



**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.



## Baldur's Gate 3 Has 174 Hours Worth of Cutscenes

A new update from Baldur's Gate 3 developer Larian Studios reveals that the title has around 174 hours of cutscenes, a lot more than gamers expected.

BY GABRIEL MACHADO PUREZA PUBLISHED JUN 30, 2023



# 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)

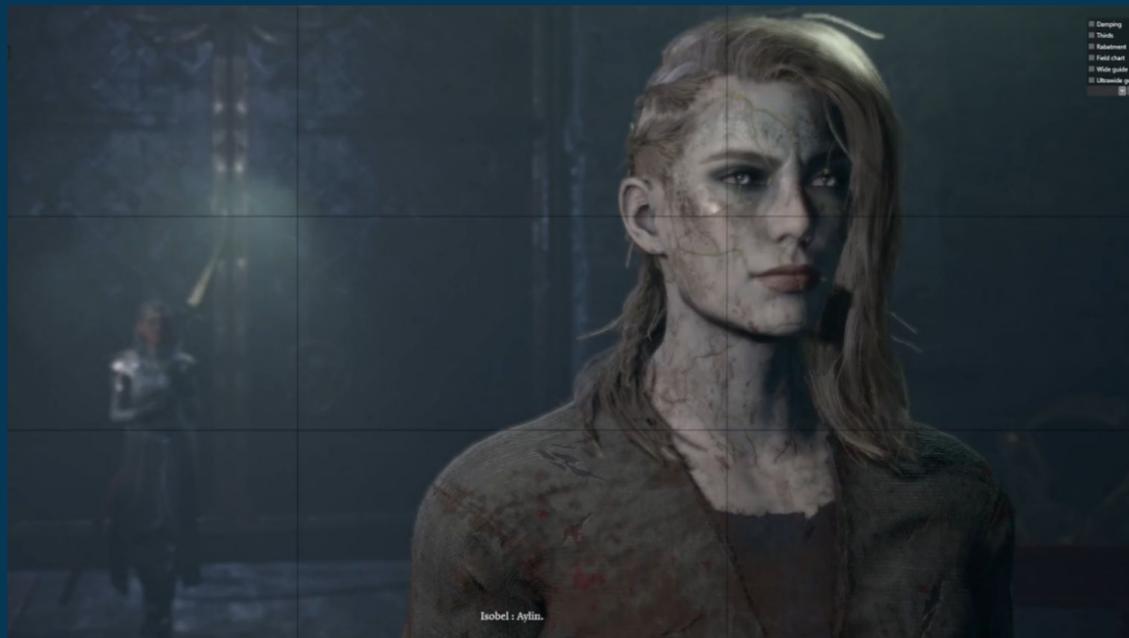
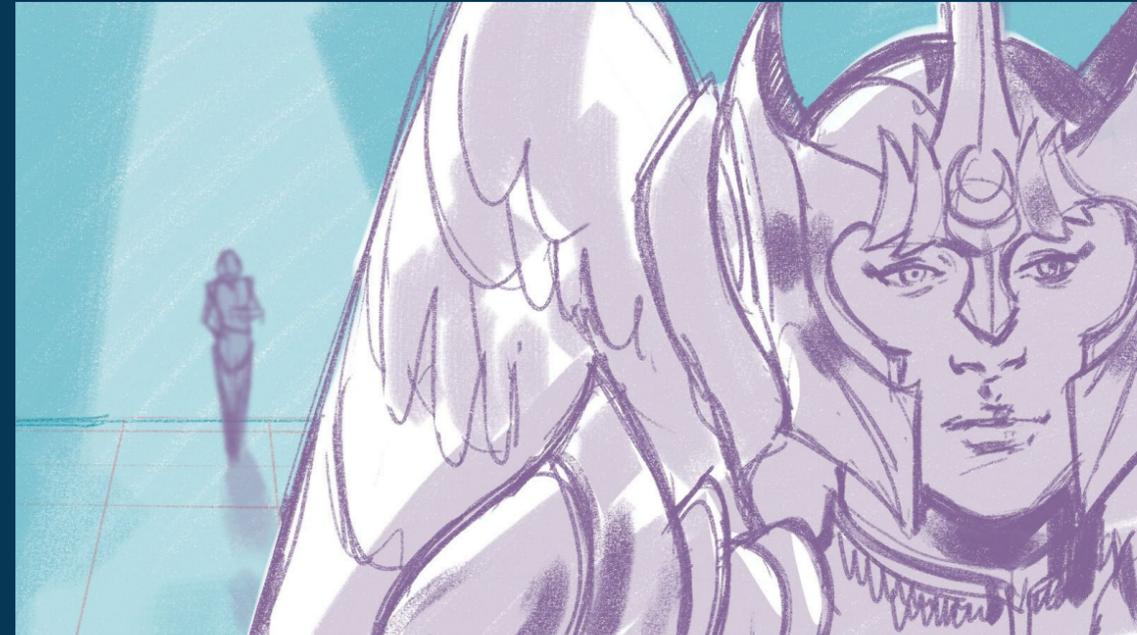
Lead	Priority	Title	2/2/2024	Last Update	Status	Recruiters / Contacts	Notes
BeHavior Interactive		Narrative Game Designer	12/20/2018	1/3/2019	passed		
Bungie		Systems Narrative Lead	12/20/2018	1/3/2019	passed		
Probably Monsters		Narrative Director	11/23/2018		no longer posted		
EA-Chatsworth		Cinematic 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, sho 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 passt 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)	receiv
Arkane-France	Closed	Cinematic Director	8/5/2018		Closed	recruiter	met with designer. h
Respawn	Closed	Senior Cineamtic Artist	7/12/2018		Closed		played: ter at 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

What did we think it would take to make cinematics?



problems

What were the bumps along the way?



