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Making Connections: My “Journey” as a Scholar of Faith

In 2012 a game called *Journey* shook the games industry by becoming the first independently developed game to receive a game of the year award from several notable outlets. In an era of AAA games development that favored bombastic shooters with dedicated online communities or expansive, open-world titles that were seemingly endless in both scope and scale, *Journey*'s critical success was surprising because it was a small game that took only two hours to complete. Rather than being a “gamer’s game” that focused primarily on creating an endless stream of fun activities or modes of play, it focused instead on delivering a singular experience that leaned closer toward being a meditative art piece than a by-the-books “video game.” The industry, it seemed, was beginning to embrace and call attention to games that moved beyond mainstream design philosophies and instead sought to use the medium to create new types of experiences.

As I reflect on my path toward becoming a scholar, *Journey*'s release was the most formative experience in my memory in that I felt called toward it in ways that felt both intellectual and spiritual. As I saw screenshots of the game and heard the discussions surrounding it, I felt drawn to play *Journey* for reasons other than because it looked “fun.” Instead, I felt as if it was *important* for me to play *Journey*—to have an experience with it. Until this point in my life, my gaming “career” had been geared mostly toward games that had the most cutting-edge graphical fidelity or offered the most adrenaline-filled fun, but when I saw *Journey*, I felt drawn to it in a way that I had never felt about any piece of media before it.¹



Figure 1. A lone traveler faces the mountain as *Journey*'s title card appears on screen.

When I first played the game, I had a solum experience as I traveled through the desert as a wanderer, learning of a world driven to destruction by greed and division. My role, it seemed, was to find my place in this beautiful but desolate world as I traveled ever closer to the mountain on the horizon. The journey toward the mountain (Figure 1) reflected the path of the hero's journey, from call to apotheosis, enduring hardship, death, and transcendence before being sent back to the beginning to experience it all again. As a singular experience, I was emotionally struck by the beauty of the game's visually communicated story and the spiritual resonance that I experienced from the traveler's encounters with mundanity, joy, hardship, and the divine. As a sixteen-year-old coming to terms with my own spirituality—particularly the larger truths of the gospel and my place within it—I felt as if playing *Journey* had opened my mind to a dimension of spiritual experience that I had previously not considered: life-altering truths, spiritual or otherwise, could be found and experienced in works of art! While many others likely had this

epiphany earlier in their life (possibly while reading the literary classics that I struggled so much with), this was the first time that I had glimpsed the capacity of art to connect us to the transcendent.

At first, I felt as if my experience with *Journey* was a singular one—that I had gleaned what I needed from it and that I could simply move onto the next game as I so often did with the endless churn of entertainment that I worked through as a teenager. But as I reflected again on my time with it, I felt called to return. My first journey had been a solitary one, a time to consider my place within a larger story. Upon returning, however, *I encountered another player* (Figure 2). A large reason that *Journey* had received so much attention from gaming outlets was because of its unique approach to multiplayer game design: rather than having a player-to-player experience focused on conflict or competition, *Journey* positioned players as co-travelers on the same journey, walking the symbolic path of life together without direct means of communication or forms of identification. Where many games at the time labeled players with gamer-tags or usernames and utilized voice-chat as a primary mode of communication, *Journey* positioned each as an anonymous traveler, able to communicate only through chirps to one another.

Having played the game before, I thought I knew exactly what I would experience on my replay, but I was soon surprised as my co-traveler led me to places that I had previously missed. Off the beaten path, around corners, and in hard-to-reach areas were glowing symbols that allowed my traveler's scarf to grow longer which in turn allowed me to jump higher and for



Figure 2. Two players look toward the mountain in *Journey*.

longer. My fellow traveler would chirp frantically to get my attention and guide me toward opportunities for growth and betterment that I would have otherwise missed. They would similarly jump and chirp in what seemed to be exultation as I collected these symbols and as they saw my potential grow. Where I had returned to the game for myself, a fellow traveler had returned to the game *to help guide me*—a stranger—through the world and share their knowledge and experience so that I could have a better, more fulfilling experience. My appreciation for the game’s themes about life and spirituality were deepened by my encounter with another traveler, which in turn caused me to reflect on the real-world travelers who walked the way with me and helped me find truth, hope, and beauty along the paths of life.

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Seven years after my first encounters with Journey, I sat in a family member's basement, having just moved to be with them in the wake of life-changing circumstances resulting from COVID-19. As I trudged through the remaining homework of my degree, filled out grad school applications, and worked on the finishing touches of my honors thesis, I felt suddenly drawn to Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* that had released the year before. The game focuses on a post-apocalyptic landscape in which society has shattered into a multiplicity of self-contained and isolated bunkers. Further dividing an already physically disjointed nation is a rising climate of ideological division, social unrest, and self-interested isolationism. As I learned more about the game, I was astounded by the resonances between this 2019 game's fiction and my 2020 reality. It was a game that seemed to have its finger on the pulse of the globalized tensions and the growing social patterns of division that would only become exacerbated in the wake of the pandemic, BLM protests across the United States, and an increasingly divisive political season.

