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Looking for Cosy in All the Wrong Places. Cosiness and Tamed Sublime of *No Man's Sky*

Abstract

In this article, I argue that some games may elicit cosy sentiments even if they are centred on a premise not usually associated with cosiness – for example the infinity of the universe. They do so not by a fluke, and cosy spaces in these games do not only appear as designated spaces apart. Evoking a cosy feeling is done by specific game mechanics or design choices, "taming" the sublime premise of the game discussed. The architecture and mechanics of this unexpected cosiness may offer a new look at the fringe cases of cosy aesthetics, perhaps broadening the understanding of this phenomenon.

Keywords: game studies, cosy, sublime, retrofuturism, spatial aesthetic

Tanya X. Short et al. (2018) posit that cosiness in interactive entertainment "refers to how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness." These three characteristics have usual connotations of intimate, human, homely spaces, emphasised by Short's consequent choice of examples. Among them are the pastoral landscapes from *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), enclosed safety zones as seen in some interior scenes in *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), lived-in

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architectures of *Terraria* (Re-Logic, 2011), and soft materiality of *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014).

These are some of the most common tropes of cosy aesthetics. However, in this article, I argue that some games may elicit cosy sentiments even if they are centred on a premise not commonly associated with cosiness – the infinity of the universe. The archetypal representation of cosmos in games[1] is built around a sublime aesthetic, which arguably can be perceived as not cosy, or even anti-cosy. Here, I want to focus specifically on three aspects – the military/scientific aesthetic of technology (technological sublime), the vastness of the cosmos (mathematical sublime), as well as typical conflict-focused game loops (gaming sublime and stuplimity).

No Man's Sky (Hello Games, 2016)[2] is an action-adventure survival game. Instead of a linear narrative, the game focuses on the free exploration of a procedurally generated open-world, while providing certain general goals which players may, but do not have to, pursue. Players can visit planets, discover new species, gather resources, establish bases, engage in space battles, and ground combat with hostile creatures and robotic sentinels. The specifics of combat mechanics, the variety of weapons and upgrades, and the nature of encounters may vary depending on the player's choices, upgrades, and the randomly generated aspects of the game. The game does indeed seem to be built to evoke sublime feelings, but I would posit that it restructures them so the resulting experience can be interpreted as cosy. The architecture and mechanics of this unexpected cosiness may offer a new look at the fringe cases of cosy aesthetics, perhaps broadening the understanding of this phenomenon.

Sublime in science-fiction cosy games

First, it is necessary to define the non-conventional spaces for cosiness. As per Short et al.'s (2018) assertion, "[c]oziness depends on where the player is coming from when they interact with your game." Henry Jenkins suggests that "narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make a hypothesis about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 10). Because of that, the non-conventional may be subjective. Short et al. (2018) note that "a player who sees their universe as inherently about the competition may find a game with meditative

1 Among many examples we may note games new and old – from *Wing Commander: Privateer* (Origin Systems, 1993) and *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003), through *Elite Dangerous* (Frontier Dev UK, 2015), *X4: Foundations* (Egosoft, 2018), to the yet to be finished *Star Citizen* (Cloud Imperium Games, TBA)

2 Subsequently referred to as *NMS*.

gardening oppressive or boring." However, "[g]ame designers have developed a variety of kludges which allow them to prompt players or steer them towards narratively salient space" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 10). Consequently, we can describe certain spaces as more and less conducive towards eliciting cosiness. That is after all one of the main points in Short et al.'s report – it can be viewed as describing the methodology of establishing just such spaces.

Within the academic context, Short et al.'s (2018) work is further developed by Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020), who propose three ways in which a cosy aesthetic may function in relation to other themes present. Coherent type is a harmonious co-existence of cosy aesthetic and game functions, while situational type describes a metaphorical or literal safe space in a game that is otherwise focused on non-cosy functions. The final type is a dissonant application, where a cosy theme clashes with or is subverted by other functions of the game. Although the latter type might seem the most apt for describing *NMS*, I intend to focus mainly on the first type, pointing out specifically how that harmonious co-existence of elements can break away from conventional representations. This differs from dissonant cosy games in which the aesthetic in question is used to create or strengthen the feeling of sublime or uncanny causing increased player's distress or even "extreme discomfort" (Smith, 2012). The premise suggests cosiness, which becomes deconstructed the further we go into the game. That seems to be the case in both examples mentioned by Waszkiewicz and Bakun – *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) and *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017). The pitfalls of incorporating the dissonant application are perhaps best visible in the example of *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021), as discussed by Sullivan, Stanfill, and Salter (2023, p. 8):

> [t]he demands for 'cosiness' risk restricting the capacity for meaningful design and threaten to impose restrictions on genres for growth and experimentation. The reception of *Boyfriend Dungeon* has been noted by games journalists as a warning to other developers that 'cosy' and 'wholesome' games carry certain expectations.

