Delivering Packages in Apocalyptic Times:
Utopia and Collectives in *Death Stranding*

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Abstract

In his radical and provocative text *An American Utopia*, Fredric Jameson embarks on a search for the pivotal institution of contemporary society able to fulfill the role of vehicle for implementing revolutionary change, the first one being the post office. While he quickly moves on to examine other institutions, I believe it is worth staying with the profession of delivery man/woman a moment longer to consider its utopian potential. Interestingly, 2019 was marked by a highly anticipated game featuring an America faced with a potential apocalypse on the horizon, and who should be central to the utopian quest of reconnecting the disparate parts of the country into a unified whole but a delivery man? *Death Stranding* (2019), directed by famous videogame director Hideo Kojima, is a game about a divided America and isolated population which needs to be relinked to form a new collective entity in order to avoid total collapse and ultimately the end of the world. I thus take Jameson's text as a point of departure, in dialogue with *Death Stranding,* to argue that the delivery man/woman as a conceptual device allows for a reconfiguration of the relationships between the whole and its parts fundamental to the utopian project of imagining alternative collectives. I begin by revisiting Jameson and the need for a utopian political project in parallel with the setting and overarching narrative of *Death Stranding*. I proceed to explore the narrative and gameplay implications of building the protagonist around the profession of delivery man and its role in reconnecting the leftover parts of the country, in conjunction with the moment-to-moment experiences by the players. Finally, I conclude by problematizing Jameson's and *Death Stranding*'s struggle with existing within and thinking beyond America, and the space of the nation itself as the space for utopian possibilities.

Introduction – Utopia One Delivery at a Time

In his radical and provocative text *An American Utopia*, Fredric Jameson redefines what a utopian praxis can be by way of mobilizing the notion of dual power as a political program to transition out of capitalism. In order to do so, Jameson embarks on a search for the pivotal institution of contemporary society fitting to fulfill the role of vehicle for implementing revolutionary change. The first one up for consideration in this process is the post office (and therefore the profession of postman/woman or delivery man/woman) as it serves as a kind of savings bank (in Europe at least), could offer a parallel to the census, secure voting rights, and even provide an almost utopian experience of nature as well as a unique relationship to community. While the historical break caused by information technology pushes Jameson to move on to examining various other institutions, I believe it is worth

staying with the profession a moment longer to consider its utopian potential. While the present paper was conceived in early 2020, its relevance has coincidently only increased with the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 that continues to affect our everyday lives, most notably with the increase in delivery services and so on – not to mention the progressively chaotic political climate across the United-States that characterized the year 2020. Interestingly enough, and perhaps even prophetically, fall 2019 was marked by a highly anticipated game featuring an America faced with a potential apocalypse on the horizon, and who should be central to the utopian quest of reconnecting the disparate parts of the country into a unified whole but a delivery man? *Death Stranding* (2019), directed by famous videogame director Hideo Kojima, is a game about a divided America and isolated population which needs to be relinked to form a new collective entity in order to avoid total collapse and ultimately the end of the world. Moreover,

Kojima boasted that the game would be a pioneer in the emergence of a new genre he called "strand games," suggesting that the sense of community at the core of the narrative is also integrated at the level of gameplay through the relationship between gamers playing the game.

I thus take Jameson's text as a point of departure, in dialogue with *Death Stranding,* to argue that the delivery man/woman as a conceptual device allows for a reconfiguration of the relationships between the whole and its parts fundamental to the utopian project of imagining alternative collectives. Some may be skeptical of my emphasis on utopia in light of the seemingly dystopian setting of the game according to traditional categorizations. While it would be possible to present an exhaustive laundry list of what makes a work of fiction utopian instead of dystopian, ultimately, it is rather unproductive to linger on the details of what is "utopian" versus "dystopian," for it tends to emphasize a dead-end duality. The argument I make here is not that *Death Stranding* is a "utopic game" in the sense of its aesthetic, setting and so on, but instead that it is utopian in its politics, as well as its approach and contribution to theory. What I suggest is that the game engages with utopian theory and discourse in meaningful ways, especially for the purpose of rethinking collective formation. In order to do so, I begin by revisiting Jameson and the need for a utopian political project in parallel with the setting and overarching narrative of *Death Stranding*. I proceed to explore the narrative implications of building the protagonist around the profession of delivery man and its role in reconnecting, literally and figuratively, the leftover parts of the country as part of the game's political message about isolation and collective formation. I then move on from these purely narrative considerations to gameplay mechanics and their entanglements with moment-to-moment experiences by the players. Finally, I conclude by problematizing Jameson's and *Death Stranding*'s struggle with existing within and thinking beyond America, and the space of the nation itself as the space for utopian possibilities.

