

What's Behind Door Number Four? (Episode 6: Bonus Feature)

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Abstract

What's Behind Door Number Four? (Episode 6: Bonus Feature) is a multimedia short film exploring the addictive, dehumanizing aspects of our modern digital landscape. Told through found-footage, this analog horror film follows an aspiring content creator as she participates in a game show that quickly spirals out of control. The narrative is contained within a taped bonus feature of a fictitious game show episode, blurring the concepts of reality and time as it progresses. Similar to hate-fueled algorithmic social media platforms, the game show's host encourages anonymity and inspires fear in its contestants. This project is a culmination of techniques, utilizing live-action filmmaking, graphic design, animation, 3D modeling, and visual effects. In this paper we will break down the production and showcase our creative and technical development.

Introduction

What's Behind Door Number Four? (Episode 6: Bonus Feature) is the culmination of everything we learned in our four years at UNCA. Born from a passion for video creation and a mutual love for the genre of analog horror, the creation of this project was an incredible experience. This multimedia short film tells the story of Pillowcase, a wannabe influencer whose participation in an uncanny game show leads her to slowly become

desensitized to the strange events happening around her. Along with four other contestants, Pillowcase is taken through four increasingly haunting games, designed to induce fear, anger, and disorientation. By the end of the episode, it's clear that her life has been fundamentally altered.

We will be breaking down the entire process of making *What's Behind Door Number Four? (Episode 6: Bonus Feature)* from the initial idea to completion. This production challenged us in many ways, forcing us to step outside our comfort zones and push our creative limits. By the end, we created something entirely unique and beyond what we thought ourselves capable of making. This in-depth research journal will reflect the technical and creative growth we underwent during the production of this film.

Conception

Initial Ideas

From the very beginning, we knew we wanted to make something in the horror genre, and analog horror in particular is something that has been an inspiration to both of us. Analog horror is a subgenre of found-footage horror fiction that mimics late 20th-century television and analog recordings. This includes elements such as VHS tapes and television broadcasts, designed to induce a feeling of distorted and bittersweet nostalgia (Tanni).

To find inspiration for this project we began by watching a collection of analog horror media, alongside a couple of movies which were all recommended to us by Forest Gamble, such as *We're All Going to the World's Fair* and *I Saw the TV Glow*. Notable internet horror that influenced us includes *The Backrooms* by Kane Pixels, *The Mandala Catalog* by Alex Kister, and *Gemini Home Entertainment* by Remy Abode. These examples demonstrate everything we like about the genre, through their unconventional story telling and technical skill.

We have experimented with the analog horror style of editing in the past for previous collaborations, but for this short film, we wanted to go all out with the elements that make us enjoy the genre. One of the first things we visualized in the brainstorming process was a cast of characters wearing a collection of strange masks, keeping their faces and identities hidden from each other. Since the vision of our characters and their appearance was so strong, we started out with some initial concept art and designs. The more we worked on developing them, the more their story became clearer to us. We filtered through a variety of different potential settings and plotlines, but eventually we landed on the idea of setting our story in the world of a 90s inspired game show. We thought it would offer a lot of opportunities to experiment with the analog style, having our characters go through scenarios that start off energetic and silly, but slowly get more unsettling and

overwhelming as the film progresses. Our main character, Pillowcase, initially went through a lot of changes. We knew we wanted the film to be shot in a found-footage style, and it took us some time to determine the reason why Pillowcase would be recording everything. Eventually, we came to the conclusion that we wanted her to be an aspiring content creator, caught up in the unhealthy desire for outside approval and recognition. She believes that this competition, advertised as “America’s Favorite Game Show,” is her ticket to getting content that might finally give her everything she’s been wishing for.

Themes

The modern digital landscape comes with many drawbacks. What we wanted to explore within this film is how negative algorithms are designed to keep its users scared, angry, and submissive. To represent these algorithms, *What’s Behind Door Number Four?* is a fictional game show where its contestants are forced into strange, uncomfortable scenarios that slowly lead them into a state of desensitization. While our story is addressing modern day themes and features characters who exist in the modern day, we wanted to explore these symbolisms in a way that juxtaposes the old and the new. This is why the game show itself is styled like an old VHS tape and includes elements that resemble technology from the 90s and early 2000s. Beyond just the VHS effects, we also intentionally played around with changing the aspect ratio of our footage, keeping the modern clips in 16:9 while changing every clip that takes place in the game show to 4:3.

