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Ludum Dare #38: Post Mortem of "Headroom"

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by

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INTRO

LD Logo, screenshot of website, Tweets from Mike & LD

OFF

Ludum Dare #38 marks the anniversary of fifteen years of Ludum Dare and also set a new record: Never before had so many people participated and published their games, in the end there were almost 3 thousand submissions. It was also a real stress test for the shiny new website.

Screen grab of submitted games, (Mag Gunner)?

My first jam was LD #32 so I can't talk much about history. Just that personally I find it extraordinary that so many people contribute to the medium.

In my last documentary, I mentioned that I wanted to shake things up a bit. I just did one thing differently this time, but that changed everything that followed:

I collaborated.

Game: "Another player joins!"

TEASER

OFF

See the struggle, the joy, the sweat, and all that pizza that forged our Ludum Dare 38 game. Seventy-two hours of peril, polygons, and programming. This is the post-mortem of: Headroom.

(TITLE ANIMATION)

BACK-STORY COLLABORATION

OFF

To me, Ludum Dare had always been a solo-adventure. Just me and the

computer and a goal: To make a game in 48 hours.

In January I was having a coffee with my good friend Max. My wild stories of my Ludum Dare experiences must have piqued his interest. "Hey, you wanna team up for the next one?" he asked, "Sure!" said I and it was settled: Ludum Dare 38 would be a co-op effort.

INTRO MAX

OFF

This is Max Meraner. He came late to gaming but has since spent every waking hour catching up and falling in love with From Software's Souls series. Max also happens to be a "real" programmer, someone who's literally getting paid for coding -- it's so weird! It was Max who introduced me to the concept of Git and version control early before the jam, which speaks volumes about ~~how~~ our different levels of proficiency.

OFF

In addition to programming, Max biggest strength is coming up with lots of different game ideas out of the blue, it's incredible. Since this is my biggest weakness ... okay, one of my biggest weaknesses, Max would be our secret weapon. Another factor was time.

JAM VS COMPO

OFF

In Ludum Dare's solo category you have 48 hours to make a game. Since we would be running in the jam category we had a full 72 hours to make our game.

Crunch time extended!

Game: Extra Time!

CHANGES WHEN COLLABORATING

OFF

Not running solo means also new challenges, such as where to jam, data exchange and data safety, scheduling for two people, or just who is doing what.

Pokémon: "A wild challenge appeared!"?

A PLACE TO JAM

OFF

We elected my home office as base of operations, Conny donated her desk for Max and his notebook.

DATA SAFETY

OFF

Also our files needed a place to stay, so I set up a shared folder on a drive on our home server. As a precaution, I scheduled a script that would back up the project every 3 hours to a zip file on a different drive that a potential catastrophe would only set us back 3 hours at the most.

OFF

To complicate things further, Max was working on his MacBook while my workstation was my beefed up Windows 10 PC. What could go wrong?

(break)

Nothing. Really. It worked, once his Computer was accepted in our LAN.

SCHEDULE

OFF

When two ^{people} persons with different sleeping patterns are supposed to crunch together, there already are concessions to be made. Max could start working at 8 in the morning whereas I would be best rested after 4 in the afternoon. We met somewhere in the middle, having our days start at 10:30-ish and Max would leave around 11 p.m. each day.

SPLITTING UP TASKS

OFF

Long before the jam, we looked at how to best split our workload. Because Max is a far superior coder, he'd do the programming in Unity, and because I am a notorious polisher, I'd take care of the art and assets. Concept and game design would happen in collaboration. ~~that was the plan.~~

UNITY

OFF

Another new thing for me was getting to grips with Unity. I've grown familiar and somewhat comfortable with Game Maker but the occasional look over the fence at the dazzling world of object-oriented programming in C# just was too enticing. Game Maker is great for 2D stuff, but building a game experience in 3D is much more immersive.

Footage from The Cellar, Visual Studio Code

The weeks leading up to the jam, I dove right in and started a small test project, a first-person re-imagining of my LD#37 game, "The Cellar".

I spent countless hours with playing around, watching tutorials, lurking on StackOverflow, and end endlessly refactoring my terrible C# code. Wrapping my head around classes, inheritance, and scoping was a bit intimidating in the beginning, but ultimately worth it and great fun.

