Bairro 112

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Interactive Storytelling Art

"This piece succeeds in placing the viewer in uncomfortable immersive situations that communicate well the underlying issues of mental health."

ICIDS 2020 Jury

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Bairro 112: an interactive narrative for mental distress awareness

Abstract

The aim of *Bairro 112* project was to create a virtual experience that focuses on mental issues and suicide awareness, problems that still are somewhat invisible and neglected in our society. Based on a real life experience, with the help of animations, sounds and interactions in a VR environment, this interactive narrative aims to enable users to understand what are early signs of mental distress, and makes one aware of future situations. Using a first-person perspective to achieve an immersive experience, *Bairro 112* manages to pass the most reliable message of this true event, during which the user becomes interested in the narrative that is being told and becomes a part of it. Most of all, *Bairro 112* encourages the audience to pay attention to the ones that live nearby, to one's friends and neighbours, often struggling with one or more problems and issues and giving a hand before it is too late. The experience offered may make everyone more aware of their own responsibility of living in a community.

texts of discomfort

Bairro 112 offers a virtual experience to the users, one in which they become a silent witness in an episode of mental issues and suicide awareness. With the help of animations, sounds and interactions in a VR environment, the user is able to understand what were early signs of mental distress, and hopefully become more aware for future situations. *Bairro 112*, was envisaged by a group of students from the Master of Interactive Media Design programme at the University of Madeira, who were challenged in the class of Interactive Narratives I to create a piece inspired by this year's ICIDS art exhibition theme, Roland Barthes' concept of the Text of Bliss "…the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts… unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions…" (Barthes, 1973, p.14). Therefore, the authors thought about conveying an interactive experience that instead of providing a pleasurable immersive experience would actually raise discomfort to the participant, in a way that makes them feel lost in the darkness. This interactive experience allows the audience to engage in a story that can be your own, a story of a family that isn't perfect in so many ways.

Most of all, one might open one's eyes to see what is hidden behind the appearance's curtain and what causes discomfort in so many of us: loss. By presenting a personal and past experience to the audience in a way that it could help people to gain the ability of not only looking at someone, but really seeing them, as a whole, the authors wish to help the audience to become more aware of problems and situations that each day affect our modern society, although most prefer to ignore them. *Bairro 112* in its narrative unsettles the audience by confronting them with mental problems, depression, suicide, death wishes, and others. By going through this narrative, the participants can gain knowledge or establish connections to some of these situa-

tions which can already be happening around their life and therefore can serve as a warning for future situations. By enabling the interaction with such issues in an interactive and immersive experience, the authors envisage that a closer connection will be established.

The story behind *Bairro 112* is based on a real story event witnessed by one of the artists of this piece, and it retells not only the events of a tragic night when his neighbour decides to take his own life but also several episodes showing what were early signs of mental distress that eventually led up to that tragic night. The narrative is largely based on the true story, however, the characters' names, location and some small details have been modified to respect the privacy of the people involved. The aim was always to try to create an experience similar to the sequence of events as they actually happened in real life. Presenting these events using an interactive approach actually enabled

a more in depth experience as the audience is able to interact with the objects that appear on the scene. This adds another layer of narrative complexity as participants are able to explore the backstory and several moments that led to the present event. In this way, participants can explore the story at their own pace and create a deeper connection with the story characters as they go through it.

The virtual reality narrative uses a first-person perspective to achieve an immersive experience, but uses an 'outsider', almost God-like point of view, of this suicide attempt. The experience takes place inside a bedroom of a housing complex. As the narrative unfolds, the audience becomes aware that they are playing in the shoes of a young teenager who is silently witnessing a suicide attempt of his best friend's father and next-door neighbour. As the events of that night progress, the audience has the ability to recall memories by interacting with objects

