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UNRAVELLING NARRATIVES OF EMPIRE IN *NO MAN'S SKY*

Abstract: Many scholars have looked at how players engage with games of Empire in ways that both reproduce and subvert capitalist-colonial narratives of resource accumulation, war, and conquest. This article examines the 2016 release of *No Man's Sky*, and how the colonial conquest and resource gathering that are central to the gameplay quickly unravelled as players spent time with the game. Firstly, this article will explore how the release of *No Man's Sky* initially replicated the myth of terra nullius, as well as an understanding of the environment as resources-in-waiting. This is contrasted with the fact that *No Man's Sky* did not replicate the traditional triple-A structure of action, which leads the player to a playthrough that focuses on 'bearing witness' to the environment, rather than harvesting its resources to strengthen the player-character and progress through the game. However, major updates to *No Man's Sky* fundamentally changed the player's relationship to the game-world, further obscuring many of the moments of speculation that the initial release provided. This analysis demonstrates how games of Empire can create affective experiences that can inadvertently challenge the very narratives that they are enmeshed in. These moments are fleeting but provide a valuable insight into the role that games play in the crises of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: affect, Empire, speculative play, video games, *No Man's Sky*

Video games have the potential to be a powerful way to explore emotive or affective transformations, despite their dual status as both works of art capable of cultural criticism and consumer products. This is because video games can act as a metaphor, either explicitly or implicitly, that reinforces, questions, or exposes ideology.¹ Many games reinforce systems of economic, cultural, or political oppression, but within them also lies the possibility to destabilise these narratives.² They provide procedural representations of abstract ideas to their players using symbolic, rather than verbal, frames. These frames are also often simplified, allowing players to experience com-

¹ I. Bogost, *Videogames and Ideological Frames*, "Popular Communication" 2006, vol. 3 (4), p. 170.

² N. Dyer-Witheford, G. de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009.

licated affective phenomena in a more easily digestible context.³ In other words, “video games render social realities into playable form,”⁴ allowing us the potential to play with different social realities. This article takes the idea of video games as speculation for *alternative* social realities that provide us with an affective experience that has the potential to challenge the way we see ourselves and the world around us, while also acknowledging how the potential affective experiences are complicated by the status of games as a capitalist commodity that often obscures their speculative potential. As Benjamin Abraham and Darshana Jayemanne⁵ suggest, games can express a future that includes a more sustainable economic and environmental system.

To this end, I will explore the ways in which Hello Games’ 2016 release, *No Man’s Sky*, had the potential to develop an alternate social reality to current understandings of the environment and our position within it. This complicates and deconstructs colonial and capitalist ways of relating to the environment. I will contrast the initial release of *No Man’s Sky* and the potential affective forms that it creates, with how these were written out of subsequent updates after both critical and consumer backlash. The ephemeral nature of the initial release will be contrasted with the more explicitly capitalist-colonial updates to the game – a contrast exacerbated by the fact that the initial release was erased through the game’s automatic updates on many players’ devices. This is also entangled in *No Man’s Sky*’s relationship with the Triple-A industry. Initially *No Man’s Sky* was an indie game made by a small team of developers. After receiving attention at the VGX Awards in December 2013, Hello Games sought help from Sony Interactive Entertainment for the promotion and publication of the game, which meant it was backed by triple-A market forces, exacerbating affective tensions. Robbie Fordyce suggests games can provide alternatives to Empire, because they allow players a way to imagine a substantively different future.⁶ This analysis of *No Man’s Sky* uses play to challenge Empire.⁷ Previous work has analysed how players play games in a way that explicitly goes against their imperial narratives,⁸ or games that are expressly anti-colonial. However, this article examines something different: how games of Empire can inadvertently complicate and undermine their own relationship to the narratives of Empire and, as a result, the form of subjectivity that Empire creates.

³ I. Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2008.

⁴ A. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2006, p. 17.

⁵ B. Abraham, D. Jayemanne, *Where Are All the Climate Change Games? Locating Digital Games’ Response to Climate Change*, “Transformations” 2017, vol. 30.

