ARGFest-o-Con 2008
Boston, MA

Keynote Address By Dave Szulborski

The Story Inside: Making ARGs for Fun and Profit

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Jonathan Waite: All right. So we've come to that point in the conference for our keynote speech and I have nothing prepared but I can speak from the heart and hopefully I don't cry. Dave Szulborski is one of the greatest people I know. And not because--

[Audience Cheers]

JW: And not because he's a genius or an evil puzzle guy that I aspire to be but it was because last year in San Francisco after maybe not being so nice about Dave and his craft, he was able to accept my apology. Which I -- I don't like to apologize too much but that was really important to me. And Dave has had a bit of a ride in the last few months but we're very happy to have him here today. So without any further ado, Mr. Dave Szulborski.

[Applause and Cheers]

Dave Szulborski: Hello. As he just said, my name's Dave Szulborski. For those of you that don't know, I've been working in the ARG field for about seven years now, since 2001 when I was a beta-tester on Majestic and I'm one of those people that's gone from being a player to being a puppetmaster and doing it for a living, and I've done it for the last two years and made a pretty good living doing it - to answer Elan's question, how much money you're making, I'll talk to you about that later. But I've made more doing "Being a Puppetmaster" than I've done at anything else in my life, so it's been very successful for me.

And in answer to another question before I get going here, it is obviously possible to go from a puppetmaster - from a player to a puppetmaster but no, you cannot go back. You just can never go back. You know, the joy that any of you have felt in playing a game, the joy in creating a game is a thousand times better, it really is. And that may seem hard to believe if you've never done it but it's really true.

I'd like to start out by thanking the ARGFest committee for putting these together. I mean, this is a big task and I don't know how many people--

[Applause]

DS: I don't know how many people have ever tried to put on an event like this, there's just so many details and it's so hard to do, and especially on a volunteer basis. You know, their dedication is really inspiring so just if you get a chance, give one of them a hug or something [Audience Laughter] because they've always done a great job and these ARGFests just keep getting better and better.

I'd also like to thank 42 Entertainment for being the sponsor. I know that's a big part of it--

[Applause]

DS: And, you know, for somebody who does this as a living - and anybody who does this as a living, you know it's pretty easy to admit that they're what we aspire to be. You know, that the jobs that they get to work on and the resources they get to play with are just the envy of anybody in this genre. So it's really great to see them giving back to the genre by sponsoring this ARGFest.

And I have to apologize, if you see me up here itching, I'm going through chemotherapy right now and I've got some rash on me that's really annoying. So I'm trying not to itch myself but sometimes I just can't help it.

I'm going to start off with a little confession or an admission, I guess. And to some people it won't be a surprise, for other people it is a surprise because it's - it kind of goes against how I've promoted myself for years. And that's the admission that I'm not a game maker. I don't think that I make games. I don't think that that's what I do, you know? And I've often in the last four years since I've gotten an opportunity to speak about these types of things that we create, I've often denied that they're even games. I don't think of them as games.

I approach what I do as a storyteller. I see this as a form of interactive storytelling. And I've always been a storyteller like most of the people that you hear who have gone from being a puppetmaster - from a player to a puppetmaster - talk about how they've always been a story writer or have always been a storyteller, and that's how I was.

I've always been a storyteller but there's something really special and unique about the storytelling that goes on in ARGs. And a lot of that has to do with what I call the interactive authoring process, which - there's no other art form that has that to this degree. We can actually create a work and get feedback on your work as you're creating it, and tailor your responses in the story you're telling to the audience and what they like best about it.

That sometimes, that interactive authoring process, can be a real bitch. As some other people have said, when you've poured your heart and soul into a game and you sit down and read somebody saying, "Ah this game really sucks!" That's when you have those moments when you sit there and say, "Why am I doing this?" Especially as a grassroots puppetmaster, I spend a lot of my time making grassroots, self-funded, independent games. And, like somebody else had said before, they really become - when you work on a game like that, they really become absorbing. They become your whole life.

I often joke about when I create an alternate reality game - if it's a six-month game, what I do is I spend six months in that alternate reality. I abandon this world and I go into that alternate reality for six months, and that's my life. And like I said, especially on independent games where you really pour your heart and your soul, and you maybe don't have as many resources so you stay up 'til two in the morning, answering all the emails and personalizing the responses.

So when you do something like that and you get some criticism over things - at times, you feel the criticism is unfair - at other times it helps you see what you're doing wrong, and it helps to guide you in what you're doing. But it can be a real bitch at times, this interactive authoring, in ARGs.

