

# **V[R]ignettes**

Mez Breeze

# **Perpetua1 Nomads**

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*“Really intriguing and mesmerising piece  
of Virtual Reality poetics.”  
on V[R]ignettes*

*“This piece offers a remarkable storytel-  
ling experience, not only on the enter-  
tainment side of experience but also on the  
educational side.”  
on Perpetual Nomads*

ICIDS 2020 Jury

# Navigating XR literature: examining *Perpetual Nomads* and *V[R]ignettes*

## Abstract

Exploring the possibilities of the creative potentials of XR, this paper traverses one artist's creative history of working with emergent spatial technologies including Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and Extended Reality, with applied instances examined within the scope of this grounding. Two projects in particular are examined: *Perpetual Nomads*, an interstitial Virtual Reality Episode of the *Inanimate Alice* digital story series, and *V[R]ignettes: A Microstory Series*, a example of digital literature designed and developed in Virtual Reality where each individual microstory, or vignette, is designed to encourage a kind of 'narrative smearing' where traditional story techniques are truncated and mutated into smears (kinetic actions and mechanics, collagelike layered building blocks, visual distortions, dual-tiered text annotations) that require a reader/interactor to make active choices in order to navigate each microstory space.

## Keywords

*XR/VR, digital literature, narrative smearing, microstory*

Back in the middle of the year 2008, artist and theorist James Morgan and I engaged in an animated discussion about Augmented and Virtual Reality. At that time James and I were collaborators-in-crime in the *Third Faction Collective*, a group of digital artists intent on constructing game interventions in Massively Multiplayer Online Spaces. During this discussion, I pitched to James an idea to establish an online space devoted to all things Synthetic Reality based (my umbrella term for Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and Mixed Reality). This space, called *Augmentology 101*, intrigued James to the point where a decision was made to sponsor it through the Ars Virtua Foundation and CADRE Laboratory for New Media. What followed was an amazing foray that outlined injecting the creative potentials of Synthetic Reality - what's now known as XR (Extended Reality) - into the realm of electronic literature.

It's now been over 10 years since the ini-

tialisation of the Augmentology 101 project. During this decade, there's been a major upswing in VR and AR production and development, with impactful XR content such as *Firebird - La Péri* (2016) [Video Game] and *Queerskins VR* (2016) [Video Game] becoming available.

My own attempts at merging digital literature into developing XR fields have been multiple and varied. Initially I began delving into VR in the 1990's when VRML, or Virtual Reality Markup Language, was the shiny new thing. Surprisingly enough, the creative and technical challenges that VR creators faced back then are similar to those faced today: high performance requirements, mainstream adoption hurdles and monetisation dilemmas are all relevant. Likewise, skillsets required by VR content creators in the mid 1990's again parallel XR creators of today including a deep knowledge of spatial storytelling logistics; emotional intelligence; the ability to formulate story experiences that take







#WHATDOYOU DO?

WHAT  
WOULD  
YOU DO  
IF THEY  
THREW YOU  
IN...

#PRISOM?

into account various hardware and platform limitations such as field of view constraints, tethered headsets restricting natural movements; and hardware specific limitations like the screen-door effect.

In terms of XR projects I've produced in the last decade, one of the more notable includes conceiving of and co-developing the 2013 anti-surveillance AR game #PRISOM.

#PRISOM<sup>[1]</sup> was developed by myself and Andy Campbell. This AR Game was commissioned by and premiered at the 2013 International Symposium on Mixed and Augmented Reality Conference (ISMAR2013) in conjunction with the University of South Australia University's Wearable Computer Lab, and the Royal Institution of Australia, on a wearable AR headset (or HUD). My primary motivation when creating #PRISOM was to highlight the increasing unveiling of covert surveillance on a global scale as evidenced

<sup>[1]</sup> <http://prisom.me>

by the NSA's PRISM Program and the snowballing monitoring of individual's private data/lives - the title was crafted by merging the terms 'PRISM' and 'prison'. As I've written in the "Resources" section of the project website:

#PRISOM is designed to make players ponder the increasing global adoption of PRISM-like surveillance technology. Every one of the "#WhatDoYouDo" scenarios that you'll encounter when playing the game stem from real-life scenarios, including the ongoing unconstitutional treatment and [in some cases] incarceration of those keen to expose the nature of heavily surveilled and overtly monitored societies" (Breeze, 2013).

