THE ART OF NORCO

Pixels, photographs, research, and other ephemera behind the creation of the game

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I grew up in Norco, Louisiana, and though it's been many years since I've lived there, I have a strong connection to the town. Most of my family remains in Norco, many of my memories were created there, and it's a place that I will always return to.

I've been a casual observer of this project since it started, occasionally contributing art and feedback, but at enough of a remove to provide an outsider's perspective when needed. When Yuts approached me about creating this volume it made sense to me and I was excited to take it on. I hope that the following pages will provide some additional context to the game, allow you to get to know some of the characters better, and give insight into the process that went into bringing this project to life.

Megan Acosta
Lead Designer & Editor

THEMES

Norco is a small, heavily industrialized community in Louisiana upriver from New Orleans. The area was once plantation land that petroleum companies purchased cheaply in the early part of the 20th century, the town's name itself being an acronym for "New Orleans Refining Company." Sharecroppers and formerly enslaved people who settled in these areas became the unwitting neighbors of petroleum refineries as the facilities expanded.

This pattern of industrial development–in which facilities blossom in the historical footprint of the plantation economy–is common in the region. It has led to the phenomenon of "fenceline communities," neighborhoods that are immediately adjacent to an industrial site and directly affected by its operations. The Diamond neighborhood of Norco was one such community before Shell agreed to finance their relocation to other parts of the region following a decades-long campaign by local residents. The neighborhood of "Dimes" featured in the game is inspired by this history.

The density of industry along the Mississippi River is linked to high incidence of cancer. The region is often referred to as “Cancer Alley.” Toxic effluents from the industry in this area enter the region’s waterways, leading to a heavy concentration of mercury and other heavy metals in the soil, water, and seafood that residents consume. There are also regular emissions violations at the various facilities, resulting in poor air quality. The health impacts of these and other conditions are explored in the game through Catherine and Duck’s ailments.

Shell Norco Refinery Expands

Major Units to Produce in '54

heir tongue-twisting names are kylation," "catalytic cracking," lymerization," and "vacuum thing" — they're synonyms for thern industrial progress in pe-leum refinery equipment.

Tiese new and modernized units refining oil, situated at Shell Company's Norco refinery, are t of an expansion program that nbolizes basic changes in Lou-na's skyline—changes that are tributing to a more balanced thern economy.

art of a petroleum industry ex-sion that has helped the South gain the rest of the nation in ny phases of industrial growth, units under construction at Nor- will begin operation during 1954, ording to Shell's refinery man-r. P. E. Hurley.

onnage Boost

hat does this kind of industrial wth mean to New Orleans?

he expansion at Norco will in-ase by 50 per cent the petrole- products shipped by the com-pany from the New Orleans area, Hurley says. For New Orleans, this means another boost to the ever-growing tonnage shipped through its port.

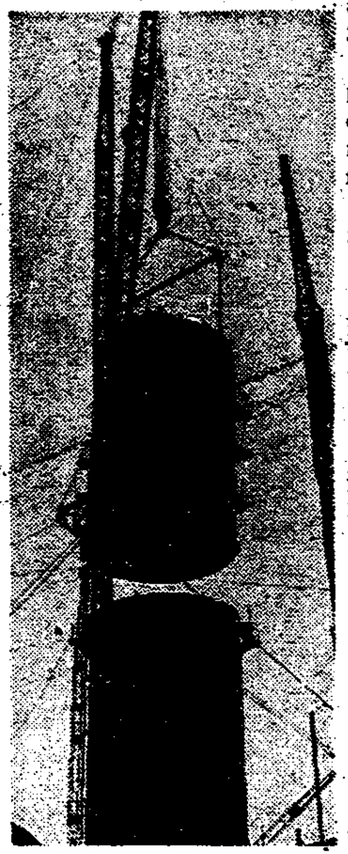
Its means brand new pay rolls for the area. An expected 50 per cent increase in employment will have been made at Shell's Norco refinery when new and improved units go on steam. Because men must be trained and crews readied months before new units are fired up, this new employment program is now virtually completed.

It means employment over a long period for additional hundreds of local carpenters, pipe fitters, cement finishers, iron workers, painters, and electricians, during the construction. These scores of New Orleans craftsmen, both at the refinery site and for off-site subcontractors, will accomplish many jobs unique in the history of the city's industrial growth.

New Total Output

Made possibl ein large part by the company's increased production of crude oil in Louisiana during the past few years, Shell's Norco expansion program climaxes 27 years of steady growth from an original daily output of some 630,000 gallons of products to its present 2,100,000 gallons.

The expansion will boost this to a new total output of more than 3,150,000 gallons of products.



PART OF A catalyst hopper is swung into position at Shell Oil Company's expanding Norco refinery. When the current multi-million-dollar expansion program is completed, production of petroleum products will be increased by 50 per cent to 3,150,000 gallons daily.

The Norco refinery expansion program means work for many other Louisiana industries too; manufacturers of forest products, for example.

To support concrete foundations for the refinery's new giant processing units, which rest on the soft alluvial soil laid down through the centuries at Norco by the meandering Mississippi, 6500 wooden pilings were driven into the ground. Most of the pilings are from surrounding Louisiana timberland.

A job of fantastic proportions when broken down into small elements, the refinery expansion includes such items as 3178 tons of structural steel, 27,500 cubic yards of concrete, and 8000 valves of all types and sizes, to be used on hundreds of miles of pipes.

Why these mountains of equipment?

Supply Products

The "cat hoppers," one type of the many units under construction, will be 104 feet high, the height of a 9-story building; another type, a condenser unit, will have a foundation containing 830 cubic yards of concrete, enough concrete for the foundations of 40 five-room houses.

The completion of Shell's Norco expansion program, Hurley points out, will signal the beginning of the refinery's real task in Southern industrial expansion: To supply products for every conceivable kind of industry, many operating for the first time in Louisiana this year, as well as to satisfy continued increasing demands for petroleum products made by other consumers.

One of the new industries will be started by Shell itself. The company's expanding refinery will supply base stocks for an addition to the New Orleans petrochemical family—a new plant to be constructed by Shell Chemical Corporation this year on a site near the Norco refinery, to produce compounds used in the manufacture of glycerine.

At the expanding refinery the new facilities will allow the complete manufacture of high octane aviation fuel for the first time there, in addition to the various grades of gasoline and oils, kerosene, asphalt, and other petroleum products already shipped by Shell from New Orleans.

Modern Look

To handle increased product shipments, many of which now pass through the city's port facilities, the Norco docks have been extended to handle additional barges and tankers. More than 300 barges will tie up eac at the Norco wharf, as many ocean-going tankers

In New Orleans, along refinery expansion now u at Norco, the company completed a service sta modeling program that h a new modern look to mar city's street corners. In modeling plans special e was put on improved au approaches to make eve sible contribution to traffic destrian safety.

At Shell's refinery, th neers expect to fold up blueprint—it took some 10 prints alone for just one units now under construc some time this year. T have completed, according co manager P. E. Hurley, we've wanted to tackle fo and a job we feel has mad contribution to Southern in

Safety Record Spur Awards

Traffic safety awards w sented by the National Council to 10 Louisiana mu ties which had no traffi ties within their corporat during 1953.

The municipalities were der, Jennings, Morgan Cit ville, Plaquemine, Rayne, Thibodaux, Ville Platte an field.

SERVING NEW ORLEANS AND THE DEEP SOUTH . . .
PITTSBURGH TESTING LABORATORY
ESTABLISHED 1881
INSPECTING ENGINEERS and CHEMISTS
NEW ORLEANS OFFICE: 1500 CARONDELET
NEW ORLEANS 13, LA.
LAKE CHARLES BATON ROUGE MOBILE

There's GAS IN

SHELL TO ERECT CHEMICAL PLANT

Building to Be Started Soon at Norco

A new plant will be erected near New Orleans by the Shell Cemical Corp. for the production of allyl chloride and epichlorohydrin to increase the company's glycerine production by approximately 25 million pounds a year, Richard C. McCurdy announced Wednesday.

Construction will start immediately near the Shell Oil Company's refinery at Norco which is presently undergoing an expansion program to increase facilities by 50 per cent, McCurdy said. The plant is expected to be completed in late 1954.

McCurdy said the output of the plant will add substantially to America's supply of glycerin and epon resins. It is the first step in the company's current glycerin expansion program.

The Norco chemical plant on an entirely new site is designed to operate in conjunction with Shell Oil refinery there and will use propylene and other feed stocks that it produces.

The new plant will employ about 150 persons initially.

McCurdy said that Shell Chemical Corp. in 1948 produced the country's first commercial quantities of synthetic glycerin from petroleum raw materials and now supplies more than 20 per cent of the American market.

A company spokesman said that cost of the new plant was not available Wednesday.

EXPLOSION AT NORCO

Boom! Shock wave became talk of the town

By JOHN POPE
Staff writer

Burglar alarms went off in Houma.

Storefront windows shattered in downtown New Orleans.

And Chalmette residents ran out into the night to look to their own refineries, fearing that the blast was in their back yard.

