

# Building “Bridges”: Metonymy and the Integrity of Cohesion in the Video Game Death Stranding

Niko Sollo

Master's Thesis

Department of Language and

Communication Studies

University of Jyväskylä

October 2023

## UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Faculty Humanistis-yhteiskunnallinen tiedekunta	Department Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Author Niko Sollo	
Title Building "Bridges": Metonymy and the Integrity of Cohesion in the Video Game Death Stranding	
Subject Englanti	Level Pro gradu -tutkielma
Month and year Lokakuu 2023	Number of pages 78
<p>Abstract</p> <p>Tavanomaista sanastoa ja kuvastoa uusiin ja epätavanomaisiin konteksteihin muuntavat videopelitekstit tarjoavat digitaalisina teksteinä kiinnostavia kysymyksenasetteluja pelien multimodaalisesti tapahtuvan viestinnän rakenteen eheyden analysoinnille, sekä pelien tekstin liikkuvien osien erityispiirteiden tarkasteluun. Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena oli havaita ja esitellä Death Stranding-pelin omakantaisen multimodaalisten viestintäelementtien organisoinnin logiikkaa. Death Stranding on tieteisseikkailupeli, jossa pelaaja matkaa kuriirin Sam Porter Bridgesin roolissa tehtävänänsä herättää henkiin raunioituneen maailman sisällä uusi symbolinen sekä infrastruktuurillinen yhteistyöverkosto. Tämän kerronnallisen miljöönsä sisällä pelissä esiintyy valikoima toistuvia käsitteitä jotka matkaavat ja mutatoituvat kontekstista toiseen epätavanomaisin tehokeinoin.</p> <p>Tutkielmassani yhdistin metonymian, koheesion ja systeemifunktionaalisen kieliteorian informaatorakenteen työkalut yhtenäiseksi, synteettiseksi näkökulmaksi lähilukuanalyysiä varten. Valitsin kolme avainkäsitettä seurattavaksi pelin keskeisestä sisällöstä tarkastellakseni niiden vaikutuksia pelin koheesioon tekstinä. Nämä olivat pelissä aluksi erisniminä esiteltyt "Bridges", "Porter" ja "Strand", jotka muovautuivat pelin edetessä monitulkinnallisemmiksi leksemeiksi. Tutkimukseni osoittaa, että levittämällä epätavallisesti käyttäytyviä avainkäsitteitensä yhtäaikaaisesti pelin eri modaliteettien kehystettäväksi Death Stranding tuo kerrontaansa merkittävästi liikevoimaa ja koheesiota. Pelin päähahmon seikkailua sponsoroiva ja fasilitoiva Bridges-logistiikkayhtiö osoittautuu toimivansa pelissä metonyyminä kansalliselle uudelleenrakennusprojektille kataklysmien jäljiltä. Tutkimuksessa seurattu sanasto osoittautuu järjestäytyvän pelissä dynaamisesti merkitsemään pelimaailman keskeisiä toimijoita ja konsepteja tavanomaisen yleis- ja erisnimitason lisäksi myös sen ulkopuolelta kiihtyvällä tahdilla.</p>	
Keywords Video games, discourse analysis, multimodality, cohesion, metonymy, systemic functional linguistics	
Depository University of Jyväskylä	
Additional information	

## Contents

1	INTRODUCTION.....	3
2	BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND THEORY .....	6
	2.1 Games as Complex Multimodal Texts .....	6
	2.2 Cohesion in a Multimodal Video Game Context .....	9
	2.3 Metonymy in Multimodal Texts .....	12
	2.4 Systemic Functional Linguistics in Synthesis .....	15
3	3. THE PRESENT STUDY.....	18
	3.1 Death Stranding.....	18
	3.2 Aims and Research Questions.....	20
	3.3 Methodology.....	21
	3.4 Data Collection .....	23
	3.5 Ethical Considerations.....	24
4	4. DATA ANALYSIS .....	27
	4.1 Sample Scene: Sam and Fragile in a cave. ....	27
	4.2 Sample Scene: Sam and the Bridges truck.....	31
	4.3 Sample Scene: Sam and Deadman.....	36
	4.4 Sample Scene: Sam meeting with Bridget .....	42
	4.5 Sample Scene: After Bridget’s death .....	46
	4.6 Sample Scene: Preparing Bridget’s corpse for transport.....	48
	4.7 Sample Scene: Introducing Amelie.....	52
	4.8 Sample Scene: Sam’s dream sequence .....	55
	4.9 Samples of common gameplay situations .....	60
5	DISCUSSION.....	63
	5.1 Metonyms in <i>Death Stranding</i> .....	63
	5.2 Cohesion and thematic progression.....	65
6	CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .....	69
7	REFERENCES .....	72
8	FIGURES.....	76

# 1 INTRODUCTION

As gaming continues to gain a stronger foothold in the collection of mainstreamed choices of entertainment activities, the stories and mechanics of video games are becoming an increasingly integral part of our now-kaleidoscopic world of entertainment options. Video games have emerged out of basements, bedrooms, and specialized hobby spaces, and they have sat down on the sofa next to us sporting a much-evolved, highly sophisticated digital habitus. It could be said that games are simultaneously becoming more accessible for the general public to parse, pick up and play, while also at the same time growing more complex and deeply fathomed with meaning and audiovisual as well as interactive density in their presentations (Bowman 2019: 1; Gee 2003: 6). We have certainly come a long way from the crude, monochromatic representations of simple sports activities such as table tennis in the 1970s (e.g. *Pong*) or two-dimensional platforming games presenting the player with what is essentially a kinetic obstacle course, framed with perhaps only a minimalist plot with narration and dialogue amounting to the length of a few text messages (e.g. *Super Mario Bros.* in 1983). Today, we find that games can take on a great variety of different subject matter even on the grandest of commercial stages, and they often combine several different content delivery modes and their associated literacies into a high-density *multimodal text* (Gee 2016). This refers to texts comprised of a meld of content delivery modes compatible with their associated literacies, such as written text, font design, visual composition, colour palette, animated sequences, soundscapes, haptic feedback etc.

(Johnstone 2018, see also Gee 2003: 14 and Gee 2016), which we then receive and parse as a unified experience as players and spectators.

While this description would no doubt be a fruitful activation for a discussion about gaming literacy, I would like to make a left-turn here and follow a different thread of discussion instead, that of the fabric of video games as texts and the logic of their construction. As established before, games continue to attain a more brazen license to be increasingly exhaustive in the broadcasting of their world-building and level of detail to the player. This enables games to be more readily caught in the spotlight of in-depth analysis as they communicate themselves into being by bridging their interactive affordances with storytelling and world-building (Gee 2016: 3-4). In other words, games organize themselves as texts over the course of their exposition and gameplay experience, and feature feedback for the player to engage with interactively, to make the game “go”. This generates a trail of design choices for both the gameplay experience and the narrative text of the game, and the fabric of *how* the game organizes this composite design then becomes ripe for analysis (Gee 2016; Gee 2003: 32, 64).

The overall aim for this study is to describe how a game rich in its multimodal density powers its progression as a story and its integrity as an experience. I source this perspective from the umbrella paradigm of discourse analysis, sharpening its focus by declaring the source video game to be a multimodal text, which then allows for utilizing the posture of modern discourse analysis prepared to meet the observed phenomena all across a winding network of modalities in flux (Johnstone 2018: 234-235; Jewitt 2005: 316-317). I have selected *metonymy* and *cohesion* as the thematic centres of gravity for this study. Metonymy refers to elements in a text standing in for larger, grander wholes or compositions of which they themselves are a part of (Arapinis 2015: 4; Forceville 2009: 57-59), and its selection for observation is inspired by the incidence and accessibility of various language artifacts repeated and brokered by the interactive gaming experience as long-form video games build their own worlds by communicating themselves to the player. Cohesion refers to the connective tissue of a text born out of its elements’ interdependencies as its reader engages with its content

(Tanskanen 2006: 7; Tseng 2021: 1). It pairs well as an analytical tool with the nature of video games as complex digital texts featuring many different elements occurring in various modalities as a unified, composed experience over a considerable length of gameplay time.

I have spent much of my life playing many different kinds of video games across a great variety of genres, and I have been witness to the evolution of games across a variety of platforms over the course of several decades. I believe I am able to leverage my investment of time into my hobby as a guiding well of experience to help me select source material which would be particularly suitable for in-depth analysis. For this study I have decided to highlight *Death Stranding* (2019, Kojima Productions / Sony Interactive Ent.), a game teeming with unconventional gameplay elements and a narrative dense with a consistently sprained, affected use of language. My motivation for this is twofold: I have purposely selected a game with a particularly challenging, strange-made narrative blended with an unusual gameplay texture to call attention to the current range of abstract and daring game design in modern titles rolled out for a mainstream audience. I am also interested in using the flexibility of a specially tailored discourse analysis toolkit to connect with a digital text of an especially opaque and complex nature. I believe this will be an effective way to dissect its mechanics, approaching its sophistications and convolutions not as daunting protrusions but as useful footholds for analytical traversal and comprehension of its totality.

The following chapter will provide an overview of approaching video games as multimodal texts, with a specific focus in constructing a discourse analysis toolkit customized for highlighting incidences of metonymy and mechanisms of cohesion. This will be followed by a chapter on the present study, where I will introduce *Death Stranding* as a game and detail the research methods used for collecting and presenting scenes and gameplay segments as data. I will then analyze and discuss the material in the two subsequent chapters, reserving the closing chapter for reiterating the research questions for this study and presenting my conclusions, offering additional insights for further study where appropriate.

## 2 BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND THEORY

This chapter will detail the construction of a customized theoretical framework for appropriately approaching *Death Stranding* as a multimodal text. The first sub-section provides entryways into understanding games as texts with messages and content surging in various modalities in concert. This approach is then refined in the following sub-sections by incorporating an objective of tracking metonymy and cohesion in the multimodal text under scrutiny, and then finally augmenting the framework with a perspective from the discipline of Systemic Functional Linguistics in order to effectively describe and highlight the complex feedback between a text and its context (Bateman 2017: 15-16; Bowcher 2019: 149) during the analysis.

### 2.1 Games as Complex Multimodal Texts

The paradigm of video games has, over time, graduated into a large menagerie of visual texts, aesthetic experiences, and gameplay approaches across its rapidly developing industry. This is a field fertile for investigation and study in order to understand the stories and worlds of contemporary video games, as they are now typically presented and woven together in elaborate ensembles of modalities (Gee 2003: 108-109; Jewitt 2005: 316; Bowman 2019). Of particular interest for linguistic study are titles notable for their extended length and the complexity both in the ludic sense (relating

to the act of *playing a game*) and also with regards to the depth and detail of the discourse and the narrative in the game. These textually rich and engrossing games are attractive to delve into due to their increasingly high density of complex dialogue and audiovisual set pieces in co-occurrence and communion with gameplay (Gee 2003: 139-140 & 2016: 4-5; see also Guerrero 2011).

We shall return briefly to a notion I alluded to in the Introduction chapter. It has become clear that while games grow more sophisticated vines of storytelling and world-building in mixed modalities (Ip 2011: 104; Gee 2003: 9), they still remain coherent and attractive to an increasingly wide audience powering a lively global entertainment market. Though video games have historically attracted an amount of skepticism as to their longevity in the global public consciousness, the activity of playing video games (“gaming”) has clearly not been phased out at all, nor has it been relegated back into its earlier status as a niche, specialized hobby either. This would seem to be an inspiring rationale for discourse analysis in the realm of linguistic threading and multimodal coherence of video games, as there is certainly a wealth of knowledge to discover with regards to the discursive mechanisms holding these games together and anchoring their interactive audiovisual logic to their presented narrative.

It is also the case that while video games do seem to escape many of the confines of more traditional texts which have provided the fuel for now well-established discourse analysis tools to take shape, they are still quite compatible with the more flexible tools of traditional discourse analysis (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 295). Simply put, the enriching of video games as multimodal texts is not so much a birthing of completely new storytelling appendages and discourse phenomena as much as it is a case of video games having more affordances to subsume well-known conventions and tropes of discourse and literature into interactive ensembles of content delivery modes for the player. This results in many modern video games ending up as presentations of complex storytelling and multi-layered interactive audiovisual content delivered in ways that we both already understand and, at the same time, have to come to grips with again as the game unfolds and teaches us its own matrix of possibilities,



interactive dimensions, narrative arcs, and other things that contribute to its texture (Gee 2003: 6, 99).

Wildfeuer & Stamenkovic (2022) articulate this layered composition of games by calling attention to the nature of tutorial segments (i.e., typically the initial introductory sections) in a selection of contemporary video games, highlighting how these games weave together a fabric of narrative events and ludic prompts which interconnect in the end:

The *instructions* in both games (**referring to the video games Grand Theft Auto 5 and Batman: Arkham Knight**) are usually subordinated to the *main narrative structure*, but the subordination always actively leads back to the main structure and with this directly allows for the continuation of the *narrative*. (Wildfeuer & Stamenkovic 2022: 45, bolded clarifications and italic emphases added)

These games communicate with the player in layers of simultaneous textual and visual feedback, split between events native to the fictional game world and prompts diegetic to the interface(s) of the game, clearly superimposed on the represented fictional reality during gameplay (Wildfeuer & Stamenkovic 2022: 33). As these interface elements are presented in tandem with (or embedded within) the multimodal stream of content of the activity taking place on the screen, the two meld together to form the whole of the content the player is exposed to (Wildfeuer & Stamenkovic 2022: 33).