So that's really what I'm going to talk about today, is about storytelling in ARGs and the story that I feel that my life helps illustrate in how I've progressed from being a player to being a puppetmaster because that's what I think is important, more so than the gaming elements. I mean the gaming elements are the elements that get put in, from my point of view, to make the story interactive.

Like I said, I say that as an admission or a confession because there's been times in the past when people have said that - that's been one of the criticisms of my work, is that there's not enough gaming elements, it doesn't feel like a game. And I'll just let you know, that's by design. That's the way I want it to be. And I think there's people who enjoy the storytelling aspects and there's people who approach this as game makers. And just to clarify, I'm a storyteller, I'm not a game maker. The gaming elements are something - the being a game maker is something I've had to learn to do to take in this field and be part of this field.

One of my favorite quotes is by Ursula K. LeGuin, a science fiction storyteller, and she said that, "There have been great societies that didn't have the use of the wheel but there've never been societies that didn't have stories." And I think that goes to show how important stories are to us as people. I would stretch that and expand it to say that I don't believe there's ever been a really successful ARG that didn't have a great story at the heart of it.

And what do I mean by successful? You could come up with so many definitions of a successful ARG. That's one of the things that was touched on earlier about having metrics for ARGs. The way ARGs now and the way we measure consumer response or player response to the games is really in such an infancy that you can't put a number on it. I mean you can give me a set of numbers and I can make it show that there were three million people playing my game or there was six hundred people playing my game. And that's a dance that we all do in the commercial world in reporting numbers and successes.

But it just - the storytelling aspect is what's key to the successful ARG. What I consider a successful ARG is an ARG that lives on past its ephemeral nature. And not all of them do that. You look at a story like The Beast, that was done in 2001, and you look at how many times it's still mentioned today and how many times people talk about specific aspects of the story - that's a successful ARG. Whether it helped to sell movie tickets, who knows? There's a lot of study of that that said that it wasn't really successful marketing but it was successful as a project and that lives on, the story that it told persists and lives on past the end of the ephemeral product that happened six years ago, six - seven years ago.

That's one of the measures that I think of, how I measure a successful ARG - is how successfully it told it's story and how successfully it engaged its players - how successfully it entertained its players. It's a lot of fun when one of your games - it happened in Chasing the Wish, a game I created back in 2008 - when the game ended for a period of about a month, I still had players emailing the characters. Even though they knew the game was over with, the players had become - the characters had become such an integral part of their life, they'd become like friends so they continued to email those people. And I teased them a little once in a while and emailed them back just to keep them going.

But it was really interesting to see that level of engagement with the characters. That all has to do with good storytelling. Good storytelling requires good characters. That's one of the areas that's hard to do in any type of writing, is characters - to come up with realistic characters, realistic dialogue. And especially in ARGs because when you think about dialogue in a novel or dialogue in a movie, it's very constrained to certain formats that it's not always natural. A lot of times if you listen to how people speak in movies, it's not the way your next door neighbor speaks to you when you're sitting down. It's not the way the person in the chair next to you speaks to you.

And ARGs because of the real-time nature, and the instant-messaging, the emails back and forth, phone conversations, it magnifies that, it becomes even more difficult to make your characters become real and engaging people.

I got involved, like I said, in ARGs back in 2001 as a beta-tester on Majestic, I think it was the Spring of 2001. Very early on, I was fascinated and almost obsessed with this genre and the thoughts that you could actually interactively tell a story like this. When Majestic failed in a lot of ways, I mean they lost a lot of money, they cut down their seasons a whole bunch - but let's face it, if you played Majestic, when Majestic worked, when you had those moments when you got your first phone call, your first interactive chat things, it was golden, I mean it was beautiful. There were times when the system would turn off and it would go into standby or whatever and I would sit there and scream at my computer. It's like, "No! I need MORE of this! You can't turn off now!"

It was those moments when I started to realize the possibilities of this form of storytelling. It was at that time that I decided that this was what I wanted to do. I actually at that point, I never dreamed that I would make a living at it. I didn't think it was something that anybody got paid to do except the people at Electronic Arts, 'cause that's the only one that I knew of at the time, I hadn't really been involved in these. So I didn't really have any ambitions or any misconceptions about going into this and doing this full-time but I knew it was something I wanted to do. I knew that there was something special and something magic about the way you can tell a story through the internet with real-time communication methods and without any of those trappings that normally can connotate a fictional reality or a game.

