choices drastically change the impact the game has on the player. Will one go through the faster route, taking hours off of the competition time, or take the longer, more scenic route intended by the programmers for first time players? Will one meticulously hunt down every upgrade, making the game far easier, or barrel through the game, eyes glued to the bigger picture? These decisions factor into the *Journey* experience just as much as any mechanic included in the coding or the art direction of the game. The game does not fit Burgan's definition of a platformer, as there is rarely a sense of tension involved in making a jump. This, of course, keeps in line with the work seen thus far from Thatgamecompany. At worst, the player must backtrack 30 seconds to reattempt the jump, removing any potential anxiety the player may feel from failure.

Strangely enough, however, the beauty of *Journey's* gameplay comes out because of its role as an exploration simulator, the most basic form of video games. But this seems to be an educated move on Thatgamecompany's part. Dr. Murray, at the birth of computer game narratives forming, wrote extensively on the themes of exploration being common in video games, which she linked to one's delve into the electronic fantasy realm. "One form of agency not dependent on game structure yet characteristic of digital environments is spatial navigation" (1999, p. 129). In *Journey*, this goes beyond a simple form of agency; special navigation is the core principle of the game.

The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion...We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean of swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. We enjoy the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it (1999).

As newborns, most of one's first experiences are learning to explore and interact with a setting that is totally foreign, with rules and mechanics not yet understood. As adults, this type of experience is almost impossible to find outside of an electronic world. But *Journey* goes even further to bring forth these raw, instinctive emotions. While the exploration of the environment is used masterfully to impart positive emotions, such as curiosity and excitement, it is also used to force negative emotions upon the player. As Dr. Murray reinforces,

The key to creating an expressive fictional labyrinth is arousing and regulating the anxiety intrinsic to the form by harnessing it to the act of navigation. Suspense, fear of abandonment, fear of lurking attackers, and fear of loss of self in the undifferentiated mass are part of the emotional landscape of the shimmering web. Moving through the space can therefore feel like an enactment of courage and perseverance...The drama of suspenseful approach does not have to be tied to combat or to jack-in-the-box effects. It can also have the feeling of a determination to face the truth, to stare directly at the threatening beast, it can be experienced by the navigating reader/viewer as well as by the player/protagonist (1999, p. 135).

Understanding that few sensations cause as much distress as being in an unfamiliar place, the studio found a way of taking the most basic form of the medium, merely an interactive system where the player travels through a rendered environment, and utilized it to bring forth the full spectrum of emotions from its players. Just as importantly, these emotions go hand in hand with those being manipulated by the game's narrative.

While I applaud *Flower* for its narrative, something rare in a game this short and freeform, it is a rather small, subtle story. Much in tune with traditional views, the narrative never eclipses the gameplay, always taking a back seat to the game itself. And as well as it functioned in this game, it did not fit the grandiose goals of Thatgamecompany to create emotion-driven gameplay, with an emphasis on what the player was feeling while they played. Good as the studio is at doing so, there is a limit to the emotional pull that can be achieved purely through operating through gameplay; to take their storytelling to the next level, Thatgamecompany was eventually going to have to design a video game with a strong, central narrative. So I was not shocked when *Journey* immediately began telling a

story within the first 10 seconds of loading. What did shock me was how well executed this story was.

*Journey* begins with a shooting star coming out from the top of a mountain, the camera then following the star as it flies across the desert before being spotted by the player's avatar. From there, the avatar climbs up the first sand dune before them. Upon reaching the top, standing between two gravestones, the avatar gazes upon the mountain in the distance, as the game's title spans the top part of the screen. From there, the player navigates through a desert filled with gravestones and the ruins of some ancient people. As one makes their way through the opening desert area, they encounter magical, glowing symbols, which allow the avatars the ability to fly. To visually show the progression of this power, the avatar's scarf grows from each new symbol, similar to the growing trail of petals from *Flower*. By the end of the game, one's scarf can be twice as long as the avatar itself.

