

Making Sense of Scale in *A Short Hike* and *Assassin's Creed Mirage*

Rory Manning Graham

University of Melbourne
1/19 Park Drive
Parkville, 3052, VIC
roryg1@student.unimelb.edu.au

Keywords

videogames, scale, game production studies, aesthetic theory, textual analysis

INTRODUCTION

In 2020 Twitter user @Jordan_Mallory tweeted “i want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less and i'm not kidding”. This succinct critique of the extensive play lengths and exploitative labour practices common in big budget “Triple-A” single-player videogames (Bulut 2020; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009) offers a useful prompt to consider how the increasingly public conditions of videogame production may relate to cultural notions of size and scale, and inform our understanding of what a commercial videogame looks like, costs, and can fit into the everyday lives of players. This paper examines two such “shorter” videogames—*A Short Hike* (Adamgryu 2019) and *Assassins Creed Mirage* (Ubisoft Bordeaux 2023)—from the conceptual vantage of scale in order to highlight how, as a subject of discourse, scale has played a significant role in mediating our understanding of videogames as both cultural form and commercial product.

Notions of scale structure our conceptions of capitalism, computation, and ecology, and have pervaded videogame discourse throughout the medium's history. The subject of scale and its guiding significance in contemporary culture has received significant recent scholarly attention in media philosophy and science and technology studies (DiCaglio 2021; Bratton 2015; Hondroudakis 2023) but is thus far little explored in videogame research. Alenda Chang's (2019) research into the relationship between videogames and natural ecologies positions games as “tailor-made to develop scalar environmental consciousness” and Geoffrey Hondroudakis' (2024) exploration of zooms and levels in videogames as scalar orders that exemplify an “antinomy of scale” in contemporary technoculture both illustrates the remarkable interdisciplinary breadth of the subject and invaluable connects formal elements of videogames to broader cultural experiences. Yet, as much research in the game studies field considers videogame production and consumption through the saturating lens of global capitalism (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009) and emphasises close analyses of game-related discourses, cultures, and practices (Kline et al. 2003; Murray, 2020; Shaw 2010), the current lack of scholarship on how scale relates to existing critical efforts to study videogames as texts and connected notions of labour, value and temporality represents a significant research gap.

To build a novel methodological bridge between the philosophy of scale, videogame production studies and the textual analysis of videogames, I position my chosen two titles as paradoxically *small* open-world videogames. Though the single-developer, independently produced *A Short Hike* and Triple-A tentpole *Assassins Creed Mirage*

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

are distinct from one another in terms of their production backgrounds, thematic content, and commercial ambitions, I argue that through their relatively tight scope and short expected playtimes they are provocative departures from the “content-centric” (Keogh 2023) approach of other popular open world videogames such as prior *Assassin’s Creed* titles and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD 2017). To analyse these videogames from a broader cultural vantage, I draw from literary theorist Sianne Ngai’s (2012) indexing of banal aesthetic categories such as “zany”, “cute”, and “interesting” to the conditions of late capitalism as I foreground the use of terms such as “big” and “small”, and “long” and “short” in paratextual materials about these games. Building on the existing application of Ngai’s aesthetic category theory to games studies (Kunzelman 2020; Blakey 2024), I use these central case studies and their contrasting positions within a contemporary “field” of videogame production (Keogh 2023) to examine how players, critics and researchers make sense of brevity and narrative finitude in a medium that has long treated expansion as its cultural and commercial signature.

This paper subsequently argues that scale has already mediated many efforts by players, marketplaces and scholars to make sense of videogames. Controversial yet ubiquitous descriptive categories such as “indie” (independent) and “Triple-A” (Keogh 2023; Ruffino 2023) may be understood as essentially scalar terminology, while policy documents that position videogames as a “growth” industry and the adoption by designers and the use of conceptual terms such as “microworld” and “possibility space” among designers and academics affirm scale as a central discursive preoccupation around which cultural narratives about videogames have historically converged (Anthropy & Clark 2014; Keogh 2015; Sudnow 1983). Paying close attention to common-sense notions of scale across discourses of videogame purchasing, selection, play and beyond thus offers a valuable conceptual space for researchers to consider other large and small entanglements of play, media, labour and everyday life.

BIO

Rory Manning Graham (he/him) is an incoming graduate student in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, researching how discourses of size and scale mediate digital media consumption and the ways we make sense of videogames as “big” or “small”. He wrote his honours thesis at the University of Melbourne on the representation of art galleries and contemporary fiction, and the intersection between literature studies and museology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anthropy, Anna, and Naomi Clark. 2014. *A Game Design Vocabulary: Exploring the Foundational Principles behind Good Game Design*. Upper Saddle River, NJ, USA: Addison-Wesley.

Blakey, Heather. 2024. ‘Cute, Interesting, Zany Ghosts: Examining Aesthetic Experiences of Ghosts in Animal Crossing: New Horizons, Genshin Impact and Hades’. *Revenant* (Article in Press).

Bratton, Benjamin H. 2015. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Bulut, E. (2020). *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry*. Ithaca, NY, USA: Cornell University Press.

Chang, Alenda Y. 2019. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*. Minneapolis, MIN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

DiCaglio, Joshua. 2021. *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Dyer-Witthford, Nick and Greig de Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Hondroudakis, Geoffrey. 2023. 'Transsystematic Scale: Media Philosophy Beyond Collapse and Difference'. Melbourne, Victoria, AUS: The University of Melbourne. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/340389>.

———. 2024. 'On Zooms and Levels: The Antinomy of Scale as Technocultural Order'. Presented at the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST) and the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S). <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easst-4s2024/paper/84842>.

Keogh, Brendan. 2015. *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

———. 2023. *The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist: Why We Should Think beyond Commercial Game Production*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.

———. 2023. 'Triple-A Games'. In *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Second edition. New York, NY, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witthford, and Greig De Peuter. 2003. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. Montréal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Mallory, Jordan. "i want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less and i'm not kidding". X/Twitter. June 29, 2020, 4:07pm, https://x.com/Jordan_Mallory/status/1277483756245442566.

Murray, Soraya. 2021. *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. Paperback edition. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Ngai, Sianne. 2012. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press.

Nintendo EPD. 2017. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Japan: Nintendo.

Robinson-Yu, Adam. 2019. *A Short Hike*. 2019. Canada: adamgryu.

Ruffino, Paolo. 2023. 'Indie Games'. In *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Second edition. New York, NY, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2010. 'What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies'. *Games and Culture* 5 (4): 403–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360414>.

Souza e Silva, Adriana de. 2020. *Hybrid Play: Crossing Boundaries in Game Design, Players Identities and Play Spaces*. Routledge Advances in Game Studies. Milton, UK: Routledge.

Sudnow, David. 2019. *Breakout: Pilgrim in the Microworld*. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Boss Fight Books.

Ubisoft Bordeaux. 2023. *Assassin's Creed Mirage*. France: Ubisoft Entertainment SA.

Wolf, Mark J. P., and Bernard Perron, eds. 2023. *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. Second edition. New York, NY, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.