A Desire Called Utopia

There are many, or more likely countless, approaches one may employ to tackle the problem of collectives, all of which involve encountering long and tumultuous histories, intricate traditions, complex experiences and ever-changing material realities. There is thus most certainly no definite approach or perspective from which to embark on

this struggle to think collectives. In the present paper, I wish to recognize the opening for unexplored spaces, unimagined imaginaries, unconceived ideas about collectives and how they form and operate. Such possibilities can only emerge out of already encountered histories, ideas, experiences yet they also point to yet-to-be futures. This emphasis and determination to think beyond established forms of collectives in order to imagine new possibilities and unrealized potential is perhaps unsurprisingly informed by a utopian tradition of thought – imagining "better worlds" so to speak. Henri Lefebvre once said that "there is no theory without utopia" for otherwise, one would simply be content with what he currently sees, keeping his eyes on reality: "he is a realist …but he doesn't think!" (Lefebvre 2009, 178-179).

Thinking of alternatives to the structures of power that shape our current reality means, in a certain way, that one must imagine the end of the capitalist nation-state. Fredric Jameson hits the nail on the head when he declares that what is truly devastating about our current predicament is not the presence of an enemy, but rather the universal belief that all alternatives to capitalism have already been tested and proven impossible and that no other system is even conceivable at this point. As he further stated, it is actually easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. To reprise the words of Žižek: "What makes this task so difficult is that ideological dreams are not simply opposed to reality: they structure (what we experience as) reality. […] So it is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality; rather, reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams" (Žižek 2015, 19). Dreams have maintained a particular conceptual significance among utopian scholars. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch suggests that there are two different kinds of dreams, some which occur at night, and more importantly some that happen during the day, characterized by a conscious imagination of a better life – unlike the night-dream, the day-dream is not "a journey back into repressed experiences and their associations," but rather a journey forward allowing for "images of that which is not yet can be phantasied into life and into the world" (Bloch 1970, 86-87). Bloch explains how these "excessive" dreams of the future are inevitably influenced, or "touched" as he would put it, by their own time of "Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-Become," precisely because they are connected to the present through negation. To this day, scholars struggle with utopia. According to Ruth Levitas,

many of the problems in employing utopia as a method of producing scholarship stems from the absence of a clear definition of utopia separating its use in academic circles from the everyday usage of the word, a problem she sets to provide a solution to through a new conceptualization of utopia emphasizing a "desire for a better way of being" both realistic and unrealistic, inclusive and positive all at once (Levitas 2010, 4-5, 8). She further attempts to set the parameters for a clearly defined utopian method involving both "making explicit the kinds of society implied in existing political programmes and constructing alternatives" (Levitas 2013, xviii). But when it comes to contemporary contributions to thinking utopia, there is perhaps no more important contribution than that of Fredric Jameson.

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson builds on the existing utopian tradition of thought to offer his own approach on how to conceive alternate systems, based on "the dialectic of Identity and Difference" in the process of imagining and even realizing a new system radically different from the one we currently live in (Jameson 2005, xiii). Jameson notes how the utopian vocation is identified by an obsessive search for solution to all problems, "a solution so obvious and self-explanatory" that anyone would be able to grasp it without difficulty – the utopian remedy, as he calls it, must first and foremost be a negative one and "stand[s] as a clarion call to remove and to extirpate [the] specific root of all evil from which all the others spring" (Jameson 2005, 11-12). As such, Jameson warns against the tendency to conceive of utopia with positive expectations offering "visions of happy worlds, spaces of fulfillment and cooperation" and so on; this positivity characterizes liberal thought as Jameson reminds us, while utopian thought focuses primarily on eliminating the source of exploitation and suffering (Jameson 2005, 12).

That being said, Fredric Jameson has in recent years somewhat changed his approach and proposed a new utopian political program that fundamentally reconsiders existing institutions and the possibility that can come from reappropriating an existing institution in order to unleash its utopian potential and form an alternative collective. In *An American Utopia*, Jameson sheds some light on a renewed and controversial approach to praxis as a way to transition out of capitalism through the mobilization of "dual power" as a political program. He explains how in such a transitional moment, "power moves to the networks to which people turn for practical help and leadership on a daily basis," becoming in the process an alternate

government all the while without officially challenging the legal structure (Jameson 2016, 4). Noting the futility of relying on older forms of government and party structure (including left parties which seem, as he points out, to capitulate as soon as they take power), as well as the corruptibility and ineptitude of representative democracy, Jameson seeks the "rehabilitation of nationalization" and the replacement of traditional forms of government with "collective commitment" (Jameson 2016, 5-7).

