THE ROAD TO JOURNEY
Jordan Erica Webber

Journeys can be physical or psychological: travel between geographical locations, or between personal states. The 2012 videogame *Journey*, by independent developer thatgamecompany, is about both.

Videogames are often examined through the lens of what you do and what you feel. Mechanically, *Journey* is an anonymous online multiplayer videogame in which you lead your masked avatar through a desert, towards a mountain, and along the way may meet another masked figure controlled by another anonymous player. Narratively, *Journey* is an interactive expression of the hero's journey, designed to engender a feeling of emotional connectedness in its players.

Journey arrived during a resurgence in independent videogames. Indie games have existed for almost as long as there have been games: Joyce Weisbecker (b.1958), who is said to be the very first independent videogame designer, was creating games for the RCA Studio II console as early as 1976. But as the industry grew so did production costs. For a while it was difficult to release a successful game without a publisher, and they were often risk averse.

In the mid-2000s, however, increased internet speeds enabled digital distribution. Through platforms like Steam (PC), Xbox Live Arcade (Xbox 360) and PlayStation Network (PlayStation 3), developers could release their games without the costs associated with physical retail packaging, production and distribution. Popular indie games of this time included the likes of *World of Goo* (2008), *Braid* (2009) and *Super Meat Boy* (2010).

To keep bandwidth requirements and production times down, many of these early games were small. And lower costs meant developers could take more risks. With that breathing space, they could create art.

Journey was one of these games, created for the PlayStation 3, small by necessity and experimental in nature. It was made in three years by a team that never exceeded 18 people. Its director, Jenova Chen, had a singular goal: 'to create a game where people who interact with each other in an online community can connect at an emotional level, regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity, and social status.'[1]

1   *Journey*, concept art

2 *Journey*, game screenshot

INTERACTIVITY

'I really wanted to create a title that showed that games can be more than the sum of their parts,' explains Chen. 'That they can genuinely create unique emotions in people, not just the sense of competition or triumph that comes from solving a puzzle or being the last person standing.' Dismissing competition helped *Journey* to appeal to that intended diverse audience. The team aimed to create a game that was playable even by someone who knew nothing about videogames, not even how to use the controller. Clear on-screen image-based prompts demonstrate how to rotate the player's view (the 'camera') by tilting the controller from side to side, move the avatar by tilting the left analog control stick, jump and glide by pressing X, and sing a wordless note by pressing O. Four inputs may still be a lot for some players to remember, but that's fewer interactions than most PlayStation games use.

One might wonder: why create a game at all, and not tread the more familiar path offered by books and films? 'What I want to see,' says Chen, 'is the player go through this emotional rollercoaster as themselves. "I went through this. I went through this with someone who is real." That is the power of interactive media that movies can never capture.'

The protagonist of a game is more connected to the player than the protagonist of a book or film is to the reader or viewer, because they can dictate the avatar's actions. This interactive feedback gave thatgamecompany an additional artistic tool besides those traditionally associated with art and sound and editing, and Chen intended to make better use of it than other games were at the time:

Journey used interactive feedback as an instrument. Unfortunately, most traditional games were still in their infancy. If you think about a driving game or a shooting game, the gameplay remains the same – you just keep driving a car, or you keep shooting the people – from the beginning to the end. It's as if you have an orchestra but one of the instruments just plays one dead beat, one dead note. That's why it doesn't touch your soul, because it's noisy. So for *Journey* we tried to change the interactions. Where the melody wants to be high, we go high. Where the melody wants to go low, we go low.

DYNAMICS

Chen frequently references the monomyth known as 'the hero's journey', summarized by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), in which 'a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.'[2]

The many stages of the hero's journey, as delineated by Campbell (and others), can be divided into three sections that align with the three-act structure often used in screenwriting: setup, confrontation, resolution. Chen, who is Chinese, was also inspired by Confucian thought on the stages of life, and regarded the story of life and death as the most effective way to bond players.


3 *Journey*, level colour chart

For *Journey*, thatgamecompany had its own version: a progression divided into levels that vary in emotional intensity (pl. 3). The player begins with a period of learning and growth, making their way through the desert, collecting symbols that lengthen their avatar's scarf and enabling them to glide for longer. Then they face a period of darkness in an underground lair inhabited by large serpentine creatures that can impede their progress, the mountain goal hidden from view to represent a midlife crisis. Finally, they reach the mountain, and the climbing of this represents death.

