Finding the Post-Postwar Japan in *Death Stranding*'s Sublime Ruins

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ABSTRACT
This paper uses the sublime as an aesthetic condition and a political apparatus to locate echoes of Japan's post-postwar modernity reverberating throughout *Death Stranding*'s story about unifying the postapocalyptic United States and struggling against the end of the world. It will first establish qualities of the sublime and explore how the game stages the sublime through its ruins and encounters. It then considers the political affordance of the sublime, namely its potency in disrupting official narratives, by exploring how the game meditates on themes intimately linked to Japan's post-postwar modernity, a blend between reflections on Japan's wartime trauma and anxieties towards future precarity. Closely reading encounters with the sublime in *Death Stranding*, this paper dwells on the frightful pleasure and the dreadful allure of the ruins and situates the sublime as a visual and political framework.

Keywords
the sublime, *Death Stranding*, post-postwar Japan

INTRODUCTION
Tasked with recovering lost parcels, you carefully guide your avatar, Sam, to the ruins outside South Knot City. The heavy rain, known as Timefall, makes the already difficult-to-traverse muddy ground slick as you decide which parcel to retrieve first before the spectral entities, known as "Beached Things" or "BTs," find and capture Sam. You hear the baby cooing in the container strapped to Sam's chest, which is attached to a scanning device. Firmly holding down the trigger buttons on the controller to ensure the steadiness of Sam's movement, you slowly collect the parcels scattered among collapsed bridges and buildings. The backpack is filling up quicker than you have anticipated, and the uneven tall stack makes movement much more challenging and slower. You must find the last two parcels with awkward movement despite rearranging the package to create an even load distribution. The scanner's blue flashes suddenly turn into a spinning red warning, and you can see BTs moving toward Sam.

You are relieved to find blood grenades in your inventory and aim at the fast-approaching BTs. It is successful! Just as you relish the banishment of the BTs, you see a pool of black tar forming beneath Sam, from which figures covered in black tar-like substances begin pulling him down. Not wanting to lose your balance, you navigate Sam to the pool's edge, hoping to end this horrifying encounter. It is, however, too late. You lose control over Sam as the black current drags him to the edge of the city ruin. The pool has become a lake where debris and buildings emerge and submerge. You attempt to find a way out, but a lion-like monster with a golden mask swiftly attacks Sam, which triggers a giant explosion, represented by visual distortion followed by a white screen.

You find yourself in an ethereal ocean after the explosion. Helpful texts appear on the screen to inform you that you can bring Sam back to life by swimming toward his body.

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Sam's death is diegetic, and you can resurrect him thanks to his unique ability to "repatriate." When you approach Sam, the camera swiftly enters through his mouth to find the container baby who awaits your return. You regain control after Sam purges the black substance out of his body. What remains after the explosion, known as a "Voidout," is now an impermeable crater to which you must bear witness. The melancholic undertone and the harrowing encounter contrast sharply with the mundane task of retrieving lost parcels. The crater and the ruins are immovable monuments, and walking through the debris and stumbling upon indignant specters feels more like a mourning process.

But what exactly is being mourned here? The opening description is one possible player experience of *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019). Though a more careful player will not trigger the Voidout, this paper brings this encounter to the fore to highlight the sublime quality of the ruin and the encounter with the BTs. By scrutinizing how the sublime, as an aesthetic condition and a political apparatus, influences the game, this paper aims to locate echoes of Japan's post-postwar modernity reverberating throughout a story about the United States.

