

Professor says the Gamepocalypse is coming, but it may have a bright side (w/ Video)

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A clip from the video below, showing Jesse Schell's presentation on life as a game.

From Starbucks punch cards to credit cards that earn frequent flyer miles, everything's becoming a game. Jesse Schell, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University and founder of Schell Games, thinks that this is only the beginning. In a presentation he recently gave at the DICE 2010 tech summit, he laid out the future "beyond Facebook," where the psychological tricks used to persuade people to fork over real cash for virtual games like Farmville will infiltrate our lives much more deeply.

The future that Schell envisions is high-tech, but not too far-fetched. As technology becomes cheaper and cheaper, it will become more prevalent and even disposable, he says. For example, sensors will be affixed to all sorts of cheap products - from soda cans to cereal boxes - that track our activities. Products will have CPUs, screens, and cameras that allow consumers to play games on the packaging, for instance, and then a Wi-Fi connector will upload the game scores or eating habits to the Internet.

Why would you want to participate in this seemingly mundane game world? Because you get points, which can be reimbursed for real goods and money. Of course, you may have to go a little bit out of your way to appease the point-givers. For example, if you use public transportation, maybe you would earn points that could be used for tax incentives. If your kids get good grades, you might get good parenting points from a government-sponsored social program, or kids that participate in positive activities could earn points that go toward a college scholarship. Sensors in your shoes could determine how much you walk per day, and your health insurance company might give you points for walking certain distances or for getting your heart rate up. Maybe you could even get a digital tattoo that comes with a "Tatoogle adsense" agreement, and earn points from that.

Jesse Schell's presentation at DICE 2010.

"I jokingly call this convergence of games into reality the 'Gamepocalypse': the moment when every moment of life is actually a game," Schell said in a recent interview at CNN.

If all this tracking and measuring sounds a bit dystopian, Schell argues that it's just good old capitalism at work. After all, no one is required to participate in the games; the game-based society is more a form of highly interactive advertising and influence.

"Anybody who has a product that can sense that the product is being used ... they're going to want to create motivations for you to use the product," Schell said. "So fundamentally, they're going to make games out of it, because games are reward-based systems that motivate us to do things."

Schell notes several examples belonging to this

game-based future that already exist today. A product called Green Goose that snaps onto your bicycle tracks how much you ride and has a system of rewards based on how much gas you save. An Oral-B toothbrush beeps when it's time to switch jaw quadrants, and rewards you with a smiley face if you finish the entire three-minute brushing routine. Similarly, a bathroom scale with Wi-Fi that connects to the Internet uploads your weight to a database for tracking over time; the system can also be configured to tweet your weight. A GPS game called Foursquare has turned a practical device used for finding directions into a gaming device, where you get points based on the places you visit. You can even become "mayor" of a place if you visit there more than anyone else. Schell predicts that the next step for these games is when game designers start merging them all together.

More information: [Schell's blog: Gamepocalypse Now](#) via: [CNN](#)

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Listening to Schell describe these everyday devices-turned-games, the Gamepocalypse seems to be a logical next step for society. It's nothing new that humans are quite a competitive species, even for seemingly trivial pursuits. Still, as Schell notes, these games will only work if the game design is done skillfully, such as by carefully tapping into the human psychology of how we rationalize spending money. Of course, the companies that hire game designers generally have only one goal in mind: profit.

"The part that I worry about the most is sort of the perverse incentives that these systems are going to try to create," Schell said, mentioning the example of tobacco companies. "Largely, the companies won't be caring about our health and welfare. They're going to be caring about, 'Can I manipulate you into doing things that help the company?'"

On the other hand, as Schell concludes in his DICE 2010 presentation, living in a world where everything we do is being watched could make us more conscientious and have a positive influence on our behavior.

"It could be that these systems are just all crass commercialization and it's terrible," he said. "But it's possible that they'll inspire us to be better people - if the [game](#) systems are designed right."

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