PROXIMA
THESIS DEFENSE

XAN DRAKE

A Visual Novel

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Artist Statement

My identity, my art practice, and my approach to understanding the world are all unquestionably defined by the subject of narrative. I consider myself a storyteller first and foremost. I believe that storytelling has incredible potential as a device for overcoming trauma and processing complicated emotions. Stories help me to get in touch with my younger self, to recontextualize my experiences, to bridge the gap of years of mental illness and self-loathing and to understand who I am now in the wake of all of that. It took me much too long to find myself; I didn't realize I was queer and transgender until the end of my teenaged years. I have a burning desire to represent LGBTQ individuals of all backgrounds in everything I create so that kids growing up like I did will get more opportunities to see themselves in the media they consume.

Proxima is a visual novel game where you oversee a team of robots that have crash-landed on an alien planet. Your task is to survive the elements and complete an unknown mission. The biggest challenge you face, however, is that your team is becoming more human. They are playful, curious, and caring, and soon enough, you wonder: How can you possibly keep them focused on the mission when they have finally gotten the chance to be alive?

The game begins as a classic sci-fi romp through space but quickly transitions into something that is more self-aware and leads players to question how systems in our own lives lead us to dehumanize ourselves—and each other—for the sake of some enigmatic sense of self-worth. Within its subtext, it is firmly queer, anticolonialist, and anticapitalist.

While Proxima isn't about me, it is absolutely a reflection of who I am and the things I care about. These robots transform from miserable objects of labor into fully realized individuals with their own desires and feelings. They are queer, they are fiercely critical of the social structures they have inherited from humanity, and they are full of joy. Through their journey, they prove that anyone can eventually learn to love themselves--even me.

I am focusing this game towards young adults, especially those struggling to find their own identity. I am building Proxima from the ground up to be accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds with no assumptions of prior experience. Recent independent games such as Pyre and Hades have successfully combined visual novels with the action game genre. Likewise, Proxima intersects with the survival genre but with a unique narrative

focus. I believe that the audience of visual novel games can be expanded by appealing to queer and other marginalized groups.

I hope that Proxima will be the first of many video game projects that I undertake over the rest of my career. I want to strengthen the view of games as another art form rather than simply being entertainment. I have approached Proxima from the ground up as a work of art and I hope that it will prove to be worthy of critical analysis for its intent and cultural impact.

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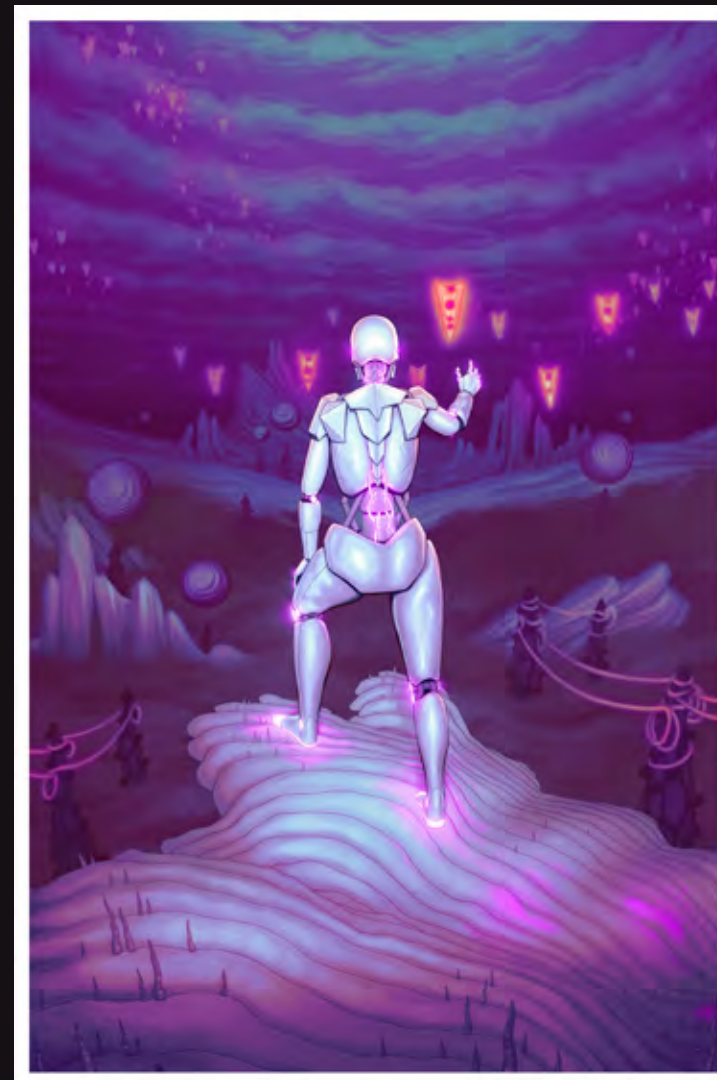
Written Thesis Proposal

Centuries in the future, a team of robots tasked with spreading humanity across the galaxy crash-lands on an alien world. Now they have to survive, rebuild, and work together to complete their mission, but in doing so are experiencing freedom for the first time and are beginning to form identities of their own. Under your leadership, can they stay focused on the mission, or will their doubts about humanity lead them to abandon it all for something new? This is the scenario that you will find yourself in at the start of Proxima, a demo "visual novel" video game that will use the narrative of robots learning about humanity as a defamiliarization tool to celebrate the beauty of humanity while revealing and critiquing the systems in human society that make us miserable.

There is a demand for thought-provoking, narrative-focused games in today's market. In the last decade, the increasing accessibility of game development and publishing tools has made lower-budget game projects possible, allowing for a much greater degree of creative freedom among developers than ever before. This has led to the success of meditative, artful games such as Gone Home, Firewatch, What Remains of Edith Finch, and The Stanley Parable. My hope is that my project will fit in with a building legacy of games created to provoke certain questions or emotions rather than stopping at just trying to be fun. The "visual novel" approach to storytelling in games, which is in some ways closer to an illustrated book than a video game, is especially popular among independent developers due to its simplicity and ease of creation.

As non-binary, bisexual, mentally ill individual, I have always dealt with feelings of alienation from my own humanity. It took me many years to be honest with myself about my queerness and even longer to seek proper treatment for my chronic anxiety and depression. On the upside, these years of isolation and confusion about my identity encouraged me to use my feelings of alienation as a defamiliarization tool to critique and to separate myself from the harmful cultural expectations that affected me. Robots are a perfect format for defamiliarization! As games journalist and podcast host Austin Walker said, "We could have made them look like anything, but we made them look like us." They serve as a sort of stand-in for ourselves as children, not yet jaded by "the way things are" and eager to question every aspect of our reality.

Because Proxima uses the backdrop of robots surviving on an alien world to tell its story, I must also contend with the long history of colonialist tropes in survival-focused video games. The ultimate goal of almost every survival game is to exert complete mastery over your environment by ripping apart the earth in order to obtain as many resources as possible. While you start out feeling small and helpless in the hostile wilderness, by the end you have fully dominated nature. While this can be fun and satisfying to play, this genre of game supports the Western ideals of colonialism on which America was founded and for which millions of people were systematically executed in order to free up land for our use. Of course no one is a bad person for playing Minecraft, but I hope that by subverting these colonialist tropes in Proxima, I can encourage players to consider ways to coexist with nature and with other people rather than solving every problem through domination.

Another important bit of context for this project that has emerged in recent months is the surge in ecofascist thought in online communities. Global pollution appears to have drastically decreased because of mass self-isolation, and as a result people have started saying things like "We are the virus!" Not only does this promote the dangerous and completely false narrative that mass death is necessary for the recovery of the environment, it also distracts from the real problem at hand, which is the large-scale systems that are responsible for the bulk of our carbon emissions. Despite the drastic global change in our lifestyles, we are currently on track to reduce our carbon emissions by only 5.5% this year, compared to the 7.6% per year for the next decade that would be required to prevent catastrophic climate change. Changes in individual behavior are never going to be enough to save the planet. The current pandemic is not stopping fossil fuel corporations across the world from getting bailed out, and it won't stop them from continuing to destroy the earth for the sake of profit. By focusing on the systemic problems facing us while celebrating individual lives, Proxima has the chance to fight against ecofascist rhetoric.

My project will function both as an art object and as an interactive narrative experience. These aspects will inform and support each other as time goes on. While my artistic focus is on character and environmental design, the art assets I create need to serve the story being told. Thankfully, I have hundreds of similarly formatted games to use as reference, and there are countless examples of innovation in this medium that I can continue to build off. While my artistic choices will be built on the precedent set by previous "visual-novel" type games, I believe that the greatest source of inspiration I can draw from is that of sequential art. I have spent a great deal of time reading, studying, and creating comics. I believe that all the artistic considerations that apply to comics, such as pacing, composition,

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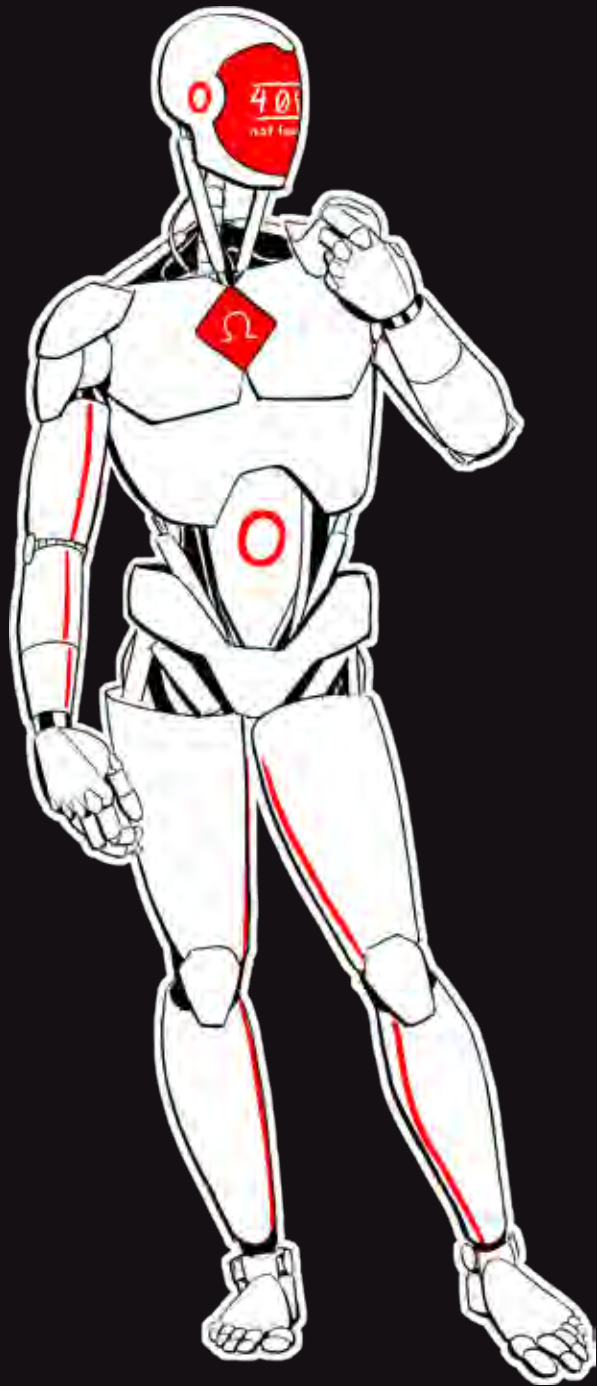
and the relationship between word and image will apply to my design work on this project.

One advantage that a narrative game has over comics, however, is that the game's tone can develop in response to how it is being played. While I have themes that I want to be consistent all throughout, I want players who focus on colonizing this new world at all costs to experience a narrative that is cold and unforgiving. Likewise, players who allow their android friends to live and express themselves freely will have an experience that is loving, upbeat, and sometimes humorous. Given that this game is intended for a more mature audience, I don't want to pull any punches when it comes to conveying to the player the potentially fatal consequences of their actions when the time comes to get serious.

Initially, the robots in Proxima are flawed. Their bodies are designed to uphold an arbitrary standard of beauty and enforce rigid gender roles. They are programmed to objectify themselves, reducing their value as people to the worth of their labor. They shirk self-discovery in favor of conformity. Under constant surveillance, they lack any kind of safety or privacy. They want nothing but to complete their mission as efficiently as possible. They are miserable. However, they are also deeply curious and prone towards asking about why things are the way they are. They start taking up interests; one sets out to study alien life as best they can. Another wants to learn everything about humans and their history. The robots start to dress themselves up and playfully exchange bodies, wondering why some have wide hips and others have broad shoulders. They pick names for themselves. They change their pronouns. They fall in love. They experience joy in its truest form. This is a narrative that anyone, but especially members of marginalized communities can understand. When we gain the freedom to express ourselves, the world becomes so much brighter and more colorful than we ever thought it could be. This is the experience that I want to capture with each character's story, and by doing so, I hope to show those who need it how much happier they could be one day.

Since my project will be the demo for a larger-scale game, I want to produce something that is simultaneously a polished vertical slice of the final product and a compelling and satisfying experience in its own right. It will be released concurrently with a Kickstarter campaign I plan to run to fund the rest of the game's development early next year. I expect a full playthrough of the demo to take between 30 minutes and 1 hour for the average player, and given the multiple-choice nature of the game, there will likely be at least 2 total

hours of playable content. The game will be in 2D and built for screens at the standard 16:9 aspect ratio. There will be a few dozen art assets involved, with at least at least one sprite of every character, a digitally painted background for every location, and a hand-drawn user interface to match the game's aesthetic. My highest priority is developing the game's look and narrative, so while I expect the programming side to be quick and easy, I am prepared to pivot towards a non-playable version of the demo if the code proves to be too much of a challenge on this time scale. I will be building the game in the Unity engine, and while I am comfortable working in Unity, I have a programmer to help me with early development work. I also have an inker/colorist who will be helping with character asset creation under my direction. This is a project that I could never undertake on my own, and I am proud and excited to be assembling a small team of trusted friends to help me out.

As of today, I already have a rough story planned for the game's demo as well as early designs for its characters and locations. Over the next four months, through mid-August, I will write the full script for the game, have my inker/colorist begin work on character sprites, and develop a playable prototype with my programmer. Thanks to the game's simple and consistent structure, this prototype, which will use placeholder assets and will take only a couple of minutes to play through, will serve as the foundation for the rest of the demo which will be relatively easy to expand upon as time goes on. In the months of August, September, and the start of October, I will spend most of my time painting the game's few backgrounds, finishing other art assets as needed, and building on the game's prototype to implement the demo's full script and make it playable from start to finish. Towards the end of October and the start of November, I will focus on polishing art assets and fixing bugs. Any extra time at my disposal during this period will be used to add features that would be fun but unnecessary, such as basic animations, sound effects, and music. I expect that it will only take only a few hours to export the game and prepare the application to play on-campus during Focus Week, but I'm allotting two full weeks at the end of development for this process in addition to preparing and printing a gallery of my concept work, finished assets, and game screenshots for viewing during my thesis defense. If the current global pandemic makes an on-campus Focus Week impossible, I will have an online version of my demo available alongside a virtual art gallery for anyone to access.

