

PASSIVE COLLABORATION AND CONNECTIONS IN A ‘STRAND GAME’: CHANGING THE WAY WE PLAY

Barbaros Bostan
Bahcesehir University
Dep. of Digital Game Design
Istanbul, Turkey
E-mail: barbaros.bostan@comm.bau.edu.tr

Sercan Şengün
Illinois State University
Wonsook Kim School of Art, Creative Technologies
Normal, IL, USA
E-mail: ssengun@ilstu.edu

KEYWORDS

video games, cooperative games, virtual worlds, *Death Stranding*

ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in new modes of online player interactions that rely on passive and asynchronous collaborations rather than immediate action-based competitive gameplay. Especially after the COVID-19 period of lockdown, quarantine, and resulting isolation, it becomes momentous to examine the new modes of interaction and association that video games offer to connect people in untraditional ways. Accordingly, we perform a close reading on the 2019 game *Death Stranding* which is based on the themes and gameplay mechanics of connection, collaboration, and new paradigms around social bonding. We identify five domains wherein the themes of the game manifest: narrative infrastructure; mechanics that discourage violence; building connections with other players; bonding with virtual characters; and construction of the self as a social agent. These findings are discussed with the possibility of defining a new genre, named by the game’s creator as a “strand game” (Kojima 2019a, 2019b).

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several games such as the *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), the *Dark Souls* franchise (FromSoftware 2011, 2014, 2016), and *Ashen* (Annapurna Interactive 2018) have attempted to use asynchronous collaborative gameplay mechanics that prioritize connections over competitiveness. However, far too little attention has been paid to the importance of asynchronous collaborative gameplay that connects people in untraditional ways. In this regard, we perform a close reading on the 2019 game *Death Stranding* (112 hours of gameplay where all game trophies are collected) to investigate how the game builds its world, characters, and gameplay mechanics on the themes of connection and collaboration in the face of isolation and social defragmentation. Accordingly, for our close reading, we have chosen to focus exclusively on explaining the mechanics and experiences around cooperative gameplay to shed more light on game mechanics that encourage participation and collaboration. From here on, we will call cooperative gameplay in single player games beyond the scope of traditional video game violence as *passive collaboration*. Although some previous works define these types of mechanics through their *asynchronicity* (see Bogost 2004 and Soren 2009 for the first examples of naming the

phenomenon, as well as Neto et al. 2020 for a recent one), we prefer to approach them from the object-subject relationship that the players perceive each other since some of these examples can emerge as *synchronous* but still stay *passive*.

Cooperative design, building, and progression has been an integral part of many digital and physical games, but few studies discussed or documented the process (El-Nasr et al. 2010). Playing a game cooperatively has been shown to increase prosocial behavior (Velez et al. 2014; Dolgov et al. 2014) and empathy (Greitemeyer 2013; Greitemeyer and Cox 2013). Cooperation has been discussed mostly in the context of multiplayer games while ignoring the implicit forms of single player games (Stenros, Paavilainen and Mäyrä 2009). Research on identifying the game design mechanisms to strengthen collaboration (Rocha, Mascarenhas and Prada 2008) thereby give examples from Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) games where different character roles complement each other, different abilities form synergies, and certain abilities can only be used on other players. Participation and collaboration in these genres are used primarily for eliminating AI- or player-controlled enemies, however, we are interested in the collaboration mechanisms that encourage prosocial behavior beyond a cooperative effort where defeat, killing, and death are central parts of gameplay.

PASSIVE COLLABORATION

Zagal et al. (2000) outline the six characteristics of multiplayer games as (1) social interactions that can happen between players that do not concern gameplay; (2) competitive or cooperative nature of gameplay mechanics; (3) synchronicity of the actions that players can take; (4) how the game rules are coordinated (enacted and enforced); (5) dependence on props and tools (e.g., rules calculation); and (6) the emergence of meta-games that can take place parallel to the intended gameplay experience. In this model, social interactions, competitive nature, and synchronicity stay as separate domains that may or may not emerge together.

Different perspectives for player interactions within the context of multiplayer experiences can be found in games such as *Journey* and *Dark Souls* franchise. Players can meet other players that look like relatable reflections in *Journey*, but there is no chat system or any information about the

other player. The players can emit musical tones to each other, and the gameplay will be easier by connecting with one another (see Spawforth and Millard 2017 for further analysis of social mechanics in this game). Aiming to create an environment where the cooperation is not forced and competition is not allowed, game designer Jenova Chan states that they have reinvented the multiplayer:

The goal was to create a game where people felt they are connected with each other, to show the positive side of humanity in them. A lot of games today have a list of quests, places to go, items to collect and rewards to receive... We just ignore each other. So, in order to make players care about each other, we have to remove their power, and remove their tasks (Smith 2012).