The inevitable question then becomes: what could possibly assume the role of vehicle for implementing such revolutionary changes in a situation of dual power? The answer most certainly does not lie in business, religion, or labor unions according to Jameson, which leads him to consider the only subsystem left possessing the appropriate kind of potential: the Army. Suggesting the renationalization of the army by reintroducing the draft with the goal of transforming the present armed forces "back into [a] popular mass force," making the army "a vehicle for mass democracy rather than the representative kind" in the process (Jameson 2016, 28). While much can and should be said about this radical and even provocative approach, what interests me here is a prior step in Jameson's investigation, before he settles on the army as the core of his proposed utopian project.

When going through the list of institutions that could serve as vehicle for utopia, he notes that almost all have suffered the "debilitation endemic to late capitalism," before considering for a moment the post office. He highlights that the post office serves as a kind of savings bank in Europe, offering a parallel to the census with the potential to ensure voting rights, while simultaneously involving the distribution of retirement, pension, and Social Security checks. Furthermore, the post office mints money in the form of stamps, used to be an important source of employment and offers, according to Jameson, "a unique, even utopian, experience of nature as well as of urban space and an equally unique relationship to the community" (Jameson 2016, 15). Eventually however, he laments the historical break of information technology coming in to prevent imagined utopias centered on this institution from flourishing, before moving on until settling on the army. Jameson may quickly cast aside the post office as an institution, yet I believe there are further connections between the profession of postman/postwoman and utopia that deserve more attention, especially in light of recent events and contributions from popular culture, and of

course, more specifically in regard to the videogame *Death Stranding*.

One might notice somewhat of a jump here, from the post office as an institution to the postman/postwoman as an individual – there lies the crux of what is utopian. The reason Jameson must abandon the post office is specifically because it fails to meet the appropriate requirement as an institution. That is because, I believe, its utopian potential does not reside in its structural and institutional foundations, but rather in the experience of the act of delivering mail, which is the function of the individual down on the ground so to speak. Jameson hints at this potential when he considers for a brief moment the relationship between the person delivering the mail and nature as well as urban environments, and the particular sense of community that comes with this activity. It is specifically at this level, and not at the level of the institution, that utopia emerges in *Death Stranding*. The utopian intervention occurs form the bottom-up, not the other way around. The act of delivering packages and making connections is what builds the foundations of the institutions that come to exist at the top. As will become apparent as I dive into the details of the game, none of the grander goals of the remaining form of government is possible without the groundwork of main protagonist Sam Porter Bridges through his deliveries.

The Deliveryman of the Apocalypse

The present work situates itself in a growing scholarship invested in the utopian potential of videogames, although this specific area remains surprisingly niche as most tend to focus on the specifically dystopian settings and narratives of games. Such is the case of otherwise fascinating studies like Óliver Pérez-Latorre and Mercè Oliva's "Video Games, Dystopia, and Neoliberalism" which highlights the fundamental connection, and dissonance, between dystopian narrative and gameplay characterized by a neoliberal logic (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva 2019, 783). This idea is pushed even further by Luis Navarrete-Cardero and Juan Vargas-Iglesias's article "Can We Programme Utopia?" in which they examine the degree in which neoliberal discourse interferes with our understanding of utopia (Navarrete-Cardero and Vargas-Iglesias 2018, 782). Moreover, I would be remiss not to mention what is perhaps the most extensive exploration of utopia and videogames, the two edited volumes by J. Talmadge Wright, David G. Embrick and András Lukács, *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies* and *Social Exclusion, Power and Video Game Play*. The two volumes offer a plethora of contributions from scholars of the field with a wide range of methodologies, theoretical frameworks and so on, albeit not necessarily as narrowly focused on utopia as one might expect from the title of the first volume in particular. Nonetheless, Lauren Langman and András Lukcás's contribution stands out, the authors arguing that a critique of the domination of global capitalism must be informed by an understanding of the power and cultural logic behind people's "fascination with fantasy, the grotesque, and the transgressive," aiming to trace the historical process that shifted "the locus of self from work to leisure and play" as the "carnivalesque" became an integral part of capitalism (Langman and Lukács 2010, 59-60). That being said, this paper may differ in its theoretical foundations, overall aims and approach to the material, but it also positions itself within the same niche as the works mentioned above, striving to negotiate the relationship between utopia and videogames.

