

16. GEOGRAPHICAL PLATFORMS, EMBODIED INFRASTRUCTURES: ON THE MOUNTAINS IN *DEATH STRANDING* (2019)¹

Daniel Reynolds

A vast mountain range bisects the map of the videogame *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019). Corresponding to the American Rockies, the range cuts from north to south across the post-apocalyptic “United Cities of America,” dividing the nation-state’s expansive Central Region from its narrower West. To advance through the game, players cross the former continental United States from the East, moving from around Washington, DC, to the Pacific Coast, before returning eastward for the game’s denouement. As is common in open-world video games, a map of the diegesis is also a spatial representation of its narrative possibilities (Jenkins 2004). In *Death Stranding*, the map further functions as a raised-relief representation of the game’s narration, which is closely tied to variations in the diegetic landscape. As players move toward the climactic events in the West, the game’s interactive challenges and its narrative and thematic development are modulated by, heightened by, and reflected in changes in the setting’s elevation, topography, and climate.

Moving through the narrative and across the continent, players retrace the trajectory of America’s colonial expansion, in the process exploring a landscape in which nationhood, the body of the citizen, and physical geography are conceptually mapped onto one another. The mountains *embody* their status as a high point in the game; themes of embodiment, extending from the environment to the characters to the game’s player, are crucial to *Death Stranding*. Protagonist Sam Porter Bridges traverses great distances on foot,

and the relationship between Sam's body and the terrain forms a thematic and interactive crux of the gameplay. As the landscape presents new challenges, the game gradually provides new equipment that permits Sam to navigate it more easily. During his travels, Sam establishes transportation infrastructure like roads, bridges, and ziplines that facilitate smooth movement across this previously difficult terrain. These interventions alter both Sam's relationship to the game world and the player's relationship to the game, highlighting how videogames function at the intersection of interactive embodiment and diegetic geography, where the technological and physiological specifics of hardware, software, player, and play meet and co-constitute one another. A videogame diegesis is a geographical platform, an embodiment of the software and hardware with which a player engages. A player's path-making in a game establishes embodied infrastructure that modulates relationships among bodies—those of players and those of in-game characters—and the geographical platforms they negotiate.

Death Stranding foregrounds these typically implicit properties of videogame play, nowhere more so than in its mountain region. In their resonances with videogame form and with practices of videogame play, the game's mountains provide insight into ways that mountains feature in broader sociocultural rhetorics of what already is (naturally) and what ought to be (culturally), culminating in the idea that a place, whether in expansionist rhetoric or in videogame design, is manifestly *for* a particular purpose. Throughout its forty or so hours of gameplay, *Death Stranding* progressively normativizes the relationships it establishes among embodiment, technology, geography, and nationhood. In the process, it exhibits a range of metaphoric and literal roles that mountains can play within interactive narratives and in virtual space, from emergent, novel gameplay challenges to rhetorical manifestations of that which is ostensibly established, prior, and immovable.

LANDSCAPES AND BODIES, PLATFORMS AND PLAYERS

When the landscape swells up in a game like *Death Stranding*, a platform (a flat form) becomes an obstacle. What would otherwise be the horizontal surfaces on which a character could stand become navigational challenges and vertical barriers, and they thus come into increased visibility while maintaining topographic continuity with the flatter landscape that surrounds them.

Though we may be inclined to regard them as colossal objects in their own right, mountains are really articulations of the ground, neither separate from it nor embellishments to it. They thus belie the conventional contrast of figure (in this case, mountain) vs. ground (in this case, well, ground). John Dewey employs this continuity as a metaphor for encounters with artworks, urging the restoration of

continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish. (Dewey [1934] 2005, 2)

While Dewey's topic is the theorization of aesthetic experience, his metaphor requires a particular characterization of mountains and their study. A mountain is a "manifest" operation of the earth, an aspect of what the earth is and what it does. Art and artistic experience, likewise, are not separate from other phenomena and forms of experience but are instead continuous with the rest of the world and with the broader range of human activities.