At the end of each level is a shrine that lights up in the player's presence. Once seated there, the game plays a cutscene, showing the avatar meeting with a much larger figure with a white version of the player's robes. Through these cutscenes, the player sees, in a style reminiscent of South American hieroglyphics, the story of the people who inhabited the now-ruins. There was a society, all of whom resemble the avatar, who obtained a great power from the top of the mountain. With this power, crops flourished, great cities were built, and there was even a form of transportation reminiscent of subways. But there was eventually a scarcity of resources and a war broke out between the people, with the assumed outcome being a collapse of the society into the ruins previously explored. At the end of this history lesson, however, the figure shows more pictographs, showing the player's avatar and their struggle through the game; depending on which

route one took, or if they went with a companion, the images seen in this cinematic will show this unique path, with the final images being the avatar getting to the base of the mountain and beginning the climb up. After this, a pair of gates before the player open, granting access to the snowy mountain as the final area of the game.

From here, the atmosphere of the game changes drastically. What was earlier a general wandering through a fantasy setting, fueled by curiosity, abruptly becomes a forced march through blizzard conditions towards the top of the mountain. The cold also robs the avatar of their ability to fly as well as greatly muffling the musical chirp. While there are moments of comfort, discovering a hidden place of warmth, finding animals surviving in the snow, much of the experience is daunting one. As the player makes their way higher still towards the summit, they pass a graveyard as the storm (and musical score) picks up. A few minutes later, as they begin to slow from the cold, robes icing over and scarf completely blown away, the music and sounds of the storm dim, leaving only the sound of the avatar's footsteps through the snow. Then, after stumbling, the player's avatar falls into the snow and dies. There is about 20 seconds where the screen goes white, when I thought that was the end, that I had failed my journey. But another cutscene plays, there the avatar's body is surrounded by the large figures from the previous cinematics. Gathering them up, the avatar is reborn, with golden robes and near unlimited flight as they soar above the storm, floating above the clouds as they effortlessly make their way to the summit. From there, it is a quick walk into the setting sun as, once more, the screen goes white; but now, I feel satisfied, knowing I had accomplished my goal, finished my journey. As the credits begin to roll, a star shoots out from the summit, making its way across the game's landscape, eventually flying over the very hill the player begins the game on.

Without any dialogue or text, Thatgamecompany created an advanced, cyclical narrative. Better still, this narrative matches perfectly with the soundtrack and environment to create Thatgamecompany's strongest in-game atmosphere yet. The moods created by the magical desert are breathtaking, and the dread of encountering danger underground is bone chilling. The death of one's avatar is silencing, leaving the player feeling empty in that moment, only to immediately fill with excitement and satisfaction as they are reborn and finish their journey. And while the talented staff of the studio get the lion's share of the credit, it may not have been possible without their inspiration, Joseph Campbell. "So what we did was borrowed the Hero's Journey, Joseph's Campbell's work, and the three-act structure from filmmaking, the transformation of the character. So you get two players who will go through the transformation of life together" (Ohannessian, 2012, para. 5). The purpose of *Journey* is not just to enjoy a beautiful game, but also to transform oneself through the process, preferably alongside a new friend.

Mentioned earlier, Thatgamecompany's greatest ambition for their newest work was to incorporate multiplayer, a goal seemingly at odds with their past record of narrative-focused, emotional gameplay. This stigma comes from the video game industry itself, where multiplayer's role is best represented by the *Call of Duty* franchise: a chance for players around the world to test their skills directly against one another, specifically designed around gameplay, not story. There is also a certain culture associated with certain online communities, ranging from friendly to newcomers and young gamers to toxic environments where vulgarity and verbal abuse are the norm.