Speaking of Majestic, that's obviously one of the failures of Majestic, at least from my standpoint, was that the game mechanics - the client utility you had to download and it only turned on for a half an hour a day and then went back into standby - those overpowered the storytelling. That's what made it, I think, one of the things that made it an unsuccessful project, was how the game overpowered the story even though they had a great story to tell. They had great characters, it was a really engaging project, but it was the overtness of the game mechanics that made it a losing proposition.

So like I said, it was back in the days of Majestic that I first decided I wanted to do this, that I wanted to create these type of games. Actually I created my first two games while Majestic was still running and I set them in the Majestic universe. Today - I didn't know at the time, I didn't know any better at the time - but today what I did would be considered "game-jacking," basically. [Audience Laughter] I made up parts of the - I took little obscure parts of the Majestic world and I created websites for them and characters and I thought it was really cool.

As it turned out, one of the great things about Electronic Arts was, instead of reacting negatively to what myself and a couple of other people were doing - because I wasn't by myself in this, there was other people creating fan fiction sites and things like that - is that the people from Electronic Arts embraced it and nurtured it. You don't - and they did that in a couple of different ways, they first of all when they saw all these people having all of these creative outlets and involved in their product, which was great - that's what you want to do, you want to inspire people to be creative and to be engaged - one of the first things they did was to create a story contest, where each week they gave away a different piece of Majestic swag for the best story that was set in the Majestic "conspiracy" frame of mind. So they were trying to channel that community which they didn't know quite what to do with yet, they were trying to channel that creativity. I actually won one of those Majestic story contests, which gave me even more encouragement that this was what I wanted to do because whenever you get positive feedback, it's like, "Yeah! They like me! So I can do this!"

So I created my first game and actually, because I created that first game, that was one of the things that spurred Electronic Arts to create what they called the Bios Project where they actually encouraged a dozen or so players to create their own pieces of fiction within the Majestic universe and they embraced it as part of the storyline. They put elements of it in their newsletters, on their websites, and they really made it very accessible for the player to become involved in creating the fiction of the game Majestic,

which was really beautiful. I mean, it was - it's what got me started doing this but it also, it just - it kind of led the way for how I've approached ARGs and how I think that they should be almost like an open-source thing.

Even though, in the commercial sense, I need to compete against people like 42 Entertainment when I go in and give pitches to different clients or other people who are branched out and doing ARGs now, in another real sense in the ARG world that just doesn't feel right to me, it feels like we should be collaborating on everything. And it's like, "Well, I know somebody at GMD who could do this really well and somebody at 42 who could do that really well..." so there's just something about the collaborative nature of ARGs that makes me approach even the commercial end of it from that aspect.

So yeah, I created my first game, it really nowadays would be called a game-jacking because I took part of somebody else's creation and I made it into my own little storyline and I got a really great response for it, so I was encouraged to keep going. And after they shut down Majestic, I actually made another game that was kind of based on the same characters I had created but it wasn't any longer set in the Majestic universe, and that was the one called Change Agents: Out of Control.

That was a game that I created entirely by myself. I made eighteen different websites, I had daily interactions with the players, and it consumed my whole life. Like Andrea [Phillips] said, it takes up everything you do and I'd stay up 'til four in the morning sending emails and stuff like that. And there were many times during the course of that where I would - where something would go wrong, like I would spend a week creating a puzzle and I'd put it out there and all of a sudden, ten minutes after I put it out there, I'd notice an error in it, there was a problem in the coding or something.

So I'd go online quickly and I'd say, "Oh, they're already talking about it." Those are the moments when I would sit there and ask myself, "Why am I doing this?" again. "Why am I doing this?" The only answer I could ever come up with, when I would ask myself stuff like that is, "Because there's a story to be told." That's the way I really feel about making ARGs. Even though I've spent the last two - over two years - working professionally in the genre, and working as everything from a puzzle designer, to a consultant on pulling entire campaigns, production, everything like that - I've always still remained dedicated to creating independent games because that's where my love is. That's what I love to do, and I love to be able to tell a story without the constraints of the commercial client telling me, "Oh, well our legal department doesn't like that," or, "We don't really think we should do that."

A lot of times I find, working for commercial clients, are restrained but what I try to do - and this goes back to something I said on an earlier panel, when I was asked a question - is I always try to find a way to invest, to get invested in the story that I've created for them, or the story that they've created and that I'm playing a part in. My first commercial job was on Audi's "Art of the Heist," where I was brought in as the puzzle designer and also got to go to a couple live events and participate in the live events.

