

Storyland

DESIGN CHALLENGE



The Shops at Earth-B

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Show Writers: David Charles and Caitlin Sprague

Logline:

When a parallel dimension suddenly appears inside a shopping mall, revealing a grim alternate Earth timeline, guests must find out what happened to our parallel brethren and how to stop it from happening to us... before our fates collide.

Synopsis:

As a scientist, you know that our knowledge of the universe is but a drop in a big lake. Even so, you weren't expecting a fissure in Earth's energy to open a vortex to another dimension... right in the middle of your local mall. Initial reports reveal photos like ours, technology like ours, commodities like ours -- all in the exact same mall, leading people to call it "Earth-B." But unlike our mall, it hasn't been updated since the '90s, and mutated plants seem to be its sole remaining residents. Suspicions are raised when a wall full of newspapers dated 1997 parade the headline: "IS THIS THE END?" The public is uneasy, and one question on everyone's lips: what happened?

You are considering exactly that when it's announced that only one company is being allowed research access to the vortex: Globax, a multi-billion dollar information technology and engineering corporation with a seedy reputation. Globax is refusing to disclose their findings or intentions to the public, leaving the scientific community in the lurch. Using your collective resources, you decide to infiltrate their operation to find out what happened to the humans of Earth B and why Globax is controlling the information.

With only 75 minutes on the clock, you must explore the eerie remains of our alternative past, unearth clues to its destruction, and stop Globax's plot -- before the fate of our dimension ends in the same destruction.

Scene Description

Entrance/Queue

As we approach the east wing of the mall, our eyes catch the edge of a white tent with a large biohazard sign. We round the corner and see a wall extending all the way up to the mall's ceiling, past the second floor. It's glitching green, blue, and black - almost like a computer screen. The tent, spanning at least 50 feet on the ground floor, connects to the flickering barrier, and dons two guarded doorways, a Globax Corporation logo, and numerous signs that say, "Authorized Personnel Only" and "CAUTION: Unstable Environment."

Our ticket directs us to find the "Inconspicuous Taco Stand" located near the Globax employee entrance upon arrival, and it only takes a second to find it. As indicated on the ticket, we approach the counter and ask for twenty inconspicuous gorditas. The food vendor asks for identification, and we hand them our ticket. They nod in approval, slip us a pager, and tell us to return to the taco stand when it buzzes.

Upon our return, a different employee at the taco truck opens a side door and ushers us in. Inside, they introduce themselves as one of our fellow scientists working to figure out why a portal opened to another dimension and why their society collapsed. They explain that Globax has suspiciously restricted outside researchers from entering the vortex. They're sending us in to infiltrate Globax's operations and figure out what happened to Earth B and determine the secrets behind Globax's interest in it. Once inside, they encourage us to probe the Globax employees with as many questions as possible without blowing our cover.

The scientist explains that the second QR code on our ticket will act as a fake clearance badge and instructs us to present it to the Globax security guard at the side entrance. Before we leave, though, they emphasize that our badge will only provide us admittance for 75 minutes; and if we spend any longer in the other dimension, we will be caught and prosecuted by Globax.

Equipped with our clearance badges, we make our way towards the security checkpoint...

Scene Description

Pre-Show - Biohazard Tent

We approach the entrance to the Globax biohazard tent, the Globax Corporation logo looming above us. We line up at the security checkpoint, anxiously waiting to see if our badges clear. Thankfully, the scanner beeps in approval and we are admitted as Globax Employees from an adjacent division.

Just inside the tent, the Globax scientists welcome and debrief us, explaining that they are collecting data and samples from the other dimension in response to the astronomical energy reading they recorded from the parallel universe. They task our group with the goal of searching for any components or elements that might be linked to the type of energy used in the alternate world.

Once they are finished, we enter a tunnel and make our way through the vortex. Psychedelic lights and sounds fill our senses as we proceed. We turn a corner and a layer of fog prevents us from seeing more than a few feet ahead. We step through it and emerge into Earth B.