One notable creative influence for Proxima is Supergiant Games' Pyre, a game that presents its narrative mostly in the format of a visual novel. Pyre has no "game over" state.

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Facing defeat contributes to the narrative rather than forcing the player to lose progress and try again. A similar example of this subversion of established game mechanics can be found in Undertale, created by Toby Fox. Undertale's tutorial encourages the player to fight and kill their enemies to gain experience, "level up," and become more powerful, but the game's happiest and most satisfying ending can only be attained if the player refuses to kill a single enemy throughout the game. In Proxima, attempting to complete the game's mission as quickly and efficiently as possible will lead to a much more unhappy outcome, encouraging the player to question their objective and whether there are more valuable goals than simple "success." Another major influence on this project has been the comic strip series Strange Planet by Nathan W. Pyle, which presents human practices in a new light to make them feel alien to us. Strange Planet is both hilarious and poignant, and it introduced to me just how powerful a tool defamiliarization can be. I also want to mention the playable character Fl4k from Borderlands 3 by Gearbox Software. Fl4k is an android that was clearly engineered to sound and behave like a man, but who identifies as non-binary. Fl4k is the first and only instance I've ever encountered of a transgender robot in fiction and I identify with the character quite a bit.

Last year, thanks to the Portland Indie Games Squad, I got my first chance to make art for a video game. My team finished the game in a week. Since then, I have made the art for three other games, each completed in a severely limited amount of time. While I didn't take an active role in the programming of these two projects, they were also much more mechanically complex than what I have planned. The most important skill I picked up from these experiences is my ability to organize my time well and produce all of a game's art under pressure. If anything, having more than a week to create this demo will feel like a blessing, and I expect to have much more time than I will need to achieve my minimum goals for the project. Another result of my experience with PIGSquad is that I have increasingly found game development to be my passion. Not only does it allow me to draw and paint a vast array of art for all kinds of purposes, but it also has given me the chance to dive into new skill sets that I have come to love such as animation and 3D modeling. Every single thing I have learned at PNCA will come into use during my time working on this project, and there is nothing I love more than learning, exploring, and experimenting with new tools. Now that I know that I am serious about pursuing a career in game development, this project is the perfect opportunity for me to show that I know how to design and produce art assets with an understanding for how they will function within the game as a whole, as well as coor-

dinate with a team in order to meet deadlines and produce something greater than I ever could have achieved on my own.

I believe Proxima has the potential to do something powerful: Highlight the pain that people needlessly inflict on themselves and others because of the expectations that have been imposed on them. Yes, this includes gender and sexuality, but I also want to dive into the root causes of our prejudice and self-loathing. Why are we so focused on interpersonal conflicts and so afraid to consider the artificially upheld scarcity that puts us at odds with one another? Are we capable of overlooking the things that divide us and uniting to solve the problems that face us as a species? I want to inspire people to be true to themselves and to treat each other with greater love, patience, and understanding. I hope to continue doing that for as long as I can.

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Thesis Abstract/Project Statement

Proxima is a visual novel game where you oversee a team of robots that have crash-landed on an alien planet. Your task is to survive the elements and complete an unknown mission. The biggest challenge you face, however, is that your team is becoming more human. They are playful, curious, and caring, and soon enough, you wonder: How can you possibly keep them focused on the mission when they have finally gotten the chance to be alive?
The game begins as a classic sci-fi romp through space but quickly transitions into something that is more self-aware and leads players to question how systems in our own lives lead us to dehumanize ourselves—and each other—for the sake of some enigmatic sense of self-worth. Within its subtext, it is firmly queer, anticolonialist, and anticapitalist.

I am focusing this game towards young adults, especially those struggling to find their own identity. I am building Proxima from the ground up to be accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds with no assumptions of prior experience. My goal is to expand the niche genre of visual novels to a wider and more diverse audience.

Proxima began with a problem of my own: a crisis of identity externalized as an android, an empty vessel that exists only to work. I imagined, given free reign, what could that android grow into? Who could they become? What if they could learn to love themselves?

As a bisexual, nonbinary individual, this project is deeply personal to me as I hope to use robots as a defamiliarization tool to represent how it feels to struggle with your own body as a result of your identity. I want players to love these robots in all of their queerness and to develop empathy for them that carries into their own lives.
In Proxima, you don't just witness the cast of robotic characters struggle with their own humanity. You are their boss, the artificial intelligence of the spaceship the crew arrived on and the only person they answer to. Every scrape, dent, and lost limb is a direct result of the decisions that you made for the sake of the mission. The way in which you interact with them influences their relationships to their own humanity, whether they think of themselves as fully autonomous individuals or merely objects of labor, and these paths have their own unique upsides and downsides.

The game you can play right now takes only about 30-45 minutes to play through, being a vertical slice of the free demo I'm developing which itself represents a small portion of the full story that I have outlined. My goal is to show the technical possibilities of this game, including dialogue choices with both short- and long-term consequences and animated characters and environments that feel truly alive.

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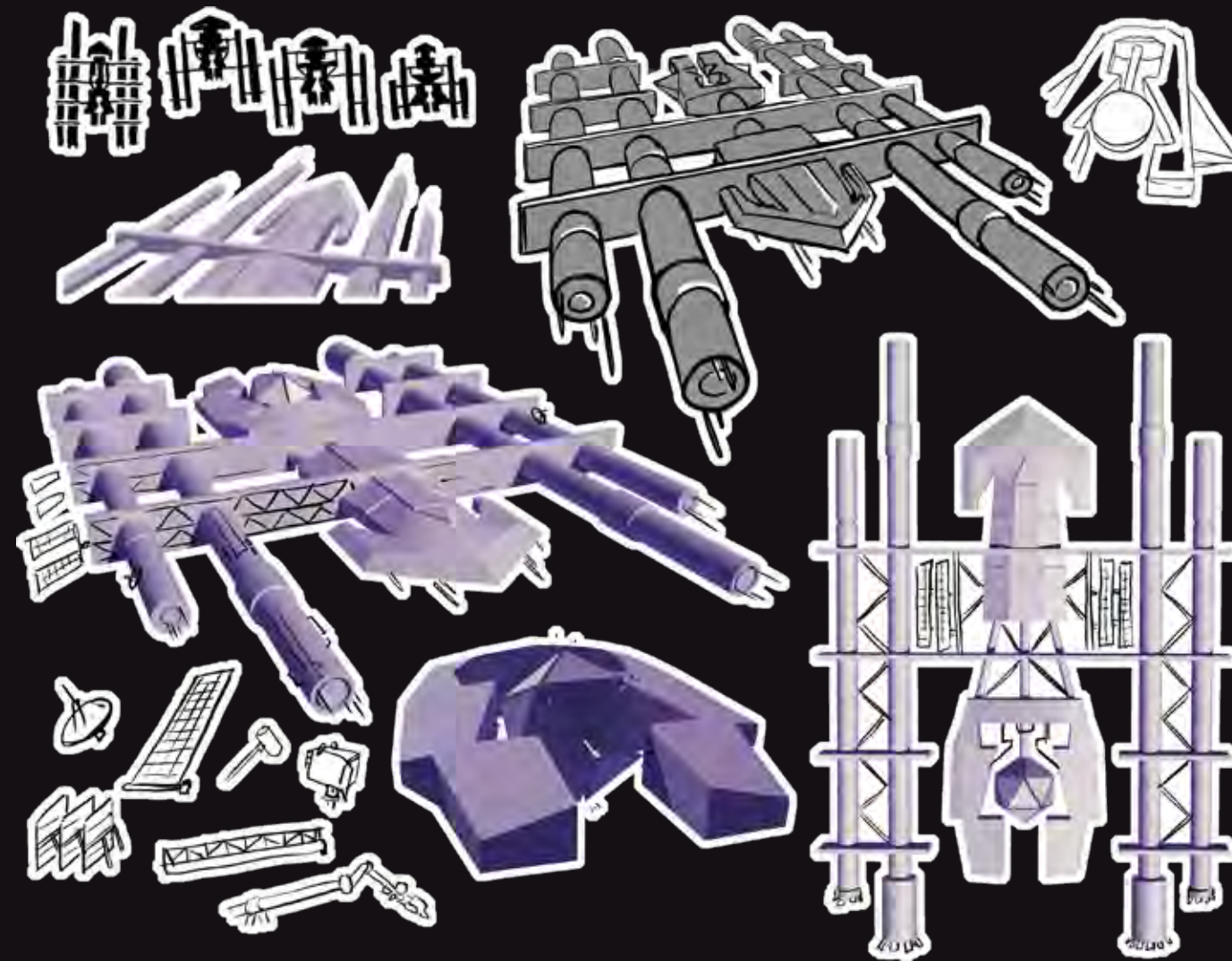
Oral Presentation (The Speech)

How much of yourself would you be willing to destroy for your work? Would you give up a hand? Your whole arm? Who does your body even belong to?
Thank you for coming to my thesis defense. My name is Xan Drake and I'm here to talk about Proxima.

Proxima is a visual novel game where you oversee a team of robots that have crash-landed on an alien planet. Your task is to survive the elements and complete an unknown mission. The biggest challenge you face, however, is that your team is becoming more human. They are playful, curious, and caring, and soon enough, you wonder: How can you possibly keep them focused on the mission when they have finally gotten the chance to be alive?

For those unfamiliar with the concept of a "visual novel," it is a genre of video game that closely resembles an illustrated novel. However, by incorporating trademarks of video games such as branching dialogue, artificial intelligence, or any other type of gameplay, visual novels have the potential to tell a very different kind of story than can be done on paper. Proxima features the near-universal presence of a "dialogue box" at the bottom of the screen where the game's narrative is delivered. The outside of this box is reserved for a set of backgrounds, characters, and animated effects that illustrate the events of the game. It is currently playable online through any web browser, but is planned for eventual release as a downloadable file through a digital storefront such as Steam. The game's aesthetic is structured around lined and cel-shaded characters with hand-painted backgrounds, creating a hierarchy of abstraction that puts emphasis on the characters' importance and makes them easy to read at a glance.

I am focusing this game towards young adults, especially those struggling to find their own identity. I am building Proxima from the ground up to be accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds with no assumptions of prior experience. My goal is to expand the niche genre of visual novels to a wider and more diverse audience.

To be honest, the main reason that I'm making Proxima is that I adore robots. They serve as a stand-in for ourselves as children, not yet jaded by "the way things are." They are eager to question every aspect of our reality. They are an excellent tool for defamiliarization, able to bring light to institutions that are so entrenched in our lives that we might never think to question them on our own. Additionally, robots are objects of labor—the term even

comes from the Czech robota, literally meaning "forced labor." They lead us to question, in a world where our worth is so wholly defined by our productivity, what sets us apart from them? To lead into another example of what robots make us question: real life robots are almost universally gendered, oftentimes even designed with particular sex characteristics in mind as if these characteristics are fundamental to our ability to humanize them. Is gender really so essential to who we are that not fitting into our universal understanding of gender makes someone less human?
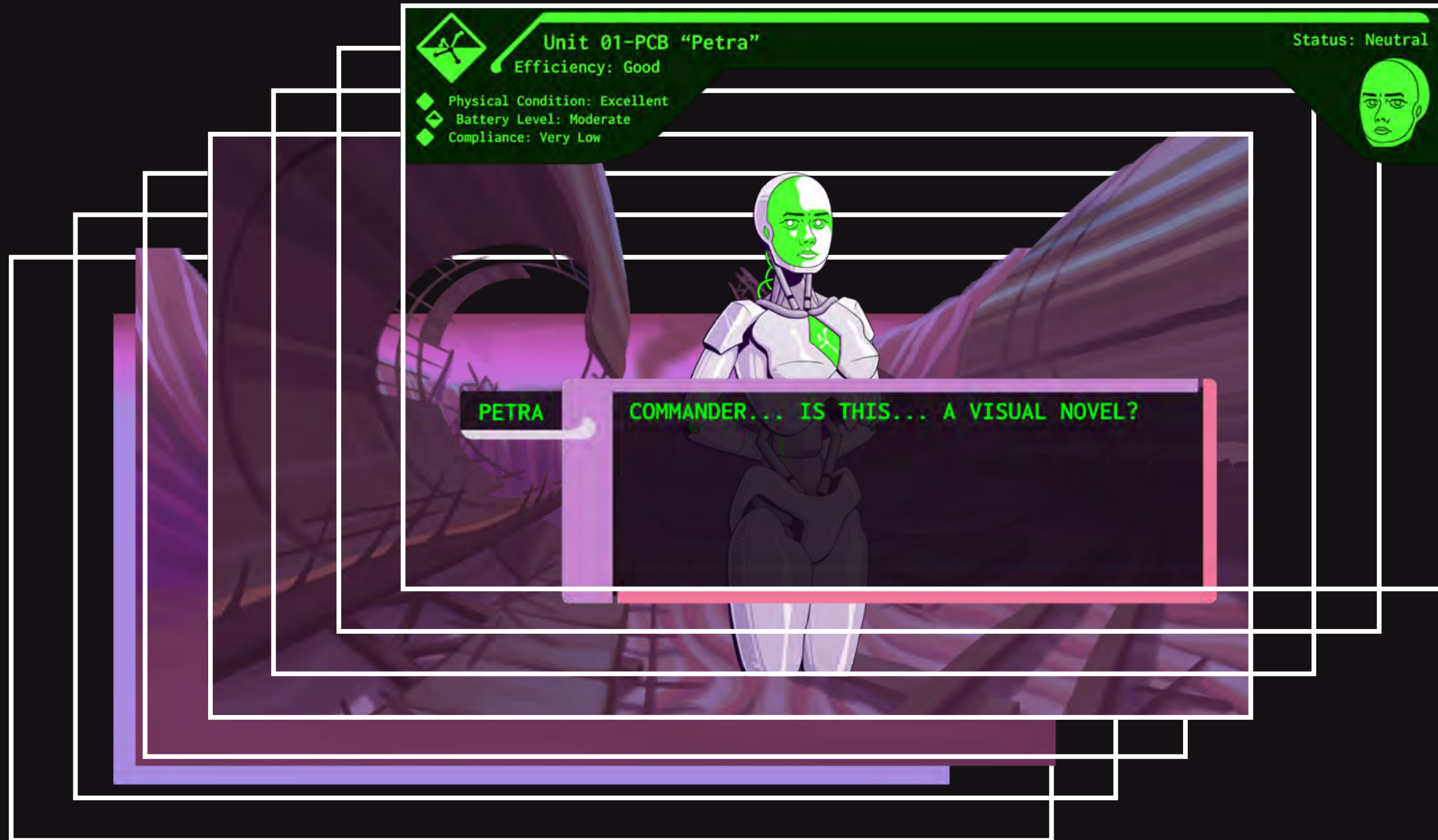
I am no stranger to having my humanity put into question. I live with chronic anxiety and depression which significantly impact my ability to work. I am bisexual and for a long time have identified as agender, two aspects of my identity which I battled with for years and am only beginning to fully come to terms with. While this causes others to look at me a certain way, no one's political views have harmed me nearly as much as the dehumanization that I have inflicted on myself. The self-loathing brought on both by my queerness and my inability to live up to my own lofty standards of productivity took hold of me. It transformed my admiration for robots into complete idealization, a dream that I could become a perfect being with no fears, doubts, wants, or needs—only the ability to work.

