Playing piano with a sledgehammer: creating Death Stranding's unidentifiable score

One of the first places Joel Corelitz went when he got off the plane from Chicago was a nearby Home Depot. He wasn't getting wood, supplies, or power tools for a home renovation project. He was shopping for instruments. Anything he could use to make noise: a paint roller without the brush, a sledgehammer, and pretty much anything that was made of metal.

"We were just walking around Home Depot and treating it like it was Guitar Center," Corelitz, who previously scored games like *TumbleSeed* and *Gorogoa*, told me. "We probably looked like we were absolutely insane. We were doing things like putting air vents up to our ear and hitting them. Who goes in there and buys one piece of metal ventilation, a heavy rubber mallet, and all sorts of random crap?"

He was stocking up for a three-day recording session in late 2017 in San Mateo, California, for *Death Stranding*, Hideo Kojima's enigmatic new adventure game that stars Norman Reedus. Corelitz, along with Kojima Productions composer Ludvig Forssell and a few others from Sony, needed to find objects that could create sounds that no one could identify.

"Some items were easy to spot, like a frying pan that had a very wispy metallic sound," Forssell said via a Skype call from Tokyo. "It was something we had to get used to while we were there. I had no idea what to do at first but then I just grabbed a pipe and started banging it against something, without bothering the staff of course."

Forssell had worked with Kojima to establish an overall

feeling for the game's score, with the main idea that it needed to be unlike anything else. "Hideo handed me the soundtrack for the movie *It Follows*," Forssell said. "He wanted it to be dark, he wanted it to be gritty. Then I worked out my own approach to that. Kojima has such a vision with so many details, so I would still get a lot of direction from him. One of those directions was the sound of chains."

Kojima wanted more than the sounds of chains banging against floors and walls sprinkled throughout the score. He wanted unique sounds that felt familiar and real. That led to the trip to Home Depot and the three-day recording session, something Corelitz was brought on to help coordinate and run. While Forssell and Corelitz had an idea of what they wanted, much of the recording session involved experimentation; putting different objects together to see what kind of noise they would make.

While it's hard to create a strict plan for experimentation, Forssell and Corelitz had to come up with an idea of what they wanted to use to make noise before they went into the studio. Corelitz had a few ideas in mind, but there was one thing he knew they would need: a piano they could do anything they wanted to.

"A piano is the ultimate percussion instrument."
"A piano is the ultimate percussion instrument," Corelitz said. "We think about the piano as something expressive and delicate, but it's in the percussion category simply because it's about the sound of something being struck. It's this mechanical instrument that strikes a string in a very advanced way. If you open up and get more control over how that string is strung, the possibilities for sound open up so much."

That's exactly what they did. They took an upright piano and

laid it on its back so the sound hole, a small hole that exposes the strings, was upright. They removed everything around that hole to open the strings up even more. Then they put screws and playing cards between strings, put duct tape over the dampers, put bricks on the sustain pedal, and other sorts of odd customizations. “If you put a screw in between two of the strings it doesn’t sound like a piano anymore,” Corelitz said. “You’ve disrupted the way the piano is going to work. It’s going to sound like a weird, twisted bell.”

It’s called a prepared piano, a concept created by John Cage in the late 1930s. Corelitz made these modifications to make the strings react longer and make more of a dominant sound when struck. They then used a rubber mallet, a rake, and a sledgehammer to hit both the strings and the side of the piano. “Using the rake on the belly of the piano is something that just happened in the moment,” Forssell said. “I’d never done anything like it before.”

The three-day session inspired Forssell to create more sounds with odd objects and modified instruments. He went back to Tokyo and modified his guitar and used things like Styrofoam and a cardboard box to produce more sounds.

Almost a year later, Kojima Productions reached out to Corelitz again, but this time it was to help compose pieces of music for the game using the sounds he had created in San Mateo. Forssell had already written hours of music for *Death Stranding,* but they needed more so the player wouldn’t hear the same thing too often.

“When we got to the part where I was writing cues for the game, this is the most oppressive music I’ve ever created,” Corelitz said. “The sounds we created were raw but they don’t sound harsh or digital. They sound big and they have a natural

feeling to them. They don’t sound like anything else out there.”

“They don’t sound like anything else out there.”
The whole point of the recording session was to create acoustic sounds that felt otherworldly and could be layered throughout the score. The sound of oil drums getting hit with sticks, a rake being dragged over piano strings, and a whole cart full of metal wiring getting shaken all show up on the score. “Everything is everywhere,” Forssell said. “The bigger sounds, like the big piano or oil barrel hits were stingers, some of the stuff I did on my guitar was more tonal, simple percussion sounds, while the paint roller ended up being your faster, clickity, rhythmic stuff.”

It was the perfect balance to Forssell’s compositions that were mostly comprised of synthesizers. Forssell hadn’t worked on music for horror games before but wanted to emulate the sound of *It Follows*. “I really latched onto the pitchiness of older synths and how out of tune things can sound and still sound musical,” he said. “That really worked well with the idea of the BTs, the darker, more horror-esque parts of the game. I wanted things to sound not-musical but musical at the same time.”

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These segments of the score would primarily fit into *Death Stranding’s* combat sequences with BTs – otherworldly beached things that somehow stranded themselves on Earth – which were broken up into four different tracks. “Each track consists of a different energy level,” Corelitz said. “The highest level of energy is for when you engage the enemy. The lowest level is when you are sneaking around. The two levels in between represent that the enemy might know someone is there. As you’re playing, the music is constantly adjusting between four tracks.”

Forssell wanted the transitions between levels to be subtle to the player. They used a third party audio engine to help build out a system that used some procedural generation. It helped keep the score unique throughout a playthrough.

“We have a pot full of sounds, it shouldn’t matter what tempo it is or what sound plays after the next one. It should just work together,” he said. “You can’t really identify what the track is while you’re playing; I’m sure people are going to hear the soundtrack and think that they didn’t hear a track like this in-game. It’s not 100 percent procedural, but it is a soup of sounds that has an identity. It’s just supposed to be reactive to the gameplay.”

“It’s a score that’s based around texture and feel.”
The end result is a creepy score with layers of synth and sounds. The sounds were edited and mixed to help gel with the synthesizer, but they still fit in well to *Death Stranding*’s gameplay. “A lot of film scores and game scores are still known for their sense of melody and harmony,” Corelitz said. “*Death Stranding* isn’t. It’s about unsettling emotion and aggressive unrelenting sensibility. It’s a score that’s based around texture and feel.”

A lot of that texture and feel came from that three-day recording session where they hit a piano with a sledgehammer and a rake. It was something neither composer had done anything like before, but they can’t imagine doing it any other way after the fact.

“Sometimes the most horrific, twisted things are familiar to us but presented in a way that’s unfamiliar,” Corelitz said. “If you want to make something that’s truly unique, in a lot of ways you can’t start from a blank slate, it needs to have something familiar to provide context. These sounds work because they come from something familiar.”

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