Ludum Dare #39: Post Mortem of "Power, MT"

1st draft started: 2017-09-06
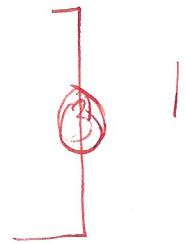*edited* 2017-09-30

by

Phil Strahl

INTRO

LD Logo, screenshot of website

Voting on theme

> **OFF**
> Unsurprisingly the ~~themes I suggested~~ didn't make it far. ~~and~~ in the final voting round I found not many theme suggestions particularly appealing.

ANNOUNCEMENT

I've been participating in LD games for a couple of years now and realised that my games so far were pretty traditional, nothing weird and original like so many other games.

For LD#39 I was looking to change that — by suggesting some themes of my own again...

①
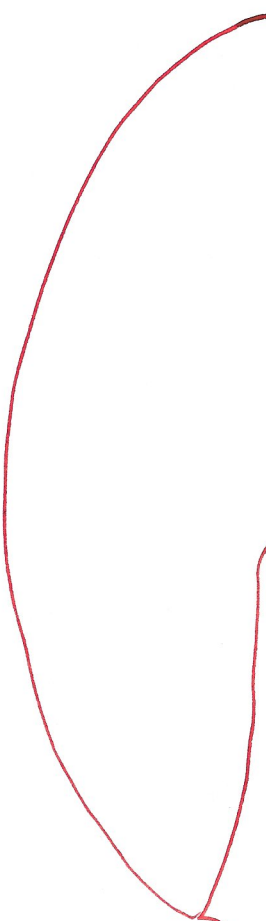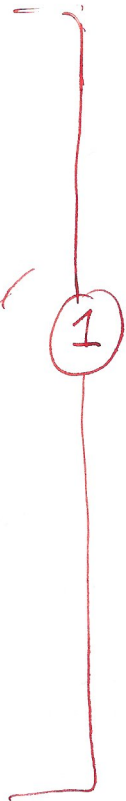
> Theme voting, not too happy 6533

Better? ↓

> Voting on themes is always a glimpse into madness, and this time I felt fed up with it. While there were some ... workable suggestions, I found the majority of suggestions stupid.

④

ESTABLISHING SHOTS

Outside house, hallway, clock, etc.

⑤

OFF

5 hours before the announcement, I was struck with migraine, but luckily 3 glasses of water, an Aspirin, and a nap were enough to rid myself of the affliction.

BATHROOM - INT. NIGHT

SHOOT

PHIL in the bathroom mirror, washing his face. (~~FIND~~ MISSING FOOTAGE!)

OFF

I wasn't feeling splendid, but well enough for some game dev.

HOME OFFICE   *Let's do this*

②

OFF

This time, I set myself four additional goals in addition to: *the usual time constraints* Get out of your comfort zone! Use an unconventional setting! Be weird! Make it unsellable.

Writing notes, putting on the screen

put

OFF

I ~~wrote~~ them on sticky notes and attached them to my screen, so they would always put me back on track. *should I got lost.*

⑦

OFF

In anticipatory wisdom I checked for Windows updates. Surprisingly there were none! Hooray!

Editing

OFF

⑥ — *I Sticky notes reminder*

There was ~~a little~~ *some* time ~~left~~ to 3 a.m. when the theme would be announced. That meant I could spend some more time working on my LD38 documentary, literally to the last minute.

Theme announced on Twitter

> OFF
> The winning theme this time around was "Running out of Power".

Phil looking not too unhappy

> OFF
> And for the first time in an LD jam, ~~I~~ felt that it didn't suck! After a minute or so of traditional blackout, ideas started flowing.

6575

> PHIL
> This is workable! *went spitballing mostactually*

> OFF
> I fired up my trusty Scully text editor and ~~kept adding~~, searching for that weird ~~one~~ *gem*, hidden among all those low hanging fruit. *I mean* Electric power would be way too obvious!

> OFF
> My ideas included a take on running out of political power with the player assuming the role of a dictator shortly before a coup, or a more abstract and puzzely take on running out of powers of a number.

