



MARCH 18-22, 2024
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Larian Cinematics

A Top-Down Look At Our Bottom-Up Approach



#GDC2024

Baldur's Gate 3 cinematics runtime more than double the length of the entirety of Game of Thrones

Also, the release date has changed.



Starting from Scratch

I took the job with Larian after coming off a 6 month layoff

- I applied for 67 jobs before getting an offer

Track your actions

- Track application dates
- Track last communication
 - Don't ghost recruiters (they're juggling a lot too)

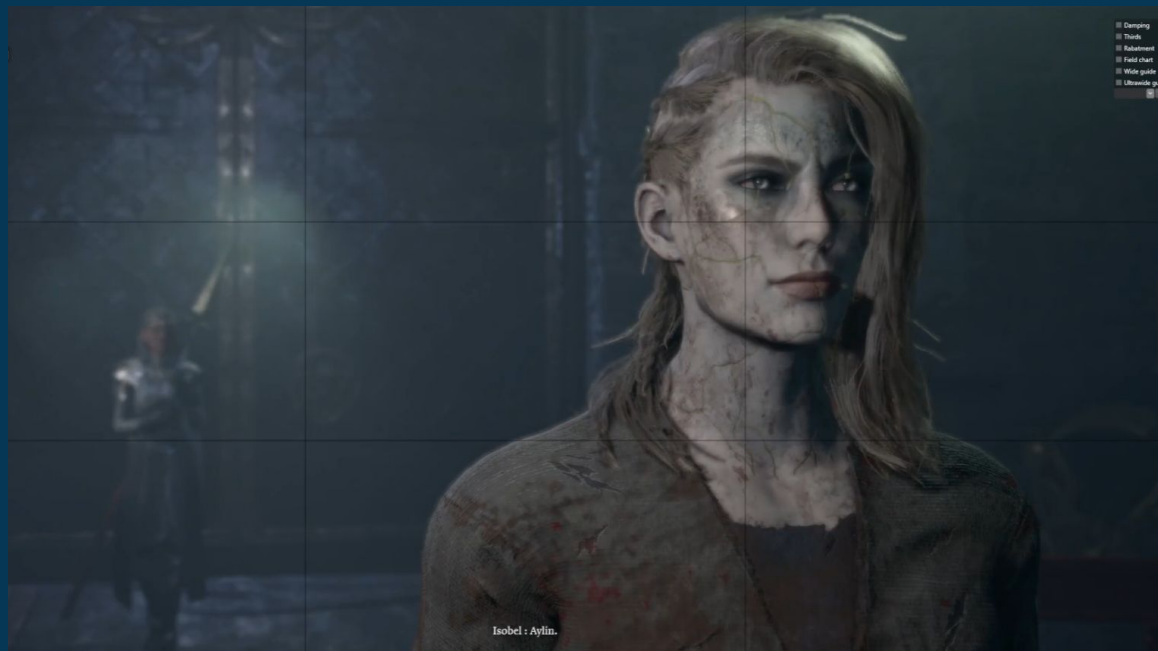
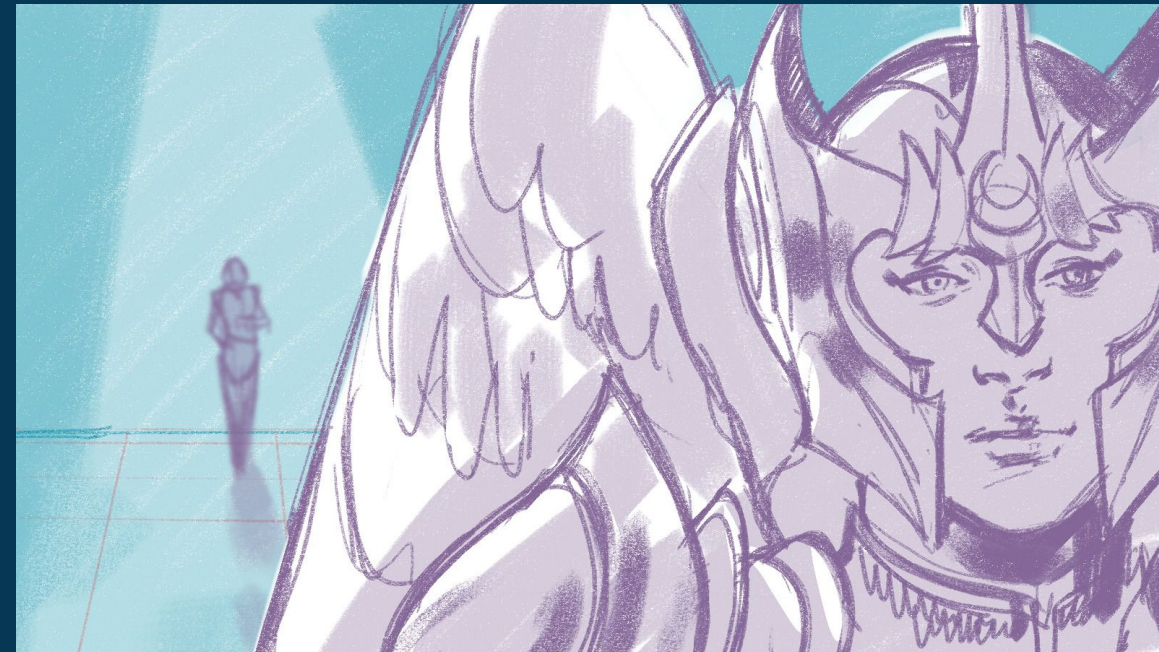
Lead	Priority	Title	2/2/2024	Last Update	Status	Recruiters / Contacts	Notes
BeHavioInteractive		Narrative Game Designer	12/20/2018	1/3/2019	passed		
Bungie		Systems Narrative Lead	12/20/2018	1/3/2019	passed		
Probably Monsters		Narrative Director	11/23/2018		no longer posted		
EA - Chatsworth		Cinematic Designer (Star Wars)	9/30/2018	10/18/2018	(waiting for response)	recruiter	Reached out
Wizards of the Coast		Narrative Designer	10/29/2018		no longer posted		
Wizards of the Coast		Game Designer	10/22/2018		no longer posted		
Gold Iron		Senior Content Designer	10/15/2018		no longer posted		
Lucasfilm		Director, Animation Short Form D	11/23/2018		passed		Contacted
Ghost Story		Narrative Scripter	10/16/2018		no longer posted		
WB Games		Cinematics Director, Presentation	9/30/2018	11/5/2018	passed	recruiter	Weird, she Sent off ap
Mercury Filmworks		Storyboard Director	9/23/2018		passed	recruiter	
ILM X Lab		Experience Designer	9/26/2018		passed	assistant director recruiter	Application
Double Fine	Closed	(Open Letter)	9/23/2018		Closed	producer	Toured the seem upcoming
The Game Band	Closed	(Open Letter)	9/30/2018		passed	creative director	Talked to h pas candidate
ArenaNet	Closed	Cinematic Artist	9/21/2018		Closed 10/02/2018	contact	was t
Turn 10 Studios	Closed	Cinematic Artist	9/21/2018		(waiting for response)	(no contact)	reciev
Arkane - France	Closed	Cinematic Director	8/5/2018		Closed	recruiter	I met with designer. h
Respawn	Closed	Senior Cineamtic Artist	7/12/2018		Closed		played ter al ten
Iron Galaxy		Design Director	10/22/2018		(waiting for response)		
Titmouse	Closed	Production Coordinator	10/18/2018		(waiting for response)		
Powerhouse Animation Studios	Closed	Storyboard Director	9/23/2018		Closed		
Turn 10 Studios	Closed	Cinematic Director	10/19/2018	10/25/2018	(waiting for response)		



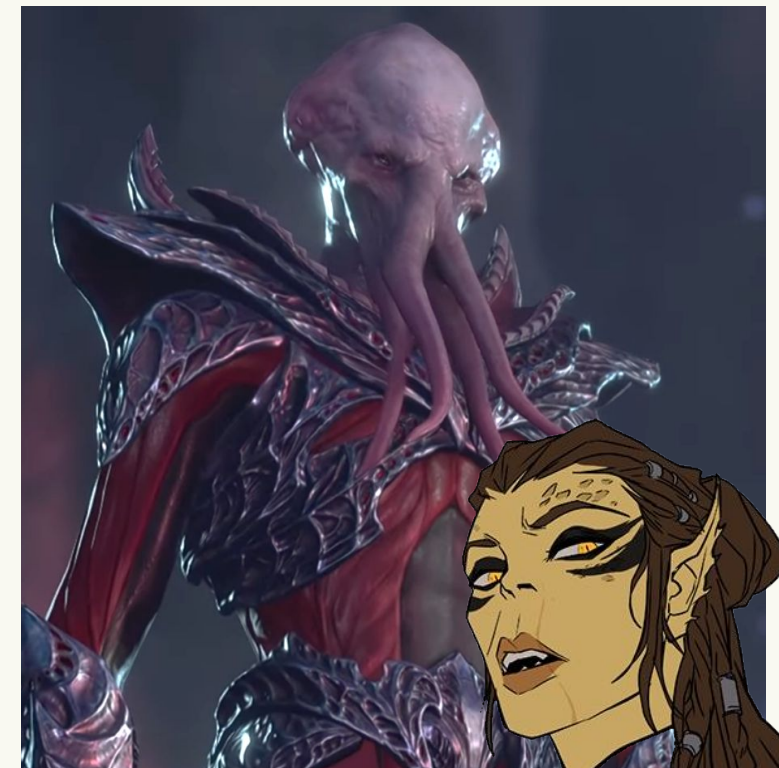
Back to Cinematics

CINE CONTEXT:

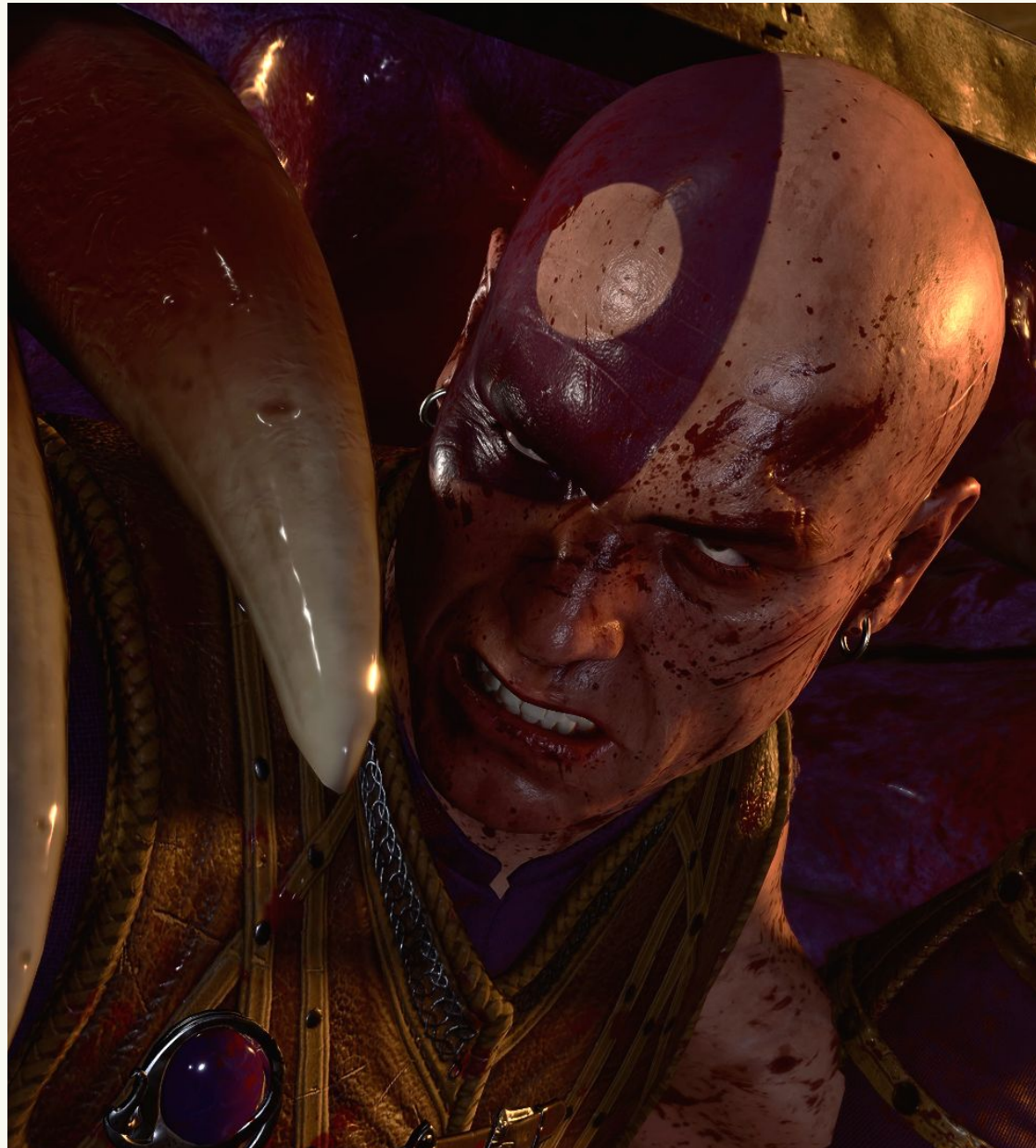
Isobel and Nightsong (now Aylin) spot each other from across the room. Both are full of bewilderment, pain, and joy.



Overview



Initial Vision



Flexible Cinematics

- Templated structure that won't break with narrative changes

Don't make the game smaller

- Divinity: Original Sin 2 had 54266 interactive lines of dialog

"Muppet acting"

- Most VO was MoCapped to hide "NPC-ness"

Grounded Tone

- Adjust the storybook tone of DOS2 to work on a cinematic level

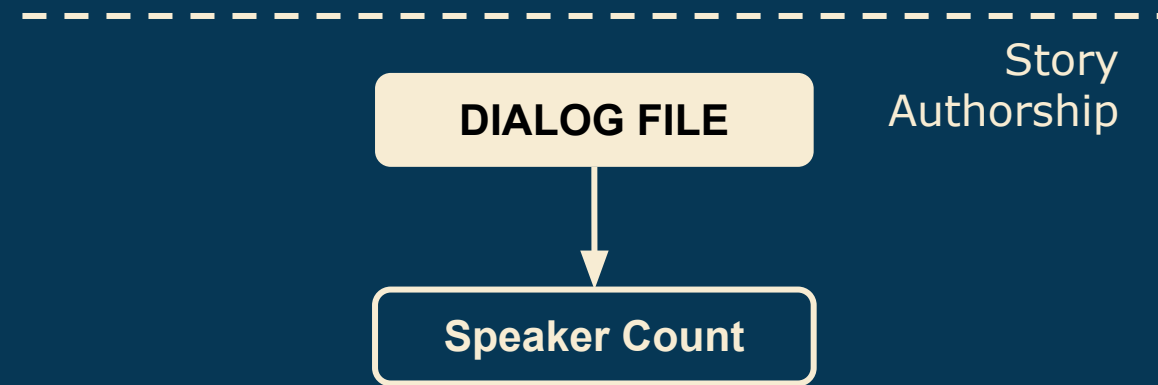


Initial Victories: Flexible Cinematics

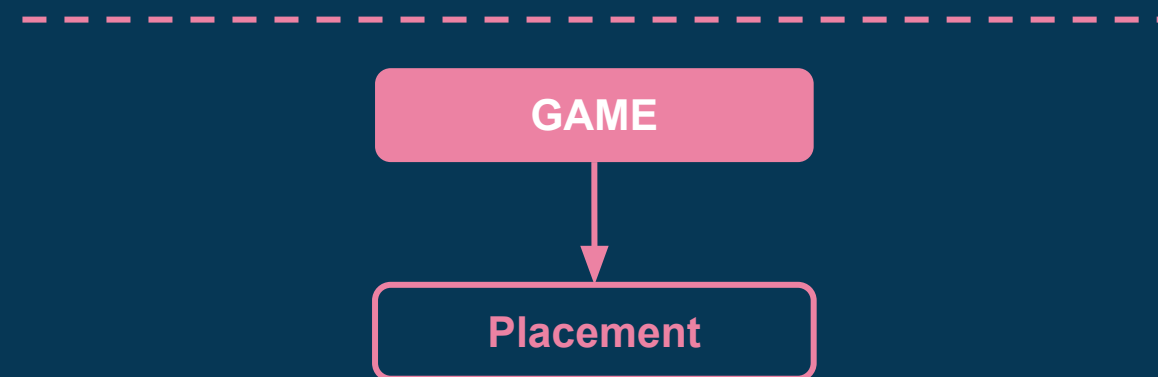
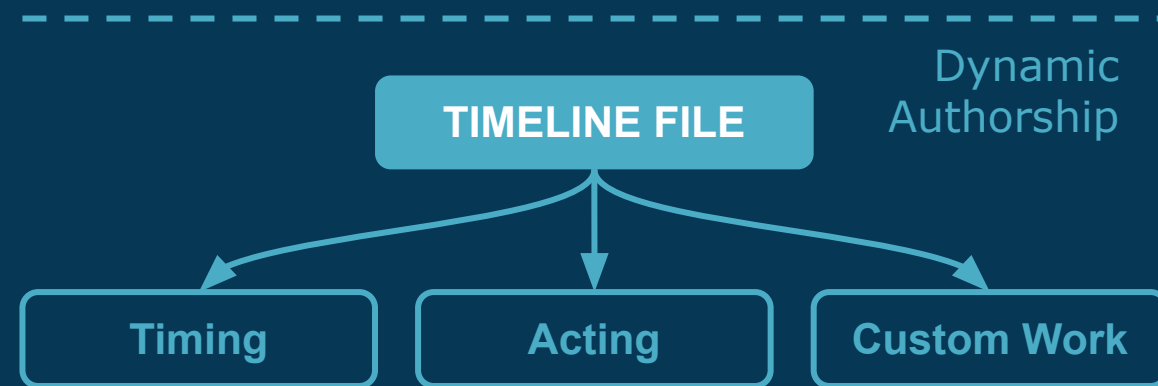
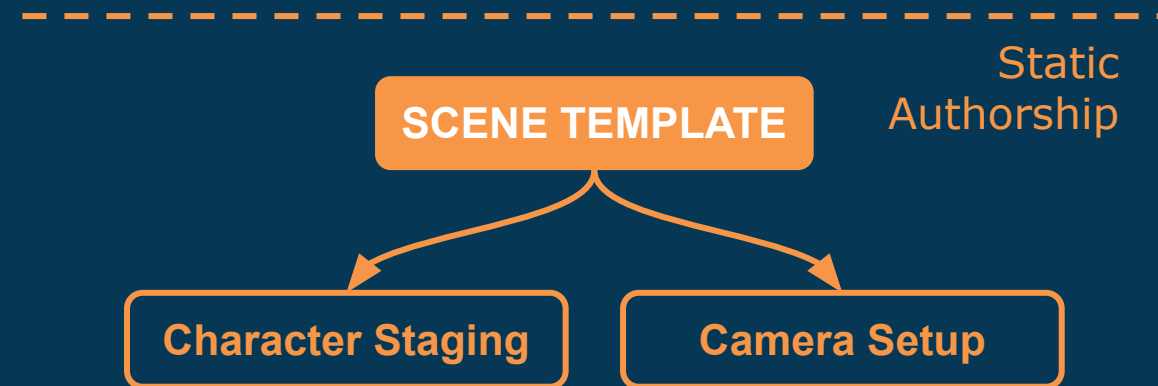
Scene Templates
stamped cinematics
anywhere

- “Paint with the broadest brush possible”
- Basic conversations: basic staging
- Standardized cameras and line of action
- Inherited authorship





SHADOWHEART:
Blind honesty is always a bad idea. We should keep quiet in future.



LAE'ZEL Your sour face is tiring, Shadowheart.

