

Zep's Dreamland PostMortem

So, what is this "PostMortem" thing, anyways?

Well, not being really sure of it myself, it's basically a document that's going to describe the whole process of working on my game: Zep's Dreamland. Through this document I am (hopefully) going to describe many things, including the hardships I faced and all the "negative" things that happened along the way. I hear in the industry world they're called Postmortems, so there you have it!

I understand what it is now, but, why?

Why am I going to write one of these babies up? Well, to tell you the truth, I've wanted to write one for quite some time. In effect, my website really described much of the process from a technical standpoint through the eyes of a programmer. As much fun as that is; I still think it's nice to take a different perspective on the development process of the game. I am, however, going to try to make references to my website as well as things other people have said during ZD's development process.

Prepare for a little history lesson.; the kind that was never disclosed before!

At the time of ZD's conception I was actually working on another project. Suffering hardships and a lack of motivation as well as proper design work I needed to take a break from that project I was working on. I decided to fire up something a little fun that would draw random blocks onto the screen. I worked on this little block-drawing program in secret, without mentioning anything to my readers at the time. I noticed how fun and easy it was to manipulate the blocks and create simple little playing fields.

For one reason or another, which I obviously can't remember, I decided it would be really fun to put one of my hand-drawn characters I had come to love over the years into this block world, to let him walk around and drop down between the blocks that were created on the screen. In no time, I realized that this has some surefire game potential! I programmed, more than likely, for hours on end getting the basics of the collision detection down so you could play "Plinko" with my little character, Zep, in a randomly generated play field, (If you've never heard of "Plinko" then you've never watched "The Price is Right").

Sure, I thought it was pretty fun to have that kind of mechanism working. Neato, right? *Wrong.* After wanting to be able to move back "up" the screen after having fallen down from one level of blocks to another, I started to think about what kind of game I could create out of this little system I conjured up as a diversion to having "programmer's-block" with my other project. It was only obvious at the time that this would be the perfect candidate for an interesting kind of puzzle game! Since I was currently working on a platformer type of game, I had no visions of making the game have "levels" any bigger than the size of the screen. This was a welcome different from my other project. In any case, I began to brainstorm ideas that would make a fun puzzle game!

Of course, I could make the ability for my little creature to just be able to jump around, but I realized quickly that this would make for an ineffective puzzle game. Taking the time to closely look at what could tie this game together, I recalled a game that resembled my playing field a bit. This game required the user to build platforms in order to reach an exit on a level. Exactly! I'll make Zep have to build things in order to move around on the screen. What an interesting idea. The game in question that I speak of is called "StarDust." While you may be thinking: "Wow, Jay just ripped off this other game," that's absolutely not the case. Play it for yourself and see how dramatically different it is from Zep's Dreamland. The game play is entirely different.

I quickly came up with a scheme for Zep having to build stuff on the screen in order to move about. Simple! He can build blocks just like the ones on the screen and use them to stand on and move between ledges. It became apparent after playing for just about a minute that being able to build blocks anywhere you please in any direction doesn't make for a very puzzle-oriented game. That being so, I devised up a scheme that would spruce things up a bit! What better way to make things more annoying than only allow the user to build blocks under certain conditions? This is where the intricate ruleset for Zep's Dreamland came into play. I'm not going to divulge that information here as

it's quite lengthy, and I don't feel like rewriting the same contents of the in-game tutorial here. Go play it if you haven't yet, and you'll see what I mean.

After finally having something semi-playable I hopped into photoshop and made some silly programmers art to spruce up the game from being completely solid, single colored blocks to nice textured areas that looked like some kind of extraterrestrial landscape. As I was building these tiles I noticed that it's pretty sad to simply have a black background with nothing in it. I decided to go the way of creating a nice starscape using my newly acquired friend: The Standard Template Library. Within 10 minutes I cracked out a starry background that had little colored pixel-stars whizzing by the screen at different speeds. I was happy.