PRODUCTION

Each member of the small team helped to sculpt this structure in their own way, with their own tools, constrained only by design goals and technological limitations. The person who oversaw all of that was Robin Hunicke, who was originally asked by Chen to be the lead designer on the game but realized when talking to the team that what thatgamecompany actually needed was a producer.
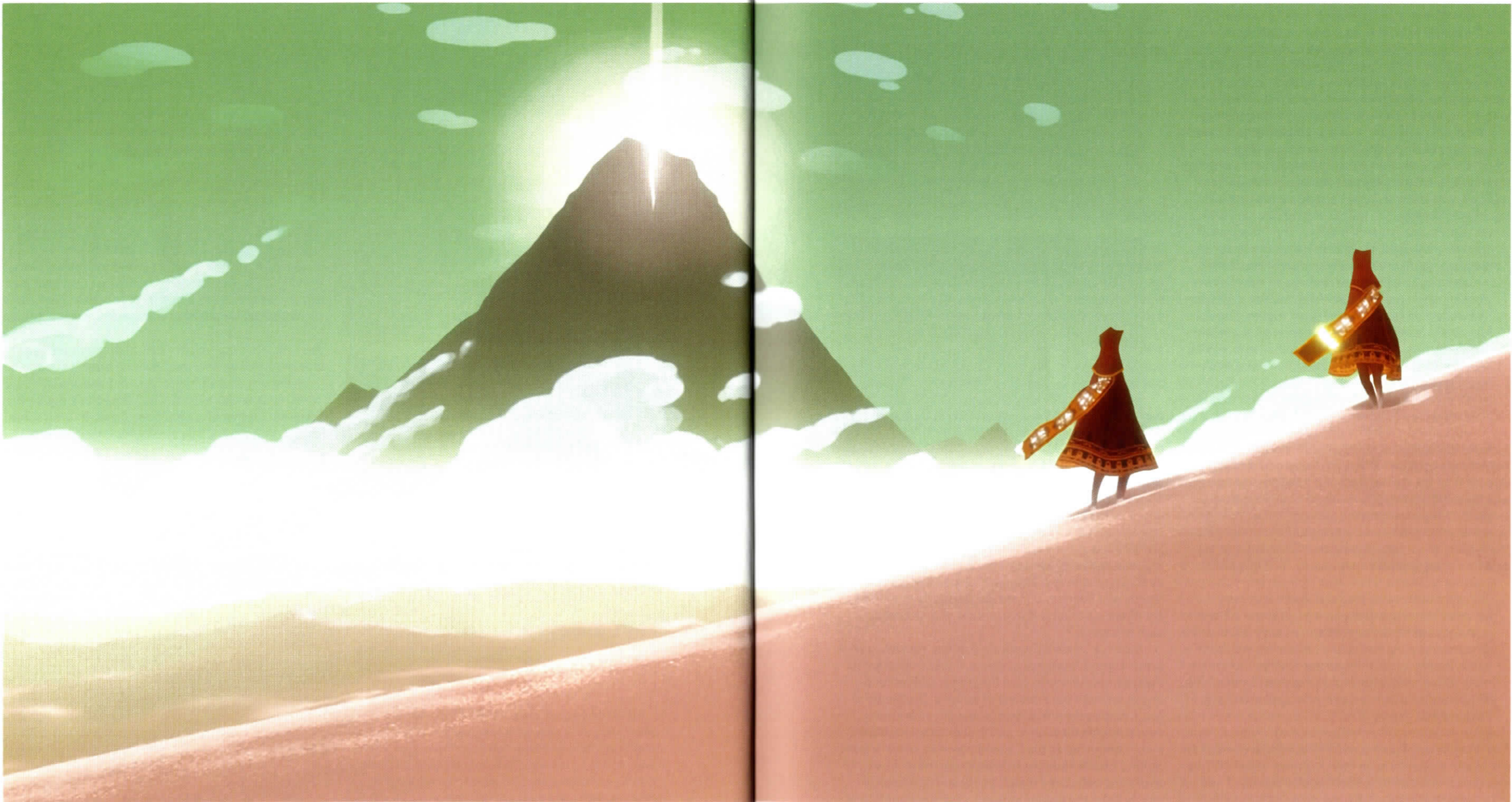
Videogame producers fulfil a similar role to that of film producers or book editors: managing artists and ensuring the work is completed on time. For Hunicke,
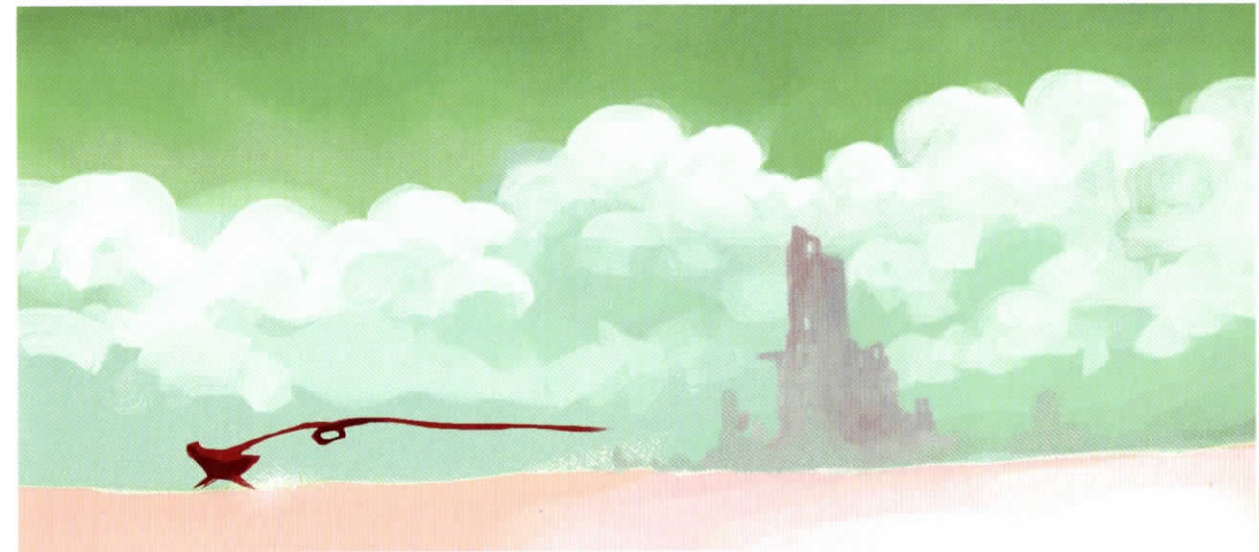
4 *Journey*, level concept art