Nonetheless, I would posit that cosy dissonance in these games is not applied in the same fashion in *NMS*. Here, the process seems to run towards the opposite end of the experiential axis – from the sublime, non-conventional place for cosy, towards establishing a cosy space. This observation is going to be further developed subsequently.

First, however, we need to establish what is to be understood as a non-conventional cosy premise. Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) reiterate Short et al.'s (2018) observations that cosy games can be characterised by three tenets – safety, abundance and softness. Conventional places for cosiness seem to encompass the homely architectures mentioned in the introduction. Enclosed, but not

claustrophobic spaces, built to a human scale, understandable in their purpose and materiality. Following this line of reasoning, non-cosy games are those which to some extent subvert the three tenets – though we need to remember that the lack of one tenet does not immediately delegate a game into the non-cosy rubric.

This subversion is exactly what is happening in *NMS*. One of the main marketing points of the game concerned the vastness of its environments. The game was to "feature 18,446,744,073,709,551,616 worlds. That's 18 quintillion, if you were counting. Visiting each at the blistering rate of one per second would take five billion years" (Higgins, 2014). And it indeed had the effect that was to be expected from such a sublime representation of the vastness of cosmos:

> It brings back that sense that Elite provided – that you're a lonely and vulnerable traveller . . . The universe won't care when you're gone. The universe barely knows you're there (Stuart, 2023).

The alienating sojourn was perhaps intended by the designers of *NMS* as a counterpoint to the usual fare of games that through their focus on the medium logic can be considered *uncosy*. Sean Murray, the managing director of Hello Games, seems to suggest that purpose: "if you want deathmatch and that MMO progression there are so many more better games for that. For us what we're after is a more Journey-esque experience" (Warr, 2015). Murray is referring here to *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), an independent game focused on travelling through a vast desert, widely lauded for its pensive atmosphere that "leaves you feeling comfortably small" (Castania, 2023). However, unlike *Journey*, *NMS* forefronts its focus on game loops and traditionally realised conflict. Murray suggests that:

> [w]e want to create something that feels more real and people have stories from, rather than just an ambient experience. We want people to have real experiences and that means making choices and feeling like this is you, your character and what's around you is real and the adversity of the world (Murray in Warr, 2015).

Thus, *NMS* is not supposed to be just about the exploration of a static universe. Here, space-faring vessels are magnificent machines of war and speed, covering unfathomable distances of space in the blink of an eye. At least as long as they are fuelled, because in the game, players need to concern themselves with the economic aspect of travelling. The goals of the game are varied and include trading and conversing with alien races, exploring marvels of alien technologies, and reconnoitring exotic planets. Murray's "adversity of the world" (Murray in Warr, 2015) is realised by introducing enemies to that vast universe, either in the form of hostile local fauna and flora of explored planets, or equally dangerous encounters

in space. To deal with these threats the players are given typical tools of science-fiction combat – Blaze Javelins, Neutron Cannons, Paralysis Mortars, and so on. A common theme begins to emerge – it seems that the antithesis to cosy spaces is the spatial organisation that evokes the feelings of the sublime.

The sublime has been an influential theme in culture and cultural criticism, "from the Hellenistic Longinus to Freud and beyond" (Hobby & Bloom, 2010, p. xv). In the general sense, the sublime is an aesthetic or emotional experience that transcends the ordinary – "sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what may lie beyond these limits" (Shaw, 2006, p. 2). The connection between cosy games and the sublime may not be immediately apparent, as these two concepts are often associated with different aesthetic and emotional experiences. While cosy games and the sublime may seem contradictory, they can be connected through the idea of balance or contrast in the gaming experience. Players may find enjoyment in alternating between cosy and more sublime experiences (be it different games or spaces within a singular game). The contrast between the two can provide a diverse range of emotional and aesthetic encounters within the medium. In games, the sublime may emerge "when the elements of a digital experience such as autonomy, abstraction, permutation or complexity become undeterminable by the subject . . . Virtual frameworks such as multiplicity, topology and allegorithm encourage this scenario" (Betts, 2014, p. 42). In game studies, the theme was explored by various critics, both from the perspective of visual representations (Fraser, 2016; Martin, 2011) and that of technologic and ludic implications (Betts, 2014; Shinkle, 2012; Vella, 2015).

