
Game Design Document: Pond Scum

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Project Logline

A knight from an amphibious kingdom must protect their pond from a barbarous neighboring faction, but after sparing a helpless child, their perspective begins to change.

Type/Style of Game

Isometric action-RPG

Project Mood

Thoughtful exploration and combat in a whimsical fantasy world on the surface of a pond

Overview

The Knight Castel is a dutiful protector of the Sharpreed Kingdom, sworn to protect its people and territory from all who would encroach upon them. Sharpreed claims ownership of the entirety of Stillwater Pond, which is home to two factions of tiny frog- and axolotl-like humanoids. The Sharpreeds have fought against the latter group, whom they call Scum, for years. Today, Castel receives a quest: travel to Scum City, the home of the outsiders, and slay their barbarous Queen. The Knight is to return to Sharpreed City with her head, and destroy any other Scum in their way.

But as Castel begins their quest and destroys a Scum village in their path, they find and spare a helpless orphaned Scum child called Aketzalli. She is innocent and, unlike most outsiders, speaks the Sharpreed language. Castel agrees to take her to her people at the edge of the pond, on the condition that they leave and never return. As the quest continues, the lines between friend and foe, justice and injustice, become blurred. Despite their differences, Aketzalli starts to change the hateful perspective Castel was raised with. The Knight realizes that these people aren't evil, and that Stillwater is their ancestral home—it was the Sharpreeds who conquered and colonized the territory. The Knight begins using more merciful combat techniques and seeks a peaceful audience with the Queen of Mudburrow, the true name of the Scum.

When the two reach Mudburrow, Aketzalli reveals that she is the Queen—she had been travelling to Sharpreed City to seek peace with the Sharpreeds. The two return to Sharpreed City together, and Castel is challenged by the Guard Captain. After a fierce battle, the Knight defeats the Guard Captain but refuses to kill him. Becoming the new Guard Captain, Castel explains that too much blood has needlessly been shed in the name of power, intimidation, and supremacy. Sharpreed will no longer encourage such violence; the Mudburrowers are not their enemy, and shall no longer be hunted and persecuted. Their homes and traditions are to be respected, and they will share Stillwater Pond in peace. Castel takes in and raises Aketzalli, who becomes a Royal Diplomat.

Emotional Start / Cathartic Event / Emotional Conclusion

- **Emotional Start:** Hatred and violence
- **Cathartic Event:** Sparing an innocent
- **Emotional Conclusion:** Understanding and tolerance

Technical Specifications

Engine

Unity 2021.1.16f1

of Players

One

Estimated Game Play in Minutes

10-15 minutes

Controls

CONTROLS: Mouse and keyboard, possible controller support

CONTROL MAP: [WASD] to move; [Mouse] to navigate UI; [Left Mouse Button] to melee attack; [E] to interact and progress dialogue

Camera

Static isometric camera with player at center, reminiscent of classic dungeon crawlers like Fate and Diablo. Player can zoom in or out slightly but generally camera view will remain the same, except for scripted events where the camera will pan over to a focused subject and then back to centering the player.

Cheats (Required to have at final)