But *Journey* is not the normal multiplayer experience. While playing, after entering the second area of the game, the player can encounter a similar red-cloaked avatar in the

desert. This person has no gamertag or ID to know who they are, they are simply an anonymous figure in the environment. From there, the player can decide to join the stranger or desert them. But while exploring the unknown, it is a great emotional comfort to have a companion to rely on. "Journey, which is a game focusing on a feeling of unknown and a feeling of awe, which makes the player feel small and make them care more about the other players" (Chen, 2013). In most multiplayer, players are "either killing each other or killing something together" (2013). To avoid players wanting to fight, Thatgamecompany made the avatar a small person in a large world. The idea behind it is that two small, scared creatures will naturally want to group up and protect one another, rather than try to compete. But rather than just rely on players better natures, the studio coded the game so that the player's flight ability is charged when near another player; by staying together, the player's experience is easier and faster.

The other player also serves to heighten the emotions of the game. The thrill of exploration is exciting enough but doing so with a friend brings out a childlike sense of wonder that the single player experience does not provide. The terror I felt trying to sneak past the game's enemies was nothing compared to the dread and concern I felt when I realized that my companion was the one about to be spotted. The death sequence is especially powerful with someone else beside me, watching them stagger and fall into the snow face first, knowing that I would soon join them. I have played the ending of the game both with and without a partner, and I attest that it is better with a friend. As great as my triumph was, my sense of accomplishment of finishing my journey, nothing else I have played in the medium has been as rewarding as finishing *Journey* with the same companion beginning to finish. Just as Chen described in his many interviews, the journey itself had

changed: it was no longer my journey, it was our journey. “We wanted them to feel a connection to another player” (Ohannessian, 2012, para 4). A task one would have considered impossible in the violent, play-based culture that is online communities, Thatgamecompany accomplishes as masterfully as any other aspect of their works.

Like any other Thatgamecompany project, the studio went back and further refined elements of *Flower* that, at the time, I would have argued didn't need changing. Perhaps the best example of this was the game's ability to show the player where they are supposed to be going without actually telling them. At the beginning of the game, *Journey* has no instructions telling the player they must venture to the top of the mountain. There is no text or dialogue informing the player of this quest, no icon blinking on a mini-map or a glowing path to follow. The game finds incredible ways to always point the player in the direction you're supposed to go: the shooting star pointing players towards the mountain at the beginning, cut scenes ending with the camera forcing players to face towards the next objective in a puzzle, a creature the player frees flying in a certain direction. The developers know that the curiosity about what the mountain is, how the star came to be, will be enough to push players into exploration. *Journey* never forces the hands of the player to do anything, because Thatgamecompany knows they want to witness the game without needing extra incentive.

I can personally attest that the Flow found in *Journey* is the best of any of Thatgamecompany's titles. The day I first played it, I was engrossed by it, barely looking away from the screen for a moment as I completed the game in one sitting. When it was finally over, only then did I realize that almost three and a half hours had passed, how hungry I was, and how stiff my body felt. The game had utilized all components of Flow,

and each added something to my overall experience. As a video game with no way of killing your avatar (aside from the one planned in the narrative), there are few ways to fail at *Journey*, giving few times that anxiety or stress could enter the player's experience. Another aspect of this, once again improved between titles, was the game's controls. Knowing that they wanted to attract nontraditional gamers, Thatgamecompany uses simplified controls, only requiring the player to learn two buttons and up to two joystick inputs. Most games have been more complex than that since the Nintendo 64 from 1996, but modern video games are made with the notion that the people playing them have a lifetime of experience operating them. Thatgamecompany offers an attractive tutorial that flashes on screen in the first level of the game; not being one to settle for boring, these mandatory lessons are presented in the same beautiful aesthetic of the game, making them just as beautiful as the desert around you. While the player could still use motion controls to control the camera, letting this trope go was a smart move by Thatgamecompany. As fun as motion controls are in theory, and as much as they have shown to attract new players, I find them consistently limiting in player's control over their avatar, leading to more of the frustration that the nonlinear controls were supposed to end. Exploring a new technique, then deciding to grow in a different direction, is the mark of intelligent evolution on Thatgamecompany's part.