The 3:30 a.m. explosion at the Shell Oil refinery in Norco sent a shock wave across metropolitan New Orleans, shaking houses and jolting thousands of people from their sleep. By morning, the area's rude awakening had become the talk of the town, as people traded stories about their reactions to the blast.

But at the time it occurred, most were not sure what was happening. Many of them, veterans of such disasters as hurricanes or a grain-elevator explosion, woke up afraid.

"My wife thought it was a burglar or something, so I got my gun and went outside. When I got outside, everyone else was out there looking toward Tenneco, so I put my gun away," said Roy Dalessandro, 42, of Chalmette.

Dalessandro figured it couldn't be the Tenneco Oil refinery in Chalmette or the Murphy Oil refinery in Meraux because explosions there would have broken his windows.

'It's such a tremendous amount of energy in the explosion, it's going to travel a much greater distance than a normal sound. . . . It's almost a seismic wave or shock wave.'

Rober H. Morriss, Tulane physics professor

Residents of Chalmette, about 35 miles east of Norco, are no strangers to refinery explosions. In August 1983, a Tenneco worker was killed in an explosion and fire that raged for 16 hours.

In Houma, about 30 miles southwest of the Norco refinery, the blast set off burglar alarms and rattled the steel doors of the jail, said Maj. Douglas Chauvin of the Terrebonne Parish Sheriff's Office. Chauvin, though, admitted he slept through the tumult.

Windows were shattered at some businesses in New Orleans, and burglar alarms went off throughout the area.

On a normal night, Main Electronics of Metairie never gets more than 10 automatic calls from security systems, said Ray Main, its president. But after the explosion, the switchboard received nearly five dozen automatic calls, he said.

Robert H. Morriss, a physics professor at Tulane University, said the wide range of forceful impact shouldn't be surprising.

"It's such a tremendous amount of energy in the explosion," he said. "It's going to travel a much greater distance than a normal sound. . . . It's almost a seismic wave or shock wave because it has so much energy, like a sonic boom."

Damage is to be expected, he said, "because when sound impinges on anything, the energy causes it to vibrate back and forth."

Closer to the explosion, residents reported different reactions to the blast.

In Destrehan, Tianna Stanek said she heard rumbling and thought a plane had crashed in her back yard — until she looked outside "and the sky was really red."

Like many of her neighbors, Stanek and her husband pulled on clothes and ran into the street to reassure each other and compare the sketchy information they could piece together.

When the Staneks went back inside, they realized their 3-year-old daughter, Amanda, had slept through it all.

"I don't know how," Stanek said.

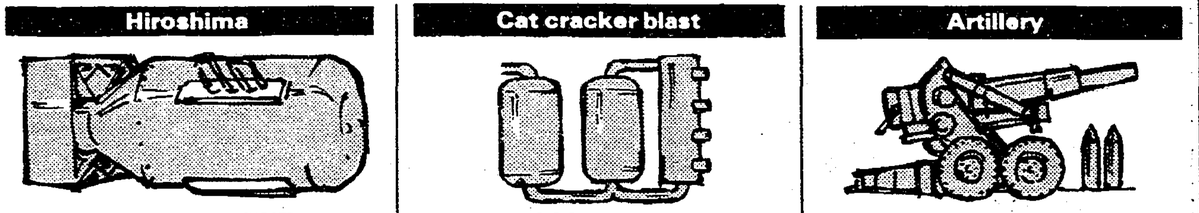
When the explosion jolted Teddi Touchard awake, the Luling woman didn't have time to react.

"My cat, who usually sleeps at the foot of the bed, leaped up and landed on my chest," Touchard said. "My bed has a big headboard, and the building shook so much that the headboard came forward and hit me on the head."

Unlike most other people, who initially thought they might have heard an airplane crash, an especially loud clap of thunder, a shootout or a massive piece of furniture thudding to the floor, she knew exactly what must have happened.

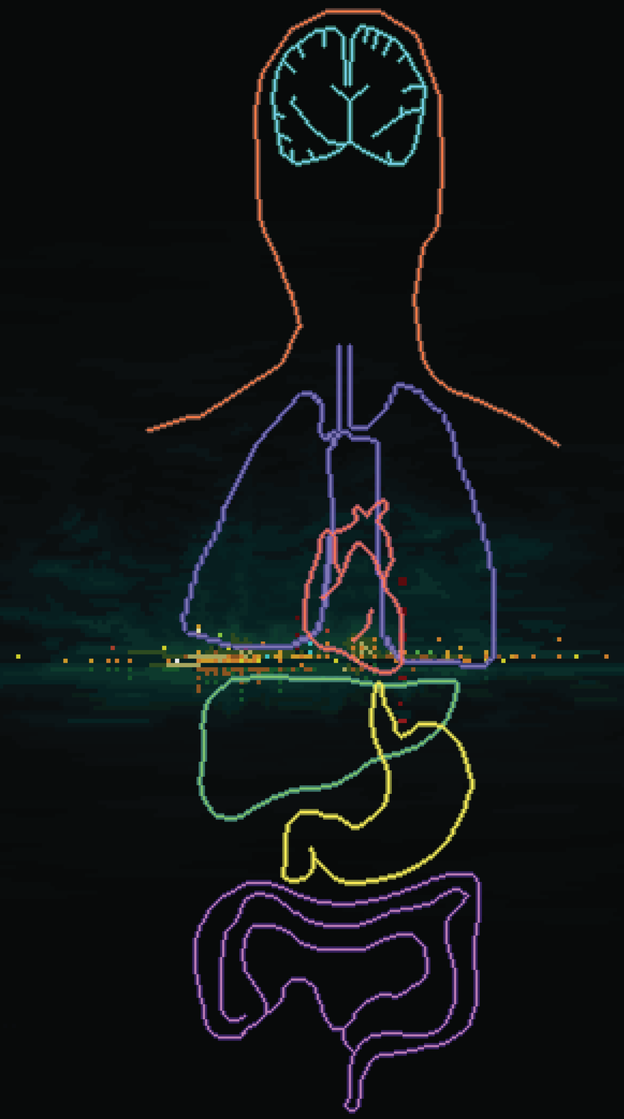
"My initial reaction was that it was too loud to be thunder," she said, "and I knew we don't have earthquakes, so I knew it had to be a plant explosion."

How big the blast



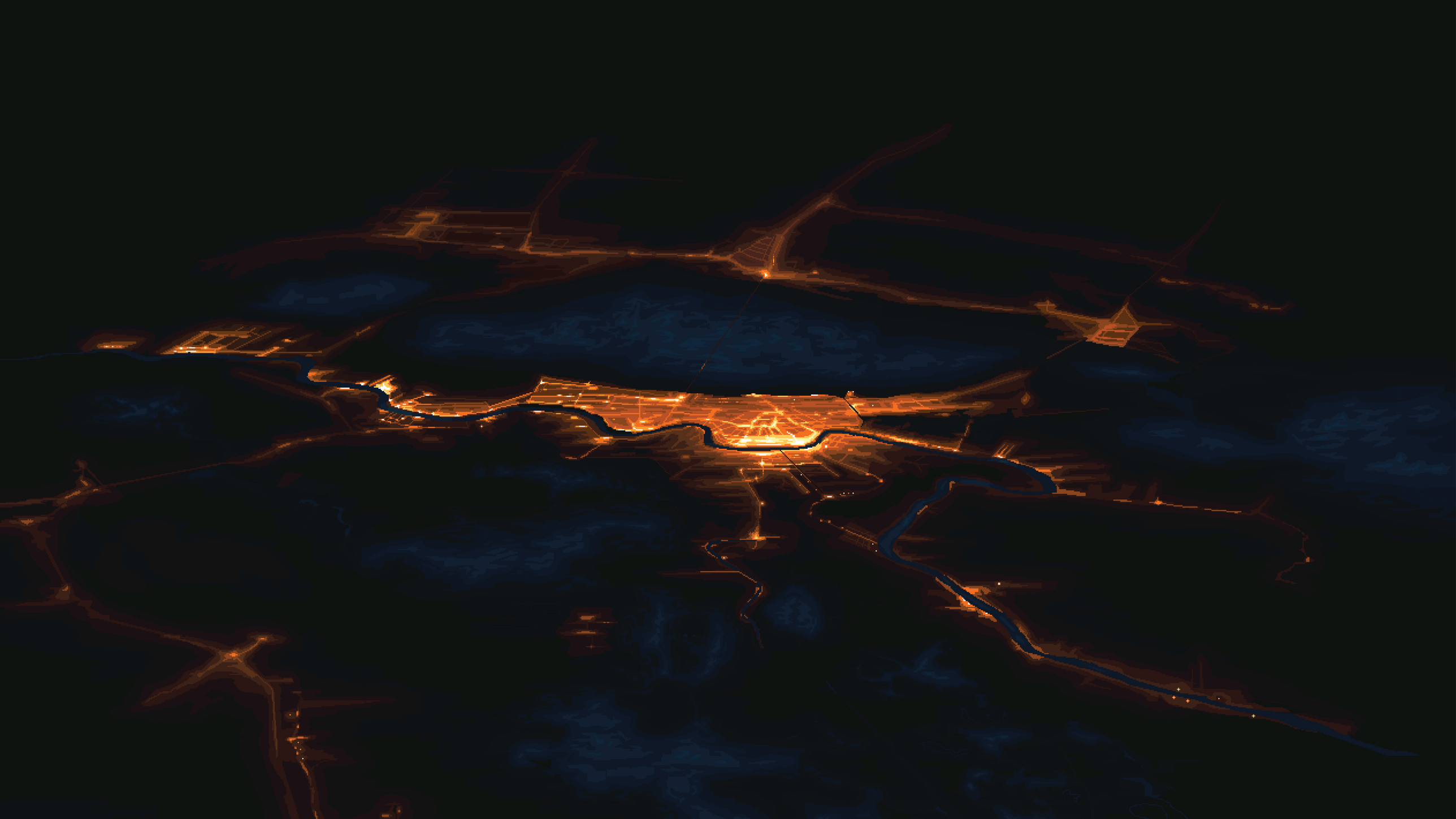
Compared to TNT, gasoline produces an explosion with less damage at the site, but more effects at a greater distance.