THE VIRTUAL AND POLITICAL SUBLIME IN VIDEO GAMES

As the debut of Hideo Kojima's independent Studio Kojima Productions, *Death Stranding* follow a courier named Sam Porter Bridges conducting transcontinental unification of the postapocalyptic United States by delivering materials, building infrastructures, and joining lost communities. It is also a story about struggling against the end of the world, represented as an inescapable titular extinction event, "Death Stranding." Despite its relatively recent release, the game has garnered research interest with various disciplinary approaches. Barbaros Bostan and Çakır Aker apply a set of heuristics to break down and analyze the narrative (2022, 312). Mixing narrative and game mechanic analyses, Beatrice Näsling explores how the game creates an unconventional heroic figure by providing alternatives to violence and highlighting the significance of human connection (2022, 82). Antonio José Planells De La Maza and Víctor Navarro-Remesal reiterate the theme of the human bond by framing *Death Stranding* as a "slow game" that highlights the slow recovery after a societal and environmental collapse and the precariousness of Sam's labor of cybernetically and physically reuniting the United States (2022, 3). From the cultural studies perspective, Anja Kurasov situates the game as a critique of American Exceptionalism (2022, 143). Kurasov eloquently presents the irony of reuniting a nation whose ideological pillar favors individualism and exceptionalism (2022, 144). Impressively, Amy M. Green proposes the game as a treatise on the human condition that spotlights the crucial role of human connection in rebuilding societies (2021, 7). Green's book extensively investigates the interplay between the real world and the game. She argues how the game erects human connection as the beacon in "a dark period in the real world of American and global histories punctuated by brushes with totalitarianism and a resurgence of racism and misogyny" (2021, 81). This body of work outlines *Death Stranding*'s preoccupation with ideological, societal, and environmental concerns in the United States.

That said, there is a lack of consideration of how Japanese discourse affects the game, given its primarily Japanese staff and the director's history of melding Japanese perspectives into his games. For instance, Rachael Hutchison suggests Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* series (1987 - 2015) as a "counter-discourse to the mainstream war game genre in Japan" through its engagement with nuclear weapons (2019, 229). In addition, Japanese games that do not seem Japanese have been widely studied. Notably, Koichi Iwabuchi coins the term "cultural odor" to describe the erasure of overt Japanese signifiers from globally celebrated Japanese media (2002, 28). Iwabuchi thinks through the legacy of Japan's postwar reconstruction and argues that the self-erasure strategy

helps separate Japanese media from its complicated history (2002, 28). Though *Death Stranding* is set in the United States, the fictional landscape lacks clear American cultural signifiers and privileges Icelandic-esque environmental details and sublime ruins. In other words, the game uses the United States as a blank canvas to create stories about crisis, trauma, and identity. This paper uncovers the cultural background of these stories and foregrounds the sublime to draw attention to the similar sentiments between what is presented in *Death Stranding* and what has been discussed in post-postwar Japan.

The sublime is rooted in aesthetic and literary studies, describing experiences in which conventional understanding ceases (Shaw 2017, 2). Philip Shaw links sublimity to the moment when one's ability to "apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated" (2017, 3). This defeat allows the mind to experience what lies beyond thought and language. A transformation takes place here where the subject is overwhelmed by a sense of lack (feeling small) that is also an expansion (desire to overcome) (2017, 4). Thus, the sublime can be "transcendental," which is a prominent aspect in Romantic conceptions of the sublime, proposed by theorists such as Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke (Shaw 2017, 116). In short, early conceptions of the sublime describe the experience of encountering something overwhelming yet transcendental if one can overcome it. Matthew Spokes paves the way for utilizing the sublime in video game analysis in his book, breaking down the virtual sublime into affective registers to explain moments in video games that are awe-inspiring, frightful, overwhelming, or simply sublime (2020, 146). Spokes stresses how virtual sublime encounters in video games persuade players to reflect on the present, which "are only achievable through types of play" (2020, 148). Working within similar parameters but focusing on video games as an aesthetic form, Eugénie Shinkle finds the digital sublime in the blurry "boundary between the self and the machine" (2012, 95). Shinkle observes the digital sublime's uniqueness, which "elevated emotion in the banal" (2012, 95). Expands on Shinkle's digital sublime, Thomas Betts details how he staged the digital sublime in his games, such as *AvSeq* (2012) and *In Ruins* (2012), in his doctoral dissertation (2014, *2*). Remarkably, *In Ruins* shapes the Romantic sublime, notably the dreamlike aesthetics, into digital topology while cultivating an intimate relationship between the player and the environment through which the player meditates on their subjectivity (99). These authors think through the sublime visually and ludically. However, there has not been enough consideration to link the virtual/digital sublime to cultural studies.

