

Bachelor's thesis

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The Terror Deep in the Dark

Subnautica - A case study

May 2020

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Summary:

This paper is going to be a case study on the survival-crafting game Subnautica and its sibling Subnautica Below Zero. My research question: What keeps a man who hates scary games and has never finished one, from exiting the game when playing the Subnautica series? I want to try and find what makes this game series so interesting that even though I'm scared most of the time; I'm not exiting the game. Is it the narrative that keeps me interested? Is it the surviving and crafting that keeps me going? Or is it just the colors and the beautiful environment that ways heavier than the scary terror in the deep. The discussion draws on a comparison between Subnautica and Subnautica Below Zero up against the theories that have provided the necessary background for my research. These theories are Indie game theory, Flow-theory, and the theory around horror or terror games. There will be a word explanation for a lot of uncommon word that I'm going to use. I wanted to bring in some theory on indie games, since both Subnautica and Subnautica Below Zero are indie games. The point of this is to describe what indie games are. Subnautica is an open world survival-crafting game, the player will have to manage health, thirst, hunger, and oxygen. Since the game takes place on an alien ocean planet, the oxygen part is somewhat new for survival games. In Subnautica you play the non-essential systems maintenance chief, Ryley Robinson. He is the sole survivor of the Aurora crew, managing to escape the ship in Lifepod 5. Subnautica Below Zero is the second installation in the Subnautica franchise. Below Zero is at the moment in production and was made available on Steam as an Early Access game in January 2019. Thru this case study, I have found out what keeps me playing the Subnautica series. A dive through the theory and the game has made me aware of the differences between horror and terror. I have found out that I still hate horror games, but this game isn't that, it's a terror game, and it is one of my favorite games ever.

Introduction:

I'm not a fan of horror, in any sort of form, neither in games nor movies. In games, I feel it's too scary, cause I'm the one controlling the player. In movies I don't find it scary, I only get startled a lot at the same time as I feel the narrative usually is bad, compared with other movie genres. I've tried playing some horror games, first scary game I tried was Resident Evil 3 on Nintendo Gamecube. I stopped playing it very fast, I was more fan of watching my older brothers play. Later I tried Doom 3 on pc but going down dark, tight spaces with a tiny flashlight and a pistol was too much for me, I stopped playing that too. After that, I only tried horror games where multiplayer was possible so that I could have company while trying it. I tried both Dead by Daylight and The Forest, but with people and never alone.

At the end of December 2018, Epic Games gifted away the Subnautica game to anyone that wanted it. A free game that you got to keep for the rest of your life. I had waited for this game a while, to see if there was going to be a discount on Steam or somewhere else. Since I am a student and money don't grow on trees, I saw this as a great opportunity to finally play the game. I didn't know what to expect from this game, I had seen videos, a game which had its hole story, below the ocean surface. A beautiful game where the ocean and the graphics looked amazing in both videos and pictures.

I can see that for some people, seeking the thrill of fear and the surprise of getting startled around the next corner being fun and adrenaline giving. But that's something I never looked for, but in Subnautica I got it. And what surprised me, was that even though I find this game terrifying at times, I just can't stop playing or exploring. So, when the opportunity of researching the matter came to me, this was what I wanted to do.

My research question: What keeps a man who hates scary games and has never finished one, from exiting the game when playing the Subnautica series?

I want to try and find what makes this game series so interesting that even though I'm scared most of the time; I'm not exiting the game. Is it the narrative that keeps me interested? Is it the surviving and crafting that keeps me going? Or is it just the colors and the beautiful environment that ways heavier than the scary terror in the deep. This paper is going to be a case study on the survival-crafting game Subnautica and its sibling Subnautica Below Zero.

The purpose of this paper is to thoroughly examine the methods and instruments that are being used in these two games. So that I can find out why I haven't quit this game series yet, as I did with all other scary games.

I hypothesize that the narrative and exploration make it possible to tolerate the horrifying roars and the darkness. That the need for exploring and the need to know more about the narrative, keeps me going. The examples I have chosen throughout the paper have been selected for their representative value to this study.

