Little Big Planet and Metal Gear Solid 4: Being Old Sack Snake

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Abstract: Video games offer an unusual opportunity: to slide into being *someone else*, with *someone else's problems* and *someone else's life*. A chance to layer a different self and a different world upon your own, deciding between gentle creation, loud explosions, fabulously huge guns, and plastering a new world in jungle stickers. Sometimes that choice of *who to be* is particularly difficult, even when the choice is between such dramatically different characters and games as Sackperson in *Little Big Planet* and Old Snake in *Metal Gear Solid 4*.

In 2008, I bought my first game console ever. I'd been playing games on borrowed technology since *Diablo II* dropped in 2000, leaving unfinished barbarian adventurers, customized *Rock Band* avatars, and a level 59 vanilla *World of Warcraft* druid scattered in various places across the country. (And I don't even want to talk about how many *Portal* games I'd left stuck in Chamber 18.) I never seriously entertained the idea of spending $400 on a Play Station 3, particularly since I would have to beg, borrow, or steal a television to use it on, but my brother Isaiah called me in Indiana and said,

"If you don't get *Little Big Planet* I'll disown you..."

I gulped—he sounded pretty serious. He followed the threat up by telling me about a Sony credit card deal that would get me two free games with my new system—

"...and Abraham [our younger brother] has a television from 2006 that he's trying desperately to get rid of."

"I'll bet he is," I weakly responded, wondering if it had the right plugs for a PS3—or merely a built-in VHS player. But the idea of finally getting my own system was appealing—unfinished games would travel with me! Characters wouldn't vanish into someone else's life and hard drive! I could create my very own account with my very own credit card and buy all the zombie-related downloadable content (DLC) I wanted!

So I applied for the card, and soon after found myself wandering through the aisles of a Best Buy, *Little Big Planet* (LBP) gripped tightly in my hand, eyeing other games. LBP looked suspiciously adorable—the game was described in various places online as "cute" and "playful" and "good clean fun," and I was worried that there wouldn't be enough guns or explosions to sate my gaming urges. *Metal Gear Solid 4* (MGS4) on the other hand, looked full of dark and deadly intrigue—more than enough for therapeutic shooting after a long day. I walked out with a 320GB PS3 and what would prove to be two very different but satisfying games.

A Brief Introduction: *Little Big Planet*

LBP is a multi-player game that—during gameplay—simul-taneously introduces you to the designed world and unveils the authoring tools needed to design further levels, which are subsequently shared with the LBP community at large. Your initial foray into the game as a "sackperson" (see Figure 1) highlights the cuteness, friendliness, and exploratory nature of the LBP design, serving to illustrate the numerous building possibilities, and sharing the gameplay mechanics that shift from level to level as well as the mechanics that remain constant across LBP. While your initial sense of community is limited

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solely to the teasing but loving narrator, after a short period you have access to player-created levels and to the multi-player aspect of the game. Multi-player games in general tend to have both friendly and unfriendly fellow players and LBP is no exception, but in my experience, the population errs on the side of gleeful cooperation. (*Little Big Planet 2* has been recently released, and greatly advances the tools available to player-creators. However, the original LBP and LBP2 are quite similar, and my comments here are appropriate for both game editions.)

Figure 1:   A sackperson from LBP.
Image credits: Media Molecule, LBP Fansite Kit.

A Brief Introduction: *Metal Gear Solid 4*

MGS4 is a single-player first-person role-playing game, where the main character—Old Snake—is an aged assassin spy with a complex history. The game begins by depositing Old Snake (you) in the middle of a futuristic urban battlefield with no allies: both sides of the war will identify you immediately as "the enemy", and you have to learn urgently how to hide, sneak, and kill in order to survive. The only sense of friendly support comes from a technological support character who provides an anthropomorphized robot to help you out, and his own occasional assistance (primarily through information sharing and a safe house). As the game progresses, various parts of Old Snake's history come to light, filling in the details about who he is—and who you are. And while Old Snake meets old friends, they often die in his arms or betray him sorrowfully—and both old and new enemies are relentlessly killed, even as they poignantly reveal their humanity. The MGS series is famously known for its

extended cut scenes, particularly one near the conclusion that always brings me to tears (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:   The prologue graveyard scene in MGS4.
Image credits: Junior22G
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMk0eoySP9E)

