

CITIZENSHIP, AS PORTRAYED IN DEATH STRANDING

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Death Stranding (Kojima Productions 2019), a game by Japanese videogame designer Kojima Hideo (小島 秀夫), puts players into the role of Sam Porter Bridges, who is tasked to rebuild the Nation of the United Cities of America (UCA) following the apocalyptic events of the titular “death stranding”. The game deals with the subject of citizenship both via its narrative elements and its gameplay mechanics, as players are interacting with other players in an online context. In this essay, however, I will focus on the former aspect and show how varying concepts and ideas of citizenship are portrayed or dealt with in the story and narrative of *Death Stranding*.

For this purpose, more information about how the game unfolds may be necessary, so a brief summary goes as follows: the former president of the USA, Bridget Strand, asks her son Sam (the player character) to reunite the country as her dying wish. Sam is to travel from west coast to east coast in pursuit of his sister, “Amelie” Strand, while also convincing underground “knot cities” and survivors’ outposts along the way to join the UCA and the chiral network (a futuristic network comparable to present day’s internet). This is done in parallel with the core gameplay loop of *Death Stranding*, as players deliver packages of various kinds while traversing the country. Once the goal of reuniting the country is reached, a new president emerges and declares the birth of a new nation. Then, in the end, Sam decides to leave the network, the new nation, and his new friends behind in an attempt to save his “Bridge Baby” (BB).

These so-called BBs – unborn fetuses within artificial wombs, carried around by porters in the world of *Death Stranding* – are introduced to the player as tools to help navigate the game-world and allow for visual perception of a certain kind of deadly enemy. It is made clear that there should be no emotional bonding involved, as they are deemed replaceable. Nevertheless, Sam carries his BB around on his chest for most of the game, interacts with it in various ways, ends up forming a bond with it and even giving it a name. This notion of male pregnancy and

motherhood has already sparked its own discussions, as can be seen in the conference talk by Korine Powers (Powers 2020). Furthermore, this story element of Sam taking on the function of a mother presents an example of how taking such roles and responsibilities can be an important part of living in any functional society. The idea that duty (or obligation) can be considered a vital aspect of citizenship is also observable in various other aspects of the game.

Citizenship, however, can be defined in numerous ways. Some may stress civic equality, social cooperation, duties, and democracy (Bellamy 2008: 17), while others like Rousseau have an idea of it being more linked to identity and self-representation, which then lead to autonomy and altruism (Salvat 2007). While the elements of cooperation and duty may play big roles in both the story and gameplay of *Death Stranding*, those of equality and democracy are not only less important – they even get violated in some regards. As such, there was no sign of a demographic election before the new president of the UCA was announced, and equality is also lacking in this post-apocalyptic world in which select individuals are blessed with supernatural powers, or an elite few seem to make use of surveillance to control the masses. However, the concepts of autonomy and altruism are more dominantly featured in this game, as it has clearly stated themes of reconnecting a fragmented society and forging connections with others (Webster 2019). Thus, it can be said that the focus lies on the interpersonal, micro-level aspect of citizenship, rather than on a systemic macro or meso level. *Death Stranding* is about connecting, not only in a geographical way, as cities and outposts join the UCA as the story progresses, but also on an interpersonal level, as the bonds between characters (and also those to other players) strengthen. Sam, Bridget and Amelie are all characterized as extremely altruistic, willing to sacrifice themselves for others or for their country. It seems to be also those connections to others that repeatedly cause Sam to continue on his quest to reconnect the former USA.

While Sam makes it clear that he does not care for notions of citizenship or countries, there is a clear sense of duty to drive him. This sense of duty can be likened to the duty to help others as described by Kant (Kant 1964: 66) or it may also be called a sense of obligation; the game shows how Sam is shackled by this feeling – both figuratively and literally. As such, he is handcuffed early into the game and continues wearing those handcuffs all through the game until the last mission. However, those so-called “Cuff links” are also explained to be a tool, as they serve as wearable computers, monitoring bodily parameters, connecting the wearer to the network, or bringing up the game’s maps and menus, among many other functionalities. Those literal ties that bind allow for Sam to connect with others even over long distances, while also reminding him of, and shackling him to his duties, thus serving as a kind of metaphor for obligation, and by extension, citizenship. There is also a clear parallel between the “Cuff links” and modern smart devices or social media, as they function similarly both from a technical and a sociological viewpoint by reducing most of social interaction to asynchronous messages and reacting or interacting via “Liking”.

Further relevant aspects portrayed in *Death Stranding* include the idea of refusing or laying down one’s citizenship. The latter is exemplified by Sam at the very end of the story, as he frees himself of his shackles, leaves his country and the network he helped create behind, and starts a new life with the BB he saved. This may stand in contrast with the message the game seems to want to convey – the importance of forging connections and rebuilding society – but it may also fit in with the aforementioned ideas of duty or obligation. In the end, Sam loses his previous shackles and decides to take on the new role of a parent instead, which will serve as a new obligation. As for refusing citizenship, there are cities and outposts in the game that refuse to join the UCA and the chiral network, before convinced otherwise. Similar to access to the

internet, joining a wide network entails becoming part of a class (Gray 2002), with not only privileges attached to it, but also responsibilities and risks, such as being surveilled and spied upon, or becoming the possible target of terrorist attacks.

In conclusion, it can be said that the story and narrative of *Death Stranding* portray certain micro-level aspects of citizenship in well-executed metaphors of subjects shackled by duty to ensure the survival of a nation and its population. On the other hand, some macro-level aspects get neglected or even rejected. The final decision of Sam, to lay down his citizenship and leave behind what he helped foster, points towards a more ambivalent approach to notions of nations and citizens. However, the game manages to portray all of this while fostering a sense of obligation and altruism in the player to do good for others not only via the narrative, but also by the use of multiplayer elements in which one can help out other players by sharing structures or making deliveries instead of, or even towards others. In a reality in which society has become fractured and social disconnection has become a major issue even before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, games like *Death Stranding* may not only help us depict, think about and solve real problems (McGonigal 2011), but also allow us to realize our own obligations towards each other.

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