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**ASSESSMENT 3: GAMES DESIGN
DOCUMENT**

FM3608: EXPERIMENTAL GAMES

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Game Title: Ebb of Ego

The Ego recedes from one reality to another in an attempt to protect itself.

Document Ambience

Please open the Document Ambience.mp4 file attached in the submission before continuing.



Document_Ambienc
e.mp4

Executive Summary

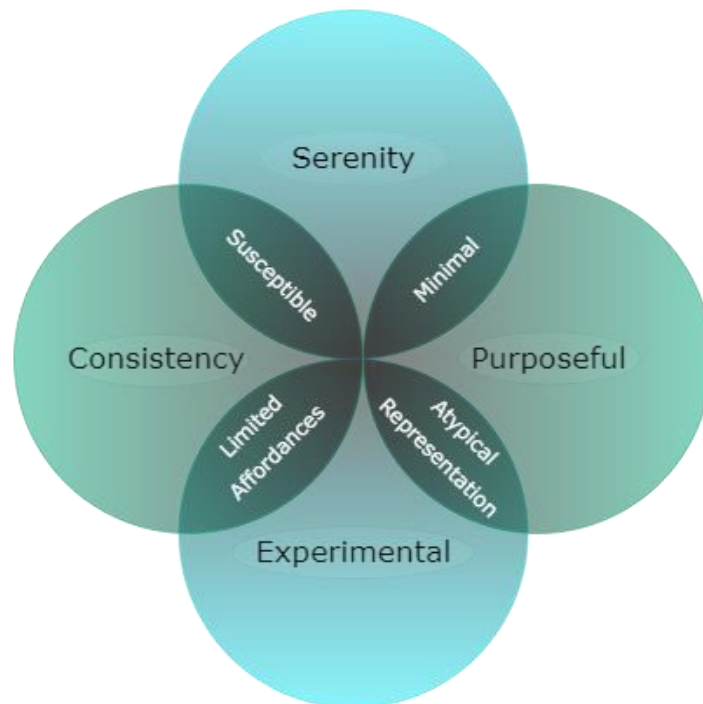
Ebb of Ego is an experimental VR game that immerses the player in an underwater environment, where they find themselves continuously sinking down a trench. As the player sinks, they will be able to interact with the surrounding environment and its wildlife. While a path has already been set for the player, it is down to them if they want to continue sinking or help themselves back to the surface.

Before the game starts, the player is asked to lie flat on their back with their arms at their sides. This does not only tie in with the perspective of the game but also creates a sense of surrender in the player where there is little to no call for action from them.

Ebb of Ego is centred on the theme of addiction, with each game component and mechanic being metaphorical for the potential experiences one may face when battling with varying forms of addiction.

i.e., sinking further into addiction, making use of others, and accepting help

Design Pillars



Serenity

The constant, slow descent, ambience, and *minimal* call to action will aim to create a game world and experience that lulls the player into the abyss. Much in the same way that the pleasures and comforts of addiction lull the addict into their grave. The game world will be a primarily peaceful environment but will include elements that convey sinister undertones. These will be realised through the forced actions taken by the player, such as drowning fish, or weighing themselves down (drowning themselves).

Purposeful

Each game component, their associated action, and the actions of the player will all relate directly to the overarching theme of addiction. Specifically, these would all be either mimetic or representational of the experiences an addict may face and not detract from the game's meaning. The number of actions the player can perform will be limited to only those that drive the game's meaning while also tying into the previous pillar of Serenity.

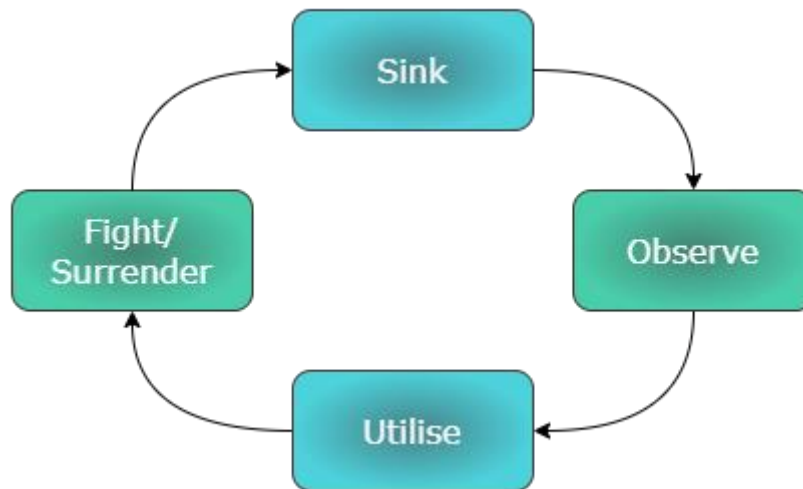
Experimental

The game will include mechanics that actively go against normative game design and aim to challenge the player's perceptions through an *atypical representation* of addiction. This includes a non-typical interface where the player lies down, unclear objectives and outcomes, and limited tutorialisation.

Consistency

It is only through the repetition of actions that someone creates habits and find themselves in the cycle of addiction. It is only through consistent attempts to end this cycle that they are able to escape the grasp of addiction. *Limiting player affordances* aims to support this concept while also resonating with the serenity of the environment and making the player more *susceptible* to the allure of the descent.

Core Loop



Sink

The player character is continuously sinking further and further down an underwater trench with walls on either side of them, towards the ocean floor. The speed at which the player sinks can be slowed down by holding their arms in the air, though this is not explained to the player. This introduces a physical challenge that the some may find deceptively difficult.

Observe

The player must pay attention to their surrounding environment in order to identify objects and items that they may utilise, as well as piece together the game's narrative by reading the messages carved in the trench walls. This also ties into the physicality of the VR system as the player will need to look in the direction of points of interest.