The Strangeness

LBP and MGS4 are such very different games—why am I writing about them together?   MGS4 and LBP are similar in that they are both incredibly good games that position players from the start as Old Snake and a Sackperson, respectively, and immediately begin guiding the player in the direction of what it *means* to take on that identity.   When I sit down to play, I have to choose between two incredibly different worlds that have very different roles for me to assume.   I find it fascinatingly difficult to decide each time, as I have to explicitly choose my identity in a way that's unparalleled in other parts of life.   Deciding between playing a conflicted and dedicated human weapon in the midst of a futuristic world that is based on war and all that it brings, or playing as a fuzzy, adorable sackperson that communicates with deliciously astute and friendly other sackpeople through facial expressions and exploration of their creations—what a decision! What a *brutal* decision, deciding *who I want to be* for the next hours of life…

Both games are well-designed according to Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) rules of play, as well as by the more subjective but still valuable reason that I enjoyed them. (I fully subscribe to the belief that games that appear perfectly good by any rubric, however carefully designed, can contribute only so-so playing experiences, thus I give weight to my personal opinion regarding the game design.) So who *are* these characters, these people that I can choose to be? And how can I figure them out, and consequently figure myself out, and myself-as-them? The virtual identity that develops comes to be through the interaction of group membership, social languages, and context, and both games use specific game structures to support certain types of identity development. My lens for analyzing the conflict that I felt every time I sat down in front of the PS3 is a lens for examining the games, and the intentionality of the game designers.

Theoretical Framework

The lens through which I examine identity, community, and ideology in MGS4 and LBP is a synthesis prompted by Gee's (2008) argument that "…the who we are and the what we are doing are really enacted through a three-way simultaneous interaction among (1) our social and cultural group membership…; (2) a particular social language or mixture of them…; and (3) a particular context, that is, set of other people, objects, and locations…" (p. 93). While Gee was not explicitly focusing on games in his work on big-D Discourses, a connection is readily achieved through his exploration of literacy in video games (2003). In the latter, Gee posits three identities at play when engaging in these "worlds in a box" (Squire, 2006, p. 19): real-world, projective, and virtual. Each of these identities can be seen to develop in that "three-way simultaneous interaction" (2008, p. 93) that Gee speaks of, which renders Gee's theoretical exploration all the more complex by shifting *where* our social and cultural group memberships are located, *how* our social language(s) develop, and *who* composes (or designs) our context(s).

A natural addition to Gee's work includes insights provided by Squire (2006), who highlights the nature of games as "ideological worlds":

> …games focus our attention and mold our experience of what is important in a world and what is to be ignored. The game designers' choices, particularly of what to strip away from a world, can be read as ideological… (p. 22)

Combining Gee (2003, 2008) and Squire (2006) in such a way reveals an unusual and incredibly important space, one that I felt myself tangled in every time I faced my MGS4 vs. LBP dilemma. My real-world identity remained ephemeral yet constant: every time I sat down, it was Caro in front of the television, Caro after a day of work and classes, Caro generally wishing for a sense of pure satisfaction and achievement after task after Sisyphean academic task. My virtual identity, co-created with the game Discourse (language, salient values, community, successful strategies, ways of seeing the world), would vary wildly depending upon my choice, but I could depend upon a sense of satisfaction, pride, and achievement regardless. My projective identity, on the other hand, had to be different, had to *stretch* differently to connect Caro-with-Old-Snake or Caro-with-LBP-happy-fun-sackperson.   This feeling of *stretching* is one that I struggle merely to identify, much less articulate...

