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Concept Brief

Fractured Empyrean

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Background Information

This project began as I was watching the clouds as the sun set outside of my window one day and I imagined a world of people living up in the sky. I have always been fascinated by the sky, and I imagined how fun it would be to explore it. I was very inspired by *Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition*, specifically by the interconnected fantastical world of the Bionis and the Mechonis and the game's intricate and emotional story progression as the party traverses the large world. I wanted to create a similar feeling of learning about a world by seeing all aspects of it. I also was inspired by the dual nature of the game's world, with the Bionis and Mechonis having very contrasting styles and themes surrounding the two, with different people groups and characters in each. I also took influence from the style and mechanics of *Sky: Children of the Light*. Since this is another game dealing with aspects of the sky, I thought many of the exploration mechanics would match the sort of exploration I was going for (specifically the flight mechanic from the game). Some other examples of media that have civilizations/locations in the sky that I also took inspiration from are the games *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*, and the Studio Ghibli movie *Castle in the Sky*.

Purpose/Audience/Justification

The purpose of this project is to create a 3D action RPG video game that invokes curiosity through exploration of a fantastical world and progression of an emotional storyline that encourages players to empathize with the characters. Players will explore the kingdom of Nepharos, learning about the broken nature of the floating nation, and by following Iris, the

protagonist, as she works to unify the divided kingdom against a common cause, gaining companions along the way.

Jesse Shell discusses Bartle's Taxonomy of Player Types, explaining one of these four types as explorers, who "want to get to know the breadth of the game. Their primary pleasure is discovery" (135). This game will primarily appeal to these "explorer" player types, with a heavy focus on building out the world and all its interconnected aspects. This includes the physical world, which is a dual monarchy split between areas ruled over the Sun, the Auren Domain, an area of daytime, and areas ruled over the Moon, the Siderean Province, an area of night. This also includes the social world, including many people groups living in both the Auren Domain and Siderean Province, including the Stars, whom Iris, the protagonist, is a new member of. The players will discover more details about the nature of Nepharos as the story progresses, learning about how the different people groups interact with each other, some in conflict and others in harmony. This discovery will hopefully lead players into a fascination of the world and its characters, driving them to continue through the game. A study about the metacognition of curiosity states that "people tend to underestimate the motivational lure of curiosity" (Kim et. al). I hope to use this curiosity to keep players motivated and having fun as they play the game.

The choice to create this fantasy game with a heavy emphasis on the world is to allow players to immerse themselves into a completely new place and for them to *want* to learn more about it. The plot, though still following a specific set of characters, is mostly centered around the plot of the kingdom and everything that has shaped it into what it is, similar to games like *Hollow Knight* or *NieR: Automata* (both games that have a focus on worldbuilding and environmental storytelling through exploration and discovery). The game will have a more graphical and less realistic style to add to the dreamlike and imaginative quality of the game,

while keeping very ethereal and heavenly graphics to enhance this dreamlike location. The choice to use Unity to develop this game will allow for a stronger focus on less realistic 3D graphics and better performance on lower end hardware, so that the game can be playable on a range of hardware. Its more user-friendly interface will also prove helpful for this project, as it this be the first full-fledged game project I will attempt.

Aims & Objectives

The major aims of this game are to give players an immersive experience in which they are able to uncover a complex storyline through exploration of the fantastical world of Nepharos, stimulating their curiosity and allowing them to feel an emotional connection to the characters and world of the game. Players will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the world through environmental storytelling as they explore the world. They also will learn more from interacting with various NPCs and different people groups that live in Nepharos. Players can experience important battle sequences firsthand through gameplay, and they will be able to empathize with the characters by playing in their shoes. There will be a sense of achievement from leveling up and gaining enough skill to defeat higher level enemies.

Project/Resource Description and Structure

Story:

- The main story follows a newborn Star, Iris as she learns the ways of the Kingdom of Nepharos. Nepharos is a kingdom that exists in the sky that is ruled by the Sun and the Moon, the dual monarchs. The Sun rules over the Auren Domain, an area of daytime, while the Moon rules over the Siderean Province, an area of night. Each of the regional

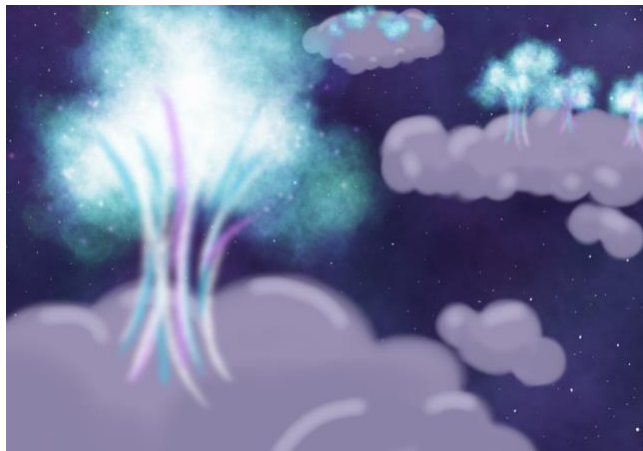
areas in the game will be in either one of these two territories. There are many people groups living in Nepharos, including the Stars, whom Iris is a new member of. There are also people groups based on light, rain, wind, lightning, and even comets (though they are rare to be seen).