This brings us to September 9th, 2002. It was on this day that I first mentioned anything about this new puzzle game I'd been working on. Better yet, I even packed up a demo for people to play with! How cool is that? I thought it would be shocking to the readers; announcement of a new mini-project **and** a demo for it in the same post? I updated that post with a big grin on my face. At that point, the game was just called "Puzzle Game." Here is the post I made on that day:

"09.09.02 - *Once again.*

It has been too long without an update. I'm really sorry about that everyone. I'm not dead, really. :)

Lots of things have happened during this big duration of time. I have obviously wasted a lot of time **playing** games, but that's not really important right now. What **is** important is what I've been doing with my games. I've done some work on Lune, although I couldn't really tell you exactly what I've done since the last update. I've been fixing up the buttons as much as I can, which is kind of a pain. It's not that hard, it's just a long process. If you haven't already noticed, you'll see a new link that says "Puzzle Game" under the games section. Now, woah there! Don't go jumping to conclusions. Lune hasn't been put on hiatus, or anything like that. :)

I guess my brain **made** myself take a break from Lune. I was just fooling around with a new project and this game popped out. Now, after making a simple engine with it, I realize that if I converted Lune to cartooney and cutesy characters it would be so much easier to complete. I think half the struggle I'm having is with art and the fact that the game just doesn't look good at all. No matter how hard I try I just can't get things looking the way I want them to look: real. It's hard enough to draw a base character, but animating it so that the movement looks human is really hard. I guess this is also why I ended up playing around with this new project. Either way, I'm still thinking about what I should do to Lune - change it to a nice cutesy game, or just try and keep it the way it is. I'm not sure.

Anyways, let's get onto the Puzzle Game. I wrote it in basically about one day with the exception of animating the character, Zep, the day before. It's a simple block game, but not like PushPush. Instead, it's sidescrolling and uses a lot of the trickery and mechanisms I used in Lune. It was very easy to write. You control Zep and must travel from point a to point b. Sounds easy? It's not. There are pits and ditches that you must get around, and you do this by creating blocks in a certain fashion.

The game is based off of a game that I played on a Macintosh a long, long time ago. I unfortunately can't remember the name of that game. Anyways, you should go check it out. It's come so far along that I already have a test demo out for it. I'm sure you'll be pleased with something new to play with. At least I'm getting more downloads out!

Have fun. And make sure to **please** read the readme file. The technicalities of the game are a little complex, and it will make much more sense if you read that little file that explains everything for you first."

Here I came clean with everyone and told them what was up. I completely confessed everything, except those minor historical details you just read. :) That's the history behind Zep's Dreamland and its conception. More information than you ever needed to know, but now you know. That same day I submitted a post to allegro.cc showcasing my game, and asking people to play it and let me know what they thought. I got some good feedback which fueled me for a big programming-fest over the next week.

"Puzzle Game" gets an overhauled engine... and a facelift!

Over the course of the next week, I became fully engrossed in tweaking and modifying the code base for "Puzzle Game." I worked day in and day out, making new fun little levels as well as adding things in that lead to problems. You know, the kind of stuff like: "Your character walks off the screen into an area he shouldn't be, and then falls out from the top of the screen." I put all my effort into fixing these minor little problems as well as advancing the ruleset for the game even more; introducing new types of blocks and everything! Within that time, I released another demo and posted it to allegro.cc. I'm quite certain that many people didn't recognize my first thread since it was so short between the release of the first demo and the second. In any case, I got a lot more feedback in the second thread I started. One of the first things that people mentioned was that my method for turning Zep around in place sucked; and they were right.

As easy as it is to say something like "**No, you** suck! Read the readme; it tells you how to do everything!", I didn't. If anything I realized that anything negative someone says about your game can sometimes be better than the good things they say. Learning about what people **don't** enjoy in your games is the best way to make them **more** enjoyable. I took everyone's critiques very seriously, and tried to address many of their concerns later on in the development process of the game. Many people who conversed with me about the game gave me very helpful suggestions, as well. Although I didn't use many of them, I created spinoffs and derivatives that helped keep the game within the vision that I had for it.

To top the cake off, after a successful second demo release, within that same thread a very widely known independent game developer did something completely unexpected to me. Within the thread there was a screenshot of my puzzle game, with completely retro SNES style graphics. I was blown to the floor. I couldn't possibly fathom someone going through the time to create some awesome looking graphics "just for fun" to see what they would look like for my game. That developer was Johan Peitz. Through that thread, we contacted each other and it was agreed upon (very enthusiastically on my part) that he would do the graphics for my game, completely.