Initially, I will start with a word explanation to give the reader some information regarding some of the words that might not be that common. After the word explanation, the theory section is up, this is where I will present my theories. Consequently, I will delineate a set of proposed strategies that form the basis of the succeeding discussion. The discussion draws on a comparison between Subnautica and Subnautica Below Zero up against the theories that have provided the necessary background for my research.

These theories are Indie game theory, Flow-theory, and the theory around horror or terror games. In the final part of the paper, I will evaluate my research and try to justify my decisions and choices.

Word explanations:

There are a lot of uncommon words that I'm going to use in this paper. That's why I want to explain them here, instead of having them in the running text.

Unknown Worlds Entertainment: Will use UWE for the most part.

Early Access: Is a program that allows developers to sell early "alpha" or "beta" versions of their games in an unfinished state (Abraham, 2018). The consumer gets to buy a game cheap, to support the development of the game. And the developer gets some extra funding while also getting free help with bug reporting (Steam, 2020a).

First-person view: The camera comes from the eyes of the player or a specific physical point of view, the player sees what the camera sees (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p.140).

Open world: Games that are in this category have a big open world, usually without any loading. Meaning that the player can move wherever he or she wants to move, without having to see a loading screen.

Leviathan: Is a classification given to extremely large creatures of the Subnautica universe.

PDA AI: Personal Digital Assistant Artificial Intelligence

LinkedIn: The world's biggest professional network (LinkedIn, 2020b).

Steam: Online store for digital distribution of games and some programs.

Epic Games: Online store for digital distribution of games.

Nok: Norwegian Kroner

Seamoth: Small one-person submarine.

Theory:

In this chapter I will focus on the theory I will use in this paper. First, I wanted to bring in some theory on indie games, since both Subnautica and Subnautica Below Zero are indie games. The point of this is to describe what indie games are. After that, I have some theory on flow and then some about differences in horror and terror.

Indie games:

For most of my indie game theory, I found Garda and Grabarczyk's "Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the Concept of Independent Game" quite useful. The paper focuses on the difference between games that are called "indie" and games that are "some" sort of independent. It also focuses on the history of indie and independent games and how the genre became so popular. First, I will represent the three types of independence that Garda and Grabarczyk talk about.

The three types of independence:

Garda and Grabarczyk talk about three types of independence, that makes a game independent, not indie, but independent. The three types are Financial, Creative, and

Publishing – independence. What is important is that for a game to be independent, it needs to be one of the three independences, but first let's start with the Financial part.

Financial independence is about if a developer is financially independent by self-funding it's production or if the developer is backed up by a third-party. It does not matter if the developer is a private investor or a government, when the means have been transferred it makes the developer dependent on the funds. As Garda and Grabarczyk point out; "The presence of an investor is a clear-cut requirement, there is no need to ask if she has a real influence on game design" (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 2.1).

The next type of independence is creative independence. The easiest way to describe creative independence is to say that the game is independent if the developer is the intended audience. Hence, when researching creative independence, the only thing that needs to be examined is direct developer's quotes describing the game in interviews, product descriptions, and promotional materials (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 2.2).

Lastly, we have publishing independence, the easiest of the three to describe. A developer is independent when it's also a publisher. Or the other way around, when a publisher is a developer than the game is considered an independent game. But sometimes if a game release has been successful there is often an external publisher that ports the game to other platforms or the more traditional hard copy style, like selling in retail stores (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 2.3). Another point that Garda and Grabarczyk point to when it comes to independent games is digital distribution and how it has changed the market.

Digital Distribution:

One of the biggest reasons for the number of independent games we see these days are digital distribution. Traditionally the cost of distribution was covered by the publisher, now the creator adds the game to Steam or Epic Games' library and then they pay a percentage of each sale (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.2). Instead of before when you had to pay big companies like EA Games to make hard copies of the game and distribute it to every store in the world. As for that, digital distribution has been severely connected with publishing independence as the cost of distribution was conventionally covered by the publisher (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.2). But digital distribution isn't something of a marker for independent games, most games these days are distributed digitally. While on the other side, the most successful independent games are being released physically (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.2). Independent games are known for being boldly and experimental, trying out new things that the titans of the industry think are too risky.

Experimental Nature:

Since independent developers have budgets that are somewhere microscopical compared to the big giants, they can take more risks, and still land on their feet (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.3).

