

Released from the Wild: Immersive 3D digital storytelling to strengthen community connection and environmental awareness in a remote regional community

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Key points

- Released from the Wild is an immersive 3D digital storytelling project aimed at strengthening community connection and environmental awareness in the remote regional community of Benambra.
- Building on a 2016 community-created book, the project honours local stories of Lake Omeo and surrounding waterways while translating them into a new digital form.
- Using narrative, music, song, photography and drone footage, the 3D website was developed with Benambra residents, artists and the North East CMA to create an interactive and accessible storytelling experience.

Abstract

Released from the Wild is an innovative 3D digital storytelling project designed to strengthen community connection and environmental awareness within the remote regional community of Benambra. The project builds on the original *Released from the Wild* book, created collaboratively with the Benambra community in 2016, which celebrated the deep connections to local waterways and recognised Lake Omeo as a central thread to community life.

The original book captured local stories and landscapes linked to Lake Omeo and the Morass Creek/Wetland, highlighting community knowledge of these water places and the shared responsibility of caring for waterway health across the catchment. The new digital iteration honours this foundation while transforming the project into an immersive, interactive experience.

Using narrative, music, song, photography, and drone footage, the project has been reimaged as a 3D website that allows users to explore the region's waterways and stories in a richly layered visual and auditory environment. Developed in partnership with local residents, artists, and the North East CMA, the platform supports community led storytelling and enhances accessibility for diverse audiences.

Early engagement demonstrates that the 3D format is particularly effective in remote contexts where digital inclusion, connection, and community participation are priorities. By blending creative media with emerging technology, *Released from the Wild* showcases how digital storytelling can amplify local voices, deepen emotional connection to place, and strengthen community identity.

Keywords

3D digital storytelling, community engagement, remote communities, environmental awareness, creative digital media, interactive website, place-based storytelling, Benambra community

Introduction

Remote and regional communities often hold deep place-based knowledge of local waterways and may face barriers to sharing these stories more broadly and sustaining participation in catchment stewardship. These barriers can include distance, limited opportunities for collaboration, and uneven digital access. In these contexts, creative approaches that support local voice, strengthen connection to place, and enable multiple ways of participation can complement traditional engagement methods and help translate environmental values into collective community action.

Released from the Wild has been an opportunity through an immersive 3D digital storytelling experience developed with and for the remote community of Benambra in north-east Victoria. The project builds on a community-created book produced in 2016, which gathered stories and images connected to Lake Omeo and the Morass Creek/Wetland and articulated a strong local care for waterway health across the wider catchment. The digital iteration retains this community-led foundation while expanding the sensory and navigational possibilities of storytelling through an interactive website that brings together narrative, music and song, photography and drone footage in a layered visual and auditory environment.

This paper outlines the development of the 3D platform and reflects on early observations of its value for connection, inclusion, and participation in a remote community setting. It examines the collaborative process and partnerships that shaped the project, including contributions from local residents and artists, supported by the North East Catchment Management Authority (North East CMA). It also discusses the creative and technical decisions involved in transforming a printed storybook into an interactive digital experience and considers how the format improves accessibility for different audiences. Finally, the paper explores the broader implications of community-led digital storytelling as a tool for strengthening community identity and fostering environmental awareness in regional catchments.

Study area and community context

Benambra is a small rural township located in north-east Victoria within the Victorian Alps/High Country region, approximately 28 km north-east of Omeo and around 430 km north-east of Melbourne. The township sits at an elevation of approximately 700 m above sea level on the Omeo Plains, a broad valley landscape characterised by open grasslands and wetlands. Benambra lies on the margins of Lake Omeo, an ephemeral lake system that plays a central role in both the physical environment and the identity of the local community (Rowe, 1984).

Both Lake Omeo and The Morass are situated within the Upper Mitta Mitta River catchment and are situated upstream of Dartmouth Dam, within the Murray–Darling Basin. Local hydrology is characterised by a network of small creeks and wetlands, including Morass Creek, Benambra Creek and Minute Creek, which drain the Omeo Plains. The Lake Omeo basin itself is internally draining, receiving inflows from surrounding creeks and wetlands during wetter periods, but frequently remaining dry for extended intervals due to high variability in rainfall and runoff (North East RCS, 2021).

Lake Omeo and associated wetlands, including The Morass and nearby wetland systems, contribute important episodic habitat values and act as focal points for local ecological processes. The region experiences a rain-shadow climate with relatively moderate annual rainfall compared to surrounding alpine areas, contributing to the highly variable hydrological regime. This intermittency has shaped both land use and community relationships with waterways, influencing grazing practices, water management decisions and local environmental values (North East RCS, 2021).

The catchment is within the North East CMA region, with waterway health, wetland condition and community stewardship recognised as priority management themes. The township of Benambra provides an important backdrop for the *Released from the Wild* digital storytelling project, which focuses on local waterways as both environmental and social connectors within a remote regional landscape.

Methods

This project used a place-based digital storytelling approach to translate the 2016 *Released from the Wild* publication into an immersive 3D web experience for the Benambra district (north-east Victoria). Methods comprised partnership formation and co-design, community recruitment and content selection, multimedia collection (audio-visual and drone imagery) and story editing, and iterative 3D platform development and user testing leading to public launch.

The North East CMA worked in partnership with the Benambra community, and the Benambra Neighbourhood House (BNH) supporting local coordination, promotion and inclusive participation. Project planning centered on retaining the intent of the original book (community voice, connection to waterways and care for place) while adapting content and navigation for an interactive 3D environment.

