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Game conference speech: "The Wonderful Power of Storytelling"
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Thank you very much for that introduction. I'd like to thank the
conference committee for their hospitality and kindness -- all
the cola you can drink -- and mind you those were genuine
twinkies too, none of those newfangled "Twinkies Lite" we've
been seeing too much of lately.

So anyway my name is Bruce Sterling and I'm a science fiction
writer from Austin Texas, and I'm here to deliver my speech now,
which I like to call "The Wonderful Power of Storytelling." I
like to call it that, because I plan to make brutal fun of that
whole idea... In fact I plan to flame on just any moment now, I
plan to cut loose, I plan to wound and scald tonight.... Because
why not, right? I mean, we're all adults, we're all
professionals here... I mean, professionals in totally different
arts, but you know, I can sense a certain simpatico vibe....

Actually I feel kind of like a mosasaur talking to dolphins
here.... We have a lot in common, we both swim, we both have big
sharp teeth, we both eat fish... But you look like a broadminded
crowd, so I'm sure you won't mind that I'm basically, like,
reptilian....

So anyway, you're probably wondering why I'm here tonight, some
hopeless dipshit literary author... and when am I going to get
started on the virtues and merits of the prose medium and its
goddamned wonderful storytelling. I mean, what else can I talk
about? What the hell do I know about game design? I don't even

know that the most lucrative target machine today is an IBM PC
clone with a 16 bit 8088 running at 5 MHZ. If you start talking
about depth of play versus presentation, I'm just gonna to stare
at you with blank incomprehension....

I'll tell you straight out why I'm here tonight. Why should I
even try to hide the sordid truth from a crowd this
perspicacious.... You see, six months ago I was in Austria at
this Electronic Arts Festival, which was a situation almost as
unlikely as this one, and my wife Nancy and I are sitting there
with William Gibson and Deb Gibson feeling very cool and rather
jetlagged and crispy around the edges, and in walks this
woman. Out of nowhere. Like J. Random Attractive Redhead,
right. And she sits down with her coffeecup right at our table.
And we peer at each other's namebadges, right, like, *who is
this person.* And her name is Brenda Laurel.

So what do I say? I say to this total stranger, I say. "Hey. Are
you the Brenda Laurel who did that book on *the art of the
computer-human interface*? You *are*? Wow, I loved that book."
And yes -- that's why I'm here as your guest speaker tonight,
ladies and gentleman. It's because I can think fast on my feet.
It's because I'm the kind of author who likes to hang out in
Adolf Hitler's home town with the High Priestess of Weird.

So ladies and gentlemen unfortunately I can't successfully
pretend that I know much about your profession. I mean actually
I do know a *few* things about your profession.... For instance,
I was on the far side of the Great Crash of 1984. I was one of
the civilian crashees, meaning that was about when I gave up
twitch games. That was when I gave up my Atari 800. As to why my
Atari 800 became a boat-anchor I'm still not sure.... It was
quite mysterious when it happened, it was inexplicable, kind of
like the passing of a pestilence or the waning of the moon. If I
understood this phenomenon I think I would really have my teeth
set into something profound and vitally interesting... Like, my
Atari still works today, I still own it. Why don't I get it out
of its box and fire up a few cartridges? Nothing physical
preventing me. Just some subtle but intense sense of revulsion.
Almost like a Sartrean nausea. Why this should be attached to a
piece of computer hardware is difficult to say.

My favorite games nowadays are Sim City, Sim Earth and Hidden

Agenda... I had Balance of the Planet on my hard disk, but I was
so stricken with guilt by the digitized photo of the author and
his spouse that I deleted the game, long before I could figure
out how to keep everybody on the Earth from starving....
Including myself and the author....

I'm especially fond of SimEarth. SimEarth is like a goldfish
bowl. I also have the actual goldfish bowl in the *After Dark*
Macintosh screen saver, but its charms waned for me, possibly
because the fish don't drive one another into extinction. I
theorize that this has something to do with a breakdown of the
old dichotomy of twitch games versus adventure, you know, arcade
zombie versus Mensa pinhead...