In 2016 I lectured as part of the 'Future Possible: Beyond the Screen' Series which centred on how VR can transform creative practice - which also included a live VR performance walkthrough using one of my Tilt Brush-created works. In 2017 I keynoted at the Electronic Literature

Conference with a VR performance presented both live at the Conference and simultaneously in a public Virtual Reality Theatre. In 2017/2018 I created the VR Poem/Experience *Our Cupidity Coda*. This VR work was designed to emulate conventions established in early cinematographic days (the silent soundtrack, white on black intertitle-like text, similarities to Kinetoscope viewing) in order to echo a parallel sense of creative pioneering/exploration evident at that time. In 2017, *Our Cupidity Coda* premiered at The Wrong Digital Art Biennale, and in 2018 it made the Finals of the EX Experimental New Media Art Award. In 2017/2018 I wrote, co-produced, and was Creative Director and Narrative Designer of the *Inanimate Alice VR Adventure Perpetual Nomads*.

*Perpetual Nomads* is an interstitial Virtual Reality Episode of the *Inanimate Alice* digital story series. The project is the result of an Australia and Canada co-production with

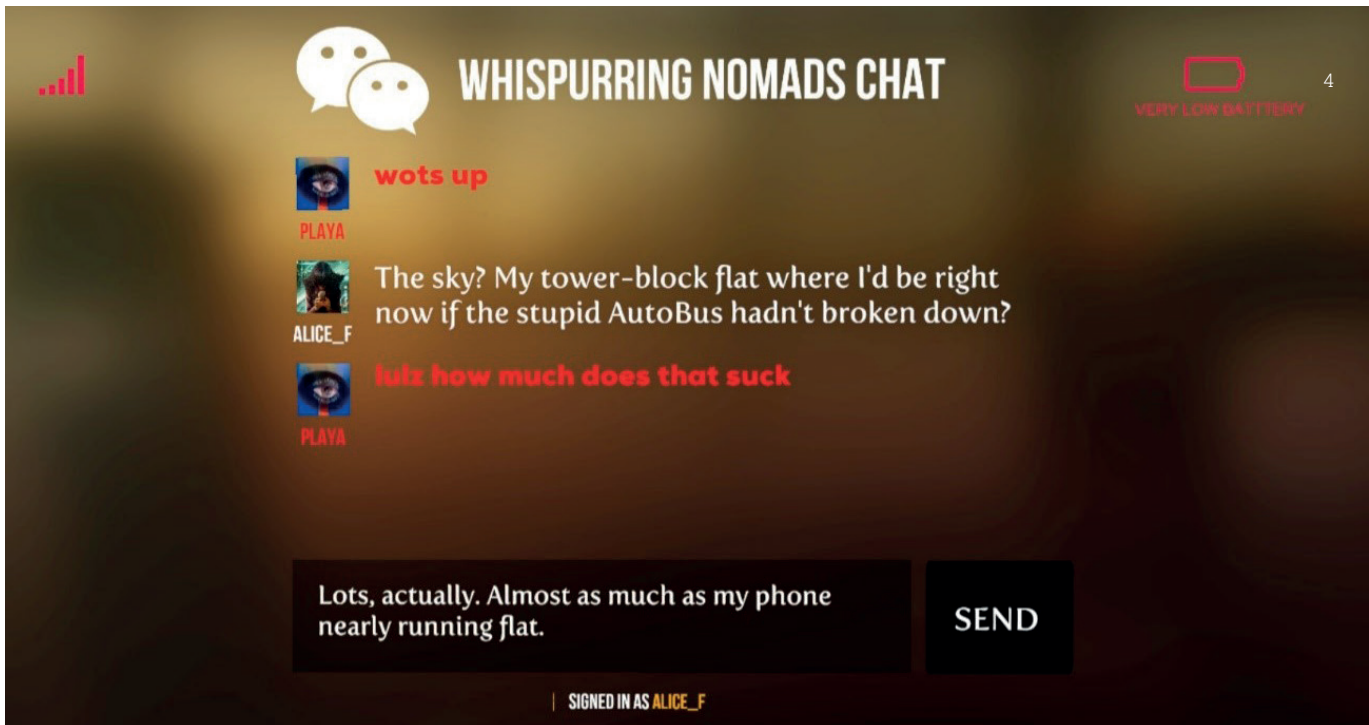


investment from the Canada Media Fund and The Australian Government/Screen Australia. In *Perpetual Nomads*, Alice (the Series protagonist) finds herself stranded in the desert on a broken down Autobus. Never one to be boring, *Alice* downloads and installs a chat app called 'Whispurring Nomads' on which she encounters

