

Subnautica: The undersea comfort game

Eoin Murray, Falmouth University

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Eoin Murray is a ludo-narratologist who has been published with Routledge for his academic work on Lovecraft narratives in video games and in magazines for a short story. His work focuses on gender and horror within video games as well as the concept of utopia in broader interactive media. Eoin has also worked as an editor for a collection of conference articles with Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Postgraduate Network (MeCCSA PGN) and reviews for the Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds. He is currently a lecturer in creative writing, with a focus on game narrative writing and post-digital content, at Falmouth University.

Contact: Falmouth University, Falmouth Campus, Woodlane, Falmouth United Kingdom TR11 4RH.

E-mail: Eoinmurray94@outlook.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9992-5390>

Received 14 September 2023; Accepted 2 October 2023

Abstract

This review of Unknown World's Entertainment's survival and exploration game, Subnautica (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018) aims to discuss the game and highlight just how it presents an enjoyable experience to new and veteran players alike and why the game is seeing a continual boom in its player base. To do this I will be discussing some context around Subnautica and its place in PlayStation's 'Play at Home Initiative' over the course of the global pandemic. Then I will discuss the game in-depth, focusing on its atmosphere and style, its narrative and finally its gameplay before offering some final thoughts on Subnautica as an excellent 'comfort' game whose different gameplay modes can attract players of all inclinations, providing the experience they are looking for.

Keywords: Subnautica, Game review, comfort gaming, survival game, crafting game, ludology, exploration game

The sea: boundless at first sight, mysterious, captivating, dangerous and beautiful. For millennia mankind humanity have been entranced with the ocean, desperate to know just what may exist within its depths. The ocean I wish to discuss here, though, isn't our own; but rather, something much more alien. As I move through the swiftly darkening ocean, the light bubbling noise of my Sea Moth submarine proves provides and a comforting companion. Searching for wrecks this deep can be risky, and the huge roars I hear make me cautious. I pause. Look up, look down, left, right and behind- suddenly! A horrific beast has my Sea Moth in its huge mandibles, shaking it side to side, sparks fly from the corners of the machine as the console beats a frantic update, danger! The beast lets go and I zoom away, in a deeper, darker, a small cave. I huddle inside, frantically leave my little Sea Moth and with only my rebreather mask set about repairing the damage. In less than a minute's time the roars are gone. My Sea Moth is fully repaired and the small cave is full of gently swaying bioluminescent plants. The cave is beautiful, and the monster is a quickly forgotten memory; time to bubble onwards.

This is Subnautica.

Video games provided a much-needed escape from the difficulties of the world during the pandemic. This review of Unknown World's survival and exploration game, Subnautica (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018) aims to discuss the game and highlight just how it presents an enjoyable experience to new and veteran players alike and why the game saw a recent boom in its player base. To do this I will be discussing some context around Subnautica and its place in PlayStation's 'Play at Home Initiative'. Then I will discuss the game in-depth, focusing on its atmosphere and style, its narrative and finally its gameplay before offering some final thoughts on Subnautica as an excellent 'comfort' game whose different gameplay modes can attract gamers of all inclinations and provide the experience they are looking for.

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought several entertainment industries low (especially theatre, festivals and live performances in general), video games saw something of a boom in sales. According to the financial website MarketWatch, video game revenue increased by \$29.5 billion by the end of 2020 (Witkowski 2021). Given such an increase in sales and the difficult world situation, several game companies and associated industries such as Big Fish Games, The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment (UKIE), Ubisoft, Microsoft and Sony to name a few, all took up charitable initiatives to help keep gamers' spirits up during the pandemic. From Xbox's 'Support a Hero! Stay Home!' to PlayStation's 'Play at Home Initiative', companies offered a selection of games available for players to download, play and keep for free in an effort to promote staying at home and preventing further spread

of the virus. Several of these games were older titles, with Subnautica among them. The exploration and survival game was developed by Unknown Worlds Studios and first released as an early-access title on PC only back in 2014, with a full release on PC, Xbox and PlayStation release not coming till January 2018. By January 2020, the game was confirmed to have sold over 5 million units worldwide across PC and all consoles (Valentine 2020); an impressive feat highlighting the game's popularity and commercial success. Unknown Worlds founder, Charlie Cleveland confirmed in an interview that the game had an additional 4.5 million downloads as part of an Epic Games Store promotional campaign in March 2019 (Valentine 2020). The fact that the game is still attracting large numbers helps to explain why the title was released as part of The PlayStation Store's 'Play at Home Spring 2021 Update'.