Initial Problems: Flexible Cinematics

Top Down games don't have horizon lines

- Our cinematics could play everywhere
- But everywhere wasn't designed for viewing from eye-level
 - *Short draw distance*
 - *One-sided textures*
 - *Odd decoration placement*
 - *Floating Scenery*
 - *Visible scripting "asylums"*





Initial Victories: Don't make the game smaller

Confirmation by a Negative

- We seemed to be moving pretty fast
 - No writing estimates
 - Didn't know if we were moving fast *enough*
- About a year to achieved "shipping level" results
 - In-game cinematic tools are irreducibly complex

Crikey, *Baldur's Gate III* Sounds Pretty Dang Long

From cinematics to the actual game, Larian's upcoming RPG is gonna be a lengthy adventure.

By Justin Carter Published July 1, 2023 | Comments (24)



Image: Larian Studios



Initial Problems: Don't make the game smaller

There were no small scenes

- Casual conversations with complications
 - Alfira's conversation took more effort than her song
- To a certain degree this was by design
 - Keeps players on their toes
 - Encourages exploration





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LAE'ZEL If that bard breaks out in song, I'm not having it.

GDC



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LAE'ZEL Carefully positioned.
Artfully, even.

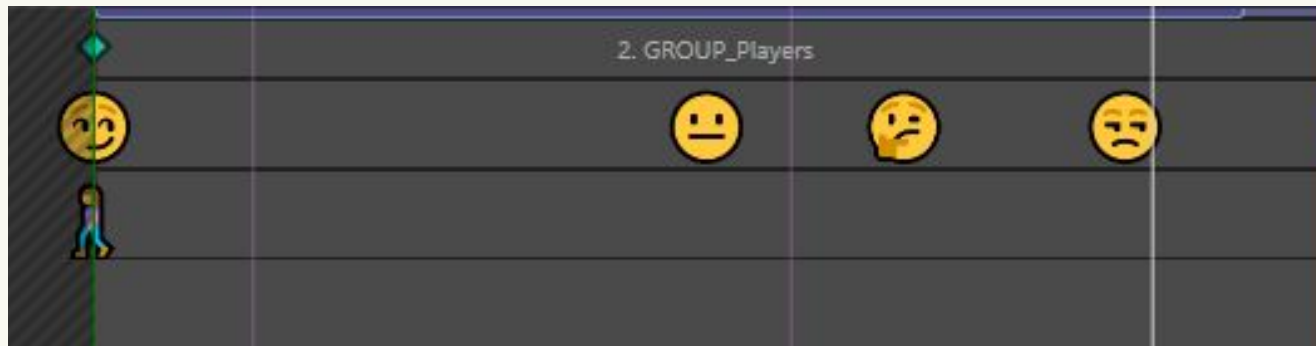
GDC

Initial Victories: “Muppet acting”



Loads of characterization direct from the actors

- Mocap came in with “paddle hands”
 - Adopted StretchSense
- Facial acting was authored by the Cine Art team
- FaceFX handled the lipsync
 - Less was more, for us





Happy A 😊



Happy B 😊



Happy C 😊



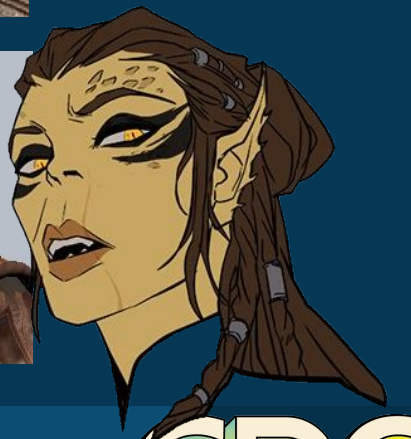
Happy X 😊



Happy Y 😊



Happy Z 😊

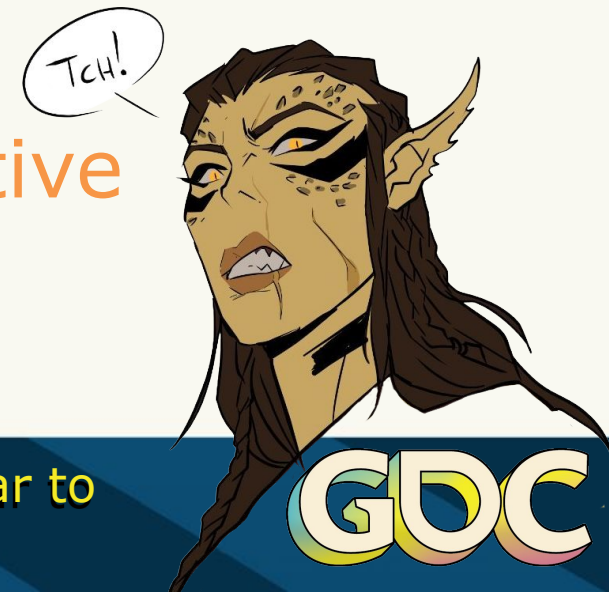


Initial Problems: “Muppet acting”



Lookat vs MoCap

- The Mocap baked in the head's orientation
 - Actors needed to read off the prompter
 - VO Direction didn't know our staging setup
- Our artist layer needed control over eye lines
 - We implemented an additive approach



Problem Solved?



Problem Solved

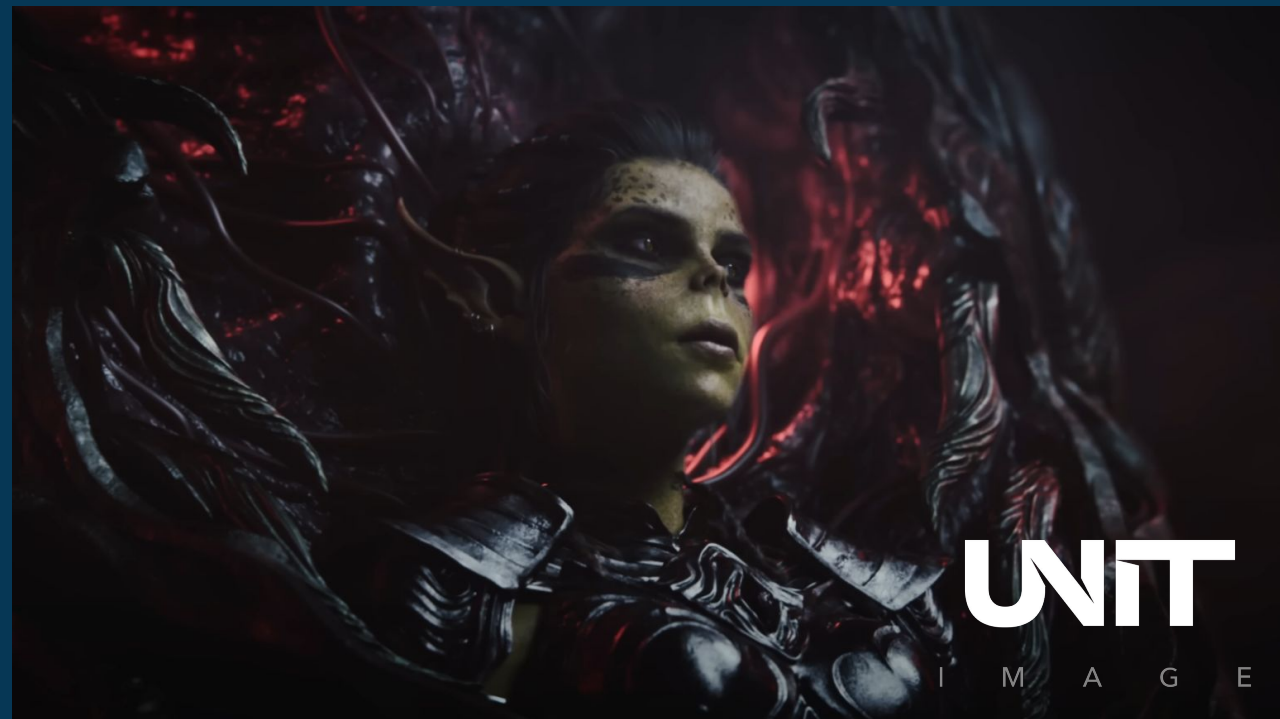


Initial Victories: Grounded Tone

CGI Teasers served as Tonal Pieces

- Working with UNIT Image was a highlight of the project
 - Brilliant collaborators (*work with them*)
- Their PBR style provided aspirational art targets
- Cemented body horror tool
 - Orin's body cracking transformation
- This also helped nail the narrative tone
 - We knew how dark we could go





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LAE'ZEL Beautiful. And terrifying.





