

THE MAKING OF DISCORDIA

STEPHEN KING'S LEGENDARY DARK TOWER GOES INTERACTIVE

Brian Stark, founder of Metro DMA (along with business partner and soul mate Judy Hahn), has provided design, branding, and interactive services for a host of high profile clients—from Sharon Osborne, Linkin Park, and Marilyn Manson, to Dreamworks, Baz Luhrmann, and Donald Trump. Even so, this widely respected interactive producer had to marvel at his own good fortune when he went to work for best-selling author Stephen King. Though Stark had been a devoted fan of the prolific scribe since childhood, their professional relationship did not begin until 2002, when Stark was charged with the task of redesigning the author's website, stephenking.com (which had made its debut in 1998). Since 2003, Stark and Hahn have been responsible for maintenance and promo work for stephenking.com, but in 2007, they were contracted to orchestrate their biggest challenge yet—a complete overhaul of the site, along with King's other website *The Dark Tower Official Website* (www.stephenking.com/darktower/), originally constructed by Stark in 2002.



The retro-tech themes inherent to the fictional NCP corporation served as the basis for the site's design.

The latter was selected as the first to undergo development, and for those who may be unfamiliar, *The Dark Tower* is an addictive series of seven King books

that incorporate elements of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and western genres. Relying on influences from Arthurian legend to Tolkien's Lord of

the Rings, to the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, *The Dark Tower* chronicles the adventures of Roland Deschain (a gunslinger inspired by Clint Eastwood's iconic Man With No Name character), on a quest toward a tower both physical and metaphorical in nature.

Everyone involved with the project agreed that because it had taken 30 years to write and publish, the branding for *The Dark Tower* series had become fragmented, no longer accurately portraying the technological, esoteric, or metaphysical concepts that heavily influenced the original story. It was decided that the ultimate goal of the overhaul would be to sharpen the brand and present a better understanding of the *Dark Tower* story (and its values) to the uninitiated.

In Stark's efforts to rebuild the site, as well as rebrand the series as a whole, he began with an art direction concept that was actually never intended for use. The early stage art focused on North Central Positronics (NCP), the fictional corporation in *The Dark Tower* series, which once manufactured computers,



"Working on the *Discordia* project has been an amazing experience," says director Robin Furth.



Brian Stark and Judy Hahn are responsible for Crimson Crescent boss Arina Yokova's storyline.

robots, and both magical and chemical weapons. The retro-tech themes inherent to NCP served as the basis for the site's design. "It was very basic and would look like child's play now," admits Stark, "but it served as the inspiration for what would eventually become *Discordia*."

Though considered relatively simple by Stark's standards, the design and concept struck a chord with producer Marsha DeFilippo, who six months later, pitched the concept to King on a flight to New York City.

"One aspect of my job as Stephen's personal assistant has been reading and responding to fan mail and moderating his website message board," says DeFilippo. "And one request that has come up time and again over the years

has been for a *Dark Tower* based video game. Although not a full-fledged video game, I knew fans would be excited to have something like *Discordia* featured on Stephen's site and was thrilled when he gave the green light for the project."

With King's blessing, *Discordia* became, as Stark describes, "an all-consuming passion" for his team members. They worked diligently to create an interactive site that honored the original *Dark Tower* storyline, yet also managed to introduce new concepts and characters. The concept would grow into a detailed story that chronicles the war between bad guy Sombra Corporation (affiliated with NCP) and the good guy Tet Corporation (both entities instantly familiar to *Dark Tower* aficionados) over the past ten years. Stark, along with interactive producers

Judy Hahn, Jordan Hahn (Judy's son) and Marsha DeFilippo, are responsible for the original concepts.

