The Rules Change Entirely: Jason Bender on RTS and Mobile Design

A Command and Conquer developer talks to us about design

Tangents can be surprisingly useful. When Kabam creative director, Jason Bender, and I sat down to talk about the lost history of Electronic Art's early esports broadcast, CNCTV, we ended up getting thoroughly distracted from our original topic down an ever-deeper rabbit hole of video game design.

This outtake, presented here, gives an incredibly rare peek into the inner sanctums of the game development world. Woven through the interview is the history of real time strategy (RTS) games, mis-learning from pro players, the surprising influence of the Michael Jordan logo in balancing

games for esports, and the tantalizing new horizons of mobile games which enticed him away from his position as lead design on Blizzard's *Diablo 3* console team.

ZAM: Esports tournaments in 2016 can have ten million dollar first prizes, but what was the competitive scene for *Command and Conquer* (CNC) like in 2007 when you were lead designer?

Jason Bender: There were tournaments all over the world. In Norway I went to a LAN party that had 5500 people there, and they had *CNC* tournaments. There was big prize money. *Generals* was probably the most successful competitive *CNC* game, which is no surprise because Dustin Browder made that and he balanced it immaculately. *Generals* was just a warmup for *StarCraft 2*. Video games that play with the right pace and a classic RTS style tend to make good competitive games because they have strategic depth and skill differentiation. *Command and Conquer 3* was less so. On the other hand, take *Company of Heroes*—that's a game about immersion. You're immersed as a single player or co-op player in what's happening on the battlefield. You feel it like a movie. It offers a totally different experience. The *CNC* franchise has always sort of been in the middle. You can push it either way.

Have you ever been a professional competitive video game player? What is your background as a player?

No, but as a player I got pretty damn good at *Counterstrike*, and there were a few other games I excelled at. But I have never been a competitive RTS guy. I can brag that I was able to defeat Dustin once in *Command and Conquer Generals* toe-to-toe. I was very very proud of that, but I had to play my top game to do that. Any other day of any other week he would crush me.

What about the rest of the people involved in CNC team, did they have professional esport or gaming experience at all?

We did a mix on the team because taking professional gamers, or even just hardcore gamers, on to a dev team is a double edged sword. What happened on *Command and Conquer* is that we took a little bit of the wrong feedback from our best players. We brought them in and put them up at the Ritz Carlton where we had them play the in-development game for a week. Every day they would give us notes. Every night we would integrate the notes and give them a new build by the morning. What ended up happening was the game got a little too twitchy and little too fast. And it really wasn't the *CNC* we wanted. It wasn't even giving the hardcore players what they were asking for either. It was the old Henry Ford saying, "If I had asked people what they want they would have said a faster horse," you know? That's not our job as game designers, to give people better horses, it's to give people the car. So, when you bring pro players on you can get

the wrong messages. But games like *StarCraft* and *League of Legends* have really benefited from having pro player input.

Henry Ford

Outside of those top players, did you have any good demographic data on the user base for *Command and Conquer*, such as for the rest of people who watched the CNCTV broadcasts?

I don't recall what the data was. I know that it was our hardcore. But we didn't have the greatest analytics back then. Analytics are the rage now so I can get data on anything. That's how we live our lives now. A database life. Back then it was limited. Most of our feedback came in our forums. Our forums for *Command and Conquer* were really active and highly moderated. That's where the really heated discussions about patches and upcoming stuff would happen. Our forums were not as dreadful as forums are today. This was before internet comment vitriol had reached the pitch that it has now, so we were able to get some useful comments out of those forums. Though when Greg and I were casting for CNCTV, I remember one comment which