characters from opposite sides of the globe. By spending time with her new companions, Alice learns about social interaction in an increasingly isolating and impersonal digital world with themes focusing on privacy, surveillance, and greenwashed corporate corruption.

A special 360 video edition of *Perpetual*

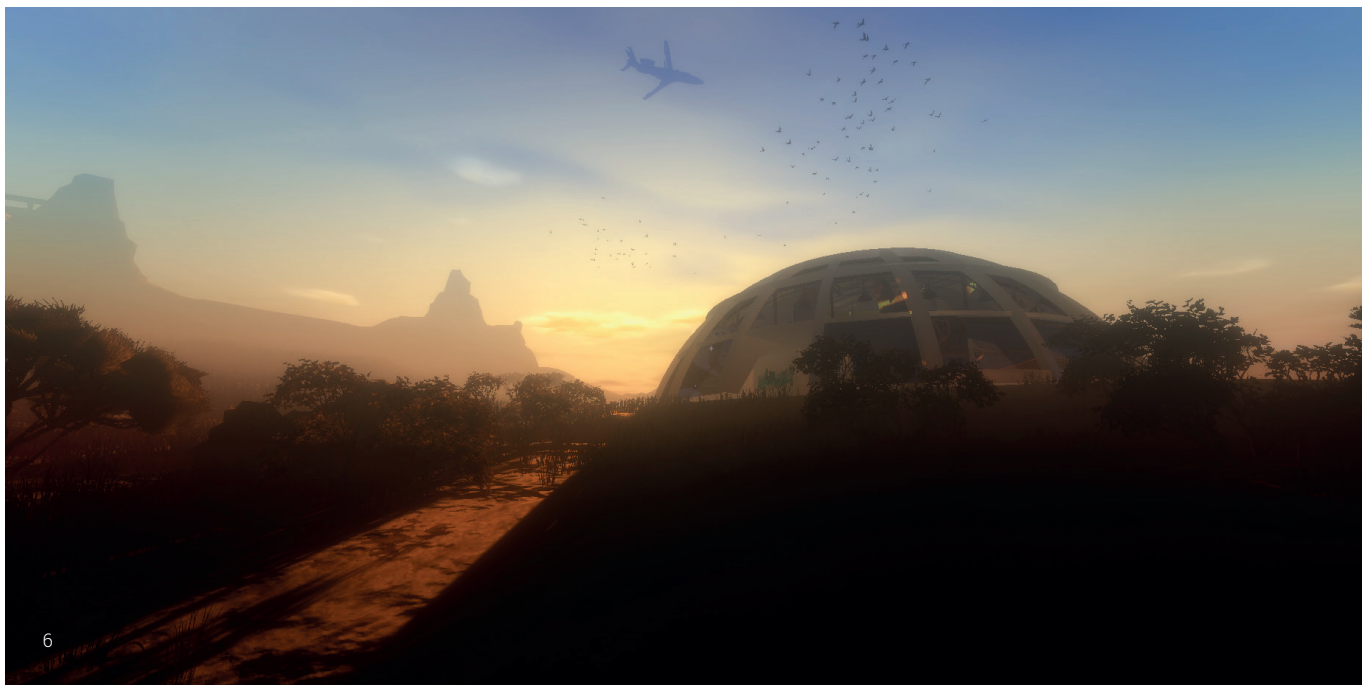




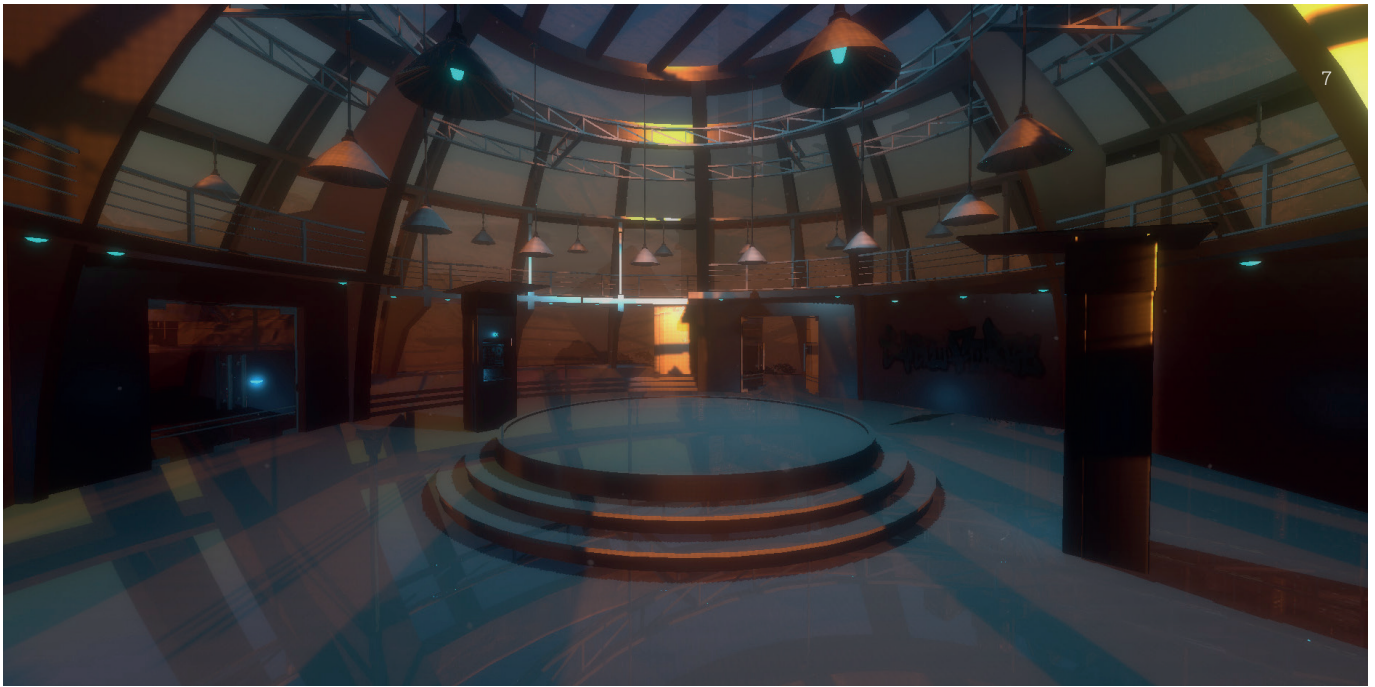
*Nomads* is designed with a global Young Adult audience in mind, one who has suffered through the COVID Pandemic who is more than fluent in navigating electronic literature crafted specifically for a 360-video platform. This special edition of the project can be experienced on mobile devices and desktop computers, whereas the

full interactive version is designed to be experienced through Virtual Reality headsets and desktop PCs.