⁶ R. Fordyce, *Play, History and Politics: Conceiving Futures Beyond Empire*, “Games and Culture” 2021, vol. 16 (3).

⁷ N. Dyer-Witheford, G. de Peuter, *Postscript: Gaming While Empire Burns*, “Games and Culture” 2021, vol. 16 (3).

⁸ L. van Ryn, *It Takes Food to Make Food: Survival and Sustainability in Don’t Starve*, DiGRAA, 2020.

Gerald Farca's concept of the emancipated player argues that aesthetic effect is a part of many digital games, but attunement to these forces requires an open-minded, critical player. The emancipated player is asked to "step beyond basic pleasures of entertainment."⁹ I argue that the presentation of a game in promotional material can help position (or not position) the player in this way. Classic triple-A video games affectively position the player to get enjoyment from resource accumulation and conquest. Obviously, there are many games that eschew this, but they usually signpost it in the pre-release materials, and are also usually not triple-A games. The introduction of Sony Entertainment and the way *No Man's Sky* was released meant that players began the game with an affective expectation, which was not supported by the actual gameplay. As I will discuss in this article, some players were frustrated at this mismatch, while others stayed with the game regardless, and found that a new set of affective forces emerged that unravelled those of Empire that were foregrounded in the release materials. I argue that this *process of unravelling* is particularly interesting in *No Man's Sky*. It provides a pathway to imagine how capitalist and imperial narratives might become unravelled in other contexts. Although 'playing against' a game is a tactic that players use (for example, a vegan run of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*¹⁰), what happened upon the initial release of *No Man's Sky* is unlike those experiences – players didn't necessarily explicitly choose a playstyle that was in competition with the game – the intended playstyle of the game was undermined *by the game itself*. This follows and expands upon Tomasz Majkowski's analysis¹¹ of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* as paradoxically both upholding and undermining a colonial worldview. This paper will detail how, despite *No Man's Sky* following explicitly colonial narratives of resource extraction and 'discovery,' through affective forces that arise from the game it also undermines this core narrative drive.

Video Games, Subjectivity, and the Brain

Many classical understandings of Western philosophy and social theory that establish the subject as unified and bounded (whether this is a natural state or socially constructed) are the consequence of a particular (usually Western) understanding of

⁹ G. Farca, *The Emancipated Player*, DiGRA/FDG, 2016, p. 1, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gerald-Farca/publication/309232213_The_Emancipated_Player/links/5806486308aeb85ac85f3e34/The-Emancipated-Player.pdf (accessed: 26.11.2022).

¹⁰ M. Westerlaken, *Self-fashioning in Action: Zelda's Breath of the Wild Vegan Run*, Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, 2017, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1407940/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed: 8.12.2022).

¹¹ T. Majkowski, *Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia*, "Open Library of Humanities" 2018, vol. 4 (1), p. 6.

self-perception.¹² The video game subject is a result of a particular affective relationship between the self and other that commodifies and objectifies the environment as resources-in-waiting within an explicitly capitalist and imperialist framework. Historically, video games have not only constructed their protagonists within this framework,¹³ but also explicitly positioned the player as a consumer.¹⁴ Video games explore many colonial affective forces – pleasure is derived from success and mastery of the game. Affect and emotion are produced through our interactions with objects and images.¹⁵ This is also exploited in video games. Logics of Empire produce positive affect when the player owns, or rules, over in-game objects and narratives.

However, video games have the potential to provide a momentary rupture in this perspective that allows for the opportunity to undermine the capitalist subject and the relationship to the environment that it creates. Catherine Malabou¹⁶ suggests that the brain is always both giving form to the world around us, while also receiving form from the external world. This plasticity of the brain allows us to understand the ways in which the brain is not only moulding and being moulded by the world, but also acting as an “agency of disobedience”¹⁷ against capitalist and imperialist ideologies. This highlights the potential for those within these frameworks to take emotive shifts that are experienced through cultural objects and demonstrate how this gives form to the outside world, through how we relate to the material world. As Meghna Jayanth posits, many games are made from the perspective of ‘white protagonism,’ which positions white men as the default, ideal player.¹⁸ White protagonists are exemplified by their position as the hero of a narrative, and the rest of the game-world is positioned as objects that are only useful insofar as they can be utilised by the protagonist. The story usually centres around them ‘levelling up’ and becoming more powerful as the narrative develops.¹⁹ *No Man’s Sky* positions the player in accordance with Jayanth’s white protagonist framing of the player as a lone explorer at the fron-