texts of discomfort

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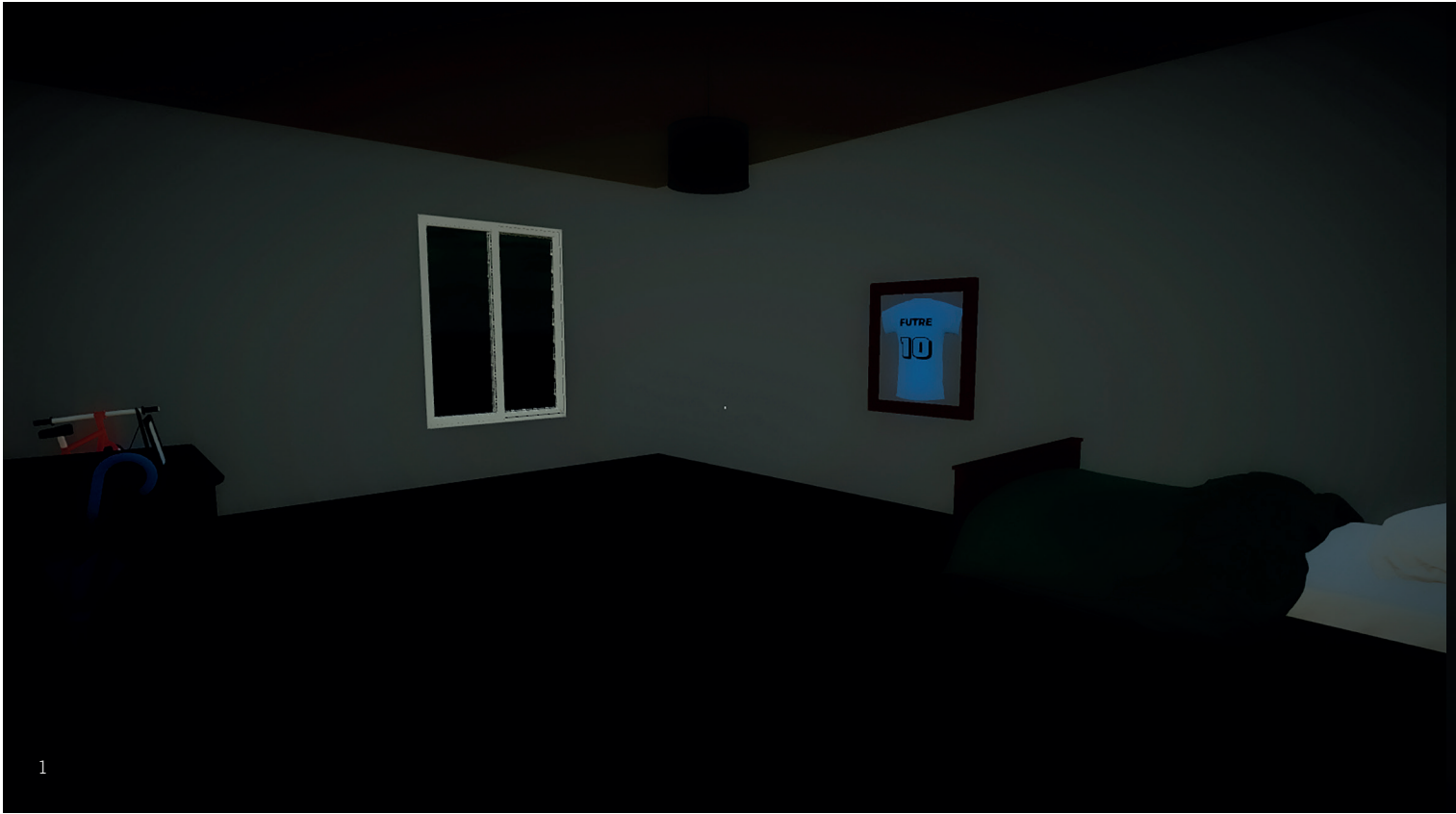
present in the room. Each interactive object is a token of a life event involving the neighbour, see Figure 1 and 2. These events (flashbacks) are presented to the audience by using 3D animations. However, while the audience unravels memories, the present time events continue to develop outside the bedroom window during the

narrative time: these are represented by lights, sounds and dialogues that appear in the walls of the 3D scenario (room), see Figure 3 and 4.

The story takes place during night-time, and the goal was to recreate an ambience and mood close to the real event. Hence, special attention was given to the visual aspects of the

