**Transcript - Open Worlds**

*Note: Episodes of Outside/In are made as pieces of audio, and some context/nuance may be lost on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors.*

**Justine Paradis: When you’re just starting to get to know your plants and herbs, it can at first feel pretty bewildering.**

**How are you supposed to get to know all these different species, where they grow, what they’re good for?**

**Personally, I started small, with the flowers that grow in town, maybe in the garden or along the side of the road. You know, garlic, lavender. And sometimes, as I got to know a specific plant, I’d try a little to learn some of its properties.**

**And gradually I started to level up. Learning wilder plants like mountain flowers, which are pretty widespread; giant lichen, often found in marshes; and nirnroot, easiest to harvest at night, since it glows and emits that loud ringing sound.**

**[nirnroot/level up fx]**

Megan Sawyer: We didn't use to be able to make plants glow, but we were very insistent that, you know, for specific plants, they had to glow. That was a thing we needed.

**This is Megan Sawyer. She is an environment artist at Bethesda Game Studios, and the creator of the nirnroot.**

**And in case it’s not yet clear, I’m talking about plants in a video game.**

[level up fx]

**Megan’s particular specialty is “ingredient plants.” She designed the herbs that I spent so many hours learning about and collecting in the world of Skyrim.**

Megan Sawyer: We used to joke that we spend a inordinate amount of time making the most perfect tree, so that you will run by it in five seconds and not notice it. And if you don't notice it, then our job is done.

**I don’t currently own a video game console, but I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wished that I could escape in Skyrim right now.**

**I really wouldn’t call myself a gamer, although I think these days that’s kind of an arbitrary definition. Like, I think of myself as spending most of my childhood outside, but when I list the number of games I’ve played, I realize it is not short.**

***Bugdom, the Sims, American Girl Doll Theatre, French for the Real World, Crash Bandicoot Warped, Metal Gear Solid…***

**But for me, all of those games are nothing to Skyrim.**

*[Skyrim theme]*

Megan Sawyer: Uh, Skyrim is an open world video game which means you can explore anywhere.

**I have never spent so many hours in a virtual world.**

Megan Sawyer: And it is a fantasy themed game…

**The main premise: dragons have returned to the world,**

Megan Sawyer: …where you are the hero of  the world…

**and so you are the one who can defeat the dragons, and thus obtain the words of power, essentially, and fulfill the legends of yore.**

Megan Sawyer: …and you gotta save it!

*[Skyrim theme]*

**But honestly I was not interested in the battles and the dragon fights. I actually never even did some of the main quests.**

**I was mostly interested in just being in the world itself.**

Megan Sawyer: Whenever I’m creating an ingredient plant or really anything to go in a space, I think about, like, what story is that space telling? What’s the player going to be doing when they’re in that space? How do I want them to feel?

**[mux rise]**

**Skyrim is vast. There are cities, villages, remote farmhouses, abandoned ships, islands. And wilderness: high waterfalls cascading into deep pools.  Packs of wolves roaming the edges of misty alpine forests. Echoes in the canyons. Mountain lakes. In a valley, a mossy stream glittering, birches with white trunks and golden leaves.**

**But spend enough time in a fantasy, and it might change how you relate to the real world.**

**Ten years ago, before I’d ever played Skyrim, I went on a hike at sunrise in the Hudson Valley. I remember standing on a ridge as the sky brightened, watching the fog rise off the river in thick, curling ribbons - and I thought, wow. That looks like a dragon.**

**And now, there are times when I go on a hike, and maybe I'm on a trail I’ve never been down before, and I notice how the light’s playing on the moss...  when I think, wow. This looks exactly like Skyrim.**

[mux fade]

**But of course, Skyrim is not a landscape shaped by geologic forces and wind and rain.**

**It’s  a landscape and a world invented by people - people with their own relationships and lives and memories. And the act of creating a virtual world can be transformative too.**

Noah Berry: At peak moments, I would go and take a walk, and I’d be like looking at light… sunlight… on pavement. And I would find myself trying to figure out what RGB color value it would be, and I would catch myself, and I would feel my heartrate increase stressfully. And it wasn’t quite an epiphany but it was this realization of, like, oh my gosh. This is crazy… for lack of a better word. It’s flippin’ crazy!

