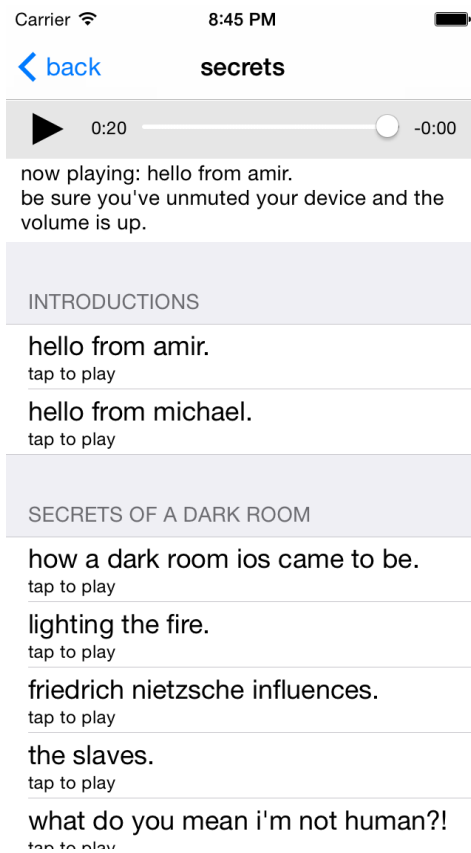


Screenshot



TECHNICAL

Record MP3 at 64 bit-rate.

INTRODUCTIONS

hello from amir. (amir)

Hello wanderer. I'm Amir, the developer for the iOS version of A Dark Room. Only those that have completed this journey at least once will ever hear this message. I hope you felt a sense of wonder while playing this game. Great care was taken in creating a world. A world that you would be emotionally attached to. I hope you found that A Dark Room was a unique, personal experience... unlike anything in the App Store. Most of all, I hope you found A Dark Room to be a work of art.

Aristotle once said: "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance."

The following developer commentary is an exploration of that inward significance. Michael and I will talk about how the game was developed, what influenced this world, secrets that you may have missed in your playthroughs, among other things. I hope the connection to this game will deepen after listening to these sound bites.

Also, if you're about to try to beat the game without building huts, the additional commentary is a *great* way to pass the time during the earlier stages of your journey. You can leave this screen and the commentary will continue to play.

hello from michael. (michael)

Hi! This is Michael, the creator of the web version of A Dark Room. First of all, thanks for playing! Amir and I have put a lot of work into ADR, and it's great to see people playing and enjoying the results.

When I first posted the original game back in June of 2013, I had no idea of whether it would be a success or not, or even if anyone would notice. The reception from all corners of the internet has been extremely gratifying, and I'm constantly amazed that something I created has touched so many people.

In this commentary, I'm going to focus on the inspiration, creative design, and development of the web-based version of the game. I guarantee that it'll be full of spoilers, so if you're not done thinking about ADR yet, you may want to wait.

SECRETS OF A DARK ROOM (feel free to reorder stuff.... whatever you think will help continuity)

candies, lollipops, and bleak existentialism. (michael)

I'd just traded a handful of candies for a wooden sword when it hit me. Aniwai's Candy Box was quite unlike anything I'd played before. Its apparent simplicity hid an extremely compelling core of discovery and imagination. I knew that I had to make something like it. I've been developing software since I was a kid, but never actually finished any of my projects. I have a pretty abysmal attention span when it comes down to it. Candy Box proved to me that a lot could come from very little. A game like that could be completed before my attention waned, and I ran off after the next shiny object.

I wanted to see if I could marry the expanding mechanical scope of Candy Box with an expanding narrative that would engage the curiosity as well as the primal desire for ever larger numbers. I threw the initial interface together before I knew a whole lot about where the game was going to go, and from that interface grew the isolated, slightly menacing setting. The sparse black on white just screamed "wasteland" to me, so that's where it went. From there, I settled on

simple, clipped sentences to reinforce the slightly unsettling tone. Hey, it worked for *The Road* (perhaps mention the author? Cormac McCarthy), so it can work for me.

how a dark room ios came to be. (amir)

Back in June of 2013, I came across the web version of *A Dark Room*, Michael's original creation. At this point, I was 3 months into my sabbatical. I had spent the last 8 years of my life creating software for other people, and decided to take some time to do a few things for myself. I took on a minimalist lifestyle, getting rid of as many worldly possessions as possible. Anything I could live without was thrown away, donated, or sold.