Videogames, like many other media, are composed of a complex web of narrative and interactive elements making it sometimes difficult to know where to begin. Whether in design or in academic discussions, the choice of this starting point will inevitably affect its interaction with the others. For example, if gameplay comes first for a developer, then that means that the technology such as the engine on which the game runs will be created to accommodate such gameplay mechanics and the means by which narrative is told, and vice-versa (Rouse 2001, 43-49). The same can be said of the scholar who considers videogames through similar starting points, or at least in terms of the primary function or potential of games. If narrative is deemed most important, then it is through that lens that analysis builds upon itself and becomes the driver of the gameplay and so on. It is because of the various interconnected elements that form videogames at their core that they should be considered within the context of intermedial networks and their relationships with other media (Fuchs and Thoss 2019, 3-5). Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine that videogames, by virtue of the ways in which they bring together technology, rules of play and fiction writing inherently consist in an amalgam of media. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin theorized the process by which any new media, digital or otherwise, inevitably consist in a "remediation" of already existing media – as such, all media are fundamentally defined by the multiplicity of media they incorporate, reiterate upon,

reproduce, reimagine, etc. It is with these foundations in mind that I approach the following discussion of *Death Stranding*.

The game is set in a post/middle/pre apocalypse America after a cataclysmic event known as Death Stranding. As a result of this event, a connection between the world of the living and the dead of sorts manifests itself through the presence of Beached Things (BTs), invisible creatures who seemingly roam the Earth. These creatures come from the "Beach" – a mental or perhaps even imaginary landscape thought to be unique to each individual. Each individual's Beach, which is typically visited during near-death experiences, serves as a representation of an individual's connection to the afterlife. The presence of BTs also gravely endangers human life on Earth as those who come in contact with the creatures suffer from necrosis, a condition that deteriorates and corrupts the body until it generates a giant explosion referred to as "voidout" within the game. The calamity of the Death stranding is also at the origin of a special rain called Timefall which ages everything it touches. These events lead to the collapse of America as we know it – people start distancing themselves in order to limit the risk of voidouts, often living underground to avoid the BTs roaming the surface. The survivors are spread across small colonies, and even individual shelters, isolated from one another.

This continuous isolation perpetuates the state of collapse, eventually leading to an increasingly complicated situation for producing and distributing supplies across the remaining settlements. As a result, the profession of deliveryman, or porter as it is referred to in the game, becomes particularly important. Because of the Death Stranding, it is now a very dangerous profession consisting in travelling the land to carry cargo unprotected by underground shelter, braving not only a treacherous landscape, but also Timefall and of course the presence of BTs. Under the umbrella of the company Bridges, porters perform various governmental functions on behalf of the United Cities of America (UCA), the last remaining government-like entity attempting to maintain a sense of national unity and the structures and institutions that would allow it to do so. Enter the main protagonist, Sam Porter Bridges, one such deliveryman with a complicated past. The player is introduced to Sam as he is on a mission to dispose of a body affected by necrosis that urgently needs to be carried to an incinerator before causing a voidout. This is also the player's introduction to Bridge Babies

(BBs), premature babies kept in containers for their ability to connect the living and the dead. Within the world of the game, porters can connect to BBs (similar to an actual baby in a womb) in order to gain the ability to sense the presence of BTs – this connection between the porter and his BB unsurprisingly has important gameplay ramifications. Sam utilizes a BB for the first time in this first mission and will proceed to do so throughout the game. Furthermore, the player eventually learns that Sam is affected by a condition known as DOOMS which grants various abilities based on its severity. He is also a "repatriate" meaning that he can come back from the dead so to speak – more specifically, travel back from the "Seam" between the world of the living and the Beach.

Much of the game consists in Sam travelling across what is left of the United-States to re-establish contact between the remaining settlements – bigger communities are known as "knots" while smaller ones form "nodes" – and re-build connections between them through the primary infrastructure of the "chiral network." Through a series of deliveries, Sam provides settlements with supplies and equipment, identifying routes and reforming the network that used to bring these settlements together before the collapse. This is the central "national" project to rebuild the UCA as a community, which heavily relies on the technology of the chiral network, Bridges' communication network that functions as a spiritual successor to the internet. The chiral network allows instantaneous data transfer and thus the shareability of information, knowledge and so on, an essential feature of the newly envisaged UCA. Once re-established, the network allows for schematics and blueprints to be shared and then easily converted into equipment and tools of various functions (from ladders to motorcycles and so on) through an advanced technology similar to 3D printing. Connected nodes are also capable of running "chiralgrams," syncing holograms of participating people into a single perceived space considerably improving communication. Each rebuilt connection between settlements is called a "strand," the hope being that these strands will cover all of the territory that used to comprise the United-States to re-form the UCA proper.

