Aethersea Narrative Design Document

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Overview

Aethersea is a 3D isometric RPG, set in a 19th century inspired world where players take on the role of a Sky Captain they design personally, to explore the changing tides of the Aethersea. Players will be attacked by pirates, be embroiled in sky wide intrigue, and face off against a shadowy organisation seeking to bend the Aethersea to its will.

This document will cover the Narrative design of *Aethersea*. RPGs have always had a huge importance on story and characters, and Aethersea is no different. Inspired by Victoriana, and 18th century history, Aethersea tells a tale of a world that has abandoned the earth, and reached for the sky.

Mankind no longer lives on the ground. Instead, through the use of the mysterious material known as Aether, the various civilisations of the 19th century have raised their cities into the sky, renaming them as Platforms. In game, players will be able to explore the Platforms of a number of nations, stretching from across Europe to places like Central Africa and Asia. Each Platform has its own culture, history, and problems that the Player can try to solve.

As stated, the Player takes on the role of a Sky Captain. Inheriting *The Kestrel* from your father, you leave your background and take over the ship, using it however you please. Players can trade goods between the Platforms for money, travel the Aethersea and complete quests, or become a pirate and attack ships for their loot. Its entirely up to the player.

Your ship also comes with several Officers, and many more are available to recruit during the game. Officers can support your ship in different ways depending on their roles. Engineers, for example, can improve the efficiency of your repairs if your ship becomes damaged, while Navigators can increase the range of your ship's vision, helping you detect events and foes much earlier.

Officers are also interactable. Players can talk to them through a dialogue system that rewards building relationships with your Officers. As your relationships improve, you can learn more about them, and their skills improve. Officers also react to the decisions you take as a Captain. A pacifist Doctor might abandon your ship if you attack innocent traders, while a firebrand Gunnery Officer might cheer and improve their relationship as you unload cannons into your foes.

The main quest of the game involves the mysterious Aether, and a shadowy group known as the White Palm. By manipulating Aether, they seek to take control of the Platforms and rule the sky with an iron fist. Their efforts stretch across all the Platforms, and the player can choose to stop them, or assist them instead in return for a position of power.

Character Creation and Progression

All characters in game are governed by 5 main statistics:

- Strength: a character's physical strength. Used to determine carry weight, damage with melee weapons, and in some skill checks
- Dexterity: a character's speed and nimbleness. Used to determine the order of actions in combat, damage with ranged weapons, and in some skill checks
- Intelligence: a character's mental ability and wisdom. Used mostly for skill checks, and to determine additional experience earned during the game
- Physique: a character's physical resistance. Used to determine a character's health when unarmoured, and to determine carry weight
- Charisma: a character's social ability. Used mostly for skill checks, and to determine the price of items in shops

All these stats start at 10, have a minimum value of 5 and can be raised to a maximum value of 20. Players earn a new stat point each time they level up, which they can use to raise any stat not already at 20. At character creation, players can split 10 points between these 5 stats, but can also reduce the starting value of stats for additional points to spend.

For example: Sal has just started the game and is building their first character. Deciding they want to build a strong and fearless leader, they decide to prioritise Strength and Charisma, raising both. Wanting more points to work with, they reduce their character's intelligence by three, and split their remaining points between Dexterity and Physique. Their final Character Stats look like this:

Strength: 15
Dexterity: 11
Intelligence: 7
Physique: 13
Charisma: 14

When the game wants to test a player's ability in a field, it will grab the player's relevant stat, and compares it against a specific limit for that test. If the player stat is higher, they pass, and if it isn't, they fail. Some tests are optional, but others are out of the player's control as part of random events.

After determining their stats, Players then choose 5 skills to tag as Specialist skills. Each stat has 3 skills attached to it, and just player stats, skills can also be the subject of tests. However, if the skill being tested is one of the player's Specialist skills, their extra training can improve their chances, increasing their stat by 3 for the purposes of the skill check.

