GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT

Evolving Emotional Storytelling In thatgamecompany's SKY

Jennie Kong
Story Writer, thatgamecompany

GDC
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE
MARCH 18–22, 2019 | #GDC19

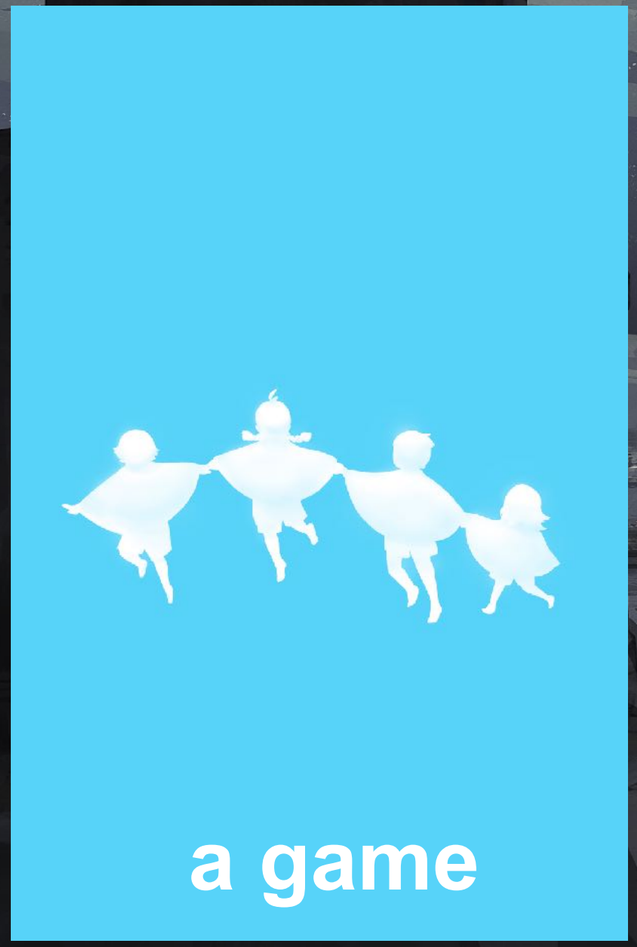
Jennie Kong

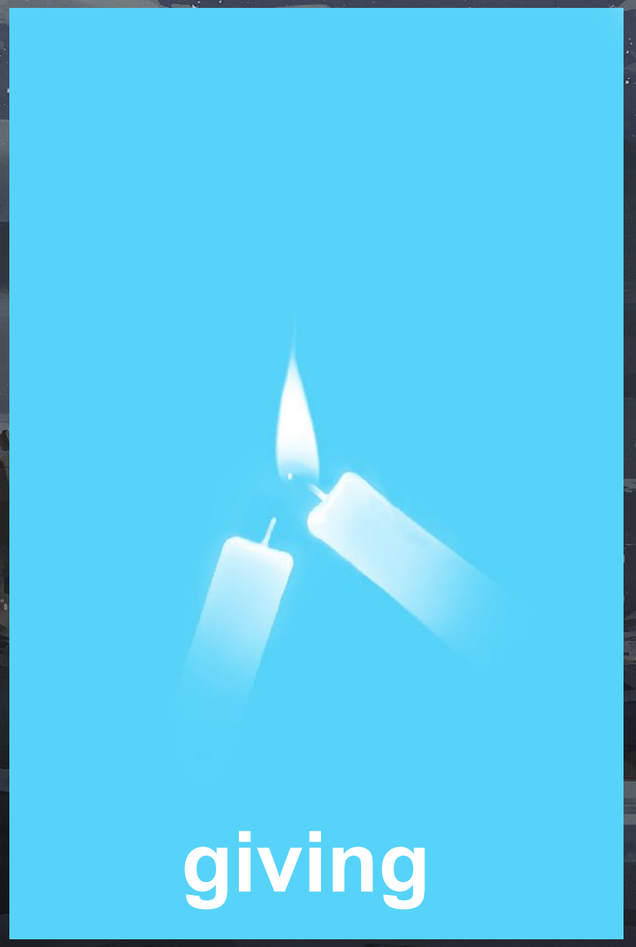
Story Writer, thatgamecompany:
SKY

Narrative Writer: AVMLab, Serenity Forge
Director: ‘The Game Makers’ docuseries

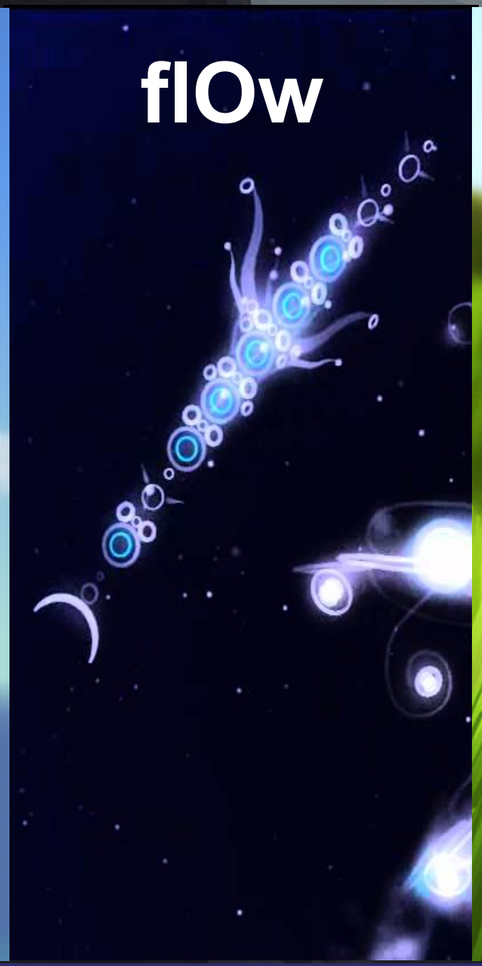
Sony PlayStation:
Ico, Shadow of the Colossus, Flower, Uncharted