[theme]

Ana Diaz: It is not a stretch in any way to say that Skyrim is one of the most important video games of all time, in my opinion, and I think in very many people's opinion.

**This is Ana Diaz. She’s a video games journalist. Just to get some perspective here on why I’m talking about Skyrim now nine years after its release in 2011 -**

Ana Diaz: It's part of the video games canon, essentially.

**Within its first week, Skyrim was** [**reported to gross $450 million**](https://www.wired.com/2011/11/skyrim-sales/)**. And while I’m told game sales numbers are notoriously difficult to determine, I’ve seen Skyrim sales placed at 20 and** [**30 million copies - it’s one of the top selling video games in history.**](https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/skyrim-creator-on-why-well-have-to-wait-for-another-elder-scrolls-128377/)

Ana Diaz: The game was quite literally large for its time, like the actual digital space you occupied in it was big.

**Again, Skyrim is vast. Exploring every forest and cave and town and lake would take days, weeks, even months. Just completing the main storyline takes on** [**average 30 hours**](https://howlongtobeat.com/game.php?id=9859)**, though of course you can do it a lot faster.**

Ana Diaz:  In addition to its size, the game brims with beautiful flora and fauna and there was a lot to look at within that large world.

Noah Berry: So Skyrim had this Scandinavian, Nordic, northern European setting, so it lent itself well to tall towering pine trees and that kind of rugged jagged rock and snow-capped peaks.

**This is Noah Berry. He was the lead environment artist for Skyrim.**

Noah Berry: And just personally speaking from an aesthetic sense, that’s just something I've always loved… just, I’ve...  I’m a fan of forests.

**Within the world of video games, Skyrim is in a category called an open world.**

Noah Berry: That more kind of relaxed gameplay. Explorative, contemplative, almost meditative. I think in the best moments,  personally speaking, you could go into it and not have any conscious gameplay notion in mind. And you could just sit and be in the world, and experience it aesthetically, through your screen and through your speakers.

**Compare that to a game like Mario, basically a linear track with obstacles and levels that are essentially pass/fail. In a linear game, the environment is a back-drop. Maybe you see mountains off in the distance, but you can’t go there.**

**In Skyrim, you can go to the mountain.**

Justine Paradis: Yeah, I'm thinking about um specifically um the monastery

Noah Berry: Uh huh

Justine Paradis: It’s like, at the very very top of a mountain peak, somehow the game prevents you from stumbling across -

Noah Berry: The Throat of the World.

Justine Paradis: Yeah. Throat of the World.

*Parthaanax: this is the most sacred mountain in Skyrim*

Justine Paradis: And it takes forever to get there. And it’s kind of this really steep slope, it’s really, really snowy, and it kind of points to, you know, these are people who are sort of cloistered, they’re deeply academic. In the story, they have their problems. So, that seems to me to be a place where landscape and story really overlap.

Noah Berry: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Honestly, I don't think there's any location in the game we didn't try to do that with.

The world itself was almost the main character of the game, in a way. To say that it's just the background I think is not quite enough. All the memories that you take away from playing a game, I think the world is sort of the larger encompassing vehicle that helps usher all that into you. We hope.

**I think a lot of really successful stories do this. The imagined landscape and the world that contains these stories is organized intelligently. It provides a place for all that magic and emotion and story to root.**

**I think about Ursula K. LeGuin and her speculative fiction and sci fi. Her imagined planets and people are shaped by forces both geologic and social. Like in her novel *The Dispossessed*, she imagined an anarchist society on a barren moon. Every part of the world is influenced by the harshness of the environment, from concepts around privacy, to property, language.** [**As one reviewer**](http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/08/09/specials/disch-sun.html) **put it, LeGuin’s societies are like natural outgrowths of their physical surroundings.**

[music swell]

**A video game like Skyrim takes many minds and people to put together.  It’s more on the scale of a movie than a book. And creating a huge virtual world that feels at once real, transporting, and at least at first, limitless, is not a simple thing to pull off.**

**From the layout of the map -**

*[mux]*

Noah Berry: Where in the world is this town gonna go? And then how do we shape the world around this town...

**To the terrain -**

...to reinforce the town’s purpose? Ecology, what kind of climate is this area, relative to town, and the folks and the culture of the people who are here?

