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Lucid

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LUCID

BY
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN, COLLEGE OF COMPUTING AND
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MFA Thesis Verification Form

This thesis has been read and approved by the thesis committee below according to the requirements of the School of Design graduate program and DePaul University.

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ABSTRACT

The PC video game, *Lucid*, promotes self-reflection and emotional exploration by balancing interactive dream journals with a meditative platform puzzle. Players switch between reflecting on their dreams through dream journals and following the main character's story as they realize they are in a dream. To finish the platforming portion, the player travels up and around the mountain by completing short puzzles. This is done to deliver the last living flower from the garden to the castle at the top of the mountain.

By building personal dream journals into the game, *Lucid* highlights how games can be used as tools for introspection. The game setting of a mountain with a winding path of obstacles symbolizes the internal journey the player goes on while playing the game. This game is inspired by the idea that playing a game and dreaming are similar. They are both controllable, exploratory, and subjective experiences. *Lucid's* mechanics are based on controlling the natural world to symbolize that having dreams, and the emotions reflected or symbolized by those dreams, are a natural part of life that can be navigated and even used advantageously.

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CHAPTER 1

Description of Game

Lucid begins by asking the player to answer some questions about a recent dream. They will be able to reflect on those questions later in the form of follow-up journal prompts that are presented as scattered pages throughout the rest of the game. After the initial journal phase, the player falls into a platforming game, damaging a flower garden in the process. The game then turns into a 2.5D platformer with some unique mechanics for vertical movement. While playing the platforming portion of the game, the player will move up and around a mountain guided by a moth. To finish the platforming portion, the player travels around the mountain by completing short puzzles. The goal is to reach the moth's castle at the top of the mountain, in hopes of saving the last moon flower by getting it on higher ground and closer to the moon light. The last scene involves helping the flower grow up the castle's tower until it reaches the moon light and finally blooms. The design features two main mechanics. The player moves vertically on floating platforms by manipulating the moon's phases, which affects the bodies of water the platforms sit on. The player can also draw vines on areas of the mountain that have trellises, and then use them to climb over obstacles. These mechanics help the player move forward on the mountain path. Throughout the platforming gameplay the player is asked to reflect on the information given at the beginning of the game. This is done using questions that attempt to find connections between several aspects of the dream. The story that takes place during the platforming portion focuses on the main character taking agency of their situation as they realize they are dreaming and become lucid. The final scene is a flowy 3D painting experience that builds on the previous vine mechanic by growing a continuous vine up and around a 3D castle tower. This gives the player time to think about the game experience while doing a cathartic motion. By doing this the player helps the flower grow and reach the moonlight so it can bloom, thus ending the game. At the very end, the player has the option to download their dream journal, composed of the answers they've given throughout the game, for further reflecting or keeping as a play artifact.

CHAPTER 2

Statement of Intent

Lucid is a 2.5D platformer that encourages self-reflection and emotional exploration. It does this by asking the player for personal details and reflections about a recent dream. The following gameplay is themed around taking agency of a dream and harnessing organic growth. *Lucid* is an exploration of games being used as tools for introspection. And normalizes embracing emotional experiences by using dream-themed gameplay paired with an encouraging narrative. Its introspective narrative, nature-inspired mechanics, and thematic comparisons to dreams make *Lucid* a reflective and imaginative experience.

Lucid's dream journal pushes the player to self-reflect and explore their emotions around the topic of a recent dream. After some cathartically simple and familiar gameplay, the interactive dream journal suggests connections between distinct characteristics of the player's dream. It does this to aid the player towards thinking about their dream in a meaningful way. Most games do not aid the player with this type of out-of-game personal awareness. Some well-known games do cover the topic of mental health and self-awareness, such as *Celeste*, *Control*, or *Life is Strange*. There is also the well-known concept of mental health activities such as journaling and prompting games to aid or teach the participant how to self-reflect. But there are few examples of video games that combine these two concepts to create an experience that feels like a video game but is still largely helpful to the player. By making its gameplay experience similar to reflecting about a dream, *Lucid* asks the player to be more involved with the game on a personal level. The game is a calming experience because its puzzles do not provide too much difficulty and many of its movements are cathartically freeing or familiarly cyclical. This leaves room for the player to focus on the more difficult experience of self-reflection. *Lucid* shows that there is value and opportunity in pairing gameplay with introspection.

Lucid's environment focuses on a single path up and around a mountain to symbolize a journey inward and towards something enlightening. Night-time is used as an internal or intimate setting. By taking place at night and in a natural setting it creates a calming experience as well as suggesting that personal growth may be something that goes on unnoticed or in private. This is also symbolized by the story taking place around a flower that only blooms at night – the tropical white morning glory - also known as the moon flower. Flowers that bloom at night, when most people won't see them, are a reminder that flowers are not purely aesthetic objects that exist for our enjoyment but are functional and important to the ecosystem. Inner growth is something that doesn't exist for others but is still admirable and beneficial.

Lucid's two main mechanics focus on vertical movement and have naturalistic inspirations. This symbolizes that introspective journeys can have non-linear forms of progress and often require balancing our natural reactions. Growth can come from struggle, which is symbolized through the ivy climbing mechanic. By allowing the player to map out the ivy they climb on, it encourages the player to make their own choices about how they would like to direct and harness their growth. The player uses this growth to overcome obstacles. The other main mechanic involves controlling floating platforms through moon phases, which symbolizes balance and cycles. This mechanic requires the player to achieve specific platform placements by cycling through moon phases. Introspection and emotional growth can sometimes be cyclical, repetitive, or hard to balance. This mechanic asks the player to embrace those aspects as a tool. Through organic theming *Lucid* normalizes the nuances of emotional journeys as an organic part of life.