¹² See: K. Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, Dover Publications, New York 2019; E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*, Penguin, London 2003. Even critiques of this (such as J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, New York 1994; M. Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, “Critical Inquiry” 1982, vol. 8 (4), pp. 777–795; S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1989) often still retain some semblance of the subject, even as they describe subjectivity as fraught and contested.

¹³ M. Jayanth, *White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design #DIGRA21*, Medium, 2021; S. Mukherjee, *Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism*, “Games and Culture” 2018, vol. 13 (5).

¹⁴ M. Jayanth, *White Protagonism...*, op. cit.

¹⁵ S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014.

¹⁶ C. Malabou, *The Brain of History, or, The Mentality of the Anthropocene*, “South Atlantic Quarterly” 2017, vol. 116 (1).

¹⁷ C. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Fordham University Press, New York 2009, pp. 5–6.

¹⁸ M. Jayanth, *White Protagonism...*, op. cit.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

tier of space, but this position unravels as the player progresses through the game and a more speculative game experience unfolds.

No Man's Sky is an open-world survival video game where the user is free to explore the game-world as they see fit. *No Man's Sky*'s world is a procedurally generated universe on the same scale as our, non-virtual, universe. There are approximately eighteen quintillion planets in the game universe, each with their own unique lifeforms, colour schemes, environments, and resources that are almost infinitely variable.²⁰ There are four main elements that make up *No Man's Sky*'s gameplay: survival, trading, exploration, and combat.²¹ *No Man's Sky* was eventually released in August 2016 to mixed reviews, with consumers feeling as though the promotional material was misleading.²² Although after the release Hello Games went on record to say that they were not satisfied with the state of the initial release,²³ the pre-release marketing did not indicate to players that the initial release was unfinished, which only increased negative feelings about the game. Many of the features released in updates were not ones that were signposted in pre-release promotion material. Furthermore, many of the elements of *No Man's Sky* that will be discussed in this article either no longer exist or are buried under new elements added by updates that replicate more traditional gaming structures, which will be unpacked later in this article, after an analysis of the game's initial release.

The potential for disruption largely emerges through the affective relationships that players build with *No Man's Sky*. My approach to the affective attunements of *No Man's Sky* follows Clare Hemmings's²⁴ understanding of affect. Hemmings posits that affect is constrained by social structures, and not free-flowing. Broadly, affect signifies states of being, as opposed to their emotive expression and interpretation.²⁵ Affect can also be described as the innate forces that exist before our conscious thought.²⁶

²⁰ A. Kharpal, 'No Man's Sky': Would You Play a Game That Takes 584 Billion Years to Explore?, CNBC, 10.08.2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/10/no-mans-sky-release-would-you-play-a-game-that-takes-584-billion-years-to-explore.html> (accessed: 26.07.2017).

²¹ Hello Games, *No Man's Sky*, 2016.

²² B. Hillier, *No Man's Sky Reviews: Is This the Most Divisive Game of 2016?*, VG247, 2016, <https://www.vg247.com/2016/08/12/no-mans-sky-reviews-round-up/> (accessed: 26.07.2017); K. Orland, *How Sky-high Hype Formed a Storm Cloud over No Man's Sky's Release*, Ars Technica, 2016, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2016/08/how-sky-high-hype-formed-a-storm-cloud-over-no-mans-skys-release/> (accessed: 26.07.2017).

²³ D. Strickland, *Sean Murray Gives Rare Talk on No Man's Sky's Triumphs, Woes*, TweakTown, 2019, <https://www.tweaktown.com/news/65314/sean-murray-gives-rare-talk-mans-skys-triumphs-woes/index.html> (accessed: 13.08.2022).

²⁴ C. Hemmings, *Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn*, "Cultural Studies" 2005, vol. 19 (5).