The important point here is that this deceptively simple *choice* of what game to play led me to examine the two games beyond their obvious differences, in an attempt to reconcile the similarity in satisfaction that my real-life identity felt after gameplay and after *being* the very different virtual identities. Gee's (2003, 2008) and Squire's (2006) work provide a framework that supports both a theoretical and pragmatic exploration of this dilemma, and the nature of this examination focuses on the explicit ways the designed experiences of MGS4 and LBP co-create identity with the player, specifically through their facilitation of community and their ideological structures.   Finally, although this lens is used to

gain insight, the process is not a linear one: my gameplay and game mechanism exploration serve to deepen the lens in return.

Playing Little Big Planet

LBP holds my own personal award for "Best Game to Watch Other People Play." And if you've ever been at a party where the focus of attention is Rock Band with only two guitars or Super Mario with two Wii-motes, you'll know: unless you're the type of ruffian who latches onto a controller and refuses to politely give it up, it can be more than a little boring. But LBP is adorable and amusing enough to merely watch, for hours—even without a beer/martini/cigarette/iPhone in hand! The sackpeople move fluidly, like perfect stuffed teddy bears come to life, and gesture clearly, and hop around as if gravity is just a little more fun over in their world, and smack each other around like bruises ain't no thing. When a microphone is added to the mix, their cutesy little mouths open and close around words until you swear you could lip-read their fuzzy little faces. In fact, the sackpeople and the LBP universe are *so* adorable that I frequently and unceasingly abuse the word "adorable" in the context of LBP discussions (e.g., see Williams, 2011).

And lest LBP sound too adorable to be actually fun for adults to play, let me explain: levels range from circular labyrinths riddled with evil henchmen, teleportors, one-way stairs, and a variety of mini-puzzles, to duplications of Portal (see Figure 3) and the first level from the Legend of Zelda (see Figure 4), to top-down racers. LBP is full of action and excitement and pulse-pounding edge-of-your-seat drama. And stickers—LBP is chock full of stickers! Stickers of monkeys, gigantic Kiss-esque lips, tigers, coffee rings, a "ghetto blaster," mustaches, gothic-style pianos, and masking tape. And objects like soccer balls, wrenches, tricycles, coat hangers, chili peppers, bones, sardine cans, and fiery red candles—not to mention all the fun little toys that explode on impact (that list needs its own article to do it justice—especially the confectionary *cakeinator* that fires pastry-shaped TNT and does goopy jelly damage to all the scenery). All of these stickers, all of these objects, are what

make up each little world in LBP, and are collectible or re-creatable so that each item—fabulous or not—can become part of each player's own authorship experiments.   I can use the stickers and objects to make a Spanish cantina, with a quartet mournfully playing in the background, or a rescue-the-monkey-princess *Mario*-inspired puzzle level, or a fiery pit where the player must avoid the pomegranate seeds to see the light of day.   I can do *anything* and *everything*, all at once.   (My first design, true to form, involved creating cannons and pirate ships.)
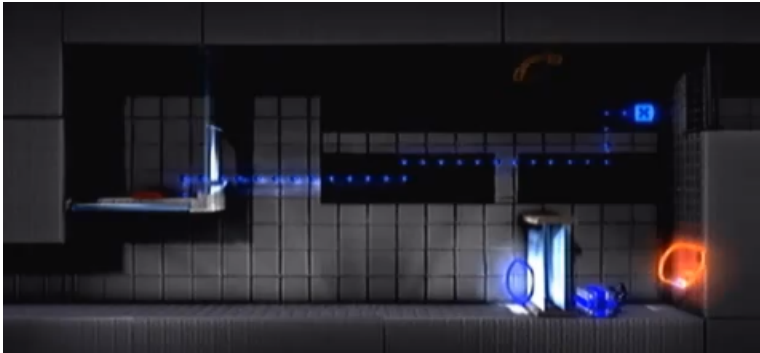
Figure 3:   Portal recreation built in LBP2 Beta.