"Although many independent games tend to replicate the structure and aesthetics of mainstream titles or other successful productions within the indie sector, indie games are often recognized for their potential for experimentation that can transform the industry (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016 point 3.3)."

When independent game developer often makes games, they tend to go for unpopular genres and game mechanics that's been forgotten. Lots of independent games that are

being made are 2D platformers, a genre that's been pretty unpopular since the gaming industry changed over to 3D game engines (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.3). But this changes over time, as Garda and Grabarczyk point out, at the moment 3D platformers are underrepresented in the business, meaning, that in the close future we might see a lot of independent 3D platform games.

Tiny budget, cheap games, and small teams:

Because the business model of digital distribution offers such a good revenue to the developer compared to other options, the marker of a tiny budget and cheap games has also been heavily connected with it. Indie games are generally cheaper to produce than triple-A titles, due to the production needing fewer people and lower production values. That makes this marker vastly associated with financial independence. Another thing that has been known to keep the budget at bay and the price low is the creation of short or very hard games (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.4).

Independent games are known for having smaller teams than triple-A titles due to that it's considerably safer to fund the game from the team's own pockets if the group is rather minor (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.7). The size of the team has an enormous impact on the development cost, and that forces developers to either have a smaller team or get funding for a bigger team. If you get funding from investors, you might lose your creative independence. Small teams might have a more positive association with creative independence. Since the creative team is a lot smaller you get to see every individualist expressing his or her work throughout the game (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, point 3.7).

Flow-Theory:

Flow is a state in which individuals feel that they are in control of their actions at the same time as they feel a deep sense of excitement that is long-beloved and that becomes a milestone in memory on how life should be (English, 2006). The experience of flow represents a distinct state of consciousness that combines high but effortless concentration, loss of awareness of self and time, feelings of competence and freedom, intrinsic motivation, and facile response to challenge (English, 2006). Flow is a sense of powerful participation in an activity that tests one's abilities without overpowering it. The theory is often associated with pop-psych phenomena such as peak experience or being in the zone (English, 2006).

Horror or Terror:

While reading upon empirical data for *Subnautica* I read a review on steam from a person, he said that he felt *Subnautica* used terror to scare you and not horror. I always thought these were the same things, but I figured I would check it out and see what the difference might be.

In 1826 Ann Radcliffe one of the founders of Gothic fiction published an essay called "On the Supernatural in Poetry", she there explains the differences between terror and horror. She said that terror and horror are far opposite, that terror expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life, while horror contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them (Townshend, 2014). Translated to more common words this means that terror is all about suspense and the threat of danger, while horror is all about startling and scares.

Empirical data:

Unknown Worlds Entertainment:

Unknown Worlds Entertainment is an independent game company in San Francisco, California (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2020a). *UWE* is the developer and publisher of both *Subnautica* and *Subnautica Below Zero*. *UWE* is a small developer, *LinkedIn* estimates between 11 and 50 employees (LinkedIn, 2020a) Wikipedia says 33 employees (Wikipedia, 2020). On their website, *UWE* informs that almost their entire team is available for contact through Twitter, from animators, to co-founders and even the president of the company is reachable (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2020a). That's not information you find in the about site on big developers like EA Games for example.

UWE has created games like the *Natural Selection* series, *Subnautica* series, and *Zen of Sudoku* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2020b). The last one was seen as a project to get an economical buffer so that they could continue making the games they wanted to create (Caldwell, 2006).

The motto of Unknown Worlds Entertainment: "Our goal is simple, but not easy – to unite the world through play" (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2020a).

Subnautica:

Subnautica was first released on Steam in 2014, as part of the *Early Access* program (Melnic and Melnic, 2017). After being in development for some years, the game was finally released on Steam, January 2018 (Steam, 2020b). *Subnautica* is an open world survival-crafting game, the player will have to manage health, thirst, hunger, and oxygen. Since the game takes place on an alien ocean planet, the oxygen part is somewhat new for survival games. When starting a new game, the player will have four difficulty options. Survival – the basic survival game, manage health, hunger, thirst, and oxygen, if the player dies, he respawns in his base, but he might have lost some items. Freedom mode – an easier version of survival, with hunger and thirst being disabled. Hardcore mode – survival, but you only have one life, if the player dies, he dies and the save file gets permanently deleted. Creative mode – every survival aspect is disabled, player starts with all blueprints, and no resources are required to craft (Subnautica Fandom, 2020e). The game has a lot of similarities to other survival-crafting games when it comes to difficulty options, like *Minecraft* for example. The game is being played in the first-person view, not to be mixed with the first-person shooter, since *Subnautica* is not a shooter game. It was made as a point, not to have guns in the game. The creators wanted to make a stand against gun violence and for people to find creative solutions instead of violent ones (Macleod, 2016).