Utilise

Lights

The player is able to collect glowing fish as they sink. These can be used to help light up the area surrounding the player character. Holding the fish for too long will kill the fish. Not collecting the fish, especially later on in the game when it becomes darker, will leave the player unable to see what is around them. This aims to create a feeling of isolation and fear in the player.

Black Pearls

The player is able to collect large black pearls during their descent. These may provide an aesthetic reward to the player but have no functionality other than weighing them down and causing them to sink faster. The player will need to grab these and bring them towards their chest in order to 'collect' them.

Fight/Surrender

As the player sinks, a set of tendrils periodically descends from the surface of the water and attempts to partially drag the player upwards each time. This triggers a sort of quick-time event where the player will either have to fight these tendrils off by shaking their controllers or give in to them. The longer the player keeps their arms suspended in the air, the more often these tendrils appear.

Feedback Loops

Positive Feedback Loop

- ❖ Higher light levels towards the water's surface allows the player to observe their surroundings more easily while also not having to rely on the light from glowing fish.
- ❖ Frequency and vibrancy of flora and fauna are greater towards the water's surface enticing the player to remain there.
- ❖ The messages carved into the walls of the trench allude to an overarching narrative that the player may uncover by reading them. These aim to maintain the player's engagement with their surroundings while also enticing them to continue their descent in order to uncover more of them.

Negative Feedback Loop

- ❖ Lower light levels towards the ocean floor means the player becomes more dependent on the light of the glowing fish, meaning they are used more often and for a greater duration.
- ❖ Dependency on glowing fish means they are more likely to be held until they die.
- ❖ The tendrils appear threatening and invite the player to fight them off instead of giving into them. The more the player fights them off, the less likely they are to give into them later on.

Compulsion Loop

In addition to the core mechanics mentioned previously, the game will include game-defined goals as well as allowing for a number of potential player-defined goals to be created as well. The object of this compulsion design is not to tell the player what to do, but rather what they can do and from this, they may decide what it is they want to do.

Game-defined Goals

- ❖ **Short-Term Goal:** Reflect on presence within the environment.
- ❖ **Mid-Term Goal:** Exploring the environment by sinking further and maintaining visible light levels.
- ❖ **Long-Term Goal:** Overcoming preconceptions and either continue sinking towards the ocean floor or attempt to reach the water's surface.

Player-Defined Goals

- ❖ Collecting all the black pearls
- ❖ Keeping their arms raised for as long as possible.
- ❖ Killing all glowing fish that they encounter or not killing any glowing fish they encounter.
- ❖ Reading all the messages carved into the walls of the trench.

Goal Regulation

While no explicit goals are given to the player, the game will implicitly drive player actions through affective design. This includes:

- ❖ Creating a world tone early on that invites the player to explore further and further into the game without any context as to where they will end up.
- ❖ Driving player actions through limited affordances with the desired outcome of the player either reaching the surface or the ocean floor.
- ❖ Keeping the player engaged with their surroundings through actions such as collecting pearls, glowing fish, and fighting off the tendrils to the point where the focus is shifted away from the potential outcomes of their actions, thereby keeping them very much in the pleasures of the present.

Variables Design Considerations

Player

- **Descent_Speed:** The rate at which the player moves towards the ocean floor.
 - o Variable value.
 - o Value is decreased when the player's arms are raised. This is an incremental change based on the distances of the controllers from the player's physical sides.
 - o Value is decreased during Tendril interaction sequences.
 - o Value remains the same when the player's arms are at their physical sides.
 - o Value is increased based on the number of black pearls the player has collected.

Tendril Variables

- **Spawn_Total:** The number of times the tendrils will appear in the game.
 - o Variable value with an initial value of 10.
 - o Total value is decreased by one when the player successfully fights off the tendrils.
 - o Total value is increased by one when the player does not fight off the tendrils.
- **Spawn_Rate:** The time in between the tendrils appearing in the game.
 - o Variable value which is tied into an in-game timer.
 - o Value is increased when the player successfully fights off the tendrils. Increased time between tendril appearances.
 - o Value is decreased when the player does not fight off the tendrils. Decreased time between tendril appearances.
- **Drag_Distance:** The distance in which the tendrils will pull the player.
 - o Variable value with arbitrary initial value.
 - o Value is decreased when the player successful fights off the tendrils.
 - o Value is increased when the player does not fight off the tendrils.

Glowing Fish

- **Spawn_Rate:** The time in between the glowing fish appearing around the player.
 - o Variable value
 - o Value is increased based on the number of fish that have died already.
- **Life_Span:** The amount of time a glowing fish can be held before it will be killed.
 - o Fixed value.
- **Area_Effect:** The amount of light generated by the glowing fish.
 - o Variable value.
 - o Value is decreased based on the number of fish that have died already.

Black Pearls

- **Spawn_Quantity:** The number of black pearls that appear in the environment surrounding the player.
 - o Variable value.
 - o Value is increased based on the number of black pearls that the player has already collected.
- **Weight_Total:** The value used in addition to the **Descent Speed** variable.
 - o Fixed value.

VR-Specific Design Consideration

Embodiment

The player's in-game avatar will be represented as a set of virtual hands only (see [User Interface](#), Image 1). This has been decided as it not only reflects the limited number of interactions that the player may perform within the game, but also allows for a potential increase in presence based on the Illusion of Virtual Body Ownership (IVBO).

Movement Type

The type of movement described in Ebb of Ego is similar to flight in many other VR games though the speed and direction of travel are pre-determined. The fixed movement path also removes any tutorialisation that would otherwise be required when explaining to the player how they may traverse the world.

Reactive Environment

Visual Feedback: Objects that the player may interact with will be highlighted when the player's virtual hand nears the object (see [User Interface](#), Image 3). Animated objects like the glowing fish and tendrils may also have alternate animation states that are triggered when in contact with the player's virtual hands.