Lucid draws comparisons between dreaming and playing a game. By making this comparison and breaking the fourth wall it further involves the player by insinuating that they are the wake-version of the character. The character's story revolves around them taking agency of their dream and encourages the player to do the same. Like dreams, games can provide players the opportunity to explore new situations, be more vulnerable with themselves, and experiment with various levels of agency. Because of this the player can learn a lot about themselves by reflecting on the choices they make in video games. This game compares dreams and games as safe and helpful tools for self-reflection.

When I started this project, the only thing I was sure of was that I wanted to make a game about plants, psychology, and dreams. It has been great to work on and see this game evolve over time. I have also grown from this experience. *Lucid* reflects me as a Designer by encouraging the player to self-reflect while playing. Self-reflection is something that I have personally struggled with and found media to be a helpful tool for doing so. I also feel that dream analysis can be a fun and approachable starting point for processing emotions. As a Game Designer I want to create experiences that encourage player expression and provide a sense of satisfaction from doing so. I believe *Lucid* does this using positive reflective narrative, organically inspired mechanics, and dream theming.

CHAPTER 3

Link to the Game and Inputs

Link to Game: <https://gvbrlv.itch.io/lucid>

Inputs are meant to be explained in the game, but here is a summary:

- Clicking on text options for interacting with the dream journal
- Left/Right Arrows or WD keys for forward and backwards movement
- Left mouse click and drag for ivy manipulation
- Right mouse click for erasing existing ivy
- Clicking or clicking and dragging on upper right corner for moon and platform manipulation
- E Key for mounting and dismounting from ivy while over the ivy

APPENDIX 1

Links to Early Designs

[Initial Ideas and Pitches](#): A document I put together before working on this project

[Early Game Design Doc](#): A GDD for an early concept of this game

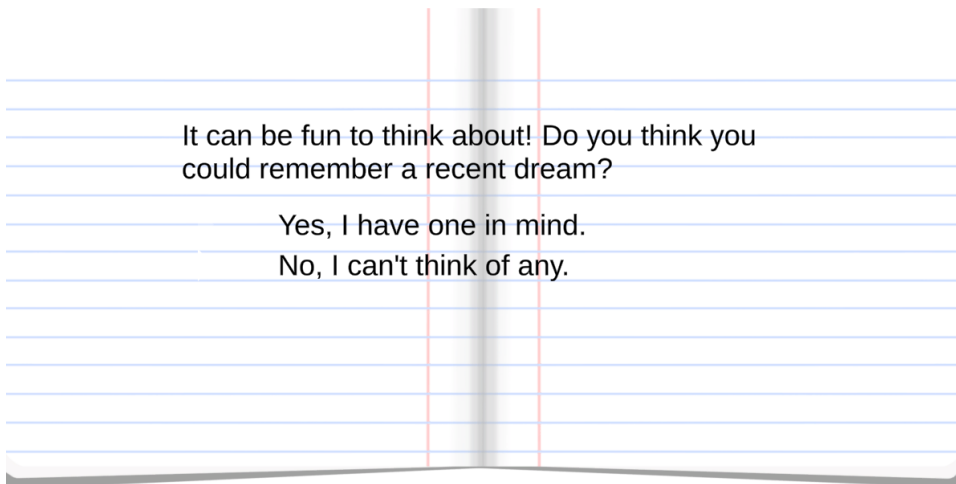
[Lucid Github Repository](#): GitHub where I source-controlled my work. It contains some early prototypes up to the most recent version.

APPENDIX 2

In-Game Screen Shots



Splash Screen and start button.



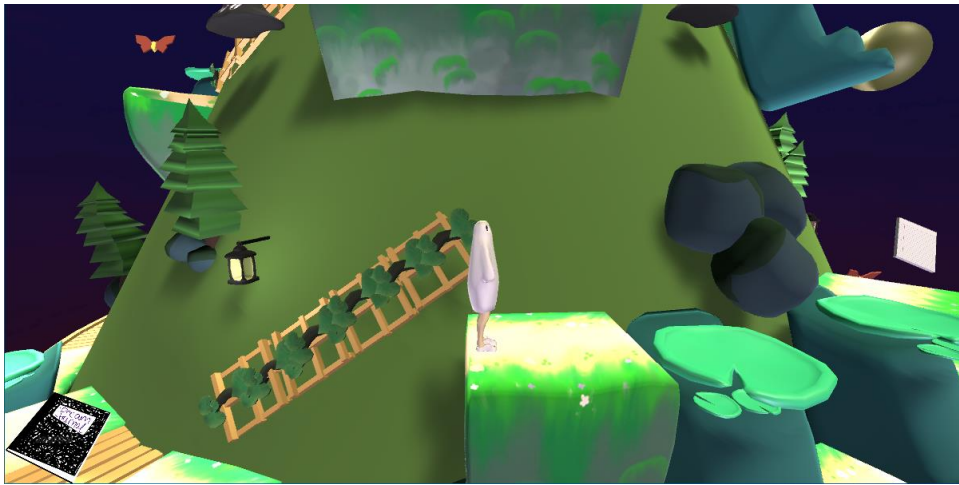
Part of the opening dream journal.



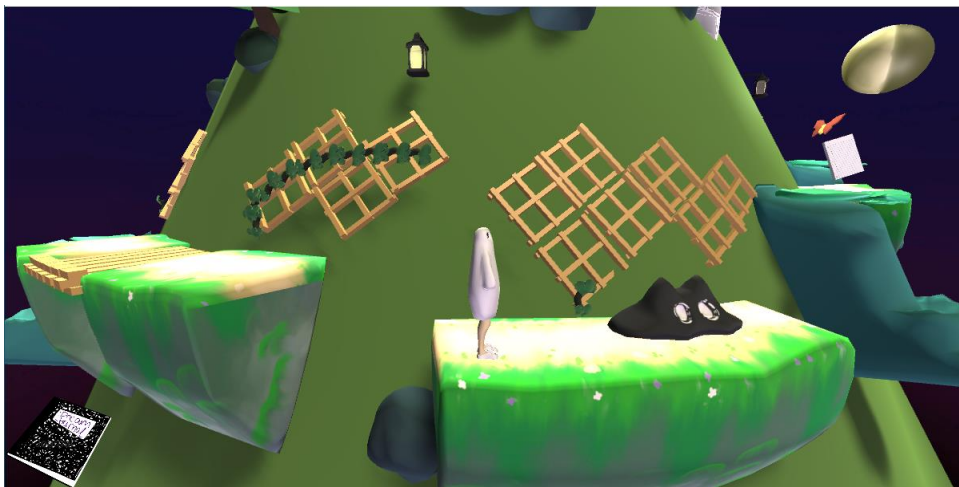
Inciting incident of falling into the garden of moon flowers.