I can dimly see a kind of transcendance in electronic
entertainment coming with things like SimEarth, they seem like a
foreshadowing of what Alvin Toffler called the "intelligent
environment"... Not "games" in a classic sense, but things that
are just going on in the background somewhere, in an attractive
and elegant fashion, kind of like a pet cat... I think this kind
of digital toy might really go somewhere interesting.

What computer entertainment lacks most I think is a sense of
mystery. It's too left-brain.... I think there might be real
promise in game designs that offer less of a sense of nitpicking
mastery and control, and more of a sense of sleaziness and
bluesiness and smokiness. Not neat tinkertoy puzzles to be
decoded, not "treasure-hunts for assets," but creations with
some deeper sense of genuine artistic mystery.

I don't know if you've seen the work of a guy called William
Latham.... I got his work on a demo reel from Media Magic. I
never buy movies on video, but I really live for raw
computer-graphic demo reels. This William Latham is a heavy
dude... His tech isn't that impressive, he's got some kind of
fairly crude IBM mainframe cad-cam program in Winchester
England.... The thing that's most immediately striking about
Latham's computer artworks -- *ghost sculptures* he calls them
-- is that the guy really possesses a sense of taste. Fractal
art tends to be quite garish. Latham's stuff is very fractally
and organic, it's utterly weird, but at the same time it's very
accomplished and subtle. There's a quality of ecstasy and dread
to it... there's a sense of genuine enchantment there. A lot of

computer games are stuffed to the gunwales with enchanters and wizards and so-called magic, but that kind of sci-fi cod mysticism seems very dime-store stuff by comparison with Latham.

I like to imagine the future of computer games as being something like the Steve Jackson Games bust by the Secret Service, only in this case what they were busting wouldn't have been a mistake, it would have been something actually quite seriously inexplicable and possibly even a genuine cultural threat.... Something of the sort may come from virtual reality. I rather imagine something like an LSD backlash occuring there; something along the lines of: "Hey we have something here that can really seriously boost your imagination!" "Well, Mr Developer, I'm afraid we here in the Food Drug and Software Administration don't really approve of that." That could happen. I think there are some visionary computer police around who are seriously interested in that prospect, they see it as a very promising growing market for law enforcement, it's kind of their version of a golden vaporware.

I now want to talk some about the differences between your art and my art. My art, science fiction writing, is pretty new as literary arts go, but it labors under the curse of three thousand years of literacy. In some weird sense I'm in direct competition with Homer and Euripides. I mean, these guys aren't in the SFWA, but their product is still taking up valuable rack-space. You guys on the other hand get to reinvent everything every time a new platform takes over the field. This is your advantage and your glory. This is also your curse. It's a terrible kind of curse really.

This is a lesson about cultural expression nowadays that has applications to everybody. This is part of living in the Information Society. Here we are in the 90s, we have these tremendous information-handling, information-producing technologies. We think it's really great that we can have groovy unleashed access to all these different kinds of data, we can own books, we can own movies on tape, we can access databanks, we can buy computer-games, records, music, art.... A lot of our art aspires to the condition of software, our art today wants to be digital... But our riches of information are in some deep and perverse sense a terrible burden to us. They're like a cognitive load. As a digitized information-rich culture nowadays, we have

to artificially invent ways to forget stuff. I think this is the
real explanation for the triumph of compact disks.

Compact disks aren't really all that much better than vinyl
records. What they make up in fidelity they lose in groovy cover
art. What they gain in playability they lose in presentation.
The real advantage of CDs is that they allow you to forget all
your vinyl records. You think you love this record collection
that you've amassed over the years. But really the sheer choice,
the volume, the load of memory there is secretly weighing you
down. You're never going to play those Alice Cooper albums
again, but you can't just throw them away, because you're a
culture nut.