Now, wait a minute here. I'm not done talking about this whole art thing. How often does it occur that an artist (who also happens to be a fellow programmer) ask the programmer to do the art for them!? Throughout the course of my independent programming career and hearing what others had to say; it usually went the other way. Even so, it generally was incredibly difficult to snag an artist to do the art for one of your games, especially if it was so far from completion. Johan's offer and enthusiasm completely took me by surprise. This really was a classic case of "perfect" timing. I was in need of someone to make some awesome graphics for my game, and Johan was in need of an excuse to draw graphics of a specific style. Even though it wasn't known then, what would (in a few days, actually) be known as Zep's Dreamland was meant for Johan's art, and Johan's art was meant for Zep's Dreamland. It was genuinely the most perfect match ever made.

This immediately boosted my motivation levels through the roof! This was the most excited I'd ever been about working on a game in my whole life. It also was the first experience I would have doing collaborative work on a single project.

Puzzle Game becomes Zep's Dreamland

Finally, things start getting really great. I've attached a name to the game: "Zep's Dreamland." As unoriginal as it sounds, it stuck really well and now I can't imagine having called it anything else. As usual, a new demo is out showcasing the new graphics that Johan has done for the game. Again, another thread goes up on allegro.cc. This time, things get interesting and over three pages are generated from players for this thread. Again, tons of positive feedback and suggestions, as well as some negative feedback. In my head, I thought the game would get some good feedback, but I never imagined it to get as much as it did. Everyone seemed to be genuinely in love with this very simple game I have created. It was addicting people. Sometimes, I couldn't believe this was my own project! The demo contained 10 levels of various difficulty. I was happy to release it. On that day, September 21st 2002, "Zep's Dreamland" was officially christened.

The void that was University

From that point on, up until ZD's completion, things were fairly slow. I'm not going to lie, I spend a lot of time and energy on other things (mostly school related) rather than working on my game. So, I won't go into the details of every little thing I did, as to me it's all a blur anyways. I can single out some specific points, but I don't want to bore you with mundane details. If anything, read through the archives of my site from September '02 to December '03 (The games first complete release). It is here that I'd like to describe more of the thought process that went on rather than the little things I added of the game's code, etc.

Over the course of this time Johan and I kept in touch. At first we conversed a lot, even about things not related to Zep's Dreamland. After the first demo release featuring the new graphics our contact started to slow down a little bit. I was delving a lot more into the code and crafting new levels, and Johan was busy creating new graphics for my game as well as being preoccupied with other projects of his own. We decided upon, together, about the level setup; a different "set" of worlds consisting of things like forest, caves, ice, space, etc. Once we decided upon that, things kind of flowed like butter between us. I would occasionally get updates from Johan, and in return I would send him occasional updates of the game and editor. Many times he had a request for a feature or for specific tiles to be drawn in a specific order, and it was relatively easy to tailor the editor to help suit his needs.

This went on for quite some time; and eventually, Johan finished all the art that I would need for the game. Of course, the game was nowhere near completion mode, yet. I still had plenty to add, and plenty of levels to create. This leads to another story entirely, but more on that one to come.

New features, slick as cake

I was constantly trying to think of new gameplay elements that would add to the feel of the game. Things that come to mind are "prebuilt" blocks, teleports, crumbling blocks, tunnels, etc. All of these items were things that were fun, and easy to add to the game. Most of the ideas for these items came about while I was creating levels. Many a time I would craft some really awesome level! The only problem was that it would be completely unbeatable due to a single tile, and the lack of another type of tile that would allow for certain functionality while restricting other. When this happened, I usually got fed up trying to make a workable solution in the editor and said "screw it!" I would just make a new gameplay element that would *make* that level work. This was one of the best things, in fact. It allowed for lots of gameplay elements to be added as well as giving me much more leverage for creating more fun and difficult levels for the later part of the game. Creating levels and new gameplay elements worked quite well hand in hand. As the levels progressed on and on new element would be added into gameplay; so for the user that means the farther you go, the more things you learn about! There was a downfall to this, however. After creating so many of these new elements, I eventually was left with only creating more levels and working the title/ending screens a little bit. Before we get onto describing the process of level making, I'd like to touch upon the tutorials. Although these were made late in the game, I'd like to talk about them next.

I knew you didn't read the ReadMe...

Ah, the tutorials! These are more complicated than you think and involve a lot more than one would imagine. Early in the game I knew I wanted to be able to make Zep move on his own in a "pre-recorded" fashion. The functionality for this was available in the game a little more than halfway through its completion. I never fully used it or implemented it as something for the user to view until I added in the tutorials. The tutorials used a lot of "hacking" I suppose. Half of them were hard-coded and the other half was the engine just running one of the pre-recorded "movies" I scripted. It was a neat combination that created an effect that I fell in love with instantly.