The frame of a visual text digitally contextualizes these expository legs of chained modalities, and so streams of content in a collection of modes (some of which are decidedly non-diegetic) coalesce to form a unified presentation (Jewitt 2005: 316; Gee 2003: 108-109). This perspective situates the *text* of a video game within the purview of multimodal discourse analysis since the modes of written messages and talk (among others) pair with multifarious artistic audiovisual exposition, each retaining their intelligibility and integrity as parts of the whole as they blend with the ludic dimensions of the game (Gee 2003: 13-14, 108-109; Ip 2011: 108-109).

While the gameplay component of these experiences is a logical namesake for the experience (a *game*), the presentation of a video game may also include an extended

script acted out as scenes with dialogue and elements of cinema used for effect, or the game world may feature a myriad of written text pieces filling in the milieu of the game in tandem with gameplay events (Gee 2003: 100; Ip 2011: 108-109). Gameplay (the *ludic*) elements can then be seen as sluices landing players to experience key concepts, objects, discourse, and lexis as the game delivers its narrative plot and introduces various elements to the player to appraise (Gee 2003: 119-120). This perspective allows us to delve deeper into anything outward-jutting a game uses in the language embedded in its visual or narrative design, while still taking into account the actual gameplay or ludic interaction the game facilitates.

## 2.2 Cohesion in a Multimodal Video Game Context

As contemporary video games present themselves as visual texts threading together various conventions of narration and audiovisual scene composition, the elements contributing to their *cohesion* become detectable and of interest for a well-rounded analysis. In more specific terms, playing a game for an extended period of time presents elements interwoven and in series for the player to cognitively assemble into a narrative and theme, with an overarching goal to work towards (Gee 2003: 68-70). Video games are often rather expansive planes of expression, which makes it possible for elements in several dimensions to not only contribute to the cohesion of the game as a multimodal text, but also build pathing from various elements (diegetically tangible or not) from one mode into another and back again (Wildfeuer & Stamenkovic 2022: 28-30, see also Tseng et al. 2021: 2).

When taken with the notion of Wildfeuer and Stamenkovic (2022: 32) about the needed inclusion of “non-game world elements” (such as messages and instructions featured in the interface of the game during a gameplay segment) in the “communicative situation” of a video game, we can see that connectivity and/or tension introduced across modalities contributes in various ways to experiencing a video game as a cohesive whole of content and communication. After all, this kind of imposition on

the diegetic by the non-diegetic is not uncommon at all in games with complex controls and gameplay mechanics, especially if the game experience has been designed to not be a cinematic experience with little *heads-up display* content on the screen, but rather an experience with a collection of information given visual space (such as health, held items, ammunition count or intermittent button/key props when approaching devices or objects the player character can manipulate) and/or prominence in an ensemble of modes (instructional voice-overs, pointed Foley soundscapes, animated mission briefings, radio-transmitted dialogue with subtitles etc.).

However, in order to properly cover cohesion in this chapter, it is necessary to briefly shift our focus away from video games for a moment. The core operation of cohesion in texts is perhaps best defined and described by first highlighting it in terms of a traditional, monomodal written text before moving on to cohesion in complex multimodal compositions.

Where the dress of the lexis along with the construction of the syntax make for harmonious, related discourse, there is cohesion; the text rests together as a “unified whole” (Taboada 2019: 312). As particular cohesive devices in the text are keyed by the elements they are pointing to, the two then create a *cohesive tie* which grids a part of the initially free-flowing and unpredictable substance of the text (as it unfolds) to a pattern that we find agreeable to parse (Taboada 2019). Taboada (ibid.) refers to the work of Halliday & Hasan (1976) to express this in more concrete terms: texts hang together by way of, for example, reference between concepts and key elements by pronouns and their antecedents along the threading of the text, or substituting new elements in the text with closed-class lexis standing in for something else (“doors usually have handles, but *this one* is voice-activated”<sup>1</sup>). A common additional realization of the latter is the *elliptical* variant of this substitution, where a simple “yes” or “no” as a response to a question forgoes repeating the content of the inquiry. Its absence *is* the cohesive device, an ellipsis, the “zero” state of cohesive linkage (Taboada 2019: 315-316).

---

<sup>1</sup> The logic of this example is adapted from Taboada 2019: 315.

Tanskanen (2006: 12), like Taboada (2019), also refers to Halliday & Hasan (1976) in order to illustrate the concept behind *lexical cohesion* as a cohesive device, highlighting the two mechanisms of *reiteration* (elements themselves in repetition) and *collocation* (elements in consistent co-occurrence and association) as the energizing phenomenon behind the organization of lexical items making a text more cohesive. These components of cohesion highlight how a text can deploy a large potential variety of its own constituent fragments along its progression in order to fortify its texture overall.

As cohesion builds momentum and texture from elements pointing away from themselves, we also can see that cohesion is closely related to *anaphoric reference* (Taboada 2019: 318-319), which refers to the textual tendon created by an element pointing backwards towards something that had come before (a given text may also point forward at an upcoming new element, known as a *cataphoric reference* or cull from a text-eternal source by way of an *exophoric reference*). As we resume our focus on video games as texts, it is obvious that anaphoric reference is abundant in them. It is typical for games to have a ludic rhythm of introducing new elements in relation and reference to previously established concepts, gameplay mechanics and narrative elements in order to both progressively colour in and build the world of the game as well as teach the player how to play (Gee 2016: 4-5, see also Gee 2003: 41-42).

With regards to the implications of the complexities of multimodal texts on the reaches of cohesion within them, Engebretsen (2012: 146, 149-150) points out that the denser and more information-rich a text is, the more crucial it is for it to have extensive cohesion-building mechanisms to retain understandability. He declares that multimodal texts achieve their cohesion by elements sharing space in the text with intuitive unity and logical continuity, together “shaping a textual universe where all elements fit in” (Engebretsen 2012: 146). However, Engebretsen (2012) also points out the utility of the inverse of this: tension and non-cohesive dissonance in appropriate measures can space out handholds for parsing and processing a given text, as conducted discord galvanizes the reader (or watcher, or player) to “to react, engage, draw conclusions –

in other words, actively interact with the text” (2012: 146). The structure of a video game may spend some time (and/or react to the player’s actions by) withholding plot-central narrative information or perhaps present(ing) a situation *in medias res* with little to no initial exposition, and the gameplay experience may stow away or at first only allude to initially unremarkable gameplay mechanics which later become regular gameplay or perhaps even crucial to the weight of the conclusion of the game experience and its story (Gee 2003: 81). Just as with the mode of written text, video games, too, have the capacity to deploy elements of reference and antecedence from a variety of available resources along the onward development of the multimodal text and arrange a collection of recurring, manipulable artifacts and interdependent narrative constituents of the game to present the experience as a cohesive whole.

### 2.3 Metonymy in Multimodal Texts

Montgomery et al. (2013: 126) describe metonymy as a device distinguished from *metaphor* (which metonymy is certainly related to) as an indirect, figurative substitution of one thing to stand for another. To highlight the difference between metonymy and the perhaps more well-known concept of metaphor, Montgomery et al. (2013: 126) use the example sentence “Moscow made a short statement” to illustrate. In order to parse the message, we are to understand that the Moscow being referred to are the relevant officials in the Russian government rather than the city of Moscow itself. Moya Guirarro (2013) provides an additional explanation by pointing to Forceville’s (2009: 59) encapsulation: “In short, in metaphor we get *A-as-B*; in metonymy *B-for-A*” (italics mine).

We can look to Arapinis (2015) for a further delineation of the position of metonymy with regards to the concept of metaphor:

“while metaphor builds on mappings across distinct domains (e.g. time *as* movement: *time flies by*), metonymy involves intra-domain mappings (e.g. author *for* book: *Proust is tough to read*).” (Arapinis 2015: 4)

Put simply, in the case of metonymy in the written mode, Arapinis identifies the text itself as the zone of activity for the plucking of a part to stand for the whole (2015: 4). As texts parcel out information piecemeal by their structure and syntax, a trackable arc of syntactic reference remains as a chain between instances linking back to a common particular thing.

Markert & Hahn (2002: 147) point out how metonymy is interlinked with anaphoric reference (reiterated here as meaning expressions and items becoming the referred antecedents of their subsequent, transformed mentions). Metonyms interspersed in texts can thus create a kind of referential momentum backwards as the text itself unravels linearly (in a temporal sense), since coherent text-internal reference necessitates an awareness of the static nature of the item as well as the morphing texture of its repetitions (see Markert & Hahn 2002: 147). This is of course intuitive and obvious to us in everyday communication, but it bears mentioning due to its clarity as a foothold when analyzing the organization of voluminous texts, particularly when they are presented in a collection of modalities operating in concert.

As established before, extended or protracted ensembles of modes (i.e. video games, films, comics etc.) often feature various communicative devices employed in flux and on the move. This requires a robust framework to observe the dimensions and effects of metonymical vehicles embedding in and out of non-diegetic visual elements, diegetic objects and straightforward text or dialogue. In the case of comics or graphic novels, Kowalewski (2018) highlights the occasional insertion of metonymous elements in comics in the form of speech balloons featuring, instead of the expected dialogue text, onomatopoeia communicated with symbols standing in for a larger whole a particular character is engaging with (within the relevant scene in the comics panel). A particularly lucid and accessible example of this is Kowalewski’s description of “musical note *for* melody” (2018: 9, italics mine), where a part of a whole (a single musical note in the speech balloon instead of dialogue text) stands for an entire piece,

perhaps a song or a bit of one that the character is singing. Kowalewski points out that the formation of these metonymic elements is generally resistant to entropy by way of an internal logic of selecting and favoring representations with direct ties to the original element being referred to, rather than loose or ephemeral ones (2018: 5, see also 15-16). This is why in the previous highlighted example a musical note is a felicitous choice for this particular incidence of metonymy to go over well. A cramped drawing of a sheet of music struggling to fit inside of the speech bubble would be more difficult to parse.

In the purview of cognitive linguistics one can find a more systematic and neat division of different types of metonymy. For example, Peirsman & Geeraerts (2006: 274-275) call attention to Seto's (1999) split of metonymies into spatial, temporal, and abstract realizations in discourse. Individual elements in phrases and units of discourse slot into various schema by which metonymies can be tracked and enumerated. Take, for instance, the temporal category of *whole event-subevent* (as described by Seto 1999), which Peirsman and Geeraerts illustrate with an example of a student *reading for his first degree* (2006: 275). Here the plain-styled verb of *reading* is in reference to a more complex endeavour in contact with a larger institution and paradigm of action than just someone reading words to comprehend something that has been written down (Peirsman & Geeraerts 2006: 275).

By being mindful of metonymy, we can now perhaps find the analytical terrain of cohesion in multimodal texts easier to traverse. Feng (2017) describes the role of metonymy in complex threadings of modes as discursive signposting for "inferring a whole script from the mere mention of a part". In practical terms, an artifact jutting out of the "script" may become fixtured as a *vehicle* for the *target* concept in the same domain as the text develops (Feng 2017: 444, 447-449; Arapinis 2015: 3-4). The implication of this notion is brought into a particularly lucid focus when one adopts this approach to an engrossing multimodal text, because it is not unusual for audiovisual texts in motion (films, video games, animation) to mix modalities by running them *concurrent* with each other, enabling various elements at play to cross modalities and

delegate instances of themselves for modalities in secondary focus (Gee 2003: 14). This could be, for example, a bit of foley or ambience indicating a presence of a character previously represented visually, leaving a section of the screen real estate free to display other things if so desired.

## 2.4 Systemic Functional Linguistics in Synthesis

So far, the concrete theoretical tools we have included in our framework to address ensembles of modes have been weighed towards an intra-textual perspective, most of their utility in describing and recognizing the movements of individual elements within a text. However, we also need a perspective on the unveiling totality of text-and-context in symbiosis, with the aim of recognizing how the more grand context of elements in a text is a consistent ingredient in its composition. This is where the perspective and analytic discipline of Systemic Functional Linguistics becomes useful for lodging the constituents of a complex text into their most felicitous positions for analysis.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL) is a framework developed in the mid-1980s by Michael Halliday in prominent dialogue with the work of J.R. Firth, a teacher to Halliday and also SFL's preceding architect (Halliday & Webster 2009: 63-64). SFL perceives language as semiotic selections and choices keyed in the context of the facilitating situation, meaning that the assembly of a text or discourse is drawn from paths laid by the *systems* brought about by our social organization as people in the world we inhabit and navigate (Webster 2019). SFL operates on an understanding of language as "form following function" (Webster 2019: 37) as the approach tracks the linguistic *metafunctions* which comprise our communication and text assembly. The *ideational* function concerns the actual content of what is being relayed (i.e. "the information"), the *interpersonal* function deals with the texture of social relations of a text and its attitudinal dimensions, and the *textual* function covers the structural organization and intertextual characteristics of a given text (Webster 2019: 36-37; Banks



2002: 2-3). As a way of describing and enumerating exchanges wrought in language proper, SFL enlists the universality and ubiquity of these three metafunctions to animate the morphological and lexicogrammatical realizations of a language, as well as power its semantic system delineated by grammar (Webster 2019: 36-37). In other words, SFL views the organization of what is being said and in what context (and ending up as what sort of text) as overlapping metafunctions of language coming together in a complex act of selection to produce the resulting act of communication with the appropriate lexicogrammatical dress. Put more simply, in SFL, the potential to create meaning is a combination of realized language use and also the contexts which influence it, meaning that the concurrent social backdrop of language in use is a molding hand in its formation (Webster 2019; Banks 2002; see also Halliday 2003). An SFL approach highlights the circumstances, context, and social implications of the structure of the texts we compose as people in ongoing situations and environments.

