



Game Design Document

INTENDED PLATFORM: PC, XBOX SERIES S & X, PLAYSTATION 4 & 5
TARGET AGE: 16+ DUE TO VIOLENCE, LANGUAGE, DRUG REFERENCE &
HORROR

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Game Outline

Guardians of Aether is a Narratively Driven, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Game (MMORPG/MMO). Players will take on the role of a self-created character that takes on the mantle of Guardian during the game. Players will, initially, choose a class to play as based on the standard MMO archetypes: tank, healer, and damage dealer. Players will complete a series of quests and dungeons that will provide them with experience points which result in them levelling up and gaining more skills to use in battle for their chosen job. Players will also be active in cutscenes, rather than passive with a selection of dialogue choices being provided during these.

Narrative Outline

Guardians of Aether is a story that follows the player's character in a journey to avenge the destruction of their hometown and prevent a tyrannical empire from draining the lifeblood of the planet, which will culminate in the release of the Cosmic Horrors, ancient monsters from across the stars that devour planets.

Players will work together with other players along with an eclectic cast of characters in the game world to hone their skills, overcome challenges and betrayal and defeat the empire preventing the cataclysmic release of the Cosmic Horrors.

Gameplay Outline

The core of the gameplay will be done through the player engaging in battles against enemies both in the overworld and in dungeons that will make use of an instance system, using the skills available for their chosen class to overcome the challenges presented in battle to progress the story. Players will also have dialogue choices available to them during most cutscenes in the game, these dialogue choices will be presented as appropriate responses to the situation but will allow players to show a certain emotional state for their character.

Players will also interact with chests after boss battles in dungeons to collect gear (weapons, armour and accessories that raise stats for the character's class) and loot (Au - gold, potions to temporarily boost stats in battle and miscellany items that can be traded for Au), along with NPCs to repair gear or purchase items, including gear and weapons.

Characters

Guardians of Aether will have a broad set of character, including a self-made player character and a cast of non-playable character.

Playable Character

Players will be able to create their own player character in the game. The character they create will have choices in terms of playable race from a set of 4 (Fig. 1) along with them choosing one of eight playable classes (Fig. 2 & 3), players will have the opportunity to change player classes upon completion of the first chapter in the game should they wish.



Fig. 1 – Description of Playable Races



Fig. 2 – Playable Classes available

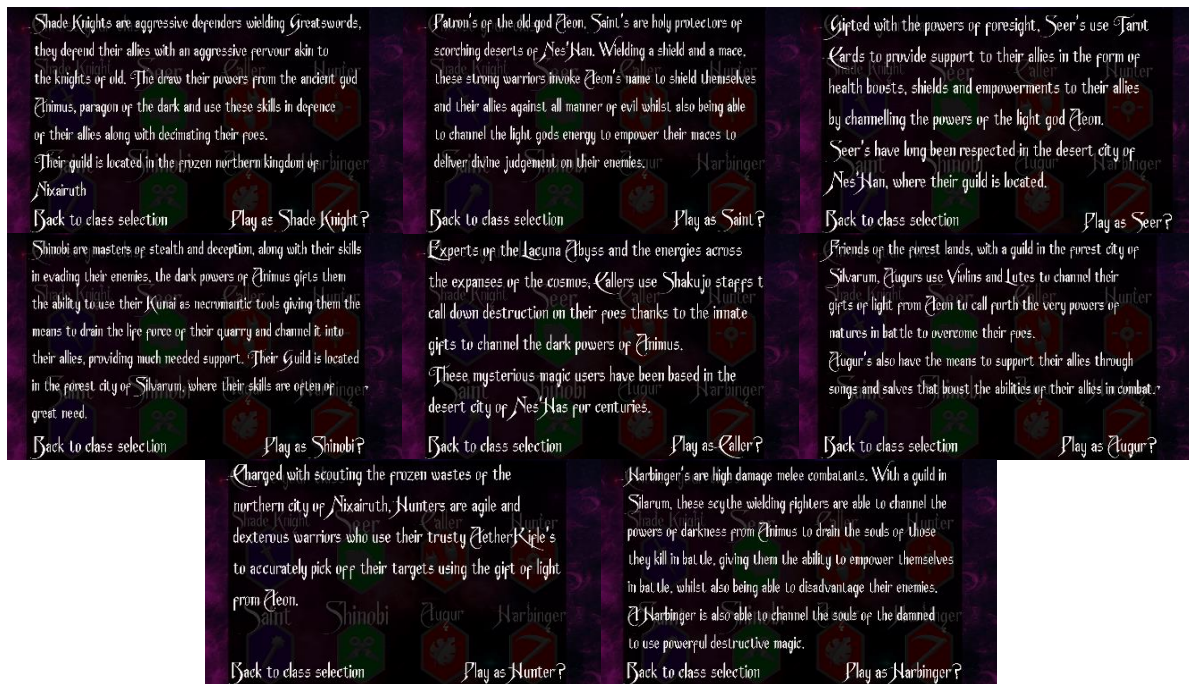


Fig. 3 – Class information

Non-Playable Characters

Adventurer/Guardian.....	Player Character
Animus.....	Ancient Deity of Darkness
Aeon.....	Ancient Deity of Light
Casius Sie Valanth.....	Supreme Archon of the IVth Phalanx
Norbraea & Cornicula.....	Twin Leaders of the Heralds of the Abyss
Xeth'Ita.....	Leader of the Keepers of Knowledge & Caller
Ruvay.....	Saint of the Keepers of Knowledge
Thraleve.....	Shinobi of the Keepers of Knowledge
Alina.....	Hunter of the Keepers of Knowledge
Lucien.....	Shade Knight of the Keepers of Knowledge
Milla.....	Caller of the Keepers of Knowledge
Rai'Ahn.....	Harbinger of the Keepers of Knowledge
Tian Glen Darach.....	Archdruid of Silvarum and The Shaded Holt
Czar Constantine III.....	Lord Ruler of Nes'Han and Protector of the Solitaidem
Marquise de Verglas.....	Marquise of the Nixairuth Senate and Xinth Mesa
Cosmic Horrors.....	Extra-terrestrial creatures of destruction from across the Cosmos, sealed in the Tartarus Carceream

Gameplay

Guardians of Aether will use a variety of sequences to present the gameplay. Chief among these is the use of an open overworld in which players will be able to explore and battle enemies to gain experience points that will support them in leveling up their created player character to unlock a broader range of skills for their chosen class. The use of these skills within instanced content (dungeons, raids, and trials) will be crucial in the players effectively engaging in the games core gameplay loop of completing quests to gain experience and loot.