Physical Feedback: Pseudo-physical connections will be created using the Oculus Quest 2 controller's built-in haptic motors to create the sense of touch for game components like the tendrils, glowing fish, and black pearls.

Audio Feedback: Audio will be used in response to changes in the environment (descending further towards the ocean floor will see a shift in the dynamic non-diegetic music. See [Sounds/Audio](#)) as well as the player's interactions within the environment such as collecting black pearls or grasping glowing fish.

Visual Latency

The assets used and processes performed will be optimised to increase performance over visual fidelity. The aim of this is to decrease the potential visual latency experienced by the player during gameplay which often has a negative impact on the overall player experience.

Coherent World

Visual Coherency: In order to maintain visual coherency throughout the game world, all assets used will be procured from Epic Game's Quixel Bridge platform. Additional assets may be created using Maya, but emphasis will be placed on maintaining the same visual style.

Mechanical Coherency: The player's in-game interactions are limited, with almost all game components reacting to player interaction in the same way throughout gameplay. This allows the player to better anticipate the outcomes of their actions.

Level Design

Section	Name	Overview	Style	Description	Player Journey	Time
Prologue	Enter the Descent	Introduction to game	Intriguing, unsettling	A blank screen with the muffled sounds of an argument taking place in the background.	This should pique the player's interest while also creating unease.	15 secs
Act 1: Part 1	Tranquil Desert	Creating a relaxed state for the player	light-hearted, tranquil	A beautiful underwater desert, which is open, empty, and appears to expand outward indefinitely. There is no life other than the player in this area.	This setting aims to instil calm in the player that doesn't call for any action from the player. There is nothing for them to focus on except their descent.	60 secs
Act 2: Part 1	Trench Maw	Captivating the player with life and colour	Vibrant, exciting	Another beautiful area, but this time colour and life are introduced and should captivate the player. Creating a desire within them that makes them want to explore and discover more of the world.	The player should feel charmed with the introduction of new life that can be observed and interacted with. e.g., utilising glowing fish and pearls, and encountering the tendrils.	3 mins
Act 2: Part 2	Abyssal Divide	A tonal shift from previous areas	Mysterious, sombre	Two separate apertures divide the vibrant life of the previous area and the next. A large expanse of dark, open water. This marks a turning point where the world becomes unfamiliar.	This area isn't designed to scare the player, but instead, make them feel vulnerable and eager to grasp onto the safe and familiar.	60 secs
Act 3: Part 1	Depths	An apparent change in ecosystem	Alluring, unfamiliar	Similar in style to the previous parts of the trench, but now a more alien ecosystem is apparent.	The player should notice the shift in tone. Though they should not feel as though there is any malicious nature to this shift, but unease and some anxiety should begin to settle in.	3 mins
Finale	Hollow Cove	Disappointment and confusion in the outcome.	Solemn, isolating	A cave at the bottom of the game world where the player is no longer disturbed by tendrils or glowing fish. This area is devoid of everything but black pearls. An empire of dirt.	The player may feel disappointed, frustrated, and confused here as the end of the game is abrupt and underwhelming.	60 secs

Gameworld Visualisation

The following is a visualisation of each of the areas described in the World Structure table on the previous page. This includes callouts with reference images that convey a general setting for each of these areas.