The Textual Metafunction of SFL is of special interest with regards to analyzing a video game as a text due to the close bond the metafunction has with cohesion. The Textual Metafunction describes the operation(s) behind the composition and orchestration of the elements constituting a text with regards to the rhythm of information being relayed in relation *with* (and in reference *to*) preceding elements in the text (Webster 2019: 41, see also Banks 2002). It calls attention to the *information structure* of a text, as well as its *thematic progression*. In more general terms, this perspective is concerned with the logic of introducing new elements in concert with designing upcoming ones in the quilting of a text. SFL begins to identify the information structure of a text by tracking the organization of the Given and the New; the Given referring to previously encountered and contextually retrievable content and the New to newly introduced elements, the interplay of the two progressively contributing to the girders of the text (Webster 2019: 41-43). Related to this model of how a text is constructed and comprised is the *thematic progression* of a text, another point of interest with regards to the Textual Metafunction in SFL. A topic-establishing discourse item is read as the Theme, and the elaboration and texturing of the Theme as the Rheme (Webster 2019; Matthiessen 2010: 222-223). Webster (2019: 42-43) outlines the (typical) palette of forward-

motion thematic progressions identified by Danes (1974) as linear or continuous depending on the shape of the sequenced Themes, which then go on to influence the shape of the text itself. A linear thematic progression generates new thematic references as the text develops (e.g. “Last week, I went to the dealership and bought a new car. The car has been a joy to drive.”), whereas a continuous one retains focus on the same Theme throughout (e.g. “**The dealership** had closed when I drove to the parking lot. **They** had not updated their hours on their website.”) (Webster 2019, examples and formatting original). Of course, in SFL, communication and textual development is always under the purview of all of the metafunctions simultaneously, making truly exhaustive and comprehensive description beyond the scope of this paper due to its complexity. Nevertheless, the utility of an SFL perspective proves itself useful in approaching complex media texts, and for this reason this facet of SFL is being highlighted here.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the affordances of this framework are being synthesized into an analysis of a *video game* as a text. While it may feature lifelike and detailed scenes of emoting, interaction, and interpersonal drama, it is still a fictional, edited text summed via its modalities. A single-player video game is by definition an artificial *composition* of communication, a vignette of interactions which are facsimiles due to their scripted, edited nature. A particular kind of tension ends up being *spliced in* between modalities to construct the resulting experience; gameplay, interface stylization, soundscapes, dialogue, character movement and simulated physics are all deliberately organized to converge into an interactive assembly presented on a screen (Jewitt 2005: 319-321; Gee 2016). This is obviously different from a text where actual human beings have been recorded interacting with each other, where any jostling of elements is more so the result of a real-life convergence of multiple participants, rather than something orchestrated and fine-tuned to play out a certain way. Therefore, analysis of this kind should react to the object of investigation as “depicted” language events constructed and scripted as part of the game experience.

### **3 3. THE PRESENT STUDY**

This chapter will detail the aims of the study and the methodology of the analysis, as well as explain how the data will be collected and structured for appraisal.

#### **3.1 Death Stranding**

*Death Stranding* (2019, Kojima Productions / Sony Interactive Ent.) is a post-cataclysmic adventure and science fiction video game viewed from a third-person gameplay perspective. It takes place on an Earth transformed by the titular Death Stranding event, a cataclysmic phenomenon which has created various alterations to the physical laws of Earth in the game by connecting a morbid afterlife dimension with the real world. Players assume the role of Sam Porter Bridges, a hardy courier whose special agency (his familial tie to the leader of the remnants of the United States, President Bridget Strand) is harnessed by the organization Bridges, which consists of surviving confidantes of what used to be the government of The United States of America. The nomadic Sam gets entrusted with special technology to reconnect disparate communities of survivors in a wireless, futuristic network in order to create a new nation energized with a collective aim to repopulate the remains of America with new communities and infrastructure. Sam presses onward making deliveries and, over time, galvanizes a fabric of networked cooperation as scattered communities are inspired to

come together again to utilize a new form of energy sourced from the revealed beyond for nationwide co-operation, rebuilding and manufacturing.

*Death Stranding* presents a world sporting a number of unconventional features, as the simulated outside world in the game behaves at times very differently to what we experience in real life. This includes outside life becoming treacherous due to rainfall rapidly aging anything it touches, as well as sections of the game world birthing dimensional wells which spring forth ghostly monsters from the revealed afterlife dimension, attacking and trapping those venturing near them in deadly tar. The game features a wealth of both philosophical and pragmatic discussions about the practical implications of the Death Stranding event as it is shown to make the outside world dangerous in completely unforeseen ways. This is reflected in how the human characters in the game parse the world for themselves, as their dialogue and behaviour are shaped in highly unusual ways by the mutated everyday experience of the post-Death Stranding world.

The player must adventure onward as Sam on his quest as he personally braves a variety of treacherous and unpredictable terrain, interacts with a varied cast of characters in different locales and experiences the politics of the game world as various factions aim to control what is left of the United States. Along this journey, the game consistently introduces unconventional gameplay elements to the player and, via storytelling and gameplay incentivization, presents and has the player witness various symbols, themes, and signs in affected repetition throughout. This gets established very early on, and the player gets used to the game highlighting and repeating discursive touchstones, which often become pointed fixtures in the stream of content the player is exposed to across several modalities in an ongoing shuffle. A gameplay-wise mundane tangible object or theme may stand for a weighty concept introduced previously, or pervasive and idiosyncratic nomenclature may establish itself as a key feature in how *Death Stranding* communicates its world to the player. In other words, the game world and its discourse are rich in symbolism and internal intertextuality, primed to consistently repeat key terms and concepts during gameplay. This

establishes consistent points of reference linking concepts and statements together and weaves a texture of the world by way of networked references across mixed modalities.

### 3.2 Aims and Research Questions

A number of key terms in *Death Stranding* invite observation from the very beginning of the game, as many not only prominently repeat as lexical items, but also persist in high density across different modalities from the outset, with a growing torque of anaphoric reference as the game goes on. The aim of this study is to investigate these occurrences of repeated, highlighted communication choices written into the multimodal text of the game, and to record and analyze the metonymy and cohesive devices employed by them to lay bare their influence and utility in unifying the organization of information in *Death Stranding* during the gameplay experience.

It must be noted here that an average playthrough of *Death Stranding* could take well over 40-60 hours (or even more) and would produce an enormous amount of data to appraise if analysed in detail throughout. Therefore, due to the considerable scope of the game, I will be focusing on the game's initial, introductory stretch and its establishing and handling of three specific items of interest: the lexical items "Bridges", "Porter" and "Strand". These have been selected due to their particularly blatant penchant for repetition, narrative weight, and persistent inhabitation in multiple modalities at once. "Bridges" remains prominent throughout the game as an organization, a project, an ideal and a logo for a national reconstruction effort. It is also the repeatedly mentioned surname of the protagonist Sam Porter Bridges. "Porter" is a repeated tag as well, and persists as a descriptor for Sam (and other couriers like him) as an agent in the world; the game goes on to consistently refer to active "Porters" making deliveries and connecting communities together through their work. Finally, "Strand" recurs as the name of a key item (the Strand, a length of rope used as a survival tool and a weapon) as well as lending its name to a number of central concepts in the world of *Death Stranding* (such as the Death **Stranding** event itself). It is also the surname of

Sam's mother, President Bridget *Strand*, and a name sometimes foisted on Sam himself as well.

The following research questions will be driving the discussion and the analysis concerning the behavior of the chosen key lexical items in the game:

1. What kind of metonyms do the observed key terms in *Death Stranding* harness to deliver a cohesive narrative?
2. How is the game organizing its multimodal exposition and world-building to support the threading of its textual elements?

### 3.3 Methodology

This paper will feature a qualitative study comprised of analyses of key scenes and dialogue events spanning the first few expository legs of the game, amounting to approximately the first 10 hours for a typical player. These segments will be scrutinized with special attention given to the appearances and the multimodal contexts of the chosen lexical items "Bridges", "Porter" and "Strand". This will be followed by a discussion with regards to their implications on the cohesion of *Death Stranding* as a multimodal text, as well as the evidence present of their metonymical utility for the texturing of the game world and its narrative.

Due to the volume of potential artifacts and multimodal textual characteristics at play, I will be utilizing the practice of *close reading* with a further specified and demarcated analytical focus, as proposed by Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum (2011: 289-299, 305) in their combined accounts of close reading games as complex media texts. Guided by their approach of selecting a specific "analytical lens" in order to focus the analysis of the discourse in a game, I have selected two specific linguistic features to observe in the material. The first of the two is the occurrence and persistency of metonymy in *Death Stranding* across its multiple modalities. Metonymy escapes uncomplicated

encapsulation and is often pragmatically leashed by the requirements of the study where it is being observed (Ädel 2014: 74, see also Seto 1999). For the present study, the posture of metonymy in the language of *Death Stranding* itself is permitted to be multimodal, accepting modality-crossing metonyms in the appropriate domain for a wider net of data collection while safeguarding the perspective from falling into a more grand, intertextual analysis of metaphors.

The second observed phenomenon is the effect created by recurring cohesive devices in action as the game presents scenes and gameplay along its development as an experience. In order to properly comment on cohesion in *Death Stranding*, a systematic approach to identifying its individual cohesive devices must be established, and it needs to be bolstered with an awareness of (and compatibility with) the multimodal, dense nature of a modern video game as a text. For this end I will be establishing a foundation for identifying cohesive devices in *Death Stranding* by utilizing Taboada's (2019) highlighting of the cohesive devices described by Halliday & Hasan (1976), with *co-reference* of elements and their antecedents and *lexical cohesion* (repetition and collocation) selected as a dual focus for identifying mechanisms of cohesion in *Death Stranding*.

There also needs to be a way to alternate between granular analysis and a more big-picture perspective with regards to the cohesion of the material, and it must be grounded in compatibility with a multimodal text rich and dense with elements. For this end, I will be synthesizing into my analysis the view of a stratified structure of language and language functions in Systemic Functional Linguistics, which enables the tracking of the elements of the discourse in *Death Stranding* while being more acutely conscious of substantive textual context surrounding and influencing these elements as they appear. By this I mean the data collection being cognizant of the drivers of the textual organization of *Death Stranding* as a text. The depicted linguistic choices of both speaking characters and environmental elements (e.g. objects, emblems and the general graphical milieu or diorama) will be registered as items of

interest from an SFL perspective, specifically with regards to the style of thematic progression in the multimodal communicative output of the game.

As a safety measure within the larger framework and toolkit of discourse analysis, I will be utilizing Gee's (2003: 24-25, 37-38) delineation of discourse items and lexical units in their native video game (the *text*) context as having *situated meanings*, referring to the context of the game imbuing these items with affordances to successfully broker the transmission of ludic and narrative elements for the player to understand and interact with. In other words, Gee's (2003) description of situated meanings in the reading of video games focuses their instances and implications into their native context in service of identifying their utility and meaning *within the world the game is presenting*, directing away from emblematic or iconic interpretations (Gee 2003: 40-41, 84). This is to provide a reminder for a clear containment of analysis, preventing it from straying into the bounds of Critical Discourse Analysis, as this paper is focused on how *Death Stranding* as a text threads references back at *itself* with a selection of concepts and lexis the game itself emphasises about its own depicted universe.

It should be noted that this is a novel synthesis of approaches for this kind of study. I have customized an experimental combination of different theoretical ingredients for the express purpose of providing tools for pinpointing a clear pulse of specific recurring discourse elements relevant to the present study within a kaleidoscopicity of gameplay and narrative exposition. *Death Stranding* is a large, ludically unconventional multimodal text with a wealth of handholds for analysis at every turn, and the theoretical undergirding of its investigation had to be specialized to properly accommodate for this. The spirit of the game as a text would remain undistorted; its study would morph to meet it where it is, embracing the unconventional nature of the text.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

The data will consist of gameplay segments and cutscenes (meaning non-interactive cinematic scenes and sections of a game, often featuring protracted dialogue and plot



development) captured by recording screenshots of the game. These have been selected due to the clear persistence of anaphoric reference keyed by the central lexical items selected for scrutiny, highlighting the language the game uses to talk about its world. The screenshots will be organized in the following section as a series of representative scenes of central interactions and scenes in the game, and together as a collection of samples they give an overview of the many appearances of the repeating, modality-crossing lexical items focal to the discourse in the game.

Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum (2011: 298-299) point out that lengthy games (particularly ones with any kind of open-ended structure) can shift and morph as they go on due to the influence of the player being afforded the freedom of non-linearity, the choice to experience a selected part of the game world before another one, or otherwise interact with the game world in a great number of unpredictable ways (see also Gee 2003: 81, 131). Much of *Death Stranding* is subject to this kind of malleability as well, and as such capturing its texture with screenshots presents a challenge with regards to representing a clear time frame of capture for each unit of data. For this reason, the present study is weighted towards highlighting the discourse mostly during sections which *are* always the same from player to player, due to their non-interactive nature and suspension of difficulty (see Wildfeuer & Stamenkovic 2022: 30). Examples of ordinary gameplay will be included after these, demonstrating that items of interest persist during actual gameplay sections as well.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

To clarify my position as a researcher here I will state that I have completed the game in its entirety before, and I am very comfortable playing it and navigating its mechanics. I am leveraging my familiarity with the source material to serve the objective of the present study, as the game does not hold any true narrative surprises or novel entertainment value for me. I deem this to be a useful factor in focusing the analysis and approaching the game as a multimodal text from a close-reading perspective.

