

American Exceptionalism in *Death Stranding*: Videogames and Culture

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Abstract: With videogames being one of the most popular and widespread forms of entertainment media to date, this essay wishes to regard the medium as a cultural artifact that both shapes and continuously is shaped by culture. For this purpose, this essay analyzes the 2019 videogame *Death Stranding*, delving into the game's central theme of reconnecting a post-apocalyptic United States during a time of deep division, tying this to a criticism of the ideology of American exceptionalism. Through analysis of both the game's narrative elements and the ways in which the game is played, this paper makes evident how *Death Stranding* deconstructs American exceptionalist narratives with the intention of laying bare foundational issues within American society, problems that all stem from the same narratives that so deeply define the United States' national identity.

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Today's world of videogames has evolved far beyond the times of *Tetris* and *Space Invaders*. What started out as a simple yet entertaining test of hand-to-eye coordination, carrying comparatively little narrative value, has evolved into a medium that became as multifaceted as film, literature, and TV productions. Thanks to cinematic scenes, intriguing characters, a variety of genres, deeper player interaction, and the graphics quality that modern consoles and computers can provide, the contemporary world of gaming has evolved into something so extensive that its immense cultural impact cannot simply be

ignored. Videogames, today, make up a considerable amount of pop culture – *Pokémon*, *Fortnite*, *Minecraft*, *Call of Duty*, to bring just a few examples, are games that many will probably recognize, even if completely removed from the sphere of gaming oneself. However, despite the wide popularity of videogames across younger generations, or maybe even *because* of it, videogames are oftentimes not included in cultural discourse. Despite the academic field of Game Studies existing for about 20 years and counting, the medium remains unfamiliar and not sufficiently explored for many, specifically when the discussion of videogames is brought into fields outside of Game Studies.

One of the purposes of this essay is to shed more light on this medium, and show that analyzing it only within the field of Game Studies can oftentimes be too restrictive. Specifically, this article proposes a view from Cultural Studies, and show that videogames should not be excluded as cultural artifacts, that they are fully capable of participating in contemporary cultural discourses. Just like the more familiar mediums of film and literature, videogames are products of their time that are actively influenced by their surrounding culture and history, many games mirroring contemporary cultural discourse and contributing to it in their own ways. With this intention in mind, *Death Stranding*, a 2019 videogame that revolves around the reconnection of a post-apocalyptic and divided United States, will be analyzed to show the game as a critical take on American exceptionalism. Within its narrative and the ways in which the game is played, *Death Stranding* playfully re-constructs American exceptionalist ideology to, later, effectively de-construct and criticize it, arguing that a nation connected only through its exceptionalism is inherently dysfunctional. In the end, this ideological pillar that is the beating heart of American national identity is criticized as poisonous to American unity.

***Death Stranding* – An Overview**

Death Stranding is an action-adventure game that was originally released November 8th, 2019, for the PlayStation 4 console. As of July 14th, 2020, the game is also available for Microsoft Windows systems. The game was developed by the Japanese studio Kojima Productions and published under Sony Interactive Entertainment. Hideo Kojima, director and creative mind behind *Death Stranding*, is already a well-known figure in the world of gaming – his impactful *Metal Gear Solid* series has not only created and popularized the genre of *stealth*, in which the player is forced to find non-lethal ways to bypass enemies, but is also recognized for its politically charged narratives. The game series combines real-world historical events, such as the Cold War, with fictional, often supernatural elements. Through this, the series tells a story that is both entirely fictional *and* familiar, embedding its social criticism into entertainment. Because of this, the *Metal Gear Solid* series consistently carries

a political tone, as the player is always reminded that the work was not born of pure fiction, but is directly influenced by the environment and history of the people who have created it. The series, with its poignant messages against war and nuclear weapons, often directs its sharp criticism specifically towards American foreign policy, ideology, and the military industrial complex.

Kojima's latest work, *Death Stranding*, follows the same pattern. The game, revolving around the reconnection of a post-apocalyptic United States in a not-so far future, heavily thematizes American national identity, American exceptionalist narratives, and America's 20th century wars, thus making it an ideal subject to be analyzed within the context of American Studies and Cultural Studies as a whole. While the director emphasizes that his game's core message of unity and connection is not targeted at only one specific nation, also mentioning that he has had in mind other global issues of isolation as for example Brexit (Powell, 2019), the game still establishes a strong connection to America and its problems through the deliberate choice of the game's story unfolding in a dystopian imagining of a future United States. Thus, while this message of unity and reconnection can be applied to rising isolationism, nationalism, and right-wing extremism all over the globe, the story of *Death Stranding* taking place in the United States allows for an analysis of the game that focuses on its representations of American ideology.