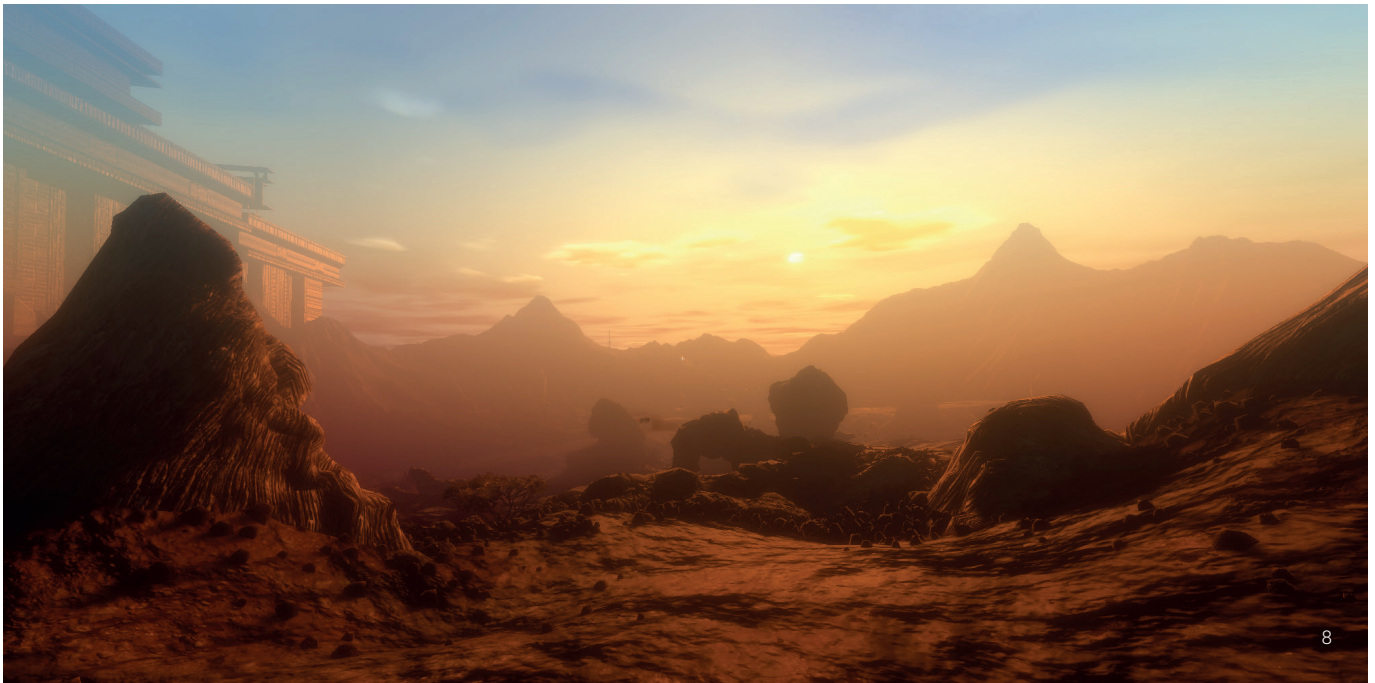
In *Perpetual Nomads* you navigate your way through a fully realised digital environment where you find yourself navigating creepy scenarios like finding yourself on the pointy end of a







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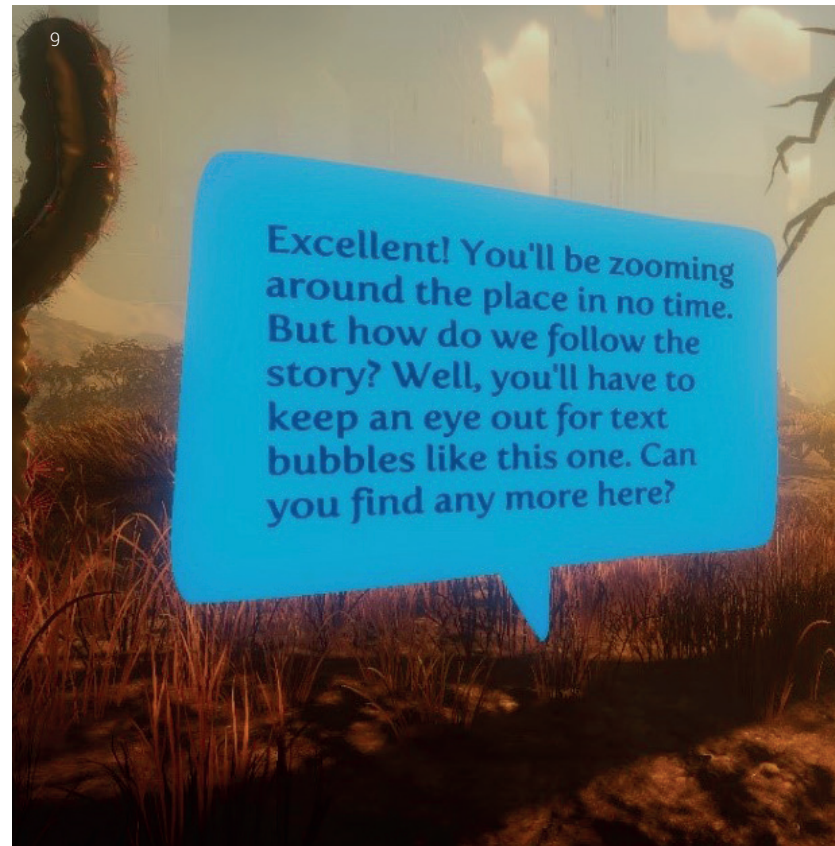