In addition to the "movie" playbacks, the tutorials (as well as the introduction and ending) featured a nifty scrolling text box that could show images to accompany them. For some reason I seem to have the need to add these into any game I write. I just love writing a text scrolling box for some reason.

As cool as the tutorials were, they were probably the part of the game that got the **most** negative feedback of all! Almost *everyone* who played the game had some kind of negative experience with the tutorials. Either the text scrolled too slow (which you **could** speed up by pressing a key), or they felt insulted by it! I suppose, in a way, I made it quite *too* beginner level in the first tutorial. However, I feel that I was quite justified in writing it that way. I wanted to cover all of my bases with that tutorial; down to the level of explaining what left, right, up, and down meant. I did this on purpose. Did you see Zep mention to you about jumping? That's **right**. There **is no jumping!** I figured it would get the point across that those are his *only* basic movements, but I still get some users to this day wondering what the "jump button is". :)

The heaven and hell that was level making

This had to be the most rewarding and, yet, at the same time, the most absolutely frustrating part of developing Zep's Dreamland. One of the things I had to figure out early on, or at least create a final decision on at **some** point while working on the game was how many levels there would be. 100 levels obviously sounded like fun, but I never considered it a real target simply because I realized how long it took to create challenging levels. Instead of setting my goal to 100 levels, I simply chose a goal of 50 levels. As I stated earlier, while crafting levels I realized there were components that needed to be added to the game. Eventually, after all the components that would be added to the game were, in fact, added, creating challenging and interesting levels became more and more difficult.

Many days I would tell myself "Okay, it's time to make some levels.", but I never would. Why? For one reason or another, I wasn't too great at creating levels. Yes, sure, I could make some hard ones, but pumping them out one after the other was the most difficult thing I had ever tried to do. Once I reached around 25 or so levels, I became kind of burnt out. I decided there was no way I was going to make it to 50 levels, so I dropped the amount to 40. On good days I would produce at most two levels. On better than average days I would produce a single level. On normal days I would get a little work done on a level. Usually, days would go by and I wouldn't touch a level at all. Simply put, after creating a level that was difficult, my brain juices were kind of depleted. Anything else I tried to do after that was either total garbage, or mirrored a lot of the stuff I used in the previous level. To clear things up I had to allow for some time in between finishing a level and starting up a new one. Even when giving a decent amount of time in between level making, I still suffered from not being able to create levels that I thought were "good enough." In actuality, these levels were more than fun, and once I had people finally play them, I realized I was doing a good job on the levels. At one point during development I slacked off way too much and let my level creation slide for quite some time. Christmas was nearing, and I had to set a completion date for myself. That date was, obviously, before Christmas hit. I was able to saddle up, bite the bullet, and simply work as hard as I could to complete the last few levels I needed to in order to get the release out before Christmas.

Bells and whistles and the stuff that brings it together

One of the more rewarding parts of ZD were all of the "little extras" that were put into it that gives it that polished and complete feel when you play it. This includes things like a proper start and options screen. Multiple options to help the game be more versatile. Introduction screens, ending screens, and the whole pie were there; even an advanced saving system with animated menus! Although working on these aspects of the game was very time consuming it was extremely rewarding in the long run. I put a lot of effort into making the menus easy to use and as pleasing to the eye as possible.

The save menu was one of my favorite accomplishments. After receiving many complains about the allegro style save selection box I decided to take things into my own hands and add a very easy-to-use and nice looking user interface on top of saving levels. I spent, literally, a few days perfecting the system and making it what it is today. At first, the "slots" for a specific save would not slowly animate up and down. The contents of the background box would simply change instantly. There was nothing pleasing or nice looking about it. When I realized this, I simply thought "How cool would it be to add some kind of scrolling to these level slots?" So, I did. Even though I ran into many hardships trying to get it to work, I just wouldn't give up on it. It's something I wanted in that menu so bad. Once I finally got

it working, I added the little bouncing arrows to signify whether there was more items for selection that were off the screen. That topped the whole thing off. I literally stepped back and said "Wow, that's awesome." I'm not sure if the players really notice it as something "awesome," but if they use it and have nothing bad to say about it, then I did my job correctly: it's a user interface that doesn't get in the way of the player's experience.