PRE-JAM MEETING WITH MAX

OFF

Incidentally, that meant I had more Unity experience than my programmer!
Two days before the jam, I visited

Max and showed him what I got.
Laying bare my hacky code in front
of a real programmer was a
terrifying experience. At least it
brought Max up to speed how things
worked in principle inside Unity.

Eating pizza

OFF

And we primed our stomachs for what
to expect that weekend.

SHOPPING

OFF

The last step of preparation was
scavenging for supplies for us to
survive the weekend: Fruit, nuts,
drinks, questionable choices in
refrigerated pizzas, sweets, and
delicious treats to reward
ourselves for milestones.

Game start visual cue.

ANNOUNCEMENT

PHIL enters office.



OFF

The theme's announcement, as always, happened at 3 a.m. local time with me still ~~wide awake~~ *wide awake*.
~~am~~ Everything was ready, I just had to wait.

Theme voting.

OFF

Once more, I was expectant for one of my preferred themes to win. I had some ideas for "Two Colors", but in general I avoid brainstorming before the announcement because to me that feels a bit like cheating.

Windows wants to update, BSOD.

OFF



There must be a joker somewhere at Microsoft following the jam, because like clockwork, a Windows update was ready for download shortly before the announcement, just like last time. Sure, why not? What's the worst that could ... oh right. That. Off to a good start, aren't we?

My workstation trying to recollect itself, I resorted to some mindless gaming and refreshing my Twitter time line.

"hoping for the best..."



This time, the theme was "Small World". Funny, because that was the only theme from the final voting round that I dreaded the most. But this time around I wasn't on my own.

Writing SMS to Max.

OFF

I fired a quick text message to Max so he could start churning out ideas as soon as he'd see it.

Starting up Scully.

Once *was* OFF
 After I had largely finished my indulgence in self pity, I went to

looking down onto keyboard



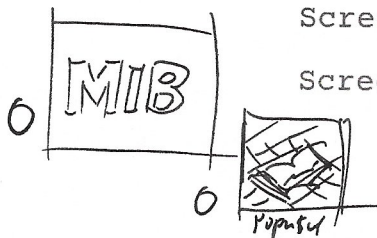
work. Kinda.

OFF

Spelling out my ideas didn't get me far, I felt I needed to think in images.

Screengrab: Ending sequence of MIB.

Screengrab: Populus.



OFF

The first idea I had was the universe as a marble like in the ending sequence of *Men in Black*, then a self-contained miniature village in a book, probably because I had spent some time with *Populus* recently.

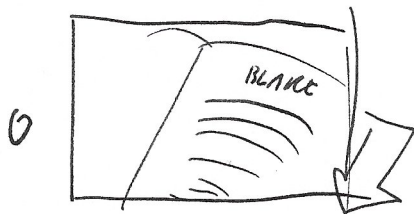
All of a sudden my brain tapped into a buried poem and produced the first lines from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*:

Pan over the poem in *Collected Works*:

BOOK

"To see a world in a grain of sand,
and heaven in a wild flower,
hold infinity in the palm of your
hand,
and eternity in an hour."

OFF



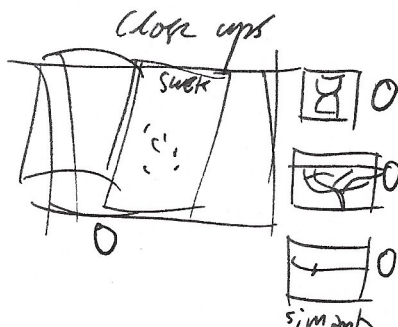
World... sand... hour... of course!

Screengrab: Footage from SimAnt

OFF

I had this vision of a desert town in an hourglass and tunnels underneath reminiscent of *SimAnt*, tunnels that would collapse as the sands of time trickled down. I was quite enamored with the premise, there was potential for a great mechanic in there; and how turning the hourglass over would be a mind-blowing twist.

I called it a day and hoped for Max to have something even better.