[R] – Restart

[0] - Toggle invulnerability

[1] - Load Level 1

[2] - Load Level 2

[3] - Load Level 3

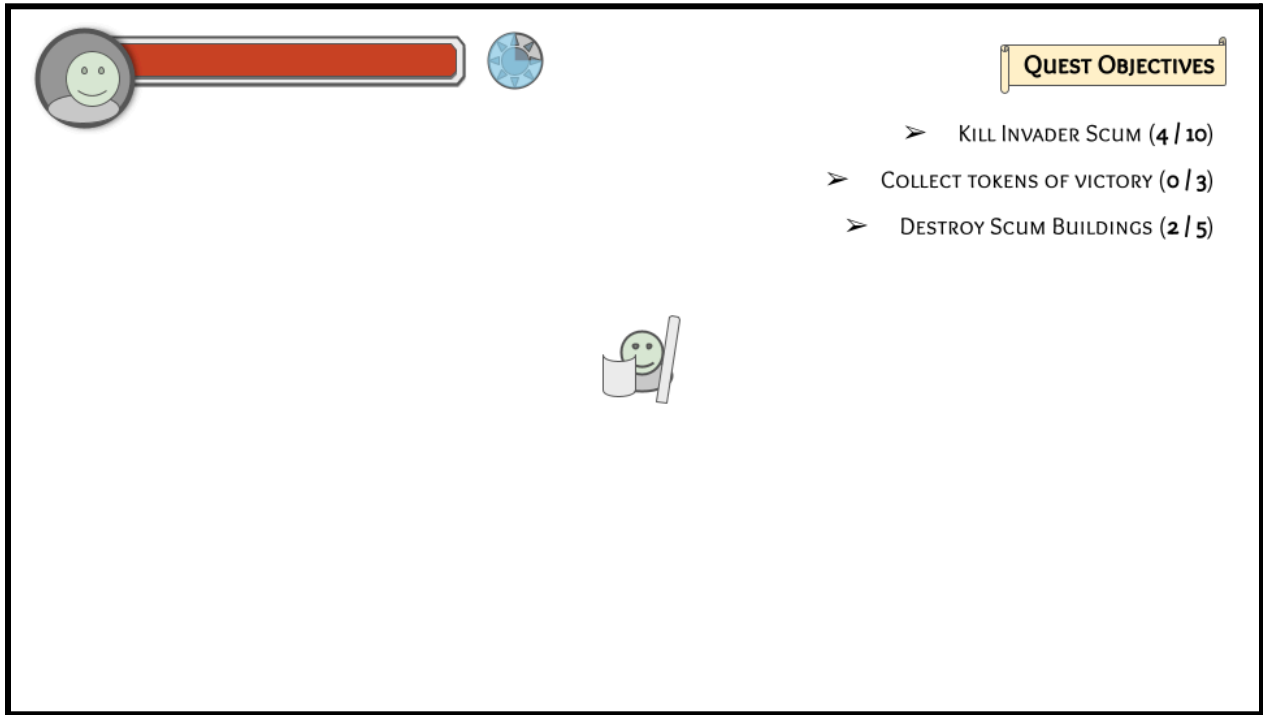
Mechanics

1. **Combat:** The Sharpeed Knight (player character) wields a sword and can use a melee attack with LMB. The environment features destructible objects that can be destroyed by attacking.
 - o **Nonlethal Combat:** The Knight learns how to defeat enemies without killing them (knock-out). After a conversation with the NPC Aketzalli, enemies automatically get knocked out instead of dying when their health reaches a set threshold.
2. **Quest Objectives:** The Knight will always have at least one quest objective given by an NPC. Each act/level will have 1-2 quests. Quest objectives include: kill [x] number of [y] enemy type, destroy [x] number of [y] object type, speak to [x] NPC, collect [x] number of [y] object. Quests can be turned in by interacting with a specific NPC when the objectives are finished.
3. **Character Dialogue:** The game features interactable characters with dialogue, in addition to the player character. Dialogue features a character portrait, a stylized text box, typing text, and synthesized gibberish character “voices” a la Okami or Animal Crossing. There are no dialogue choices, just linear dialogue interactions like in Okami or Hades.
4. **Dungeon Crawler Exploration:** As the player pursues their quest objectives, they will explore series of rooms while fighting enemies, collecting items, destroying objects, and talking to NPCs. Collectible items restore health and are used on pickup, so no dedicated inventory screen is necessary.