5 *Journey*, early character concept art

6 *Journey*, game screenshot

that meant answering questions like: 'How do we make sure the right people are in the right places doing the right thing? How do we build trust between the people on the team to get stuff done? And then how do we execute against this really important vision, which is to build something where people can play with a stranger online and walk away with a feeling of connection, which is a very aspirational goal, and not just be beating them over the head with the idea?'[3] But for the first year of development, Hunicke's focus was on hiring people who would be able to use their particular skills to help encourage those feelings in players:

We were hiring what we call 'feel engineers'. So we created a test, which was that you were to take a cube and move this cube through three-dimensional space in a way that made it feel juicy. We ended up getting a few great feel engineers to join the team, and then started working on the art hiring, and trying to find someone to work with Matt to do the modelling in the game and make the game look beautiful.

ART

Matt Nava was the art director on *Journey* – the person responsible for figuring out the overall visual direction for the game. Because thatgamecompany was so small, Nava's job involved character creation, world building and narrative design. He had to make sure that what players saw on screen contributed to the feeling of connectedness that Chen wanted to create – a huge conceptual task:

We wanted to make it so that you could befriend people, and it was a space for collaboration where connections could be made in a really positive way in the gameplay. And that all sounds great, but it wasn't really what that game would be. So my job was, 'Okay, well, what would a game like that look like? How could the art of a videogame support making that happen?'[4]

The first job was figuring out what sort of a world players would experience on their journeys together. The idea to set *Journey* in a desert came quickly: it was an environment that was both practical for the goals of the game and visually compelling. 'Visually, it isolates the players,' explains Nava. 'It also presents this idea of a challenging space that requires you to collaborate with players to succeed.' The snowy areas, where players end their journeys, were chosen for similar

reasons. 'The only time people will connect is when they are small … when they have a sense of awe towards nature,' says Chen:

If you go to a hike in the middle of the wild and run into someone, you always would say hi and acknowledge them, because you are lonely and because this is the only human being that is nearby. If the same conditions happen in Times Square, if someone wants to talk to you, you will think, 'Is this guy trying to take advantage of me or something?'

SAND

To find inspiration for their awe-inspiring desert, thatgamecompany took a company trip to Pismo Beach, California, to see its sand dunes (pls 7 and 8). Nava sketched their surroundings on a Nintendo DS, a dual-screen handheld games console with a touch-screen and stylus, using an unofficial painting programme. Back then this was the best portable option, though he had to construct a shade to use it outdoors, and the console ended up full of sand. Hunicke also brought sand home with her – in her case intentionally, along with shells and other things she'd collected from the dunes – and made a kind of terrarium. 'I kept that on my desk the whole time that we were working on *Journey*, to remind myself what it was like to be there with the team.'