Scene Description

Scene 1 - Atrium A

Our eyes don't know where to look first. We're still inside a mall, but it's not the one we just left. Dense, invasive foliage crawls up and drapes over almost every exposed structure, and cracks in the overhead skylight drop dust-filled beams of sunlight onto the floor. While the building's foundations look the same, the architecture is wildly different, evoking neoclassicism with its white tiles, regal columns, and statue of Icarus in a large, circular fountain. The stores along both sides of us look familiar. We've seen these stores before, or variations of them - in the 1990s. Newspapers and garbage scatter the ground, as though tossed there indiscriminately.

The mall has clearly been abandoned but it's not empty. Globax researchers are busy analyzing the environment and collecting samples and data. We decide not to disturb them and instead, walk around the atrium, taking a closer look at our surroundings. To our left, a store is boarded up with newspaper. Some of the headlines include: "IS THIS THE END?" "IT'S TOO LATE' experts say" and "THE POINT OF NO RETURN."

As we're turning back around, one of the scientists spots our group and instructs us to go investigate inside the Science Emporium.

Scene Description

Scene 2 - Science Emporium

Upon entering our first store, deja vu hits and we're struck by the similarity to the PBS Store of Knowledge and Discovery Channel Store from our dimension. It's filled with science based toys, projects, and games, such as freeze-dried ice cream and make-your-own volcano models, all covered in plants. As we look closer, though, the differences in this alternate dimension's timeline continue to reveal themselves. For example, instead of "Bill Nye the Science Guy," this dimension has "Jill Vaal the Science Gal;" and a roost of butterflies - not the kind we're used to seeing - are perched all over the store. They appear mutated, bearing unusual colors and shapes, with some being as large as a hawk.

We wander through the store, collecting clues and information. Under the guise of our secret identities, we begin to chat with one of the Globax researchers inside the store. We learn that Globax's interest in the mall has to do with the incredibly high energy readings they've recorded here, and the company's goal is to harness that energy source. As we're chatting, a lightbulb overhead makes a loud popping sound and then goes out, startling us. The scientist makes a comment that the energy seems to be not entirely stable, but they believe their team of scientists can stabilize it.

One of the interactive exhibits in the store catches our eye: A model of the Hubble telescope hanging from the ceiling. Attached to it is some liquid metallic matter. A tiny sign points to the matter, but is too small to read. However, just underneath the model is a stationary telescope that points directly at the model. If we look through the telescope on the ground, we are able to read the text next to the model on the ceiling, which reads: "Seregonium™. Discovered by the astronauts aboard NASA's Endeavor repair mission in 1993. ."

The Globax employee prompts us to move onto the next store, saying we're needed inside. At the back of the science emporium is an open doorway that leads into the next store...

Scene Description

Scene 3 - Cartridges

We enter a video game store, similar to the Babbage's and Electronics Boutique of our dimension. The walls and aisles are lined with various games, walkthrough manuals, accessories, and character figurines. In the middle of the store is an old CRT Television with a game console hooked up to it. Looking around, we see a sign above the TV that says, "Try out the NEW Super Game Station 64!" and another above the registers, saying, "Sign up for our Cartridges Magazine!"

We pick up a game off one of the shelves and turn it over to see a large white label in the bottom right that says, "Cartridge powered with the Seregonium™ Chip." We lift up another game case and flip it over to see the same. Along the left side of the store, affixed to the wall about 8 feet up, is a display of game consoles and their boxes. The front side is inconspicuous, but as we move closer to the wall and stare up at the side of the boxes, we see that they all have a large sticker that reads "Incredible graphics powered by the Seregonium™ Processor inside each console!"

Next to the register, we see a Globax employee scanning the merchandise with a Geiger counter. Periodically, the instrument beeps at a high volume and rapid frequency. When this happens, they open the device apart and remove an item. We ask them what they are doing, and they tell us that they are trying to find Seregonium. When we ask what seregonium is, they tell us that they think it's the energy Earth B was using and instructs us to look around the room for more information about it.

After a few minutes, the Globax employee prompts us to move onto the food court to see if we can find any other anomalies. We exit out of the front of Cartridges, and into the Ambrosia Food Court...

Scene Description

Scene 4 - Ambrosia Food Court

The food court has a large open area with tables for dining and various fast-food outlets lining the outer perimeter. The food stands are abandoned, but the theming and menus are still displayed for each of the chains on TV screens inside each restaurant. We see chains such as “Timmy’s Twists,” “Cinnaswirls,” “Mr. Fieldhouse,” and “Sally Sunday’s Burgers and Sundaes.” Food items are themed around the Seregonium™ discovery, such as Seregonium-shaped cookies, out-of-this-world sundaes, and so on.