Source: Thomas Ahrens, Geophysicist, CAL TECH

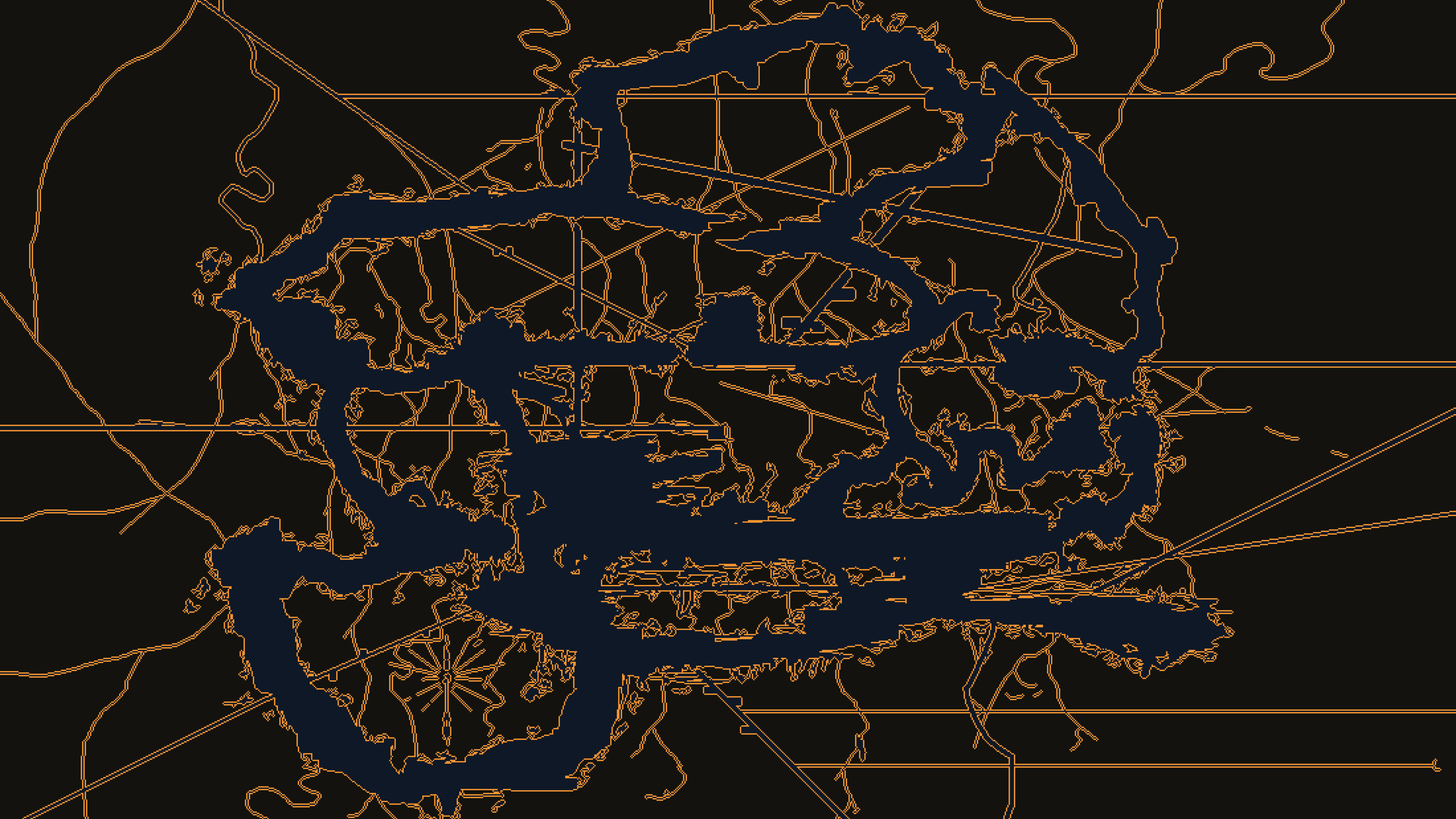


NORCO reimagines the South Louisiana landscape in various ways. In the game, the environment presented as “Lake Pontchartrain” actually incorporates many geographic features from surrounding wetland areas, such as the cypress logging “wheels” found in Lake Maurepas and the labyrinthine pipeline canals that are a common feature in the coastal marshlands.

In a similar way, the Shield oil refinery has characteristics found in various industrial landscapes across the River Parish region, such as cemeteries that have been engulfed by growing facilities, offices housed in plantation homes, and neighborhoods displaced by industrial expansion. In the game, the low density inner ring suburbs of New Orleans are also a composite of characteristics found around the region. While the game focuses on just a few geographically specific areas of Greater New Orleans that are relevant to the plot, it attempts to explore the broader region through this type of synthesis.



NORCO LOUISIANA



Louisiana's coastline is physically eroding. Neighborhoods are displaced and relocated as a result of industrial expansion, flooding, and environmental instability. In the face of both the physical and resulting social dissolution of home, some have turned to faith and the internet to establish community, while others grow more listless and alienated.

The game explores ideas of home in several contexts – physical, familial, and religious. It incorporates Gnostic concepts of spiritual alienation into the narrative, as well as more physical, tangible ideas of displacement and disconnection. Some characters in the game wrap themselves in increasingly abstract layers of mysticism, conspiracy, and irony to insulate from the vulnerability that these stark conditions bring.

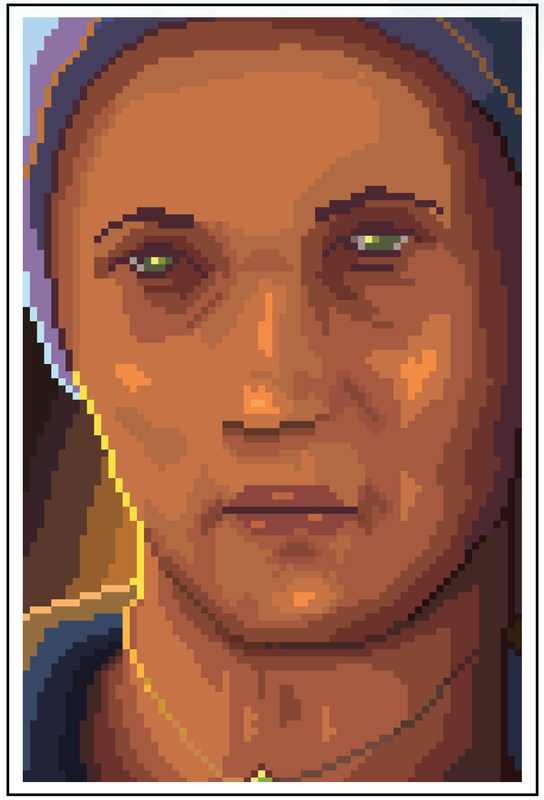
CHARACTERS

Kay Madère

Kay left Norco after graduating from Destrehan High School to travel across the United States. For five years she hopped freight trains, hitchhiked, walked, and biked west, eventually making her way to New Mexico, where she participated in a small war raging on the outskirts of Albuquerque. She narrowly escaped a disastrous event there only to learn from her brother that her mother, Catherine, had passed away back home.

At the start of the game she has returned to Norco to settle her dead mother's estate and check in on her erratic and emotionally unstable brother. At this point, the player assumes control of Kay.

Catherine Madère



Kay and Blake's mother. She worked as a college professor at a local community college before she was terminated for transcript fraud. To make ends meet, she turned to freelance research, investigative work, and archival studies, which was her occupation until she died of metastatic cancer. The cancer began in her liver, spread to her lungs, and made its way to her brain. She wore a ring on a necklace around her neck, a fake jewel made from cubic zirconia. She was buried with it.