When I saw what Michael built, I felt an immediate connection with its sparse presentation. It was almost as if it was a reflection of where I currently was in my life. I contacted Michael that day, asking if I could port the game over to a mobile medium. Being the incredible person that he is, he said yes. One virtual handshake, 70 emails, and 1 video conference later, *A Dark Room* for iOS shipped in November of 2013... it took 5 months to reenvision this experience for mobile devices. It's hard to believe I've never met Michael in person. Perhaps if *A Dark Room* is successful, I'll take a flight from Dallas, TX to Canada and we can finally shake hands.

lighting the fire. (amir)

When you first opened up *A Dark Room*, and started playing, did you feel like you were cheated? Did you feel like you were just conned into buying a game that does absolutely nothing? I'm sure many did. I know this, because some went so far as to leaving a one star review in the App Store, stating that the game was a scam. For what its worth, I was very much aware of this feeling you'd experience, and the last thing I ever wanted to do was to make you feel cheated. I can't count the number of hours I mulled over the opening sequence.

When you light the fire, it takes a little over 15 seconds before "a silent forest" opens up and you are able to gather wood. In Michael's original web version, it took *45 seconds* for this transition to occur. This timing was perfect for the web, but I was worried that it would be too long of a wait for someone who just purchased *A Dark Room*... a game with a vague description, one lousy screenshot, and depending on when you bought it, it may not have had any reviews.

A number of my friends and family play tested this opening game sequence... I wanted to see where they lost interest. Shortening the opening sequence to 15 seconds helped the play testers stay engaged, but they *still* lost interest by the time they started gathering wood.

I tried a number of things. I tried shortening the timing for the first part of the game down to 5 seconds, but that took away from the importance of the builder stumbling into your dark room. I tried added Friedrich Nietzsche quotes that would randomly appear when you stoked the fire, but that only lead to confusion. I kept the problem in the back of my head and concentrated on getting other parts of the game working. It wasn't until the third month of development where I

employed what you see today... a 15 second reveal, and when you gathered wood, a message fades in... “hope she’s okay, have to keep the fire going”.

the first sixty seconds. (michael)

Like Amir, I agonized over the opening sequence. I figured I’d lose the vast majority of my players in the space between initial engagement and the first surprise. That time is important for an idle game, though, so I couldn’t just cut to the chase. That very first expansion is what teaches the player that things will get bigger and curiosity about where things will go next is a major aspect of the genre.

In the original draft, the timing for Builder to recover was longer, and the fire died more quickly. The result was that if you lit the fire and then went away to do something else, the fire would die before Builder woke up, and the game would grind to a halt. This was a problem, since the one of the fundamentals of idle games is the ability to leave them alone and still progress. I wanted there to always be something new on the screen when the player tabbed back. With that in mind, I tightened the timings, and gave Builder the ability to stoke the fire and gather a little bit of wood. In the final game, all that is required is the initial lighting of the fire. Builder will take over from there. A distracted player will return to find the forest unlocked, and a bunch of narrative in their feed.

a thank you to my wife. (amir)

A Dark Room has a unique characteristic. You can only experience the game “for the first time”, once. So when it came to playtesting A Dark Room, I had to reach out to a different person every time I had a new part of the game developed. Imagine how hard it would be to play test this type of game... in the early stages of development, the entire experience wasn’t polished, the layout of the user interface was haphazard, the timings were off, there was no storyline to keep the player engaged.... the list goes on.

Out of every person who play tested the game, my wife stands alone. Whenever I requested, she would play the game without hesitation. She would give me feedback, she’d let me know when she was confused, she’d would slap me in the back of my head every time a sniper killed her on the Dusty Path. I know she was tired of playing the game over and over again, but she never complained. On October 31, 2013, my wife had her final playtest. It was 10 o’clock that evening, I gave her the game, and she played straight through from start to finish.... it was 2 AM when the space ship’s final animation sequence occurred, and the completion screen faded in.... she hasn’t touched the game since, I wouldn’t dare ask her to (haha).

a gamer contacts me, and it turned my world upside down. (amir)

When A Dark Room was first released to the App Store. I simply set the description to “awake. head throbbing. vision blurry... a text based journey”. Turns out, a gamer was searching the App Store for a game... specifically with the a description containing the word “text based”

When the game first released, I decided to create a Twitter handle for it: @ADarkRoomiOS. I received a reply on Twitter. This person said that he was having trouble with the Dusty Path.... he was having a hard time finding his way around. I was thoroughly confused, I play tested the game for literally 100 hours before releasing (not counting the hours my wife put in). After a couple of replies back and forth, he finally mentioned that he was blind... yes, blind... as in can't see. He was using iOS's VoiceOver capabilities and a braille reader to play the game. A number of other blind gamers chimed in also, asking for help. ... I promised them that I'd make the game 100% playable via VoiceOver.