Soraya Murray maintains that visual and critical cultural studies are intimately associated with the studies of games (2018, 7). Murray brings Stuart Hall's description of culture to game studies and situates video games as a site of social engineering and political influence (2018, 21). This paper builds on the visual and cultural lens urged by Murray and centers on the sublime as both a visual and political framework. It will first establish qualities of the sublime and explore how *Death Stranding* stages the sublime in its architectural, environmental, and character designs. It then considers the political affordance of the sublime, namely its potency in disrupting official narratives by understanding how the game works with and against Yoshikuni Igarashi's "foundational narrative" in which the atomic bombings in 1945 are rationalized as a necessary evil that gave rise to the new Japan (200, 14). Though the game is set in the United States, it meditates on themes intimately linked to Japan's post-postwar modernity, a blend between reflections on Japan's wartime trauma and anxieties towards future precarity, such as the state's failure to protect its subjects, environmental degradation, and economic instability. Closely reading encounters with the sublime, this paper dwells on the ruins' frightful pleasure and dreadful allure. Lastly, this paper contemplates contradictions created by the sublime in the game that manifest as narrative dissonance in which the ruins work against the event-closing narrative offered by the ending.

TRANSCENDENCE, MOURNING, AND RUINS

Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) is perhaps the most cited painting associated with the sublime. Widely believed as a self-portrait, the painting captures the sublime as the subject stands triumphantly over the sea of fog (see Figure 1). *Wanderer* contains essential elements that are telling markers of the Romantic sublime. The masculine-coded subject revels in his transcendence as he stands on the peak of a mountain and over the edge of the foggy abyss. The excessive mountain peaks in the distance and the endless roaming fog emphasize the subject's singularity. His cane and one leg forward confirm his steadiness in the face of the vast unknown, yet the frame suggests there is still more that he has yet to, and might never, conquer. The overwhelming environment, the limitlessness suggested by the borders, and the excessive details illustrate the ironic pleasurable fear of the sublime, or, as Shaw puts it, "a promise of transcendence leading to the edge of an abyss" (Shaw 13). The beholder experiences the sublime vicariously via the subject in the painting and whose transcendental revelation in the face of imminent threat is frozen in paint. The sublime, therefore, is the most potent when it is temporary and to the spectator who finds it allegorical. *Death Stranding* masters the sublime's temporality through BT encounters in ruins, while the third-person camera highlights the player's positionality as a more involved spectator. Players experience the sublime via Sam, and the element of play grants them a sense of responsibility.

Figure 1: Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818)

The sublime is momentary, meaning the player experiences the sublime when familiar elements suddenly become alien. *Death Stranding*'s main gameplay loop involves somewhat tedious delivery quests. Due to the early game's lack of equipment and facilities, it has garnered the label "walking simulator." The term was first used to suggest the lack of interactivity in *Gone Home* (2013), in which the player moves around in an empty house to solve a mystery (Rosa 2016, 2). Like *Gone Home*, *Death Stranding* prioritizes exploration and dwelling as storytelling methods. Nathan Altice coins the term "virtual pastoral" to describe the satisfaction of discovering and virtually dwelling in the in-game landscape of *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005). Altice links David Rosand's description of the pastoral landscape paintings as artificial constructs that simulate the natural world to *Shadow*'s vast and idyllic landscape (2010). The virtual pastoral occurs when the player deviates from the "prescribed trajectory of mastery and goal-attainment" (Altice 2010). *Shadow*'s virtual pastoral, which "operates specifically as a spatial, temporal, and subjective engagement set apart from normative play," opens

spaces for players to reflect and meditate (Altice 2010). The sublime and the pastoral are concerned with the sense of dwelling but with opposing sentiments. This paper borrows the virtual pastoral to frame moments not succinctly sublime in *Death Stranding*, meaning the player encounters the sublime when they are jolted from the pastoral.

Death Stranding's prologue perfectly outlines the shift between the pastoral and the sublime, the mundane and the unsettling. It opens with stills of landscapes that evoke a sensibility between magical realism and uncanniness: a vast open mountain range with floating objects, an upside-down rainbow over a grassy field, and mossy planes with sprouting hand-shaped crystals. Strange and unsettling objects blend in with the Icelandic-esque pastoral landscape and warn of the danger lurking beneath its beauty. Breaking the stillness, a revving noise followed by a smoke trail announces the arrival of our protagonist, Sam Bridges. Adorning a futuristic outfit, Sam notices the upside-down rainbow in the distance and begins to outrun the toxic rain known as "Timefall." The first hint of danger comes from a raindrop falling on Sam's head and immediately turning one patch of hair grey. After losing control of the bike when he almost hits a mysterious woman, Sam is thrown out of the bike and must retrieve the scattered cargo, which is when the game becomes playable.