An example of pages scattered on the mountain path.



The player has just used the vine to climb onto the raised platform.



There are a few enemies in the game, in the form of nightmare blobs.



The player uses the vine drawing/climbing ability to get past the nightmare.



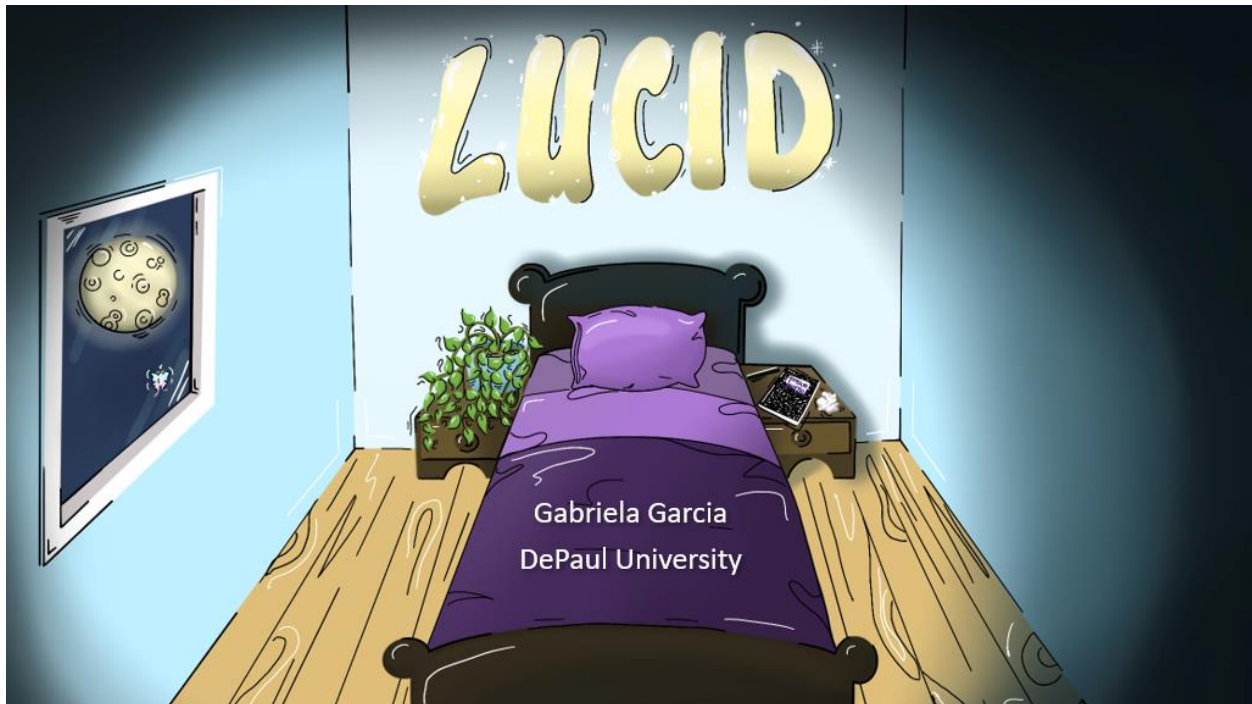
The top of the mountain, just outside the castle.