“Critics pointed to *Journey* as evidence of a cultural shift in gaming—the start of a new era of thought-provoking, meaningful experiences that stretch the boundaries of the medium” (Parker, 2013, para. 8). With themes ranging from anti-war and environmental awareness to the monomyth and reincarnation, *Journey* is (pun intended) a game-changer in an industry of Hollywood Blockbusters and action-packed best sellers. Taking the

numerous mechanics that worked in *Flow* and *Flower*, Thatgamecompany was able to once again grow as a studio, evolving their style to cover past weaknesses and mold themselves into the auteur they wished to become in the future. Even with the addition of multiplayer and a stricter, more obvious narrative, *Journey* never strays from the basics that led its studio this point. These new elements simply gave them the chance to further perfect their craft.

### SHARED TRAITS

Looking now at Thatgamecompany's whole library, not just comparing titles to the ones that came before and after, I see myself noticing the same mechanics and elements in each of the three video games. This is the strongest argument that Thatgamecompany has, in short time, made itself into an impressively consistent auteur studio. An important note is that auteur theory was designed to analyze a creator's entire list of work, with the implication that this library be several films long. When examining Thatgamecompany, as such a young studio, one only has access to these three video games to study; yet this trilogy makes a stronger argument for auteurship than many cinema directors given the title. Perhaps the most common theme of each of Thatgamecompany's works, out of each element in each of their works, is a desire to run against industry norms the studio does not agree with. Chen has said in interviews that the predominant theme in modern video games is "empowerment" (2013), because the mainly young male audience wants to feel that surge of power. Thatgamecompany is dedicated to utilizing different emotions in their games to give players something different. In general, this need to explore different emotions than just empowerment is simple to notice. Throughout the three games, there are almost no cases of the player dominating something. In *Flow*, the player does eat other

organisms to survive, but this is clearly different in both tone and execution than shooting down enemies in *Call of Duty*. “It gave me chills not because of the gimmickry but because it brought me into unexpected closeness with this particular human being in his struggle for courage. At this one moment in an otherwise uninvolved story, I could sense the potential of this technology to take us seamlessly into a character’s mind” (Murray, 1999, p. 49). Dr. Murray wrote this just as the medium was beginning to start this tradition of utilizing emotional moments to keep players invested. Oh, how amazed Dr. Murray would be if she witnessed Thatgamecompany’s trilogy.

To me, one of the most telling traits found in each of Thatgamecompany’s video games is the universality of the game and its themes. Unlike Kojima, whose efforts are obviously committed to keeping the player trapped inside his narrative, Thatgamecompany’s brand doesn’t cater its message to a specific audience. In *Flow*, the player experiences the beginning stages of life, watching it grow and evolve. In *Flower*, the player explores the fragile relationship between nature and urban development, the struggle between natural life and the lifeless cities of man. Finally, *Journey* takes the player on a quest that hints at the nature of life itself, the possibility of reincarnation and destiny, all while demonstrating a modern-day telling of the Hero’s Journey. These themes are quite at odds with Kojima’s, which are targeted specifically towards first-world countries with advanced, nuclear militaries. Looking at most of the common aspects of Thatgamecompany games, many of them facilitate the universality of the title.

Another facet found by examining the three games is the studio’s increasing use of story. While *Flow* lacked an established narrative, *Journey* took hints from *Flower* and contained a full-fledged story for players to immerse themselves into. As Chen describes,

To me, story is a tool, but not the goal of video games. In the past, when you say "entertainment" -- I mean, we care about entertainment more than story -- so "entertainment" in a sentence, basically, it's food for feeling. If you are hungry, you go to eat; if you are thirsty, you will drink; and if you feel sad, you want to do something to entertain yourself; or even if you feel too high, you want to do something to calm yourself down. So I think story, or narrative, is a very powerful vessel to carry emotions (Sheffield, 2008).