Image credits: EBjak
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QIXJZnyc9k).

Figure 4: Legend of Zelda recreation built in LBP2. Image credits: IGNentertainment playing level built by Bluetonberry (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gOx2U0tW-Q)

The question becomes: who am I in LBP? And I answer: in LBP I am an all-powerful creator, a logical thinker, a designer of experiences, a crafter of explosions. And sometimes I am just a player, an explorer, a frequently-skewered sackperson who gives up in frustration and hurls the controller across the room. Everything I see, do, or experience, I can re-create in my own space (my "moon"), and improve upon, modify, shift—and share with the millions of other adorable little sackpersons all over the world. And while they frequently just tell me, "THIS LVL IS DUMB!111," I am still the god of their experience (and I can tsunami whenever I want to).

Playing Metal Gear Solid 4

Good games, like both MGS4 and LBP, play close attention to the introductory experience, quietly teaching you how to *be* in their new world, and furthermore, *be* someone you can be proud of and truly a part of. MGS4 did this beautifully, so beautifully that I began developing my projective and virtual identities with the thought, as Old Snake first appeared on the screen, "I want to be *him*" (see Figure 5). I, a young woman with a life that relies upon intellectual stimulation, wanted to be *him*, a grizzled old man with the daily task of directed physical violence. And I wanted to *be him* so deeply that I shivered with the dire task of

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actually assuming control—I wanted to *be* him at the same time that I was terrified of failing him, with my poor playing skills and a lack of attunement to his world, as if somehow I would disappoint Snake and all that he had worked hard to become. Having assassin training—an alternate Caro life that had been the stuff of childhood dreams—felt immediately necessary, and my lack of knowledge became a very personal liability. It felt as if, somehow, Old Snake may have consented to me playing him without all of the information—as if he expected and desired and deserved a better handler than I.

Figure 5: **Old Snake in MGS4. Image credits: MugenShinobido(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7GQslg679Q).**

Wonderful, too, that the designers cultivated a sense of Snake's exhaustion and cynicism so early on, with his smoky-voiced monologue in the introduction to war:

> War… has changed. It's no longer about nations, ideologies or ethnicity. It's an endless series of proxy battles, fought by mercenaries and machines. War, and its consumption of life, has become a well-oiled machine. War has changed. ID tagged soldiers carry ID tagged weapons, use ID tagged gear. Nanomachines inside their bodies enhance and regulate their abilities. Genetic control. Information control. Emotion

control. Battlefield control. Everything is monitored, and kept under control. War has changed. The age of deterrence has become the age of control. All in the name of averting catastrophe from weapons of mass destruction. And he who controls the battlefield, controls history. War has changed. When the battlefield is under total control, war... becomes routine.

The monologue introduced me to the immediate context of the gameplay and Snake's place in it, and avoided the larger context that MGS4 forced me to slowly uncover, piece by piece. Placing the player into a limited context, providing tools for survival and success while obfuscating the variables that led the player there in the first place—the experience was masterfully orchestrated. Such a short beginning piece made me want to be Snake, assume his role, and yet gave me so little to go on that I could develop my character in a multitude of ways that did not conflict with a more detailed and larger context. My character was not prescribed, but developed between myself, the game space, and Snake—a perfect illustration of Gee's three identities (2003). I was allowed to develop my own customized connection to Snake, while playing his (constrained) role and playing my own identity in the virtual world. If I really was Snake, would I kill as many soldiers as possible to get to my objective? Or would I sneak as much as possible? What would push me to kill? Push me to take risks with my own life? At what cost was I willing to succeed?

