Every game should copy Death Stranding's "Very Easy Mode"



Enlarge / Settle in, grab some popcorn, and enjoy the game.
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Last week, the team behind *Death Stranding* discussed the game's "Very Easy Mode" publicly for the first time. The mode, according to Director Hideo Kojima's assistant Ayako Terashima, is designed for "[people] who usually don't play game[s], movie fans or RPG fans. Normal or Hard Mode is for action game fans." Kojima later added that the new mode was designed for "movie fans since we have real actors [starring]. Even [writer Kenji Yano], who never completed the 1st stage of *Pac-Man*, was able to complete the game on Very Easy Mode."

The news was treated with its fair share of derision in certain corners. Some poked fun at Kojima's not-so-hidden desire to be a movie director (as usual, the Onion did it first). Others said such a mode was below their dignity and only appropriate for babies (or for those lousy game journalists, of course).

But *Death Stranding*'s Super Easy mode is part of a trend toward extreme difficulty tuning that's slowly seeping into the industry at large. And, frankly, it's a trend we hope picks up more steam going forward.

A brief history of easy modes

Games with multiple difficulty options have been around nearly as long as the industry itself, but the idea of a "super easy" difficulty—one that makes it practically impossible to lose—used to go by another name: the cheat code. The kind of key combinations that gave infinite health in *Doom* or free money in *SimCity 2000*, to pick just a couple of prominent examples, were technically hidden from players at the outset. These settings required special knowledge gleaned from magazines, websites, or word of mouth to unlock. By calling these modes "cheats," the developers set them distinctly apart from the "standard" gameplay found in the front-and-center difficulty options.

That wall started to come down with the 2009 release of *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*. In that game, failing a level eight times in a row gives players the option to let a computer-controlled Luigi beat the level (or a portion of it) automatically. The feature has since become a staple of the Mario series, ensuring players can see the entire game even if they get stuck on a single difficulty portion.

In the decade since, a few other game makers have slowly offered modes that let practically anyone complete the game's challenges, no skill required. *Bayonetta* included a "Very Easy

Automatic" mode that was so simple it could be played with one hand. *Mass Effect 3* let players choose their way through the story with minimal combat challenge in Narrative Mode. *Nier: Automata*'s "auto mode" goes so far as to let the AI play for you so you can get through the game's hundreds of endings (that's only a *slight* exaggeration).



Enlarge / Sometimes you just want to wander around a lovingly detailed virtual Egypt without worrying about dying all the time.

Some developers are quite up front about their intentions with these modes. *Assassin's Creed Origins* introduced a combat-free "Discovery Mode" shortly after the game's release, in part as an effort to create a "living museum" from the game's detailed Egyptian recreations. Around the same time, horror game *Soma* introduced a "Safe Mode" designed to let players explore without "fear of failure." *Soma*'s developers wanted that mode "to not feel like a cheat, but for it to be a genuine way of experiencing the game."

Other developers are using extremely low difficulty modes as a way of expanding accessibility. *Celeste*'s assist mode is a brilliant example, letting players adjust gameplay speed, health, and control options without being patronizing to

differently abled players. Other developers have banded together to create detailed guidelines for making game modes that can be enjoyed by players of practically any physical ability.

Even developers remaking retro games that were renowned for their punishing difficulty are realizing that it's not necessary to force players through a quarter-munching/cartridge-value-extending death march anymore. The recent *SNK 40th Anniversary Collection* includes a clever "Watch Mode" that lets you view a complete playthrough of the game and jump in wherever you want. The *Mega Man X Collection* introduced an easy mode that made the series' instant deaths less punishing. Other classic gaming collections, including the Super NES Classic Edition, include the ability to rewind a few seconds, so a single mistake doesn't mean restarting an entire level.