We also wanted to address the element of anonymity, especially since we believe it aids in the ease of spreading negativity online. This was our reasoning behind making it a rule that our cast of characters are required to wear masks and use code names, so their real identities are never known.

We also invented a fictional soda company called Spronk to add in the element of social media’s addictive nature. Spronk is funding the sadistic game show just as addiction and capitalism fuels the toxic aspects of the internet.

Pre-Production

Synopsis

The film opens with an advertisement for a game show called *What’s Behind Door Number Four?* Seeking new contestants, it promotes a mysterious prize that quickly catches the eye of the story’s main character, a wannabe YouTuber struggling to find confidence. Thinking it’s good content for her channel, she applies and arrives at the suspicious address sent to her. After donning a pillowcase on her head she is suddenly

thrown into the show, encountering the enigmatic host and four other contestants. The contestants are identified by their masks: Tape, Lampshade, Bag, Sack, and, our main character, Pillowcase. The cast of five contestants must participate in four increasingly dangerous games. First, a baking challenge in which Tape, an annoying influencer-type, is eliminated for creating a disgusting cake. The next game is a scavenger hunt where the contestants must dig through piles of rubbish to find the key to the exit. During the search, Pillowcase uncovers Tape's dead body under a tarp. The remaining contestants panic and in the process, Lampshade is eliminated for speaking negatively about the show's sponsor, Spronk. Shaken, the remaining three contestants are then dropped in the middle of the woods with a map, instructed to follow it to find buried treasure. As Pillowcase, Sack, and Bag navigate the woods they become more and more paranoid as a strange howling continuously echoes through the forest. They discover Lampshade's body and become separated in their panic. Pillowcase wanders alone before finding the others, only to discover Sack has killed Bag. The two remaining contestants escape the woods but turn on each other upon returning to the main stage. In the end, only Pillowcase remains. She participates in the last game, unseen behind door number four. She has won the game show but at the cost of her humanity. She ends the film with the internet fame she initially dreamed of.

Script

Scriptwriting is something neither of us had significant experience in before this project. Typically, in our discipline, we create storyboards to organize our thoughts visually. While we have experience working with live action projects, this was the first time we've had the opportunity to write, shoot, and edit a short film of this length. We realized early on that shooting in a found-footage style proved too unpredictable to create an accurate storyboard, so after we developed a solid storyline, we moved right into the script writing process. This is where our story was really able to come to life. We were uncertain about quite a few sections when we began writing, but getting our thoughts on the page and further developing the voices of our characters brought a lot of inspiration and ideas throughout the process. We intentionally wanted Pillowcase, our main character, to have dialogue that was awkward and uncomfortable to match her personality. We always read each section of the script out loud after finishing it, trying to embody each character to make sure their dialogue had the desired effect when spoken aloud. For the most part, our process consisted of long writing and re-writing sessions. There were quite a few additional plot points that were not in our original plan that eventually made it into our final version of the script. This part of the process gave us the chance to further develop and flesh out our themes.

Below is a portion of our script that reflects our overall style of approaching and writing it:

INT. KITCHEN

Cheerful music begins to play as the contestants walk through the door and enter a kitchen. They see a shelf filled with weird ingredients.

THE HOST
(Over the speakers)
Pair up in teams of two and MAKE. THAT. CAKE.

THE HOST
(Continuing)
You have 30 minutes. Your time starts now!

PILLOWCASE films around the room as the contestants stand in confusion. After hearing the announcement, the camera zooms in on a woman with a BAG over her head pairing up with a man whose head is wrapped in TAPE. She is too far away to pick up what they're saying. TAPE is holding a camera and turning it on himself, vlogging. While distracted, someone wearing a SACK approaches PILLOWCASE from behind.

SACK
Hey.

PILLOWCASE
(Startled)
HEY.

SACK
(deadpan)
I guess we have to partner up.

PILLOWCASE
Yeah, I guess so.

Concept Art

The process of visualizing our concepts occurred concurrently with writing the script. We began creating illustrations to explore the mood and aesthetic of the film. The concept art was created using a technique known as photobashing. Mixing photography and digital painting, the process involves collaging several photos together to create unique images

(MattePaint). These images are then used as the base for the illustration. In our case, this was done in Procreate. We wanted to focus specifically on prop and costume design so it could serve as a reference when bringing the items to life.