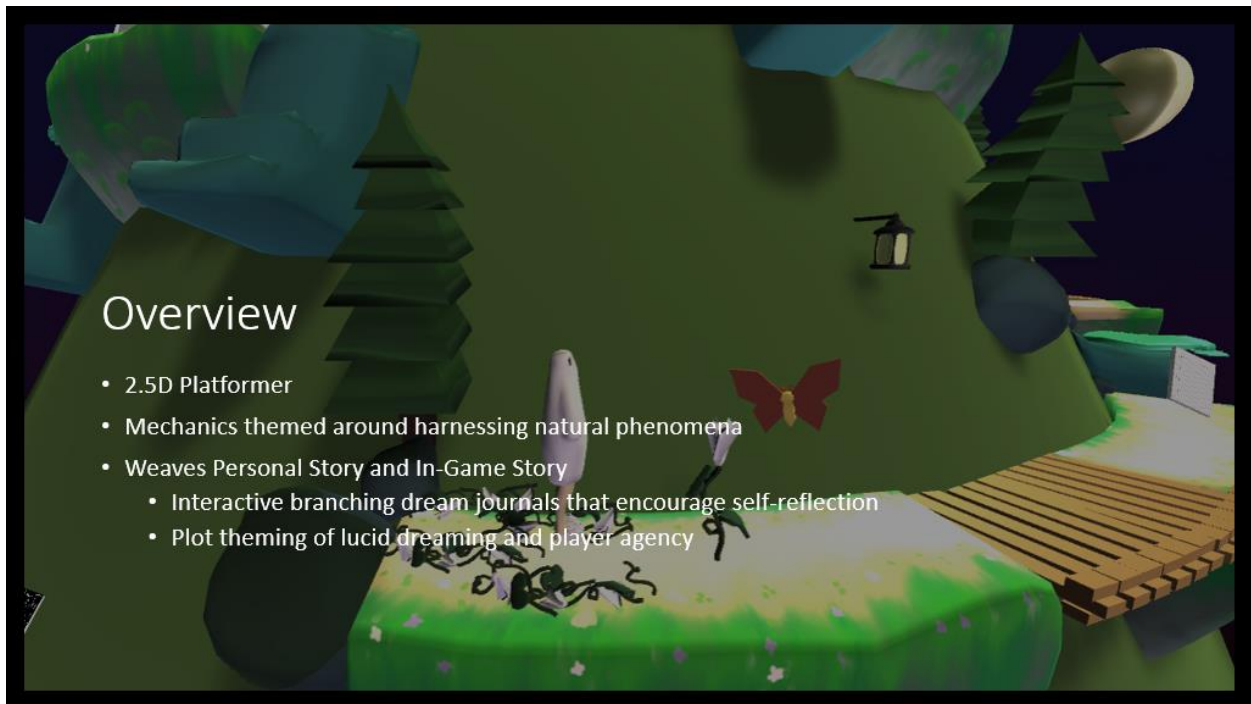


The final level of drawing the ivy up and around the castle's tower.

APPENDIX 3

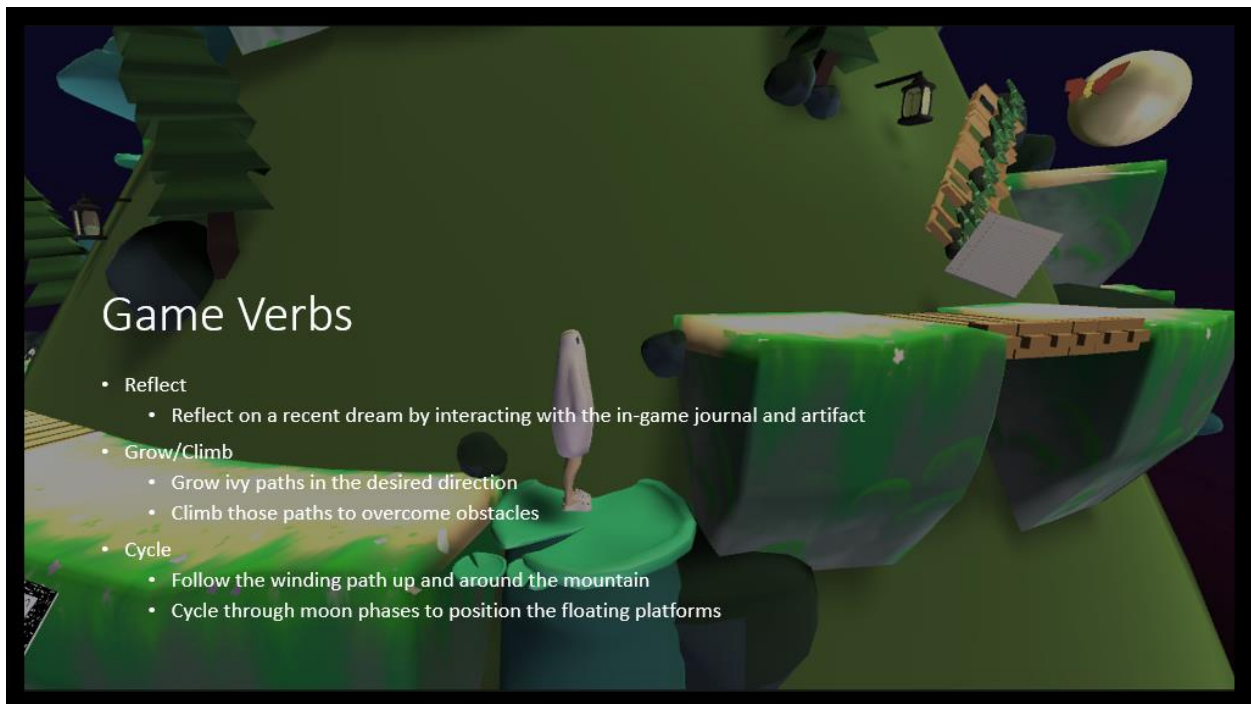
Defense Presentation Slides



A screenshot from a 2.5D platformer game. The scene is set on a green, mountainous landscape under a dark sky with a full moon. A small, white, bird-like character stands on a wooden plank bridge. The environment includes stylized green trees, a red butterfly, and a lantern hanging from a branch. The text 'Overview' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