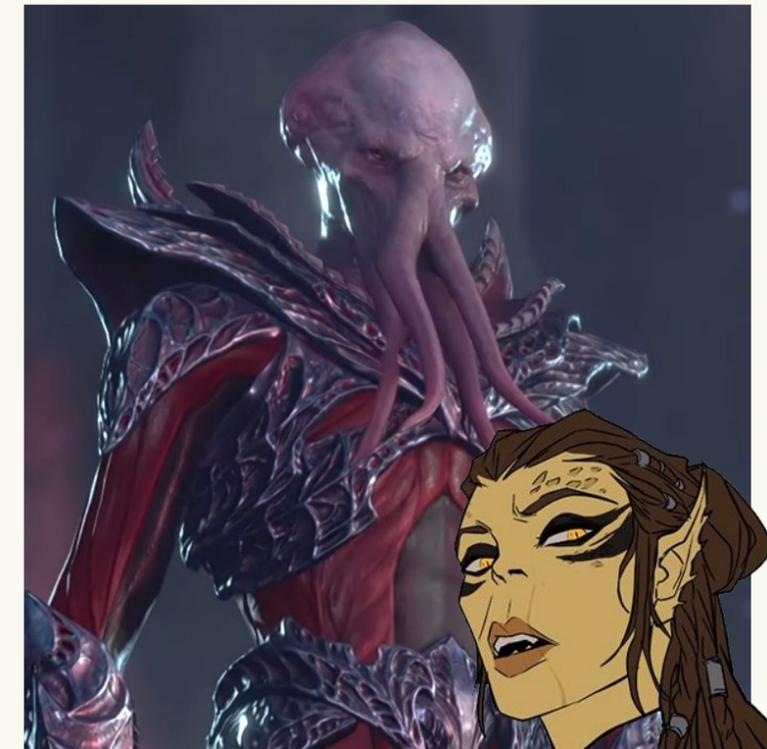
new vision

How did we recover from those bumps?



new problems

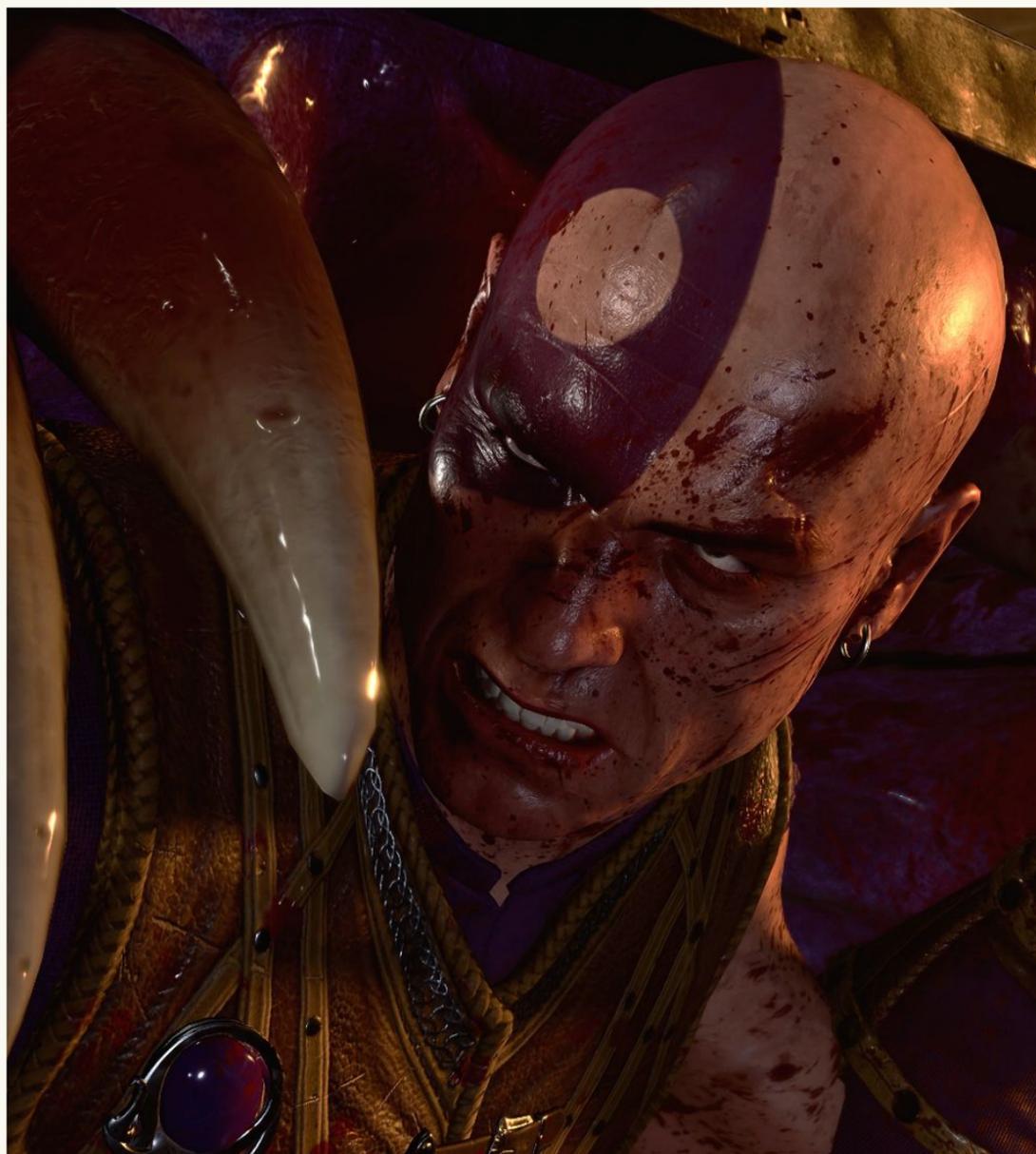
What new wrinkles were introduced?



resolution

What is the big lesson I'm taking into next project?

# Initial Vision



## Flexible Cinematics

- Templated structure that won't break with narrative changes

## Don't make the game smaller

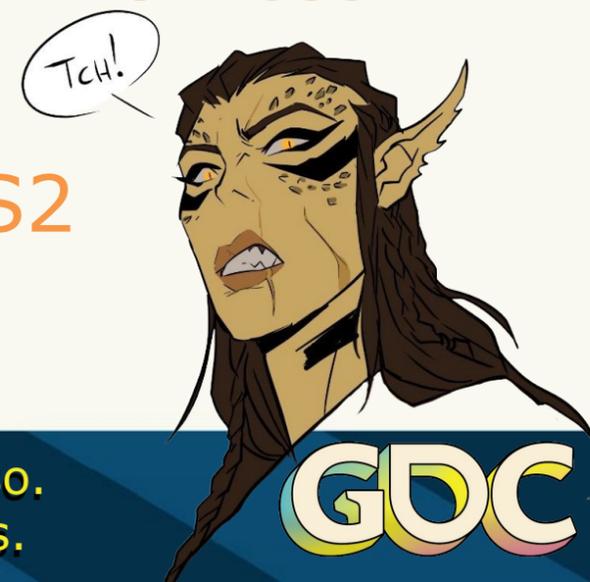
- Divinity: Original Sin 2 had 54266 interactive lines of dialog