And playing MGS4 was *intense* for me, simultaneously stimulating and exhausting. Generally I would play in short chunks of about an hour at a time, which I consider to be a really small period of time for gameplay—in *World of Warcraft*, I could handle endless gameplay sessions. But with MGS4, the longer I played, the more I could feel the sense of paranoia and claustrophobia that characterizes Snake's life, surviving alone, caught between two warring armies that both identify me as "enemy", with no resting place beyond gutters amid echoing

gunfire. But every time I leave the game, it's as if Snake's narrative is a rising crescendo, and I am but breaking the music, the trajectory, in half. Betraying it, somehow, from its natural conclusion that only I can bring it to. And, really, who am I to stop the story?

Identities

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Gee (2008) views identity and the enactment of that identity as a complex mix between group membership, social languages, and context. Each of these three components is addressed in turn, in regards to MGS4 and LBP, and specific elements of each game is examined. As a final note, I will refer to the MGS4 virtual identity as "Old Snake," and the LBP virtual identity as "Sackperson."

Group Memberships

In MGS4, group membership is defined more by consistent indicators of exclusion than indicators of inclusion. While Old Snake arrives on the urban battlefield surrounded by soldiers that are not unfriendly, the game prevents a social connection by preventing interaction with them, and then quickly disassociates Old Snake further from that community by saying "You have no allies. This is not your battle" and ensuring that all sightings of Old Snake result in shouts of alarm. Any "human" (Non-Player Character or NPC) contact is dangerous and hints of imminent attempts to kill you, or is completely business-oriented, uneasy, and limited. In other words, there is no group membership: Old Snake is a lone soul surrounded by enemies, and interaction with others in the game world generally only interferes with progress. Throughout the game the player encounters various previous allies and friends, and the moments of community with them serve to remind you that Old Snake has loved ones, but ultimately must always leave them.

LBP, on the other hand, begins immediately with demonstrating desired elements of behavior, then requiring them for full participation with the game. During the initial tutorial, the

Sackperson is learning how to navigate through the game basics, as well as where to find the authorship tools, by standing in front of a stage with a walk-through demonstration video of another Sackperson. This NPC Sackperson is perky, cheerful, funny, and undeniably cute, and the juxtaposition of your new self with the more experienced Sackperson is a sly but effective way to model the friendly apprenticing of the new by the old.   As these videos decrease in frequency in the introductory levels, the player comes across areas that explicitly require other players to complete, so that in order to "win" completely, cooperating with other members is necessary.   Contrary to Old Snake's environment, LBP requires active participation with the overarching group in order to progress fully.   Another intriguing way the games encourages person-to-person interaction is by severely limiting the different types of NPCs that can exist or be built: the machine-based movement design and the limitations of the NPC dialogue boxes leave the space narratively sparse, and authentic interactions can only occur between players.   In other words, when the Sackperson is on a level by him- or herself, it is quite obvious that no other real-world identities are present.[i]   Getting a sense of community beyond the narrator, then, requires interpersonal interactions and the development of community.[ii]

Social Languages

In MGS4, social languages—like group membership—can best be seen when one looks at *what is not there* instead of *what is there*.   Old Snake engages in conversation very little during gameplay, only occasionally grunting and wincing in moments of inaction when the muscles begin to cool and he begins to feel the stress they're under.   During cut scenes, Old Snake engages in conversations with various characters in a generally consistent way: a distinct level of self-confidence and presence that appears to stem from his history of personal warfare skills, combined with a willingness to take advice from others in his areas of inexperience.   Old Snake is confident enough to question others when he wants to know something or doubts that

he is being treated appropriately, and to use his skills to support his right to question, but he makes no attempt to engage in the social languages of others. He is a skilled fighter and evader, and makes no attempt to speak as if it was otherwise. Others position him as one that is dangerous and knowledgeable in a very specific way, but are able to leverage his naïveté in certain areas to control or manipulate him.