From the beginning, Stark and company knew that, as part of the rebranding effort, they wanted to set the game in present day New York City. They also determined that their Tet Corporation operative would be going to Mid World (where most of the original series takes place) on an investigation. Out of those early decisions, a debate arose. How could they bring these concepts to fruition based on the established mythos? The answer would be found in countless hours of research (with heavy reliance on the series' Kindle version for support and search functionality) as well as *The Dark Tower: A Concordance* by Robin Furth. "We started by hyper-analyzing every word of the sections that we needed to create," says Stark. "We took detailed notes on everything that needed to be considered and in the end, every last detail described by Stephen in the books, was manifested in 3D."

In November, 2008, Furth joined the team as the project's director, playing a large role in the creative writing. In addition, she has input on all new concepts (in



Take a seat: Brian Stark's pre-vis rendition of the Dixie Pig

relationship to the original content written by King), as well as overseeing the development team's manifested content.

"Working on the *Discordia* project has been an amazing experience for me," says Furth, "As an old fashioned pen-and-paper kind of person, I've learned a tremendous amount about computers, gaming, and 3D animation. There is an incredible magic in this kind of story visualization, a magic made even more wonderful since Brian and Judy were determined to make the *Discordia* project even more than the usual game."

Acclaimed veteran artist and illustrator Michael Whelan, who was directed to create the definitive characterization of each main character in the original *Dark Tower* series, finds his images hidden in "character orbs" scattered throughout the *Discordia* experience. When a user has found all orbs in each chapter, hi-res files can be downloaded, printed, and framed as a suite of portraits. Whelan also contributed conceptual and art direction to *Discordia*, as well as original paintings for the online experience.

King remains the Executive Producer of *Discordia* and works with the development team on all aspects of the production and storyline. He approves artwork and concepts as well as making decisions to keep the team grounded in the world of *The Dark Tower*. *Discordia* is engineered by Eric Klotzko.

It would take over two years to finalize the concept and bring *Discordia* to its current state: an internet-based *Dark Tower* experience which has evolved into a progressive storytelling platform. As the interactive producer for the entire stephenking.com website, Stark



Set in present day New York, *Discordia* takes a Tet Corporation operative on an investigation to Mid World.



Discordia interactive producer Brian Stark

continues to perform a wide range of daily duties, but with *Discordia*, he found himself saddled with a completely different animal that required him to be responsible for much of the overall concept, storyline, and execution of the 3D artwork and Adobe® Flash.

“My roles were to lead our team and create something special that the fans would not only enjoy playing, but would expand *The Dark Tower* universe in a way that honored what the fans hold as sacred.” Indeed, Stark was aware of the tightrope he was negotiating. “I wanted them to start thinking “what if” again,” he says, “and not show up at my door with torches and pitch forks.”

Hardware and Software

Upon completion of the research phase, the *Discordia* team could finally begin creating the game’s path and accompanying artwork—building 3D environments from the ground up, using software application Maxon Cinema 4D. In terms of hardware, Stark had relied on an Alienware four thread system for a number of years, but upgraded to a competing manufacturer’s eight thread system as the *Discordia* project

got underway. The price was right, but the new system was not up to the task and died as Stark was in the middle of building the Dixie Pig, a visual interpretation of the fictional New York City rib joint featured in the original series. “After such a bad experience in the middle of a high profile gig,” Stark recalls, “we knew that we needed to step up to the type of rigs the big boys use.”

Stark contacted **BOXX Technologies**, makers of high performance workstations and rendering systems, where sales consultant Rich Petit took stock of what the interactive producer needed. “Our philosophy at BOXX is that we don’t sell, we serve,” says Petit. “My discussion with Brian began as most of my customer discussions do with me asking, ‘Why are we talking?’ I needed to know what was missing in his creative workflow, as well as the actual event or situation that prompted him to get in touch with me. The situation in question turned out to be *Discordia*.”

“Rich could be the nicest and most helpful salesman I have ever worked with,” says Stark. “I hesitate to even call him a salesman. He’s my guy at BOXX.”