## "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



DIALOG FILE

Story  
Authorship

Speaker Count

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

SCENE TEMPLATE

Static  
Authorship

Character Staging

Camera Setup



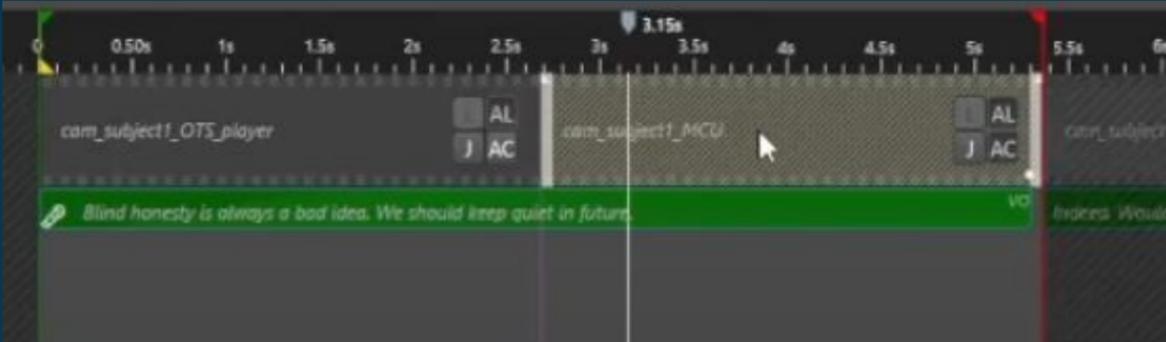
TIMELINE FILE

Dynamic  
Authorship

Timing

Acting

Custom Work



GAME

Placement



# 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"*





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**LAE'ZEL** Every moment a new danger. I may have underestimated this Faerûn.



# 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.





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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



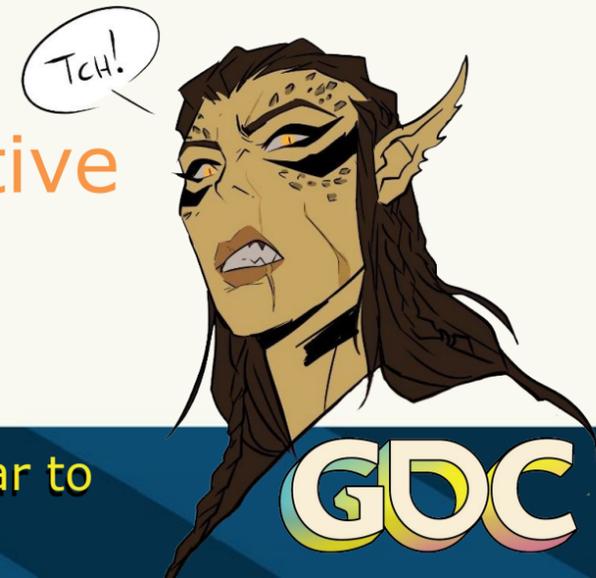


# Initial Problems: “Muppet acting”



## 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.





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**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



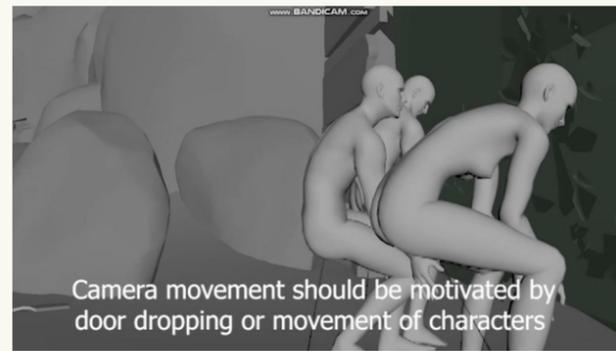
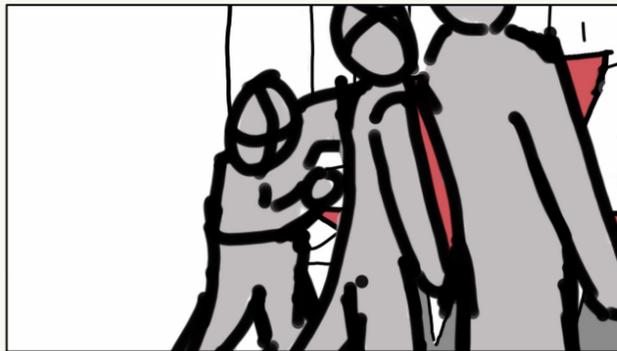
# Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics



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



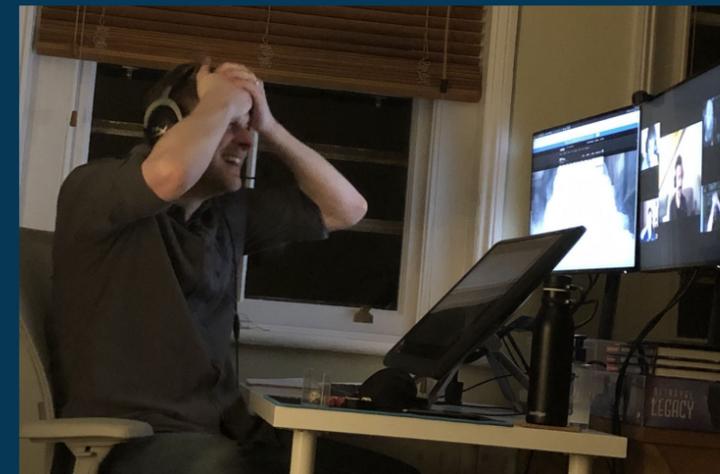
# Initial Impasse: Flexible Cinematics



All set, nothing can stop us now!



# One month later...



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**LAE'ZEL** Ignore it. Deny it. This is nothing but a disease.