In the middle of the food court stands a Globax employee and multiple rows of electronics, lined up neatly along the ground. They hold something that glows blue in one hand and a clipboard in another. They point the glowing object towards the items on the floor and move back and forth, left and right. Certain objects rumble and let out a loud whining noise when they get close, and then they step back and jot a note down in their notepad. We ask them what they’re doing and they say that they’re testing how powerful the Seregonium is.

We make our way behind the counters one-by-one. About halfway through, while we’re inside the cookie chain, Mr. Fieldhouse, we hear white noise on the TV menu behind us. We turn and see static snow on the screens. Over the next few seconds, it transforms and beneath the static, almost shaped by it, we can barely make out the silhouette of a girl. She appears to open and close her mouth, and then the feed cuts out, eventually settling back to the menu.

The same thing happens in the restaurant across from us: the menu changes to static. A shape of the girl appears and disappears a second later. We make our way into that kitchen, then hear the white noise again in the next restaurant down. We follow it, see the feed change, go out, and return to the menu. This happens one more time, in the last restaurant; and then we hear the same noise coming from the store next door.

Curious, we take a step forward and right before we enter the next room, the Globax employee from the middle of the food court calls out to us, “Be careful in there. We haven’t gotten that far yet.”

Scene Description

Scene 5 - Smells Like Teen Clothing

We arrive inside a teenage apparel store with a bright neon sign advertising its name, “Smells Like Teen Clothing.” It is stocked full of all the hip clothing trends any 90s teen would go *totally tubular* over. It’s got grunge to prep and everything in between. There’s even a 1992 Dodge Caravan in the middle of the store with the engine and trunk propped open, clothing stacked inside each. As we walk down the aisles, we see shirts in the goth section that have slogans on them like “Dark Like Dark Matter” and “Welcome To My Darkness;” and we’re serenaded by 90s music videos playing on TVs lining both walls.

At the far end of the store near the fitting rooms and register we see the girl again on another TV screen. She’s clearer now, and we can see she’s wearing a yellow uniform and red apron embroidered with “Mr. Fieldhouse”. She is pointing at something. We rush towards the back of the store, only to once again have the TV feed go out. We look at the area where she pointed, and find a remote control, taped against a wall.. A piece of duct tape is pasted above the control, stating, “MANAGEMENT ONLY” and the power and fast forward buttons are almost entirely worn out.

We push the power button. All of the TVs in the store are tuned to a teen reality show called *Gettin’ Wild and Real*. On it, a college-aged man is drinking beer, swaying, and yelling at the camera, “If we’re all gonna die, then so should they!” and the camera pans to a burning building with a Globax logo that is different from the one we’ve seen. When we hit fast forward, a different clip pops up, this one of a group of teenagers on the beach. The camera pans back and forth between them, as they say things like, “F*ck corporations!” and “People over profits, man!” Another fast forward reveals the same house mates frantically packing suitcases and running down the streets with a wave of others, talking about going to a shelter. The show flicks itself over to R.E.M.’s *It’s The End Of The World* music video.

The feed cuts out and suddenly chiptune music starts blasting from the fitting rooms. We go to investigate, and discover bright lights behind one of the fitting room doors. We open the door to reveal a hidden staff entrance to a video game arcade.

Scene Description

Scene 6 - Ar-K-O Arcade

We emerge from the secret passageway and into an arcade. The game cabinets line the room labyrinthine rows. Games include “Todd the Possum,” “Super Mutant Samurai Salamanders,” and “Lethal Fist Fight” among other similarly strange but familiar titles. The chiptune music in tandem to the lights of the game cabinets.

While most of the games have an “Out of Order” sign taped atop them, a few look available for play. A token machine sits nearby, but we have no cash. Luckily, we see a message carved with a key or knife into the side of the machine that says, “HOLD RETURN 4 10 SEC 4 FREE ¢.” We hold the ‘Return’ button for ten seconds and four tokens are released into the change cup.

