

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

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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; Horton 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* are distinct from one another in terms of their production backgrounds, thematic content, and commercial ambitions, I argue that through their relatively tight scope

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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 intentional brevity 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 a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, researching how discourses of 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.

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