Lead programmer John Edwards learned a lot about sand on that trip: 'It showed the richness of that environment in a way you wouldn't expect. There are just all these details about moving on sand. The physical experience of walking over these dunes, there's so much texture to it. There are places that are really liquidy and flowy, and there are places that are hard and there's a crunch. The experience is incredibly high feedback.'[5]

Much of Edwards' work on *Journey* was to do with graphics and feedback systems. It was important to thatgamecompany to give the player a lot of responses for even the smallest of actions. So, the sand has a fluid system that means any tiny movement sends ripples through it, and that positive feedback in turn encourages play. It also prevents players from getting bored. Hunicke explains how these kinds of decisions can come about as a result of disagreements between team members over the direction of a game: 'John might say, "The game is too easy. It's boring," and Jenova would say, "The game's not supposed to be hard. It's supposed to be accessible," and I would say, "Well, maybe what we need to do is we need to make it less monotonous but still accessible,

7, 8 Field trip to Pismo Beach, California, 2009

right? It is boring to walk across this entire desert by yourself. What can we do to make that juicier?"'
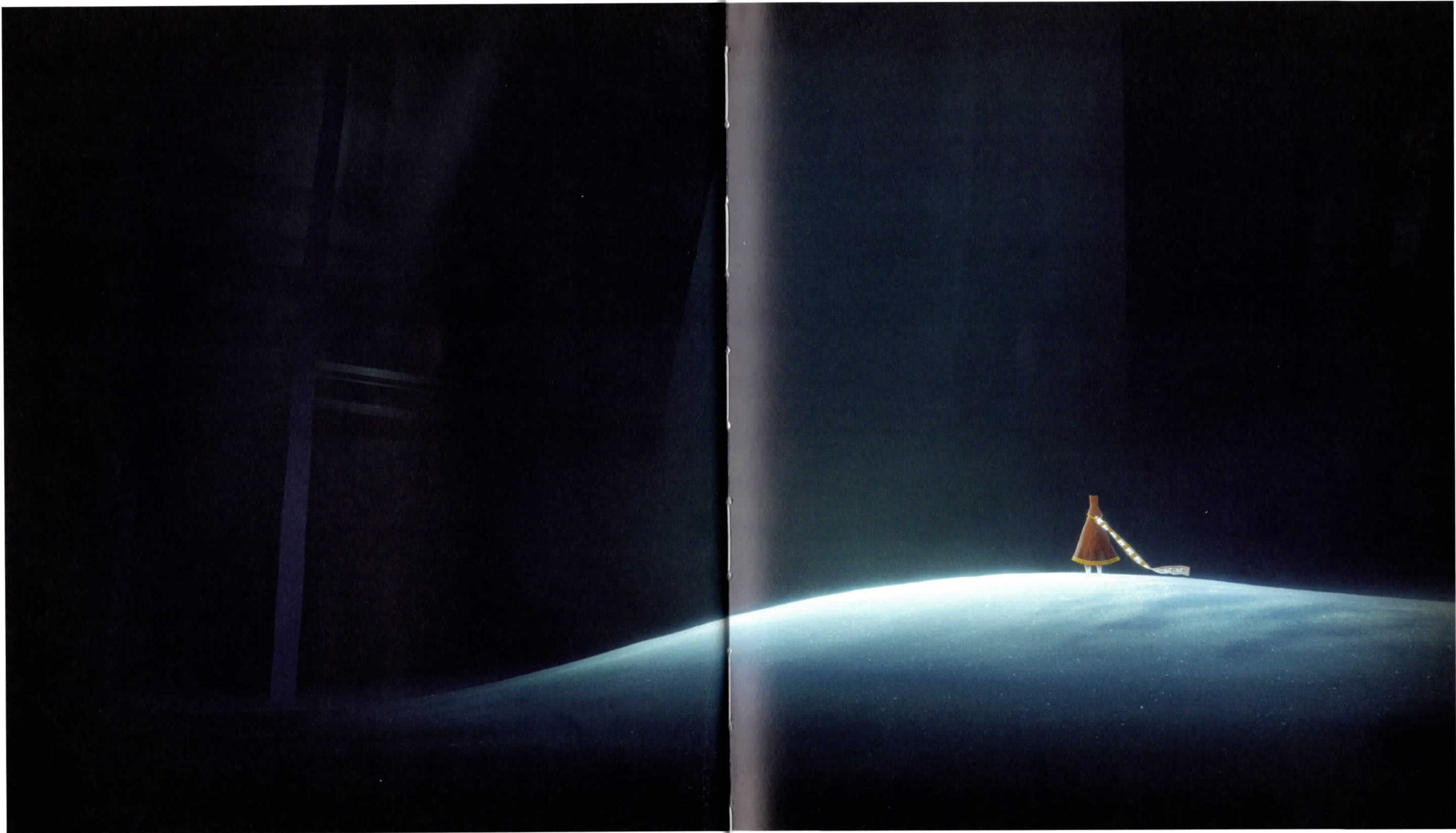
REALISM/REPRESENTATION

Game design involves balancing different goals. Edwards recalls how the sand changed over the course of development:

We actually did switch to using a lot of photographic reference towards the end, which I think was necessary. It certainly increased the accessibility and maybe the feeling of just quality coming from the game. But it did kind of mute a lot of the flowiness and the feedback, because I guess we didn't have time to maintain them both, and some of the graphics put constraints on the micromechanics and the feedback.