The events of *Death Stranding* take place in an undefined future, as no exact year is specified. The United States, as a nation, no longer exist in this scenario. Hit by the titular *Death Stranding*, an apocalyptic event that ravaged across the country only a few years prior to the events of the game unfolding, the former nation now consists of mostly empty and destroyed land. Because of this event occurring due to a collide of the world of the dead and the living, caused by U.S. government experiments that ventured too far into the unknown, the land is now plagued by *Beached Things*, or short BTs, which are souls of the dead roaming this land of the living. Upon encounter with a living person, BTs will attempt to drag the person into the land of the dead with them, effectively killing them in the process. Due to this and various other dangers the world of *Death Stranding* brings, such as rain that rapidly ages everything it touches, the remaining civilization now lives in underground bunkers. The former Americans are now scattered across the former nation, living their lives as preppers who completely isolate themselves from others.

In this dystopian scenario, the player assumes the role of Sam Porter Bridges, motion-captured by actor Norman Reedus, to help reconnect this destroyed nation. Sam, being a skilled porter who makes a living by making deliveries and traversing this dangerous land, is tasked by the current President of the United States, Bridget Strand, to go on a westward journey with the intent of establishing a network that spans the entire country. On his way,

Sam fulfills deliveries to help supply the isolated preppers and outposts with necessary materials, building up relationships along the way and connecting them to the chiral network, an experimental connection more advanced than the internet. As Sam heads on this journey westward, his starting point being the easternmost part of the country, he connects the formerly isolated preppers that live scattered across the land and reintegrates them into the new *United Cities of America*.

Death Stranding is a game that is incredibly story-driven, its narrative working to “create compelling characters and/or scenarios that help an audience flesh out some kind of meaningful interaction with the events and characters” while, simultaneously, “allowing varying degrees of influence upon the storyline and/or the environment” (Jones, 2008: 26). For this reason, the game is filled with cinematic cutscenes that, occasionally, can even take up the length of an average movie, as is the case with the game’s ending sequences (GamerSPrey, 2019a: 00:00:00–01:58:02). Despite this fact, it cannot be ignored that the gameplay elements of *Death Stranding*, the intricate mechanics of how the game, function to enhance its storytelling. As such, the gameplay helps carry the game’s critical message to the player more effectively through forcing interaction, allowing the player to immerse themselves into the story and experience it from Sam’s view. “The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story” (Jenkins qtd. in Jones, 2008: 20), as the medium *requires* player interaction to fully function, thus allowing varying degrees of immersion and identification for the player. For this reason, both narrative and gameplay are analyzed equally – even with a heavily story-driven game such as *Death Stranding*, leaving out the gameplay would lead to an incomplete perspective on the unique blend of media that is videogames.

In the Footsteps of Our Forefathers: “Make America Whole Again”

With the story revolving around the reconnection of a divided America, a closer look at how exactly *Death Stranding* portrays this endeavor allows for an analysis that points out the game’s use of narratives that stem from American exceptionalism. To rebuild a broken nation, the belief in a nation’s *capability* of being reborn must first be established. Thus, American exceptionalism, being a concept that provides “national narratives of individual and collective heroism and excellence” (Paul, 2014: 12), fits this dire situation of disconnect perfectly. The concept, being incredibly malleable, allows itself to easily be adjusted to fit specific contexts (Depkat, 2021: 17). Functioning as an anchor of national identity, easily evoked through American myths and foundational beliefs, this concept can prove itself useful in times of deep disconnect and discord within a nation. *Death Stranding* intends to question whether this

exceptionalism is truly beneficial for true reconnection. Testing the limits of this ideological concept, it wishes to ask if a callback to America's glorious past, the words of "make America great again", can truly bring about lasting unity and reconnection.

Right from the beginning, the key narrative the game makes use of is the idea of the West as a site of American rebirth. This concept, propagated mainly through Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, identifies the American West as revitalizing for the nation. The notion of "this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities" (Turner, 1893) is directly evoked as Bridget Strand, the last President of the United States, pleads Sam to lend his aid as a skilled porter to help reunite the nation by undertaking a westward journey (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Bridget, on a hospital bed in the Oval Office, asks Sam to help her with reconnecting the nation. Her condition directly mirrors the wavering national identity of Americans.

