

Remnants of Reality

Design document

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Game synopsis

“They come out of nowhere, these creatures that bleed light, suddenly, twisting reality as they appear, and they feed on us. Creatures invisible to the naked eye, yet somehow I can sense them – a feeling that terrifies me but somehow, at the same time, fascinates me in ways alien to the human mind. Will I be able to stop them? No, I don't think so. You see, I'm driven by simple curiosity and this perverse desire of having to be there when it happens. So don't look so scared or surprised now, this gun in my hand will solve your problems forever. You'll never dream of them again.”

-- Vincent Harris

Imagine you are in a dark room. You can sense you're not alone but you cannot see. Fear. Lights are turned on, the sensation remains. You know they are in there with you, but even in light, you cannot see them. Panic. Remnants of Reality is built around this uncertainty. The game's main character, Vincent Harris, suddenly becomes the only person in the world able to sense otherworldly creatures – not by sight, but by a strange extra-sensory power of perception which is as disturbing as the creatures themselves. Driven on by a strange fascination, Vincent tries to unravel the secrets of these invisible predators. Where do they come from, how, and why?

Gameplay

Remnants of Reality focuses around the concept of detecting the unseen. Vincent's method for this is his noise sense; a kind of an extra-sensory perception that induces disturbing noise inside his head whenever monsters are near. Since the game will require the player to look around carefully, it's best done as a first-person adventure / shooter, where the shooting part will be kept to minimum and up to the player as much as possible. After all, Vincent is by no means an experienced fighter: he knows how to point a gun and pull the trigger but that's about it, so usually he's better off avoiding his enemies.

In a more specific level the game lends a lot from the survival horror genre although more focus will be put to knowing where the monsters are and figuring out the best way to avoid confronting them. The noise sense works in two ways: as an ambient proximity warning signal and a directional microphone-like pulse signal which Vincent can use to locate the monsters more accurately. Once detected, monsters can be marked by wounding them; wounds in their bodies bleed rays of light which will give away their locations. These two detection techniques are at the game's core, making it a unique horror experience.

Target audience & competition

The game is aimed at players who look for intense emotional experiences and suspense in horror games. It is yet another answer to how we may avoid typical problems in horror games and while it doesn't innovate much, it works its way around usual pitfalls by taking a new approach: the player will simply never know what he really is up against, thus preying on the powerful fear of the unknown. In this sense Remnants of Reality differs greatly even from its closest competitors; whereas avoidance is hardly a new innovation in horror games, keeping the veil of the unknown up infinitely is.

Production

The game will be produced in several stages. The first stage will be a prototype demonstrating how the game's two special aspects work, as well as some of the game's atmosphere. The prototype will be produced as a mod for Half-Life 2 using its Hammer-editor and will be done inside the production team as a proof of concept. This will be done in two months after which the concept will be demonstrated to possible publishers. If the project gets financed, it will be made into its own game in order to get an engine that better responds to requirements set by the game. The project is clearly doable on any current platform and larger challenges will remain in plotwriting, directing and level design, all very essential to make an enjoyable horror game.

Key ideas

- Invisible enemies to invoke fear of the unknown
- Noise-based ESP mechanic to make detecting enemies a unique experience
- Film Noir style detective story delving deep into the unknown
- Atmospheric, haunted environments twisted by the merging of two dimensions

Design notes

This section contains various notes about designing the game and how it is intended to turn out. The approach is relatively ideal, and most of what is described here won't be visible in the first demo of the game.

Design philosophy

Ever since we decided to do a horror game, it was clear that we'd have to avoid certain aspects typical to the genre. For instance, while there are guns in the game, it's definitely not intended to be an action game, and this should be reflected all over the game very clearly. The focus is clearly on adventure where the player proceeds slowly and carefully through uncertain environments, having to rely much more on his hearing than his vision. I wanted the game to be more problem-solving oriented than your usual horror game in way that each encounter is a challenge of its own, usually containing multiple solutions. The player's advantage in this game is detection and it has to be put to good use as the adversaries are faster, stronger and often more durable than the hero. Just like a detective, the player needs wits and careful inspection to survive.

Look and feel

Fear is at the core of every horror game worth its salt and it's always strongly affected by the atmosphere and the environment of the game. Our hero, Vincent, is facing invisible enemies which he can only detect by some disturbing noise signals inside his head. That alone though is only a start. The game's primary focus is to capture the feeling of being hunted on an alien ground. The player moves

around slowly, trying to pinpoint the location of his hunters, while hiding his own presence from them. This is the tension we're aiming for, thrilling slowness and finally sudden bursts of panic when the player is detected.