PlayStation's 'Play at Home Initiative' has 'two components: first, providing free games to help keep the PlayStation community entertained at home; and finally, establishing a fund to help smaller independent game studios who may be experiencing financial difficulties continue building great experiences for all gamers' (Ryan 2020, n.pag). The two games released were Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection (Bluepoint Games 2015) and Journey (Thatgamecompany 2012), both particularly apt considering they contain beautiful scenery and explorable environments that people trapped indoors might crave for. The Spring 2021 update promoted games from independent developers and Subnautica was among them. This opportunity brought more new players to the game as well as several more experienced players who are in need of a comfortable playing experience; the gamers equivalent of curling up with a favourite book or gathering round the hearth to speak with old friends (Flynn 2010). Subnautica offers all this to its returning fan base along with that same thrill of exploration and interaction with beautiful and mesmerizing environments. In a time where going out poses a health concern, the low-risk, surrogate experience offered by exploratory video games helps to sate that urge for external stimulation. Subnautica's vast pre-existing audience can take advantage of the chance to once again dive deep into the oceans of Planet 4546B (where the game is set), feel the rushes of excitement, terror, success and tenderness the game provides and, for a time, forget about the pandemic.

In a vein that would be familiar to many during the pandemic, one of the most immediate themes of Subnautica and Planet 4546B is isolation. The game opens to a black screen, the sounds of machinery exploding and sirens blaring. The first-person protagonist's panicked breathing seems as loud as the destruction of his spaceship as he fervently buckles himself into a lifepod that is catapulted away from the main ship, The Aurora, just in time to see it explode and the ensuing shock wave blast his small life pod. Broken pieces of debris fly around inside and strike him in the face, turning the screen black once more. When he awakes and unbuckles himself the

control is handed over to the player who, through the first-person view, is immediately put in the position of a hungry, thirsty, injured survivor trapped in a now on fire lifepod. Using an on-board fire extinguisher, the player is able to smother the flames and is introduced to their sole companion for the game: their Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The PDA functions as one of the few sources of in-game dialogue and is certainly the most common. It functions as a source of technology from the Alterra Corporation, who were in charge of the Aurora spaceship and now functions to, in its own words 'to keep you alive on an alien world' (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018).

As the player attempts to get their bearings they are presented with an immediate choice; go up the ladder to the roof of the escape pod or down through the bottom hatch and into the ocean. Should they go up the ladder, they are greeted with the awe-inspiring and terrifying view of nothing but ocean, the wreckage of the Aurora and a chilling message from their PDA: 'no human life detected' (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018). It is a sight that serves to both overwhelm and, perhaps, frighten players while making them aware of their situation. For more experienced players, this view and message may still inspire both of these reactions, but with an added sense of familiarity and perhaps even excitement at seeing the Aurora again. The wreckage of the protagonist's ship actually serves as the easiest landmark for the player to make use of as they explore the ocean to help maintain their bearings. The ocean, despite its beauty, acts much in the same way the view above water does. When the player chooses to open the bottom hatch and enter the ocean below, they will see open the hatch and immediately a large sea creature swims quickly into view and then out of its sight before the player dives in and begins to explore.

These two initial moments serve to encapsulate the experience of playing Subnautica: a fine balance between beauty and terror. The Safe Shallows where the player begins their initial explorations, foraging for components to repair their lifepod and arm themselves, are beautiful at first. The water is clear, harmless fish of varying sizes swim about making sounds that soon become familiar and the seabed is always in view. The slightly panic-inducing oxygen gauge never presents too much fear with the surface only a few seconds away and the player is given a relatively un-punishing chance to come to grips with the game's controls if they are a new player should they be new or refamiliarize themselves if they're returning and have started to a new game. Then night falls. Almost in seconds, the sun is gone and the bright, colourful shallows immediately become pitch-black save for the bioluminescence of several fish. Telling up from down is only doable with the help of faint moonlight and the Heads Up Display (HUD) informing you of how deep you are. No large predators emerge, the player is in no more danger than they were exploring in the light, but as Dani Cavallaro explains, '[t]error/disturbs because of its

indeterminateness' (2002: 2). The player cannot see what is around them as they did before and the fear of what 'could' be lurking just feet away from them under the water is enough to prompt panic and make the moments earlier magical underwater world seem like a terrifying abyss.