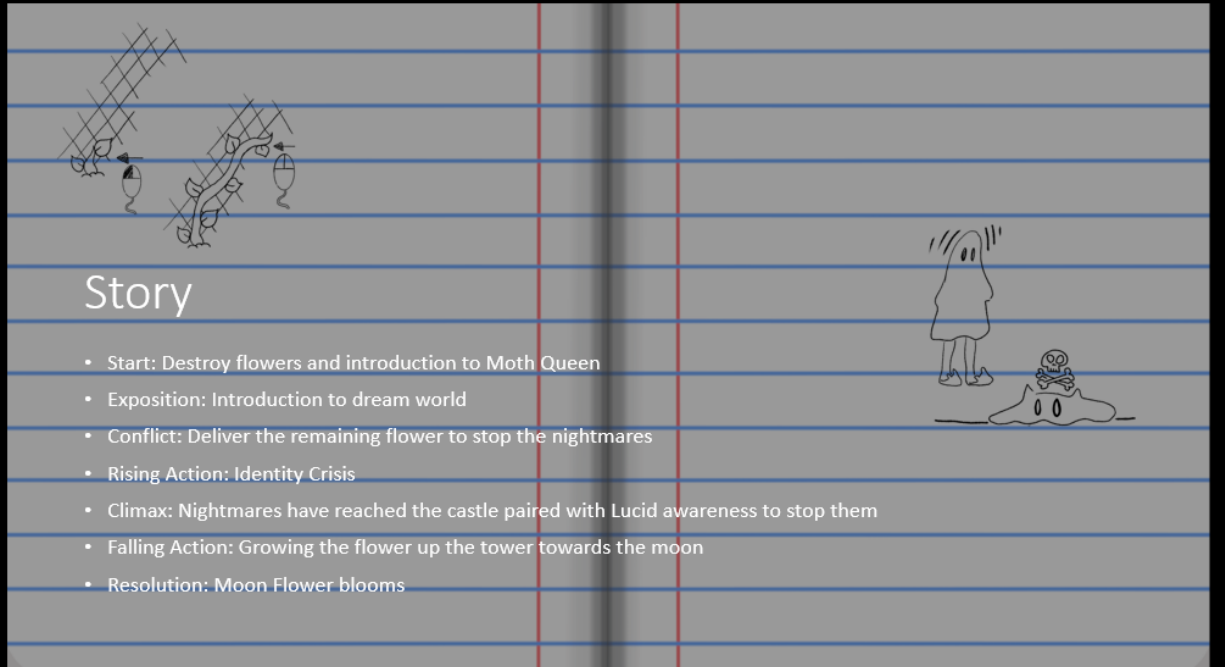
Overview

- 2.5D Platformer
- Mechanics themed around harnessing natural phenomena
- Weaves Personal Story and In-Game Story
 - Interactive branching dream journals that encourage self-reflection
 - Plot theming of lucid dreaming and player agency

A screenshot from the same 2.5D platformer game, showing a different perspective of the mountainous landscape. The white bird-like character is now on a green ledge. The scene features a winding path, a lantern, and a floating platform. The text 'Game Verbs' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

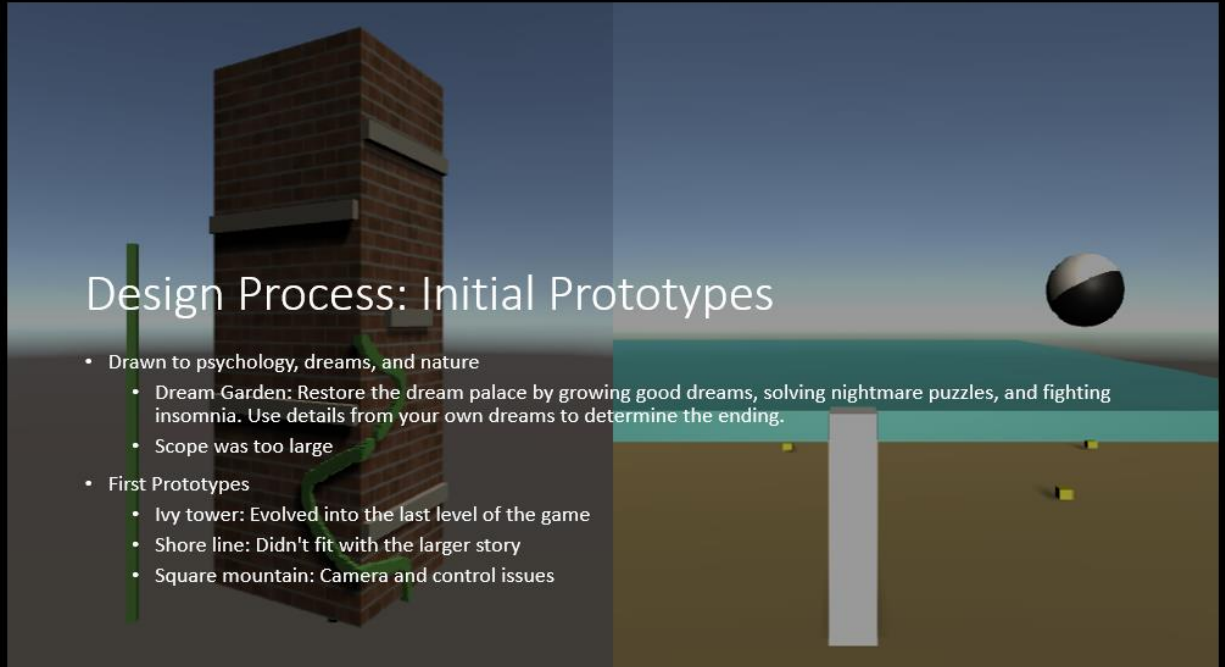
Game Verbs

- Reflect
 - Reflect on a recent dream by interacting with the in-game journal and artifact
- Grow/Climb
 - Grow ivy paths in the desired direction
 - Climb those paths to overcome obstacles
- Cycle
 - Follow the winding path up and around the mountain
 - Cycle through moon phases to position the floating platforms



Story

- Start: Destroy flowers and introduction to Moth Queen
- Exposition: Introduction to dream world
- Conflict: Deliver the remaining flower to stop the nightmares
- Rising Action: Identity Crisis
- Climax: Nightmares have reached the castle paired with Lucid awareness to stop them
- Falling Action: Growing the flower up the tower towards the moon
- Resolution: Moon Flower blooms