Beyond all the aforementioned jargon that contribute to the world-building of *Death Stranding*, the game's "message" or central focus is clear enough: in order to rebuild a collective, we must form solid and meaningful connections. By setting the game against a backdrop of

collapse in which isolated settlements are spread across the landscape and narratively situating the quest of the main protagonist (and therefore the player) to re-establish connections between them, *Death Stranding* formulates its understanding of collective in terms of parts and whole with a focus on the relationship between the two types of entities. The parts occupy space in the same way a physical body occupies a space, while the whole contributes to an abstract or "imagined" (to reprise the now seminal formulation of Benedict Anderson) space that encompasses all the parts. What is of particular interest to the game's mission statement, so to speak, is specifically the foundations of their relationship. In order to (re)build this relationship, who better to send than a deliveryman? As a porter, Sam fulfills both the narrative purpose of establishing connections between settlements through the chiral network, but he also serves the gameplay purpose of traversing physical space – in doing so, he operates on both the physical and abstract dimensions of space. His profession thus proves singularly meaningful to explore this core relationship of collective formation in relation to space. Moreover, Sam may seem like he is "going with the flow" yet he actually finds himself in the position of power, and it is rather the so-called authorities around him that depend on him. Being the only "man for the job," Sam's role is fundamental in the plan to reform the UCA. It is because he is a porter that is capable of traversing the land – not to mention his familial lineage linking him to the previous president – that he finds himself in such a position. The ability to bring a cargo to its destination is highly sought-after in this situation. In fact, only such a deliveryman of the apocalypse is suited for the task a hand to build strands that connect people together and reconfigure the collective in an alternate fashion, under new principles.

These narrative implications are certainly significant, but as anyone studying videogames knows, the narrative does not operate independently of gameplay, and *Death Stranding* is no different. Before release, many speculated as to what the game really was: what would the player actually do and in what genre would it fall? According to director Kojima Hideo, *Death Stranding* was to be part of an entirely new genre of games. Responding to inquiries on Twitter, Kojima specified months before release: "By incorporating with the concept of connection (strand), it's [a] totally brand-new genre called action game/strand game (social strand system)" (Kojima 2019). Of course, this only

further heightened speculations on social media, as enthusiasts wondered what the meaning of a "strand game" was. This level of anticipation and hype could only lead to disappointment for many as some fans and critics were not particularly impressed by this newly established strand game, which ultimately mostly refers to the game's specific brand of asynchronous multiplayer experience. Indeed, many games have incorporated various forms of asynchronous multiplayer over the years, making the function itself something that is perhaps not so new after all, yet *Death Stranding* does differentiate itself in a few significant ways, not the least of which in how narrative and gameplay are intertwined.

Fundamentally a single player game, *Death Stranding* provides optional online multiplayer that considerably alters one's experience with the game. For one, the multiplayer affects the environment and the world first and foremost, without any direct interaction with other players. Because Sam's mission consists primarily in delivering packages by travelling treacherous terrain, one of the main gameplay hooks consists in preparing for such trips with the appropriate equipment while ensuring that the cargo remains in prime condition. The player is faced with mountains and rivers that can be crossed with the help of ladders, ropes, and so on. As the game progresses, the player will also accumulate materials to build bridges and roads as well. Where the game truly shines is in the way it puts together players within a server, and each player's action – such as putting a ladder to traverse a mountain path, or rebuilding a road to allow vehicle to easily drive through the terrain – affects the world of other players within this server as long as they have re-established the chiral network in that specific region. This means that if another player builds a bridge, you might then see this bridge in your own game, allowing you to cross a ravine that would have been much more difficult to conquer otherwise. There is nothing quite like the experience of being out of resources and facing treacherous terrain during Timefall, about to lose your cargo, only to find a ladder, rope, vehicle or shelter that saves the day. There is an important statement in the fact that the online interaction/connection or strands being built can only be positive and useful to the other – there is no concrete way to negatively affect the experience of others as the experience consists only in providing help through equipment, structures, as well as signposts to alert others of various dangers (such as BTs). Furthermore, the game also accounts for the possible clutter such a system

could create with everyone building structures as Timefall eventually washes away bridges, roads and so on, bringing narrative and gameplay together in surprising ways. In bridging narrative and gameplay, one could even say that *Death Stranding* also bridges reality and fiction.