What drew me to the game, however, was not only its resonances with the mid-pandemic social and political climate, but the game's hopeful attitude about what would otherwise be seen as apocalyptic. The game's trailer touted taglines like "Make us whole again," "Unite the divided," "Reconnect the world," and "Tomorrow is in your hands" and showed scenes of a dark and dreary world interspersed with scenes of emotional connection and healing. Having heard the game's themes and its unique approach to the post-apocalyptic genre, I bought a new console specifically to play it.² I was especially drawn to the game because as I sat inside doing homework, the world seemed to be burning around me. I felt increasingly confused about my role in the world—what good was my admittedly amateur work when the world seemed to change by the day in increasingly drastic ways? Was going to graduate school to work in game studies under the guise of an English degree selfish? Would it yield any good? Was it even possible to enact change through research and writing? I was *starving* for hope, and I had faith

that this game would help me adopt a sense of hopefulness toward the real world—to help me process the seeming catastrophe that was happening outside.

As I began playing *Death Stranding*, I was again struck by the game's devotion to hope—and through a particularly unique lens. The game puts players in the shoes of Sam Porter Bridges, a post-apocalyptic delivery man who is tasked with transporting cargo between isolated bunkers and socially reconnecting the nation through a digital network to help people find solutions by working together and sharing information. In a world where catastrophe waits around every corner and where the world itself becomes hazardous to human life, the game puts its faith in a glorified postal worker—a position that often lends itself toward a degree of transparency, in that we often take it for granted until it fails to deliver. Rather than putting its faith in the role political action, social movements, or radical reform, *Death Stranding* finds its hope in the small, connective actions of an individual making one delivery at a time. As I played the game, the physical weight of the cargo strapped to Sam's body (Figure 3) and the emotional weight of a nation needing to be reconnected was palpable, and it resonated with me.³ I felt a sense of personal responsibility to make those deliveries—to be someone who could forge



Figure 3. *Death Stranding*'s Sam Porter Bridges loaded with cargo that stands well above his head. He looks across a broad valley, the skeleton of a fallen city awaiting him in the distance.

connections in a world that would otherwise encourage one to retreat into isolation. My time as Sam Bridges made me contemplate my future as a scholar. I reflected on the inner sense of responsibility that I was feeling to make connections in the world that seemed increasingly divided, and I found comfort as I saw the individual lives changed as I made small, seemingly inconsequential deliveries to people across the map. If Sam could make a difference in a crumbling world, maybe I could too.

As players travel the broken landscape, they are at risk of tripping, falling, and being injured. These environmental hazards make the player's progress through the world necessarily slow and careful in ways that many other games are not. In fact, while the game has a central narrative with its own villain, the act of navigating the world quickly reveals that the player's primary antagonist is really the landscape itself—serving as the greatest impediment to the

player completing their objectives. This was not the smooth and effortless floating of *Journey*—this was hiking the Appalachian trail with no markers and a few hundred pounds strapped to your back. To alleviate some of this difficulty, players can place structures such as ladders, ropes, healing stations, etc. to make their journey easier not only on their first pass through the landscape, but also on the return trip and other future trips. Traveling a familiar path and seeing a ladder to help conquer a steep rockface or ravine is endlessly relieving.

As players continue in the game and connect bunkers to one another in the game's narrative, the player's game also connects to other players' games through the internet and imports their structures and tools into their world. In other words, as players build their own infrastructure to navigate the landscape, those same tools can be sent to other players' games to make *their* journey across the broken landscape easier (Figure 4)—much like rock climbing anchors left in the side of a mountain to help all future climbers. I had countless times when I was long into a journey, out of materials, and needing to climb a mountain, only for the hand of a distant and unknown stranger to step in and give the final push with the help of rope or ladder left just where I needed it—granting not only literal help across the landscape, but knowledge that someone else had made the journey before me and laid the groundwork for what I was attempting to accomplish. In light of this, I began to build additional structures with the intent of helping other travelers through particularly difficult parts of the game. Though the presence of the other player was not as immediate or tangible as in *Journey*, the game's design similarly communicated a value for cooperation—of helping others along both the literal and metaphorical landscape that lay ahead. In a society so broken by division, *Death Stranding* reminded me that we only make progress in our journey with the help of others, and as we turn and lift the burdens of others by sharing our resources and experience.



Figure 4. Sam Bridges approaches a ladder leaning against a rockface in *Death Stranding*. The game displays the name of the player who placed the ladder and gives the active player a chance to give a “like” to the player for helping them out.

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My experience with both *Journey* and *Death Stranding* continues to affect my view of the world and my conception of what it means to travel along the path of life. As I consider the relationship between my life’s experience, my faith, and my scholarship, I feel that these games have provided meaningful and foundational lessons to me about what it means *to me* to be a scholar of faith.

