



Interactive documentary explores massive BP oil spill

The first oil well drilled in the United States was in Pennsylvania over 150 years ago. Since that time, many more oil and gas wells have been tapped and pumped dry across the country.

As the easily accessible fossil fuel deposits get depleted, energy companies are forced to work harder and drill deeper to satisfy our insatiable thirst for energy. In Pennsylvania, that means horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing to unleash the vast reserves of natural gas in the Marcellus shale formation. In other regions, it means going far offshore into very deep water.

Just over four years ago, in the Gulf of Mexico, BP's Deepwater Horizon rig exploded and sank while drilling an oil well over 18,000 feet deep under water over 5,000 feet deep. Eleven men were killed in the explosion and it's estimated that over 200 million gallons of oil leaked into the gulf. It was the worst oil spill in history.

A look back

"Offshore" is a feature-length, online, interactive documentary exploring the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon disaster and the difficulties of extracting energy from increasingly challenging environments. It can be experienced at offshore-interactive.com.

The interface for "Offshore" is part documentary, part video game and part website. The home screen features a CGI 360-degree panoramic view of grey skies and rough seas, with drilling rigs dotting the horizon in every direction. Clicking and dragging allows you to manipulate the view from side to side and up and down.

As you spin the seascape the title appears with a play button under it. Pressing the button reveals a quote, "The era of easy oil is over." It's from the CEO of Chevron in 2005. You are then taken on a video helicopter ride from an industrial port out to the open sea, which is littered with drilling rigs and vessels. Facts and figures about energy exploration are superimposed over the video as you fly to your destination, an unoccupied drilling rig platform.

After the chopper lands on the helipad, you can explore the inside of the virtual aircraft by clicking and dragging. A file folder on a seat can be opened to read the incident report inside. Spin to the open door and you can venture out to the drilling platform. The sounds of wind and waves surround the deserted rig. Everything is rendered in shades of gray except for the markers that guide you on your journey.

Signs with faded construction-yellow paint, red loudspeakers or floating blue play buttons all beckon you to explore different parts of the massive, virtual-3D platform. Clicking on the various guides causes you to travel down stairs, up ladders, through doors and down hallways to get to the next part of the story.

As you arrive at each destination, text, audio and video tell different parts of the story of the Deepwater Horizon and the quest for fossil fuels where the cutting edge of technology meets nature's harshest environments.

An ongoing problem

The Deepwater disaster has long since faded from the news and most people probably assume its over. The stories from residents, doctors, scientists, lawyers and other specialists who lived through, or are studying the catastrophe, tell a tale of an ongoing crisis with serious health and environmental implications. BP is portrayed as driven more by profits than employee safety. The oil company's side of the story is not presented.

The documentary claims many people, and the marine ecosystem, were exposed to dangerous toxins from the spill and cleanup efforts. This has caused serious, ongoing health and environmental problems, including human deaths and reduced fishing harvests.

"Offshore" is a good documentary with engaging interactivity, strong visual elements and some compelling stories. There is an obvious anti-oil bias in the production that makes me suspicious of some of the charges, even if they're right. Including responses from oil companies would provide some needed balance and allow viewers to draw their own conclusions.

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