In *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul proposes that videogames are primarily based on the two inseparable aspects of real rules and fictional worlds. Videogames are "real" in the sense that the player must interact with a set of established rules that dictate his/her experience, and they are fiction in the sense that the worlds in which the player's avatar exist and interact are imagined fictional worlds (Juul 2005, 1). As he further adds, this interaction between real rules and fictional worlds is present "in the design of the games themselves; in the way we perceive and use games; and in the way we discuss games" (Juul 2005, 2). *Death Stranding*, like other videogames with online multiplayer experiences, takes full advantage of this interrelation between the fictional world and the rules of its gameplay. Beyond the narrative itself, the world of *Death Stranding* provides the space of this interaction and the basis for a whole different kind of narrative, that of a player's experience and interaction with a world transformed by the intervention of other players within their own world. The game bridges the gaps between these individualized isolated worlds by bringing them together in partial segmented ways.

What define the possible interventions are of course a set of rules. These rules however should not be understood in the sense of limitations, as they are also very much generative of potential actions. *Death Stranding* does not limit the intervention of players to helpful actions, but rather provides the possibility to positively affect one's environment while simultaneously transforming that of others in ways that generate empathy and gratification – another aspect worth consideration is how players can "like" any structure they encounter within the world, similar to liking a post on social media. If rules are the foundation of the real, then we must liberate them from the very notion of limitations in favor of a multiplicity and openness that produces new possibilities. That is, rules in the sense of enablers of further possibilities, generative instead of constrictive. It is in this vein that Juul speaks of fictional worlds in relation to rules, when he refers not to narrative or storytelling but rather to the worlds in which the player exist within the game, and more specifically how games cue players into imagining worlds. More importantly, Juul specifies that all fictional worlds are incomplete, as "no

fiction exists that completely specifies all aspects of a fictional world" (Juul 2005, 122). This incompleteness means that fictional worlds are therefore possible worlds. The player is free to imagine the entirety of the unrepresented portions and elements of the worlds that form within a particular game. What *Death Stranding*'s narrative and world offer is thus this incompleteness, one that presents and represents an America in collapse and a playful landscape that allows the player to not only imagine what lies beyond, but actually very much become part of a collective that builds strands through mutual aid. The game is a testament to the importance of meaningful connections and coming-togetherness of collectives. *Death Stranding* thus plays with "reality" and "fiction" by providing the player the opportunity to participate in a collective based on new criteria. Reality and fiction are in constant dialogue with one another; they inform and teach one another. There lies their utopian potential. I should reiterate that the "setting" of the game, which would typically be considered "dystopian" in the conventional sense of the term, is not itself the crux of the game's relationship to utopia. It is rather the interplay of narrative storytelling and gameplay instances dedicated to the reconfiguration of collective formation that ties *Death Stranding* to utopia.

Utopia beyond the Nation-State

One may have noticed that *Death Stranding* and Jameson's *An American Utopia* alike both ground their vision of the nation-state to the United-States, reflecting an intricate relationship between utopia, collectives and space. As such, it is worth taking some time to consider the role of space and how both *Death Stranding* and *An American Utopia* struggle with the nation-state and space in meaningful ways. Lefebvre suggests that the state binds itself to space in a relation that involves the production of a physical space (national territory), a social space (the state itself), and a mental space (representations of the state) (Lefebvre 2009, 224-225). Of primary importance is the idea that the state and the spaces it occupies are mutually constitutive, and understanding this relationship requires us to pay particular attention to "the lived and the body," that is from a space occupied by an "organic, living, and thinking being" (Lefebvre 2009, 229). According to Lefebvre, "each living body *is* space and *has* its space; it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (Lefebvre 1991, 170). Spaces and bodies are however dominated and appropriated, and the resulting

dispossession is rooted in the interrelationship between capitalism and state. David Harvey further emphasizes the way in which utopias "get perverted" from their initial noble objectives because they must inevitably compromise with the social processes they are meant to control – through this negotiation, they lose their ideal character and often produce the opposite result than those intended (Harvey 2000, 179-180). As such, the task at hand is to define an alternative – a "spatiotemporal utopianism" in the words of Harvey – that is "rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical developments" (Harvey 2000, 196).