**GDC**

# 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.

# 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

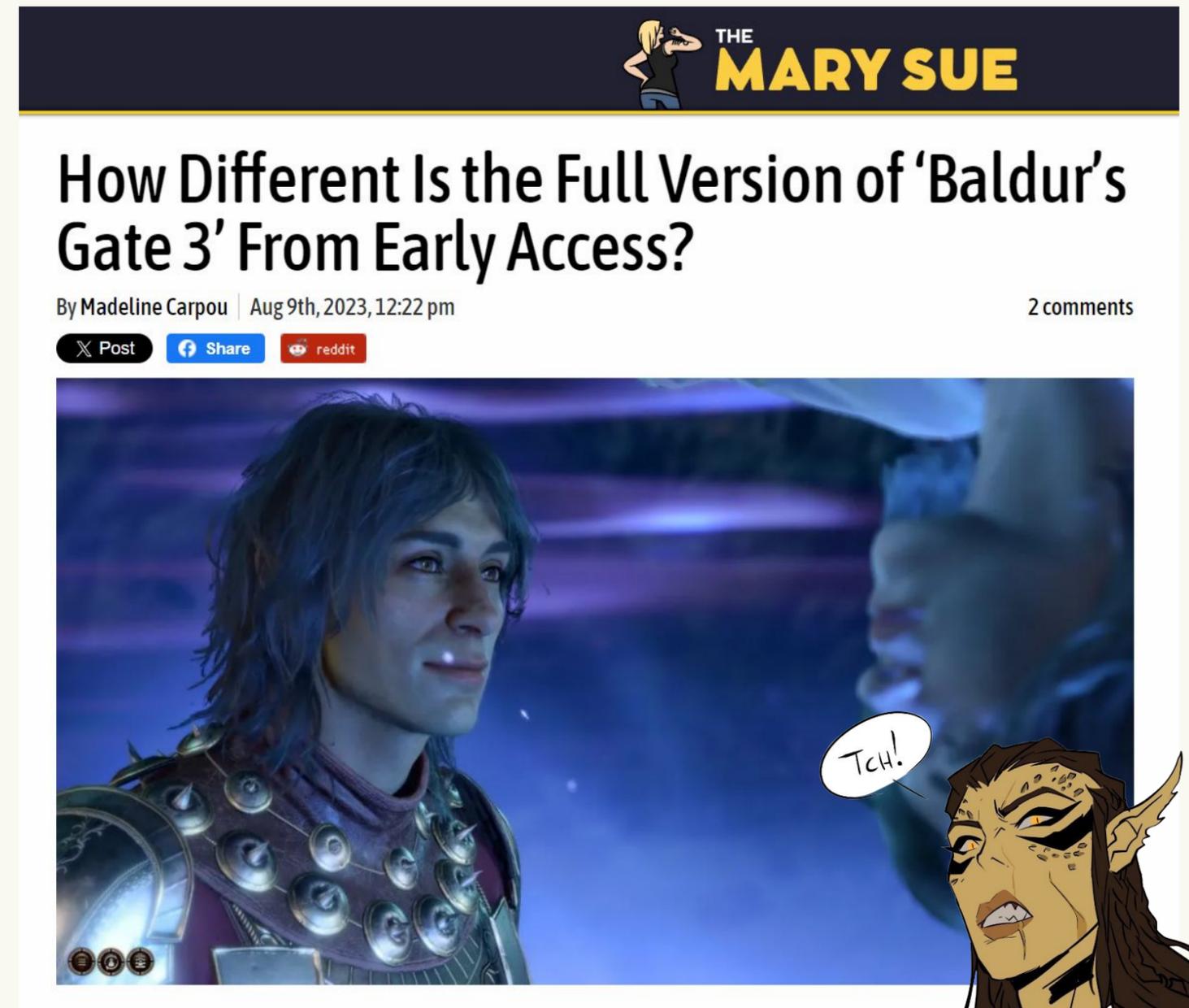
- Provide Team Identity to as model

## 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

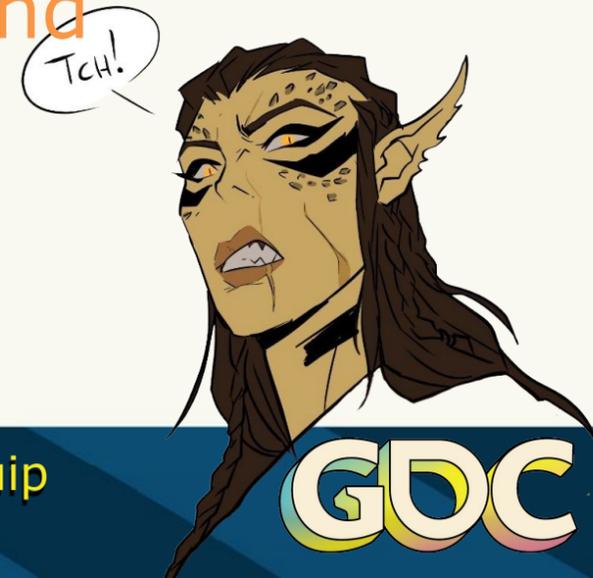
## CINEMATIC ART

### 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

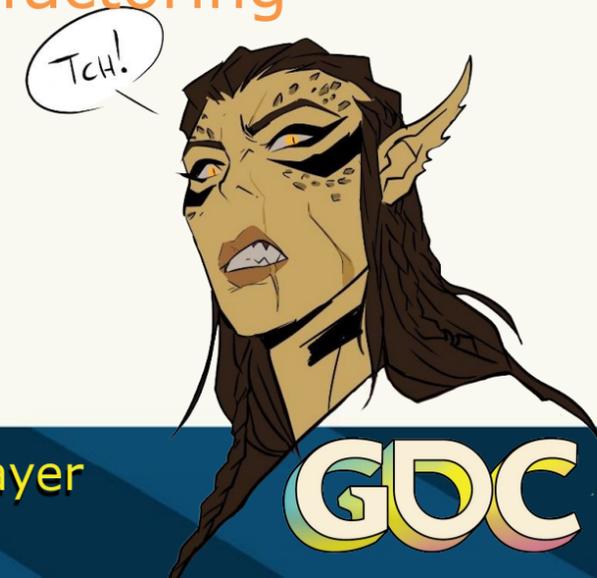
How well does your plan conform to the tools?