was something to the effect of, "Why am I watching this ridiculous man and his nerdy sidekick talk about the game?" They were just making fun of us.
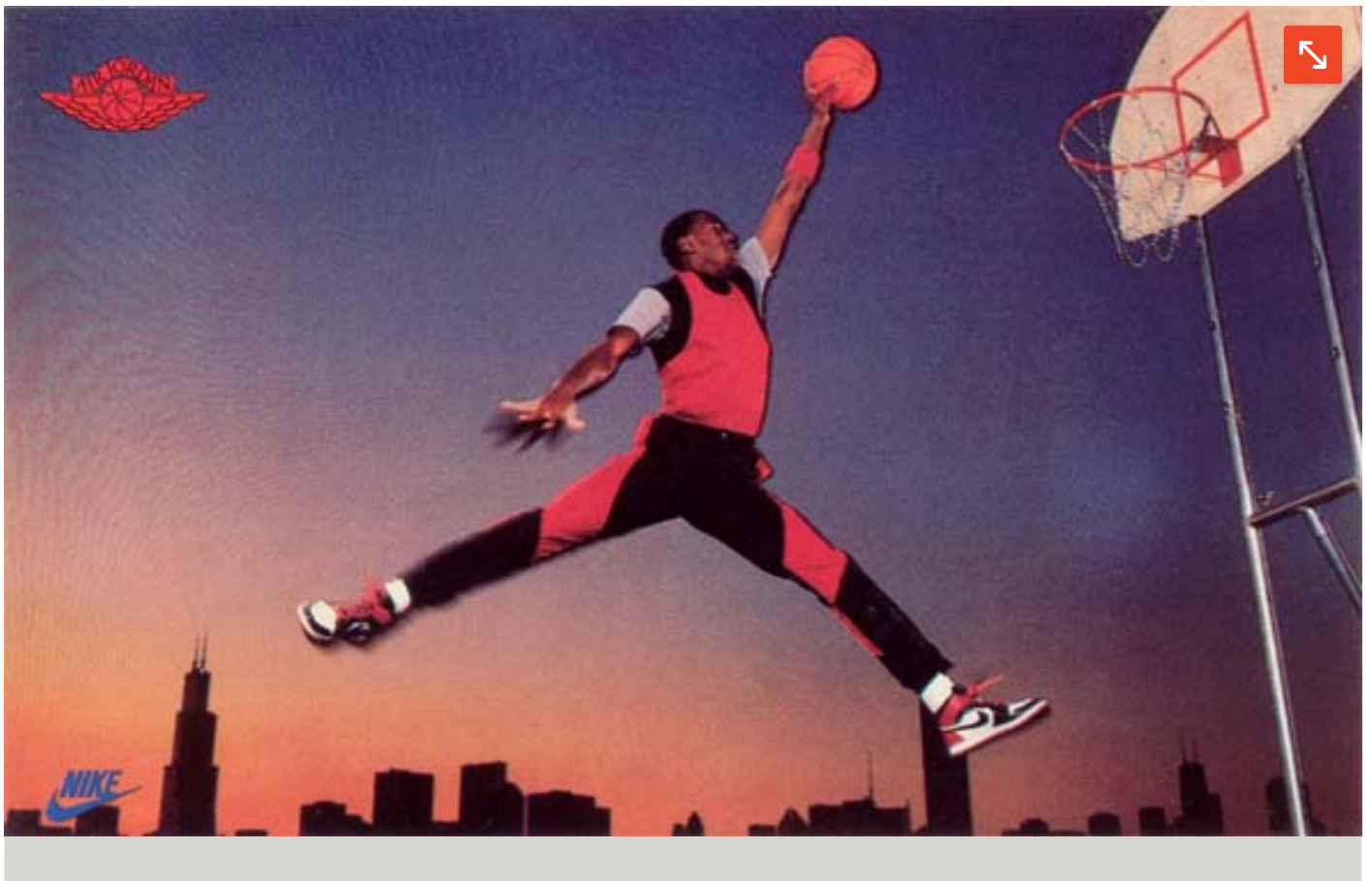
Were you the nerdy sidekick?

I was the nerdy sidekick. Which was funny because at the time I was Greg's boss.

But on air it didn't seem that way?

No! The reason Greg was doing this role in the first place was that he has this wonderfully huge personality. He's frickin' ridiculous—he's larger than life—and he's very very comfortable with attention. And usually I am too, but on camera he totally outshone me. He was so much more comfortable on camera than I was and he very much dominated the cast.

To talk a bit more about the performative aspect of esports, at the 2015 IndieCade here in Culver City there was a really excellent panel about esports development moderated by Chloe Lister. One of the lessons those developers discussed was that in the era of streaming there is a new emphasis on the performative aspect of playing a video game. That playing a game on a stream is not simply about winning or losing anymore. Videogame players take on this new hybrid role of a public actor for an audience; an actor in theatrical sense.

Yeah, you become a personality. But Air Jordan's don't have a silhouette of him doing a layup, okay? That's the thing: You have to bring theater because that's what people want to watch. So, if you can add some style and panache to what you're doing, that's what the audience wants to watch. If I can watch any of 1000 games being played, I want to watch the one where something really sweet is happening.

Do you find yourself trying to design video games to make that experience more regular for players?

The Holy Grail of design is for us to have enough depth that players can do things that seem athletic. That players can do things that seem so creative and interesting, and involves such practice and skill that you can really blow people's minds. But simultaneously we have to make a game that everyone can play. When you think of basketball you can have a bunch 10 year-olds on the court shooting hoops, and they'll block each other; they probably won't dribble all that well. And maybe they are dribbling well, but certainly nobody's dunking. But everyone can still get in to it. But at the peak of the game, it's almost unrecognizably different. You still have a ball, you have a court, you have a hoop. But what the people on the court are doing is almost entirely different. So if we're making a strategy game, or any game that's meant to be competitive, we have to do the thing that everyone can enjoy but a few people can master.

Do you think those heights are possible in mobile? Given your long tenure at storied traditional studios, I'm curious what your experience has been with mobile development reaching for those heights.

It is an exercise in frustration on a daily basis. I am a relatively hardcore gamer and can't count how many other similar people that come out of AAA traditional games have on died on the hill

of free-to-play. The problem is pretty simple: for the most part you can't make money charging full price for a game on mobile. People simply do not download games that cost money in volume. There are a few exceptions but this is mostly true. So your games have to be free-to-play. And once your game is free-to-play the rules change entirely and you're no longer worried about skill differentiation and mastering the game: you now have to find a way to ask people to spend money.