The UI of each cargo displays its value (represented as likes), destination, and content, which confirms our unlikely hero as a courier. The need to retain control over Sam's body becomes evident as the player follows the instructions to scan for scattered parcels and pick them up one by one. *Death Stranding* makes in-game movement a chore and a constant discipline by asking the player to grip the controller, allowing Sam to grip onto the straps of his back carrier for balance. A design decision that slows down the gameplay. After collecting all the parcels, the game instructs the player to seek shelter in a cave and wait out the Timefall. Sam removes his suit inside the cave and reveals two distinct red markings on his back, suggesting his back barrier's heavy burden. As the camera moves to better lighting, we also see several uncanny handprints on his body. The origin of the handprints is made clear when Sam meets a set of handprints, implying invisible creatures known as BTs, entering the cave and searching for him. The mysterious woman named Fragile, who Sam almost ran over, drags him away from the handprints and instructs him to hold his breath—the two wait with bated breath until the BT leaves.

The prologue sets up the interplay between the mundane pastoral environment and the unsettling sublime dangers the player will experience throughout the game. The upside-down rainbow, the hand-shaped crystals, Timefall that causes time acceleration, and the haunting handprints all point to what triggers the sublime, Beached Things (BTs). These humanoid specters seek out any living being within the allowed distance of the umbilical cord attached to them. Intriguingly, they do not attack in the traditional sense but drag Sam down into a tar pit. Though BTs can appear in many places on the map, they are reliably located within ruins. Players can find ruins scattered all over the map, like those mentioned at the beginning of the paper. While it is possible to fabricate temporary structures and construct infrastructures inside or near the ruins, nothing is allowed to obscure them. All fabrications exposed in Timefall are ephemeral, yet the ruins stand still. Identifying photographs of earthquake ruins in Japan as sublime, Gennifer Weisenfeld argues that "reconstruction would wipe away the conflicted memories embodied in ruins and replace them with a coherent commemorative narrative of the tragedy" (159). Sublime ruins are stubborn reminders of what was lost, and the game's refusal to erase or replace them confirms that. The questions remain, what was lost, and how should we feel about it?

EXPLOSIONS AND THE NUCLEAR SUBLIME

Japan's post-postwar modernity, punctuated with the discourse around nuclear power, gives textures to the story of *Death Stranding*, which opens with a monologue about explosions,

> "Once there was an explosion, a bang which gave birth to time and space. Once there was an explosion, a bang which set a planet spinning in that space. Once there was an explosion, a bang which gave rise to life as we know it. And then, came the next explosion... an explosion that will be our last" (Kojima Productions, 2019).

For postwar Japan, explosions are foundational. Yoshikuni Igarashi coins the term "foundational narrative" to describe how postwar Japan, mostly in the 1960s, rationalized the atomic bombings as an inevitable and necessary evil that ended the imperial institution and gave rise to a modernized Japan (Igarashi 2000, 14). The bombs in this narrative allowed postwar Japan to reinvent itself as a peaceful and prosperous nation, but it prohibited forms of remembrance that deviated from the values of the new nationhood (Igarashi 2000, 199). Igarashi characterizes feelings towards the explosions, which holds the power to create and destroy, as "conflicting desire[s] both to re-member and to forget its loss" (2000, 199). This duality is present in the above monologue, where explosions are both a blessing and a curse. Igarashi's work focused on media produced immediately after the war, between 1945 to 1970. To understand how the ambivalent feelings developed, we can look to Anne Allison's *Precarious Japan*, in which she characterizes neoliberal Japan as the "post-postwar" era (2013, 44). Allison attributes societal issues, such as the rising rates of depression, suicide, and self-inflicted violence, to the economic downfall following "the high economic growth and a high level of job security for (male) workers in the 1970s to the 80s" (2013, 10). Commenting on the need to be constantly productive, perpetuated by neoliberalist rhetoric of the miraculous postwar recovery, Allison highlights the lack of human ties in the face of precarity (2013, 17). In addition to the disillusion of the postwar prosperity myth, Allison comments on how the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, causing the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, triggered "memories of Japan's victimization and vulnerability at the end of the Pacific War" (2013, 7). It can be argued that these resurfaced memories destabilized the foundational narrative in the form of anti-nuclear protests. Azumi Tamura studies these protests and details how the loss of lives and the government's failure to protect and inform the citizens "shattered people's belief that their lives would be stable if they stuck to the dominant norms" (2018, 4). Tamura argues that disasters reveal the fundamental fragility of lives, and only by connecting with others can we face the precarity with certainty (2018, 203). The ambivalence for the foundational narrative, anxiety towards precarity, and desire for human connections defines post-postwar Japan, which is also the theme of *Death Stranding*.