Character Skills

The center of gameplay is focused on players making use of the skills available to their class, based on the 3 main archetypes found in similar MMO's such as Final Fantasy XIV, World of Warcraft, Elder Scrolls Online and New Worlds – Tanks, Healers and Damage Dealers. Each class will have individual mechanics related to the class that will be used in both open world exploration and in instanced content such as dungeons and raids. Players will use these skills to defeat creatures in the open overworld along with instanced content. Skill details for each class can be seen in Fig. 4 & 5.

Level	Tanks		Healers	
	Shade Knight	Saint	Seer	Shinobi
1	Single Target Attack - Great Sword	Single Target Attack - Mace	Single Target Attack - Star Magic	Single target attack - Kunai
2	Single Target Combo off of Level 1 Skill	Single Target Attack - Shield	Single Target Attack - Damage over time (Burn): Lasts 20 seconds	Single Target Attack - Damage over time (Poison): lasts 20 seconds
5	Area of Effect - increases enmity from enemies	Area of Effect - increases enmity from enemies	Single Target Heal	Single Target Heal
7	Attack Increase on Self	Defense Increase on self	Revive fallen ally	Resurrect fallen ally
10	Combo Skill linked to Level 1 and 2 skills - also gives a buff that increase attack on self	Single Target Combo off of Level 1 Skill using Mace	Single Target Shield & Area of effect spell that shield adds a shield equal to 15% of allies maximum health	Single target attack that also heals a targeted ally and applies a health regeneration for 20 seconds to target
12	Area of Effect attack that applies a debuff to all enemies reducing their defense	Single Target Combo off of Level 10 Skill using Mace - deals high damage and grants a damage reduction buff to self.	20 second buff to self that allows user to move whilst casting spells	Can instantly teleport to any targeted ally and provides a shield to self and them reducing damage taken by 20%
15	Combo finisher linked to the level 10 combo move - deals high damage and heals self for 10% of maximum health	Area of Effect attack that stuns nearby enemies for 5 seconds	Single Target Heal that does double the healing of Level 5 spell	Single Target attack that also launches self back by 20 yards healing all allies in a cone from point of landing for 60% of max HP
18	Area of Effect Spell that reduces physical damage taken by all allies by 15% for 10 seconds	Combo skill linked to level 6 skill - deals high damage and buffs allies to reduce damage taken by 10% for 8 seconds	Single Target Shield now regenerate health of target	Area of effect spell that heals allies based on damage done to nearby enemies
20	Single Target attack that deals high damage and, if used after combo, grants a damage increase buff (Can stack up to 4 times) that lasts 20 seconds	Applies a shield to a targetted ally that redirects damage to self	Ground targetted shield for allies that stand in that area that nullifies damage equal to 20% of targets max health	Area of Effect Heal that applies a health regeneration for 15 seconds along with a medium heal
23	Area of Effect Spell that reduces magical damage taken by all allies by 20% for 12 seconds	Provides a shield to all nearby allies reducing damage taken by 25%	Area of Effect Attack that does medium damage to nearby enemies and stuns them for 8 seconds	Area of effect spell that does medium damage and applies damage over time to enemies in area for 10 seconds
25	Prevents health from dropping below 1 for 10 seconds, Increases damage done by 15%	10 second buff that nullifies all damage.	Shields target for 80% of their health and applies a health Regen	Heals single target for 100% of Health