Videogame mountains are grounded not only in the diegetic earth, but in the software and hardware underpinnings that make videogame diegeses possible. Videogame mountains, in other words, are videogame platforms in one of their manifest operations. The mountains of *Death Stranding* in particular make evident the continuity among overlapping diegetic, technological, and cultural platforms at play in videogames. "Platform" is a multivalent term, and it would be a mistake to treat its various senses as discrete from one another (Reynolds 2019, 97–121). "In common parlance," write Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal, "a platform is something you build on. Rather than a completed structure in its own right, it provides a base or foundation upon which people can build. But the openness of platforms to being built on varies widely" (2012, 126). This is a versatile framework for understanding platforms as simultaneously physical, conceptual, procedural, and socio-cultural formations. When Sam builds structures on the mountains, he uses the mountains as physical platforms; his building is constrained by their topography even as it expands their affordances. A high peak may be difficult to climb but might provide a direct line of sight and thus be an ideal site for a zipline which, once installed, makes the peak's daunting elevation an asset rather than a hindrance. The resulting opportunity for faster travel is made possible by the platform of the zipline *and* the mountain in combination with one another. These forms of infrastructure transform the diegesis as a narrative space, altering both a player's embodied relationship to the game and Sam's bodily presence in his environment.

Death Stranding foregrounds Sam's body within a largely depopulated landscape. The game is played in third-person perspective, and Sam is on-screen most of the time. As he travels, players are given the option to sit and rest, to

have Sam massage his aching shoulders, and occasionally to visit a restorative hot spring. Sam's actions, movements, and perceptions are enactively foregrounded by a complex and sometimes confounding control scheme, and his physical vulnerability is made visual and haptic through dramatic and dangerous, though often visually slapstick, falls that he experiences while attempting to negotiate the world. Sam's archetypal masculinity is complicated by a female fetus that he carries in a life-support system on his chest. The game's partial deviation from tropes of videogame masculinity connects Sam to what Soraya Murray has called "an image of masculinity that mobilises a moral high ground of victimisation and alienation within the nation," as exemplified by the character Joel in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), another game in which a middle-aged male protagonist travels westward across a devastated United States while escorting a younger female character in service of a supposedly socially restorative mission (Murray 2019, 107). As Melissa Kagen has shown, the characters of Sam and Joel both function as "postapocalyptic cowboy" figures whose "stories obfuscate the actual historical apocalypses that occurred for native peoples around the globe after the invasion of White Europeans" (Kagen 2022, 128).

In a corresponding geographic obfuscation, the in-game map of *Death Stranding* matches the boundaries of the present-day continental United States. It is as if, even after an apocalypse, cultural understanding of the proper extension of the nation is a given. However, the playable gamespace diverges from the country that serves as its model. It is smaller and distorted, with some regions inaccessible and others compressed to a more navigable scale. As Dia Lacina notes, its ecological and topographic details are profoundly unlike those of the real United States, with ambiguous implications and destabilizing effects for players that open a range of possible allegorical interpretations (Lacina 2020). The game functions as an imaginary United States, a setting for a thematic exploration of technology, embodiment, and an historical ethos of expansion undertaken with the goal of establishing a nation stretching across the land "from sea to shining sea."

The song "America the Beautiful," source of this turn of phrase, maps ordained nationhood and God's grace onto the natural features of the country—mountains and plains, grain and fruit—naturalizing the conquest and violence that established "alabaster cities" ostensibly "undimmed by human tears." Significantly, "America the Beautiful" had its origins as a mountain poem. It was composed by Professor Katherine Lee Bates of Wellesley College, Massachusetts, who traveled west to Colorado, where the ground swells upward and the Great Plains transition into the Rocky Mountains, and it was inspired by the view of the plains from Pikes Peak, the highest summit of the region. "No one can have had a more directly continental American inspiration," writes Sylvester Baxter, citing "the panorama of American landscape

unrolled in the long journey from the sea, and across the prairies and plains, to its culmination on the mountain heights” (Baxter 1918, 428).