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 551.

²⁶ M. Gregg, G. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2010; S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: Volume II: The Negative Affects*, Springer, New York 1963.

Affect is ‘simmering,’ constantly moving in and out of focus.²⁷ Hemmings also uses Frantz Fanon’s writings to demonstrate how affect is linked to the embodied social world. Affects are imposed upon Fanon through reactions to his presence, such as a young child shivering in fear as Fanon walks by.²⁸ This emphasizes the fact that affect not only disrupts stereotypes (which is too often the focus in affect theory), but also re-embeds and strengthens them.²⁹ This understanding of affect allows the game code, as well as the player experience and external factors, to guide the affective responses in the player as a result of playing *No Man’s Sky*. Much reporting around *No Man’s Sky* has focused on gamer reaction. However, affect is situated outside the order of social signification, and it is in this sense that it can be used to analyse the potential for video games to have an impact on capitalist ideology, despite also being consumer products that are intimately entangled in capitalist networks. The analogy of the two-way street of affect, constantly emanating from us and being directed towards us, also demonstrates how affective forces are both constrained and constraining.³⁰ Many theorists have discussed the affective potential of video games.³¹ In video game theory, affect is used to demonstrate how the player feels responsible for, and identifies with, their on-screen avatar.³² These studies clearly demonstrate the connection between video games and embodied experience. The experiential affective flow of *No Man’s Sky* is one that is closely tied to how a player travels through the game-world.

Ruptures in *No Man’s Sky*

With this in mind, this article will now turn to explore the potential for moments of rupture in the initial release of *No Man’s Sky*. In particular, I will detail how the game’s ephemeral narrative discouraged a progress-oriented playstyle that calls into question the common way of playing video games – and more broadly capitalist lifestyles – that focuses on the accumulation of resources, and how a sense of underperformed affect that arises from the modes of travel in the game opens up different attunements in *No Man’s Sky* in relation to subjectivity, time, and environment. *No Man’s Sky* has been – quite rightly – critiqued for its mechanics that reproduce colonial

²⁷ M. Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Sage Publications, Los Angeles 2012, p. 12.

²⁸ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York 2008, p. 60.

²⁹ C. Hemmings, *Invoking Affect...*, op. cit., p. 550.

³⁰ S. Ahmed, *Happy Objects* [in:] M. Gregg, G. Seigworth (eds.), op. cit., pp. 29–51.

³¹ For a review of this research, see: P. Cairns, A. Cox, A.I. Nordin, *Immersion in Digital Games: Review of Gaming Experience Research* [in:] M. Angelides, H. Agius (eds.), *Handbook of Digital Games*, Wiley Books, Hoboken 2014, pp. 767–798.

³² S. Lyons, L. Jaloza, *More Human Than Non/Human: Posthumanism, Embodied Cognition, and Video Games as Affective Experience*, “The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference” 2016, pp. 5–7.

myths of *terra nullius*.³³ Undoubtedly, the original release of this game does reproduce capitalist and colonialist affective relationships with its environment, through things such as the ‘discovery’ and naming of planets and their fauna and animals that are clearly already occupied by other lifeforms, as well as the environment being structured as a collection of resources waiting to be extracted for the player’s benefit. Because of these mechanics, the player initially assumes that the form of visuality produced by *No Man’s Sky* closely mirrors the capitalist-imperialist narratives of exploration and resource exploitation and, as a result, their first impulse is resource accumulation and exploration. Yet this fades the more time the player spends with the game. Gaming journalist Narelle Ho Sang³⁴ reports initially finding herself focusing on mining resources in order to replicate a linear familiarity that she finds comforting, particularly due to the unnerving size of the game that emphasizes the insignificance of the player. The fact that *No Man’s Sky*, as an ephemeral uncontrolled narrative, is unsettling to begin with means that Ho Sang, as well as many others,³⁵ begin by focusing their sights on collection, classification, and the quest to learn new languages through visiting ‘monoliths.’