Fig. 4. Skills for Tanks and Healers

Level	Damage Dealers			
	Augur	Caller	Hunter	Harbinger
1	Single Target Attack - Earth Magic	Single Target Attack - Space magic	Single Target Attack - Rifle	Single Target Attack - Scythe
2	Summon Familiar to support in battle	Single target attack that enters a state that regenerate Aether Points - Gravity Magic	Single Target Attack - Rifle Combo 1	Single Target Attack - Scythe Combo 2, links to Level 1 Skill
5	Single Target Attack that applies a damage over time to them for 15 seconds (Wind Magic)	Single target attack that does double damage if used after 3 Level 1 spells - uses 90% of available Aether Points	Single Target Attack - Applies damage over time to enemy (Shock)	Area of effect combo 1
7	Area of Effect Spell that applies a damage over time to all nearby enemies for 10 seconds (water magic)	Area of Effect Attack Spell - Does low damage, also slows enemy movement - Gravity Magic	Forward facing conal attack that applies all hit enemies with a poison damage over time for 15 seconds	Single target attack that applies a bleeding damage over time effect for 15 seconds
10	Command Familiar to release an energy wave that buffs allies with damage increase of 10% for 20 seconds	Single Target Attack that puts user in a state of increased damage if they use space magic spells, but increases AP cost	Single Target Attack - Rifle Combo 2. Also applies a debuff to target, reducing their defence	Single Target Attack - Scythe Combo 3, does high damage to target
12	Area of effect spell that buff's all allies magical damage by 15% for 10 seconds	Area of Effect Attack Spell - Does low damage, also stuns enemies - Space Magic	Area of effect attack that applies all enemies with slowed movement for 10 seconds	Single Target Attack that also stuns the target for 6 seconds
15	Command familiar to leach health from enemy and channel it into a target of your choice. Health restored is equal to half damage done over 20 seconds.	Increases spell damage by 10% for 10 seconds.	Single target attack that prevents enemy from moving for 5 seconds (enemy can still attack from range)	Area of effect combo 2 also adds a damage over time to enemy
18	Single target attack that does medium damage (Earth and Wind magic)	Single Target Attack that does medium damage, also instantly recharges AP to maximum	Area of effect attack that does medium damage to enemies	Single target attack that restores health equal to 15% of users max HP
20	Cause water and wind damage over time spells to expire early on target causing high damage	Spells can be cast with no casting time for 15 seconds	Single Target Attack - Rifle Combo 3 does medium damage	Single Target Attack - Scythe Combo 4, refreshes and damage over time effects on target from user.
23	Command Familiar to detonate, causing large damage to a single target.	Area of Effect Spell (Gravity) that does high damage to nearby enemies	Area of effect spell that boosts movement speed and defense of all allies by 20%	Buff self to reduce damage taken by 20%
25	Send away familiar and create large area of effect that does high damage to enemies in a area of your choosing	Single target attack with high damage, uses all AP and reduces damage done by enemies for 10 seconds	Single Target Attack that does high damage to target. Damage is doubled if used after Rifle Combo 3	Single target attack that will always land a critical hit if used when target has a bleeding effect on them

Fig. 5. Skills for Damage Dealers

Narrative Sequences

To ensure pacing in the game is set at a level that does not plateau and maintains engagement, the structure is set up in a chapter format. Players will have a series of quests that need to be completed to progress the chapters story, however some of these quests will be able to be completed in any order the player chooses (Fig. 6).

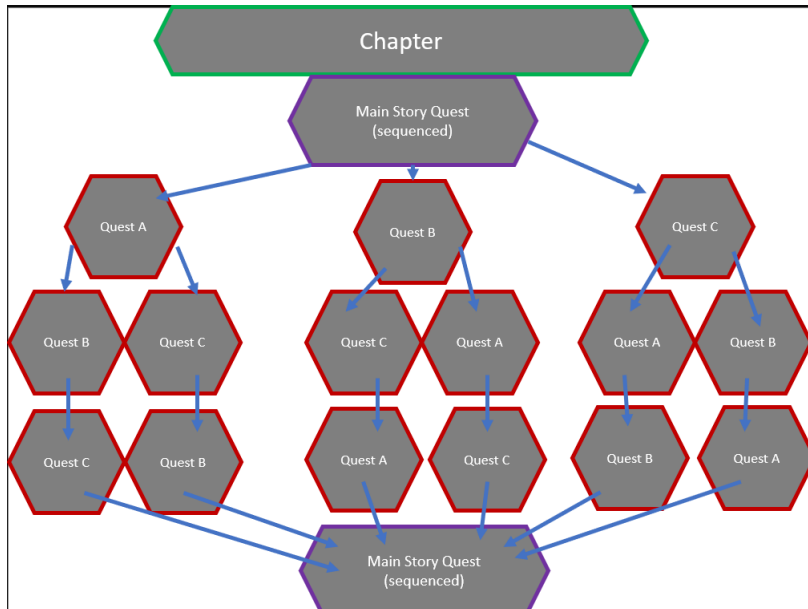


Fig. 6. Overview of quest flow in chapters

Table. 1 shows the outline of the narrative in each chapter. For further quest breakdowns and details see Full Narrative Document.

Main Scenario Chapters	Quest List - Central	Quest Level
Chapter 0: Endings	Escape	0
Chapter 1: A Fresh Adventure	New Beginnings	1
	Finding Your Feet	2 to 5
	Knowing Your Surroundings	2 to 5
	My First ChiChi	2 to 5
	Mysterious Ticking	5
Chapter 2: Althemisian Envoys	A Most Unsettling Development	6
	Nixairuth Bastille	6 to 10
	Nes'Dahnian Sturrings	6 to 10
	Silvarian Sepulcrum	6 to 10
	Conference, Sweet Conference	10
Chapter 3: Powers Nul and Void	The Keepers of Knowledge	10
	Clockwork Menace	11
	Ancient Guardians	11
	Stop That Ticking!	11 to 15
	And Now There's a Cult?	11 to 15
	Ominous Clouds	11 to 15
	Deforestation	11 to 15
	The Archon Steps Forth	15
Call of the Abyss	16	
Chapter 4: To Rise Unto The Heavens	Sealing the Rifts - Nixairuth	16 to 20
	Sealing the Rifts - Silvarum	16 to 20
	Sealing the Rifts - Nes'Dahn	16 to 20
	Imperial Espionage	16 to 20
	Drain This Imperials!	16 to 20
	Imperial Excavation	20
	That's A Big Spider!	21
Chapter 5: For The Future of The Realm	Fallen From Grace	22
	To See the Realm Burn	23
	Requiem of the Guardian	24
	Allied Counter Offensive	25
	Guardian of Aether	25

Table 1. Narrative Outline

Platform Specific Features

When reviewing the control schemes for Guardians of Aether, the use of different control schemes between PC and console is imperative to ensure players can get as positive an experience as possible. Therefore, basic control schemes on PC and Console are detailed in the table below (Table 2)

Control	PC	Console (PC with Gamepad)
Movement	W,A,S,D	Left Analogue Stick
Camera	Arrow Keys	Right Analogue Stick
Targetting/Interactions	Mouse and Left Mouse Button	Arrow Keys and X/A Button