MARCH 18-22, 2024 **#GDC2024**

LAE'ZEL *Chk. A shell so thin
requires little to crack it.*

Initial Problems: Grounded Tone



Old habits

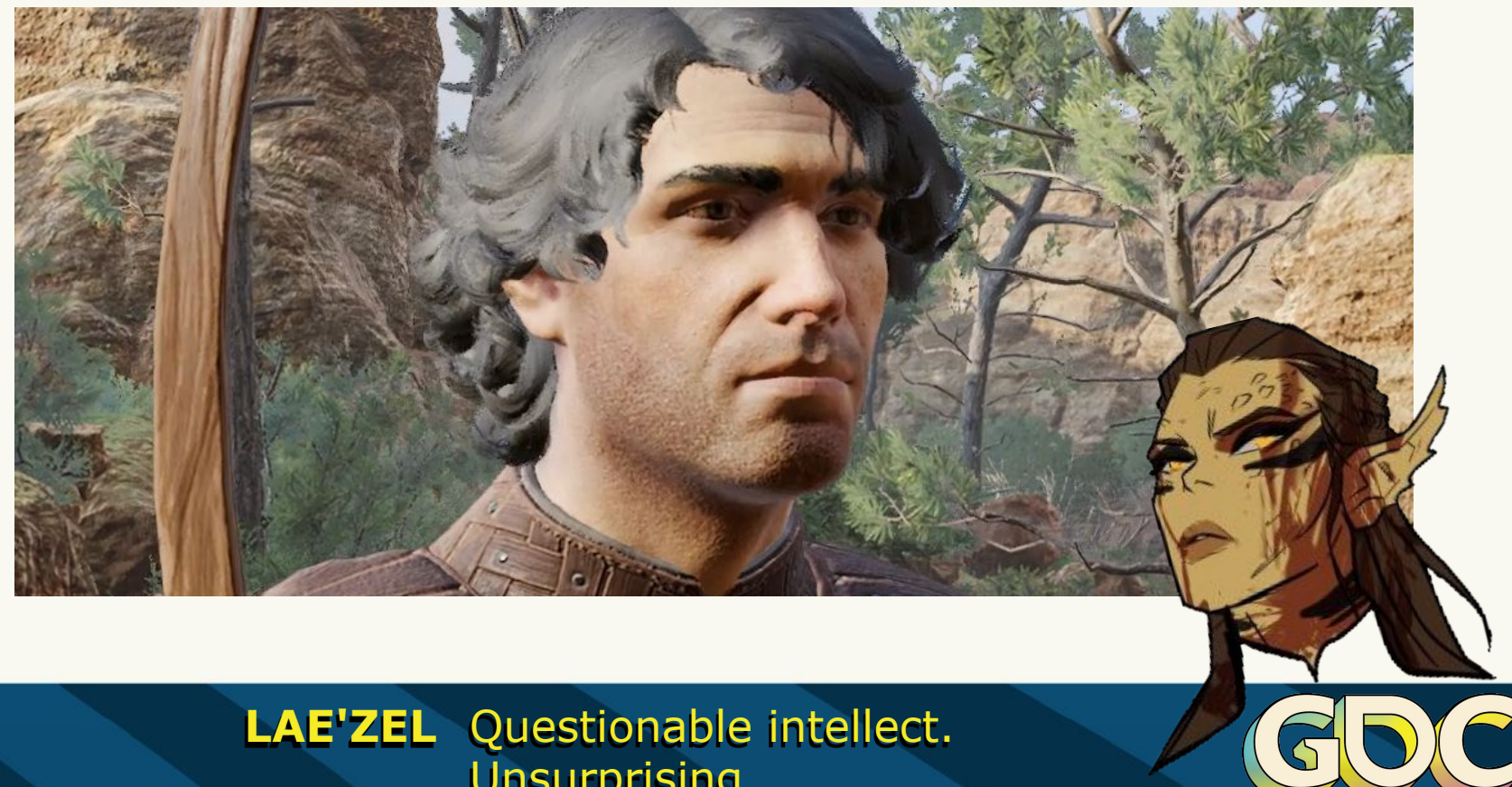
- Scenes were not always written with visuals in mind
 - Astarion's recruitment used to involve convincing him to exit a pod into the sun
 - Some romance scenes were written without a specific setting in mind
- We added a "Cinematic Context" field to the Dialog Editor



Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics

Scripted Movement

- We wanted our cinematics to match the game state 1-to-1
 - Movement was driven by GoTo commands from scripting
 - Minor staging changes were handled by game locomotion
- Results were... not great



Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics



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LAE'ZEL *Tsk'va! This 'tart' is disgusting.*

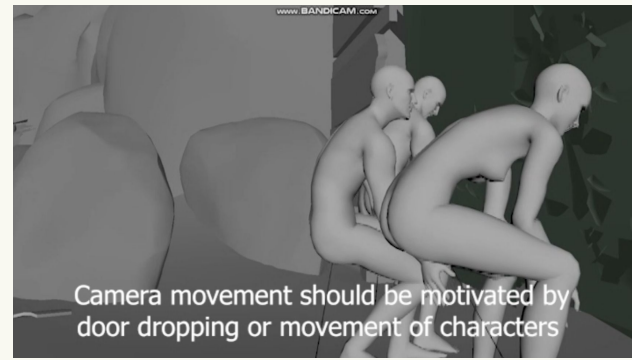
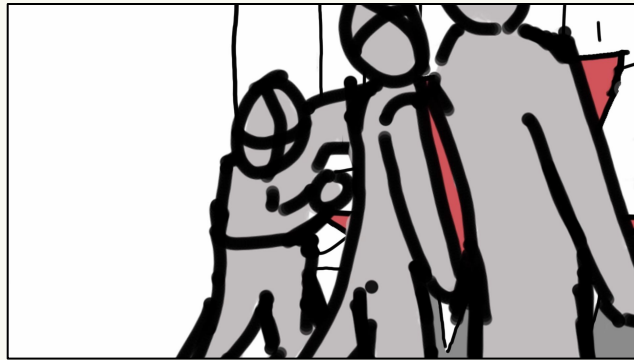
Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics



It was time to find a Plan B



Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics

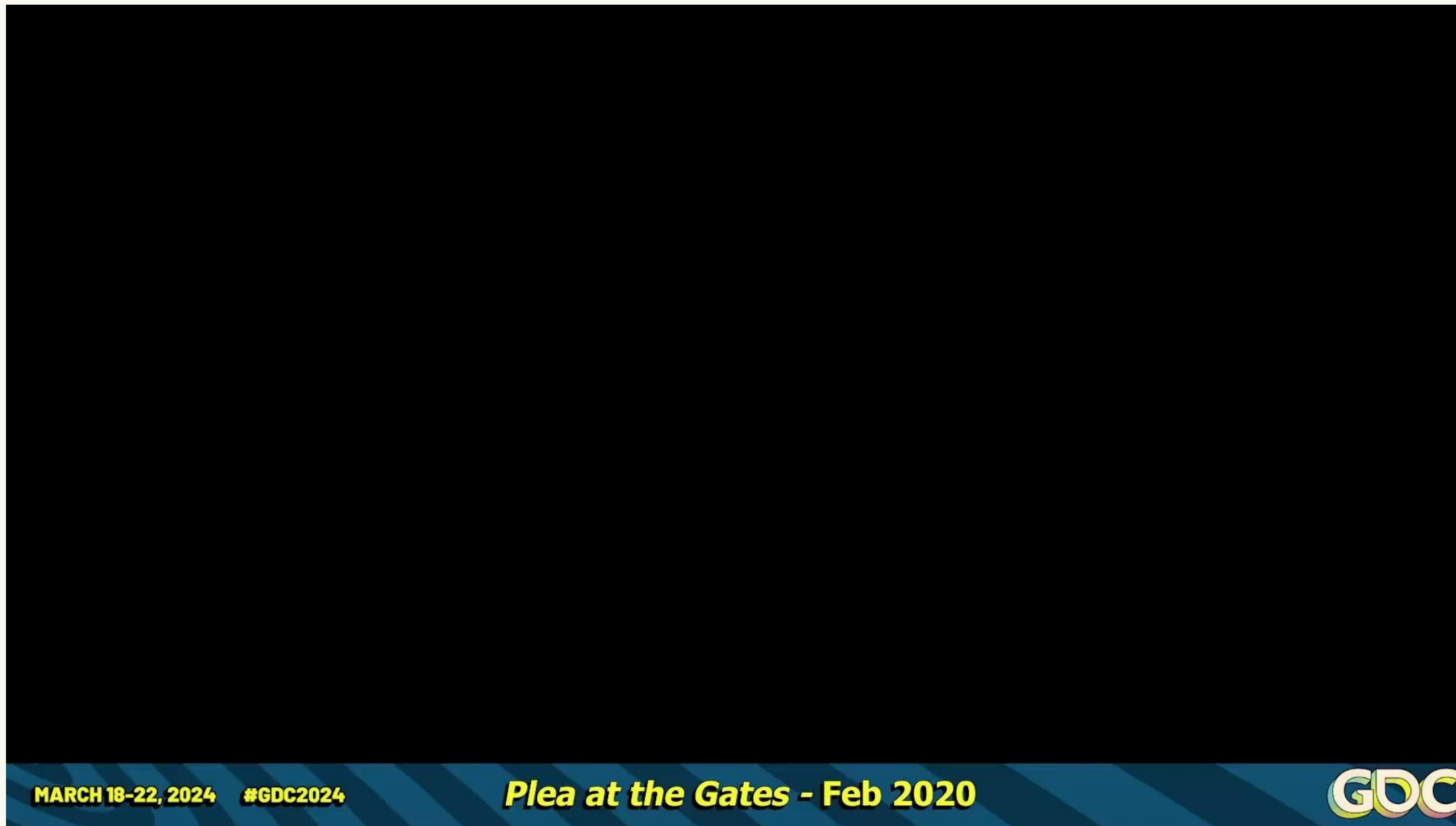


Implemented Cinematic Dummies

- No, not like that...
 - Timeline entities would replicate and hide their in-game counter parts
- This would allow the cine team more freedom
 - Keep Timeline as an artist tool
 - Cut down on anim blends
 - Cheat staging changes
- Results would take months
 - Tech, pipeline, authorship



Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics



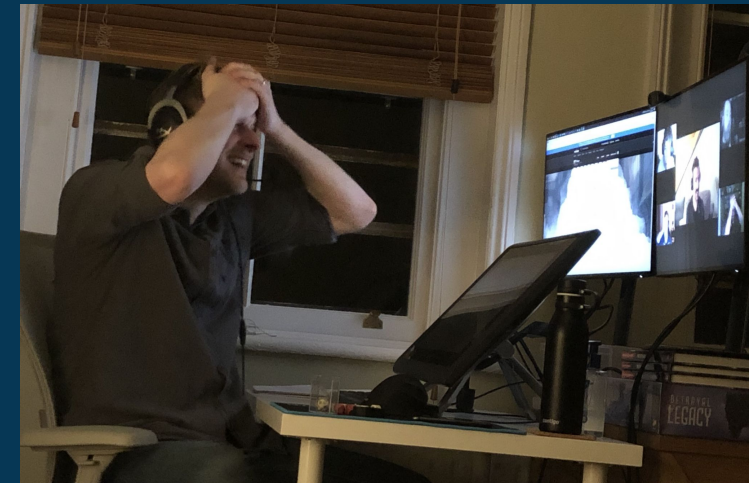
Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics



All set, nothing can stop us now!



One month later...



Time to Think

Accomplished Vision

- ☒ Flexible Cinematic
- ☒ Don't make the game smaller
- ☒ "Muppet acting"
- ☒ Grounded Tone

COVID slowed the writing pipeline

- This gave our team time to evolve and pivot
- Our team grown from being the "new kids on the block"

Baldur's Gate 3: What to Expect of the Next Chapter

Baldur's Gate 3 has launched into early access, but only in part. What should players expect next for the Dungeons & Dragons-based RPG?