But if you buy a CD player you can bundle up all those records
and put them in attic boxes without so much guilt. You can
pretend that you've stepped up a level, that now you're even
more intensely into music than you ever were; but on a practical
level what you're really doing is weeding this junk out of your
life. By dumping the platform you dump everything attached to
the platform and my god what a blessed secret relief. What a
relief not to remember it, not to think about it, not to have it
take up disk-space in your head.

Computer games are especially vulnerable to this because they
live and breathe through the platform. But something rather
similar is happening today to fiction as well.... What you see
in science fiction nowadays is an amazing tonnage of product
that is shuffled through the racks faster and faster.... If a
science fiction paperback stays available for six weeks, it's a
miracle. Gross sales are up, but individual sales are off...
Science fiction didn't even used to be *published* in book form,
when a science fiction *book* came out it would be in an edition
of maybe five hundred copies and these weirdo Golden Age SF fans
would cling on to every copy as if it were made of platinum....
But now they come out and they are made to vanish as soon as
possible. In fact to a great extent they're designed by their
lame hack authors to vanish as soon as possible. They're cliches
because cliches are less of a cognitive load. You can write a
whole trilogy instead, bet you can't eat just one...
Nevertheless they're still objects in the medium of print. They
still have the cultural properties of print.

Culturally speaking they're capable of lasting a long time because they can be replicated faithfully in new editions that have all the same properties as the old ones. Books are independent of the machineries of book production, the platforms of publishing. Books don't lose anything by being reprinted by a new machine, books are stubborn, they remain the same work of art, they carry the same cultural aura. Books are hard to kill. MOBY DICK for instance bombed when it came out, it wasn't until the 1920s that MOBY DICK was proclaimed a masterpiece, and then it got printed in millions. Emily Dickinson didn't even publish books, she just wrote these demented little poems with a quill pen and hid them in her desk, but they still fought their way into the world, and lasted on and on and on. It's damned hard to get rid of Emily Dickinson, she hangs on like a tick in a dog's ear. And everybody who writes from then on in some sense has to measure up to this woman. In the art of book-writing the classics are still living competition, they tend to elevate the entire art-form by their persistent presence.

I've noticed though that computer game designers don't look much to the past. All their idealized classics tend to be in reverse, they're projected into the future. When you're a game designer and you're waxing very creative and arty, you tend to measure your work by stuff that doesn't exist yet. Like now we only have floppies, but wait till we get CD-ROM. Like now we can't have compelling lifelike artificial characters in the game, but wait till we get AI. Like now we waste time porting games between platforms, but wait till there's just one standard. Like now we're just starting with huge multiplayer games, but wait till the modem networks are a happening thing. And I -- as a game designer artiste -- it's my solemn duty to carry us that much farther forward toward the beckoning grail....

For a novelist like myself this is a completely alien paradigm. I can see that it's very seductive, but at the same time I can't help but see that the ground is crumbling under your feet. Every time a platform vanishes it's like a little cultural apocalypse. And I can imagine a time when all the current platforms might vanish, and then what the hell becomes of your entire mode of expression? Alan Kay -- he's a heavy guy, Alan Kay -- he says that computers may tend to shrink and vanish into the environment, into the walls and into clothing.... Sounds pretty good.... But this also means that all the joysticks vanish, all

the keyboards, all the repetitive strain injuries.

I'm sure you could play some kind of computer game with very
intelligent, very small, invisible computers.... You could have
some entertaining way to play with them, or more likely they
would have some entertaining way to play with you. But then
imagine yourself growing up in that world, being born in that
world. You could even be a computer game designer in that world,
but how would you study the work of your predecessors? How would
you physically *access* and *experience* the work of your
predecessors? There's a razor-sharp cutting edge in this
art-form, but what happened to all the stuff that got sculpted?