Similarly concerned with space, Jameson notes a dialectic whereby the seeming weakening of the nation-state as a dominant structure of power gives rise to new reorganizations of binary oppositions in the form of the global and the local, an "idiotic formula" according to Jameson which has nonetheless achieve widespread success – within this dialectic, the "global becomes unimaginable, while the local becomes unthinkable" (Jameson 2016, 13). In what is somewhat the opposite argument Harvey has made for years regarding the limited consideration for space in scholarship, Jameson suggests that there is a preponderance of space and suppression of time. In order to appropriately consider both time and space, he deliberately reduces his framework to the American context to reformulate the question of space. Furthermore, he claims that the unique feature of American space – non-national reality – is a historical construction of the American Constitution (Jameson 2016, 15). As such, the utopian project/program Jameson proposes falls under the triple problematic of globalization, space, and federalism. When conceiving a utopian alternative of collective formation, one thus inevitably has to meticulously consider its relationship to space.

Much could be said about *Death Stranding*'s use of space gameplay-wise, the game being primarily about struggling with terrain and the previously mentioned help provided by other players in conquering this terrain through various tools and structures. It is rather the broader narrative conceptualization of space which I would like to consider first however. By limiting its framework to the United-States, or at least what is left of it, and presenting a narrative of national and even patriotic rebuilding of the country under the banner of the UCA, one could question whether the game provides much in terms of utopian potential. There is after all an argument that could be made about the seeming inability of the game (and its director Kojima Hideo in particular) to imagine collectivity beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and instead retooling the same old structure of power under a different name. Yet I believe Kojima, like Jameson, does not limit his framework out of a limit in thinking, but rather in a purposeful attempt to question the American context and reformulate the notion of space. By setting the game after the collapse of existing structures, Kojima presents a point of entry into potential alternative conceptualizations that would not be possible otherwise. Remnants of past structures remain, as is always the case, yet he does away with the kind of "compromise" with social processes Harvey refers to by presenting a "carte blanche" so to speak. In other words, Kojima recognizes the legacy of historical connections that formed the core of collectives, and in particular the nation-state in the American context, yet he also simultaneously opens the space for an unbound imagination about future organization principles for alternative collectives.

This is where gameplay comes into play in a truly significant way. The basis for this rebuilding of the "nation" rejects previous organizational principles in favor of new ones, principles built on creating strands and knots, sharing knowledge and resources, and perhaps most of all, asynchronous mutual aid. Unlike the nation-state that emphasizes collective and spatial unity through the "imagined community" that dictates the relationship between individuals and the state that govern their lives, *Death Stranding* does away from the imaginary part of this equation by making the player actively build this sense of community through direct action and interaction. This is done in the act of playing as Sam and meeting the inhabitants of this world through a series of deliveries that are nothing short of mutual aid, almost in the anarchist sense of the likes of Kropotkin at least narratively speaking. Indeed, Sam never appears to profit in the capitalist sense from this involvement in building this new community, but instead benefits in less tangible ways from these interactions. The player might engage in these activities out of less altruistic intentions, yet here again, the game provides the ground for a different layer of interaction that is actually very much built on similar principals of mutual aid. As previously discussed, when a player engages with the environment of the game by placing useful structures and items for other players, he/she engages with other players indirectly on the principle of mutually beneficial

interactions. Furthermore, whether narratively through Sam and gameplay-wise through the player, there is a direct engagement with space that bypasses the centrality of structures of power such as the nation-state. The relationship between the individual and space is much more direct and instant, as opposed to being processed by a higher entity. In this regard while the narrative may seem to promote a traditional project of collective formation of the same nature as the nation-state at first, the gameplay of *Death Stranding* subverts this expectation by offering an example of the principles that form the foundation for thinking about collectives in a different way. *Death Stranding* provides the means for thinking about collectives in terms of uninterrupted strands that promote mutual aid directly between the parties involved.