After the initial burst of excitement in gathering resources, many players changed the way that they played, realising the futility in endless accumulation. In the original game, players quickly realised that they needed few resources to make their way through the game, and spending hours accumulating resources had minimal impact on their playthrough experience. Moreover, it could take several minutes for the player to move between planets or galaxies, in which time they did not have a task or activity within the game to turn their attention to. Walking around on a planet in the in-game universe was also very slow, mimicking the pace of walking around the Earth in the physical world. These slow movements were compounded by the sheer size of the in-game universe. The estimated eighteen quintillion planets in *No Man’s Sky* dwarf the initial sense of progress or activity that players feel by completing resource-gathering activities, as, unlike in many other triple-A releases, these were not rewarded as the ‘optimal’ or ‘most efficient’ way to play. *No Man’s Sky* is a game where players expect a playstyle that is explicitly colonialist and capitalist, with players ‘discovering’ (already inhabited) planets, and indiscriminately exploiting these spaces for resources. However, many players who adopted this style of play felt frustrated at the slow, goalless reality of playing *No Man’s Sky*. There was a tension between the promise of affective pleasure of this task, and its repetitive reality.

³³ J. Byrd, *Playing Stories: Never Alone, Indigeneity, and the Structures of Settler Colonialism*, Cornell Video, 2017, <http://www.cornell.edu/video/jodi-a-byrd-video-games-indigeneity-settler-colonialism> (accessed: 23.01.2018).

³⁴ N. Ho Sang, *I’m Struggling With No Man’s Sky*, Kotaku, 21.08.2016, <https://kotaku.com/im-struggling-with-no-mans-sky-1785553692> (accessed: 26.07.2017).

³⁵ K. Hamilton, *No Man’s Sky: The Kotaku Review*, Kotaku, 26.08.2016, <https://kotaku.com/no-mans-sky-the-kotaku-review-1785383774> (accessed: 26.07.2017); *No Man’s Sky Reviews*, Metacritic, 2018, <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/no-mans-sky> (accessed: 26.07.2017).

Gaming journalist Kirk Hamilton³⁶ details his experience of playing *No Man's Sky* in a similar manner. He disliked his first playthrough of *No Man's Sky* in which he rushes to the centre of the galaxy, annoyed at the ephemeral and largely pointless narrative of the game. He also finds the procedurally generated planets, animals, and plants to be indistinguishable and not enough to capture his imagination. Many players agreed with his experience, as evidenced by the criticisms following *No Man's Sky*'s release.³⁷ It is clear that some players did not experience the breakdown of the progress narrative and the speculative state that arises from this shift. However, those that stayed with the game were much more likely to see the speculative alternatives unfold. For example, Hamilton decided to start a second playthrough, where he explicitly played without any objectives, and found his gaming experience to be much more fulfilling. Hamilton stays in one solar system on his second playthrough, where he begins to notice the small differences that he missed when he was occupied with progress and accumulation, slowing down and appreciating the planets that he visits. He discovers that each planet has something that sets it apart.³⁸ This explicit rejection of many of the facets that are required for triple-A video games allows for a sense of rupture that brings forth a speculative moment in relation to ourselves and our relationship to the environment. Instead of focusing on a particular goal, players like Hamilton 'bore witness' to the game's environment – its small differences between environments and its slow, meditative movement between planets. This playstyle picks up on the affective currents that emanated from *No Man's Sky* that was not immediately subsumed by the structure of triple-A games as commodities.

No Man's Sky's narrative structure is also unusual for a triple-A release. It is without a linear, or even a particularly prominent, narrative, and has an ambiguous ending that leads the player to the realization that they are inside a simulation created by The Atlas, a floating, pulsating red orb. They can choose to either reset the simulation to end the game or continue to explore the game universe indefinitely. If they choose to end the simulation, they are transported back to a scene that is, in essence, the same as the opening scene of the game, with the same spaceship to repair and the same dialogue. Only their station position in the game-world has changed. The original end of the narrative functionally brings the player back to the exact same place that they started – an ending that ensures no form of the resolution or achievement that is generally expected in a triple-A release. This is compounded by the game's size. The vastly different temporal scale in which *No Man's Sky* operates places the player in a position that dwarfs the game's objectives, revealing their insignificance in stark contrast to the in-game universe's temporal scale. *No Man's Sky* operates as a hyperobject,³⁹ or an object that exists on a vastly different temporal scale

³⁶ K. Hamilton, *No Man's Sky: The Kotaku...*, op. cit.