The thing that gives me hope is that *League of Legends. League of Legends* has figured out how to make a free to play game that is competitive. But it has a 45 minute session length on a PC, so you have to remember the player is sitting in front of a computer with a really nice monitor, that they've spent lots of money on. Your buy-in for *LoL* is a $1000 at least, and you are dedicated a big chunk of time where you're focusing on this game for 45 straight minutes. The fact that as many people play that as they have is mind-boggling. It's so great! But on people's phones the session length is typically 5 minutes or less. The player needs to be able to do something in 30 seconds, or two minutes, then put it away. So how much depth can you put in to a game that has half of your attention for 4 minutes? Do you think Michael Jordan is going to really be able to knock your socks off if a basketball game has a 3 minute session length? Not necessarily—you have to get in the flow. You have to get engrossed and immersed and involved.

Our key is to figure out how to give you strategic depth and a sense of mastery over a long period of time with short sessions. And that is an ongoing effort.

My final questions I have relates to what you've worked on since your early days designing *Command and Conquer* and as a caster for CNCTV: What do you think you learned from those experiences that you've brought to the projects you've done since then?
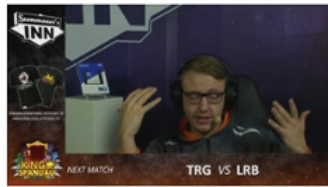
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the greatest challenger tiered player to e...
32,313 viewers on imaqtpie

DominGo BO 1/1
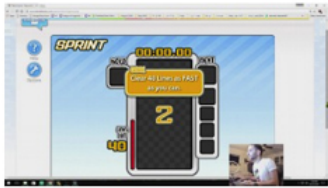11,142 viewers on DominGo

YoDa - VOLTEI PRO TRABSON SÓ PAR...
8,863 viewers on YoDa

King of Spandau #15 - Spaundauer Infe...
6,603 viewers on SummonersInnLive

Doublelift - challenger jacket hunt // duo...
6,288 viewers on TSM_Doublelift

Reckful - promos to gold - started from ...
6,181 viewers on Reckful

División de Honor - Jornada 11 - ¡Envía...
5,485 viewers on LVPes

Challenger için son 100 puan
5,258 viewers on Elwind

Kurteczko, jesteś moja! (30 sec delay)
5,187 viewers on Arquel

【鳳梨】台服９４８７９４狂死歌本人 ...
3,574 viewers on 鳳梨妹 (vickypan)

Herdyn - Pokus o Tryhard West | Od 23:...
3,336 viewers on Herdyn

GeForce CUP - Grupa B - Komentarz: D...
3,145 viewers on NVIDIA_PL

GROUPE B - QUALIFIER WILDCARD G...
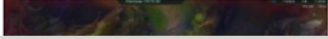2,750 viewers on eclypsiatvlol

TSM Gosu - Tryhard Solo Queue
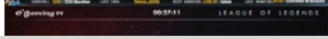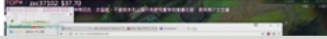2,744 viewers on MushIsGosu

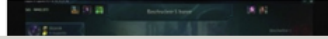[Mid][Ger] - Diamond 1 Promo - BibleTh...
2,509 viewers on NoWay4u_Sir

IT'S CAJU, B*TCH ♥ RJ É ABSURDO ♥
2,121 viewers on Caju_sz

↘ ZOOM

After all that we did *Command and Conquer 4* which was an attempt to do something more competitive. But by way of production of realities it ended up in a very strange place. It was supposed to be a free to play game, that was supposed to be an esports thing in the League of Legends vein. But then we ended up having to put it in a retail box with a story because things went crazy.

After that I went on to *Diablo 3*, which was really gratifying, because they have such a healthy community and the game was awesome. Since then I've went back to my RTS team to work on mobile games but in that same AAA vein where want to reach a bunch of people with top quality releases. I don't generally sit and watch streaming but what I learned from CNCTV was to get the

social aspect to be ingrained into how I think about approaching games. It really emphasized the value of the social elements, not just the competitive "good balance" parts. People want to be involved in their favorite thing.

One of the cool things about games is that there's so much depth. We can talk about strategy, we can talk about the best players, we can talk the next expansion pack—there are so many things we can talk about in the social sphere. There is so much content being generated because at any given time 1000 games of *LoL* can be going simultaneously and all of them could be cast by a different caster. There is so much rich society there, so much depth that the social side of games is a living thing now. It feels like an ecosystem. Coming out of the 90s gaming scene it felt like you put the DVD in, you install the game, you play it for 20 hours, and then you're done. That's not where were live now. That's a very very satisfying world.

(This interview was edited for clarity and length.)

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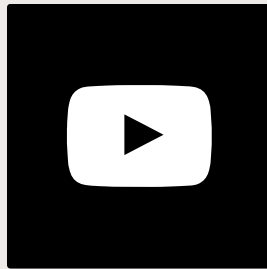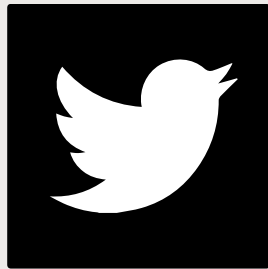

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