Table 2 – Basic Control, PC and Console

When thinking about how players will use skills however, there will be more differences between how Keyboard and Mouse players and Gamepad players interact with the game. After some research, a decision to utilize a similar system developed in Final Fantasy XIV would, at present, best suit the needs of the game as it allows players to set a range of skills to the buttons on their controllers and employ the triggers (R2/L2 or RT/LT) to activate them when they are needing to be used (reference image below in Fig. 7) whereas, following on from trends in current MMO’s a number key binding system used in most other MMO’s will be used for keyboard and mouse (Fig. 8)

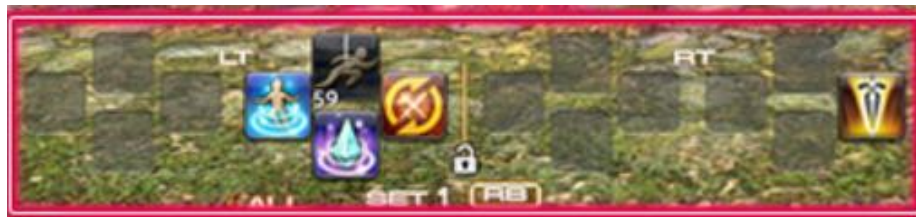


Fig. 7. Reference material for Gamepad/Console skill bar (Square Enix, 2021).



Fig. 8. Reference material from World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2021) & Elder Scrolls Online (Bethesda, 2021)

Game World

Guardians of Aether takes place in the fictional continent of Althemisa, a continent with a range of biomes and landmarks as detailed below in Fig. 9. Players will be able to navigate between the cities and surrounding areas that will all exist as separate areas. Each area will have a north, east, south & west. The closer players move to the center of the map, the stronger enemies will become in terms of level.



Fig. 9. Map of the Althemisa Overworld with comments on the three main city states and the central biomes.

Other Locations and Dungeon Reference

Frostfallen Bastille	Will be similar in architecture to other buildings of Nixairuth, however will show signs of severe timeworn damage (broken walls, structural damage etc) Unlike Nixairuth however, the internals of the building will be more medieval in structure with large wooden support beams installed.
Fel'Ahn Grotto	Subterranean cave system with a range of lakes and rock pools forming with in them like those found in Namibia
Animus Sepulcrum	Large underground catacombs and tombs like those found under Paris, London, and Rome. However, these open in a large cylindrical chamber with a pillar found in the centre.
Crestfallen Lake	Large open lake area with a tall pearlescent tower at its centre. General area will be close to Lake Vyrnwy in Wales.
Ruins of Aeon	Desert ruins that will be similar in architecture of the tombs excavated in ancient Egypt. Many of the walls will have hieroglyphs on them to depict a deeper lore in the game.
The Barren Flatlands	Large salt flats area like those found in Utah, however, will also have a mountainous region to the north of them.
Aetherial Tears	Large open spaces where the skyboxes will show a swirling purple/red/green nebula. Players will be placed on a large, black concrete platform when battling in the tears.
Imperial Facilities	Will draw inspiration from gothic architecture and factories from the British industrial revolution merged, however instead of being constructed from stone, they will be constructed out of dark steel.
The Megaron & Anaktaron	Heavily inspired by Ancient Greek structures like the Pantheon. However, instead of white marble, they are constructed from dark steel. The outer walls of the fortress will have a arrays 20-foot Tesla coils setup to imitate a shield wall. Many of the structures will employ the use of clockwork and steam-powered machinery also.
Crystalline Pillar	Will be a large crystalline pillar with colouring of Amethyst. The pillar will have a slim, yet spiked shaft with a large flat top. The tower will be semi-translucent to reflect some light beams.

Sound and Music

The games music will reflect the use of repeated melodies for areas but transposed into different keys or incorporating the use of a broader of lesser range of instruments to convey specific moods such as isolation and hope.

- Hero's theme – will be central to the game in terms of versions of this being used in various keys to convey the emotions players may be feeling based on the narrative. Towards climatic battles, the Hero's theme will incorporate a broad range of instruments, the final battle of the game will also use modern instruments such as electric guitars and synthesisers tied, and lyrics will be used to convey further narrative subtext.
- Area themes – each area will have a specific style of music based on the architectural inspiration for the area. This music will be transposed into a minor key in dungeons in that area to support the idea of cohesion in location and music:
 - Nixairuth – Will draw inspiration musically from the classical period of music (Mozart etc) and will employ the use of instruments such as harpsichords to provide further stylistic ideas.
 - Nes'Han – Will draw inspiration from Middle Eastern and African fusion music, incorporating the use of instruments such as Sitar's and reed-based instruments along with strong drumbeats that build into a cohesive musical representation that conveys the area.
 - Silvarum – Will draw inspiration from East Asian music, employ a range of pipe instruments, harps, guitars, and bells to convey a sense of calm and quiet reflection in the area.
- Empire's Theme – Will make use of ideas from industrial music of the 1980's, including the use of heavy drumbeats and synthesisers. The idea here will be to convey the heavily industrial focus of the empire using synthetic melodies set against heavy metallic drumbeats.
- Herald's Theme – Employing timpani drums, the Herald's theme will use brass stabs and string instruments in a minor key to convey a dark, moody, and foreboding musical style. This music will be present in all scenes with the Heralds of the Abyss and a larger fuller orchestrated version will be used during battles against them. Climactic boss battles will also make use of Gregorian and operatic vocals to enhance the theme.

Coupled with the music will be a mixture of soundscapes that will be designed to provide players with further information on the game world from an auditory perspective to supplement the visuals. As part of the soundscapes, the sounds will be diegetic in that the player and character in the game will refer to them. This will be particularly important when players are trying to evade imperial clockwork machines.

Example versions of the sound scaping and two ideas for the hero's theme are demonstrated in the unity prototype as a starting reference for full sound development.