While most studios would use this to create a story of vengeance, using the narrative to fuel the aggressive gameplay throughout the rest of the video game, Thatgamecompany seems to be one of the few who utilize this vessel for positive emotions. Unlike some examples in the industry, however, this story is never placed before the gameplay. Jenova Chen himself stated that narrative is a great tool to enhance the player's experience, but that it is never a priority when crafting a video game.

On a similar page to this, a trademark of Thatgamecompany is their choice in protagonist. "Games tend to favor abstracted personas over 'developed' characters with clear personalities and motivations. More abstracted characters leave more room for the player, and are therefore better suited to support a play-centric model" (Pearce, 2004, para. 11). Given the three protagonists being a single-celled creature, a breeze, and a totally covered humanoid, it appears that Thatgamecompany agrees with this stance. By having a more passive, abstract protagonist, the player can focus on the game itself and how it makes them feel, rather than focusing on the avatar's thoughts and feelings as the player progresses. Furthermore, by making the player's avatar more abstract, more players will be able to immerse themselves into their avatar's struggle than an established character.

Which will be easier for more people to emphasize with: a genderless, featureless humanoid or a Japanese/Caucasian, American male soldier like in *Metal Gear*? For a studio trying to create a global experience, this line of thinking has served Thatgamecompany well.

The final trait commonly found in the studio's work is the inclusion and dedication to Flow theory. While it is the point that any video game be fun to play, making players want to continue playing, Thatgamecompany has gone beyond this. Focusing on designing games that will scale their challenge with the player's abilities, while omitting as many stressors as possible, the company has produced some of the most relaxing, calming games available to the market without creating an experience lacking in any challenge. Research has "found that people tended to play video games that helped them meet motivational needs that weren't being met in real life, such as socialization, feeling that they can make their own decisions, or feeling able to do something useful and have an impact on the world." (Markey, 2017, p. 66). While simulations of battlefields and hellish landscapes were the desired escape from monotony in the past, today's gamers may simply want an escape from the stress and fear of the real world. In a society brimming with hate-fueled politicians, Twitter rants that imply nuclear war, and fear-inducing news updates, I believe that a viable, desirable fantasy setting can be a peaceful world, one with no danger or conflict.

Going back to Andrew Sarris, Thatgamecompany looks to perfectly fit the critic's definition of an auteur. While *Flow* struggled in this capacity, the rest of the studio's work show "the technical competence" (1962, p. 562) necessary for Sarris' definition. Each game built upon the mechanics of the previous, leaving *Journey* to be a near-perfect game both technically

and critically. As to “certain recurrent characteristics of style” (1962, p. 562), it is difficult to argue against the studio lacking this qualification. From the simplistic designs to the impersonal avatars to the evolving control schemes, each game in the trilogy relates directly to one another, both visually and in gameplay. Finally, Thatgamecompany boldly showcases “interior meaning” (1962, p. 562) in each of its works. Just from man’s place alongside the environment and the cyclical nature of life, one sees themes that do not occur this frequently anywhere else in video games. More than anything, this is a studio looking to break new ground in their medium. Exploring parts of the emotional spectrum unknown to the rest of the industry, each title boldly states that video games have caught up to the narrative complexity of other digital medias. I believe that the *Cahiers* critics, if they had the chance, would praise Thatgamecompany for transforming itself into such a consistent auteur in only six years.

## **SKY**

Moving forward, one should be able to take these past attributes and apply them to have a grasp at Thatgamecompany’s newest project, *Sky (TBD)*. With their three game deal finished with Sony Computer Entertainment, Thatgamecompany signed a contract with Apple, so the game will release on Apple devices before moving to other platforms. Even after about two years of development, there is little released about the project, aside from only a few teaser trailers. The studio’s website describes the game in their typically vague, humanistic style: “Spread Light. Hold hands with your loved ones as you fly together through a desolate sky kingdom, where generosity and compassion is key to lighting your path” (Thatgamecompany, n.d., para. 1). *Sky* has been described by Chen as a game about giving. Playing as a child in a world above the clouds, players work together to open new areas for exploration and accomplish challenges. The landscape looks similar to the ruins

of *Journey* but set above the clouds. Chen described the game as similar to a “theme park”: players can spend a short amount of time there, getting just a few minutes of fun, or they can take a day and see everything there is to see (Sky Interview with Jenova Chen, 2017). He has also stated that landscape of the game will be constantly changing and evolving to keep giving players new experiences. He seemed especially excited about the emotional possibilities of multiplayer, whether players would help or harm one another and what it meant to the players experiencing it.

