

“If I had to grade that presentation, I’d give it a C. Do you want my honest opinion? I think you should redo most of it before tomorrow.”

That wasn’t the feedback Marcus was expecting.

Especially not one day before the final round of the Hatch House Open.

He had meticulously answered several detailed questions about ProjectMQ to pass the first and second preliminary rounds.

Also, on nights and weekends over the previous month, he had invested nearly 60 hours into building his pitch deck and memorizing his 10-minute pitch.

This competition was certainly worth all of that effort: after years of fine-tuning ProjectMQ’s vision*, Marcus and his twin brother Malcolm were almost ready to disrupt the gaming industry.

* (For more on that story, check out ProjectMQ’s entry in the “Innovation Heroes” category)

Winning 1st place at the Hatch House Open would help them take ProjectMQ to the next level.

Now, Marcus had less than 24 hours to rework his pitch and pitch deck before the final live presentation.

Marcus could feel his anxiety starting to grow, with vivid flashbacks of his college final exams: he used to cram for them last-minute.

But Marcus had worked too hard to get to the final round of the competition; \$5000 cash was at stake, and he wasn’t willing to throw in the towel.

“Focus.” He thought to himself, “You’re wasting valuable time worrying, and you didn’t fly all of the way up here to lose. GET YOUR SHIT TOGETHER!”

Reflecting on the incredible traction he and his brother had made with ProjectMQ, Marcus quickly calmed down and strengthened his resolve.

He had the technology. He would make it better, faster, and stronger than ever

before. He was now confident that he would rebuild ProjectMQ's presentation.

For the next several hours, Marcus worked incessantly on the new presentation, obsessively reviewing the page of feedback from his mentor.

After emailing the last version of the presentation script and slides to Malcolm, Marcus finally passed out around midnight.

Marcus got a quick shower the next morning, and then stopped at the Greek diner down the street for breakfast: pancakes, bacon, and a cup of coffee.

Once the coffee's caffeine kicked in, it was time to get back to work.

Since he was short on time, Marcus needed to optimize how he practiced his presentation.

Using his phone, Marcus recorded the script (from each slide) to separate audio tracks, so he could learn his 10-minute presentation in smaller pieces.

Pacing back and forth around the parking lot behind Hatch House Ventures, Marcus practiced his presentation well into the late afternoon.

He then returned to Hatch House Ventures to save a final copy of his presentation to a jump drive, and pick up the key to his presentation: Super Mario Bros. 3

Malcolm and Marcus got the Nintendo Entertainment System and Super Mario Bros. 3 for Christmas when they were six, and they have been playing video games ever since.

Marcus knew that showing the NES cartridge during the pitch would make the presentation more authentic, so he made sure to pack the game in his luggage before he left Tampa.

The live pitch event was hosted in an antique Firehouse, that had been retrofitted into an office complex by a Venture Capital firm.

This Firehouse was only about 5 blocks away from Hatch House Ventures, so Marcus was conveniently able to walk there right before the event.

The short distance was even more convenient, especially when Marcus noticed that he had accidentally forgotten his wireless clicker at Hatch House Ventures.

About 10 minutes (and 2 short jogs) later, Marcus returned to the Firehouse to upload his slides to the projector.

As Marcus arrived, he saw that many of the guests were beginning to take their seats, and some were enjoying the light appetizers that were donated for the event.

Marcus wasn't hungry: he was still catching his breath from running back and forth to Hatch House Ventures, and his anticipation of his upcoming pitch made his adrenaline kick in.

The President of Hatch House Ventures stopped by Marcus and the other finalists to quickly review the presentation order.

As Marcus continued to compose himself from the jog, he was relieved to hear that ProjectMQ would be presenting second of the three groups.

Hatch House Ventures' President then picked up the microphone, welcomed everyone for attending, and thanked the sponsors for the generous prize donations.

Next, he introduced the event's judges, which included various tech/media leaders from the local Bethlehem, Pennsylvania community.

Once Hatch House Ventures' President finished his announcements and introductions, the first finalist began their pitch.

Marcus' nerves had settled, and he stood in the back of the room, making quick notes from the first presentation.

"Make eye contact with the audience, use the entire space, and don't read the slides verbatim", Marcus repeated under his breath.

Marcus didn't like public speaking, and never took the class in college; as the first finalist finished their pitch, Marcus quickly recalled some advice from Oren Klaff's

award-winning sales book “Pitch Anything”.

Walking towards the front of the audience, Marcus took a few deep breaths, before turning to the judges and beginning his presentation.

All of his hours of dedication and preparation paid off; he walked calmly back and forth across the presentation area, maintaining eye contact with the judges and audience as he confidently worked through each of his slides.

After what seemed like a surprisingly short 10 minutes, the judges responded with a few questions, to which Marcus thoughtfully and successfully responded.

The NES cartridge of Super Mario Bros 3 worked perfectly: Marcus carried that momentum through the judges’ Q&A, and he nailed the presentation!

Returning to the back of the room, Marcus waited patiently for the third finalist to finish their pitch.

Once the third pitch was over, the Hatch House Ventures’ President thanked the three finalists, and mentioned that there would be a short break while the judges deliberated.

After about 5 minutes, the Hatch House Ventures’ President returned to the microphone with a check nearly 6 feet long, and called the finalists back to the front of the room.

Hatch House Ventures’ President thanked all three startups for their insightful presentations, and congratulated the third and second place winners before making his final announcement: ProjectMQ PLACED FIRST in the Hatch House Open!

Marcus and Malcolm had invested all of their time and money into ProjectMQ, living on a college budget and working 70+ hour weeks for three years.

If you’ve ever tried to bootstrap your own company, then you know how stressful and difficult it is to essentially work two full-time jobs, so you can use the salary from the first to cover the expenses of the second.

It takes an incredible amount of faith and dedication to stay the course in the face

of various setbacks.

The Howard brothers had participated in nearly 10 startup competitions before the Hatch House Open.

In each of those events, the Howard twins had their expertise and ProjectMQ's traction dismissed.

Yet Marcus and Malcolm used every one of those failures as learning opportunities to improve ProjectMQ.

Winning the Hatch House Open was long-overdue success for their team, and reassured them that ProjectMQ has a bright future ahead of it.

That win was one small step for ProjectMQ, and one giant leap for indie games!