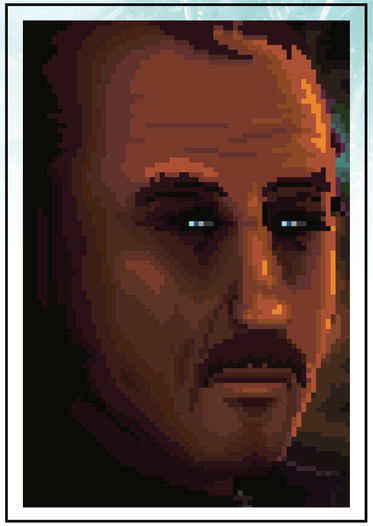
Her research made her many enemies and often attracted unwanted attention. At the time of her death, she was conducting research for an unknown client in the suburban New Orleans neighborhood of Fat City.

Monkey

Kay's childhood best friend. She abandoned Monkey when leaving on her travels, which results in tension upon her return. She is able to recruit the stuffed toy only after winning a staring contest with him, which enables his psychic attack in combat.

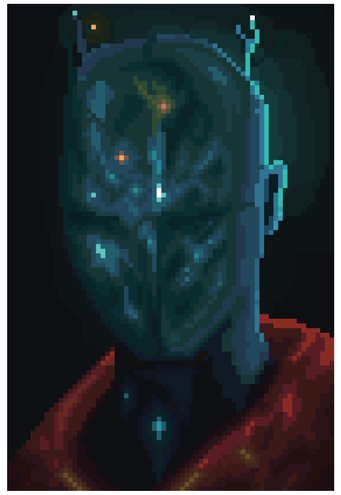
Lucky

An oil pirate who roams the Mississippi batture woods. He menaces Shield Oil and targets their infrastructure for no other reason than entertainment. He travels with his K-9 companion Pots and sometimes carries grenades in his backpack.



Brett LeBlanc

A private investigator and longtime acquaintance of Catherine. He operates out of a makeshift rented office that was once the bathroom of the neighboring business. He hasn't taken on a new case in years, and spends most of his time at a nearby watering hole.

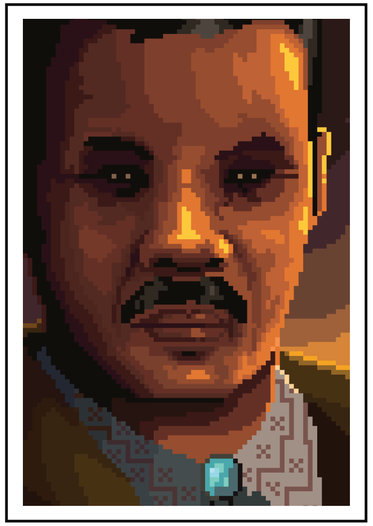


Million

A private security android that once guarded the perimeter of a nearby aluminum refinery. She fled her post and encountered Catherine in a gas station parking lot while on the lam. Catherine offered her refuge at the Madère household where Kay was able to untether her from her host security network.

Pawpaw

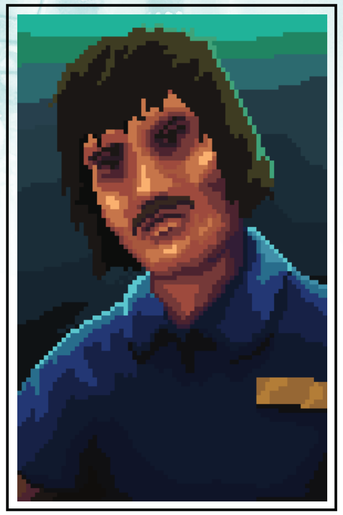
Pawpaw hides in ditches and drainage canals. He has a deep fixation on Catherine, believing her to be a descendant of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene by way of her Acadian ancestry. Some believe that he arrived at these ideas by conflating the novel *The Da Vinci Code* with reality, while others believe that his claims are true.



Dallas

Dallas works small gig jobs for a viral network known as Superduck. His work takes him to all corners of the New Orleans region, often finding himself in bizarre situations. He has an extensive collection of bolo ties and only listens to Christmas-themed music.

A Boy Named Gooch


The Burnout

The Idiot Son

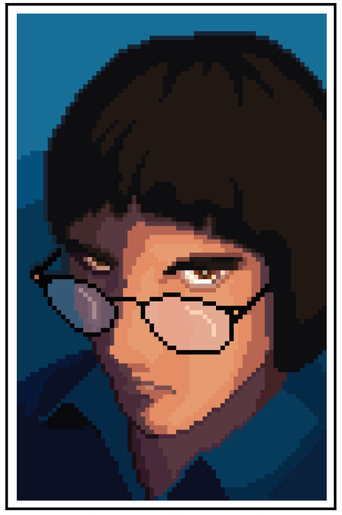
The Swordsman

The Teenage Shithead

Little Creepy Boy

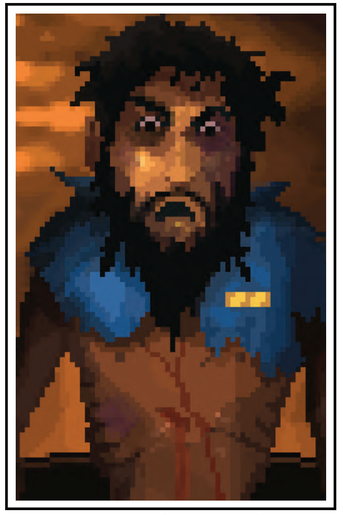
The Kiss Ass

The New Guy


The Intellectual

The Aggrieved Dad

The Thoughtful Gamer


Pawpaw's Favorite

LOCATIONS

Kay's timeline takes place in Norco and the surrounding River Parish region. Her home is located near Apple Street, Norco's "Main Street." She visits several key locations inspired by real Norco environments, including the Mississippi River batture, Airline Highway, and the oil refinery that dominates the town. There are many allusions to the Bonnet Carré Spillway, a massive piece of flood control infrastructure that sits just upriver from New Orleans.

Norco embodies many characteristics of South Louisiana more broadly and can be regarded as a kind of microcosm. Industrialization, erosion, flooding, subsidence, residential displacement, and other conditions of the Louisiana experience are found within this single small town and its environs.

PADU P.I.
WE SMART 4 U
APPLE
THIRD

BOOKS
CHEX2CASH

WE ACCEP
TRANSFERS
EXIT

FLOODGATE
OPEN

BEE

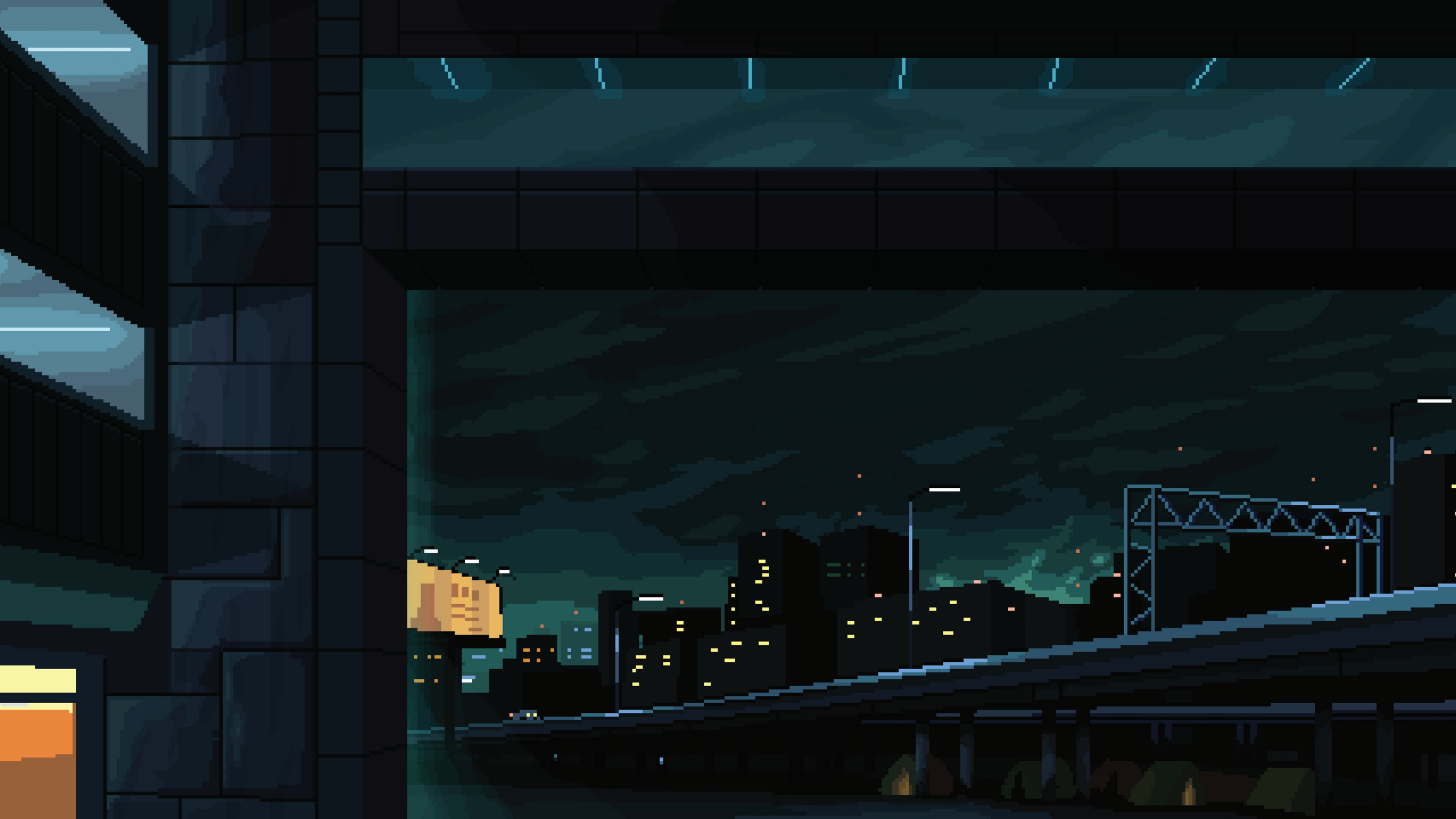
Catherine's timeline takes place approximately 25 miles downriver from Norco in New Orleans and its inner suburbs. Her story begins downtown, in what's sometimes called the "Medical District." From there she's able to access a particularly touristy corner of the French Quarter, and is soon able to visit the warehouses and subdivisions of neighboring Jefferson Parish.