BY GLENN CARREAU PUBLISHED JAN 16, 2021



Baldur's Gate 3 launched into early access late last year, but the game is far from complete. Rather than release the entire game, Larian Studios instead opted to release it chapter by chapter, and thus far, only the first chapter of Baldur's Gate 3 is available to play.

The first chapter of *Baldur's Gate 3* is quite the adventure, totaling over 20 hours of gameplay, but it's just the beginning. *Baldur's Gate 3* still has quite a ways to go in early access, and thanks to a few hints and unfinished plot lines in the first part of the game, there are quite a few things to expect in forthcoming chapters of the future.

Which upcom are you mos

- ☐ Legendary
- ☐ Pokemon Tradi
- ☐ Pokemon Horizo

Evolving Vision

Target Final Quality

- We wouldn't have EA to hide behind for the final release

Maintain the Floor

- Refactor Scene Templates

Collaborate to Shape

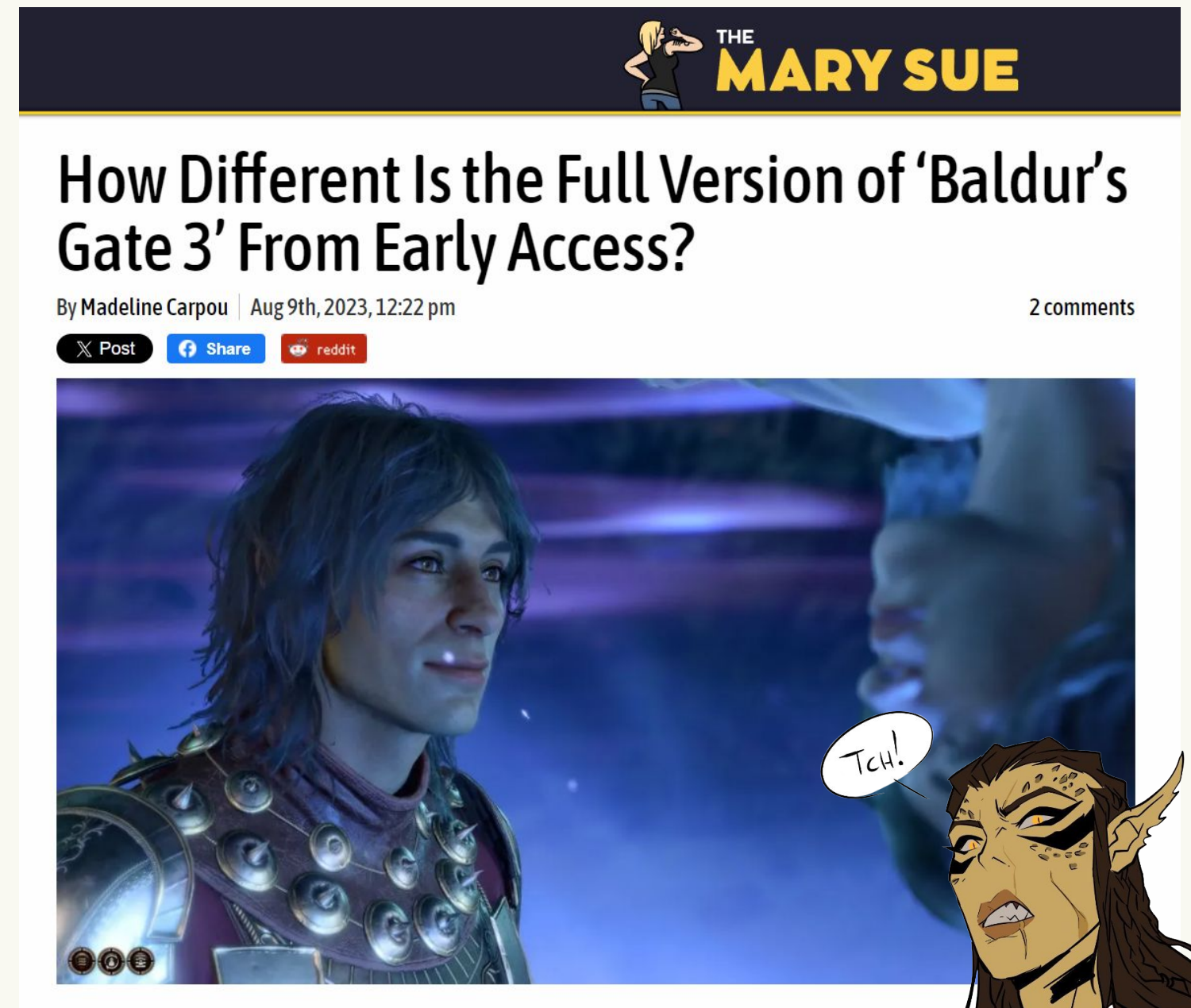
- Provide Team Identity to as model

Focus fire the ceiling

- Custom Node identification

Solve lighting

- Somehow...



Evolving Victories: Maintain the Floor



Refactor Scene Templates


- Revisited all Scene Templates
- Tighter staging allowed for more visible companions
 - Also created a smaller footprint for cinematics to play closer to the game state
- Established baseline
 - Standard starting point



Evolving Problems: Maintain the Floor



Some Scene didn't fit the Templates

- Wildshape would double as a Speak with Animals Spell
 - We couldn't support the player as an animal everywhere in cinematics
 - Mid development we opted to simply keep the player offscreen
- 



Evolving Victories: Collaborate to Shape

CINEMATIC ART

Execution

- Character and Camera placement
- Editing
- Facial Performances
- Animation Implementation and Timing
 - Body Gestures for Non-Mocapped Characters

Broader Tasks

- Understanding the Drama
- Advocating for Fidelity
- Owning Kickoff Meetings
- Advocating for Asset Reuse
- Refactoring old workflows
- Escalating Technical and Narrative Issues



Evolving Victories: Collaborate to Shape

CINEMATIC ART

Broader tasks lead to pillars beyond execution

analysis

How well the assignment is understood?

Understanding the Drama

ideation

How strong are your visual goals?

Advocating for Fidelity

strategy

How clear is your plan of action?

Owning Kickoff Meetings

Escalating Issues

execution

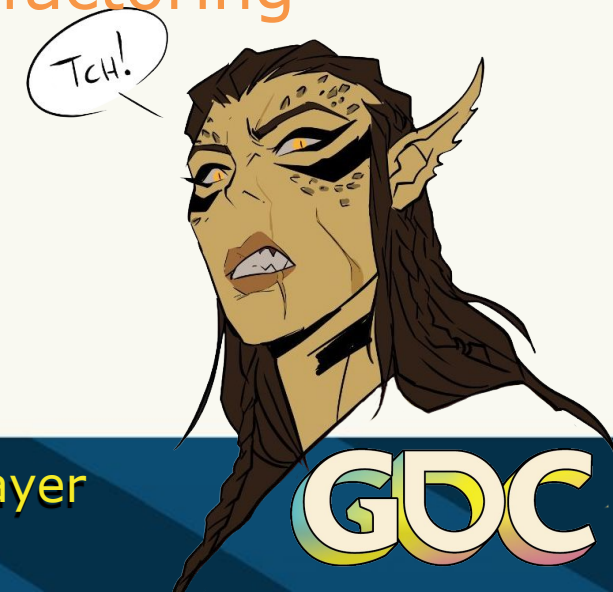
How well does your plan conform to the tools?

Working in the Timeline Tool

revision

How efficiently does your work achieve polish?

Stability and refactoring



Evolving Victories: Focus fire the ceiling

Cinematic Context

- Each line of dialog is represented by a node
- Added a field for visual information
 - Used for mocap shot lists
- Once writing got back to speed we had more work than we could review
 - We needed a way to prioritize the most complicated scenes
 - WITHOUT having to read them

EMPEROR:

Before you do anything - I am your ally.

CINE CONTEXT:

From the ground, the Emperor locks eyes with us and speaks



Evolving Victories: Focus fire the ceiling

Custom Nodes

- Added a toggle to easily count Nodes with Cine Context
- Dialog Fidelity and Cinematic Context were early concepts
 - This married the two
 - 1 Custom Node in a Gold Dialog equaled 1 Gold Node
 - Historicals indicated 0.5 Gold Nodes resulted in an new animation request

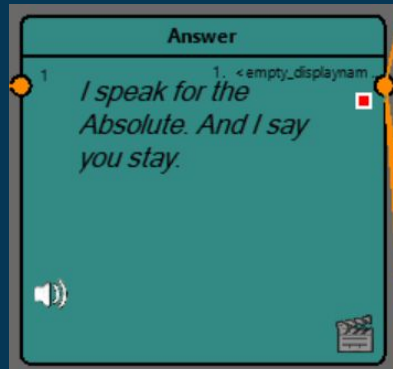
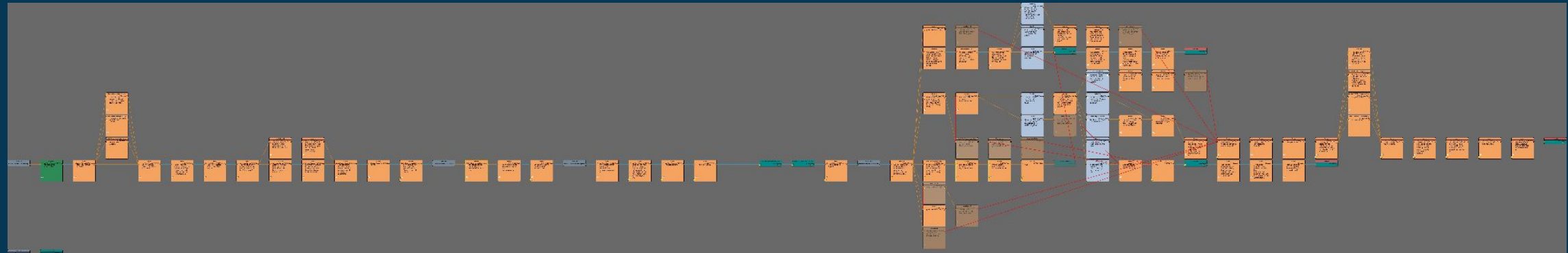
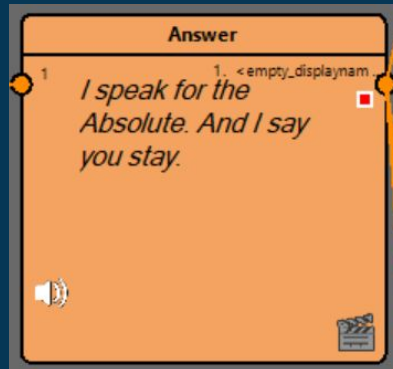
Dialog Fidelity: Gold