As her condition worsens and she is shown on her deathbed in the Oval Office (Figure 1), directly symbolizing the deteriorating state of the nation, she begs Sam to help her and her daughter Amelie with the endeavor of reconnecting America. Her pleas to "help us reconnect" and "make America whole" initially fall on deaf ears, however, as Sam retaliates with the claim that she is "the president of jack shit" (Jekavac TV, 2019a: 00:02:33–00:03:39), signifying that Sam believes there is nothing left that is worth reconnecting.

Bridget passes from her illness, and Sam leaves her request unfulfilled. After the President's passing is taken care of, it is revealed that Bridget's daughter, Amelie, has already headed West once before with the idea of reconnecting the nation by setting up chiral network terminals. During her endeavors, she was captured by the terrorist organization Homo Demens at the western-

most area of the country, Edge Knot City. Now it is not only Bridget's dying wish of reconnecting the nation that Sam must fulfill, but he must also return Amelie back to safety to ensure that she can take up her role as the new President of the *United Cities of America* (Boss Fighter, 2020: 00:02:20–00:06:47). Within its beginning hours, the West is thus firmly established as a site of American rebirth and revitalization, as only Sam's arrival in Edge Knot City can bring about a reconnected America – both through setting up the network and by bringing back Amelie.

Starting this journey in the easternmost part of the country, the landscapes the player encounters upon embarking on this adventure only underline this notion of rebirth – hopeful green hills, overgrown nature, and flowing rivers signify a revitalization of this withered nation being possible, while the dark, rainy skies remind of the dangers Sam has yet to face on this adventure. The game continuously represents this melancholy of a destroyed America and contrasts it with untouched, blossoming nature (Magnus Opus, 2019: 00:03:54–00:05:07), symbolizing that not all hope is lost.

A closer look at Sam shows that he is ideal for this task of bringing the nation back together based on exceptionalist narratives. In his first appearance, Sam is introduced to be driving his motorcycle across the empty American wasteland (GameSpot Gameplay, 2019: 00:01:13–00:02:58), depending on nobody but himself, immediately identified as the self-reliant loner who has no-one but his motorcycle. Within this opening cinematic of the game, *Death Stranding* is directly evoking the near-mythical imagery of the American cowboy who travels through barren and untamed American land.

Physically our Cowboy is tall, tanned, sinewy, a man quite at home in the great outdoors. Weather-beaten and rough, this child of nature is innately handsome, despite eyes squinted from work in the glaring sun and legs bowed from a life in the saddle. Never far away is his horse, Old Paint, who has almost human intelligence. The two of them form the most enduring team in American mythology. (Fishwick, 1952: 81)

In a similar fashion as the cowboy that Fishwick describes, *Death Stranding* portrays its protagonist with stark similarities to this American myth. This portrayal, then, further enhances the American exceptionalist tone the beginning of the game carries with it.

On the level of game mechanics, the game allows the player to rebuild the former nation piece by piece through the construction of roads and bridges. Thus, as Sam travels westward, he leaves behind a trail of modernity and infrastructure, slowly bringing back parts of an America that once was. Once again, the essence of Turner's thinking of the West as a site of rebirth shines through: The player progresses westward and leaves behind functioning roads and bridges, and "little by little, he transforms the wilderness" (Turner, 1893).

Players, over the course of their journey, thus create “a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American” (Turner, 1893). As Sam is quite literally retracing the steps of America’s Manifest Destiny, he is walking the same path as American forefathers did many centuries ago. The narratives from the period of American Westward Expansion are directly evoked here as the player is following these footsteps from American foundational history, rebuilding this nation on the same premises.

Therefore, this notion of *reconnection*, in the beginning hours of *Death Stranding*, can be seen as deeply influenced by narratives that stem from American exceptionalism. This concept, one of the most important ideological pillars of the United States, especially encourages a belief in greatness and an exceptional American history. By continuously creating parallels that mirror this distinctly American past, for example the spirit of Westward Expansion or American individualism by evoking the mythical image of the American cowboy within its protagonist, the player is made to follow in the direct footsteps of America’s beginnings. As everything seems to go according to plan, the player is led to believe that these American exceptionalist narratives must be sufficient to rebuild this deeply fragmented nation.

