The Mind behind PLAY NYC: Dan Butchko

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Despite a flourishing indie game development scene, New York does not have host a games convention. Many claim that the need is covered by PAX East, in Boston, or GDC, far away on the West Coast. Furthermore, the supposedly little interest that is suspected to exist locally would be covered by branches of New York ComicCon or the Tribeca Film Festival. The success of the video game components of the two events, however, shows that the interest is growing and might not be satisfied as it is.

Dan Butchko saw a need for action, and Playcrafting, an organization dedicated to supporting indie game development in and around the City, was born. The organization boasts a perspective that comes from years of experience growing the scene, personal connections to the developers, and knowledge of their needs.

Thus, the main focus of Playcrafting's work, since the beginning of this year, is to stage New York City's first video games convention: PLAY NYC, which indie devs are now anxiously awaiting, on August 19. Many questions surround this event: Could this be the first in a long line of New York City video game conventions to come? Could New York perhaps develop into a video game Mecca? Time will tell. The questions about the event that are answerable I asked Dan, amidst his preparations for PLAY NYC.

OPN: I WAS CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT GOES INTO ORGANIZING THE EVENT. WHERE DO YOU FIND SUPPORT AND ARE THERE ANY REMARKABLE HURDLES?

Dan: (laughs) Yes, there are a lot of them. Playcrafting is behind PLAY NYC, and we're working with a number of partners on this event. There is Playcrafting staff behind it, as well as a few other companies that we worked with on other events, such as Sidekar Interactive. On the logistics and design side, we have Ashley Zelinskie and her team. They are designing and building up the stage itself. Additionally, we have a group of high-level Twitch streamers in New York that are handling the full stream.

Early on, the biggest supporters were all of the developers in the community. We opened up booth submissions, and they went very, very quickly. We got on the phone with everybody that submitted so they could understand exactly what we're doing with the event, how it's connected to — but different from — our usual Playcrafting events, and just what we were planning on doing. On top of that, the press response early on was significant. I think that both developers and press (in and around New York) are

hungry for an event of this magnitude and scope happening in their backyard — that was encouraging early on.

The most exciting and surprising support, though, has been from representatives of the New York state government. We have Howard Zemsky, who was appointed by Governor Andrew Cuomo, to Head the Empire State Development Corp, which is specifically tasked with building up specific industries and companies in and around New York City — with gaming being a primary focus of theirs. We have another state senator who is going to be joining us that I can't reveal just yet, but that's been exciting as well. That was an unexpected area of support that we got, and it has been an encouraging sign for us because it's showing us that our mission of having this event helps elevate developers and industry in and around New York City.

In terms of hurdles, I think that, even though Playcrafting has been doing events in New York for years now, this is much larger in scale and affects much more people than anything that we've done before. [So far, this is the biggest crowd of people] in a room together under the Playcrafting banner of events. I'd say, early on, the biggest hurdle was finding the right venue partner. We wanted to make sure that this event felt very 'New York' and didn't feel just like PAX East or GDC plopped onto a different city. It was important for us to find a venue that was very New York-specific and New York-feeling and I'm glad that we landed at Terminal 5 because I think that it helps us drive that point home that this is a New York event that is welcoming developers from all over. We want to build out a convention that is unlike anything ever seen before.

THE PRESS HAS BEEN MENTIONING PLAY NYC IN A TRIFECTA WITH NEW YORK COMICCON AND THE TRIBECA GAMES FESTIVAL. HOW DO YOU GUYS SET YOURSELVES APART FROM THE OTHER TWO EVENTS?

PLAY NYC is the first dedicated games convention, and we (mean it when we) use the word "dedicated." There are several events going on in NYC that feature games as a subset of a pop culture angle. Some of them are gaming specific, but are only targeted at a certain kind of game, a certain kind of developer, or perhaps are industry only. We wanted to build from the ground up New York's first dedicated games convention: that's what sets this apart. It's a full-scale convention for New York, by New York. It's not games as part of larger culture; it's not a specific kind of games; we have games of all different shapes and sizes across all different platforms, unlike Tribeca Games Festival — which, in large part, was piggybacking off of the Tribeca Film Festival. I know that a lot of their content was mixing-and-matching game developers with personalities across the broader entertainment industry. Then, of course, New York Comic Con is Comic Con. It started primarily (about) comics, and now (now become about) pop culture.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT FOR INDIE GAME DEVELOPERS TO ATTEND AND TAKE PART IN PLAY NYC?