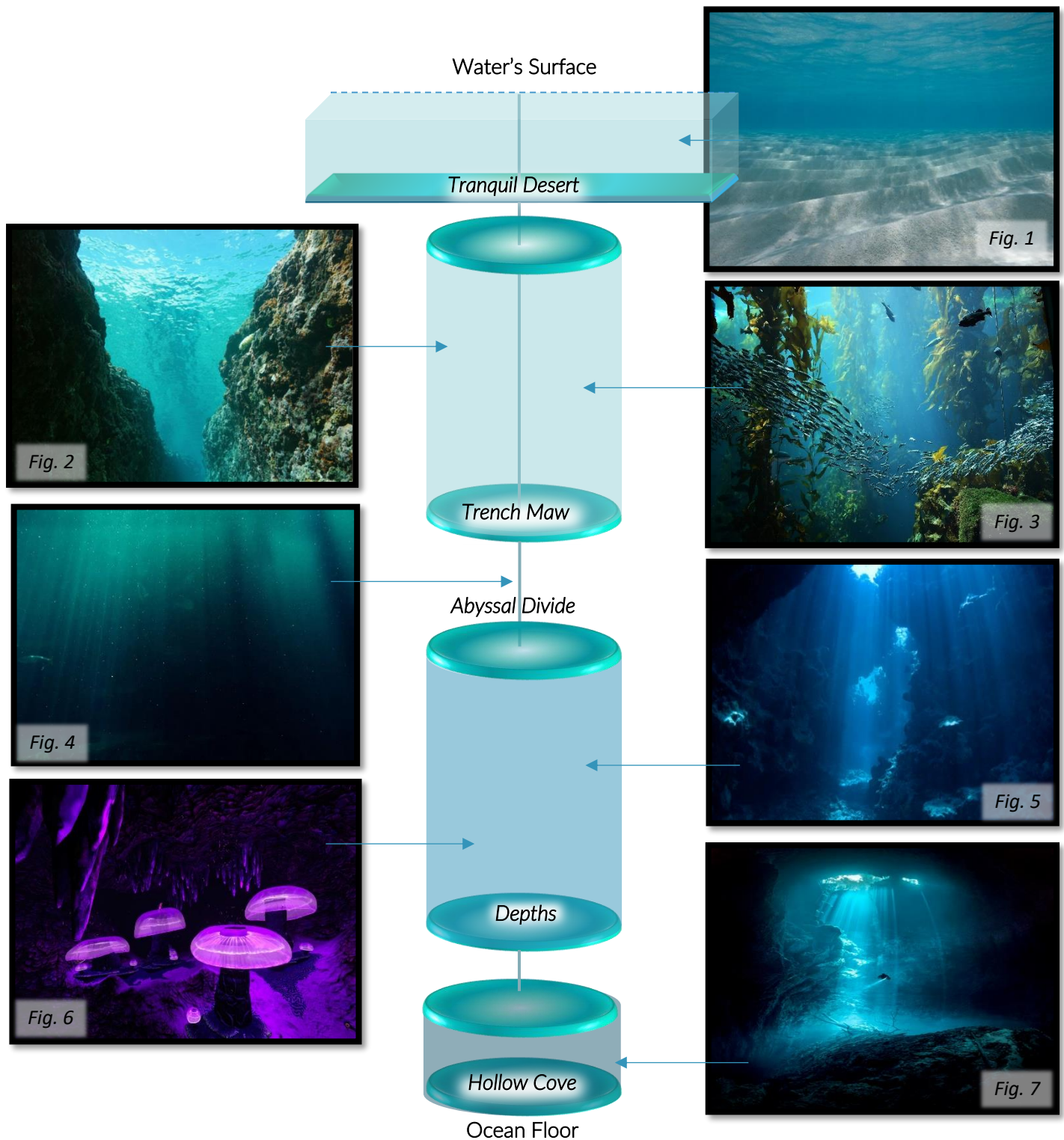


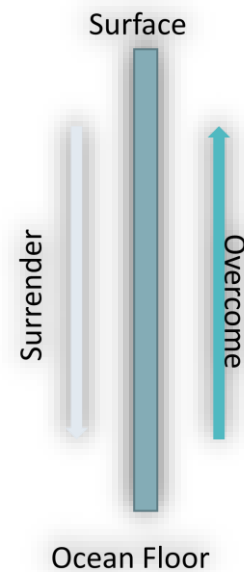
Image References: **Fig.1:** Ali (2018), **Fig.2:** Sexton (2018), **Fig. 3:** Stowe (2021)., **Fig. 4:** Untitled (2021), **Fig. 5:** Devil's Grotto, (2020), **Fig. 6:** FyrnOfficiel, 2021, **Fig.7:** Broen (2020)

Designed Outcomes

The game has been designed so that the player does not contemplate whether or not they have won or lost. Instead, they question their actions and whether they achieved their desired outcome based on their experience with the game world. Allowing the player to impart their meaning into the game world.

The player character has already fallen into the path of addiction. Therefore, taking no action to stop themselves from sinking will see them continue their descent until they have reached the end when it is then too late.

On the other hand, consistently accepting help by giving into the tendrils as well as helping themselves by continuously raising their arms is the only way that the player is able to reach the surface and escape this addiction.



Designed Meanings

The glowing fish represent people who have attempted to bring light into the life of the addict at the cost of themselves. Repeatedly sacrificing themselves leads to their own light fading.

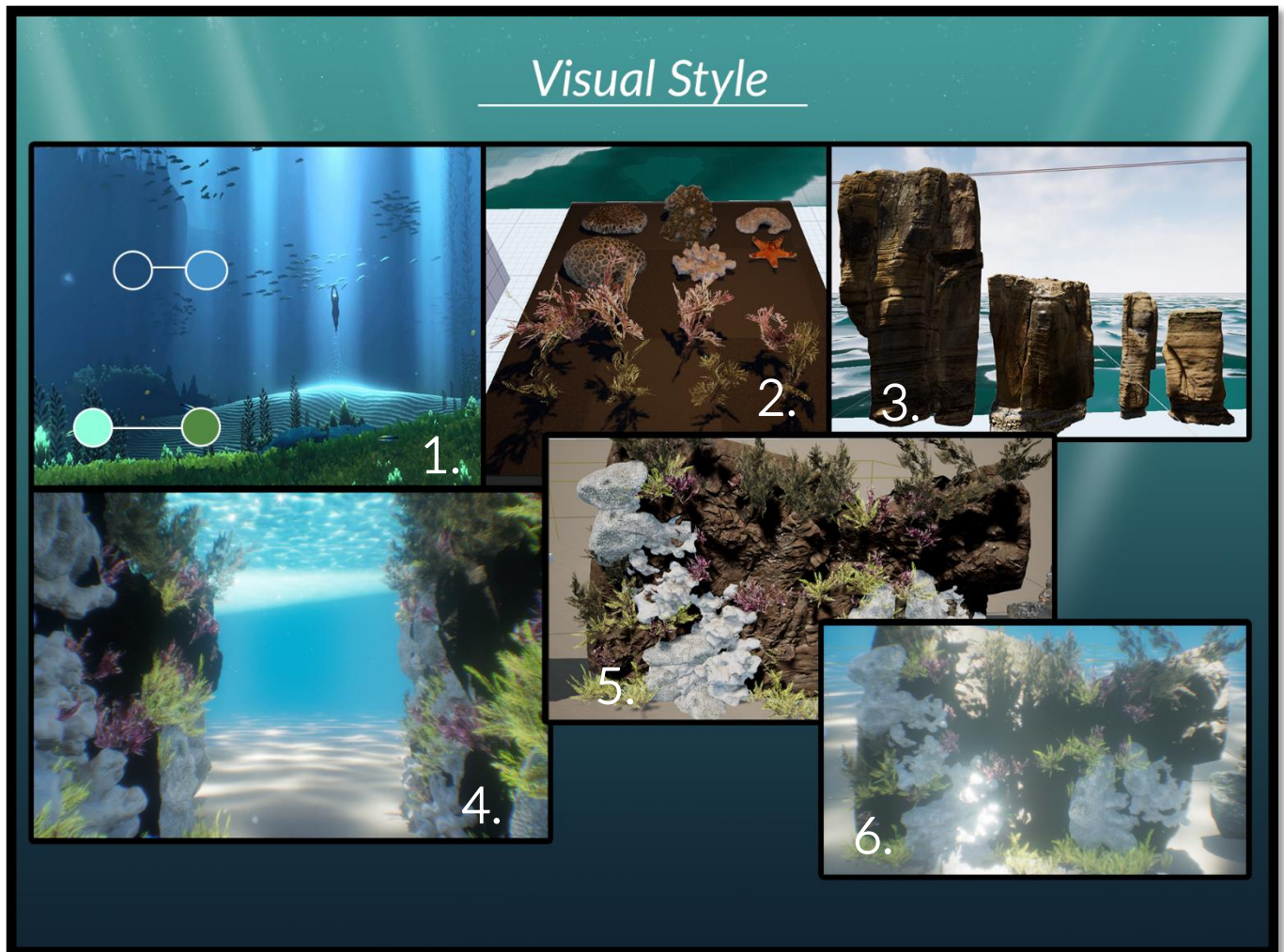
Black pearls are symbolic of desire for the addict, possibly a source of addiction or those that enable the addict to continue sinking faster.