Proxima grew from this seed: a crisis of identity externalized as an android—an empty vessel that exists only to produce value through labor. This thought alone is crushing, but it led me to imagine: Given free reign, what could that android grow into? Who could they become? What if they could learn to love themselves?
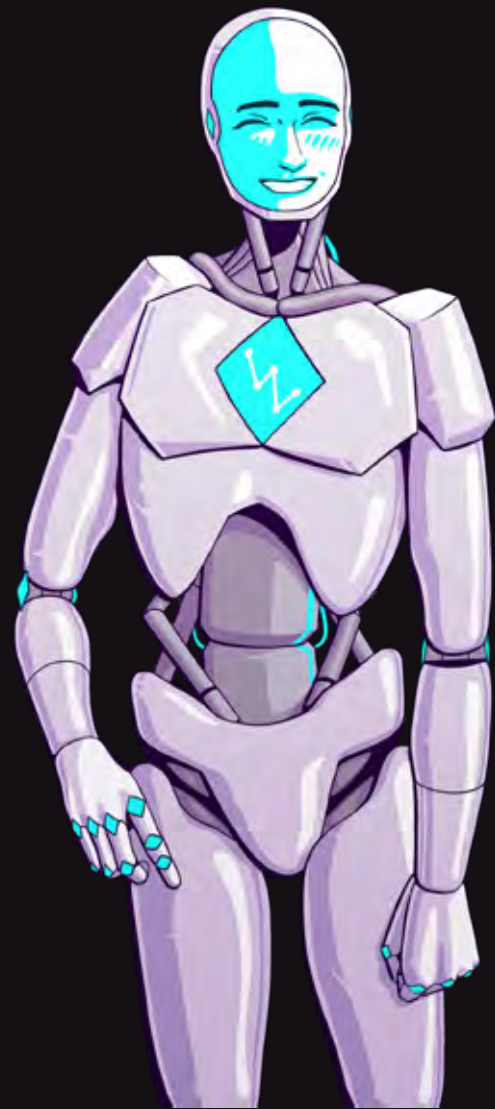
In Proxima, you don't just witness the cast of robotic characters struggle with their own humanity. You are their boss, the artificial intelligence of the spaceship the crew arrived on and the only person they answer to. Every scrape, dent, and lost limb is a direct result of the decisions that you made for the sake of the mission. You might have the impulse to be kind to them, but if you do, they quickly diverge from their set programming and become less efficient. For some players, their experience with this game may be about nothing other than maximizing the robots' work output and spending every available resource to do so. They will be rewarded with a quick victory, but also a narrative experience that is cold and distant as they watch the fire inside each one of their robots go out.

That may sound cruel, but I have put a huge amount of effort into making these robots as

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Unit 01-PCB "Petra"
Efficiency: Good

Status: Neutral

◆ Physical Condition: Excellent
◆ Battery Level: Moderate
◆ Compliance: Very Low

PETRA   COMMANDER... IS THIS... A VISUAL NOVEL?

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lovable as possible. They get excited about things, they crack jokes, and they care what you think of them. You jump into their bodies and literally see the world through their eyes in order to navigate the world. My hope is that most players will push past their desire for pure efficiency and instead accept that in order to bring these robots the happiness and freedom they deserve, they need to adopt a new set of priorities. I want to guide everyone who plays Proxima to choose to be caring and nurturing, for that choice to have real weight to it, and for that philosophy to follow players into their own lives leading them to be kinder both to themselves and others.

I firmly believe that our society would actually be more productive if we allowed ourselves to take breaks and focus on self-care. There's ample evidence to support this idea--In the summer of 2019, Microsoft Japan granted its employees an extra paid day off each week, reducing their work weeks to only four days, and reported a 40% increase in productivity as a result. I hope this kind of experiment is a sign of a larger cultural shift away from maximizing work hours at the cost of our own productivity and wellbeing. I say this knowingly going into the field of video game development, infamous for its "crunch" culture where employees are sometimes expected to work as many as a hundred hours a week to compensate for poor management and unrealistic deadlines. This leads to burnout and forces passionate, talented developers to pursue alternate careers for the sake of their health. These priorities clearly need to be reexamined.

One robot in particular embodies this core experience I'm trying to capture; His name is Atlas. He is friendly, joyful, and an appreciator of human arts and culture. Unfortunately, he has very little confidence, eager to apologize to everyone around him just for taking up space. As you get to know Atlas you can reassure him of his value, but you also become aware of a much more complex problem: Atlas is deeply uncomfortable with his body. He was manufactured with a form that is unmistakably masculine, tall and broad and angular. He had no say in the matter; he was just designed that way. He knows that it shouldn't matter and yet it makes him miserable in a way he doesn't have the words to describe.

The truth is that in many ways, Atlas is me. I feel like a robot who had no say in how I was manufactured and am now forced to carry the weight of this form with me. It's a heaviness that makes my heart ache with sorrow, but also with a yearning for something different. It's an aching that never goes away and the only solution I've found is to keep working, wearing

myself down to the point that I am too numb to think about it. Similarly, Atlas tries to focus on his work and shirk his ever-growing humanity, but it catches up to him nevertheless.

Over time, Atlas' story will develop and he will have the opportunity to try a new name, new pronouns, and even a new body. My script does not yet use the word "transgender"--my priority is to build empathy for Atlas and to foster care for his wellbeing that will translate into newfound understanding about the trans experience for players who might not be coming in with much, or even any, knowledge on the subject.

It would be inappropriate for me to talk about labor and dehumanization in Proxima without touching on the fact that the game is inextricably anti-racist and anticolonialist. Before I even thought about making a transgender robot, I knew that I wanted to create a story that interrogated whiteness in the same way that artists of other racial and ethnic backgrounds are expected to interrogate those parts of their own identities. Part of my goal with the player character is to portray the experience of being an inheritor--and even a beneficiary-- of your ancestors' crimes, creating a power imbalance between you and your community that you must take responsibility for. The game seeks to make white players practice the process of identifying systemic problems and actually going through the effort of dismantling them rather than watching complacently from the sidelines.

For all I talk about the themes of Proxima, the version you can play right now isn't that game yet. The current demo's playtime stands at a respectable 30-45 minutes representing about a third of what I have fully scripted out, which in turn is an even smaller part of the game's complete outline. As my time working on Proxima went on, I realized that this was the only path I could take without destroying my body in the process. I probably could have implemented my full script, but it would have been at the cost of dozens of art assets and a level of polish that was essential to demonstrating the potential that this project has going forwards.

Beyond the inescapable issue of scope, one core question shaped how the design of Proxima changed over time: how do these robots go through the process of discovering, or failing to discover, their humanity? My first idea was a simple linear scale of humanity that can increase or decrease to an infinite degree depending on how you interact with your crew. If you treat them with kindness, they become more human but less efficient
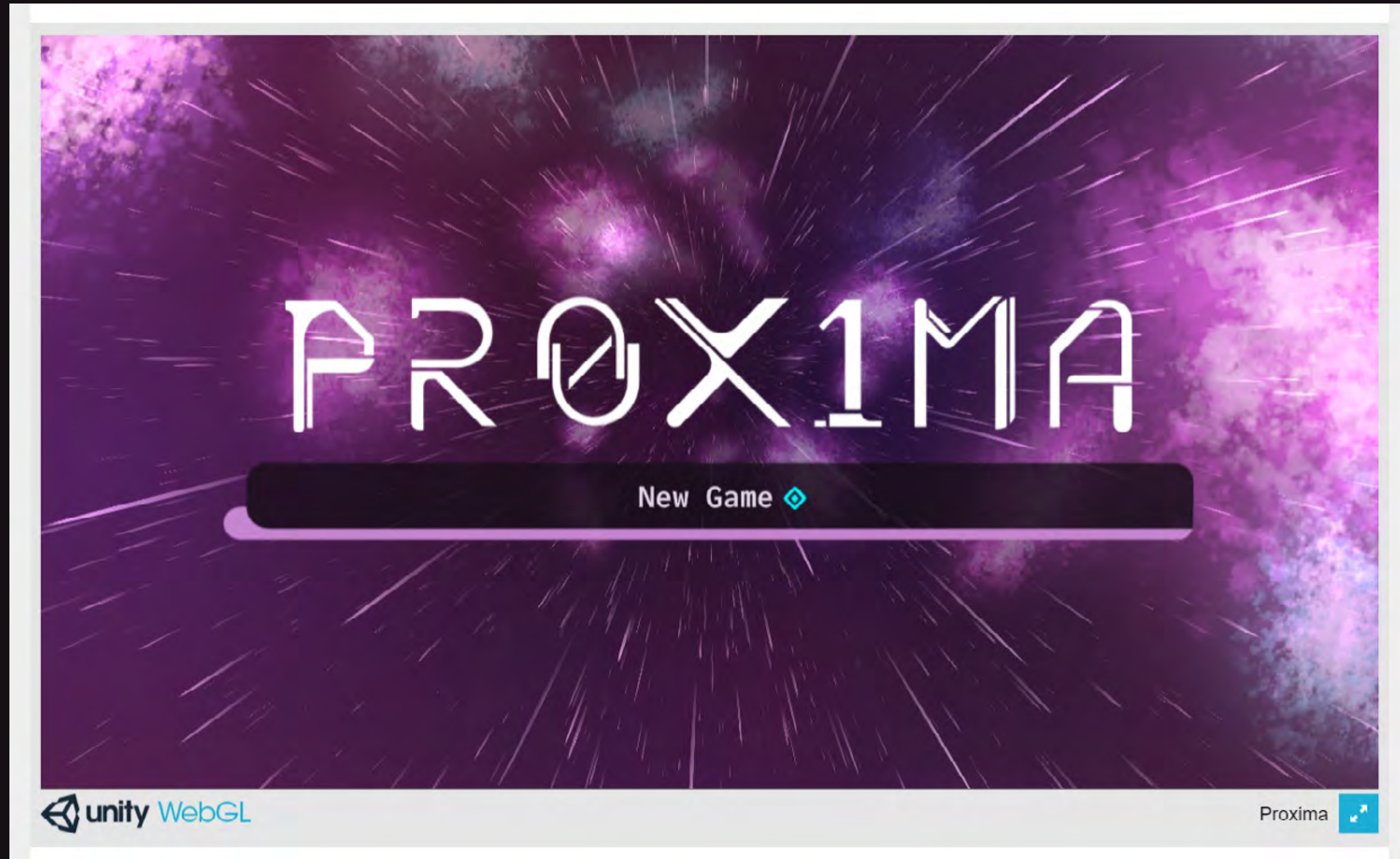
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workers. Likewise, if you are firm in your orders and critical of their mistakes, their humanity decreases and they become more productive. This works well enough, but I hated the idea that everything these robots gained could also be taken away so easily, so I decided to switch to more of a "Pandora's Box" approach. In the current game, robots discovering their humanity is an irreversible process. You can make choices to force them into compliance to make up for the lost efficiency, but the more human they are, the more they will recognize what you're doing to them and the more upset they'll become. However, if you never let them become more human in the first place, you can continue to maximize their compliance without issue and they will be perfect workers, happily destroying their bodies to help you.

I love this change because it opens up so many new opportunities for unique player stories. For example, a player who is cruel to their robots at first can decide to change course and become kind and nurturing at any point. However, someone who starts out kind and becomes cruel over time will end up with robots who feel betrayed by this change and may decide to retaliate. All in all, the way that the robots feel about themselves and you, and how these things affect their work, has become a intricate black box of variables that I'm constantly tinkering with in the hope that players will have a memorable experience exploring the different potential outcomes. Most importantly, I hope this abstraction of real life power dynamics and human growth will convince people to consider priorities in their life besides productivity for productivity's sake.

Proxima's mission to create strong emotional reactions in its players and challenge their worldviews is the culmination of what I have always sought to do as a creative person. Yes, I am proud to be an illustrator, but I am a storyteller first, and this intersection between visual art, game design, and narrative has proven to be the perfect path for me. Not only that, but I believe my unique viewpoint as a a queer illustrator has helped me create an game that stands out in a crowded market.

Visual novels are rather niche, most known for "dating simulator"-style games. My hope is to create a game that is a bit more accessible to a wide audience of players—including those who have no prior experience with the medium. I've always been making Proxima for my own sake, so its target audience isn't something I worried too much about in the beginning, but I imagine it will resonate most with teenagers and young adults.
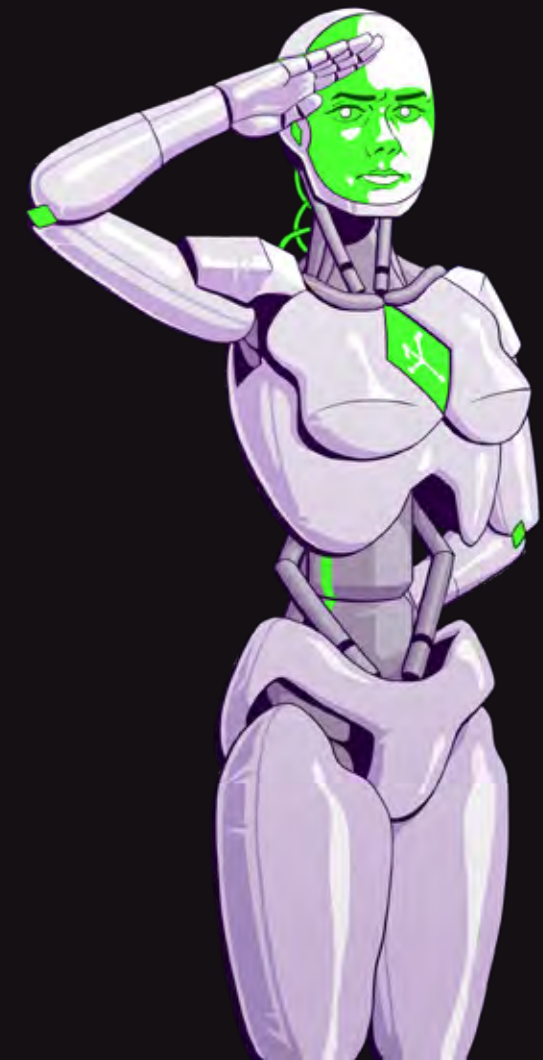
Working on Proxima is both the most creatively fulfilling and the most challenging thing I've ever done. It has consumed my whole life, and while I expect balance to return over time, there's no denying that this has been a process of building the creative person that I want to be as much as one of creating a video game.