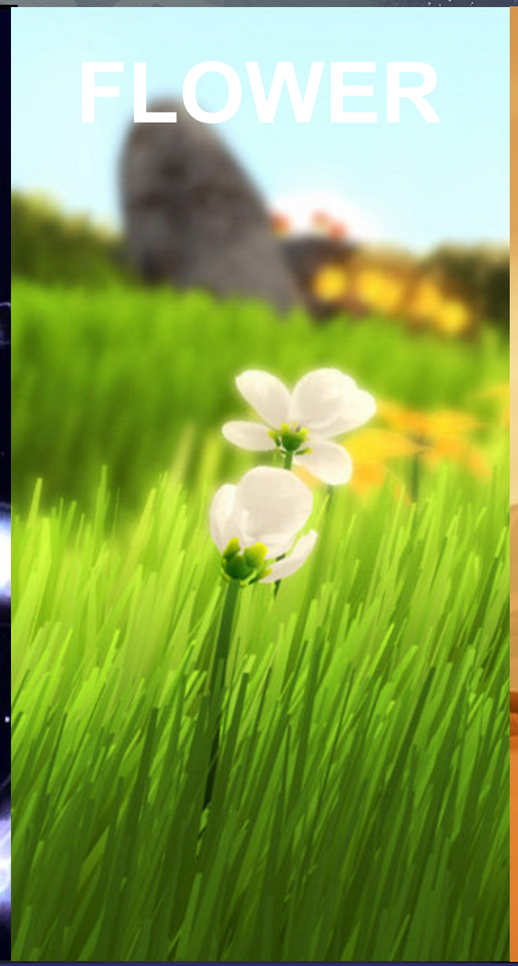
2013-Present





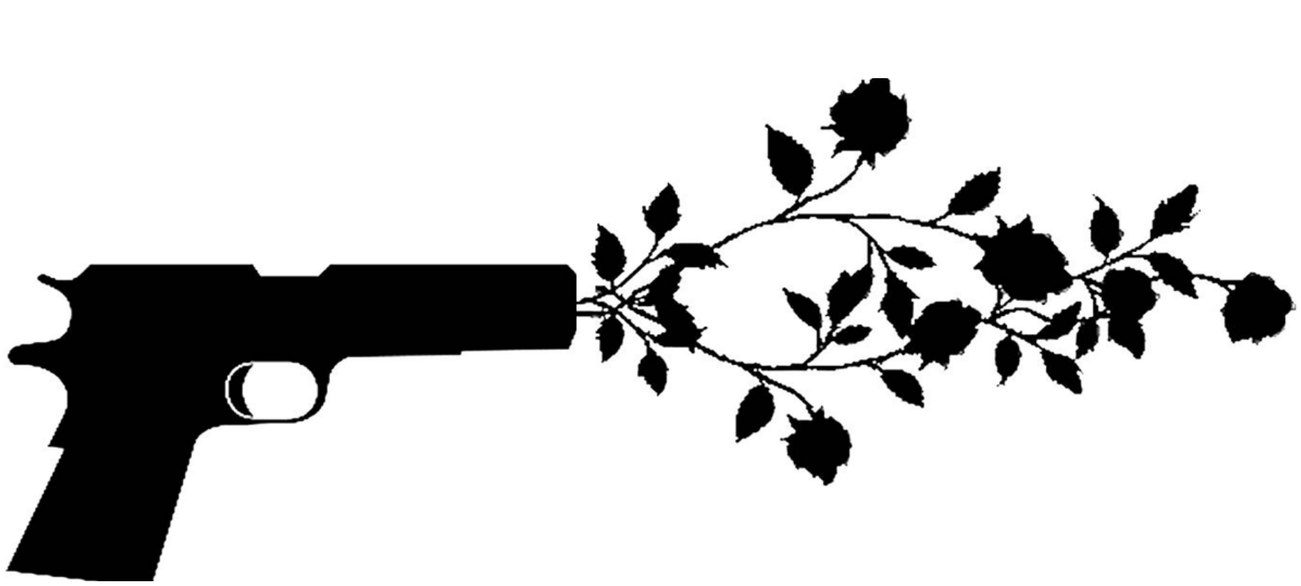
thatgamecompany





thatgamecompany

“Develop timeless interactive entertainment that connects players worldwide through positive emotional experience and appealing to all ages”