DAY 1

MAKING COFFEE ETC



OFF

The alarm woke me at 9:30 in the worst of it. [ALT: Since caffeine transfusions are not easy to come by, I had to settle for the old-fashioned way and I] brewed myself a big, steamy pot of liquid motivation to appear awake enough for Max. In a bout of caffeine-lit zeal, I relocated my white-board to facilitate some professional agile development.

OFF

Max arrived shortly after with Annabel, his girlfriend. As our ladies left for brunch, there was just one thing for us to do: buckle down and work.

Montage with Eye of the Tiger as in BBT, S03E04

OFF

Ind As I had hoped, Max brought a whole list of ideas with him and we began pitching to each other and put our material on the board.

an The top-runners were the world inside the hourglass; an adventure game set in an ordinary room with the player being tiny, and a racing game with planets.

I still was in favor of the hourglass idea which Max found promising too. There was something great in there, somewhere, we just had to unearth it. Whatever that was, it was just out of reach. We tried all sorts of approaches to extract that One Great Mechanic but to no avail. Max already put into words what I wouldn't admit:

2364-01:01

MAX

I am afraid I like the concept too much...

had to OFF

We put it aside for the time being and shifted our attention towards

the other ideas. Here's us exploring the wacky racing game with planets with chocolates.

OFF

I still find it funny how billions would scream as the player would use Jupiter's gravity to drift around a galactic corner. Aside from that we knew that this wasn't going anywhere either.

2377-00:59 Bolson Construction gag

MAX

It's not about losing your mind...

OFF

We moved our brainstorming around the apartment. Each idea we picked ran through our fingers like sand the closer we looked. It was frustrating.

OFF

At 3 p.m. we were 12 hours in without a promising concept. This all looked awfully familiar to me. My bad influence must've rubbed off to Max, as this time it was him flipping through Simon Stålenhag's book, "Ur Varselklotet", desperate for inspiration.

OFF

We went back to the hourglass idea, and kept smashing our heads against it. [ALT: In our despair Max called our better halves for ideas and advice regarding that hourglass thing.] There's something in there, goddammit! Even with a lot of emergency pizza, no Eureka!-moment relieved us from our frustration. 2401-01:17

PHIL

The theme is shit.

MAX

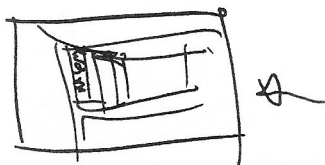
No it's not the theme.

(beat)

Let's put it this way: What kind of game would you like to make?

PHIL

Myst.



RETURN TO THE HOURGLASS IDEA

OFF

Ultimately, we accepted that we had
~~to just let the hourglass idea~~ go... *Just lost 2* *if* ✓

Frozen meme?

OFF

With sober eyes we returned to one
 of Max's ideas, the survival game
 set entirely in an ordinary room,
 with the player being the size of
 an ant. ✓

What I liked about it was that it
 put the tired old survival
 mechanics in a new context. Instead
 of punching trees for wood and
 hunting boars for food, players
 would have to scavenge for matches
 and mine crumbs. ✓

It reminded me a bit of [ALT:
 SimAnt in that regard, or of] Bad
 Mojo, if anybody remembers it. ✓

BASIC CONCEPT

OFF

This That departure finally got the ball
 rolling and we struck game design
 gold at last: Instead of just being
 tiny in a big room, everything
 would change in size depending on
 where you went. Passing one door
 would put you in the same room,
 albeit smaller; going the other way
 round would grow you in size. ✓

STUBS FOR PUZZLES

OFF

Quickly, we came up with a bunch of
 stubs for puzzles involving
 changing size. How cool would it be
 to pick up a needle when you are
 tiny and take it with you to the
 normal-sized world. The needle ✓

would keep its relative size when you picked it up, meaning that you now had a big spear.

Seeing all the possibilities we committed to it. *This* would be our game. We just had to make it.

1ST PERSON

Early OFF
 Soon, we agreed upon the game being played in 1st person 3D so no character design was necessary, thank heavens! Plus Max could use some of my existing code from 'The Cellar'.

He Max came up with the concept of a cabin within a cabin within a cabin so when players looked back, they would see the cabin they just came from as if it were a dollhouse.

