

World Knowledge Forum 2012

Game = More Than Virtual Reality
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Instead of focusing on reading, writing, and arithmetic, moms around the world may soon be instructing their children on the merits of video gaming.

On the third and final day of the 13th World Knowledge Forum in Seoul, a panel of video game experts discussed the past, present, and future of the video game industry. The panel included James Gwertzman, General Manager of Asia Pacific Popcap Games, Inc.; Jesper Juul, Arts Professor of Tisch New York University Game Center; and Dr. Ian Bogost, Distinguished Chair in Media Studies and Professor of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

"Fundamentally, everybody understood what a video game was," said Mr. Juul, speaking on the history of video games up to the year 2005. He noted that what was considered a video game then typically came in a box and was sold primarily to young male teens, with new games and consoles marketed on the basis of improved graphics. "Certain people didn't feel that video games were talking to them," he added, noting the homogeneity of the target audience at the time.

Mr. Gwertzman noted that this viewpoint has changed radically over the past few years. "The smartphone has changed everything; it is now all about how people play games, and I believe that this is going to be a disruptive force," he said. He cautioned against successful developers sitting on their laurels, saying that the industry is "ripe for disruption everywhere."

Far from being concerned about the dramatic changes facing the industry, Mr. Gwertzman saw these changes – including its potentially disruptive effects – as a positive development, stating that he loves being in this business "because it changes so fast. We don't know if the prevailing business model is going to last six months."

The recent tectonic shift in the business model for smartphone gaming has been to supply users with free games while offering in-game purchases as a means of generating revenues. "Eighty percent of revenue now is coming from games that are free to play, and as a business we have to react to that. Clearly, our audience is telling us something," said Mr. Gwertzman.

Dr. Bogost provided additional context by summing up the history of video games and highlighting the continuing refinement of modern games. After noting how research labs in the mid-20th century, both in government and academia, used shared networks to create rudimentary games, he highlighted the fact that the existence of these shared networks led to a "collaborative culture of building materials," a culture that has become increasingly pervasive in today's video-game development environment.

Dr. Bogost also took note of the prevailing culture of the time, pointing out that scientists were not necessarily attempting to design what we now view as video games. "It was not about advancement. Research is about looking forward to the potential uses of technology."

Like the others, Mr. Juul noted the dramatic changes between the past and present. He pointed to the sea change in distribution and business models, changes that are integral to any effort to create a successful game nowadays. "A conflict has arisen over creation; is it data-driven design or [is it] the auteur?" asked Mr. Juul.

He suggested that while the "auteur vision" of video-game design turns the game into "a direct expression of someone's vision, it is a bit overblown. A single vision is not always better." Mr. Juul reflected upon the increasing emphasis on turning game design "into a science more than an art form," and he expressed his preference for data-driven design.

This data-driven, collaborative design has resulted in such modern marvels as the Nintendo Wii or Xbox Kinect, which use motion sensors that allow users to play games without the use of controllers on game consoles. In what may be an even more astonishing development, Google is currently developing Google Glasses, which would immerse the user in a peripheral-vision game environment as opposed to one in which players view a screen to play games.

In speaking of the glasses, Mr. Gwertzman marveled, "It's pure science fiction, but it is really happening. Gaming in its very nature is changing."

The evolution of gaming is perhaps best summed up as a reflection of the changing nature of modern society. Said Mr. Juul, "It makes a lot of sense for us today. In video games you change your role, just as in society you change your job."

So moms, maybe letting the kids play for an extra hour isn't the worst thing in the world, after all.