Subnautica's underwater world presents interesting compliments to existing work done on the digital sublime. Both Paul Martin and Daniel Vella discuss the digital sublime in their work. Martin argues on the fragility of the ludic sublime that will eventually become 'banal' (2011, n.pag) as the player discovers the limits of the game world. Whereas Vella furthers the discussion, stating a player's mastery of a game, their deep knowledge of a game's cosmos can never be wholly complete as players 'at no point can/assert with complete certainty that the phenomenal cosmos she has arrived at is a perfect reflection of the game system' (Vella 2015, n.pag). Martin's point on the geography of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion's (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) Tamriel notes the 'seemingly infinite expanse of Tamriel is undermined is through the game environment's borders' (2011, n.pag) is an issue Subnautica has at first glance; the game has a pre-set world map with ends to them. However, the method the game uses to inform players they have reached the 'edge' of the game map makes use of terror and the sublime. Upon moving past a certain point, the players PDA will inform them that they have entered a 'dead zone' and states 'the ecology of the trench surrounding the crater supports only two kinds of life: microscopic, and leviathan class. Exploration is ill-advised' (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018). Following this the game spawns in a horrific Ghost Leviathan to attack the player and essentially push them from the dark waters making up the edges of the game map. The player will only see pitch-black waters and the slight bioluminescence of the Ghost Leviathan coming for them; no 'borders' as such are seen to shatter the sublime but rather an infinite expanse of darkness to craft fear in a players mind.

Of course, this abyss does not hold the same terror for returning players as it will new ones to players experiencing it for the first time, but the game's strength in creating this atmosphere, and linking to Vella's work on the sublime lies in how little the protagonist seems to matter. The oceans of Planet 4546B can function perfectly well without the Aurora's survivor even being there; he is a temporary addition to the environment who must adapt or die like any other creature. Most inhabitants completely ignore the player altogether and the 'lack' of importance attributed to the player is freeing to enhance their exploration yet also humbling as, once larger predators do make an appearance, the player is nothing but an easy meal to them. And this status never changes. However, regardless of a players familiarity, their mastery of Subnautica, these sea creatures cannot be perfectly predicted every time. As Vella states, 'even after extended play has resulted in mastery of the game, there

remains at least an opening for the possibility of surprise' (2015, n.pag) and surprise, when dealing with leviathan-class predators, can and will often, result in death. So regardless of how experienced players are with Subnautica their protagonist remains at risk in ways that cannot be perfectly predicted. This continual risk, this tension, harkens back to Janet Murray's discussion on games as symbolic dreams where a game experience resembles a real life one but compresses and heightens it. For example, a player 'encounters a challenging test of skill or strategy and succeeds at it' or, 'take a risk and are rewarded for their courage' (Murray 1997: 142). The level of threat, risk or surprise and reward for success remain the same so the game is easy to return to after a break away; players can continue from where they left off making small amount of progress without feeling rushed or corralled towards an ending. The protagonist is quite free to explore wherever they want, however they want; they're just one more fish in the ocean with no expectations upon the player.

This lack of expectations is one of the reason I would describe Subnautica, for myself, as a comfort game. However, I am aware of my own bias in the subject and defer to Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun's article on the aesthetics of cozy games to discuss the three qualities making up a cozy game: 'safety, abundance, and softness' (2020: 226). At first glance Subnautica provides none of these things; however, the game can deliver these qualities through its differing gameplay modes, in particular, its Creative Mode. Subnautica offers players a total of four gameplay modes: Survival, Freedom, Hardcore and Creative. Of the four, Creative Mode fits the three qualities of a cozy game well. A 'safe' game contains 'gameplay that relies on exploration and includes tasks that are easy, repetitive and without time constraint' (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020: 226). Subnautica's Creative Mode allows a player to explore yet be unable to die, have no need to regulate their hydration, food or oxygen levels nor gather materials before they can craft something. So, the player can explore the planet's ocean without fear of time constraints or attack. By removing dangers, the game allows players to 'create a sense of belonging by performing tasks related to an improvement of one's home and land' (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020: 226) in the form of building grand sea basis in the ocean they're exploring. Finally, for the purposes of softness, Waszkiewicz and Bakun note the 'use of natural materials/are meant to emphasize and strengthen the sense of safety by evoking the contrast between natural as welcoming and technological as sterile and uncomfortable' (2020: 226). The natural environments of Subnautica, with the fear of attack or death removed, become only beautiful and no longer terrifying to explore and craft in, successfully acting as a more cozy game for those who desire it.