Catherine never visits Norco in the game. Her timeline begins after having arrived at the Greater New Orleans Neural Versioning Clinic, and it ends in a warehouse in the Fat City neighborhood of Metairie. While Kay's timeline is defined by refineries, swamplands, and the open highways of the River Parishes, Catherine's is defined by skyscrapers, interstates, drainage canals, and derelict shopping centers.

MUTE

CITY HALL

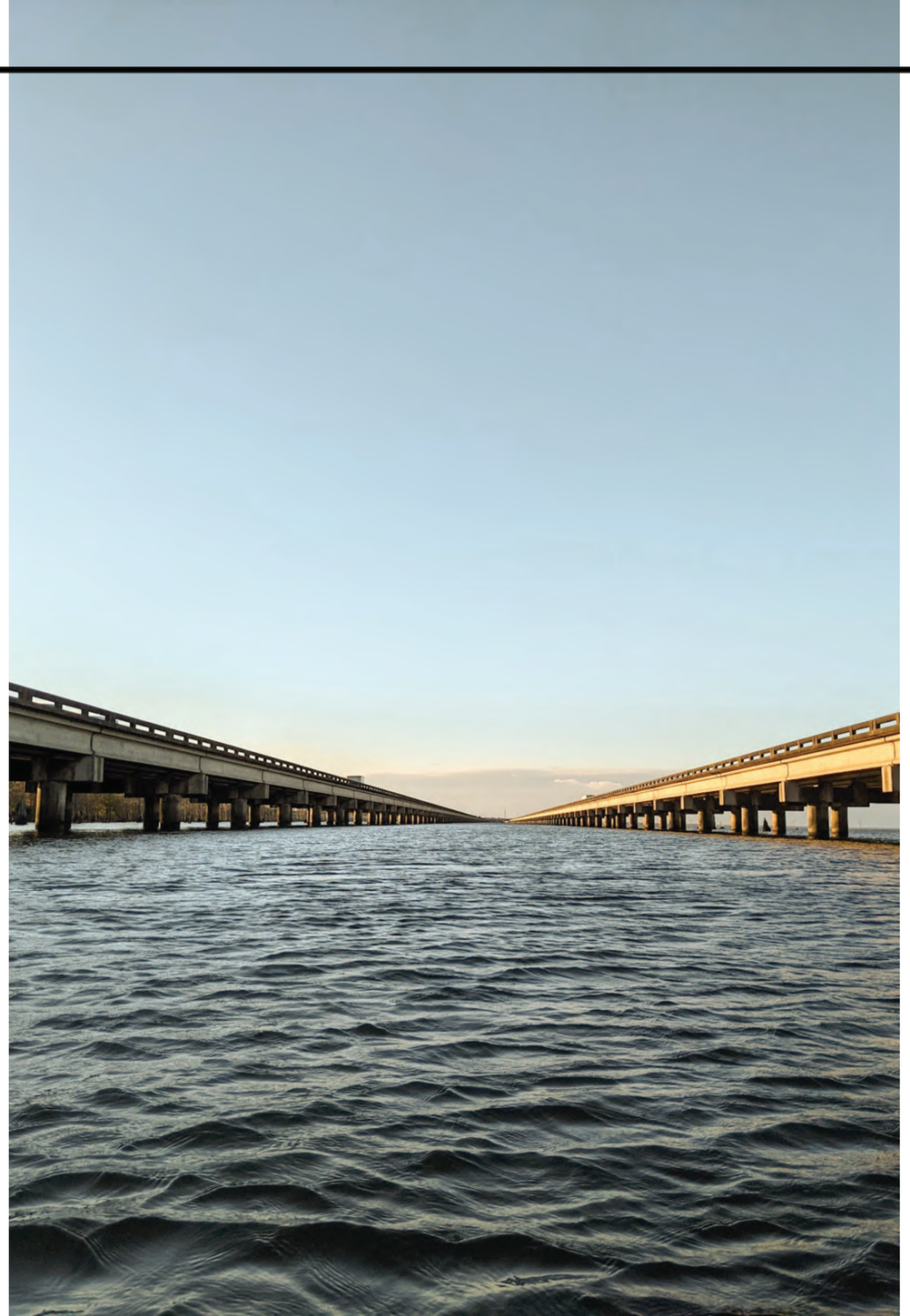
EXIT



BUBLEY
1-800-2060
EAGLE
WHOLESALE
RESTAURANT
SUPPLIES

Act three of *NORCO* unfolds in an alternative version of Lake Pontchartrain. In the game, as in reality, the lake is ringed by Cypress and Tupelo swamps. Cypress logging, hurricanes, and channel dredging have denuded these swamps and caused saltwater intrusion that's led to significant wetland erosion.

The player explores this history through a series of vignettes that take place both above and below the surface of the water. The Interstate 10 high rise cuts across the lake from east to west, a visual motif that appears in both the introduction to the game and here in the final act.



INTERVIEWS

Yuts
Creator

Can you talk a bit about how *NORCO* came to be?

The game's rooted in an oral history project that I was doing with a close friend in the years after Hurricane Katrina. We'd travel around South Louisiana interviewing people about flooding, industrialization, how they felt about the environments they lived in. We'd do some archival research and tie the pieces we collected into various kinds of media. Photos, video essays, paintings, stuff like that. Some of the output took the form of online web maps and other interactive digital pieces. Another was a small, messy side-scroller that featured a cyborg named Million attempting to break into an oil refinery. I continued to iterate on it for years after, refactoring various pieces until it became what it is today.

I remember you posting about the side scroller back then and it's impressive to see how much the concept has evolved since those days. Do you feel like you can attribute any of that evolution to social media?

Social media influenced the project in all kinds of ways. As disorienting and terrible as it can be, it's helped keep this project alive. Working full-time and moonlighting as a game dev was taking its toll and in the spring of 2020 I posted to Twitter asking if anyone out there would publish the game. A mutual, Alex Connolly, tagged Johan Toresson (Raw Fury's scout) in the post. We had a brief conversation about New Orleans metal and the rest was history.

It's also how I met Aaron Gray and Jesse Jacobi. Aaron followed GoR on Instagram and DM'd me asking if I needed any help. At the time I didn't, but after signing the contract with Raw Fury and realizing I was in over my head, I messaged him asking if the offer was still good. In the case of Jesse, I did the DM'ing. We'd been mutuals for a while, I was a big fan, and I reached out asking if he was interested in creating the game's key art. That conversation became another massive inflection point.

There are a lot of other valuable relationships that happened over Instagram/Twitter/Tumblr/Discord. A whole community of support, really.

Discord specifically has a unique role because much of the communication related to development happens in dedicated channels, but there is also a community aspect to it in the non-dev channels which enables feedback and dialogue about the game.

The community that we have in Discord is excellent, though the public channels have gone pretty dormant since the intensity of production has ramped up. In the early days, it was equal parts heady and stupid, which is a duality that may also be reflected in the game. It was a very rich space for thinking through how certain philosophies and political tendencies intersect with the geography of the Gulf South. It was also a place to vent and shitpost without judgement. Because the community is so small and intimately connected, nothing feels performative. Or if we're performing,

we're just performing for each other on a small secret stage. Having a little refuge like that online has been critical. And while the public channels have been more quiet lately, the private dev channels have lit up. We've taken on so many new collaborators and have been experimenting with a lot of strange ideas. Not all of them have made their way into *NORCO*, but we've got a lot of threads to explore in future projects.

What was your experience working on the game while living in another state as well as during a global pandemic?