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experience. From the 3D scenario, the colours, the objects that would allow the desired interaction and the sound design. Every detail, from objects used in the scene, the lack of light in the room during the whole experience, the effects used on the models that complement the narrative, was combined to achieve that ghost appearance inside the room. The interactions are phased according to the narrative, so it is not possible to rush the entire story. All sound effects were used to give a bit more life to the spectral figures that appear in the room, giving more emphasis on the story and making it more meaningful and easier to understand. Thus,
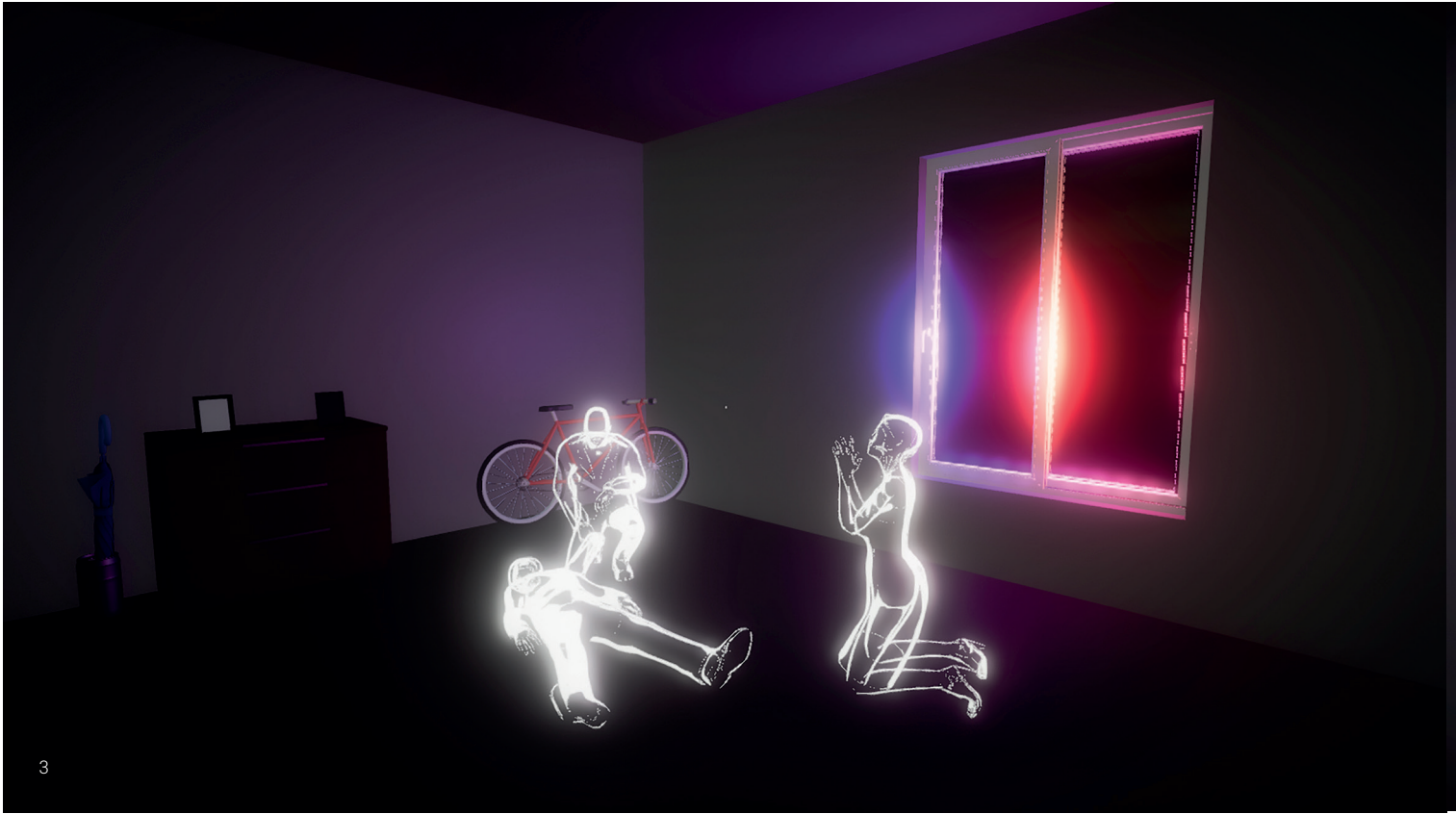
every technical aspect binds together to reinforce and convey the "heaviness" of the situation, feelings like sadness, loneliness, despair and mourning for the character who committed suicide.

As mentioned before, once the audience interacts with an object by clicking on it in the room, it triggers a flashback. This flashback comes to life through an animation with a couple of seconds picturing a life moment where the person who is about to commit suicide crossed paths with the character which the audience is embodying. The animation is represented by white silhouettes almost as if the characters in

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it were holographic ghosts, see Figure 2. Besides these flashbacks that are linked to the room objects, some text is displayed on the walls of the room, giving extra information and context to the narrative events as they unfold. This text is also animated and follows a similar visual style to the flashbacks.