DIRECTION

OFF *quite to 6 p.m.*
 Around 17:45 we finally had a direction. It had taken us 15 hours. Could it work? Only one way to find out.

Max and Phil in front of the white board.

PHIL
 Let's prototype it!

OFF
 I began blocking out a rough room in Unity in and continued in Maya to mock-up a proof of concept of the nesting, while Max picked apart my Unity prototype of 'The Cellar' and threw out most of it.

After a while I had a first prototype set up in Maya. It became obvious that the player growing and shrinking was limited by the height of the doorways they had to traverse, so I kept tweaking.

We thought *we had* made good progress on

our idea until we realized we had slightly different notions of what the game should be.

~~(Communication is key.)~~

CLARIFICATION MEETING

~~PHIL~~

~~Clarification Meeting!~~

OFF

Thus far, I had assumed that the room would keep its size while players grow and shrink, while Max thought of differently sized nested instances of the interior with the player retaining their scale.

In the end, we found common ground in the room staying the same, and scaling and teleporting the player around. Teleporting hassles aside, that's simpler to implement and way easier to handle in the editor than a fractal nesting of instanced environments.

20:00 - STATUS

OFF

Around 8 p.m. we had collected some ideas for item-scaling puzzles and an interim floor plan on the board. Max was already running around in my blocky concept room in Unity and could start implementing holding objects. I tweaked the layout of the walls to prevent players from potentially seeing themselves through either door-portal.

21:50 - PLAYER GOAL

OFF

10 to 10 we had our second meal mulling over the goal. The game was lacking a win-condition, a flaw nearly all my jam games shared.

"Get big enough to escape? Kinda

like Alice in Wonderland... you unlock a cupboard and there's a potion inside that lets you grow free." Max suggested. Perfect!

ART DIRECTION

OFF

"Alice in Wonderland" was all the art direction I needed for the setting. The log cabin thus became a Victorian interior with floral wallpaper, polished and shiny mahogany panels, dusty bookcases, a little writing desk... I loved it.

Highly motivated I spend the following hour gathering references for the art style as Max grew more comfortable with C# in Unity.

ON HAVING A PROGRAMMER

OFF

Having a dedicated person on the team that focuses entirely on the code was a big relief to me.

Don't get me wrong, I really enjoy coding. But now I could completely wallow in sinful polishing without a guilty conscience for sacrificing essential coding time.

2 PEOPLE ON THE SAME UNITY PROJECT

OFF

Soon we realized that it was not possible for both of us to have the scene open in Unity at the same time.

I was working on the assets in Maya and Photoshop, so Max had priority access to the scene.

When it came to shading, I had a local copy of the project where I could tweak the shaders as long as I wanted, place any new asset and add colliders. Then I made a prefab out of it and exported a Unity

when I was finished

Asset package for Max to import. ✓

Whenever he'd take a break, I'd quickly jump in to fine tune art and placement on the live project. ✓

That's not optimal, but it worked for us then. ✓

MAX LEAVES

OFF

Max stayed until midnight that day as I was finishing up the wall segment that would make up our rooms. ✓

OFF

Logic-wise, picking up objects worked in principle. We agreed to meet at half past 10 and I went back to doing a little more polishing before going to bed. ✓

the next day

3 A.M.

OFF

After 24 hours the groundwork of our game was laid and I was getting tired but I was having too much fun to stop. It was long past 3 when I finally did and shambled to bed. ✓

DAY 2

OFF

Wholly ignoring my own advice to
get plenty of sleep, On Day 2 I
made a bee-line for what was left
of yesterday's coffee...

(beat)

and...then brewed another pot. ✓

2509-00:22 Max arrives

OFF

Max arrived shortly before 11 for
our next session. ✓

PHIL

Morning.

MAX

Morning. You're up already?

PHIL

Kinda.

MAX

Oh god...

} Subtitles!

DOOR FRAME

OFF

Max continued adding new features,
while I started with the next art
assets: A Victorian door frame to
go with the wall panels. ✓

Time lapse of modeling

OFF

Then: Rugs to make the place a bit
more homey. ✓

NEW FLOOR PLAN

OFF

In another informal stand-up
meeting, we finalized the floor
layout and how passing through a
portal affected the player's world
position and rotation. Easy-peasy! ✓

2516-00:38

PHIL

...it's that simple.

