

## Subnautica Review – Deep Sea Terrors

*Subnautica* is one of the scariest games ever made- and it isn't even billed as a horror game. Instead, Steam lists the title as a survival game since that's what it is- but there's plenty lying beneath the surface. Set in the 22nd century, the opening sees your first-person character launched in an escape pod during a spaceship's mayday. After landing, you take the ladder out from your tiny pod to see only two things: the remains of your crashed space shuttle, and an endless ocean.

You'll explore the undersea world of Planet 4546B building bases, crafting tools, and hunting fish in this single-player experience- after all, you're the only crew member who made it out of the wreck. But there's more going on here than just your typical survival game duties. The habitat quickly reveals it's home to more mysterious entities than the flora and fauna found in abundance. Along with the main goal of finding a way to escape the planet, there's an enticing storyline about the ancient alien civilization that inhabited this planet ages ago- and they won't let you leave. It's kind of like *Lost*, surviving nature while slowly realizing this is no ordinary place you've trapped yourself on.

The story invites you to go deeper into the coves and caverns of *Subnautica*, and traversing this rich sea is one of the game's greatest strengths. Your surroundings come to life so beautifully, with lush plants and breathtaking geographic formations covering a detailed ocean floor. Every species of the foreign fauna has its own actions and lifestyles. You'll be swimming by and spot a stalker, a shark-like creature, attacking its prey, a tiny, yellow-eyed fish called a peeper. You can

even read a data entry about each critter after scanning on them- just make sure you're prepared should they attack you.

And that's where *Subnautica* becomes a title like no other. There's no indication anywhere from the marketing that it's a horror game. The main cover art simply contains your character in his scuba gear, with a few small fish and the submarine you unlock sitting in the background. That's how Unknown Worlds is able to subvert your expectations, exactly how your marooned survivor has no idea of the terrors that await him on Planet 4546B.

The progression forces you to enter the realms of hostile nightmare-fuel creatures that want nothing more than to know what you taste like. Swimming around every corner had me feeling like I was in some crossover film of the *Jaws* and *Alien* franchises. After hovering around dangerous areas of the map, you'll learn to recognize each terrifying leviathan's battle cry thanks to the spine-tingling sound design. Thalassophobia fuels *Subnautica*, even when it's not trying to. Simply hovering towards the top of the open ocean is inherently nerve wracking because this game makes you constantly feel vulnerable. It gets so frightening to the point where the sudden smack of my submarine accidentally ramming into a tiny peeper fish was enough to make my heart stop.

But venturing into deeper territory doesn't just raise the stakes. Once I finally mustered up the courage to search farther than 20 meters from the sanctuary of my buoyant escape pod, I was introduced to a series of sleek biomes that each have their own character. The Jellyshroom Fields are a gorgeous realm of giant pink mushrooms, but be careful: the wormlike critters that reside in

them will attack anything that gets too close to their precious eggs. Then there's the Lost River, a hazy sea creature graveyard filled with skeletal remains and a toxic green pool you don't want to dip your foot into. This grim zone wouldn't be complete without the monstrous ghost leviathan that lurks within it, a beast whose name alone gives you an idea of how mortifying it is. The thrill of discovering each colorful biome kept me eager to see what new creatures to research, plants to study and grow, and alien secrets I'd stumble upon. Simon Chylinski's often haunting score truly captures the tone of these settings as well as the vastness and wonder of the ocean.

However, diving into a save file will take a mighty long time: upwards of five minutes, sometimes as long as 10. This is a good move from *Unknown Worlds*, though, because *Subnautica* uses this time to pre-load the entire world. Once you're in-game, there are zero loading screens- entering and exiting bases, vehicles, or biomes is completely fluent for a fully involved experience. However, rendering terrain can be a pain, especially on console. There were countless times on Xbox One where I stood by a mineral I was waiting to render for 10 whole seconds. This was particularly frustrating in the map's deadlier areas where I had to be in and out swiftly so the freakish-looking sea monsters wouldn't bite my head off.

The worst case came when my Cyclops submarine got stuck in debris that didn't render until I was driving *through* it, causing a hideous glitch that froze my game. Thankfully, *Unknown Worlds* was smart enough to include console commands for the player to access, so I inserted a code that respawned my submarine and continued my adventure. Due to its technological format, *Subnautica* is a game best played under PC capabilities.

If PC isn't an option, the title is still a marvelously original experience, which is saying something given the current status of the overmilked survival genre. The underwater landscapes and complex wildlife AI immerse you into Planet 4546B's stunning world. That's not to count out *Subnautica*'s biggest success: baiting you into a horror scenario you don't fully expect going in.