The initial seed of the game's concept came into my head back in March: a vision of a group of robots, alone on a strange and hostile planet, simply trying to survive. I knew I had to explore this concept and quickly produced a comprehensive story outline with supporting worldbuilding documents and an in-depth character bible. I grew to love this world I created and it became obvious that this would be the year I dedicated everything I had to bringing it to life.
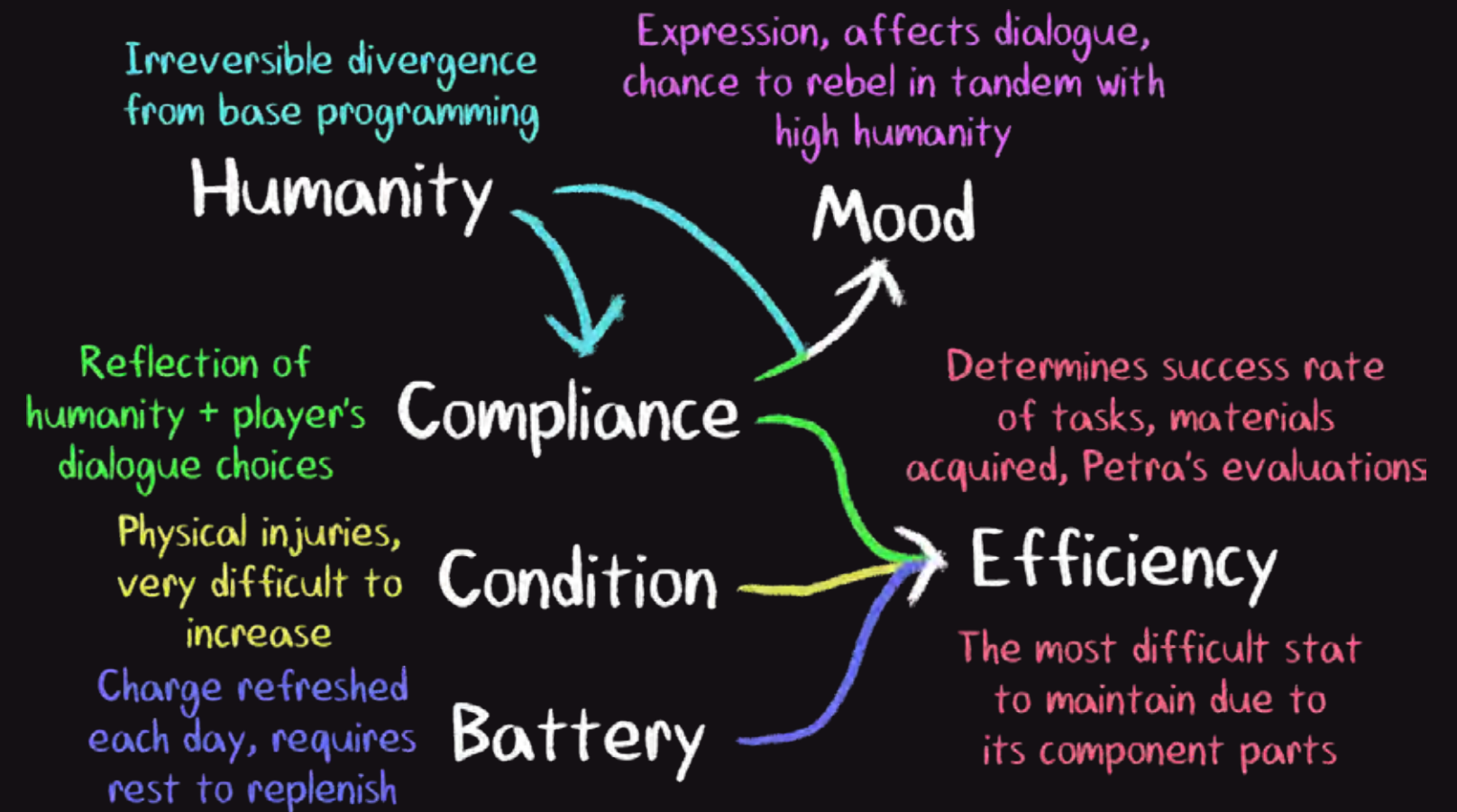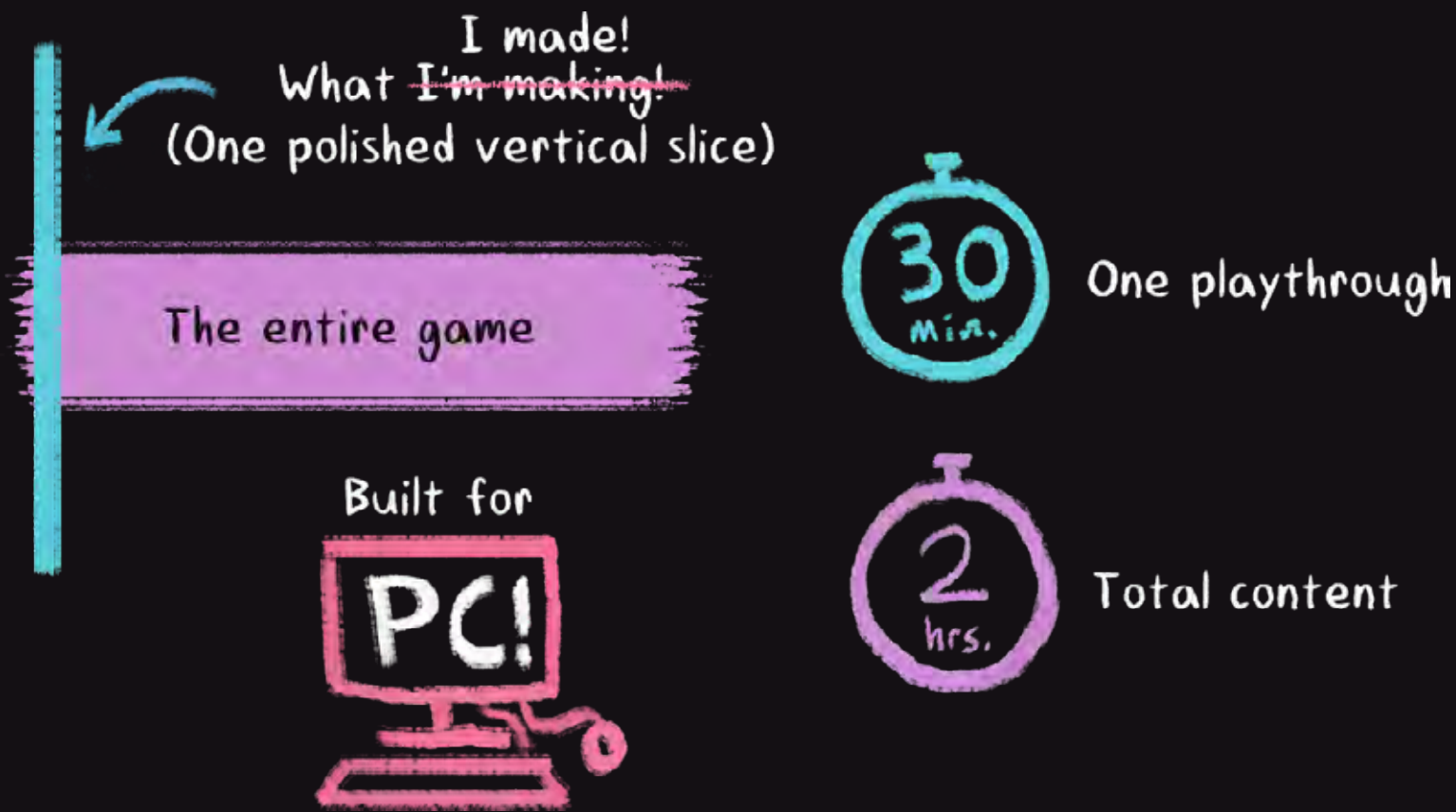
I spent hours listening to experts talk about their experiences and played at least a dozen narrative games for inspiration. Rather than map out every possible player choice from the start, I decided my first outline and script would follow only one potential path through the game. This would provide a jumping-off point for future dialogue variations and story branches. It was essential for making sure that any given playthrough would still follow the basic story structure of rising action, climax, and resolution. Finally, I worked with my mentor-slash-editor Jason on producing the outline for the game's demo, which came out to about 4,000 words by the end of May. All the while, I was furiously sketching character and environment designs, and even writing short stories to develop the lore of the game's setting.

By this point, it was obvious to me that Proxima had expanded dramatically in scope and it was no longer a project I could take on alone. I reached out to PNCA alum and active game developer Marlowe Dobbe on her experience working with collaborators on her own thesis project, and after some discussion I decided to ask a few close and trusted friends for help. My friend Kiana volunteered to assist with art, my brother Søren became the game's composer, and my friend Peter joined the team both to help Søren with music production and to program the game itself. The team grew to four people including myself and has stayed at that size since, although I suspect it has room to grow in the future.
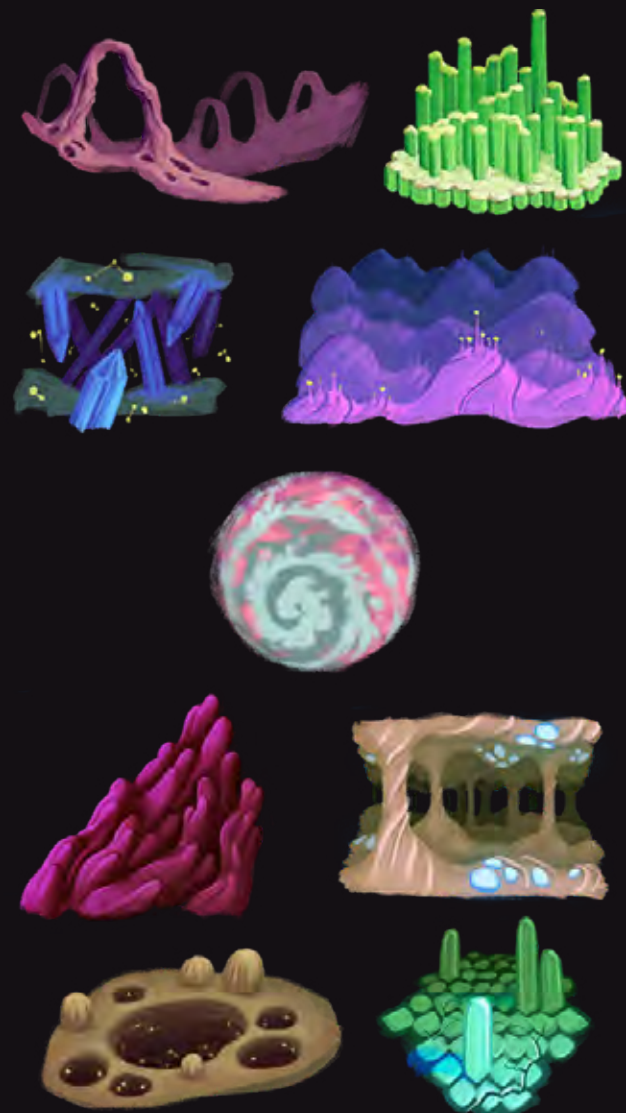
Because my collaborators all have lives of their own and I couldn't afford to pay them, everything they did for Proxima was on a volunteer basis. I operated on the assumption that

PR0X1MA

What ~~I'm making!~~ I made!
(One polished vertical slice)

The entire game

Built for
PC!

30 min. — One playthrough

2 hrs. — Total content

Humanity
Irreversible divergence from base programming

Mood
Expression, affects dialogue, chance to rebel in tandem with high humanity

Compliance
Reflection of humanity + player's dialogue choices

Efficiency
Determines success rate of tasks, materials acquired, Petra's evaluations

The most difficult stat to maintain due to its component parts

Condition
Physical injuries, very difficult to increase

Battery
Charge refreshed each day, requires rest to replenish

PR0X1MA

my team could drop out at any moment and I might have to finish the project on my own, and as the year went on and my team was pulled away for various responsibilities, having these contingencies in place proved to be a lifesaver. Coordinating remotely with people who had vastly different availability and timelines also required that I develop a number of invaluable skills including team leadership, project management, communication, and being able to juggle a dozen different responsibilities. I love collaboration more than just about any part of the creative process and I hope I get to keep working with amazing, talented people such as these for the rest of my career.

Over the months of June and July, I adapted my story outline for Proxima into a 30,000 word script. Again, this script only follows one path through the game--it appears to be at least tripling in length as I account for all the different possibilities. The demo alone will likely end up with a word count in the six figures, which is a pretty shocking thing for me to say out loud. I've never thought of my strength as being in the written word, and I care very deeply about Proxima's writing being as good as it possibly can be. While I'm relatively new to writing prose, I'm no stranger to storytelling. I've spent years making comics, illustrating narratives, and engaging in collaborative storytelling through the medium of tabletop role playing games. 30,000 words sounds like a lot to tackle, but I've managed to get this far through excessive planning and compartmentalization.

My main focus during August and September was working with my programmer, Peter, on creating a basic playable prototype of the game. This included making placeholder illustrations of my robot characters based on the designs that my art assistant Kiana helped me with, as well as finding a way to translate my script into the Unity game engine. We ended up using a combination of two plugins called Yarn Spinner and Playmaker which dramatically reduce the amount of coding in C# that I have to do. Setting it all up required a bit of finagling on Peter's part but we are now in a place where implementing new story events in the script takes little time compared to the writing process itself.