- The main conflict that exists in the game's story is the broken Kingdom. Though ruled by two monarchs, neither does much to insure peace among the different people in Nepharos. The Stars and the Boreans (the wind tribe) are warring with each other, and relations between many of the people groups seem to be strained. Even though Iris is a star, she discovers over time that she was born out of a forbidden union between the Sun and the Moon, a rare being known as an Eclipsian Star, and she is destined to unify the two sides of the kingdom. She builds up a diverse party of companions while working to try and figure out what is causing these disruptions in the kingdom in the first place.
- While this is occurring, there are also a group of enemies plaguing the kingdom that the people of Nepharos have coined Vorricks. Vorricks are hostile machines that seem to be coming up from the surface underneath Nepharos. They are seen more as a nuisance and an entirely neutral cause of havoc by the people of Nepharos. These are the basic enemies in the game. However, as the story progresses, Iris and her companions discover that the Vorricks have more to do with the disruption in Nepharos than everyone originally thought. The main story concludes by Iris's party unifying the people of Nepharos to travel all the way down to the surface to find the origin place of the Vorricks and stop whoever is sending the automatons skyward.

Character concept art for three of the major party members:



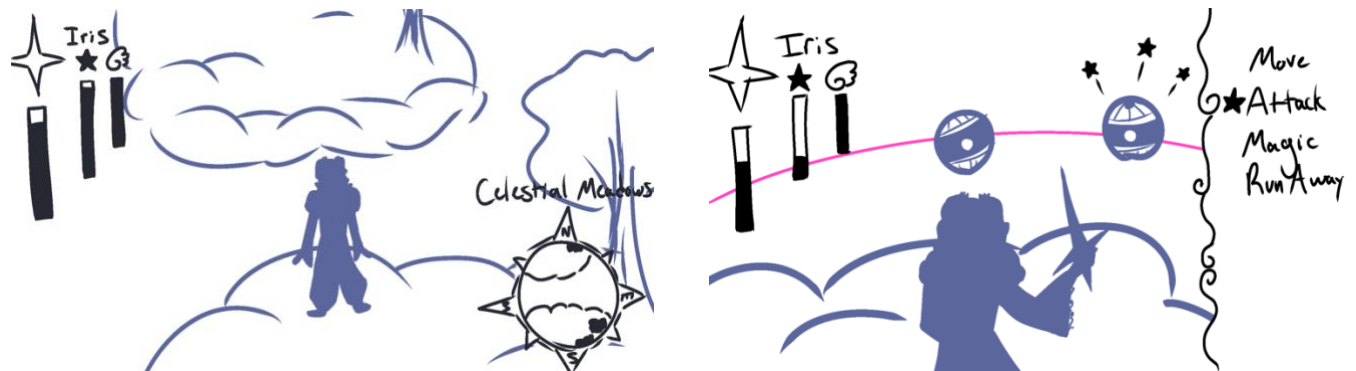
Concept art for the game area Celestial Meadows:



Concept art for the lowest level of Vorricks:



Overworld UI and battle UI sketched storyboard:



Mechanics:

- Exploring 3D world
- Split up into regions, each open world-ish with story and side quests to complete around each area, similar to the gameplay from the *Xenoblade Chronicles* series.
- Movement includes walking in all directions, jumping, and flying
- Length of time able to fly before falling back down is indicated by a gauge in the UI, it will automatically recharge after standing on ground for a period of time, this will be upgradable
- Battle encounters with enemies will occur in the overworld
- These battles will be turn based, but occur in the open game environment, a spherical barrier will appear around battle area to prevent player from leaving (unless after choosing the run away option). This gameplay style is slightly similar to *Baldur's Gate 3*, with how the turn-based combat still exists in the overworld with movement included.
- There will be a party of different characters that have different abilities, strengths, and weaknesses that will build as the story progresses (game starts with only protagonist in the party)

- Party members (and enemies) will have specific stats of HP, hit strength, magic gauge, flight, and agility
- Magic gauge refills after a battle ends, but HP must be restored by using a healing item, resting in a bed/inn, or recharging at a garden
- Gardens will be spread throughout the areas, acting as a place to recharge HP and level up stats through EXP gained in battle/completing quests

Aesthetics:

- Since the kingdom of Nepharos resides in the sky, the aesthetics will be very heavenly and ethereal.
- The art style is more graphic and comical and less realistic, specifically the character designs.
- Even though dealing with some heavier themes, the aesthetics will be very bright and whimsical.
- The music will be a mix of orchestral (to give the game an ethereal quality) and a more synth-y lofi sort of style (to show the whimsy and more alien side of things).
- UI graphics will include a lot of blues and purples, with more bubbly fonts and icons
- Sound design will include very soft, mystical sound effects, with some louder, more bombastic sounds for more serious battle scenarios.
- Maybe there will be voice lines? At the very least, each major character will have voiced noises and exclamations

Technology:

- This game is intended for either console or desktop
- It is a single player experience, since the focus is on exploring the world and progressing the story
- There won't really need to be any online or multiplayer features
- Controls will be fairly simplistic, all movement will be via controls, but turn based battle sequences will be text menu based
- Developed in Unity 6
- I will likely use ChatGPT for help on programming and writing scripts (since I am still a beginner)
- Character models will be created/edited in Blender, with maybe some animations also made in Blender
- Mixamo models will be used to be edited into some character models, and many animations from Mixamo will likely be used
- Some textures or 2D assets will likely be made in Illustrator

Inclusivity Statement

With this project, I aim to create an inclusive experience that a wide range of people will be able to enjoy. Though characters in *Fractured Empyrean* are fictional beings, they will still present a wide range of genders, skin colors, and backgrounds with regard to avoiding stereotypes. I want for these characters to be relatable, and I want players to feel represented while playing this game. There will always be subtitles for any dialogue, and text sizes for any element in the UI will be scalable. Careful attention will be taken to use of color to ensure any

with colorblindness won't be at a disadvantage playing the game, and most selection and movement will have audio cues to accompany them. Audio volume will also be adjustable. This game is meant to be enjoyed by all, and any steps that can be taken towards creating a fully inclusive and accessible experience will be taken.

Timeline

There are four and a half weeks between Spring Break and the final due date. This is how I plan to generally space out the milestones/tasks within that time frame.

- Project planning and concept- Due Friday, March 14, 2025
- Spring Break
- 3D modeling and asset development- Week 1
- Building environment in Unity- Week 2
- Programming and UI implementation- Week 3
- Testing and debugging/finalizing- Week 4
- Finishing touches/prepare presentation- Week 5 (only half a week)
- Due on Wednesday, April 23, 2025

Team Members

Currently, I (Riley Stinson) will be the only person working on this project. All tasks and roles will be completed by me.

Task Specifications

Story and dialogue writing- Though the first area will only have a single character present, there will still be some dialogue and tutorial text that will need to be written beforehand. I will also need to write the story I want the environment to tell at this point in the game. There will need to be a lot of exposition.

3D Modelling- Iris and the low level Vorrick enemies will be created and rendered in Blender. I may also possibly use Blender to create some environmental elements. I may use Mixamo models and edit them to create models for this project.

Building Environment in Unity- The environment as a whole (Celestial Meadows) will be built in Unity, including lighting, shaders, materials, VFX and general layout of the world.

Creating UI- UI for overworld and battle mode will need to be created and implemented into Unity. I will likely use Illustrator to create flat PNG assets for the UI.

Music and sound design- this is a skill that I don't really have the qualifications for, so I will likely need to find a sound/music library that I can legally use from another publisher (possibly purchase). I will still need to implement the sound and music, though.

Animation- Most animations I will try to use from Mixamo, but I may make some simple 3D animations in Blender.

Programming- I will program the gameplay and scene mechanics as I build the environment and implement the models/UI into the project on Unity. I will likely use ChatGPT for help on writing C-sharp scripts, and maybe some from the Unity documentation.

Testing and debugging- I will do most testing and debugging myself as I work, but I may have other classmates or friends play through to find issues I might not be able to. A lot of the debugging will happen simultaneously during the programming stage.

Budget

Time:

- 3D modeling and asset development- 15 hours
- Building environment in Unity- 15 hours
- Programming and UI implementation- 20 hours
- Testing and debugging/finalizing- 5 hours
- Finishing touches/prepare presentation- 5 hours

Equipment:

- Adobe Creative Cloud (provided by school): \$50/month
- Unity (free version): \$0/month
- Blender: \$0/month
- Mixamo (free through Adobe): \$0/month

Actual costs:

- Sound packs (undetermined if paid sound packs will be needed or not): \$0-\$30

Works Cited

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- Castle in the Sky*. Directed by Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, 1986.
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- Kim, Sunae, et al. "Metacognition of Curiosity: People Underestimate the Seductive Lure of Non-Instrumental Information." *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, Springer Science and Business Media LLC, Nov. 2023, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-023-02404-0>. Accessed 12 Mar. 2025.
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- Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition*. Monolith Soft, Nintendo, 2020.
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