Cine Context: True

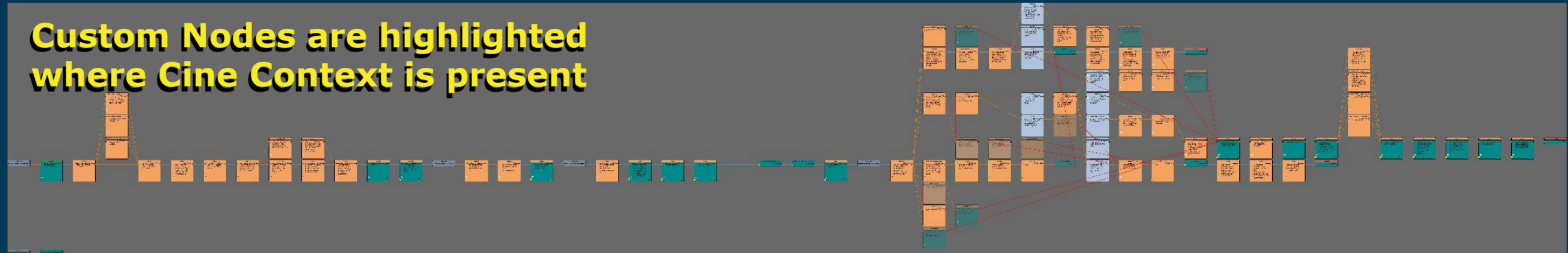
Custom Node: ☒

Gold Node: 1





Custom Nodes are highlighted where Cine Context is present

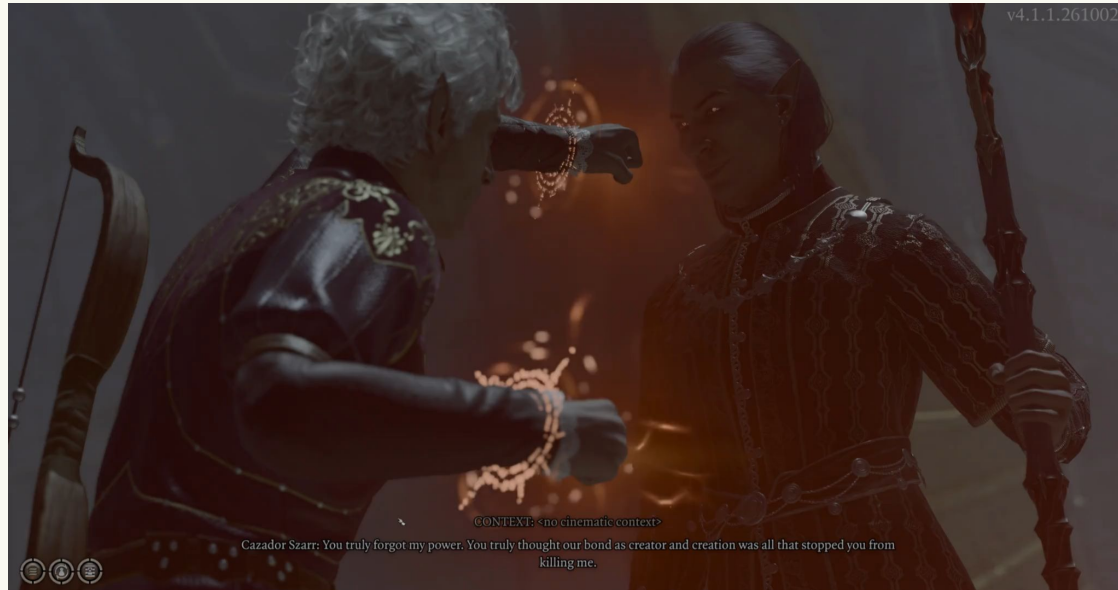


- 99 Total Nodes
- 71 Timeline Nodes
- 24 Custom Nodes
- 22 Nodes won't create work
- 47 Nodes only need standard work
- 24 Nodes likely require new assets and implementation of some kind

- 5000 Timeline Nodes might only have 542 Custom Nodes
- We knew **where** to read



Evolving Problems: Solve Lighting

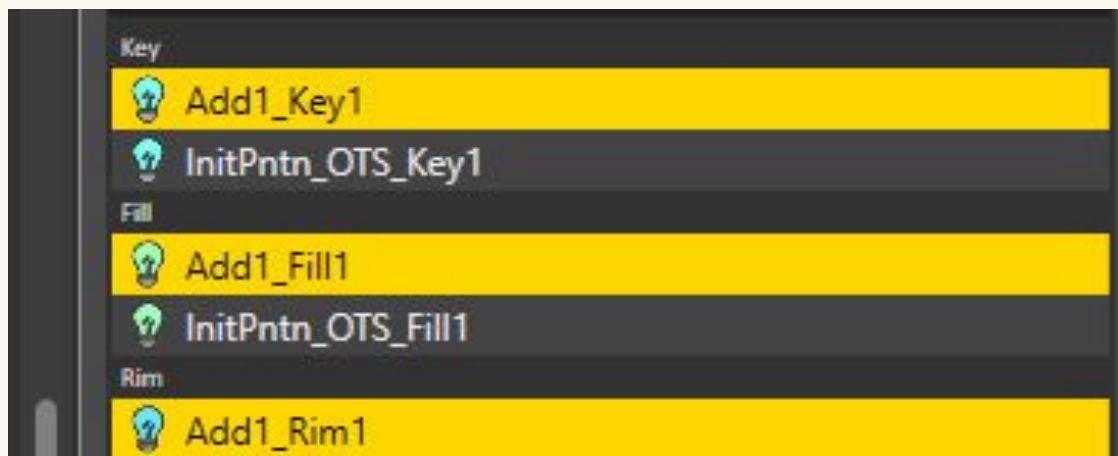
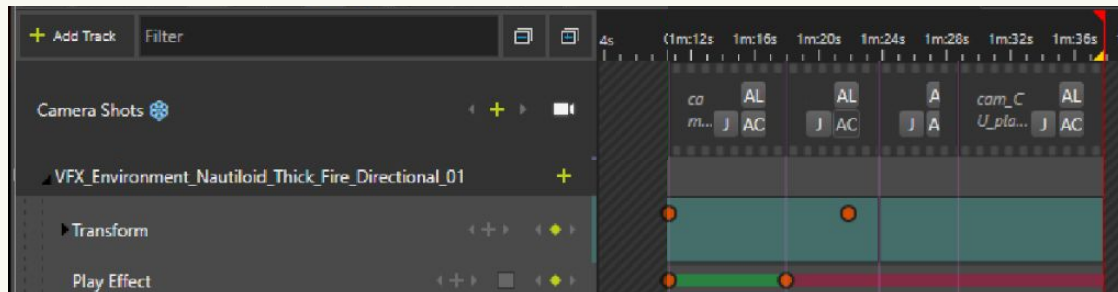


Big Game, 2 Lighting Artists

- High demand role made recruiting difficult
 - TV/Film skills don't transfer naturally
- Proprietary workflow was not outsourcing friendly
- Our Auto Lighting solution for Early Access didn't handle movement
 - This built a huge backlog of time consuming lighting work