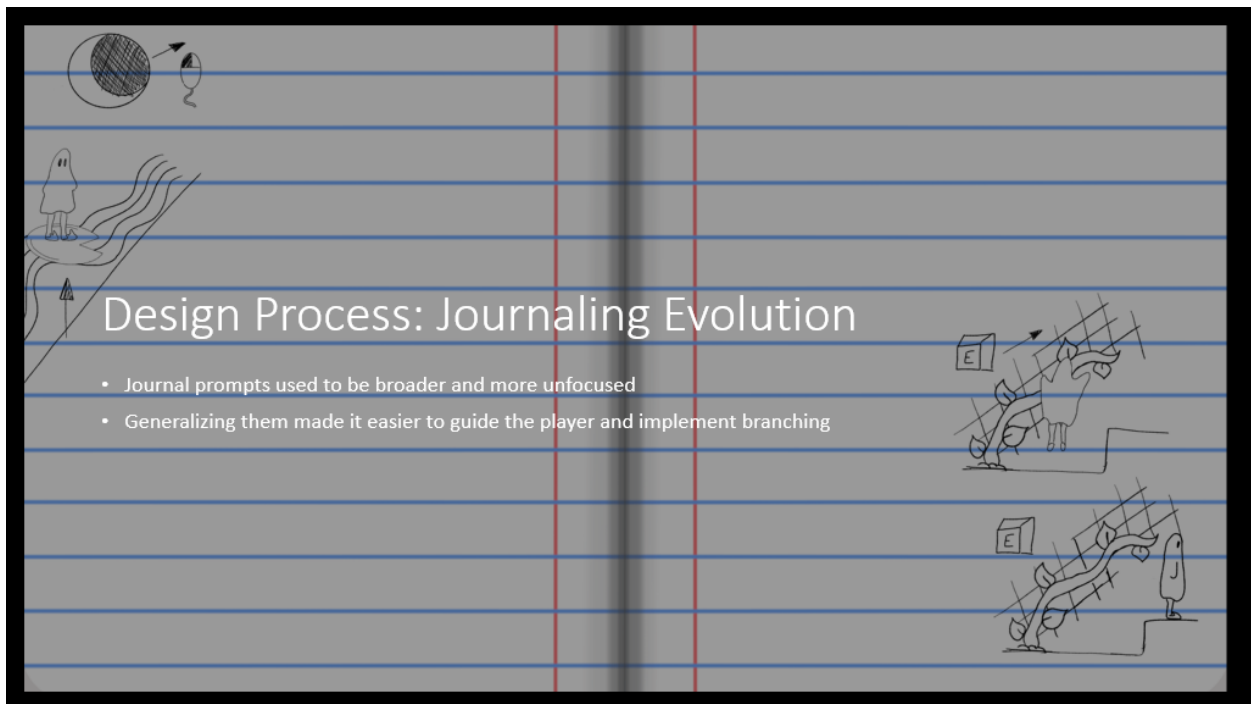
Design Process: Initial Prototypes

- Drawn to psychology, dreams, and nature
 - Dream Garden: Restore the dream palace by growing good dreams, solving nightmare puzzles, and fighting insomnia. Use details from your own dreams to determine the ending.
 - Scope was too large
- First Prototypes
 - Ivy tower: Evolved into the last level of the game
 - Shore line: Didn't fit with the larger story
