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Hideo Kojima, *Death Stranding* (2019) / Reconnecting in the Time of Climate Change

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Since its first trailer in 2016, digital game *Death Stranding* primed audiences with a strange aesthetic imagery: photo-realistic Hollywood celebrities stand on a beach of oil-spilled tar and stranded whales; a naked Norman Reedus carries an unborn baby in an artificial womb; a World War II battlefield writhes with monstrous tentacles; undead US Marines emerge from the black blood of the planet itself, only to be set aflame by a cigarette-smoking Mads Mikkelsen. In the public's first vision of this massively anticipated title—auteur Hideo Kojima's first game since his messy departure from long-time publisher Konami—*Death Stranding* promised to encapsulate the pressing issues of our time. These range from climate and ecological catastrophe, to life and death in the Anthropocene, to, most uncanny of all, the challenges of staying connected in a socially-distanced world.

The eventual 2019 release was in many ways even stranger than the selective marketing glimpses suggested. An event known as “the death stranding” has muddled together the realms of the living and the dead, while spectral “Beached Things” (BTs) haunt parts of the world. When BTs, comprised of what looks like tarry oil and exhaust fumes, attack a living person, a massive supernatural explosion called a “voidout” occurs. The risk of voidouts and other supernatural effects have forced the world's survivors into underground bunkers, unable to move around the world (an uncanny prefiguring of the 2020 COVID lockdowns). Society becomes dependent on the few “porters” that trek across dangerous remnants of the world, delivering food, resources, and messages between outposts.

As is common for videogames directed by Kojima (best recognised for his work on the long-running *Metal Gear* series), *Death Stranding* is a heady cocktail of experimental and generic gameplay styles, grim seriousness, soapy drama, fourth-wall breakings, on-the-nose metaphors, magical militarism, an incomprehensible number of neologisms and abbreviations, and sophomoric sexual and scatological humour. Though much more goes on in *Death Stranding* than could even be glossed over in a single essay, it teaches us about living through the end of the world—both through and *after* climate catastrophe—and the double-edged sword of “chronic connectivity” (Gregg 2013). The latter gets players to question our pervasive internet connections, gamified social-media platforms, and the forms of social interaction they mediate. *Death Stranding* shows us how we might live on in our time of unevenly distributed collapse.

Death Stranding is also, like many of the texts in this collection that teeter on the edge of utopia/dystopia, fatally compromised—as much as any other videogame, anyway. Like all digital games, *Death Stranding* requires a hardware platform notorious for devouring conflict minerals and spewing e-waste, sucking real energy to create pleasing illusions, potentially diverting our attention from vital concerns. Certainly in many possible end-of-the-world scenarios, videogames will be among the first cultural texts to become illegible and unsupported.

These endemic compromises, however, are what makes the game instructive: *Death Stranding* sits at an inflection point in science-fiction storytelling and digital gaming, one pushing back against mainstream gaming's often unreflexive apocalypticism with a more critical climate-fiction imaginary shot through with dim rays of hope. As the product of a globally dispersed production team (with locations credits including Santa Monica, Tokyo, Amsterdam, London, among others) helmed by Kojima, a creative director who has an almost uniquely auteurist status in the industry, *Death Stranding* operates at an intensive contemporary nexus of independent aesthetic vision supported by the extractive potentials of

game tech conceived both as “experience machine” (Nozick) and attention economy or platform. While the “auteur” notion is as important to scrutinize and problematize in digital games as elsewhere, the uniqueness of this case can be gleaned from the studio established by *Death Stranding*’s creator after Kojima’s public departure from Konami: Kojima Productions. Kojima ranks among the few game developers that could have negotiated access to the jaw-dropping resources necessary to produce such an idiosyncratic vision.

With explicit themes of human extinction and a visual language that hints at climate catastrophe in our fossil-fuel era, the game captures something of the contemporary zeitgeist. As another lesson along these lines, *Death Stranding* teaches us, by working through its own conditions of possibility, the importance of the contingency or “banality” (Anand 2017) of infrastructure in the face of our quilted apocalypses.

