

SUBNAUTICA

A deep dive into Terror

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UXG1701

Assignment 3

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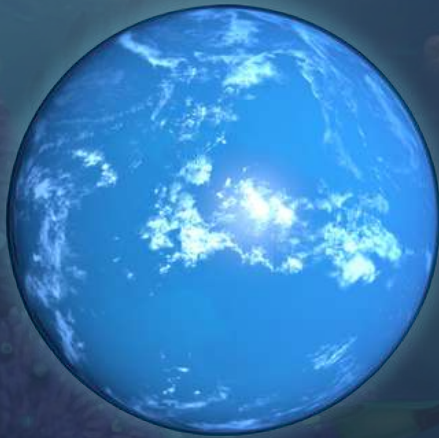
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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Overview



Planet 4546B



Subnautica is an **open-world survival adventure** game developed by Unknown Worlds Entertainment. The game is set within the expansive and unexplored oceans of an extraterrestrial world designated as **Planet 4546B**.

INTRODUCTION

Overview



Aurora

Released in 2018, the game commences with players stranded on this planet following a catastrophic **crash-landing** of their spaceship, the Aurora.

INTRODUCTION

Overview



Lifepod



Safe Shallows

From the outset, Subnautica immerses players in an unfamiliar and daunting underwater environment where survival is precarious, and apprehension pervades each excursion. The objective is unambiguous: **acquire resources, establish a base, explore the ocean's abyss**, and ultimately find a way to return home.

INTRODUCTION

Terror



Terror



Horror

Ultimately, **terror stands in stark contrast to horror**. While horror's primary objective is to **evoke a primal and shocking response**, terror operates on a more insidious level. It **exploits the individual's imagination**, inducing a **state of heightened anxiety** and overthinking. Notably, terror derives its power from the **absence of information**, whereas horror relies on an **overwhelming abundance of stimuli**.

INTRODUCTION

Terror



In definition, terror is a **strong and overwhelming fear or dread**, often accompanied by **panic or extreme anxiety**. It is often associated with a **loss of control** or an inability to escape a perceived threat.

INTRODUCTION

Terror



Crater's Edge in Subnautica

In Subnautica, terror is rooted in the **ocean's abyssal, extraterrestrial depths**, where players encounter threats and environmental perils. This form of apprehension **intensifies players' emotional responses and sustains their engagement**, as each excursion promises the discovery of novelties, peril, and survival.

INTRODUCTION

Thesis

Subnautica's use of psychological theories to induce terror leads to player engagement.

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



Maslow's hierarchy tells us that humans need **safety, belonging, and self-actualization.**

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Safety needs

personal security, employment, resources, health, property

Physiological needs

air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing, reproduction

At the surface of Subnautica is an open world survival game. Survival games generally **rely on Maslow's theory of self actualization**, more specifically a human's desire to fulfill their Physiological needs and safety needs. **Air, water, food, resources and bases** are the building blocks that are leveraged by such games to drive player engagement through emulating real life needs into the game.


HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Love and belonging

friendship, intimacy, family, sense of connection

However, what sets Subnautica apart is it's insidious way of using Maslow's **concept of love and belonging on the player**. Being a single player game, you have crash landed in a frigid alien planet and find yourself utterly alone. The further you go into the game, the **realisation that no one is coming to save you** digs into a **primal human fear of abandonment**.

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



This solitude becomes more than a game mechanic, it pulls the players into an unsettling silence, broken only by the eerie sounds of the underwater world, allowing the **player to only hear their thoughts**, furthering the feeling of loneliness. The **psychological toll of isolation is intensified by the player's responsibility to ensure their own survival**, aligning with Maslow's idea that **safety and security are fundamental needs**.

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



In Subnautica, these needs must be met without any outside help, making every close call **feel more personal and every encounter with danger feel intensely real**. This emotional investment **deepens player engagement**, turning survival into an **experience that resonates on a deeply psychological level**.

BEHAVIORAL CONDITIONING

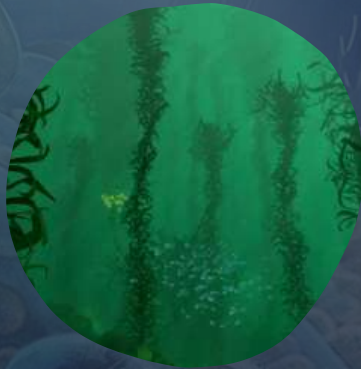


BEHAVIORAL CONDITIONING

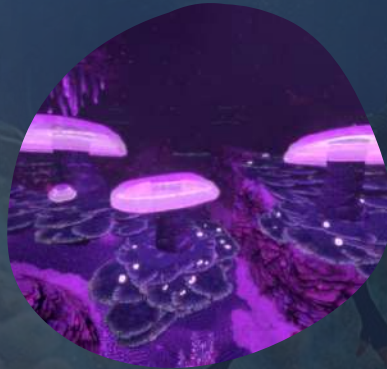


Behavioral conditioning is the idea of **associating specific stimuli with certain responses**—a concept that Subnautica leverages cleverly. At first, the game presents players with a **safe, serene environment**. The early stages take place in shallow, calm areas with few threats, **lulling players into a false sense of security**. This slow introduction **gives players confidence, almost like conditioning them to expect safety**.