**To the emotional vibes.**

Noah Berry: Like how can we use the natural environments to give the players different senses of space?

**And for that, they used trees.**

Noah Berry: and we would use foliage for those purposes as often as we could.

**On his website, Noah writes: “Something seemingly simple as the silhouette for frequently occurring tree types can have a significant effect on the player's perception of the world.”**

Noah Berry: When I think of leafy, sun dappled environments like that, that evokes pastoral and safer, homelike, summerlike, kind of calmer, warmer, bountiful feel

**In the same essay, Noah continues: “What if these same broad-leafed trees were instead tall evergreens, having a more open, jagged, vertical profile? This same location might instead lead the player's eye upward, towards distant landmarks visible towards the horizon, subconsciously ushering them forward....”**

Noah Berry: So it was interesting to play with contrasts to give the player an increasing sense of distance and scale.

**But the thing about creating a world is that a real world is infinitely detailed. I think of those videos that start on a picnic blanket, zoom out by 10 feet, then 100 feet, then 1000… until before long, you’re looking down from the edge of the atmosphere, then the edge of the solar system, the galaxy, and on, and on, and on…. And the scale of the universe unfolds for you.**

**And then, in the reverse direction, from the palm of a hand into a cell, an atom, an electron… the more you look, the more you see.**

**But for the artists of Skyrim -**

Noah Berry: I used to jokingly say, lovingly so, to fellow landscape artists, that we’re trying to trick the player to look at the art for just enough time to get a sense that it's real, and  then distract them from something else so they don't look too closely and see the verts, and the triangles, and the texture seams… you know, the nuts and bolts of the constraints of game development.

**And Skyrim is detailed. Just consider the fact that Skyrim has weather, and time passes - you see the same landscapes in fog, rain, sun, sunset, dawn, midnight, noon.**

**There are ants on logs.**

**But it doesn’t get everything right. For instance, the horses - horses are prey animals. They have eyes on the side of their head, so a real horse looks at you from the side. But** [**in Skyrim, they look at you dead-on**](https://i.redd.it/ut1rngytm7r41.png)**, like a person or a wolf. There are places where shadows don’t feel quite right, like in a room with firelight.**

Noah Berry: The game, being a game, it’s still… not to make an excuse, but it’s still truncated from what we would ideally do in reality, which we would still be working on right now if that were the case.

**And then there’s High Hrothgar, the Throat of the World, the monastery we talked about earlier, and one of the most critical locations in the whole game. It’s part of a legendary pilgrimage…**

*Skyrim NPC: They call it, the path to the monastery, the 7000 steps*

**… and in the lore, it takes 7000 steps to get to the summit.**

*Skyrim NPC: Those stairs can be treacherous*

Noah Berry: I remember having a meeting about this, of like, how many steps are we able to include to support the written lore that has it as these numbers, specific number of steps? We felt like that was something that they would notice and would give this tactile sense to your journey.

**And… the player did notice it. The journey to the Throat of the World takes not 7000 steps, but 700 some odd - and yes, people have clocked it.**

Noah Berry: I remember we were both disappointed, I’m picturing the other artist involved in that case, and we were both disappointed that we couldn’t do it.

**Because the thing is if you’re trying to create a whole world, whatever you do...**

Noah Berry: You can never have enough detail. I think it’s fair to say it’s always possible to add more detail, so.

**...it’ll never be enough.**

Noah Berry: The moment you begin an undertaking, the moment a project starts, the clock is ticking. And your energy and time and patience on large scales, you know, life, uh… life chapter scales, multiyear undertakings.

**For Noah, the imagined worlds he created were becoming something different, and they became less and less of an escape.**

Noah Berry: It's um... It takes all the time you could ever throw at it, and it’s still starving for more.

**That’s coming up after the break.**

*Break*

**Sam Evans-Brown: This is Outside/In. I’m Sam Evans-Brown. Today, Justine Paradis on the landscape of Skyrim. Here she is speaking with lead environment artist for the game, Noah Berry.**

Justine Paradis: So you left the industry a few years ago...

Noah Berry: mmhm.

Justine Paradis: Um. Why?

Noah Berry: Oh man. Um. I’m struggling for any way to encapsulate it simply, at the outset. I was really burnt out.