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

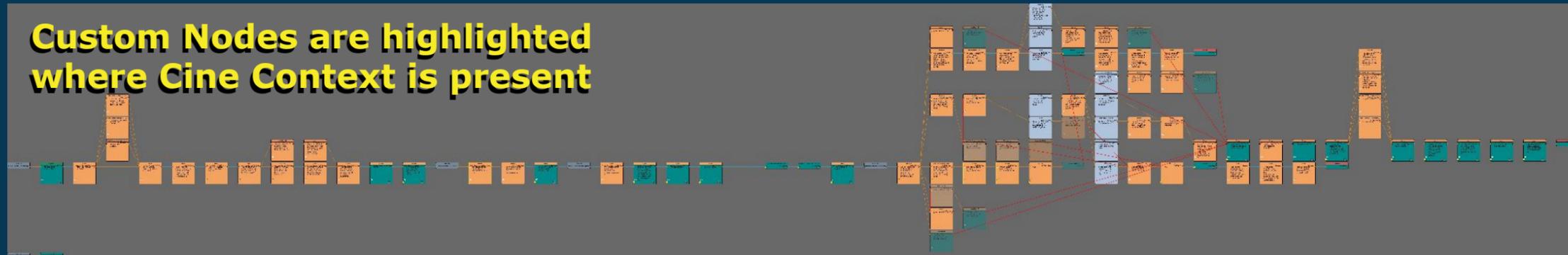
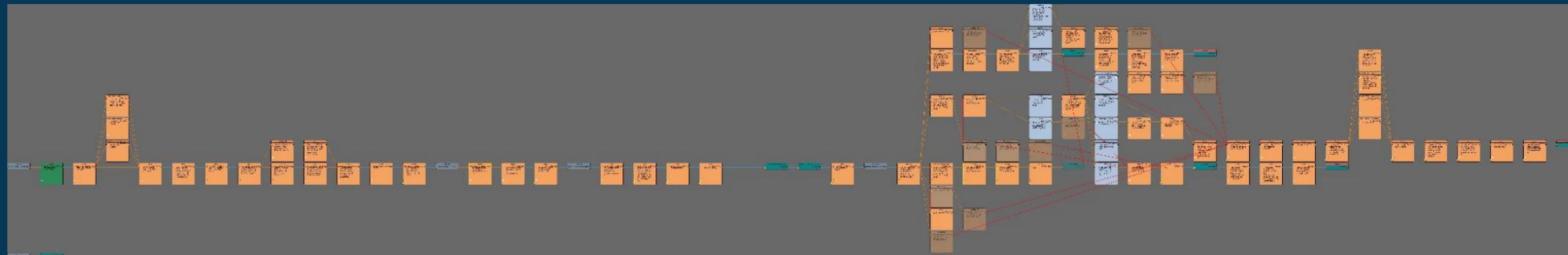
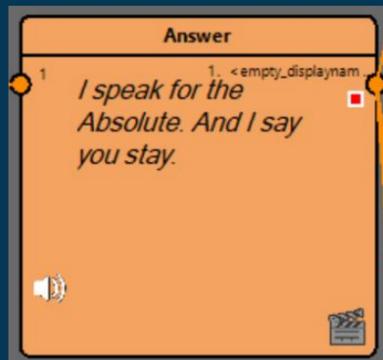
Dialog Fidelity: Gold

Cine Context: True

Custom Node:

Gold Node: 1





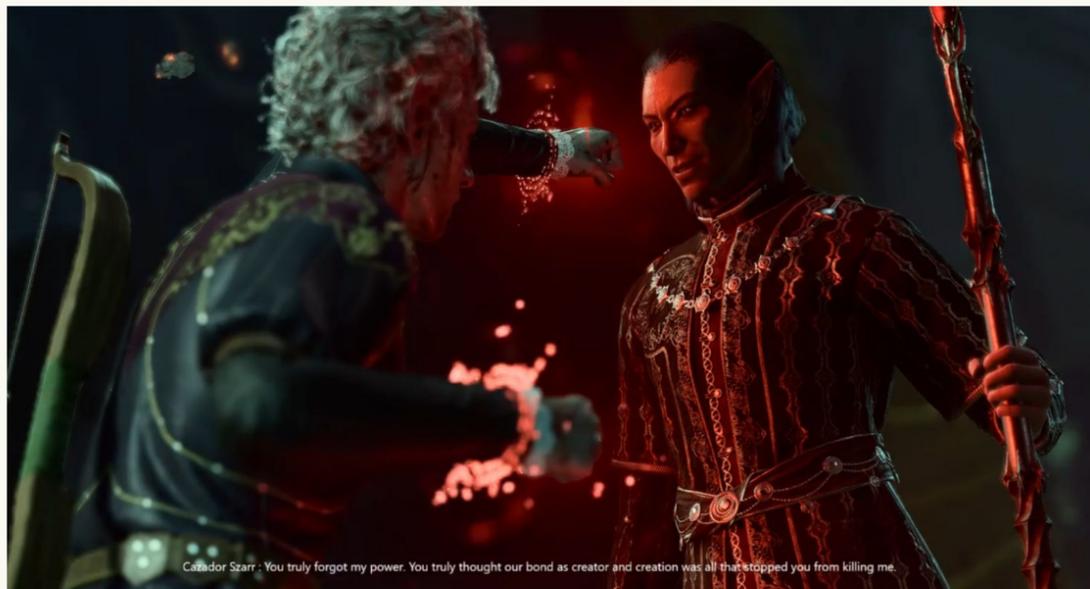
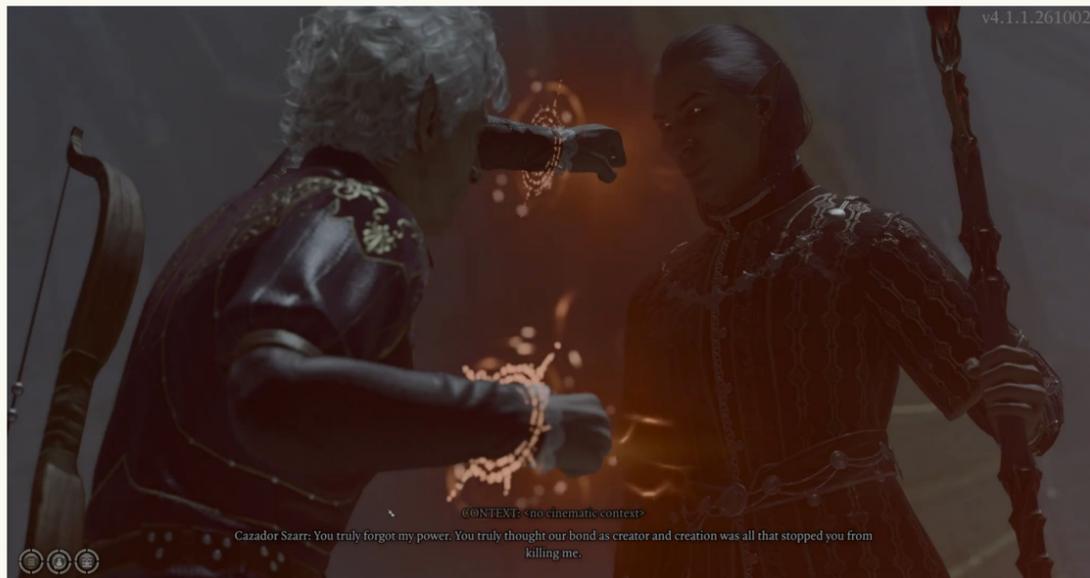
**Custom Nodes are highlighted where Cine Context is present**