In addition to simple start/ending and saving stuff, I also took a large amount of time to make the game have a lot of these little "extras" throughout. I believe the inclusion of the "Level Stats" after completing each level really added a new element to the game. Although the user may take as long as they want to complete a level, did they complete it in the best time they could, using the least amount of blocks? Players could replay levels over and over trying to get better "scores" on a level, although they didn't even matter. I always like to outdo myself, so I guessed there must be other gamers like me out there.

Another touch that I really loved putting into the game was the level names. Not only did the levels have names, but they scrolled by in a little bordered box at the start of each level. I felt like this was a little perk that added to the overall feel of the game. Sure, the box could intrude with seeing Zep, but you could still maneuver him around the level even while the box was quickly floating by.

I still really do believe, six months after the game's official first complete release, that the fullness of the in-game menus and a proper ending sequence with credits really tied everything together. It created, at least to me, an experience where nothing seemed to be "missing" from the game, as is apparent when playing other freeware games that don't even showcase a proper title screen.

The necessity of the ReadMe

Before the in-game tutorial came the ReadMe; the first place I attempted to explain the rules of Zep's Dreamland in an easy-to-understand format. Believe it or not, even in its first demo, the game was complicated enough to warrant a pretty big ReadMe file. Sometime after Johan offered to do the art for the game, I started to get to work on a "real" ReadMe that would go over every aspect of the game. To do so I decided to go the route of a HTML based ReadMe. Using HTML I would be able to insert graphics and very nice formatting into the documentation for my game.

It wasn't until the game was almost near completion that the ReadMe got a giant overhaul. I added everything I could think of; including screenshots. Each gameplay element was described, as well as other pertinent information. I went so far as to fully and carefully document the game's editor. This was a pain to do, because there were so many options for the editor (we'll touch upon this later).

There's not much else to say other than the ReadMe really was a necessity, even *if* there was an in-game tutorial. I think this is another one of those factors that made Zep's Dreamland feel more complete, even if almost nobody reads the manual for anything nowadays. :)

Making the editor useable for the masses

One thing that I decided very early on was that the level editor for Zep's Dreamland would definitely be released with the game. This is my belief with all puzzle games. What better way to keep your game living other than letting your players create their own levels or worlds in it? So, it was from an early stage that I started tailoring my editor to make sense to even the casual user; using buttons instead of simple key commands. Of course, there were some key command items, but most everything that anyone not interested in advanced techniques of level building could be done via the buttons I put into it.

Making a good editor that's (relatively) easy to use took a little more effort on my part, but it was well worth it to give something a little extra with the game.

Pre-Game: The Beta Testers

The game really got a lot of help in its ending stages due to the beta testers. I tried to make my beta process as official as possible, creating a complete section of my website for the beta-testers, with

user accounts and all; as well as updates to the status of the beta. I divided the beta into two sections: one for testing the game, the other for testing the level editor. Although these two things went hand in hand, I really want to isolate the game from the editor at first.

I can tell you one thing for sure: as complete and bug-free you think you may have a project, someone else will always find something you missed, or didn't even consider a bug in the first place. Although my testers didn't find many outright "bugs" in the game, they found many things that could use improvement that would completely enhance the playability and feel of the game.

Although their finding bugs and other assorted things that could use fixing is very beneficial to making the game better than it was before, it was also depressing at the same time. There is a level of joy in knowing that your game is so close to completion, and it's disheartening when your final beta-testers find a lot more work for you to do. Don't get me wrong, it's awesome that they found so much I missed, but it also gave me a feeling of "Gah! More work!?" When you're so close to completion you just want to get your project out the door for the world to see!

I am very thankful to them for putting in the time to test my game when they could be doing a plethora of other things.

Packing up and shipping out

There's not much to it here. Once the game was finished, it was finished. All that was left to do was package it up and make it available for download. In actuality, the game was completely done before I even set a release date for myself. I never announced a strict release date to the public; I simply just put my game up. The main release goal for myself was sometime before Christmas. Once the game was done I gave myself to check things over a few more times, and then finally just put it up (with an accompanying news post) for download. Hitting as many places I could at the time, I promoted the game, and the rest is history since that day in December.

Allegro.cc was one of the main places I wanted to promote the game the most; as the members there were waiting for over a year for the game to be completed. After the game's release I got a lot of feedback, both positive and negative. All of it (yes, even the negative) brought me to a level of pride about my game I didn't even know I could achieve...

Done, done, and... it's seriously done!?