The environments discussed in this article frequently present a specific type of the sublime, which in turn may strengthen the feeling of departure from cosy spaces. The difference between a human spatial organisation and the sublime one is often just in pure mathematics of scale – "[t]he mathematical sublime can be thought of as an experience of an object in relation to its magnitude, differentiated between the 'simply great' and the 'absolutely great' . . . the absolutely great challenges our ability to reason through" (Spokes, 2020, p. 25). This is particularly visible in games taking place in outer space, where that vertigo-inducing backdrop of starscape posits a non-trivial challenge to comprehension. Human, cosy mathematics, operating on numbers within our scope of understanding, is expanded exponentially.

Secondly, the element of the technological sublime is also present: "[m]achines, as tangible, physical objects, . . . instil awe and might be understood as sublime because of the ways in which the mind encounters the enormity of the achievement of human endeavour" (Spokes, 2020, p. 38). This is further enhanced by the previously mentioned mathematical sublime – these are not just machines,

these are massive machines in motion, seemingly autonomous, with a purpose and design that are beyond our immediate comprehension.

Finally, we may also look at the gamified sublime as founded on the border between the human mind and the specificity of the digital game medium. One of the awe-inspiring aspects of the sublime, both romantic and postmodern, was that it forced the viewer into a stupor, an impossibility of action when faced with the grandiose. As Trifonova notes:

> [t]o feel overwhelmed by the size of natural phenomena like the ones filling the pages of Burke's *Enquiry* and Kant's *Critique* . . . is to experience the physical limits of human perception. By contrast, feeling overwhelmed by data is an experience of intellectual frustration as we become aware of our inability to 'read' or 'interpret' the amount of data we are presented with (Trifonova, 2018, p. 84).

In both cases, the audience, unable to comprehend the monumentality or complexity of the perceived subject, is forced to admit that no human logic can grasp the sublime material. Ksenia Fedorova observed a similar pattern of sublime incomprehension in some aspects of digital landscapes:

> certain phenomena of digital culture such as the autopoetic, generative qualities of code; the extension of the senses that makes new perceptions possible; virtual reality, which offers an illusion of immersion into "other," imagined worlds; and datascapes that are hardly navigable in their immensity and escape our ability to comprehend them in their 'totality' (Fedorova, 2018, p. 142).

This inability to comprehend could consequently turn towards stuplimity, "a concatenation of boredom and astonishment – a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue" (Ngai, 2009, p. 271). The foci of this logic in games are numerous: extrinsic reward, danger, fear, threat, responsibility, intense stimulus, distance, and phobia sources. These can be realised in complex or high-intensity game loops. *Dark Souls II* (FromSoftware, 2014), which focuses on memorising intricate move patterns of enemies and high lethality of combat, is rarely described as a cosy game. The gamified sublime may be detrimental to evoking cosiness because it introduces medium logic which Short et al. (2018) suggested is "negating cosiness", or which is "overlapping but not-cosy". Therefore, cosy games tend to either avoid it or restructure the experience towards less immediate stimuli.

At a glance, all three sublime conceptualisations of cosmos seem to squarely position games that evoke them into the non-conventional rubric of cosy play. Of

course, cosy spaces can still exist within these sublime landscapes – as sanctuaries, hiding holes (see Waszkiewicz and Bakun's situational cosiness). However, we may also assume that these avoidance strategies could strengthen through contrast the dominant message of awe and alienation. Still, I posit that despite aforementioned factors, some space games may not only evoke feelings of cosiness, but that feeling may become the principal mode of play. These games are to be played not for the experience of the sublime, but because they "evoke the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness" (Short et al., 2018). Investigating this 'taming' of the sublime should perhaps shed a new light on how cosy aesthetic may function in games whose topics or presentations are not usually considered congruent with cosiness. It is then time to investigate *NMS* as an example of a non-conventional space game and find how the sublime is tamed, reconstructed, and subverted.