6581 - Clock

> OFF
> *for more inspirations*
> After half an hour I turned to good old Wikipedia and learned of the existence of a few towns called Power. The one in Montana tickled my fancy the most. ~~Because~~ *Since* we're living in ... THE FUTURE ... Google street-view made it possible to click myself along the dirt roads and explore the town. *virtually myself.*

> OFF
> It had this vibe of an ordinary place with a Stephen King-like

horror lurking somewhere
underneath. ~~Inspired by Stranger Things~~ *I took inspiration from other things.*

STRANGER THINGS SOUNDBITE

                    OFF
... and Slenderman. ~~the~~ player would be
hunted by a shadowy beast. You
wouldn't play~~s~~ as soldier or super
hero, but yourself, only with the
apps on your cell phone ~~at your~~ *to aid you.*
~~disposal.~~ *and had to escape*

                    OFF *In essence,*
The phone would running out of
power, as players, too, were *literally*
running out of Power.

                    OFF *Began our assembly*
And I loved it! I ~~wrote down~~ a list
of ~~anything~~ *all things* you could use a cell
for that would require battery
power*, flashlight, compass, reception, et..*

Going to bed
had a great one

In all jams so far, I
had wasted 12 hrs or more
with finding the right idea,..
                    OFF
With most previous jams, arriving
at a workable idea took half a day,
but this time I ~~felt confident~~ *over my previous jam attempts*
after just two hours! ~~So~~ I ~~felt~~
~~that~~ I already had an advantage and
set the alarm to 12:30 that day.
(But what gameplay? Genre?)

    In bed

In the half
dreamlike state
                    OFF *decided*
~~Short~~ before falling asleep I ~~came~~
upon the perfect genre for my game:
A text adventure.   *— text adventure*
                                        experience)
would create
                    OFF
Making a text adventure ~~I decided upon making a text~~
would let me keep my ~~adventure to~~ maintain my momentum,
without slowing myself down with
graphics to paint and polish. No,
it was just writing copy and code.
~~Sweet dreams!~~
There simply was no way to polish, right?

                    (LAUGHING MADMAN)

    ~~DAY 1~~

DAY 1

ESTABLISHER

Waking up happily, brewing some coffee

> OFF
> ~~This time~~ I woke up in a much
> better mood than usual, despite
> some nightmare about horrific,
> Cyclopean cities and inhabited by
> gigantic, nameless things…

for ghostly music

> OFF
> The weather was beautiful, almost a
> waste ~~to stay inside~~, ~~really~~. But I
> ~~had to make a game.~~ And coffee
> would help with that. Isn't that
> right, coffee?

staying inside seemed like

But duty called — I had a game to make

> COFFEE
> Bet your ass!

→ James Rolfe?

INT. HOME OFFICE — DAY

> OFF
> The last time I attempted a text
> was … over 20 years ago (Jesus!),
> and a lot of things had changed
> since then. I wouldn't settle for
> BASIC this time but use something
> better suited. ~~I've only heard of
> Twine so the first thing I did was
> download it~~ and dig into the
> documentation.

making

The #1 goto for text adventures IF is Twine, naturally?

my first milestone was getting a hold of it

> OFF
> Twine offers different story
> formats depending on your needs. I
> knew that I needed something as
> close to a programming language as
> possible and that was the SugarCube
> 2 format, allowing for variables,
> conditions, even audio.

fully fledged

> OFF
> Twine now up and running, my plan
> was to construct some kind of *story-*
> wireframe first. To Have a start, have
> an ending and then fill it all up
> with obstacles for the player to
> overcome and puzzles to solve,
> eventually add some branching
> provided ~~I had the~~ time.

there was

> OFF
> (~~To outline the story~~, I drew a
> ~~visual aid.~~) Between beginning and

end, I divvied up the game in
different beats to structure the
narrative and the player's journey
from fleeing, exploring, gathering,
observing, and finally fighting. ~~the~~
unseen horror that's stalking them.