 - Square mountain: Camera and control issues



Design Process: Mechanic Removal

- Z-axis movement: collider issues
- Jumping: removed focus from ivy and moon-based mechanics



Design Process: Journaling Evolution

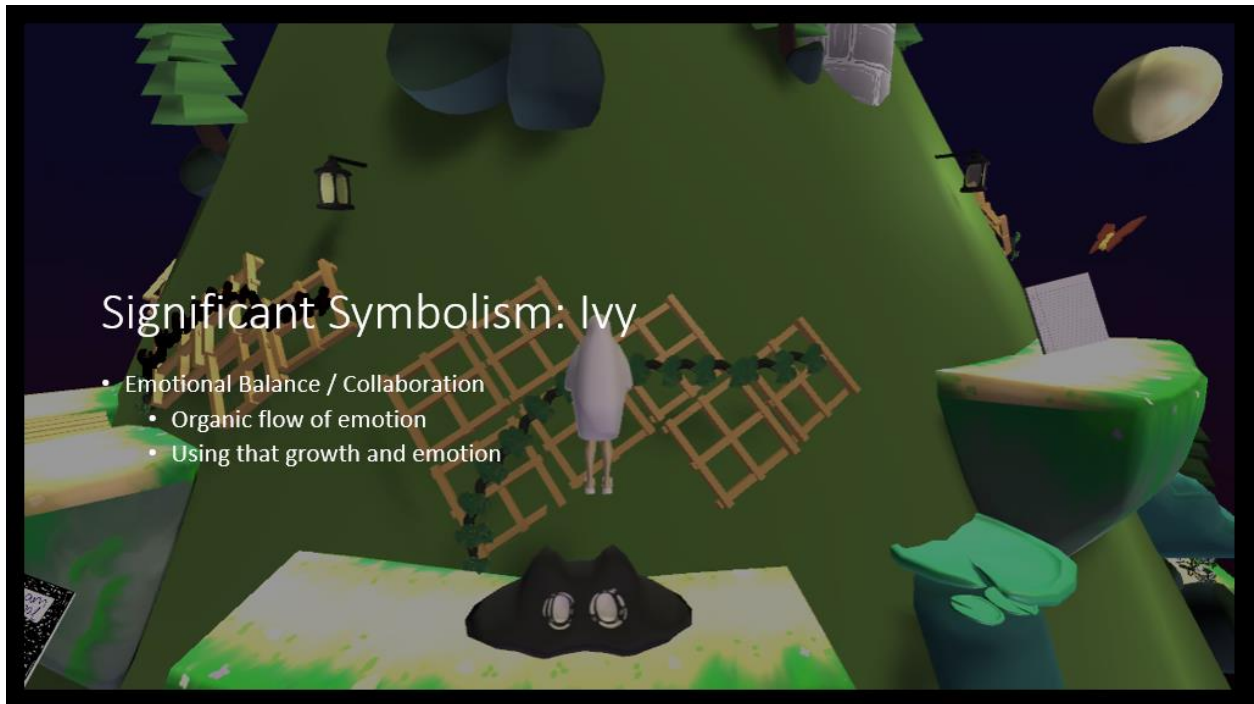
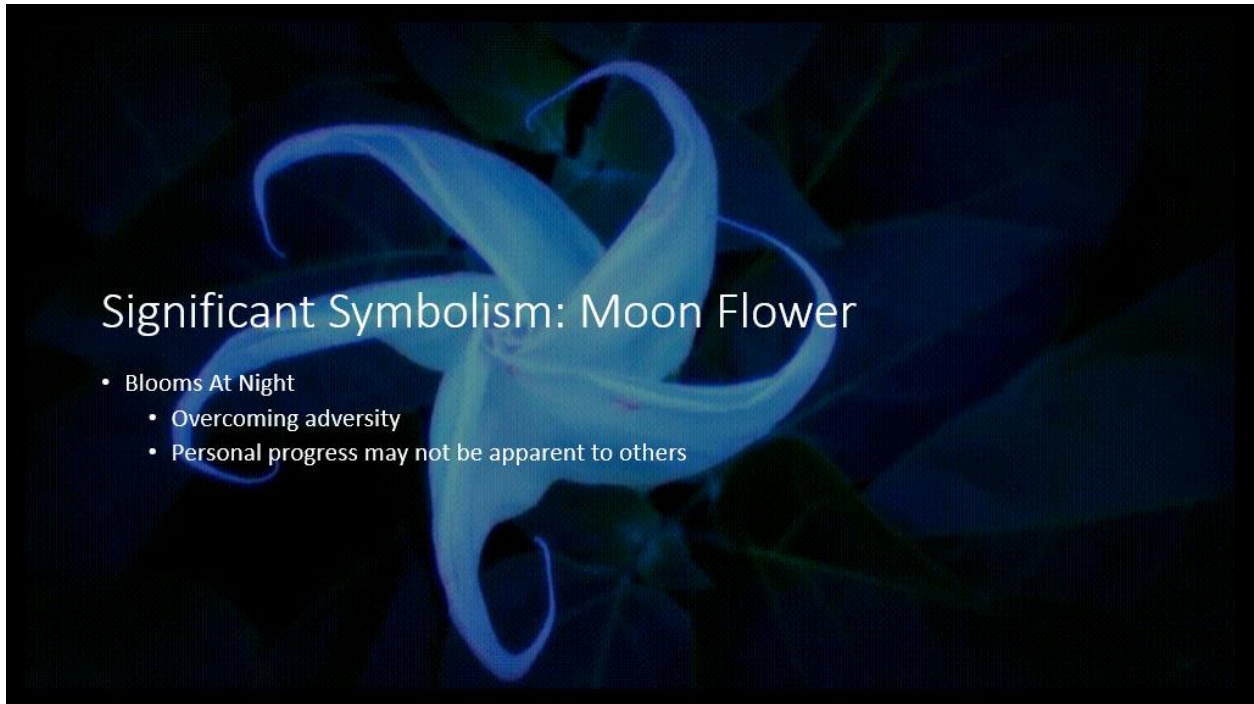
- Journal prompts used to be broader and more unfocused
- Generalizing them made it easier to guide the player and implement branching