³⁷ *No Man's Sky Reviews...*, op. cit.

³⁸ K. Hamilton, *No Man's Sky: The Kotaku...*, op. cit.

³⁹ T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2013.

to humans that challenges our assumption of history as solely human. This also calls into question many imperialist narratives of cultures deeming themselves superior not only to nature, but to other people as well.

In an interview on Stephen Colbert's *Late Show*,⁴⁰ *No Man's Sky* creator Sean Murray puts the immense size of the game into perspective: "even if a planet was discovered every second, you know, we would still all be dead before they were all discovered. Our sun would've burnt out. Our own sun."⁴¹ Here we can see how *No Man's Sky* draws our attention to vastly different temporalities than we are used to, which draws the futility of conquest and accumulation – a central feature to so many exploration games – into sharp focus. The sheer size of the game suggests that it is not made for us, particularly when considering the fact that it would take 584 billion years to discover all the planets within the in-game universe.⁴² This is something that we can see unfolding in *No Man's Sky*, particularly when the player realizes that they are merely a projection in a simulated universe that is operating on a timescale difficult for us to imagine, and that there is no satisfying way to 'beat' the game.

Ho Sang's⁴³ review of *No Man's Sky* demonstrates these challenges. She speaks of the fear of 'missing out,' and not feeling like she is leaving her mark on the game. This is compounded by the fact that the in-game inventory has very limited space, which discourages excessive accumulation of resources, despite that being a core mechanic of the game. This leaves the door open for the player to shift their perspective regarding the possibilities of experience generated by playing *No Man's Sky*, how it questions common gaming features that reproduce capitalistic affective states and, by extension, the questions it raises through the breakdown and subsequent rearticulation of a different affective state. Consequently, *No Man's Sky* gives the player an opportunity to begin to think about their relationship to the environment, and how this relationship might be otherwise.

Often, affective relationships between player and game are discussed in terms of moments of excitement or intensity. In fact, games are *designed* to position us as consumers, rather than subjects in our own right, and game design often reflects this by holding our attention by any means necessary and avoiding even small moments of stillness or reflection.⁴⁴ This is particularly true of triple-A releases. However, *No Man's Sky* sits with these moments. The most impactful affective flows of *No Man's Sky* happen in moments of *underperformed* affect. Underperformed affective experi-

⁴⁰ Sean Murray May Have Replaced Morgan Freeman as God, *Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqeN6hj4dZU><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqeN6hj4dZU> (accessed: 26.07.2017).

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² C. Higgins, *No Man's Sky Would Take 5 Billion Years to Explore*, *Wired*, 18.08.2016, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/no-mans-sky-planets> (accessed: 26.07.2017); A. Kharpal, *Would You Play a Game...*, op. cit.

⁴³ N. Ho Sang, *I'm Struggling...*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ M. Jayanth, *White Protagonism...*, op. cit.

ences refer to emotions that represent “recessive action.”⁴⁵ Affective experiences, like boredom, are an important element in how *No Man’s Sky* unfolds itself to the player. Boredom stupefies, “and indicates the *inability* of other mental activities, including reason, to overcome an affective state.”⁴⁶ In *No Man’s Sky*, once the initial flurry of capitalist and colonial activity fades away, the vital experience of boredom begins to unfold. Lauren Berlant argues that flat or underperformed affect is not something that is evident narratively, and what initially seems like a non-event, the loss of interest in the ‘goals’ of *No Man’s Sky*, actually provides a moment of rupture between capitalist and imperialist gameplay styles, to instead getting the player to ‘bear witness’ to the planets that they visit, which, due to the size of the game’s universe, are unlikely to ever be witnessed by anyone else.