Uneven Apocalypses

In *Death Stranding*, players take on the role of Sam Porter-Bridges, mo-capped and voiced by actor Norman Reedus. Sam is tasked by President Bridget Strand with tracking the path of her daughter Amelie, who had led a failed expedition to “Make America whole again” in the wake of the catastrophe. Mirroring the colonialist path of the Westward Expansion of the 1800s, players steer Sam west across what was the United States of America, re-connecting isolated outposts to the “Chiral Network” (a combination high-speed internet and power grid) to physically rebuild a fragmented country as The United Cities of America. Routing through “the Beach”—the timeless oily limbo from which issue the returned dead (the aforementioned Beached Things). With the Chiral Network capable of miraculous information transfer and matter manipulation, as players bring outposts into that network, players themselves gain access to another network: that of the game’s online servers that allow players to share the infrastructural pathways across the world. Through Sam—that is, all the Sams of *Death Stranding*’s globally dispersed playerbase—traversal is not treated as a sovereign right of neocolonial conquest wielded by “the player,” guaranteed through vast cycles of playtesting and iteration, but instead is facilitated by the connection to an ad hoc community and the infrastructure it maintains.

Perhaps the most innovative, and polarizing, aspect of *Death Stranding* is the design decision to make simply *traversing* the environment a central feature. This muddles the normative game-design truism that it is a cardinal sin for players to become lost: not knowing where to go next nor how to get there. Identifying a novel path to new outposts through the apocalyptic landscape presents a tedious task. Mundane, real-world logistics, such as balancing cargo weight while walking, become key to gameplay. Attempt to carry too much or unevenly distribute your items’ weight, and the chance of a fall that scatters precious cargo is increased; carry too little, and the gruelling trek becomes less worthwhile relative to the dangers of the environment and players’ time.

This future is topologically uneven in a way that spatially reflects the extreme temporalities of diachronic timefall and the synchrony of the Beach. Steep slopes, ravines and rocky terrain risk unbalancing Sam, and make the going slow—players can hold the trigger buttons on the controller to have Sam hold onto his load more tightly to prevent toppling, however it slows him down to a walking pace. Cliffs, ravines and even other tamer environmental obstacles like gentle slopes and rocky ground that would be unproblematic in any other game here become formidable obstacles requiring delicate maneuvering and appropriate equipment.

Once Sam has connected a region to the Chiral Network, however, this task becomes not only much easier, but is suddenly and dramatically *synchronized* to the experiences of other players and “porters” in their own games. The Chiral Network maps repetition and difference in strange ways: bridges and ladders established in one player’s world will appear

in another, and the regular foot-traffic of players along certain routes create pathways that smooth out uneven ground, making it much easier for Sam to move through the worlds.

Playing *Death Stranding* online means accessing a support network of other players who help make the aggressively tedious terrain more navigable and the lonely disconnected world more communal. One player may place a bridge across a fast-flowing river, or leave a rope dangling over an otherwise unscalable cliff. The placement of these objects in the world also reflects the very ordinary needs of other humans, not conforming to (or dependent on) the rigid, regular order of centralized planning. Upkeep of these objects requires the contribution of materials to restore them to their prime condition, relying on decentralised donations and the generosity of other players, rather than a centralised collection and distribution scheme. In a quirky turn, players can show their thanks by rewarding other players' infrastructure in the world with "Likes" – operating not as a pretext for extractive competition and scarcity simulation characteristic of (capitalistic) attention economies, but as an endless and renewable resource of gratitude that gradually builds a grassroots sense of community.

Extinction Entities

In *Climate Leviathan* (2018), political scientists Mann and Wainwright offer an analysis of the political space for governance structures to adapt to climate change in the near future. They figure the space for adaptation exists between poles of capitalist/anti-capitalist responses to climate change, as well as along an axis of planetary sovereignty. They argue for a future that is hard to imagine, only the faintest of glimmers of which are evident today, a world-future they describe as Climate X which is not "Support for Green Keynesianism[,] . . . climate finance[,] and the elite politics of adaptation. . . are distractions, dissipaters of energy for change" (173). Instead Climate X takes the form of grassroots, decentralised and highly local focused actions adding up to a revolution in the way we inhabit planet earth. *Death Stranding* shows some of the benefits of this kind of devolution of power and planning with public, shared infrastructure that is determined not by central government but by individuals, created and maintained according to need and the greatest utility. As with most videogames, however, these principles are not simply explored by *Death Stranding's* scripted narrative, but are unearthed systematically through the very act of playing, in engaging with the game system's affordances and constraints. The act of playing *Death Stranding* exemplifies Mann and Wainwright's Climate X vision of a world built on the principles of equality, "the inclusion and dignity of all," and "solidarity in composing a world of many worlds" (175-6)

