



The New Gonzo Journal

Escaping Through The Death Stranding:

Can escaping into a videogame, reveal more about who you are in reality?

Alone I wander the harsh and unforgiving wasteland dystopia of North America. Over 100 kilos hang from my back. Boots are failing - wearing thinner with every step. The timefall - a type of unforgiving rain that forces all it touches to age rapidly into oblivion - falls in torrents. My porter suit protects me as I push toward my next destination.

Despite this being downtime after a long workday, I can't help but feel I have adopted a new responsibility; the weight of carrying fragile cargo across unstable ground. One wrong step and all the items will break - followed by the screaming of the unborn child strapped in the BB unit on my chest, desperate for comfort. All of this to focus on, before the beached things come for me. Catchers drag me into the tar, hoping to trigger a void out - a nuclear-scale explosion caused by a convergence of the worlds of the living and the dead, leaving behind a city-sized crater.

Life is laden with responsibility. At times you can feel compressed by the immense existential pressure. To lighten this load, we turn to escapism, however, our understanding of this in modern society feels askew. We're often taught many lies about the expectations beset to us.

If you work late, then you tick the box of ambitious. When you hit the gym, you're disciplined. If you go to the pub post these events, then you're blowing off steam. This form of decompression doesn't sit with everyone, so some choose other

vehicles - videogames. Despite its popularity, many view this activity as a waste of time.

The night out and night in, are a fascinating comparison to make, because humans across history have always escaped through common seen trends. Religion, music, cinema, sports, myths and storytelling. The latter two points are something that a videogame can do with ease.

I don't dispute that fun memories can be created down the pub, but they're hardly life defining ones. The myths written in this setting are as easily forgotten as the hours it took to earn the money you've just pissed away.

It's interesting how escape in some forms is seen as a weakness. Have people become so fooled by the trap of societal expectation that they're missing the point of what escapism actually is?

Escapism is not wasting time, it's time dedicated to psychological recalibration.

On this basis, gaming can tap into something primal within us - that part that used to weave tales of the fantastic, to spur ourselves on, whether it be due to an affinity to something greater than ourselves, or for a cause bigger than we believed ourselves to be. Storytelling has played a vital role in defining our sense of self.

Videogames can be pivotal in this pursuit. They are an underestimated art form, with many missing that the stories they hold can have great emotional depth, which other mediums struggle to do.

Movies are a good example - especially those adapted from stories that originally lived in another medium. Such as *The Watchmen* by Alan Moore. Snyder's movie is fantastic, but it misses the nuance of the graphic novel.

Movies are an observational task - videogames are a participatory task. You don't just observe a character, you inhabit them. You walk the distance with them, you feel the pain they feel. Your actions, decisions and plans have impact on whether they/you succeed or fail. You'll find yourself projecting onto them, whilst they imprint on you.

A technological symbiosis.

Death Stranding stands out because of its choice of protagonist. No valiant knight, soldier on the frontline, conquering warrior, secret agent or assassin can be found here. Instead they are what most would consider to be pedestrian.

A courier.

Breaking the games mechanics down to their simplest core, you are a delivery boy. One that operates in the same way as the Bokkas operated in ancient Japan - a role that meant walking across remote regions to deliver cargo, a big inspiration for Hideo Kojima when designing the game.

Your whole purpose as Sam Porter Bridges (played by Norman Reedus), is to carry deliveries to remote prepper installations and connect these isolated locations, to stop humanity from dying due to its separation.

This is an over simplification of Death Stranding's lore rich and enigmatic open world, which sadly most people give up on before the experience reveals its brilliance.

Sure, there are ghosts, babies in pods, flying whales, ships that can both levitate and also submerge beneath the ground, navigating the tar currents, with a handful of mechanised samurais that come after you in its sequel - but at its centre, it's the fragile things that matter most. The tasks we would see as menial side quests lacking depth in reality, suddenly take on a new meaning in this world.

Death Stranding subtly mirrors life with unsettling clarity.

In our lives, we balance weight, plan our routes, and protect those that depend on us.

Balance the cargo.

Plan our approach.

Walk the distance.

Care for our loved ones.

The terrain changes, the weather worsens, the risks rise.

Falling now has impact. Any wrong step you take, can have dire

consequences. Despite this, you keep on keeping on. The weight never disappears.

The pressure stops being a reason to give up, and inverts to become an inspiration to press on.

You navigate this world by building structures to support you. Bridges, ladders, climbing ropes, generators, and safe houses. Then something strange happens. You realise that these structures also appear before you. Ladders you didn't place, and safe houses you didn't craft. Aids left by porters who walked this path before you - people you'll never meet.

Invisible cooperation.

Death Stranding isn't like other console titles, where it's strength comes from dominance. It's about strength in connection - something slowly being forgotten in reality. As we face ever more pressing crises, we find ourselves polarising instead of uniting against our impending extinction. Disconnect permeates and we find ourselves forgetting the children that will come after us, to inherit what's left. Much like Lou - the unborn child within the BB unit - our greatest responsibilities, are carried on our chests.

Escapism isn't about avoiding responsibility. It's about finding a space where we can practice and reflect on how we carry it in reality.

A moment to recalibrate and refresh - returning with a new perspective.

In videogames we play an echo of who we are. Isolated individuals that despite the help, know we have to wake up each morning and take those first and last steps of each day alone. Our cargo, is our hopes, dreams, fears and aspirations.

Our truth. As we push forwards on our route, we share this truth through vulnerability to build up our connections, to become something larger. A network.

Is it time for us to remember that for connection to exist, we must venture forth out of isolation?

After reading this, will those that dismiss videogames as escapism think differently?

I hope so, because writing this certainly didn't feel like a waste of time, nor do I regret the hundreds of hours I have put into walking the terrain of Death Stranding - learning to carry the responsibility of my everyday life in a new way.

And if videogames are still a waste of time...

you should probably try one.

Because life itself is a wonderful waste of time.

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