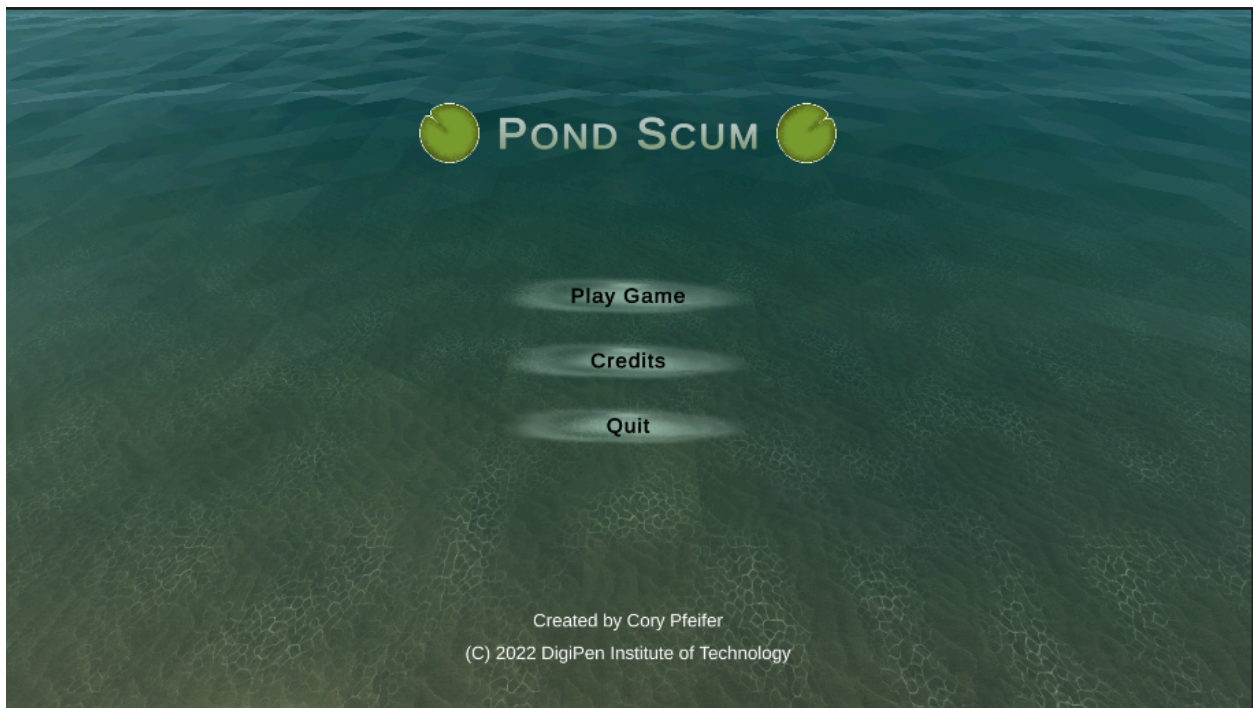
UI/UX Elements

HUD Wireframe

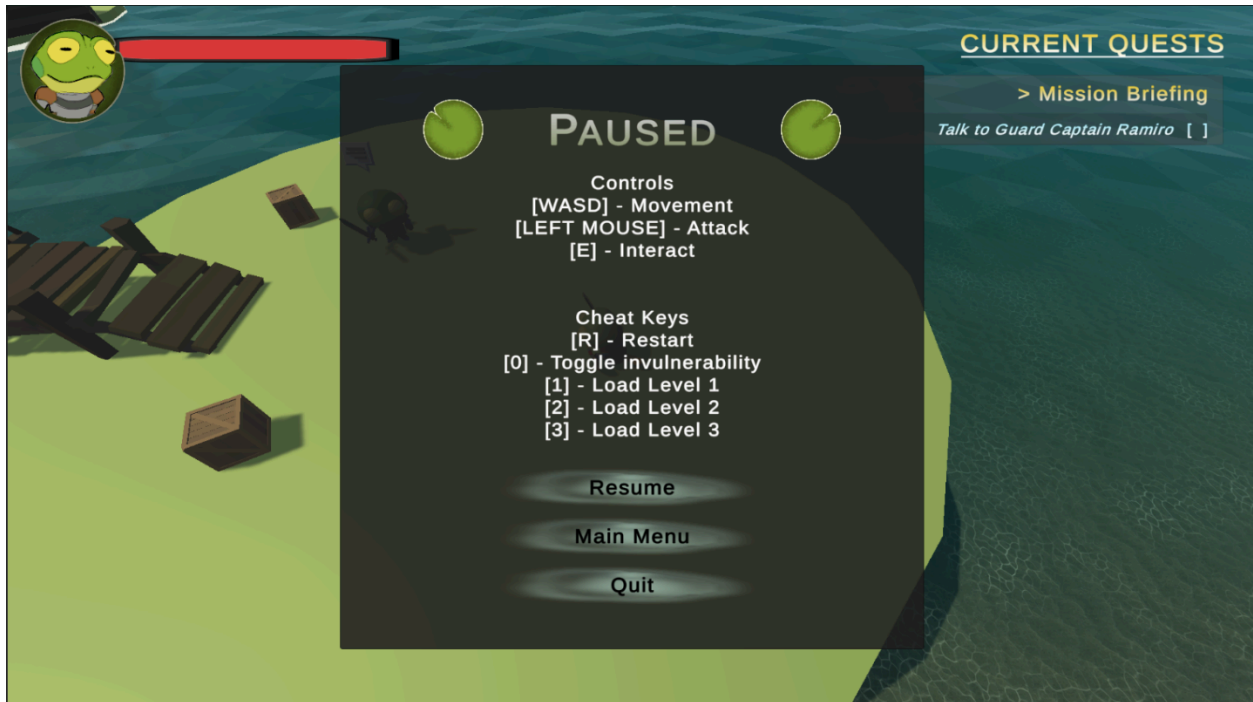
I want my HUD to have as few elements as possible to avoid visual clutter. The only two elements present by default are player health and quest objectives. When an interaction is possible, a modal prompt appears just below the player character and disappears when the interaction occurs or is no longer possible.