Plessis (2018) asserts that the gameplay of *Journey* subverts the “utilitarian subject-object relations” in video games that are typically “driven by the violent accumulation of power” and “be channeled by the player-character into further violent actions against the so-called objects with the video game.” We believe that this perspective is better in defining the central approach of the passive collaboration games than temporal methods such as synchronicity.

Similarly, *Dark Souls* series incorporate a feature identified as the signpost mechanic by Toups et al. (2014) that allows players to write messages on the ground to be read later by others. Previously, Manninen (2003) defined modifying environmental details and settings of a game as an instrumental action that players can employ for communicative purposes. An unspecified number of messages written by other players appear in a game session, but there are no guarantees that the messages will be helpful. The feature of adding a positive or negative rating to messages aims to solve this problem. Player death in *Dark Souls* can also form a passive form of interaction/collaboration since a bloodstain where the player died can appear on the ground of some other players’ game sessions as warnings for future dangers. Game director Hidetaka Miyazaki explained the ideology behind these asynchronous multiplayer features as:

You could probably call it a connection of mutual assistance between transient people. Oddly, that incident will probably linger in my heart for a long time. Simply because it's fleeting, I think it stays with you a lot longer... like the cherry blossoms we Japanese love so much (MacDonald, 2010).

A similar form of passive collaboration can be found in the game *Ashen*. Players cross paths with companions but without identifying markers or voice chat, it is not possible to understand if the companion is an AI-controlled character or another player. Players can choose to team up with these companions or go their separate ways. The aim of cooperating with another is to overcome obstacles or eliminate enemies together. The creative director of the game Derek Bradley explained the passive multiplayer features of *Ashen* as:

Ashen is a completely immersive experience – any other player that joins your world will take on the appearance of an established character the player has already met. In terms of the passive multiplayer functionality, people can connect to your game seamlessly in that you just run past each other out in the world and disconnect if you run too far apart (Isaac 2018).

Passive collaboration can stay as a direct contrast to previous literature that offer competitive game mechanics and strategies as being more engaging to players (such as Siu et al. 2014) or that offer communication as an inseparable part of collaborative game design (such as Winn and Fisher 2004).

METHODOLOGY

In this article, the elements that construct an engaging form of passive collaboration in the highly acclaimed video game *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019) are analyzed with a close reading methodology that is grounded deeply in the experience of gameplay performed through both immersing the self in the game world while remaining critical of the poetics of the game mechanics, world-building, and gameplay experience. The hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications from digital games depend on the interplay of three player experience dimensions: narrative, mechanics, and context (Elson et al. 2014). In this regard, the complex interplay of narrative, mechanics, and context in *Death Stranding* creates a powerful experience and develops a social capital between players. The game uniquely blends cooperative game mechanics and asynchronous multiplayer features to prioritize the themes of untraditional social connections and passive collaborations over traditional video game design choices. Our close reading of the game prioritizes the game design mechanisms and storytelling techniques employed (1) to create a connection of mutual but passive assistance and collaboration; and (2) to design a game where players feel that they can relate to each other without actually meeting in the game world. The method of close reading (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011; Fernandez-Vara 2015) has been previously demonstrated as an effective way of analyzing video games and exposing hidden layers of meaning within a game. In this study, close reading allows us to highlight the game mechanisms that form a possible new genre called a “strand game” (Kojima 2019a, 2019b)—a game that prioritizes the themes of untraditional social connections and passive collaborations over traditional video game design choices based on immediate, conflict-oriented, and competitive interaction—and to emphasize the importance of forming novel social connections with others within the medium. As our close reading is performed under the specific conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic during when online social connections emerged as prevalent practices, an inter-textuality emerges (Carr 2009) where we prioritize the certain aspects of the game (specifically, the way the connections and collaborations are built and represented) within the textual organization of the game’s embedded connotations. In addition, we use data from

secondary sources such as statements from the interviews with developers and critics.

RESULTS

We discuss our results under five domains that outline how certain aspects of the game were constructed through game mechanics, design choices, narrative, and other elements: narrative infrastructure, mechanics that discourage violence, building connections with other players, bonding with virtual characters, and construction of the self as a social agent. When perceived together as a whole, we argue that these aspects support the emergence of the game as a novel genre that persist through each play session that might be separate indeterministic experiences.

Narrative Infrastructure: Metaphors of Social Defragmentation and Isolation

Yar (2015) identified two distinctive modes in which the apocalyptic is recast in the modern imaginary—the first one recuperates the utopian and redemptive narrative of eschatology, while the second one inverts it into a dystopian vision of disaster and regression. *Death Stranding*'s fictional world fits more into the latter where civilization, law, order, and peace are undone. The fictional world of *Death Stranding* has been divided and fragmented by a series of horrific events known as the death stranding that caused the world of the dead and the world of the living to become disconnected. The game highlights that the sufferings caused by the events of *Death Stranding* cannot be eradicated through a remaking of the world, but humanity still has a hope to survive.