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texts of discomfort

harassment stick, participating in social app-based tug-o-wars, dealing with a nefarious greenwashing corporation and attempting to cope with your phone battery running crazily low just when you really need it. Underlying all of these challenges lies a far more sinister one that's guided by consistent and cohesive story world building through rigorous attention to detail (a tip when playing through the work in either VR or in Desktop mode: make sure to play on past the end credits to get the full thematic experience). Part of crafting the narrative arc was the decision to preface the main experience with an immersive tutorial that helps anchor and assist the reader/player with text guided instructions: an example is shown below.

Thorough participation in a high-end VR based experience like *Perpetual Nomads* hinges entirely on immersion which is triggered initially through the audience having





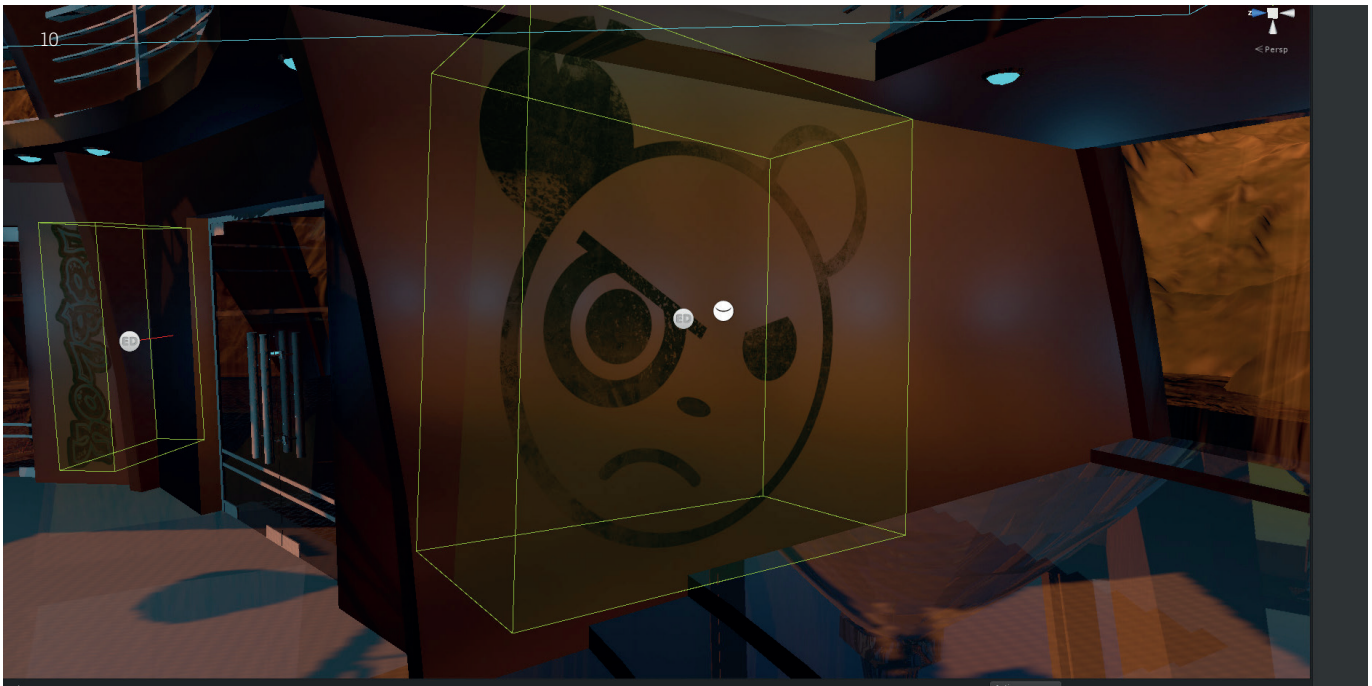


to don discombobulating gear that firstly reduces their ability to engage in their actual physical space in standard ways (their vision and hearing being “co-opted” into a VR space). The leap of faith the audience needs to make to establish a valid and willing suspension of disbelief (as Samuel Coleridge so aptly phrased it) is already set in motion by the fact a user is entirely aware from the moment they slip on a VR Headset that their body is in essence in a state of initial discomfort, essentially hijacking the body (haptically, kinetically) as opposed to a more removed projection into a story space via more traditional forms (think book reading, movies, tv). Such body co-opting might lead a user to disengage from the VR experience from the very beginning which will reduce the likelihood of true immersion: alternatively, they may readily fall headlong into the experience with an absolute sense of engagement and

wonder (the preferred option as a VR content creator) if the work has been precisely crafted.

