

Playable Deniability



Biracial Representation and the Politics of Play in *Metal Gear Solid*

The *Metal Gear Solid* series (Konami, 1998–2015), which follows several covert agents as they infiltrate terrorist bases and active war zones, has received much praise in both academic and popular outlets for its storytelling and clever gameplay. Anglophone game studies has commended the franchise’s sophisticated antiwar and anti–nuclear weapon pronouncements—a welcome antidote to American games bound to the military-industrial complex.¹ Derek Noon and Nick Dyer-Witheford, for instance, have read the series’ contrast with American military shooters as director Kojima Hideo’s reflection on the nuclear bombings of Japan and a “critique of imperial power from within mainstream gaming’s culture of ‘militarized masculinity.’”²

Anglophone work has also looked favorably on the core stealth mechanics: gameplay that involves circumventing confrontation by guiding the player character through different natural or urban terrains, avoiding enemy patrols, and staying out of sight. Although these mechanics foreground non-violent engagement with the enemy, Noon and Dyer-Witheford note that

Metal Gear Solid (hereafter *MGS*) does not practice simple didacticism: it allows for lethal actions.³ Indeed, “much of the challenge . . . depends on the tension between the availability of an arsenal of deadly weaponry and the rewards for a ‘no-kill’ completion” that has been possible from *MGS2: Sons of Liberty* (Konami, 2001) onward.⁴ For this reason, Miguel Sicart has seen *MGS3: Snake Eater* (Konami, 2004) as a paragon of gameric media’s unique ethical potential. Sicart argues that the provision of player choice, alongside the experience of consequences, enables critical reflection on lethal play at the level of choice in gameplay.⁵

While the Anglophone literature has examined the antimilitary politics of the franchise and Kojima’s “antiwar, antinuclear” message, the question of race in the games has received little attention.⁶ Noon and Dyer-Withey’s view is paradigmatic: “The game *is* played from a position of ‘hegemonic white masculinity.’”⁷ I argue against this view for two reasons. First, Solid Snake (hereafter Snake), the protagonist/player character for *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998), the introductory section of *MGS2*, and *MGS4: Guns of the Patriots* (Konami, 2008)—the three games that form the core of this analysis—is *not* white: he is biracial, half white and half Japanese.⁸ This character thus differs from the protagonists of *MGS3* and *MGS5: The Phantom Pain* (Konami: 2015), who are the Caucasian Big Boss and his doppelgänger Venom Snake, respectively.

Second, Snake has largely “passed” as white in the American academic context despite his racialization in the franchise’s narrative, in part due to Anglophone game studies’ initial inattention to national contexts (see Hutchinson, this volume). This disregard risks replicating the “postracial” rhetoric that attends American representations of mixed-race Asian bodies. LeiLani Nishime argues that the inability to see these bodies in their sociohistorical specificity extends the logic of the Asian American racial formation as “disappearing” (assimilating) along lines that naturalize existing hierarchies of race in the United States. To combat this tendency, she suggests that “grounding contemporary multiracial Asian American visual representations in history and at the intersection of identity categories lays bare the social negotiations that organize our ability to racialize the bodies we see.”⁹

By following Nishime’s methodological example, this chapter considers Snake’s biraciality in the context of Japan, and in terms of discourses around Japaneseness. I argue that Snake’s racialization in Japanese political context(s) constitutes a means of engaging with the digital world for the implied Japanese player, a mode of premediating the games’ antiwar and antinuclear message

in ways that absent Japan itself from the critique. In so doing, I develop the concept of “playable deniability” to describe the processes that allow play to appear free from the politics around militaristic violence in Japan. Here I am indebted to Tara Fickle’s observation of “an important and overlooked symmetry between the *racial* logic that undergirds the spatialized systems of oppression and exploitation and the *ludic* logic crucial to securing our perception of games *as* games.”¹⁰ I point to a similar symmetry in *MGS*, one that preserves the primacy of play—the political inconsequentiality of action—via a racial logic mediating play.