MAX

That simple! Big discussion.

MAYA CRASHING

OFF

But suddenly Maya and Unity became recalcitrant up to a worrying degree. Especially Maya got very prone to random crashes, particularly when splitting polygons or moving UVs.

2516-01:11

MAX

Why?

PHIL

Because Maya.

MAX

Because Maya...

OFF

Over time it got so bad that I had a shortcut to the crash-save folder to quickly pick up work. Unless Windows force-installed an update out of the blue.

2520-02:54

PHIL

Why?!

16:00 - MAKING A PLAY-THROUGH POSSIBLE

OFF

At 4 p.m. we had our first lunch break over which we socialized and talked about our next steps. Crashes aside, everything was coming along nicely. We still had a lot of work ahead, but we couldn't help sharing a positive outlook on the endeavor. Highest priority was having a complete play-through possible in its barest form first, then we'd add complexity until we'd run out of time.

OFF

And I ran out of something essential much sooner.

2525-00:22

MAX

Is that ... coffee?

PHIL

Coffee. I've run out of ground coffee.

PORTALS

OFF

The initial idea was to traverse the level and grow and shrink as you'd walk seamlessly through a series of rooms that, surprise!, are the same room all over again.

OFF

Max demonstrated picking up placeholders and using the portals including scaling the objects with the player.

ESCAPE THE ROOM

OFF

Some time around this point, we also ditched the unlockable cabinet with the "Drink Me" potion and *instead* opted for a plain old locked exit door. "Escape the room", *is* a trope most everybody understands *that's* instantly.

17:30 - THE DAVENPORT

OFF

For the door you'd need a key, naturally, but the key couldn't just be sitting on the floor. We needed something to put it on top.

OFF

I busied myself with modeling this little writing desk, called a "Davenport". I learned a whole lot of new terms for furniture that day.

CHIPPENDALE BIT

cue
PHIL, with top-hat, ~~monocle~~, pipe in hand, asking CONNY in a snobby, faux Upperclass tone.

did you care across my pants?
 SNOBBY PHIL

shored
 Darling, have you seen my *on*
 pantaloons? I thought I draped them *emptied*
 the chaise lounge, but I can't find *castel*
 them. I've searched the *shifted*
etagère,
 I've looked under the Canterbury,
 I've ruffled the Chiffonnier and
 picked apart the Pembroke.

persistently
 CONNY

Have you looked in the Chippendale?

checked
 PHIL

(dropping his antics)
 The what now?

HOME OFFICE

OFF

Max demonstrated what worked thus far: Picking up and throwing objects, and teleporting players around. Whatever they'd be holding it would scale with them accordingly. Nice! ✓

OFF

Three hours later also the portal cameras were working, you could now see through a door to the other side. ✓

Animation showing what's going on.

OFF

For this to work, we ended up with having cameras on either side that render to the texture of a plane placed in the door frame on the opposite side. ✓

KEY & ENDING SEQUENCE

OFF

The second key asset we'd be needing was ... well, the the key. ✓

PHIL

Fine. So, erm, key right?

MAX

Key.

PHIL

Key.

OFF

While we were at it, we also discussed how the ending sequence should play out.

2530-02:15

MAX

I just don't know what should be on the outside.

PHIL

I don't know, just a bit of scenery, you take a couple of steps, fade out.

2530-02:45

MAX

You know what would be cool? When you're outside in that beautiful garden, and in the distance you see a giant door.

PHIL

Oooh!

Timelapse of Key modeling / 2532

OFF

I struggled a bit with my box modeling techniques on that one until I recalled the basics of how to do it with splines.

PRIORITY LIST

2536

OFF

Towards the end of our shift, we compiled a quick priority list for what the game still needed at that time, such as the door to the outside, the outside, ending animation, menu screen, intro text, and sound.

OFF

items such as: We added a "Nice to have" list *that listed* including assets for lamps, a cupboard, music, footsteps, paintings on the walls, that sort of stuff.