Main Menu



Pause Menu



Learning

I intend to teach mechanics through prompts and character dialogue during regular play.

1. Button prompts for interacting with NPCs, item pickups, etc – these are always visible when applicable.
2. Advancing dialogue – an arrow with the relevant button [E] appears at the edge of the window.
3. Combat – Not explicitly taught; the simplicity of the combat enables players to figure it out quickly in the first level.

Affordances/Signifiers/Feedback (ASF)

Interactions will largely be indicated by consistent iconography, color coding, and particles. Interactable items (pickups, NPCs) always display an interaction prompt. Destructible items with loot inside will emit yellow sparkles. Enemies have red floating health bars. When an enemy is knocked out, their health bar freezes and they emit “sleep Zzz” particles. NPCs have a chat icon above their head when dialogue is available (similar to WoW). Particles and sound effects are used for feedback events.



Character ASF

The Protagonist is a light green frog that is always located in the center of the screen, and their portrait is displayed in the upper left. Aketzalli is a small pinkish axolotl with beige clothing. The colors of these characters help them stand out in the environment. Other prominent NPCs, such as the Sharpreed Guard Captain, have unique colors and accessories/clothing to distinguish them from others. Each enemy type from a faction has only one unique

appearance. Sharpreeeds and Mudburrowers will be easily differentiable from each other by their different colors (shades of green vs pink to brown), head shapes (froglike with big bulgy eyes vs feathery gills and flat rounded heads), and presence of a tail (frogs have a thin yellow tail due to modeling limitations, axolotls have a more appropriate ridged tail).



Environmental ASF

Destructible items with loot inside emit yellow sparkles. Most flat terrain can be traversed, and the surrounding water (which is animated) always represents the level bounds. The general style of the environment is stylized low-to medium-poly, with an amphibious fantasy theme.

Level Design

Level 1

Act: 1

Theme: Exciting and violent combat, then emotional realization

Description: This level begins at an outer Scum village called Scum Squats. The Knight Castel speaks to Guard Captain Ramiro and receives their quest to kill the Scum Queen. Castel fights Scum warriors as they move through the village. In the last unscathed building, the Castel finds and spares Aketzalli. The new quest objective to bring the child safely to Scum City is gained, and the two leave the village together.



Level 2

Act: 2

Theme: Journeying to Mudburrow (Scum City), fighting culture shock and misunderstanding

Description: . To get to Scum City, the two must travel through the Backwaters, an area mostly containing natural unsettled pondscape. There is a section of dense foliage, logs, and rocks where the Knight and Aketzalli talk as the player traverses the environment. Then, they reach a Sharpreed Checkpoint where Sharpreed guards block the way

forward. The Knight learns the knock-out technique and uses it to nonlethally defeat them. The Knight learns more about Mudburrow society from Aketzalli. Closer to Scum City, the two encounter Mudburrow Defenders who mistake their intentions and must be nonlethally defeated. As they finally approach Mudburrow, Aketzalli reveals herself to be the Queen. Knowing they can't kill her, Castel agrees to travel back to Sharpreed City with her to advocate for peace.



