

Waiting in Wonder™

Transforming a Clinical Waiting Room into a Restorative Experience

Project Overview

Location: The Lotus Center

Date: April 2026

Experience Type: Ambient audiovisual environment

Duration: Ongoing looping experience

Designer: Lulu McPharlin / Emerge Art Spa

The Challenge

Many waiting rooms unintentionally increase stress. Televisions, clinical décor, and uncertainty can leave visitors feeling anxious, overstimulated, or disconnected before their appointment even begins.

The goal of Waiting in Wonder™ was to transform the waiting period into a meaningful part of the care experience rather than simply time spent waiting.

Design Intent

Waiting in Wonder™ was designed to:

- Reduce perceived stress and urgency
- Encourage reflection and presence
- Create a sense of welcome and belonging
- Support nervous system regulation
- Introduce moments of beauty, awe, and wonder
- Utilize the television in waiting rooms for a more productive purpose

The experience uses nature imagery, subtle motion, ambient sound, and brief reflective prompts to create a restorative atmosphere without demanding attention.

Design Principles Used

Slow Attention Rather Than Attention Capture

Most public displays are designed to seize attention. Waiting in Wonder™ is designed to gently hold attention without demanding it. Visitors may engage deeply, glance occasionally, or simply absorb the atmosphere in the background.

Nervous-System-Aware Pacing

Visual movement, transitions, and prompts are intentionally slow and spacious, allowing the environment to support regulation rather than stimulation.

Nature as Co-Regulator

Water, sky, trees, storms, clouds, and seasonal landscapes serve as emotional anchors that help reconnect visitors with rhythms larger than themselves.

Invitation Over Instruction

The experience avoids directing or prescribing emotional states. Instead, it offers gentle invitations that allow visitors to engage in their own way.

Wonder Over Entertainment

Rather than distracting visitors, the experience creates moments of curiosity, beauty, reflection, and awe.

Belonging Through Environment

The space communicates that visitors do not need to perform, achieve, or become anything. They are welcome exactly as they are.

Design Elements

Visual Content

- Nature cinematography
- Water, sky, clouds, forests, storms, and lotus imagery
- Slow pacing and gentle transitions with elements of surrealism
- Seasonal content rotation

Reflective Prompts

Examples:

- "There is time and space to breathe."
- "Let your thoughts pass without chasing them."
- "You are welcome to rest here."

Environmental Enhancements

- Indoor fountain feature lighting and plants
 - Plants and natural textures
 - Backlighting on TV to gently guide attention
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The Experience

Visitors enter a softly lit environment where nature imagery unfolds slowly across a television display. Reflections shimmer on water, clouds drift overhead, and occasional prompts invite a moment of pause. The experience asks nothing of the visitor while creating opportunities for calm, curiosity, and reflection.

Installation

Space

- Lobby for mental health clinic
- Display type: Television
- Audio setup: Television
- Additional environmental elements: Wall fountain with added plants

Technology

- Content delivery platform: Yodeck.com
 - Display specifications: 55" television
 - Playback schedule: Playlist of custom created nature loops with reflective prompts
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Observations & Feedback

Visitor Responses

- “I enjoy the waiting area where I can ground myself before a session”
- “A client came in yesterday flustered and frustrated. We had her sit in our lobby in the Waiting in Wonder installation. She said “Your TV really was relaxing, thank you!”
- “It’s my favorite thing about coming to my sessions. It takes me on a trance.”

Staff Observations

- Clients are commenting on how nice and calm it is in our lobby
- Clients watch and seem to visibly relax
- Clients seem overall calmer and want to spend more time in our lobby

Designer Notes

Something surprising was that the staff complained that it was “too calm.” They were feeling tired, and we had to install a music player behind the desk so they could have other stimulation. Another interesting note with this project is that some people wait for 5 minutes; other people wait for over an hour, so it was important to create a longer playlist for content in order to reduce repeat viewing.