Hideo Kojima is no stranger to weaving nuclear discourse into his games. Rachael Hutchinson finds Kojima's antiwar sentiment in his design interventions in the *Metal Gear Solid* series that deter players from creating and weaponizing nuclear weapons (2019). The antiwar message in *Death Stranding* is made clear by evoking the sublime. Calum Lister Matheson coins the "nuclear sublime" to describe images of nuclear waste and the impact craters because they "decenter humanity and disrupt the subject by revealing the vastness of the inhuman" (2019, 20). Two nuclear allegories in *Death Stranding* are "Timefall" and "Chiralium." Timefall describes the phenomenon where rainclouds absorb "Chiral Matter" and accelerates the passage of time for any living organism they touch. Chiralium comes from the place between life and death called the "Beach." They are crystalized Chiral Matter that forms when BTs move between the two realms. Due to their links to the Beach and their anti-gravity property, scientists

harvest and utilize Chiralium to create the "Chiral Network" that unites the country. Chiralium is also used to create shelters, charging stations, rest stops, ziplines, and highways that would make delivery much safer and faster. Through these two unifying levels, Chiralium becomes the core apparatus that physically, cybernetically, and metaphorically unites the country. Like nuclear energy, the adaptation of Chilarium provokes a sense of ambivalence. It holds destructive powers but also provides a solution to what it has destroyed. By taming its harmful nature, humanity is somewhat recentered in the face of the nuclear sublime yet remains uncertain because the sense of control it ensures is precarious. Through the lens of Japan's history with nuclear power, we must consider the political function of the nuclear sublime.

Michael J. Shapiro highlights the political affordance of the sublime by identifying and synthesizing natural, racial, nuclear, industrial, and 9/11 terror sublime in *The Political Sublime* (2018). Shapiro details how the sublime "lay siege to the institutionalized forms of quiescence and passivity that turn events into impregnable monuments." (172). Bring Shapiro and Igarashi together, it is easy to see how ruins in *Death Stranding* conjure the sublime to resist the impregnability of the foundational narrative. The Middle Knot City Ruins sit south of the most prominent visible crater, caused by thermonuclear bombing, on the map. The entire area showers in constant Timefall, signaling the presence of BTs (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Encountering a BT in the ruins of Middle Knot City

The mangled remains of buildings block the direct passage to the ruined shelter, which forces the player to path through the remains of a commercial structure. Excessive debris and loose steel frames clutter the space's interior, where roaming BTs await. Unlike the peaceful and pastoral landscape outside, the design of this area is chaotic and unsettling. The decaying and haunted interior becomes the stage of the sublime. The most noticeable aspect is the BTs, literal and figurative embodiments of haunting. Early concepts of the BTs are more abstract and aggressive looking, but according to the artists' notes, they decided to mold them from common animals and humans because the perversion of the familiar feels "scarier and compelling" (Kojima Productions 2020, 126). The sublime quality of these specters not only comes from their uncanniness but also their lamenting gestures – as if they are constantly in mourning.

Connecting Kant's notion of Isis as the goddess of mourning and Marjorie Garber's work on ghosts, Barbara Freeman positions ghosts with the sublime and argues that they serve as a reminder of loss and "appear in the place where they have not been acknowledged or admitted" (1997, 119). Freeman identifies a feminine sublime,

characterized by mourning and haunting, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), where memories of slavery come back to haunt the characters who are supposed to be far away from that history. Morrison's sublime is about historic traumas that have been oppressed and unpresentable due to their sheer scale and depth. Unmetabolized historic traumas come back in the form of ghosts in literature and art to overwhelm the senses of the beholder and force them to witness the absence they symbolize. While Morrison's sublime is concerned with the trauma associated with slavery, *Death Stranding* evokes the sublime through BTs who are intimately linked to nuclear powers. These ruins are like memorial sites that refuse to become, what Shapiro calls, "impregnable monuments" because the unmourned ghosts of the past insist you to look beyond the concluding narrative. Considering Kojima's previous engagement with anti-war sentiment in his *MGS* series, it is not surprising to see postwar Japan's complicated feeling towards the bombs and nuclear energy in *Death Stranding*.