The present study utilizes a series of screenshots captured by standard gameplay of a copy of the game I own on a PC owned by myself. The screenshots have not been edited or cropped in any way and have only been resized to fit in this document appropriately. I have consulted with the data protection officer made available by my university during the composition of this thesis to make sure that my usage of the screenshots is permissible. Every attempt at accurate representation of the phenomenon described under each screenshot has been made, and I have not included any superfluous content from the game unrelated to the analysis. Though *Death Stranding* has a co-operative element across an international player base and certain multiplayer affordances, the screenshots featured do not have any elements sourced from other players, and only show content native to the single-player experience of the game triggered by my own gameplay actions.

Finally, it should be noted that while the core design and creative direction of *Death Stranding* was birthed by a Japanese game studio (with its own configuration of international outsourcing and collaboration), the English-language version was established as the definitive, original experience, shaped by the English-speaking real-life, multicultural professional actor cast who provide their likenesses and voices for the characters in the game. In fact, the Japanese-language voice over and presentation is dubbed and imposed over the English-language lip synch of the original actors performing the gestures of the characters<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, thinking of *Death Stranding* as an English-language game is quite intuitive due to the milieu in *Death Stranding* (The United States) and the recognizable real-life actors speaking and repeating plot-critical, unchanged English in the game (or in its pre-release promotional material), and also because of the commentary from its chief designer (see footnote). However, it is important to still recognize that the linguistic

---

<sup>2</sup> As explained by the director of the game, Hideo Kojima in: <https://comicbook.com/gaming/news/hideo-kojima-death-stranding-english-japanese-dialogue/>

commentary here is postured such that it is interested in the activity of the language items selected for analysis (“Bridges”, “Porter”, “Strand”) which persist in the game world in all modalities no matter which language has been selected by the player. This analysis is granted access by the definitive experience of the game being the English-language one, but it attempts to also acknowledge the complexity of its localization by highlighting the fact that other versions of the game still play with the same language items and feature the same gameplay and plot content.

## 4 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Segments of *Death Stranding* are presented here via screenshots showing incidences of the game persistently presenting the lexical items (or a combination of) “Bridges”, “Porter” and/or “Strand” in repetition across modalities, with additional surrounding texture and context provided as well but with irrelevant interims and/or cinematic set pieces excised when necessary. The samples are presented in the order they appear in the game, making it more straightforward to point out repetitions that refer back to things that were introduced earlier.

### 4.1 Sample Scene: Sam and Fragile in a cave.

This scene is at the very start of the game, presenting the first protracted dialogue interaction between the game’s protagonist Sam Porter Bridges and another character, Fragile. They spend a moment in a small cave taking shelter from a deadly rainfall phenomenon, after which Sam prepares to exit and part ways with Fragile as the weather starts to clear up. A Bridges Central Dispatch officer appears as a third speaking character in this scene, chiming in via radio.

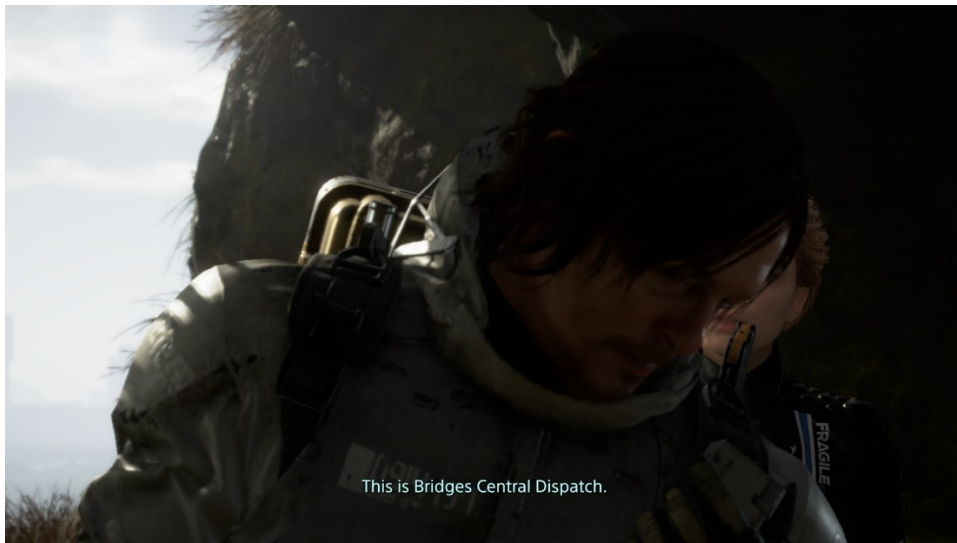


Figure 1. The protagonist Sam Bridges receives a radio transmission.

The proper noun “Bridges” is introduced. The voice on Sam’s personal radio identifies itself as a representative of “Bridges” as an organization (“This is Bridges Central Dispatch.”).

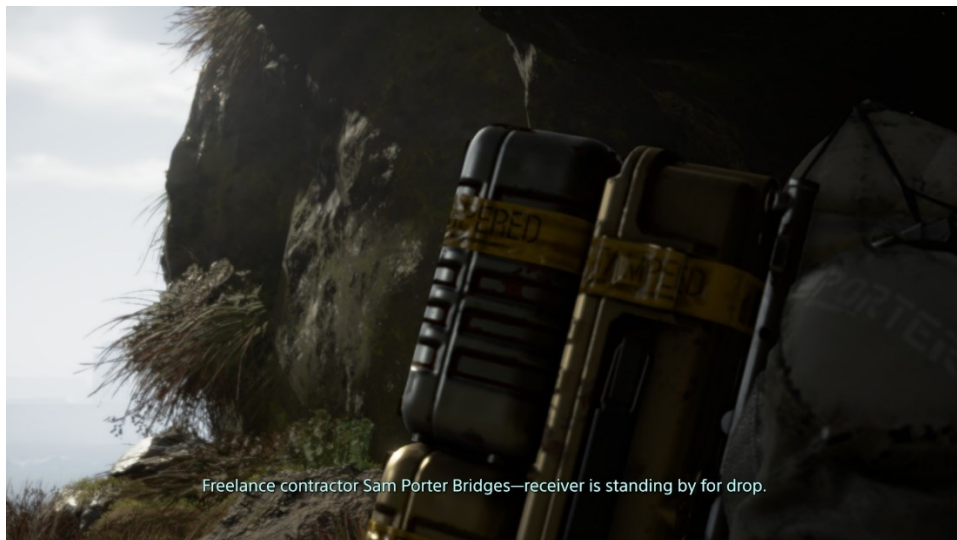


Figure 2. The radio transmission addresses Sam as he walks over to collect the rest of his cargo.

The voice on the radio engages in a dual use of the proper noun “Bridges” here: it is used both as part of Sam’s full name (frontloaded with a job title) as well as the name for the organization Bridges (as seen in Figure 1), both instances residing in the communication mode of speech. Another lexical item, “Porter”, is introduced as the full

name of the protagonist Sam is uttered by the voice. In this scene, the use of “Porter” has fewer obvious cohesive dimensions in the mode of speech when compared to “Bridges”, as “Porter” is stowed in Sam’s full name as a proper noun and strictly enclosed in that particular context for now. However, “Porter” is also present in the visual mode here. We can see that both Sam and Fragile have text emblazoned on their apparel; in the case of Fragile, we see that her jacket sports “Fragile” on its sleeve, whereas Sam’s shoulder pad features the lexical item “Porter”. Thus, we can observe “Porter” making an appearance in two communication modes early on in this scene.



Figure 3. Sam looks at a photograph. The character Fragile (just out of frame) makes a philosophical comment about the nature of the world in the game.



Figure 4. Sam looks at the photograph, Fragile's monologue continues.



Figure 5. The full line spoken here is "I'll see you around... Sam Porter Bridges". Fragile exits the scene, the camera focuses on Sam's face as Fragile ends her monologue.

In Figures 3-5 Sam appraises a damaged photograph while Fragile delivers a monologue off-screen, eventually addressing Sam by the same full name as the voice on the radio did in Figures 1-2, repeating the lexical items ("Porter" and "Bridges") established and uttered previously and thus contributing to lexical cohesion by repetition. We can also observe multimodal cohesion in the persistent appearance of the title "Porter" on Sam's apparel in Figures 2 and 4. As the scene progresses, both "Porter" and "Bridges" are established in two communication modes; in spoken dialogue

output and also capitalized in the accompanying subtitles. “Porter” can be tracked on a third mode of communication as well, as it is legible on Sam’s clothing during the scene.

## 4.2 Sample Scene: Sam and the Bridges truck

In this scene we see Sam receiving a call via intercom about a “special commission”, after which he heads outside to find out what his task involves.



Figure 6. Sam listens to an intercom announcement after making a delivery on foot.

In Figure 6 we can see “Porter” and “Bridges” returning as part of the intercom message as proper nouns, and we see “Porter” on Sam’s shoulder pads once again as he turns around while listening to the intercom. Sam had just made the first of one of his many deliveries as a courier in the transformed world and is now reacting to a new task being offered to him (upwards glance, turning away from the interface on the right).





Figure 7. Sam walks by a truck emblazoned with “Bridges CDT”. Non-diegetic cinematic credits are featured.

Figure 7 shows Sam proceeding to go handle the commission, “Bridges” now featuring prominently on the side of a vehicle (a non-diegetic music credits text sequence temporarily taking space on the right side of the screen as the game is still introducing itself), while “Porter” is intermittently visible on Sam’s apparel once again.

Both “Bridges” and “Porter” have now claimed space in multiple modes, affixed to ordinary items and objects such as outdoors apparel and a vehicle, both of which are likely to repeat their appearances in the game (the player will continue to play as Sam from the third person perspective and see their apparel, and vehicles are not out of the ordinary in the game world).



Figure 8. Sam has climbed onto the bed of the truck and is meeting with a man describing a body.

We can see in Figure 8 that the environmental suit of the character clad in orange is sporting a “Bridges” logo on the left thigh just as the vehicle did moments before (see Figure 7), and “Bridges” is faintly visible on the harness across the body bag as well. “Porter” is also visible, obscured somewhat by a sunlight effect on Sam’s clothing.

While the player has already been made aware of Bridges as a company contracting Sam for a delivery (Figure 2), Figures 7 and 8 gradually introduce “Bridges” as an entity which emblazons its name on various kinds of objects, while “Porter” stays with Sam as a part of his apparel only. This suggests two lanes of reference: the world is being textured in the visual mode with the lexical item “Bridges”, while “Porter” is relegated to a more contextually confined item interlocked with Sam and his agency in the depicted game world.



Figure 9. Sam is proffered a handshake by the unnamed character minding the body bag.

After discussing the incident relating to the body in Figure 8 (preparing to deliver it to an incinerator), the other character offers to shake Sam's hand in Figure 9. This is another instance of a character representing "Bridges" as an organization (like the less direct line spoken in Figure 1). The spoken line in Figure 9 leaves "Bridges" out of Sam's full name but includes "Porter". The texturing of the game world is constructed further with the use of these two items once more, as choices in the mode of speech and dialogue design reinforce what was implied by the visual mode before: "Bridges" represents an influential corporate entity with a sprawling presence in the world, while "Porter" remains a reference to Sam as an agent moving within the world textured by Bridges as an entity and "Bridges" as a lexical item.



Figure 10. Sam rides on the bed of the Bridges truck as it leaves for the incinerator.

In Figure 10, “Bridges” features prominently on the rear of a truck, headlining a logo based on the outline of the United States of America (the logo features a piece of text slightly obscured by dirt: “United Cities of America”). The design of the logo deploys another repetition of “Bridges”, positioning the proper noun as its topmost element. The logo also populates an austere map of the United States of America with a spiderweb-like pattern. This design choice further payloads the lexical item “Bridges” with symbolism, suggesting that Bridges is an entity with the capability to create connections and a sprawling presence in the world, as the player has begun to witness by now with increasing frequency.

In this scene we have seen how the “Porter” (both the lexical item “Porter”, persistently a proper noun at this stage, and Sam as a literal porter making deliveries) gets involved, but does not share the footing of “Bridges” with regards to salience or density across the communication modes. The appearances of “Bridges” are flexible, malleable, and additive with regards to what Bridges is as a company and as an element in the game world, while “Porter” continues to relate to a more personal agency and the status of Sam as a comparatively static figure in the world.

### 4.3 Sample Scene: Sam and Deadman

In this scene, Sam wakes up in a barracks-like facility chained to a bed after a violently traumatic incident following the delivery of a body to an incinerator. The character Deadman (shown in Figure 13) is building a rapport with Sam as he explains various things about the remains of the United States of America affected by the Death Stranding event, along with Sam's role in it.

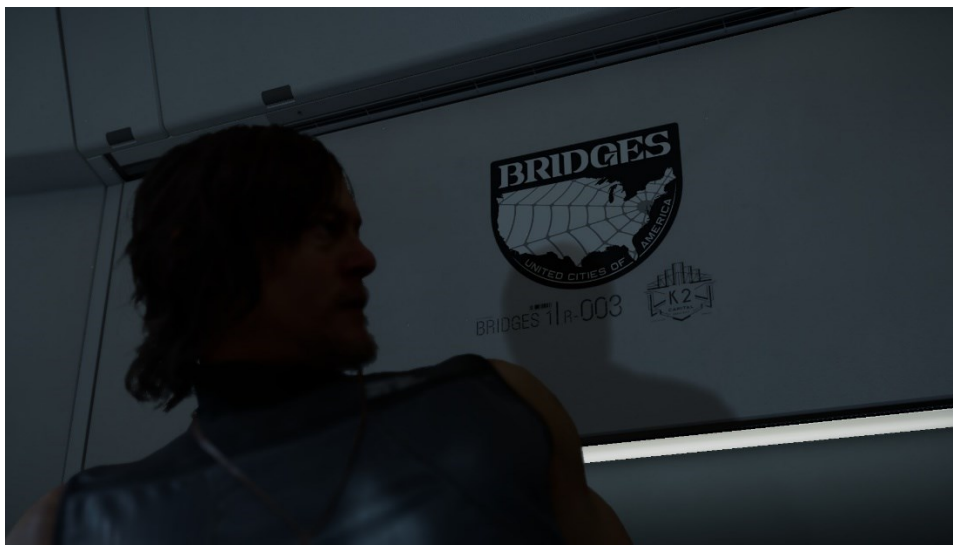


Figure 11. Sam sits on a bed and looks behind him, the camera focuses on the Bridges logo on the wall.



