

Death Stranding is Kojima unleashed, and it's as weird as you'd expect

A certain sect of gamer has been waiting for this one since 2016.

Kojima Productions

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Death Stranding is Hideo Kojima unleashed.

That sentence carries a lot of weight in the video game universe, where solid personal branding and marketing across decades of Metal Gear titles means Kojima ranks as one of the rare game auteurs players actually know by name. And as much as Kojima used the Metal Gear games to defy both narrative and gameplay conventions, the series still represented a stealth-action box that Kojima found himself straining against over and over again.

Death Stranding once again stands as a bold subversion of expectations from a creator known best for leaning into action heroics. For the vast majority of the game, your protagonist is not a Solid Snake-style hard-bitten action hero. He's just a guy carrying a comically overloaded backpack across a lot of empty space, focused on a simple but necessary job, for better or worse.

Death Stranding is Kojima's escape, not just from Metal Gear's

cardboard box but also from the restrictions and recriminations of his former corporate parent Konami. That means the new game lets Kojima take some bold risks, experimenting with gameplay systems that are somehow utterly isolating and deeply connected to other players at the same time. It also means this is Kojima at his most self-indulgent, with a bloated, convoluted mess of a sci-fi story that's heavy on complication and light on relatable human moments.

Death what-ing?

It's the near future, and America as it once was has been ravaged by a mysterious event referred to as the Death Stranding. For some reason, the barrier between the world of the living and the dead has been weakened, causing ethereal, usually-invisible-to-most creatures called BTs to roam the Earth. When a BT consumes a dead body, it causes a voidout that utterly destroys everything for a miles-wide radius.

As if that wasn't enough, BTs surround themselves with timefall, a form of rain that speeds up the flow of time significantly. Years of this timefall has destroyed the communications and transportation infrastructure that used to bind America together across its cities and towns. What remains of the US populace is holed up in remote, disconnected cities called KNOTs, where the populace cowers in fear, dependent on outside deliveries from brave couriers who can withstand the timefall and BTs.

- Kojima knows how to frame a memorable shot, I'll give him that.
- One of the many cringe-worthy gamer in-jokes in *Death Stranding*.
- All right, I'll restore America, just please get back in bed!
- These guys look much more menacing than they actually are.

- Just a day at the beach.
- The camera's gaze has a way of falling on Normal Reedus' half-naked digital body like this a lot..

That's not a bad setup for a new post-apocalyptic universe, all in all. But Kojima can't leave well enough alone, weighing down this somewhat solid premise with layer after layer of overcomplicated, semi-mystical sci-fi dreck. Simply explaining what's going on practically requires consulting a glossary of new and bewildering terms.

There are the stillborn bridge babies (BBs) that can let a human sense BTs when they're connected through a sort of external womb. Except there are also some people who can inherently sense and/or control BTs through a power known as DOOMS (I never really figured out what this acronym stands for). And there are also some people who come back to life after they die, called repatriates, and their blood is apparently toxic to BTs.

Then there are the Beaches, the mystical, personal planes that connect the world of the living and the dead. Everyone has their own private Beach, but they're also all connected by personal and inanimate relationships, you see. Also some people can go back and forth to different Beaches with little effort. And sometimes people's souls can be trapped on their Beach, ageless, even if their bodies stay in the real world. *Got it?*

I'm not going to further belabor this review by explaining cryptobiotes, chiralium, the q-pid necklace, or any of the other new concepts that get thrown at the player with abandon throughout the game. Don't worry, though, the game takes enormous pains to explain all of this and more in long, discursive cut scenes that go into excruciating detail about how all of these complications work.

I'd estimate at least half of the game's story scenes are

taken up by deep-in-the-weeds theorizing about the history of the Death Stranding, or the metaphysical properties of BBs, or some other esoteric minutiae that doesn't really affect anything. It's as if Kojima barfed up an encyclopedia of background material for his apocalyptic fanfic before worrying if anyone was interested in the original story.

Despite all that explaining, the world of *Death Stranding* never feels cohesive. There's a strong sense that the writers are making this up as they go, forming a patchwork quilt of scientific-sounding magic that holds together only if you don't look at it too closely. Even in the run-up to the game's conclusion, characters are still introducing entirely new theoretical concepts that seem to come completely out of nowhere. Meanwhile, bits that are obviously intended to serve as mysterious twists fall flat thanks to horrible telegraphing and seemingly clueless characters.

Without spoiling anything, I'll note that *Death Stranding's* ending is more or less a two-hour cut scene that tries to explain how the preceding 30+ hours are actually supposed to fit together... yet I still came away scratching my head about what the hell happened.

Help me, Sam Kenobi, you're my only hope

Into this whole mess drops Sam Porter, a stoic and largely blank-slate courier who serves as the player avatar (we'll get to talking about the gameplay soon, I swear). Sam can sense BTs and "repatriate" if he dies, so the dying president of the United States begs him to crisscross the country connecting cities in an Internet, but also magic, chiral network called the United Cities of America. Also, if he could deliver some packages along the way and save the president's daughter who has been captured by terrorists on the West Coast, that would be grand. Thanks!

While the game goes deep on its mystical technobabble, it seems remarkably unconcerned with the interesting questions of how society or government actually functions in this post-apocalyptic world. There's a president, but she seems to serve as a cult-of-personality totem more than a real leader with power. We never get to see inside these shining KN0Ts on a hill, which somehow seem able to operate with some extremely advanced technology despite the destruction of all existing infrastructure. We also don't get to see inside the homes of the scattered preppers who somehow rode out the post-Death Stranding world outside of the KN0Ts.

- Just your average delivery man out to save the post-apocalyptic world.
- Who's gonna go out and be the best courier he can be today? YOU ARE!
- Born to be wiiiiiiiiiiiild.
- Scanning the nearby area with BB's AR ping is a pretty neat effect that never gets old.
- Kojima solves the "invisible wall" problem by creating a visible AR wall that you can't get past. Sure, why not.
- Beats a desk job.
- Eh, it's a living.

Instead of holding up a twisted mirror to society, Kojima uses his sci-fi future as a means to let his characters pontificate in extremely direct and unsubtle grand philosophical statements, full of dramatic imagery and botched attempts at symbolism (and occasional memorable imagery). Most of these focus on the need for human connection, a blunt "we live in a society" statement writ large.

"If we don't come together again, humanity will not survive," the president says in one characteristically unsubtle statement of the game's core thesis. "Humans aren't made to be alone," another character says at one point, as if it was the most profound thing in the world. "They're supposed to come

together. To help one another.”

The voice and motion capture cast does its best to give this material some life, soldiering on through countless “tell don’t show” diatribes that often focus on their characters’ own out-of-nowhere sci-fi powers. But there’s very little real human drama for the cast to hang their hats on; they’re dealing with an excess of unnatural dialogue to fight through. When the game does attempt to dive into a character’s backstory or motivations, the result is almost always ridiculously overwrought, complete with swelling musical cues that try their best to evoke utterly unearned emotion through ridiculous circumstance.

If you don’t think about it too hard, perhaps you can let the contrived pseudoscientific theories, pop philosophy, and overly direct symbolism wash over you. But if you’re hoping for a coherent, well-told plot full of relatable characters, you have to look elsewhere.

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