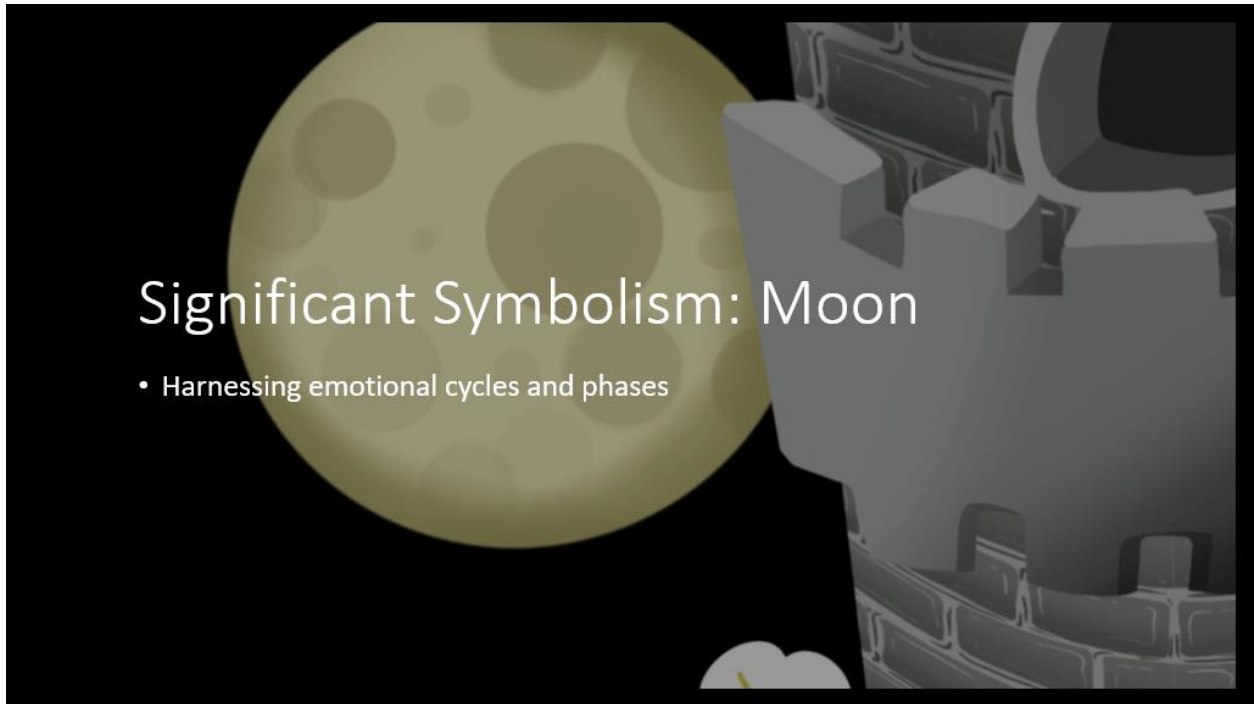
Design Process: Characters Design

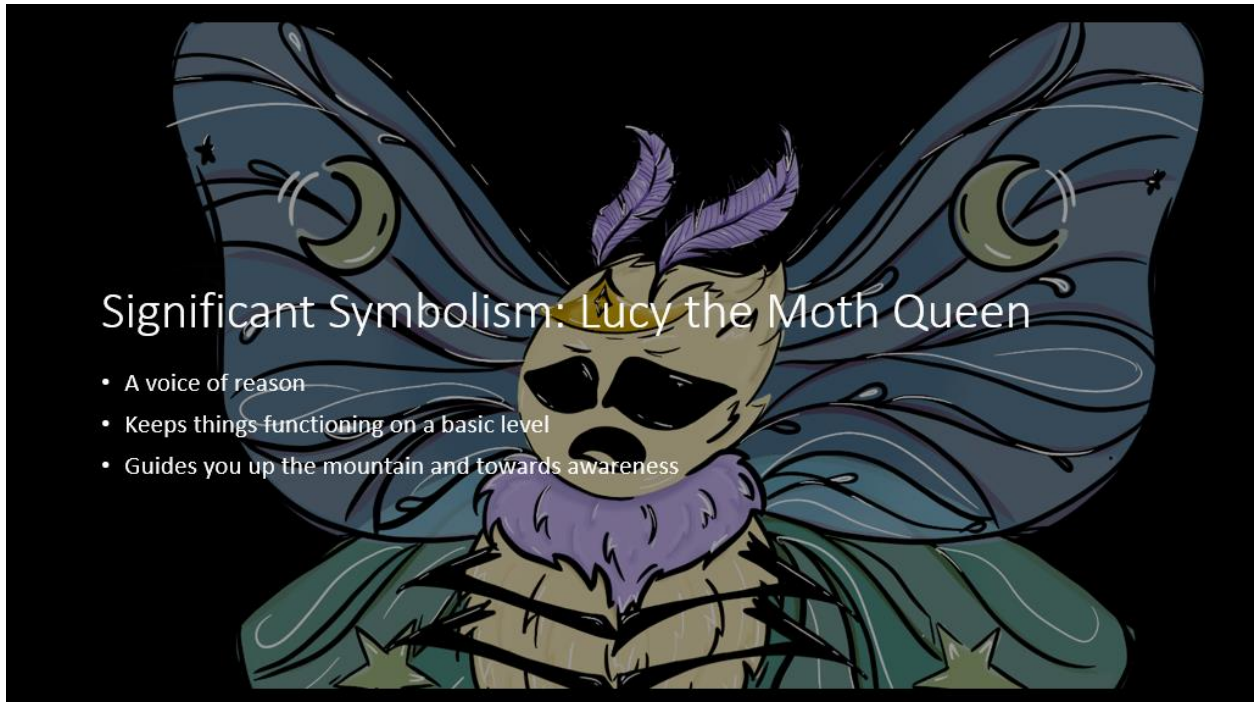


Design Process: Playtest Feedback

- Moon wasn't noticeable
- Reviewable Instructions/Journal
- Ivy climbing bugs

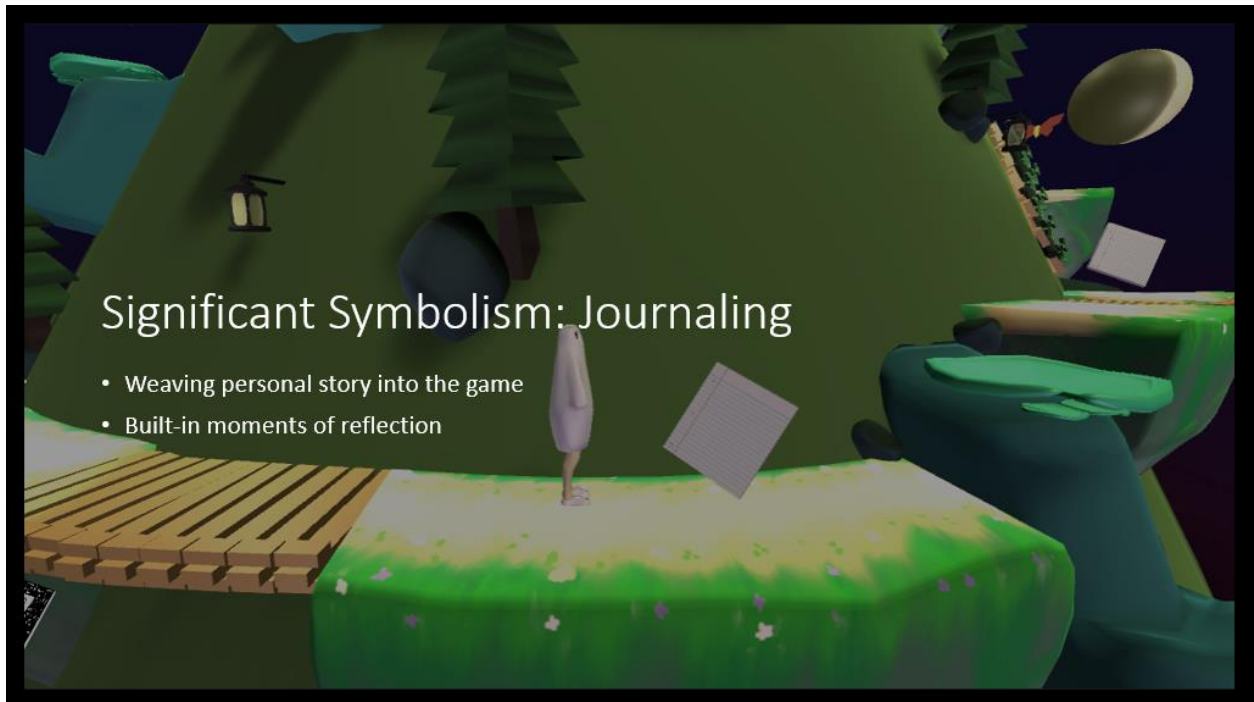







Significant Symbolism: Lucy the Moth Queen

- A voice of reason
- Keeps things functioning on a basic level
- Guides you up the mountain and towards awareness



Significant Symbolism: Journaling

- Weaving personal story into the game
- Built-in moments of reflection



Dreams and Games

- Mixed levels of agency and awareness
- Personal / Vulnerable spaces
- Meditative and Introspective
- Exploratory virtual worlds
 - Organic dream worlds
 - Crafted game worlds



Thank You!

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