Deconstructing the American Illusion

After this initial buildup, making *Death Stranding* almost seem like a piece of U.S. propaganda during its beginning hours, the game takes a sharp turn to tear down these narratives it so carefully constructed. If familiar with the works of Hideo Kojima, this twist was only to be expected – in for example *Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain*, released 2015, the narrative heavily criticizes the American military industrial complex and thematizes the English language as a direct tool of oppression in colonial and imperial contexts. Knowing this, the critical tone towards the U.S. was, therefore, only a matter of time with *Death Stranding*.

The further the player progresses into the game, the more this exceptionalist tone from the beginning is subverted, and *Death Stranding* shows itself to openly condemn America’s supposedly glorious past. The game swiftly clarifies that it does not wish to feed into the common U.S. centric narratives of nationalism, exceptionalism, and greatness. Instead, it slowly begins to make the player question this westward journey as beneficial for reconnection, the protagonist’s stark individualism fades as he learns to cherish the bonds he has formed with others, and the former United States are shown in a much more critical light as the game portrays the nation’s 20th century wars in nightmarish re-enactments the player gets to experience.

With the West being initially constructed as a site of rebirth, this setup is quickly turned on its head once the player arrives at the westernmost outpost, Edge Knot City. Once there, the player will realize that the place that was initially promised to be a site where America will be reborn, continuously framed as the nation's last hope, ends up being site of pure death and decay. The remains of what can only be identified as *an American city*, no landmarks specializing which exact one it is, are first encountered to be sinking in a sea of black tar, the exact imagery that *Death Stranding* uses to symbolize *the Beach*, the game's world of the dead (Ruba, 2019: 00:01:00–00:02:00). After crossing this sea of tar and arriving at the final outpost, Edge Knot City is full of ruins. The city seems entirely untouched after the events of the *Death Stranding* have destroyed it. The crushing atmosphere in this final area makes clear that this place is neither the “space of residence and settlement” (Paul, 2014: 314) or the “Edenic paradise” (ibid.: 314) that exceptionalist narratives promised it to be. Instead, having to face the harsh reality, this West functions as a snapshot of the nation's final hours. Completely frozen in time, Edge Knot City is the only area of the game that offers a view of the game's *past America* as detailed as this – the ruins function to show the American West as a dead end, a reminder of everything that once used to be, everything that went wrong and caused this disaster. Due to this portrayal, the exceptionalist setup of the American West being a site of rebirth immediately collapses upon itself.

However, despite this crushing revelation, Sam succeeds in the mission of reconnecting the chiral network across the country. Having successfully connected this final outpost, the task of establishing the *United Cities of America* seems finished. To the player's dismay, however, a major turn in the story is triggered here. The connection of this chiral network turns out to have been beneficial for initiating a massive extinction event, larger than anything that has happened before, and Amelie is revealed as an Extinction Entity who is responsible for this final apocalypse. The game's main antagonist, Higgs, explains the Last Stranding as the final step to achieve a fully clean slate for humanity and everything that is alive (Jekavac TV, 2019b: 00:20:43–00:24:44). Here, the nihilism and hopelessness of many Americans is directly mirrored within Higgs: In a time of rising right-wing extremism, social injustice, wars, and a global pandemic, a *clean slate* and the opportunity to begin anew can often seem like the only way to help humanity out of this never-ending loop.

With this entire journey, the West as an area proved itself to not be helpful towards lasting reconnection, even triggering the danger of the Last Stranding, being a site that only symbolizes death and decay. Though this, the player is now forced to question the entire meaning of the exceptionalist narratives that this reconnection was initially based on. Does a callback to a shared past, returning to what once was, really suffice to reunite a nation as divided as this? *Death Stranding*, with this turn, emphasizes the need for truly meaningful

bonds that transcend superficial exceptionalist beliefs – social connections, mutual aid, and kindness must be valued above a misled belief in a glorious past and an insistence on old, unhelpful narratives. Within the game’s final hours, the player is made to hike the entire way back East to reconvene with his allies and work on overcoming the danger of this Last Stranding.