In and out of videogames, mountains function as platforms for sociocultural meaning. The Rocky Mountains, in particular, played a symbolic role in the nineteenth-century ethos of Manifest Destiny, which held that white colonial settlers were fated to spread across the breadth of the North American continent. The real-world Rockies were cited as the last major geographical obstacle to Manifest Destiny, as when expansionist politician Thomas H. Benton wrote in 1818 that “[I]n a few years the Rocky Mountains will be passed, and the ‘children of Adam’ will have completed the circumambulation of the globe, by marching to the West until they arrive at the Pacific Ocean” (quoted in Smith 1947, 378–79). This ambulation of the mountains, and the transportation and communications infrastructure that attended it, were instrumental in the genocide and displacement of the continent’s Indigenous inhabitants and to the appropriation of land and resources that characterized the westward expansion. A rhetorical link between conquest, colonization, and mountaineering, as Caroline Schaumann writes, “helped develop a sense of place and pride in North American identity predicated on driving indigenous populations from their homes and erasing their histories” (Schaumann 2020, 234). Open-world videogames, as Ashlee Bird writes, “take on the narrative of Manifest Destiny” when they depict land as something “to be moved through, erased, and reshaped for the purposes of the ‘progression’ of civilisation and its people” (Bird 2021, 249). In its narrative, *Death Stranding* interrogates the myth of a rugged individualist—prototypically white, cismale, and able-bodied—whose acts of bravery and kindness, as he traverses the wilderness and scales the mountains, serve to extend and unify the nation under a common, and ostensibly higher, cause. The connection between Sam’s mission and America’s historical expansion has prompted commentary on its implications for interrelated topics including Indigenousness, colonialism, ecology, gender, and contemporary politics (Lacina 2020; Kagen 2022; Jayemanne et al. 2022; Green 2022).

Landscape may find “culmination on the mountain heights,” as Baxter puts it, but what lies beyond the land? In *Death Stranding*’s supernatural lore, a shoreline can represent both the limits of a landmass and the limits of life. “The Beach” is the name of a transitional space one enters upon dying; beyond this strand is the world of the dead. Oceanic death suffuses the game. Wraithlike creatures stranded in the world of the living are called “Beached Things” (BTs). As Amy Green writes, a motif of dead whales “elicits ... a sense of biological ruin” throughout the game (Green 2022, 48). Precipitation has become dangerous; now called “timefall,” rain accelerates the aging and deterioration of anything it touches. Dying is figured as leaving a body, leaving dry land, and leaving a nation. If Sam dies, his soul is transported to an aquatic

version of his current location, called “The Seam,” in which it can swim back into his body and re-emerge, on land, into his life. Unlike the rest of the game, these sequences are played in a disembodied first-person perspective, so that players must locate and re-enter Sam’s physical body from without. This process is known as “repatriation.” Via his revival, Sam is restored to citizenship within his body, within the nation, and within life itself. Nationhood is existential in *Death Stranding*; the shoreline is the limit of existence, and the mountains are its highest point. Manifest Destiny, *Death Stranding* reminds us, is not merely a horizontal proposition.

GEO-GRAPHICS AND GEO-LOGICS

If mountains have loomed over the western American landscape in physical fact and in national mythmaking, they have likewise been a persistent environmental presence in videogames throughout the medium’s history. Many early videogames played out in abstract space, as in the tic-tac-toe simulator *OXO* (Alexander Douglas, 1952), or in the abstraction of outer space, as in *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962). When games became terrestrial, gameplay became geographical and geological and thus geo-graphical and geo-logical, grounded in representations of earthly structures, limits, and affordances. The text-based *Colossal Cave Adventure* (designed by Will Crowther and further developed by Don Woods, 1976) helped to establish an intertwining of spatial logic, interactive possibility, and narrative progression that characterizes many videogames of the decades since. The game’s descriptions of its settings exemplify how spatial representation in videogames—often defined pragmatically by a delineation of what is navigable and what is not—intertwines the graphic (or, in this case, the textual) and the geographic.

As Nick Montfort notes, the world of *Adventure* “is described much as one would expect a caver to describe it ... the emphasis is on where there is access for further travel” (Montfort 2003, 88). Space, including geological formations, defines the potential for motion, and motion is progress: to the next challenge, through the narrative, or toward a goal. Laine Nooney proposes “speleology” as a metaphor for videogame historiography, a “phenomenologically imprecise” feeling-through of history that acknowledges the “inability to apprehend the spatial field in its wholeness” in pursuit of a methodology that acknowledges that “gender is an *infrastructure* that profoundly affects who has access to what kinds of historical possibilities at a specific moment in time and space” (Nooney 2013). Following Nooney, Aubrey Anable writes that “in a cave, our access is limited by the contours and qualities of the space, the contours and qualities of our bodies, and the affordances of the technologies at hand” (Anable 2018, 3). In videogame studies, Anable argues, “we must hold on to the body, its corporeal and