[mux beat]

I dove into gaming, and specifically my job and my career, as an escape in and of itself. Like, I certianly enjoy games and wonderfully engrossing environment as well, as an escape. I always have.

And I personally think that that’s what helps make any art that's well-received or liked, or generally thought of as good, however collectively, I think that's how it is good, is when the person doing it loves it too.

Justine Paradis: I think I get the sense... I've also experienced burn out.

Noah Berry: Yeah, sure.

Justine Paradis: And it's hard to, you know, find yourself in a place when you don't feel love for something that you once felt love for.

Noah Berry: Yeah. And to feel that love kind of wither over time. Like, being aware enough of the danger of that happening, and then also witnessing it slowly happening. It becomes this feedback loop… It's like seeing this large wave, this tsunami in the distance that you think like, okay. When you first notice it, maybe I can avoid it. And then it gets closer and closer every time, and you realize, oh, U'm going to get wet. I’m going to get really wet. Oh man, my raft is going to get disintegrated

**There are a few reasons Noah felt this way, and I’ll get to them. But I want to return to something Noah said about the possibilities of open world gameplay:**

Noah Berry: That more kind of relaxed gameplay. Explorative, contemplative, almost meditative.

**I’ve said already that this is the main reason I liked Skyrim. I liked to explore, to linger in the valley of golden birches.**

Ana Diaz: I mean, Skyrim is a beautiful game and it’s pretty astounding to me that it’s still pretty to this day.

**And in fact, video games journalist Ana Diaz did the same thing. She called this basically using the game as “a walking simulator.”**

Ana Diaz: Oftentimes I use game as sort of a form of therapy, I guess, and so that way of playing just made more sense to me. Or it just felt better.

Justine Paradis: What do you mean by you use games as a form of therapy?

Ana Diaz: S,o this goes back to another game that has a lot of overlap with Skyrim called *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

*[Zelda trailer mux]*

It is also very focused on building out a beautiful natural world,

And my senior year of college I got very sick and couldn't leave my bedroom for days on end, and I was very lucky that I had a switch and that game.

There's this study that even looking at a picture of a tree can make you feel better... I think that exploring these very thoughtfully crafted natural environments sort of… it's just very relaxing to splash in the water, and hear the sounds of birds or crickets, or the leaves rustling, and.... it doesn't replace being outside, but like I said, it's still very therapeutic.

Justine Paradis: Yeah. It’s interesting cuz I had the same sort of experience of gameplay with Skyrim where I was like, yeah, I don't want actually really want to kill these dragons, nor do I want to battle, I just want to sort of walk around and be in the place. But one thing I wonder: did the game kind of allow you to sort of peacefully walk around?

Ana Diaz: No, I mean, it doesn't. Even, I hopped in again last night and I started freaking out because…

[wildlife sounds]

… these wolves started attacking me. So then, I tried to run past them but they kind of design the game so that even if you get past one enemy without  what we call “aggroing them” or being aggressive towards them, there will be another, and  another, and so that felt inescapable to me. And I actually ended up dying. I was like, okay great, I need to practice this.

**The longer you play, the more the game’s basic patterns become clear -- including some pretty familiar ones.**

Justine Paradis: I mean, I guess, even in Skyrim, there’s like… you think about wildlife, and the main way you interact with the wildlife is killing it.

Noah Berry: Yeah! You’re pillaging the landscape, you know, the countryside, I should say. And I do it too. You go into a game, everything not nailed down, oh, it goes into inventory. I mean, it’s fun. Not to condemn it.

**Again, I liked playing Skyrim. I would play Skyrim now if I had a video game console. And there are certainly parts of the game that are not focused on violence.**

**Like, you can become an alchemist and get to know the herbs and ingredient plants in the game - but that still means harvesting, and buying and selling.**

**So even when the skill is relatively benign, the relationship between the virtual natural world and the player is one of extraction.**

Noah Berry: Competitiveness against the world for resources, and certainly competitiveness against another player or person.