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The available skills are as follows

Strength: Athletics, Tactics, Throw
Dexterity: Acrobatics, Pickpocket, Stealth
Intelligence: Artificing, Insight, Research
Physique: Endurance, Medicine, Willpower
Charisma: Charm, Deceive, Intimidate

Our example player Sal decides to tag Athletics, Tactics, Insight, Endurance and Charm

After determining skills, Players can then select a Background. Backgrounds represent who your character was before they became a Sky Captain. Backgrounds vary from the mundane, like Accountant or Shop Owner, to the more exciting like Mercenary Captain or Street Urchin. Backgrounds grant a unique skill your player can use in combat, and also determine your starting relationship with some of the factions found across the Aethersea. Backgrounds will also allow the player to choose unique dialogue options, drawing on their selected experiences.

Sal chooses Street Urchin for their character. Street Urchin grants them an additional 20 points in the starting relationship with the "Criminal" faction tag, but also reduces their relationship with the "Law and Order" faction tag. Factions represent a number of things, and can influence your dialogue and interaction with characters from those factions. Sal's character might not be able to ask the local police for help in a pinch, but will be able to levy her history with the local criminals instead. The choices the Player makes during the game will affect their relationship with various factions, and if they manage to anger a specific faction enough, they might be attacked on sight by its members.

After choosing their Background, the last step for determining a player character's stats is Traits. Traits are a set of unique conditions with both positive and negative effects. Players can choose a maximum of 2 at character creation, and can gain and lose Traits as their game progresses.

Sal chooses only one Trait at character creation, deciding her Captain has an Old Leg Injury. This Trait reduces the player character's Dexterity stat by 2, but also tags Medicine as a Specialist skill. After this point, all that is left is to design how their Captain looks and give them a name!

The aim here is to make Character Creation a procedure that allows for a lot of expressive freedom for the player, while also not making it too in depth and time consuming. The player should be able to feel almost any kind of character is possible.