Level 3

Act: 3

Theme: Final confrontation and changing the ways of Sharpreed

Description: Having reached Sharpreed City with the Mudburrow Queen, Castel is not welcomed back by their people. Castel confronts the Guard Captain and tries to convince him to negotiate peacefully. The Guard Captain refuses and initiates the final boss battle. The Knight nonlethally defeats him, becoming the new Guard Captain. Turning back to the crowd of Sharpreed warriors, the Knight declares the end of Sharpreed colonization of Mudburrowers. The Knight adopts Aketzalli and she becomes the first Royal Diplomat of Sharpreed.



Characters

Protagonist – Knight Castel

Purpose in Game: Protagonist

Appearance: Spring green frog with standard Sharpreed armor.

Motivation/Goal: Initially – to protect the Sharpreed Kingdom, uphold the honor of Sharpreeds, and make Ramiro proud; later – to protect Aketzalli and end Sharpreed hostility against Mudburrowers

Special Abilities/Unique Aspects: Standard melee attack; after learning from Aketzalli, can defeat enemies without killing them

Overview: Castel is a Sharpreed Knight who was orphaned as a child and raised by Guard Captain Ramiro. They were raised to deeply value Sharpreed ideals of honor and superiority, and also to hate the “Scum” who live in

Stillwater Pond. Castel is chivalrous but not blindly loyal, and holds empathy for innocent and vulnerable creatures.



Antagonist – Guard Captain Ramiro

Purpose in Game: Antagonist

Appearance: Dark green frog with dark reddish markings and a stern expression. Wears special black and red Sharpreed armor.

Motivation/Goal: To uphold the “superiority” of the Sharpreed Kingdom and gain control over the entirety of Stillwater Pond

Special Abilities/Unique Aspects: Strong melee attack, much more health than normal warriors, slower move speed than normal warriors

Overview: Guard Captain Ramiro has held his position of power over the Sharpreed Guard for a long time. He is highly motivated to strengthen Sharpreed’s military forces and spread the ideals of Sharpreed superiority. Ramiro is a father figure to Castel, who he raised into the Guard after losing their parents. Ramiro sees Castel as his perfectly handcrafted warrior, though he believes they are naïve for their empathetic tendencies. Many years ago, Ramiro was responsible for the initial occupation/colonization of Stillwater Pond as a new home for the Sharpreeds. Ramiro killed the Mudburrow Monarchs and has steadily waged war on them since.



NPC #1 – Aketzalli, Queen of Mudburrow (Scum Child)

Purpose in Game: Incites change in protagonist, educates protagonist about the true nature of the “Scum”

Appearance: Very small pink axolotl with beige clothing.

Motivation/Goal: To end Sharpreed hostility towards Mudburrow and protect her people, culture, and land

Special Abilities/Unique Aspects: Teaches Castel how to non-lethally defeat enemies

Overview: Aketzalli is the orphaned child of the Mudburrow Monarchs who were killed in the initial invasion of Stillwater Pond. She is sensitive, thoughtful, and diplomatic. Aketzalli spent years teaching herself the Sharpreed language in an effort to be the first to speak to them directly and negotiate for peace. She planned to travel to Sharpreed City to attempt this, but was staying in Scum Squats when Castel killed everyone there except her.

Aketzalli deeply cares about the future of her people. She has seen a lot of loss, but refuses to let it corrupt her into violence or indifference.



Story Overview - Hero's Journey

Pond Scum

Logline

A knight from an amphibious kingdom must protect their pond from a barbarous neighboring faction, but after sparing a helpless child, their perspective begins to change.

| DEPARTURE: The protagonist is separated from the known world and steps into the unknown world. | | |
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| | | Key Mechanics |
| Ordinary World | The Knight leaves Sharpeed City, their home, at the orders of the Guard Captain. Their quest is to travel to the hub city of the outsiders ("Scum") and kill their leader, then return with their head. They are to kill all Scum in their path. | Combat (Regular melee & shield), Quest Objectives (Kill all scum), Dungeon Crawler Exploration, Dialogue |
| 1. <u>Call to Adventure</u> | After destroying a Scum settlement, the Knight encounters a helpless orphaned child who, unlike other Scum, speaks the Sharpeed language. The child begs for its life. | |
| 2. <u>Refusal of the Call</u> | The Knight can't bring themself to kill the Child and tells them to run, saying that's all they can do. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Refusal</i> | The Knight turns their back and tells the Child to run back to its people and lay low. The Child explains that there's no way it could make it back to its people without help; they would never make it past the Sharpeed checkpoint, and patrols would likely kill them. Without protection, the Child is as good as dead. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Acceptance</i> | The Knight agrees to bring the Child with them to Scum City, on the condition that they never approach Sharpeed territory again. | Quest Objectives (Bring the Child to Scum City) |