I researched the capabilities of iOS devices and their support for those that can't see. It is truly incredible the amount of thought that was put into this feature. I never realized how much iOS devices have changed the quality of life for the blind...

For those that can see, take a moment to reflect on this. Imagine that you were blind. Close your eyes. Your eyelids cover the light, and all you see now is the color black. But try to understand that the concept of the color black isn't something that a blind person can relate to. The blind don't see black, they see nothing.... if you go to ADarkRoomiOS's twitter handle and look at the followers, you'll see some that don't have a profile picture... it's just the default egg that Twitter sets you up with when you register... what's the point of having a profile picture if you'll never see it?

For those that have completed A Dark Room, for those that are now listening to this commentary... remember, you're all connected by this experience... gamers in over 30 countries... both seeing and blind.... The story of A Dark Room goes beyond what you hold in your hand... it exists outside too... and you are a part of it.

A special thank you to the blind communities at AppleVis.com and AudioGames.net. Thank you for being patient while I updated the game. Thank you for forgiving my ignorance of your existence.

balancing an economy. (michael)

I absolutely love supply chain games. The more interconnected and complex, the better. Entire weeks have been lost to The Settlers and Anno. The balancing of ever increasing interdependent numbers seemed like a natural extension of the core concept of idle games, and so the second phase of ADR was borne.

The most efficient way to play this phase of the game is to leave every villager as a gatherer and build nothing but huts until your village is full. This is boring, though, so I did everything I

could to tempt the player away from the simple path. New resource types and buildings appear just as you're reaching the required resources for the next hut, hopefully making you wait just a bit longer for that cool new thing instead of a boring old hut. The maximum population was also very carefully chosen. It is possible to set up an entirely balanced economy, but you won't gain any one resource very quickly. Focusing on any one resource comes at the cost of others, often forcing the player to run a deficit on some of the lower-level materials. I wanted ADR to be entirely playable as an idle game, with only the barest of interaction, but also to reward the more active players with quicker progress.

The random events also came into being around this time. The intent was to always have something interesting on the screen when the player returned. Originally, the events were going to be a much deeper part of the game, with decisions carrying on to affect other events. I'd been playing King of Dragon Pass, and I thought that kind of decision making would be a cool addition to the game. That ended up being a lot of work, though, and not entirely in line with the rest of the mechanics, so I reduced the events to affecting resource levels and gaining perks and items to use on the Path.

The "mysterious wanderer" gambling events may be my favourite, just because I'm slightly vindictive. Statistically, the lower cost option is a good investment with an expected value higher than the price. Once you're farther in the game and able to afford the higher cost, you may have already learned to trust the wanderers more often than not. That's when I drop the probability on you. The higher cost option is always a bad investment. Sucker.

the development of a dusty path. (amir)

Interesting story about my experience with A Dusty Path. I never actually went onto the Path when I played the web version of the game. When I first came across Michael's creation, and the idea of the port came to mind... I wanted to start working immediately on it. I had bought the compass and had built the smokehouse, but never went onto the Path itself... in the web version of the game, the embark button is actually "disabled" until you have cured meat (this was changed in the mobile version).

I had been developing A Dark Room for a month now, the resource production part of the game was mostly complete... you could build a tannery, smoke house, and buy the compass. Only then did I really took a long hard look at what all was involved in the Dusty Path.

I'll try to put it in relative terms. The size of A Dark Room (if I were to print out all the code as a single document), would have been about 150 pages long.... the size of a small novel. The code for A Dusty Path would have taken up 95 pages of this document.

When I first explored the snapshot of the Dusty Path code that Michael sent me, I'm sure I felt what you felt the first time you embarked. Suddenly, this game that was a simple, elegant resource management simulation, became something very vast, and complex.