discursive properties, and its affordances and limitations” (2018, 36). Caves are, of course, an ancient metaphor for partial knowledge. In their pragmatic and embodied use of the figure of the cave in videogame studies, the accounts of Montfort, Nooney, and Anable diverge from Plato’s model of the cave as a space of illusion and show how an embodied understanding of spelunking is instructive for characterizing experience and perception in the wider world. These accounts are more concerned with the embodied enactive experience of *a* cave than the implications of *the* cave. Like Dewey’s mountains, caves are neither discrete entities nor abstract essences; they are part and participant in the landscapes with which they are continuous and the experiences to which they contribute.

Mountains themselves appear on the early horizons of videogame history. *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980), among the first games played in a first-person perspective, uses distant mountains to convey scale and proportion. In the two-dimensional gamespace of *Moon Patrol* (Irem 1982), inaccessible background mountains create parallax effects and lend a sense of diegetic depth. Impassable mountains can establish the boundaries of a gamespace, as in *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1987) and many other games. A distant peak might serve as a destination or a point of navigational reference; in *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), players spend the game moving toward, and then ascending, a mysterious mountain. Climbable mountains often present interactive challenges, as in *Journey*, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017), *Celeste* (Extremely OK Games, 2018), and *Death Stranding*. In their immense complexity, mountains can serve as a showcase for what games and consoles can do; the second-generation PlayStation virtual-reality headset was released alongside the prestige mountain-climbing title *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2023).

Sascha Pöhlmann characterizes videogame mountains as simultaneously provocative and elusive presences that share with mountains outside of games a quality of “thereness.” This is a quality “that both challenges and rejects human interaction,” highlighted by games that “draw on the cultural imagination of the thereness of mountains to take their players to the limits of interactivity within a medium that is fundamentally defined by it” (Pöhlmann 2021, 217). Pöhlmann’s emphasis on the *limits* of interactivity is fitting not only for consideration of mountains in videogames but for consideration of videogame play itself. While videogames are often equated with interactivity, videogame play is also characterized by the modulation of what is interactive and what is not—what the player can or cannot manipulate, access, and employ at a given time. As Ian Bogost writes, this is fundamental to what play and games are: “an invitation to do *only* what the system allows . . . Games are built out of constraints, and play arises from limitations” (Bogost 2016, 138). Bogost’s characterization of the constraint systems of games resonates with the quality

of being “there” in Pöhlmann’s terms—like mountains, games simultaneously invite and constrain presence, comprehension, and interaction.

The massive scale of *Death Stranding*’s landscape, and that of the mountains as elements of it, underscores the resonant therenesses of both games and mountains. Alva Nöe classes *experiential* forms of artwork that engage with perceptual experience as “a temporally extended process of exploration of the environment on the part of an embodied animal” (Nöe 2000, 128). Nöe focuses on artworks like large-scale sculptures that can be explored by moving through and around them, but these core qualities would seem to apply also to experiences of videogames, and to experiences of mountains. These may be exceptional as experiences, but they are not exceptions to experience; being “refined” or “intensified,” in Dewey’s terms, does not make them discontinuous with experience more broadly.

An environmental understanding of perception, and a sense of how thereness participates in experience, points to a blurring of distinctions between what is regarded as external and what is internal either to experience (perceptual, conceptual, subjective) or to media (textual, virtual, diegetic). In videogames and across media, distinctions between what is “inside” and “outside” of a media text erect divisions between the diegetic and the extradiegetic, narrative and “real” experience, media use, and everyday life. However, the relational dynamics of engagement with videogames invite us to treat this nominal inside and outside as constituent parts, components of a larger dynamic characterized by continuity rather than division (Reynolds 2019). A player’s exploration of a game world becomes a simultaneous inquiry into a diegesis and into the hardware and software platforms that structure it, carried out through embodied, physical tasks of gameplay. This exploration is never unidirectional but mutual and reflexive. Nor is it ever neutral; we change the world, and in the process we change. This change is constant, even as we, and as the features of the world, maintain a certain stasis for the duration of our existence. Real mountains come and go—in fact, they never stop doing so as they “continually form and deform all over the globe” (Ireton & Schaumann 2012, 1). A mountain is emblematic of the simultaneity of stasis and change, at once monumental and immovable *and* a signifier of the dynamism of the ground itself—not unlike a videogame, which only exists because of an ongoing process among a player and a program, but which also relies on a previous stable substrate, a platform that allows it to take form.