Snug infinity: The cosy paradox of *No Man's Sky*

On the surface level all three types of the sublime are realised in *NMS*, positing the game in the non-conventional cosy rubric. The mathematical sublime exists in the scope of the distances traversed by the characters, but also in the incomprehensible near-infinity of spaces that the game seems to offer. The technological sublime is based on players' encounters with the wondrous space machines, which even in their smallest representations dwarf puny human form. And finally, the gamified sublime, visible in seemingly conventional gaming fare encouraging the player to scourge the planets for resources, upgrade, expand, explore, fight and die, reload and fight again. As per Short et. al.'s (2018) observation "[the] responsibility requires emotional labour: the effort to plan, think, and execute on a plan to resolve something. Being responsible generates high priority need/expectation". Here the constant barrage of game loops, of thinking through the mechanical processes that the game is built around, can be perceived as detrimental to the feeling of cosiness.

Andrew Reinhard, Kate Euphemia Clark, and Justin Carpenter examine *NMS*, focusing on these very concerns. The first author, for example, applies archaeological methodology to the study of digital and human habitation. He explores the fate of players, their creations, and the in-game community in the aftermath of a software update that made some player-made houses uninhabitable (Reinhard, 2021). The players' effort to create a safe, homely space was suddenly subjected to the entropic powers of cosmos. This disruption can be considered unsettling or even antithetical to a cosy framework. However, the event did not occur within the structure of what we traditionally understand as a game narrative. It was a meta-event, a change on the super-universe level that only a certain group of players experienced. Reinhard's perspective may certainly offer

a valuable analysis of how 'meta' events shape the experience of the players, and why the traditional perspective on the game narrative needs to be often reframed. In this paper, however, I focus on the designers' intentional attempts to establish/ re-establish cosy aesthetics, and accidental events or meta disasters are beyond the scope of this analysis.

One of the arguments that Kate Euphemia Clark posits in her analysis of *NMS* is that the game in its early version did not conform to the expected structure of action, but rather allowed for a more passive play that focused on 'bearing witness' to the environment (Clark, 2022). This type of reconstruction of the typical mode of play may indeed be perceived as in tune with a cosy aesthetic. However, once again the intentionality of the authors should perhaps be taken into consideration. If we are to consider the number of major updates to *NMS*, it becomes quite clear that this initial version was most likely the outcome of a rushed publishing push rather than an authorial attempt to create the meditative and countercultural gaming experience as described by Clark. This particularly seems to ring true if we take into account Murray's quote above, suggesting that the adversity and non-ambient nature of the game was to be a preferred design scheme. Moreover, other critics' reactions to early versions of the game were far from meditative – "the game's title is true: this isn't yet a sky any man (or woman) should bother claiming" (Machkovech, 2016), "[i]n the end, it's just boring – a monotonous and dreary affair with pretty visuals and the promise of something more just over the horizon" (Kain, 2016). Moreover, this early version is simply not playable anymore, with consequent updates changing the game beyond recognition. In a truly hauntological fashion, we see the glimpses of what the artefact was, but cannot experience it first-hand. Consequently, while Clark's analysis offers a look into how players can construct their own experience in a predesigned game structure, the accidental, divisive, and ephemeral nature of this version of the cosy aesthetic proves beyond the scope of the paper.

In his work, Justin Carpenter (2022) analyses the generative design aspect of *NMS* and explores how the interaction between humans and machines is essentially a relational process. While Carpenter focuses on generative design and emergence, some aspects of the process seem to be congruent with attempts to establish a cosy aesthetic. One of the 'promises' of generative design is the apparent infinity of the game world. This aspect is going to be further analysed here, as a cosy 'meta-abundance' of play. The focus of Carpenter's analysis is not, however, on generating cosy. I would posit that purely generative environments need additional mechanisms to make them more congruent with the cosy aesthetic. Speaking about an early version of the game, Kain noted that "[w]hat sounds cool on paper – its vastness, its procedurally generated planets – is less gripping in execution. Eventually, . . . [s]ameness, and a withering lonesomeness, begin to define the

game's experiences" (Kain, 2016). After all, just as the infinity of the play universe may elicit feelings of abundance, it may also make one feel infinitely small and insignificant. Therefore, while generative environments may offer a foundation for the cosy experience, specific techniques need to be applied to strengthen or broaden the scope of that aesthetic.