Paul Martin’s work captures the intertwined political problematics arising in the Japanese industry that I am concerned with here: the fraught domestic and intraregional dynamics of war memory in Japan, and the status of playable war in a state that has lacked the constitutional ability to possess an offensive army since 1945, at least on paper.¹¹ Analyzing *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), a game whose narrative draws on “dark continent” colonial tropes, Martin shows how the representation of white and Black bodies allows the Japanese player a racialized power fantasy: the game allows “the non-White-male player to experience being a White-male subjectivity exercising control over Black and female bodies . . . [and] also opens up a space for this player to experience—from a non-White subject position—control over the White-male body of Chris [the player character].”¹² From this nationalized position, the implied Japanese player can perform militarized, white, and neocolonial intervention. This maneuver not only elides Japan’s history of imperialism in Asia but also bypasses Japan’s postwar “peace” constitution by making military intervention non-Japanese.

The deployment of race in *MGS* echoes Martin’s point that racialization externalizes certain questions of war from Japan. Unlike *Resident Evil 5*’s conservative conflation of military capacity with “normal” nationhood, however, *MGS* wears its progressive antiwar politics on its sleeve. Rachael Hutchinson has shown that Kojima’s critical engagement with war proceeds from an “observer position [that] preserves the myth of Japan as an uninvolved outsider.”¹³ *MGS* upholds an exceptionalism where Japan can pass moral judgment on others’ wars by means of its exteriority to global conflict—an exceptionalism based on “postmilitary” understandings of Japaneseness that obfuscate Japan’s own colonialism in the Asia-Pacific. The series thus replicates a political doxa around historical memory that articulates the war through a narrative of Japanese civilian suffering rather than one of imperialist aggression.¹⁴ If *MGS* “has not overcome the ‘Japan as victim’ stance so problematic

for mainstream/dominant war narratives in Japan—rather, it utilizes this stance as a basis from which to put forward a broader critique of war and violence which is rare in videogames,” then I argue that this critique has never earnestly engaged with domestic political debates around war, whether in terms of commemoration or Japan’s (defensive) military capability.¹⁵

Situating Snake

Snake’s identity disengages the game from these politics by turning to a problematic conception of Japaneseness, one that Yuko Kawai describes as unmoored from its colonial history as both race and ethnicity. Just as ethnicity in the postwar period “has been used primarily to describe ethnic conflicts outside Japan,” so too does “race” exist elsewhere to a Japaneseness that is defined as singular.¹⁶ In the context of this homogenized Japaneseness, Snake’s biraciality creates a semantic matrix to glide over the politics of playable war, to transform play’s political potential into something deniable.¹⁷ Because biraciality manifests in *MGS* not only as representation or narrative, but also as gameplay, I align myself with Jennifer Malkowski and Trea-Andrea M. Russworm’s call to consider racialization in the space between visibility and procedurality, between representation and the core systems of gameplay.¹⁸ If, as Sicart has neatly summed up, Ian Bogost’s influential notion of proceduralism “claim[s] that players, by reconstructing the meaning embedded in the rules, are *persuaded* by virtue of games’ procedural nature,” then Malkowski and Russworm argue that race enters strongly into how rules and play create meaning.¹⁹

The matrix where play becomes deniable for the implied Japanese player depends on the mass-mediatic bifurcation of masculine biraciality into two particular figures. One is the *konketsuji*, or “mixed-blood child” who resulted from the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–52) and who emerges historically in society as a maligned domestic minority. The second image is that of *hāfu*, a term that has appeared since the 1970s to connote Japanese internationalism and multiculturalism. Scholars in Asian American studies have shown the contiguity, rather than linear development, of racialized stereotypes; likewise, I would submit that these twin figures of Japanese biraciality run together.²⁰ In *MGS*, the contiguity emerges on the axis of lethal/nonlethal play as a matter of player choice. If the implied Japanese player chooses the lethally aggressive option, their actions are captured within the semiotic

matrix of *konketsuji* that naturalizes violent physicality as a biraciality that is aberrant to Japaneseness. Conversely, players who elect a nonlethal strategy imbue Snake with an ability to represent Japan as *hāfu* in juxtaposition to the hegemonic militarized whiteness of the West.