**And then, there's the main storyline itself: saving the world from the dragons. Often, when you defeat a dragon, you get to learn a “word of power” - a shout.**

**Some shouts confer new abilities, like Whirlwind - it lets run really fast. Others are weapons, like Fire Breath - which is what it sounds like. And then there are shouts that change the environment around you - Clear Skies, which dispels clouds and storms.**

**And there are shouts that you use against the dragons themselves, including ones that force dragons to land in the middle of an encounter, so you can more easily shoot them - there are shouts that let you ride them, and that even deploy dragons to fight on your side, even against another dragon.**

*[Skyrim fx]*

**So in one interpretation, you could break this down to say: the main storyline involves killing the dragons, adopting their language and learning it, in some cases, to use it against them, to control them and at a certain point, to compel them to destroy each other.**

Ana Diaz: I mean, like...  it doesn't take much to look at a lot of the major open world games and to see that they can still can embody this very masculine charge of manifest destiny, right? But then we're not even thinking about video games, like we're thinking about the history and culture embedded in the United States, right? I mean, just to give you a little perspective, like, I’m a woman of color and I don't always feel comfortable being violent and aggressive in games.

Noah Berry: And I, you know, I was just tired of blood and gore and people laughing at it. And in the back of my mind, I’m thinking, this is kind of f-ed up. Like, why are we enjoying this stuff?

**When I think about what Ana said about the charge of manifest destiny, this idea about how the white settlement of the West was framed as both righteous and inevitable, and how it became a big shaper of how white society treats the landscape, and how that shows up and gets repeated in the stories we tell ourselves, in the United States at least. I start to wonder: what are other types of relationship to landscape could we depict in our stories?**

**Like, I think it’s a fun thought experiment to imagine what Skyrim could look like. What if there was a choice in the game to have a relationship with landscape besides fighting or harvesting?**

Ana Diaz: I’m not necessarily a game designer, but I can point to other games that I feel like have led me to cultivate more mutual relationships with nature, and one is a game called Mutazione.

It’s an [indie game,](https://youtu.be/fFfEO0fq2Lk?t=832) It was published last year, yup, 2019, fall.

What you do is you compose music by planting gardens. So, each plant is its own instrument, and you sort of arrange them, and can kind of compose these soundscapes by tending these gardens.

And then what you see as you play the game is that by taking care of the gardens and thus the island, we also heal the relationships, not only between inhabitants and the island, but the relationships between inhabitants themselves.

And so there is no way to level up the player and so we’re not encouraged to take those resources, we're not selling anything,, we're not using it to improve. We're just using it to heal.

**Mutazione subverts a couple different norms in the gaming industry. For one, Ana says it’s closer to a “walking simulator” in its gameplay.**

Ana Diaz: Even within critical circles, a lot of people [would sort of look down on the walking simulator genre](https://www.salon.com/2017/11/11/a-brief-history-of-the-walking-simulator-gamings-most-detested-genre/)… I mean, that’s a much larger conversation and =can run really deep into the culture of a vocal minority in gaming. Walking simulators are not seen as, as good as [insert big budget blockbuster first  person shooter here].

**Ana says, there’s a real culture of gate-keeping in the gaming industry… one that labels games that are packed with violence and action and agency as “real games” and anything else as “fake” or not legitimate. Plus -**

Ana Diaz:  Games media tends to be very commercially focused, and sometimes relatively narrow with its concerns, and can sometimes embrace this idea that better graphics, or more realistic graphics, are better. And I think this was especially the case at the time that Skyrim came out.

**And since Skyrim, the industry has continued to evolve. Graphics can come closer and closer to crossing the threshold of the uncanny valley, the gap between life and its simulation. Even just a couple months ago, a new game engine was announced for next year, which is a software that game designers use to build games. It’s called Unreal 5.**

*[Unreal 5 promo: there are over a billion triangles of source geometry in each frame]*

**And it is unreal in how real it looks.**

*[Unreal 5 promo: what does that many triangles look like? This isn’t noise. These are the triangles, each a different color, most are so small that they look like noise. Nanite achieves detail down to the pixel.]*

Justine Paradis: I’m just kind of trying to get a sense of what the industry is like... is there kind of a pressure to sort of outdo each other on different games -

Noah Berry: Oh yeah.

Justine Paradis: Like to make games more photorealistic, like a sort of arms race to become more and more detailed, or some kind of other quality, of an arms race?