Death Stranding was also the name of the cataclysmic event in which paranormal entities from the other side called *Beached Things* (BTs) become stranded in the world of the living and trigger simultaneous explosions-like annihilations (voidouts) all around the world. As a result, whenever a human being dies, the corpse will necrotize and cause another *voidout*. Moreover, a special matter called *chiralium* with its time-altering properties is introduced to our reality and *chiralium* give rise to a phenomenon called *Timefall*—a rain that ages anything it touches and devastates ecosystems.

The survivors of the death stranding event now live in isolated cities (called knot cities) but there are also individuals who live alone or with their families (called preppers). The protagonist of the story is a porter working for a company called *Bridges* which aims to reconnect the fragmented society of the United Cities of America. By carrying cargo across uninhabitable lands between knot cities and preppers, the delivery company metaphorically builds bridges and connects people. Pérez-Latorre (2019) analyzed the post-apocalyptic video game bestsellers released between 2009 and 2017 and identified three utopian enclaves as: (1) post-apocalyptic cowboys; (2) back to nature and do-it-yourself; and (3) community leaders, empathy, and rebelliousness. The world of *Death Stranding* cannot be classified as either of these categories. The protagonist of the game, Sam Porter Bridges, is not a forlorn cowboy forged into a hero by acquisition or accentuation of certain neoliberal and patriarchal characteristics. The game also

does not idealize nature and the restoration of nature as the fundamental way of rebuilding society. Although the player/character in *Death Stranding* can be classified as a man of empathy, he avoids other people and has no intention to become a community leader. The protagonist of the story even has haphophobia, a rare phobia that involves the fear of touching or of being touched. Indeed, it is also argued that Sam is more like a side character than a protagonist:

I think that this is the point of the game: we have to do the tasks to get to the people and then help them survive a little longer. Our protagonist is nothing more than a supporting character in these longform tragedies, and that's what makes Death Stranding so worthwhile (Kunzelman, 2019).

In accordance with the definitions of Farca (2018), the fictional world of *Death Stranding* cannot be classified as a utopia gone wrong where an attempt to create a good society failed but it is also not an anti-utopia where the possibility of a better future is non-existent. The events of *Death Stranding* are about an *Extinction Entity* (EE) whose purpose is to bring mass extinction. It is explained in the game that throughout the history of life on Earth, five extinction entities are believed to have caused five mass extinction events. These five EEs can be seen on *The Beach*, which is the place between the living world and what comes next, as a reminder of the inevitable. These processes are a natural part of the cycle of life and death on Earth, so they are not caused by spiritual sins such as pride, avarice, or ambition. The characters in the game do not know if such a mass extinction can be prevented, but their actions indicate that they still have hope, especially through the porters that traverse the uninhabitable lands of the game to deliver packages (and connections) among people.

The world-building of the game intersected and expanded in meaning when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in prominence in the early months of 2020. Many people pointed out the similarities between the fictional world of *Death Stranding* and our world after the COVID-19 outbreak:

The self-enforced quarantine in Death Stranding is remarkably similar to real-world events occurring as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people have spent much the past few months at home, with businesses closing their doors and daily life effectively shutting down for some time. Like the underground survivors in Kojima's sci-fi world, people began to rely on others to bring them food, medicine and other essential items (McNulty, 2020)

The theme of the *Death Stranding*'s story is a criticism of an era of individualism where everyone is fractured yet all connected. Turkle (2011), in her book "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other," pointed at the fact that we defend connectivity as a way to be close but end up spending more time with technology and effectively hide from each other. In this regard, the society of *Death Stranding* is depending more on each other than the technology and the game wants the players to feel alone in a fragmented society but also asks

them to reconnect people by delivering packages and connecting them to the United Cities of America (UCA). The story is about loneliness, despair, distrust, as well as friendship, trust, and connection.

Mechanics that Discourage Violence: Action and Death in a Strand Game

Post-apocalyptic games can usually be classified as “murder boxes” where killing and death are central parts of gameplay (Spokes 2017), but *Death Stranding*’s producer and director Hideo Kojima stated that he prioritized the theme of “connection” over traditional video-game “violence” (Gault 2019). Video game combat, action-based play, and eventual representation of violence is closely related with the content of many video game that rely on a neat cleaving of allies and enemies through a dehumanization of human victims (Kocurek 2015). Players must kill to survive, and this phenomenon is also reflected on the design of missions where opposing forces must be eliminated with violence. Clever use of game mechanics can give the player the option to find peaceful solutions to the problems, such as the supernatural powers in the dystopian world of *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012) and *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios 2016). In these games, there is even an achievement/trophy named “Clean Hands” for both games which is unlocked by finishing the game without killing anyone. The digital game distribution platform Steam shows that only 5.2% of the players of *Dishonored* and 8.0% of the players of *Dishonored 2* received this achievement as of March 2021 (Valve 2021a; Valve 2021b). So, killing is an option embraced by most players and endorsed by game developers since it is the easier and, arguably, more engaging way.