I think what I did in that game or the way I tried to approach that game was - one of the big discussions at that time in the ARG community and even to this day, is the role of puzzles in ARGs. When I heard someone else talking about making difficult puzzles, and how do you guage how soon they're going to be solved and stuff like that, and then somebody else in the back yelled, "Don't have puzzles!" I think that reaction comes from when puzzles are thrown on as game elements and as time-delaying elements because that's what happens a lot. We decide we have so much content and we've burned through a lot of it, and we've got six weeks to go and we've only got two weeks of content, let's give them a really hard puzzle! That'll slow 'em down for awhile.

I've never tried to approach puzzle-making from that sense. In my mind, puzzles need to be story elements - the puzzles are grounded in the story, the puzzles make sense in

the story, and the puzzles are integral in delivering key pieces of the story. I think when you approach it from that and you're successful in creating puzzles like that, they don't become obvious game mechanics like the stuff in Majestic and they don't become distractions to the storytelling.

I think I was successful in doing that in Art of the Heist, I think the puzzles were really key elements of telling the story and they made sense why they were there. I'm proud of that, I'm proud of the storytelling aspects. I haven't always been successful in that. There have been other times when I've been asked to create puzzles for other campaigns where the puzzles just didn't feel right but they insisted that they needed puzzles because, "Well, Vanishing Point had puzzles and we want to make another Vanishing Point!" or whatever.

So there's times when you - but still, if you always approach it from, "How does this tell a story, why is this puzzle here?" - the puzzles should be telling a story, it shouldn't just be serving a purpose of delaying people for two days because your content is not ready. Sometimes that does happen where you have to use puzzles like that, especially on commercial campaigns, it always seems like you never have enough production time in commercial campaigns.

I recently was involved in the Holomove campaign - I didn't get a chance to finish that up because of my illness that came up - but it's funny, in the very beginning one of the things when we were talking two years ago, we were always saying, "We're gonna have six months dedicated time and we're gonna have everything done before we start!" [Audience Laughter] I think I used to say, "Well, that's a fine theory. We'll see if that works." [Audience Laughter] And of course it didn't work and that seems to be the way it is in every commercial campaign.

But that's okay. That's really all part of the interactive authoring process of ARGs and that's what I find so unique and special. That's what makes investing every moment of my life for six months into creating a game for sometimes at no financial reward, that's what makes it worthwhile to me. To have that interaction with the players, to see them enjoying the stuff I've created, to see them taking it in new directions, to see them being inspired to create their own content, to create their own games. That's the most beautiful thing in the world.

It always - even in the commercial jobs or the grassroots independent games - it always comes back to the story for me. I've heard other ARG designers say the same thing, that it almost feels like ... normally when I have an idea for a grassroots or an independent game, a story of my own that I want to tell, I'll get the idea and I'll start thinking about how I'm going to tell that in this interactive media. Because writing an ARG is a lot different than writing a book or writing a movie screenplay, because you not only have to think about the story you're telling, you have to think about all the interactive parts. You're not just writing, thinking about past tense or future tense, or which shot you're framing, you're thinking about whether this is a video clip, or whether this is an audio clip, or is this told through a website, or is this told through an email.

Writing an ARG and getting it to that level, where it's scripted out for everything you wanted to happen, is a really different process than any other type of writing process. Normally, when I come up with a story idea, it's like there's a story in me that's burning to be told.

I think Maya Angelou, she phrased it in a way that really had some meaning to me, "There's no agony like bearing an untold story inside." That's how I feel sometimes. When I created Chasing the Wish, my first really big, independent game, I was going through some very tough times in my life at that time. I had a lot of family health problems, there was a lot of other things going on in my life, and the amount of dedication and time it was going to take to create the type of game I wanted to create

for Chasing the Wish, just seemed to be an impossible task. It didn't seem like there was enough hours in the day to create the stuff I wanted, didn't seem like there was enough resources that I had. But like I said, when we'd all come back to it ... when I'd sit down in and lay in my bed at night, I couldn't help myself thinking about this story I wanted to tell, and how cool it would be if I used a video for this part and how great it would be if I could get the players to go out and actually look for these items that I've hidden around the country. And that's what I kept coming back to, that there was a story to be told and I needed to tell that story.

And just one aside, while I'm talking about Chasing the Wish - and it's something I've meant to do for the ARG community for quite a while - and that's quite often I speak of Chasing the Wish and I speak of other games that I've authored or helped create as if they're my games and that's really not true. In cases like Chasing the Wish, I had a great team of behind-the-scenes people, other artists who helped me create websites and stuff like that. They were working from my direction in a lot of cases, in a lot of cases they came up with their own stuff, but I had a lot of help from behind the scenes but really when you come down to it, it's the players' games. The players are the people who own the game once it starts to take place. They're the ones who own the story, who drive it forward, who react to it and in their emails back to you, tell you what's great, what's not so great.

