

Pirate Purgatory Summary

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ABSTRACT

For our interactive piece, *Pirate Purgatory*, we elected to create an interactive space with an evocative narrative in the easily recognizable location of a pirate ship. Our goal was to create an eerie and vacant atmosphere for our shipwreck, and we did so through various elements of mise-en-scene, including setting, props, and lighting, as well as sound design.

Keywords

Mise-en-scene, evocative narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea behind *Pirate Purgatory* was to turn the familiar environment of a pirate ship into an eerie journey to the afterlife. The player is meant to gather more hints about what happened and why they are here as they move through the environment and ascend the levels of the ship. This act of ascension is a core component of the game, as it mirrors the ascension to the afterlife. Since a pirate ship is an environment that is familiar due to its frequent appearance in media, we drew inspiration from film and image references to craft our evocative narrative.

The story of our game takes place in purgatory, so we wanted the piece to have a spooky, unsettling effect, similar to that of horror media. Therefore, we used several elements of mise-en-scene, such as setting, props, and lighting, as well as sound design and interaction, to create an eerie, vacant atmosphere in our interactive piece.

2. PROCESS

The idea for the setting came from a class reading on narrative types, and from this we decided on an evocative narrative for our interactive piece. After this came our decision to base the game on the journey to the afterlife, from which we decided on the atmosphere of the piece. We divided up the work: Clark, Benjamin, and Bella did most of the work in Unity, while everyone contributed to the modeling of the props on the ship.

Several decisions influenced the direction our game and narrative took, the first of which was how to clearly communicate the story to the player. When it became unclear if non-verbal cues would be enough to convey the direction the player was meant to take, we added a system that would show which objects could be interacted with, and eventually decided to leave diary entries scattered throughout the ship that would more explicitly reveal the narrative to the player before the final reveal that the player has been dead the whole time.

While we eventually decided to add some verbal elements to the game, most of the game relies on elements of mise-en-scene to convey the story and atmosphere. Since our game takes place in a version of purgatory, we decided that the atmosphere would be creepy and unsettling, and we applied the elements of mise-en-scene to create this atmosphere.

3. MISE-EN-SCENE

3.1 Setting

Since our interactive piece is an evocative narrative, it relies heavily on its familiar setting to convey the narrative; as such, it is also a key element of the mise-en-scene of the piece. As stated before, the setting of our interactive piece is a pirate ship, specifically one shipwrecked and long since abandoned. The ship itself is an allegory for the ascension to the afterlife, as your only goal is to ascend and escape the ship you've found yourself trapped in. The ship has three different levels: the lowest level, which consists of the cells you begin the game in and the storage, the middle level, with the captain's quarters and the infirmary, and the upper deck, where the player reaches the exterior of the ship and can ascend to the afterlife. The levels were created both to mirror the ascension to the afterlife and so that the player could unravel the narrative of the game gradually, all leading up to the central reveal that the player has been a ghost the whole time when they finally ascend to the afterlife.

While we wanted to evoke the familiar setting of a pirate ship, we chose a pirate ship shipwrecked and in the desert to imply the passage of time, as the events of the game do not occur in a specified time period. To evoke the idea of an eerie, vacant, static purgatory, we designed the ship to look run-down and abandoned, with old wood and empty spaces. The enclosed area gives the player a sense of being trapped, and this feeling lessens as they ascend the levels.

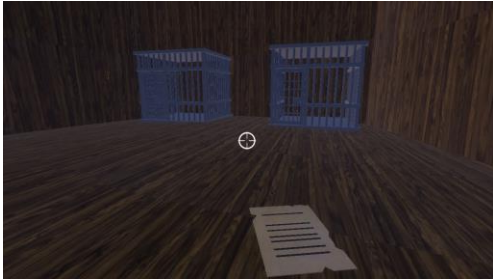


Once the player ascends to the upper deck of the ship, they realize that the ship is in a desert, rather than sailing on the ocean. The desert is uninhabited, and like the ship, seems to exist outside of time and space. It brings an element of the unexpected to the game, while also adding to the vacant, unsettling atmosphere, and it exists in direct contrast with the familiar setting of the pirate ship.