It took 5 months of work, to provide you with this complete journey that most complete in 3 hours... and that time doesn't include the work Michael initially put into the web version of this game. I tried to think about how time passed in this small world that was created.... I'd like to say that a week passed within the world of A Dark Room for every minute of gameplay you put in. I hope that puts the entire journey into perspective... from development to the final cut scene. It's difficult to describe time with words, it has to be experienced.

walking the path. (michael)

The Dusty Path turned the whole game on its head; changing from a numbers game into an exploration game. I wanted to parallel the "wooden sword" moment in Candy Box with something equally surprising, and maybe a little more grandiose. The Path probably went through more playtesting and revisions than any other part of the game.

Initially, the Path was even less forgiving. Roads and Outposts didn't exist, encounter rates were higher, and the compass pointed nowhere. Playtesting (and a lot of complaints from early players) led to a rather drastic reduction in encounter rates pretty quickly after release. Outposts and roads were actually a lazy solution to a concern I had about the random map generation. It would be possible, I thought, to have important map elements placed outside the reach of the player. Instead of making the map generation more complex, I decided to turn conquered dungeons into resupply points. It's still possible the end up with an impossible map, I think, but highly unlikely. That's also the reason for the "Desert Rat" and "Slow Metabolism" perks. I'm a hack, I know.

Playtesting also revealed that the concept of encountering stronger enemies as you venture farther isn't universally understood. Testers would venture out as far as they could in one direction and get slaughtered by enemies far too powerful for their gear level. This surprised me, and so warnings were added when the player explored beyond their means.

Most of the development time for ADR came from writing the dungeons. I wrote until I had to quit, lest I give up and leave the game unfinished. To this day, I feel like I didn't add enough content there. For weeks, my desk was covered in hastily-scrawled flow charts, diagraming all the possible ways through each dungeon. They work sort of like a Choose Your Own Adventure book, but with each choice made by the roll of a die. It was the best way I could think of to create a reasonably dynamic experience while maintaining a cohesive narrative.

the slaves and friedrich nietzsche. (amir)

I mentioned earlier that I was struggling with pacing the beginning sequences of A Dark Room. I didn't want the players to lose interest, delete the game, and leave a one star review. Those reviews are a constant reminder that I could have done better... I tried adding random Friedrich

Nietzsche quotes during the slower moments of the game. These quotes didn't make it into the final version, but let me read a few of them to you:

"every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit, a mask is continually growing."

"when you stare into the abyss the abyss stares back at you."

"a dictator divides mankind into two classes: tools and enemies."

In total, I curated about 200 quotes that would fit the atmosphere of the game. They were all deleted, never to be seen. But the impact they left stayed in the back of my head.... specifically: "a dictator divides mankind into two classes: tools and enemies".

The lull in the first part of the game was taken care of with a few story elements: "hope she's okay. have to keep the fire going", "she's woken up. says she can build things. says she's a friend."

Eventually you end up building a few of the buildings... the trade post unlocks... and finally you have the ability to buy the compass. Bits of the story line slowly build up... the Nietzsche quote about dictatorships still lingers in the back of my mind. And finally.... after you've built the last two buildings, before you have to set out and embark to the world outside the village... you get a dialog between by the unnamed wanderer, and the builder:

"the villagers. the fatigue in their eyes."

"back breaking labor. no rest for the villagers."

"make them work. day and night."

"they are slaves."

... you can thank Nietzsche for this transition...that anxiety and shock you felt... when suddenly, the sanctuary you built for these lost souls, becomes a prison.... and your path towards corruption begins.

When this transition occurred, I heard that a number of people simply deleted the game. Others reset the game and started over, trying to avoid this transitions. Many pushed through uncomfortably, or embraced the new persona. Some were literally brought to tears. If you pay attention, events on The Dusty Path puts this transition into context... What if I told you that the wanderer in the game wasn't human?

what do you mean i'm not human?! (michael)

The original plot of ADR was a much more straightforward story of resistance against an occupying force. To my great benefit, a friend mentioned to me that a “Chinese Box” style narrative would suit the mechanics that I was building. It was then that the twist was added.

As the player opens up new mechanics, the scope of the game “zooms out” to reveal more and more of the world. The slow pacing is extremely important here, as it allows the player time to build up their own model of the world in their minds between reveals. Each reveal is intended to shake the player’s preconceived notions: From survivalism to medieval serfdom, to post-apocalypse, to the dying remnants of a conquered world. For the majority of the game, I suspect that the player imagines herself as human. I certainly don’t say anything to challenge this assumption. As the player explores further from home, however, the hints start to drop. Did you notice? Hopefully by the end, the realization finally dawns that you are not a survivor, or a protector, or even a hero. You are attacked, not out of desperation, but because you *deserve it*.