To further underline the sheer danger the monsters represent, the environment needs to reflect their brutality, as well as their otherworldly nature. For example in the demo episode, the ship is designed to look like as if it had been sunken for several decades as a result of the dimensional shift that occurred there. Rotten wood, dampness and rusted metal fill up the place. Yet somehow people have survived, only to be eaten by the otherworldly predators, and what remains of them can be found littered all over the ship. Even more mystically some equipment is still functioning as if haunted. Overall, inspiration for how the places will look like could be sought from photos of results of various kinds of destruction from fires to earthquakes to atomic weapons.

Storyline

In the background of the story is the cause for everything. It's described in more detail in the next section, but I'd like to say a few words about it here, too. I wanted the Big Bad in this game to be not unlike predatory animals. There simply is no grand design, no evil plot, no conspiracy, no nothing. The monsters come to our world with no sinister purpose, they are simply living in the only way they know. They have their own ecosystem which dictates all of their behavior and the hapless victims are just that, victims of chance.

The story of the game focuses around Vincent's character and its development. He is a tragic hero from the film noir style, a detective no less. Other key people in the game are the dreamers and much of the game's plot tension is built around the conflict between them and Vincent. In the beginning, Vincent is chosen by random chance, gifted with powers to detect the otherworldly enemy. He is confused and only looks for a way to survive and get off the boat. However, after he has escaped, some time later he's drawn to another similar scene. No matter how much he fights, in the end he'll always find himself on a yet another scene, trying to investigate it. At first he cares about the dreamers, looking for a way to save them. Later on, as he becomes more and more frustrated, he is simply driven on by curiosity although he has no idea what is it that he wants to learn, but it always seems to be just one site away.

Game mythology

This section contains a (rather limited) dictionary of key terms in the game's mythology, defining the elements that happen behind the screen. Most of this is actually never revealed to the player but is written here as inspiration for artists, directors, level designers and writers. This part of the document is bound to expand once the project goes past prototyping phase and the story gets written more elaborately.

Nightmare Heaven is a dreamworld located at the rim of reality where beings from this dimension may enter only while they are dreaming. Typically people in despair are attracted to this world and on the surface it's a place of comfort and solace where it's easy to lose oneself in. There are no specifics as to what exactly it looks like, but it can be described simply as a heaven of sorts. Sinking inside doesn't happen instantly and many people have time to realize they are falling into a trap as they find themselves dreaming of the place every night and start to feel the pull of the dreamworld stronger and stronger night after night. The world itself is harmless, but it's various inhabitants are not, although they are not hostile towards *dreamers*, save for the *Harpoons*.

Harpoons are the only creatures in *Nightmare Heaven* that interact with *dreamers*. Their role is to plant a *hook* to a dreamer and that way make him permanently attached to the dreamworld (hence the name), making a *connection*. The Harpoons are relatively few in number and typically it'll take several nights before they can locate a dreamer but once they do, the trap springs and there is no escape for the dreamer anymore. Unlike *Hunters*, Harpoons never leave the dreamworld but are instead fed by tithes brought in by others as a payment for their services. This arrangement is the most sophisticated side in the entire otherworldly ecosystem.

Hunter is an umbrella term for a group of species found in *Nightmare Heaven*. Hunters are, by nature, intelligent predators who cooperate in packs that may contain individuals from several species. Every pack includes one *Invoker* that invokes the *connection*, causing a *shift* to occur. Once the pack reaches our dimension, they will hunt down every living soul inside the shifted area, eating most at the spot while taking a few back to act as offerings for *Harpoons* and the pack's Invoker. Hunter species vary physically in strength, speed and size. In the real world, Hunters become invisible to any inhabitants of the real world save the *dreamer*. However, if wounded, their shell cracks and beams of light bleed through, making them somewhat detectable.

Invokers are creatures that can use a *connection* to cause a *shift*, allowing inhabitants of the dreamworld to cross over into our dimension. In order to do so, they must find a spot where the connection is anchored and perform a simple ritual. That is essentially all they do: lead their pack in pursuit of connections. This hints that time flows very differently in dreamworlds as *hunts* typically occur rarely in our world whereas from their point of view, they hunt daily.

Dreamers are people who have been attracted to the dreamworld. Dreamers are people who feel they have no purpose in life, or who are otherwise desperate and most of the time lonely. The *Nightmare Heaven* appears to them as a place of solace and tries to hold them until they are caught by *Harpoons*. Before that happens, a person can stop dreaming about the place by realizing the trap he is about to fall into and try to change the thing in his life that makes him dream about it. While in the dreamworld, only the *Harpoons* interact in any way with the dreamer. Once the *connection* has been made, the dreamer continues with his life normally, typically until a *shift* occurs. The dreamer himself is always unaffected by the shift and the *hunt* never extends to him, but he is able to see the *Hunters* at their work. It's in the *Hunters'* best interest not to harm the dreamer, as there always remains the possibility to make another shift using the same dreamer. Dreamers themselves have no clue about what is going on, and the shift usually has a severe impact upon their lives, more often than not ending it.