3.2 Props

To evoke the familiar pirate ship setting, we filled the ship with props that would be commonly found on a pirate ship. These props created the effect of an immersive environment that would feel believable to the player. The props were textured to look old and derelict, both to indicate to the player that the ship is a place abandoned, and to contribute to the eerie, vacant atmosphere. While there are clues scattered throughout the game in the form of diary entries, the player is for the most part left to discern the

story through non-verbal clues, so texturing the ship and its contents to look old and abandoned plays an essential part of the story as well as the atmosphere.



One of the ways the props play a role in the story of *Pirate Purgatory* is through foreshadowing. In the cargo hold, interacting with a lantern causes it to fly up into the air, as if affected by a ghost. Additionally, there is a mirror in the captain's quarters, but the player is unable to see their reflection. Elements like these add up to create a spooky, unsettling atmosphere and the feeling that something isn't quite right as the player struggles to figure out why they are trapped in the ship and how to escape.

3.3 Lighting

If the props and setting are essential to driving the narrative without dialogue, the lighting in *Pirate Purgatory* plays a similar role in creating the game's atmosphere. The lighting below the decks of the pirate ship is dim, low-key lighting, with high contrast and dramatic shadows. Dim lighting is typically used in the horror genre to create suspense by concealing information, with the possibility of hidden dangers lurking in the dark. Lighting is used to similar effect in *Pirate Purgatory*; the player begins the game with little knowledge of the setting and premise, and the dim lighting keeps the player in the dark as they work to figure out where they are and how to escape.

As the player ascends the levels of the ship, the lighting becomes brighter and more high-key, lessening the trapped, claustrophobic feeling of the lower levels. This culminates in the cool, low contrast lighting that illuminates the final level, where the player reaches the upper deck and prepares to escape the ship and ascend to the afterlife. In contrast with the warm artificial lighting below decks, the cool natural lighting of the final level indicates that the player is finally free of their prison and can escape purgatory.



4. SOUND DESIGN

While not generally considered an element of mise-en-scene, the sound design of *Pirate Purgatory* plays a significant role in creating the eerie, vacant atmosphere of the game, and makes for a more immersive experience for the player. The goal of *Pirate Purgatory* was to create an abandoned, eerie, vacant atmosphere, and the sound design contributes to this with the whistling of the wind through the ship and the sound of old wood creaking.

The absence of certain sounds is as much of a crucial part of the sound design as the sounds we included and plays a key part in the game's foreshadowing. For example, the absence of the sound of waves crashing indicates that the setting is a shipwreck, and the absence of the player's footsteps is key foreshadowing for the reveal that the player has been a ghost the whole time.

5. INTERACTION

The player sees the world through a first-person camera. This choice prevents the player from discovering their identity before they have a chance to piece together the clues for themselves. At the end of the game, there is a switch to a third-person camera, signifying that the player finally knows who they are.

Text-based prompts guide the player on their journey. The design of these prompts was carefully considered, as we wanted them to have a consistent design with the abandoned pirate theme. Therefore, we went with a burnt scroll aesthetic for the UI. The player interacts with three of these messages from the past, presented in reverse chronological order. The order of events may disorient the player, which adds to the surprise at the end of the game. The climax of the game comes at the top of the ship, where the player ascends to the afterlife.



6. CONCLUSION

Each of the elements of mise-en-scene, as well as the sound design and interaction design of this piece was designed to immerse the player in the game's spooky, unsettling atmosphere. The elements evoke the familiar setting of a pirate ship, as well as the unfamiliar setting of a vague and unsettling purgatory.

By using setting and props to indicate the passage of time, lighting to create a sense of unease and claustrophobia, sound design to make the setting feel eerie and vacant, and interaction design to fully immerse the player in the experience of ascending from the depths of purgatory, we were able to create an interactive environment that could convey a narrative even without the aid of verbal exposition.