Key Learnings

- **Healing begins before treatment begins. That is to say environments can be part of the healing process.**
 - **Restoration requires an emotional arc, not simply calming content. You must create an environment that allows for resting while also making it stimulating enough for moments of personal reflection and insight.**
 - **Wonder and beauty create openness that supports nervous-system regulation. Nature is particularly powerful in this regard.**
 - **Some people engage more than others. There were some clients who did not notice anything different at all, but many of them comment on how calm and comfortable they feel in The Lotus Center space.**
 - **Small, carefully orchestrated sensory details combine to transform ordinary spaces into meaningful experiences.**
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Outcome

Waiting in Wonder™ demonstrated that even brief periods of waiting can become opportunities for restoration, reflection, and emotional preparation. The project established a framework for integrating immersive environmental design into wellness spaces and serves as the foundation for future Emerge experience suites. This project also created a framework for using the standard waiting room/lobby TV to produce a more restorative environment that could make waiting part of the healing process.

Future Development

Potential areas for expansion:

- Seasonal content collections
 - Specialized versions for healthcare, hospitality, wellness, and corporate environments
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Gallery

Tour of lobby completed: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1556440406155028>

Preview of audio/visual programming: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1765446941537350>

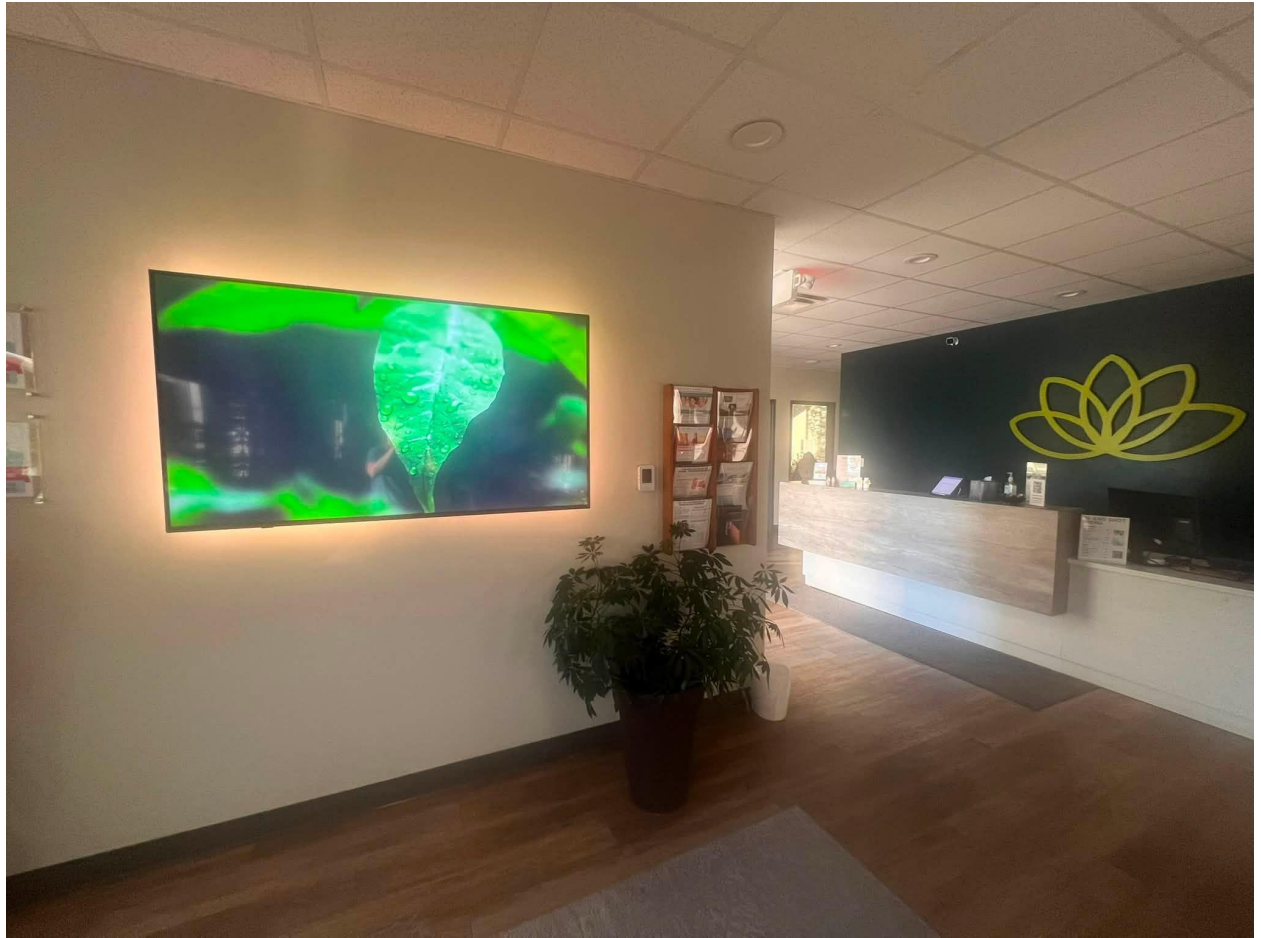
Still images of lobby:



