

VIRGINIA

GAME DESIGN ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

Virginia is a narrative and exploration first person game. It takes place in the small town of Kingdom, Virginia in 1992. The player controls an FBI special agent : Anne Tarver. Helped by her colleague Maria Halperin, the player has to investigate on the disappearing of a teenager : Lucas Fairfax.

But at the same time, the FBI also asks Anne to secretly investigate about Maria. The player is plunged into a deep plot, for a 3-hours game experiment.



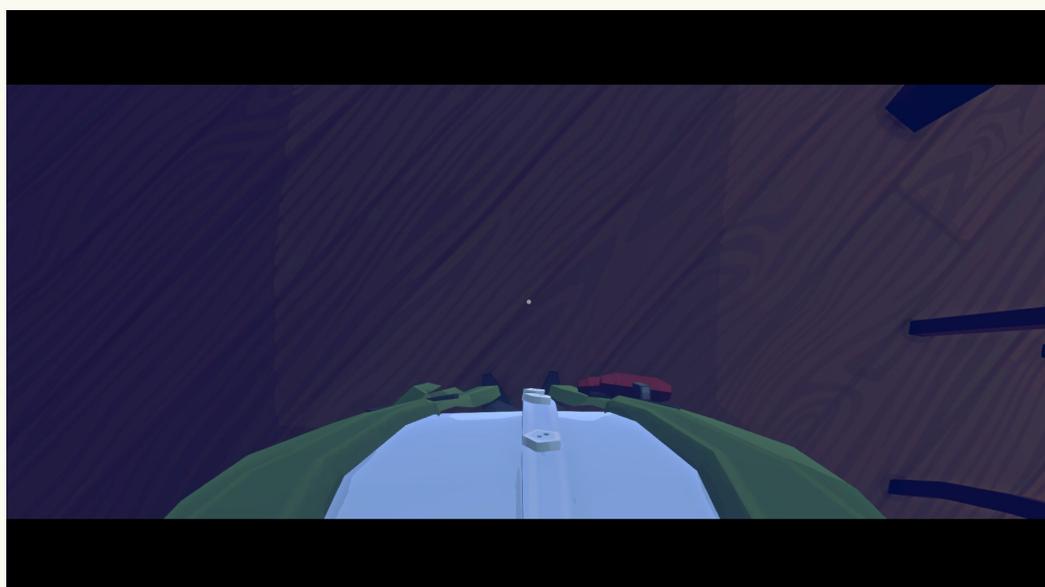
Graphically, Virginia is a low-poly game with narrow color palette, that gives a surreal aspect to the images. Though, the game is very beautiful and we can't deny a strong ambiance coming from that art direction.

The first notable thing is the complete absence of dialogue. That way, all the story is given through narration, player's interactions, character animations and visual clues spread all over the levels. This, underlined by the music, composed by Lindon Holland for the game, which is helping to understand the emotions and ambiances of every scene.

CAMERA

Virginia is a first person game, the camera is subjective and we see through the eyes of Anne.

That camera is wanted very realistic in the range of movements available. Indeed, we can't see the hands of the character all the time and we can turn our head in every directions, we can also see Anne's body if we look down. Those points are uncommon regarding other first person games in which you usually can't see your body and you see your hands as an element of gameplay (in FPS for example).



The camera lets us see the character.

Out of the exploration moments, the camera is often very «directed» and focuses the player's attention on a specific thing. We can't move it then.

CAMERA

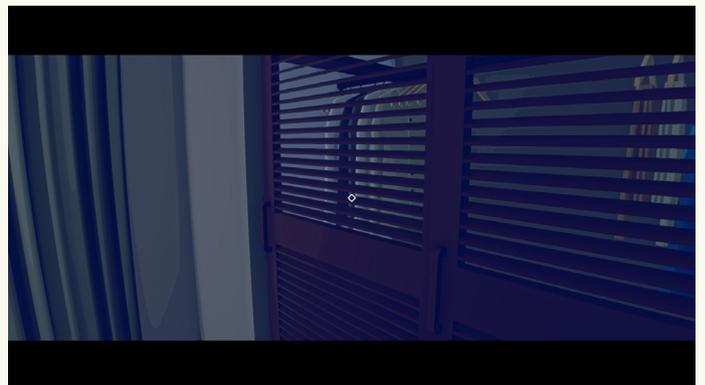
The HUD is very minimalistic as we only see a white dot to target point. This dot becomes a square when there's something we can interact with such as a person or an object, as we can see on the following screenshots.