Now the connections that Sam, and thus the player, has made over the course of the game are put to the test. Functioning as an antithesis to Higgs’ nihilistic views, Sam and his allies embody the hope of many Americans, the wish to keep on keeping on. Sam, beginning his journey as a self-reliant individualist and loner, now openly shows care and reliance on his allies, determined to prevent this apocalypse from making him lose it all. In a conversation with everyone who has helped him on his journey thus far, visibly worried right before the final encounter with Amelie, his development shines through:

I was living a lie. I was hung up on past regrets. I was broken. Somewhere along the way, I started changing. Started meeting people that made me think that maybe it wasn’t all bad. So I gotta deliver, for their sake. (Video Games Source, 2019: 00:00:00–00:01:27)

In addition to this deconstruction of the mythical West, Sam has slowly left behind his initially deeply individualist nature, the game showing that extreme self-reliance as championed in American individualism, in the long run, makes people antisocial and isolated. In Sam, this physically manifested in what the game describes as *aphenphosmophobia*, a fear of physical touch. “No wonder you were out there alone, where no one could touch you” (UZU TV, 2019: 00:00:58–00:01:30), Deadman, a supporting character who later is a great ally to Sam, remarks as he notices Sam’s physically avoidant behavior for the first time. Sam’s phobia, thus, can be read as his strong self-reliance and individualism manifesting as a physical trait, that at its very core, his *aphenphosmophobia* encapsulates his fear of human relationships and showing vulnerability.

Sam, as a character, thus perfectly represents what this increased self-reliance and dependence on only oneself can do to people, that, in the end, this individualism can easily lead to loneliness. Over the course of the game, Sam’s behavior changes: He not only learns to open himself up to others, sharing his thoughts and fears more openly, but his initial phobia of being touched strongly subsides as the game continues. By the end, he is even willing to hug people (GamersPrey, 2019a: 01:19:00–01:19:50), something he would have never done at the beginning of this story. Coupled with the game’s central themes of unity and reconnection, American individualism is defined as a deeply isolating ideology. Individualism, as such, actively hinders American unity and social cohesion, as it was necessary for Sam to overcome his strongly individualistic nature to succeed with this daunting task of reconnecting America and, in the end, even save it from total annihilation. Without the al-

lies he has made over the course of this journey by his side, Sam alone would not have been able to fulfill this task.

Exceptionalism and America's 20th Century Wars

When it comes to attempts of reconnecting a nation, a popular approach is to evoke the bittersweet memory of a *better past*. That, if we work together, we can return to these better times. In truth, these periods are often exaggerated and glamorized, but nevertheless appeal to people's nostalgia. These notions often manage to unite specific groups of people, as for example under the slogan of "make America great again", and is exactly the approach *Death Stranding* initially starts out with as well.

However, like all the other exceptionalist narratives that *Death Stranding* has started out with, this, too, crumbles. There cannot be a return to a glorious American past when, in fact, this past has never been anything great. *Death Stranding* wishes to elaborate on this by thematizing the U.S. military industrial complex, taking a deeper look at both America's involvement in 20th century wars and the role of the American soldier. Directly questioning narratives of morally justified military intervention and U.S. superiority, *Death Stranding* wishes to paint both the wars as deeply reprehensible and the soldier as a multifaceted and troubled individual instead of a heroic figure.

As the game transports the player into three separate "Nightmares of War" sequences, the player faces World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War in nightmarish re-enactments. The sequences are purposefully distorted, the aspect of horror amplified through inclusion of disturbing elements beyond horrors of war that are commonly known or seen. One particularly memorable example of this is shown during the nightmare sequence of World War II. A tank, covered in unidentifiable and bloody remains, being led by skeleton soldiers who are clad in World War II gear (PEA, 2019: 00:00:42–00:01:08). Sam, transported into these nightmares against his own will, must try and find his way out of these scenarios – he is not taking on the role of a war hero, nor is he directly participating in these war sequences. Instead, the ghost soldiers are leading this war on their own, the events constantly repeating themselves as the soldiers shoot each other over and over (GamersPrey, 2019b: 00:30:55–00:34:00). A distinction on which exact soldiers these are, *ally* or *enemy*, cannot truly be made, as their shapes are only vaguely defined through red and black particles. Through this, the notion of there not being one timeless *enemy* is also underlined – an *enemy* in war, *Death Stranding* suggests, is only a soldier that merely happens to be on the opposite side of a conflict much larger than his existence.

Clifford Unger, a US Special Forces Veteran who is long dead by the time the story of the game unfolds, is the person who is responsible for the ap-

pearance of these nightmares. Because of the connections between the world of the dead and the living being unstable, as the events of the *Death Stranding* have upset the balance, the deceased Veteran is explained to be bringing these nightmares to life through “a compulsion so powerful that he was not only able to drag himself from the depths of hell, but bring a piece of that hell along with him” (Gamer’s Little Playground, 2019: 00:54:11–00:55:29). These *pieces of hell*, scenarios that are purposefully otherworldly and distorted, function to portray war through the eyes of a former soldier. Thus, they are a direct manifestation of Clifford’s negative experiences and emotions.