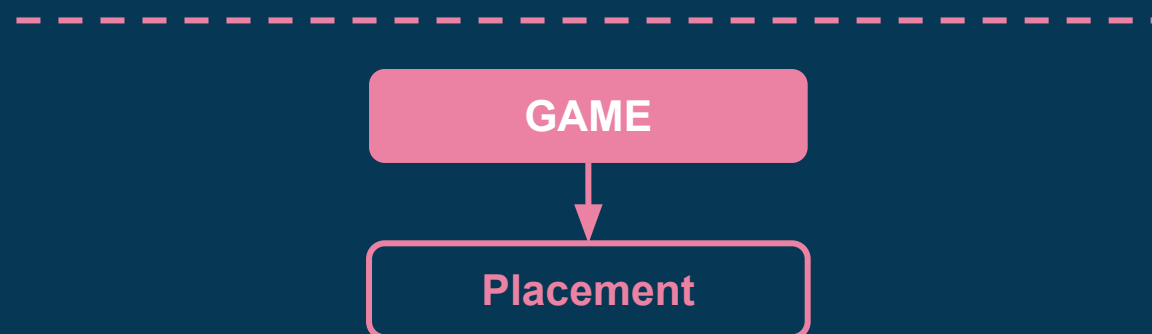
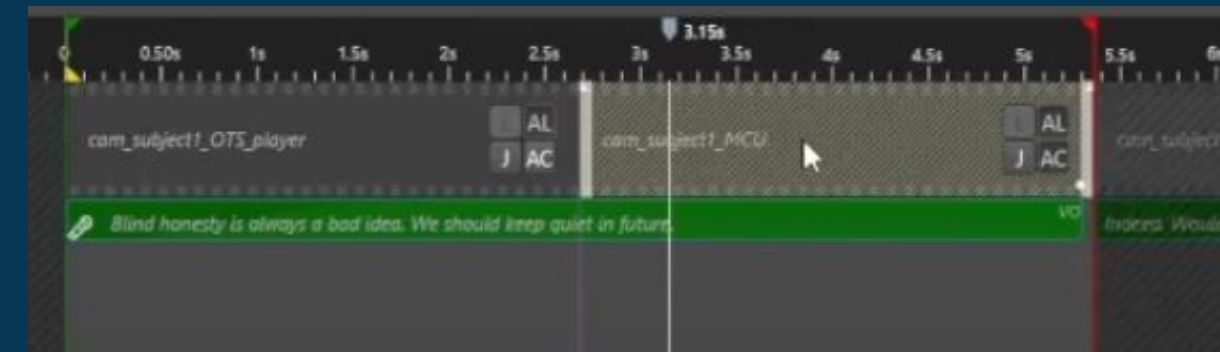
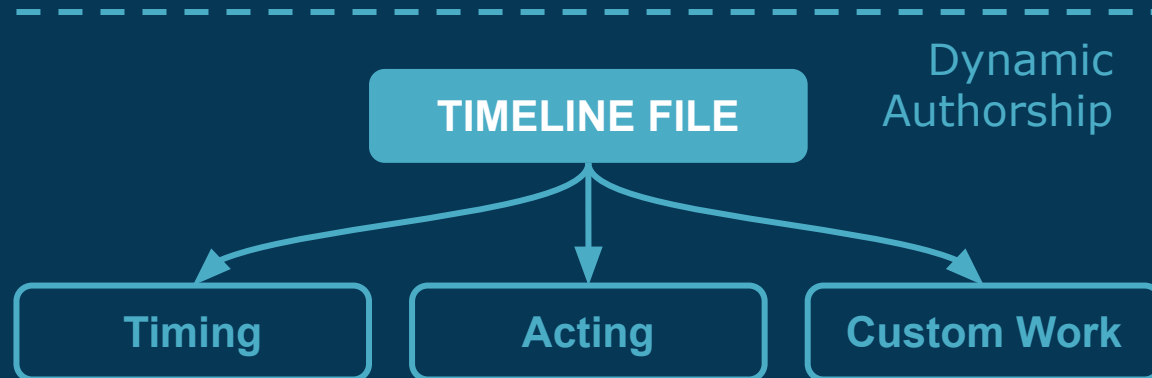
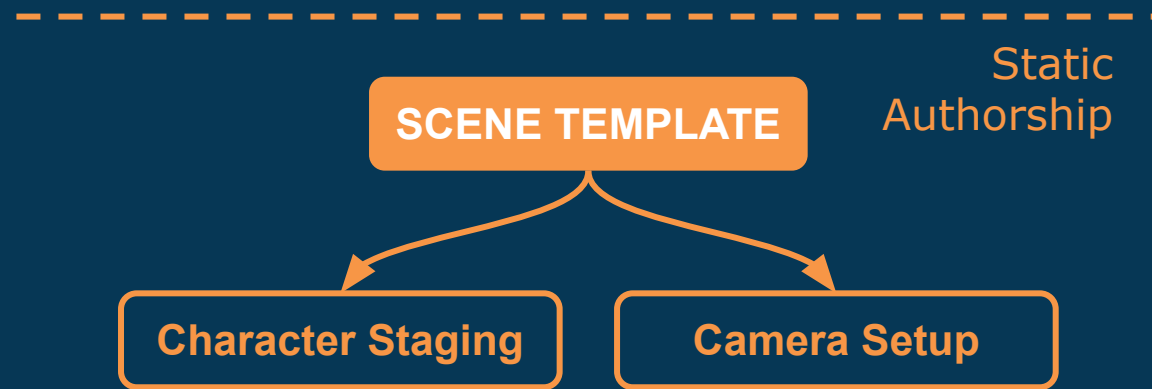
Evolving Problems: Solve Lighting

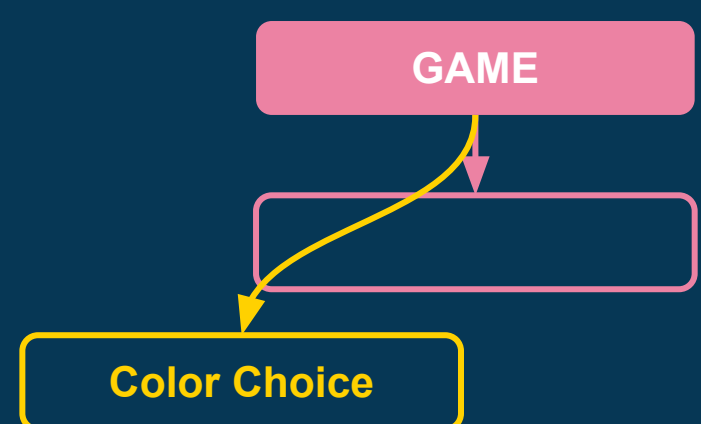
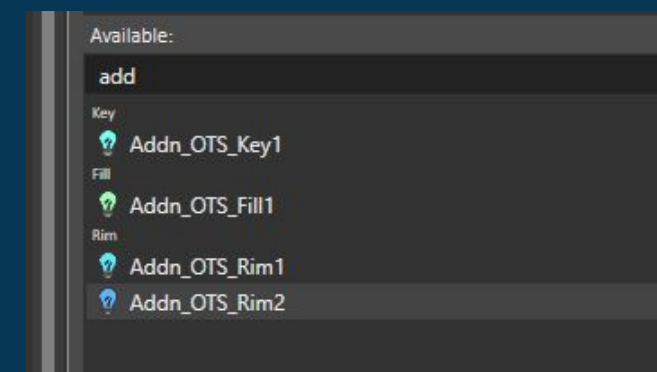
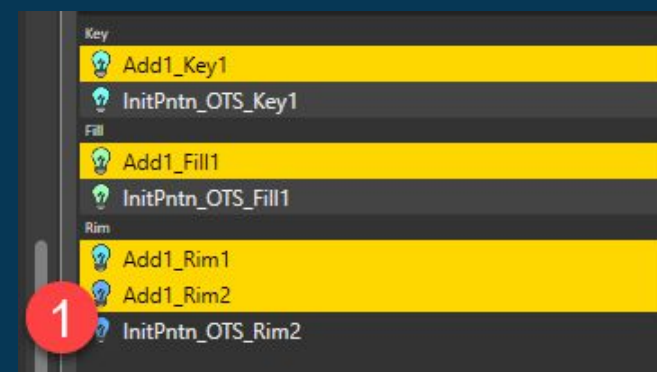
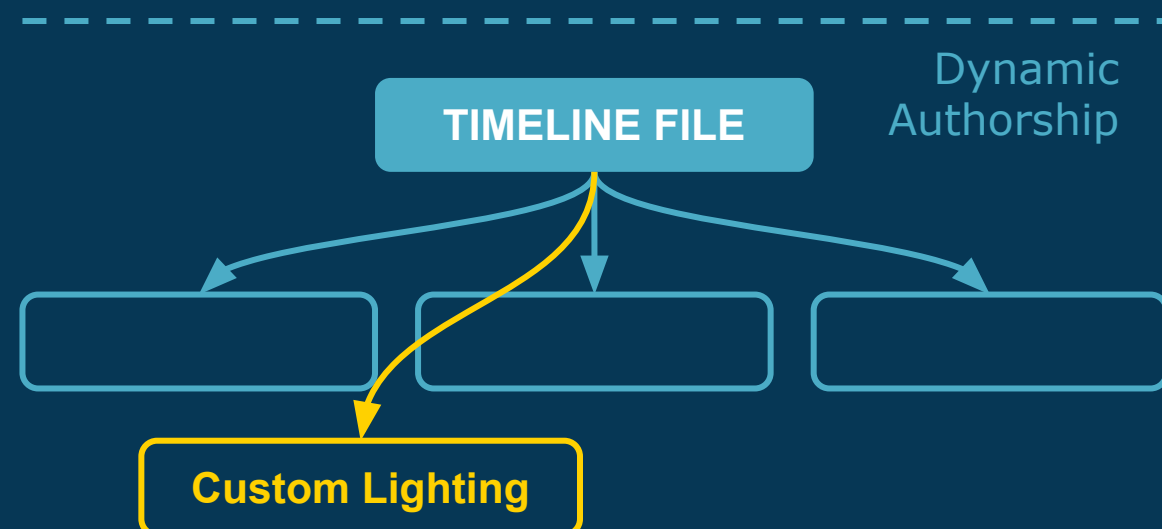
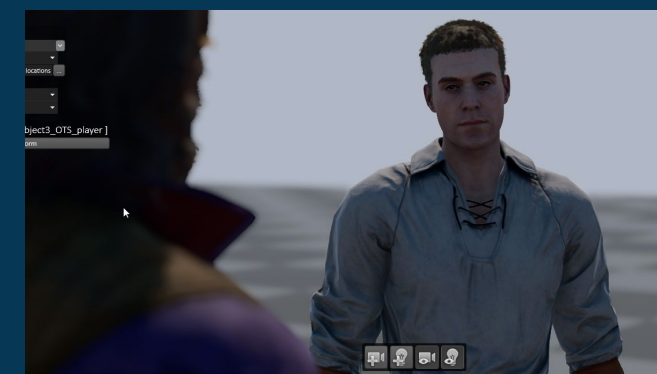
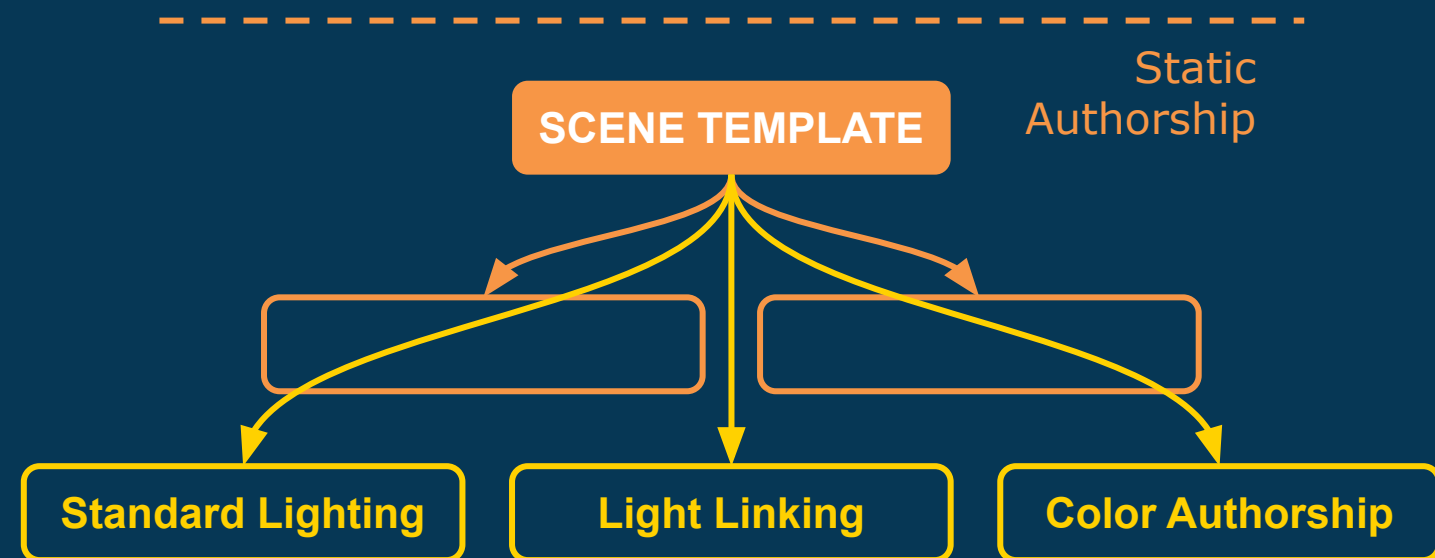


Light Linking

- Manually toggled each light per-camera for Early Access
 - This work was essential but time consuming
- We attach light activation to camera activation
 - It was intuitive
 - Huge time savings
- We had two buckets of work
 - Bulk linking / Custom Work









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LAE'ZEL Our lives will be coloured by
blood-red and death-black.



