

Water Trembles: Alternative Experiences of Poetry

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Water Trembles is a poetry game, which will be published along with the forthcoming poetry book, *Fast Fire* (Carnegie Mellon University Press). This project is developed by the Burnt Orange Game Lab at Syracuse University, led by Su Hyun Nam, Rainie Oet, and Regan Henley, in collaboration with students in the Computer Art and Animation program. In the game, the main character Gertie, who has locked themselves in their room after their mother died, solves puzzles by collecting poems about memories of their mother. By progressing the game, Gertie completes the poetry book and also takes themselves out to the world ending their isolation. In the process of solving puzzles, the main character encounters illusions and imagined beings in their room – such as a gecko tail key, roly-poly bugs in the closet, and storks in the bathroom.

As a participant engages directly in the decision-making in a structured narrative to complete the poetry book, the game unpacks the protagonist's profound emotion through an exploration of the virtual domestic environment. Such a poetic unfolding of the narrative leaves plenty of room for the player to interpret their encounters and interactions in the game. The background music, designed by Izzy Montoya, amplifies the emotional experience, while setting up the uncanny atmosphere.

The game has eleven puzzles to solve, and at the Frameless Symposium, we will present the first puzzle on a desktop along with a navigable environment in VR.



Fig. 1. A screenshot image from the game play – Gertie's navigation in the room.

I. SIGNIFICANCE OF ITS PRESENTATION

The presentation of this game at the Frameless Symposium is timely as a response to the current situation of the global pandemic. *Water Trembles* is

about the story of the character, Gertie, who experience loss, disconnection, and trauma after their mother died. The game progresses as a player helps Gertie to get out of their room and reconnect with the world by finding all pieces of puzzles (poems) to complete a poetry book. This story should be relatable to anyone going through this time as having disconnected and isolated – also currently reconfiguring the relationship with the world outside of our home.

The development of this game started in early 2020, right before the pandemic outbreak in March 2020. Our plan had to be shifted radically due to the unexpected changes in our life and work environments. By discussing our experience in the unconventional production process, this project would contribute to the conversations of game creators on diverse collaboration methods to overcome physical restrictions in production.



Fig. 2. A screenshot image from the game play – Discovering a page of the poetry book.

II. PRODUCTION

The game engine Unity and 3D graphic software Maya are the primary tools for this project. The team currently explores diverse platforms (from Web GL and desktop to VR) to examine different gaming experiences. While the game is mainly played with a third person controller on a computer to foreground the non-binary protagonist, we are currently pursuing the experiment with the first-hand experience in VR.

Two more puzzles will be completed by the end of this year. The entire game will be officially launched at the time of the book publishing in 2023 .

III. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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