As I was saying, I don't think it's any accident that this is
happening.... I don't think that as a culture today we're very
interested in tradition or continuity. No, we're a lot more
interested in being a New Age and a revolutionary epoch, we long
to reinvent ourselves every morning before breakfast and never
grow old. We have to run really fast to stay in the same place.
We've become used to running, if we sit still for a while it
makes us feel rather stale and panicky. We'd miss those
sixty-hour work weeks.

And much the same thing is happening to books today too.... Not
just technically, but ideologically. I don't know if you're
familiar at all with literary theory nowadays, with terms like
deconstructionism, postmodernism.... Don't worry, I won't talk
very long about this.... It can make you go nuts, that stuff,
and I don't really recommend it, it's one of those fields of
study where it's sometimes wise to treasure your ignorance....
But the thing about the new literary theory that's remarkable,
is that it makes a really violent break with the past.... These
guys don't take the books of the past on their own cultural
terms. When you're deconstructing a book it's like you're
psychoanalyzing it, you're not studying it for what it says,
you're studying it for the assumptions it makes and the cultural
reasons for its assemblage.... What this essentially means is
that you're not letting it touch you, you're very careful not to
let it get its message through or affect you deeply or
emotionally in any way. You're in a position of complete
psychological and technical superiority to the book and its
author... This is a way for modern literateurs to handle this
vast legacy of the past without actually getting any of the

sticky stuff on you. It's like it's dead. It's like the next
best thing to not having literature at all. For some reason this
feels really good to people nowadays.

But even that isn't enough, you know.... There's talk nowadays
in publishing circles about a new device for books, called a
ReadMan. Like a Walkman only you carry it in your hands like
this.... Has a very nice little graphics screen, theoretically,
a high-definition thing, very legible.... And you play your
books on it.... You buy the book as a floppy and you stick it
in... And just think, wow you can even have graphics with your
book... you can have music, you can have a soundtrack....
Narration.... Animated illustrations... Multimedia... it can
even be interactive.... It's the New Hollywood for Publisher's
Row, and at last books can aspire to the exalted condition of
movies and cartoons and TV and computer games.... And just think
when the ReadMan goes obsolete, all the product that was written
for it will be blessedly gone forever!!! Erased from the memory
of mankind!

Now I'm the farthest thing from a Luddite ladies and gentlemen,
but when I contemplate this particular technical marvel my
author's blood runs cold... It's really hard for books to
compete with other multisensory media, with modern electronic
media, and this is supposed to be the panacea for withering
literature, but from the marrow of my bones I say get that
fucking little sarcophagus away from me. For God's sake don't
put my books into the Thomas Edison kinetoscope. Don't put me
into the stereograph, don't write me on the wax cylinder, don't
tie my words and my thoughts to the fate of a piece of hardware,
because hardware is even more mortal than I am, and I'm a hell
of a lot more mortal than I care to be. Mortality is one good
reason why I'm writing books in the first place. For God's sake
don't make me keep pace with the hardware, because I'm not
really in the business of keeping pace, I'm really in the
business of marking place.

Okay.... Now I've sometimes heard it asked why computer game
designers are deprived of the full artistic respect they
deserve. God knows they work hard enough. They're really
talented too, and by any objective measure of intelligence they
rank in the top percentiles... I've heard it said that maybe
this problem has something to do with the size of the author's

name on the front of the game-box. Or it's lone wolves versus teams, and somehow the proper allotment of fame gets lost in the muddle. One factor I don't see mentioned much is the sheer lack of stability in your medium. A modern movie-maker could probably make a pretty good film with DW Griffith's equipment, but you folks are dwelling in the very maelstrom of Permanent Technological Revolution. And that's a really cool place, but man, it's just not a good place to build monuments.