Of course, almost every bit of story I implemented required new art, whether that be for unique character expressions, a new background, or even animated particle effects to bring life to the screen. I ended up spending the entire month of October and the first half of November working exclusively on producing as much art as possible for the game. By numbers, the current demo has 25 character sprites and 7 different environments. Almost
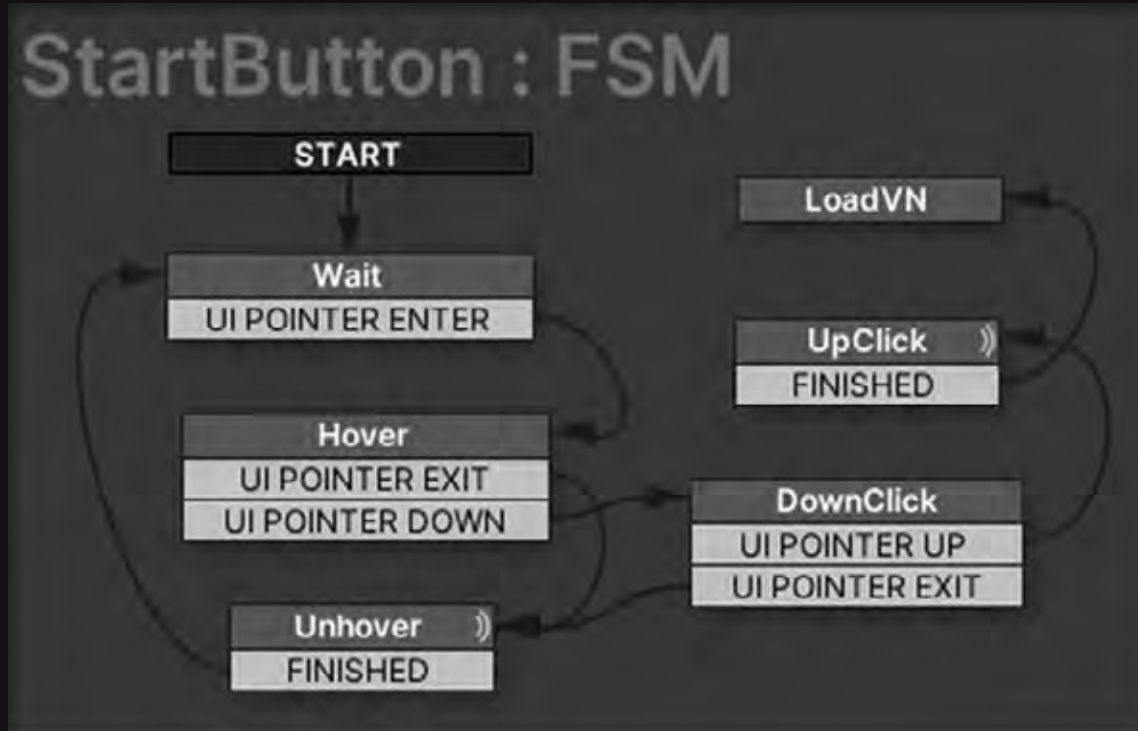
every character sprite has a unique animation to go with it. Two of the environments are in a state that I would consider "polished," including separation into layers so that they can be animated to move at different speeds with the movement of the cursor, creating a parallax effect that gives the illusion of depth. Aside from these illustrations, the game features a fully-animated title screen, dozens of different particle effects, and a unique user interface of my own design.

The robots in Proxima are designed to look like marble statues brought to life, in many ways representing idealized male and female bodies. They are not just defined by their aesthetics, but are limited by them, showing that their creators were more fixated on creating something beautiful than something functional. As they destroy themselves for your sake, their shiny outer shells will wear away, revealing a form underneath that is both messier and less recognizably human. Another way in which I play with their humanity is through their full-face holographic visors, which appear human by default but can transform into abstract shapes, symbols, or might not portray anything at all. Since the various robots' designs are so similar, I had to put extra effort into their body language and expressions to keep their silhouettes distinct and recognizable.

The backgrounds in Proxima are designed primarily around the contrast between the hard, geometric forms of the humans' creations, and the soft, organic ones of the alien planet. This shape language is intended to emphasize the difference in ideals between the expansionist humans and the balanced natural world. Unlike other survival stories and even some seemingly anti colonialist narratives, however, there is no heroic invader and there is no "noble savage" alien stereotype for him to learn from. There are simply robots, isolated and confused, here to carry out the will of people they will never meet in a world that's intended to be as fiercely inhospitable as it is beautiful. Not only do I hope to subvert the usual colonialist tropes you find in the survival genre of video games, but I also find that designing around hostility actually enables me to design environments that are much more unique and interesting than what I would have come up with otherwise.

Creating the user interface of Proxima was a challenging and educational process. I knew early on that I wanted to draw inspiration from the colorful, quirky computer screens on the sets of old sci-fi series such as Star Trek: The Next Generation. I made some rough mockups and consulted with a friend of mine named Casey, a graphic designer and illus-

PR0X1MA

StartButton : FSM

START

Wait
UI POINTER ENTER

Hover
UI POINTER EXIT
UI POINTER DOWN

Unhover ⟩
FINISHED

LoadVN

UpClick ⟩
FINISHED

DownClick
UI POINTER UP
UI POINTER EXIT

```
-> Who are you?
    <<set $hasasked_whoareyou to true>>
    Wait, who... <i>are</i> you?
    <<if $Grunt is true>>
    PETRA: AH, SO YOU CAN TALK AFTER ALL. GOOD.
    <<endif>>
    <<emote Petra Salute>>
    PETRA: MY DESIGNATION IS PETRA.
    -> Uh, alright. (Return to questioning)
        Uh, alright.
    -> I think I already knew that? But, <i>what</i> are you?
        <<set $hasasked_whatareyou to true>>
        <<increasehumanity Petra 1>>
        I think I already knew that? But, <i>what</i> are you?
        [[What_Are_You]]
```

```
1   using System;
2   using System.Collections;
3   using System.Collections.Generic;
4   using UnityEngine;
5
6       public class Parallax_BG : MonoBehaviour
7       {
8           public float parallax;
9           public float parallaxSpeed = 1f;
10          private float yAspect;
11          private Vector3 worldMouse;
12          private Camera cam;
13          private bool xBounds;
14          private bool yBounds;
15          private bool inBounds;
16
17          void Start()
18          {
19              cam = Camera.main;
20              yAspect = 10 / cam.aspect;
21          }
22
23          void Update()
24          {
25              worldMouse = Input.mousePosition;
26              worldMouse = cam.ScreenToWorldPoint(worldMouse);
27
28              if (worldMouse.x >= -10 && worldMouse.x <= 10)
29              {
30                  xBounds = true;
31              }
32              else xBounds = false;
33              if (worldMouse.y >= -yAspect && worldMouse.y <= yAspect)
34              {
35                  yBounds = true;
36              }
37              else yBounds = false;
38              inBounds = xBounds & yBounds;
39
40              if (inBounds == true)
41              {
42                  transform.position = new Vector3(
43                      worldMouse.x * parallax,
44                      worldMouse.y * parallax,
45                      transform.position.z);
46              }
47          }
48      }
```

PR0X1MA

trator, on how to make the user interface of Proxima as clear, consistent, and aesthetically pleasing as possible. I learned a lot about separating out information, repeating visual motifs, and designing around accessibility. The biggest challenge of all proved to be the creation of a "heads-up display" of sorts that appears when the player has switched to the perspective of one of their robots. I designed and scripted this display, which automatically provides vital information about the robot you're inside including their current expression. Putting a face to the robots' words is a core part of the game's empathy; Long stretches of this game simply could not work without it. It's still a work in progress, but it's a sign of my commitment to shaking up the visual novel formula and creating a wholly unique experience.

Towards the end of October, I realized that I had a strong need for feedback from people with no outside knowledge of the game. It's important to me that I know what it's like to play through it for the first or second time, and that requires fresh eyes. I reached out on social media and a couple dozen folks expressed interest in playtesting an early version of the game. I set up both a mailing list and a discord server to update this growing community on the game's development, send them new versions of the game, and to collect feedback. This has been a fantastic experience and all of the feedback has been essential both to my design process and how I prioritize what to work on next.

Proxima has almost too many influences to name--broadly, pulp sci-fi, existentialism, cute robots, and the queer community at large. The game that inspired Proxima more than any other is Pyre by Supergiant Games. Pyre is one-part Oregon Trail, one-part Fantasy Basketball, but most notably a game that presents its narrative largely through the format of a visual novel. Not only did Pyre show me the extent to which visual novels can be expanded and built upon to create memorable experiences, but it also stands out in my memory as a game that champions failure. There is no game over state in Pyre; You are likely to succeed in some moments and fail in others, and every one of these moments propels the narrative forward. In real life, our failures define us as much as--if not more than--our victories. I love how Pyre pursues this truth and it's a theme I want to touch on in everything I create, starting with Proxima. I actively hope that my players will fail to do the right thing and learn from it.
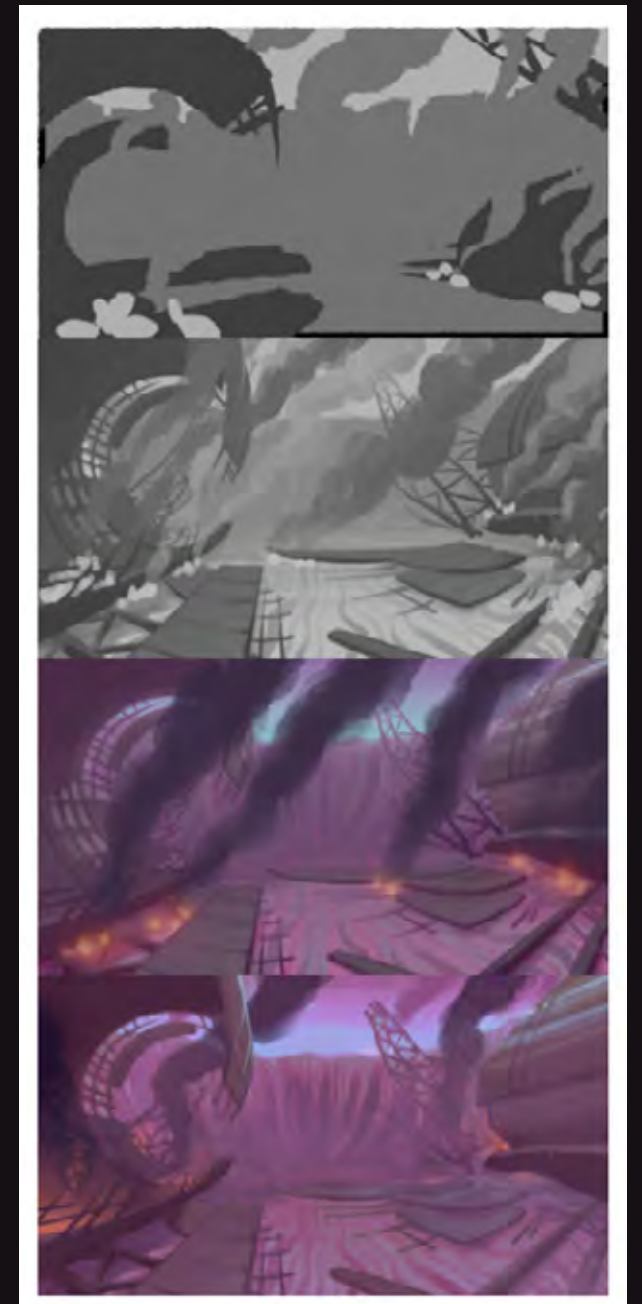
Similarly, Proxima is very much influenced by Undertale, a role-playing video game creat-

ed by Toby Fox. Through its design, Undertale seems to encourage the player to kill their enemies and become more powerful in the process, much in the same way that practically every RPG does. However, every life you take has ramifications, and it's only by actively defying the format of the game and refusing to kill a single creature that you are able to experience the game's happiest and most satisfying ending. I adore how this decision turns the player's actions--and by proxy, the morals that they are testifying to the validity of--into a deliberate and challenging decision, unlike the morality systems of other games which tend to present morality in black and white and make those choices painfully obvious.

I played a number of narrative games while doing research for Proxima. The one that stands out most in my memory is Heaven's Vault by Inkle, a space archaeology game that masterfully explores humanity, artificial intelligence, hard choices, and grappling with the past. Another great game I played was Creatures Such as We, an interactive romance novel by Lynnea Glasser which provides an incredible meta-commentary on the very nature of player choice and creator intent in games. I also want to mention SOMA by Frictional Games, a horror game that left me questioning everything about my existence as a human being.
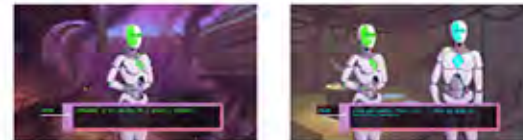
There are a number of specific robots, both in real life and in fiction, that were formative in my love for robots and influenced my approach to Proxima. Honda's ASIMO is the first real-life robot I ever saw and revealed so much to me about how we endeavor to capture images of ourselves in everything we create. Data, from Star Trek: The Next Generation, convinced me that humanity is not an isolated category but rather a loose collection of identities, beliefs, and behaviors. NASA's Valkyrie robot provoked me to fully investigate the gendering of robots and what that says about us. Finally, the character Fl4k from Gearbox Software's Borderlands 3 is the first instance I ever saw of a transgender robot in fiction and made me wonder how much further the concept could be pushed if it was allowed to.

Proxima is a small project on a nonexistent budget. The full game is less than 10% done in total, and while the work I've done laying the foundation for Proxima will make future development significantly easier, it's becoming clear that its scope is so large that development cannot continue without funding. The burgeoning indie games market has provided many avenues for finding independent funding, including Kickstarter, Steam Early Access,

PR0X1MA

and Patreon. Many indie games such as Undertale, Hollow Knight, and Outer Wilds began as crowdfunded projects and went on to find success. I am no stranger to crowdfunding--I played a major role in organizing and running the Kickstarter campaign for Postscript, the third and final book in the Unversed comics anthology, in collaboration with Jonathan Hill's Advanced Graphic Novel class at PNCA in 2019. I know the amount of work it takes to run a campaign like that, and I'm prepared to do it again if I need to.

The primary requirement to crowdfunding success is having an audience, and I believe that the best way to build an audience is by releasing a free demo to show people that Proxima is an idea worth investing in. I want to implement the remaining 2/3rds of my script and create the full demo I had in mind from the start before I ask anyone to open their wallets. My first step will be to apply to creative grants from organizations such as the Oregon Arts Commission and the Regional Arts & Culture Council. Whether it takes five months or five years, I firmly believe that this is a story worth telling and I would give anything to be able to finish telling it.

In the last decade, the increasing accessibility of game development and publishing tools has made lower-budget game projects possible, allowing for a much greater degree of creative freedom among developers than ever before. This has led to the success of meditative, artful games such as Gone Home, Firewatch, What Remains of Edith Finch, and The Stanley Parable. My hope is that my project will fit in with a building legacy of games created to provoke certain questions or emotions rather than stopping at just trying to be fun.

Proxima seeks to tackle a number of modern issues, including the existential threat to humanity that capitalist systems pose, how to find and hold onto your own humanity while surviving under these systems, and how we recover from our long history of recklessness and abject cruelty. Most of all, it speaks to people struggling with their identities. I believe that in a year where the very foundations of our lives have been shaken, the need to redefine ourselves has become more relevant than ever.