The feeling I got from releasing Zep's Dreamland was unparalleled to any of my other game releases simply due to the sheer amount of people who were interested in the game once it went out. To be honest, I have never felt more accomplished or proud of something I've done in my entire life; even if it is a pretty basic game.

To watch people download the game, converse about it, solve levels together, and outright start pulling their hair out due to difficult levels was so unbelievable. Even those who had some negative things to say, said so honestly, which, as much as I'd have like to have said something in defense of my own game, I took as best I could and realized that no game could ever satisfy everyone who played it. ZD became a hit, and soon people were recommending it to their friends, and their friends were recommending it to *their* friends. To see one of my games take to the crowds like this just filled me with joy.

Even though the enthusiasm from the players gave me such a great feeling, I think I felt more accomplished for making the game complete, and sticking with it from start to finish. This is something many developers have a hard time doing and I was quite proud I was able to overcome those things that usually kill a project.

I had finally finished Zep's Dreamland and players loved it. I was happy, the gamers were happy, and my character Zep finally made it into a complete game as I had always hoped...

The good, the bad, and the ugly

Now I'd like to discuss these certain aspects of Zep's Dreamland. Let's start with the things I think are good, as it's the easiest for me to do. :)

The Good:

Zep's Dreamland is a complete game. Nothing can beat a fully complete game that just feels "sewn together." The all-original content brought something new to the community instead of ripped graphics or sounds.

The game is outright fun if you're into puzzlers, and comes with an editor. If you'd like to continue the puzzle-fun you can just build your own levels, or download other user's levels.

Expandability: Zep's Dreamland allows for use of custom music and the engine is built in such a manner that it's easily expandable if the occasion arises to do so.

It's **free**. This one speaks for itself.

This whole document pretty much explains the rest of the good stuff. ;)

The Bad:

The length of time the game took to complete. Sure, maybe a year isn't very long if you think about it, but I still truly believe that if I put even *more* effort into getting the game done I could have possibly cut down the development time in half. Dedicating that much time to the game and letting it cut into personal/work/school time obviously isn't a good idea, though, so in a way I'm glad I took as long as I did to ensure I didn't go insane. :)

Still a little buggy. The first "final" release of Zep's Dreamland still contained some bugs. This is unfortunate and hard to stop, but I still believe they could have been caught if I were extra careful. Nothing is worse than saying "Hey, my game is done. Play it!" and instantly receiving notification that things don't work correctly.

There could have been more levels. This is just my opinion though. I would have loved to release the game with 100+ levels. Not only is this impressive to the players, but it would have also kept them busy with the game for a lot longer than 40 levels would. I don't have any big regrets about only creating 40 levels; it would just have been nice to have more.

The ugly:

This section gets only one item: Unbeatable level 40. This was the most embarrassing thing about releasing the game. To my belief, level 40 was quite beatable, and when people started asking why it was so difficult, I simply told them that it was, in fact, beatable, so keep trying. I was quite disheartened when I went to go and check things out for myself and noticed that level 40 was in fact impossible to beat! It was embarrassing to have to apologize to those players who got a hold of this copy of the game; but all in all they were completely understanding.

I'm not even sure exactly how this one happened. I believe it to be a mess up where I accidentally saved the level to the wrong file and just assumed it was the working version. You know what they say about assuming things. Just don't do it, okay? :)

The aftermath (short and sweet)

A month or so after Zep's Dreamland was released I purchased a Macintosh, and immediately went to work on porting ZD to MacOSX. During the porting process I found even more bugs and or *misfeatures* in the game that I had never noticed before. Needless to say, I fixed all of those up and was happy to announce a new version of Zep's Dreamland that also played on a new operating system. This new version didn't take as big in the Windows side of the world as the first release did, so I won't go into detail about that.

As of this writing the Mac side of the world is getting its first taste of Zep's Dreamland, and I must say that my little blue buddy is spreading like wildfire across the freeware gaming scene. Nothing is more satisfying than seeing reviews about your game pop-up, and especially special entries for your game on gaming-only websites. The whole introduction of ZD to the Mac scene is fairly brand new, so I can't go into much detail objectively at this point, but I can say one thing; It sure feels **damn** good to notice that a new website references your game each and every day, as well as receiving emails from all the players who take the time to write.

The motivation factor; How did I do it?

This topic has come up many times while talking with many various developers and casual game-players alike. Independent game developers are most interested in just exactly what it was that kept me so fueled and dedicated to my project that it reached completion. Dedication, motivation, and perseverance are all things that are difficult to keep at an optimal level when working on a single project for such a long time. There are many things that attributed to helping me keep my vision strong.