Death in digital games could be seen as the ostracization of death in the modern capitalistic world (Nteali 2015), however, killing other people in *Death Stranding* does not solve the player’s problems but intensify them instead. If the player kills another human being in the game, this will cause a *voidout* which is an explosive annihilation event big enough to destroy a whole city. The player faces MULEs who can be classified as cargo thieves and terrorists who are a decentralized group of militant separatists in the game, but the best way to deal with them is to use non-lethal weapons utilizing rubber bullets. The only drawback of using non-lethal weapons is that the unconscious enemies will later wake up and continue to be a threat, but this is acceptable when compared with the alternative of creating a *voidout*. The craters created by a *voidout* will make the area become inaccessible to the player and the increased *chiralium* density will cause any BTs encountered in the area to become stronger. The only way to prevent this is to destroy the body through cremation at an incinerator. So, if the player ends up killing all the terrorists in a camp, they have to take the time and effort to carry the bodies to an incinerator or the consequences of killing another human being will be dire for the player. This is in direct contrast to many games where killing an opponent does not have any consequences.

The player/character of *Death Stranding* is a repatriate, a person who can reconnect his soul (ka) to his body (ha) while in a place of purgatory called the *Seam*. This process brings him back from the brink of death every time. When

the player dies, the protagonist swims in a body of water and follows a “strand” back to his body, and then he is brought back to a location near the place of his so-called death with his cargo lost. In the *Seam*, the player may also see the souls of other players who also died in the same area and can touch them. Touching the souls of other players will increase your connection with them and affect the gameplay. This construction of death also creates a paradigm shift in the players from caring about their character to protecting their cargo. The player knows that the protagonist will not die but lost or damaged cargo will have more serious consequences.

Building Connections with Other Players

Survival in the post-apocalyptic world of *Death Stranding* depends on what the player can build. The player uses a portable chiral constructor (PCC) to construct various structures like bridges, timefall shelters, generators, safe houses, zip-lines, and postboxes in areas connected to the chiral network (an advanced version of Internet) but the chiral bandwidth is limited. This means that the players cannot build everything they will need in their journey. One of the unique asynchronous multiplayer features of the game is that what other players have built may exist in your world and what you have built may exist in other player’s worlds. When a mission requires the player to cross a river, they may find a bridge already built by another player; when their vehicle is running out of juice, they may stumble upon a generator some other player built; when their cargo is degrading because of timefall, they may find some other player’s timefall shelter to take refuge in. Additionally, when these things happen, players have the option to give likes to the structure built by the other player to show their appreciation and thanks. The structures built by them will also get likes if they are helpful to others. This gratifying and uplifting process is defined as:

As you play, you always have the option to bolster the experience of other players. And in general, you find yourself wanting to be of service to others. This desire comes not only from the gratification of getting likes from other players, but from the sheer weight of the journey that you (and you know other players) are undertaking alone (Outlaw, 2020).

Traversing the world of *Death Stranding* is a laborious task and building highways or roads will make it easier for the player to complete deliveries. BTs do not appear on roads and MULEs and terrorists avoid them. In this regard, collaboration becomes more important with the road building process since every piece of road requires the player to put lots of resources (ceramics, metals, chiral crystals) into devices called auto-pavers. But as the player puts resources in an auto-paver, they will realize that other players are also contributing to the process by putting their resources into the same auto-paver. The roads will be built mutually and when other players travel on roads you have built or roads you have donated to, you are going to receive likes from them automatically. Players can also leave signs, giving directions to points of interest or warning others of unseen dangers. In this way, although the players may be physically alone in the post-apocalyptic world of *Death*

Stranding, they never feel alone, and they always know that they are building the future together with others.



Figure 1: Collecting lost cargo, gameplay video

Losing your precious cargo is a natural occurrence in *Death Stranding*. The players may stumble and fall to their so-called death, they may be eliminated by MULEs or terrorists, or if they are caught in rapidly moving water their cargo may be swept away by the current. There are various other ways to lose cargo, but lost packages may appear in the world of other players, as other player's lost packages will appear in yours. By choosing the "Deliver Lost Cargo" option at a delivery terminal with the lost cargo in their possession, the players can return the lost packages to their owners and get likes. The players can find their returned lost cargo in shared lockers found at safe houses or distribution centers, and shared lockers can also be used to donate materials and equipment to other players. Players in need can take whatever you put in your shared locker and use them. Players can also issue supply requests and specify what they need. Any player who wishes to help can deliver the specified cargo to the specified location.