The behaviour of the player was intentionally made more and more morally questionable the farther she travelled from the village. One particular path through the City was intended to make the player question her place in the world. You think murdering innocent children in an unprotected shanty town is heroic?

Originally, the only clue to the player’s true identity was the noun “wanderer.” Since nothing in ADR is capitalized, there’s no way to tell which nouns are proper and which aren’t. Wanderer isn’t a loose title, it’s the name of a species; The species directly responsible for the state of the world. That turned out to be entirely too obscure, however, and so more clues were added: The wanderer with multiple arms in the remains of the city; the old wanderer in the swamp; and the particular description of the ship discovered out in the wastes. It was important to me that it wasn’t an explicit reveal, though. I wanted the discovery to feel personal. I was very careful to call most friendly NPCs by the appellation “wanderer” without overusing it. I hope it worked.

I spent far too much of my time after ADR was released reading through forums, following the progress of players to see if and when they realized what was going on.

mysteries of the locket. (amir)

In the web version of the game, there are no storyline elements that appear when you gather wood. That was something unique that was added to the mobile version. It’s my small, creative mark in Michael’s post apocalyptic world.

In the web version of the game, when you ran out of water or food on the Dusty Path, you’d be taken back to embark screen and a message would show up implying that you died. For me, the death and revival, without a reason, was a plot hole. I know it’s common in video game that you can just come back to life, without explanation. But I wanted to leave something a bit more

explicit for the player to hang their imagination onto. The first time you die on the dusty path, you get the following dialog:

"died out there. sure of it."

"saw her face before collapsing. a glowing locket around her neck."

"brought back to life by her? how?"

And the second time you die:

"she looks weary. almost as if every death affects her too."

"the locket around her neck glows brightly. a healing light."

I felt that these few pieces of dialog helped explain how you were able to come back to life after dying on the Dusty Path. It also added a bit more mystery to the builder... and probably brought a bit more anxiety with regards to what would happen to her, if you continued your journey. When the builder finally vanishes from the game, she leaves the locket behind, which becomes an artifact that is always equipped... This serves as another game element when it's time to start searching the world for alien alloys.

I wish I could say that the story had some grand design from the beginning. It turned out to be an evolutionary progression, inspired by Michael's world, and techniques to keep the player engaged through the slower points of the game... I don't think it could have been created any other way.... and I'm glad where it ended up.

scraps on the cutting room floor. (michael)

When I think about all the things that were originally planned for A Dark Room, the finished product feels so incomplete and lazy. I'm not sure if this is true of all creative endeavours, or if it's just me.

My original concept for ADR had two additional phases that never made it in. From the Dusty Path, the player would eventually arm and organize her villagers into armies. Hostile outposts were to be spread around the map, like in Far Cry 3, and conquering them would reduce the amount of encounters in the area, and the frequency of attacks on the player's village. The Path would change from a zoomed-in nethack style view to more of a tactical map, with armies moving around, taking and losing territory. The outpost mechanic was eventually added to the Path in a much simpler capacity, but the tactical strategy aspects were just too much for me to build at the time.

There was also another phase planned after leaving the planet. After lifting off, the player would reunite with the Wanderer fleet in orbit. From there, she would lead the fleets in a Master of Orion style 4X game, spreading Wanderer destruction to all corners of the galaxy. Eventually, the player's ship would be shot down and the game would loop, starting over in a dark room on

a newly harvested world. I decided pretty quickly that there's probably a whole nother tie-in game there, and it was much too big to fit into ADR if I ever wanted to ship it.

mysteries of the ending. (amir)

The final stage's storyline was also evolutionary. If you can see, you're probably wonder how the blind ever got through the spaceship sequence. For the VoiceOver users, they cannot navigate the ship, nor upgrade thrusters. Instead, the alien alloy applied to the ship's hull gives +2 hit points as opposed to just +1. This gives the blind the ability to barrel through the end game sequence with about 15 to 20 alien alloy.

With the problem of navigation solved, I had to devise a way to keep the blind entertained through the endgame sequence. For those that can see, the story elements you saw fading in and out were (initially) only available to the blind. After a couple of updates, I decided to provide this endgame story to all gamers.