Connection is a link between *Nightmare Heaven* and the real world. It's one end is always tied to an anchor spot in the dreamworld, while the other end is a *dreamer*. The connection can be activated by *Invokers* and this may happen whenever the dreamer is awake. When the dreamer is sleeping and thus residing in the dreamworld the connection does not lead into the real world and cannot be invoked. A connection is ultimately severed if the dreamer is killed and this seems to be the only way to do this.

Shift is an event that occurs immediately once a *connection* has been invoked by an *Invoker*. The shift's effects vary greatly and typical effects include time warps, decaying, all sorts of unnatural twisting etc. The ultimate effect of each shift on the other hand remains the same: to transfer *Hunters* into our dimension, to feed on anyone who survived the shift. The shift usually affects an area comparable to one large building in size. The shifted area is in some kind of haunted state as long as the *dreamer* remains there; this haunting appears as machines acting up, things moving around, sudden transformations and so on, anything can happen in an area that has been shifted. Once the dreamer leaves the area, it remains as it was after the shift with no evidence left of what caused it.

Hunt is what the feeding is called. A hunt begins after a *shift* and lasts until the *dreamer* is either killed or leaves the area. The *Hunters* will remain in our dimension, waiting for new prey to stumble on the area and they will only return when they have to; they also have no means of voluntarily going back to the dreamworld.

Vincent's biography

Name: Vincent Harris

Age: 48

Height: 179 cm

Weight: 74 kg

Profession: private detective

Family: two sons and a daughter living with ex-wife

City: Boston, USA

Appearance: Vincent has the features of a rather ordinary middle-aged man. Like most of us, he has tried to do some exercising but no results remain to be seen. Business hasn't been good for a while and this has caused the contents of Vincent's wardrobe to become rather dated. Aside from his one relatively fair suit which he wears when meeting with clients, Vincent is typically clothed in jeans with various degrees of wearing out, old shirts bought from second hand stores and his brown leather jacket which is almost older than himself and looks every bit like it too. Vincent prefers to call his fashion "blending in with the crowd" which might be true in poor districts but isn't exactly accurate in a typical urban environment. Taking care of his appearance is something Vincent does rather lazily, especially with his beard which is never carefully shaved unless he is meeting with a client. The hairline of his dirt-brown hair has slightly escaped and while he prefers to keep it quite short, more often than not he misses his monthly haircut. There's always a faint smell of cigarettes present in his clothes.

History: Vincent grew up in Boston. His father was a factory worker and his mother was an elementary school teacher and he had two older sisters. The family wasn't particularly rich and while in high school, Vincent maintained odd jobs to help out. His favorite jobs were running various errands and delivering mail and orders, often taking him to new parts of the town. What he really wanted to do though, was to become a police officer and eventually he successfully entered a police academy. During his study years, Vincent met his wife-to-become Sarah Wilson who was running a small shop near Vincent's academy. Vincent never finished his studies at the academy as life led him to help Sarah out with the shop. Life was good back then and the happy couple got three children: two sons and a daughter. In a few years Sarah closed shop to open up a bigger one and Vincent faded away from that business to start up his own detective agency a year later. Sarah's business was good and she was clearly making her way up in the society and a few years later she decided that life with Vincent was too stagnant, so off she went, taking the kids with her because Vincent didn't have the money to raise them. Vincent on the other hand become very fond of his job, even when business wasn't that good. After losing his wife, the agency was all that was left and it kept him going, although he did start smoking, first on bad days and then more regularly. These days Vincent has been in the business for almost fifteen years and while his economy isn't that good, he's still liking what he's doing.

Nature: While his appearance is a little rough, Vincent is actually a smooth talker. He knows his way around the city better than most. These work to his advantage greatly, as he is somewhat of an old-timer, favoring legwork over modern gadgets. He does know his tech, but never feels entirely comfortable around complex machines. While he might not be the most optimistic man when talking about life in general, he does have faith in his own abilities and they often provide results as well. Vincent likes to keep things simple and unpolished, perhaps taking a bit too much of the "film noir" approach to his work which unfortunately drives rich clients to more polished and modern agencies. This doesn't bother Vincent too much though as long as he manages to live off his cases. He takes pleasure from the thrill of going around town and talking to strange people in search of clues as well as

the good old shadowing business. He always keeps with him his black ink pen and notepad which he prefers to use over electric ones, especially because he can flip the pen around in his fingers while pondering. Vincent is not a man of action but if cornered he'll stand up to himself and actually has a pretty sharp right hook. He also carries a gun around for safety but he's barely drawn it outside a firing range. Aside from smoking and using pens as stress toys, Vincent doesn't have any particular vices but he is suspicious of flying and especially airports.