During the events and the interaction of users, the room that seems to be without light provides the mystery of the search for discovery, making the user interested in the narrative that is being told. On one hand, the dark environment of the bedroom conveys a message of sadness which leads the user to feel compassion with

the character and is crucial for the message to be absorbed by the user. On the other hand, the white colour in turn refers to purity, peace and spirituality, arising liberation and inner balance, by the fact that the character who commits suicide, sees that the best way to help his family is to leave this world, so that it does not cause more suffering and anguish for the people he loved.

The narrative uses a screen-based computational VR environment controlled by mouse and keyboard, to achieve a higher sensation of immersion and embodiment in the character's narrative. This screen-based computational VR was chosen to allow an easier accessibility by participants, however authors envisage that a VR headset would potentiate embodiment and immersion in the narrative experience. The project was developed using the Unity game engine as it would provide the support needed to incorporate interactivity and all the media

(sound, 3D animations and interactable objects) that the authors wanted. Also, since it is a free and light game engine, the experience is able to be run almost on any device. All the 3D models were developed using Blender, being a free software and capable of modelling any complex 3D object. Artists started by creating the basic shapes of the characters that had to be highly optimized in order to achieve smooth animations.

The sound design of this narrative had to be carefully designed to mimic the real events of the narrative and thus provide a more emotional experience. The voice-over of this narrative was all recorded with the support of a mobile phone with a microphone and edited in the Adobe Audition software. Some noises and speeches were recorded by the elements of the team. All this was outlined and discussed in group so that a great user experience was possible despite being a sad narrative, managing to communica-

ate the challenging message of this true event. The process of designing this narrative was iterative and involved user testing in the early stages to ensure no errors in the interaction process. This also ensured that the representation of the visual effects, animations and sounds were in perfect sync to convey a better understanding of the whole narrative. The feedback gathered from the testing helped to fine tune any imbalances in the experience.

As so, *Bairro 112* became more than an interactive narrative: this artwork encourages the audience to pay attention to the ones that live nearby, to one's friends and neighbours, often struggling with one or more problems and issues that one might rather ignore in one's selfish assumptions, and giving a hand before it is too late. Especially in a year that was severely marked by a pandemic that made millions of people 'prisoners' in their own houses, isolated, and forcing them to deal with loneliness, health issues and concerns, financial problems, unemployment, even post-traumatic disorders, the authors believe that the message of *Bairro 112* is even more imperative. This kind of experience may serve as a reminder of all those issues and make everyone more aware of their own responsibility of living in a community.

Credits

Sound Design & UI: António Ramos

Programmer: João Freitas

3D Designer: Louis Michael

Producer: Roberto Rodrigues

Music: "We are Echoes" song by Stanley Gurvich

Special thanks to professor Mara Dionísio

References

Barthes, Roland, (1973). *The Pleasure of the Text*. Paris, Editions du Seuil (edition cited 1990, Oxford, Basil
Blackwell)

Images

1. 3D environment where the action takes place, the young boy's bedroom;
2. Right: Interactable object that triggers a flashback memory;
3. Left: Animation of a Flashback Memory;
4. Combination of the animation of a Flashback Memory while the present events unfold and are highlighted by the text on the walls of the bedroom.

António Ramos has graduated in Design through the University of Madeira where he acquired several skills in various areas of Design such as Graphic, Industrial, Web Design. One of the features that Antonio most appreciates is the value attached to the detail and rigor. As a professional, Antonio describes himself as a creative person with great communication skills with a continuous desire to learn.

Louis Michael took an undergraduate course at the University of Madeira, where he developed many skills both on the graphic and 3D levels. It ended up becoming the area of greatest interest, dominating some 3D modulation tools like Blender. Currently, he works at M-ITI as a researcher on a project where the job is to create 3D content and some products. He spent a year working at the Institute, then decided to continue studying and joined the Master Interactive Media Design at the University of Madeira, because he wanted to deepen his skills, this time more focused on Game Design and Interactive Applications.

João Freitas is a Portuguese student currently attending Master's degree in Interactive Media Design at the University of Madeira. His background began with a professional course in Programming after completing his bachelor in Language and Business Studies. João's interest in games made him enrol in the Master to develop new skills in various fields from animating, modelling and storytelling. João always thrives to expand his knowledge in the game development area.

Roberto Rodrigues has been a designer since 1999, developing several works for web and communication companies. Between 1999 and 2013 he worked in the Editorial Art department and Internet department of Diário de Notícias da Madeira and saw his work recognized by the 'European Newspaper Awards' in several design categories. He's currently attending the Master's degree in the Interactive Digital Media course at University of Madeira.