Game Experience

The overall experience of Guardians of Aether will be a thrilling journey through an engaging narrative that will require players to master the skills of the chosen class to overcome numerous challenges.

Upon starting the game, players will be met with a character creator that will allow them to create a custom character wherein they will choose a character race and a class to start the game as. Following this player will be put into a first-person sequence and tasked with escaping their hometown Fig. 10.

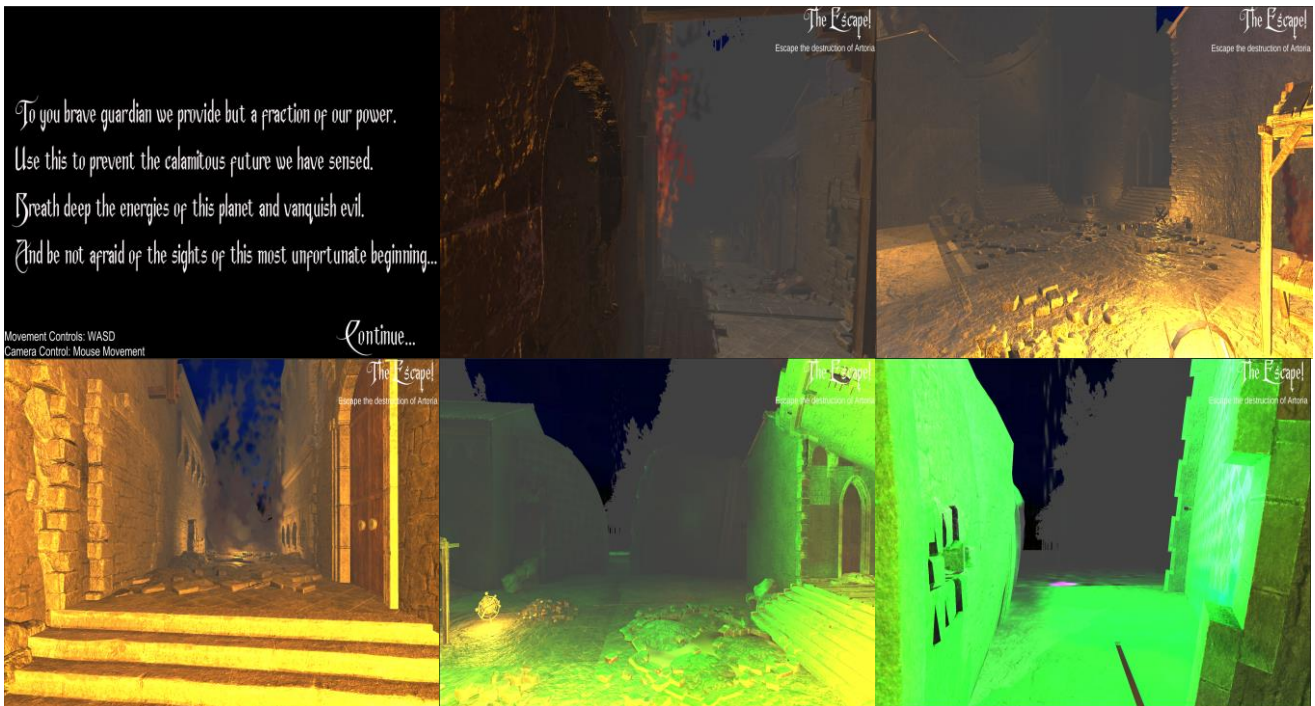


Fig. 10. Opening Sequence

The presentation of the game will be consistent with the designs shown in the opening sequence in that it will use a level of partial realism in the way in which environments are presented whilst also keeping an aesthetic of late 1800's architecture. The creation of the environments will need to be done in a game engine that will be able to realise this.

Colour and Broader Presentation

In terms of a broader presentation to players, the game will use a consistent colour scheme of purples, reds and green as these are the colours of Aether in the game. The idea here is to make players associate these colours with the main source of power for the players in the game. The colour scheme has been chosen to evoke a mixture of emotions in the player (energy, wisdom, and health) (Smith, 2016) with the aim for them to associate the colours and associated emotions to their player whilst progressing through the story. These colours are included in the menu and character creator screens along with being prominent throughout the game including in-game menus and box art.

Ways of Play

During the game, players will mainly be progressing through the story through controlling their character in the third person completing quests and battling enemies. However, there will be quests that will require the player to control the player in the first person to survey certain areas of the world. This idea should keep gameplay fresh and use some of the mechanics used in the opening sequence.

A major factor of the battle system that players will be able to use is Guardian Force. This will be a meter that fills over the course of battle when players take damage, do damage to enemies, and heal themselves or allies. Once the meter has filled each class will be able to unleash a class specific move that will either provide all party members with a shield that absorbs 90% of damage taken (Tank classes), heal and, at higher levels, completely revive all party members for 100% of their health (Healer classes), Very high damage area of effect spell that will damage every enemy in a large area (Magical Damage Dealing Classes), or extremely high single target damage to a targeted enemy (Physical Damage Dealers). Guardian Force will be available to all players from level one and will have 2 charge levels. Level 1 will be a slightly weaker version of the ability, whereas a level 2 version will be as detailed above. Guardian Force abilities are shared between class types, as opposed to everyone in a party meaning that players will be encouraged to have a broad and varied party if they are playing this in the multiplayer form as opposed to the single player option as explained in the mechanics section.

To ensure that players do not spend large portions of their time walking around the open world, players will have access to mounts from very early on in the game. The main purpose of mounts is to give players the option to traverse the overworld more efficiently than walking. Mounts will have an increased movement speed along with the ability to “leap”. Leaping will enable the mounted player to use a jump input to propel the mount forward by a significant distance, making traversal both enjoyable and efficient.