Project Takeaways



What worked

- Inherited authorship
 - Staging, cameras, lighting
- VO Mocap Pipeline
- Scaling the team's expectations
- Data prioritized vetting

What didn't

- "Golden Path" scoping
- 1-to-1 Cinematics
 - (this stings)



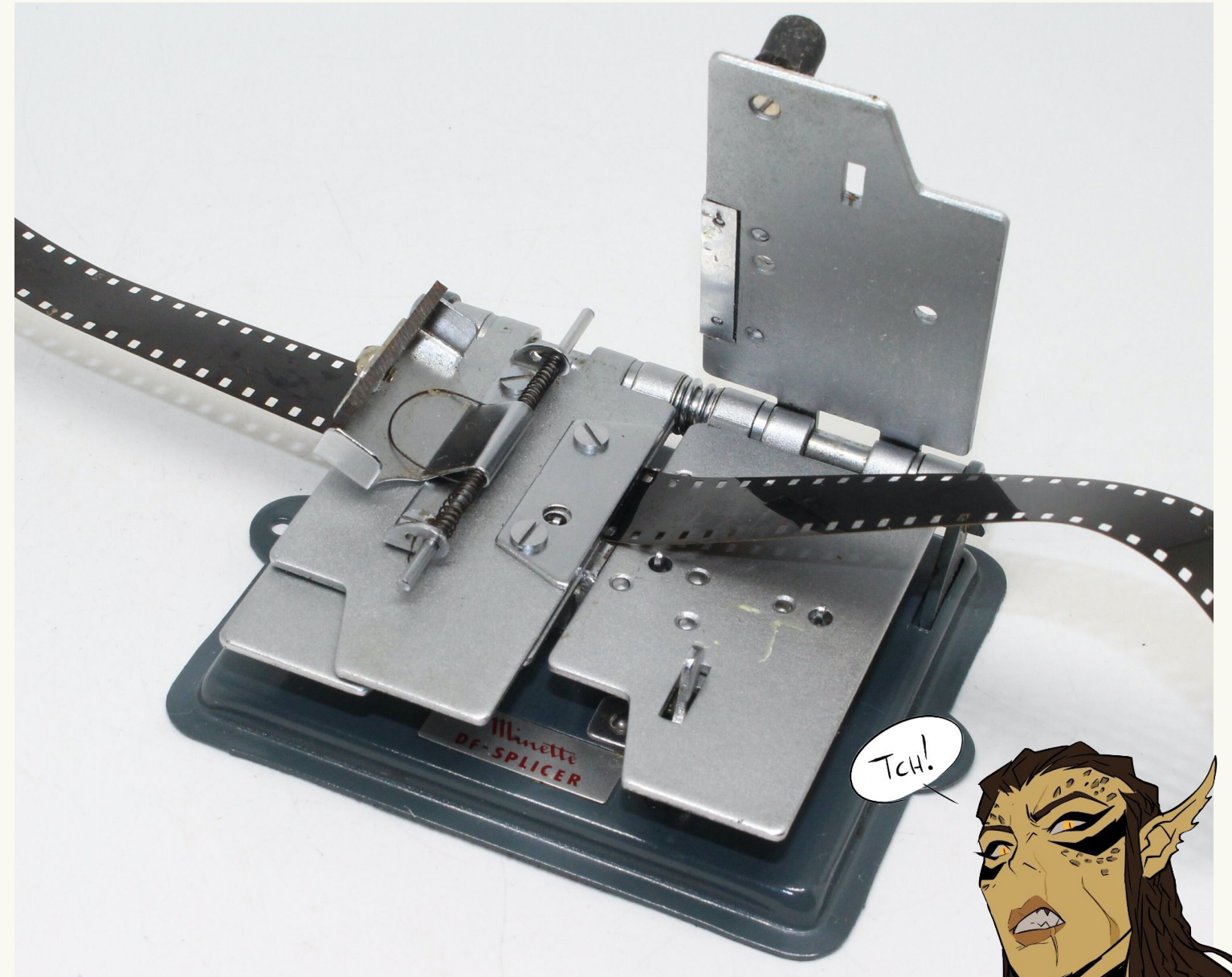
Personal Takeaways

Kill your darlings

- Eliminate all the parts of a story you love but cannot justify
- What remains are the moments that actually serve your story

This is what I did with my job

- Storyboarding > Storyboard Artists
- Creative Feedback > Cine Leads
- Mocap Shoots > Perf Director
- *What remained were director tasks*



What remained was unblocking these people

CINEMATICS

CINEMATIC ANIMATION

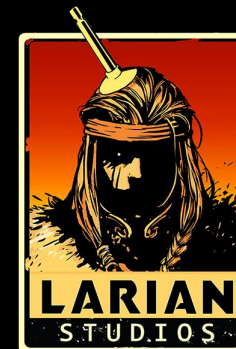
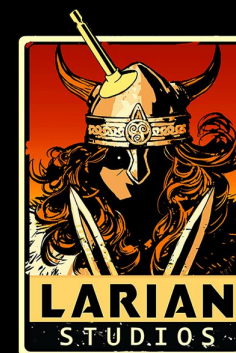
Lead Cinematic Animator JIM SOUTHWORTH
Associate Lead Cinematic Animator CHAD DAVIS
Associate Lead Cinematic Animator LILI TAN LAI YAN
Cinematic Animation Producer LEAH CALDWELL
Associate Cinematic Producer CINDY ARIAWATY DHARMAPALA
Senior Cinematic Animator AARON CLEMENT
Senior Cinematic Animator AMÉLIE LOYER
Senior Cinematic Animator BEAU MELO-ROBINSON
Senior Cinematic Animator CODY MITCHELL
Senior Cinematic Animator DAN ARMSTRONG
Senior Cinematic Animator GERRY JACOBS
Senior Cinematic Animator PAUL NOVOROL
Senior Cinematic Animator TARIK SRHIR
Cinematic Animator ADAM B SMITH
Cinematic Animator CHOICELYN TAN SIAW YING
Cinematic Animator CHRIS WOODS
Cinematic Animator CHRISTIAN DHARMAWAN
Cinematic Animator KAYLEIGH DE HAAN
Cinematic Animator LEE TZE GWEN
Cinematic Animator LOGAN PROVÉ
Cinematic Animator OLIVER SATTERLEY
Junior Cinematic Animator MARCO BARREDO
Junior Cinematic Animator MATHIAS VEKONY
Junior Cinematic Animator SIREETHON SRINUALLAONG
Mocap Technician CHRISI MITCHELL
Mocap Technician MATTHEW STEVENS

CINEMATIC ART

Lead Cinematic Artist FARIDZ RIDZUAN
Lead Cinematic Artist GRAHAM ROSS
Lead Narrative Technology/Programming KEVIN VAN NERUM
Associate Lead Cinematic Artist AZIMAH MOHD NOOR
Associate Lead Cinematic Artist ELLEN GRANT
Associate Lead Cinematic Artist KEALAN CUDLIPP
Cinematic Producer CHRISTIAN BANK ENEVOLDSEN
Pipeline Producer SRIRANJANI PARTHASARATHY
VO Producer SINÉAD BRADY
Associate Cinematic Producer ALEK SHARMA
Senior Cinematic Artist ELODIE CESELLI
Senior Cinematic Artist FELIX PEDULLA
Senior Cinematic Artist SIMON GAUTHIER
Cinematic Artist AIDI KHALID
Cinematic Artist JACK O'FLYNN
Cinematic Artist JASON CHOO KAM WHYE
Cinematic Artist KRIS BONGO
Cinematic Artist LEONG SHI PEI
Cinematic Artist MARTIN KELLY
Cinematic Artist MATTHEW DAVIS
Cinematic Artist RIVER STAS
Cinematic Artist TOM KLEINENBERG
Cinematic Artist WILSON LEE ZHI XIAN
Cinematic Artist WISNU IRAWAN
Cinematic Storyboard Artist DAVE STOKES
Junior Cinematic Artist AARON HOULIHAN
Junior Cinematic Artist DANIEL PORTER
Junior Cinematic Artist HARITH AIMAN
Junior Cinematic Artist HUSNIYAH AMRY
Junior Cinematic Artist JOSHUA KHOO ALAN
Junior Cinematic Artist KELLY MCCARVILL
Junior Cinematic Artist KILIAN DUFFY
Junior Cinematic Artist KRIZSHA PEROCHO
Junior Cinematic Artist MURAT ONDER
Junior Cinematic Artist PATRICIA SUM NAM KAO
Junior Cinematic Artist SEAN LOW ZHENG SHAN
Junior Cinematic Artist SIVANESH A/L M V SUKUMAR

LIGHTING

Associate Lead Lighting Artist JOANNIE LEBLANC



Personal Takeaways

A new vision for "Vision"

- I thought being a Cine Director was about me delivering the story
- Instead it was removing obstacles so my team could deliver the story
- My raw material wasn't the story
 - My raw material is ambiguity
 - My goal is processing this into clarity
- With clarity my team could focus on storytelling



Tch!






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Q&A

SPECIAL THANKS

Ash Jamieson
 @bs_artssss



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