Officers, Factions and Dialogue

A major element of Aethersea is the ability to build relationships between the Officers of your ship and your Captain. This section will brief how exactly this achieved. To do so, here is an example of an Officer you can meet in your travel: Dr James Adebayo
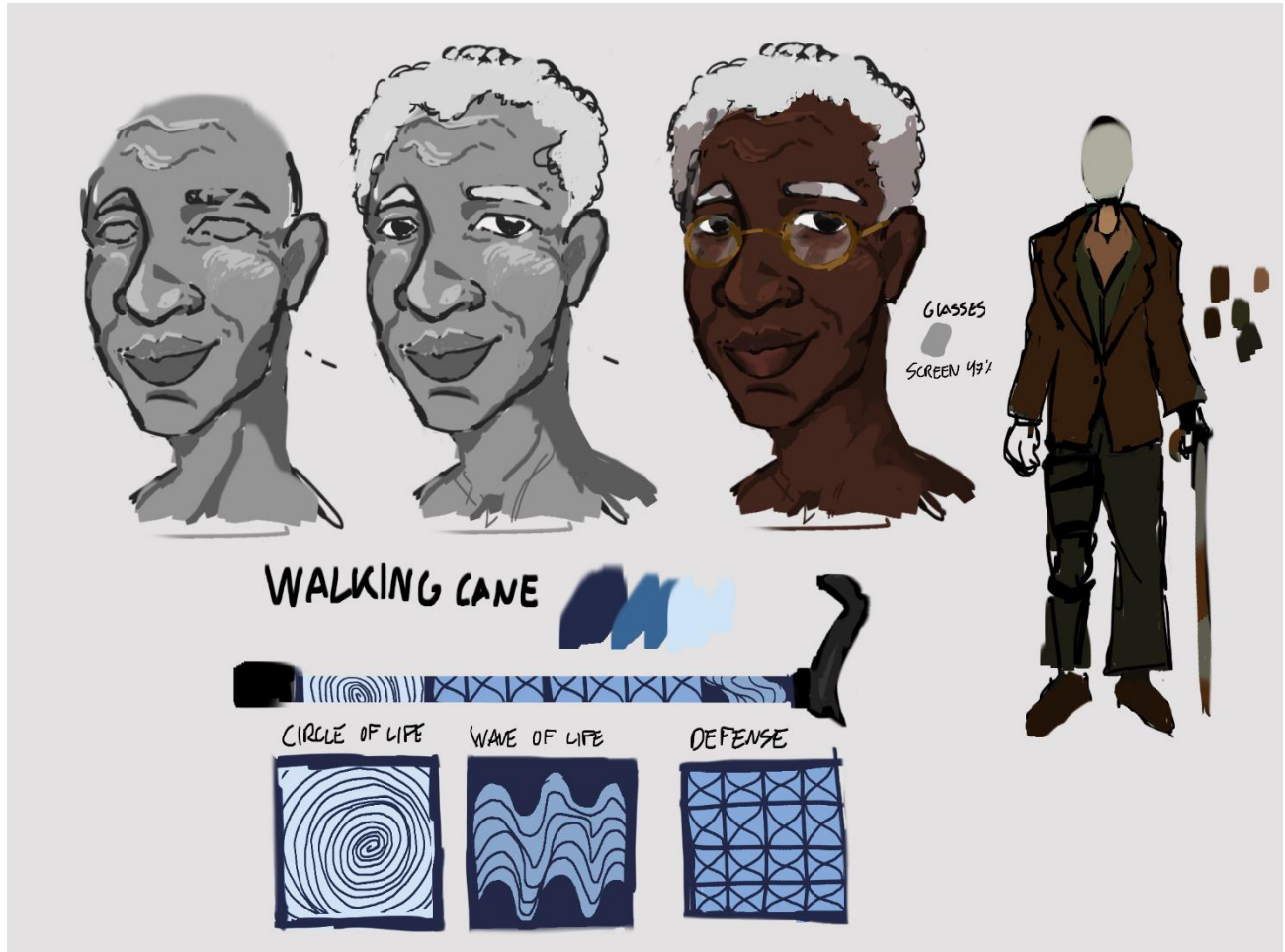
Dr James Adebayo is a starting Officer in service with *The Kestrel*. He acts as ship doctor, and even in his old age, he is often seen as the heart of the ship, loved by many in the crew.

Adebayo's story is unlocked by talking to him and giving responses in game that he likes. To determine what Adebayo responds to, both positively and negatively, we use his Faction tags.

- Oduduwa
- Good
- Intellectuals
- Pacifist *
- Religious

Each interactable NPC has a set of faction tags, with most Officers having 5. 3 of these tags are specific to the characters Home Platform, Alignment and Organisation.

Home Platform represents where that character calls home, even if they haven't been there for quite some time. Adebayo is from Oduduwa, a Platform inspired by Yoruban culture, and still considers it his home despite leaving over 40 years ago.

Alignment represents a character's moral personality, and is either:

- Lawful
- Good
- Neutral
- Evil
- Chaotic

These represent how players will react to moral challenges. Lawful characters uphold whatever laws they are bound by, even if this means harming others to do so. Evil characters put themselves above everybody else, and ensure they always come out on top. Adebayo being classed as Good represents his history as a doctor, often accepting patients' other doctors would deem untreatable.

Organisation represents what kind of background the character has, and is incredibly varied. Street urchins, thieves and thugs are classed as "Criminality", while the rich and powerful landowners of the Aethersea are classed as "Aristocracy". Adebayo is classed as "Intellectuals", a group representing doctors, scientists and philosophers. Players with Backgrounds that have interacted with these groups will have unique dialogue options to choose from when interacting.

The final 2 Faction tags are used to flesh out a character's main personality traits, and can also affect how the player can respond to them in conversation. Adebayo's remaining 2 tags are Pacifist, and Religious, representing his abhorrence of violence, and his Christian faith.

Some of these Faction Tags can clash with each-other. To solve this, each character also has a Primary Faction, which is prioritised over other Faction Tags in the event of a clash. In Adebayo's case, this is his Pacifism. Even if a war might be just and for the good of the people, Adebayo cannot agree to putting people in harm's way.