The final way in which players will experience the game is through interactive cutscenes where players will be able to choose a range of dialogue choice linked to 3 types of responses, Aggressive, Pragmatic or Comical/Sarcastic. These dialogue choices will allow players to actively take part in framed cutscenes that will be produced using the same graphic engines as those of the rest of the game. The use of a branching dialogue system will play into the ways in which non-playable characters will react to the players dialogue choices, the aim here is to ensure that players feel like they are actively part of the narrative, as opposed to a passenger in cutscenes. An example of the dialogue choices and NPC reactions are detailed in Fig. 11.

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=== CasiusExplanation1 ===
"This land is rich in the energy which you call Aether, an energy that we of Gzelmathian blood are unable to interact with. For
centuries our people have toiled in the harsh conditions of the western continent, never asking for aid from neighbouring nations
, nor accepting it. Every man, woman and child in Gzelmath is born with the selfsame condition, a lack of aetheric compatibility.
All except those of the Royal Bloodline.
->PlayerResponse1

=== PlayerResponse1 ===
+ "Wait the Empress can channel Aether"
->Response1
+ [Remain Silent]
->CasiusExplanation2

=== Response1 ===
"She is indeed, but not in the ways you are familiar with"
->CasiusExplanation2

=== CasiusExplanation2 ===
"You see, the Empire is a Matriachal society and has been for at least 2 centuries after the women of the Royal Bloodline began
showing signs of the gift of Precognition. A gift that allows them to gain glimpse of the future of our glorious Empire. This
gift has led to our technological marvels, which you and your kind seem so hellbent on destroying. However, her Imperial Majesty
foresaw a great calamity befalling our Empire. One that would have eradicated our peoples from this world. To that end she
tasked each Supreme Archon the task of combatting this more grave threat and thus I have been tasked with collecting requisite
Aether from this feral land.
+ "Requisite Aether for what?"
->Interuot1
+ "Enough of this, I'm putting an end to this now!"
->SceneEnd

```

Fig. 11. Example of branching NPC reactions to player response in cutscenes.

Mechanics

Guardians of Aether uses an interesting mix of core mechanics coupled with narrative mechanics as detailed below. Many of the core gameplay mechanics are built using well known systems that exist in other games in the MMO genre. What makes the game stand out is how mechanics have been applied to the narrative system.

Gameplay Mechanics

The main mechanics of the game are players learning to use the skills for their class in battles against enemies. Much of the progression of the game is focused on players earning experience points from defeating enemies, completing quests, and clearing dungeons which will allow them to unlock new skills they can apply in battle content. On top of the gaining of experience, players will also be able to obtain Au (in game base currency) that they can use to purchase better gear (weapons, armour and accessories).

Another gameplay mechanic will be players searching areas in the first-person during missions where they are asked to search for or survey areas. Players will be given a list of things to find while they are in the first person and will use either mouse or gamepad buttons to select areas of interest while in this mode.

Finally, players will also be interacting with both non-playable character (NPC's) and some items during gameplay. These interactions will be prompted with in-game colouring over items or quest icons over NPC's. There will also be prompts to quest goals that need interacting with on the quest log from the User Interface.

All mechanics will be introduced to the player during a series of story focused onboarding quests from the very start of the game. Each quest is designed to introduce players to key mechanics including battles, traversal, first-person search sequences and interactions.

Due to the nature of the game, there is also a need for the game to actively include systems for counter play and team play in the Player Vs Everyone (PVE) content. To that end, enemies in the game will have certain attacks that will appear as a bar attached to their health bar on the UI. This bar will have a charge time wherein the bar will fill, and the enemy will use that move after the charge is complete (the bar is filled). Players will need to learn what these skills do to them and their party members and sparingly use their skills (such as stuns) to ensure that the more damaging attacks will not complete charging by interrupting them with these skills.

In terms of team play mechanics, many of the skills shown in Fig. 4 & 5 have been designed to compliment playing with other characters, whilst also being highly versatile for use when playing the game solo. The idea behind this is to provide a varied playstyle that is unique to each class and that also ensures players have fresh experiences when playing each class.

Economies

There are a series of economy systems within the game. The reference table below summarises these systems in some detail.

Damage System	The damage system in the game will be largely based on stats that players will have based on their player class along with a defense number. Players and enemies damage will work on a basic algorithm of (Attack primary stat including armour bonuses) x 1.3 (or another arbitrary number based on testing) – target defense = damage done. This system will work for all battle participants in a battle (player, allies, and enemies).
Experience System	Experience will be gained by the player upon successfully completing quests, dungeons and defeating enemies. Experience earned will be preset based on player level and will provide adequate values that will enable players to gain level quickly at low levels, but this number will increase each level to ensure there is adequate balance in the experience earned to prevent players from being over-levelled when approaching content. To further ensure that experience systems are not exploited every piece of instanced content will use a level sync system that will lower players level and stat to an appropriate level for the content.
Currency System – Au	The main form of currency that players will obtain in game is Au. Au works as the base currency that is used to purchase gear upgrades, potions, in-game dyes for gear along with repairs for gear that will accrue damage as players take damage. Au will be relatively easy to obtain for players, and there is minimal benefits to players for having large amounts in the game other than allowing them to purchase items from vendors and in-game stores to gain access to some cosmetic features and temporary stat boosting consumables.