Emotion Through Language

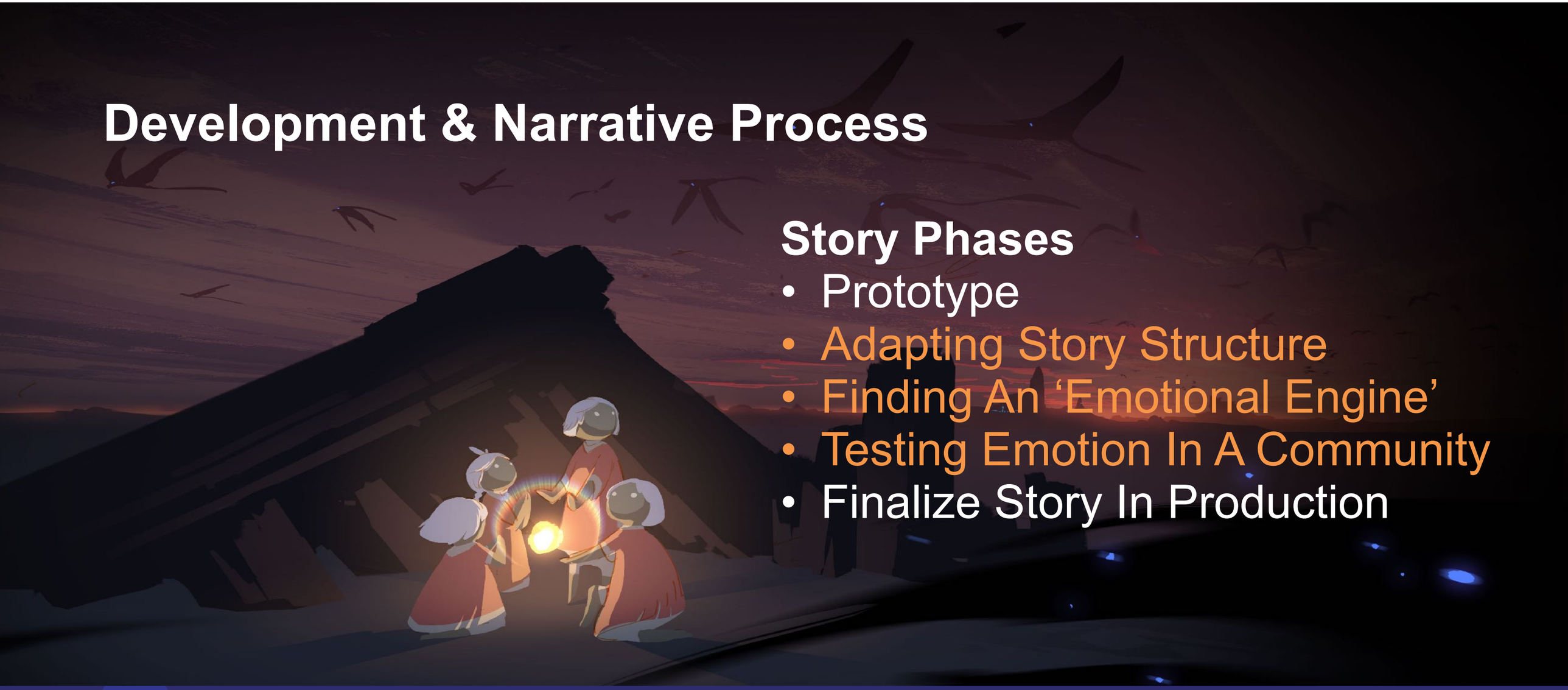
GAME NARRATIVE SUMMIT

Emotion Through Space

Emotion Through Action

- Social Driven
- Coming of Age
- Childhood Wonder

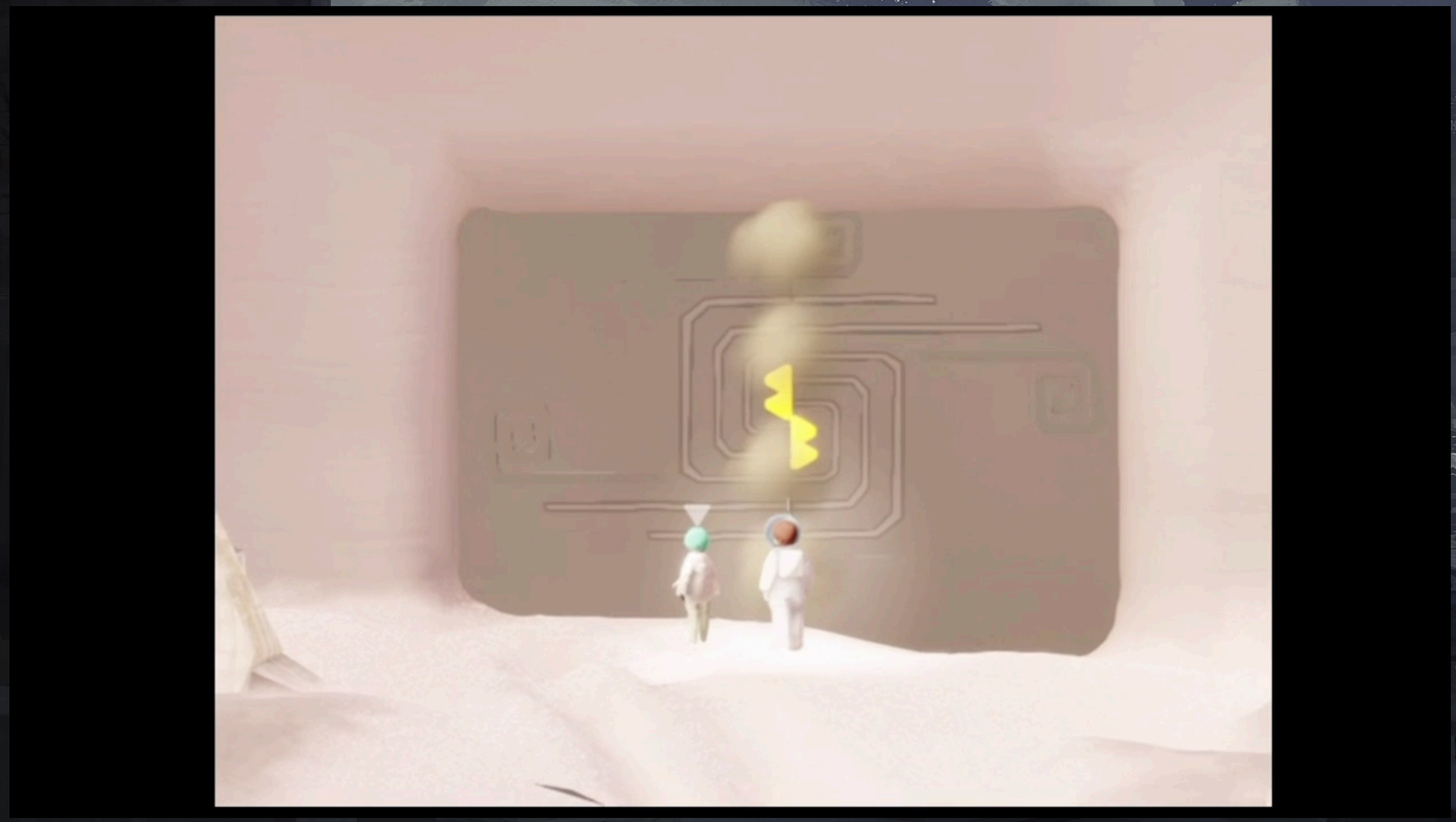