The warm machines of war: Cosy aesthetic and retrofuturism

The foremost element that turns the cosmos into a cosy place in *NMS* is the game's spatial aesthetic realised on the visual level. While the game does not shy away from using contrasting and vivid colours, the palette remains warm and exuberant. That applies even to the images of starscape, where instead of the cold sublime backdrop of infinite darkness, more often than not the screen glows with the diffused luminosity, or light reflected from planetary rings, or asteroids. Even the vastness of cosmos is almost always filled and suffused, so the sense of emptiness can be very rarely experienced.

Figure 1. A representative image of the colour palette used in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

The second method of increasing the cosiness is focused on dealing with the mechanical sublime. As per aforementioned Spoke's observation, it results from "the mind [that] encounters the enormity of the achievement of human endeavour" (Spoke, 2020, p. 38). Emily Godbey, writing about American technology fairs of the past, emphasises that "[m]achines, factories, and engineering marvels are examples of the technological sublime. Americans treated machinery with reverence and awe, and their power . . . astonished and amazed crowds" (Godbey, 2014, p. 39). In the mechanical sublime of science fiction we see echoes of this awe. The underlying

complexity and incomprehensibility remain a source of the sublime experience, further enhanced by the deadly nature of machines.

NMS, however, reconstructs these tropes. There is a plethora of weapons and warships present in the game, but they rarely look like complex machines designed primarily for war. Handheld weapons are not even weapons since they are presented as modifications for the multitool that the player is using. This object itself bears some semblance of a futuristic gun; however, the representation is fanciful rather than war-like.

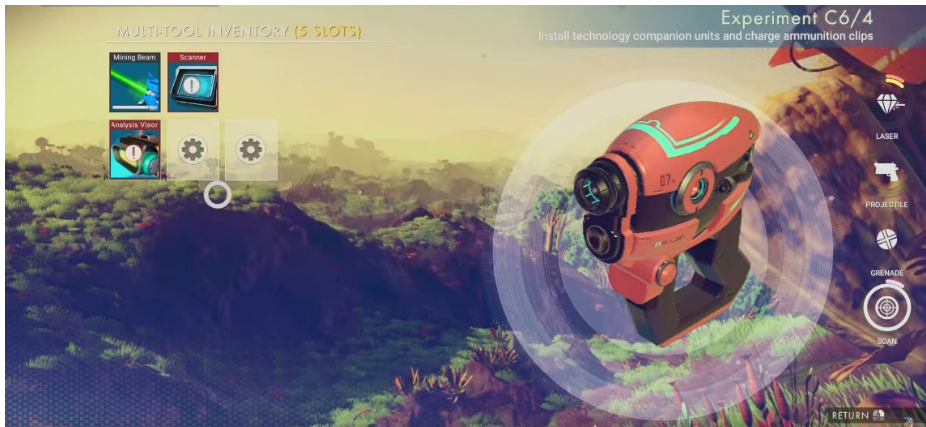

Figure 2. An example of a multitool/weapon used in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

Spaceships receive similar treatment – even crafts designated as war machines (fighter, interceptor) lack the visual menace usually present in science fiction.

Figure 3. , "Radiant Pillar BC1", a fighter class starship, in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

Space stations in the game are indeed massive objects, yet their representation is simplified to the extreme. They are mostly plain three-dimensional shapes, either orbs or polyhedra. Easy on the eyes, they lack the mind-boggling convolution that can be associated with what is, after all, a sophisticated machine complex.

Figure 4. A representation of a space station used in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

Based on these changes we may assume that the spatial aesthetic of the technological sublime in *NMS* is influenced less by hard science fiction, and more by retrofuturism. Retrofuturistic aesthetic "encompasses multiple strands and meanings in twentieth-century culture, including the identification of 'the future' as a style, as well as content that highlights nostalgia, irony, and time-bending dislocation" (Latham, 2014, p. 434). By itself, retrofuturism can negate the feeling of cosiness – "at its most unsettling, retrofuturism disrupts our understanding of the nature of time, encouraging a kind of hybrid temporality. Retrofuturism reflects a time-bending vertigo, forcing our contemporaries to confront earlier conceptions of the future" (Lathatm, 2014, p. 437). This time-bending vertigo can be interpreted as congruent with the conventional realisation of the sublime aesthetic. However, *NMS* avoids unsettling unsteadiness, since its temporality is already well-established. There is no blurring of past and future, no Gibsonian "architecture of broken dreams" (Gibson, 2016). That is because it is the future, with its dreams fully realised in glorious, vibrant colours and smooth shapes.

