{ Wh!sper }

Design Document

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Pitch

Whisper is a 2D vertical space shooter, which makes use of space and time to create an intuitive and challenging gameplay experience and redefine the Shoot 'Em Up genre.

Gameplay

Gameplay follows the *Shoot 'Em Up* game loop of dodging obstacles, defeating enemies and gunning for a new high score. In addition, Whisper's core mechanic provides a new dimension for navigating the Player, Enemy, Bullet ecology.

Setting

Whisper takes place in outer space, far away from any contact with the living or otherwise. There is nothing save solitude and lonely stars casting light. But with light comes hope, even without a sound.

Theme

Befriending silence.

Influences

- ❖ As with all space shooters, *Whisper* draws heavily from the forefather of the genre – *Space Invaders.* The concept follows a very similar pattern of a lone ship in space, combatting waves of endless enemies in a seemingly perpetual journey.

- ❖ For the mood and atmosphere, *Whisper* draws from timing games such as *Thumper, Hyper Light Drifter, Octagon* and *osu!,* to create a fast-paced experience that can be both punishing and very rewarding.

- ❖ Lastly, the setting and gameplay come from the philosophical question of –

  If a tree was to fall in a forest and no one heard it, would it make a sound?

- ❖ The core gameplay mechanic seeks to emulate this pondering by only allowing time to pass where the player is present. The story was influenced by Halo 4's narrative and the discourse on the imperfection of Artificial Intelligence. Whisper goes a step further, wondering what shortcomings of the human psyche would plague Artificial Intelligence if it were slightly less – artificial.

Narrative

Whisper takes place at an undefined time, in an undefined place. All details are both unknown and irrelevant, like the ones who began this mission.

The mission was to find peace. And they might very well have.

It's been centuries since the passengers of this ship passed away. In that time, their vessel has drifted endlessly on towards the depths of mystery. The only thing left is Timbre, the artificial intelligence unit, stuck on autopilot and quickly going mad.

Turns out solitude's as crippling as it's constant. The silence even more so.

Core Mechanics

Whisper makes use of two core mechanics to define the gameplay experience:

The first is **Space/Time**. On-screen, the game is divided into three columns each with its own local 'time' that only activates once the player is within its bounds. Every so often, impassable barricades will fall from the top of the screen, forcing players to navigate around the obstacles by making use of the other columns.

The second is **Whispers.** These are special player abilities that can be placed in any of the three columns to interact with the Space/Time. While a Whisper is active in a column, time will continue to pass inside the column, regardless of the player location.

Control

Whisper's main controls involve both the mouse and keyboard. Standard arrow or WASD keys are for movement while the mouse is for aiming. Left clicks fire bullets and right clicks place a Whisper in whichever column the mouse is at the time of clicking.

Assets

Overall Design

Despite the Science Fiction setting, Whisper uses an art style more akin to a loose, whimsical genre. This design choice was meant to reflect the mental state of Timbre, the artificial intelligence unit. Her intellect is the closest a machine has ever come to being human. What this means is that she feels loneliness – and she has been lonely for hundreds of years.

More than loneliness there is the pain of what that solitude causes. The entirety of the game is just a series of hallucinations from a computer. To reflect that wavering mental state, the juxtaposition of art style and game genre helped to emphasise how things aren't quite as they seem.

Enemy Design

Enemies went through multiple iterations. The first being canister-like elements that would fall from the top of the screen like rain – not particularly targeting anything. Unfortunately, the look created too sparse of a feeling both when they spawned and when they were destroyed, meaning interactions between the player and the enemy could never feel responsive enough.

Figure 1: Initial Enemy Designs

A second problem with the canister design was colouring. The in-game obstacles had blue and red versions that had to be shelved so as not to confuse players. With all these issues, this model of the enemy was put back and more research was done to see what could do all of three things: Appear threatening. Seem uncanny. And feel alive.

Figure 2: Second Enemy Design

The next iteration took all three of these items into account. Designs drew from viruses and other pixelated enemy types of old. In addition, the decision to change the sprite upon enemy defeat helped further that dynamic, aware experience for every enemy taken down.

Yellow proved the perfect color to play against the dark, plain background of space, and not have to compete against the colourful stage elements as well.

Level Design

Barricades, as they are called, were meant to fall towards the player and force motion and quick wits to avoid. Like the enemy designs, the barricades were never meant to appear threatening, even though they very much were. This decision, like all others, drew from the game being a series of hallucinations from the computer.

The hallucinations show a creative side of a very uncreative domain – the computer. In order to achieve that look, barricades, enemies and even the player character were all to seem as though drawn.

Figure 3: Block and Barricade

Whisper Design

The Whisper is a stylised exclamation point based on a quarter note rest. The rest was chosen as a way to represent silence as a beautiful, though unfamiliar, companion. The dot was added to accomplish that look of an exclamation.

The reason an exclamation point was used was again to represent silence, this time as a loud and suffocating experience – if left to linger for too long.

Figure 4: A Whisper

Player Design

Initial attempts at player design centred on a wing-based design and creating a sense of freedom and flight. The wing, however, was detached from the hull of the ship as a way to use an asymmetric design. Unfortunately, none of the investigated hull shapes worked with the wing shape that was initially proposed.
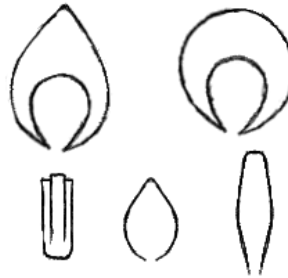

Figure 5: Wing Design

Figure 6: Player Hull Designs

Once asymmetry was done away with, attempts were made to use the wing as more of a tail, and create an off-centered ship design. The hull shape, and the number of ridges on the tail were both points of consideration.

Figure 7: Off-Centered Ship Designs

The problem of these designs came from fluidity of motion. Because the player character can be played in every direction, it required the ship silhouette to likewise feel like it can be pulled in every way while maintaining its momentum. None of the four images above managed to accomplish this.

Finally, the successful sprite came from a previously shelved enemy design. It had symmetry, playfulness and a very subtle gravity all contained in its movements.

Figure 8: Final Design

Sound Design

The last, and most crucial element was the background music.

Mood was critical in order to capture the hostility and peace that silence can instil – simultaneously. These criteria lent design towards songs that never strayed too dark or too happy but carefully toed both lines.

'Prohibition Blues', the final song choice, managed to capture everything needed.

It starts with a promise, of what is yet to come. With the slow build up comes gradual additional elements: first, the bass and then drums. The atmosphere changes twice to create a swing feel – playing towards the themes of hallucination, and the images created to stave off loneliness - the wild images. More fun but not necessarily more inviting.

Finally, the piece returns where it started, as though having never gone anywhere.

Sound effects for bullet firing and enemy destruction were done away with to help bolster the uncanny sense of hearing something, but not everything one wants to hear.