In a change from several other survival and crafting games; Minecraft (Microsoft Studios 2011), No Man's Sky (Hello Games 2016), Raft (Redbeet Interactive 2018), etc. Subnautica, upon its full release, contains a complete story with an ending. The

majority of the narrative is told through other PDA's the player finds, recording the last moments and important information of other Aurora survivors or previous castaways on the planet. Other narrative points are told through impressively voice acted logs such as the unfortunate fates of the Degasi Crew who were marooned on the planet years before the protagonist. Subnautica unveils this lengthy side-plot well by incorporating it with the player's own exploration, having them visit each base these former survivors created, learning more about each of them and increasing the emotional impact felt when their ultimate ends are implied. The player also has the ability to create a scanner machine they can carry with them and use to scan almost everything in the game, from ocean plants to fearsome leviathan-class predators. This mechanic rewards players willing to go that extra step with useful information about how passive and harmful creatures behave as well as expanding the immersiveness of Planet 4546B. One particularly well-done piece of scanner-discovered lore concerns the Reaper Leviathan; most likely the first aggressive leviathan-class creature players will find, as they patrol around the wreckage of the Aurora. If scanned, the PDA will reveal the following about these frightening enemies: 'The deep roar emitted by the reaper at regular intervals is effectively sonar – if you can hear it, the reaper can see you' (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018).

All the player's continual research into PDA logs and the creatures around them encourages them to keep diving deeper into the ocean. Eventually, the player will reach the planet's molten core and the climax of the story. After navigating the most dangerous biome of the game and the most dangerous leviathan, the Sea Dragon Leviathan, the player is given a final quest from a Sea Emperor, the only creature on the planet able to communicate with the protagonist. Poignantly, the player must create conditions for the hatching of Sea Emperor young so that they may travel through the ocean of the planet acting as a cure for a deadly disease known as the 'Kharaa Bbacterium'. The successful quest of healing an entire planet from the disease, serve as just the kind of hopeful narrative popular at the height of the pandemic. The slogan 'Stay Home, Save Lives' has been used by the UK Government throughout the pandemic to encourage people to do that one thing they can to help improve the situation: stay home unless making essential travel. In effect, the only thing a lot of people have been able to do to help is to 'do' nothing. A game like Subnautica provides an outlet for that pent-up need to act to do something to help. In fact, without the player acting to facilitate the hatching of the Sea Emperor's young children, Planet 4546B would be doomed. The surrogate experience of acting as that crucial person who cures a planet gives players a chance to imagine, for a moment, the relief and joy of knowing a disease has been beaten

back. That they, and the planet, will endure and thrive. And on the tail end of that joyous experience there is one final item to craft: a rocket.

The narrative of *Subnautica*, much like its gameplay, relies upon player exploration to truly eek the most out of it. A player must explore to progress, learn more and gather more. Currently, we exist in a time where we cannot explore at all. A walk to the shops is frowned upon, visiting spots of natural beauty is punishable by fine. We cannot explore. *Subnautica* forces us to explore and again provides that surrogate experience of something we have been craving for. The player can, and in fact needs to, move through every biome of the game's enthralling world, looking into every cave, at every animal and gathering every resource with total freedom. If we cannot explore outside, we can at least explore the game worlds like *Subnautica* and become momentarily captivated by a sublime ocean. Only through their own investigation of Planet 4546B can a player truly appreciate how the 'Kharaa Bbacterium' spelled an end for the Degasi survivors, the ancient alien race civilisation who settled there 1000 years ago and the fauna of the planet. The surprisingly deep narrative of the game is just one more feature of *Subnautica* to reward a player who searches. Given the vastness of the ocean and all to be found within, returning players driving back into the sea for the second or twentieth time can still feel a small rush of excitement that they may yet find something new or pull some unexplored thread of continuity from a game and their own experience.

The main thread of experience that can be pulled from the game is to never stop. Much in the way animals in nature can scarcely have a reprieve from threats or needs, the player will always have a problem to solve or goal to be headed towards. At the game's inception these goals are immediate survival; food to deal with hunger, water to deal with thirst and first aid kits to manage injury. With time and experience comes further exploration, more resources and more powerful technology. The simple goal of survival is at the core of *Subnautica's* gameplay, and is easy to learn, but difficult to master. Even more experienced returning players who know what raw material combinations produce the equipment they need are required to still scavenge for blueprints, food and water and avoid predators. The challenge never becomes insignificant and that provides, along with a consistent under-tone of terror, continual engagement with the game. Fans can return to *Subnautica* and will never be in a position to easily defeat a Reaper Leviathan or cure the 'Kharaa Bacterium' in half an hour, save for the few glitch-perfect speed runners, so players can just settle in and explore instead. The easy-going scavenging that can turn quickly to a perilous situation perfectly treads the line of engagement and immersion to craft flow (Douglas and Hargadon 2000).