I left Louisiana not long before partnering with Raw Fury. A lot of the major themes of the game were already present in an early demo that me and Gewgawly created at that point. I moved to the Blue Ridge Mountain region of central Virginia and brought a lot of books and research with me that I knew I'd need to finish the game. Central Virginia is uniquely gorgeous and is opposite to South Louisiana in many ways. It's on the opposite side of the South. It's mountainous, elevated, there's crystal clear running water all throughout the region. Louisiana is low, flat, stagnant. It's a different kind of beauty. Having the opportunity to explore such an unfamiliar region put me in a good headspace to finish *NORCO*. It was a hard adjustment, and I got regular bouts of homesickness, but I channeled those feelings into the game, focusing on it to a point of total obsession.

The lockdowns didn't change much for me personally in terms of lifestyle. I was already very reclusive; just working on the game, reading, researching, and spending time outside. But it did a lot mentally, as I'm sure is true of most others. The online experience was surreal. This was when many of the new Geography of Robots collaborators came into the fold, and we harnessed our collective malaise to add new facets to the game that reflected the absurd, strange experience of 2020–2021.

Aside from the southeast Louisiana region, what influenced you when you were creating the game?

Outside of regional and environmental literature, a lot of what I was reading while working on the game relates to Christian mysticism, Gnosticism, Paganism, and other kinds of faith traditions. I also revisited some theory that I was big on as a teenager, especially essays by the Situationist International and Baudrillard. The ufology of Jacques Vallée has had an influence on the game, as well as the fiction of Umberto Eco and Ursula Le Guin. Assorted small indie games have left their mark. *Critters for Sale* by Sonoshee, *Discover My Body* by Yames, just to name a couple. The music of Abner Jay and Lucinda Williams is constantly playing in my headphones while I pixel.

What are you most excited for people to experience when they play *NORCO*?

Lately I've been really enjoying the sounds in the game. Sometimes I'll throw on a scene and listen to Gewg's music and fmAura's ambient loops and get lost in meditation. I don't know if it's what I'm most excited about, but it's something I hope others appreciate. Also going to clown town with LeBlanc.

Aaron Gray
Developer

You've been involved in *NORCO* as a developer for quite some time now. How did you and Yuts start working together?

I followed Yuts on Twitter and Instagram for a good while prior to ever getting involved, was a huge fan of the art and didn't even realize there was a game attached for a while. I reached out on Instagram basically just offering whatever help I could on the game, but didn't get involved right away. Fast forward to 2020 and I happened to get laid off during the first big COVID wave, which was right around the time Yuts was talking to Raw Fury. I reached out again since I was doing freelance at the time, and off we went [laughs]. Also, I'd happened to pick up the game engine Yuts was using for the demo at the time for that previous job, so that just kinda worked out perfect.

You're also from Louisiana. Where in the state did you grow up? Do you think being from Louisiana helped kindle that relationship at all?

I was born in Shreveport/Bossier but much of my family is huddled not far off the I-20 corridor in North Louisiana. Louisiana as a subject is a huge part of why I got interested in the project to start with and definitely made me feel more compelled to reach out. Just wanted to try and contribute to art from and centered around the region.

Growing up in Louisiana gives you a very unique understanding of the area so I think it's awesome that you two started working together. You visited Yuts in Norco last year. How did that impact your understanding of the game?

Definitely made me appreciate the art even more. It's such a fantastic capture of the real place it kinda shocked me, namely scenes like the house, Apple Street, the batture, and especially Dimes. The other thing that kinda knocked me out was the scale of everything. Those refineries are massive, and seeing them dwarf everything around them first hand is really nuts. Also there was a fuckin' swing set right at the fenceline that instilled a deep dread in me.

I know that swing set very well. An imposing industrial backdrop has a very distinct effect on whatever is in front of it, especially something like a playground. There's also the hum of the refinery providing a constant soundtrack. I'm not sure if that stands out when you're visiting or not.

Oh yeah definitely stood out, I remember commenting on how loud it was while I was there. And that was from blocks away.

What kind of video games did you play when you were growing up? Did they influence the work you do now?

I basically only played *Kingdom Hearts* and *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One* for like three years straight at one point and now I think NPCs are real people, which is great because the characters are maybe my

favorite part of *NORCO*. Outside of that, lots of strategy games and an embarrassing amount of *Dota*, which I think exposed me to more raw systems and how to balance around a narrative.

I'm glad you mentioned narrative because *NORCO* is very story-driven. Is it challenging designing the systems and mechanics to assist in the storytelling? Have you worked on any similar projects in the past?

The only real challenges in design are making sure everything is accessible to whoever wants it and any mechanics that aren't reading or exploring service that core experience and don't clutter it out. For example, combat isn't a measure of skill in *NORCO*. It's there because that's just how we chose to represent physical confrontation in the narrative. A game over truly is a failure of the game design. Yuts is especially good at crafting up puzzles and scenarios that seamlessly weave and work alongside the dialogue and core experience. I definitely haven't worked on a project quite like *NORCO*. The composition of mechanics we have is a little wacky [laughs].

Is there a certain element of the game that you're most excited for people to experience?

Pawpaw.
Shield
A Greener
World Awards

Jesse Jacobi
Artist

Before we get into the game I want to talk a little bit about your background as a painter because that is initially how you became involved with this project. How long have you been painting?

I had grown up doodling for as long as I can remember, but didn't start painting until I was in my early 20s. I went for a year or two but it wasn't anything I was taking seriously. I made a lot of junk out in the garage and none of it was worth keeping. Painting sort of fell by the wayside for a stretch of years, but eventually I really needed something to focus on outside of my day job, and I'd always sort of had a gut feeling that I should have been painting the whole time. So I started doing it intentionally at the end of 2015. I don't think I made anything decent until 2018. The trajectory was sort of scattered, but for the last few years painting has consumed most of my time, thoughts, and energy.

I think that can be the case a lot of times when you're self-taught. Progress isn't always linear because life gets in the way but it's very clear that you're passionate about your work. What are your biggest influences? Are there any video games in that list?

No doubt life got in the way for me for quite some time, but once I made a firm decision that art/painting was the one thing I wanted to try to master in life, it felt pretty natural to follow through on that and keep myself disciplined to that end, regardless of the potential endpoint. It's been a good compass for me. As far as art influences go, I was deeply inspired by 19th century romantics, symbolists, pre-raphaelites. I think people most commonly have told me that my work looks like Giger, Beksinski, and Metroid - which is funny because I've never considered any of them to be a direct influence, but I'll take it.

Video games have been a constant for most of my life as well, so inevitably certain things work their way in. I've always intentionally sort of avoided making art that felt blatantly referential or genre-oriented, but I think maybe it comes through regardless. It's something I accept at this point. That list is long as well, but for the sake of brevity I'll just say that old JRPGs are what made the biggest impact on me.

One of the first visuals many people will see from *NORCO* is the key art, which needs to convey so much in such a limited space. How do you feel your style complements the tone of the game?

Good question. When Yuts first contacted me about doing the key art, I was truthfully a little confused. I'd followed and admired his work online for a couple years already. I was fascinated by what he was able to capture in pixels, a mood that felt mysterious and forlorn like so many of the old paintings I love. I'd watched his work grow and improve over time. Meanwhile, I had basically been making dark fantasy paintings. There was something going on under the surface in his work that I could feel, but it also felt so much more grounded in reality than what I was doing. I didn't see the connection at first.

We spoke on the phone a couple times before I got started so I could get

a feel for what was really going on with his world and his characters, and when I started to get a better idea of the bizarre conceptual framework of the project, I started to feel like, okay, maybe I can do this. It was a great challenge on one hand, but also pretty eye-opening and rewarding as a process.

As far as working my style into the game, I think I realized the only sensible choice was to go for some sort of maximalism - try to cram it all in and hope for the best. It may be a little loud and chaotic, but overall I feel it works for the tone and themes of the game.

Back when Yuts was considering asking you to do the key art it seemed like a perfect match to me. It turned out to be a really beneficial thing for both of you because you took an interesting turn and learned how to create pixel art for the game. Did you ever see yourself working with a digital medium?

Frankly, no, not at all. I don't come from a computer or software background at all, and my views have changed now, but to some degree I think I had it in my head that digital art didn't feel "real" to me, or that it all looked and felt the same. In some respects I still find that to be true, but more as a matter of personal taste than a snobby objective truth. A medium is a medium. There is always the opportunity for the human to come through and make it feel interesting and soulful. I'm not sure if we've accomplished that with pixels, but I guess that's the aim.

There was a lot to learn in terms of medium for this game. Some things carry over from painting of course, but in other ways pixeling forces you down new paths. It's forced me to re-examine all sorts of art fundamentals (color, light, perspective, space) that I thought I had understood before but clearly did not. With painting you can fudge a lot of those technical aspects. Pixeling to me is a medium of restrictions - how to convey as much as much as possible with as little as possible. So you're still thinking in a painterly manner in terms of composition, color, and so on, but with pixeling you simply can't do certain things you can with paint. I found it involves an equal, or greater, amount of tricky decision-making and problem-solving as real painting.