After a minute, the overhead lights turn off and a black light turns on. Glowing on the wall is the text “Ready Player?” All of the game screens flash the words “Follow Me,” and then a sequence of arrows. We follow them, weaving through the maze of game cabinets. The arrows lead us to an isolated game cabinet in the back of the store. The screen blinks, “Enter Code.” We look around us for the code and our eyes eventually catch something bright on the carpet. Starting on the right of the game cabinet and circling around us to the other side are arrows and letters painted in neon paint, lit up by the black light. They show:

↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ← → ← → B A

We input the code and the cabinet slides over to reveal a hidden pathway.

Scene Description

Scene 7 - Movie Theater Projector Room

The secret passage leads us to a projection room. It's mostly barren, save some shelves stacked with film reels. The projector is pointed at a large open window overlooking a movie theater. We notice a blinking button on the side of the projector and press it. A commercial for the mall - Pompeii Plaza - begins, but the sound cuts out. The teenage girl we saw before appears on the screen and directly addresses us. She introduces herself as Ashley. In a rushed tone, she tells us she knows who we are and that we're in danger.

She goes on to explain that a form of dark matter was discovered on the Hubble Telescope in 1993 and transformed by the Globax corporation into a powerful energy source called Seregonium. The Pompeii Plaza was one of the earliest and most fervent adopters of it, far before the reports started coming out that Seregonium was unstable and fatal to humans.

When all the mall employees started getting sick, Ashley grew suspicious and went to management, who waved away her concerns. While people all around the world were beginning to perish, her co-workers were dying at an exceptionally high rate. Concerned and suspicious that the mall was hiding something, she smoozed up to mall management in an attempt to get information.

Upon finding out that the seregonium powering the S-Tower energy hub inside the mall was actually a form of dark matter and that Globax was paying the mall to cover up the side effects - she took it upon herself to shut it down. Unfortunately, she failed and was absorbed by the S-Tower; her consciousness, digitized. She has watched over the mall from inside the electronics ever since.

The rest of humanity died over time, it being too late to do anything once the risks were finally exposed. Over the decades, she was able to help keep the Seregonium levels in check; however, the dark matter recently suddenly began to rapidly expand, ripping a hole into our own dimension. Now, the Globax in our dimension is exploring the same dangerous element, risking us all all over again.

She tells us we must finish what she started by finding the S-Tower and shutting it down. She will help us along the way. The projector clicks off and the theater goes dark. We exit the projector room and head into the theater lobby.

Scene Description

Scene 8 - Movie Theater Lobby

As we walk through the lobby, we see posters for a variety of upcoming movies with release dates in 1997. We head towards the entrance, but the lobby doors are blocked by mutated plant life. Ashley appears on one of the monitors in the lobby and tells us that we can use the emergency exit located inside of the theater, which will lead us back into the mall atrium. We open the doors to the movie theater and enter inside.

Scene Description

Scene 9 - Movie Theater

After entering the movie theater that we previously saw from the projector room, we make our way to the emergency exit next to the movie screen.

Scene Description

Scene 10 - Xtreme Zone

Estimated Run Time: 8 minutes

Expecting another store, our jaws drop at the sight of an enormous playground in front of us. Tubes, slides, bridges, ball pits - everything a child or child-at-heart would love is in this room. It feels like a combination of Chuck-E-Cheese and the old Discovery Zones, but those certainly always had less botanic life crawling up between their crevices.

The main pathway to the exit is blocked by fallen debris and thorned plants. We have no choice but to enter the tube in front of us (although an ADA accessible path is available for our mobility-limited friends). It leads us to a series of rope ladders, then a bridge, more tubes, and then a path of trampolines. We continue through this exciting obstacle course until we reach a spiral slide, which exits us right in front of a door leading to the mall atrium. The sound of a waterfall draws us into the lobby.

Scene Description

Scene 11 - Atrium C

In the middle of the atrium, twin escalators lead to the second story. Rainfall from the broken skylight and leaking pipes upstairs have turned the escalators into literal waterfalls, pooling at a hole in the floor, filled with colorful fish and surrounded by beautiful plant life. While looking around the atrium, we stumble upon a mall directory. Ahead is the Mall Information and Gift Wrapping Center with offices behind them. Beyond is the Boundaries book shop, followed by Radio Shanty. On the Radio Shanty store block is a red 'S' inside a circle. We look at the symbol on the map key and see "S-Tower."