A Game Disappeared

What, so far, is missing from this analysis of *No Man’s Sky* is that the 2016 version of the game that I have been discussing thus far bears little resemblance to its current state. Video games are a unique medium in the sense that they are always being updated and new features are being added to already existing titles. There is no guarantee that a game that a player purchases upon release will remain unchanged as it sits in their digital library. In the case of *No Man’s Sky*, the immense backlash that occurred upon its release meant that there was significant pressure on the developers to release several major updates that aligned the game with more conventional triple-A releases, which, in turn, encouraged more colonialist and capitalist gameplay styles. *No Man’s Sky* now has multiplayer capability, extra side quests and missions, base building, character customisation, and more opportunities to craft items. These features give players more action-oriented tasks to complete that obscure the more subtle affective responses that players previously had to *No Man’s Sky*.

Ultimately, consumer expectations of the initial release were antithetical to the actual user experience. This demonstrates the difficulty these alternative, speculative realities face to thrive within a big-budget consumer product. If, as I argue throughout this article, there were moments of speculative potential in the initial release of *No Man’s Sky*, why then, did so few people seem to appreciate or become attuned to these gameplay experiences? This adds further weight to the notion that the affective experiences produced by *No Man’s Sky* are not free-flowing. As Margaret Wetherell posits “flows of affect can tangle, mesh with the media – there are a wide range of potential connections.”⁴⁷ Marketing choices, such as demoing the game in ‘god mode’ – where the player jumps from planet to planet without having to travel between

⁴⁵ L. Berlant, *Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin*, “International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society” 2015, vol. 28 (3), p. 193.

⁴⁶ S. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2005, p. 270.

⁴⁷ M. Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion...*, op. cit., p. 13.

them – and the focus on colonialist exploration, obscured the other attunements of *No Man's Sky* and replicated the forms of capitalist accumulation and colonial conquest that define many of the biggest video game titles, concealing these possibilities for many players before the game was even released.

The need to present *No Man's Sky* in this way was in large part due to market forces that require a triple-A release to meet certain expectations. The aspects of *No Man's Sky* that allowed for a break with the current modes of subject formation have been remedied by recent updates that have added extra features to the game, such as the option to build a base, quicker travel between planets, and more intense battles with non-playable characters (NPCs).⁴⁸ These have changed the way *No Man's Sky* is experienced by the player, and many of the experiences detailed here are not replicable in today's *No Man's Sky*. In short, it is naïve to suggest that potential breaks in Empire that arise from an affective relationship to a consumer product could fully break out of the global capitalist market. However, the potential for small cracks and moments of rupture remain. These small moments of rupture give the player fleeting glances into a world beyond Empire.

Conclusion

This article details some possibilities of the affects that unfold while playing video games, and the potential for video games to alter affective relationships to the world around us. It does so by demonstrating how *No Man's Sky* in particular holds this potential, and that video games in general, due to their immersive potential, are uniquely situated to produce subjective reconfigurations and an array of affective experiences. Moreover, this article argues that this video game provides a space that reflects and simplifies the non-virtual world, making it a useful medium to produce an affective, speculative state.

Video games are objects of play, and consequently they are often deemed less serious than other forms of art. The potential of video games to provide experiential narratives and cause the player deep reflections on how they relate to the world around them suggests that video games need to be taken much more seriously in the humanities. The practice that I have detailed in this article occurs through play. Yet, as Brian Massumi⁴⁹ would suggest, that does not make this experience any less meaningful. Both the intentional and unintentional frames that emerge while playing *No Man's Sky*, as well as the broader economic structure that the game is embedded in, all co-create a possibility of gameplay that does not just side-step the structures of capitalism but gives a brief glimpse into how we might relate to the world around us without its omnipresence. These moments are fleeting, as evidenced by *No Man's*

⁴⁸ L. Painter, *No Man's Sky NEXT Release Date, Gameplay Details, and More*, Tech Advisor, 24.07.2018, <https://www.techadvisor.co.uk/feature/game/no-mans-sky-next-3531001/> (accessed: 16.08.2022).

⁴⁹ B. Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2014.

Sky being a completely different game today to its 2016 release, yet these moments provide interesting avenues of exploration that point to ruptures in capitalist and imperialist narratives that can begin to be explored in video games.

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