Journey was never meant to be a photorealistic game, however. Nava describes realistic graphics as 'both an advantage and a disadvantage'; it's an easily understandable art direction, but videogame graphics are limited by technology, and age fast. 'If you try to create a stylized look,' he says: 'You can use techniques that will stand the test of time. But it's not just black or white. If you go too abstract there are no details that ground the game in reality and make players immediately connect with it.'

The story of *Journey* is full of carefully judged balances between realism and representation: Hunicke wanted the world to change according to the time of day and weather so that each time you visited it would be different, but it was too much work for the team, and she realizes now that it would probably have made it harder for the artists to create such a beautiful world; Edwards talks of how features like the fluid simulation in the sand aren't realistic but rather an interpretation of a feeling; Nava points out that all of *Journey*'s lighting effects were added by hand rather than simulated: 'I really wanted to flatten the space, visually, and to have the emphasis be on colour and shape rather than form and lighting and depth. It made the spaces feel more magical, more like a painting, and less like a world that you're used to.'

This distinctive visual style also helped *Journey* to stand out among games with bigger budgets and more photorealistic graphics, and to appeal to different people. As Nava explains: 'Part of the intention of the art style was to make a game that was multicultural and could appeal to a wider demographic.' One non-realistic element of the visual style was the colour

9 *Journey*, game screenshot
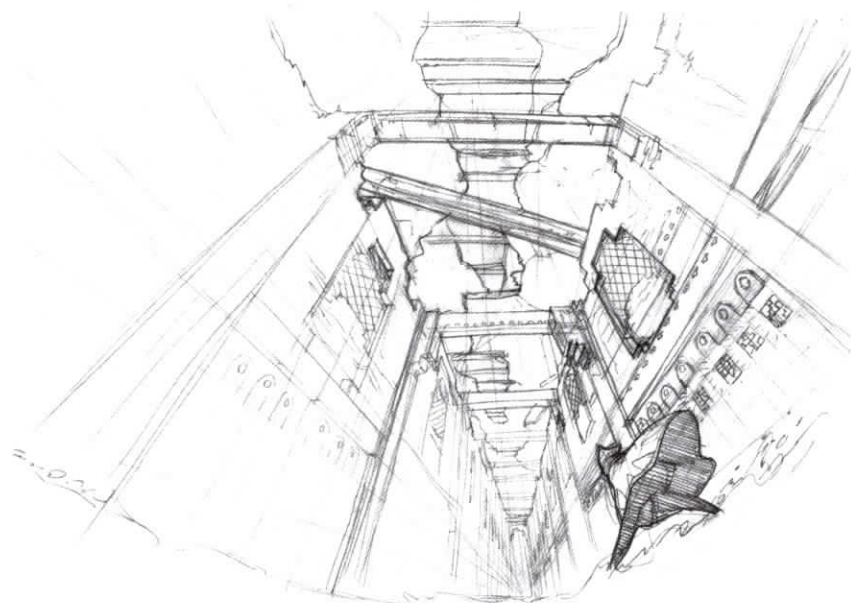
10 *Journey*, level concept art

11 *Journey*, character movement concept art

schemes used throughout, which allowed Nava to map the levels onto that representation of the hero's journey that the team drew from at the beginning of the project – the curved line through varying levels of emotional intensity:

> I took that curve and I thought, 'Okay, what kind of spaces and what colours would really make this curve come to life?' And I drew this gradient of colours. And that colour curve was something that influenced all the graphics of the game, and all the lighting, and all the colours of everything you see.

The beginning of *Journey* was designed to feel neutral, so the ground and sky are both orange. When the player has their first encounter with another person there's more contrast, with pink dunes and a green sky. Nava specifically avoided using blue skies until the end of the game: 'To really fit in with this emotional curve I wanted that colour to be a sigh of relief.'

DEATH

The curve of the art fit closely with that of the music. Hunicke notes that Nava was 'extremely responsive' to each new piece of music the team received from the game's composer Austin Wintory. One idea Nava attributes to Wintory is the concept of subtraction:

> It's really interesting when the goal of the music is to erase itself, to essentially let the player inhabit the music space, or even the visual space, with their own meaning. It is interesting to think that the whole purpose of the *Journey* is to get you to this place where all of a sudden you have to fill in the blanks.

Every hero's journey eventually ends with death. *Journey* ends with the player flying to the peak of the mountain, surrounded by that beautiful blue sky, and then walking into a light. But right before that, there's a period of hardship in the snow. The colour is gone from the environment; almost everything is white. The music fades to silence. And the player's mobility is severely restricted as if they are weighed down; they're unable to fly, and their steps slow until eventually they collapse in the snow.