Aside from the structures built by other players, the players do not see other players in the game, but the player/character can shout out to the wilderness hoping that someone would reply. This does not have any effect on the game but sometimes, the player will hear someone else reply to them. The game's 'A Shout in the Dark' trophy is related with this phenomenon: it is earned when the player sends a shout out and have it returned for the first time. If you shout as "I'm Sam," the reply may be "I'm Sam, too". This fourth wall breaking mechanic represents an act of faith and collective effort to make the world (of *Death Stranding*) a better place.

Bonding with Virtual Characters

Passive participation and collaboration of players in this post-apocalyptic world is achieved by the unique mechanics of the game but it is very important to note here that the collaborative features do not aim for the elimination of enemies together within the scope of traditional video game conflict-based design choices. The collaboration is about forming connections and upholding hope, as described by many video game critics such as:

The game is oftentimes oppressively lonely, but there's an inherent hope to it all that is utterly captivating. That hope comes from the fact that nearly everything you do in Death Stranding is about altruistically helping not only the other characters in the game, but other players across the world as well (Sliva 2021).

The second type of social connection that requires attention is the player's relationship with various non-player characters (NPCs). *Death Stranding's* story consists of 14 chapters and each chapter requires several story-related orders to be completed by the player. Each knot city or prepper in *Death Stranding's* virtual world also offer optional orders. These optional deliveries for the player are called standard orders. Standard orders increase the player's connection (displayed with stars) with characters and are sometimes rewarded with unique items. The players can strengthen their relationships with these characters by completing orders for them or they can simply ignore these NPCs. Players who complete standard orders for NPCs will receive e-mail messages from them. This simple feedback mechanism also gives the impression to the player that they are making a change in the world and their efforts are not in vain. These e-mail messages include the backstories of characters, lore about the world of *Death Stranding*, interesting things that NPCs notice, and the opinions of NPCs on joining the UCA. More importantly, they also represent their bonding with the player/character. Some of these messages unveil the philosophy of the game and highlight the importance of connections, but some also appreciate the collaborative efforts of all the players around the world to make the world (of *Death Stranding*) a better place.

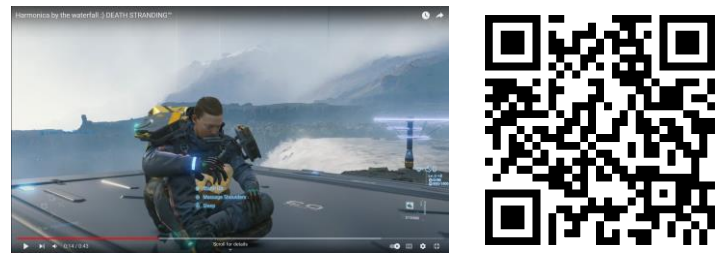


Figure 2: Playing harmonica to BB, gameplay video

The most interesting relationship the player is going to have is with a *Bridge Baby* (BB). Bridge Babies are unborn fetuses that have been taken from brain dead mothers to be used as equipment. Kept in portable pods resembling a mother's womb, these BBs can sense and detect BTs. In the game, BBs are presented as ethical dilemmas wherein it is questioned whether they are living beings or valuable equipment that should be disposed of when they stop functioning. The players will be given a BB on their journey and will find the abilities of the BB quite useful. Certain things can upset BB and make him cry, and some other things can satisfy BB and make him laugh. For example, if you take a nasty fall when climbing a cliff, the BB will cry and there will be the option of soothing him. If the player gently moves their controller up and down, they will cradle the BB in their arms, rock, and soothe him. At a certain point in the game, the players must complete a few missions without the BB and can come to the realization of how much they are now used to him.

Additionally, the player/character can sometimes meet other porters who are non-hostile NPCs making their own deliveries. There is an option to trade with a porter, where the player gives an item to the porter and the porter gives an

item in return. Players will get the “Any Porter in Storm” trophy for this act of generosity. Seeing other porters making their own deliveries also reinforces the feeling that you are not alone in your journey.



Figure 3: Meeting with other porters, gameplay video

Construction of the Self as a Social Agent

There is no RPG-like leveling system based on experience points in *Death Stranding*, but a porter grade represented by five stats. If the player delivers cargo with minimal damage, their *cargo condition* stat will increase. Depending on how much cargo they deliver, their *delivery volume* stat will increase. If the player delivers time-sensitive packages on time, their *delivery time* stat will increase. The miscellaneous stat increases if the player retrieves items from BT or MULE areas. The final stat is Bridge Link that increases as the player receives likes from other players. In this regard, everything is tied together in an innovative way and increasing stats will be much easier if the players form connections with others—if they build the future together. It takes time, patience, and perseverance to reach “The Great Deliverer” porter grade. “The Great Deliverer” porter grade of one of the authors was achieved in 112 hours of gameplay with 543,334 likes received from other players.