Figure 1. Concept Art of Props



Figure 2. Concept Art of Masks

Masks

Each of our characters is wearing a mask that conceals their face, so working on the costume design was the first part of our prop making process. We had a series of notes that consisted of the style of outfits that we envisioned for each character, and this was loosely based upon their personality. For the masks themselves, we have five game show contestants, so we needed to create five unique masks that were designed to fit each of our actors. Several designs were as simple as cutting eye holes in a paper bag or pillowcase. Others were more complex, such as the mask made from duct tape. With concerns of ripping off our actors' facial hair in mind, we decided to create a second layer under the tape. We used a styrofoam mannequin head as a base and wrapped it in plastic wrap. We then enclosed the entire head in duct tape, cutting it off the head when done. After fitting each one to our individual actors, the masks were complete.

Locations and Equipment

Being students at UNCA provided us with a lot of great resources when it came to selecting filming locations and renting equipment. Through speaking with UNCA faculty

and staff, we were able to gain access to a teaching kitchen, lecture hall, and green screen television studio. These facilities were the perfect backdrops for our scenes. The New Media department provided us with industry-quality equipment, such as lights, cameras, and microphones. With the support of our University and department, we were able to elevate our production.

From the beginning we knew we wanted to make a found-footage film. While this style of filmmaking is incredibly accessible, especially for productions with no budget, it presents its own unique set of challenges. How do you walk the line between realistic and professional? We spent a lot of time experimenting with different options to achieve our desired look. Using a DSLR camera, our footage came out too shaky and disorienting to watch. There was also the issue of practicality. We had shots that involved running through the woods at night or throwing the camera at the ground to create the illusion of falling that would have simply been too risky with an expensive camera. A GoPro was considered, but would have caused significant distortion to the footage. Eventually we decided on using a smartphone. It made sense story-wise, our main character is vlogging and realistically would be using one. A smartphone provided us with the flexibility we needed and our footage came out as desired when paired with a gimbal stabilizer.

Production

Filming

The first major scene in our filming process was our first game, a cake baking challenge, that needed all of our actors and helpers present. We needed to find a kitchen location to film in, so we got in touch with the Teaching Kitchen in the Sherrill Center, and were able to get the required permissions to use that space as our backdrop. Every prop and element related to the scene were things we wanted to either get or make ourselves, and these included a collection of ingredients for the contestants to “bake with” and two baked and decorated cakes. We wanted the baking ingredients to be strange and untraditional, so we bought sardines, ketchup, beans, green and white icing, and cake mix. These were placed as the ingredients the contestants had to choose from to bake their cakes. Next, we also needed to make our two cakes in advance, so we dedicated a night to baking. One was baked as per usual while the other we stuffed with sardines and beans.

Our second major scene was the scavenger hunt game. The incentive for this game is for our contestants to search a cluttered room for a key to the exit, so we had a much more specific vision for this setting. Before the shoot, we created a Jell-O mold. Working in layers, we were able to suspend a key in the substance before it fully set. We ended up being able to use the New Media Project Room, which provided us with plenty of space to

use everything we brought to design the set. We needed to get more professional equipment beyond the found-footage style, so we brought a green screen and a couple of studio lights. We wanted to create a makeshift mini studio that our characters would interact with during the scene.

With all of our equipment and props ready, we started by covering a lot of the wall in black tablecloths, as well as laying out black foam puzzle mats along the ground. Our goal was to have the room be as dark as possible, with the only light coming from our studio lights, which emitted a green glow that had an interesting natural color grading effect on camera. We wanted the set to intentionally look like a mess, so we covered the floor in black trash bags stuffed with paper packing material and empty Spronk soda bottles. Once the room was as cluttered as possible, we were able to prepare for the most difficult shot, which was hiding Tape's body amongst the trash to later be discovered. We had a dedicated spot of the set that we wanted him to lie down in, particularly filling that area the most with our fake trash and various items.

The treasure hunt game was set in the woods at night. We picked an isolated location off the Blue Ridge Parkway to film. We prepared for this shoot by creating a prop map, mixing fake blood, and ensuring we had enough lights packed to navigate in the dark. Since it was already difficult to see when wearing the masks, a concern with this scene was safety and visibility. We decided to take extra time when running through tests of each shot, making sure we were aware of the terrain.

Post-Production

Editing

The editing process allowed us to be very creative and experimental. This is where the bulk of our time on this project was spent.