My love of scholarship arose from the pursuit of new ideas, of the joys of seeing the world in new ways and creating new connections. In my first undergrad humanities classroom, I would spend hours doing “homework” that didn’t feel like homework—readings and screenings that would expose me to cultural touchstones, placing me within a larger social and historical

conversation, finding my place in a larger web of meaning that was full of coincidences and contradictions. I often felt most at home when I was in the middle of what I would call the “beautiful mess” of the humanities. In the classroom, being able to hear so many views on the same text was invigorating and was often just as enlightening, if not more so, than encountering the text on my own. Every text was active for each of us, often in different ways, acting as a multivalent mirror exposing truths about both individual and collective experience in our shared world.

As I took courses in the BYU Honors Program, I was struck by its motto: “Make unexpected connections.” I began to realize that scholarship, at least for me, was about finding these connections between texts, disciplines, people, the mundane, the spiritual, etc. In my eyes, to be a scholar is to discover networks of meaning and to recognize them as a type of ecological amalgamation—each text with its own individual life and function but coming together in entangled networks that illuminate greater symbiotic meaning. My role is to try and find these fragments of truth and circumscribe them into one greater narrative tapestry, one that points toward larger Truths that are greater than the sum of their parts. These encounters with “unexpected connections” illuminate not only new complexity and intellectual stimulation, but also the potential spiritual truth that lay within each text.

And this process is often just as much about making connections with other people as it is about making intertextual and interdisciplinary associations. As a graduate student, I often feel the temptation to give time toward only what is relevant to *my* project, *my* work, *my* ideas, *my* etc. With too many things to read, too many classes to teach, and too many papers to write, it often feels more efficient and convenient to condense my experience into a confined package, distilling ideas that are most useful to me and creating my own scholarly niche—a “worldview” that will define the future of my scholarship and give ultimate direction to my career. This push

to specialize often comes with the temptation to be confined to a specific path, specializing in one area and—for the sake of time—closing out all else. Rather than experiencing the beautiful mess of multiplicity, I have recognized myself drawing increasingly inward, looking for meaning within my view of the world and seeking to validate that singular worldview rather than seeking to expand my capacity to *view the world*.

But then I think about why I'm doing this in the first place: why I'm reaching out into (what often feels like) the void of scholarship in search of meaning, why I wade through the stacks of readings, and why I keep on writing even when it would be easier to just ... stop—to take what I've learned and quit while I'm ahead. I think back to my experiences with *Journey* and *Death Stranding*—to the ways that my experiences with those games made me feel like I was a part of a support network as I traveled an unknown, and sometimes treacherous landscape. Just as other people were willing to come back to the same path time and again to help other travelers, to show them where previously unknown good was hiding, and to establish a framework to help the next person make it even farther on their journey, I have hope that our work as scholars establishes a network of unexpected connections between both ideas and people. I have hope that just as the work of countless teachers, professors, mentors, colleagues, authors, and scholars who have come onto my path and helped provide direction and frameworks for me, my work and influence will be like a small bridge across what was once a previously gaping chasm that will help the next person make it just a little bit farther than I did.

My role as a scholar of faith is not to get lost in the webs of interconnection that make up the world and its complexity—as fun as that process of getting lost can be. Rather, my role is to be the one who helps illuminate truth in the world's sprawling network, who leaves signposts toward hope, who comes back time and again to help students recognize the opportunities and truths that lie behind seeming obstacles and difficulties of the human experience, who leaves

behind a framework of tools and methodologies that prompt connection and cooperation—to create connective strands across gaps and through barriers, in hopes that other travelers who pass by the way can make it farther than I did in the search for solutions and truth.

My role as a scholar of faith is to have faith not only in my work and God’s capacity to consecrate it for good, but to develop trust and connection with my fellow man—to build bridges, not walls—and find hope in the thought that those bridges may lead to somewhere better (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A thin ladder bridges a chasm in *Death Stranding*’s landscape. Sam is able to make further progress across the landscape, cargo in hand, because another player left the ladder there for him.

¹ The only problem was that the game was exclusively available on the Playstation 3, and I owned an Xbox 360. Those familiar with the “console wars” of the games industry may be able to empathize with the pain of a teenager being priced out of certain games by exclusivity deals between brands. In the end, I ended up trading my Xbox 360 for a Playstation 3 at GameStop specifically to play *Journey*—a decision that would drastically affect my trajectory as a game’s scholar.

² Just like I had done with *Journey*. Being a student, I hadn’t yet been able to justify purchasing a Playstation 4, but the release of *Death Stranding* was the reason that I finally made the upgrade to the next console generation.

³ With so much cargo stacked on Sam's body, it is easy for him to get out of balance, stumble, and fall causing cargo to splay across the ground and become damaged. To help combat this, players need to hold the controller's trigger buttons to provide balance and stability to his walking. Because of this, as Sam's body trudged across mucky swamps and crested mountain ridges, I experienced frequent muscle fatigue in my fingers from squeezing the trigger buttons and holding on for dear life, hoping that he would make the journey successfully and make just one more delivery—one more connection.