STAGING THE SUBLIME

The visual parallels between ruins in *Death Stranding* and photographed remains of nuclear explosions are quite compelling. A photograph that captures the sublime indignity of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima belongs to the photographer Stanley Troutman, one of the first American journalists to document the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Troutman favors images of a singular figure amid debris and refuse of the war. One of his most iconic images depicts a figure facing the blasted skeletons of the former Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, now the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, or, more commonly, the A-bomb dome (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: One of Troutman's iconic frames taken in Hiroshima one month after the bombing.

Due to the abundance of photographs capturing the aftermath of the Fukushima incident, no one image is as influential as that of Troutman's work in Hiroshima. That said, it is intriguing to see players drawing similarities between the game and the incident. One Reddit user points out the similar themes and visual motifs between the game and the real event. They present an image of a man in white overall walking solemnly in the debris of the earthquake, with the *Death Stranding* title photoshopped in it, to persuade others (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Noticing the visual and narrative parallels between the game and the Fukushima nuclear incident, one Reddit user uses this image to suggest *Death Stranding* as an homage to the real events.

Ignoring the eerie similarities between these photos and Friedrich's Wanderer is difficult. Like the painting, we see a masculine-coded subject confronting the incomprehensible reality. The crowded environmental details highlight the isolation of the subject, and the bombarded building skeleton forms a dreadful and somber relationship with him. The framing and the contrast with the hazy sky further enhance the excessiveness of the debris. Unlike the *Wanderer*, however, these images promise no transcendence but create a space for reflection and mourning. The ruins of *Death Stranding* evoke the sublime through excessive debris, shattered infrastructure, and haunting BTs. Yet the game is also about finding rescue in human connections to prevail over the imminent threat of extinction. Intriguingly, the game conflates the two interpretations of the sublime, transcendence versus mourning, which creates contradicting attitudes toward facing the collapse of human society.

The sublime as an aesthetic condition of the ruins and as a political apparatus is well established in *Episode 3: Fragile*, which begins with Fragile's backstory and the history of the thermonuclear bombings. Even though Timefall and Voidout are perfect allegories of lingering nuclear fallout and nuclear explosions, *Death Stranding* included direct references to nuclear bombs in his narrative. Fragile, played by Léa Seydoux, runs the namesake delivery company and works closely with a man named Higgs Monaghan, played by Troy Baker. Higgs learned the inevitability of the imminent extinction event and decided to accelerate human extinction by smuggling a thermonuclear bomb via Fragile Express into Middle Knot City. The bomb killed most residents in the city, and the lingering BTs instigated several Voidouts that effectively eliminated the remaining surviving population. The ruins of Middle Knot City discussed earlier remain a sublime reminder of the attack, which gestures towards the parallel bombings in 1945. The only two differences here are that, in an almost cathartic manner, the first fictional bombing takes place in the United States, and the effect of the second bombing is transferred to Fragile's body.

Realizing Higgs' plan, Fragile intercepted the second bomb before it arrived in South Knot City. Higgs captured Fragile and forced her to choose between teleporting away to safety using her unique ability or mitigating the explosion by throwing the bomb into a tar lake near the city, except she must do so running naked in the Timefall. Higgs then put a mask on her face because he wanted people to remember her as the culprit of the bombing of the Middle Knot City, while her heroic sacrifice remains unknown to the people she saved. Determined to save the city, Fragile ran with the suitcase containing the bomb while her body deteriorated in the Timefall (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Fragile's body deteriorates in Timefall as she cradles the suitcase containing a thermonuclear bomb.