That's why we got on the phone with every developer that wanted to be a part of this

event. We're building this for developers. Playcrafting [...] is built on a foundation of a very strong community of game developers. Unlike other shows, where it's a separate company or separate organization that comes in and just plops an event on top of the city, with us, developers are a part of this process from the very beginning. We have something called "Play Crew" that's been meeting once a week. Those have been the core developers that signed on with us early on. We want to make sure that everyone has a say in terms of how the event is coming together.

In terms of the structure of the event itself, developers have (received) a heavy focus. We've commissioned local developers to also create installations specifically for this event. That's been another area wherein developers have been involved. I think that in the end, the benefit here is that New York doesn't have its own game convention. The developer and press response to Play NYC has proven that the city needs one and there is a place and a call for it. [We have] this platform to show off developers that are in and around New York, as well as some of the folks that are coming from around the country and around the world. We're offering this atmosphere where they can directly interact with the press, both gaming, and broader press, where they can connect with fans at a place where it's very clear that games are the primary and only focus. If games are unfinished — that kind of goes in line with what we've been doing with Playcrafting as a whole — they can get playtesting time, sell things at their booth, etc. There are multiple different ways that developers can benefit.

YOU WILL HAVE PANELS AT PLAY NYC. WHAT ARE THE PANELS GOING TO BE ABOUT AND WHO ARE THE PANELISTS?

We have a lot lined up for it. There are a few headlining keynotes, as well as a number of local developers and industry folks that are going to be there. Patricia Vance is the president of the ESRB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board). They're responsible for the little black and white ratings that are at the bottom of every game box. They're going to be there talking specifically about how ESRB is adapting for this primarily digital age and making a case for how ESRB is relevant nowadays, given the rapid change of the industry.

We have Howard Zemsky, who is the head of the Empire State Development Corp, appointed by Governor Cuomo. [There is also] another person from the New York state government that's going to be there talking specifically about how New York is working toward becoming an even bigger Mecca for the game industry. [They will also talk about] how [New York] is working on courting larger studios to come and set up shop in New York City and the surrounding areas. We also have three of the top Twitch streamers in New York. They're going to be doing a panel and help out on stage with live streams we're doing throughout the weekend. There are a number of speakers from Avalanche studios, which is the big AAA developer that's in New York.

Who are the streamers?

We have swiftor, we have FutureManGaming, and there's also Bifuteki. That's not the final line-up. I think, there are probably going to be two more that come in, but those are the ones that are officially on board so far.

IN PRIOR PRESS COVERAGE YOU HAVE MENTIONED THAT PLAY NYC FIVE BIG GAMES AND FIVE BIG NAMES. DO YOU WANT TO GIVE ANY HINTS AS TO WHO AND WHAT THOSE ARE?

Yes, I think on the big names side, certainly Patricia Vance, who as I said, is the President of ESRB; she's one of them. The two folks from the New York state government that are going to be there fall under that category, as well. There are a couple of voice actors that are super high-level that we're still locking in. It sounds like they're going to come through, but I don't want to confirm who they are just yet. They are going to be from huge AAA games that everyone knows. [...] Then, of course, we have the Studio Head of Avalanche studios; they released Just Cause 3. Their sister studio, out in Europe, also released Mad Max. [...] The response and support from Avalanche has been key here. They joined early on, and they believe in the need for this. Their presence in New York is a testament to their support in building out the games industry in New York as a whole. I know that the heads of that studio are very vocal on the government side, as well. That's a sample of some of the big names.

On the big games side, we have Avalanche Studios again, then, there are a number of indie games that are going to be there, which have been making waves recently. One of them is Slime-san which was just announced for Nintendo Switch. They're great. They're a big part of our community as well. The game is coming out to Switch later this week. I'm super excited, personally, to go and play it. There is also Digital Continue. They did the remake of Lock's Quest that came out, I believe it was a few months back. This is going to be the East Coast debut of playable gameplay for their new game. There's a number of mobile developers that are going to be there as well. ustwo games is going to have a presence there. We also have NYU Game Center, of course, so we have a number of educational institutions that are on board to show off games. They're falling right in line with our mission of helping elevate New York as a whole with this event. There is also XGen Studios. They just released a cool game called The Low Road. Their main developer on it, his name is Leif Oleson-Cormack. He is also going to be one of the speakers at the event. That game's gotten a lot of great press at Kotaku and a couple of other places, as well. Ninety-to-one-hundred exhibitors are already confirmed, and there's plenty more where that came from, but I think that's a good sample.