Figure 12. Sam looks back at Deadman (in front of him, off-screen), and says "Oh. "Us".".

In Figure 12<sup>3</sup>, Sam’s spoken line is “Oh. “Us” “, delivered in a sneering tone. This is a reply to Deadman’s explanation regarding a device on Sam’s wrist; his spoken line before Sam’s response was: “These aren’t handcuffs; they’re cutting-edge devices that keep us all connected”. This causes Sam to look behind him (Figure 11) and connect Deadman’s first-person plural pronoun “us” with the “Bridges” logo on the wall (Figure 12). This “us” refers to an exclusive (to the player) “us”, which is Bridges and its United Cities of America (as seen in Figure 11 in this scene and also previously in Figure 10) subsuming and representing the depicted world under reconstruction.

Consistent with previous scenes, we can once again observe “Bridges” texturing Sam’s surroundings as the lexical item affixes itself to a facility interior, while “Porter” is revealed to stick to just Sam for now, even after he has changed clothes (see Figures 8 and 12).



Figure 13. Deadman talks to Sam and explains the mission of Bridges as an organization.

In Figure 13, directly after Sam’s reaction Deadman responds with “Yup. Bridges.” and proceeds to point at the Bridges pin on his jacket. Like with “Porter” previously, we can now observe “Bridges” being affixed to a person as well as part of their

---

<sup>3</sup> Due to a technical error, Figure 12 is missing some subtitles. In Figure 11, Sam looks behind him to see the Bridges logo. He then reacts to it verbally in Figure 12 and says “Oh. “Us” “.

clothing and habitus. The visual mode is in dialogue with Deadman’s layered explanation of what Bridges is, as he equates it with the first person plural pronoun “us” (prompting Sam’s response in Figure 12) while also describing it as a grand effort concerned with survival on a global scale as he refers to Bridges as “Humanity’s best hope for the future – or avoiding extinction, if you prefer”. Once again, “Porter” is a title of an agent still quite literally stuck to Sam in Figure 12, while “Bridges”, though now also sported by Deadman as an accessory, retains its influence and representative authority of the aforementioned effort of reconstruction and salvation because Deadman’s description of Bridges as an organization is consistent with the way Bridges has shown to be able to texture the world (providing equipment, vehicles, services and now personnel).



Figure 14. Deadman explains to Sam how he has been able to survive some of the lethal effects of the Death Stranding cataclysm.

Visually, “Bridges” remains as a literal fixture on the wall behind Sam in Figure 14. In the mode of speech, the lexical item morphs from a proper noun in the plural into an adjective in the singular as part of a mention of a “bridge baby” by Deadman. In *Death Stranding*, a bridge baby is a literal live human baby in an amniotic tank connected to Sam’s bloodstream as he traverses the game world, granting him an additional “sixth sense” to help him avoid invisible monsters present in the world affected by the Death Stranding. In an instance of visual cataphora, Figures 8 and 10 showed another character being equipped with an amniotic tank for a bridge baby (the character on the

truck bed appraising the body with Sam), suggesting that bridge babies are survival equipment to be issued and not unusual artifacts in the game world, as unconventional as they might come across. Consistent with this observation, we can observe Deadman's line adding the adjective "broken" (as opposed to "injured" or "dead") to it to denote that he regards bridge babies as mere objects or tools.

The similarity between the now gratuitously repeated "Bridges" and the appearance of "bridge" in the singular builds on the cohesion created by the artifacts we have observed as directly claimed by Bridges, such as the truck and the body bag in Figures 7-10 and the actual facility interior featured in this scene (f. ex. Figure 14). While the common noun "bridge" in "bridge baby" does not directly imply corporate ownership and affiliation like the previously mentioned examples do (in the case of "Bridges"), the choice in the narrative of the game to opt for the re-use of the noun "bridge" for the bridge baby artifact is still notable here for its close proximity with the pervasive "Bridges" in the visual mode across this scene.



Figure 15. Deadman is shown to be standing in front of a display of environmental suits.

A simplified version of the "Bridges" logo features in the background in Figure 15, appearing twice on the thighs of the heavy-duty environmental suits in the large display case. The repeating, palette-swapped design suggests it is also on the third suit obscured by Deadman's frame. We can observe a similarity in the environmental suits



to Sam's outfit from before; the encased suits all display the text-only Bridges logo on their thighs, whereas Sam's suit had shoulder pads featuring "Porter" before (and nothing on the thighs of the suit, as freeform gameplay camera movement will make apparent during gameplay). We have seen a character wearing the orange suit in Figure 15 before (see Figure 8) as he proceeded to represent Bridges as an organization and carry out a job in a truck with Bridges decals and equipment to match with Sam brought along to help.

Once again, we can see the language in the game creating cohesion by way of repetition as "Bridges" recurs in via multiple modes contexts which suggest organized ownership and deploying of objects, equipment, and employees. "Porter" is also affectively repeated in the same manner, but it appears to abstain from sprawl and building textual connections across the world in favor of relating more closely to Sam, or the singular courier or adventurer as an agent in the world.



Figure 16. Sam questions Deadman.

In Figure 16, the appearance of "America" as a topic in the conversation as a known institution (though labelled by Sam as defunct) calls back to the geographical outline of the "United Cities of America" in the "Bridges" logo, which is based on the geography of the real-life United States of America. The interplay between the consistent torque of anaphoric reference of "Bridges" (building significance through text-internal

backwards-pointing repetitions in a growing number of contexts in the game) and “America” employed here as a vehicle for an exophoric reference (its significance culled from outside the text: the real-life geographical knowledge of the player) allows “Bridges” to further establish itself in the text of the game as an influential entity.



Figure 17. Deadman communicates with Sam as a representative of Bridges.

Finally, Deadman (off-screen in Figure 17) repeats a phrase heard previously in the game (see Figure 9), as we hear of Bridges entering into a contract with Sam Porter once more. This instance organizes a familiar syntactic frame around “Bridges”, and now two different characters have used the verb *to enter* (in the grammatical progressive aspect case of “enters”, building on the forward motion in the syntax) to imbue Bridges with the power to employ and network with individual agents such as a Sam in an extemporaneous manner. As Deadman represents Bridges as an organization, Sam’s last name is once again left out as he is addressed only as Sam Porter.

In this scene we can once again observe “Bridges” exerting power and corporate initiative being depicted multimodally (Deadman’s spoken lines demonstrating the nature of Bridges while it makes various world-texturing appearances as logos and decals across Figures 11-15 and 17). The sphere of influence of the lexical item “Porter” again appears to stick to Sam but it is present simultaneously in multiple modes as well, if perhaps somewhat less prominently (the tail end of Deadman’s dialogue and

also again visible on Sam’s vest in a thin white font, as seen previously in Figures 12 and 17 clearly).

#### 4.4 Sample Scene: Sam meeting with Bridget

In this scene we see Sam reconnecting with his mother, Bridget, who is the deathly ailing President of America. Sam arrives with Deadman and interacts with the masked character Die-Hardman, described by Deadman as the “the president’s right-hand man”.



Figure 18. Deadman and Sam view Sam’s mother, Bridget, laying on a hospital bed. Deadman identifies the character Die-Hardman (standing bedside) as “the president’s right-hand man” and as “the director of Bridges”.

In this scene we can see that “Bridges” is present in multiple modalities. Figure 18 shows “Bridges” embossed on the back of the jacket worn by Deadman, spoken as part of Deadman’s line (and identified as an organisation), and also indirectly referenced by the presence of Bridges’ head representative, Die-Hardman.

As the script of the game bestows the character Die-Hardman with the descriptors of “president’s right-hand man” and “the director of Bridges”, “Bridges” is brought in particularly explicit close proximity to the institution of America. The presence of an American flag (see Figure 18) and the introduction of a *president* comport with the

understanding of the player of The United States of America being a nation bearing this flag and with a president as its leader.



Figure 19. Die-Hardman speaks to Sam.

Following the collection of instances of “Bridges” during Deadman’s exposition (see Figure 18), in Figure 19 Die-Hardman refers to the president (out of frame but still in the same room) by her first name, Bridget. He also states the familial connection between Bridget and Sam explicitly (“It’s your mother”).

Bridget’s name stows the common noun “bridge” within it, and while it is not an exact repetition of the now obviously central lexical item “Bridges”, the close similarity of the names (along with the significance of the character with regards to Bridges as an organization and her connection with Sam and Die-Hardman) still has the effect of calling back to Bridges as an unfolding entity of significance.



Figure 20. Sam's mother, Bridget. A close-up with the character name (along with a voice actor credit) superimposed on the depicted scene.

In Figure 20 we can see the interface of the game laying out an introduction with non-diegetic elements arranged on the screen to display Bridget's name as she speaks to Sam in her hospital bed. This is the second of two consecutive mentions of Bridget in this scene; the game first deployed Bridget's name in the mode of speech as part of Die-Hardman's spoken line addressed to Sam in Figure 19, and in Figure 20 it is in the visual mode instead as a stylized piece of non-diegetic text ("Bridget" to the left of the character's head with pronounced spacing, subtitled by a voice actor credit).



Figure 21. Bridget talks to Sam (now bedside).

Bridget's topic of conversation before and during the moment captured in Figure 21 concerns Sam's sister, Amelie. Bridget asks Sam to help her sister and speaks of an "us" as a faction or a conglomerate requiring Sam and Amelie's help to "reconnect". This is similar to how Deadman spoke to Sam of an "us" that Sam's wrist-worn hand-cuff devices helped to "keep connected" (see Figure 12). Sam understood Deadman's "us" as meaning Bridges as a project of salvation or a reconstruction effort (Figures 11-13), and in Figure 21 we can see Bridget speaking to Sam as a leader of an "us" reaching out to Sam for assistance.



Figure 22. Bridget speaks to Sam (close-up).

In Figure 22 Bridget speaks to Sam about his ability to "make America whole". This is similar to how she describes Sam as being able to "help us reconnect" in Figure 21, and indirectly rebuts Sam's statement of America being "finished" in Figure 16 as now Sam would be an agent of hope and reconstruction according to the president of America, Bridget. This is also harmonious with Deadman's description of Bridges as "humanity's best hope for the future" and the appropriation of the outline of America as a nation on Bridges' logo design, as seen many times previously (f. ex. Figure 11).

Similar to the mention of a *bridge* baby in the middle of an extended multimodal dispersal of “Bridges” in the previous scene featuring only Sam and Deadman (Figures 11-17), this scene also arranges for a jostling of a lexical item in particularly close morphological similarity to “Bridges”; the name of Sam’s mother, Bridget. Her name is made focal intermodally and paired with a looming presence of Bridges as an organization, primed by the appearance of the logo on the back of Deadman’s jacket and his explanation of Die-Hardman’s position as the director of Bridges in Figure 18.

#### 4.5 Sample Scene: After Bridget’s death

This scene takes place after Bridget succumbs to her condition and expires. Sam, Deadman, and Die-Hardman all react. It should be mentioned for clarity here that the plain-looking treatment room in this scene (Figures 23-25) is still the same location as the room in the previous scene (Figures 18-22), as the presidential office milieu is revealed to be an illusion after Bridget succumbs to her illness in the game.



Figure 23. Die-Hardman talks about the ramifications of Bridget’s death.

“Bridges” is referred to as an organization by Die-Hardman in Figure 23. The “Bridges” logo pin remains visible on Deadman’s red jacket and also on Die-Hardman’s black suit, though less prominently. The game is now accumulating characters with Bridges-

emblazoned apparel, each with a weighty allegiance to what is unfolding as an effort to save America, or what it has been turned into by the Death Stranding event.



Figure 24. Die-Hardman and Deadman turn to Sam (who is in shock due to the death of his mother), demanding co-operation.

“Bridges” is once again referred to as an organization in Figure 24, this time with Sam as a member, included by Die-Hardman and Deadman in their “us” with a mission to rebuild America. The framing of the dialogue scene in Figure 24 transposes the standing positions of Deadman and Die-Hardman from Figure 23, bringing Die-Hardman closer to the fourth wall from the player’s perspective and making his Bridges patch take space as a foregrounded element in the scene. This instance of intermodal cohesion allows for several elements to come together all at once: “Bridges” and “America” in the mode of speech (and also featured and capitalized in the included subtitle text) as Deadman and Die-Hardman talk to Sam, and “Bridges” is highlighted in the visual mode with a striking black-and-white colour juxtaposition featuring the outline of the United States in the Bridges logo on Die-Hardman’s apparel.





Figure 25. Die-Hardman commands Sam to embark on his quest.