- 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

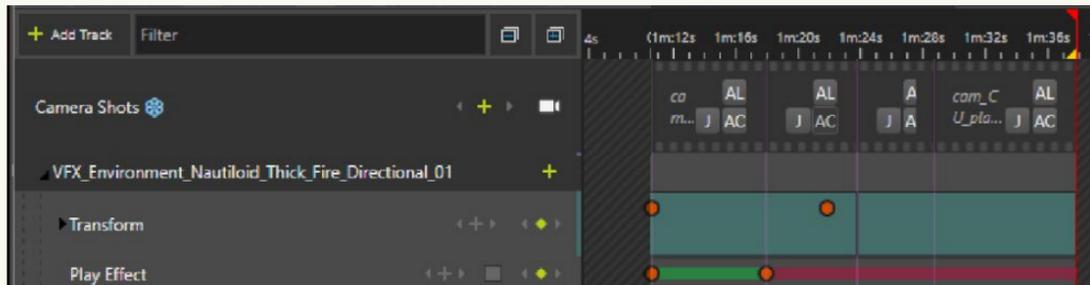


## Big Game, 2 Lighting Artists

- 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



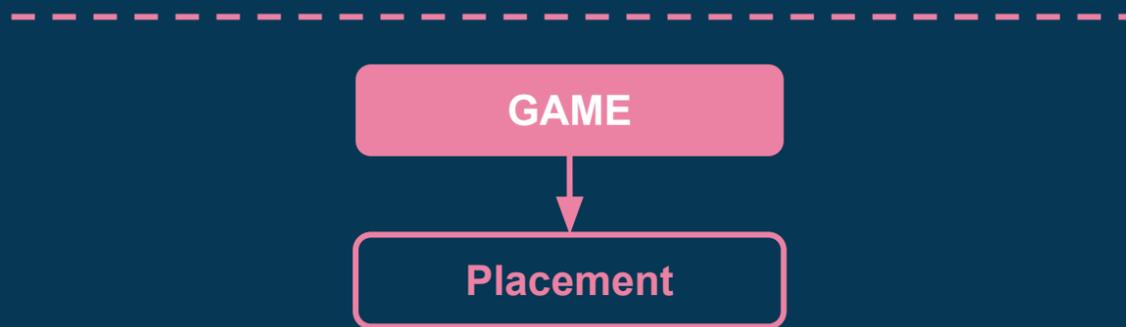
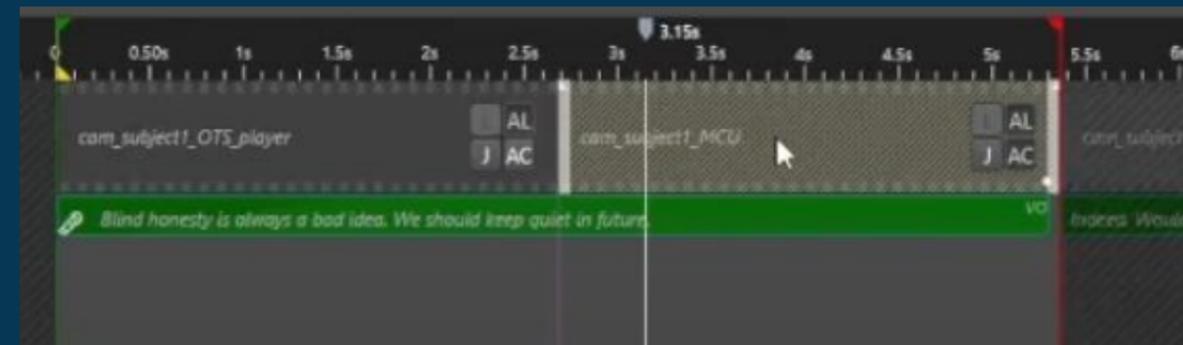
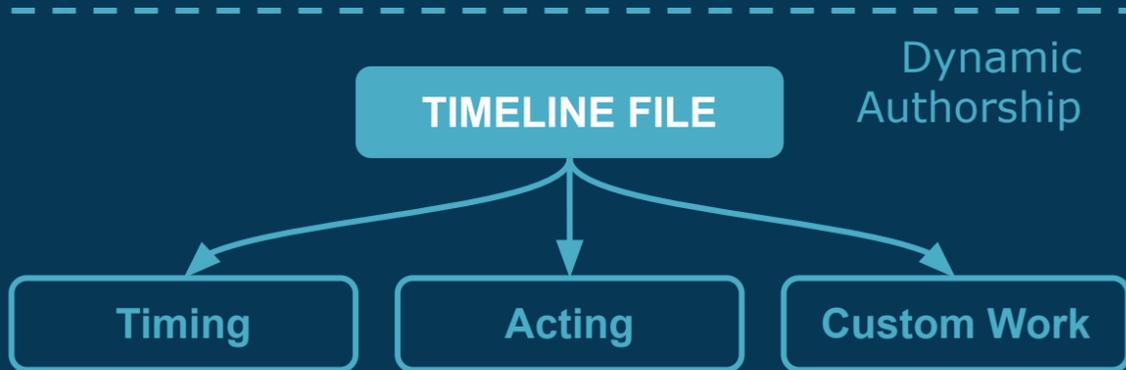
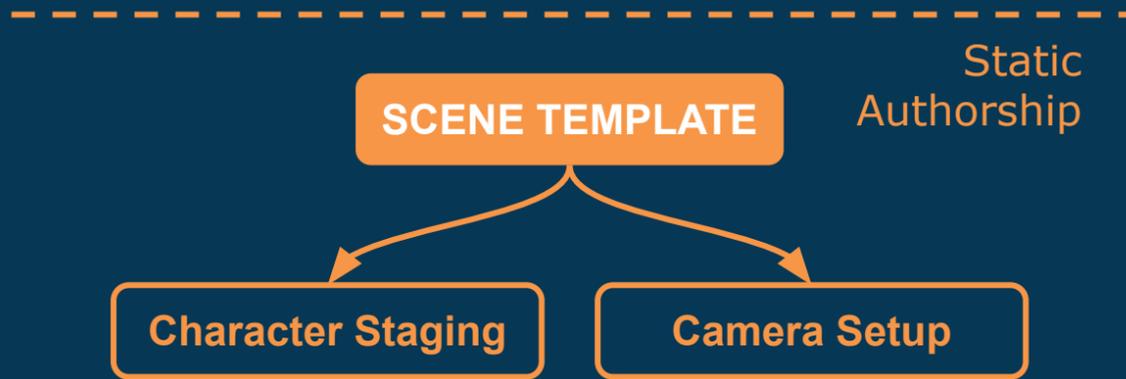
# Evolving Problems: Solve Lighting