Remembering what Ashley revealed to us in the movie theater, we set our sights on Radio Shanty. However, the path is blocked off by overgrown plant life yet again, so we make our way into the Mall Information Center to see if we can access Radio Shanty via Boundaries.

Scene Description

Scene 12 - Mall Information/Back Offices

When we enter the Mall Information Center, it's apparent that they tried to make the room look welcoming and warm; however, the fluorescent lights and narrow space makes us feel like we're inside an oversized closet. A nondescript "Information" sign is affixed to the back wall over a display of various sized boxes, and a massive gift-wrapping station takes up most of the room. Prices for gift wrapping are labeled underneath the box display but are crossed out with the words, "SALE: All sizes \$2.01" written over them. Looking around, an advertisement poster hangs on both sides of the room, sporting the phrase: "First mall to be fully powered by Seretonium energy" Just behind the gift wrapping counter, we see a door labeled "Employees Only." We check the door, but it's locked. It takes a three digit code, so we glance around for anything that might indicate which three numbers to enter and settle on 201. The lock makes a noise and level inside retracts, allowing us in.

We enter and find ourselves in a combination break room and office. The kitchenette has a coffee maker, microwave, mini fridge, and table with two chairs, while office space only consists of a desk, chair, and tall file cabinet. On a bulletin board behind the table are various documents, including the Employee Code of Conduct, labor laws, newspaper clippings, and employee memos. The news clippings mimic the posters up front, mentioning that Pompeii Plaza will become the first shopping mall fully powered by seregonium.

When we look at the various memos, dating from 1995 to 1997, we see that there were numerous complaints to management about headaches, nausea, stomach cramping, severe fatigue, and loss of vision; but that mall management continued to blame it on an abnormally high pollen count and low air pressure. On a plaque next to the board is a Pompeii Plaza Employee of the Month award from August 1997 given to Ashley Templeton.

We continue to search the room for clues and turn to the office area, specifically the file cabinets. Combing through them, we find multiple folders labeled, "EMPLOYEE DEATHS" followed by a month and year. On the top of each is an email exchange between mall management and a Globax employee, wherein the Globax employee is thanking mall management for bringing these occurrences to their attention and accepting their gift of a new addition to the mall for their secrecy.

Scene Description (Cont.)

Scene 12 - Mall Information/Back Offices

Above the desk is a “Hang in there” cat poster, framed. Noticing that it sticks out from the wall slightly, we pull it back to reveal a blueprint poster of the S-Tower. We analyze it thoroughly before moving a door in the back marked, “BOUNDARIES.” Again, we try to open it but find it has a six-digit electronic lock code. Eventually, after a few incorrect guesses, we type in ASHLEY and it opens.

Scene Description

Scene 13 - Boundaries

The bookstore is divided into sections: books in the back, magazines up front, an INFORMATION desk, and a small cafe off to the side. Books and other items are strewn all over the floor, making certain paths unwalkable; but the center aisle is open, so we take that towards the front. Empty bookshelves line the end caps, with signs featuring books about Seregonium and dark matter.

At the information desk is a display for the e-book tablet, Kindling. A sign next to it says, "For better reception and a longer lasting battery, increase proximity to an S-Tower.™ Our mall's S-Tower™ is located in the Radio Shanty." Looking at the tablet, we see that it is already on and open to a page about the design of the S-Towers. We swipe through a few pages to read how the Seregonium is harnessed and controlled, where the S-Towers can be used, and the operational buttons. On the third page we receive a message saying, "End of trial copy."

Up front in the magazine section we see a number of newspapers covering the course of Earth B's destruction and "Minute: Man of the Year" magazine issues with the CEO of Globax on it, all spray painted with graffiti. Suddenly, an announcement begins to play over the intercom repeating, "STORE IS CLOSING. PROCEED TO CHECKOUT" three times, followed by sudden lights out. An aisle lit by emergency lights along the floor guides us out the door.