End Game Currency – Opera's	As opposed to Au which will be a standard currency available throughout the game and all potential expansions, upon completing the main story, players will begin to acquire Opera's. Opera's will be obtained from endgame instances and can be traded for the best gear available in each of the post-game patches. The gear that will be acquired from the collection of Opera's will be updated with each post-game patch and as will the type of Opera's available. To ensure players will continually play the game, players will be capped on the number of Opera's they can carry in total and will also have a smaller number they will be able to collect each week.
Core Stat Systems (Player)	Players will have to manage 2 central stats as they play the game: Health (HP) and Aether (AP). As players gain better gear and increase in level their HP will increase, however all players, at level 1 will have access to a base AP of 10,000. As players engage in battle and take damage to both enemies and environmental hazards they will lose HP. HP will regenerate when they are not in combat. Likewise, when players use certain skills they will use AP. AP constantly regenerates at a flat rate of 100 points per second, however player's that do not fully understand how to play a chosen class will find themselves running out of this rapidly.
Enemies	Enemy number will work as an economy in terms of players choosing whether to take on large numbers at once or whether to tackle enemies in small groups or individually. The biggest factors that will manage enemy economies will be the skills available to a player in a certain situation. Enemy stats as well as quantity will factor in how players will have to make meaningful choices as they progress through content, specifically dungeons.

Narrative Mechanics

What makes this game stand apart from other games in the genre is how a semi-linear narrative structure is employed in most chapters to allow players choice over the quests they complete. Fig. 12. Shows a detailed demo of how players can choose the order they complete the first series of quests in the game.



Fig. 12. Opening Quests – Silvarum.

The inclusion of this system will enable players to choose their own play sequence for story quests in a chapter to maintain pacing. However, there will be bookend quests in each chapter to ensure that players are able to fully engage with the narrative.

Another way in which players can directly engage with the narrative is through the dialogue choices in cutscenes which have been detailed in the Game Experience section. The goal of both systems is to ensure that players have as much control over the story as is possible when the main story has a level of linearity.

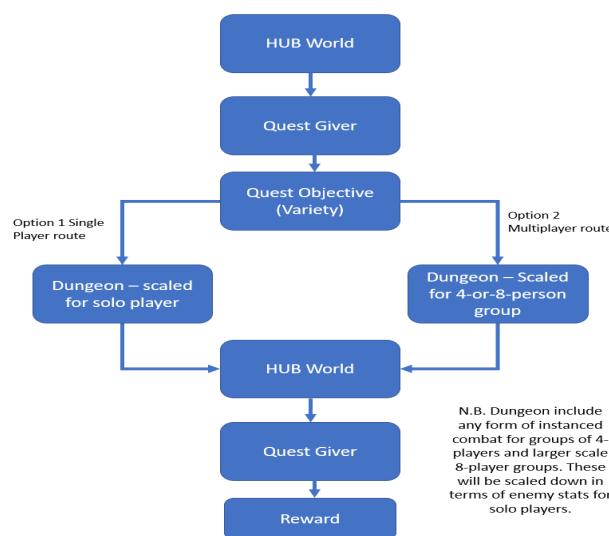


Fig.13. DIS Diagram.

The final way in which narrative mechanics enable player choice is through the divergent instance system (DIS). The DIS is a system that enables players to choose whether they want to complete story-based instances with a group of friends (other playable characters) or whether they want to complete the content on their own. A further explanation of the system can be seen in Fig. 13. And, in Appendix 1 – Divergent Instance System.

Enemies

As players explore both the overworld maps of Althemisa and the dungeons they will face a great many forms of enemies. For ease of reading, enemies can be split into 4 distinct groups: Local Flora and Fauna (Creatures), Gzelmethian Empire, Heralds of the Abyss, Cosmic Horrors. Cosmic Horrors, Larger Imperial Machines, Casius, and the leader of the Heralds of the Abyss will make up the main bosses in the game and each will have a broad range of mechanics tied to them to challenge players. Despite the game being an MMO, the final boss of the game will be a solo battle against the true leader of the Heralds after their betrayal of the player at the end of chapter 4.

<p>Creatures</p>	<p>Most of the enemies' players will face in the early parts of the game will be creatures that players may expect to find in the biome they are exploring (overworld or dungeon). E.g., If a player is exploring a desert, they are likely to battle human sized snakes, scorpions, or vultures. Likewise in the frozen biome they can expect to battle polar creatures (Polar bears, snow wolves etc.). These creatures will not be particularly difficult for players to defeat, however will have level assigned to them to ensure there is balanced difficulty. Some creatures will not be aggressive in the overworld; however, all creatures will be in dungeons to ensure players have challenge when playing this content.</p>
<p>Gzelmethian Empire</p>	<p>The Empire are the primary antagonists in the game, however instead of players battling against humanoid characters they will be battling against an array of clockwork machines that are highly aggressive and are designed around more ferocious animals (lizards, spiders etc.). In the early game, most of these enemies will be present in dungeons, however as players progress through the story, they will battle more of these.</p> <p>On top of the clockwork monsters, players will also battle against Supreme Archon Casius. Casius will be a constant antagonist introduced in the opening sequence and players will often fall to him in battle upon meeting him until the climactic battles at the end of chapter 5 where players will final be able to battle against Casius in a massive clockwork spider in the courtyard of his fortress the Anaktaron known as the Megaron. (See Fig.14. for reference images)</p>

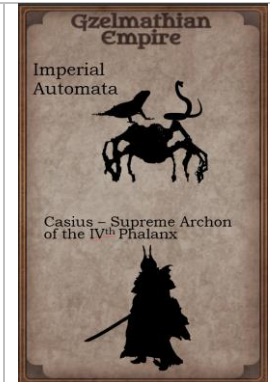




Fig.14. Imperial enemies (Yoshida, 2017).

<p>Heralds of the Abyss</p>	<p>The Heralds of the Abyss are introduced as secondary antagonist in the game. They are powerful mages and will hinder the player on multiple occasions. Unlike the empire, these enemies will be humanoid, and their character models will be a mixture of the 4 playable races. Most are seen in robes of varying dark colours.</p> <p>The Heralds leadership however are most significant enemies and will stand-out amongst their followers. Instead of battling the player outright, the heralds tend to battle through summoning cosmic horrors. Players will finally battle the leaders of the Heralds during the fifth chapter where players will not only battle the twins in a potential 8-person trial, but also the true leader following their final confrontation with Casius when they create the crystalline pillar. (Fig. 15. Contains reference materials)</p>	 <p>Fig.15. Leaders of the Heralds (Miyazaki, 2015).</p>
<p>Cosmic Horrors</p>	<p>To set the game apart from competitors, the Cosmic Horrors will be designed to evoke a reaction of fear from players compared to the other enemies found in the game.</p> <p>Large creatures that take a lot of inspiration from the descriptions of the Eldritch Horrors of H.P. Lovecraft, players will not encounter cosmic horrors until later in the game. These enemies will mainly be found in dungeons and trials as a true test of the players skills in their chosen class (Fig. 16. Contains some reference images).</p>	 <p>Fig. 16. References for the Cosmic Horrors (Mason, 2016)</p>