## Light Linking

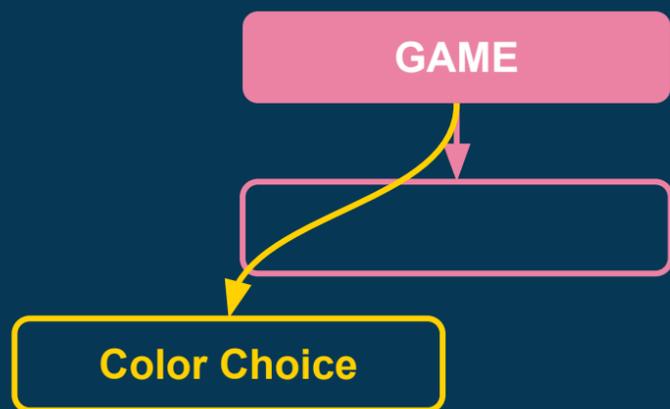
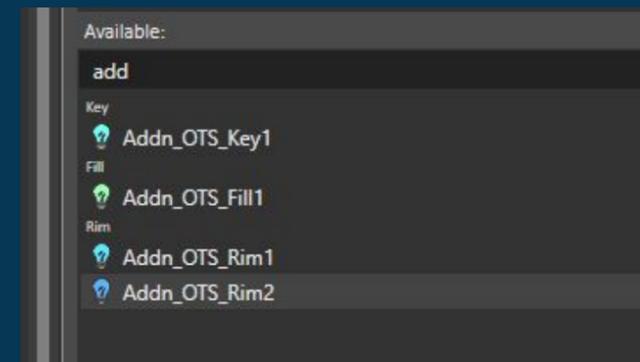
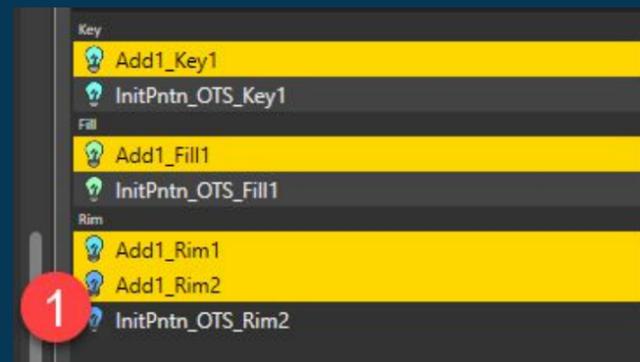
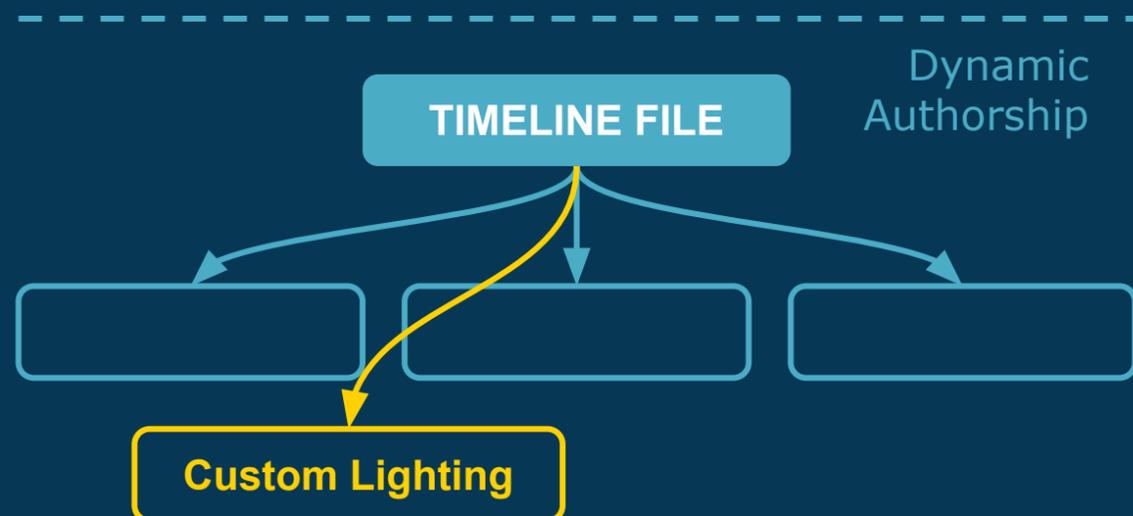
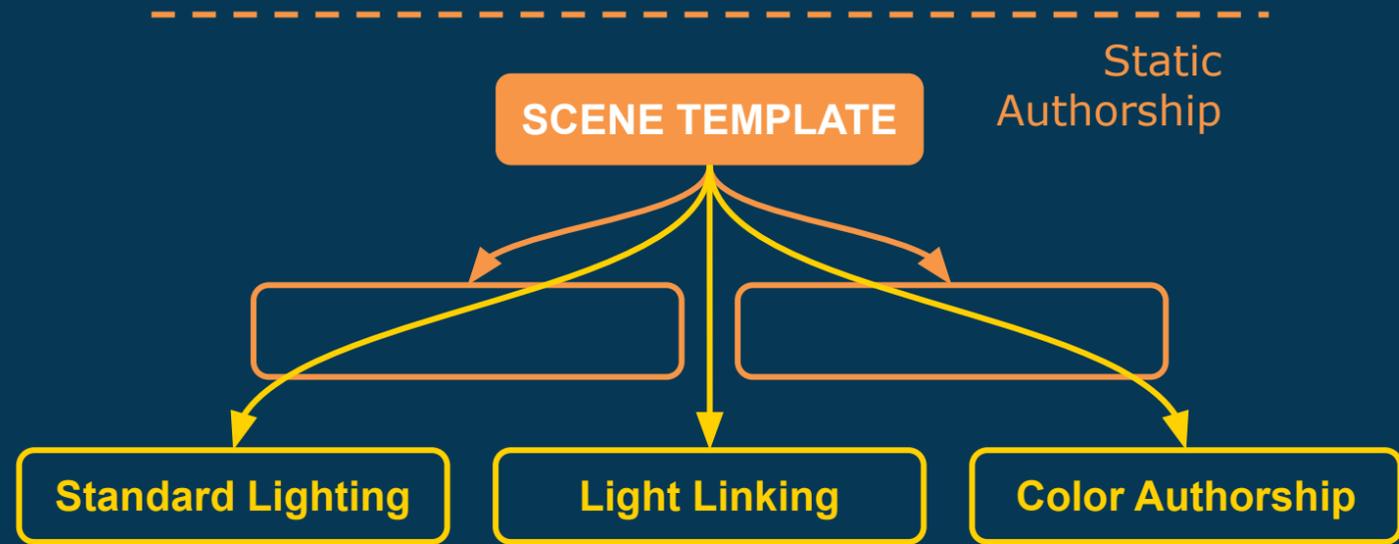
- Manually toggled each light per-camera for Early Access
  - This work was essential but time consuming
- We attach light activation to camera activation
  - It was intuitive
  - Huge time savings
- We had two buckets of work
  - Bulk linking / Custom Work