Figure 4: Building together, gameplay video

The game menu has a *Bridge Links* option that shows a list of players whose items or structures have appeared in your game. These are the players that you connected with, whose lost cargo you found, whose bridge you used, whose road you traveled, etc. There is also a *Strand Contracts* option in this menu that allows you to make a list of favorite players. When you form a strand contract with another player, their structures and items will appear in your world more frequently. The most important metric here is the total number of likes a player has received. If a player has received a lot of likes, this means that that player’s structures are very useful and helped a lot of players. So, if you form a strand contract with them, you will also benefit from that player’s strategically placed structures. The number of players that you can form a strand contract depends on a player’s porter grade. And as the porter grade increases, the

players can form more solid connections with other players via strand contracts, can give more likes to each other’s structures, and more structures can be built together. “Bridge Links” and “Strand Contracts” transforms the passive collaboration mechanisms of the game into active game mechanics that constructs a second-self who can influence the experiences other players. Kojima also stated that he aims to create a chain reaction of positivity with these game mechanics:

In games we default to doing things that benefit us: If I do this, I'll power up; if I do that, I'll make money. Even building bridges is motivated by personal gain--I want to get across this gap, so I'll build a bridge. But the bridges you build in DEATH STRANDING are shared with other players in the world, and they'll give your bridge a "like" when they use it. Once that happens you start thinking things like, "Huh, maybe that was a good spot for a bridge," and then you build your next bridge in a spot that helps others as well as yourself. Maybe instead of throwing away items you don't need, you put them in a shared locker. My hope is that it creates a chain reaction of positivity (Famitsu, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study provides an exciting opportunity to advance the understanding of cooperative gameplay beyond the scope of traditional game violence. We find that *Death Stranding* combines asynchronous or passive multiplayer functions with innovative game mechanisms that focus on “connections” to deliver a unique collaborative ludic experience beyond traditional action-based gameplay. Typically, a game cannot be characterized as prosocial if it encourages violence, even if the players build relationships of reciprocity and cooperation (Shoshani & Krauskopf, 2021). In this regard, the collaboration mechanisms in *Death Stranding* encourage prosocial behavior and they do not allow a cooperative effort where killing and death are central parts of gameplay. The unorthodox notion of the consequences of killing in this video game also steers the players towards non-violent solutions. The ad campaign of the game used the tagline “Tomorrow is in your hands” that can also be applied to the COVID-19 era of isolation, lockdown, and quarantine where hope lies in collaboration and forming connections or bonds with each other. Inspired by Huizinga (1950), an interview found in the game (“Bridges Needs Homo Ludens”), also highlights the importance of play in our modern lives.

There is, however, another very special type of human. A breed that would serve Bridges rather well. Homo ludens—they who play. Be it deliberate or unintentional, Homo ludens unite people—creating culture, shaping the very world around them—not through violence, nor laws or proscriptions, but rather through metaphorical acts of play (Death Stranding 2019).

One of the issues that emerges from our analysis is how the thought-provoking and moving story elements in the game,

combined with the game mechanics that focus on connections and the context of typically asynchronous collaboration with others, creates a meaningful and satisfying game experience. This experience establishes a sense of community with unique game mechanics and creates shared memories through passive multiplayer features. The five domains of analysis identified in this article that construct the game design and storytelling mechanisms of interaction and association in separate ways are summarized below (Table 1).

Table 1: Five Domains of Analysis

Domain of Analysis	Explanation
Narrative Infrastructure	society, creatures, political and environmental systems, value systems, history of the world
Game Mechanics	mechanics of collaboration, mechanics that discourage violence
Building Connections with Other Players	helping others, making a change together
Bonding with Virtual Characters	NPCs that appreciate player's efforts, NPCs with an emotional impact
Construction of the Self as a Social Agent	the player/character becomes a social agent by using certain game mechanics and building connections with others

Death Stranding has a very detailed and distinctive narrative infrastructure that sets up the stage for a different type of gameplay, paving the way for a new genre. The game introduces unique game mechanics of collaboration and mechanics that discourage violence. As the players play the game, they build social connections with other players and bond with virtual characters. And in the end, the player/character becomes a social agent that makes the world a better place rather than becoming a killing machine type of hero that saves the world.

The identified domains in this article may indicate the birth of a new genre called a "strand game," wherein the primary focus is on forming connections through passive collaborations and building a virtual and positive collective experience asynchronously. The post-apocalyptic world of *Death Stranding* and the story of the game incites feelings of loneliness, despair, distrust but also friendship, trust, and connection. The unconventional notion of death deployed in the game paves the way for player actions oriented towards peaceful solutions to the problems faced. The relationship of the player with virtual characters and other players prioritizes the importance of forming connections. *Death Stranding* players depend more on each other in a collaborative effort to connect a fragmented society together. The "strand game" mechanisms of bridge links and strand contracts creates a second self that can leave marks on other player's virtual lives.