'Interaction is the instrument, right?' says Chen. 'So when the person is dying, the thing you can do should also shrink and become weakened just like everything else.' Edwards explains: 'This kind of hidden companion to the player, the sand feedback and the fact that every moment was fairly satisfying and responsive, we

took that away. It was just one more way in which they felt alone. By taking all that away, the player experiences that loss.'

CONNECTION

'I think what we were trying to get at,' says Nava, 'and we always talked about this, was this idea of the universal story, this universal feeling and journey that people go on.' Part of telling this universal story was demonstrating the commonality between people, encouraging an emotional connection between two people – as Chen said – regardless of their differences. And that too required input from different disciplines. Nava, for instance, encouraged players to seek each other out by making the avatars red and ensuring they stood out against every background. 'At first we actually had this idea that players could change their colour, to make them more unique and interesting, but we found that actually people connected more when they were the same.'

Chen had a design process, the aim of which was to 'maximize feedback for things you want and minimize feedback for things you don't want'. He describes a person who enters a virtual world, leaving behind the value system they've learned from real life, as like a baby banging their spoon on the table to get attention:

> Initially players could push each other, and when one baby pushed the other baby off the cliff that person died. So when we tested the gameplay, even our own developers preferred killing each other because of the amount of feedback they would get, whether it's visual feedback, audio feedback, or social feedback from the players in the room. For quite a while I was disappointed at our own developers' ethics, but I was able to talk to a child psychologist and she was able to clarify why these people are doing what they're doing. She said, 'If you want to train a baby not to knock the spoon, you should minimize the feedback. Either just leave them alone, and after a while they're bored and stop knocking, or give them a spoon that does not make a sound.'

So the developers made it impossible for players to kill, steal resources from, or even speak to each other. Players were encouraged to stay close together using high-feedback action – physical contact provided them with the energy needed to fly.

Hunicke managed regular playtests that allowed the team to figure out how to adapt the game in order
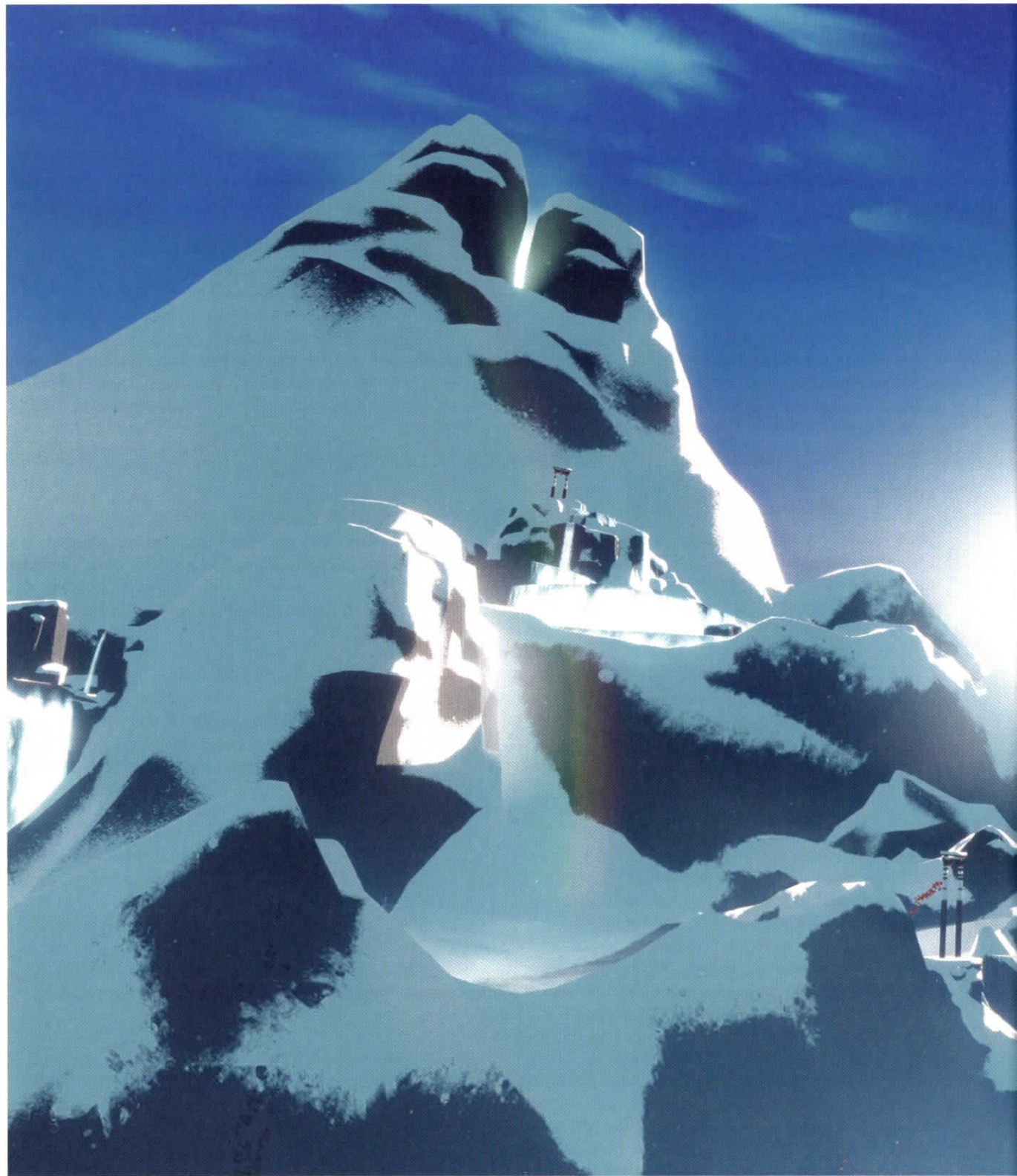
12 *Journey*, game screenshot