Tendrils are used to represent the helping hands that reach out to the addict, but often appear foreign and menacing as they disrupt the comforts of addiction.

Having the player raise their arms aims to create a sense of exhaustion as helping oneself requires effort and consistency. This is not directly explained to the player, but the shift in speed for their descent will be apparent.

The messages carved into the walls of the trench are representative of the messages that may be brought up during an intervention.

Visual Style

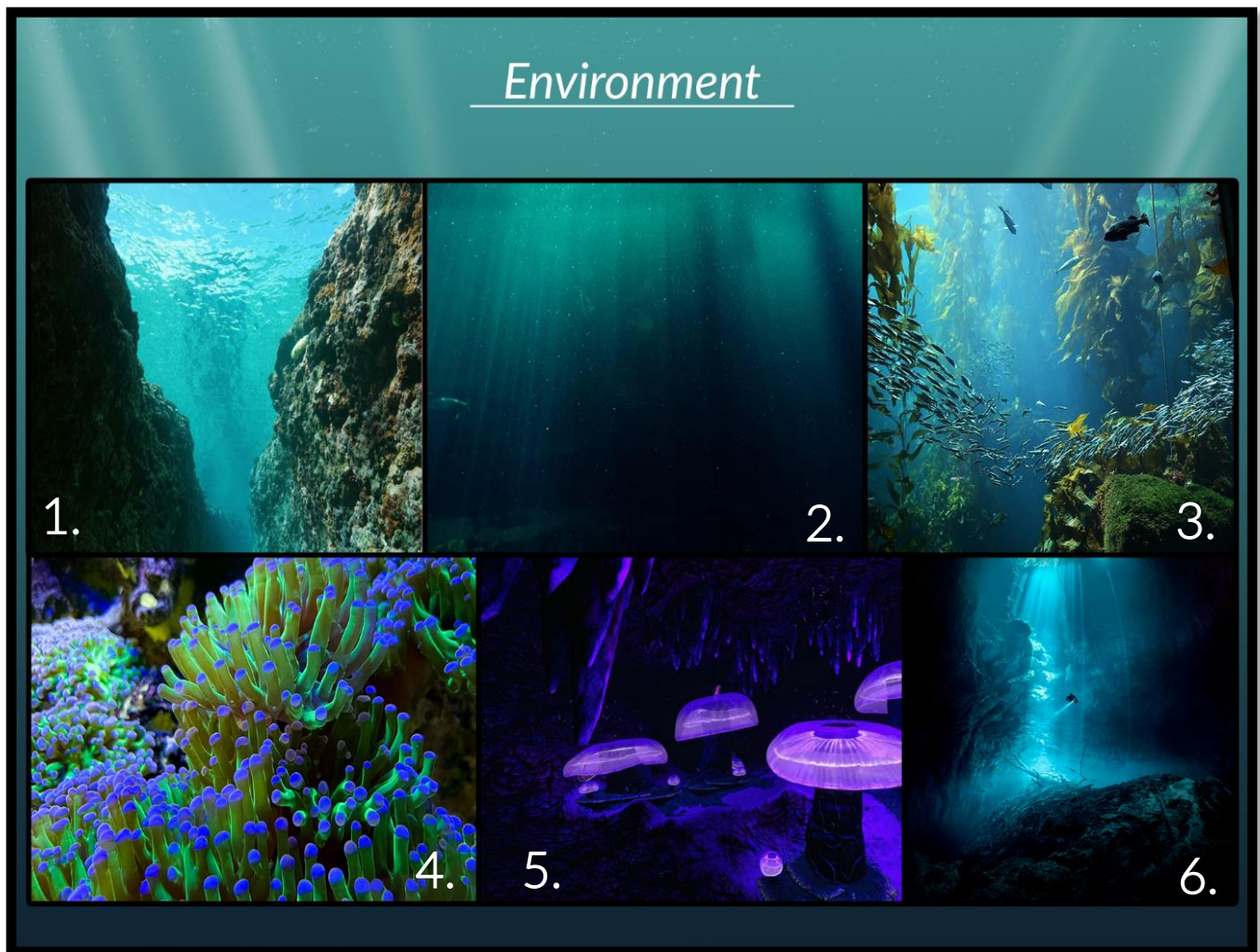


The visual style for Ebb of Ego draws inspiration from the game Abzu (505 Games, 2016), and to a lesser extent the environments within Subnautica (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018) with its use of high contrasting colours for areas that contain life, and muted tones for distant game elements. The flora and fauna used for Ebb of Ego will be primarily based on the vibrant coral reefs found in the Indian and South Atlantic oceans surrounding South Africa.

The in-game models used will focus on a higher level of realism than Abzu, but still maintain a level of fantasy design aimed at enticing the player to explore more of the game's world. Images 2-6 in the moodboard above contain in-engine test footage showing example assets staged within a virtual environment that would closely resemble what the final game would look like.