Snake's racialization maintains a formal choice between lethal and nonlethal action, all while avoiding political problematics. The balancing act hangs on the specificity of biraciality in Japan: whereas a fully Japanese avatar might summon past conflicts and divulge the politics of playable war, a stealthy white avatar could challenge the Japanese civilian exceptionalism of *MGS*'s antimilitary and antinuclear message. *Konketsuji* and *hāfu*, as ludo-representational modalities, absent Japan as an object of critical contemplation, maintaining playable deniability. Both lethal and nonlethal styles converge on a singular Japaneseness that finds coherency in play at the moment that Snake's racial difference becomes evident to the implied Japanese player.

Before proceeding, a brief biography of Solid Snake is in order. Snake's story, communicated through cutscenes in *MGS1* and *MGS4*, runs thus: Snake is a clone, born from experiments known as "Les Enfants Terribles" that were aimed at re-creating and perfecting Big Boss (a Caucasian man)—the world's foremost super-soldier. To do so, scientists used Big Boss's DNA and the donated eggs of a Japanese woman and grew Snake and his twin, Liquid Snake, to term in the womb of Eva, an Anglo-American woman.²¹ Snake was raised in the United States, eventually joining the military and making his way into the special force unit Foxhound. By the time of *MGS1*, Snake has retired to Alaska after establishing himself as a capable solo operative with a checkered legal past. He is called back to duty when Foxhound, under Liquid Snake, goes rogue and takes over a facility in Alaska that transpires to be a weapons lab for the development of Metal Gears, bipedal nuclear-warhead-equipped tanks. It is during this first game that Vulcan Raven, an Inuit member of Foxhound, identifies Snake as biracial: "Asian blood flows in your veins."²² After successfully stopping the terrorist plot, Snake goes on to establish the antinuclear organization Philanthropy, having departed the service of the American military. While investigating the continued US development of Metal Gears during *MGS2*, Snake stumbles onto a sinister plot of the Patriots, a shadow organization seeking to control world governments. In *MGS4*, he learns that the Patriots are now artificial intelligences that are running a newly developed "war economy," and he fights through premature aging to disable the AIs and end the struggle "between a dominant, quasi-fascist

faction and a dissident libertarian group.”²³ The series ends with Snake, having contemplated suicide, deciding to live out his remaining days.

Biraciality as Representation

As this story implies, Snake never organically inhabits spaces where his appearance would allow him to pass unnoticed. In fact, stealth in *MGS* games entails managing Snake’s visibility through controlling his physical movements. This visibility manifests differently between the two basic stages of gameplay. In the relatively open areas that pit Snake against rank-and-file nonplayer characters (NPCs), the player can choose between concealing Snake from enemy eyes, or directly engaging them. Boss stages, however, lock Snake into limited arenas, reducing the player’s ability to conceal the character. The player progresses through *MGS1*, *2*, and *4* by moving between digital spaces where Snake is always visible and always out of place.

While the series explains this visibility in terms of infiltrating hostile territory, Snake’s perpetual liminality resonates with the situation of mixed-race people in a nation that has considered itself predominantly mono-ethnic since the end of the Asia Pacific War (1945). On the one hand, Japanese “blood remains an organizing metaphor for profoundly significant, fundamental, and perduring assumptions about Japaneseness and otherness both within and outside of Japan.”²⁴ On the other hand, to “qualify” as Japanese requires the simultaneous overlap of “nationality, ancestry, language competence, birthplace, current residence, level of cultural literacy, and subjective identity.”²⁵ Biraciality in Japan, then, is ambiguous because many such people born there meet all of these criteria *except* pure-bloodedness—a point evident in the travails of the multiracial children (*konketsujū*) who resulted from the Allied Occupation (1945–52). The contemporary term *hāfu*, which came to particular prominence in the 1990s, has attempted to suture biraciality to the nation through associating it with Japanese internationalism and multiculturalism.²⁶ Nevertheless, visual difference remains a kind of spectacle, as the large number of biracial individuals working as on-screen talent in the mass media suggests. The oscillation of (multi)culturalized proximity to Japaneseness and racialized distance, frequently signified as “foreignness,” makes the question of whether *hāfu* can represent Japan a vexed one. For example, debates raged around whether Ariana Miyamoto, a mixed-race person of Japanese and Black

heritage, should stand for the nation when she was elected as Miss Japan in 2015 during the Sixty-Fourth Miss Universe Pageant.²⁷