2536-02:40

PHIL

Can we manage all that tomorrow?
Yes.

MAX

The six items on the left for sure.
That's pretty doable.

OFF

The puzzle ideas we had kept, got the "nicer to have" label, meaning we would touch them only if we had the key-puzzle finished and still some time. We couldn't help but feel pretty good about ourselves.

2536-04:14 fist bump

23:00

2540-01:51

OFF

Max went home at 11 and, just like the day before, I kept working. I set up the terrain for the outside, and populated it with standard Unity assets.

FOLEY RECORDING

OFF

Once that was done, I took care of the sounds. I like to do my foley recordings at night because there are no birds, no airplanes, and not much traffic noise in the background. With various objects substituting for our heavy key, I recorded dropping them onto the floor, carpet, and picking them up. Further, different footsteps on wood and carpet, just in case.

Recording lock of balcony door and bathroom door.

OFF

...and various locking mechanisms around the apartment. Quick and easy.

PAINTING

OFF

As a subtle setup for the ending, we thought it to be nice to have a painting innocuously depicting the outside world. As soon as I was done fiddling with the latter, I took a screenshot of it to Photoshop, threw a cheesy filter on and painted some lost details back in.

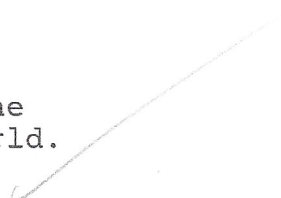
tension



THE DOOR

OFF

My last duty for that day was the door leading to this outside world. Modeling, texturing and shading were very straight forward.



ASSETS LOOKING GOOD

OFF

I wanted to make every asset look as best as I possibly could. And this meant going the extra mile on texturing and shading, manually baking ambient occlusion into the albedo and specular maps and generating normal maps from fake depth-maps.

05:00 - GOING TO BED

OFF

At 5, the morning dawn tinged the sky navy blue, I was in dire need for as much sleep as I could get. In the noise of the early birds shouting at each other, I went to bed.

of

DAY 3

PHIL in bed, looking terrible, trying to open his eyes, inter-cut to sleepy kitten.

OFF

Three days without enough sleep and it took me half an hour to open both of my eyes and get up. I was grateful that the jam didn't last any longer than it did, because I felt outspent already. Just one more day. One more day...

AUDIO ASSETS

OFF

I selected, edited, and converted the recorded sounds into assets for Max to put in the game, as if he wasn't occupied enough already. For the sound effect of traversing the portals, I played with speed effects and layering again until it sounded interesting enough.

12:50 - GAME TITLE

OFF

Looking at our list, our game still needed a title. It had to be cool and witty, hint at the mechanics, set the tone, tie the experience to the theme, and paint an evocative surreal atmosphere. My first idea was simply "Alice" and we both knew it sucked. Max proposed "head-space", and without much thought I blurted "headroom!", probably thinking of Max Headroom.

Short MAX HEADROOM snippet

12:50 - GAME TITLE (CONT'D.)

OFF

Headroom... The longer we thought about it, the more we liked it. At 12:50 we could take it from the list and I threw together a title card for our game with a name.

MUSIC

OFF

As you all know, I am a sucker for atmosphere and ambient sound is great for that. Though, there were no visible sound sources anywhere in the level, apart from the outside world. Thus, music should cover for that deficit.

Something electronic or grand symphonic would not really fit the game's atmosphere. I dusted off my solo strings library and experimented with a chamber quartet at first. I tried different combinations and styles of cello, violin, and viola, then a piano. Once I had the viola playing marcato stabs shaping both rhythm and melody, everything fell into place from that point on. Surprisingly, just after 90 minutes, we could tick off music from our list.

What's next?

FRAME & PAINTINGS

OFF

The painting depicting the outside world was lacking a nice frame that went well with the rest of the interior, so back to Maya. Once it was ready, adding more paintings to the scene was as ~~simple as changing a texture~~ *just a sample matter of...*

Showcasing Pre-Raphaelite paintings

OFF

I wanted to share my admiration and love for the fairy-tale-like quality with the realistic lighting in the paintings of John William Waterhouse and especially Edmund Blair Leighton. Both being Pre-Raphaelite painters, so their works fit into the time period of the interior perfectly.