DEATH STRANDING: EXPLORATION AS GAMEPLAY

The story of *Death Stranding* is so complex and convoluted that I find it nearly impossible to summarize, an insurmountable edifice of speculative science fiction, supernatural allegory, and wordplay (for instance, the term “strand”

permeates the game as a verb, a proper name, several homonymic nouns, and an organizing metaphor). In very broad strokes, the game is about Sam Porter Bridges, a porter who delivers goods and information to the isolated inhabitants of the United Cities of America. He is the adopted child of Bridget Strand, who was President of the United States at the time of a catastrophe called “Death Stranding,” which established a connection between the worlds of the living and the dead, caused a series of devastating explosions, and disrupted communications networks. As Bridget dies near the beginning of the game, she pleads with Sam to travel west, reconnect the nation, and locate his sister, Amelie. In one of the game’s many narrative convolutions, it is eventually revealed that Amelie and Bridget are two aspects of the same entity, respectively representing a soul and a body.

Technology, the supernatural, and the body are intertwined throughout *Death Stranding*. On his chest, Sam carries a “Bridge Baby” (or BB), a fetus who connects Sam to the world of the dead. Sam names her Lou. Other than Lou, Sam spends most of the game alone. When he encounters others, he usually only meets holographic projections of survivalists who prefer to stay hidden in underground bunkers. The non-player characters’ alienation from Sam, and from one another, is incrementally bridged as Sam ports cargo, delivers information, and establishes infrastructure. This is sometimes represented as an interpersonal endeavor, as when he helps to reunite an estranged couple, but it is more often in service of reestablishing industrial and governmental presence by bringing locations online to the “Chiral Network,” a kind of supernatural internet. As he makes deliveries to the scattered doomsday preppers, he connects their bunkers to the growing network.

The game is structured around a long series of deliveries. Some are required to advance the storyline, introducing Sam to new areas and prompting new narrative developments, while optional deliveries flesh out the game’s world and extend the gameplay. At the outset of a delivery, Sam collects cargo and straps it to his body, loads it into his oversized backpack, carries it by hand, or loads it onto a vehicle. The cargo presents a challenge even before Sam sets out on a delivery. It is beneficial to be careful about the alignment, positioning, and accessibility of each object that Sam carries. The game tracks weight and balance precisely, and a heavy or unbalanced load might slow Sam down or upset his equilibrium. A player is responsible not only for Sam’s intentional motion but also for his sense of balance. *Death Stranding* has an unusual play mechanic in which the trigger buttons at the top corners of the controller are used to adjust Sam’s balance and to grip the straps of his backpack and steady the shifting load.² Balancing a large delivery is challenging even on level terrain. In hills and snowy mountains, where surfaces are uneven and traction can be bad, a misplaced step can send Sam tumbling, injuring or killing him and scattering his possessions and cargo. New equipment and infrastructure

alter Sam's relationship to the inhospitable environment and can make it safer, more navigable, and even restorative. This is sometimes achieved through gear that adorns and extends Sam's body, whether futuristic enhancements like robotic exoskeletons or more pedestrian equipment like hiking boots. Other technologies to navigate the terrain include ropes, ladders, roads, bridges, and ziplines that allow Sam to traverse distances with newfound disregard for elevation and topography, as well as shelters where he can rest and restock his supplies.

While *Death Stranding* can be played as a single-player adventure game, it is at its most fully realized in its online mode. Unlike online multiplayer games in which players collaborate or compete synchronously, *Death Stranding* allows tools, vehicles, and infrastructure that players create to be shared asynchronously with others playing the game. Structures that other players have left in the landscape will sometimes appear in your game, and yours in theirs, so that Sam might be in a remote region and come across a ladder that helps him to climb out of a ravine, or he might climb a rise to discover a shelter built by another player. In addition to its practical utility in the moment, this feature creates a sense of interpersonal, asynchronous collaboration and connection—and often of gratitude—even as the gameplay is still largely taken up in solitary single-player exploration.