Development & Narrative Process



Story Phases

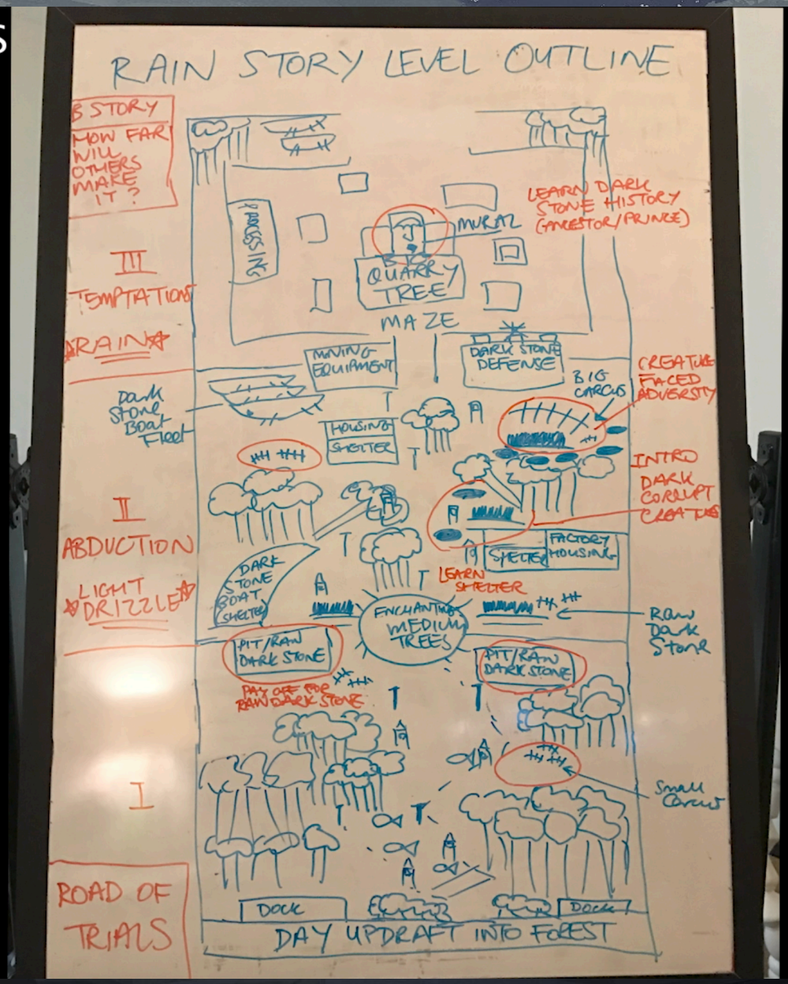
- Prototype
- Adapting Story Structure
- Finding An ‘Emotional Engine’
- Testing Emotion In A Community
- Finalize Story In Production

