

Washed Ashore VR — Design Brief

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Single-user interactive VR for Oculus Quest, a 4 × 4 m walk-in space. My MA graduation project in Digital Narratives at ifs Internationale Filmschule Köln, built in Unity in a team of four; I wrote the brief and the story, directed it and designed the mechanic. This excerpt keeps the world, the historical background, the core feature, the core idea and the sample walkthrough. The personas, target groups and purposes are left out.

VISION STATEMENT

A single-user interactive VR experience which presents the metaphorical world of the lost stories of a sunken city.

GAME WORLD

The user is placed in a fictional, metaphorical world, in a kind of limbo of lost memory.

A lonesome shore of the sea of forgotten memories, in a world which has no top or bottom. Whales of memory inhabit the sea and feast on bits of stories, as whales feed on plankton. When they die, their skeletons hang in the sky, because top and bottom are looped in this world. Standing on the shore, one can see their dark backs rising above the water and, from time to time, the jets of water they blow. The shore itself is part of an island which sits on the back of another huge whale. There are artifacts in the sea, and nets and old boats on the shore.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The whole city is gone. Sixty years ago it was flooded, along with 200 villages, when the Soviet regime tried to build the biggest cascade of artificial lakes in Europe. People were forced to leave. Nothing was left, even under water: gardens were cut down, and houses were burned or dismantled.

Now we can only walk along the shore and look at what is washed ashore. This is the way the flooded city talks to us.

CORE FEATURE

The user can walk along the shore and see artifacts in the water.

To learn the story, the user pulls the net out of the water. As the net comes in, the user sees an artifact stuck in it. As the artifact gets closer, it turns into a cloud of particles and flies around the virtual environment, triggering the appearance of models and the playback of sound and video, through which the story is told. As the story progresses, ghostly silhouettes appear and the weather changes.

Optional second feature. The user says a short phrase, and the phrase is recorded. Looped several times and passed through resonators, it turns into a kind of song. With each wave of the hand the “song” becomes more abstract and closer to a whale song; the more abstract it is, the closer the whales come and the more pixel-like particles fall from the sky as rain. As the whales approach and the rain falls, the water rises and the user is forced to leave the shore. In a boat nearby the user can sail a short distance away, and finds out that the shore they stood on is part of an island on the back of a giant whale.

CORE IDEA

The main idea is finding something which seemed long lost, non-existent and therefore inaccessible. The stories of the flooded city cannot be restored to their original form, but they can be brought back to life

through artistic interpretation: a destroyed Memory Palace rebuilt in a new form.

MOOD AND REFERENCES

Nostalgia: a calm, slow rhythm, no sharp turns of plot, and a minimal kind of interaction that does not demand acute concentration — the light sadness of a traveller who comes home and finds the house empty and abandoned.

Dear Esther (mood, the sea coast) · *The Monk by the Sea* VR, a revived painting by Caspar David Friedrich (loneliness, minimal interaction) · *Notes on Blindness* VR (3D sound, how human figures look) · *EL BEAT* VR (Tilt Brush models and volumetric video to build the story world).

SAMPLE WALKTHROUGH

1. After the opening credits, the user can walk along the shore and see artifacts in the water. The user cannot step into the water, but can teleport along the shore and onto a small sandspit.
2. Noticing a skull lying in the water, the user takes hold of the hanging net in which the skull is stuck and pulls it out of the water, grabbing the floats with the Grab button on the side of the controller.
3. As the skull gets closer, it turns into a cloud of particles which flies in the direction where the user's attention needs to go. As it flies, trees and houses begin to appear.
4. At one point it stops and turns into a bigger cloud of moving particles. As the user approaches, the cloud gradually takes the shape of a person, who tells a part of the story.
5. When that part is finished, the flying particles guide the user to the next part of the story, presented the same way.
6. When the last part has played, all the models disappear. The skull appears in the air in front of the user and falls to the ground. The user can pick it up and throw it, but nothing is triggered.