Additional Content

Based on the nature of the game there will be a range of additional content that will be aimed at expanding on the game and providing players with a wealth of reasons to continue playing.

Achievements

Guardians of Aether will have an achievement system built into it that will provide players with titles that will display on their character names bar in game. These achievements will link to milestones within the game such as completing certain quests, levelling classes to major milestones (Level 5, 10 etc.) or completing a set number of dungeons on certain types of classes (Clear 60 dungeons as a Shade Knight). The in-game achievement system will be synced to the achievement systems of external systems (E.g. Xbox Achievement systems or PlayStation Trophies).

Multiplayer Aspects

Guardians of Aether is, by nature, a multiplayer game on account of it being an MMO. However, there is scope in future development for player versus player (PVP) to be implemented. At present the multiplayer aspects will focus on player versus everyone (PVE) due to the focus of this game being on the narrative detailed in this and supplementary documentation.

Players will be able to interact with other players through a chat log (that will occur through keyboard input) along with emotes for their character that can be unlocked in the game (there will be a base set of emotes available from the start of the game, more will be unlocked through the completion of quests and certain achievements). Depending on technological implications there is also potential for the game to use voice chat when in parties also.

Additional Content

To ensure there is constant updated content available to players and prevent the game experience from stagnating, Guardians of Aether will provide players with regular updated content aimed at expanding on the story told through the main game. This added content will be designed to bring any loose story ends from the main scenario to a close and to also set up story plot points for future expansions.

Much of this content will be delivered in an equivalent manner to the main story, however due to it being released sequentially as post launch patches, each patch will be considered a singular chapter. Each piece of free additional content will bring with it one or two additional dungeons for players to explore, new end game raid chapters (patches will alternate between 8 person raids and 24 person Union raids, and these will provide the players with new gear that will provide stronger stat boosts to previously acquired gear), more chapters to expand the story and different gear and challenges for players to do. These patches will occur every 3 to 4 months depending on development pipelines to ensure player engagement is maintained.

As a series of post-launch patches end, a new expansion will become available that will increase level cap, offer new classes to play as, potentially new playable races and a whole new narrative that will explore new regions of the world created.

Monetization

Due to the nature of Guardians of Aether there are several ways in which the game can monetize content: Subscriptions, Cosmetics, Experience Boosting Accessories, Mounts, Summonable Pets, Armour Dyes. The below table details monetization ideas.

Form of Monetization	Rationale and benefit
Base cost of the game	<p>Due to the scope of the game, there will be an initial price put on the game. This will fall in line with current pricing for video games in the MMO Genre (between £35 and £50) for a base version of the game.</p> <p>There is scope for a deluxe and collectors edition of the game to also be purchasable, these will come with additional in-game rewards such as specific summonable pets or mounts along with potential art or lore books and will be available at a premium to the base cost of the game.</p>
Subscription Cost	<p>Due to maintaining high quality server connections for the game, there will be a need for players to potentially pay a subscription service to the game. This would fall into the same categories as other subscription-based games in that players will pay a set amount of money on a rolling plan of either 3, 6 or 12 months to continually access the game. The focus around the plans will be to offer reduced costing for the longer subscription periods to entice players to continue to play the game. The use of frequent content updates (approximately 1 per quarter) will also help to keep players subscribing to the game.</p>
Future major expansions	<p>Due to the nature of MMO's, Guardians of Aether will explore the continent of Althemisa. Depending on the initial success of the game, there may be scope to develop further narratives in the same world, increasing the level cap from 25 to 35 or 40, providing new playable races that are introduced in the game, and more playable classes to offer players a broader range of playable experiences.</p>
Cosmetic Items (cash store specific armour and weapons) & Dyes	<p>An online cash store being setup would enable players to purchase armour and weapons based on specific fashion styles and trends for them to use with their characters. These items will provide no in-game benefits to ensure players continue playing content and to ensure the game does not follow a "Pay to Win" ideology, however, will allow players to customize the looks of their created character.</p> <p>There is also scope to offer premium dyes that players can apply to change the colour of their favourite armours in the game.</p>
Experience Boosting Items	<p>Offering players access to items that boost experience earned is a potential way to allow players to continually engage in the game by providing small incentives to make leveling other classes easier. These items would only work for subsequent classes that players level after completing the main story to maintain balance in the game and ensure that players are able to fully experience the game and narrative as intended</p>

Pets and Mounts	Allowing players to pay for a broader range of premium mounts and summonable pets is another way in which monetization can be applied. Providing players with premium mounts that are not obtainable in game, along with pets that follow players around could potentially result in players spending money to ensure continued development occurs.
Physical Merchandise	Depending on the engagement with players in the game, there is a potential for physical merchandise in the form of figures and plush toys to be produced that could also be sold for profit – this would be implemented only if the game is a success.

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Appendix 1 – Divergent Instance System (DIS)