1) Prototype



2) Story Structure

OLD STORY BRAINSTORMS



Linear Multiplayer “A-Story” Path In Sky World

Linear progression of Emotional Gameplay

Isle

Alone - Needy

Prairie

Freedom - Joy

Forest

Uncertainty - Melancholy

Mountains

Hubris - Romance

Credits

Storm

Selfless Sacrifice

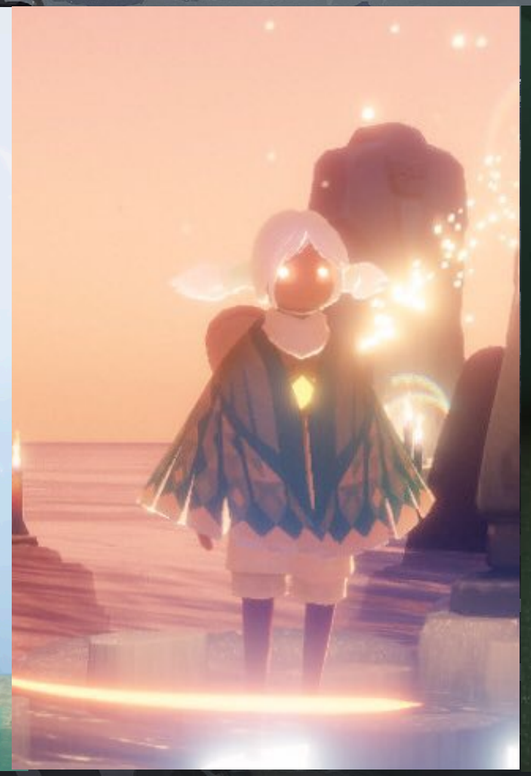
Vault

Hope - Togetherness

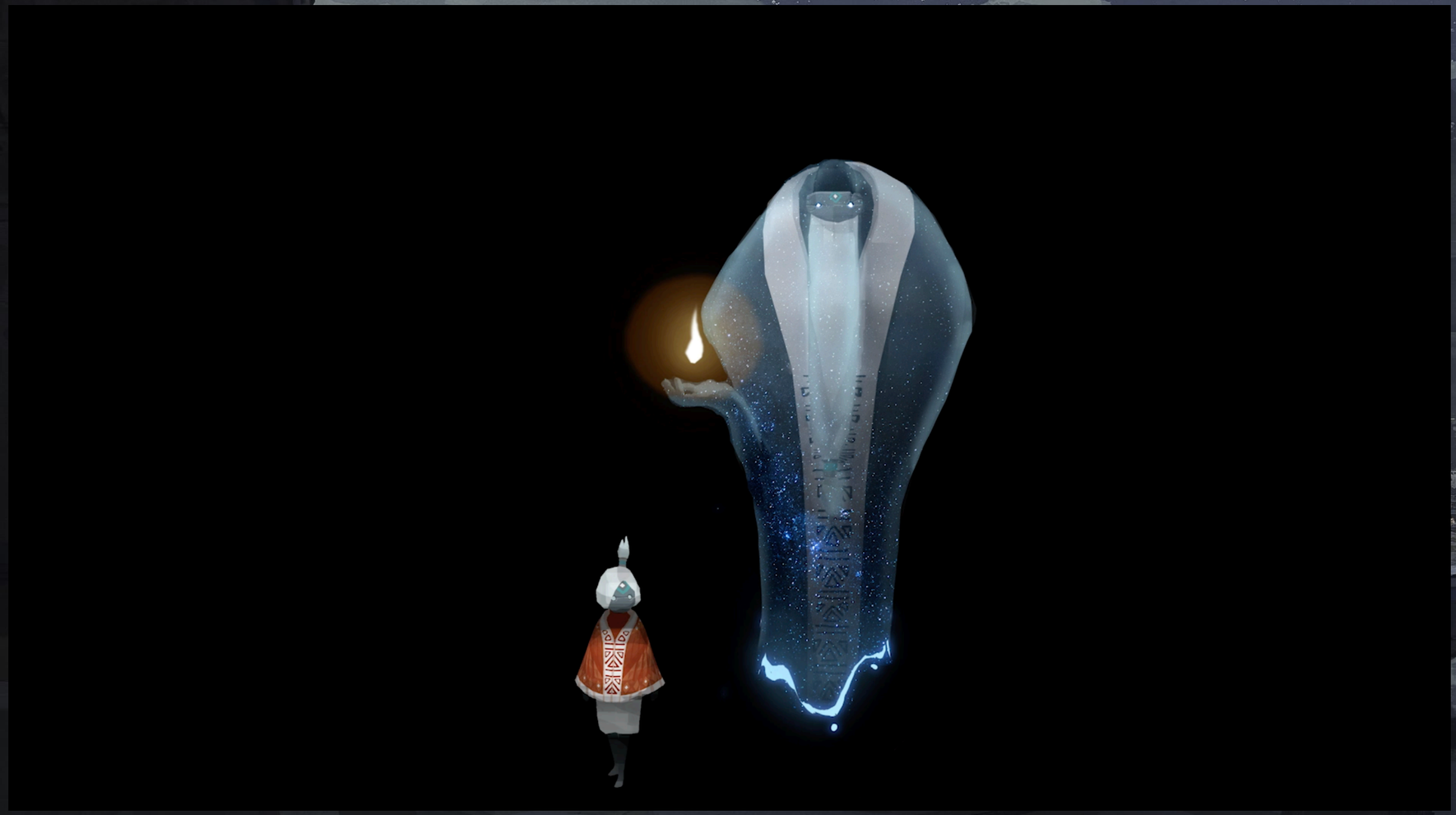
Wastelands

Fear - Resigned

Sky Character Development



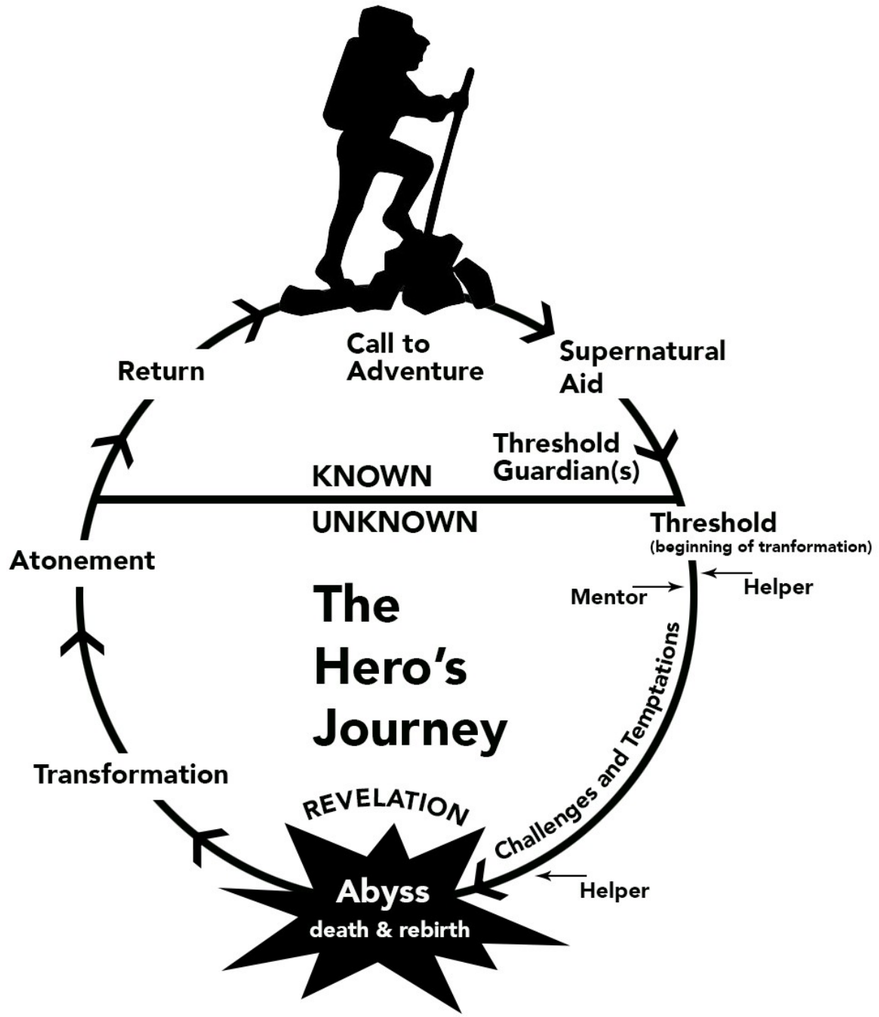
Sky Cast Development



Going Beyond The Hero's Journey?

IS SKY:

1. Driven by conflict
2. Weighted on masculine impulse
3. Linear Narrative
4. Singular villain
5. Good vs Evil binary
6. Limited feminine representation
7. Not conducive to communications technology
8. Knowledge scarcity
9. Mentors are rarefied elders
10. Heroic power and glory
11. The Hero loses = the Community loses



collective journey

“A new kind of storytelling that lends itself to our nonlinear, networked, omni-perspective digital age”
- Jeff Gomez

https://blog.collectivejourney.com/

Going Beyond The Hero's Journey!

SKY IS:

1. Driven by purpose
2. Motives arise from all voices
3. Multi-Linear and Non-Linear Narrative
4. Systemic Change
5. Beauty in Light & Darkness
6. Femininity celebrated
7. Linked to communities online
8. Sharing Knowledge
9. Mentors in Peers
10. Heroic vulnerability and sacrifice
11. We are all one and we all play a part

