



What the hell was CNCTV?

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by [Eron Rauch](#)

Do you remember *Command & Conquer Television*?



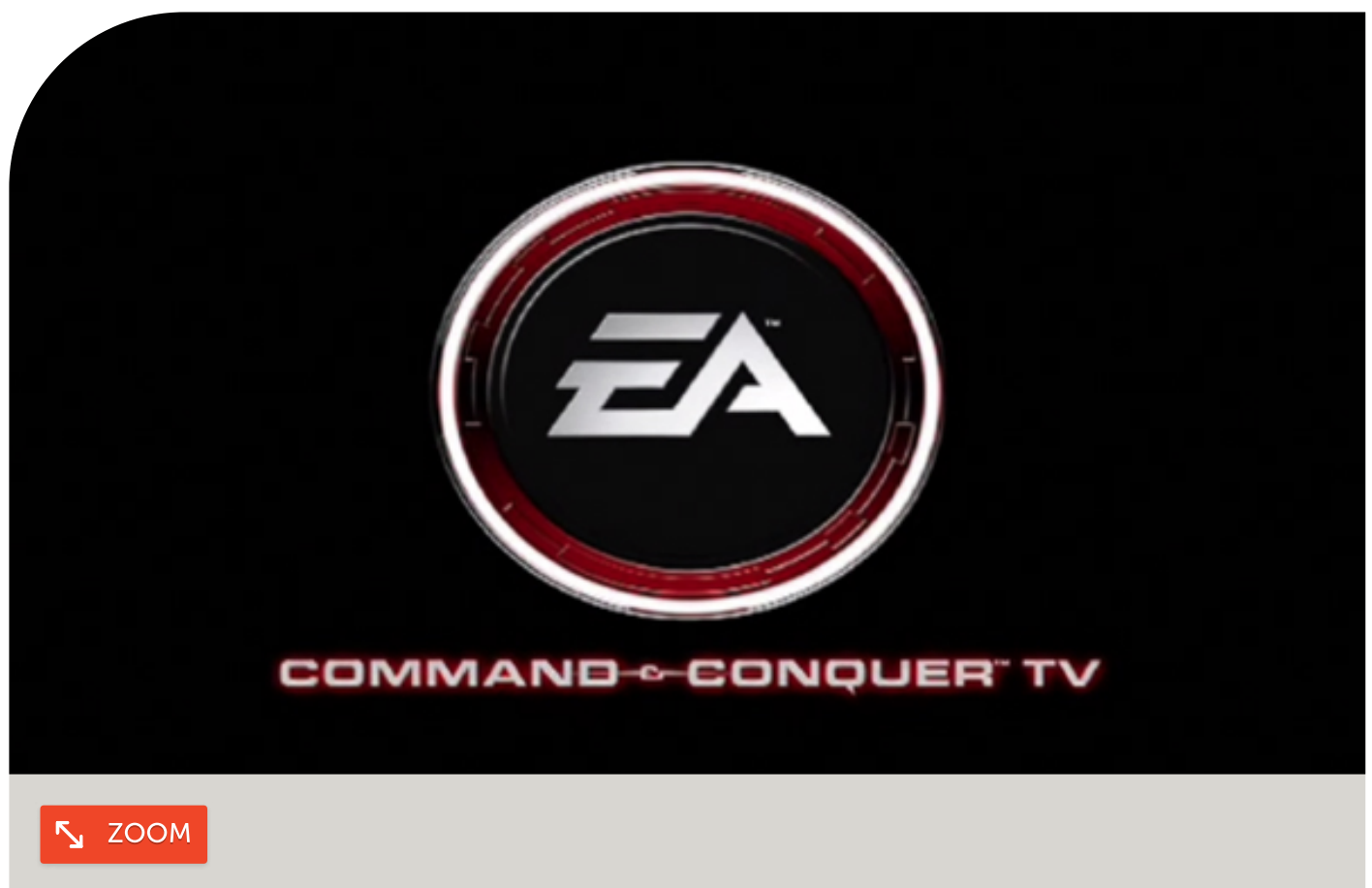
Jason Bender is a video game industry veteran who is perhaps best known as the lead designer for the incredibly popular console version of Diablo 3. The two of us often get drinks and raconteur about video games and art. One night, as a casual aside, he dropped that he been on-air caster for an esports broadcast for Electronic Art's Command and Conquer franchise, where he had also been a lead designer. The more Jason told me about the broadcast, called CNCTV, the more it seemed to prefigure so many of the successes and challenges of the esports and streaming explosion we see now with League of Legends, DoTA2, Twitch, and YouTube. We sat down a few weeks later to formally explore this curious lost tangle that involves Dustin Browder, ESPN, the Starship Enterprise, and a whole host of other lost threads from the mists of video game history.