For the most part, XR projects such as those mentioned above exist only in the main-

Interactive Storytelling Art



stream margins, with a majority of experiences requiring costly high-end VR rigs and expensive desktop computers that demand audiences experience the works in their optimal state. To counteract this selective catering to the exorbitant end of the XR market, in early 2018 I had the idea to create a set of XR Experiences that would reduce the mandatory use of high-end tech. Such projects would instead cater directly to a range of audiences by crafting works that can be experienced through a far larger (and much more accessible) range of lower-end tech. The first work I produced in this set was the VR Literature work called *A Place Called Ormalcy*, followed by *V[R]ignettes: A Microstory Series*.

*V[R]ignettes: A Microstory Series*<sup>[2]</sup> is digital literature designed and developed in Virtual Reality. It was constructed using the Virtual Reality Application Masterpiece-VR to craft the 3D models, with each micro-

<sup>[2]</sup> <http://mezbreezedesign.com/vr-literature/vrignettes/>



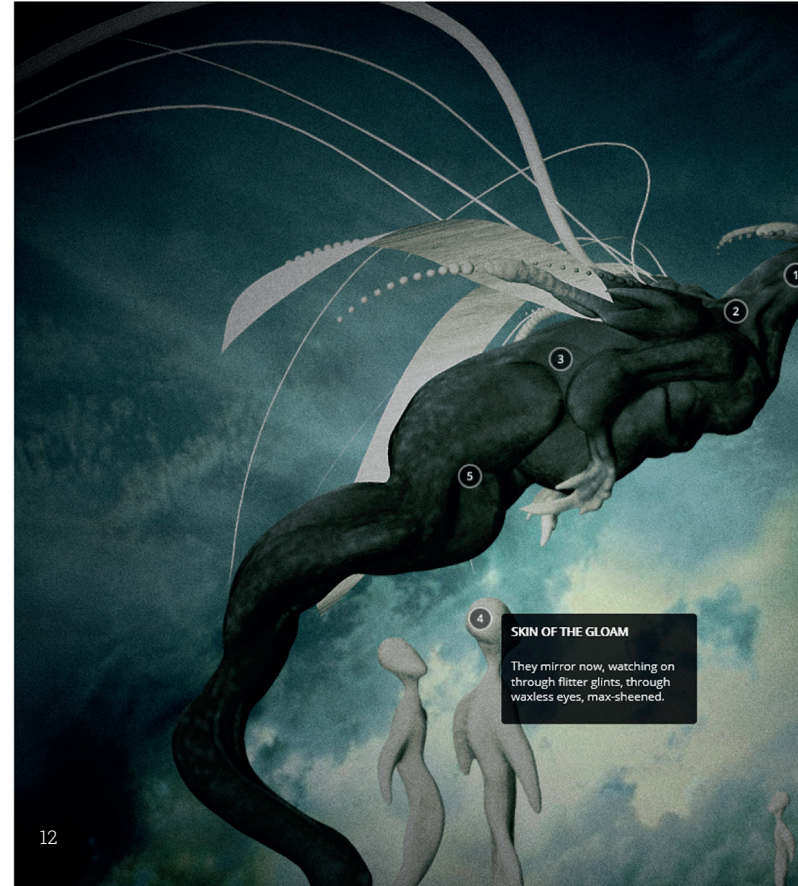


## The V[R]ignettes

In the Skin of the Gloam

story (made up of 3D models, text, and audio components) then combined and hosted via the Sketchfab platform. It can be accessed via a wide range (crucial in terms of its social commentary aspect) of mobile devices, desktop PCs and both low-end and high-end Virtual Reality hardware. Audiences using the cheapest type of VR equipment (such as Cardboard headsets) are able to access complete versions of this experience, as are users of any net connected mobile device with a WebXR-enabled browser.