This article extends our knowledge of passive collaborations in video games and shows that the conceptual focus on "connections" and asynchronous multiplayer features in *Death Stranding* ensure that players are never alone in their

journey of "reconnecting" an isolated and fractured society although there is typically no first-hand multiplayer portion of the game. Understanding the social strand system and the philosophy of the design of the game can offer us new perspectives beyond the criticism of video games on their violent nature and focus instead on the innovative social mechanics and unique ludic experiences. A limitation of this study is that it focuses on a single video game, but *Death Stranding* is the first video game that attempts to define a new genre, named by the game's creator as a "strand game" (Kojima, 2019a, 2019b).

REFERENCES

- Ashen. [Videogame]. 2018. Los Angeles, CA, US: Annapurna Interactive.
- Bizzocchi, J. and Tanenbaum, J. 2011. "Well read: Applying close reading techniques to gameplay experiences". In *Well played 3.0: Video games, value, and meaning, 2011*, D. Davidson (Ed.), Pittsburgh, PA: ETC-Press, 262-290.
- Bogost, I. 2004. "Asynchronous multiplayer: Futures for casual multiplayer experience". *Other players*, 6(8).
- Carr, D. 2009. "Textual Analysis, Digital Games, Zombies". In *Proceedings of the DiGRA 2009 Conference*.
- Dark Souls. [Video game]. 2011. Tokyo, Japan: From Software.
- Dark Souls 2. [Video game]. 2014. Tokyo, Japan: From Software.
- Dark Souls 3. [Video game]. 2016. Tokyo, Japan: From Software.
- Death Stranding [Video game]. 2019. Tokyo, Japan: Kojima Productions.
- Dishonored [Video game]. 2012. Austin, Texas, US: Arkane Studios.
- Dishonored 2 [Video game]. 2016. Austin, Texas, US: Arkane Studios.
- Dolgov, I., Graves, W. J., Nearents, M. R., Schwark, J. D., and Brooks Volkman, C. 2014. "Effects of cooperative gaming and avatar customization on subsequent spontaneous helping behavior". *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 49-55. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.12.028
- Farca, G. 2018. *Playing dystopia—Nightmarish worlds in video games and the player's aesthetic response*. Transcript Verlag.
- Fernandez-Vara, C. 2015. *Introduction to game analysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Greitemeyer, T. 2013. "Playing video games cooperatively increases empathic concern". *Social Psychology*, 44, 408-413.
- Greitemeyer, T. and Cox, C. 2013. "There's no 'I' in team: Effects of cooperative video games on cooperative behavior". *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 224-228.
- Huizinga, J. 1950. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press.
- Journey [Video game]. 2012. Los Angeles, CA: Thatgamecompany.
- Kocurek, C. A. 2015. "Who hearkens to the monster's scream? Death, violence and the veil of the monstrous in video games". *Visual Studies*. 30 (1). pp. 79-89.
- Manninen, T. 2003. "Interaction forms and communicative actions in multiplayer games". *Game studies*, 3(1), 2003.
- Neto, A., Cardoso, P. and Carvalhais, M. 2020. "Asynchronous Interactions Between Players and Game World". In *International Conference on Design and Digital Communication*, 148-156, Springer, Cham.
- Nteali, R. E. 2015. "Death in digital games: A thanatological approach". *Antae Journal*, 2, 89-100.
- Pérez-Latorre, O. 2019. "Post-apocalyptic Games, Heroism and the Great Recession". *Game Studies*, vol 19, no. 3.
- Plessis, C. du. 2018. "Subverting utilitarian subject-object relations in video games: A philosophical analysis of Thatgamecompany's Journey". *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 37(4), 466-479.