Amy Green ruminates on Fragile's remarks that she cradled the bomb "like a child" and situates her choice as one between assuming the role of a mother or a destroyer (2021, 62). Green expands on Fragile's motherly sacrifice by pointing out the parallel between Fragile's withered body and the decaying bomb sites (63). Reading Green's analysis in the historic context, we can situate Fragile's body as a site of the nuclear discourse. Instead of letting the second nuclear explosion occur, her body becomes the stand-in for the symbolic second atomic bombing in August 1945. James Orr examines Japan's postwar victimhood and argues that "Japanese pacifism and its supporting construction of the war experience came to rely on an image of self as victim" meanwhile downplays the "consciousness of self as victimizer" (2001, 3). Fragile's resilience echoes postwar Japan's affinity for endurance and perseverance, and her hatred for Higgs resonates with the unaddressed anguish towards the perpetrators of the war, the leaders of Imperial Japan and the United States. Fragile's catchphrase – "I am Fragile, but I am not that fragile," further illustrates her embodied qualities. She ends her story with a request for Sam to capture Higgs and implies that she would kill him for revenge. In the end, however, she decides against killing him. Their final confrontation satisfies Fragile's need for revenge but allows her to move forward without a guilty conscience. Fragile, as an oblivious accomplice in the first bombing, echoes the sentiment that the Japanese people do not have the power to overturn the war crimes committed by the state and the military. Her contradictory role as the hero and the victim points to the ambivalence of the foundational narrative, and her deteriorated body symbolizes the trauma of enduring cruel and unnecessary punishment. In many ways, Fragile's body is another instance of sublime ruin.

ENCOUNTERING THE SUBLIME

Sam, like Fragile, also bears traumatic markings. In addition to visual evidence of hard labor, Sam's body is covered with handprints which indicates the number of his repatriations or how many times he has died. One of Sam's repatriations was caused by the suicide of his wife. Her death triggered a Voidout, which took away their child along with the entire city. Sam became the sole survivor, and his inability to die forced him to live with the traumatic memories. If Fragile's story echoes postwar Japan's ambivalence towards the war, Sam's story contemplates the meaning of survival under precarious conditions of the future. Sam's immortality compels him to live in a postapocalyptic world where he must struggle through the consequences of those who came before him. Sam's doomed fate of existing alongside constant disasters mirrors

the precarity in post-postwar Japan, as noted by Allison (2013, 3). The post-postwar subjectivity is constructed through the aesthetics of Sam's labor and body, which is marked by hard labor and traumatic haunting. *Death Stranding* explores the nuclear discourse through Fragile's backstory and reiterates her positionality through play. Players must repeat her past to progress the story as Higgs attempts another thermonuclear attack on South Knot City. The player must travel through the ruin outside the city and toss the bomb inside the tar lake just like Fragile did before.

At this point in the story, the player is familiar with the danger of this ruin through another quest described in the paper's opening. The ruin sits in the center of a natural basin, which also hosts a giant Voidout crater filled with tar. The volcanic terrain enclosing the basin renders the area difficult to access without proper transportation methods or expensive infrastructure. These design choices ensure the complexity of this task for most players. Compared to other rather normal or even pastoral environments in the game, this ruin stands out as it contains several carefully curated clusters of excessive debris. The case containing the bombing is fragile, which means the player must not drop or damage it while navigating the two risky routes. The player might enter the tar lake through North, which contains numerous spiky rock formations, or Southwest, which is infested with BTs. Through plotting the safest route, managing Sam's movement, and avoiding a hazardous environment against a ticking timer, play becomes a shared labor between the player, Sam, and Fragile. This shared positionality encourages the player to ruminate about the past presented by Fragile as they experience uncanny fear through Sam.

Uncanny fear is a notable expression of the sublime, and it is prominently featured in what could be argued as the precursor to *Death Stranding* - *PT* (7780s Studio, 2014). *PT*, short for "playable teaser," was planned to be published by Konami as a new installment of the horror game series *Silent Hills* (1996 - 2014). It was directed by Hideo Kojima in collaboration with Guillermo del Toro but did not develop into a full game, possibly due to Kojima ending his tenure at Konami (Wilhelm and Michaels 2022). Matthew Spokes argues that encounters in *PT* successfully stage the sublime because "it makes increasingly hard to reconcile which is familiar and which is not" (2020, 117). As argued earlier, *Death Stranding* understands that the sublime is most potent when one is jolted from familiar territories. Design details such as controlled player agency and the constant threat of hostile apparitions in *PT* are prominently featured in the encounter described earlier. It can be argued that *PT* serves as a blueprint for provoking uncanny fear, and the story of *Death Stranding* gives that fear a historic texture. Through encountering BTs in ruins, the player is encouraged to sit with the uncanny fear and perhaps contemplate the unmetabolized and contradicting feelings in the context of post-postwar Japan.