What are you most excited for people to experience in the game?

I'd probably have to say just the general narrative. I think Yuts has done an incredible job of weaving together a wide array of themes and tones while also making sure it doesn't go off the rails completely. I'm also a big fan of Keith.

Gewgawly I
Composer

fmAura
Sound Designer

How did you both get involved in this project?

Gewgawly I: I'm not exactly sure if Yuts asked me to be involved or if I kind of just pushed my way in. But I've been working with Yuts on this game since before *NORCO* was a pixel art adventure game, back when it was going to be a side-scrolling platformer. I was familiar with his work from a former project and I knew I wanted to contribute to anything I could. Mostly, it was just wanting to work on some collaborative project with a friend.

fmAura: I got involved because Gewgawly reached out about maybe doing some sound effects for this game project. Like he said, we've been doing creative stuff together for a while so without knowing really what it was all about I said definitely. Gewgawly is one of my friends I trust the most aesthetically, so anything he was doing I knew would be very interesting. Doing this sort of sound work has always been something on my brain, like pulling sound effects out of thin air, trying to make functional sounds that can contain a lot of mystery and what the fuckness, always wanted to do foley work and things like that.

Gewgawly I: I love working with fmAura, we've been collaborating on music for over a decade now. In previous projects I'd worked on, he's the guy I'd turn to when it was like, *this is pretty good, but it's missing something*, and he always knew how to fix it. He's a fixer. I knew bringing him into the *NORCO* fold would add the sonic subtlety that the game deserves and he's done such an amazing job with it.

[to Gewgawly I] Where did you get inspiration from when composing the score?

Gewgawly I: I drew my inspiration from the images and storyline. For most of the earlier tracks Yuts would send me a still image and a couple of sentences explaining the mood and I would compose to it. The visual aesthetic of the game is both familiar and also disorienting. The spirit of the game matches my experience of living in the South. A combination of feeling totally hopeless but somehow still mysteriously enjoying your life because of the daily interactions you have with strangers, friends, neighbors. I tried to incorporate that into the sound palette. Keep it somewhat familiar structurally but really hammer home the despair and struggle of daily living.

[to fmAura] You picked up some new skills to work on the sound design for the game. Do you want to share anything about that process?

fmAura: Prior to this I really only had the experience of designing sounds. Basically from my own music, so in starting this project I sort of made it a goal to broaden my skill set. Doing sound for games is something I've had on my mind for quite a while so I needed to get as much knowledge as I could on the process, while still having enough time/sanity to make the

actual sounds. Yuts and Aaron sort of got me going on Unity, implementing the sounds and generally mixing the game. At this point they basically make the tools and I use them to build out the sound world. It's been such a blast learning the layout and functionality of the engine for sure but next I'd really like to learn how to build all the sound elements from the ground up – creating tools and using midware stuff. It's actually really fun to hear everything come together. To click an icon, over and over again, and hear a sound you made come out.

What makes working on a video game different than working on your own projects?

Gewgawly I: Working on video game music is just so much more relaxing than working on my own projects. I don't have to think about how the music reflects on my beliefs or whether or not it expresses the depths of my personality. It's a real treat

fmAura: I think they both kind of inform each other, or it's at least a similar process of experimenting with layering and density of sound, texture, harmony, melody and shape. I think the process of doing the sound design for *NORCO* is going to really expand my musical palette as far as deep diving into sound making. Or I might throw my computer out the window and make an acoustic record. I can't tell yet.

Are there any moments of the game that you're most excited for people to experience?

Gewgawly I: From a score/soundtrack perspective I'm most excited for the later segments of the game. One thing I made an effort to do was to match the surreality and disorientation of narrative structure. So while there are more pleasant plinks and plonks in the first act, the music starts to get a little denser and ornate as the game progresses. I'm hoping that comes across with some subtlety and kind of helps to crescendo the reveals at the end.

fmAura: I'm really excited to see how people experience the sound in the end game as well. I really tried to make very dense and lush environmental ambiance in the swamplands that I am pretty hyped on – lots of bugs and frogs. There's also some pretty cool moments of interactivity with sound elements that will hopefully be fun for the player.

SKETCHBOOK

Warm

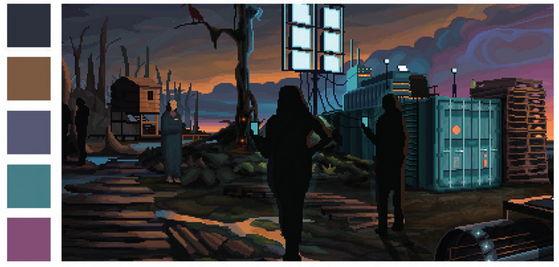
Kay's timeline takes place over the course of a single evening. Warm sunset tones were chosen for many of her scenes.

Cool

Catherine's timeline occurs primarily at night and is comprised of mostly cool tones with warm accents.

