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Travel With Purpose

How Travel Drives a Plot

Within many hero narratives, travel is an integral part of the story. The main character, after identifying a problem, must travel far from their starting location in order to solve their issue, whether it be to defeat a malicious actor, retrieve some miracle solution, or to change as a person. Travel signifies change, as well as a physical representation of a protagonist's journey and evolution as a character. Such is the travel within Kojima Productions' *Death Stranding*, where you play as Sam Bridges, who is tasked with traveling across the continental United States following an apocalyptic event that destroys much of society. *Death Stranding*'s narrative is largely driven by the idea of travel by forcing Sam to travel to accomplish tasks, by being an obstacle to Sam for the majority of the game, and serving as the core gameplay element.

Death Stranding's story follows the large-scale destruction of the United States (and, allegedly, the entire world) due to a cataclysmic event referenced as "the Death Stranding," which has caused the lines between the living and the deceased to blur, allowing beings that were once alive to return as corrupted, violent versions of themselves. These entities are accompanied by a phenomenon known as the Timefall, which is rain that rapidly ages anything that it touches. Sam Bridges, the protagonist, works as a porter, someone that makes the journey through the wilderness to the isolated colonies, where the remainder of humanity lives, in order to deliver goods and supplies. After discovering that he has similar abilities to porters working for the

government-run delivery service Bridges, Sam is tasked by his mother (who is also coincidentally the President) to reconnect the “Chiral Network,” a communications service that links all of the colonies together. The game follows Sam’s journey throughout the now-named United Cities of America to complete his task, and later on when he discovers that his sister Amelie is in danger and must be rescued.

Much of the narrative is driven by Sam’s objectives of getting from one place to the other. Because he works as a porter, Sam is accustomed to traveling in the wilderness, but as the game progresses, his tasks shift from simple delivery runs to missions with more importance. The only constant throughout the entire story, in fact, is that he is far from where he needs to be and must traverse a large distance in order to get to where he is going. At the beginning of the game, this concept is introduced to the player, as the main objective is to complete the transportation of a recently deceased person to avoid a large-scale explosion called a “void-out.” On this journey, Sam is aided by a vehicle, a team, and a road to drive on, making the actual travel less of a focus, and allowing the player to focus on the exposition of details revealed through conversations. After this mission goes awry, and Sam is acquainted with Bridges, he must travel Westward in order to connect the network, stopping at different settlements along the way. This task turns out to be very daunting for Sam, as he must embark on this journey alone, with minimal assistance and resources.

As the game progresses, Sam is forced into a situation in which his family is put at risk. His sister, Amelie is kidnapped by an insurgent group, and it is up to Sam to save her. He must once again travel far, putting himself in harm’s way, and without the assistance of technology he was using previously. The change in pace from having a well-defined goal—establishing the chiral network—to the more vague mission of rescuing his sister coincides with the plot

progression. At this point in the narrative, it is revealed that there is a malicious actor working in the background, and much of what was thought to be understood of the corporeal entities is proven to be wrong. The setting change reflects this new theme, as Sam must trek through unfamiliar, low-visibility climates, all the while unable to avoid the entities as well as he was able to before.

Travel in this game is not as simple as walking to an objective. Every time Sam travels, there are many factors to consider. The weight of the cargo that Sam carries affects the way that he travels and must be accounted for. In addition to this, the terrain is uneven and difficult to traverse. Travel in this game takes on a new meaning, as any number of errors can cause Sam to drop and potentially damage his cargo, as well as injure himself. Travel sets the pace for the game as well. As mentioned previously, the locations that Sam must go through reflect the tone of the story. When the pacing is lighter, travel is limited to plains, or rolling hills that are much easier to walk through. Once the tone becomes grimmer, the settings move onto colder, harsher climates.

Travel in this game is also an obstacle with regards to the story and lore building. Sam is what's known as a repatriate, someone who can navigate back to the world of the living from a limbo-like place called the Seam. There is a big emphasis on this aspect of the game. In many similar titles, upon the player-character's death, a game over screen would be displayed and the player would be prompted to try again. In *Death Stranding*, however, "death" is not an end. Rather, Sam is able to force his way out of the Seam and back into the real world. The travel between the world of the living and the world of the dead is constantly referenced, as the link between these two places is the cause for a majority of the problems humanity is facing. It is repeatedly referenced as a painful procedure, one that requires much determination. In many

ways, coming back into the real world is one of the hardest journeys that Sam has to make consistently throughout the game.

At its core, the premise of *Death Stranding* is to make it from one place to another. As Sam, the player has to travel the long way to any objective. Other characters in the story are shown to be able to transport themselves through superhuman means. By forcing the player to travel on foot for a majority of the story, Kojima highlights that travel is the core motivator for this game. Another similar series that Kojima is well known for, *Metal Gear Solid*, allows the player to skip the long, arduous journeys through differing methods, which draws more attention to other gameplay mechanics present. The focus on travel in *Death Stranding* acts as a medium on which players can form a newfound appreciation for the depth of the world Kojima has created. In addition to this, after having completed the main narrative, the player is free to continue playing the game as Sam. Now, however, he has settled into his role of working as a porter, and the game simplifies into one of traveling from a starting point to the end. This repetitive gameplay solidifies travel as the main actor in this narrative.

Death Stranding is a very unique game with a sometimes confusing narrative. While it deals with very fictional ideas, the expression of these themes is done in a way that is very easily interpreted: the travel necessary to accomplish a task, and the difficulties encountered throughout this journey. Sam's travel narrative is highly fictional, but parallels the traditional plot structure of a hero's quest. To save those around him, he embarks on a journey, and through this travel, he learns more about himself and the world around him, and is able to find a resolution to his problems.