Present: Vincent's latest case was to find a girl who traveled to Norway. He was hired by the girl's father who was worried since he hadn't heard from the girl in quite a while. The girl had indeed run into trouble with local small criminals and was too ashamed to contact her family. Once Vincent found her it was easy to convince her otherwise and a few days later when things were arranged proper, the girl was put to a plane back home. Since this job had paid better than usual, Vincent decided he had the leisure to take a ship back to Boston instead of flying.

Game mechanic specifics

Extra-sensory noise perception

This section aims at clarifying the noise sense of the protagonist. In order to detect his invisible foes, the protagonist has two different kinds of senses. Both of these senses produce noise inside the protagonist's head in the proximity of monsters. Both senses have their own detection areas: the less specific sense detects monsters from a circular radius around the protagonist, while the more precise sense acts much like a direction microphone, generating pulses whenever a monster is exactly or almost directly ahead (see pictures below).

We'll start by introducing the static (static sense from now on). In the following picture, a monster is outside the protagonist's FOV. The noise produced inside the protagonist's head is shown in the graph to the right.

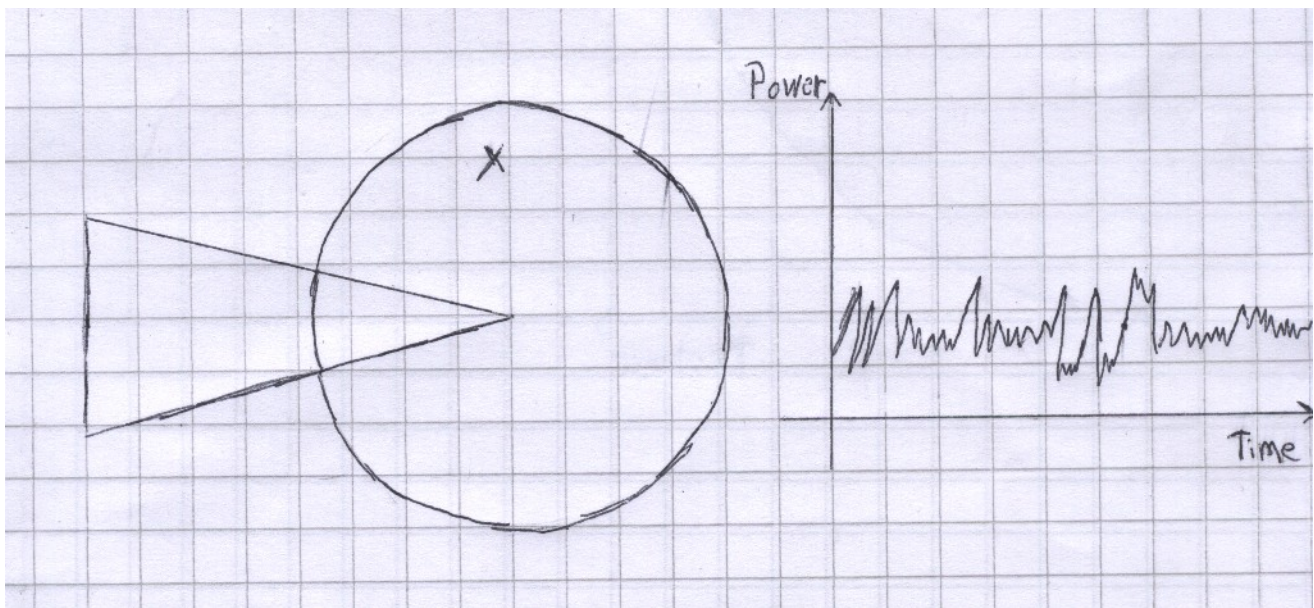


Chart 1: Active static sense

The static noise is relatively weak in power. In other words, the sense is highly vulnerable against external noise sources, making it hard for the player to hear this “warning signal” if there are noisy machines or other sources nearby. In such environments, the protagonist will be vulnerable against attacks from his sides and behind.

Currently I'd consider the static noise to have invariable power. If there is a monster within the sense's radius, then noise will be produced at the same volume. This puts more pressure on the player, because direction and distance cannot be measured from the static in any way. There might be a relatively sharp fadeout at the edge of the static sense area but that should be all.

The more accurate sense is presented by noise pulses. The range of this sense (pulse sense from now on) is longer than the radius of the static sense. This is shown in the charts 2 and 3.