An analog horror element that we wanted to blend with our live-action footage is the creation of slides with graphics that appear in various spots to provide explanations or give additional details that exist in the story. We decided that these would be our added content featured in the bonus feature of the game show episode the storyline is focused on. The first example of this is our advertisement for the game show, which takes place at the very beginning of the film. It featured a mix of the many different graphics we've created, along with animated text and a narrative voice-over that announced the concept of our game show for the first time. We also have various cuts away from the live-action footage that have this graphic style, such as brief interruptions from The Host to explain each game to the audience.

For the character of The Host, since he is the main antagonist of the film, we wanted to make it appear as if the camera was unable to capture his image. To achieve this effect, we decided to rotoscope over our actor of The Host to make him look like a dark silhouette without any identifiable features. This was a meticulous frame-by-frame process of using the Roto Brush tool in After Effects to trace around the figure of The Host, isolating his body from the rest of the footage. While the tool does attempt to create a mask that tracks the movement of the isolated subject, it often makes a lot of mistakes, and requires a thorough revision process to clean up the mask to avoid it looking glitchy. We went through this process for every scene The Host was in.

An essential element of editing analog horror is adding glitches in post. VHS tapes naturally decay with time and overuse, causing fuzz and other distortion. To simulate this in our footage, we made use of a variety of effects in After Effects. We applied static overlays and adjusted the saturation and hue of affected clips. We were strategic in our use of glitching, using it to transition between shots and redact specific information. For The Host, we used effects to further distort his appearance after the rotoscoping process. The goal was to have the footage become unstable whenever he's on screen. This was achieved through the Noise and VR Digital Glitch effects.

Sound

Sound design has the ability to completely change a scene. We were highly intentional with the music and sound effects we selected.

The music in our live-action game scenes is diegetic, meaning the fictional characters are hearing it in their environment, not just the audience. To add this into our footage without overpowering the dialogue, we relied on reverb effects. Through editing we were able to make it sound like music was being played on speakers in the same room as the characters.

We sourced most of the sound effects from copyright free websites, but some we made ourselves. In the woods scene there is a creature hunting the cast. To create a unique monster cry we merged audio of a dog howling with a goose hiss, pitching it up and down until we achieved something disturbing enough.

Our host character slowly deteriorates throughout the story, the same goes for his voice. For the first half of the film he is fully voice-acted, then he switches to a text-to-speech generated voice. We used a Microsoft created text-to-speech generator that was released in 1998. We found that its emotionless delivery served as a nice contrast to The Host's original charisma.

Glitching is a common visual theme that appears throughout the entire film, but there's an audio component to it too. Whenever the footage is glitching, we intentionally cut up the

audio to add effects in Premiere Pro. We made music and dialogue stutter, shift pitch, overlap, and change speed.

3D Modeling

It's only within the last year that we've gotten to dive deeper into learning 3D modeling, but we knew that we wanted to incorporate 3D elements into the film. Since we already knew we wanted this to be a multimedia project, we decided on experimenting with incorporating and blending 3D modeling into our live-action footage. Doors play an important role in the story, and they mark the transition between each new game the contestants face. We thought it would be interesting to work on modeling the doors rather than just using a graphic, so we built a white door in Maya that would end up being an asset we'd use multiple times throughout the film. We surrounded the modeled door with large green rectangles, added lighting, and rendered it out. We were then able to key it out in After Effects and manipulate it to our liking.

The next part we modeled was a long, seemingly infinite, hallway of doors. This was part of a section where we wanted to simulate our main character walking through this setting, eventually ending up at a door that leads her to the fourth and final game. Our inspiration for this visual largely came from Kane Pixels *Backrooms* series and his fully 3D modeled found footage videos. It had been a goal of ours to attempt to edit a scene like this ourselves, and we decided that this was the perfect place to include it. We started by 3D modeling a long hallway, duplicating our white door asset many times to cover each side of the wall. We then added a camera into the scene, positioning it at our estimated height of a person to mimic the camera that Pillowcase has been recording with. Then, we moved onto lighting and texturing, keeping everything for the most part white with little detail, while giving the doorknobs a slight shine. For lighting, we used a mixture of a Skydome Light and Area Lights, placing them on the ceiling of the hallway to illuminate the space and produce a reflection onto the floor.