In *Subnautica* you play the non-essential systems maintenance chief, Ryley Robinson. He is the sole survivor of the *Aurora* crew, managing to escape the ship in Lifepod 5. Ryley works for *Alterra*, a Trans-government that funded the *Aurora*'s mission. The corporation earned its money during a time called the *Expansion*, where they supplied arms to all sides, for so to threaten to cease trade if the war wasn't brought to a stop. Today *Alterra* has a ban on all weapons within its borders. The company also has very strict policies related to resources. The rules state that all resources gathered by the company's employees are owned by *Alterra* and should be reimbursed in full market value. As we learn at the end of the game, Ryley's debt to *Alterra* is around a trillion-credit (Subnautica Fandom, 2020f).

We don't get much information about Ryley throughout the game, he is a silent guy, only making a sound when he is in pain, and when he breaths. When it comes to voices in the game you have the *PDA AI*, she keeps you informed about health status, if oxygen is low for instance. There are abandoned PDAs around the world, those contain log messages for the player to listen to. Other than that, there is the Sea Emperor, a 2600-year-old leviathan, that can talk, and the rescue vessel Sunbeam. Sunbeam is however only talking for a short part of the first hours of the game, and you only meet the Sea Emperor in the last one or two hours of the game, so you are pretty much all alone.

The game contains a wide range of Biomes to explore and exploit, and they all represent a miniature ecosystem from the real world. The one biome that the player always spawns in, is the Safe Shallows. The Safe Shallows is the safest of the biomes and the least deep one at that, only 80 meters deep. Now for someone that maybe haven't played the game, this seems maybe deep, but the deepest place in the game is 1700 meters deep (Subnautica Fandom, 2020a). In Subnautica there are around 40 harvestable and nine non-harvestable floras. The ones you can harvest can be used for crafting or just simple décor in your base (Subnautica Fandom, 2020b). With 13 carnivores, 21 herbivores, nine scavengers and parasites, and six *leviathans*, the game features a huge variety of creatures (Subnautica Fandom, 2020c).

Subnautica was awarded a lot of awards when released: It was awarded, Best survival game by PC Gamer in 2018. It was awarded PC game of the Year by Golden Joysticks 2018. And the Best Exploration game by Game informer 2018 (Steam, 2020b).

Subnautica Below Zero:

Subnautica Below Zero is the second installation in the Subnautica franchise. And it follows its predecessor's footsteps. Below Zero is at the moment in production and was made available on Steam as an *Early Access* game in January 2019. First, as an *Early Access* game, anything is subject to change, so that fact or information that is being written at this moment might have changed within the next patch or in a year. What is known is that the story of Below Zero takes place on the same planet as the first Subnautica, just one or two years later, and in the arctic region of the planet (Steam, 2020c). There you play Robin Ayoub, a zoologist and xenologist who is told by Alterra that her sister has gone missing. She travels to planet 4546B to try and find her sister Sam Ayoub (Subnautica Below Zero Fandom, 2020). This is a new storyline, last time I looked into this game, probably 3 months ago, the storyline was quite different. In the last storyline you were doing research on the planet, and then a storm hit, and you suddenly were alone and cut off from people. But you could still have contact with your sister, who was up on a satellite in orbit. But in April (2020) Unknown Worlds Entertainment launched a new storyline in the Frostbite update. Changing most of what I knew about the game and information available online, that's how fast *Early Access* games change. Most of the empirical data and information I will give from the game in the discussion will come from my observations of playing the game.

