



Transcript of podcast with

Ben Sawyer, President of [Digital Mill](#) and Co-founder of the [Serious Games Initiative](#)

Chauncy Rucker (CR): Welcome, I'm Chauncy Rucker. I'm at the 2008 Technology Innovators Conference. It's hosted by the National Center for Technology Innovation. The theme this year is "Thriving in a Global Marketplace." I'm having a conversation today with Ben Sawyer. He's the co-founder of Digital Mill Incorporated in Portland, Maine. Ben I understand your presentation, well no, I don't understand it I was there. Your presentation definitely had to do with all sorts of aspects about gaming and I was impressed. Could you kind of give a summary of that presentation for us?

Ben Sawyer (BS): Sure, what I tried to do today for the audience was to give them a very broad and at times dive down view of everything dealing with this notion that we call serious games which is this sort of appropriation of attributes, technologies, talent and other resources from the modern day computer and video game industry and applying those to purposes beyond entertainment.

I think what the audience was most interested in today besides just that background was that they're thinking about how they can use these technologies for training and learning and then specifically there was a lot of discussion given the province of NCTI in this respect over accessibility and what kinds of technologies and methods and what's the state of them in gaming space so that through gaming, through the types of things that I do everyday, we can make these new types of learning and training and productivity and other things that we're doing with games more widely available.

We often say in the serious game space that unlike commercial games, you don't have the luxury of choosing your audience or letting your audience choose you. You have to if you're working on a grant project that says this potentially could be a product that we want out in the hands of every third grader or every college kid or every adult learner in the country, you have to give some consideration to accessibility, so I was able to deliver some of the work in that regard. I talked a little bit about some of the resources and the grassroots efforts within the games industry to work on accessibility. There are a lot of problems with accessibility in the video gaming space. Some of them are inherent to the way the market develops, some are inherent to the underlying technologies they use, there are cost issues, there are marketing issues, there are just appreciation issues and in fact in talking with some of the NCTI staff, I said you know honestly some of the fundamental investments in general computer accessibility started ten, twenty years ago and they've reached a certain level of maturity such that further investments can be done at marginal costs.



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The games industry hasn't done barely any of that and I don't mean to be critical of the games industry; I think it just kind of happened, but there're ways to deal with that and there increasingly are ways that are coming from grassroots communities, from developers, from others, but we do need to make fundamental investments in accessibility for games if we're going to be making fundamental investments in games for learning, games for education, games for health.

We need to develop fundamental philosophies as well so through a project that we do, called Games for Health, we have started to make some of those investments in the tiniest way that we can in collaborating with the accessibility communities in the video gaming space through the International Game Developers Association.

The rest of my talk really focused on what serious games are, what's going on, various issues with the way games are overlapping with modeling and simulation with learning and just tried to give the audience an appreciation for how far that notion has come, how developed some of the thinking is, but also how much more it has to go.

Often with communities like this, what it gives them is an opportunity to realize, "*Wow, there is a lot more there than I realize, I need to spend more time!*" That's our evangelism side of things is to get that information to people and let them know that that information exists so now they can begin to act upon it.

We see tremendous opportunity for gaming across a lot of different areas, different age ranges, gender ranges, regions and people with learning disabilities, people with no disabilities, people who need to learn, people who need to be productive. I mean, it really is something that could be pervasive and what's really exciting.

It was actually an idea that kind of popped up in the room, was how once we do these things for some of these very specific segments that some of this stuff actually would kind of loop to the general entertainment side of the industry for that benefit.

New types of play patterns which I believe T. V. Raman from Google brought up, was- and I said you know you're dead on-if we could figure out games specifically for blind people, what we're actually really doing in a larger sense is thinking about really kind of new, oral-based games that we could be doing for everybody that could be really exciting and different.

Within the video game industry, there's a lot more appreciation for a wider variety of platforms, a wider variety of players and a wider variety of experimental game play so the industry is maybe maturing in various points to be a lot more receptive to these things. But the games industry is unforgiving in one sense- which is you've got to show up ready to deal, you've got to show up ready to show them what you can do, you've got to show up and be aware of the tremendous Darwinian business environment that they exist in.



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So I think some of these things that we want from gaming need to be developed outside of the gaming industry to a certain point where then they can be engaged within the gaming industry at a more ready standpoint and then mature together.

There's this sense that we should dive into the gaming industry and build it from within very, very specifically. There'll be points where that kind of works, but I think it's going to take communities like this who have cut their teeth elsewhere outside of gaming, on desktop computer applications, on mobile applications, on traditional 3-D simulation, to figure out what works and bring that in and then we'll see some things. So I was really enthused.

It was a good conference for me to be at especially given that I'm doing some small bit of my efforts in that area and trying to stay up on it so that I can go back to the communities in the games industry that spend all day with this and say you know here are some leads to other people, to other things that they can do and to help mature that a little bit on accessibility and then just the grander issue of delivering the message on what games can do besides just entertain us.

If this medium ends up as only being great for entertainment, we will have spoiled a tremendous opportunity akin to the way we spoiled the opportunity with comic books and graphic novels with the way that they were sort of disassociated from non-entertainment venues in the fifties and sixties.

If you actually go to other countries like Japan, comic books in the process of that media are used in a wide variety of ways. When Google launched their Chrome browser, Scott McCloud who wrote *Understanding Comics*, the seminal book on comics as a more serious media form beyond what or that it had been obtained but not been as widely appreciated, did the entire roll-out of Google's browser underlying technologies. What was special about it as a comic-and it was really, really a neat thing-got written up in the *New York Times* and other. It was really, really incredible and there are a lot of parallels seen in the video game industry with comics and by media researchers like Henry Jenkins saying you know we can't let that happen. I don't think that's going to happen, but I think it's because of being more engaging with communities like what we had here at this conference.