Trust what emerges











Experience Details

Experience Name: Waiting in Wonder™

Category: Ambient Wellness Environment

Format: Licensable audiovisual experience suite

Created By: Emerge Art Spa

Designer Reflection

Waiting in Wonder began with a simple question: **What if waiting could become part of the healing process instead of something to endure?**

Most healthcare environments are designed around efficiency. Waiting is treated as an unavoidable gap between arriving and receiving care. This project challenged that assumption by asking whether those in-between moments might instead become opportunities for restoration, reflection, and reconnection.

As the project evolved, I realized I wasn't simply designing calming content. I was exploring how environments can gently shift the way people experience themselves. Rather than asking visitors to relax, meditate, or practice mindfulness, the experience offered subtle invitations through nature, beauty, movement, music, and poetic reflection. The goal was not to direct an emotional outcome but to create conditions where people could discover their own.

One of the most meaningful insights was that **regulation is not the same as stillness**. Supporting the nervous system required carefully balancing moments of rest with moments of curiosity, surprise, and awe. The most restorative sequences weren't the quietest ones. They were the ones that alternated between spaciousness and gentle engagement, allowing attention to soften without drifting away.

The project also reinforced my growing belief that **beauty is functional**. Thoughtfully composed imagery, sound, pacing, typography, and sensory details communicate care long before a clinician enters the room. When people feel that a space has been intentionally designed for them, they often arrive differently. They become more present, more receptive, and more connected to the experience unfolding around them.

Perhaps the deepest realization was that wonder can be more than an emotional response; it can be a design strategy. Moments of awe interrupt habitual patterns of attention, inviting people to pause, notice, and reconnect with both themselves and the world around them. In that sense, wonder becomes a gentle pathway toward regulation, belonging, and possibility.

This project has fundamentally shaped the future direction of Emerge. Rather than creating videos or installations as standalone pieces, I now think in terms of **immersive restorative experiences**: multisensory environments designed around emotional journeys. Whether in healthcare settings, wellness spaces, hospitality, or public environments, the aspiration is the same: to transform overlooked moments into meaningful ones through thoughtful orchestration of art, technology, nature, and human-centered design.

If I were to create a second version of *Waiting in Wonder*, I would expand the experience beyond a single looping installation. I am currently creating a living ecosystem that evolves with the seasons, responds to different times of day, and offers multiple emotional pathways depending on the needs of the space and its visitors. I would deepen the sensory integration through adaptive lighting, soundscapes, scent, and interactive elements while exploring how technology might quietly personalize experiences without drawing attention to itself.

Ultimately, *Waiting in Wonder* affirmed something I continue to explore through every Emerge project: **healing environments are not defined by the treatments they contain but by the experiences they invite**. When we intentionally design spaces that cultivate beauty, awe, reflection, and belonging, we don't simply change how people spend their time. We can gently change how they experience themselves.