The game's two overarching themes—climate apocalypse and the always-on internet—are not as distinct as they might first appear. In 2001, at the peak of enthusiasm for the empowering, democratizing, and participatory power of "Web 2.0," Kojima helmed *Metal Gear Solid 2*, a game deeply cynical and pessimistic of the impacts of the internet and its ability to spread misinformation through society. In recent years, many have looked back at *MGS2* as anticipating the current age where fake news, bots, and meme farms support unbelievable conspiracy theories and authoritarian world leaders while the private platforms we depend on for our social world stand by and do nothing. Climate change, in particular, has been emblematic of the insufficiency of "facts" to allow the imagining of climate change's nonhuman (but accelerating) timescales or for that matter alternative, sustainable futures.

If *MGS2* warned of how the internet would destroy society, then *Death Stranding*, released 18 years later, muses over how the internet *already has* fragmented society: how a non-exploitative vision of the social is critical to our response to the uneven apocalypses with which we are faced. This quality of the game's vision is clearly tied into the specific violence of US colonialism. Immobilized President Bridget and expeditionary Amelie are (we learn at the end of the game) the same person: a physical body subject to terminal cancer, and an

atemporal, ageless ideal of a re-colonized United States of America that exists in the timeless Beach. Together, they form an “Extinction Entity” — beings responsible for mass extinctions, which emerge from the tarry, oily mass of the Beach.

Sam, heading west to reconnect and recolonize the American continent, we learn towards the end of the game, was saved by this Extinction Entity, sent back to the world of the living after his untimely death as a baby. This explains, within the game’s internal logic, Sam’s ability to traverse multiple worlds: both fictionally, through the Chiral Network, and in reality through knotting together of multiple players’ labor, their painstakingly created infrastructures of support. Sam, as a being whose death was incomplete, is something akin to Meillassoux’s notion of the “essential spectre”—a paradoxical being which enjoins us to be open to radical contingency (such as a bridge appearing from another world). However perhaps more apropos is a figure that has emerged in new light during the coronavirus pandemic that is the most proximal crisis as of this writing: Sam as *essential worker*: “essential work extends beyond health care. Although some people have been able to shift their jobs to their homes, millions of workers have jobs that cannot be done at home—not only custodial staff and orderlies in hospitals, but also teachers and child-care workers, grocery clerks and supermarket workers, delivery people, factory and farm workers, and restaurant staff, often without adequate PPE” (The Lancet 2020). The essential worker both reveals the colonial infrastructure of everyday life and the reality of technological capabilities as constrained by the politics and culture of empire, and they do so through overexposure to contingency.

Death Stranding thus offers different answers than Kojima’s prior directorial efforts on the perspective of daily labor serving empire. In *MGS2*, “magical militarism” was used to explore the formation of the subjectivity of *soldiers*: individual workers who have been shaped and traumatized by the state to project colonial force. In *Death Stranding* however, the considered balance of realism and fantasy in *MGS2* gives way to the far more oneiric tonality of the death-stranding event. It is true that Sam can equip the armor and guns beloved of mainstream gaming, but combat encounters are so rare amidst the drudgery that these iconic objects are most of the time *just more cargo*. In another of Kojima’s uncanny anticipations, the hazardous conditions of the game’s world means that the PPE of the essential worker is far more important than the hyper-specialized equipment of the supersoldier. This decenters player action itself, such that player activity comes to resemble the “Quality Assurance” hours that go into creating such a virtual world. Often outsourced and precarious, this form of labor resembles “essential” and banal infrastructural work beneath the glitzy surface of game industry culture and products.

As focal point for both players’ interactivity in the game, and the shift from soldier to essential worker; as protagonist of a game born of a dysfunctional relationship between the games industry and one of its marquee creators, Sam reveals the game’s auto-critique of the delirium of big-budget videogames: “virtual reality” not as speculative science-fiction trope or marketing flimflam but as it really exists in the everyday domesticity of game consoles, personal computers and mobile devices. In linking this critique to its engagements with both fictional and real social medias, *Death Stranding* plays with the idea that the technologies shaping human communicative and creative powers could be developed not by extractive interests but with a view to “solidarity in composing a world of many worlds.” (Mann and Wainwright, 176)

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