Though *MGS1* was released in 1998, Snake does not visually or biographically correspond to the mass-mediated image of *hāfu*. Rather, there is an ambiguity to his physical appearance, as can be seen in figure 4.1. This ambiguity is particularly visible when he meets his Caucasian “father,” Big Boss, at the end of *MGS4* (see figure 4.2).²⁸ Not coincidentally, this game also fleshes out the earlier invocation of Snake’s “Asian blood” in *MGS1*. In one of *MGS4*’s longer cutscene sequences, Eva reveals the source of his Japanese heritage: “In the successful artificial semination, the eggs of a healthy Japanese woman—the doctor’s assistant—were used.”²⁹ The subsequent line, a verbatim repetition of Raven’s *MGS1* pronouncement, confirms Snake’s biraciality.³⁰ The experimental nature of Snake’s birth renders him an orphan. Big Boss was unaware of the cloning, and his “mother,” who appears only during this line of dialogue, seems to have had no interest in Snake.³¹

This diegetic depiction makes Snake’s closest analog the mediatic image of the *konketsuji*, who resulted from the union of Japanese women with white and Black soldiers during the Allied occupation. As symbols of Japan’s defeat, this group of children often found themselves orphaned and effectively stateless. Legal barriers stood on either side of parentage, whether this was the Japanese patrilineal passage of citizenship, or Allied command’s discouragement of soldiers’ “local” fraternization. Even when they were inclined to claim paternity, GI fathers faced steep challenges in a bevy of anti-Asian exclusion acts, which allowed little migration even after the laws were repealed.³² Japan’s first large-scale population of biracial people entered the public consciousness in both nations as a “problem” trapped between American anti-Asian racism and Japanese discourses of ethnic purity.³³ Carrying forward prewar views of biracial people as more prone to deviant behavior (“hybrid degeneracy”) and as a source of discord within Japanese society, these latter beliefs marked *konketsuji* as racially different, leading to their marginalization and stigmatization relative to pure-blooded Japanese children.³⁴ Simultaneously, their societal spectacularization coincided with the postwar shift from multiethnic empire to mono-ethnic nation, a shift pivoting on a perceived loss of Japanese national self-determinism at Allied hands.³⁵

While Snake’s biography aligns with *konketsuji*, the science fictional nature of his conception also obscures this history within the game’s narrative. Snake’s diegetic situation as akin to *konketsuji* is most significant to



Metal Gear Solid
(1998)



*Metal Gear Solid 2:
Sons of Liberty* (2001)



*Metal Gear Solid 4:
Guns of the Patriots* (2008)

4.1. The appearance of Solid Snake throughout *MGS*. Image courtesy of Miru *MGS*, YouTube.



4.2. Snake (*left*) meeting Big Boss (*right*) in *MGS4*. Image courtesy of Miru *MGS*, YouTube.

gameplay, where his racialization serves as a de facto explanation for his violent physical capabilities. Examining this association in contemporary media, Yamamoto Atsuhisa has viewed *konketsuji* not as a historical figure per se but as a contemporary modality of representing and policing biraciality. Yamamoto argues that contemporary media constructs an aberrant biracial masculinity exemplified by “an excess of physicality and behavior that anticipates violence, criminality, and aggression.”³⁶ As social figures, the *konketsuji* became disciplinary objects of public discourse and more or less formal discrimination, spectralizing biracial difference in service of a “homogeneous” Japan. By designating biracial people as aberrant, defined

in part by a historical association with war and loss, this mode continues to exert a disciplinary effect on mixed-race individuals within mediatic representation. The modality—which I term the *konketsuji* modality, for the sake of clarity—also circumvents questions of Japanese wartime culpability, since it unmarks the implicitly full-Japanese subject and grants them the exceptional power to see, or, in this case, to play.