Tch!





Tch!





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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)



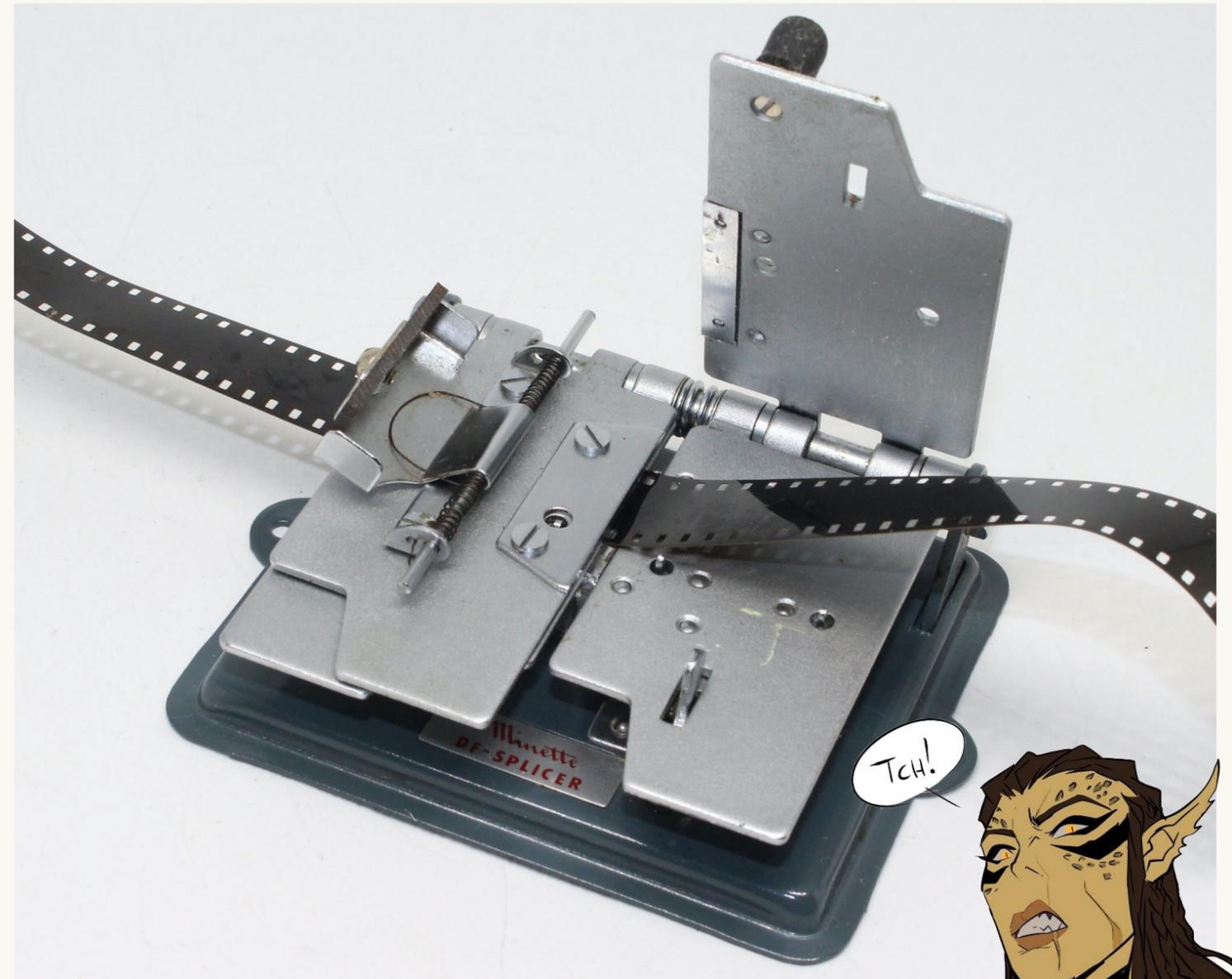
# Personal Takeaways

## 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

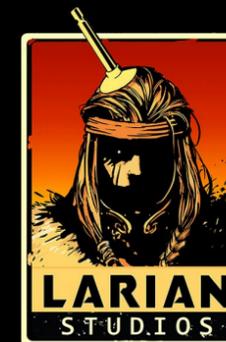
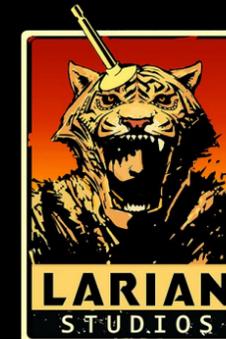
Lead Cinematic Animator JIM SOUTHWORTH  
Associate Lead Cinematic Animator CHAD DAVIS  
Associate Lead Cinematic Animator LILI TAN LAI YAN  
Cinematic Animation Producer LEAH CALDWELL  
Associate Cinematic Producer CINDY ARIAWATY DHARMAPALA  
Senior Cinematic Animator AARON CLEMENT  
Senior Cinematic 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





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# Q&A

**SPECIAL THANKS**

Ash Jamieson  
 @bs\_artssss



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