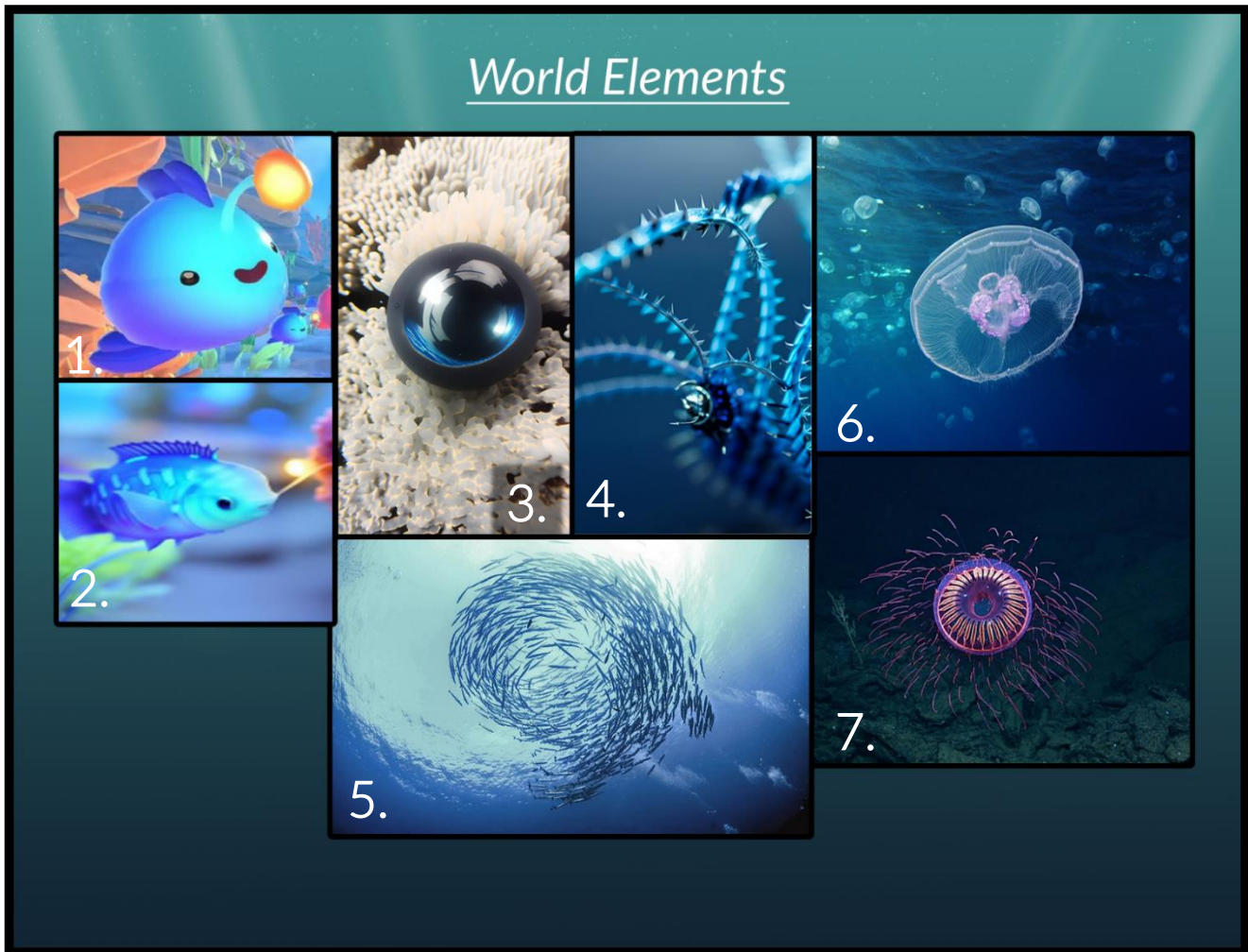
1. Abzu (505 Games, 2016) reference image
2. Sample assets from Epic Game's Quixel bridge.
3. Sample rock features that may be easily tiled to create the structure of the 'trench'.
4. Example of the trench walls from a player point of view (POV) in an underwater environment.
5. Example of assets shown in images 2 & 3 combined outside underwater environment setting.
6. Example of assets shown in image 2 & 3 combined within underwater environment setting.

Environment



The design of the game world and its visuals aim to create picturesque scenery that the player wants to be in. The environment within the game will also shift from the warm and bright waters of the surface to the cold and dark waters towards the ocean floor. This is also reflected in a shift of colour and designs used for flora and fauna, with more abundant and familiar-looking assets used towards the surface and scarcer, more alien-looking assets used towards the ocean floor. This tonal shift aims to capture the pleasures of the known comforts during early stages of addiction and contrast them with the unease and anxieties caused when these comforts change.