This function helps explain Snake's biraciality, as it allows for a disarticulation of militaristic violence and Japanese-ness. To demonstrate this point, I turn to the original moment and context of Snake's in-game racialization: the cutscene where he meets Vulcan Raven in *MGS1*, and the ensuing boss fight. Raven, an Inuit man, traps Snake in a subterranean frost-filled warehouse. Unlike other boss encounters to this point, the fight against Raven has no narrative rationale beyond making progress. While Snake is a figure of excessive physicality, with developed musculature, the ability to withstand extreme environments, and a trained capacity for lethal violence, Raven visibly and procedurally dwarfs Snake in all of these aspects. The native Alaskan towers over the player character in stature, and his massive machine gun can make short work of Snake's body and weaponry. The fight itself unfolds among rows of shipping containers that divide the space into long, thin corridors. Raven will fire indiscriminately down these passages, requiring the player to avoid his line of sight. In practice, there are two strategies for winning: the player can fire missiles at Raven's back and risk the boss noticing and shooting their ordnance down, or rig explosives along Raven's path. In either case, the player's ability to avoid a head-on conflict ensures their victory.

Diegetically, Raven situates the encounter in terms of survival of the fittest, a deadly competition that pits the Indigenous man against Snake. Snake's triumph, which results in fatally injuring Raven, thus gestures to a *supplemental* quality of the player character over and above Raven's physicality. Raven's final words condemn this quality as an excessive ability to kill, one that he locates in the artificiality of Snake's body: "In the natural world, there is no such thing as boundless slaughter. There is always an end to it. But you are different. . . . The path you walk on has no end. Each step you take is paved with the corpses of your enemies. . . . Their souls will haunt you forever. . . . You shall have no peace."³⁷ Not only do these lines associate Snake with a ceaseless militarism; they also speak to the *konketsuji* modality of aberrance marking Snake's physicality and aggression. That boss encounters in *MGS1* are fatal (there is no nonlethal way to defeat Raven) links aberrancy to the embodied capacity for a military form of violence—a capacity that,

through Snake's racialization, is externalized from Japaneseness as the object of a disciplining Japanese gaze.

At first glance, the player's skills in strategizing, dodging, and managing Snake's visibility appear to be another source of Snake's supplemental quality. However, this ability is premediated by the *konketsuji* modality: the moment of revealing Snake's biraciality interferes with the immediacy of the implied player's identifications with their actions. Instead, their choices throughout the boss encounter reinscribe the alterity of Japaneseness to the scene of the fight, enacting aberrance to reify its violent difference to "pure" Japaneseness. For this reason, the player's acts are rendered deniable, contained and shaped within the semiotic matrix of *konketsuji* at the moment that Snake's racial difference becomes visible through lethal martial violence.

In *MGS1*, Snake's "biracial" persona aids in the constitution of a Japaneseness that can consume Kojima's "political" message *and* engage in militaristic play without a sense of contradiction. The *konketsuji* modality not only naturalizes the player's violence but also further enables the game's moralizing diegetic message *by* absencing Japan and transforming it into a disciplining presence beyond the game itself. Raven's ominous valediction becomes less a condemnation of the player's actions than an authentication of the *konketsuji* modality, ensuring ludo-narrative consonance—the alignment of play and narrative structures—around the biracial figure of Snake. This consonance extends to the relation of the implied Japanese player and their actions, suturing the gap through a figure that cannot represent Japan even as his "Japanese blood" is confirmed. Thus, the *konketsuji* modality simultaneously nullifies questions of Japanese military violence *and* unmarks Japaneseness while retaining the Japanese player's exceptional power over and above biraciality.