Petit asked a number of questions, leading off with what type of creative applications Stark was running and how the new workstation would be used. “The demands for design, modeling, editing, animation—they’re all different, as are the primary demands of the artist,” says Petit. “I ask a lot of questions and I listen to what the customer is telling me.” Petit was also sure to inquire as to what aspects of the computing platform were most important, i.e., CPU, graphics card, RAM, etc. and based on Stark’s answers, he was able to offer the designer a

range of hardware configurations and, as Petit puts it, “what life would be like under each choice.” Stark considered the options and then selected a 3DBOXX 8500, the top of the BOXX workstation line, featuring dual quad-core **Intel® Xeon® processors**. He also opted for a custom configuration he believed would best suit the workflow demands of both *Discordia* and stephenking.com. Stark’s confidence in BOXX was buoyed by the fact that all possible BOXX configurations have been pre-tested by BOXXlabs before they are ever chosen by customers. “Everyone at BOXX dealt with us on a level that I would describe as “boutique,” says Stark. “This is a good thing when you’re talking about fine computers.”



Gunslinger Roland Deschain as envisioned by artist

Michael Whelan.

With **3DBOXX 8500** as the platform, the detailed artwork pushed the Cinema 4D rendering toolset to the limit with high-grade shaders, anti-aliasing, global illumination, ambient occlusion, volumetric lighting and more. The BOXX workstation was put to the test as well, and according to Stark, passed with flying colors. “*Discordia* would not be possible without the workstation we acquired from BOXX,” he says. “This 16 thread system has fundamentally



Reaching into their minds: With over 13,000 objects and a staggering 9,000,000 polygons, the Dixie Pig appeared exactly as many fans had imagined.

changed everything for us. It has a CineBench mark of over 30,000! Coupled with Cinema 4D's amazingly fast, high-quality render, we're seeing things now that we would have thought were many years off."

The performance of the new 3DBOXX also shortened rendering times, enabling Stark to work faster with greater freedom, thereby enhancing his creative process. "Working on the BOXX rig was the first time I truly felt like an artist," he says. "The ability to create insanely detailed artwork and render out 700% faster is a true luxury for someone like me. I could not be happier with its performance, noise level, and style." In fact, everyone was so impressed with BOXX, that stephenking.com recently expanded its creative arsenal by adding a dedicated render farm comprised of two renderBOXX modules.

As work progressed on *Discordia* and the various zones were developed, Stark enlisted the aid of a focus group formed to offer feedback and assist the artists in the refinement of their creations. Dubbed "The Secret Window," the group consists of ten devoted fans that have been regular stephenking.com visitors since its debut in 2003.

"We have a private place on our message board to show them new content and get feedback," says Stark. "This goes for all aspects of the site, as well as special projects like *Discordia*. We even had the luxury of having Bev Vincent (author of *The Road to the Dark Tower*) as a member. We really appreciated having such an esteemed author contributing feedback and encouragement during the process, and once we knew that he was into the *Discordia* concept (just like the others), we all felt much better about