Survival-crafting genre:

The genre is a mix of survival games and crafting games. In most survival games the player will have to manage health, hunger, thirst, and often temperature to survive. The crafting part will have the player finding resources to make different equipment that is useful for survival. Like making an ax from a stick and stone in Minecraft, so the player can chop wood and build a house for shelter. Games known as "survival-crafting" popularized after the success of Minecraft (Abraham, 2018).

Discussion:

As I said in the introduction, I don't like horror games, it's not my cup of tea. I don't want to go near any of the games that classify as a horror game. Games like the outlast series, The Evil within series, Soma and Amnesia, I stay completely away. These games are not my type, they are made for one reason, to be scary. The gore, the blood, the sick monsters or humans with crazy weapons or faces, no thanks. I know to stay away from these games, I can see it in the trailers and the pictures, that's enough. But this Subnautica game tricked me, and I was completely caught off guard.

Subnautica:

The Game starts with you jumping down, in the lifepod, and shooting yourself out from the Aurora. Getting out of the lifepod after the hefty start is a sight to behold. You climb out from the top of the lifepod, and there you only see the ocean and half the Aurora, the other half is underwater. With only one place to go the ocean is the next destination, and what a place. The colors and the environment, it all looks so real and the water is so clear. The game does not give you much time to explore though, Ryley is hungry and thirsty, so you need to find food and water. Grabbing some of the fishes will make a new entry in the PDA, letting you know what the fish is good for. If you take the fish back to the lifepod, there is a fabricator there that will cook the fish and make water out of another fish (Abraham, 2018). The fabricator in the lifepod is soon your new best friend, it shows you what you can make, and which ingredients are necessary to make it. After a while of playing you will get signals from other lifepods that you need to investigate. Unfortunately, every pod is punctured and empty, there are no bodies or traces after your crewmembers. Is there something this game want, it's for you to feel completely alone.

The logs you find together with the help from the AI indicates a foul monster lurking in the deep dark, the Reaper Leviathan. The chances of meeting one of these dangerous



leviathan's in the early game, are slim, but the game wants to keep you on your toes, meaning the Reaper can be heard from across entire biomes. This is where the game is rather clever, the visibility is pretty low, especially in the more dangerous areas owing to

sand, radiation, and darkness. But the bioluminescence of most creatures can be seen at much larger distances, so you might be warned before you meet a beast.

The first time you are moving towards a biome called Mountains the *PDA AI* will say: "Detecting multiple leviathan class lifeforms in the region. Are you certain whatever you're doing is worth it?" hinting at the dangers of getting too close to the Reaper leviathans the scariest predator in the game if you ask me. If you have the Stasis Rifle and are brave enough, you can find a Reaper, and scan it. The PDA will then give you information about the monster. One of the points about the Reaper Leviathan says that: "The deep roar emitted by the Reaper at regular intervals is effectively sonar - if you can hear it, the reaper can see you" (Subnautica Fandom, 2020d). Now, when you have this information you probably don't feel like hearing a Reapers roar, ever again. Another thing about this beast is its body, it only possesses slight bio-luminescent skin. This means that the Reaper is especially hard to see at night. Swimming or driving a *Seamoth* in the dark while hearing the Reapers roar is a terrifying feeling. I mentioned the Stasis Rifle, are rifle that gives a form of false security, the invention in itself is amazing. What it does is freeze the object you shoot, depending on if you just click or hold the mouse button down, it will determine how many seconds the objective is frozen. This works wonders if you want to scan or look more closely at something scary. But to use the rifle you need to jump out of the *Seamoth* or any other vehicle you're using. If a Reaper is hunting you, you don't want to jump out and shoot, you want to run. I felt that the rifle was a fantastic invention in a game that has no lethal weapons, it gives you an exciting option to handle your problems.

Compared with other survival-crafting games I've tried, no one comes close to the narrative that Subnautica delivers. Games like Minecraft and The Forest are far from the impressive narrative being delivered by Unknown Worlds Entertainment in Subnautica. In a YouTube video called Honest game trailers the narrator said: "In a narrative that is clearly trying way harder than the majority of the genre, you might even call it deep" (Fandom Games, 2018).

