LIONIA IS LEAVING

A Wartime Drama Told in Mixed Reality

Format: Mixed Reality Experience (Meta Quest 3)
Runtime: Approximately 20 minutes
Language: English
World Premiere: SXSW 2026

TAGLINE

A House. A Life. A Choice.

LOGLINE

In war-torn Ukraine, an elderly man must decide whether to abandon his lifelong home, and face whatever his choice brings.

DIRECTED BY
VOLODYMYR KOLBASA

WRITTEN BY
LUCAS ABRAHÃO

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VRBA LABS

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SYNOPSIS

Lionia Is Leaving is a mixed-reality immersive drama based on the true story of Lionia, a retired engineer from Okhtyrka, Ukraine, whose home was bombed during the Russian invasion.

The tale unfolds through photogrammetric fragments of a Ukrainian house, where characters appear only as animated shadows and voices. Navigating the space reveals scenes from before and at the invasion's start: family dinners, hurried packing, breaking news, a neighbor at the window.

As his family flees, Lionia refuses to leave. In a pivotal interaction, you try to move the stubborn old man from his sofa to avert the inevitable. But Lionia has made his choice, whatever it brings.

"*If I should die, I'd rather die in a warm house.*"

THE EXPERIENCE

The narrative unfolds across interconnected moments, responding to the viewer's movement through space. Each memory scene is triggered by approaching objects in the room: a door, a dining table, a window, family photographs, a television, revealing layers of Lionia's life and relationships through shadows and spatial audio.

The experience requires no controllers. Users navigate naturally through physical movement, with the mixed reality environment adapting dynamically to their position and gaze.

ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE

VISION STATEMENT

The experience allows the user to follow a narrative in a non-linear form when the virtual mixed reality space around them changes in response to their movements.

Utilizing photogrammetry of a traditional Ukrainian village house interior, we project dynamic shadows of characters onto its surfaces. Audiences immerse themselves in the voices, dialogues, and soundscape, watching shadows flicker on photogrammetric models, encouraging their imagination to weave the narrative. This approach fosters empathy, creating a unique connection with the characters.

Our project follows a complete story arc with a beginning, climax, and ending.

SOUND DESIGN

Sound design plays an extremely important role in our experience. While we only depict our characters as shadows and silhouettes, sound plays a crucial role in complementing the visual narrative in the user's imagination. For each scene, a unique soundscape is crafted to help the user understand which scene they are approaching in the virtual space. An original soundtrack is composed to emphasize the atmosphere in key moments.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

SPECIFICATIONS

Title: Lionia Is Leaving

Format: Mixed Reality (MR) Interactive Experience

Runtime: Approximately 20 minutes

Platform: Meta Quest 3

Engine: Unity

Language: English

Subtitles: Available

Age Rating: PEGI 7

Space Required: Room-scale (4m × 4m recommended)

Controllers: Not required (hand tracking / gaze interaction)

Completion Year: 2025/2026

PLANNED PLATFORMS

- Meta Quest Store (primary distribution)
- Apple Vision Pro (iOS port planned)
- Steam VR
- Festival/Gallery installations

EXHIBITION REQUIREMENTS

Space: Minimum 4m × 4m for optimal experience
Lighting: Controlled lighting environment preferred
Staffing: Docent recommended for public exhibitions
Equipment: Meta Quest 3 headset (can be provided)
Setup Time: Approximately 30 minutes
Throughput: ~3 viewers per hour (single-user experience)

CAST

TODD LAWSON as *Lionia*

A retired engineer in his late 60s. A grumpy-but-kind type of guy who uses his cynicism to avert the harshness of what he's going through. His deep attachment to his home becomes the central conflict of the story.

LISA BARNES as *Maria*

Lionia's wife, a retired accountant in her late 60s. She has a witty and lively demeanor, and her relationship with Lionia is based on inside jokes and crisp humor.

ALESSANDRA FANELLI as *Ivanna*

Their daughter, 25. She's a geeky type, more introverted than her parents, and also more prone to outbursts. Her frustration with her father's stubbornness drives emotional tension.

HOLLI HARMES as *Nadya*

The neighbor, 50s, a school teacher. She can be very talky and a bit annoying, but is kind at the bottom. Her fate becomes one of the story's tragic elements.

DAVID WALTERS as *Ivan*

Lionia's father, 80s, a retired military man. Tough-sounding, but has gotten more sentimental over the years. His wartime story provides crucial thematic resonance.

CREW

KEY CREATIVE TEAM

VOLODYMYR KOLBASA, Director

Filmmaker and media artist with experience in both classical cinema and immersive XR projects. He holds an MA in Cinematography from the Viewfinder Erasmus Mundus program (Ireland, Hungary, Estonia) and an MA in Digital Narratives from the International Film School Cologne. His previous XR work "Fresh Memories: The Look" premiered at SXSW 2023 and was exhibited at DOX Contemporary Art Center Prague.

LUCAS ABRAHÃO, Writer

Brazilian screenwriter and director with an MA in Screenwriting from the KinoEyes program (Portugal, Scotland, Estonia). His short film "Maputo" won 4 awards at the Gramado Film Festival including Best Direction, and "Roof Knocking" won Best Short Film at the Cairo Film Festival 2018. He teaches screenwriting at the International Academy of Cinema in São Paulo.