Players gain and lose relationships with each Faction through the actions they take during the game. How player's resolve quests and conflicts will not appeal to everyone, and players will face consequences based on those choices. An example using Adebayo is being extremely aggressive and violent when completing quests. Adebayo will comment on your aggression and, if the player doesn't change their ways, will leave *The Kestrel*, and will no longer be available as an Officer on board.

This gives choices in game real weight, and helps players build an identity for their character through the factions they support. This also helps players get a better idea of the characters they interact with, which alongside their dialogue will build full and vibrant characters that players will enjoy talking to.

Events and Event Generation

The main way to progress and gain experience is by completing quests. Quests can be found and started in a variety of places, including on the Aethersea. Quests are broken up into different categories:

- Main: The main story Quest chain, tackling the White Palm across the Aethersea
- Officer: Quest chains relating to your Officers, which often improve your relationship with them
- Platform: Quest chains relating to specific Platforms, often isolated to that Platform and nearby islands
- Side: Any other quests not related to the previous categories

Below we will brief some examples of these Categories.

Main: Following a bombing in Britannia, you spot an Agent of the White Palm who you believe is responsible!

Officer: Dr Adebayo wants to travel back to Oduduwa to attend the funeral of his brother, but fears his distance from his family will lead them to resent him. He asks you to assist him on the Platform in repairing his family ties.

Platform: Amidst a worker's revolt, the industrious Platform of Stein-Tor has requested the aid of less scrupulous Captains to ship their stock.

Side: A flower seller in Britannia has asked you to deliver a letter to her lover in Stein-Tor as soon as possible.

Some of these quests are simple, often requiring the player to simply gather some supplies or fight a foe in return for rewards. However, the main quest and many of the Platform and Officer quests give the player a great deal of freedom in how they resolve these quests.

Using our Stein-Tor quest as an example. The player can choose to back the Stein-Tor elite and agree to ship stock. If they do, they are attacked as they leave by revolutionaries out for revenge. If the player survives, and completes the shipment, they are invited to the party of Lord Otto Richter, a powerful aristocrat in Stein-Tor.

Here however the player has a number of options: they can break ties with the Stein-Tor elite and not attend, earning the ire of Otto, who is a member of the White Palm. They can attend and brush shoulders with many powerful people from across the Aethersea, and gain access to the White Palm itself as a member. Or they can pledge themselves to the rebels and launch an attack mid-party backed by their fighters. Players can even choose to back the rebels immediately before taking any shipments, failing this specific questline, but opening a new one where they help wage war against the powerful elite of Stein-Tor.

Additionally, the knowledge the player has going into these quests can change how they respond. As we said, Otto Richter is a high-ranking White Palm member. By completing other quests and progressing the story, the player can learn this before completing this questline. If they do, they

can use the party as a way to get close to Richter, and assassinate him to weaken the White Palm. This helps uphold the main aim of the quest system, which is to give players as much freedom as possible when resolving these questlines.

Alongside quests, Random Events can occur while exploring the Platforms, or sailing the Aethersea. These events might be positive, like finding an abandoned stash of supplies while sailing, or negative, like being having an engine explosion at sea. The player will have a number of options in how to respond to these events, each affecting their relationship with other Officers and Factions.

As an example, while sailing the Aethersea, a player encounters a random event where they discover a man stranded on a floating island. They can choose to save the man for free, demand they pay their way aboard with labour or money, or leave them stranded and carry on. These events could also have random outcomes. The stranded man could be simply an unlucky sailor caught on the Aethersea, or a madman dedicated to some evil purpose who plans to use your crew as a sacrifice. How the player builds their character, and the Officers and Factions they align themselves with, will all play a part in how they respond to the world around them.

Overall, the aim of this game is to give the player narrative freedom in how they respond to quests and characters, while making those choices matter in the long term for the game. By doing both of these, we can craft a narrative experience players will love and share with others.