Subnautica Below Zero:

As I mentioned earlier, Below Zero got a new update in April 2020. I've seen videos on how the game looked and how it started before the update but not after. I decided some time ago not to buy the game, I wanted to wait until it was finished. But since I had this paper, and I wanted to write about Subnautica, I decided to buy it.



You start the game from outer space and it looks impressive, and more so when you know the game is in Early Access. There are some hints to the first game since you're traveling towards the planet at the start of both games, but this time the player you control wants to be there, so she is controlling the spacecraft towards the planet. Not completely the same as the first game where Ryley fell towards the planet in a lifepod. There is an enormous difference in the environment in this game compared to the first. It's so cold here, going out of water will make a temperature reader pop up on the left side, and without finding warmth or shelter, you freeze to death. Staying underwater in a storm is a good idea to keep you warm, it is also an incredible feeling, you can hear the thunder, rain, hail, and when you go up for air, you see lightning hitting around you.

For this paper, I played Below Zero for maybe one – one and a half hours. Just getting the feel for the game and maybe get what I needed of information. I did see loads of new flora and fauna in just a little amount of time that I played. Without the game being near finished, there will come new things, and maybe things will be removed. The feeling of exploring something completely new and seeing things for the first time was pleasant. The Game was scary however, a lot of the carnivores were aggressive, hinting to maybe a more terrifying game than the first. The "safe shallows" of Below Zero didn't feel as safe as in the first game. I have been attacked by a fish that froze me, I could not move for many seconds and the oxygen became more and more depleted. I met a large and ugly fish that looked scary and it was. But at the same time, I have met two herbivores that were pretty cool, one let me sit on its back like a horse, and I could control it. The other one was the Sea Monkey, and just like a real monkey they are playful and a bunch of thieves, they steal whatever is equipped in your hand, and then they run. Since Below Zero is still in Early Access and can change many times before it gets released, I will focus mostly on the first Subnautica game when discussing it against the terror-theory.

Indie game theory:

With the indie game theory, I wanted to highlight how a developer like Unknown World Entertainment can have the possibility and ability to make good games even though they are a small company. Cause *UWE* checks of all the boxes when we talk about the three types of independence. Checking of the publishing independence box on the Steam store page for both *Subnautica* and *Subnautica Below Zero*, *UWE* is the developer and the publisher of the games (Steam, 2020 b, and c). They are financially independent since they made *Zen sudoku* so they could get some funding for the games they wanted to make (Caldwell, 2006), at the same time as releasing the games for Early Access, getting more financial support. *UWE* is also creative independent because they made a game they wanted to play, a game without guns (MacLeod, 2016). Other points that I found in Garda and Grabarczyk's text are about digital distribution, experimental nature, and the description of the company. Both *Subnautica* games might not have existed if it wasn't for digital distribution. Without Early Access, the funding, debugging, and the ideas coming from the community would never have existed. Forcing Unknown Worlds Entertainment to maybe borrow money from other companies, losing one or more of their independences. For the first *Subnautica* game it's pretty experimental, there aren't many games who would make a game completely below water for the whole time, making another point towards Garda and Grabarczyk's text. The last point I had in the indie game theory was about tiny budget and cheap games. I feel there is no need to go in on the budget after what I said about financial independence but let's have a look at cheap games. As seen on both the Steam store pages, both games are very cheap, 176 *Nok* for the first game, and 145 *Nok* for the second game, the price for what you get is minimal. We see that in the reviews section the first game has overwhelmingly positive reviews and the second has very positive reviews (Steam, 2020 a and b).

Flow-theory:

I wanted to have the flow-theory in this paper because I learned about it in school some years ago. And when I think about *Subnautica* that's one of the first things that come to mind. When I first got the original *Subnautica* game I installed it, while eating breakfast. When the installation was done I made coffee and started playing the game. This game does not have any loading screens after you have loaded into the world, nor does it have cut scenes. What this means is that you don't have any breaks, unless you hit the ESC button. I didn't do that, I just sat there playing, exploring, and enjoying life. Suddenly one of my roommates entered the room to check up on me, which made me press pause. I had sat there playing continuously for nine hours, so when he made me hit pause, I felt that I really had to go to the bathroom. And when I was done there, I noticed that I was starving, I was so extremely hungry. Hours had just gone past, I hadn't noticed anything, time wasn't existing for me, I was in the zone. As Fenwick W. English says:

"Flow is the key to intrinsic motivation. It is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at a great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (English, 2006)."