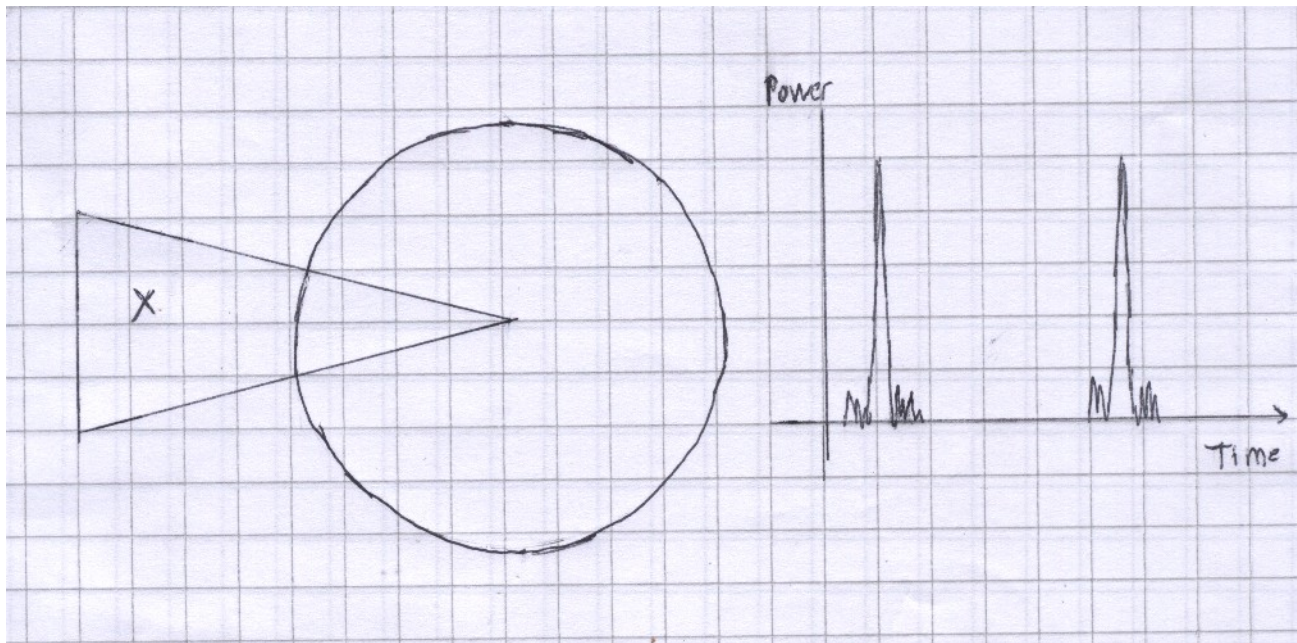


Chart 2: Active pulse sense outside static sense radius

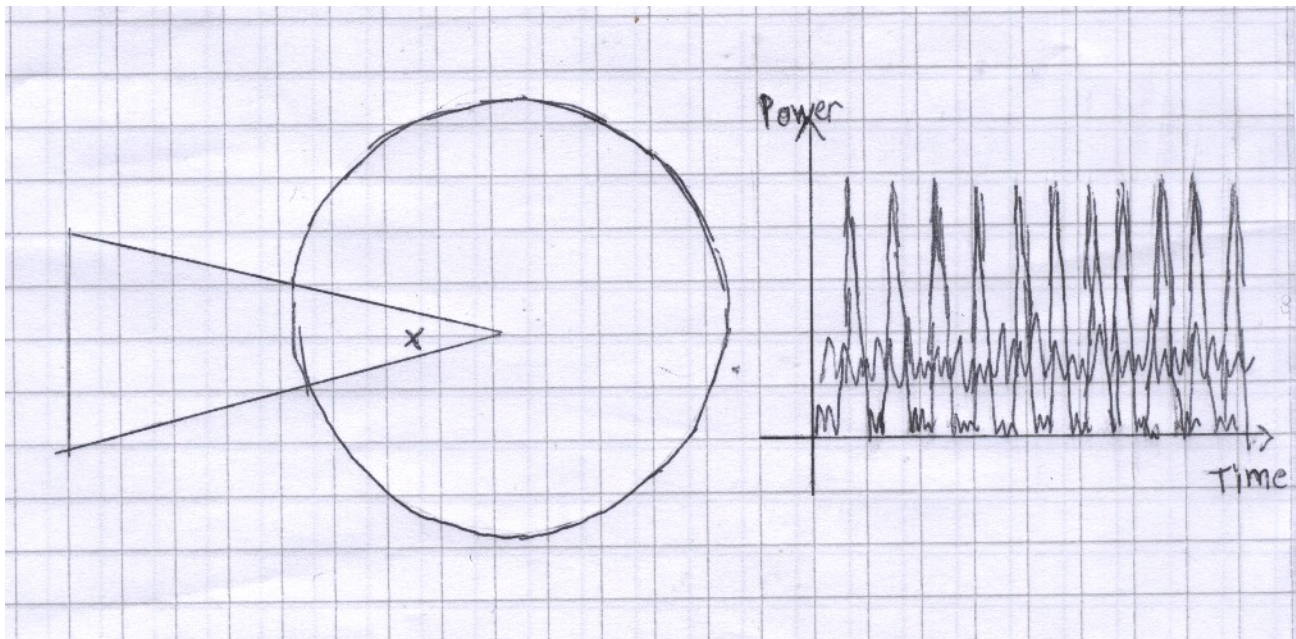
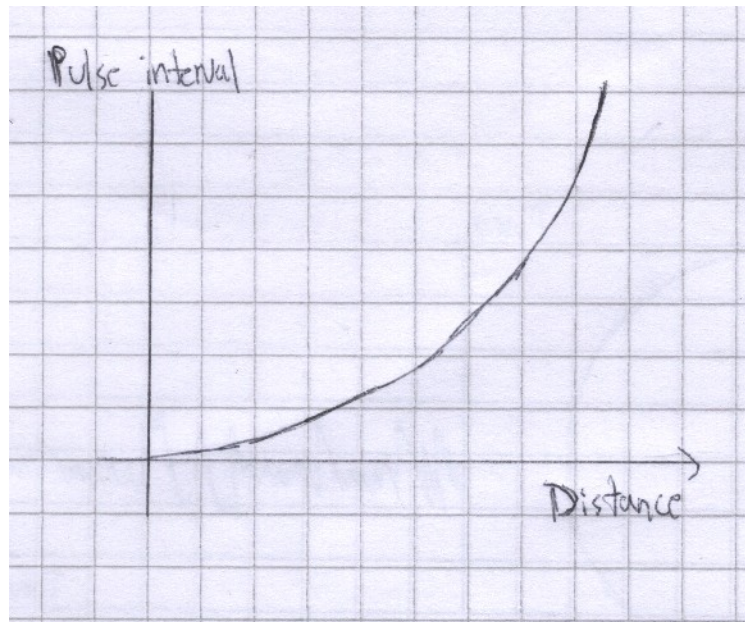