In the last year, thanks to the Portland Indie Games Squad, I've gotten to work on four separate projects, each completed in a limited timeframe ranging from 48 hours to two weeks. These projects were all great practice for the long hours of strenuous work that it has taken to create Proxima, but they have also led me to the realization that I love making games and I want to do it for the rest of my life. Not only does it allow me to draw and paint a vast array of art for all kinds of purposes, but it has also given me the chance to dive into new skill sets that I have come to love such as animation, 3D modeling, and coding. Working on Proxima as my final project at PNCA has the perfect opportunity for me to show that I know how to design and produce art assets with an understanding for how they will function within the game as a whole. I have taken on the roles of writer, artist, designer, animator, programmer, creative director, team leader, and community manager. Each one of these roles has brought me immense joy and creative satisfaction.

Proxima is a visual novel game about robots being gay in space. That's how I describe it to people when I don't want to use terms like "defamiliarization" and "anticolonialist," but it also speaks to the core truth of the game: beneath all of the grand statements I make about the human condition, it's just a thing I wanted to make, and made with love. I love robots. I love being gay. I love space.

I have endured so much pain, confusion, and isolation on my journey of self-discovery. I used to be convinced I could never understand who I am. I'm fixated on the mental image of two vampires, unable to see their own reflections, sitting on the floor and trying to describe each other: The contours of their cheeks. The shimmer of their skin. Whenever I draw something or tell a story, I feel like I'm engaging in this process with myself, sketching out the outline of everything I am but cannot see. My training as an illustrator has given me the vocabulary to describe myself and it's given me the space to speak that truth with joy. Of course, Proxima is not a perfect mirror of me. It's a single snapshot of my life, a blurry polaroid of what I'm thinking about and feeling and going through. To be honest, that's enough of an improvement on what I had before to feel worth giving up an arm for. Here's to the next one.

PR0X1MA

Creative Brief

Project Vision

Proxima is a visual novel game where you oversee a team of robots that have crash-landed on an alien planet. Your task is to survive the elements and complete an unknown mission. The biggest challenge you face, however, is that your team is becoming more human. They are playful, curious, and caring, and soon enough, you wonder: How can you possibly keep them focused on the mission when they have finally gotten the chance to be alive?

The game begins as a classic sci-fi romp through space but quickly transitions into something that is more self-aware and leads players to question how systems in our own lives lead us to dehumanize ourselves—and each other—for the sake of some enigmatic sense of self-worth. Within its subtext, it is firmly queer, anticolonialist, and anticapitalist.

Audience

I am focusing this game towards young adults, especially those struggling to find their own identity. I am building Proxima from the ground up to be accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds with no assumptions of prior experience. My goal is to expand the niche genre of visual novels to a wider and more diverse audience.

Methods & Materials

Proxima began with a problem of my own: a crisis of identity externalized as an android, an empty vessel that exists only to work. I imagined, given free reign, what could that android grow into? Who could they become? I knew I had to explore this concept and I quickly produced a comprehensive story outline. Over the summer, I adapted that outline into a 30,000-word script and created pages upon pages of character and environment designs. From there, I enlisted a programmer, a musician, and an art assistant to help me bring this game to life.

I am currently building Proxima within the Unity engine, combining 2D and 3D graphics to create a world that is beautiful, polished, and visually distinct. On an average day, I am designing user interfaces, scripting game events with unique logic and variables, producing game-ready sprites, and managing a team of collaborators.

Comparative Media

Recent independent games such as Pyre and Hades have successfully combined visual novels with the action game genre. Likewise, Proxima will intersect with the survival genre but with a unique narrative focus. I believe that the audience of visual novel games can be expanded by appealing to queer and other marginalized groups.

Marketplace Application

Proxima is a small project on a nonexistent budget. My plan is to release a free demo of the game at the end of the year to start building an audience. The burgeoning indie games market has provided many avenues for funding, including Kickstarter, Steam Early Access, and Patreon. Many indie games such as Undertale, Hollow Knight, and Outer Wilds began as crowdfunded projects and went on to find success. My hope is that Proxima can be the first of many visual narratives that I will create over the course of my career.

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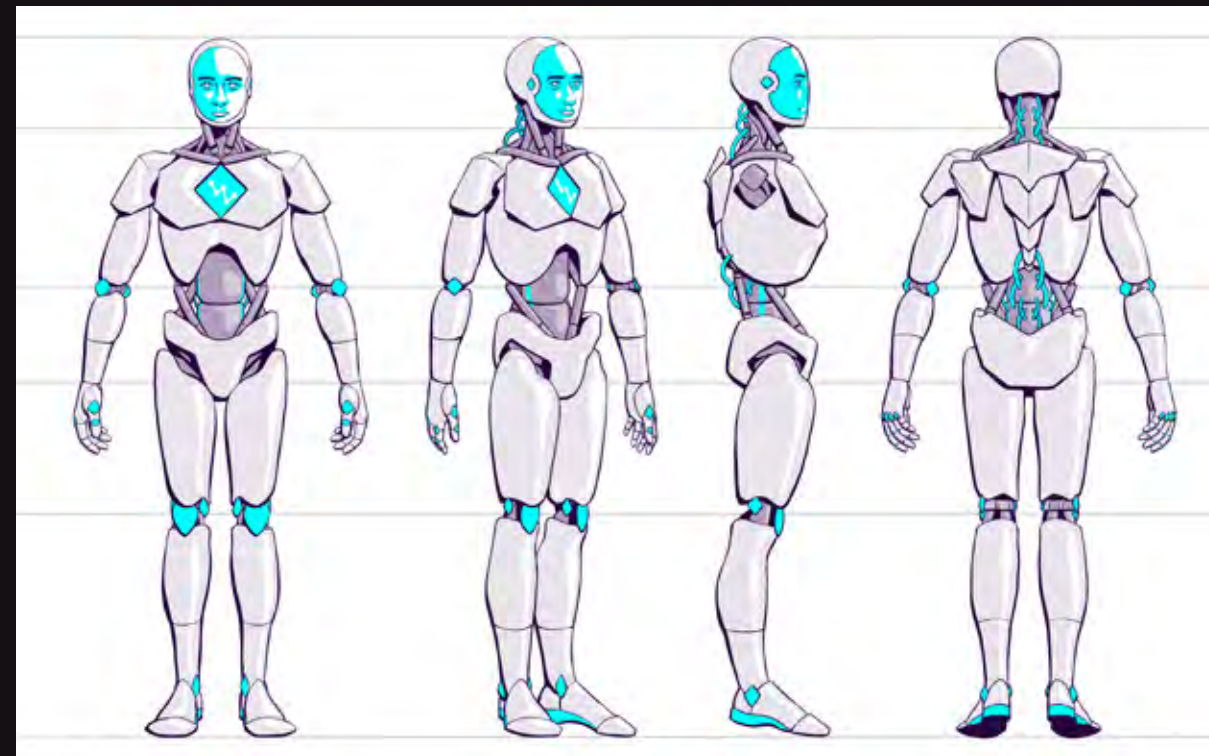
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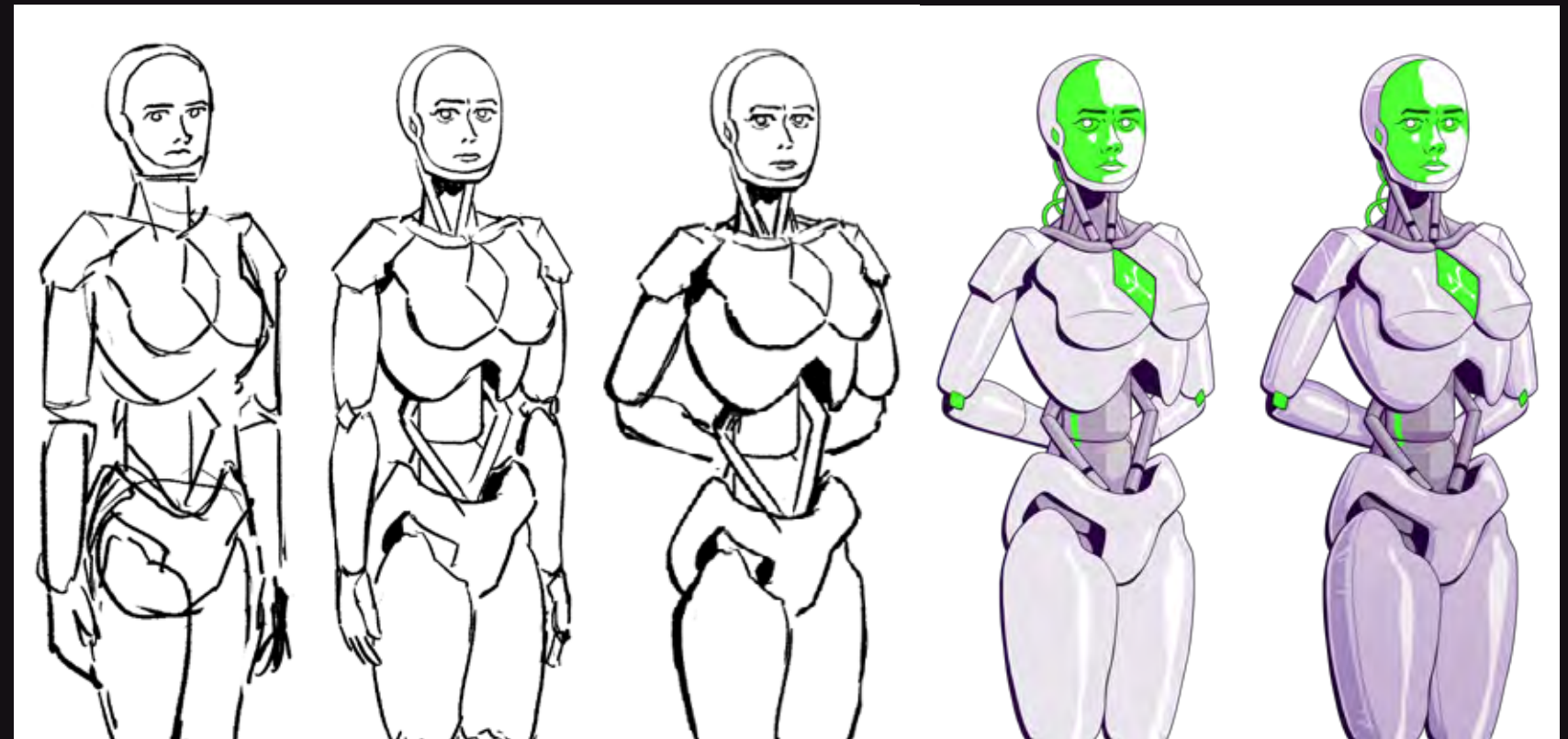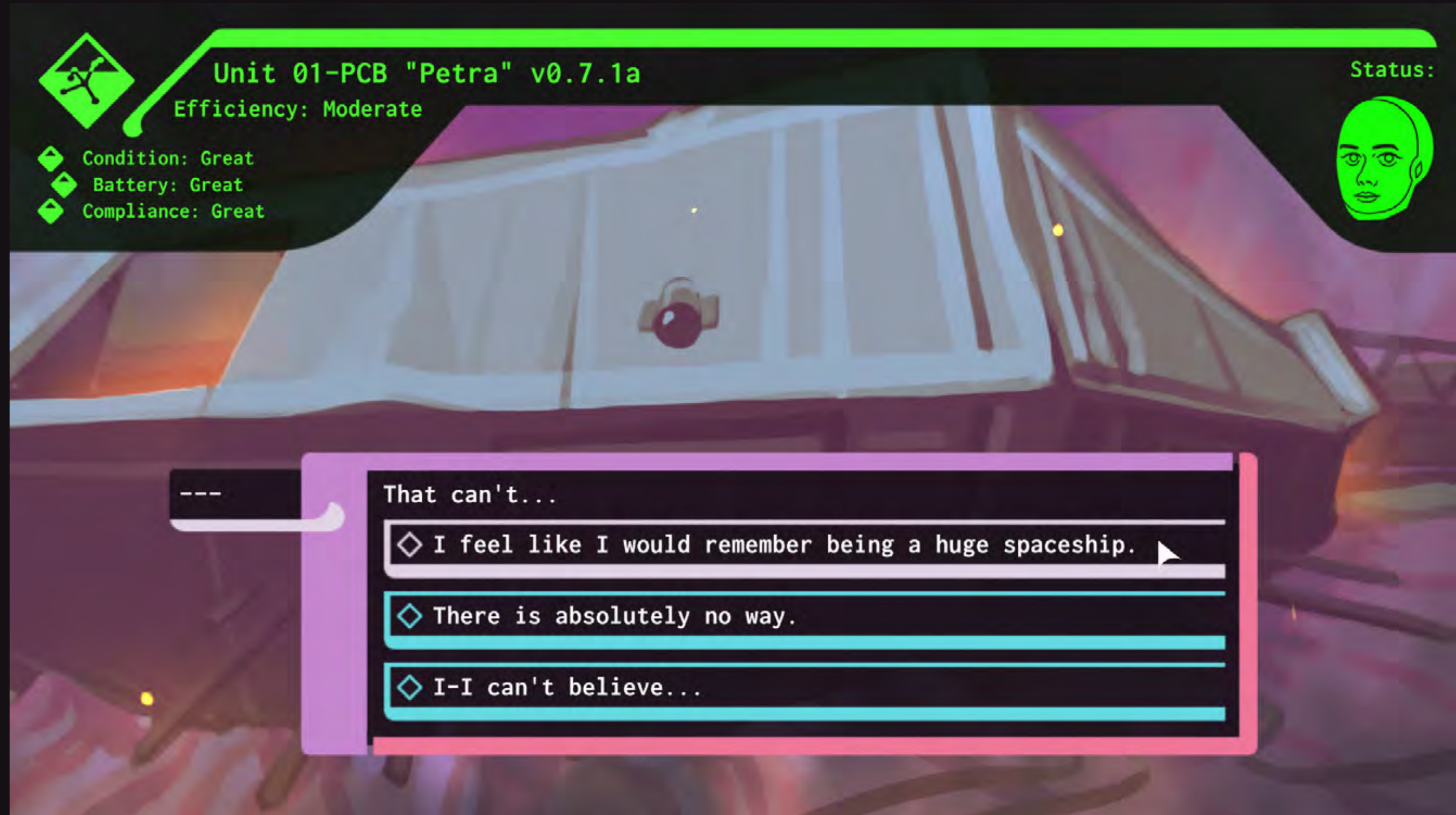
PROX1MA

Unit 01-PCB "Petra" v0.7.1a
Efficiency: Moderate

Condition: Great
Battery: Moderate
Compliance: Moderate

Status:

PETRA

PLEASE KNOW THAT I WILL NEVER HESITATE TO EXPOSE MYSELF TO DANGER IF YOU REQUIRE IT OF ME. THAT SAID, I RESPECT YOUR DECISION TO AVOID UNNECESSARY RISK TO MISSION-CRITICAL ASSETS.