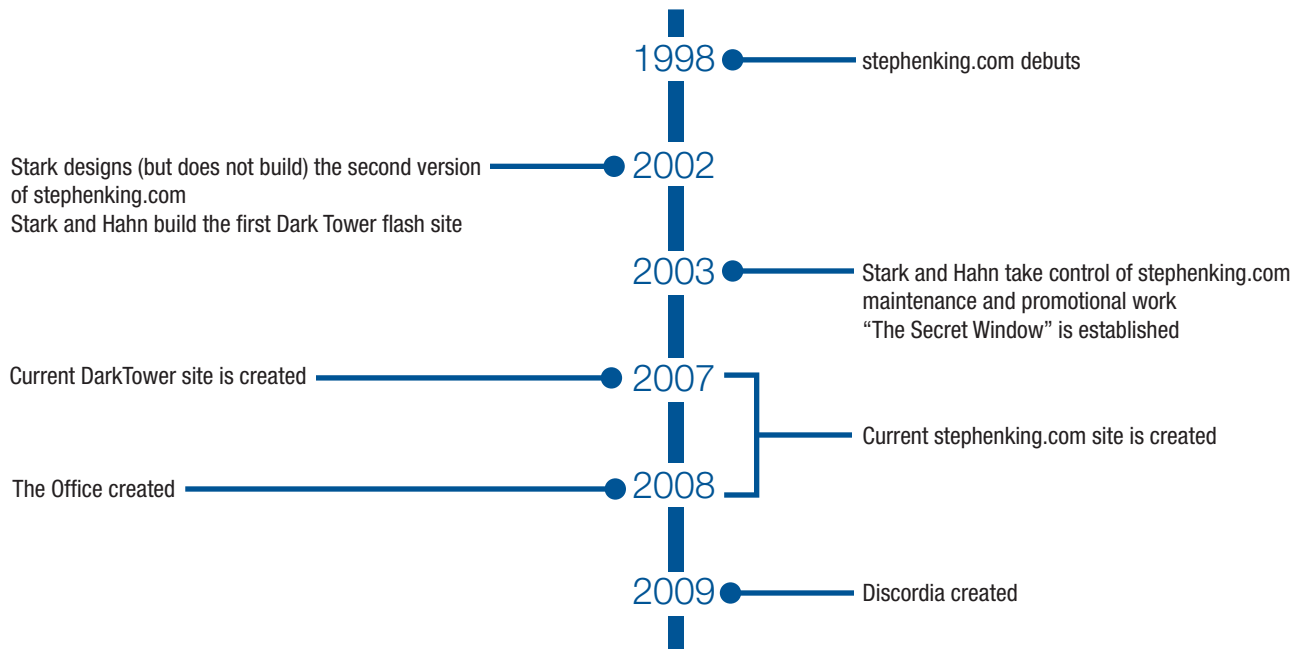
the gamble of a present-day *Discordia* storyline."

Once a room within the *Discordia* game engine was complete and all points of view finalized, rendering of the video fly-through was underway. After all artwork and videos were created, they were assembled in Adobe® Flash using the H.264 compression tools found in Adobe® Premiere® Pro. "The final step of Flash development was extremely complex and offered a wide range of challenges to both Eric Klotzko and myself," says Stark. "As a 15-year Flash veteran, it took everything I know in order to build it."

Online and Onward

Despite the focus group's strong approval, the site's debut in December 2009 left Marsha DeFilippo still concerned about those passionate

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Dark Tower fans that frequent the stephenking.com message board. "It was with some trepidation about their reaction that we launched it to the public," she admits. Fortunately, her fears were allayed when the torch and pitch fork-wielding masses envisioned by Brian Stark failed to materialize. In fact, *Discordia* has been incredibly well-received.

"I knew we'd hit the mark when we got feedback that the Dixie Pig was exactly what readers had envisioned and that it was as though we'd reached into their mind and they were now seeing it on their computers," says DeFilippo. "A further litmus test was their question, 'when can we have more?!' With that success in mind, we're looking forward to the next phase of *Discordia's* development."

The fact that *Discordia* succeeds in leaving a major "jump off point" for exciting, new content inevitably leads any fan to question what the future holds for this latest *Dark Tower* incarnation. "Right now, we're in a holding pattern," Stark says. "The degree of complexity in creating an indie game like this took a major toll of blood and treasure from our team. It was a true labor of love that needed everything we had to create it. We just want to take a short breather before we take that next step into Mid World. From here out, it's going to get crazy, and we need to get ready for that big, creative push."

Stark anticipates that when and if they go forward, the *Discordia* game engine will take "major steps forward" in the coming chapters, and emphasizes that video-based movement from point to point will

become a primary factor in upcoming battles and future game play. But for the time being, Stark is focusing his energy on the next version of *The Office*—not the popular NBC comedy series, but the interactive Flash module based on the real world business office of Stephen King. Built in 2008 and featured on stephenking.com, it offers users a unique way to get to know the man who created not only *The Dark Tower* series, but all of those other memorable books that (through print, film, and now interactive) have become permanent fixtures of our popular culture.

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