Chart 3: Active pulse sense inside static sense radius

As can be seen, the pulses are much more powerful than the static noise. Another thing worth noticing is the pulse interval which decreases as the monster becomes closer which allows the player to measure distance to some degree. Also, because of this, it is harder to notice a monster from afar because the pulse interval is relatively long; the monster needs to stay inside the pulse sense detection area until one pulse is produced. This way, by looking around quickly, the player may accidentally overlook a monster's position. On the other hand, when the monster gets close and panic ensues, pulses will come very frequently making the monster detectable on a rather quick look-around. Graph 1 illustrates this.



Graph 1: Pulse interval as a function of distance

If desired, the pulse sense could be modified to produce loudest pulses when the monster is directly ahead of the protagonist, and weaker pulses when the angle grows. If this is not technically too challenging, it sounds like a better option than to produce pulses at same volume.

One other thing should be noted as well: these senses should penetrate walls and other obstacles to make them useful enough for the player. Of course, since we are mean, this can be used to create lots of false alarms from monster that can't really reach the protagonist.

As can be seen, there's no numerical data on the graphs yet. Suitable ranges for the senses can be decided at the implementation and testing. It is worth notice that the range is an important factor in level design, so it should still be decided relatively early on and keep fixed from that point on.

Bleeding light

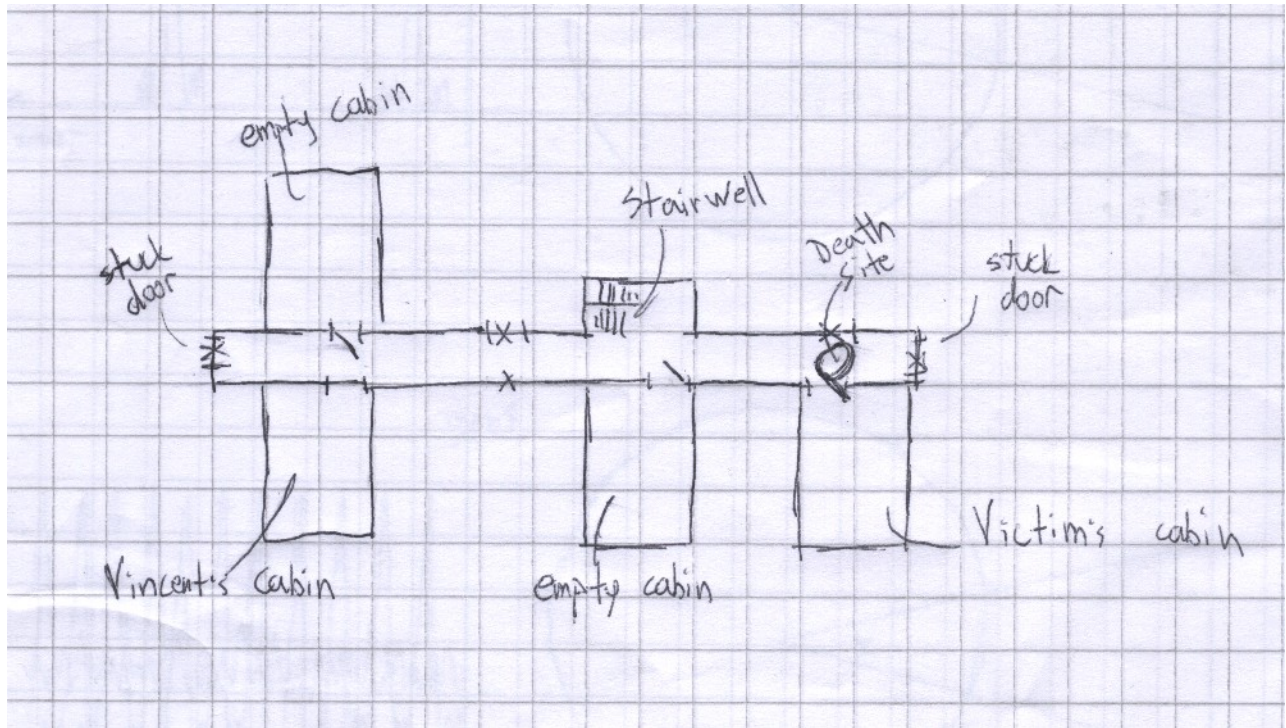
As described in the mythology, the enemies in the game bleed light from their wounds as focused beams. In game terms, this is what makes it easier for the player to mark detected enemies in a way so that they can be perceived more quickly afterwards.

The intended system is relatively simple to describe. There is a core of light inside every creature and once they take damage from anything that'll make holes in their outer shell, a beam of light is projected through said hole, directly away from the core. The light's color can be fitted on the current atmosphere but should not be dependent on the species of enemy, as it is not in our intent to allow the player to recognize enemies.

In the prototype stage this can be demonstrated by an easier method of making the enemies glow some eerie light.

Scene descriptions for the demo episode

Scene 1: Introduction / Corridors of Desolation



Setting: On a deck above the car deck. The area contains Vincent's cabin, a hallway and a stairwell (see rough layout). In both ends of the hallway, massive doors are stuck closed, preventing passage to other departments of the deck. In the hallway there are a total of 7 cabin doors. Two of them are swinging open whereas the rest are stuck closed. Vincent's cabin door is still functioning normally. The stairs leading upwards are blocked by some rubble, so the only way forward is down.