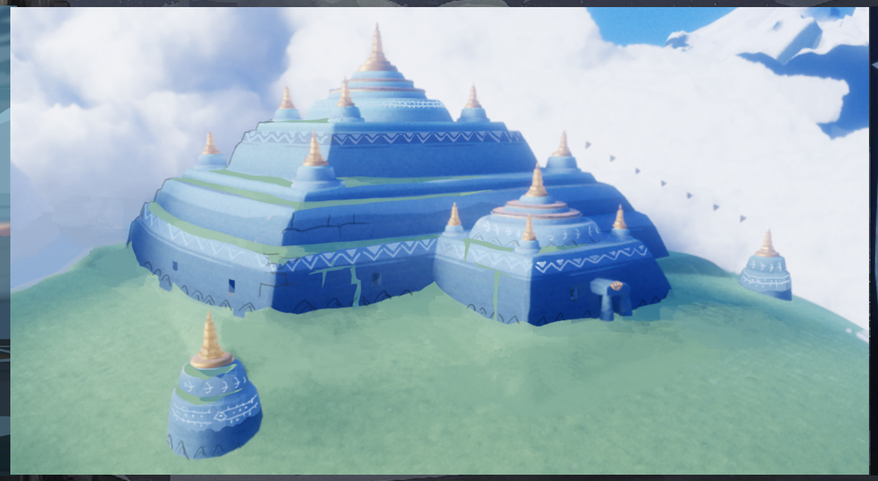
"Conflict" Redefined By Collective Cast

collective journey

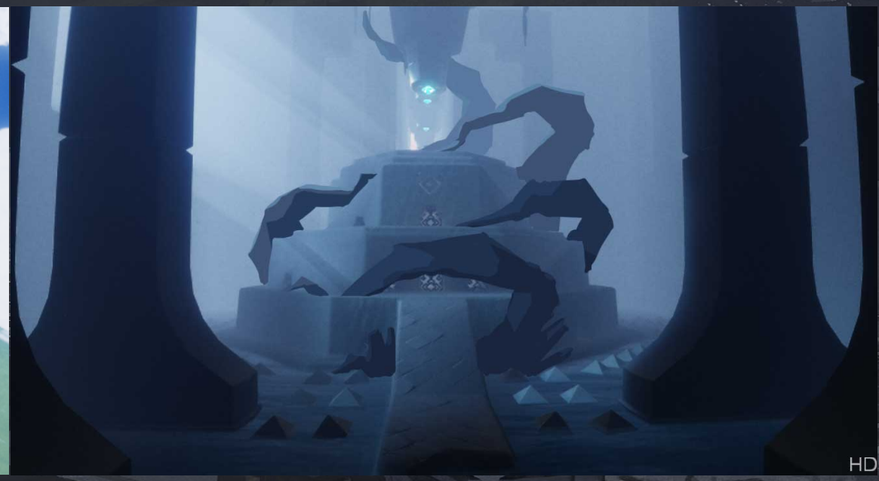
Ongoing Co-Op A-B Stories in an Evolving Sky World

Uncovering ‘Emotional Engine’ For Repeat MP Gameplay

Isle



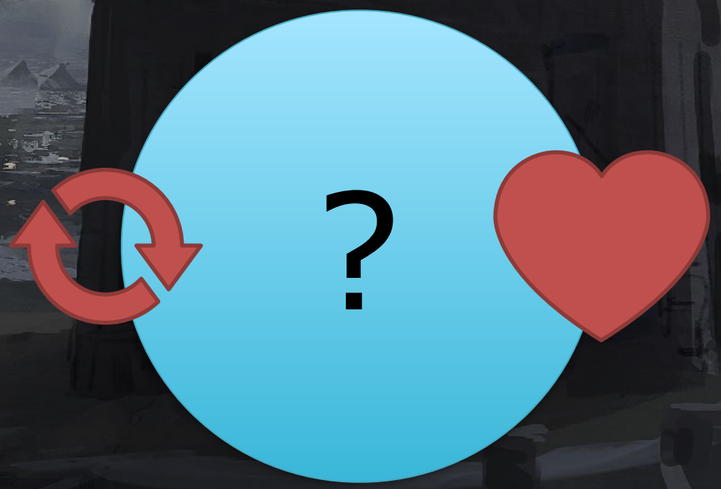
Prairie



Forest

Uncovering ‘Emotional Engine’ For Repeat MP Gameplay

EMOTIONAL ENGINE



EMOTIONAL ENGINE

ALTRUISM x CONNECTION

Sacrifice

Togetherness — We are one

Joy — Hope

Romance — Freedom

(SPREAD LIGHT)

SELFISHNESS x DISCONNECTION

Hubris

Alone — Fear

Melancholy — Resignation

Needy — Uncertainty

(DARKNESS OVERCOMES)

Support through language, space and action

FRIENDSHIP FEATURES

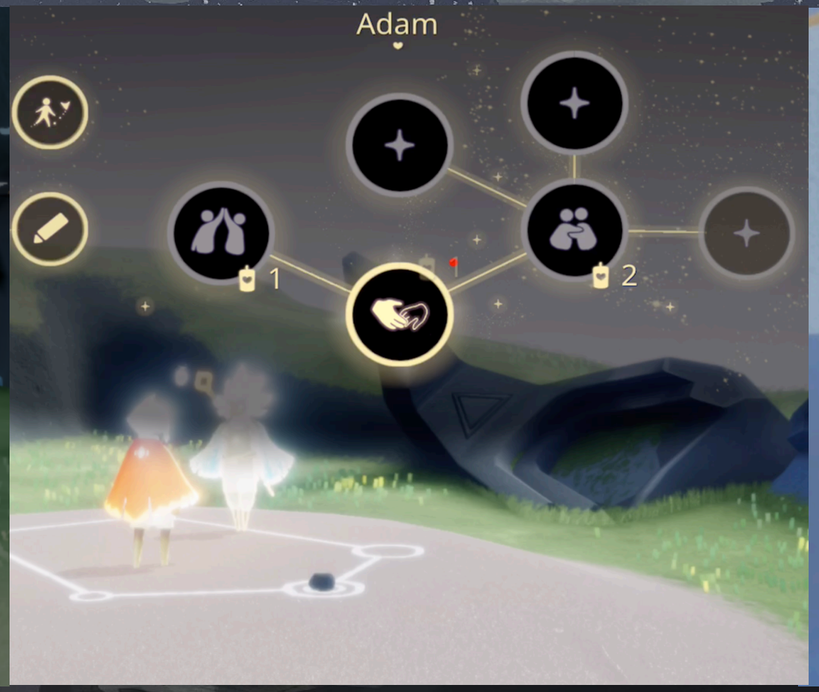
4) Testing ‘Emotional Engine’ In A Community

Beta Overview (Live)

- 1 Year+ testing
- 20,000+ Players Global
- Multiple iterations
- Emotion Feedback?
- Multiplayer Dynamic?
- Friendship Bonds?
- Replay value?

Testing The Emotional Engine: Altruism & Connection

Testing The Emotional Engine: Altruism & Connection



Community Surveys & Social Feedback

What do you feel is your character's goal in Sky?

No idea!