- Rocha, J. B., Mascarenhas, S., and Prada, R. 2008. "Game mechanics for cooperative games". In *Actas da conferência ZO. Digit. Games 2008*, 73-80, Porto, Portugal: Universidade do Minho.
- Seif El-Nasr, M., Aghabeigi, B., Milam, D., Erfani, M., Lameman, B., Maygoli, H., and Mah, S. 2010. "Understanding and evaluating cooperative games". In *Proceeding of CHI'10*, ACM, New York, NY, 253–262.
- Siu, K., Zook, A., and Riedl, M. O. 2014. "Collaboration versus competition: Design and evaluation of mechanics for games with a purpose". In *Proceedings of FDG*, 10, 14-22.
- Spawforth, C. and Millard, D.E. 2017. "A framework for multi-participant narratives based on multiplayer game interactions". In *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, 150-162, Springer, Cham.
- Shoshani, A. and Krauskopf, M. 2021. "The Fortnite social paradox: The effects of violent-cooperative multi-player video games on children's basic psychological needs and prosocial behavior", *Computers in Human Behavior*, 116.
- Spokes, M. 2017, "'War... War Never Changes': Exploring Explicit and Implicit Encounters with Death in a Post-Apocalyptic Gameworld", *Mortality*, 23: 135–50.
- Stenros, J., Paavilainen, J., and Ma"yra", F. 2009. "The many faces of sociability and social play in games". In *Proceedings of the 13th International MindTrek Conference: Everyday Life in the Ubiquitous Era*, 82–89, New York, NY: ACM.
- Toups, Z.O., Hammer, J., Hamilton, W.A., Jarrah, A., Graves, W., and Garretson, O. 2014. "A framework for cooperative communication game mechanics from grounded theory". In *Proceedings of The First ACM SIGCHI Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 19-21 October 2014. New York: ACM Press, 257-266.
- Turkle, S. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York: Basic Books.
- Velez, J. A., Mahood, C., Ewoldsen, D. R., & Moyer-Guse, E. 2014. "Ingroup versus outgroup conflict in the context of violent video game play: The effect of cooperation on increased helping and decreased aggression". *Communication Research*, 41(5), 607-626. doi:10.1177/0093650212456202
- Winn, B. M. and Fisher, J. W. 2004. "Design of communication, competition, and collaboration in online games". In *Dipresentasikan dalam computer game technology conference*. Toronto, Canada.[
- Yar, M. 2015. *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order*. London: Palgrave.
- Zagal, J. P., Nussbaum, M., and Rosas, R. 2000. "A model to support the design of multiplayer games". *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments*, 9(5), 448-462.
- Famitsu. 2019. "Long-Distance Empathy: An Interview with Hideo Kojima About DEATH STRANDING". Retrieved from: <https://www.famitsu.com/news/201911/02185866.html>
- Gault, M. 2019. "We're Not Thinking About Others.' What Hideo Kojima Wants You to Learn From Death Stranding". Retrieved from <https://time.com/5722226/hideo-kojima-death-stranding/>
- Isaac, A. 2018. "Ashen Interview: Xbox One Exclusivity, Multiplayer, Combat And More Discussed". *Gaming Bolt*. Retrieved from <https://gamingbolt.com/ashen-interview-xbox-one-exclusivity-multiplayer-combat-and-more-discussed>
- Johnson, S. 2009. "Analysis: Asynchronicity in game design". *Gamasutra*. Retrieved from https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115254/Analysis_Asynchonicity_In_Game_Design.php
- Kunzelman, C. 2019. "Death Stranding's hero is just a side character", *Vice*. Retrieved from: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ne88g7/death-strandings-hero-is-just-a-side-character
- McNulty, T. 2020. "Death Stranding Is More Relevant Now Than Ever". *CBR*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbr.com/death-stranding-more-relevant-now/>
- MacDonald, K. 2010. "Souls Survivor. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki discusses the origins and ideology behind From Software's masterpiece". *Eurogamer*. Retrieved from <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/souls-survivor?page=3>
- Outlaw, J. 2020. "Asynchronous Collaboration is Motivating: The Positive Social Experience of Death Stranding". *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@jessica.outlaw/asynchronous-collaboration-is-motivating-the-positive-social-experience-of-death-stranding-5a2a5d2692fd>
- Sliva, M. 2021. "Death Stranding Is the Defining Game of 2020 (Despite Releasing in 2019)", *Escapist Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/v2/death-stranding-is-the-defining-game-of-2020-despite-releasing-in-2019/>
- Smith, E. 2012. "A personal journey: Jenova Chen's goals for games". *Gamasutra*. Retrieved from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/170547/a_personal_journey_jenova_chens.php
- Valve. 2021a. Steam Community. Retrieved from <https://steamcommunity.com/stats/Dishonored/achievements>
- Valve. 2021b. Steam Community. Retrieved from <https://steamcommunity.com/stats/403640/achievements>

WEB REFERENCES

- Kojima, H. [@hideo_kojima_en]. (2019a, June 5). As I'm getting similar questions so I shall re-post. DS is not a stealth game. Could move subjectively but not a PFS shooting game either. By incorporating with the concept of connection(strand), it's totally brand new genre called action game/strand game(social strand system). [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN/status/1136074622711975936
- Kojima, H. [@hideo_kojima_en]. (2019b, June 6). The name of the new genre is not made by the creator but it comes after. I know that but I just like to name it as I did in my past titles. Calling it as Social Strand System is similar case when I called Tactical Espionage Action before it was categorized as Stealth Game. [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN/status/1136484766176333824