

'Abzu' game creator finds endless inspiration in the sea

August 1 2016, by Derrik J. Lang



This video game image released by 505 Games shows a scene from the undersea odyssey "Abzu." (505 Games via AP)

After designing grassy knolls and desert vistas for the landmark artsy video games "Flower" and "Journey," there was only one place video game designer Matt Nava wanted to go next: underwater.

Following the success of thatgamecompany's 2012 indie hit "Journey," which swept that year's Game Developers Choice Awards and whose score was nominated for a Grammy, Nava formed his own studio to create an ethereal undersea odyssey called "Abzu."

In a sea of role-playing games and first-person shooters, moody experimental games like "Abzu" remain an anomaly and are especially difficult to design.

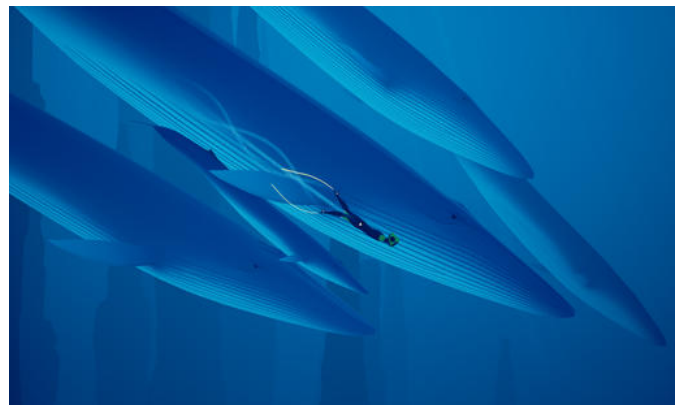
"Abzu," out Tuesday for the PlayStation 4 and PC, casts players as a nameless diver exploring an immense three-dimensional seascape that's teeming with marine life and fantastical topography. There's no dialogue or weapons. As with "Flower" and "Journey," the game's story

unfolds through exploration.

"There's a fine line between telling a story solely through the atmosphere and players just not having any idea where to go," Nava said. "There are hundreds of directions you could travel in the ocean, so figuring out how to direct the player and design the environments so people had the right amount of direction—but not too much—was very important."

The 10-person team at Nava's Giant Squid studio found that one of the biggest challenges in creating a game that's entirely set within the ocean was directing light and forming terrain that undauntedly guides players.

"In our early playtests, people were too scared to explore," said Nava. "They would see an awesome vista but turn around because it was too vast and too open, so we had to balance that."



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"Abzu" is among several games out this summer exploring the depths of the sea, following the

ominous aquatic moments in Playdead's "Inside," the folksy oceanic atmosphere of Insomniac Games' "Song of the Deep" and a diving segment in Naughty Dog's "Uncharted 4: A Thief's End."

"I'm not sure what it is, but it does seem like the ocean is having a moment right now," Nava said. "I think maybe we were all just tired of sand at the same time."

While the game's protagonist and the underwater artifacts she uncovers are purely fiction, the creatures depicted in "Abzu" are recreations of actual fish, whales and other sea life. That's right. There are no "Pokemon" critters to capture here. After a scuba diving field trip with his fellow developers, Nava recognized reality was the best inspiration.

"We realized that real fish are crazier than anything we could've imagined," Nava said. "They're insanely fascinating."

Ultimately, "Abzu" ended up not being the game Nava set out to create three years ago. It wasn't until Jenova Chen, his former colleague and co-founder of thatgamecompany, played through a version of "Abzu" that Nava realized he'd made a wrong turn along the way.

"At that point, the game was not done and was not going in the right direction," said Nava. "We asked him what we could do to fix this thing in time to ship it. He came up with some critical ideas. It was a turning point."

Nava and his team at Giant Squid dropped destructive mine-like drones into the middle of the [game](#). The foreboding triangular concoctions offered a stark contrast to the otherwise lush surroundings of "Abzu."



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"We always wanted to create this serene world, but we realized if you added conflict, it brought the player deeper into the world," said Nava. "If there's something ugly, it makes players more appreciative of beauty."

More information: www.abzugame.com

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