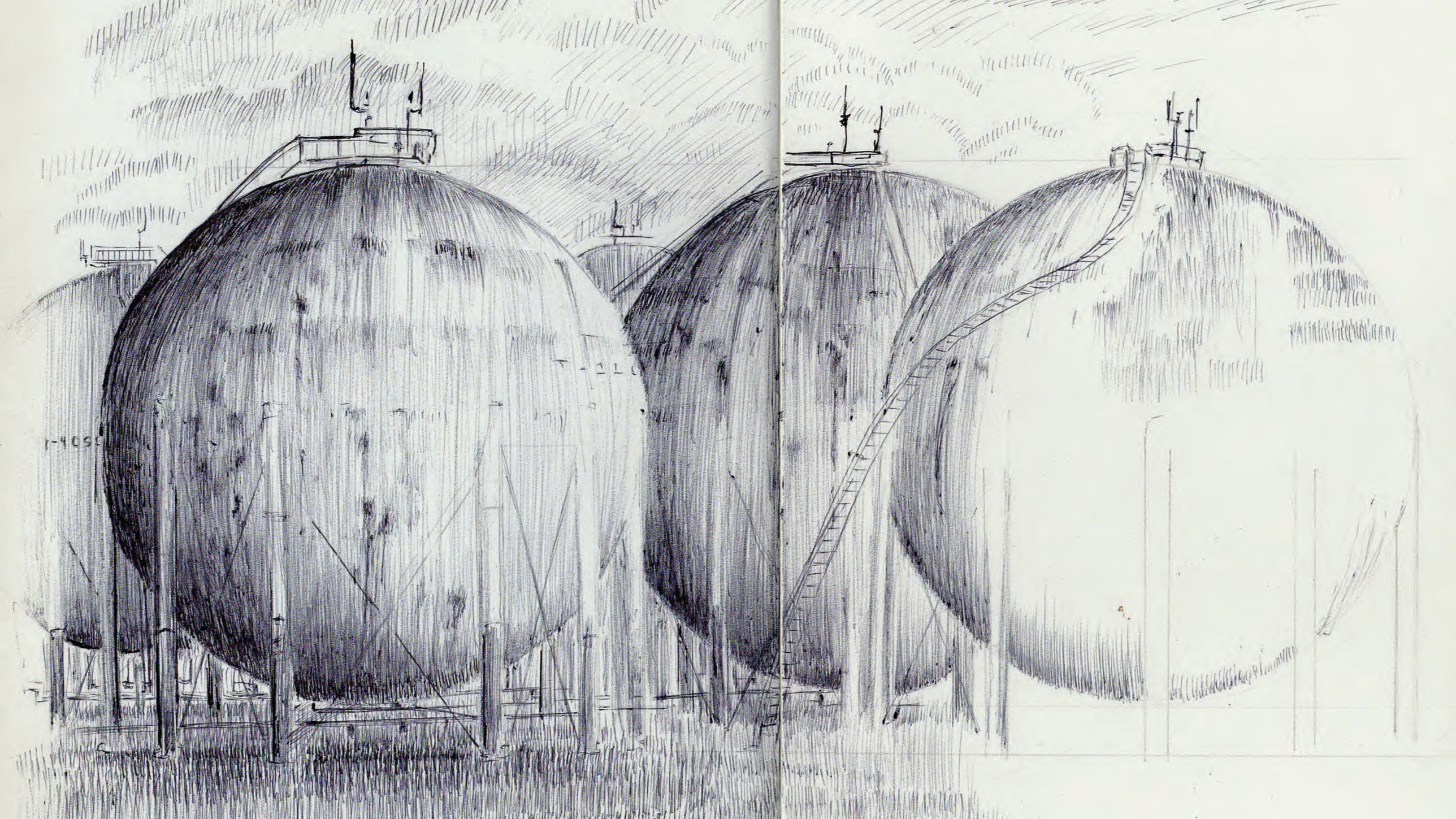
Convergence

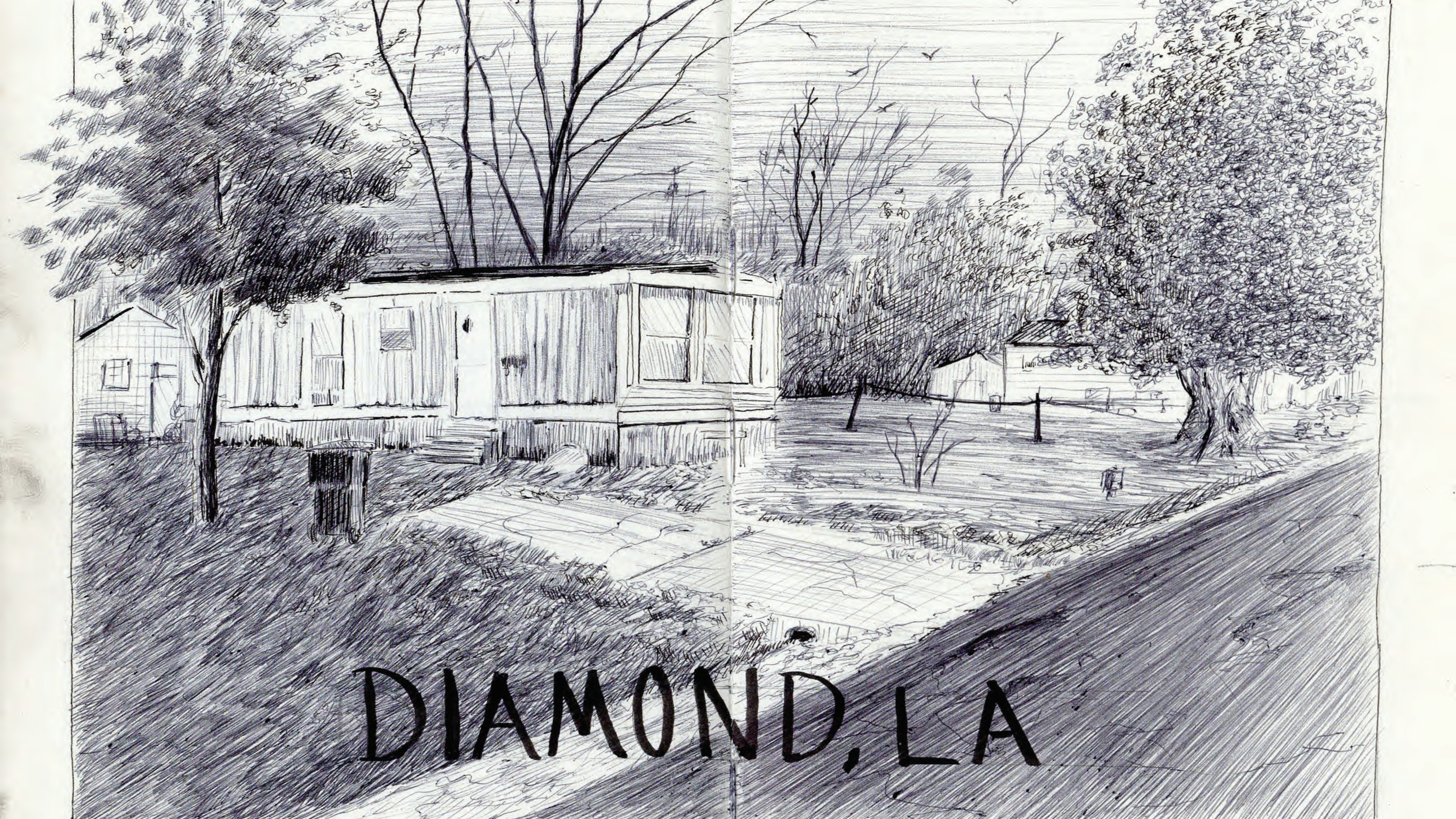
The crossover of Kay and Catherine's timelines is represented by a hybrid of the two former palettes, resulting in purple hues throughout.



Pen and ink sketch of Lake Maurepas

Pen and ink sketch of cypress trees in Lake Pontchartrain



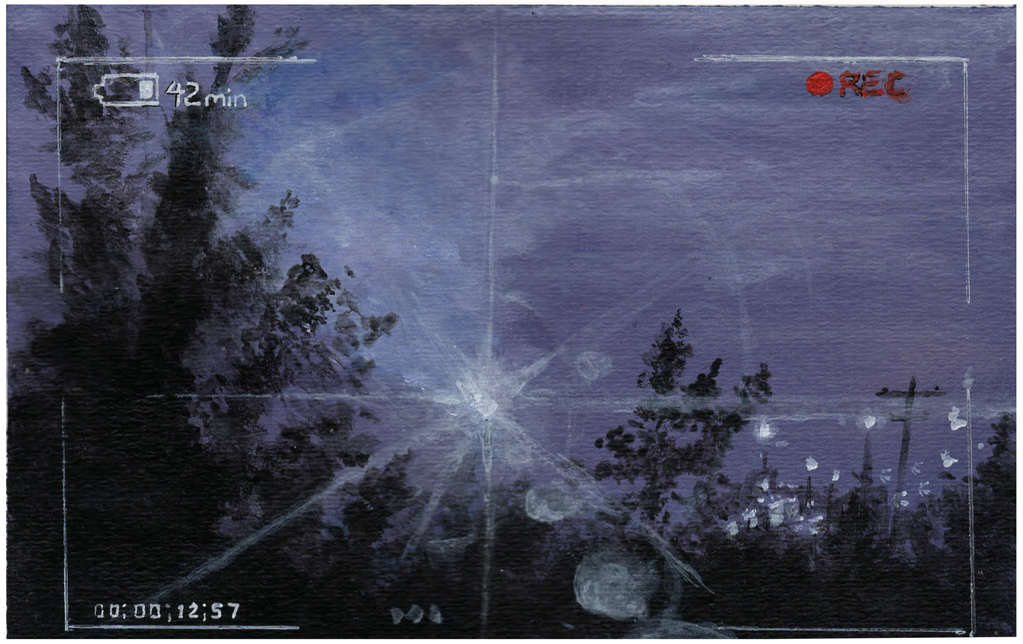

DIAMOND, LA

SAD CLOWN
WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG! CHILD?

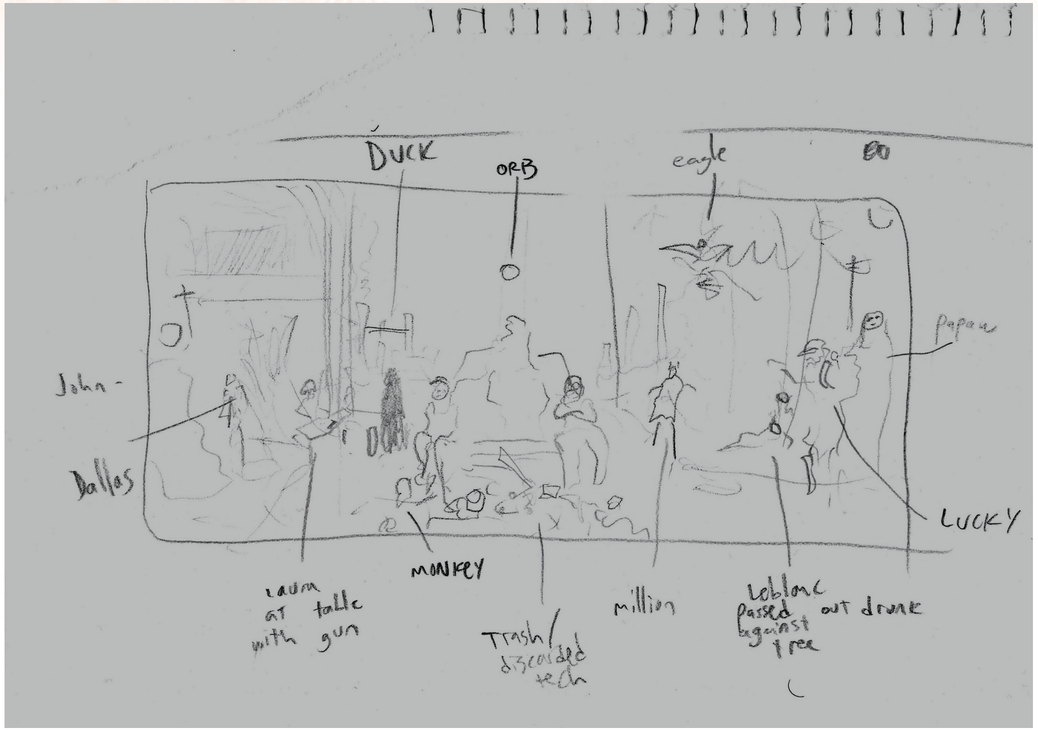
Impression of a borrow ditch

I-10 on-ramp at Airline Highway

Impression of traffic camera footage over the Bonnet Carré Spillway



Impression of Hurricane Isaac passing over the Shell Oil Refinery in Norco



Initial sketch of the key art by Jesse Jacobi

Early stages of key art painting

QUACK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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“Superduck” painting on back cover by Jesse Jacobi.

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The Times-Picayune, January 31, 1964

The Times-Picayune, date unknown

The Times-Picayune, May 8, 1988

NORCO