Scene Description
Scene 14 - Atrium B

We exit Boundaries into the atrium to make our way towards the Radio Shanty. This section of the atrium has a Merry-Go-Round, and some coin operated toddler rides. At first, they remain still, but as we walk past, they all suddenly jolt into action. Faster and faster they go until they're going so fast we fear they may fly off their frames; but then they unexpectedly stop, the music along with it. We wait, seeing if something else will happen, but only the music turns back on, playing eerily on a ride with no passengers.

Having nowhere else to go, we step inside Radio Shanty.

Scene Description

Scene 15 - Radio Shanty

Radio Shanty has wall-to-wall electronics: TVs, radios, computers, cameras, cell phones.. At the front of the store there is a cardboard cutout of someone captioned Billy-Steve the Pirate. The cutout has a speech bubble stating, "I've sailed the Seven Seas for the best technical treasures! Buy them at your local Radio Shanty!"

The electronics in the store hum mechanically, surrounding us. Many are pulsating with their screens or lights in sync with the overhead techno music.

Ashley appears on all of the televisions in the store at once, letting us know that the energy levels in this room are dangerously high because we're nearing the S-Tower, located in the back of the back room of the store. A light appears behind a door at the far wall, as if Ashley is illuminating it for us so we know the way.

We make our way to it and open the door, entering what looks to be an engineering room. Circuit breakers line the wall, large boilers stand in each corner, and tubes of all sizes snake through the room. In front of us is an enormous generator. Standing at least 12 feet high, it's shaped like a giant cylinder with a spoke through it. The copper coils inside have a dangerous fiery glow while a bright blue light pulses from behind. A loud, high pitched and repetitive popping noise emits from it, like pistons firing on a steam engine.

Ashley appears on a surveillance monitor against the wall and explains that it is not possible to eliminate the dark matter that makes up the Seregonium inside the S-Tower. Energy cannot disappear: it can only be transferred. She says that if we've noticed, the plants inside this mall are not normal. Over the decades, they've absorbed the dark matter energy and thrive off it, self-cultivating new species and varieties not naturally seen on this planet. The plants can take on the energy from the S-Tower and store it in new, magnificent ways.

To transfer the energy, she goes on to explain that there are a number of levels, buttons, and switches on a box near the generator. In order to turn off the generator, a sequence of events must be followed precisely. When she had attempted to shut it down previously, she missed a step and was killed.

Scene Description (Cont.)
Scene 15 - Radio Shanty

We're first instructed to pull something that looks like an oil stick 12 inches out of the center of the spoke until we hear a clink. Then we press a series of buttons on the box, turn a key exactly three-quarters (locking it in place), and pull a lever, causing the generator to puff loudly and slow its RPM.

One last step is necessary, Ashley says: we must trace a symbol onto a screen on the top of the box. Specifically, what we must draw is a capital G with a circle around it. We follow her orders, and a button appears with the message, "EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN. DO YOU WANT TO PROCEED?"

We push "YES," and the machine abruptly shuts off, throwing the room into an eerie silence. Then the lights above cut out, plunging us into total darkness. A dazzling blue light begins to emerge from beneath the generator. The ground seems to absorb it, and bright streaks snake through the room and up the walls like veins along skin. They stop when they all reach the ceiling and pulse for an awe-filled moment until they disappear into the wall and the room plunges back into darkness.

The emergency lights turn on, and we exit out the door opposite the generator, emitting a purple glow underneath.

Scene Description

Scene 16 - Tanks and Terrariums

Our jaws drop when we emerge in the next store. What used to be a pet store, apparent from the countless tanks scattered all over the room, has transformed into an otherworldly garden. Flowers blanket the walls, and in the center of the store is a willow tree. The boughs of a giant tree, glowing with a fluorescent purple hue, hang all around us, and flowers blanketing the walls glow a breathtaking blue. The energy has successfully been transferred into the plant life, allowing it to thrive in unimaginable ways. The willow gently sways, and from it bellows the voice of Ashley. She thanks us for helping her finish her mission, and tells us that we should sneak out before any Globax employees get suspicious of us.

Scene Description

Scene 17 - Exit (Through the Gift Shop)

We exit Tanks and Terrariums, and return to the atrium. With the power cut off, the only light to guide us is from the bioluminescent plant life. We see a few of the Globax scientists from before staring at the plants and running around confused, trying to figure out what happened. We quickly make our exit, avoiding any further suspicion.