Sam's full name is spoken by Die-Hardman in Figure 25, explicitly exposing its stow-  
ing of two central lexical items: "Porter", and the persistent, densely repetitive  
"Bridges". As a mission of national reconstruction and adversity prevention has been  
bestowed upon Sam, his agency is now more compatible for reflecting that of Bridges  
as an entity: "Porter" has not detached itself from Sam's name or identity to seek out  
a different character or object to affix itself to, but "Bridges" now appears as part of  
Sam's name again as he gets entrusted with a mission of great importance. This is  
markedly different to how Deadman (Figure 17) and the character on the Bridges truck  
(Figure 9) addressed Sam as merely Sam Porter while taking the initiative to contract  
him under different, less urgent circumstances.

#### **4.6 Sample Scene: Preparing Bridget's corpse for transport.**

In this scene, Deadman and Die-Hardman speak with Sam as he prepares to transport  
the body of her mother to an incinerator with haste because of the inherent danger of  
corpses in the game world; dead human bodies eventually explode in the world struck  
by the Death Stranding event and must therefore be disposed of quickly.

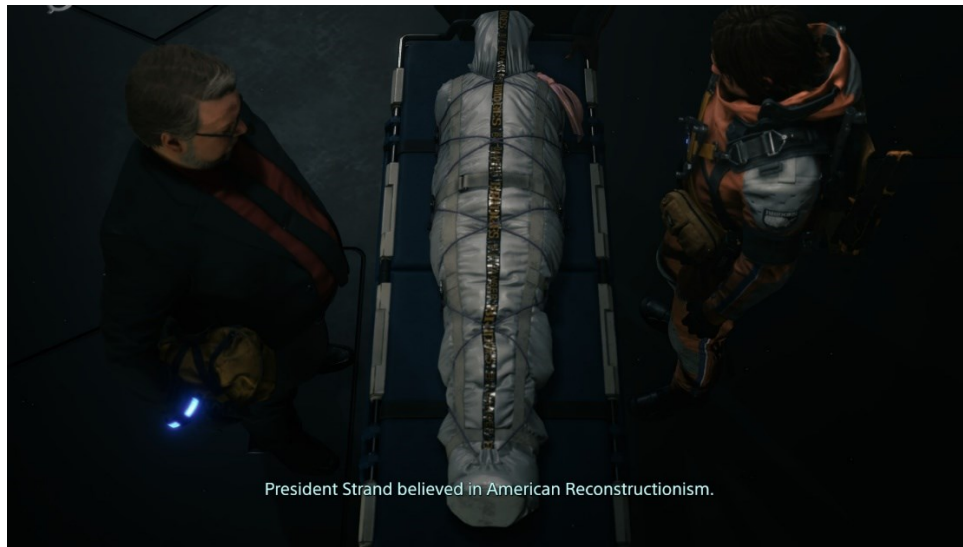


Figure 26. Deadman and Sam stand by Bridget's corpse. Deadman speaks.

Deadman refers to the late Bridget officially as President Strand in Figure 26. The game begins to deploy "Strand" in reference to a notable figure with regards to the reconstruction effort of America, using it as a proper noun. We can observe Sam wearing one of the Bridges environmental suits (as seen in Figure 15) as he spends a brief moment with Deadman and Die-Hardman going over what Bridget's mission was before her death. Bridget's body-bag also features the Bridges insignia on the tape stretched across its length, as seen before in Figure 8. Each character in this scene (alive or dead) sports the Bridges logo in some fashion, which builds cohesive connective tissue in the visual mode as the characters now appear to be working under the same aegis.



Figure 27. Deadman responds to Sam's line "Face it, America is finished".

As Deadman responds to Sam in Figure 27, he is shown to be wearing the Bridges pin on his suit coat as he speaks about the state of America in the world. We saw previously in Figure 16 that Sam felt that America was "finished" when he was still wearing his "Porter" clothes (and was addressed simply as "Sam Porter" without finishing his full name with the "Bridges" surname added). Deadman, as an optimistic representative of Bridges, makes a statement to the opposite.

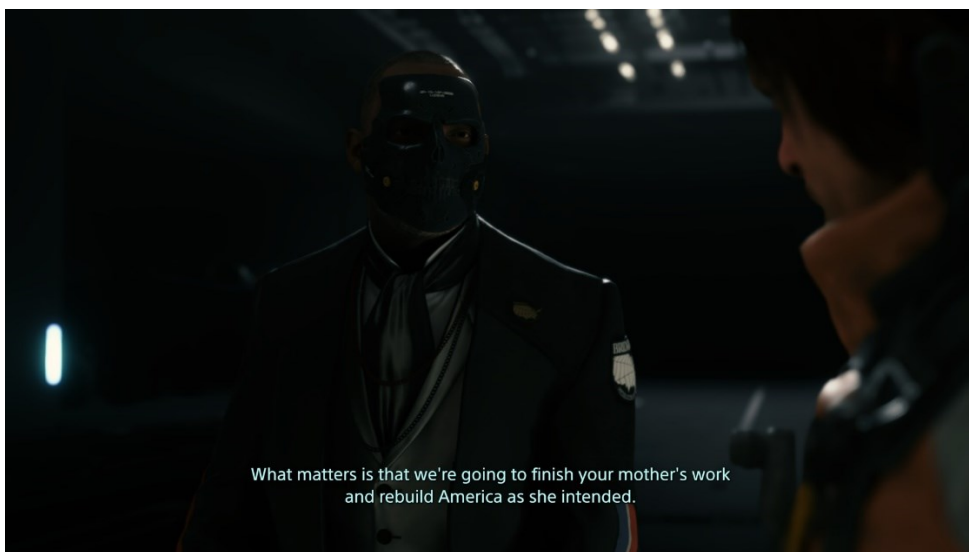


Figure 28. Die-Hardman refocuses the conversation on Sam's mission.

Die-Hardman speaks from the position of the director of Bridges in Figure 28. The Bridges logo is present on his shoulder patch, and he is revealed to be wearing the

same Bridges pin as Deadman (see Figures 13 & 27). His declaration of finishing Bridget's work and rebuilding America utilizes the first-person plural pronoun "we" as the collective of agents working to bring about this end, similarly to how Deadman and Die-Hardman both readily used the pronoun "us" to refer to the ubiquitous influence and activity of Bridges and their stewardship of it.



Figure 29. Die-Hardman speaks about the gravity of Bridges as an organization.

Die-Hardman states the mission of Bridges (to "rebuild America") explicitly and directly in Figure 29. In this moment we can observe that the composition of the shot and the assembly of the characters now obscure any obvious visual instances of "Bridges" which were present in a dynamic manner in the visual mode in the preceding exchanges, monologues and close-ups (Figures 26-28).



Figure 30. Sam embarks on his delivery and looks back at the closing garage door behind him sporting a large “Bridges” logo.

Figure 30 shows “Bridges” becoming visually extremely prominent as the scene comes to a close. The design of the Bridges logo is shown in an enlarged fashion (when compared to previous instances), and it can be appraised more easily. We can observe “Bridges” headlining the outline of United States, which is covered in a spider web-like pattern.

#### 4.7 Sample Scene: Introducing Amelie

Die-Hardman facilitates Sam’s remote connection and co-operation with the hologram of Sam’s sister, Amelie. They resolve to work together as Amelie establishes her role and status as the new president of America, replacing Bridget.



Figure 31. Amelie introduces and establishes herself. Voice actor credit (along with a motion capture actor credit) is visible.

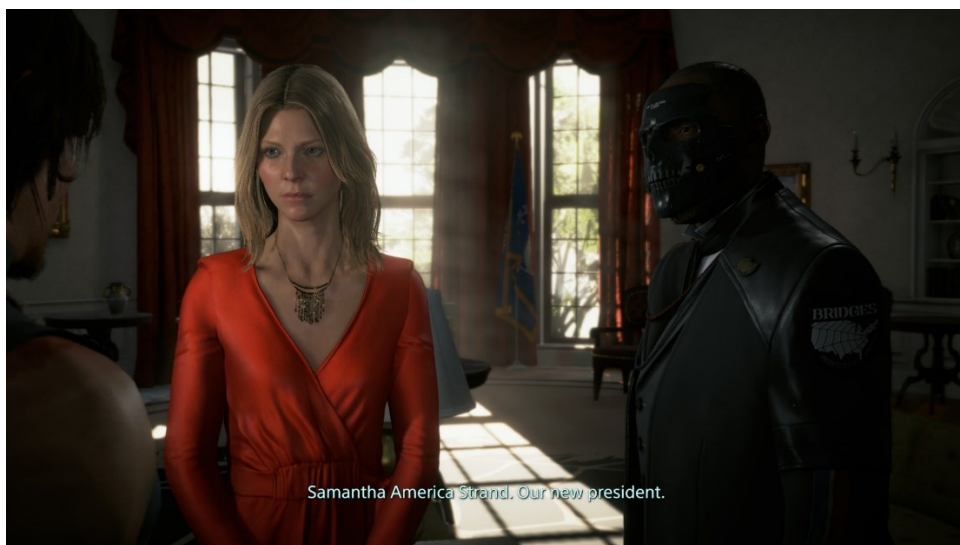


Figure 32. Die-Hardman assists in introducing Amelie.

In Figure 31 Amelie refers to the demise of Bridget in direct familial lexis (“my mother may be gone”) and the curt noun phrase that follows after the conjunction (“I’m here”) implies the survival of Bridges as an organization; Bridget is gone, but Bridges still has a leader in Amelie. Die-Hardman then proceeds to bestow Amelie with a name to use as a public-facing persona in Figure 32: Samantha America Strand. The proper noun “Strand” recurs once more, as does the complete mention of a President Strand, the name and title Deadman used for Bridget in Figure 26.

The sibling characters Sam Porter Bridges and Samantha America Strand now both stand as instances of the game inserting one or more of the observed key lexical items into the names of plot-critical agents in the game world, reflecting their roles in the story. Sam’s middle name (Porter) suggests a reference to his role as a courier journeying the world to make deliveries, while Samantha’s middle name (America) is representative of her position as a leader of the to-be-rebuilt America, the desolation of which is being tended to by Bridges. Both Sam and Amelie (now publicly known as Samantha) are agents and actors with special assignments in the project overseen by Bridges to rebuild America, and thus their names being reflective of their roles payload a substantial force of constructing cohesion as they will continue to be addressed and referred to by their names (by other characters in dialogue and also automated voice communications during gameplay) as the game progresses and the player witnesses them playing out their parts in the narrative of *Death Stranding*.

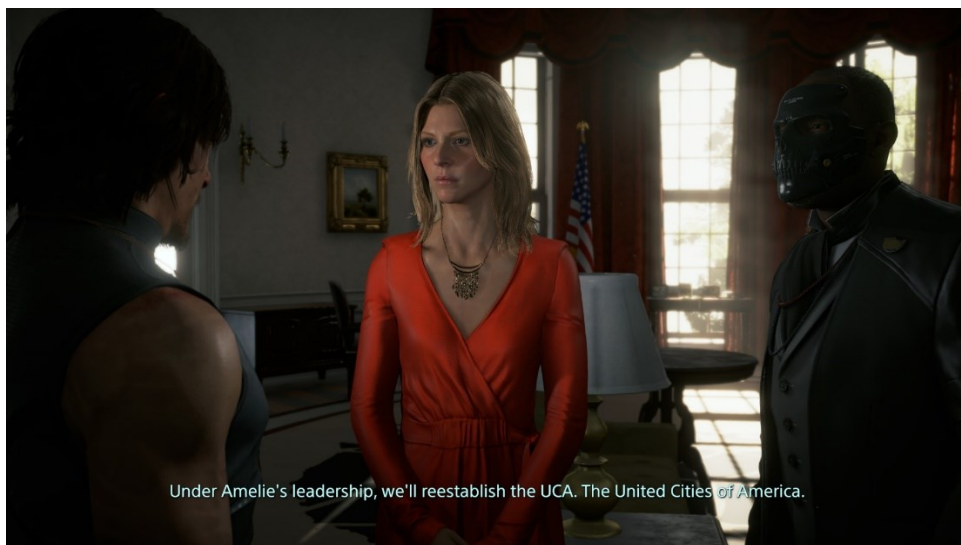


Figure 33. Die-Hardman explains Amelie’s mission to Sam.

In Figure 33 we can see Die-Hardman speaking similarly to his line in Figure 28. Amelie is identified as a key agent in continuing her mother’s work to rebuild America, now referred to as re-establishing a “United Cities of America”, a phrase previously seen subtitled the full version of the Bridges logo (see Figures 10, 11, 14 and 24). The lexical item “Bridges” has made several appearances where it has decorated and textured the game world, and the logo design of Bridges (along with Die-Hardman’s

statement in Figure 33) suggests that Bridges is responsible for the restoration and integrity of the United Cities of America. Amelie's mission is implied to be that of Bridges as well, and re-establishing The United Cities of America is presented as a composite part of rebuilding America, as referred to by Die-Hardman and Bridget before (Figures 22 & 28).

#### 4.8 Sample Scene: Sam's dream sequence

Having strategized and debated his mission with Amelie and Die-Hardman, Sam interacts with Amelie again in a dream.



Figure 34. Amelie speaks to Sam in a dream.





Figure 35. Sam corrects Amelie.

Amelie refers to Sam as Sam Strand in Figure 34, emphasizing the familial tie between Amelie and Sam. However, Sam rejects the name given to him and proceeds to correct Amelie and call himself Sam Porter Bridges instead. “Strand”, “Porter”, and “Bridges” all now occur in close syntactic proximity during a single adjacency pair (Figures 34 & 35) and are augmented with very minimal additional dialogue elements only. The repetitions of the lexical items become highlighted as they are set against a milieu detached from the real-world infrastructure and concrete physical reality of the game world proper. Sam and Amelie are facing each other in a much more abstract dream environment, engaged only in the conversation with no ongoing activity taking place apart from their verbal exchange.