Biraciality as Choice

If the lack of player choice in *MGS1*—the inevitability of Raven's death—thus naturalizes player violence as that of the other, how do we understand the shift from *MGS2* onward, where the games facilitate nonlethal play? Yamamoto's view of the fluidity of mediatic representations of biraciality is key to answering this question: both *konketsuji* and *hāfu*, as images coined by and within the mass media, can be imposed on multiracial bodies *ex post facto*.³⁸ In other words, any biracial person can shift from a position of relative

prestige into deviancy that inherits the semiotic matrix of aberrant behavior, without ever being termed *konketsuji*. While *hāfu* ideologically displaces *konketsuji* along a cosmopolitan narrative of historical development, the two are contemporaneous in practice.³⁹ To play as *hāfu*, then, requires not only sublating *konketsuji*'s aberrant violence but also demonstrating similitude with a disciplining Japaneseness defined in terms of antimilitary nonviolence.

In *MGS2*, Snake can approach *hāfu*—and therefore stand in for a kind of Japaneseness—in the interplay of Japanese difference to militaristic Euro-American whiteness. The game's opening section makes this point by situating racial difference alongside the introduction of player choice between lethal and nonlethal play. Set several years after the events of *MGS1*, the second entry in the series is split into two sections: the brief “tanker chapter,” which features Snake as the player character; and the “plant chapter,” which introduces a new avatar.⁴⁰ The former sees Snake infiltrating a US Marine vessel masquerading as a civilian tanker in New York harbor. At this point, Snake has effectively left the service of the US military; he now works for an anti-Metal Gear NGO, Philanthropy, not unlike an antinuclear NGO. His mission aboard this tanker is to find photographic evidence of a new Metal Gear, and Snake's compatriot stresses the importance of going undetected and avoiding lethal action toward enemy NPCs. For this objective, Snake is given a tranquilizer gun, which serves as one of the main vehicles for nonlethal play throughout subsequent titles.

Snake must use this weapon in the game's first boss encounter with Olga Gurlukovich, a Russian mercenary whose squad storms the tanker to steal the new Metal Gear from the Marines. Olga, who is Caucasian, fights on a stage where she is divided from Snake by an uncrossable wall of boxes. Crucially, the encounter sees a quantitative difference in the use of force. Whereas Olga fights using a live-ammunition pistol, Snake can only use the silenced tranquilizer gun. When the player hits Olga with a dart, a small purple bar under her green “life” bar diminishes; upon reaching zero, Olga slumps over, defeated and asleep.⁴¹ Snake walks away with her lethal gun in hand. In short, the encounter proceduralizes the division between lethal and nonlethal play, and the latter option has the subsequent benefit of incurring lesser penalties even when the player is discovered.⁴²

Although this fight lacks the explicit verbal racialization of Raven's, Snake refuses Olga's identification as an “American,” instead calling himself stateless.⁴³ Here Snake's meeting with Olga amounts to an encounter with militarized whiteness *as* deadly force. This connotation to whiteness draws on

a long history of Japanese representations of Western aggression that took their most overt depiction in World War II propaganda. Such representations have lasted into the present, recalling the threat of American military pressure against a victimized Japan.⁴⁴ In contrast to Olga, the procedural bearer of these significations, Snake comes into legibility as *hāfu*, as representing a Japaneseness that transcends this “Western” belligerence. This legibility builds on the course of action unique to Snake in *MGS2*, which combines the stealth mechanics of the previous game with the possibility of absolute nonlethality.

This possibility reconfigures Snake’s supplemental quality from Raven’s fight, shifting it from player *ability* to player *choice*. By relieving Olga of her pistol following the fight, Snake and the player symbolically inherit the capacity for lethal force. Henceforth, it is the player’s decision whether or not to use it. The logic of inheritance is paramount here: should the player use the deadly weapon, their actions amount to the mimicry of Olga’s militarized whiteness, lapsing back into the *konketsuji* modality. The encounter thus sets a precedent by suggesting that Japaneseness becomes aberrant insofar as it copies militarized whiteness. In fact, the allure of deadly force beckons the player via Snake, who can approach *hāfu* only insofar as he withstands this enticement. The pursuit of the “ethical” path inscribes Japanese difference to militarized whiteness as a form of moral refusal, suggesting that Snake’s unique ability to succeed through abstaining from lethality wins the day. As a play style, then, Snake as *hāfu* underscores alterity along the axis of nonlethality, implicitly encoded as resistance to the gameplay temptation of using lethal violence.