Curiously enough, Vincent's cabin has been left untouched by the dimensional shift and remains as it was before. It's a typical cabin for two people: two beds (on top of each other), a small table (where Vincent's gun is located), a closet for hanging clothes and a bathroom with a shower and a sink. Outside Vincent's cabin the ship looks like it has been laying in the bottom of the sea for several years. Paint on metal doors has peeled off and the carpet-covered floor in the hallway is partly rotten and still soaked in water. For some odd reason, lights are not entirely out but they do flicker a little, sending the hallway into temporary darkness from time to time. The other cabins (which are there merely for adding some atmosphere) look pretty bad: their inhabitants have withered away, lying on the floor along with rotten sheets and blankets, all still damp. Woodwork is twisted.

Scenario: The scene starts on autopilot. Vincent looks around in his room, making the player notice the gun on his table. After looking around for a bit, Vincent steps outside and there's a temporary shock, some blinks. Vincent has time to say "What ... " and then the static noise hits his head, accompanied with a grunt from Vincent. Still in autopilot, Vincent looks around and sees another man entering the hallway from a cabin. Almost immediately after, there pulse noise starts, and the man gets slashed apart. At this point control is transferred to the player and Vincent says "I better get my gun, just in case."

While Vincent is getting his gun, the monster goes inside the dead man's cabin and returns to the hallway a short while afterwards.

The main focus of this scene is for the player to get a feeling of the noise sense. So far, no method for marking the monsters is given but the relatively narrow hallway makes it easier to find the monster. Overall the scene is very linear, an introduction to the threat and some elements of the game.

Scene 2: Car Deck

Setting: In the car deck below Vincent's cabin. For now no sketch is provided, inspiration should be drawn from how real car decks in ships look like inside. Originally the deck was parked full. However, once the shift took place, most cars have been moved as if the whole place had been filled with water and stirred afterwards. Most notable is a huge pile of cars near the staircase where Vincent comes from. Remaining cars form a maze in the middle (exact design left for level designers) with several possible routes through it.

The place is dimly lit, but enough that it's possible to see the whole area after climbing on the huge pile of cars. The lights flicker a bit between dim and brighter. There are small pools of water remaining on the floor and some litter from car wrecks.