E: My first question is fairly simple; what exactly is CNCTV?

J: CNCTV stands for Command and Conquer Television, which also went by the name BattleCast Prime Time. It was *Command and Conquer* (CNC) development team's attempt to reach into the early video game social media space. *Defense of the Ancients* had just kind of blown up and the marketing department was really enthusiastic about where that stuff was heading and they wanted to get ahead of it.

E: What platform was this on? What year was this?

J: It aired on the EA (Electronic Arts) website under the *Command and Conquer* section. We worked on CNCTV while *Command and Conquer 3* was in development so it was ready to launch around the time when the game came out, so 2007. It is worth mentioning that it was the brainchild of our marketing director, David Silverman. At the time this project was simultaneously insane and visionary, as most visionary things are. We all thought he was a bit daft.



E: Why was it considered "daft," or perhaps we could use the word "ambitious"?

J: It considered ambitious because at the EA Los Angeles studio we took one of our focus test rooms and gutted it and we built an entire soundstage with professional lighting! The studio was

established by Richard Taylor, who did the Budweiser frogs and designed the *Wrath of Khan* version of the Enterprise. I mean this guy is a legend! So he directed the building of the studio and we had this giant news stage, it had all these cameras. The whole thing was a massive production and it cost a lot of money, so it was a big bet to put on the table for something that wasn't at all proven.

E: Can you just describe one of the broadcasts for an audience that might not be familiar with the game nor esports?

J: *Command and Conquer* was a strategy game where you build an army of tanks and infantry and fight other players. CNCTV was a news format show, like you would see on ESPN. We based it very much on ESPN and even had a big spinning *Command and Conquer TV* logo. We had two hosts who would talk about the game. Then we would have special guests, updates, and whatnot. We would then take 1 v 1 match and treat it like we were covering a tennis match. The two hosts would introduce the matches we were looking at then we would dive into the game. We'd call play-by-play, "Oh! It looks like this player is going to build rocket troopers, and that suggests he's going to go for this tactic. The player on the other side is going to go all jeeps. Let's see what happens!" Then Aaron Kaufman would give the patch news.