> OFF

I experimented and stumbled my way
through ~~making~~ my first paragraphs *writing*
until I was low on coffee /again. ~~and~~ *and inspiration*
~~in good tradition~~ left ~~the house~~
for some more public programming.

To avoid my usual case of cabin fever, I →

INT. CAR - DAY

Montage of driving shots and getting coffee. *Music!*

INT. STARBUCKS - DAY

> OFF *and* [*Reinvigorated*]

By ~~With~~ a strong brew, I propped up my
notebook. *and got back to work*

> OFF *quite*

I ~~kept adding to it but~~ still
didn't manage to get a handle on
how to structure and maintain the
story. ~~So~~ I just cruised around ~~in~~ *Pone*
StreetView until ~~I had an epiphany.~~
it struck me:

> OFF

Tolkien said, "I wisely started
with a map", and ~~that's what really~~
~~saved me.~~ *Jim Sterling agrees: It's good to have a map."*

Map / MOV_0111 & MOV_1090 *And they were right!*

> OFF */ la /of Pone*

~~I~~ Quickly I sketched out ~~the~~ map on
paper and ~~settled for~~ a starting *elected*
location at the East end of ~~the~~
town, a house on Rainbow Avenue.
①

> OFF *I ~~elected~~ staged on*

The showdown ~~would be~~ the football
That allowed me to field on the ~~other~~ side. ~~And now I~~
~~could~~ plot the player's journey *opposite*
through the town and draw on the *heavily*
real location; the Coop, this *add*
Caravan little ~~house~~, the post office,
Suds & Grub Smoot Honey, the ~~Power Pole~~ bar,
and the high school ~~and~~ roughly
assembled my nodes in Twine
accordingly.

GRAPHICS

OFF

[handwritten: dig] *[handwritten: was able to]*
Thanks to the Internet, I ~~could research~~ in the archives of the local newspapers and chronicles despite being thousands of miles away. ~~Researching~~ all the little details was incredibly fun, I just love my research.

[handwritten: Gathering]

OFF *[handwritten: for example,]*

[handwritten: learned of a]
I ~~came across~~ • nuclear missile silo not far away, ~~and~~ that the local pub was apparently haunted. That's all something I could work into the back story. *[handwritten: for the fire in the Honey factory]*

OFF

[handwritten: starting to are some grand deed indulge in my]
Just as I was getting completely ~~engrossed in~~ my own story, the mall was about to close and I had to ~~pack my belongings and~~ leave.

OFF *[handwritten: essential]* *[handwritten: some issues to solve]*

[handwritten: neither]
I still had ~~a bunch of problems:~~ The player wasn't given a clear goal, the cell phone mechanics ~~weren't~~ properly developed, I had no ideas for puzzles, and overall the atmosphere wasn't menacing enough, *[handwritten: the writing could've been better.]* *[handwritten: nor implemented]* *[handwritten: nor implemented at all]*

INT. DRIVING IN CAR - EVENING

OFF *[handwritten: and more I mulled]*

~~I mulled over these details~~ as I drove downtown.

Driving montage

OFF

I should really get some love from the local tourism office. -;

INT. CAFE WERNBACHER - EVENING

OFF *[handwritten: my unsolved problems]*

~~Once more,~~ I arrived with ~~a lot of work~~ in my favorite cafe. Maybe the mediocre latte would help ~~me~~. *[handwritten: Coffee?]* ~~continued with a cafe latte for another hour~~ until I ran out power on my notebook. *[handwritten: 2]* *[handwritten: I worked]*

PHIL
How fitting.

OFF

① better

I didn't solve the problems there ~~but premature polishing got the best of me and I wrote the first draft of~~ the opening to hopefully set the mood ~~right.~~ *properly in the beginning.*

and then: At least I was able to improve the writing and drafted.

That motivated me enough to get home. To figure out the rest.