However, even as *hāfu*, Snake is only ever an incomplete representative of Japan. In this capacity, he premediates player action and vouchsafes player choice within the complex politics of war memory. A violent fully Japanese character, for instance, risks invoking the much-demonized figure of the Imperial Japanese soldier. A stealthy or nonlethal white character, conversely, risks undercutting the exceptionality of Japan’s antimilitarism within *MGS*; that is, the supposed *uniqueness* of its response to, and experience of, war. Biraciality solves both of these issues at the level of choice. Snake as *konketsuji* is “naturally” violent *and* different to full Japaneseness, while Snake as *hāfu* can represent Japanese difference without implicating Japan as such. Moreover, the contiguity of these two mediatic modalities allows for containing the meanings of lethal or nonlethal play from one moment to the next. Should the player choose to step off the path of nonlethality, the *kon-*

ketsuji modality premediates questions around why. Player choice never need rise to a higher level of moral or critical questioning because these actions are deniable as play. Snake's racialization reaffirms Japanese exceptionalism in matters of war without shining a light on the larger geopolitical conditions of possibility for that exceptionalism. Precisely because Snake's actions can be disavowed racially, his biraciality nullifies questions around Japan's place within contemporary and historical global conflicts.

Conclusion

To conclude, I return to Hutchinson's point that Japan as a national actor is always apart from the world of *MGS*—that it never enters the games as an object of contemplation beyond the tamest conceptions of victimhood and externality to global conflict. As I have argued, Japan attains coherence *through* play, defined in action sometimes counter to, and sometimes through, Snake's racialization. The mainline games deploy Snake's biraciality not in its own conflicted terms but, rather, in terms of a singular and unexamined Japaneseness—a point that echoes Nishime's argument that “in popular film, multiracial people often act as a bridge between cultures, representing racial difference without having to address racial issues at any point in the script.”⁴⁵ The grand irony of Snake's biraciality is its singularizing effect on Japaneseness. By representing what Japan is not, in a sense, Snake flattens the real politics of Japan's (historical) place in global conflict just as it transforms politicized questions of war memory into a unidimensional and abstract refrain of “antiwar, anti-nuclear weapons.” Paradoxically, the cost of playable deniability is the undeniability of race as a distancing mechanism, a line dividing play from politics and Japan from a more complex history of war.

Yet Soraya Murray has also shown how games can engage with the specificities of mixed-raced individuals in ways that do invoke larger political questions. Murray analyzes how mixed-race blackness functions to conjoin gameplay and narrative in *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) around the creole player character, Aveline. As the player navigates New Orleans between 1765 and 1777, they have the option to change Aveline's clothing in a way that foregrounds her multiple racial legibilities. These different “personas,” in turn, can heighten persuasiveness, mobility, and combat strength. Murray argues this ability to alter Aveline's hybridized racialization foregrounds “larger themes of passing, contingency, the rejection of

binaries and the function of context for identity.”⁴⁶ From this perspective, biraciality—Snake’s included—can open new zones of inquiry around the relation of play and politics because racialization opens itself to critical thought as a process in gamic media. Indeed, *MGS*’s chief failing is its dependence on unified and mutually exclusive categories of identity: *konketsuji* or “full” Japanese, *hāfu* or “foreign.” This reliance denies the power of play as a hybrid territory, a zone that is, as noted in the introduction to this volume, undeniably political. If play practices can blur boundaries and multiraciality can reconfigure racial meaning, then closer attention to the intersection of the two can generate more penetrating critiques of Japanese and American military entertainment and racial formations through analytical and ludic epistemologies of hybridity, rather than mutual exclusion.

Notes

1 Huntemann and Payne, *Joystick Soldiers*.

2 Noon and Dyer-Witheford, “Sneaking Mission,” 92. See also Whaley, “Beyond 8-Bit.”

3 For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the series as *MGS*, and individual titles by their number.

4 Noon and Dyer-Witheford, “Sneaking Mission,” 78–79.

5 Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, 107–9.

6 In Japanese scholarship, the series generally features in historical accounts of cinematic games in the 1990s more than textual analysis. See Nakagawa, *Gendai gēmu zenshi*, 295–98.