In *V[R]ignettes*, each individual microstory, or vignette, is designed to encourage a kind of 'narrative smearing' (my own term) where traditional story techniques are truncated and mutated into smears (kinetic actions and mechanics, collagelike layered building blocks, visual distortions, dual-tiered text annotations) that require a reader/interactor to make active choices in order to



## The V[R]ignettes

### Wracking in the Upper Bubble



texts of discomfort

navigate each microstory space (or storybox).

When exploring each microstory, a reader will experience poetically dense language (such as letters bracketed in words - requiring rereading - that are designed to expand and enhance meaning potentials) and various visual, textual and technological elements that require direct audience input (such as: do you choose to view each microstory in a 3D or VR space through a virtual reality headset, or a mobile phone, or computer monitor? Do you set each microstory to autopilot or navigate the experience through manual annotation click-throughs and spatial manipulations? Do you choose to use the model inspector and view the microstories without any post-processing effects, or in wireframe? Do you choose to enable audio? Do you read only the title fields or entire paragraphs?). Such smears are also designed to be combined by the reader to create a story-piecing system that's circular in nature, where a reader/interactor is encouraged

to experience each microstory multiple times, in multiple ways. For instance, when experiencing *In the Skin of the Gloam* if a reader chooses to read only the title line of each annotation, they'll experience a minimal poetic (title) text version. If they instead read the rest of the annotation accompanying each title line, the narrative is accented differently. If they choose to manipulate (scale, rotate, zoom) the 3D models in the space (and/or if they engage autoplay or, in the case of *Wracking in the Upper Bubble*, they read the wall text only), a reader's experience will be markedly different from those choosing to experience each microstory in a VR space (where teleportation is an option and the spatial dimension is crucial). To load each microstory, readers press the white arrow in the middle of each storybox (and if viewing on a mobile device, they need to make sure to view each storybox in full screen mode). After clicking on the white arrow, to begin reading the text they click on the 'Select an



annotation' bar at the bottom of each storybox screen. From there, they get to choose how they experience all other narrative smearing possibilities. If they need help with navigation and controls, they can click the '?' located at the bottom right side of each storybox.

Just as XR Literature can work to extend the creation of accessible electronic literature beyond the text-centric to truly encapsulate the haptic and the spatially-oriented, both *Perpetual Nomads* and *V[R]ignettes* illustrate how XR accessibility issues are relevant and necessary. I look forward to continuing to promote, create, and experiment with stretching the limits of VR and AR while producing XR projects that are openly accessible, as well as socially relevant.

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## Images

1. Screenshot from the 2016 Multilingual Virtual Reality Project Firebird - La Peri;
2. Screenshot from the 2013 Augmented Reality Project #PRISOM;
3. Press Image for Perpetual Nomads;
4. Screenshot from the Whispurring Nomads Chat App in Perpetual Nomads;
5. Screenshots taken from a live playthrough of Perpetual Nomads;
6. Screenshots taken from a live playthrough of Perpetual Nomads;
7. Screenshots taken from a live playthrough of Perpetual Nomads;
8. Screenshots taken from a live playthrough of Perpetual Nomads;
9. Screenshot from the Interactive Tutorial of Perpetual Nomads;
10. Screenshot taken from the Unity development of Perpetual Nomads;
11. Image from the V[R]ignettes: A Microstory Series.Press Kit;
12. Screenshot from V[R]ignettes: A Microstory Series;
13. Screenshot from V[R]ignettes: A Microstory Series.



**Mez Breeze** first started using the Internet in the 1990's to create digital works, and she hasn't slowed since. She creates award-winning digital literature, games, and other genre-defying output as well as archiving, championing, and teaching about/mentoring digital artists and electronic literature. Her recent awards include 'Inanimate Alice: Perpetual Nomads' winning the inaugural 2020 Readers' Choice Prize as part of the 2020 Woollahra Digital Literary Awards, while her Virtual Reality Microstory Series 'V[R]ignettes' won the Queensland University of Technology's Digital Literature Award as part of the 2019 Queensland State Literary Awards. In 2019, Mez also received the Marjorie C. Luesebrink Career Achievement Award which: "...honours a visionary artist and/or scholar who has brought excellence to the field of electronic literature."

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