One of the main things that did, and always will keep me strong and dedicated is my fans, if you would call them that. After having put one project on the back-burner completely, and then taking a "break" from another in order to "play around" with a puzzler style game, I felt that I was leading my readers around in a circle; telling them "yeah, sure, I have a project that I'm working on", peaking their interest, and then sadly telling them that the project was no longer in development. Once I noticed the potential that ZD had, and the fact that the core code for it was already complete, I simply told myself "that's it, it's time to put this project in the limelight and keep it that way until it is done." I proudly touted all the awesome features of my game and wrote about every little thing I did with it. I wanted to make my readers very interested.

I basically told myself that this game is "going to be something." Especially after Johan and I teamed up I was very confident in myself. Although I fell into times where things were running slow, or looking gloomy, I was able to ride it out knowing that I made a promise to myself to complete this game and finally give a new game to my audience. I felt as if they had been waiting much too long for some well needed progress. My own dedication alone definitely was not enough to keep the project alive, however. One can only do so much to make themselves feel motivated to work on a project. For me, that energetic blast of motivation and inspiration starts to die down once I have the core code for a project written out, and all that's left is to "put in the filling."

Thanks to my fans, my family, and my friends, I was able to get much needed support and encouragement. On great motivation builder was simply watching, or hearing from, other people playing my game. Seeing and hearing how people reacted, and talked to their friends about my game in progress really made me feel wonderful about ZD. Especially encouraging moments were when people asked me about the progress of my game unprovoked. This truly makes your game feel "wanted", for lack of a better term. When others were as eager about my project as I was I felt that nothing could stop me. Hopping onto the #allegro channel on IRC and getting a "Loomy! How's Zep!?" instantly upon entering was moving. More often than not, I would reply "Doing good. Thanks for that, now I'm going to work on it some more", and then leave to get to work.

Player's negative feedback had a positive effect as well. For every piece of negative criticism I received, I wanted to make ZD twice as good. Also, the complexity of the game did well in favor for it being completed. It may be a no brainer, but if you're working on a project that is just overly complex more than likely it will be much, much harder to complete it. The fact that Zep's Dreamland was a simple yet appealing concept for a game made it very easy to get out of low-motivation times.

Of course there were many times where I wondered if ZD would be a hit with players. Eventually, over the course of the year it took to make the game, people started forgetting about the project, or became less excited about it because all they had was "that demo from X months ago." I knew, though, that even if not many people were to play the game when it was done I wanted to finish it and make it as

much of a complete game as I could.

I think having a vision and taking pride in your project whether you think people will enjoy it or not plays a big role in being able to keep your juices flowing and your motivation levels high. If you are very excited about your project, more than likely you're going to get other people excited about it, too.

A final thank-you

As I come to a close with this PostMortem I would like to take the time to seriously and genuinely thank everybody who has helped me in my endeavors with Zep's Dreamland. I am also very appreciative of your continued support while Zep's Dreamland is still going strong and I begin to delve into other projects.

To every person who has played Zep's Dreamland, the Allegro.cc community, the gang over at #allegro, each individual who took the time to write me an email, whether it be for a support issue or for personal reasons, those "behind the scenes" who promote my game without my knowing ;), reviewers, my forum community, the talented folks over at pixelation.swoo.net, my family and friends, Johan, especially, and anyone else who took an interest in this project as well as LoomSoft's prior work and hopefully future endeavors: **Thank you**. Without you my games would not be what they are today. I am especially grateful and look forward to bringing you more great games in the future.

Are you seriously telling me there's more!?

Some readers may find these links interesting. These are threads started over at allegro.cc regarding releases of my game:

Puzzle Game Demo 1 Thread:

http://www.allegro.cc/forums/view_thread.php?_id=205856

Puzzle Game Demo 2 Thread:

http://www.allegro.cc/forums/view_thread.php?_id=206488

Zep's Dreamland Demo 1 (Puzzle Game Demo 3) Thread:

http://www.allegro.cc/forums/view_thread.php?_id=209012

Zep's Dreamland Release

http://www.allegro.cc/forums/view_thread.php?_id=321296

Zep's Dreamland 1.02 Release

http://www.allegro.cc/forums/view_thread.php?_id=368599

Fin.

Zep says thanks, too. :)