JÁN HRONČÁK, Executive Producer

Slovak entrepreneur, technology innovator and XR producer working at the intersection of immersive technologies, smart cities, and the built environment. He is a partner at GOSPACE LABS, co-founder of VRBA – Gin&Tonic; Virtual Reality Bar in Bratislava's Old Town, co-founder of Akular (an AR platform for the AEC industry), and VRBA LABS Studio, an XR studio creating immersive experiences exploring new forms of spatial storytelling.

PÉTER PANYIK, Unity Developer

Hungarian game developer with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science Engineering from John Von Neumann University. Specializing in Unity development, shader programming (HLSL), and gameplay systems, he brings technical expertise in building immersive interactive experiences.

VARTAN MARKARIAN, Art Director

Installation and new media artist whose practice combines art, research, and digital technologies to explore ecological and cultural processes. His projects investigate themes of memory, transformation of landscapes, and recovery of natural ecosystems and cultural ties. In 2018, he received the Scholarship of the President of Ukraine for young artists in the field of fine arts.

MARIA MARKARIAN, Sound Design

Professional composer and pianist with a Bachelor of Music in Composition from the National I.P. Kotlyarevsky Conservatory of Music in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Twice awarded the Presidential Scholarship for achievements in music composition, she specializes in creating music and sound design for art exhibitions, performances, films, and digital art, blending diverse genres to craft unique soundscapes.

PRODUCTION COMPANY

VRBA LABS is an independent studio specializing in immersive storytelling and mixed reality experiences. Based in Bratislava, Slovakia, the studio focuses on creating emotionally resonant narratives that leverage the unique capabilities of XR technology to foster empathy and connection.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first heard Lionia's story in the very beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022, while working as a volunteer. A friend went to Okhtyrka to deliver humanitarian aid, met an old man who refused to leave his home, and told me about him later. The story immediately resonated with me. It reminded me of my own family. My father even shares the same name as our protagonist. In those first days of the invasion, I had a heated argument with my parents, trying to convince them to leave Poltava. I thought if they left, it would be easier for me to manage alone. But they refused. My sister's family was ready to flee by car, the only way out, with no buses or trains running. My parents' car was broken. Luckily, the Russians were stopped about 70 kilometers from Poltava. The only result of that argument was that my father and I didn't speak for about a week. By the time my friend met Lionia, he was living in an undamaged shed near his destroyed house, in winter, without electricity, only a stove they had used during summers. A year later, we traveled to Okhtyrka to find him. His house was still in ruins, covered in snow. We knocked on neighbors' doors until someone gave us his number. He had moved to an empty house nearby. That's where we recorded our interview. We were lucky to find him alive and well. I chose mixed reality because I see it as a technological form of daydreaming: immaterial elements superimposed on reality. Since this project is built on memories, on what burst into Lionia's mind when the bomb hit, mixed reality felt like the right format. We used shadows, silhouettes, and voices as our artistic approach. This choice was inspired by wanting to give space to the audience's imagination. When you see shadows and hear voices, you picture these people yourself, creating a deeper connection and, hopefully, more empathy. After four years of war, this story feels significant because it shows how everything began: how fast things can fall apart, how inflexible our minds can be in crisis. People, especially older ones, often stay in dangerous places, calling for help only at the last moment. Volunteers risk their lives to evacuate them. This project is dedicated to Slava Ilchenko, who was killed on Christmas Day 2025 while trying to evacuate an elderly man near Pokrovsk. In almost four years, he had evacuated more than 1,500 people from war zones. His sacrifice reminds us why these stories must be told.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Finding Lionia

When the team first heard Lionia's story, they only had a secondhand account: no recording, no contact information. A year later, they traveled to Okhtyrka to find him. His house was still in ruins, covered in snow. They went door to door, knocking on neighbors' gates, asking if anyone knew what had happened to the old man who survived the bombing. Finally, a neighbor dialed his number. Lionia had moved to a nearby empty house. That's where the team recorded their interview.

The Photogrammetry Process

Since Lionia's actual house was destroyed, the team couldn't scan it directly. Art Director Vartan Markarian reached out to contacts around Poltava to find a house with a similar interior style. They found one that authentically represents how these old Ukrainian village houses look inside, and that became the basis for the photogrammetric environment.

Voice Recording Sessions
Voice actor Lisa Barnes not only performed the role of Maria but also organized the entire English-language cast. She gathered the actors at her home, recording sessions taking place in her walk-in closet for sound isolation. Director Volodymyr Kolbasa directed the performances remotely, with an 8-hour time difference, while simultaneously shooting another project.

International Collaboration
The project brought together talent from across the globe. Script development required finding time slots between Ukraine and Brazil. Day-to-day production coordination happened between Ukraine, Slovakia, and Hungary, neighboring countries that made scheduling easier. This international team telling a Ukrainian story represents the ongoing support of the global community.

CONTACT & RESOURCES

PRESS INQUIRIES

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FESTIVAL & SALES

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Website: www.lioniaisleaving.com
Trailer: youtu.be/v1uvXpOmHGM
Screener Access: Available upon request

SOCIAL MEDIA

Instagram: @lioniaisleaving
Twitter/X: @LioniaIsLeaving
Facebook: /LioniaIsLeaving
Email: info@lioniaisleaving.com

DOWNLOADABLE ASSETS

Poster (Vertical): drive.google.com/file/d/1H2_n1q2TMNLcEpTyvjHzegT-G-J5FOPq
Poster (Horizontal): drive.google.com/file/d/11P6FPiO8_JnHJvjP-rI4bKeDg-iDsGUR
Headshots: drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gViPCpX2UkXyOLf0ovJnk6OpApYYp4j4

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