Figure 36. Amelie crouches to deliver a monologue close to Sam.



Figure 37. Amelie talks about “strand” as a word, the camera zooms in on her necklace.

In Figures 36 and 37 Amelie prefaces her “strand” (now a common noun, and with marked subtitling in the game interface) with a statement priming the lexical item to be interpreted differently than the familial use seen in Figures 34 and 35. “Strand” is made focal by Amelie as she analyses it from a linguistic perspective in her monologue. Her necklace, itself a small curtain of literal strands, is framed as the focal point in the visual mode in Figure 37. The marked subtitling (the quotations around “strand”) remains persistent.



Figure 38. Beached whales are shown as Amelie continues her monologue off-screen.



Figure 39. More images of beached whales as Amelie's monologue continues.

In Figure 38 Amelie inflects “strand” into a verb. Elements in the visual mode move in concert with the content in the ongoing speech: grim imagery of beached whales is shown as Amelie states that the meaning of “stranding” is “being washed up on the shore”. The marked subtitling of “strand” remains, adapting to the inflection. Figure 39 shows “strand” being inflected again by Amelie, this time into an adjective and presented as part of an abstract notion about not being able to “go home”. The marked subtitling remains, adapting to the inflection once more.



Figure 40. Amelie brings her monologue about the word “strand” to a close, beached whales are shown strewn along the beach and skyward “strands” enter the frame (top right, faint).

Finally, in Figure 40 Amelie speaks to Sam directly again, utilizing the inflected “Strand” while the quotation marks are no longer present in the subtitles and thus the interface no longer calls attention to “Strand” as a marked element in the same manner. While the camera brings Amelie and Sam back into view, the graphical presentation of the game displays all of the central elements of their surreal beach surroundings in a wide panorama.

Figures 36-40 illustrate a particularly clear instance of multimodal cohesion as the visual mode provides elements coinciding with the morphing repetition of “Strand” present in the mode of speech during Amelie’s monologue. The close-up shot of the strand pattern on her necklace pairs with her definition of “strand” as part of a rope or bond, and her definition of the adjective “stranded” (“beached on the shore”) is paired with images of literal beached whales. The visual mode also harmonizes with Amelie’s more abstract statement of being “stranded” without a place to go or the ability to return home; the scene begins to feature an empty horizon as the camera zooms outward and Amelie states her situation plainly in the dream.

## 4.9 Samples of common gameplay situations

Figures 41-43 are instances of normal gameplay where the player is in control of Sam and the visual mode is being influenced by the actions of the player, rather than there being a sequence with a predetermined visual composition and no interactive ludic component. The descriptions of these screenshots expand on what has been shown in previous images, as they have been selected to show sights and operations which recur in the game many times over its course.



Figure 41. An example image of gameplay, Sam transports a corpse and comes across a large “Bridges” logo emblazoned on a building.

Figure 41 illustrates how “Bridges” remains as a lexical item recurring as part of the Bridges logo, persistent and prominent throughout the game as Sam visits different locales and communities. It is often seen on buildings and vehicles in various settlements and remains legible even from quite a distance, as illustrated here.



Figure 42. An example image of gameplay. Sam travels by foot towards his destination.



Figure 43. An example of an actual bridge in the game being built and maintained by Sam (and in reality, by the player(s)).

Figure 42 illustrates how the game delivers text feedback to the player concerning their decision to have Sam drink from his canteen in order to recover his strength (“Bridges Energy Drink consumed.” displayed on the left-hand side of the screen). The energy drink is of the Bridges brand, and thus we see yet again an instance of “Bridges” as a fixture within the selection of objects in the game, this time associated with a consumable item.

In Figure 43 the interface of the game reflects the activity in the game world as the player decides to spend some of their resources to build or maintain structures, vehicles, and objects. We also finally see an instance of one of many literal *bridges* constructed, used, and witnessed by the player across the game as *Death Stranding* affords the player with resources and freedom to influence and transform the game world for themselves and other players as well. As the density of this activity grows during sections of gameplay, structures (such as the bridge in Figure 43) become increasingly common to encounter in various stages of completion and/or disrepair. This element of the game would appear to realize the suggestion of the character of the game world being greatly influenced by the proliferation of Bridges-branded assets and objects all over the expanse of the game environment (see Figures 10, 17, 30 and 41).

## 5 DISCUSSION

This chapter will detail the findings from the data collected with regards to central metonym deployment in *Death Stranding*, as well as the particulars of the cohesion present and featuring the key words chosen for close observation, “Bridges”, “Porter” and “Strand”.

### 5.1 Metonyms in *Death Stranding*

Of the lexical items observed in the present study (“Bridges”, “Porter” and “Strand”) “Bridges” builds a particularly direct metonymic link to Sam Porter’s mission of “making America whole” and “re-establishing the United Cities of America”. While Bridges is initially introduced simply as a logistics company employing Sam (Figure 1), it quickly starts to become associated with the more grand, nationally sanctioned role in the story. Two examples from the data demonstrate this with particular clarity:

1. The line spoken by Die-Hardman (the “director of Bridges”) in Figure 28 (“What matters is that we’re going to finish your mother’s work and rebuild America as she intended”) payloading the upcoming pronoun “that” to function as ellipsis for the mission of Bridges in “that’s the reason Bridges exists” in Figure 29.
2. Earlier, in Figures 11-12 Sam’s initial disappointment at Deadman’s “us” connecting to Bridges as an organization is met with only delight from Deadman



in Figure 13. Deadman's actions in the scene run concurrently in the modes of visual gesture and speech as he points to the Bridges pin on his suit (the design of which matches the Bridges logo on the wall behind Sam in Figures 11-12, just moments before) and declares Bridges to be "Humanity's best hope for the future - or avoiding extinction, if you prefer".

Kowalewski (2018: 6-8, 16) suggests that the most likely metonyms to be selected for a given target concept are arranged by our own cognitive pathing favoring vehicles which most felicitously match the conceptual domain of the target to be referenced, and exhibit the most salience and the greatest ease of parsing in context. Of the key lexical items observed, "Bridges" is situated with demonstrable primacy in the sphere of felicitous choices for representing the project of rebuilding America in the game because of its staunch presence in the game characters' discussions regarding affairs concerning national reconstruction, as well as its consistent headlining of the literal outline of the United Cities of America which is to be re-established.

Further choices of composition in the design of *Death Stranding* work to inject "Bridges" into the zones of text feedback within the heads-up display or the interface of the game as well, in addition to the more prominent modes of cutscene dialogue or recurring visual assets in the game world. In Figure 42, the interface of the game displays a simple message reading "Bridges Energy drink consumed", which shows that the game opts for a mention of "Bridges" as a brand or an organization in this specific zone of minimalist text feedback as well, rather than just displaying a more generic message of the character having consumed some unremarkably named restorative item. Put simply, the game uses an extensive collection of communication modes to power the movement of the lexical item "Bridges" across the multimodal gameplay experience. This manner of textual arrangement affects the posture of "Bridges", making it more salient throughout the game experience, and as such it becomes more likely to be selected and retrieved as a vehicle for metonymic representation when deployed (Kowalewski 2018: 5-8), in this case as a metonym for the steward of the national reconstruction mission in the game.

“Porter” is lent salience as a lexical item elsewhere due to its persistence as a part of the apparel on Sam, as he is the player avatar constantly present, and remains a central character appearing in most cutscenes in the game. Though “Porter” could be ascribed some metonymical dimension as standing in for the world-shaping agency that Sam exerts, the data does not show the discourse in the game powering the lexical item with this quality as clearly as it does with “Bridges”. The game is more eager to utilize “Porter” multimodally to continually foreground the agency and role of Sam in the world as he presses onward in his quest, rather than enveloping the game world with it using the same weight and reach as “Bridges” does.

Finally, “Strand” proves to be strong in its penchant for anaphoric reference across modalities, employed by the game most notably as a flexible, malleable metaphor rather than a metonym conferring heft to the network of narrative elements in the game. For example, the looming inflection of “Strand” in the titular and antagonistic danger of the Death Stranding event (along with Amelie’s monologue across Figures 34-40) is at odds with the inspiring use of “Strand” in the name of the nationally broadcasted new face for rebuilding America (Amelie being dubbed “Samantha America Strand” in Figure 32), reflecting the shape-shifting nature of “Strand” and its nimble pervasiveness in the text of *Death Stranding*. This allows for it to contribute to cohesion and claim salience in various modes by appearing in many different guises in the game multimodally, but its grammatically inflected traversal between domains and contexts suggests that it is most readily recognizable as a constantly mutating metaphorical tool for the game to use intermittently, rather than a steady-state metonym in the same way that the lexical item “Bridges” is in the game.

## 5.2 Cohesion and thematic progression

Moving away from metonymy and into the realm of cohesion proper, we can see a different way to approach the lexical item “Strand” in our analysis, which is to observe its mentions and elaborations conjuring a particularly robust example of multimodal

cohesion. Amelie's conceptual refining of "Strand" in the "Sam's dream sequence" sample scene (Figures 34-40) presents a *continuous* thematic progression by fronting each of her spoken lines with a different inflection of "Strand", demarcated from the previous exchange (with Sam) by Amelie's launch into her presentation in Figure 36 (Webster 2019: 43). The discourse morphs from a dialogue into a monologue as the camera drifts away from the speaking characters (see Figures 34-35 -> 36-39). While Amelie's sentences have some syntactic variety in the way "Strand" is inlaid into their delivery, the style of thematic progression at play remains identifiable due to the flexibility within Systemic Functional Linguistics with regards to identifying several Themes within a message in rapid succession (Webster 2019: 42-43). In Amelie's monologue, the conjunction in Figure 38 or the sequenced conjunction and an auxiliary verb in Figure 39 can be construed as textual Themes supplying the logic for the syntactic resolution of these elaborations, and they do not detract from "Strand" being a particularly focal textual Theme powering the thematic progression in an emotionally charged, plot-crucial scene.

The relationship between various modes coalescing into one presentation necessitates a junctioning of their respective palettes of cohesion, as multiple brands of concurrent linguistic and spatial organization line up to construct the resulting stream of content (Bearne 2009: 159; Engebretsen 2012: 149-150). The content delivered to the player in the visual mode across Figures 35-40 emphasizes the character of the thematic progression in the monologue by presenting scenes of beached whales with an unchanging colour palette within a single milieu. The initial absence of this imagery is, in turn, in sync with Amelie's first, plainly stated definition of "Strand" (Figure 37, the visual mode focusing on her red dress and her golden necklace featuring a design of little ropes and bonds). During her extended, continuous elaboration the visual mode synchronizes with the thematic progression of the spoken lines in the resulting multi-modal text by featuring the same imagery throughout, and only at the end of the monologue subtly introduces Amelie and Sam back into the frame after Amelie's elaboration into the word "Strand" comes to a close (Figure 40).

Elsewhere in the data, we see a collocative cohesive device being employed during Sam's meeting with Bridget, with his earlier conversation with Deadman influencing its interpretation. In Figures 11-12, Sam reacts to Deadman's use of the pronoun "us" and connects it with the organization Bridges. During Sam's meeting with his ailing mother Bridget (Figures 20-22), she asks Sam to "help *us* reconnect" and follows this up with "you can make America whole". Bridget favors the modal auxiliary "can" with regards to Sam, implying that the "Porter" has the ability to "help" an "us" "reconnect" and "make America whole". As this enterprise is revealed to be the mission of Bridges, the instances of collocation between "us" and "Bridges" becomes apparent, as closed-class lexis is connected with a corporate (and now administrative) entity.

"Porter", then, settles into a role of imbuing special agency and distinction to Sam in the texture of *Death Stranding*, simultaneously generating both proximity from and association with Bridges. Figures 9 and 17 both feature a character stating to Sam that "**Bridges** hereby enters into a contract with Sam **Porter**" (specific key words bolded for emphasis). Here, we see an arrangement of syntax where "Bridges" slots in as the Theme (in Systemic Functional Linguistics terms) while the whole of the Rheme in the sentence stops short of finishing Sam's full name, even though the official tone of the exchange would deem it typically expected and intuitive. Rather, Sam's middle name, Porter, is used in Sam's proper surname's place. Here, the lexical organization of elements is such that "Bridges" gets to represent the corporate entity in the Theme, and is decidedly dropped from the name of the individual engaging with the larger, more influential party in the exchange of the contract so as to not reappear as a constituent of the Rheme. The choice to end uttering Sam's name with "Porter" thus signifies Sam's role as a party that Bridges has the power to impose on, rather than granting "Porter" with the kind of thematic stewarding and networking that "Bridges" has access to as its true purpose unfolds.