Figure 2: Clifford, here shown in a web of wires, awaits Sam in all three “Nightmares of War”. The game does not shy away from portraying war as a horrifying, disturbing, and never-ending event.

With these portrayals, such as seen in Figure 2, with Clifford awaiting Sam in a web of wires while surrounded by dead soldiers, fire, and mutilated dolls to signify the loss of his own child, the “Nightmares of War” sequences work to emphasize that the realities of war are far more horrifying than what the average person usually sees through media coverage. Any narratives of heroism or American exceptionalism are completely amiss here. The wars are shown as deeply reprehensible events, and the soldier, in the midst of them, as a traumatized victim.

As a contrast, common military games, such as for example *Call of Duty*, use the same exact same wars *Death Stranding* portrays as horrifying nightmares to, instead, perpetuate American exceptionalist rhetoric. Looking at the example of *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War*, released 2020 and developed by American game studios Treyarch and Raven Software, the game places these difficult periods from American history, like the Vietnam War, into a narrative that makes American military action fully justifiable (Robinson, 2015: 465). In

this example from *Call of Duty*, the player fulfills the role of a national hero, the exceptionalist tone and moral justification of American involvement in these wars easily clouding players' judgement.

Connection and Player Interactivity

The creator of *Death Stranding*, Hideo Kojima, has voiced his worries about the current state of the internet when interviewed on *Death Stranding* in 2019:

If you look at the world right now, we are connected to the internet 24 hours a day. And that technology was supposed to be there to make us happy. However, what you see today is people anonymously fighting each other or discriminating against each other. (PlayStation Access, 2019: 00:12:59–00:13:55)

For this reason, the online functions of *Death Stranding* are specifically made with the intention of pushing players to cooperate with one another – instead of seeking competition, players must learn to rely on each other, to help and be helped. Quickly, players will realize that the American ways of self-reliance and strong independence will only make the experience of playing *Death Stranding* more difficult.

This is achieved by making the experience online vs. offline different for players. If online features are refused, the game thus played in fully offline mode, the player is left to fend entirely for themselves in the dangerous and lonely world of *Death Stranding*. All materials must be procured on their own, all helpful items like ropes and ladders must be crafted by themselves, and infrastructure such as bridges or roads take much more effort to build and longer to finish when only one person is contributing to these time-consuming constructions. All these factors make the experience of *Death Stranding* more frustrating and daunting for the player, the world becoming much harder to navigate. The daunting task of American reconnection, thus, turns into a heavy burden that the individual player must bear entirely alone.

Online, however, this experience is greatly facilitated. Having agreed to join the network, players become able to see remnants and marks left behind by other players, receive help from others, or to lend their helping hand to someone else. The world of the game remains single-player – meaning that players will not encounter one another in their respective games, the lonely landscapes of *Death Stranding* remaining as devoid of other humans as before. What they *do* see in their own worlds, however, are helpful signs and items other players have left behind: A warning that enemies are waiting ahead, a motivating *thumbs up*, a rope, a ladder, or even a fully constructed bridge to help cross a difficult river. These signs, items, and structures, deliberately left by other players in helpful places, can thus greatly facilitate one's jour-

ney. When using other players' items or structures, players can leave a simple Facebook-esque *Like*, letting the other player know that their help was appreciated. Through this system, the player is made to feel less lonely during their travels – someone, somewhere, is helping you and appreciating your help. The task of reconnecting a nation as massive as America seems less daunting.

Furthermore, players can help each other finish their deliveries. Some of them, requiring the crossing of large rivers, canyons, or climbing snow-covered mountains, can turn out to be particularly difficult, especially when the player must carefully balance Sam's steps to make sure he does not fall and lose everything he was carrying. Where one player failed, for example by getting caught up in a river and having Sam lose all his cargo as the current flushes him away, another player can find this lost cargo and finish the delivery in their stead, earning reward points for both.