VIDEOGAMES

JOURNEY
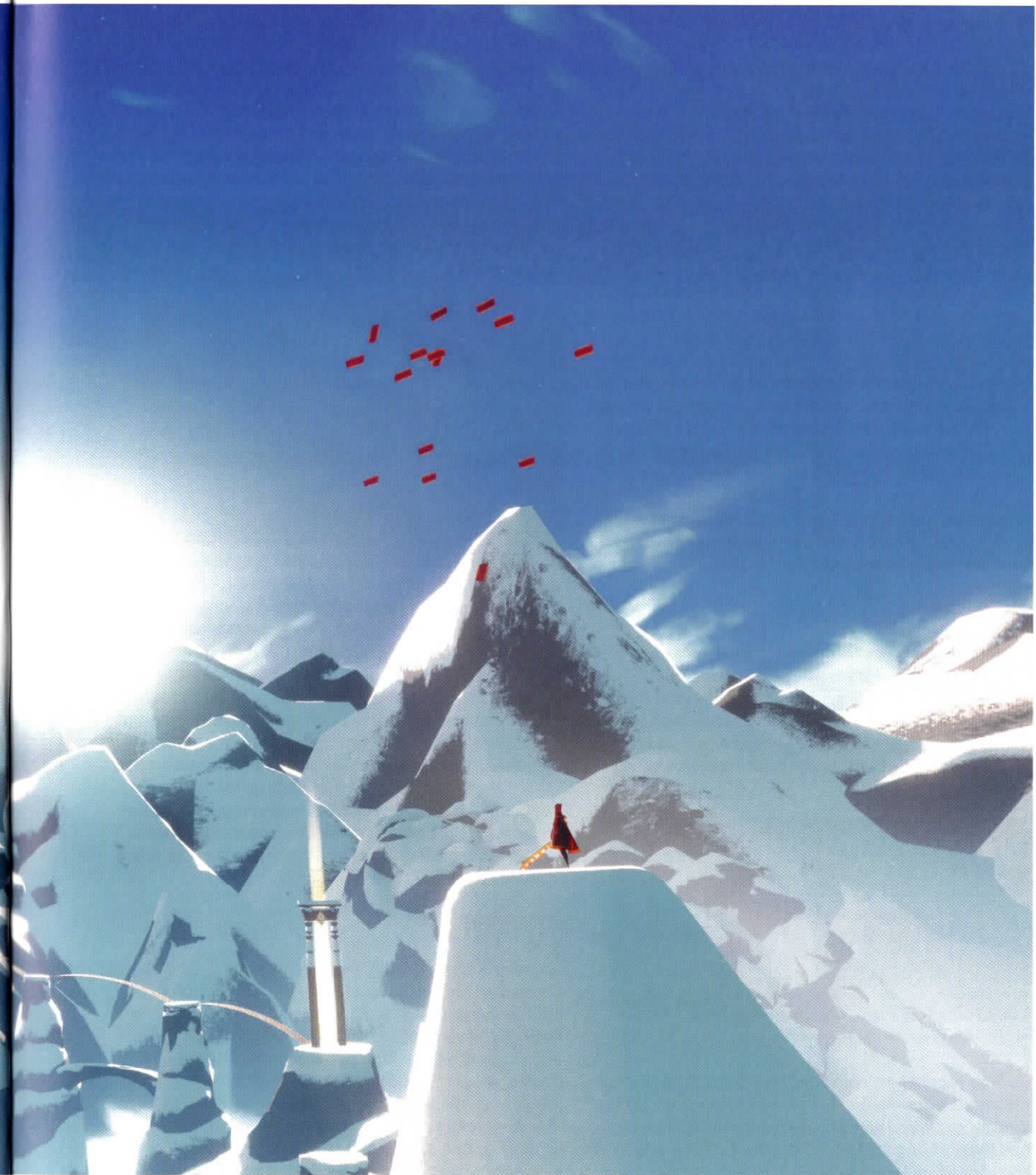
to encourage desired player behaviour. Many of the developers became bored with testing the game, so she created a sort of role-playing game where team members were given a card with a role like 'lover', 'fighter' or 'loner' that they would adopt for testing purposes. She recalls artist Jacky (Ke Jiang) fulfilling his role as 'griefer' (a player who disrupts the game for other players) by following other avatars around while repeatedly pressing the button to sing, which led the team to remove the option to behave that way. It might seem a shame that players were heavily restricted in order to encourage togetherness, but Chen thinks it's apt: 'It's a lot easier to fall in love if you're in a foreign city where you don't speak the language.' This restriction is what makes *Journey* a focused work:

> Art is a deliberate choice of things so they start to become one voice, to express something. *Journey* for me is a way to express what I wish the human relationship could be. But obviously the real world is very noisy. If you take a photo of real life, it's very noisy. If you see a romantic painting, impressionistic painting, the painting emphasizes what the artist has seen, and sometimes they are much more beautiful and simple.

COMPLICATIONS

The noise of real life hampered thatgamecompany. Ironically perhaps for a team working on a game about facilitating human connection, some of the developers argued. While Chen was clear with what he wanted the game to achieve, there was some doubt among the team about how they were going to get there.

13 *Journey*, character development

'The number one problem on *Journey* was always the amount of uncertainty that was represented in the design,' explains Hunicke. 'John [Edwards] in particular had really strong feelings about the fact that we didn't know where we were headed. It is very difficult, when you're making an experimental title, when you get the middle part where it is just really not working.' Edwards describes 'a constant pressure of falling into the void of unknown', which for him clashed strangely with the occasional mundanity of developing a product. And there were further complications. The team ran out of time, failing to hit their original 18-month development target; Hunicke had to manage conversations with their publishing partner Sony in which they asked for multiple extensions that eventually brought them up to three years of production time. Money then ran out, and they had to let people go. But the team persevered.

14 *Journey*, early character concept art

'Everybody was very dedicated to seeing it to the end,' says Hunicke:

> The arc of production was one where we were just really trying to get over the hill. And getting to the summit was so hard that when we finally made it through it was like this big release. In a way, the game's production really mirrored the experience in the game. They fed off of each other in a way that I think made it special. I was really blown away by the response, and I still kind of can't believe that we ended up doing that together. It was a really special thing.

RECEPTION

The response to *Journey* was overwhelmingly positive. Critics awarded it perfect scores. In 2013 it won five British Academy Games Awards: Artistic Achievement, Audio Achievement, Game Design, Online – Multiplayer and Original Music. And, perhaps most importantly, players did form those emotional connections through the game. This was an important time for Nava: 'I went to school for visual design, 3D graphics and concept art, and I didn't know what I would use those things for. *Journey* was a project where I used those things to create an experience that moved people and improved people's lives, that people came to us and told us how this was such an important experience for them.'

Edwards was inspired by seeing the multiplayer-work at scale, observing players enjoy these human experiences: 'You can't do that in a movie. You can't do that in anything else. And it seems really interesting and deep and worth exploring. So that was something I took from *Journey* and tried to continue working on.'

Hunicke agrees that *Journey* proved what games could do:

> I think that *Journey* is one of those artefacts, pieces of art, experiences, games, whatever you want to call it, that really did transform people's understanding of what is possible in that space, in a way that even we hadn't really hoped it would. Games like *Journey* get nominated for awards but they never win them, right? We did not expect the response that we got. We did not expect it to do as well as it did, and specifically to reach as many people across such a broad spectrum of play types as it did.

Chen believes that he achieved his goal: to create an authentic portrayal of the hero's journey that facilitated human connection. But even he was surprised at what some players took from the game. People who were grieving over the death of a loved one found it cathartic to walk into the light with an anonymous companion. Some players who had been medically dead themselves even told Chen that *Journey* was the best media they had found to describe that experience. This certainly wasn't what he designed *Journey* for, but Chen is open to different interpretations: 'Art, in the end, has to be interpreted by the audience. And depending on what the audience has experienced they will walk away with very different things.'

1
Interview with Jenova Chen, 20 September 2017.

2
Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949).

3
Interview with Robin Hunicke, 19 October 2017.

4
Interview with Matt Nava, 25 September 2017.

5
Interview with John Edwards, 20 September 2017.