The digital project was built on contributions from the original 2016 book, developed with approximately 60 community members who provided poems, short stories and/or photographs. For the 3D platform, BNH supported recruitment of additional participants to expand intergenerational involvement (including local teenagers) and to re-engage earlier contributors. Participation included contributing to the new media, advising on story selection and sequencing, testing the prototype experience and assisting with local launch activities.

Multimedia assets were assembled to create a layered sensory experience, including written narrative, music and song, photography and drone footage of key waterways and surrounding landscapes. Drone imagery collection was paired with a community dinner hosted by BNH and supported by the North East CMA, where the project team introduced the 3D approach and provided hands-on demonstrations using VR headsets/goggles. Community feedback gathered during this event and subsequent conversations informed refinement of story pathways, selection of imagery and audio elements, and the overall tone and representation of place.

Platform development commenced approximately 15 months prior to the public launch (1 May 2026) and followed an iterative build–review cycle: prototype scene layout, integration of media assets, and revisions to improve navigation and accessibility. Basic engagement evidence was captured through observations and informal feedback during demonstrations and testing sessions, supplemented by simple participation records (e.g., numbers of contributors and events delivered) to support later reflection on reach and inclusion.

Results

The project generated a completely immersive 3D website that integrated community stories with original musical works and other multimedia content. Two songs were produced for the platform, with lyrics drawn from the original *Released from the Wild* book. To translate these written pieces into an audio format, two artists were commissioned to compose and record the songs. These recordings formed part of the digital storytelling experience and were also performed live at the public launch, extending the project across both digital and in-person settings.

Community participation at the launch event was strong relative to the size of the local population. Approximately 30 community members attended the launch evening, indicating substantial local interest and engagement. Attendance at this scale suggests that the project achieved meaningful community reach within a small remote setting and provided a visible opportunity for shared celebration of local stories, waterways, and creative contributions.

Discussion

The findings suggest that *Released from the Wild* has value not only as a creative output but also as a waterway communication tool. Although the project did not generate biophysical monitoring data, it translated community/local knowledge about Lake Omeo, Minute Creek and the Morass wetlands into a form that made local waterway processes more visible, memorable and socially meaningful. In remote catchments, where hydrological variability, episodic wetland expression and long-term lived experience shape understanding of place, this kind of narrative-rich documentation can complement technical waterway science by capturing how people observe change, remember past conditions and attach significance to particular water places. This interpretation is consistent with literature arguing that local values, lived experience and multiple ways of knowing are important to more holistic waterway and wetland management, and that narrative-based approaches can create a bridge between specialist science and community knowledge (Reeves & Bonney 2023; McEwen et al., 2022).

From a community engagement perspective, the results indicate that the immersive format supported strong local participation and renewed collective ownership of earlier community knowledge. The completed 3D platform, together with the commissioned songs and the public launch, created multiple entry points for involvement across generations and across both digital and face-to-face settings. This is important because community-based environmental programs are often limited when engagement relies on a single format or one-off consultation. Here, storytelling, music and visual media appear to have broadened the ways in which people could see themselves in the project, while the launch attendance suggests that the work resonated locally at a scale meaningful for a small remote district. In this sense, the project did more than communicate information: it functioned as a mechanism for social connection, recognition of local voice and reinforcement of stewardship values tied to waterways and wetlands. This aligns with studies showing that collective storytelling can motivate catchment-scale restoration by strengthening authenticity, shared responsibility and community identity, and that digital storytelling can also help communicate diverse place values in collaborative land and water management contexts (Doehring et al., 2023; Budowle et al., 2022).

At the same time, these findings should be interpreted with caution. Evidence of impact in this paper is based on creative outputs, participation at the launch and early engagement observations rather than formal evaluation of behavioural change, long-term stewardship actions or measurable ecological outcomes. The project is therefore best understood as an enabling approach that can support water literacy, attachment to place and community stewardship, rather than as a substitute for ecological assessment or structured social research. Its broader contribution lies in showing how place-based digital storytelling can sit alongside catchment management practice: helping agencies and communities communicate local environmental values, retain community memory and build conditions for continued involvement in waterway care. Similar approaches may be transferable to other remote or regional catchments, particularly where strong local stories exist and where conventional engagement methods do not fully capture community knowledge or participation. This cautious interpretation is also reflected in wider research, which emphasises that narrative-science and participatory stewardship approaches can support social learning and knowledge exchange, but require time, trust and context-sensitive design to produce durable outcomes (McEwen et al., 2022; Reeves & Bonney 2023).

Conclusions

In conclusion, *Released from the Wild* demonstrates how immersive digital storytelling can extend a community waterway project beyond documentation to become a practical tool for environmental communication, local knowledge-sharing and community connection. The project produced a 3D platform that translated the original community book into an interactive experience supported by music, photography, drone footage and live performance, while the launch attendance indicated meaningful local participation for a small remote district. Taken together, the results and discussion suggest that the project's main contribution lies not in generating ecological data, but in strengthening the social and communicative conditions that support water literacy, place attachment and stewardship. For waterway practitioners and regional communities, the project highlights the value of combining creative media with local community participation to make catchment issues more accessible, memorable and locally owned. Future work will build on this foundation by evaluating longer-term engagement outcomes, testing the approach in other regional catchments and exploring how digital storytelling might be integrated more systematically with ecological monitoring and community-based waterway management.

Acknowledgements

- Craig Dent and Justin Dallinger - Parallel Wilds
- Trudy Anderson-Connely - Benambra Neighbourhood House
- Cody Gibson - Oscar FM
- Sylvia Connley and Jake Pendergast
- Mallee Damm and Patrick Thurtell for music creation and performance
- Community of Benambra
- Mick and Julie Gribble – Alpine Airwork

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