Noah Berry: Absolutely and you’ve nailed it, just right off the bat. There's pressure omnidirectionally: studio to studio, title to title, possibly division of a company to another division of a company… it absolutely wore me down every time and I was absolutely not aware of that reality going into it. And I was naive to a lot of it too. But yeah, it’s constant. And you'd get quite literally years into it, what is happening?

[mux]

Yeah… I can remember at peak moments of stress or frustration or something like that, I'd go and take a walk. And I'd be looking at light, sunlight on pavement, or something like that, and I'd find myself, like trying to figure out the specular level of how that information would be stored in a texture and what RGB color value it would be, and I would catch myself… and I would in a lagged, delayed fashion, I would feel my heart rate increase stressfully, because I’m thinking about this work problem stuff specifically at a time when I’m trying physically not to, so I can heal and decompress and have some homeostasis. And it wasn't quite an epiphany but it was this realization of: oh my gosh, things have to change. I have to change my life somehow. I can't do this anymore. This is crazy, for lack of a better word. Flippin' crazy!

**Noah readily admits his participation in his own burn-out. Significantly, he didn’t take a real vacation in 14 years. He’d take time off, but he didn’t really get away to really unplug and break out of his routine.**

**But in 2014, a few years after releasing Skyrim, he finally did take a little time. He went to the American Southwest.**

Justine Paradis: What was it about the desert?

Noah Berry: Oh, it’s so open and so quiet. Space and peace. It's so quiet that you can hear yourself think. You know, you can hear your own thought process, like your thoughts are able to be consistent and steady, and they’re not reacting to something in the environment like another person, or another email, or your phone ringing or a text popping up, or a meeting that you have going on, or a meeting about the meeting you just had, or like the team meeting that's 15 days away. So it’s just natural bodily rhythms, getting back in touch with that and realizing, oh, this is how I’m supposed to be all the time. Not this once a year, two week break window… I’m supposed to be this way all the time. It's the other stuff that's off track and imbalanced.

And I remember once this beautiful trip was all over, and I was on the plane flying back to DC, I remember getting back to my apartment and I just broke down in tears, cuz I just did not want to go back. I couldn't compress myself down into that headspace anymore.

[music beat]

**I remember this point I got to towards the end of my playing of Skyrim. There’s no real way to *beat* the game, but I’d completed most of the major quests, I’d obtained beautiful, super magical armor and weapons of legend; I was a master archer, a thief, an assassin.**

**I’d fulfilled the legend, and my character was godlike.**

Ana Diaz: You know, people will market video games as a place where you can do anything or you can do things that you can't do in real life. But then you lose something, when you get all the power in the world.

**The game is supposed to be fun, an escape. But if nothing in that world can touch you - not a dragon, not a wolf, not a mountain -  you do lose something. Personally, just straight up, I got bored.**

**There is a community of players that create modifications, or mods, that you can add to Skyrim, and some specifically introduce limitations like cold, hunger, the need to sleep.**

**With these, if you set your sights on the summit, and see a storm - it’s not just atmospheric anymore. It changes the idea: “if you can see the mountain, you can go to it.” Yeah, you can go to the mountain, but not everything is in your control.**

**So yeah. After all that glory, I wanted to return to more earthly constraints. As a matter of fact, Noah did too.**

Justine Paradis: What did it feel like to say, I’m done?

Noah Berry: Oh, it was huge relief. A huge huge relief. And a lot of fear as well.

Justine Paradis: If you don’t mind me asking though, just practically, are you working? What are you doing to make a living right now?

Noah Berry: I’m relying on savings, to be honest. I’ve done small odds and ends. I’ve done some dog walking. I’m helping out a friend with babysitting, things of that nature. You know, kind of low key stuff.

Noah Berry: I get outside as much as possible. I take long walks, I try to walk several miles a day. Trying to suss out some way to move forward, and flourish. You know, don't want to say just survive, because it’s about moving past primal survival. Flourishing. Because I don’t think life is supposed to be that way. I personally believe it’s our own kind of frame of mind and what we experience…. we interact with that at the very least. I personally feel like we're more responsible for it than we realize. And I’m trying to, for lack of a less cliche way to say it,  I’m trying to wake up to that.

**I notice how hard it is for me to think… to just conceive... of ways in which you could relate to a landscape in a game so that you’re neither a mere observer, nor trying to become a god - imagining a game that finds a way to let you become part of the world again. What a fantasy, right?**