Okay. Now I live in the same world you live in, I hope I've demonstrated that I face a lot of the same problems you face... Believe me there are few things deader or more obsolescent than a science fiction novel that predicts the future when the future has passed it by. Science fiction is a pop medium and a very obsolescent medium. The fact that written science fiction is a prose medium gives us some advantages, but even science fiction has a hard time wrapping itself in the traditional mantle of literary excellence... we try to do this sometimes, but generally we have to be really drunk first. Still, if you want your work to survive (and some science fiction *does* survive, very successfully) then your work has to capture some quality that lasts. You have to capture something that people will search out over time, even though they have to fight their way upstream against the whole rushing current of obsolescence and innovation.

And I've come up with a strategy for attempting this. Maybe it'll work -- probably it won't -- but I wouldn't be complaining so loudly if I didn't have some kind of strategy, right? And I think that my strategy may have some relevance to game designers so I presume to offer it tonight.

This is the point at which your normal J. Random Author trots out the doctrine of the Wonderful Power of Storytelling. Yes, storytelling, the old myth around the campfire, blind Homer, universal Shakespeare, this is the art ladies and gentlemen that strikes to the eternal core of the human condition... This is high art and if you don't have it you are dust in the wind.... I can't tell you how many times I have heard this bullshit... This is known in my field as the "Me and My Pal Bill Shakespeare" argument. Since 1982 I have been at open war with people who promulgate this doctrine in science fiction and this is the primary reason why my colleagues in SF speak of me in fear and

trembling as a big bad cyberpunk... This is the classic doctrine
of Humanist SF.

This is what it sounds like when it's translated into your
jargon. Listen closely:

"Movies and plays get much of their power from the resonances
between the structural layers. The congruence between the theme,
plot, setting and character layouts generates emotional power.
Computer games will never have a significant theme level because
the outcome is variable. The lack of theme alone will limit the
storytelling power of computer games."

Hard to refute. Impossible to refute. Ladies and gentlemen to
hell with the marvellous power of storytelling. If the audience
for science fiction wanted *storytelling*, they wouldn't read
goddamned *science fiction,* they'd read Harpers and Redbook and
Argosy. The pulp magazine (which is our genre's primary example
of a dead platform) used to carry all kinds of storytelling.
Western stories. Sailor stories. Prizefighting stories. G-8 and
his battle aces. Spicy Garage Tales. Aryan Atrocity Adventures.
These things are dead. Stories didn't save them. Stories won't
save us. Stories won't save *you.*

This is not the route to follow. We're not into science fiction
because it's *good literature,* we're into it because it's
weird. Follow your weird, ladies and gentlemen. Forget trying
to pass for normal. Follow your geekdom. Embrace your nerditude.
In the immortal words of Lafcadio Hearn, a geek of incredible
obscurity whose work is still in print after a hundred years,
"woo the muse of the odd." A good science fiction story is not a
"good story" with a polite whiff of rocket fuel in it. A good
science fiction story is something that knows it is science
fiction and plunges through that and comes roaring out of the
other side. Computer entertainment should not be more like
movies, it shouldn't be more like books, it should be more like
computer entertainment, SO MUCH MORE LIKE COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
THAT IT RIPS THROUGH THE LIMITS AND IS SIMPLY IMPOSSIBLE TO
IGNORE!

I don't think you can last by meeting the contemporary public
taste, the taste from the last quarterly report. I don't think
you can last by following demographics and carefully meeting

expectations. I don't know many works of art that last that are condescending. I don't know many works of art that last that are deliberately stupid. You may be a geek, you may have geek written all over you; you should aim to be one geek they'll never forget. Don't aim to be civilized. Don't hope that straight people will keep you on as some kind of pet. To hell with them; they put you here. You should fully realize what society has made of you and take a terrible revenge. Get weird. Get way weird. Get dangerously weird. Get sophisticatedly, thoroughly weird and don't do it halfway, put every ounce of horsepower you have behind it. Have the artistic *courage* to recognize your own significance in culture!