INT. DRIVING BACK - NIGHT

OFF

felt
with it

On my drive back I took inventory. I ~~was~~ comfortable enough with Twine to make a game ~~there,~~ knew the broad strokes of the story I wanted to tell, and still had enough time to pull it all of. Just, you know, (there was no game) really. ~~As~~ *so* (many times before.) ~~And~~ I had to face it: I was stuck. ~~And~~ with the sun, my spirits sank also.

like

INT. HOME - NIGHT

OFF

I arrived to some healthy waffles Conny had made and put out for me.

~~At home, Conny had made me some healthy waffles.~~ No sugar, no butter, she said. How lovely! A good helping of maple syrup made them even ~~better.~~
healthier

INT. HOME OFFICE - NIGHT

OFF

Okay. Puzzles. Think!

I needed made

~~Now~~ I ~~had to get to grips with it and try to work in some~~ puzzles, *that* ideally ~~making~~ it necessary to use the phone in one way or another and to provide the player with goals and mysteries. *through gameplay.*

OFF

forward to

I added node after node to the story, slowly making my way ~~towards~~ the final show-down. I grew more ~~comfortable~~ with SugarCube and implemented the boiled-down phone mechanics. ~~Instead of a couple of different apps, I settled for just flashlight and compass.~~

proficient

at last

~~(just light and compass)~~

"And who would've thought that I would find comfort in polish" etc.

OFF

~~Despite having sworn off polishing for this~~ project, the demons from my past rose and ten to twelve I found me tweaking the CSS stylesheet like a madman for almost

two hours. *(Maniacal laugh!)*

                    OFF
        I went over the beginning again,
        ~~cleaning it up and making it~~ *cleaned and trimmed it down*
        ~~shorter~~ and added a little hint in
        the /~~phone call~~ in the post office.
                /*section*

                    OFF
        Once it was possible to continue up
        to 3rd street, ~~here~~ I contemplated
        cutting the dialog with Jackie in
        her trailer.

Half time again

                    OFF
        3 a.m. - half time again. Hey Phil,
        tell us how you're doing!

3PS_6635

                    PHIL
        (Didn't get as far as I wanted)
        (Game barely finished)
        (Still 5 or 6 more hours of
        writing)

Back to work, Phil gets startled.

                    OFF
        The thing with writing suspenseful
        horror all by yourself in the
        middle of the night is, well, you
        get easily startled.

Phil looks up

                    OFF
        I'm sure that was nothing. Just get
        back to work and… what was that?!

PHIL gets up to investigate, leaves room wearing
Paragon T-shirt (OH NOES! I THREWS IT OUT! OO), and
silver wing necklace.
                            Separate!

INT. FLAT - NIGHT

All
~~The~~ lights are out. PHIL uses the flashlight on his
phone to negotiate his way through. *the flat.*

On the floor he steps into some kind of black goo,
leading to the door.

Hesitantly, PHIL follows it down the stairs in the

staircase and arrives in the BASEMENT.

INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

PHIL keeps following the strange marks in the light
of his phone.

It BEEPS, and PHIL looks at its screen:

"BATTERY LOW"

PHIL takes a breath an continues as the tracks lead
into a portal at the end.

! reason for Phil to step through !

Curiously he steps through and is suddenly on a
martian canyon, that's drenched almost entirely in
shadows and a black ground fog.

There's something moving in th shadows, something
gigantic.

PHIL steps back, visibly shaken but too enthralled
to look away.

The shadowy giants turns its head and for a brief
moment its scaly skin and narrow eyes are
discernible. Then it speaks in a booming voice.

                    THING
          FINISH. THE. GAME.

                    turns

PHIL is stupefied, just nods in sheer terror and
turns back through the portal, almost dropping his
phone.

INT. HOME OFFICE - NIGHT

Phil returns, a shocked look on his face, gets
straight back to programming.

                    OFF
                                    convoluted
          At 4 in the morning the post office
          dialog was almost done, but at this
          point players could just walk
          inside without effort or a puzzle.

                    OFF

I hid a stone
so they would need
to smash the window

          The last thing that day was still
          something bordering on polish,
          namely keeping score of the correct
          actions players would perform like
          in old Sierra On-Line games.

          At 5,   OFF
          Ominous clouds hung over the
          horizon and I had had enough for

that day. There was still a lot of
work to be done, but even I have to
sleep some time.