No possible interaction.



Possible interaction, but too far away.



Possible interaction.

CHARACTER

The player embodies Anne Tarver, an FBI agent. We can't see her face very often. Yet, we discover her at the beginning of the game because the first playable scene places us in front of a mirror. That way, the player quickly understands who they're playing : a black woman, fairly young. In that same scene, she receives her badge as a special agent, which informs us about her job. The free camera movement we talked about before sometimes give information about Anne's identity such as her insign or the way she dresses up.

It is important to notice that at some moments, the player controls another character than Anne, especially at the end of the game, when we change from character to another very quickly. Having those information about who we're playing is a significant aspect.



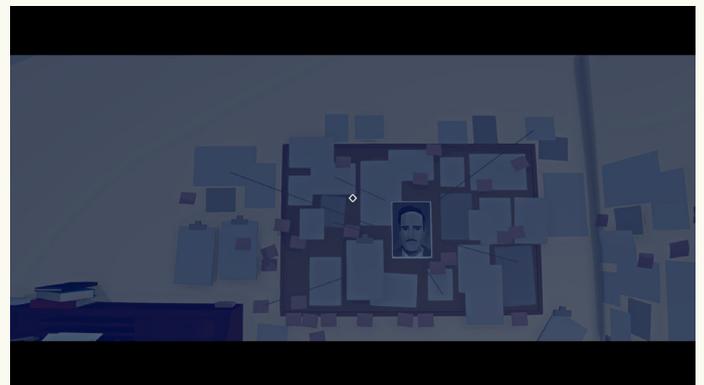
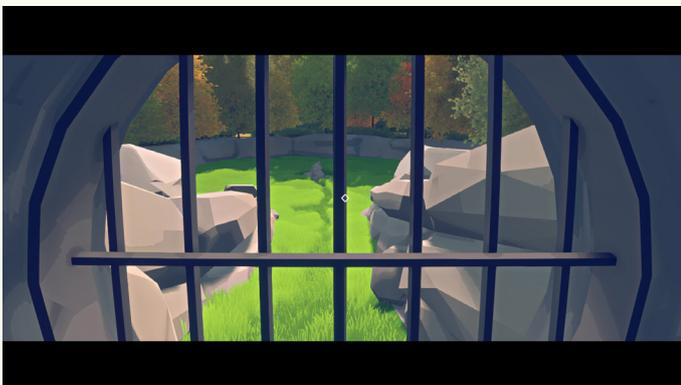
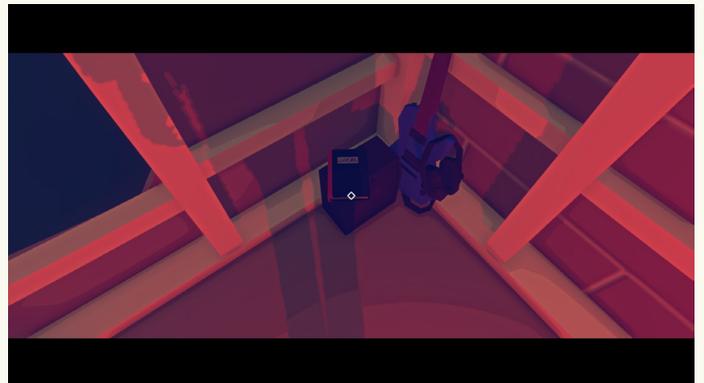
The player can see themselves in the mirror.

CONTROLS

Virginia uses the usual controls for most first person game :

- W, A, Z and D to move in space.
- The mouse axis to look around.
- Left-click for every interactions.

The left-click is the only possible interaction for the player. It allows several actions following what is the cursor on (read a document, open a door, pick up a book etc.).



Glimpse at different possible actions (very different one from another, yet controlled by the same user-input)

OBSTACLES

As a narrative game, Virginia does not show proper obstacles. Getting to the end doesn't require any specific dexterity or rapidity skills. The interaction indication is very clear and even an unexperienced gamer can go till the end. Even if the player doesn't choose the interactions that make the story continue, they have the choice of the moment they'll click. They can consequently form their own game rythm. In the meantime, they can explore and focus on the background, on details put everywhere to make sens.

Indeed, it is highly necessary to put efforts of interpretation to understand the scenario. The game indeed gives the player a lot of clues, a lot of keys to understand what is it really about but it doesn't necessarily explain them or gives them in the «right» order. Which is at first very disconcerting and demands an intellectual effort to put in. We have to observe, think and deduce what is the meaning of Virginia.