The multiplayer looks in the vein of *Journey*'s, but now with more than just two players interacting at once. Again, the basis of the multiplayer experience is people joining together and helping one another, cooperation instead of conflict. “In *Sky*, as individuals you are small and weak but together you can overcome all kinds of challenges” (IGN, 2017). Chen, at the end of the day, wanted to create a game that would bring people together. One of the complaints he received from *Journey* was players wanting to play it with friends and family, not just an anonymous figure online. With *Sky*, this should finally be a feature incorporated.

While a side-effect of working through Apple, there can be certain advantages drawn from Thatgamecompany working primarily with mobile devices. While many traditionalists will talk ill of the mobile market, calling it harmful to the rest of the video game industry or its lack of critically acclaimed titles, the studio sees more potential in the new medium for their works. Chen has expressed that one of the reasons for taking *Sky* to the mobile game medium is due to the availability. More people have access to a mobile device than to a dedicated video game console. With this Apple deal, rather than

attempting to leave the traditional video game medium, Thatgamecompany wants to bring new people into the media through the more accepted mobile option.

*Sky*, as a mobile game, is being designed mainly as a touch-controlled game. Given Thatgamecompany's early games, this evolution from motion-control to touch control makes sense; Nintendo made a similar step from the Wii console and its motion-control gimmick and their new Switch console, which acts as a tablet and features a multitude of touch-capabilities. The jump makes sense, thinking of both methods as allowing the player to exhibit physical, tactile control over the game. After years of both being tested by various companies in the industry, the main difference is that touch controls offer easier, more controlled responses than motion controls. I see this as proof that Thatgamecompany is growing, not as artists with a vision, but as game designers improving their mechanics.

There is little to go on, but *Sky* looks like every other game in the studio's library: a bold new direction from the critically-acclaimed title released previously, while continuing the traditions that led to their past successes. The art direction of the game, bright and minimalist, fits with the visual styles of the earlier trilogy. The control schemes fit a direction the studio tried for three years, with simple, instinctive controls taking priority over detailed and exact controls that do not pander to new players. The themes of exploration and cooperation are some the core elements to *Journey*, which excites me to see how they have improved the formula over the last six years. The overall picture being painted by Chen, a theme-park experience where new and experienced players can work together to explore a beautiful environment, fits the exact auteur profile I have given Thatgamecompany. If I am correct, and this game is able to reach as many players as Chen

believes, *Sky* could be the largest paradigm shift in the video game industry since Nintendo invented the handheld console.

## CONCLUSION

“New narrative traditions do not arise out of the blue. A particular technology of communication- the printing press, the movie camera, the radio- may startle us when it first arrives on the scene, but the traditions of storytelling are continuous and feed into one another both in content and in form” (Murray, 1999, p. 28). Thatgamecompany’s heart and soul seems to have these words etched into it. Every element of their style, their mechanics, their most personal traits, all turn a blind eye to the rest of the industry. Rather than design video games around addictive gameplay and empowering its players through pseudo-violence, this auteuristic team puts emotional storytelling as its top priority. It took decades to get to Thatgamecompany, but the studio may be the next step in the medium’s evolution. Thatgamecompany’s growth is a cyclical pattern. In a game, the studio perfects a strong element of their past work while finding a new component to add, strengthening the overall product. They have done this in all three of their past games, and now *Sky* looks to refine and invigorate the multiplayer aspects of *Journey*. Most impressive of this auteuristic growth is how the studio has managed to do so as a team. Two dozen men and women working together, not just to release a trilogy of games, but games that seem to show the evolution of a singular creative force. So what new theme, what element will they add next, further dissolving industry frameworks of how the video game medium is supposed to be utilized? And what can every other video game creator learn from this young studio?