Returning briefly one more time to the topic of intermodal cohesive devices in the data, as Deadman and Die-Hardman speak of a mission to rebuild and reconnect the United States into a community in Figures 26-30, the lexical item "Bridges" can be observed

moving dynamically from the visual mode in Figures 26-28 into a simple line of spoken dialogue in Figure 29, and then prominently back again into the visual mode in Figure 30 where “Bridges” momentarily dominates the visual mode as a large logo on a garage door which Sam turns towards before gameplay recommences. This network of intermodal cohesion involving “Bridges” would not be detectable if one were to simply follow a transcription of the speaking characters’ lines in the scene, but, if the appraisal is augmented with access to the concurrent visual mode, one can observe cohesive devices at play where key lexis persists in the scene (Figures 26-30) via whichever modality would include it. The visual instances of “Bridges” collocate with the discourse *about* Bridges the organization in Figures 26-29, anchoring the thematic progression of fleshing out the prestige and worthiness of Bridges’ mission by Die-Hardman and Deadman to a despondent Sam in the scene. This is an example of the *text* of *Death Stranding* disseminating key symbols external in terms of modality to the spoken dialogue, while still conceptually tethering them to the exchanges of the characters speaking to each other and expressing themselves in the narrative.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study approached *Death Stranding* as a multimodal text and analyzed three of its recurring key lexical items, “Bridges”, “Porter”, and “Strand” in order to address the research questions of the present study, repeated here for clarity:

1. What kind of metonyms do the observed key terms in *Death Stranding* harness to deliver a cohesive narrative?
2. How is the game organizing its multimodal exposition and world-building to support the threading of its textual elements?

The analysis of the data collected shows clear persistencies of the observed central lexical items across multiple modalities, intuitively seated into the general gameplay and/or animated cutscene activity. The discourse in *Death Stranding* is textured in such a way that many established elements are prone to be elaborated on, distributing cohesive devices across many different modalities as the matrix of the game develops additively, the narrative weight of the story consistently drawing from what has come before. Key lexical items contribute in various ways to the development of the text of *Death Stranding*, with “Bridges” being a central metonym that the game structures the scope of its initial narrative weight around, contextualizing the main quest in the game into an operation larger than the journey and survival of one man.

Webster (2019: 41) notes that “cohesion in a text increases as the elements within a text become more mutually dependent on another for their interpretation”, which is a key notion to keep in mind with regards to approaching *Death Stranding* as a multimodal text. The cohesion in *Death Stranding* can be seen as leaning on a gridding of tendons across modalities, which mold the presentation of the game to intuitively weigh and foreground elements which establish a narrative and ludic integrity to keep the player engaged. As players are tasked to traverse long distances and negotiate the dangers of the world, or simply parse a cutscene rife with off-kilter conversation, the underlying process in the game’s narrative continues to build on the project of a Porter tasked with rebuilding a national network piecemeal, brokered by the resources and philosophies of the organization Bridges assuming national control and responsibility. The cohesion of *Death Stranding* is therefore bound to the integrity of its discourse (and in specific terms, the consistency in the repetition of its key lexis in particular) present throughout, and pressured by the inevitable temporal distance between mentions and appearances of key terms as the game unfolds at the pace of the player.

Another kind of distance the discourse in the game has to cover is between the appearances of its key elements across its many modalities, as elements in one mode require cross-compatibility with instances of the same items of interest in other modes in order to bolster the integrity of the multimodal text (Gee 2003: 108-109). The analysis of the data shows that the text of *Death Stranding* spreads elements vital to its conceptual intelligibility across its modes in a consistent fashion, and primes its gameplay (the ludic experience of the repetitive mission of the Porter making deliveries, working for and on behalf of Bridges), visual design choices (cutscenes organized with interleaved modalities sporting key concepts and terms, or repetitive instances of plain landmark structures large enough to sport a prominent “Bridges” logo in the world during gameplay) and interface design (for example, the premier stamina recovery item often used by the player throughout the game branded as “Bridges Energy Drink”) to display these to the player consistently to control the centrality of select concepts and thematic centrepieces in the game.

*Death Stranding* is a rich text with innumerable entry points for many different kinds of analysis, and the present study has explored only a modest layer of its total discourse and texture. While various phenomena outside of the focus of this paper have made several interesting appearances in the data collected here (multiliteracies as a “reader” of the game as a text, the design of the mode of colour in the game, the utility of metaphor in the narrative of the game etc.), the synthesis of the different theoretical approaches employed here is exclusively subservient to this analysis only.

However, a toolkit based on the foundations of discourse analysis with brave combinations of perhaps even more novel or experimental approaches than mine can, much like this analysis did, attempt to embrace the unconventional character of *Death Stranding* as a fruitful challenge to identify many other kinds of complex systems of meaning within it and lay bare their constituent lifeblood of the forward motion of the narrative in the game. *Death Stranding* is exceedingly cavernous in the depth of its design and storyline, and I can’t imagine it running out of engaging questions for discourse analysis, as well as disciplines adjacent and beyond.



## 7 REFERENCES

- Arapinis, A. (2015). Whole-for-part metonymy, classification, and grounding. *Linguistics and philosophy* 38(1), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10988-014-9164-6>
- Banks, D. (2002). Systemic Functional Linguistics as a model for text analysis. *ASp* 35-36, 23-34. <https://doi.org/10.4000/asp.1584>
- Bateman, J. A. (2017). The place of systemic functional linguistics as a linguistic theory in the twenty-first century. *The Routledge handbook of systemic functional linguistics* 1, 11-26.
- Bearne, E. (2009). Multimodality, literacy and texts: Developing a discourse. *Journal of early childhood literacy* 9 (2), 156-187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798409105585>
- Bizzocchi, J. & Tanenbaum, J. (2011). Well read: Applying close reading techniques to gameplay experiences. In D. Davidson (Ed.), *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*. Pittsburg: ETC Press, 262-290.
- Bowcher, W. (2019). Context and register. In G. Thompson, W. Bowcher, L. Fontaine, & D. Schönthal (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 142-170. doi:10.1017/9781316337936.008
- Bowman, N. D. (2019). Editorial: Video games as demanding technologies. *Media and communication (Lisboa)* 7 (4), 144-148. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i4.2684>

- Daneš, F. (1974). Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text. In F. Daneš (ed.), *Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective*. Prague: Academia, 106–28.
- Engebretsen, M. (2012). Balancing cohesion and tension in multimodal rhetoric. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of semiotic complexity. *Learning, Media and Technology*. 37:2, 145-162. DOI: 10.1080/17439884.2012.655745
- Feng, W. D. (2017). Metonymy and visual representation: Towards a social semiotic framework of visual metonymy. *Visual communication (London, England)*. 16 (4), 441-466. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357217717142>
- Forceville, C. (2009). Metonymy in visual and audiovisual discourse. In Ventola E. and Moya (eds.), *The world told and the world shown: Multisemiotic Issues*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 57-74.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gee, J.P. (2016). Video games, design, and aesthetic experience. *Rivista di estetica* 63 (63), 149-160. <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.1312>
- Guerrero, H. A. G. (2011). Using video game-based instruction in an EFL program: Understanding the power of video games in education. *Colombian applied linguistics journal* 13 (1), 58-74.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. Longman.
- Halliday, M. A. K and Webster, J. (2003). *Collected works of M. A. K. Halliday, Vol. 3: On language and linguistics*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and Webster, J. (2009). *Bloomsbury companion to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Ip, B. (2011). Narrative structures in computer and video games: Part 1: Context, Definitions, and Initial Findings. *Games and culture* 6 (2), 103-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010364982>
- Jewitt, C. (2005). Multimodality, "reading", and "writing" for the 21st century. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26 (3), 315-331.
- Johnstone, B. (2018). *Discourse analysis (Third edition)*. Wiley Blackwell.

- Kowalewski, H. (2018). Heart is for love: Cognitive salience and visual metonymies in comics. *The comics grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 8 (1), 10. <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.117>
- Markert, K. and Hahn, U. (2002). Understanding metonymies in discourse. *Artificial intelligence* 135 (1), 145-198. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0004-3702\(01\)00150-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0004-3702(01)00150-3)
- Matthiessen, M. L. (2010). *Key terms in Systemic Functional Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474211888>
- Montgomery, M., Durant, A., Furniss, T. and Mills, S. (2013). *Ways of reading: Advanced reading skills for students of English literature* (4. ed.). Routledge.
- Moya Guijarro, A. J. (2013). Visual metonymy in children's picture books. *Review of cognitive linguistics* 11 (2), 336-352. <https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.11.2.08moy>
- Peirsman, Y. and Geeraerts, D. (2006). Metonymy as a prototypical category. *Cognitive linguistics* 17 (3), 269-316. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COG.2006.007>
- Seto, K. (1999). Distinguishing metonymy from synecdoche. In Panther, K.-U. and G. Rad- den (eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 91-120.
- Taboada, M. (2019). Cohesion and conjunction. In G. Thompson, W. Bowcher, L. Fontaine and D. Schönthal (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 311-332. doi:10.1017/9781316337936.014
- Tanskanen, S.-K. (2006). *Collaborating towards coherence: Lexical cohesion in english discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Tseng, C., Laubrock, J. and Bateman, J. A. (2021). The impact of multimodal cohesion on attention and interpretation in film. *Discourse, context & media*, 44, 100544. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2021.100544>
- Webster, J. (2019). Key terms in the SFL Model. In G. Thompson, W. Bowcher, L. Fontaine and D. Schönthal (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 35-54. doi:10.1017/9781316337936.004

- Wildfeuer, J. & Stamenković, D. (2022). The discourse structure of video games: A multimodal discourse semantics approach to game tutorials. *Language & communication* 82, 28-51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2021.11.005>
- Ädel, A. (2014). Metonymy in the semantic field of verbal communication: A corpus-based analysis of word. *Journal of pragmatics*, 67 (Jun), 72-88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.03.010>
- “Death Stranding” (2019). Kojima Productions / Sony Interactive Entertainment <https://comicbook.com/gaming/news/hideo-kojima-death-stranding-english-japanese-dialogue/>

## 8 FIGURES

- Figure 1. The protagonist Sam Bridges receives a radio transmission..... 28
- Figure 2. The radio transmission addresses Sam as he walks over to collect the rest of his cargo. .... 28
- Figure 3. Sam looks at a photograph. The character Fragile (just out of frame) makes a philosophical comment about the nature of the world in the game..... 29
- Figure 4. Sam looks at the photograph, Fragile’s monologue continues..... 30
- Figure 5. The full line spoken here is “I’ll see you around... Sam Porter Bridges”. Fragile exits the scene, the camera focuses on Sam’s face as Fragile ends her monologue. .... 30
- Figure 6. Sam listens to an intercom announcement after making a delivery on foot. .... 31
- Figure 7. Sam walks by a truck emblazoned with “Bridges CDT”. Non-diegetic cinematic credits are featured. .... 32
- Figure 8. Sam has climbed onto the bed of the truck and is meeting with a man describing a body..... 33
- Figure 9. Sam is proffered a handshake by the unnamed character minding the body bag..... 34
- Figure 10. Sam rides on the bed of the Bridges truck as it leaves for the incinerator. .... 35
- Figure 11. Sam sits on a bed and looks behind him, the camera focuses on the Bridges logo on the wall. .... 36
- Figure 12. Sam looks back at Deadman (in front of him, off-screen), and says “Oh. “Us”. “ ..... 36
- Figure 13. Deadman talks to Sam and explains the mission of Bridges as an organization..... 37
- Figure 14. Deadman explains to Sam how he has been able to survive some of the lethal effects of the Death Stranding cataclysm..... 38

Figure 15. Deadman is shown to be standing in front of a display of environmental suits. ....	39
Figure 16. Sam questions Deadman. ....	40
Figure 17. Deadman communicates with Sam as a representative of Bridges. ...	41
Figure 18. Deadman and Sam view Sam’s mother, Bridget, laying on a hospital bed. Deadman identifies the character Die-Hardman (standing bedside) as “the president’s right-hand man” and as “the director of Bridges”.....	42
Figure 19. Die-Hardman speaks to Sam. ....	43
Figure 20. Sam’s mother, Bridget. A close-up with the character name (along with a voice actor credit) superimposed on the depicted scene. ....	44
Figure 21. Bridget talks to Sam (now bedside). ....	44
Figure 22. Bridget speaks to Sam (close-up). ....	45
Figure 23. Die-Hardman talks about the ramifications of Bridget’s death.....	46
Figure 24. Die-Hardman and Deadman turn to Sam (who is in shock due to the death of his mother), demanding co-operation.....	47
Figure 25. Die-Hardman commands Sam to embark on his quest.....	48
Figure 26. Deadman and Sam stand by Bridget’s corpse. Deadman speaks. ....	49
Figure 27. Deadman responds to Sam’s line “Face it, America is finished”. ....	50
Figure 28. Die-Hardman refocuses the conversation on Sam’s mission.....	50
Figure 29. Die-Hardman speaks about the gravity of Bridges as an organization.	51
Figure 30. Sam embarks on his delivery and looks back at the closing garage door behind him sporting a large “Bridges” logo.....	52
Figure 31. Amelie introduces and establishes herself. Voice actor credit (along with a motion capture actor credit) is visible. ....	53
Figure 32. Die-Hardman assists in introducing Amelie.....	53
Figure 33. Die-Hardman explains Amelie’s mission to Sam. ....	54
Figure 34. Amelie speaks to Sam in a dream. ....	55
Figure 35. Sam corrects Amelie.....	56
Figure 36. Amelie crouches to deliver a monologue close to Sam.....	57
Figure 37. Amelie talks about “strand” as a word, the camera zooms in to her necklace. ....	57
Figure 38. Beached whales are shown as Amelie continues her monologue off-screen. ....	58
Figure 39. More images of beached whales as Amelie’s monologue continues.	58
Figure 40. Amelie brings her monologue about the word “strand” to a close, beached whales are shown strewn along the beach and skyward “strands” enter the frame (top right, faint). ....	59

Figure 41. An example image of gameplay, Sam transports a corpse and comes across a large “Bridges” logo emblazoned on a building. .... 60

Figure 42. An example image of gameplay. Sam travels by foot towards his destination. .... 61

Figure 43. An example of an actual bridge in the game being built and maintained by Sam (and in reality, by the player(s)). .... 61