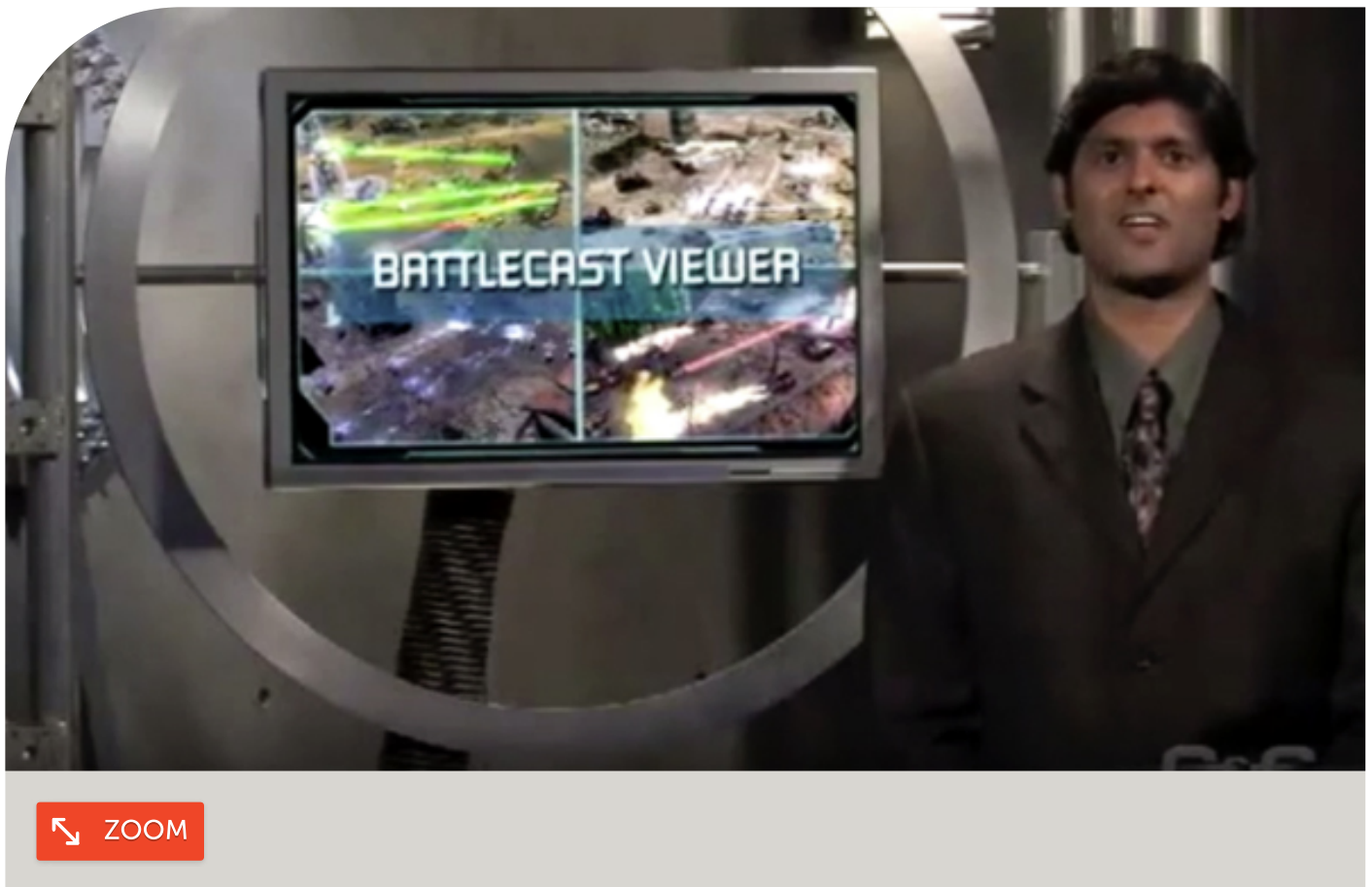


E: Were these real-time or were these based on replays?

J: These were based on replays so we could review the replays ahead of time. You see, we were amateurs at this. This was before you had a lot of professional casting personalities. But we were amateurs because we were the game's designers. We weren't great TV personalities but we knew how the game worked. We were really unpolished. Sometimes I would be a host but usually it would be Raj Joshi, and David Silverman, because they were much more charismatic. Greg Black, one of our game systems designers, did pretty well. I was mostly to awestruck by what was going on. Thank God he was there.

E: Everyone involved in this sounds like they were also working another full time at EA on the *Command and Conquer* project. Were the on-air personalities all selected from in-house staff?

J: They were. So Dave was the host, and was a very fun and over-the-top charismatic dude. Raj Joshi was a producer on the dev team and was selected for his humor. Really funny guy and really really friendly. Aaron was the team's community manager; that's why he was our "on the beat" reporter.



E: Did you ever try to hire formal on air talent for this, or was it always supposed to be people from the development team?

J: We did! We did have a few professional, polished, on air talent at first, but I can't remember who they all were. They kind of worked out fine, but it just turned out they weren't so much

better than Raj that they were bring a huge amount of additional value. We thought we could have this home-grown thing from people on the dev team, and we thought the players would appreciate that. Look at it this way: Dustin Browder basically built the *Command and Conquer* team. Fans probably know him since in as the source of the saying, "Terrible terrible damage." On air he's so good, charismatic, and passionate. He's part of the tradition of devs doing game casting. There just aren't that many devs who can call those casts as well as Dustin. Prior to that he did *Red Alert 2*, *Generals*, *Battle for Middle Earth*, and then he was working on our RTS when he switched to *StarCraft 2*. Now he of course is the VP of game design at Blizzard. He was also the *StarCraft 2* game director. He still casts games!

E: So the game isn't even out and you're already starting to develop this notion of a TV channel online that covers competitive matches hosted by the developers. Since you're working crazy hours being a dev for this game, how did you find time to juggle production of the show?

J: We essentially isolated some of our time to running the show as a side gig. Marketing did a vast majority of the work. They had a small staff with a director. We had one of our game producers, Matt Ott (who is really great producer I work with today), and his junior job was to wrangle the crap that has to happen for the show to work. So we had a staff that was on there full time doing the editing, setting everything up. Then they would call us down as, and I use this terms loosely, "the talent." We'd come down, put on a tie [laughs] and then get up in front of the camera. They had everything sorted out for us. The staff on the show was really dedicated so they minimized the impact on the development team so we could make the game.