Some story observations:

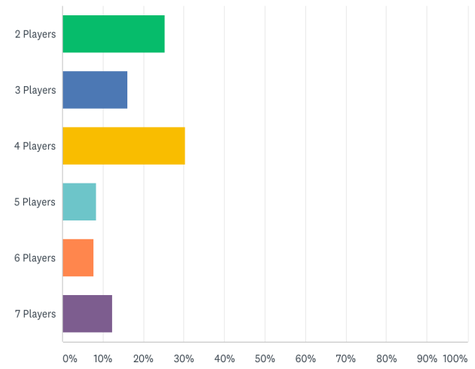
I like each of the ancients giving us some help, and with minor changes, I think the message could be sharper and connect player actions more directly to story progress: Children are here to restore light, so each cutscene could emphasize that. As they are now, some feel like an event we happen to witness because we are there, not an event that *woulnd't* happen without our presence and our actions. Children are here to help, so each of the stories could demonstrate how children have helped that particular spirit in order to *deserve* the help that is given.

What's really missing from Sky is story and a reason for playing again and again. That's what I'm really hoping they can figure out within the limits of being so open. They need a story that makes us want to go through Storm (or see the necessity of it), and that keeps us interested. They also do need to work on the Soundtrack. But when you can be in a level for an hour...the last thing you want is the same music repeating over and over.

Like · Reply · 16w · Edited 3

What do you think is the ideal number of players needed to complete a 'hard' or 'challenging' puzzle?

Answered: 399 Skipped: 0



What emotions do you feel when playing Sky?

Sadness, loneliness,

Sky: Light Awaits created a poll.

Admin · Published by Jennie Kong [?] ·

Our studio has been testing different ways to bring players together through co-operation and collaboration. What kind of gameplay would you like to see more of that unites the Sky Children together?

- Ancient Story Trail +54
- Team vs Enemies +29
- Joining Forces For Puzzles +19
- Musical Band Performances +15
- Flight Quests Together +12
- Protect Your Squad +12
- More Races +8

Community Surveys & Social Feedback

What did you like or dislike about the multiplayer?

I don't like that I'm forced to do it for some stuff. Let me be free to choose.

Kylr Avery Isn't giving and compassion of others sort of the point of the game, though? There are ways to balance it, sure, but I can understand why they designed it so the "currency" for cosmetics is something you can only get through the gifts of other players.

Like · Reply · 44w 2

Reiterating On The Emotional Engine: Altruism & Connection

Reiterating On The Emotional Engine: Altruism & Connection

Feedback Updates

What do you feel is your character's goal in Sky?

to help people

I am in love with the magical stories created behind our journeys. Inspiration and empathy connected; We face beauty and tragedy together, with friendship as our guide. Thank you.

Can I just say, I love everything? Everything. Well, except for the bugs. I love everything. Kinks to be ironed out, glitches still being fallen into, but TGC, I think you've nailed it. I knew you would. ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

Jean O. Lee, Isabella Koelman and 10 others — 6 Comments

Hey everyoneee I just joined the group and I wanted to say hi 🙂 Thank you for being such a loving and caring community, I love all of you!
I probably already met a lot of you in the game, but if I didn't hope to see you soon in Aviary 🙂

Lisa Gray Calano, Stoicmom Stoicmom and 6 others — 4 Comments

Sky: Light Awaits created a poll.
Admin · Published by Jennie Kong [?] · 20 hrs

Share with us some of the feelings have you have experienced whilst exploring with friends in the Sky world, and why?

	Added by	
Wonder	Sky: Light Awaits	+21
Joy	Sky: Light Awaits	+19
Curiousity	Janet McGregor	+17
Community	Sky: Light Awaits	+11
Altruism	Sky: Light Awaits	+7

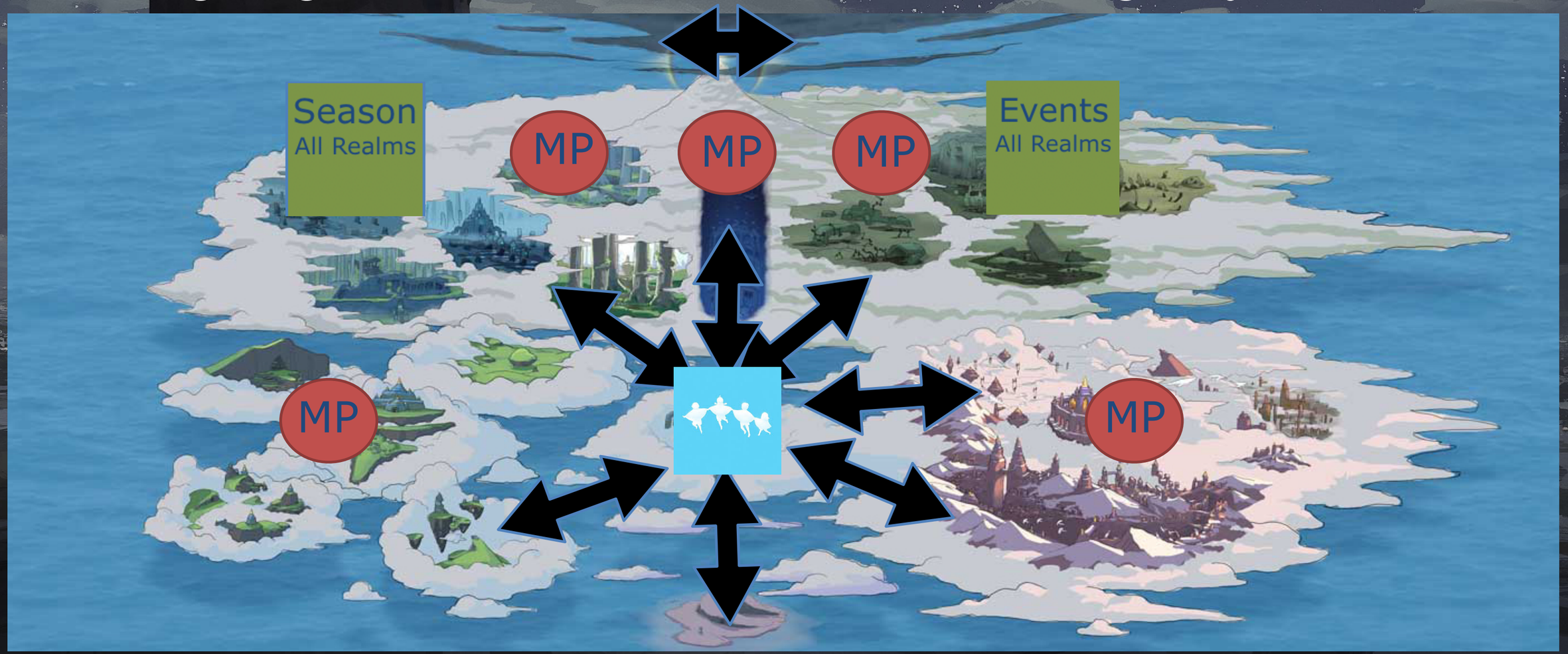
11 more options...