I still needed a way to communicate asteroid collisions. Instead of a red flash whenever the ship took damage, the VoiceOver users would instead get a piece of dialog spoken to them, followed by the remaining hull hitpoints. Here's some of the dialog whenever the ship was struck by an asteroid:

"the ship veers to avoid a rock. as if it has a mind of its own. wasn't enough.",
"ship shakes. coils back from the impact, as if it were in pain.",
"the rituals of the world. left behind. a destructive blow. from the rock ahead.",
"reflecting on lives taken. is this punishment for crimes?",
"hands. callused. body. scarred. no different, from this ship.",
"an asteroid hits. a deafening sound. thoughts wander to dark nights.",
"flames burst out of the vents. the ship exhales after the impact.",
"rocks, like beasts, trying to get in. the hull holds for now.",
"a single loud explosion rings in the cabin. hope that wasn't important.",
"asteroids crashing, like gunfire. nothing changes."

I want to reiterate the connection you now share with gamers around the world, both seeing and blind. For those that can see, perhaps try turning on VoiceOver and enabling Screen Curtain, to better understand how the blind play A Dark Room.

go forth and create. (michael)

Just like the game itself, creating A Dark Room has been quite the unexpected adventure. In those first few moments of inspiration, I would never have guessed that things would end up here. I have all of you to thank for that, and I am truly grateful.

To all of you who felt disappointed by the ending, or were left wanting more, know that I'm right there with you. My brain is full of ideas, and some of them expand on ADR. Right now, though, I've got to give some of the other ideas a chance. Can't play favourites, lest I tempt revolution. Maybe there will be more ADR in the future, but I am fickle and can't make any promises.

I hope you've enjoyed playing ADR, and listening to our narcissistic ramblings. It's been a lot of fun creating these things for you. More than anything, though, I hope that ADR has shown how much can be made with very little. It doesn't take millions of dollars, and huge teams of developers and artists to create a meaningful experience. All it takes is an idea, and a little perseverance. The technologies used to create the web version of ADR are all quite welcoming to new programmers, and I urge you to jump in. If you're interested in how ADR was made, all of the code for the web version is free and available for you to dig through. Pick it up, mess with it, and create your own experiences. Send me a link when you're done. I guarantee I will play everything.

The internet is us, and it's only as awesome as we make it. Go fill it with things that you love.

closing remarks. (amir)

Here we are. My closing remarks. This has been an incredibly long journey. The development for this game has been (at times) rather exhausting... it has definitely been emotional. I'm sitting here with an iPhone 5, iPhone 5s, the iPhone 4 simulator running on my Mac, an iPad 3, an iPad Air, and an iPad mini. Imagine playing the game at the same time across all these devices... making sure that the experience is perfect throughout. For those that are interested, my fastest completion time is 91 minutes.

I know some of you are wondering if there will be a sequel. Before I answer that, I want to take a moment and thank some people in the gaming community.

Leigh Alexander, Cara Ellison, Maddy Myers, Zoe Quinn for writing about A Dark Room.

Elizabeth Simins for the beautiful work of art on A Dark Room's support page.

The people of Indie Mega Booth, and Kaju Pop for the first podcast and video review about the game.

And last but not least, the active communities at AppleVis, AudioGames, TouchArcade, and Reddit.

If you want a detailed account of all that's happened with regards to this game, I've kept a developer log on A Dark Room's support page, there should be link to it in iTunes.

So now to answer the question... Will there be a sequel? The challenge with A Dark Room, as I've stated before, is that you can only experience the game "for the first time", once. The ending storyline element "shivering. gasping for air. must find her. the locket glows. must find her..." does indeed leave some things unanswered. The intention of this last piece of text wasn't a setup for a sequel. It was simply another scaffold to build your own ending. Does the wanderer die at the the end? Does the locket protect the wanderer and lead him/her to the builder? Is the wanderer seeking forgiveness or revenge? I _can't_ answer those questions for you. It would be wrong to do so. I also can't make you forget the feelings you felt whenever a new discovery was made... I just can't recycle and reuse that mechanic, it wouldn't have the same charm the second time around. There may be other games developed by Michael and I. A Dark Room, however, is complete, and the story you've formed shouldn't be corrupted by another installment. Now, now, everything will be okay. That empty feeling you have inside will pass... it's just a by product of your soul being consumed every time you stoked the fire.

If you haven't done so, _please_ take a moment and leave a review in the App Store... perhaps even leave A Dark Room's tagline in the body of the review: "May the fire burn brightly for you. May it keep you warm.". If you feel you've underpaid for the game, simply gift it to your friends and family. Hopefully, they too will complete this experience and become a part of this powerful story. A story that exists in the game, and the one that exists outside.