



DEATH STRANDING

KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS: *Death Stranding* (PlayStation 4 version). [digital game]. Tokio, Japan : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

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Death Stranding was, by far, one of, if not the, most anticipated games of this year. Cinematic trailers, cryptic teasers, no clear-cut theme or gameplay trailers combined with a stellar cast of main characters fired something that can almost only be described as mass hysteria. After release though, the audience has since divided into two opposing factions – one part that continues to revere Hideo Kojima and the game and another part that does not seem to ‘get’ the game. The reason is rather simple – Death Stranding as a game does not really fall under any discrete definition, but on the other hand checks all the boxes that make an (arguably great) digital game. In the context of digital game genres, Death Stranding falls under multiple genres at once. It definitely can be considered an action game, but at the same time it’s commonly referred to as a ‘walking simulator’ (this mostly stems from the gaming community at large). Furthermore, it has enough RPG elements to be defined as one, as well as an adventure game. The experience one can gain from playing this game depends rather heavily on one’s experience in these genres and expectations of Death Stranding itself.

The narrative is made in the same hybrid vein. The basic premise is rather simple – in a dystopian future, America is fragmented and the protagonist is the only person that can undertake the quest to make America whole again. The underlying narrative is much more intertwined and complicated, though. It goes into almost absurd details, where the actions of the protagonist not only influence what happens next, but past relationships between other characters as well. We would be hard-pressed to find a similarly complicated narrative in the digital games medium, as this is mostly a hallmark of movies and TV series, together with extraordinary actor casting. The trend to cast popular movie actors and MoCap them into digital games is very prevalent in Death Stranding, but Kojima went a step further and cast high-profile actors instead of the lower-tiered actors that usually get to work on digital games. The characters also refer to their past roles within the game, like Norman Reedus referencing his past TV series *Ride with Norman Reedus* (Picture 1), Mads Mikkelsen referencing *Hannibal* etc. And then there are some easter eggs in the form of some characters which are actual developers from Kojima Productions.

The basic gameplay loop of the game – which is basically completing various fetch- ing quests – by itself, does not sound the most intriguing or the most entertaining. But the way you have to work against the environment, which becomes apparent after the first few barren hours of the game, is very quickly brought to the extreme. The way you have to plan how you tackle various challenges in the environment, e.g. how to tackle slippery slopes, how to manage your load, which can upset your balance if not put on properly, how to use your ladder, how to walk on different types of ground (grassy, rocky, etc.), is completely unique and really can make or break your quest completion.



Picture 1: Ride with Norman Reedus reference
Source: author's screenshot

What really makes the game unique is how Kojima Productions works with the atmosphere. As the player, you feel constantly consternated, which sounds paradoxical, as *Death Stranding* is an open-world game, but it is true. The motifs used, as the name suggests, work a lot with darkness, death or the iconography of death and decay. What it accomplishes is to make the player feel a sense of slightness within the world. This is exacerbated by the sceneries the player has to walk through when playing the game, by the ambient music and by the frequent scanner checking. The scanner is used to check whether enemies, which almost look like Lovecraftian beasts, are anywhere nearby. This all is put into an excellent visual package, which almost evokes classic art pieces and their interpretations of humans within the time flow.

Another interesting facet of the game is how it breaks the fourth wall. One of the ways it does so is in-game advertising. While not as common in current games, *Death Stranding* has found how to use it in-game, as with the energy drinks brand *Monster Energy* (Picture 2).



Picture 2: In-game advertising of Monster Energy drinks
Source: author's screenshot

Energy drinks from this brand in-game, when drunk, boost the player's stamina. Other than in-game advertising, there are a plethora of smaller references and Easter eggs on other games and movies. The most obvious ones are the references to Kojima's own *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, or to *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. The game also references the Guillermo del Toro movie *The Shape of Water*. And lastly, the interaction between the in-game protagonist and the player himself is also quite novel. There are instances, where Sam (the main character) will deliberately blink at the player, call him to see something closer up and interact in other slight ways towards the camera, and therefore the player. Probably the most unique interaction with the player is when Clifford (the antagonist) actually wishes you a happy birthday, if the PS4 system registers, that your birthday is, in fact, on said day.

Death Stranding is a greatly unique piece of digital game art, which might not be to everyone's taste. It is more a show of freedom than anything else and shows you the product that is created by detaching oneself from imaginative expectations. The atmosphere, narrative and the gameplay mechanics create a unique masterpiece, which some people might only start to appreciate only once they finish it and look back at it.

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