Scenario: A short while after Vincent's entry, some cars start to act up. Not all at the same time, but with various intervals, some cars suddenly start up, making engine noises, while others have their alarms suddenly go off. There is one predator in the area and Vincent must make his way through, preferably without being noticed as this one's much tougher than the one encountered in scene 1. Vincent can turn off the cars that are making noises, so that they don't interfere with his noise sense.

The point of this scenario is to familiarize the player with the concept of noise detection and to use it to his advantage when avoiding enemies. The predator moves around, so the player must keep scanning for its location from time to time in order to find a safe route through the maze. Naturally the maze must not be too large, for it will be too easy to go around the predatory monster. Optionally, there can be a few monsters instead of one, two or three maybe. This will make the scene rather challenging already though.

Scene 3: Lobby

Setting: The area is a lobby, spanning several floors (four maybe), connected by stairs and a working elevator (it only goes between two of these floors, top and bottom). The place looks relatively okay, rust and rot aside. The lobby halls are relatively empty, there are just some benches, drink dispensers and such. Most entrances are blocked off – the only one leading out goes to the tax free shop through some café-restaurant. There's some bloody mess on another floor, remnants of a predator's meal. The place itself is fairly lit, more so than previous areas and the lights are functioning quite well, there's little to no flicker.

Scenario: Vincent enters from bottom lobby hall. Immediately upon entry, there's the markup weapon (if the marking system is a weapon that is, if it's something like a psychic power, then it will trigger and become available in this scene) and a weak but fast and small predator in the hall. Using the marking system, the predator should be fairly easy to defeat, the point of this fight is to demonstrate the marking system's usefulness to the player.

A short while after the predator goes down, the ship's intercom flips on. There are speakers everywhere in the lobby, and the intercom is producing static with some noise-ridden pieces of speech. Depending how much work can be put into this, these speech samples could instruct Vincent about how to make the nightmare end, by giving cryptic clues.

The real challenge in this scene is to proceed onward. There is a more dangerous predator wandering the area, on the level where the route forward is located. Vincent needs to either distract it to move away or use his new ability to take it down.

Scene 4: Shopping madness

Setting: Tax Free shop. Shelves are mostly intact, but their contents are definitely not. Glass walls are partly broken, creating another entrance to the shop. The place is fairly lit, and there's a lot of litter from the shelves on the floor.

Scenario: Vincent enters through the broken glass wall, and his goal is to get to the exit. A few steps into the shop, the glass ceiling breaks and a predator drops in. The focus of this scene is a stalking game behind shelves and in tight alleys between them. The predator is quite small and fast, and relatively tough. Once again Vincent can either go around it, or kill it if he still has bullets left.

Scene 5: Random Cabin

Setting: This scene takes place in a corridor on the upper passenger floors. The cabins are larger, designed for first class passengers. Most of the doors are stuck, except two which are located opposite to each other. The area is more lit than the corridor in scene 1 but otherwise relatively similar.

Scenario: Once Vincent gets closer to the open cabin doors, his noise sense naturally goes off. It is left up to the player whether to check the cabins or try to proceed. Either way, in one of the cabins a sole predator is stalking and will come out if Vincent walks past its door, or if he opens the door opposite. Once it comes out, the player can, if he is careful, get a warning from the sound of the door opening. This scene mostly reminds the player to stay sharp at all times – if the predator is not detected in time, it will take Vincent out from behind rather easily.

Scene 6: The Deck / Finale

Setting: This final scene takes place on the deck. The sky is dark but there's a glimmer of light coming from the horizon. Almost everything not bolted to the deck is gone. This is the most open area in the entire ship. Two lifeboats remain, both on one side of the ship, out in the open, in the middle of the ship.

Scenario: The biggest and baddest predator is located here. It's too big to fit into every passageway on the sides of the ship, but the remaining two lifeboats are out in the open where it has access. Vincent's goal is to drop a lifeboat into the sea and get on it, avoiding the predator at all times. If he still has enough bullets left, Vincent can try to kill the predator, making it easier to get that lifeboat out. If not, he has to work quickly: the mechanism holding the lifeboats is stuck, and must be “fixed” first. There's a single crowbar located in the aft deck with which Vincent can “fix” the mechanism with a few sound blows. Once the lifeboat starts to descend, it draws the predator's immediate attention, forcing Vincent to avoid it while waiting for the boat to land beyond its reach.

Alternatively Vincent can locate the last survivor from the topmost deck. If the player has understood the given hints (from the intercom in the lobby) correctly, he'll know that by killing this person, the nightmare will go away. Of course, the survivor is by no means monstrous but actually rather pathetic and entirely innocent, pleading for his/her life if Vincent points a gun at him/her. If the person is killed, all remaining predators from the ship will disappear and Vincent can safely go and land the lifeboat.