## CHAPTER SIX-CONCLUSION

While initial video game literature was stunted by the Columbine shooting, academics have made up for lost time in the last two decades. For a medium that carries the burden of being the “stupid” (Burgan, 2013), video games have grown into a respectable industry and area of research. There are, however, still sizable gaps in literature that must be settled before the field can continue to grow. From my point of view, the most important gap remaining is examining the creators working to elevate their medium. “In Japanese, they say ‘it has flavor’ when discussing something that ... reflects a unique trait of an individual...I think we could do with more flavorful games” (Schreier, 2011, p. 24). If there will ever be a time where video games have the same level of respect as film or photography, one must look at Hideo Kojima and Thatgamecompany and ask how the rest of the industry can follow in their footsteps.

Comparing these two auteurs, they appear to be polar opposites of one another. Given his release from Konami after *MGS5*, it is obvious that his relationship with them was not a healthy one; this makes a critic have to look carefully at missteps or out-of-character aspects of the final *Metal Gear* games, as they may be symptoms of Komani’s influences over Kojima’s projects. Thatgamecompany, on the other hand, seemed to have more relaxed deal with Sony Entertainment. Given sufficient funding and multiple extensions on deadlines, the studio was able to produce a product they were proud of, not simply a game to be released at Sony’s digression. What we see is a case of an auteur struggling against corporate binds, and one that is not. Hideo Kojima expresses his auteurship by filling his works with so much of his personality, so many references to his own creations, that it would be impossible to picture the game without him. Thatgamecompany expresses their

auteurship through the values that transcend their gameplay, beliefs in a better way of crafting inside the medium. Their auteurship is in perfecting each element of game design until it tells as much of a story about the studio's growth as the story of the game itself.

Hideo Kojima's career has spanned decades, and the *Metal Gear* series is among the most revolutionary and genre-defining in the medium. He has been among the first names mentioned when discussing auteurs since the 2000s. Opposite him is Thatgamecompany, a relatively new company whose three games show an almost textbook definition of auteurship with their consistent themes, aesthetic, and style. Though young, the masterminds behind the company aspire to shift the video game paradigm completely. Coming from almost opposite sides of the industry, both creators are the finest of auteurs in their field; one as a textbook example of the individual working inside the confines of the studio, while the other showcases how a studio can come together with a single auteur style. Both auteurs are deep into development on their newest game. On one end, a director whose past works make a pantheon of gaming history, whose newest work looks to rewrite his MO. On the other, a rising studio whose current project looks to be another consistent step towards an industry revolution. Yet there is so little literature crediting both for their accomplishments. A theory is inherently worth less if a real-life application cannot be found. Academics have ignored this medium for decades, but only this century have begun any unified study. We cannot, however, continue this gap in literature for an industry with the financial and social impact that video games have.

Today, in a time where the very existence of climate change is debated, Thatgamecompany's themes of environmental consciousness and harmony between natural and urban are stories that all viewers can take something from. At this current

stage in global politics, with two nuclear-armed countries both threatening war, Kojima's stories built around the dangers of escalating nuclear deterrence have a message that cannot be ignored. Now is the time to finally solidify academic literature around the auteur in the video game industry. More so, now is the time to honor two auteurs whose works explain the struggles we face today with their art. "The tasks which the critics of *Cahiers du cinema* embarked on is still far from complete" (Wollen, 2013, p. 115). The French writers of the 50s were set in their belief that their writing could convince other critics of the value they saw in auteurs where others did not. With this criticism of Kojima and Thatgamecompany, I hope to follow in their footsteps.

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