But, for players wishing to experience a greater level of comfort within Planet 4546B's ocean, Creative Mode is always there. A player need only switch to a different save file and then the focus on survival and the threat of sea monsters changes to a focus on building elaborate, decorated sea bases and exploratory swims without fear or consequence. These different modes really allow the game to cater to many different desires from hardcore realism and permadeath to cozy exploration and crafting. In a time where nothing in the world seems easy or convenient, Subnautica offers an escape time and time again where players get a little further or rather, go a little deeper, with each session at whatever level of comfort they most prefer. After all, casual gaming is no longer something negative (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020: 228) but rather something desperately needed in these difficult times. The choice of gameplay mode, emphasis on exploration and hopeful narrative are what makes Subnautica a comfort game we all may need right now.

Overall, Subnautica is a game with a world that places no expectations upon a player; they are just one more small being within Planet 4546B's ocean who must find their own way however the player chooses. Whether a player wishes to find every PDA and truly understand the narrative around them, build extravagant bases in the beautiful undersea biomes or race to the end as fast as possible, the game is content to allow it. Subnautica is there to be enjoyed however a player most wishes to enjoy it and that is the core reason as to why the flowing experience of the game generates and maintains its vast fan base who all enjoy fulfilling their individual goals. Much as the Sea Emperor says in its final dialogue to the protagonist as they leave the planet: 'We are different. But we go... together' (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018, n.pag).

References

Bethesda Game Studios (2006), *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, MDRockville: Bethesda Game Studios (Elder Scrolls).

Bluepoint Games (2015), *Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection*, Austin, TX: Sony Computer Entertainment.

Cavallaro, D. (2002), *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror, and Fear*, New York and London: Continuum (Continuum Collection Series) .

Douglas, J. Y. and Hargadon, A. (2000), 'The pleasure principle', Proceedings of the Eleventh ACM on Hypertext and Hypermedia – *HYPertext '00*, pp. 153–60, <https://doi.org/10.1145/336296.336354>. San Antonio, 30 May 2000- 3 June, San Antonio: ACM Digital Library. Accessed 23 April 2021

- Flynn, B. (2010), 'Geography of the digital hearth', *Information Communication & Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118032000163259>. 6:4, pp. 551-576
- Hello Games (2016), *No Man's Sky*, Guildford: Hello Games.
- Martin, P. (2011), 'The pastoral and the sublime in Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion', *Game Studies*, 11 :3, <http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/martin>. Accessed 7 May 2021.
- Microsoft Studios (2011), *Minecraft*, Stockholm: Microsoft Studios, <https://minecraft.net/>. Accessed 5 May 2021
- Murray, J. H. (1997), *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York City:Simon & Schuster. Accessed 27 April 2021
- Redbeet Interactive (2018), *Raft*, Stockholm: Redbeet Interactive.
- Ryan, J. (2020), 'Announcing the Play at Home Initiative', PlayStation.Blog, 14 April, <https://blog.playstation.com/2020/04/14/announcing-the-play-at-home-initiative/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.
- Thatgamecompany (2012), *Journey*, Santa Monica, CA: Thatgamecompany.
- Unknown Worlds Entertainment (2018), *Subnautica*, San Francisco, CA: Unknown Worlds Entertainment.
- Valentine, R. (2020), 'Subnautica has sold over 5m copies Unknown Worlds founder Charlie Cleveland comments on milestone reached nearly two years after game's full launch', *Games Industry.biz*, 14 January <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-01-14-subnautica-has-sold-over-5m-copies>. Accessed 21 April 2021.
- Vella, D. (2015), 'No mastery without mystery: Dark Souls and the ludic sublime', *Game Studies*, 15:1, <http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/vella>. Accessed 7 May 2021.
- Waszkiewicz, A. and Bakun, M. (2020), 'Towards the aesthetics of cozy video games', *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 12:3, pp. 225-40, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00017_1.
- Witkowski, W. (2021), 'Videogames are a bigger industry than movies and North American sports combined, thanks to the pandemic', *MarketWatch*, 22 December <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/videogames-are-a-bigger-industry-than-sports-and-movies-combined-thanks-to-the-pandemic-11608654990>. Accessed 15 May 2021.