DAY 2   *the new radiant cities in my
dreams called for me....*

INT. HOME - DAY

Day 2 : Start at 2 p.m.. Attempt a somewhat full
playthrough, make notes

> OFF
> I slept well into the afternoon and
> got up after 1 p.m. ~~This time~~, the *that day*
> weather was pleasantly reflecting
> the mood I wanted in my game.

> OFF
> But first: I needed to ~~have a close~~ *catch up*
> ~~talk~~ with my good friend, coffee.

> COFFEE
> Bet your ass!

> Hard thing is getting inspired to write a dark
piece, when outside it's rather sunny and the birds
are chirping. Listening to Alan Wake soundtrack
helps

*Unfortunately, the clouds dissipated and the cheerful
sun killed off any mood for writing some dark thriller.*

> OFF
> It took me a little to get back
> into my story, listening to the
> Alan Wake soundtrack helped ~~me~~
> tremendously *against the sunshine.*

> 16:00 Added power consumption meter

> OFF
> At 4 p.m. the power consumption
> meter was working, *the most crucial part for
> meeting the requirements of the game*

> 18:40 At school, close to the showdown. Don't have
quite an idea of how to pull it off.

> OFF   *rephrase!*
> Around 7 p.m. the story thread
> arrived at the school, close to the
> showdown without quite knowing how
> to pull it off, how to kill a being
> that lusts after electricity.

> 19:20 We're almost at the water tower. Time for
the showdown!

> OFF
> I came up with a water tower,
> because that's an image I always
> associate with small town
> Americana. *There is none in Tower, but a bit
> of creative liberty should be okay.*
> OFF
> Half past seven and I began writing

and implementing the showdown, *making it up as I went along. I needed to block the player from being able to mess up their game without knowing, so a deus ex machina crept in.*

> 21:00 pizza!

OFF
game dev recharge: At nine it was time for ~~game maker~~ a traditional ~~chow~~: A nice pizza. ~~I tried not to work but proofreading got the better of me.~~

> 21:30 Forgot where I was in the water tower puzzle

OFF *(3)* ~~When~~
~~Half an hour later,~~ I returned to the water tower puzzle ~~and needed to find my way back into story and implementation.~~ God, programming is hard. And writing's even harder!

I was out of the loop.

PHIL
So how are you doing, Phil? It is half past eleven. I just finished the whole text adventure thing. How to spend the rest of my time?
Crazy polishing: Music and images. Should I make the cell phone interface nicer? There's still the reception.
~~Battling with CSS.~~

PHIL
I just hope that I have time to proofread all this shit. How long is it? Omg 5500 words.

PHIL
I'm totally burned out describing passages where the player dies. Probably a lot of people will think it is unfair. I wish I had a whole week for this thing. I overscoped. I will ~~dust off my keyboard and will~~ dust off my keyboard and make some kind of music. Reward myself with candy. Homestretch! Onwards!

> 23:55 Conny tests

OFF
~~At~~ Midnight, three hours to the finish line. Outside the wind was rustling the leaves in every tree, oh my god it's just like in the game! *A good sign?*

CONNY starts the game, PHIL gives her a pad, a pen, and a kiss so she can start testing.

OFF
I had Conny test the game as I was
fiddling with the CSS ~~of the game~~,
trying to make it not as ugly as it
is.

OFF
So Conny played the game but boy
was it broken!

The emoji-only approach was unclear, especially
where to switch something on/off and whether some
app was activated or not. Returned to text (is ON
and "toggle"). Also, Conny ran out of power up until
the post office. I started players with more power
in their phone, reduced the drain of the functions
and added a power bank in the post, so you'd hardly
run out of it. If you did, the game would kill you
right away … unless you had unlocked the padlock
making the game beatable without any further use of
the phone. *Design*

OFF
Conny kept dying at the post office
no matter how much battery power
she conserved, it just wasn't
enough. My solution was a rather
ham-fisted power-bank in the post
office. *while decreasing power consumption and*
starting players with a pretty charged battery

> 00:45 Music!