GOALS

The goal changes regarding the scene the player's in. A the beginning, we can believe the goal is to investigate about the disappearing of Lucas and Maria, our partner but very quickly, Anne's dreams interfere with reality and the wolrd become strange. We try to know what is true, what is false, to know what is real and what comes from a dream, we try to know why is the FBI investigating on Maria. The narration is so broken we don't really what we're looking for. It makes sense because that is also the confusion in which Anne is drowning. The narration compensates the absence of dialogues that way.

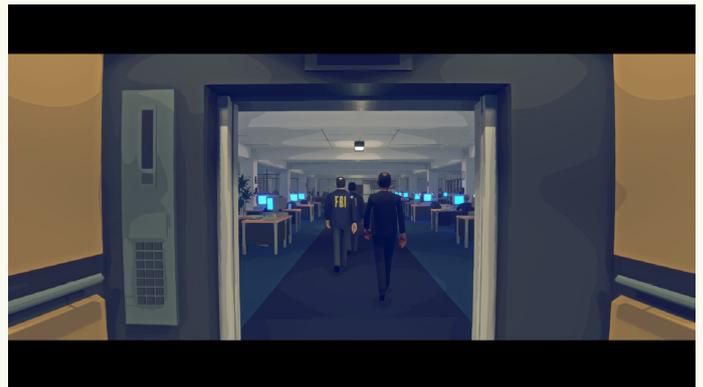
We can also notice the achievements in the game, unlocked as the game goes on but there's also secondary goals, very mysterious for most of them.

	Aleph Retirez votre pied de mon cou	Débloqué le 30 oct à 1h06
	Nuit rouge Il n'y a pas de passagers dans le vaisseau spatial Terre. Nous sommes tous des membres d'équipage.	Débloqué le 31 oct à 2h52
	Madame Pour les vendeurs uniquement	Débloqué le 30 oct à 1h36
	Béatrice Seulement pour les oiseaux	Débloqué le 30 oct à 1h36
	Mausolée Durch die Blume gesprochen	Débloqué le 30 oct à 1h43
	Iris Faites ce que vous pouvez pour Edith Fairfax. Un peu de bonté peut dire beaucoup.	Débloqué le 20 nov à 18h47
	Route morte Le pilote arrive, et tire le petit levier. Teuf-teuf! Tchou tchou! On y va!	Débloqué le 31 oct à 2h21
	Benway Le vrai navire est le constructeur de navires	Débloqué le 31 oct à 2h35
	Meda Beta vulgans	Débloqué le 30 oct à 1h41

A VERY CINEMATIC GAME WITH A STRONG POLITIC ASPECT

The first thing we notice is a very «lynchean» mise en scène, that includes dreams in reality. It creates a surprise regarding the principle of levels that you can finish and go to another in most games. In Virginia, you can't control what will happen next, will it be real or not and a level can be cut at any moment so the levels serve the story despite its holes.

The very cinematic aspect is especially assumed by the creators who, in the credits, introduce themselves as «directors». The game is made to be run at 30fps (if the player tries to change, the game reminds him that it was made to be 30fps) which is very close to the cinema framerate at 24fps. Moreover, the format is a cinemascope format (1:2.38 instead of the usual 16:9). Very often, the camera is directed, which creates an impression of framing. Finally, and even if the player can control the camera, the backgrounds are made a way it always gives an impression of framing (especially because of the repetitions in the backgrounds (a lot of vertical and horizontal lines). We observe a lot of «overframes» (frames created by the backgrounds) in the image.



*The format is generally a cinema one.
The horizontal and vertical lines are very significant and create overframes.*

The game also takes place in its backgrounds (the player can explore or not) and develops a strong political speech (we observe feminists and anti-racism movements posters). This is also appears through the choice of making the protagonists two black women.