Retrofuturism here is presented as the antithesis of the mimetic realism of space travel. Humanity already builds space stations and spaceships, and they look

anything but cosy. *NMS* is avoiding these realistic portrayals and reaches back into the past depictions of space travel, to *Flash Gordon* (Mike Hodges, 1980) and *Lost in Space* (Irwin Allen, 1965–1968): to a time when space adventure was men in tight leotards fighting with swords and blasters, not the gritty hard science, or politicised space race. The game carefully avoids the ironic and time-bending dislocating parts of retrofuturism, focusing more on its nostalgic aesthetic. It is the nostalgia for a never-realised past vision of the future. It feeds on our longing for the good old days when everything was simple, even the dreams of space travel. It does not necessarily matter that they never were simple, because you can play them as such. And as long as we play, dreams are never broken, since here even the machines of war are warm and cosy.

Traversable expanse: Movement and accessibility as elements inducing the feeling of cosiness

In the processes of play, another aspect of taming the infinity is to be found. *NMS* attempts to avoid overloading players with information through its approach to player's movement in the sublime space. Even on its own, movement can be a positive stimulus. As Steve Swink noted,

> [i]t's the kinetic pleasure of moving through space, creating flowing arcs of motion and feeling your body or the thing you're controlling respond instantly to your impulses. Even without a specific goal in mind, there is this intrinsic pleasure to control (Swink, 2017, p. 14).

What seems to matter here most is that it is not just movement but being in control. This is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *NMS* – how the player comprehends and controls the space through movement. The alienation that is brought upon by sublime structures (space stations, alien architecture on planets) is largely negated by the player's ability to move around them in fully realised three-dimensional environments. This turns even the largest and most profound objects into playgrounds, perfectly possible to be grasped in their totality, first by the eye, and second by the mind. While their purpose may remain a mystery, some sense of control is regained.

NMS also introduces a constantly changing spatial scale. The spaceship is dwarfed by the space station, which in turn seems small in comparison with a gas giant, which itself is but a wisp of vapour against the distances of space. However, even these great distances are controlled by the player, who can boost their ship with the Pulse Drive or go even faster with the Hyperdrive. Unrestrained movement establishes a new hierarchy of control with the player firmly at the helm.

Smooth transitions strengthen that feeling. From walking on the planet's surface, we can enter the cockpit of our ship, then fly into space, and boost to the next point of interest. Through all that there is nary a loading screen that could disrupt our control of perceptual spatial relations.

The smooth scale of transition additionally becomes an answer to threats present in the universe. We can escape the planetary predators by jumping into the ship and avoid space pirates by simply boosting away. The feeling of total control over something so awesome, in turn, is congruent with how "cosy games creates [sic] spaces for higher order needs like mastery" (Short et al., 2018). It is a literal interpretation of Lyuba Encheva's reading of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimal experience, which "can be seen to describe the impact of the sublime encounter as a movement from the overpowering experience of something greater than oneself to an empowering sense of being in control" (Encheva, 2018, p. 132). And there is another layer to that process relating to the very matter of the subject. Movement and control tame the sublime of space, while at the same time helping to retain the sense of wonder, which is, after all, inscribed into the exploration of the Final Frontier. Since there is always a space to move, infinity becomes a safe zone, a cosy environment.

Ride eternal, shiny and chrome. Rituals of journey, life and death as cosy aesthetics

While movement may indeed foster feelings of total control, it can, in the long run, lead to boredom. As Swink observed:

> [f]rom the point of view of a game designer, there is a problem even with the best sensations of control. Controlled motion is pleasurable, but that pleasure is fleeting. Even if the game feels great, aimlessly controlling something gets boring quickly (Swink, 2017, p. 16).

In the long run, movement and control seem to require a goal, a quantification of effort. In games, boredom of pure control can be overcome by introducing game logic into the system. In this case, "with a specific goal to pursue, control takes on new meaning. Aimless, pleasurable motion is replaced by focused, purposeful attempts to complete the challenges presented" (Swink, 2017, p. 17). However, such a shift may introduce the element that Short et al. (2018) described as "negating cosiness," or "overlapping but not-cosy," since it usually induces certain responsibilities. *NMS*, however, manages to transform it into something that can still enhance the feeling of being cosy.