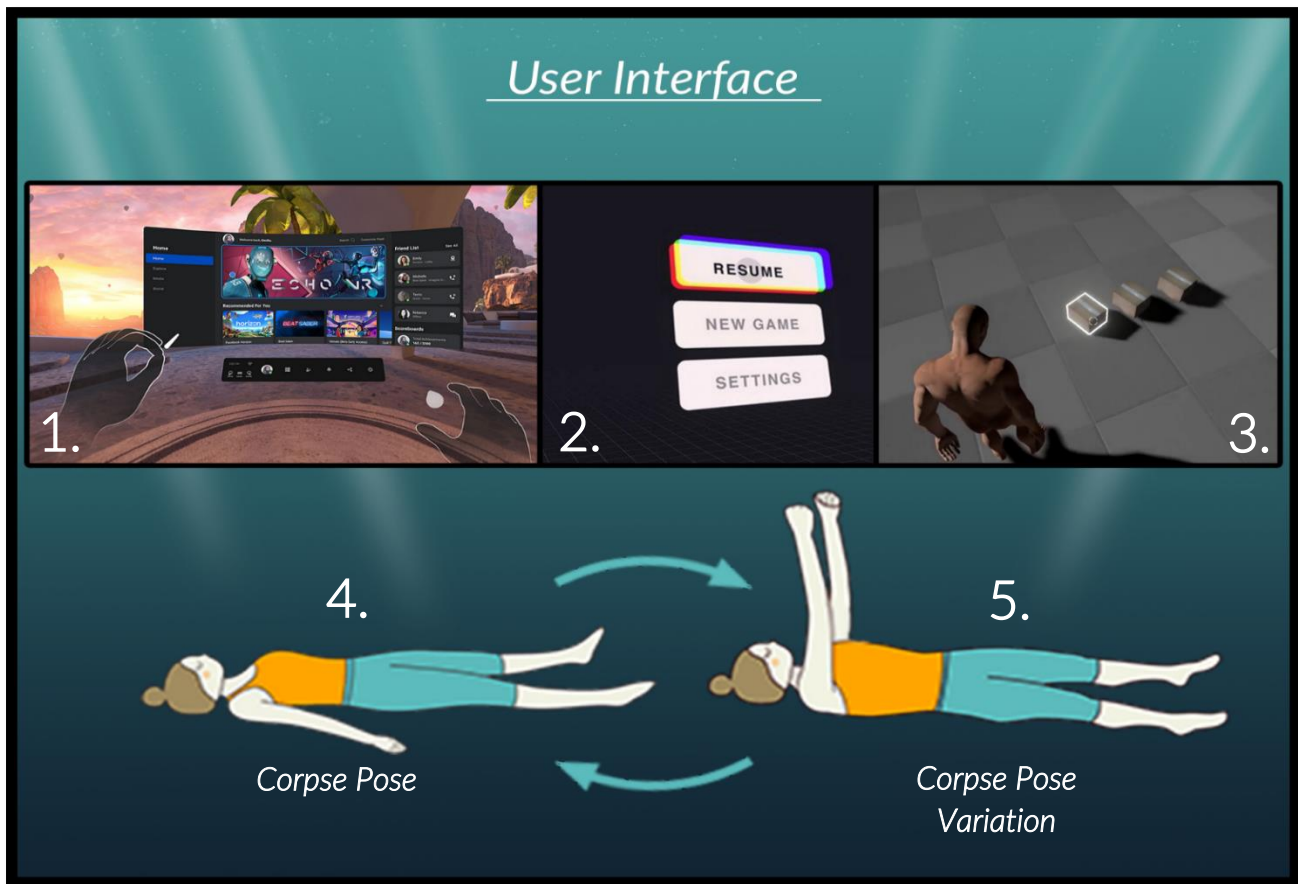
1. The continuous walls of the trench aim to create a pseudo-subliminal space that appears to the player as if it never ends.
2. Light becomes scarcer and visibility is decreased the further the player descends.
3. Examples of familiar looking flora and fauna such as kelp, seaweed, and schools of reef fish.
4. Bioluminescence may be used to create an unfamiliar 'otherness' feeling to the environment.
5. Unrealistic designs would be used to reinforce the feeling of unfamiliarity.
6. Example of the cold, dark area found towards the ocean floor.



Each world element will tie into the underwater setting of the game as well as the overarching theme. These world elements should have a sense of realism to them while also maintaining their functionality. This functionality includes game components that can be interacted with by the player, as well as signposts that signify changes in the game's tone.

1. Sample taken from the game *Slime Rancher 2* (Monomi Park, 2022), which is a more friendly interpretation of an angler fish. Something you would like to interact with and keep with you.
2. An example based on image 1, which shows a potential design for the Glowing Fish game element.
3. Example of the Black Pearls that may be collected during the player's descent. These should contrast with the surrounding environment and appear as though they can be interacted with.
4. Example of what the tendrils may look like in-game. They should look as though they are unwelcoming and something to be avoided.
5. Schools of reef fish that can be observed by the player. The size and frequency of these schools will decrease as the player descends further, towards the ocean floor.
6. Sample of a *Moon Jellyfish* that appears gentle and non-threatening. Would be apparent towards the surface of the game world.
7. Sample of a *Halitrephes Maasi Jellyfish* which appears alien and dangerous. Would be used towards the ocean floor and contrasts against the jellyfish seen earlier on.

User Interface



There will be no in-game user interface or menus other than a pause screen. This will not include any other functionality other than to simply pause the game i.e., no options to exit or return to the main menu – once the player starts this journey, they must finish it.

Objects that the player may interact with will be highlighted when they are a short distance from the player's virtual hands. Controls for interaction will draw on common [design practices in VR](#) titles such as the use of triggers for selecting and 'grasping' items and having the in-game virtual camera tie into the movement of the headset. Initial prompts may be given to the player in terms of interacting with world elements like the glowing fish, black pearls, or fending off the tendrils. The rate of the player's descent will be reflected in the apparent change in speed of the surrounding environment i.e., game components like the trench walls, particles, and fish will appear to move away from the player faster when their arms are not raised.

1. Example of a VR interaction where virtual hands are used in place of the controller's physical position.
2. Sample of a simple VR menu that would be used in the final project. This includes the use of chromatic aberration as this acts as an extension of the chromatic aberration used within the in-game setting.
3. Example of an object highlighting effect that would be used in the final project to indicate objects that the player may interact with such as glowing fish and black pearls.
4. Example of the position the player will be asked to take before entering the game world.
5. Example of a corpse pose variation that the player may take when raising their arms and slowing their descent.

Colour Palettes

The colour selected for the palettes below have been tested in combination with each other to ensure accessibility for players that experience more common forms of colours blindness such as deuteranopia and protanopia by specifically avoiding the use of red and green in combination with each other. Unfortunately, these colour palettes may be difficult for players experiencing tritanopia to distinguish from one another, however, these may still be adjusted or addressed through the inclusion of accessibility settings within the main menu.

Ocean Towards Surface

The following colours will be used for the ocean environment towards the surface of the game world. The hues would shift to a darker palette the further from the surface the player is.