After re-balancing

OFF
~~I still felt that~~ the game *✓still* needed
some bells and whistles, quite
literally. I launched Reason to
make some music, any music for ~~the~~
~~game~~. *a bit of atmosphere*

OFF
From my exposure to the Alan Wake
soundtrack, I started with strings,
but added more and more synths.~~with~~
~~lots of reverb~~. I started with
presets ~~for them~~ but misused them. *intentionally*
I played them outside their range, *for example*
For a creepy, brutal touch, I ~~used~~
a lot of distortion on the *threw on*
percussion and the piano.
~~For~~ the beginning and the ending I
wanted to be more grounded in
familiarity and kept the strings
for that.

rephrase

> 01:30 Music done, need to implement

OFF
Thankfully there weren't many

melodic parts that needed tweaking.
After just 45 minutes I exported
the six pieced I ~~got~~. I had to push
forward.   *had at that point*

          OFF
Implementation of the music took
more time than anticipated and I
~~came across~~ many unanswered   *chose*
questions/about how SugarCube 2
handles music, which results in some
choppy and erratic playback. But
since the music is supposed to be
layered, it's not that distracting,
I hope. \ *anyway* *If anyone asks: That's totally intentional*

3PS_6877

          OFF *struck*   *for*
The clock ~~turned~~ three ~~and it was~~
submission hour. I tested the game
a last time and, sure enough, ~~came~~   *had*
~~across~~ a game breaking bug. And god *only*
knows how many typos.

          OFF   *(haha!)*
And then, out of the blue, I had
another bluescreen/of death ~~again~~
just before I could start working
on the title card.

3PS_6880

          OFF
You know you're properly screwed
when you get another bluescreen ~~on~~ *upon*
logging in.

          PHIL
Why? Every time!?

          OFF
Thankfully I caught a break and the
next attempt and could get busy in
Photoshop.

          OFF
But what to depict for a game
without graphics? My first and only
idea was the classic American town
sign with the title, illuminated
only by a cone of a ~~torch~~ in front *flashlight*
of a thunderstorm and tendrils of
black fog framing the picture.

6886
                   again
Submitting was a nightmare/ the server constantly

logging me off while I was sweating in the summer
heat. The technical issues led to an additional
"Super Submission Hour" which was further expanded
yet another 30 minutes. It was half past 4 that
Power, MT was finally published -- at last.

                    OFF
          And once again the site was
          unresponsive and Mike had to extend
          the submission hour to another
          hour. And another. After entering
          all the description and details of
          my game, the site would log me out
          and disregard everything I had
          entered. Not once. Not twice. But
          many times.

6887

                    OFF
          It was truly infuriating,
          copy/pasting it all over and over
          again, hoping for it to stick. Ten
          to 5 a.m. it was done at last.

                    OFF
          Hey, I had just published a text
          adventure, of all things!

> How much did I stick to my goals? Did I achieve it? What are my learnings?

> Bottom line: I can't be overly weird, my mind doesn't work like being too random. I always need a foot in reality or rather, plausibility.

- Feedback: Plotstopper due to misplaces <</switch>>; emoji not rendering on all browsers
- Inspired a little by Lovecraft's "Shadow over Innsmouth"
- The phone picture was very arbitrary
- Not really much use for the compass after crossing the marshes

Writing process: A to B. Then, drew the map (helped tremendously), arranged nodes resembling the map. Then implemented basic cell and monster functionality. Then added writing and wired up new passages as they happened.

Design: I wanted to ease players in, first with no real options, then with just two open, one that kills them, so they know that this game incorporates player death. Then they might switch on all the buttons on their phone which gives them a nice bonus for crossing the marsh. First time trapping the player in: Mountain View Coop to Post Office. Once post office was done, player is trapped between Central/4th and the football field. When they took the picture of the bench, they can even undo the lock on the valve, but can't go back beyond the school. Switching on the generator activates the monster that takes it 8 turns to reach you. If you haven't unlocked the padlock, you can still make it with one wrong turn.