While games generally tend to have specific, quantifiable goals (Costikyan, 1994; Juul, 2010; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), how that quantification is achieved is open for interpretation. Games can be played to be won and to be finished, but also to be simply prolonged (Zagal et al., 2019). This last category is what seems to be the design methodology behind *NMS*. First, the game uses a different approach to incentivise the movement itself. Its procedurally generated universe offers almost endless possibilities. Because of that, while we usually do travel to a destination with a specific purpose, travelling becomes a goal in its own right. At each stage, we are rewarded with discoveries of new planets, landscapes, plants and creatures, and there is always a promise of more just beyond the (event) horizon. This is also how another game incentive aspect is realised – the game's narrative. *NMS* uses a type of seasonal content delivery, with each free update adding a specific expedition, with a well-defined goal to be achieved. While these expeditions can be finished in the traditional sense of a narrative end and goal completion, they are usually focused on introducing a specific game mechanic, showcasing a new aspect of the sandbox environment. So instead of providing a sense of closure, they rather open up new possibilities in the grand scheme of the game. This is congruent with the message of abundance characteristic of cosy games – "nothing is lacking, pressing or imminent" (Short et al., 2018). Here, we have a sort of meta-abundance, a promise that we will never run out of the game to play.

Secondly, the game has a very forgiving approach to the expected fare of human existence in outer space – danger and death. The usual run of *NMS* puts us stranded on an alien planet, some distance away from a crashed spaceship. To survive, we need to find resources and fix the ship. This may feel overwhelming, but players may soon realise that the danger is only relative. Death usually does not result in a game over but causes the player character to simply wake up again, stranded on an alien planet not far from a crashed spaceship. Our existence in this universe is an endless loop, where death becomes not an endpoint, but one of the many inevitable passages in the never-ending journey. What is more, the designers of the game decided to turn this medium literacy reading into a narrative of the game. In the Leviathan update the players find themselves:

> inside a time loop, . . . and every death means a reset of the loop (where players restart at the beginning of the expedition with all inventory reset). As players explore the loop, they will recover Memory Fragments: lost remnants of previous loops manifested as procedurally generated technology (Anon, 2023).

Through that, the message of the medium is incorporated into the game world itself, becoming a ritualistic rite of passage towards a deeper understanding of both the narrative and the medium itself. The game allows players to not only journey through

the universe at their own pace, but also reconsider the established tropes of interactive entertainment genera. The rituals of life and death emphasise the subconscious logic of games – winning matters to some, playing matters to more.

Conclusions

The article has explored the concept of cosiness in *NMS*, examining how the game transforms the vast and potentially sublime space into a cosy environment. I have briefly addressed criticisms and analyses from other perspectives, such as the game's early version not conforming to expected action structures and the impact of software updates on player experiences. Ultimately, I have contended that intentional design choices contribute to the establishment of cosy aesthetics in the game, challenging traditional or conventional representations of the material. This is achieved through three techniques, designed to tame the sublime typically represented in space games. First, the article has suggested that the game challenges traditional notions of high technology and conflict in space by focusing on a retrofuturistic portrayal of spacefaring vessels, weapons, and space stations. Secondly, I have explored the idea of a "traversable expanse," emphasising the player's control over movement and spatial relations, turning even the most profound objects into playable environments. Finally, the concept of a "ritualistic rite of passage" has been discussed in connection to the game's processes of restructuring traditional design schemes concerning life and death.

Not every player is going to experience *NMS* as cozy. Some may still find survival elements, combat, and the sheer sublime of cosmos too antithetical to their needs and wants. But the same could be said about any other usual suspect of this aesthetic. *Terraria* has its Wall of Flesh, and *Stardew Valley* has the nightmare/dream of the Protestant work ethic. However, despite the challenges posed by non-conventional spaces and sublime elements, the game manages to evoke feelings of cosiness. The analysis conducted here has aimed to explore how the game subverted the sublime, reconstructing it to create a principal mode of play centred on the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness.

We can state that cosiness should not only be perceived as inherent to the specific choice of the material, but rather as a methodology executable within any medium, genre or environment. This, I believe, is congruent with Short et. al.'s (2018) final message – "there is a deep well of emotionally resonant design patterns you can use to make almost any game cosier." What is, however, worth emphasising is the fact that this injection of cosy is not done to the detriment of the source material. The cosy space in *NMS* remains sublime and awe-inspiring. In the process, the game seems to prove that there is space and time for the cosy, no matter the source material, and all games may indeed benefit from introducing some aspects of it.

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