Ocean Towards Ocean Floor

The following colours will be used for the ocean environment following the shift from the abyssal divide section.



Sea Life Towards Surface

The following colours will be used for the flora and fauna included in the ocean environment towards the surface of the game. Variations of this may be used to create a more diverse spectrum of life, especially for schools of fish.



Sea Life Towards Bottom

The following colours will be used for the flora and fauna included in the ocean environment towards the ocean floor (bottom of the game world).



Narrative

The game will include a relatively ambiguous narrative that allows for interpretation with the aim of encompassing a wider range of stories relating to addiction.

The game's prologue scene (as described in the [Level Design Table](#)) will open to a blank screen with indiscernible shouting, audible in the background. The sound of crashing into water is then heard as the screen fades in and the player appears underwater amongst the calm and empty shallows of the Tranquil Desert game section. This set piece should catch the player's interest while also being a jarring experience that the player wants to get away from.

While the exact details of this indiscernible shouting are never revealed to the player, they are alluded to through the various messages carved into the walls of the trench. These messages should be short enough for the player to read quickly, while also maintaining a relative ambiguity that allows for some interpretation from the player. As mentioned in the [Designed Meanings](#) section of this document, these messages would be representative of things that may be said during an intervention for addicts.

The following images are examples of what some of these messages may look like:



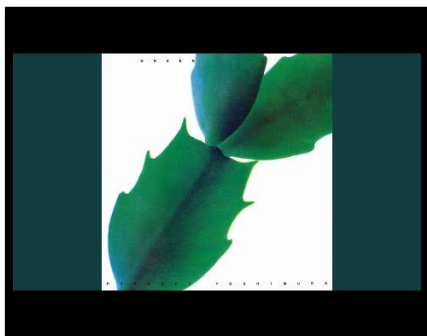
Sounds/Audio

The audio design of *Ebb of Ego* is a key element in immersing the player in the game's world and creating a serene environment. The game will make use of a singular dynamic track consisting of ambient noises and soundscapes that transforms to reflect the surrounding environment similar to the document ambience track included as well as examples 1 and 2 below. For example, the area closest to the water's surface would make use of 'brighter' sounding notes, while the deeper areas may make use of denser, colder sounds. Additional instruments may be introduced into the design of this track such as the harp and wind instruments used in example 3 below. The use of these instruments would create a sense of 'weightlessness' and adventure early on which could then be contrasted as the player descends further from the surface, with these comforting sounds fading away from the player and leaving them feeling heavy and isolated.

This change in audio aims to create additional contrast between the varying depths while also instilling a subconscious sense of change. This will ideally separate the player from their preconceptions about what lies further down as well as compounding the feeling of otherness and isolation.

Realistic sound effects will also be used for events like fending off the tendrils or grabbing glow fish, with the aim of enhancing players' experience and driving their actions while subverting their meaning, tying into the game's [Feedback Loops](#).

Example 1



Yoshimura, H. (1986). GREEN

Example 2



Soothing Relaxing Music (2023). Ocean of Serenity

Example 3



Journey Soundtrack. (2012). Threshold

The reasoning for this game

Ebb of Ego appears as a means of expression as well as an exploration of my experiences with this topic.

The game does not attempt to encompass every aspect of addiction, or indeed create any justification for addiction. However, it does attempt to evoke a number of similar emotions and actions that one may encounter during a battle with addiction allowing for a new understanding to be created.

The game's experimental nature allows for the positioning of the player as both a passive viewer and an active configurator of the game's meaning, better aligning them with the actions and emotions of someone battling addiction.

The idea of underwater having always carried a sense of both comfort and fear for me, and it is within this dichotomy that I believe addiction lies.

Technical Specifications

Development Engine: Unreal Engine 5

Development Language: C++

3D Modelling Software: Maya

Target Hardware: Oculus Quest 2

Additional information will be included in a sperate Technical Design Document.

Reference List

Images

Figure. 1: Ali, S. (2018) Underwater Desert [online]. Available at:

<https://twitter.com/alishaafii/status/1039175430098452481>.

Figure. 2: Sexton, C. (2018) Ocean Trench [online]. Available at: <https://www.earth.com/news/deep-ocean-trenches-holding-water/>.

Figure. 3: Stowe, A. (2021). Kelp Blue. [online] Available at:

<https://panorama.solutions/es/solutiofigselp-blue> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2023]. Background image

Figure. 4: Untitled (2021). Available at: <https://www.feritech.com/marine-i-supports-feritech-development-of-world-first-geotechnical-subsea-vehicle/>.

Figure. 5: Devil's Grotto (2020). Available at: <https://www.innovationnewsnetwork.com/scientists-develop-a-new-model-for-protecting-deep-sea-fauna/5041/>.

Figure. 6: FyrnOfficiel (2021) Subnautica - Glowing Mushrooms. Available at:

<https://www.deviantart.com/fyrnofficiel/art/Subnautica-Glowing-Mushrooms-890473109>.

Figure. 7: Broen, M. (2020) Mayan Underwater caves. Available at: https://news.yahoo.com/photos-the-erie-beauty-of-underwater-caves-110026499.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cucGludGVyZXN0LmNvLnVrLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMXo6R7ovduLlbr4Pvm2MEndgG33wdn_Mhd6iTrH7Nj9haFzN7lJhgqHsoUOD889MWppynhfzw5VlDEh8i-1HLUfiP5VVblUF28KxunQh3QlWXP4DRoxKj-jYKtwvCMpltM0tIPPM71XMcrVhFTI-5adbf8e6BFXkpJQA4TLS5My.

Moodboard Images

Visual Style

1. CO, A. (2016) Abzu, fields. Available at: <https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2016/07/08/this-12-minute-abzu-ps4-gameplay-playthrough-will-make-you-want-to-take-a-journey/>.

Environment

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