EMBRACING CONTRADICTIONS

That said, the ending offers a relatively uncomplicated solution to the contradictions presented by the ruins, which takes place in the final confrontation between Sam and Bridget/Amelie (played by Lindsay Wagner and Emily O'Brien). After experiencing a near-death experience during surgery, Bridget's soul and body were separated. Her soul, naming herself Amelie, is stranded on the Beach while her body survives with lingering cancer as Bridget. Bridget/Amelie's duality plays a crucial role in the story. Her paradoxical responsibilities as the president of the United States and the harbinger of the end of the world, known as an "extinction entity," make her the "quest giver" and the "final boss." Bridget asks Sam to connect the broken nation so that people can reunite to face the end of the world, whereas Amelie plans to take advantage of the network to precipitate the end of the world so that suffering can be short and humane. While the story presents the latter goal as her real intention, the player can convince Amelie to let humans take advantage of the network to prepare and confront extinction

in their own way. Amelie is sublime because she holds the power to bring about total annihilation, and her role as the caring mother, Bridget, adds to the uncanny horror of perverting the familiar. The final encounter between Amelie and Sam is also the game's final sublime encounter, resulting in two possible endings. After learning Amelie's intention of accelerating human extinction and being given a gun, the player can choose to let Sam kill or embrace her. Shooting her will result in the "bad ending," in which Death Stranding occurs immediately. Hugging Amelie reminds her of the importance of human connections and that coming together gives defying the unavoidable apocalypse a fighting chance. Sam's resolution welcomes a contradiction between accepting the inevitability of the end and treating it as an opportunity, which is reflected in Amelie's monologue:

> … **I**'m starting to think that extinction might be the key to overcoming total annihilation. It forces life to fight to survive. To endure. To exist. That's why the Big Five (Extinction Events) ultimately rekindled life instead of extinguishing it. From the ashes of the dead rise the living—stronger and wiser… They defy the universe and refuse to surrender… Extinction is an opportunity.

The metaphor of a new generation of humanity rising from the ashes resonates with the foundational narrative, which the game has been pushing back through sublime ruins and encounters. Instead of lingering on this contradiction, this monologue offers a more hopeful way to move forward. It gives our current world in crisis a productive outlook by situating human connections as salvation. A conclusion that resonates with post-postwar Japan's need for, what Tamura calls, non-hegemonic knowledge that "affirms the dignity of all lives by connecting with them and creating new values together with them" (2018, 203). Extrapolating, or perhaps implicitly influenced by, the Japanese experience and universalizing it into a globally acceptable story, *Death Stranding* manages to situate human bonds as the salvation to the alienated world in crises. However, this logical conclusion also flirts with the ableist rationale that only the strong and the smart can and will survive, which is antithetical to its empathetic intent. Moreover, unlike the other characters in the game, Sam must come to this conclusion rather quickly to stop Amelie. The lack of rumination on the betrayal and the forced optimistic tone in this ending seems quite jarring, whereas the numerous encounters with the sublime in ruins offer more space for meditation and reflection, so much so that they resist the concluding sentiment of the ending to endure and rebuild. This is not to bring the anti-violence aspect of the game and the foundational narrative into question but a challenge to its selective remembrance of the past.

Through visual and cultural analyses of the ruins, this paper explores the role of the sublime in representing historic trauma and its aftermath through mediated images and stories of the original event. The game is not a representation of lived experiences but a retelling that strikes the very emotional chord provoked by images and stories from the past. The sublime ruins and encounters in *Death Stranding* resist the foundational narrative by representing unmetabolized and contradicting feelings towards nuclear power still reverberating in post-postwar Japan. The virtual ruins embrace all contradictions and both liberate and prevent their beholders from concluding on the past, the present, or the future. Through the sublime, this paper stresses the function of ruins in video games as virtually inhabitable spaces that can foster a non-hegemonic understanding of history, particularly those difficult to metabolize.

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