Okay. Those of you into SF may recognize the classic rhetoric of cyberpunk here. Alienated punks, picking up computers, menacing society.... That's the cliched press story, but they miss the best half. Punk into cyber is interesting, but cyber into punk is way dread. I'm into technical people who attack pop culture. I'm into techies gone dingo, techies gone rogue -- not street punks picking up any glittery junk that happens to be within their reach -- but disciplined people, intelligent people, people with some technical skills and some rational thought, who can break out of the arid prison that this society sets for its engineers. People who are, and I quote, "dismayed by nearly every aspect of the world situation and aware on some nightmare level that the solutions to our problems will not come from the breed of dimwitted ad-men that we know as politicians." Thanks, Brenda!

That still smells like hope to me....

You don't get there by acculturating. Don't become a well-rounded person. Well rounded people are smooth and dull. Become a thoroughly spiky person. Grow spikes from every angle. Stick in their throats like a pufferfish. If you want to woo the muse of the odd, don't read Shakespeare. Read Webster's revenge plays. Don't read Homer and Aristotle. Read Herodotus where he's off talking about Egyptian women having public sex with goats. If you want to read about myth don't read Joseph Campbell, read about convulsive religion, read about voodoo and the Millerites and the Munster Anabaptists. There are hundreds of years of extremities, there are vast legacies of mutants. There have always been geeks. There will always be geeks. Become the

apotheosis of geek. Learn who your spiritual ancestors were. You didn't come here from nowhere. There are reasons why you're here. Learn those reasons. Learn about the stuff that was buried because it was too experimental or embarrassing or inexplicable or uncomfortable or dangerous.

And when it comes to studying art, well, study it, but study it to your own purposes. If you're obsessively weird enough to be a good weird artist, you generally face a basic problem. The basic problem with weird art is not the height of the ceiling above it, it's the pitfalls under its feet. The worst problem is the blundering, the solecisms, the naivete of the poorly socialized, the rotten spots that you skid over because you're too freaked out and not paying proper attention. You may not need much characterization in computer entertainment. Delineating character may not be the point of your work. That's no excuse for making lame characters that are actively bad. You may not need a strong, supple, thoroughly worked-out storyline. That doesn't mean that you can get away with a stupid plot made of chickenwire and spit. Get a full repertoire of tools. Just make sure you use those tools to the proper end. Aim for the heights of professionalism. Just make sure you're a professional *game designer.*

You can get a hell of a lot done in a popular medium just by knocking it off with the bullshit. Popular media always reek of bullshit, they reek of carelessness and self-taught clumsiness and charlatanry. To live outside the aesthetic laws you must be honest. Know what you're doing; don't settle for the way it looks just cause everybody's used to it. If you've got a palette of 2 million colors, then don't settle for designs that look like a cheap four-color comic book. If you're gonna do graphic design, then learn what good graphic design looks like; don't screw around in amateur fashion out of sheer blithe ignorance. If you write a manual, don't write a semiliterate manual with bad grammar and misspellings. If you want to be taken seriously by your fellows and by the populace at large, then don't give people any excuse to dismiss you. Don't be your own worst enemy. Don't put yourself down.

I have my own prejudices and probably more than my share, but I still think these are pretty good principles. There's nothing magic about 'em. They certainly don't guarantee success, but

then there's "success" and then there's success. Working
seriously, improving your taste and perception and
understanding, knowing what you are and where you came from, not
only improves your work in the present, but gives you a chance
of influencing the future and links you to the best work of the
past. It gives you a place to take a solid stand. I try to live
up to these principles; I can't say I've mastered them, but
they've certainly gotten me into some interesting places, and
among some very interesting company. Like the people here
tonight.

I'm not really here by any accident. I'm here because I'm
paying attention. I 'm here because I know you're significant.
I'm here because I know you're important. It was a privilege to
be here. Thanks very much for having me, and showing me what you
do.

That's all I have to say to you tonight. Thanks very much for
listening.