BEHAVIORAL CONDITIONING



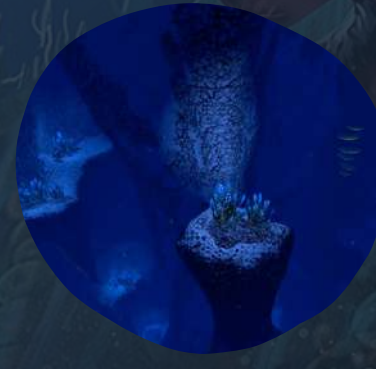
Kelp Forest



Jellyshroom Caves



Blood Kelp Forest



Underwater Islands

But as they explore further from these “safe zones,” the **environment—and the threats—escalate**. When players finally come face-to-face with something dangerous, **the shift is abrupt, almost shocking**.

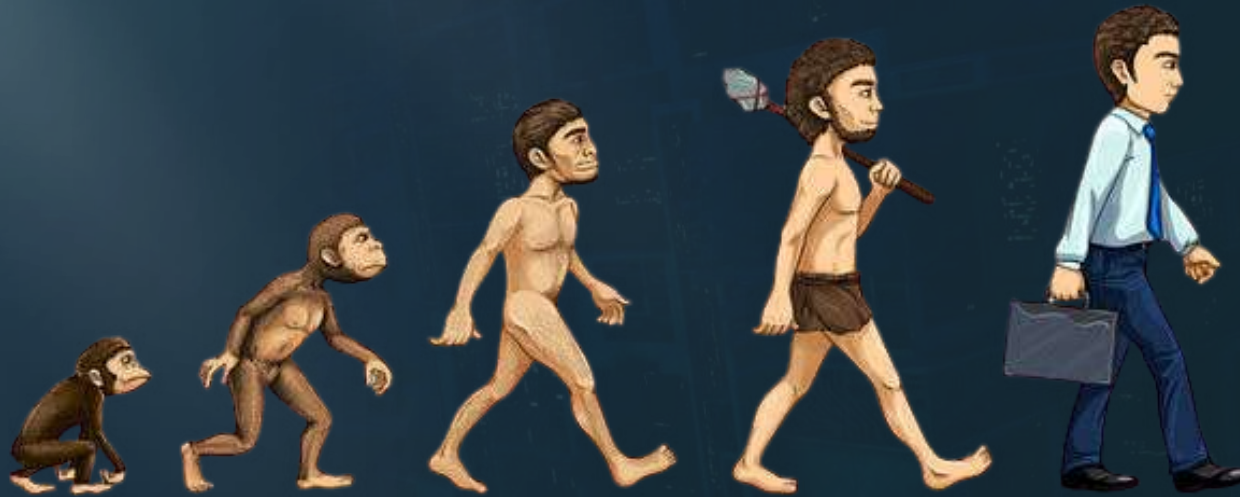
BEHAVIORAL CONDITIONING



This sudden break in the safe environment, combined with their initial confidence, leaves **players anxious and on high alert**. The game's conditioning plays with their expectations, **making it impossible to fully relax**. This **tension is key to what keeps players coming back**: the need to explore, even as they brace themselves for the unknown.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY



Evolutionary psychology tells us that **certain fears are hardwired into humans, due to the survival needs of our ancestors.** Subnautica taps into these primal fears masterfully.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY



Player Resource HUD

The underwater setting itself speaks to **deep-rooted anxieties around drowning and the unknown**. Oxygen, a critical gameplay element, creates a constant underlying tension. Players must plan their exploration carefully, **knowing they have limited air, creating a sense of urgency** that's hardwired into human instincts.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY



Then there's color and sound. Evolutionary psychology suggests that **bright or unusual colors often signal danger**—a trait we evolved as a protective measure against **poisonous animals and plants**.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY