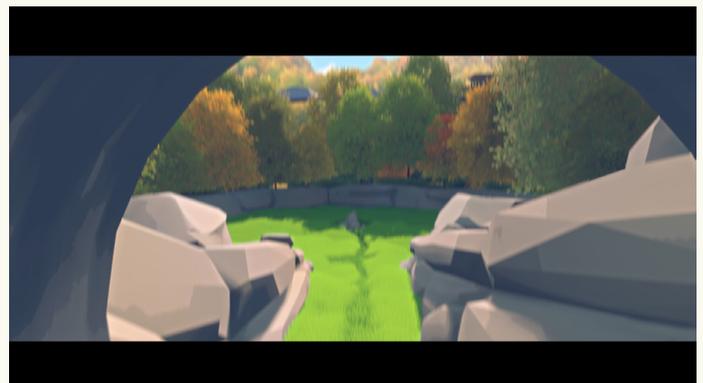
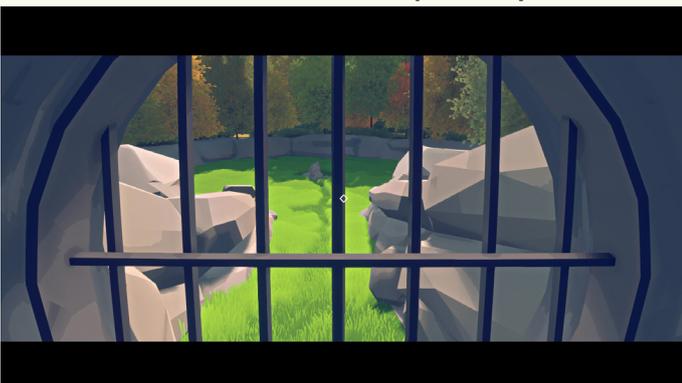
Posters that make a lot of sense and inform the player about Maria. But they can see it only if they pay attention to the backgrounds.

This is underlined by the restricted gameplay with a limited range of action, that is also the feeling of the special agents we play in the big industry the FBI is. The idea of imprisonment can also be seen, once again, in the backgrounds. Indeed, we only see very closed interiors (with the camera perpetually creating overframes that imprison the character), with grids at every window or very limited exterior sceneries (fences and rocks).



A perpetual feeling of imprisonment emerge from Virginia.

We can also notice that you only see yourself in mirror, which is an overframe by itself. The scenes in which we are freier (in particular, the scene that shows friendship between Maria and Anne) are distinguished by the absence of frames (the observatory for example) or a symbolic destruction of the past imprisonment.



For the political speech, we can notice that the power is represented by five white guys (the FBI head, the soldier, the pastor, the politician and the sheriff). They are the ones that literally imprison Anne and create a suspicion-based relationship between the two women (that are very alike actually and have a very similar story).



The five antagonists are white men.

The game takes place in a week and is cut in scenes, indicated by intertitles (Monday, Tuesday etc). The Monday works as a introduction scene (we see a introduction of the main character and what will be her goal even if the player can't understand it at the moment) and the conclusion is announced at the very beginning of the Saturday.



Monday's intertitle.

Narration of the game works really as if it was edited because being cut in the middle of an action happens really often as if we were submitted to a stronger force.

The cinematographic aspect is also seen in the impression of «shots», indeed, in numerous parts of the game, either the camera or the character can't move (for example in the car, you can't just open the door and run away, you're stuck to your seat), which has a consequence of giving the player a point of view on things regarding their proximity, which is very important. As an example, our meetings with the FBI chief are always in very rooms (audience room, very big office), in the game we have to go to this places so when we enter the place, we have a very large view, a very large shot until we walk to meet him. But the scenes with Maria are completely different, the player often sees her in the car, in which the two characters are very close and Anne's point of view creates a close-up on Maria and that is the case for almost every scene with Maria, even if we do a long walk to her, we'll always see her very closely as the game wants us to see her to create an intimacy or not with the characters.

The music is also very important, generally created by a leitmotiv that varies following the ambiance and emotion in the scene. It gives the player clues about what the player is supposed to feel in a special scene. It also makes reference to the music of Twin Peaks, the David Lynch series.



Comparison between the shots dealing with the FBI chief and Maria.

CONCLUSION

Despite its cinematic aspect, the «game» aspect is still interesting, indeed, Virginia asks the player to put effort to get what it is about : we talked about the exploration part, and the ellipsis and confusion between dream and reality. The «game» aspect implies responsibility from the player, they are the one that choose to click or not and they can feel proud or guilty of some of the actions.

The game does not include any dialogues and a very big part of the story passes through the images (animations, backgrounds), which could answer the one big rule in cinema «don't tell, show». But, in opposition with movies, in which the spectator observes, in Virginia, the player go to seek informations. That brings a new way to tell a story, implying the receiver of the story, who immediately feels committed, in a way more important degree than if they were a simple spectator.