The asynchronous multiplayer aspect of *Death Stranding* introduces new diegetic technologies for a particular player's version of Sam to employ in their game; it is also itself an articulation of technology, of networking among players' consoles, that is felt out by players as a particular variety of platform for videogame play. The game's diegetic technologies—ziplines, exoskeletons, vehicles, ladders—straighten paths of motion and smooth bumpy trajectories without flattening the landscape itself. They modulate Sam's relationship to the in-world geographical platform, altering its possibilities, and they mirror the entangled and mutually constitutive relationships among players, game, and platform. In the game's online mode, write Jayemanne et al., "traversal is not treated as a sovereign right of neocolonial conquest wielded by 'the player' ... but instead facilitated by the connection to an ad hoc community and the infrastructure it maintains" (Jayemanne, Keogh, & Abraham 2022, 223). Seen as collective action, *Death Stranding*'s gameplay comes further into focus as a reminder that exploration and path-making are never neutral acts. Sam's infrastructural interventions in the environment come to look more like repurposing the enactive landscape in his own image.

As the game proceeds, the immediate enactive challenges of its gameplay recede. Ambulation becomes simpler, paths through the world more linear, and the topography's inherent difficulties more manageable on a moment-to-moment basis. Simultaneously, variations in landscape, as exemplified by the mountains, emerge as sites of ongoing challenges to players. As Sam

scales up the mountains, the game scales up its challenges, moving from local enactive contingencies to engagement with varieties of vast spatio-temporal thereness like those identified by Pöhlmann. Players, and Sam, become attuned to the immediate enactive challenges of the game's world, and this process gradually forecloses thematic ambiguities and possibilities for more radical or experimental gameplay forms. Interactively, thematically, and narratively, progress through *Death Stranding* entails the reestablishment of prior norms of gameplay, identity, and conceptions of nationhood. This normative process pertains to Sam's bodily relationship with the game world, and to that of the player as well.

Writing about videogames in the early 1980s, David Sudnow conceives of games as worlds and gameplay as a pilgrimage of sorts, as an act of presence, of inhabitation, and of negotiation. The development of the player's skilled relationship with the game transforms the gamespace in scale and density: "Of course size is relative, the more competent you become, the more these lights take on a sort of environmental density and you're pulled by the fingertips onto a full-scale playing field whose dimensions aren't found on rulers" (Sudnow 1983, 33). Sudnow captures the unavoidable centrality of the physical control interface to videogame play, but also the ambition that the game controller will become a conduit of sorts through which a player can access and navigate a game's "microworld." The bodily demands placed on videogame users are also shaped by the structures of the games themselves. Games encourage us to try to play them well, but to do so on *their* terms. As Sudnow puts it, "Sequences of events can be scheduled into readily mastered routines of progressive difficulty, and a program of timed transitions can be organised, *programming you*, in turn, at an economically desirable rate" (63). Programmers program the game to program you. This is a useful framework through which to consider *Death Stranding*, precisely because of how the game is often careful to construct a control interface that is *not* suited for the tempos and terrains of its world and is thus pointedly not readily mastered.

More recent videogame scholarship has examined how bodily relations to gameplay and affective relations to gamespaces are foundational to the experience of videogame play (Jayemanne 2017; Anable 2018; Keogh 2018; Reynolds 2019; Ruberg 2019). Emphasizing affective relations among bodies and gameplay, game worlds, and game technologies, Anable writes, helps to refocus videogame studies on "the complex interplay of bodies, hardware, code, aesthetics, affect, and cognition" (Anable 2018, 52). *Death Stranding's* unforgiving simulation of balance and proprioception means players must learn how to keep their avatar upright and able to walk before they are able to run, climb, and negotiate the environment. The game's enactive exploration is always at once bodily and environmental, but its focus shifts toward the latter as players gain facility with the former. Especially in its earlier stages,

Death Stranding draws on a trend in smaller-scale games that center and complicate players' relationships to the bodily motion of characters. *QWOP* (Bennet Foddy, 2008), *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios, 2013), and others undermine the unity of bodily motion felt in many games (Reynolds 2019, 60–62). Bo Ruberg outlines a genre of “body physics games,” including *QWOP*, that “[transform] the human into an uncooperative collection of moving parts” (Ruberg 2019, 105). In *QWOP*, players must individually articulate the character's calf and thigh muscles to make a racer run; most game sessions end with the character falling down. The game, as Darshana Jayemanne puts it, “denatures the vehicular relation between player and avatar” (Jayemanne 2017, 161). If *Death Stranding* feels like a body physics game at its outset, the attenuation of its immediate challenges can be seen as an incremental renaturing of the relationship among player, avatar, and environment.