In the end, quite often - I think too often - I take the claim and say it's Dave Szulborski's Chasing the Wish and I think that's wrong. I mean part of that has to do with the shameless self-promotion of selling yourself to ARG clients. I've done that fairly well over the last few years, probably too well at times, but it's something you have to do to get your name out there. And like I said, once you start doing this and especially getting paid to do this, it's something you never want to stop doing. I don't mind promoting myself a little bit if it's going to get me my next job.

[Audience Laughter]

Audience: Networking!

DS: Networking, that's it. Networked awareness. So one of the key things about - and this ties into what I just said about being the players' games - one of the great things about this community and working in this genre is how it gives back to you. Sometimes those rewards are in the post-game chat, when everybody sits there and says, "Oh, you guys were so great! We really loved this and you're so wonderful!" Those are actually a lot less meaningful to me than the conversations I have with people or when I hear somebody talk about how they played Chasing the Wish and they were inspired to make games themselves or they cried at the end of it. Those are the types of things that really touch me, when I know that the stories and the effort that I've put in have had some real meaningful effect on people.

That's all part of the interactive authoring process, that's what makes this genre so very special. You don't always get that type of feedback. And it's not just that, it's the way the community itself gives back, the way we see ARGFest committee volunteers volunteer their time to put something like this together, the way we see people volunteer to pick up somebody in Ohio on their way through so they could come to Boston and be at ARGFest. There's so many really cool and unique things about this ARG community that make it worthwhile, that make me want to put out my effort and my passions to entertain them at times.

I've had a real visible example of that in the last few months. As I said earlier, I actually was diagnosed with leukemia this year, in April of this year. And I had to stop working on a couple projects that I was working on - which was tough to do, I don't like to give up on things, you know - but I had to for health reasons and stuff like that. The original

prognosis was not very good, they actually told me that I probably wouldn't survive the treatment plan and this and that.

But one of the things that kept me going through that whole time was a community-sponsored effort by the community, the ARG community here, and headed up by Michelle Senderhauf who is back there, called Folding the Wish, which really meant a lot to me. And in many ways, it seemed like the process of how that unfolded was very much like an ARG in how the community came together and invested their creativity in making these origami cranes with all the wonderful messages and puzzles inside. And it really gave me a hope that I could get through this.

And there was a lot of really neat synchronicities along the way, there always are in ARGs. That's one other thing I always tell clients all the time when I work for them, "Be prepared for really weird coincidences to happen," because all these weird synchronicities happen, we'll dig up an obscure story element that nobody's ever heard of and in the next three weeks you'll see it posted on seven different spaces, you know it's just a weird coincidence. So I always try to prepare my clients for that.

The same thing happened with this origami project, Folding the Wish. I was actually working - one of the projects I was working on at the time, that I had to drop out of - was codenamed Origami. [Audience Laughter] This was like a really weird ... and the people I had been working on with that had been sending me pieces of origami, like these folded dragons and stuff for a couple months before that. And just the timing of it - for those who don't know, the Folding the Wish thing was based on a Chinese legend where if you get a thousand paper cranes, folded origami cranes, you get to make one wish, which is what Chasing the Wish was about, and several of my other games involved making wishes, etcetera.

So the box of cranes actually came the day before I got out of the hospital. I was in the hospital five weeks but all along I was watching this project unfold online and it was really inspiring to know that people cared about me, that didn't even know me. I mean some of them, some of the people that made cranes were people that had played my games or bought my book or whatever, a lot of them were people that had never heard of me, people that had just come in with Cloverfield were sending things. That really gave me the motivation to go on and get better.

That's one of the things they say about cancers, any type of cancer, leukemia, and other things, is your attitude really has a lot to do with how you progress. I really feel that the way the community gave back to me with that project called Folding the Wish, really helped me in my recovery against this leukemia. I'm officially in remission, I'm going through chemotherapy--

[Audience Applause]

DS: In fact to get here last night, I actually drove up from my home in Pennsylvania with a chemotherapy bag hanging from my arm and a pump going in my car. So, why would I do that? Am I crazy? Um, yeah in one sense I'm crazy-- [Audience Laughter] -- I'm crazy about ARGs and the people I've met through creating ARGs. All I can tell you as far as what I'm doing, I've got a couple good irons in the fire, I've got a couple exciting things coming up, and there's still some story to be told. Thank you.

[Audience Ovation]