

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Atomic Vacation is a trans-media narrative game/melodrama with both a virtual reality, a mix of computer graphic imagery and 360 video (for Oculus Rift/Samsung Gear), and online play. It tells the story of Shizuku, a little robot girl, who speaks from the near-future as the lone inhabitant of a rocket ship on a mission to find habitable planets. A devastating nuclear war on Earth causes a secret program to run in her software—a video farewell message from “Ray,” the woman who was hired by the government to teach the AI how to be “human.” Shizuku learns that the military, fearing that Shizuku had become too “attached” to her teacher, erased all memories of her just before the robot was sent out into space. The video prompts Shizuku to search for and attempt to recover other pieces of her memory connected with Ray and Earth which have been erased. Through a time-limited interaction with an excess of data objects housed in an 1950’s style house, the visual representation of Shizuku’s “mind,” the user helps her recall her life on Earth. The result is a fascinating exploration of personal memories (video, image, text), philosophical and historical information, and detritus of pop-culture. By playing the game, the user not only pieces together Shizuku’s story, she explores her own beliefs about what it means to be human.

ABOUT THE CHARACTER

You will play Riyoko— “Ray” for short, a beautiful, very smart, Japanese-American neurologist hired by DARPA (The Defense Advanced Research Projects agency) to teach Shizuku how to be “human.” Born in the U.S. to a Japanese father (who was burned during the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as an infant) and American mother (who died when Ray was young), you have always struggled with identity. Taught Japanese as a child, you remember little of it. You rebel against conventional notions of femininity even as you are aware of your own attractiveness. You are aggressive, use your intelligence like a knife and curse too much. Underneath, you are sensitive and caring. Shizuku, this hyper-intelligent “child” robot further complicates your own questions about identity. Her innate disrespect of conventional boundaries appeals to you as does her intelligence. You see her as “free” in a way that you have always wanted to be.

You meet her first in a robotics lab in Osaka where she is “born.” Returning to Washington, you spend months with her teaching her to “be” human through poetry, dance, film. You see these art forms anew, through her un-jaded eyes, and rediscover a wonder about the world that you thought you would never experience again. Climate change, terrorism, and outbreaks of new infectious diseases seem to herald the end of the world. Eventually, over the objections of your fiancée, who is becoming a little jealous, the administrators of the mission suggest that Shizuku move in with you in the hopes that this will speed up the learning process and allow the mission to begin sooner. However, after analyzing her neural networks, they realize that the robot has begun to organize her thought processes around you— a process that is not unlike falling in love or an infant’s relationship to its mother. You, too, have become attached to this entity which looks physically like a ten year old girl, but is mentally superhuman. After a near disastrous outing with her, your bosses begin to question whether your own feelings toward her have clouded your judgement. At the urging of your fiancée who also works on the project, you are fired from it, and instructed never to interact with the robot again.

You read your fiancée's paternalism as betrayal and break up with him. You take some time off alone to recover from all these losses. But, Shizuku, hacks your phone, and, wrapping herself up in Saran-wrap to protect herself from corrosion, finds her way to you as you sit on the sand, contemplating your life. As the sun sets, the two of you have a final conversation about the future and what it means to be human. You suspect you will never see her again. The next week, you return to D.C. to have a final debriefing with your bosses. You unexpectedly run into Shizuku in the hallway, but she does not recognize you. You understand that they have erased all memories of you. You ask the Japanese programmers to insert a program into Shizuku that will play only if all communication from Earth ceases. It is essentially a doomsday video in which you say goodbye to her and to the whole planet. This is the video that initiates the game.

ABOUT THE JOB

All of these videos are meant to be Shizuku's own recordings of her surrounding, as such they will have purposefully low production values in a cinema verité style. They will be shot in 360 video. You will be in "dialogue" with a text to speech program that will act as the stand in for the robot girl. Depending on how poorly the sound is picked up, it may require re-dubbing some scenes. The scenes are brief, only a few minutes long, as the videos are meant to be recovered, partial data. These videos are crucial to the project. They provide the game player with an emotional connection to a highly fragmented story. Like melodrama, they are meant to be seductive and draw the game player in. But, unlike conventional film, when the video begins, the user is actually transported through the magic of 360 video into that time and place. These videos will not only appear in the VR "game," they will also be housed in an online "mind-map," a hyperlinked data visualization of Shizuku's mind with which users can interact.

I would like to film scenes on location at a beach, a robotics lab in NYC, Washington D.C. , a local wedding dress store (this may be in Rhinebeck, NY) as well as an apartment in N.Y.C. All costs of transportation, meals, and, if required, accomodation will be paid for. The full day rate for this is \$400 dollars for 8 hours or \$50/hour for a short shoot. (FYI: The SGA day rate for ultra-low budget film is \$125 not including pension and health insurance additional.)

Timing—my plan is to start shooting in the last week of August and completing it by October. We will do it to fit your schedule. I believe in a very open collaboration. I welcome input/criticism/suggestions from you to make this project great. This is a labor of love and experimentation and I hope it will challenge and excite you.

VR SCENE 1 "HOME"

This scene is inspired by Douglas Sirk's 1950's melodramas, Alan Turing's Imitation Game, and Kubrick's 2001 A Space Odyssey. Recall that at the end of *2001 : A Space Odyssey*, the astronaut resides in a house that is both familiar and strange. The rococo interior mixes present, idealized past, and future into a strange non-place. In *Atomic Vacation*, this non-place of memory is realized in VR as a 1950's domestic space. It is the "home" that Shizuku will never have, which she has curated from watching old American movies in an attempt to understand the most obvious patterns of human emotion.

In this space, we will challenge the user's conventional notions of space and place through form: by playing with scale, mixing 2d and 3d objects, and through content: by mixing past, present, and future in the narrative and disparate data objects. This confusion of time-space is

held together through formal constraints: the clock counting up to midnight and the room from which the user cannot “escape” until time runs out.

This work constitutes a ground-breaking “literary” experiment—to make the landscape and game function as a character. Shizuku’s mind is the room that the user explores. Why is Shizuku doing this? Although the user will glean hints from gameplay. Her motivation can be read in many different ways. Perhaps she is hoping that helping retrieve information may alter her fate and perhaps the player’s own in some way. Or, perhaps she is mourning the loss of her teacher/friend Ray and wants to recover those memories, or perhaps, she is a petulant child with super-intelligence who has more sinister motives. Or, maybe she is just playing her own game out of boredom.

I am interested in the idea that identity and construction of “self/other” is a kind of proprietary database, which then determines how we see the world. The player will learn that this is precisely what happened to Shizuku on Earth as she unexpectedly begins to organize her thoughts and form a nascent “self” in relation to Riyoko. Given that Shizuku is not human, she does not recognize human delineations or etiquette, thus the conflation of mother/beloved is perverse in human terms, but not in her terms. This loosening of conventional boundaries is meant to make the player uncomfortable.

Thematically, *Atomic Vacation* is an exploration of changes in the perception and construction of human identity in an ever more virtual, data-driven, disembodied world. It asks what are the limits of human identity psychologically and epistemologically? What happens when simulation/tele-presence replaces embodied experience? What happens to ethics/compassion in such a world, and how do we re-relate to our primordial home, the Earth? The goal of the work is to create the opportunity for players to begin to think critically about these questions through gameplay itself.