MAKING THE PUZZLE MORE INTERESTING

OFF

Having the key lay in the open on the davenport, with just the wrong size, wasn't that interesting of a

puzzle but, hey, it worked! We still had time to make it a little more interesting. Max suggested a piece of furniture that you could see under, but not reach under at your starting size. Some bookcase would do. And that was my next task as Max was debugging colliders and scripting the ending sequence, driven entirely by code. *or Sandhi.*

BOOKCASE & EASTER EGGS

OFF

After a bit of research on Google Images, I started modeling. It was rather straightforward and I felt pretty confident about my modeling skills at that point. I got cocky and decided to place a bunch of books inside, and I dropped the ball there. I did not properly think through how to handle mapping and texturing before I began modeling, and that cost me much more time than necessary. Also, the spines look ugly in comparison. Yet all that didn't stop me to slip in some Easter Eggs on the book covers that are visible.

19:45

OFF *busy*

While I was busy with the books, Max had something ready to demonstrate. The essentials were in the game so far, even sounds for throwing and picking up the key, and the ending sequence was largely done. There were just some minor audio bugs.

2613-00:02

MAX

This fucking thing won't stop playing even if I tell it to: outside ambiance - stop, now, stop! ... I know why. I know why... Because I start the ending cue on each frame.

MAX

The fun thing is: Each frame we alternated between pausing and playing the audio such quickly,

that it sounded seamless.

21:00 PROBLEMS WITH COLLIDERS

OFF

Throughout, we had problems with our colliders, the key occasionally falling through the floor. We solved this by adding a big box collider below the floor that would push everything back up what fell through. Not entirely safe but an improvement, at least. *ever*

SAFE BUILD

OFF

Max was determined for us to have everything that was needed for a submission ready as early as possible. That not only meant a functioning build, but also screenshots and the submission text. Should anything go horribly wrong later, we still had this safe build to submit. Provided we knew how to actually submit.

22:00 - LEARNING HOW TO SUBMIT

OFF

Because the whole website was so new, I had to research how to do it. Thankfully, Mike posted a bunch of mini-tutorials and they were invaluable. That out of the way, we needed that functioning build. Four and a half hours to the deadline, we attempted to build the game for the very first time.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

TEAM NAME

OFF

In the build-set-up there was an empty field for the developer name. Of course, we couldn't tolerate a blank field, and finding a team name was suddenly priority number one. A witty combination of our surnames was almost impossible. The

best thing "Strahl" and "Meraner"
 can be mashed together is
 "Meranahl" ... which sounds like
 German for "more anal". Yeah...
 That's why we just went with the
 initials and proudly called
 ourselves "S&M Productions".
 Nothing ambiguous about that.

Phil, cracking a whip.

PHIL

Absolutely NOTHING, you perverts!

BUILDING THE FIRST BUILD

OFF

While Max's MacBook took its sweet
 time building for the first time, I
 lost it. Suddenly I was terrified
 that the game would not build then,
 or ever, that we couldn't submit
 anything at all. Beach ball of
 terror.

Slow zoom in on PHIL's worried face, the spinning
 beach ball fading in, overlaying it.

2632-00:48

PHIL

I've used too many textures... but
 it's so beautiful!!

OFF

All I wanted was return to what was
 familiar to me, to what I could
 control. More polishing.

2632-01:22

PHIL

Lighting probes.

MAX

No!

PHIL

Quality settings?

MAX

We haven't tested the game yet!

Max walks over to his MacBook.

MAX

It's almost done.

PHIL

Almost done? Phew. Let me grab the camera!

OFF

It did take more than 10 minutes, but everything was fine. Of course it was.

WRITING

OFF

With all the assets in the game, we had a last stand-up meeting. I was not too happy with the placeholder text Max had put in the game, I wanted something more, quote, "melancholic", something to set the tone. With Max debugging, I drafted a couple of suggestions we revised to put into the game. The goal was to have as little text as necessary to carry as much information as possible, about the mechanics, about the character's backstory, and their goal.