E: Did the designers and the rest of the team, or even the rest of the company, think this was a genius idea? This was way before the American esports market was much of anything!

J: Oh my god, it was deeply contentious! Now granted, it was isolated. Marketing runs their own show, right? They're not beholden to the dev team, especially at EA where marketing had quite a bit of support. So they had a budget, they had an idea, and that was that. They ran with it and we thought it sounded fun. But it did sound kind of crazy. But crazy can make a big difference when it is done at the right time. Some people thought it was just a bad idea and other people thought it was visionary. In the end it was little of both. We had 300,000 monthly views, I think. Which wasn't too shabby for a niche genre PC game. Those games would tend to sell in the three to four million range, so 300,000 views a month is significant.

E: Did this come out of any pre-existing information about esports? Were people at CNCTV watching what Blizzard was doing with *StarCraft* in Korea?

J: Oh yeah!

E: This seems like such a long way back before even Riot, the current experts in esports, had figured out how to do all of the broadcasting in-house.

J: EA was seeking the same goal that Riot was seeking. This was when *Defense of the Ancients* had exploded, and people loved it. We knew *StarCraft* had been successful for years, dominating on Korean TV. There had been all this talk about Twitch and things like this coming up in the future. Those things were starting to happen and they were really exciting. People at EA who were paying close attention thought, "Jeez, we can get in on this." It was tough though for a game team to roll it's own show. That wasn't something that anyone else was doing. But it was in the spirit of where Twitch is now. It was the exact same origin.

E: What do you think was the ultimate ideal was that EA was trying to accomplish with CNCTV? Was it just marketing or was it something more?



J: Dave's aspirations were something much more than getting people to see a commercial. He had a creative passion for the project which was pretty impressive. Dave wanted to create what Twitch is. But it's hard to do that from the position of a major corporation just doing one channel about a single game. It's just tough when you don't have quite enough content to keep audiences busy. YouTube and Twitch have numerous casters creating content 24/7. But when you only have an hour of the dev's time every two weeks to create content, what do you fill that

downtime with? Why would I as a viewer come back to the channel every day? It was a problem of throughput of content. But if Dave had been able to get the snowball big enough I mean, you would probably still see them doing this today.

E: How long did it last. How long were you doing regular episodes?

J: It feels like two years but I really don't remember. It was a long time. Over time the set changed and so did the staff. It evolved while we were doing it significantly and the production staff got pretty damn good at making that show.

E: Were you personally known in the scene? Did you have groupies or fans in the community or at conventions?

J: So I was at a wedding once with Shing, my wife, and we were sitting at a table and this lady next to us, a friend of Shing's, says, "Hey you look really familiar, where do I know you from?" We went back and forth. "Did I see you at this convention? Did I see you at Renaissance Faire? Are you in SCA? Did I see you at Comic Con?"

E: Because these would be the places where people might know you from...?

J: [Laughs.] All the geeky places where people who might know me would hang out. "Eventually she was like, "What's your name?" "Oh I'm Jason." "What's your last name?" "Bender." "You're Jason Bender from BattleCast Prime!" So I had one person recognize me. At a wedding.

E: To conclude, I wondered, do you have anything to say to any random CNCTV fan that might be reading this?

J: If I knew then what I know now, I would have had a lot more coffee before each show so that I could bring a lot more entertainment and silliness to the BattleCast. The people were watching deserved it I would've been a lot more fun. But it's great that people watched it and I think all of us RTS fans are really anxious to see another really great traditional RTS come out. Know that the developers of those old-school RTS's are just as anxious to see them shipped as you are.

(This interview was edited for clarity and length.)



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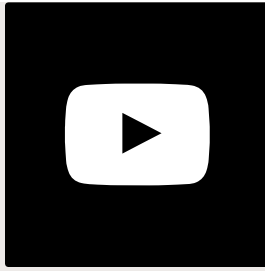
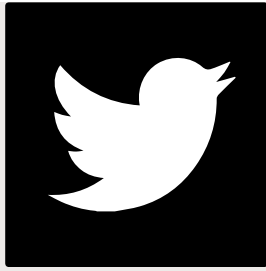
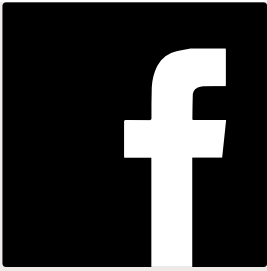
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