Review: 'Metal Gear Solid V' a technical, tactical marvel

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This image provided by Konami shows a scene from the video game, "Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain." (Konami via AP)

In an early mission in "Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain" (Konami, for the PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PC, $59.99), the player is tasked with assassinating a corrupt colonel who's up to no good. While such a chore is standard fare for a video game, "Phantom Pain" provides dozens of ways to off the military leader.

Should he be taken down first thing in the morning or the middle of the

night? Would it be better to shoot him in the head with a sniper rifle or blow him to smithereens with explosives? Does it make sense to stage his death and force him to work for your private military corporation? Oh, and do you also wanna nab his top-secret tank while you're at it?

Those decisions—and many more— await players in over a hundred missions facing "Metal Gear" protagonist Snake, who awakens at the start of "Phantom Pain" from a nearly decade-long coma during the Cold War. After a lengthy prologue, the vengeance-seeking mercenary is unleashed on free-wheeling renditions of Afghanistan and later Africa.

Other open-world games predating "Phantom Pain" have similarly offered players such freedom, but the latest edition in the stealthy 28-year-old "Metal Gear" series masterfully does so with hardly any flaws. It also inventively rewards players for sticking to the shadows and avoiding unnecessary blood on Snake's hands—bionic or otherwise.

The rewards come not just in points and virtual currency but in resources that Snake (played by Kiefer Sutherland) must use to advance Mother Base, his off-shore headquarters that can be visited between assignments. The development of the base is almost another game unto itself, requiring Snake to snatch recruits and assign them to duty.

This additional layer of gameplay means each moment on the battlefield is also an opportunity to take Mother Base to the next level, whether that means collecting herbs that can be turned into medicine, pilfering blueprints or tethering a balloon to an interpreter to send him back to headquarters to assist with enemy interrogations.

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The highly detailed vistas where Snake does his bidding contain collections of villages, military outposts, bases and other encampments dotted across vast landscapes. They're deliciously vibrant but oddly more lifeless than an "Assassin's Creed" or "Grand Theft Auto" realm because most populated areas are—for story reasons—devoid of civilians.

This time, Snake isn't operating solo in the field. He's able to call on a trusty steed, trained attack dog, mechanized robot walker and assassin sidekick for assistance. His gear and so-called "buddies" can be upgraded and outfitted with stuff like better armor and higher tech weapons, depending on the progress of the R&D department back on Mother Base.

As with most quests for revenge, "Phantom Pain" is not without casualties. The switch from linear to open-world adventure means the

story has suffered. A few integral plot points are revealed off-screen through cassette tapes, and when the narrative pops up between all the sneaking around, it feels less important than it should for a game this huge.

It's a minor annoyance considering previous "Metal Gear" installments were actually too heavy handed with story and cut scenes. It ultimately doesn't deter from the gameplay. For fans of open-world games or anyone who has played a previous "Metal Gear" title, there is no choice, really. They must experience "Metal Gear Solid V." Four stars out of four.

More information: www.konami.com/mgs

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