As these relationships become more conventionally direct, so too do the larger-scale trajectories that Sam takes through the game's environment. Ruberg identifies “meandering” as an oppositional form of navigation in videogames, one suffused with “potential for queer movement” resistant to the normative, linear paths often encouraged by mainstream games (Ruberg 2020, 633–34). If the geographical platform of *Death Stranding* encourages nonlinear navigation at the game's beginning, by the game's end the accumulated built infrastructure primes the space for more linear, rapid, goal-driven motion. In a world nearly devoid of forests and trees, Sam increasingly misses the inclines for the ziplines. This normativization extends to Sam's presentation as a character. He is coded largely in keeping with what Murray calls a “traditional highly militarized masculine ideal of strength, resourcefulness, combat readiness, a competitive spirit, a penchant for violence, and dominance in the theatre of war” (Murray 2019, 103). However, from the Bridge Baby that he carries to his depiction as existentially vulnerable, noncombative, and at a disadvantage in navigating the game's topography, Sam initially diverges from historical hyper-masculine videogame archetypes. By the game's conclusion, though, Sam has vanquished threats, crossed mountains, traversed the continent, returned to the East, and established a new degree of independence from the United Cities government; ambiguities about his origin and identity have been resolved; the Bridge Baby is out of life support and cooing in Sam's arms, with Sam seemingly poised to assume a more conventional form of paternal guardianship; and once-treacherous paths through the game have been simplified and straightened by the infrastructure that he has established. Bumpy challenges to player control are smoothed, but at the expense of foregoing more radical thematic and interactive possibilities. The embodied infrastructure with which Sam alters the geographical platforms of the game world ultimately straightens not only Sam's paths through the mountains but *Death Stranding* itself. Sam's mission

is, at once, imperial and self-regulatory; it enacts the mountainous normative thereness of nationhood, masculinity, and gameplay. Especially in the game's online mode, the interactive straightening of the landscape becomes a form of highly structured consensus-building. In the process, the game becomes an effective, if ambiguous, meditation on how platforms, both technological and ideological, come into being and reinforce themselves.

CONCLUSION: MANIFEST OPERATIONS

As the most extreme examples of topographic variation in a game in which the very contour of the ground presents a challenge, the mountains in *Death Stranding* epitomize the intrinsic relationship between videogame landscapes and videogame technology. While this relationship remains implicit in many videogames, *Death Stranding* centers and foregrounds it, both interactively and narratively. As the game progresses and players modify and simplify their character's enactive relationship to the landscape, they make easier what was once difficult and linear what was once meandering. They do not flatten the landscape itself; they flatten their ways of relating to it. This process renders frictionless and predictable what was once tactile, intimate, and contingent. Through their explorations and interventions in the world of *Death Stranding*, players industrialize the landscape, transforming its natural spaces into conduits of goods and information, extending the governmental reach of the United Cities of America.

That government's conception of the extent of the nation is presented as predetermined, as preestablished, as a platform, and its borders on the game map never change. As with the historical ideology of Manifest Destiny, a belief in what must be, coupled with the resources and might to force change upon a landscape and the people who occupy it, fuses exploration to exploitation. The desired nation-to-be is imbued with the givenness of a mountain, a game, or a platform. *Death Stranding* prompts us to consider what it means to think of a nation as the earth in one of its manifest operations. In the game's post-apocalyptic landscape, America's plains may no longer bear fruit, and the amber grain may no longer wave, but the mountains remain as geographical platforms for narrative, for exploration, and for a conception of nationhood that precedes *Death Stranding* by centuries, even as it is rebooted each time a player starts a new game and Sam steps, unsteadily, west.

NOTES

1. This essay was supported by a University Research Committee grant from Emory University.
2. The descriptions of controls correspond to the Sony PlayStation 5 release of the game.

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