In LBP, structures to support emergent but typical social languages exist through available audio capabilities and well-designed ways to communicate with others even as your Sackperson progresses through a variety of levels. Most interestingly, however, is that the LBP designers obviously considered the quandary of communicating between players when an audio connection is not possible, and built certain physical mannerisms into each Sackperson that distinctly convey the sorts of emotions players may need for in-game communication. Gee (2008) generally talks about social languages being the actual words and sounds, considered separately from what the physical contributes to the situated meaning, but he notes that such a distinction is not a clear one, nor a hard and fast one. In this situation, the physical (virtual) can serve to complement audio or to render it unnecessary for successful gameplay, and given that it can *replace* what Gee would be more likely to consider the social languages of LBP, I consider these emotional indicators to be social languages. In any case, each Sackperson is able to express sadness, meanness, happiness, and confusion to multiple degrees through facial expressions, and can express anger through a "slap" that knocks other Sackpeople over. While there is no gesture for "Come over here and help!" (a common request for levels that require exploration and cooperation), the ability of each Sackperson to frequently change their outfits has led to an emergent way of saying "Hey you!": if Jackperson wants to get Jillperson's attention, he just changes his outfit to look like hers. Thus the social languages of the LBP community are emergent but supported by the design structures.

Contexts

While I have already noted various elements of both MGS4 and LBP, and what the games look like, such an exploration of context is insufficient and must be further developed. Context, and the way that it contributes to co-creating identity, is important because of what actions are constrained and what actions are afforded. The important question is: given the tools in the context, what are you allowed to do, and what sort of identities are you allowed to perform? Merely a description of the physical (virtual) space is incomplete, without an explication of what within that space allows interaction, and what does not. Squire's (2006) idea of games as *ideological worlds* is particularly important here, as examining the context for what it includes and what it excludes allows a deeper understanding than merely examining what is visible.

In MGS4, the context is incredibly limiting,[iii] and I could spend pages listing what Old Snake is not allowed to do in the space. Instead, I will merely explore a few interesting aspects of the context, specifically how this action roleplaying game is unusual and unique for its genre. One specific element is that while Old Snake is surrounded by enemy soldiers[iv] and provided with many weapons, the game discourages fighting interactions by the simple mechanism of good communication between the enemy NPCs. Engaging one soldier in battle immediately notifies other soldiers, who do their best to swamp and then kill Old Snake. The game does not allow any attempts at communicating with the soldiers—their orders are to kill on sight, and thus the context precludes the development of any community. The space prevents the context from becoming socially richer and allowing access to different contexts (i.e., the soldiers' bivouac), forcing Old Snake to be a lone wolf that can only watch as others sit around the bonfire and talk in the languages of belonging. Another interesting aspect of the context is what becomes salient through gameplay: the player becomes attuned to the hiding places, underground tunnels, and wrecked buildings that provide cover. The necessity of avoiding soldiers forces Old Snake to

use these forgotten corners of the battleground, rejoicing in the discovery of a new one and, often, quaking in terror as soldiers' boots walk by.   The horror and sorrow of being alone sinks into your bones as the player, and any movement is akin to an eagle's shadow over a lone field mouse.

In LBP, the context is powerfully positioned from the beginning as something that the player can *act upon*.   Rather than being separate from the developing identity, an immovable physical (virtual) space that *shapes*, the context both *shapes* and *is shaped by* the Sackperson.   This tool of authorship creates a level of complexity that goes beyond most contexts: while Gee (2008) considers context to be a dialectic exchange (i.e., both *shaping* and *shaped*), LBP seems to take this to the next level. The context of LBP is explicitly about changing the context, to the point that in order to progress on the introductory levels, the player *must* edit the physical (virtual) context.   The fulfillment of the game's larger goals require the development of a unique context that other players can access, and that challenges other Sackpeople in their gameplay.   The feeling of playing in a space that will respond and can be written upon is a powerful feeling, as if the Sackperson's presence deeply and personally and permanently matters.

Comparison?