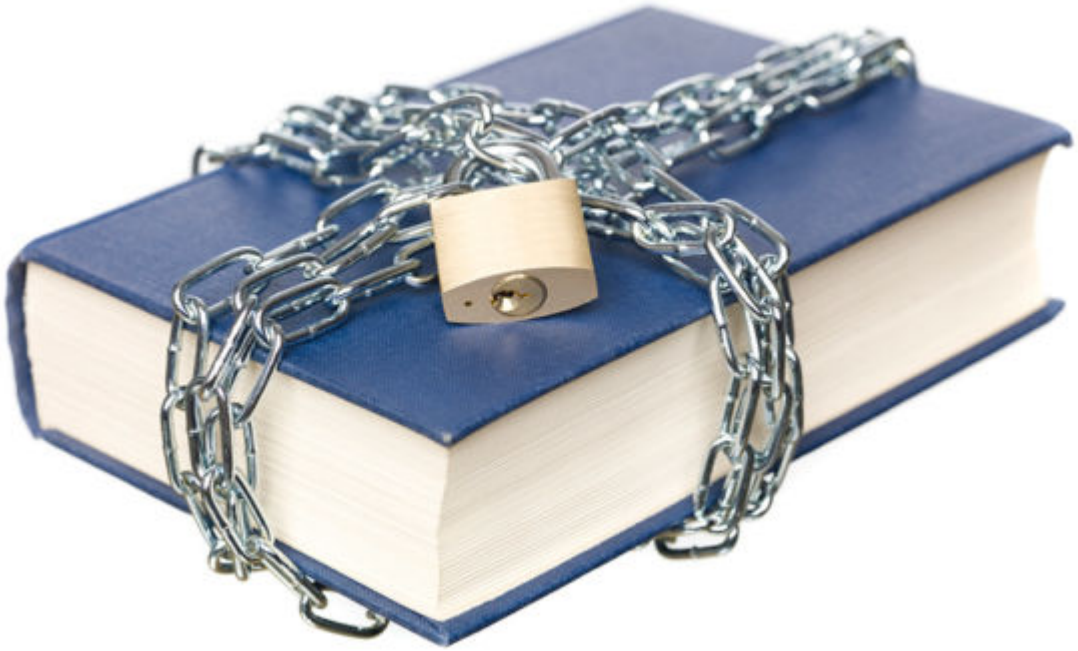
Different strokes for different folks

Inherent to all these efforts is a key recognition: players can have very different motivations for playing games. It's a fact perhaps best summarized by Penny Arcade back in 2005: "I play games to enter a trance state and experience other lives, he plays them to defeat the designer of the game by proxy. That's a significant distinction."

Often, this kind of distinction seems to require those different classes of players to seek out entirely different games. One group might revel in the challenge of a *Cuphead* or *Dark Souls*, while the other seeks to inhabit another universe with *The Sims* or *No Man's Sky*. There are gradations between these two extremes, but for the most part, developers often seem like they're picking one group or the other as their main target.

What more and more developers are now realizing is that there's no reason their games can't appeal to both groups. With a Super Easy mode in the mix, the players themselves can choose if they want a tough-as-nails test of skill and strategy or a more relaxing exploration of a detailed interactive world.

Some players and developers try to argue that the mere existence of a "Super Easy" mode option can ruin the game for everyone. "If you have a cover shooter and you switch it to easy and you don't have to use cover, you kind of broke your game," *Assassin's Creed 3* Creative Director Alex Hutchinson said in 2012. "You made a game that is essentially the worst possible version of your game… It's like if I picked up a book and it said, 'Do you want the easy version or the complicated version?'"



Enlarge / Before you can read this book, please fill out the following reading comprehension quiz…

Personally, I tend to trust players to decide for themselves what level of challenge they find will give them the most enjoyment. Maybe sometimes the player wants to explore the art and environments of a game more than they want to cower behind cover waiting for a chance to pick off enemies. Simply having

the option to do so doesn’t ruin the “traditional” experience for anyone who wants it. And if those players do feel compelled to try Super Easy mode just because it’s there, then maybe the “traditional” experience wasn’t really what they wanted after all.

More than that, Hutchinson’s attempted analogy to books is a little telling. We’d never tolerate a book that required readers to complete a short quiz before each chapter to ensure they had fully absorbed what came before. On the contrary, many classic books contain copious footnotes that make the content more accessible to a lay-reader (think of those Shakespeare collections with explanations for outdated terms).

Games, on the other hand, are the only major artistic medium that routinely requires the audience to prove they’re “good enough” before they can experience the entirety of the work. Plenty of game-makers seem perfectly content completely stopping players from even trying levels 5 through 25 until they’ve finished level 4.

You can make the paternalistic argument that this kind of gatekeeping is for players’ own good, or that it helps them grow their skills and appreciate the game even more. But players interested in a game for its story or its world-building deserve the ability to focus on the parts they enjoy without having to jump through some reflex-based hoops. “Super Easy” modes offer those players a new way into a game world without taking anything away from those who want their old-school challenges.

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