As previously mentioned, asynchronous multiplayer in itself is not something particularly new, it has been a staple of many boardgame-style videogames such as Chess, and has been popularized in the videogame sphere through the *Souls* series, for example, beginning with *Demon's Souls* (2009) and various creating/building games the most notorious of which being *Minecraft* (2011). Allowing players to interact in one way or another to affect each other's game world without synchronously engaging with one another might not be conceptually new, but that does not mean *Death Stranding*'s particular approach isn't worth considering. What distinguishes *Death Stranding* from most other games incorporating asynchronous multiplayer is the purposeful cohesion behind the act of engaging in this type of gameplay and the narrative storytelling of the game. Some may question the level of freedom the player actually possesses in such a scenario, and for good reasons – videogames in general always struggle with freedom, what is allowed and what isn't inside the game itself. The fact that *Death Stranding*'s narrative takes such a center-stage can indeed suggest a certain lack of freedom as the player can only witness its denouement without much involvement. The gameplay also possesses its own set of limitations, most importantly in relation to the asynchronous component of the game. Similarly to MMORPGs that have been abandoned over time, servers become increasingly empty and the type of instances previously mentioned become rarer as time goes on and the player-base diminishes. One way to approach these limitations is indeed to lament the inability of the game to break through these limitations in ways that allow the player to always engage in the most utopian experience

possible. There is however another way to consider these limitations that provide a different and I would argue essential perspective. In some fundamental ways, the utopian potential of *Death Stranding* is unconcerned with these seemingly limiting aspects. If anything, these limitations only further highlight utopia as an ongoing problem.

When faced with such limitations, it is tempting to dismiss the potential of a game such as *Death Stranding* for not "actually" being utopian or the embodiment of utopia itself. This kind of dismissal comes from the mistake of expecting a cultural product and commodity such as a game to fulfill in and of itself the hopes of utopia, which would be an impossibility to begin with. Instead, the abovementioned limitations should also be understood in terms of their contributions to the process of thinking utopia. In order to explore the potential of *Death Stranding* along those lines, we need to approach the game as a theoretical text and practical experiment. Beyond the obvious narrative reasons why emptiness doesn't actually clash with the vision of the world being presented, what is more important to consider is how this progressive emptiness, as fewer players interact with the game, actually reflects the relationship between time and utopia. *Death Stranding* is very much aware of the ephemeral nature of change, most concretely represented in the phenomenon of Timefall which washes away the player's creations. This approach to temporality and the need to constantly start over is at the very core of the utopian project as such. Utopia should never be understood as the endpoint of a particular attempt at implementing change, for it is the permanently ongoing project of thinking change in the future tense, the yet-to-become as Bloch worded it. Once the imagined utopian experiment has been put into practice, the goalpost of utopia has already moved somewhere else. Whether at the height of its popularity or long after most have abandoned it, *Death Stranding* is about the experiment, in a specific time and place, of utopia which must inevitably go away. For this reason, one should not conceive of its utopian potential as a permanent manifestation or practice of utopia, not only because the game itself is uninterested in such a thing, but perhaps more importantly because there never was such a thing to begin with. The utopian potential of *Death Stranding* resides rather in its attempt, as ephemeral as it may be, to rethink collectives based on a different philosophy of collaboration and mutual aid that challenges the very foundations of the contemporary nation-state. It

does so by establishing itself as an experiment in theory and practice, through narrative and gameplay, that does not give rise to a utopian space, but instead contribute to the conceptualization of collectives outside of the world of the game. In other words, *Death Stranding* exceeds itself to reprise the words of Eric Cazdyn when he describes Japan. There lies potential as its meanings bleed into all that which is not itself, "into our imaginations, whether we live [it] or not, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not" (Cazdyn 2002, 1).

Conclusion

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson proposes the notion of a "utopian workshop" where ideas can be constructed, deconstructed, transformed and iterated upon. In this sense, the practice of utopia is very much concerned with space, figuratively and literally. Fundamentally, utopian space is an "imaginary enclave within real social space" according to Jameson, noting that the very possibility of utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation (Jameson 2005, 15). This does not mean that all works of fiction, for example, are necessarily utopian of course, but rather that in order to engage in a utopian experiment, one has to begin by removing oneself from the totality of social existence and its attached socio-political entanglements. According to him, this "pocket of stasis" allows for utopia to remain momentarily beyond the reach of the social while simultaneously experimenting with new "images" of the social. I like to think of popular culture productions such as *Death Stranding* as enclaves in the same sense, where one can distance oneself from the social totality in order to experiment. Narratively, the game recognizes the necessity of operating within existing parameters to some extent with the remnants of past structures, yet through its gameplay, the game also provides a space for players to actually engage with a collective through alternative parameters and practices. In doing so, *Death Stranding* engages with space in both familiar and unusual ways – only through an active engagement, or perhaps more appropriately struggle, does the utopian potential of such an experiment come to the forefront. Utopia is after all an ongoing struggle without a definite end in sight, only in its ongoing-ness does it remain utopia.

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