The next part was more complicated, and something we had never experimented with before. We wanted to animate our camera to simulate the movement of somebody walking. First, we created a motion path, connecting it to our camera and extending it from the beginning of the hallway to the end. This required us to play around with the settings to achieve the right camera angle and movement speed we were looking for. Once we got this part of the process to run smoothly, we were ready to begin figuring out how to emulate the shakiness of walking while holding onto a camera. After doing some research on how to achieve this effect, we began by enabling Camera Shake on our animated camera layer, which allowed us to manipulate the horizontal and vertical movement as the camera was in motion (Antonio). It took a lot of trial and error to determine the right numbers to insert

for our desired movement, but after a lot of experimentation and playback, we finally were able to animate the movement we had been hoping for.



Figure 3. 3D Hallway Designed in Maya



Figure 4. 3D Door on Greenscreen

Graphic Design

Including fictional brands in our film meant that we needed to develop a brand identity for them as we would any real company. *What's Behind Door Number Four?* is a game show from the 90s, so we began by gathering a collection of real logos from the era. After examining them, we noticed that these designs involved a lot of bold colors and font choices (Enchev). We emulated this style for the game show's logo and website, creating a busy, energetic look. Spronk, our soda brand, was approached differently. This brand was inspired by design principles of the early 2000s. It was intended to be simple yet bright and easily recognizable, especially when displayed on the bottle.



Figure 5. Logo Designs



Figure 6. Website Design

VHS Transfer

A key element in editing analog horror is giving it the overlay style of a VHS tape. It's essential in making the finalized footage have that old 90s digitized aesthetic. This is commonly achieved through effects and editing with premade overlays, but we wanted to try for a more authentic look. We were told that the Media Design Lab in Ramsey Library had the equipment to do a VHS transfer process, and we knew that this would be the perfect final addition to our editing process.

Knowing that it would be complicated, we began by researching the steps for a successful VHS transfer (SkyCorp). We needed to convert our digital footage onto a VHS tape, and then convert it back to digital. Once the conversion process was complete, in theory, we would have the desired analog effect we were envisioning. We acquired a blank VHS tape, but the process ended up being a lot more time consuming than we had initially thought. It's much easier to convert something already on VHS back to digital, but to convert something digital to VHS is a bit more of a process. We ran into a lot of complications when working with the equipment, and after more research and advice, we eventually realized we needed to go an alternative route.

We ended up being able to use a CRT TV to finally get the process started. After connecting the TV to a laptop to display our footage on the screen, we recorded it onto our blank VHS tape. When the recording ended, we were able to see how it turned out, and realized that the first part of the process was a success. Our footage now had the grain and subtle glitch effects that we had been hoping for.

We then went back to the library to use their multi-format video converter to convert our footage back to digital. Despite being time consuming, doing this process for all of our

game show footage managed to give us the authentic analog aesthetic that we had been envisioning from the very beginning.



Figure 7. VHS Transfer Before and After

Conclusion

The creation of this short film has been an invaluable experience for both of us. Every step of the process was an opportunity to learn a new skill or expand on developing an existing one. The opportunity to write, direct, edit, and complete a project of this scale is not something we would have otherwise been able to complete without the support of our faculty mentor and the university. A multimedia project like this is something we had been wanting to make for a long time, and this study gave us the ability to combine every new artistic skill we've learned during our time as New Media students. From editing, to graphic design, 2D animation, and 3D modeling, we blended a mix of mediums to further hone these skills and show how much we've grown as artists. The fact that this was a collaborative process as well gave us so much experience working in a team-based setting. It allowed us to learn and grow our skills together, and create a finished product that we're both proud of. We have found catharsis in expressing these darker concerns we have with the modern digital landscape through our theme and story, and hope others will find truth in the message.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to Forest Gamble for being our mentor during this process. Getting to share our work each week and get his feedback and advice was such an important part of this production. His support and guidance gave us so much inspiration, and kept us motivated to keep pushing forward, even when there were moments when we questioned our creative vision. From the very initial idea to the end of the project, Forest's enthusiasm and contributions helped this short film get to where it is now.

This project would also not have been possible without our incredible team of friends who acted and helped behind the scenes. We appreciate you endlessly for showing up when you didn't have to and continuing to laugh and stay positive through long nights of filming. Thank you to Elise Sawyer, Rachel Huneycutt, Aidan Stratton, Anele Saige, Gaby Johnston, Thalia Arenas, Andrew Richtmyer, and Kevin Eddings. We love you!

Additionally, the support of the UNCA New Media department has been pivotal in our success. Alongside providing us with equipment and space to work, our skills would be nonexistent if not for the exceptional teaching provided by the faculty.

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