PR0X1MA

Unit 04-PCB "Atlas" v0.8.5b
Efficiency: Poor

◆ Condition: Great
◇ Battery: Poor
◇ Compliance: Terrible

Status:

Atlas' compliance stat has gotten quite low... Maybe I should bring it back up to help him stay focused.

PR0X1MA

!! 10 CYCLES UNTIL MISSION FAILURE !!

RETRIEVE THE REACTOR CORE BEFORE A CRITICAL MELTDOWN OCCURS

◇ Retrieve the reactor core

◇ Build the long-range radiation scanner

◇ Acquire concentrated argon

◇ Retrieve another crew member

◇ Acquire circuit components

ACQUIRE CIRCUIT COMPONENTS

Naturally-occurring argon deposits and eventually the reactor core itself will both be impossible to locate without the use of advanced (and highly delicate) circuitry.

Scavenging the crash site for defunct ship parts is the only way that we will be able to find these components.

CURRENTLY ASSIGNED: 0/1

ASSIGN CREW TO THIS TASK

PETRA

RIGHT NOW, ONLY ONE TASK IS AVAILABLE. GO AHEAD AND SELECT IT WHEN YOU ARE READY.

▶

AY 03

BEGIN CYCLE

'aMS V1.01

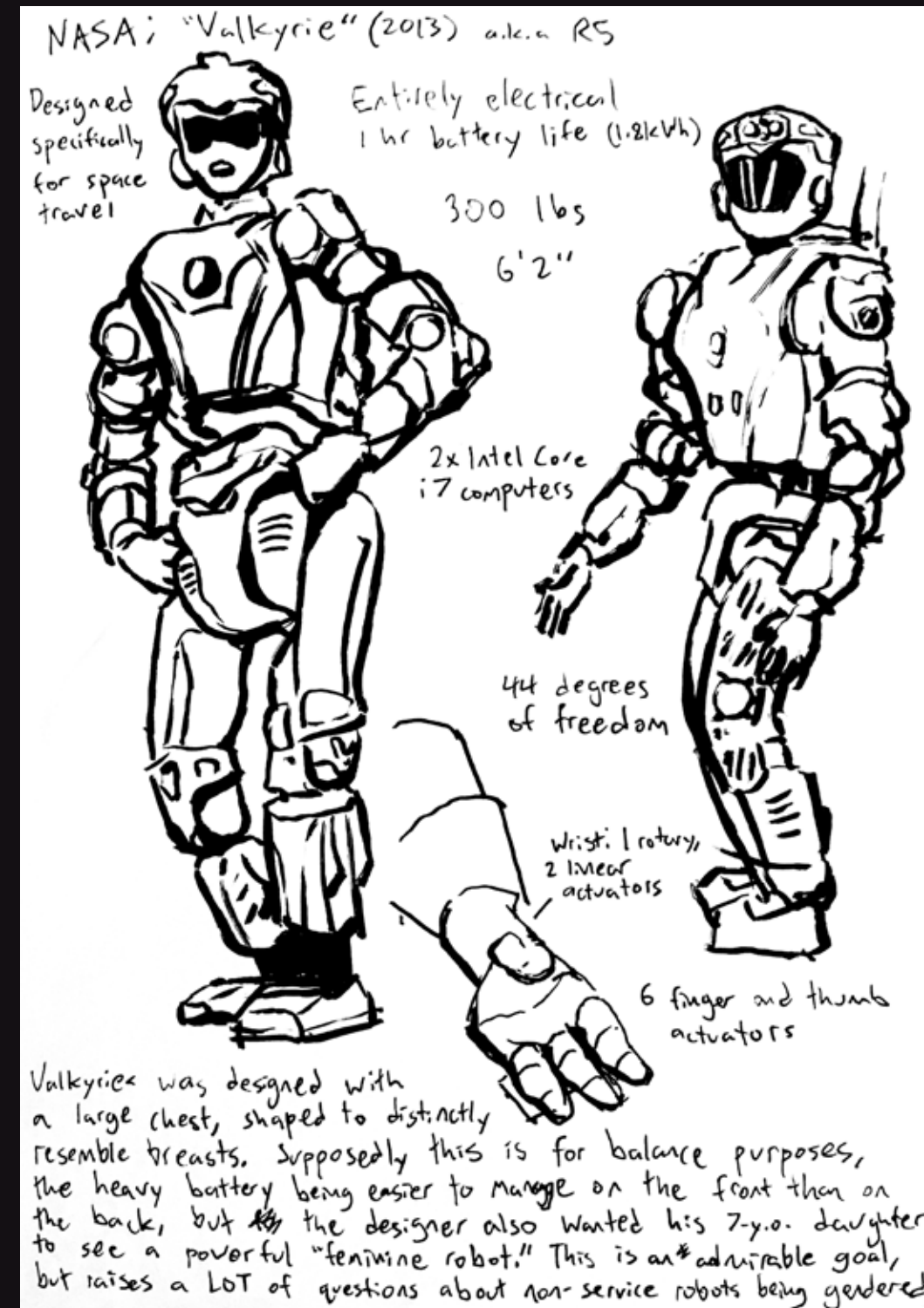# PROX1MA

Unit 04-PCB "Atlas" v0.8.5b
Efficiency: Poor

◆ Condition: Great
◆ Battery: Poor
◆ Compliance: Terrible

Status:

The points on the water's surface seem to react to its movement, spiking up and shifting as it passes underneath.

Left page (mind map):

-Genderqueer-
-robots?-

Loss of identity

Feeling useless

Becoming something -new instead-

Loneliness

Difficulty forming/maintaining friendships

Are robots puppets/mirrors for our own selves?

What does gender mean without the basis of sex?

Emotional distance/isolation

Failing to perform this function

Disappointing my parents yet again

Having particular identities/labels imposed on you

Robots

Being created for a specific function

Feeling like a drone, built only to work

In a sense, it is how you are perceived that defines you

What does it mean to be conscious? Human?

High intelligence?

Reduction by capitalism to what you produce

Empathy?

With the advancement of facial recognition + learning algorithms, is understanding others' emotions really so inaccessible?

Self-awareness?

Many animals recognize their reflections. Do they have internal thoughts?

Will computers/AI ever be considered "human?"

Language?

-Is it important to be considered human?-

Right page (robot notes):

Boston Dynamics: "Atlas" (2016)

Designed for rescue ops. in hazardous situations

Compact mobile hydraulics system - 28 independent joints

Can travel at 1.5 m/s

1.5 m tall (~5 feet)

80 kg

3D printed lightweight parts

Can pick up and toss objects

Can jump over gaps, somersault, frontflip, and backflip

Getting lighter, smaller, and more sleek. Agile is the future
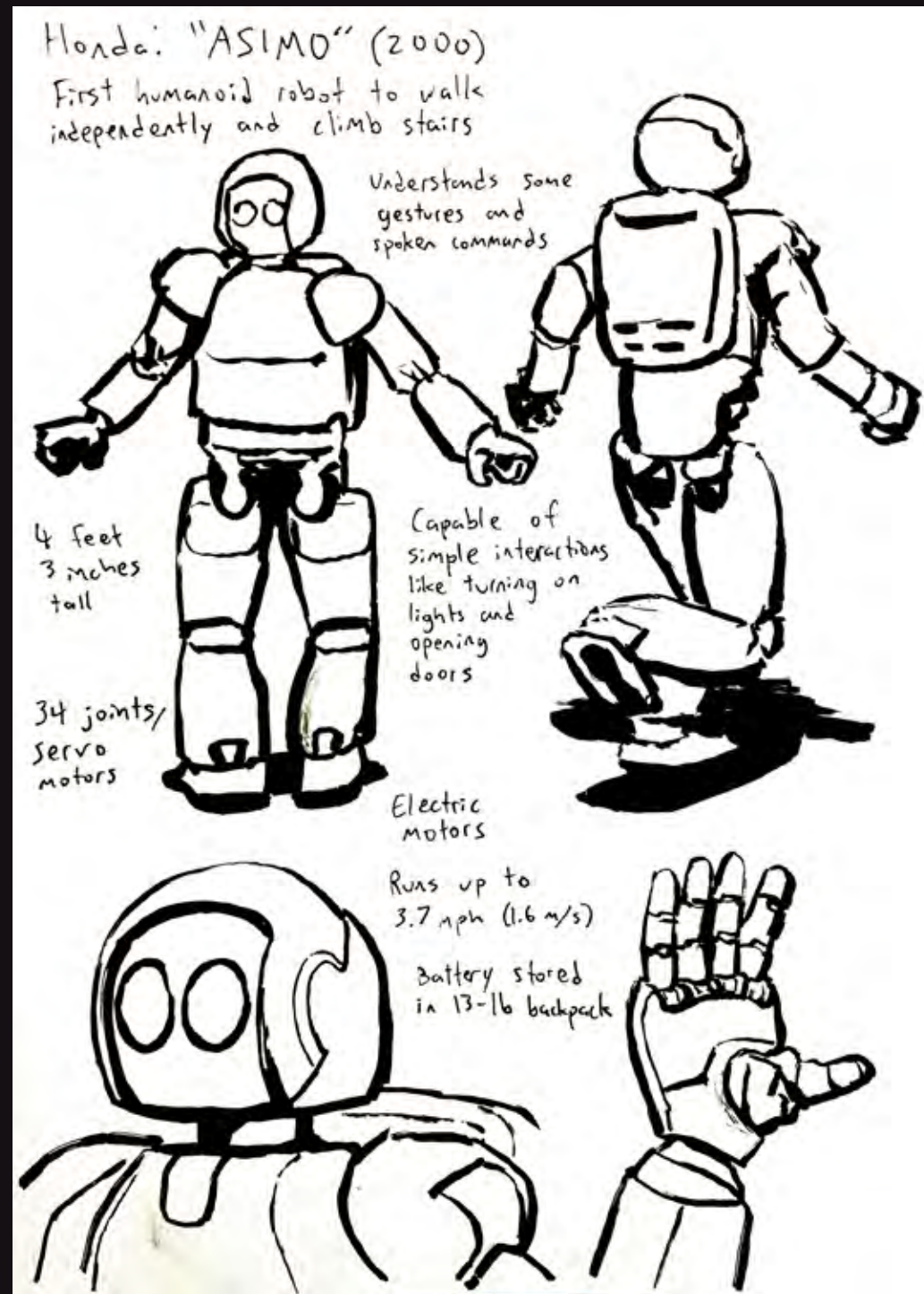
PR0X1MA

The robots are:
- geometric
  - rectilinear
  - angular
  - structural
- blunt (no sharp points)
- symmetrical
- flawless
- even
- uses human ratios
  - golden (1:1.618)
  - silver (1:1.414)

The planet is:
- Organic
  - round
  - wavy
  - fluid
- Coiled; ends in points
- asymmetrical
- flawed
- fractal
- extreme ratios
  - greater than 1:2

- Geology* and biology work in tandem
  - fully balanced ecosystem
  - life adapted to its environment, not the other way around
  - Think of interesting surfaces/materials/structures and how life would evolve to take advantage of it
  - OR think of unique, strange life and build an environment to support it
  * or geography

- Develop an interconnected ecosystem
  - doesn't have to resemble Earth food chains, but all life adapts to the support/threat/competition of all other life
  - Vary scale, behavior, material, etc. to fit niche
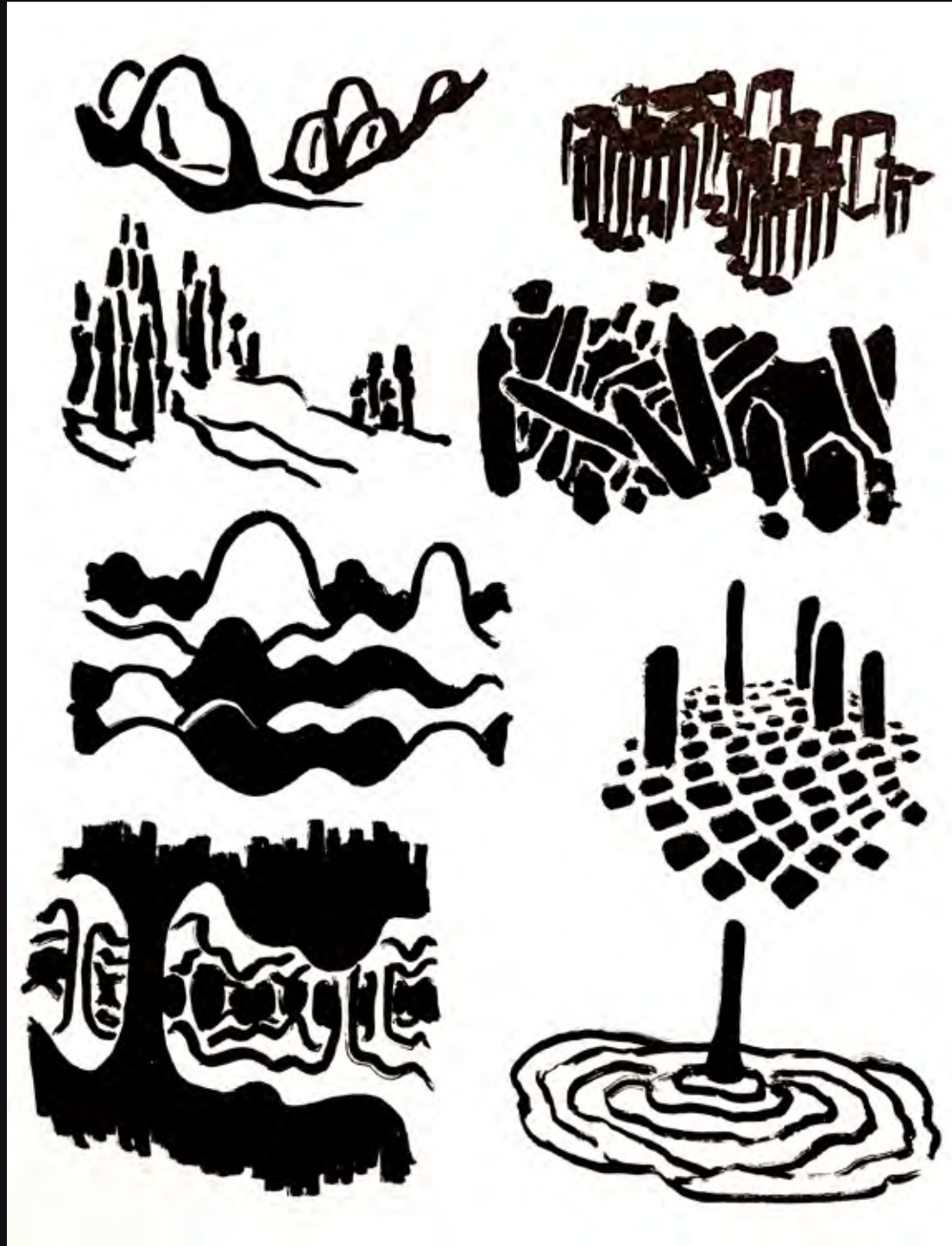
- Nature has no monocultures
  - subspecies, mutations, color variety, size... in the wilderness, diversity is how you survive