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| 3. <u>Mentor/ Supernatural Aide</u> | The Child tells the Knight about the geography and organization of Scum society, giving them vital information to help the Knight protect the Child while traveling to Scum City. | Dialogue (while traveling) |
| • <i>Guide</i> | The Child is the Knight's guide. | |
| 4. <u>The First Threshold</u> | While on their way to Scum City, the Knight must pass through a Sharpreed checkpoint manned by guards who will kill the Child and report the Knight if their disobedience is discovered. The Knight can't abide killing their own people, but can think of no other way to pass. | |
| • <i>Threshold Guardians</i> | The Child teaches the Knight how to nonlethally knock-out enemies. The Knight must nonlethally defeat the Sharpreed guards to safely pass through with the Child. | Nonlethal Combat (knock-out introduced) |
| | | |
| INITIATION: By crossing the threshold, the world of the protagonist is changed forever. A mental and physical journey merge to result in a spiritual revelation of purpose and self. | | |
| <i>Enemies</i> | Along the way to Scum City, the Knight fights hostile Scum and Sharpreed forces. Later, the final enemy is the Guard Captain, who is a father figure to the Knight and leads the Sharpreed military. | |
| <i>Companions (Allies)</i> | The Child is the Knight's main companion and serves as a quest-giver. Eventually, the Child reveals that she is the Queen; she learned the Sharpreed language and traveled to the outer camp because they wanted to advocate for peace in Sharpreed City. | |
| 5. <u>The Journey/Road of Trials</u> | The Knight and Child journey to Mudburrow (known to the Sharpreeds as Scum City). Along the way, the Knight must fight Mudburrow warriors who take the Knight to be a threat who kidnapped the Child, as well as Sharpreeds who have gotten word of the Knight's treachery. The Child advocates for the Knight to use nonlethal methods, and the Knight learns to knock enemies out instead of killing them. After bonding some, the Child reveals herself to be the Queen. Knowing they can't kill her, the Knight agrees to take the Queen back to Sharpreed City to try to convince them to be peaceful. | Dungeon Crawler Exploration, Quest Objectives (Escape the Mudburrow Prison, Find the Mudburrow Queen), Combat (nonlethal) |
| 6. <u>The Final Dungeon</u> | After traveling back to the Sharpreed capital, the Sharpreeds protest when they see the Knight peaceably entering with Scum. The Knight must continue past them to reach the royal palace. | Quest Objective (Seek Peace with the Guard Captain) |
| 7. <u>The Great Ordeal/Boss battle</u> | The Knight confronts the Guard Captain with the Mudburrow Queen and explains their situation and desire for peace and coexistence. The Guard Captain rebukes the Knight and initiates | |

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| | combat. Under Sharpreed law, the punishment for treachery is death. | |
| <i>Catharsis</i> | The Knight fights the Guard Captain and defeats him. Sharpreed tradition states that a warrior who defeats the Guard Captain (typically by killing him) takes his role. The Knight refuses to kill him, explaining that too much blood has needlessly been shed in the name of power, intimidation, and supremacy. Taking the mantle of Guard Captain, the Knight will no longer encourage such violence. | |
| 8. <u>The Prize</u> | As the new Guard Captain, the Knight decrees that the Mudburrowers are not their enemy, and shall no longer be hunted and persecuted. Their homes and traditions are to be respected, and they will share Stillwater Pond in peace. | |
| | | |
| RETURN: Through the protagonist's sacrifice of himself, they walk in an enlightened state. | | |
| 9. <u>The Road Home</u> | Now that the Queen is safe and has reached Sharpreed City, the Knight asks about her goals. The Knight adopts her and offers for her to be the first Royal Diplomat of Sharpreed. | |
| 10. <u>The Return</u> | The Knight promises to facilitate efforts to rebuild the relationship between the Sharpreeds, the Mudburrowers, and the Pond. Aketzalli accepts their aid and becomes the Royal Diplomat. | |