And this is what was happening to me, I focused more on getting food and water for Ryley Robinson, then for myself. I didn't even care for the Reapers, whenever I heard them, I stopped and looked for them in the darkness, not hitting the pause, just looking, and maybe running the other way. This is also the same feeling I got the first 5 minutes

when I tried Below Zero, but since I played that game due to this paper, and needed to take breaks for notes, the flow feeling never took a hold of me.

Terror-theory:

In the theory section, I talked about Ann Radcliff and how she talks about the differences in horror and terror. And of what I can say, the Subnautica game is all about terror, and not horror. Is this the reason I continue to play this game? Maybe. Radcliff talked about how terror is expanding the soul and awakening the faculties, I think she talks about how terror is something conscious that transpires in our imagination.

Nearly every hostile creature in Subnautica behaves like a predator, they stalk you and they'll try to ambush you. For example this creature below, the Crabsnake,



a worm with two big teeth's that live in a pink mushroom. The first time you swim in the mushroom cave, it will jump out of one of the mushrooms and try to grab you. But after getting bit or almost bit a couple of times, you start to understand that this creature is territorial and will only attack if you get close to their mushroom. This makes them a lot easier to avoid, but maybe not less scary, because when you understand that they will hide in mushrooms and ambush you. Your imagination and the terror turn an area with 15 empty looking mushrooms into 15 potential Crabsnakes, that are lying in wait.

Radcliff also said that terror awakens the faculties and here I think that the feeling of hopelessness is crucial to what she means. Knowing the creatures attack pattern but still not knowing enough about them to overcome them or truly understand them is scary, and by making your brain consider the real complexity of your circumstances instead of just reacting, makes the mind go beyond horror and into terror.

In horror games, for example, Resident Evil 3 you die a lot, and after some deaths, it stops being scary. Losing in video games gives you time to breathe, to have a break before trying again. But that's not the case for Subnautica, because this game is from time to time frustratingly easy. As long as you have 100% health, the only thing that can kill you in a single hit is the Sea Dragon Leviathan. And there are only three of those, and they are staying at 1100 to 1400 meters depth. The Reaper Leviathan is in my opinion the scariest of the hostile creatures, but it can't kill you in a single hit unless you

are below 80% health, which means that after the Reaper bites, you run. This means that you will get away with it almost every time unless you in panic go the wrong way and meet another Reaper. But the important thing when it comes to the terror is that he will still follow you and roar, giving you a decent scare and the sensation that you barely survived. I think I finally have an answer to my research question: What keeps a man who hates scary games and has never finished one, from exiting the game when playing the Subnautica series?

And it is with this theory I finally think I have found out why I haven't exited the game. I love this game, it's not a typical horror game where I die hundreds of times and see blood and gore. It's a game that keeps me on the edge the whole time, it makes me concentrate on all my surroundings, it forces me to crawl thru the torture of Reaper roars while exploring this beautiful alien planet. This game is one of my favorite games ever, the feelings are like a rollercoaster, it's an enormous thrill, and it excites and stimulates as much as it scares. Also, having a game without loading screens, that can make me forget about time for a whole day. That is extremely enjoyable, especially in a time like this, when we have the coronavirus roaming the world, and we can't go out and we have to stay home.

Conclusion:

Thru this case study, I have found out what keeps me playing the Subnautica series. A dive through the theory and the game has made me aware of the differences between horror and terror. I have found out that I still hate horror games, but this game isn't that, it's a terror game, and it is one of my favorite games ever. The crazy rollercoaster with enormous thrills that excites and stimulates as much as it scares. A game that keeps me on the edge of the chair, and a game that makes me feed the player I control while forgetting to feed myself. I have learned more about independent developers and indie games than I knew before this paper. I feel that the theory I used was very helpful, without seeing the difference between horror and terror I might have believed that it was only the exploring and the narrative that kept me playing the game like I first believed in my hypothesis. I can see now that my hypothesis was wrong, and I'm glad I did this research. Subnautica is a thrilling story and I can only hope that when Below Zero is completed it is as good as the first game.

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