Journey creator’s new game is designed ‘to battle against the human nature’

Journey creator Jenova Chen is drawn to making positive game experiences. Thatgamecompany’s latest title, *Sky: Children of the Light*, is an exploration into altruism and kindness, wrapped up in a beautiful mobile experience.

But just as *Journey* made Chen eager to create something players could share with their less video game-inclined friends, *Sky* has taught him an important lesson as well: people sort of suck.

“We also have to make sure the social dynamics don’t become hostile,” Chen says. “We want this to be a friendly experience … we designed so many things to battle against the human nature, to keep this world friendly.”

[embedded content]

Journey, released in 2012, was an instant hit among critics, who praised its gorgeous world and innovative storytelling through mostly silence. Although you could feasibly finish the game alone, the real joy was stumbling across other players and traveling together. You could only communicate via chirps and physical actions.

Sky is, in many ways, an evolution of the concepts the developer explored with that title. The mobile game is an online experience in which players work to restore fallen constellations and restore light to the world. It’s social by nature. Players have a wide world to explore through seven different realms, yet much of it is made to encourage players to interact with loved ones and strangers. Characters can hold hands with up to eight friends to guide them through the game.

It has its perks. It's easier to fly with friends, who act as an energy reserve for better soaring. Chen likens this fantasy world to a theme park. Different realms offer different experiences: some offer exploration, competition, or meditative experiences; another he likens to a sort of petting zoo for kids.

But setting the game's world up as a park has also invited its share of bad behavior. "Once we bring all these people into a theme park, all the troubles start," Chen says. *Sky*'s character can be customized with cosmetics. This led to what Chen called "karma beggars." Basically, players lovebomb strangers to win currency before abandoning them. Or more succinctly: "People are shitting on each other," Chen says. "This is a game where I don't want the seven-year-olds to say dirty words in the lobby. Imagine Disney Land, people being like, 'Anybody wants to buy hearts? Pay me $10 bucks and I'll do this.'"

"I don't want the seven-year-olds to say dirty words in the lobby"

That's not to say that *Journey* was not without its share of jerks. Chen says that when Thatgamecompany first designed their breakout game, players were often pushing each other off hills, or working to get their partners stuck.

"They liked to see the other player getting frustrated," he says. "In childhood psychology, any gamer that goes to a virtual world immediately reverts to baby mode. The morality, the moral value, does not carry into a virtual space. In any virtual space, people are seeking maximum feedback. If I can get you frustrated and you display that emotion, that's way more exciting than just me helping you out."

This struggle against basic human nature has been in part why *Sky* has taken so long to finish. He describes the game initially as a roller-coaster, a linear experience. But as iOS games grew in popularity, people became less willing to pay

for the experience. *Sky* would need to be a free-to-play game.

“Nine out of 10 gamers on the phone have never seen a console game,” he says. “There is no trust built between [the player and developer]. So, the first thing about human nature is, everything is cheap.”

Accounting for all the ways players can use each other has also taken time to sort out. The developer rebalanced the game’s economy in an attempt to make its interactions more genuine. “[If] the only way to get karma is from people, then I will be thinking about how I will get these people to give me karma,” Chen says. “You become manipulative.” But if you offer players another way, their kindness toward other players feels genuine.

Chat is restricted in *Sky* to only people you’ve built a relationship with via emotes. A stranger can’t barrel into your conversations and start screaming obscenities. Instead, players are encouraged to spend time with each other, get to know one another through physical actions, and build trust. Of one player he’s opened chat with, Chen says, “We’ve unlocked the understanding of each other.” Leveling up intimacy, so to speak.

Sky: Children of the Light is heading to iOS as a free-to-play game on July 11th. tvOS, Android, macOS, PC, and console versions will follow at a later, unannounced date. After years of balancing and testing, Chen says he finally feels like the community they’ve built is a friendly one. It just took some working around people’s natural inclinations.

“In the process of wanting to encourage people to give, we actually have to allow them to get, selfishly, so the gift actually appears to be altruistic,” Chen says. “If you don’t have the dark, you don’t have the light. When there’s no dark,

every light seems suspicious.”

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