7 Noon and Dyer-Witheford, “Sneaking Mission,” 91.

8 While Snake and Big Boss appear in the original *Metal Gear* (Konami, 1987) and *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (Konami, 1990), Snake’s appearance in the 3D *Metal Gear Solid 1* (1998) precedes the 3D rendering of Big Boss in *MGS3* (2005). Consequently, the visual similarities between the two constitute a curious case of the “son” prefiguring the “father’s” appearance.

9 Nishime, *Undercover Asian*, 18.

10 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 7.

11 While article 9 of Japan’s constitution forbids the use of military force, the creation of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces in the 1950s has made the legitimacy and scope of national “defensive” capability an ongoing political issue. See Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*.

12 Martin, “Race, Colonial History and National Identity,” 577–78.

13 Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, 216.

14 For more on Japan’s narratives of civilian victimhood, see Orr, *The Victim as Hero*; and Seaton, *Japan’s Contested War Memories*.

- 15 Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, 229.
- 16 Kawai, “Deracialised Race,” 37.
- 17 Needless to say, Japaneseness is always plural and is homogenized only at the expense of its internal diversity. Goodman’s “Making Majority Culture” provides a useful overview of this point.
- 18 Malkowski and Russworm, “Introduction,” 3–4.
- 19 Sicart, “Against Procedurality,” para. 13.
- 20 See Lye, *America’s Asia*, 3, for the contiguity between Asian American “yellow peril” and “model minority” stereotypes.
- 21 Unless otherwise noted, quoted in-game text is my own translation of the Japanese-language editions of the games.
- 22 Although the revelation of this information in game occurs first in *MGS1*, metagame materials from as early as *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (Konami, 1990) have suggested Snake’s biraciality, leaving it unclear whether Snake himself is aware.
- 23 Noon and Dyer-Witheford, “Sneaking Mission,” 81. The same section provide an excellent overview of the series.
- 24 Robertson, “Blood Talks,” 191. See also Frühstück, *Colonizing Sex*.
- 25 Yamashiro, “The Social Construction of Race and Minorities in Japan,” 151.
- 26 Iwabuchi, “Introduction,” 623–25. See also Iwabuchi, *Hāfu to wa dare ka*.
- 27 Kimura, “Voices of In/Visible Minority,” 1–2.
- 28 “Halfness” is sometimes ascribed through narrative within Japanese visual culture. See J. G. Russell, “Replicating the White Self.”
- 29 “Seikō shita jinkō jyusei niwa hakase no jyoshu de atta kenkō na nihonjin jyosei no ranshi ga tsukawareta.”
- 30 The game implies that, rather than being an exact duplicate of Big Boss, Snake’s cloning used embryo splitting to ensure the conjoined passage of maternal and paternal genetics.
- 31 Snake’s exceptional birth also bypasses narratives of Japanese Americanness in Japan. See Yamashiro, “Racialized National Identity Construction.”
- 32 Kovner, *Occupying Power*, 71–72.
- 33 Koshiro, “Race as International Identity?” See also Arudou, “Japan’s Under-researched Visible Minorities,” 720.
- 34 Horiguchi and Imoto, “Mikkusu rēsu wa.”
- 35 Kawai, “Deracialised Race,” 36.
- 36 Yamamoto, “‘Hāfu’ noshintai,” 136.
- 37 This is the official North American translation.
- 38 Yamamoto, “‘Hāfu’ noshintai,” 135.
- 39 Iwabuchi, “Introduction,” 624.
- 40 For more on this Caucasian avatar, Raiden, see Youngblood, “‘I Wouldn’t Even Know the Real Me Myself.’”

- 41 For later narrative reasons, it is impossible to kill Olga here.
- 42 Roth, *Thought-Provoking Play*, 161.
- 43 Snake says, “Ore nimo kuni wa nai,” literally “I too have no country.”
- 44 See Dower, *Japan in War and Peace* and *War without Mercy*.
- 45 Nishime, *Undercover Asian*, 7.
- 46 S. Murray, *On Video Games*, 70.