2637

OFF

And then suddenly, Max couldn't connect to our server anymore and save the Unity project.

OFF

It was because the server was busy zipping the gigabytes of texture maps in our project directory. A few very long minutes later, it worked again. Second crisis averted.

23:40

OFF

Our safe-build was still buggy, though. The biggest issue we had was that when the player was too small, the ending sequence would glitch out, pretty much ruining the ending for players. Max's last task was for the door handle to check for the player's size and stay

locked when they were too small

*to the
backing
passed, until*

locked when they were too small.

DESCRIPTION

OFF

As Max was tackling all these issues, I set out to write the description of our submission. Because I was a bit worried that not everyone playing would get our game, I intended to spell out the mechanics, just to be sure. Max, however, was strongly opposed to that and we went back and forth on the issue. In the end, Max made the right call, of course. Finding out what to do and how to do it, was part of Headroom's appeal and most all of your players discovered and understood the mechanics by themselves.

Max was under pressure to patch up the game, that I could begin my final polishing pass.

2648-02:48

PHIL

Footsteps... footsteps are still missing.

MAX

No. Denied!

OFF

The cameras for the portal projections still troubled us, because we intended to make the transition look as seamless as possible. It got hacky when Max hooked up the cameras to the player's height. It wasn't perfect, but better than before.

MAX LEAVES

OFF

90 minutes before the deadline, Max had fulfilled his programming duties and I let him go get some well earned rest. For me, the final polishing frenzy began.

POLISHING

just started

Kung
Fung



The lessy,

OFF

~~Seemingly endlessly~~ I moved the lights in the scene around until it was at least satisfactory, only then I could bake all reflection maps and light probes. I had fun with all the post effects that give the game that "next gen" look. Of course, I am talking about this Next Generation.

Snippet of Star Trek - The Next Generation.

OFF

A good deal of time I spent tweaking the portal projection cameras but never got them to look how I wanted them to behave, my adjustments made them even clip through ceiling or floor when the player was of a certain height. Close to the deadline, I just kept them how they were.

LOADING SCREEN

OFF

Because it took the game a while to load, I was worried that potential players would terminate the process, thinking it had crashed. To counter this, I added a little loading screen to go in front. Did I mention that I am all about polishing?

As the last seconds of the competition expired, I made a final test run of the game. Everything worked. I only needed to submit it. Which turned out to be a bigger problem than anticipated.

The new LD website creaked and moaned under the load of everybody trying to publish their entries. While waiting for the bytes of the website to trickle in, I did what I always do: Make a nice icon. With the site still unresponsive, I had plenty of time to take screenshots, build the game and upload it to my server.

After around forty minutes the website had recovered enough for me to finally post and submit

Hedroom,

Headroom.

I was incredibly exhausted, as usual, and my body was aching for rest.

SUMMARY

OFF

...

FEEDBACK

OFF

The feedback we got through voting revealed some interesting shortcomings to us. For one thing, the mouse sensitivity was too high for many players, since on my mouse I could easily adjust it on the fly. The other thing was walking speed. Max and I consciously decided on slowing the player down to discourage them to shrink too much, because there's nothing interesting to encounter, only glitches. But we underestimated that this was the "fun" aspect, exploring the room from different perspectives. And being slowed down too much and not being able to walk onto the carpets anymore is anything but fun.

Then, there were the glitches. Naturally, players would attempt to throw the key through the portal, often landing it in a spot where they couldn't reach it anymore. Further, we had reports from the key falling through the floor and thus also rendering the game unbeatable.

SUMMARY II

OFF

...

FINAL THOUGHTS

OFF

All in all, I had a blast and am very happy with the result. Sure, there is a certain overhead when collaborating and I can be a bit hard to work with, when I am insisting on my perfectionism in some regards. But being able to bounce ideas off other people involved can set an avalanche of interesting ideas in motion where it does.

OFF

Next time, I think, I will try going solo again, but with the learnings and insights from this time. Maybe I will even try to do it in Unity again. We'll see.

OFF

So whatever the future brings, I am optimistic that somehow I can make a game with any theme.

FADE OUT.

OFF

...unless it sucks *monkey balls* again!

(CREDITS)