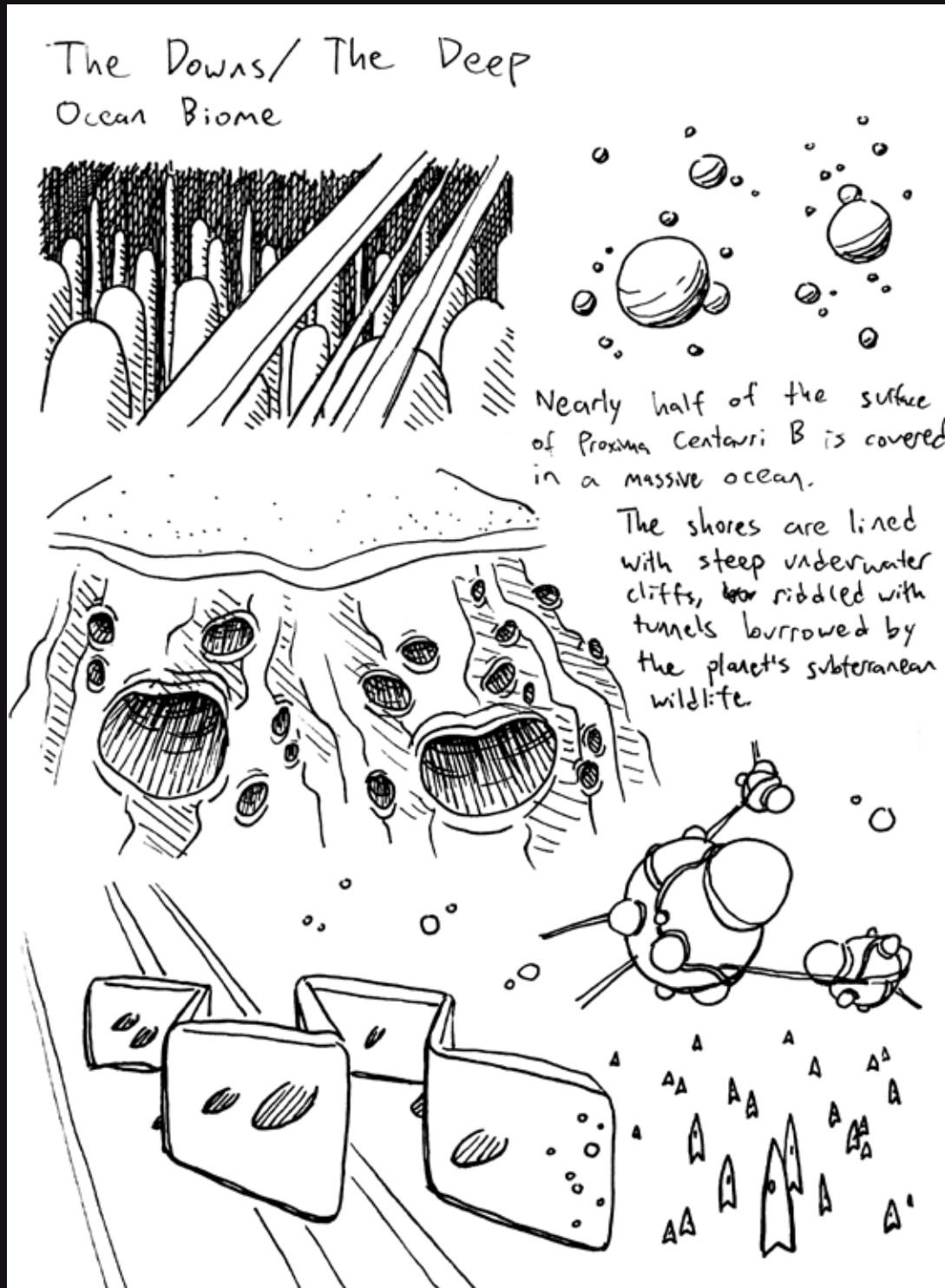- Borrow from Earth life and sci-fi, then break traditions
  - what are our assumptions about how life evolves?
  - we love familiarity, but we also love novelty

- Sci-fi alien life tends to play into clean categorization of plants and animals, but Earth life isn't even that simple:
  - bacteria, algae, protozoans, fungi
  - many animals (like coral and sea anenome) don't fit expected animal behavior
  - most interesting Earth life evolves in extremes and in isolation:
    - out-of-reach islands
    - deep-sea crevices
    - high altitudes

- Why does every alien planet have trees? Lizards? Mammals? Identical locomotion to Earth-life?
  - Think about: air propulsion. Lift. Asymmetrical limbs. Non-bipedal or quadrapedal or anything-pedal life. Division. Moving with magnets. Gravity. Electricity. Temperature. Suction. Friction. Traction. Growth. Deprecation. Multiplication. Dissolution. Momentum. Parasitism. Symbiology. Light.
  - For food, think about: Light. Radiation. Heat. Cannibalism. Combustion. Electricity. Magnetism. Gravity. Wind. Other life. Fluids. Motion. Sound.
  - For shelter, think about: Other life. Caves. Air. Liquids. Burrowing in rock. Gravity fields? Wormholes? In a different form (energy)? Fissures? Hot Springs? Magma? Super high/low pressure?

- Stretch scale as much as possible.
  - How massive can megafauna get?
    - Balloon or blanket-like sky beasts?
    - Burrowing monsters beneath the planet's crust?
    - Living mountains? Living oceans? Living valleys?
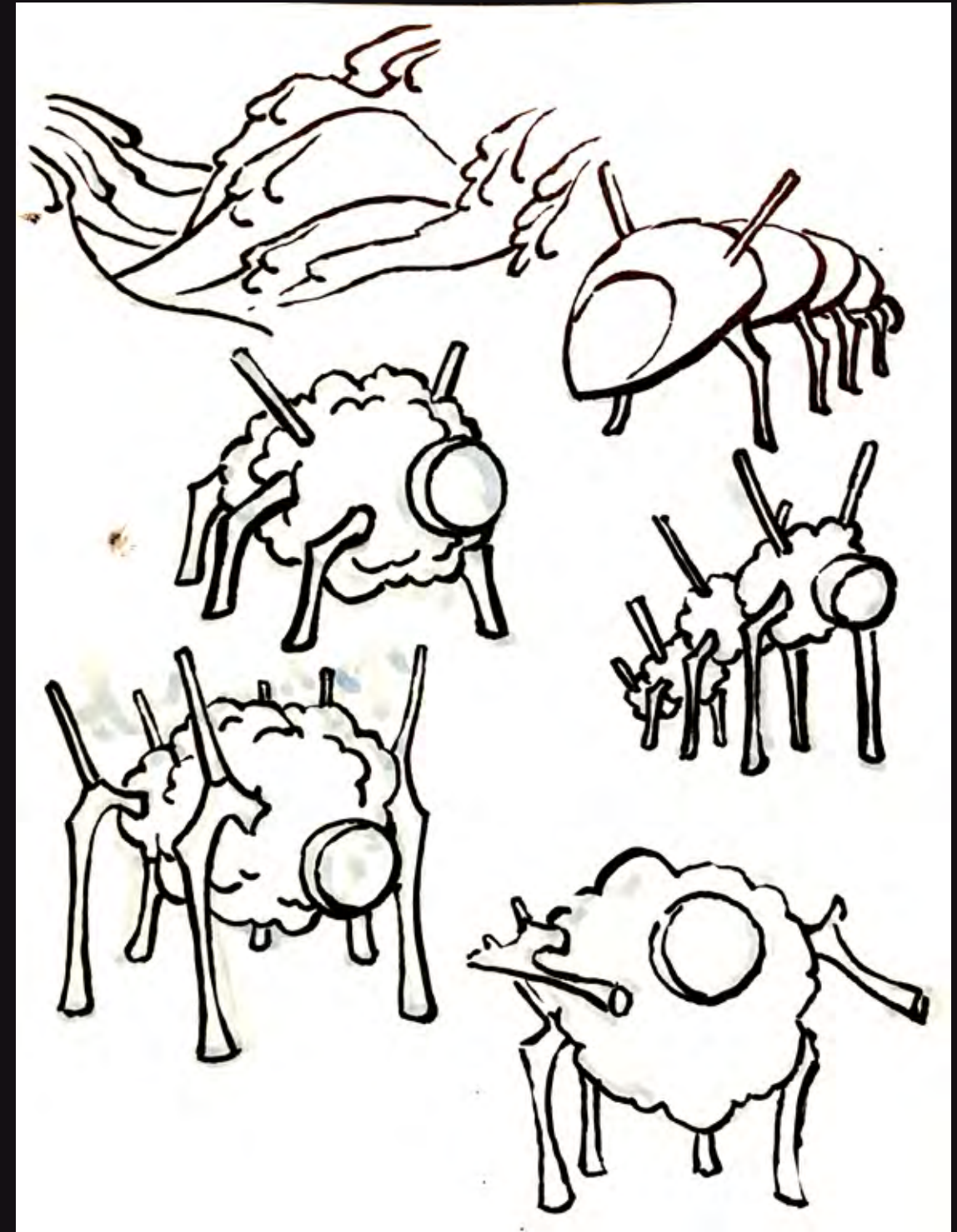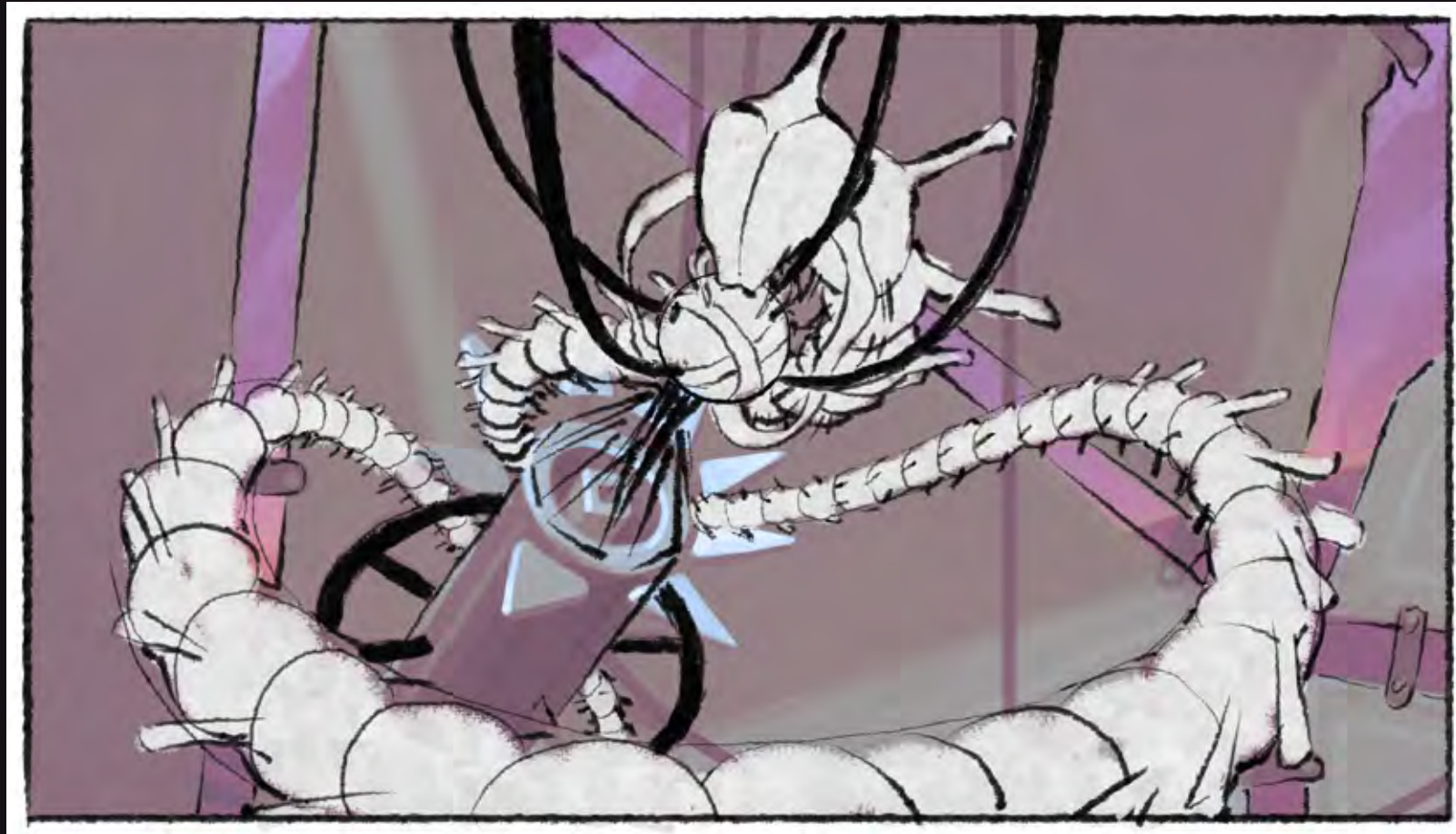   - Schools of thousands of creatures?

PROX1MA

The Downs/ The Deep
Ocean Biome

Nearly half of the surface of Proxima Centauri B is covered in a massive ocean.

The shores are lined with steep underwater cliffs, riddled with tunnels burrowed by the planet's subterranean wildlife.

Upside-down ecosystems thrive on the undersides of floating islands.

The islands are large host animals like coral.

The trenches— The floor of the Great Ocean is fractured into countless pieces, the cracks allowing water to filter down through the planet's crust. This is where some of the strangest life can be found.

Nidhogg— massive creatures with strong magnetic fields that live underneath the planet's crust, exerting great influence on the world above.

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About Xan

I'm a nonbinary illustrator and game designer with a passion for collaboration and storytelling. When I'm not drawing or painting, I love writing stories, making music, and learning new skills.

I have a deep love for both comics and painting. These are styles which I am constantly finding new ways to synthesize, and I enjoy working flexibly within this range. No matter what, my stylistic focus is always on color, light, and dimensionality.

My work has frequently been described as "cozy" and "whimsical." These are concepts that I lean into wholeheartedly. There is room for comfort and beauty within storytelling, and there is room in the fantastical for new, challenging ideas. My ultimate goal is always to bring dreams to life and inspire people to come up with stories of their own.

I want to work with you! Please reach out to me through my email and I will get back to you as soon as possible.