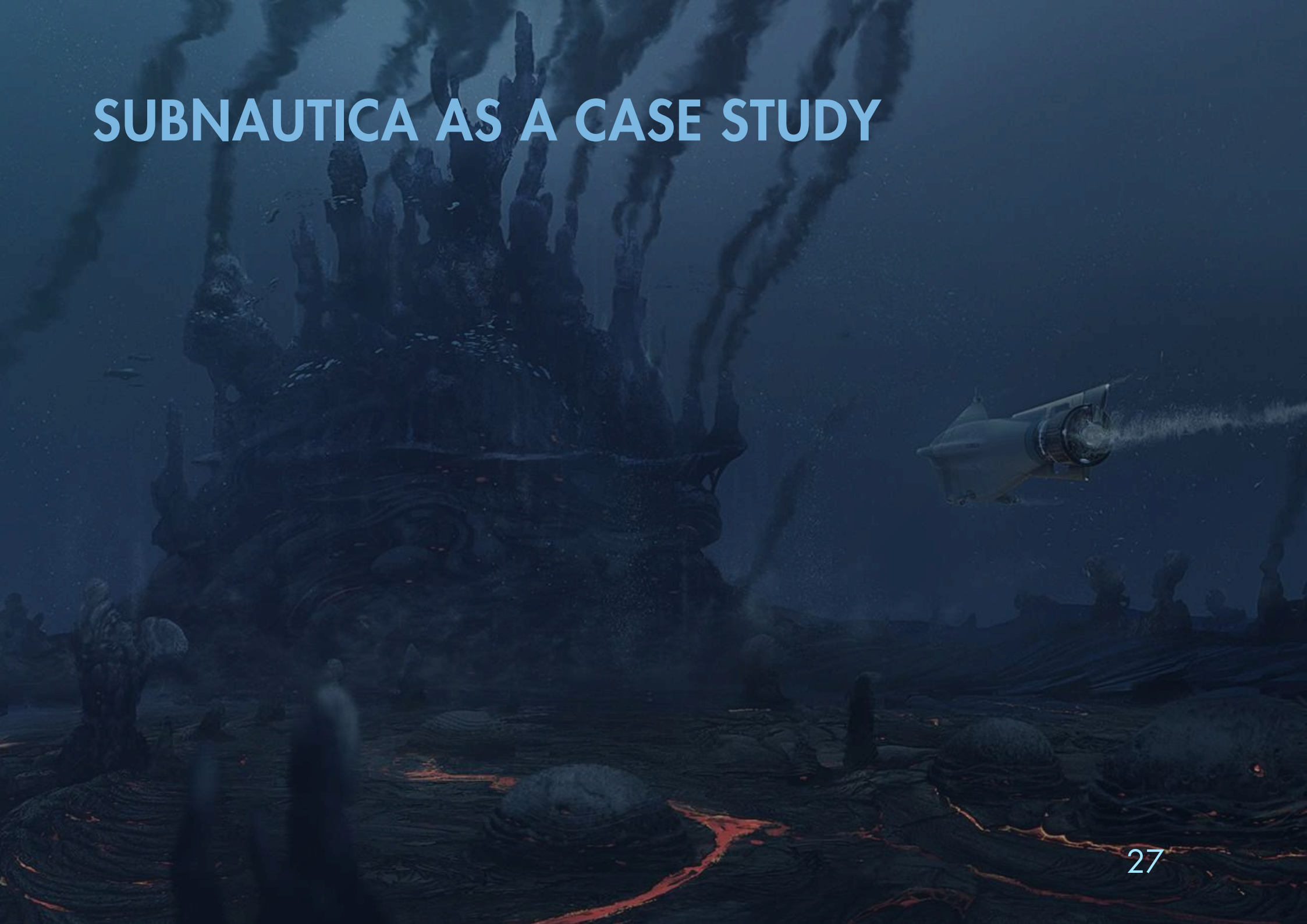
In Subnautica, brightly colored flora and fauna, like vivid purple mushrooms or glowing red corals, **cue players to potential threats**.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY



Players instinctively feel wary when encountering these colors, **even before seeing any creatures nearby**. This instinctual response keeps them alert, **reinforcing a sense of caution that heightens the game's tension and engagement**.

SUBNAUTICA AS A CASE STUDY



SUBNAUTICA AS A CASE STUDY



Subnautica's ability to engage players through psychological terror rather than conventional gameplay offers fascinating insights into gaming psychology. The game's use of the hierarchy of needs, conditioning, and evolutionary psychology demonstrates how terror can be used as a powerful tool for immersion.

SUBNAUTICA AS A CASE STUDY



By confronting players with primal fears, Subnautica taps into **universal anxieties** and turns survival into a rewarding journey of self-discovery. Players aren't just avoiding death; they're **learning about their own limits and how to push beyond them.**

SUBNAUTICA AS A CASE STUDY



The experience of **overcoming isolation and fear** creates a sense of resilience. The combination of psychological elements **ensures players remain invested**, willing to face the game's challenges despite the fear it stirs up.

SUBNAUTICA AS A CASE STUDY



For players, Subnautica is more than a survival story—it becomes a **deeply personal journey that blurs the line between reality and immersion**, resulting in a highly rewarding experience.

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION



Subnautica skillfully uses psychological principles to shape its underwater world into a landscape that's both beautiful and terrifying. By drawing on concepts from the hierarchy of needs, behavioral conditioning, and evolutionary psychology, it creates an experience that goes beyond simple gameplay, using terror to enhance immersion and engagement.

CONCLUSION



This blend of psychological triggers with thoughtful design draws players into the game's depths, encouraging them to face fears they'd rather avoid. In Subnautica, terror is not just an atmospheric detail—it's an essential part of the journey, a tool for exploration and self-discovery.

CONCLUSION

SUBNAUTICA



Through isolation, unpredictability, and the primal fears it taps into, Subnautica demonstrates that terror, when used thoughtfully, can be an incredible force for engagement and connection in the world of gaming.