When analyzed against the backdrop of American exceptionalist rhetoric, specifically American individualism, this way of playing functions as a direct antithesis to the contemporary culture of self-reliance and isolation in America. Especially during a time of people refusing masks, vaccines, and all sorts of safety measures to help stop the spread of a threatening virus, the individualist nature of Americans has deeply contributed to the deep divide that can be observed in the nation. This exact individualism, one that disregards the community to put one's own wellbeing and needs in the center, is exactly what *Death Stranding* wishes to criticize within not only its narrative, but also its gameplay mechanics. The game makes individual play purposefully harder, instead encouraging players to cooperate.

A Nation Doomed to Fail? – Conclusion

As this analysis continuously has pointed out, the ideology of American exceptionalism, its roots lying in America's colonial and violent history, is clearly diagnosed as a massive obstacle to true American unity in *Death Stranding*. At the exact same time, American exceptionalism deeply defines the nation – there can be no United States fully without it, as this ideology is so deeply intertwined with the nation's history and culture. How, then, would a nation without this ideological pillar function? Is it even possible to abandon these narratives completely, and to achieve true unity within the United States? Simply put, the game offers no clear-cut solution for this dilemma. There are no easy step-by-step instructions on how to overcome this division that are written into *Death Stranding*. With this, the difficulty of American unity, and global unity on a larger scale, becomes even more prominent, as there is no simple and straightforward way to achieve this.

The game even goes so far as to suggest that unity has never really been the case with the United States, there is nothing to *reunite* when it was divided

from the very beginning. “Covering the world in cable didn’t bring an end to war and suffering. Don’t act surprised when it all comes apart if you try to do it again” (Boss Fighter, 2020: 00:07:21–00:07:40), Sam, in the beginning hours of *Death Stranding*, replies when he is first asked to help with the endeavor of American reconnection by establishing the chiral network.

However, despite all this criticism of American national identity, exceptionalism, history, and politics, the game does not take an outright aggressive stance towards the United States. The main objective of establishing the *United Cities of America*, Bridget’s dying wish, is fulfilled by the end. The Last Stranding is prevented, and the *reunited* nation, returned to very early stages of nation-building, can now begin to work on its new beginnings that were made possible by Sam’s and his allies’ efforts. A focus, here, is specifically put on the power of collective action. What brought the *United Cities of America* into being were, *Death Stranding* continuously emphasizes, people’s sense of unity and their willingness to cooperate being rekindled through Sam’s, thus the player’s, help. The isolated former Americans, many of them initially disillusioned with the United States to a point of dismissing the idea of reconnection, received continuous help from Sam as he undertook delivery after delivery for them, reconnecting them to a network where they could once again socialize, and made them regain hope in humanity once more. It was not a belief in exceptional America that allowed the *United Cities* to come into being, but Sam saving people, and himself, from crushing loneliness.

In the end, *Death Stranding* does not wish to tell Americans to simply succumb to their nation’s failures and to wallow in hopelessness. Instead, the game urges to remember the mistakes of the past when looking at the future – that continuously clinging to past mindsets, ideologies, and patterns will only be an obstacle when attempting to build a better tomorrow. At its core, *Death Stranding* wishes to make its players think about the necessity and weight of human connections and bonds with each other, emphasizing that we, as a species, cannot survive all on our own. Individualism and nationalism only further isolate us, breeding hate and conflict where cooperation and looking out for one another is necessary. To make it through hard times it is, *Death Stranding* argues, vital for humanity to stand and act together – to continuously show compassion, understanding, and care for one another instead of resorting to individualism, nihilism, and isolationism.

With the game being released in 2019, looking back at *Death Stranding* after almost two years of ongoing pandemic can provide a slight sense of comfort. Despite how melancholic the general tone of the game is, the story’s ending offers a glimmer of hope. With nationalism, right-wing extremism, and individualism sharply on the rise, the game’s core message encourages players worldwide to recognize the necessity of staying connected to others, and to not fall victim to despair and isolation. While it is easy to sink into hopeles-

ness with the never-ending flow of bad news, especially during these last two years, *Death Stranding* urges its players to find and cherish these connections to other people wherever possible, and to recognize the weight that interpersonal relationships, collective action, and kindness to one another can hold, as this is the only way we can truly make it to a better tomorrow.

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Images

Figure 1: Death Stranding (2019). Kojima Productions. Screenshot taken from: <https://egm-now.com/death-stranding-finds-hope-in-despair/>.

Figure 2: Death Stranding (2019). Kojima Productions. Screenshot taken from: <https://egm-now.com/death-stranding-finds-hope-in-despair/>.