Daniel De La Cruz, 김다희 and 2 others

I love these murals, they help tell the story of the world in such an interesting way. I would love to see some that can only be unlocked through cooperation like emotes are.

Reading the patch notes... the Devs are really listening to us! Hooray 🙂 Love you all!

Ongoing MP A-B-C Stories in an Evolving Sky World



“Hi Jennie

I wanted to quickly say how your game has truly inspired me. I was diagnosed with cancer this winter and it was very difficult for me to face my own mortality.

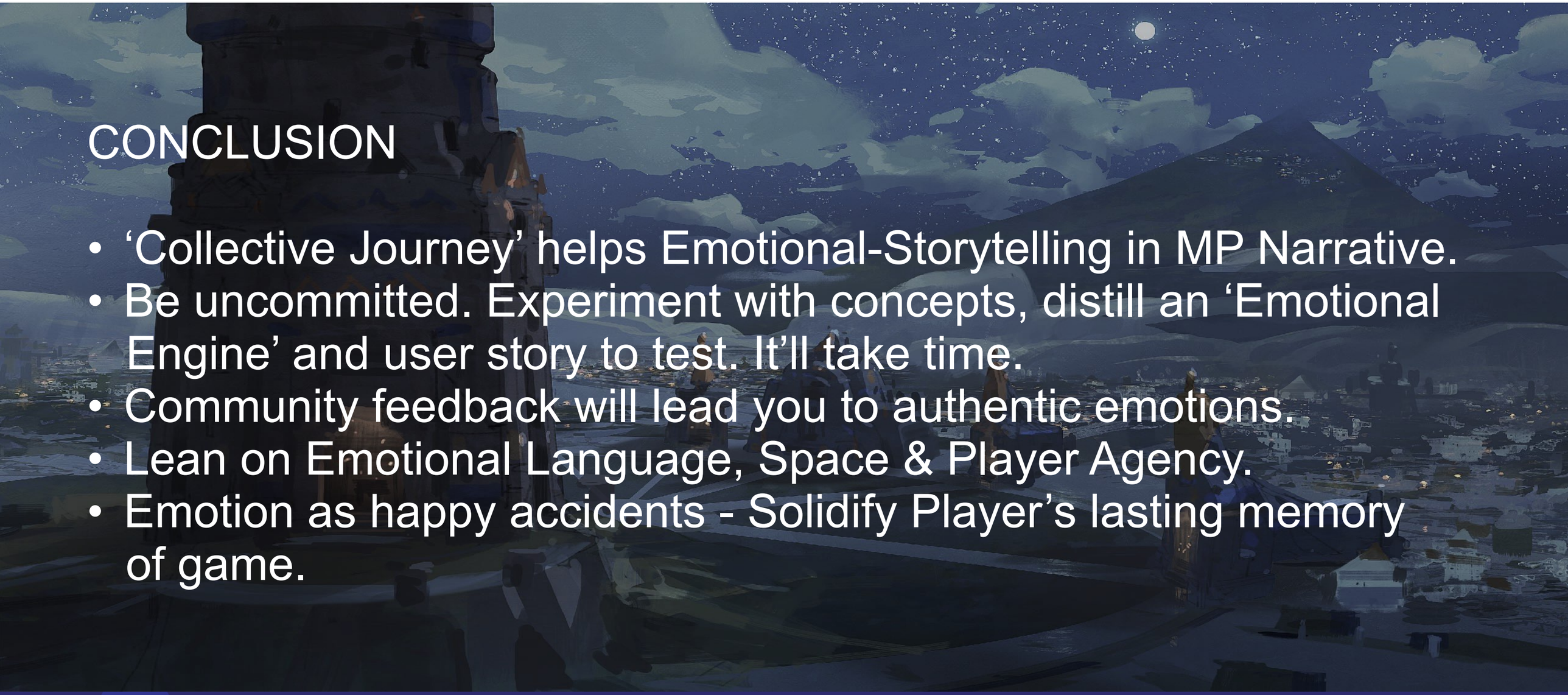
I felt a connection with the game and it helped pull me from despair in life.

Thank you so much to you and your team for working on this beautiful game about giving, exploring and living.

Warm regards,
Ariel”

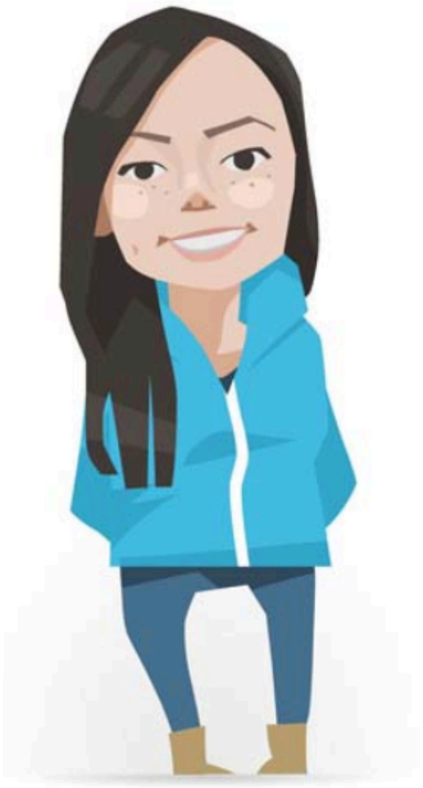
5) Finalizing Story in Production

- Emotional Balance
- User Story
- Cinematics
- Cast Polish
- Environmental Story
- Friendship UI/UX



CONCLUSION

- ‘Collective Journey’ helps Emotional-Storytelling in MP Narrative.
- Be uncommitted. Experiment with concepts, distill an ‘Emotional Engine’ and user story to test. It’ll take time.
- Community feedback will lead you to authentic emotions.
- Lean on Emotional Language, Space & Player Agency.
- Emotion as happy accidents - Solidify Player’s lasting memory of game.



THANK YOU!

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