

Will 'Death Stranding,' a mysterious game about building connections, connect with gamers?

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Credit: GameSpot Trailers

Mysterious. Surreal. Empowering. And boring?

Those are some of the adjectives being used to describe "Death Stranding," the much-anticipated video game from famed game designer

Hideo Kojima ("Metal Gear Solid") available Friday (Nov. 8) for Sony's PlayStation 4.

Since Kojima revealed the game was under development three years ago, with a trailer showing Norman Reedus ("The Walking Dead") as the main character in a sci-fi setting, expectations have been high—and speculation has spiked—about the prospects for "Death Stranding," which is currently only available on the PS4. A PC version is in the works for summer 2020.

A measurement of demand for the game comes from Nielsen, which asked 10,000 gamers, ages 7 to 54, to rank their interest in games set to be released before and during the holiday season.

While "The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening" (Score: 99), "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" (98), "Luigi's Mansion 3" (96) and "Borderlands 3" (95) led the way, "Death Stranding" was close behind with a score of 94, ahead of well-known titles such as "Gears 5" (88), "FIFA 20" (87), and "Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order" (82).

But "Death Stranding" is a different game and has arrived as sort of a Rorschach test for game critics.

An industry legend who founded the stealth video game genre and employed his cinematic, storytelling touches, Kojima has said "Death Stranding" is a response to the hyperrealized violence in many modern shooting and action games—and the abrasive, antagonistic atmosphere in social networks.

"A lot of people are sick and tired of the net," Kojima said Thursday in an online streaming event. "I wanted those people to once again think about how they could connect via the net, not directly but indirectly."

What is "Death Stranding" about?

The game is set in a near future post-apocalyptic U.S.. The United Cities of America seeks to reunite the country, which has been decimated by the Death Stranding, many mysterious explosions that have loosed supernatural ghost-like creatures called BTs. They exist in another dimension, but can sense humans and, if they attack and kill a person, that corpse must be incinerated quickly, otherwise they will "void out" and explode, creating another massive crater.

Damage is such that the UCA is planning a last-ditch effort to reconnect isolated outposts across the country to regain society's historic and scientific past and better understand the Stranding—and survive.

How does Norman Reedus' character fit in?

You play as Sam, created from the voice, likeness and movements provided by the actor. Sam is a porter, who is recruited to make special deliveries that help expand the UCA's network from the east to west. He has special powers in that he can sense when the BTs are near. Once he is connected with a BB or "Bridge Baby"—a supernaturally-enhanced baby enclosed in an embryonic container—the duo can more easily avoid the bad guys.

Sam is a virtual loner traversing vibrant, impressive landscapes—their realism is enhanced by photogrammetry, in which numerous real-world photos are stitched together in 3-D software. The process has been used in video games such as "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" and "Horizon Zero Dawn." ("Death Stranding" was created using the Decima Engine that Guerrilla Games created for "Horizon Zero Dawn.")

But the game's online component kicks in and you can call out to other

players and nonplayer characters. You may get an answer (although I have not yet in my about seven hours playing the game, which can occupy you to 50 hours or more.) You may find a sign, ladder, rope or other gadget left by the Sam piloted by other real-world players. This "Strand system" creates "a different feeling of connection through playing the game," Kojima said through a translator in Thursday's livestream.

Players can "Like" what others have left behind and built in the world. "There isn't enough caring in games and social networking," Kojima said. "But with this new system, (players understand) the impact on the rest of the world of my actions and it will be possible to rediscover consideration for other people in communications."

Also appearing in the game: Mads Mikkelsen ("Hannibal"), Lindsay Wagner ("The Bionic Woman"), Léa Seydoux ("The Grand Budapest Hotel"), and film director Guillermo del Toro ("The Shape of Water") and Margaret Qualley ("Fosse/Verdon").

What do critics think so far?

Review aggregator site Metacritic—where "Death Stranding" currently has a score of 83—said despite the game being "a genre defining gameplay experience," it was "exciting some critics and frustrating others."

To be sure, the reviews were overwhelmingly positive, with tech site The Verge describing the game as "both breathtaking and boring."

"Death Stranding" is not "a game that makes itself easy to enjoy," wrote The Verge's game editor Andrew Webster. The grind of "delivering packages over staggering distances" makes for "ponderously slow" action, he wrote. "It can be downright boring, but there's also beauty and

heart to discover if you can stick with it."

The consideration of "Death Stranding" will require a "much different approach" than that of other games, wrote ShackNews senior editor Brittany Vincent, whose review was scored as the equivalent of a 100 rating. The game "requires a much different approach, and an understanding that many games don't ask of their players," she wrote. "It feels like it's on another level entirely, one that many developers haven't reached or simply won't."

But if "Death Stranding" were a film—and Kojima is considered an auteur in the medium—"it'd be an Oscar contender," Vincent wrote.

Game Informer senior editor Matthew Kato, whose review counted as a 70, lamented the lack of "ingenuity or problem-solving" players faced in the Metal Gear series. "The real issue is that "Death Stranding's" gameplay really is as simple as it appears to be, and the elements around it—the story, combat and lackluster mission objectives—aren't satisfying enough to anchor the title and get players invested."

Not so for The Washington Post's reviewer Christopher Byrd, who said the game represented the best of the TV series "Lost" and video game "Minecraft."

In his review, rated as a score of 90, Byrd wrote that "certainly, I found carrying packages to be a tedious activity at points ... (but) I will remember the game's characters (Heartman, Deadman, Fragile, I salute you) and the snowballing effect of its story, which I consumed with increasing enthusiasm. ... So yes, the grind is worth it."

Will the game be a hit?

That's probably not the proper question.

"This game defies traditional benchmarking and sales projections," tweeted Mat Piscatella, a games industry analyst at The NPD Group.

"Wide range of possibilities, not sure the available data strongly suggest any particular position."

It will likely sell millions of copies, but the legacy of "Death Stranding" may wind up to be its influence on game designers.

Longtime [video game](#) journalist Geoff Keighley, who hosted Sony's "Death Stranding" livestream Thursday, affirmed Kojima's "bold vision ... of where games will go next."

Game designer Cory Barlog ("God of War") tweeted recently that "Death Stranding" will have a major impact on future designers, "emboldening them to stray off the path (and) follow a vision uniquely their own."

Is the game about Trump?

Not directly. But Kojima considers some of the U.S. president's actions as divisive. "President Trump right now is building a wall," Kojima told BBC reporter Steffan Powell, who visited Kojima Productions, the game maker's Tokyo-based studio.

"Then you have Brexit, where the UK is trying to leave the EU, and it feels like there are lots of walls and people thinking only about themselves in the world," Kojima said.

Players in "Death Stranding" make connections and build bridges.

"When you finish the game, I want you to use what you learned in the game. Connecting is one of those things," he told the BBC.

The game already had an effect before it even officially hit stores. On

Reddit Thursday night, members of a subreddit group devoted to the game began buying copies of the game for other members who could not afford it.

The pay-it-forward action grew after another actor in the [game](#), Tommie Earl Jenkins, who plays the character Die-Hardman, learned what was going on and tweeted about the generosity. "It's ALL about connecting people," he tweeted.

Meanwhile, back on Reddit, one member posted: "I'm not crying you're crying."

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