In the above sections, I generally talk about the games separately, leaving the compare-and-contrast primarily up to the juxtaposition in this text and the reader's mind.   The only common factors are myself and the lens through which the games are being examined.   But not long after I started playing both MGS4 and LBP, an amazing situation came to pass: LBP and MGS4 teamed up to create a series of MGS4 levels in LBP (see Figure 6).   In this DLC, playing was a strange and fabulous blend of the two games: simultaneously antisocial (with few friendly faces, in the style of MGS4) and social (with up to four players, the LBP method of doing things); with laminated (Goffman, 1981) social languages that range from spare (a la MGS4) to highly expressive (a la LBP); and linear but deeply

dialectic.   The designers worked together to meld two very different games in a fashion that did not contradict or betray either, but rather supported the nuances of both—an endeavor to be congratulated!

My previously complicated experience, choosing *who to be* when I sat down in front of the PS3, became simpler in some ways: now I could be both!   But it also felt strange, as if I was playing a third game, a third character, one that both adored others and avoided them, one that lived in a world full of guns and death but celebrated beauty and friendship, one that could hold both guns and flowers.   There became a sense in which I was tugged in three different directions, as I played the DLC: was I playing in a way that would impress or embarrass Old Snake or my Sackperson, or was there a third, an Old Sack Snake, who was the one I should strive to be faithful to?   Whether the designers had considered this quandary during the design process, I cannot say, but the projective identity forming in conjunction with my real-world identity and my virtual (Old Sack Snake) identity became torn—playing the LBP MGS4 level without thinking about my Sackperson (dressed as she always was, with rainbow boots and a blue baseball helmet) or my obligations to Old Snake was impossible.   Every   choice   that   I   made   was   layered   with

complications, then, as I saw the world in triplicate, in terms of what Old Snake would do, in terms of what my Sackperson would do, and in terms of what Old Sack Snake might do.   Striving not to betray any of the three became a mental and emotional minefield, one that I struggled to negotiate.

Conclusions

When I first began playing LBP and MGS4, and thinking about the ways in which my virtual and projective identities varied from playspace to playspace, I was intrigued by the oft indescribable differences in the way that I saw the two worlds, engaged with the two worlds, felt about the two worlds.   Gee's (2003) identities framework gave me a language to talk about the sensations and the inner conflict, but failed to predict the fragmentation of being Old Sack Snake.   The experience with the DLC reminded me that human beings do not play in a vacuum—that what you play plays you, and if what you play is deep and powerful enough, its play of you is also deep and powerful.   *What game we choose to buy* is *what person do we want to be;* it is *who we let in* and *what memories we create.*

And in the end, I'm glad that Isaiah made me buy a PS3 and LBP—and I'm also glad that I picked up MGS4.   Who I am now, after being Old Snake and being Sackperson, is different and new.   I distinctly remember being an old assassin surrounded by enemies in an old desert city, and I distinctly remember climbing up an adorably rickety wooden dragon in a sticker jungle, and I distinctly remember the satisfaction of *being* more than I'd ever been before.   I can never go back to Caro-before-Old-Snake or Caro-before-Sackperson or Caro-before-Old-Sack-Snake—and my world is the better because of it.

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[i] This has changed some in LBP2 as the tools for designing customized and responsive AIs were considerably improved. Nonetheless, the distinction between human co-players and non-player-characters is incredibly clear.

[ii] The affinity groups (Gee, 2004) formed online around LBP are numerous and active—and formed not only around *playing* the game, but around *building* the game further by designing new levels.   This is a powerful community experience I—when first playing LBP and MGS4—knew little about.

[iii] I want to emphasize that "limiting" carries no negative connotation here, and that I am not saying the MGS4 is poorly designed because it is limited.   Rather, MGS4 is an astonishingly good game *because* of limitations that are very well implemented and communicated to the player.   However, a relatively common complaint of MGS4 is that it's "on rails," that is, that succeeding always involves getting to the same place and killing the same people, for which the player is rewarded by the same cut scene.

[iv] I consider the soldiers to be part of a community (that Solid Snake is excluded from) as well as part of the context: this line is always blurry, but even more so now that the soldiers are NPCs and thus little more than designed "things."