GAME BRANDING

The Wright way ...

Creator of 'god' games talks about brands and gaming

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HIS next title just might be the next big thing in gaming — a massive multi-genre game that lets you determine the evolution of a species from a cell, all the way to its adventures visiting other creatures across the galaxy in spaceships.

Mr Will Wright, creator of "god" games such as *SimCity* and *The Sims*, is set to release *Spore* internationally next month. The 48-year-old is in town this week to talk to businesses on the impact of gaming on brand building at the Global Brand Forum.

But really, is there a place for brands in games?

"Within the palette of media forms, I think games are inherently the most personal of entertainment experiences. By linking a player's actions, motivations and interests into various brands, games occupy a unique space where brands can be represented and used in a way that feels like a net positive on the player experience rather than a blatant attempt to sell more soap," the game designer explained.

Mr Wright also believes that games can be used effectively in education. "I think there is a place for games in education but right now, their most valuable contribution comes in the form of motivation," he told TODAY in an email interview.

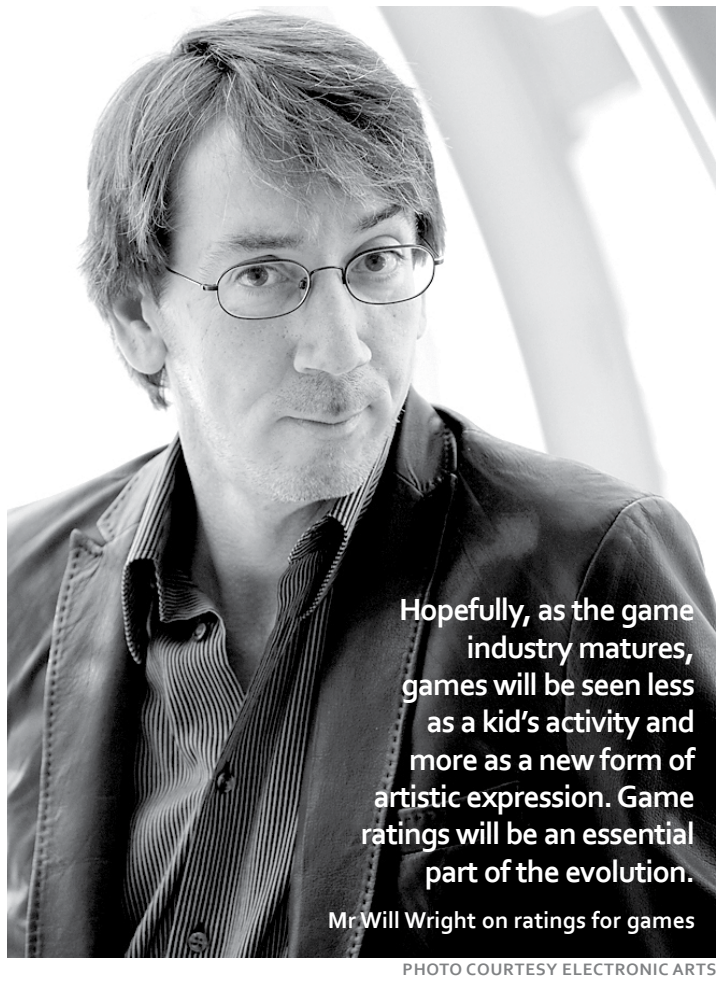


PHOTO COURTESY ELECTRONIC ARTS

"Kids are good at learning things on their own if they become sufficiently motivated. Games are a great way to introduce new subjects to kids that they may find dry and boring in a linear format. As a toy or a game, the subject can come alive in the players' imagination."

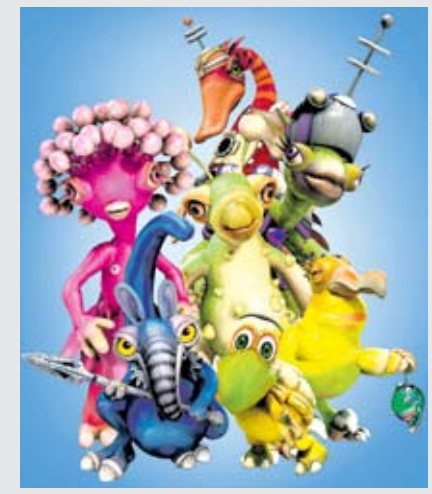
It might come as a surprise to people that he counts the classic Chinese boardgame of *wéiqí*, more commonly known as *Go*, as his all-time favourite because of the game's balance of simplicity in rules and complexity in strategy. Other games he enjoys include *Grand Theft Auto*, *Sid Meier's Civilization* and the *Battlefield* series.

"I really like games that are open-ended enough for me to do weird and creative new things and in doing so, in my own imagination, build a surreal narrative around my experience," he said.

Games will become more personal in the future, he predicts. In *Spore*, the data from player-created creatures is aggregated in an online database and used to populate the planets in the galaxies of other players. Mr Wright expects more games to make use of the player's creativity to develop the game environment for other players. His next titles will be based on such concepts, he tells TODAY.

"I'm still very intrigued by what you can accomplish by harnessing the collective imagination of millions of players. I'm also interested in how games can get people to understand the world they live in new ways."

With games becoming more ubiquitous, Mr Wright also sees them migrating from specialised computers or consoles to mobile phones, handheld systems and the Internet. "In the future, I can imagine games that are customised by the computer with the help of player-created content and playable at almost any time with whatever convenient hardware is at hand."



READY FOR A 'CELL' OUT

Spore allows the gamer to engineer the evolution of a species from a cell-based organism to a sentient being to a spacefaring civilisation. Because of its breadth of gameplay and the different genres it borrows from, it's been touted as one of the biggest games of the year.

Spore departs from previous games in the "god" genre, such as *SimCity* and *The Sims*, that came with pre-defined characters. In *Spore*, players get an easy-to-use 3D modelling tool to create characters. Your characters will be automatically added to a central online database and used to populate the galaxies of other players.

You don't have to wait till the game is launched to start making your own creatures. Download the free *Spore Creature Creator* tool (*www.sporeshow.com*) to get the hang of creating characters. You can even win a trip to Hong Kong if you win the *Spore Creature Creator* design competition. The date to watch is Sept 7, when *Spore* ships for the PC, Mac, Nintendo DS and mobile phone platforms. It will retail for $59.90. HEDIRMAN SUPIAN

www.ea.com.sg/spore

Log on for more details on *Spore*

Game development not as easy as ABC

YOU'VE just blasted through three levels of your favourite game, and you're thinking: "This is such a simple and fun game! It probably was an easy game to develop."

You couldn't be more wrong. Game development is never an easy process. Many people see the game industry as a fun sector to work in. It is fun, but the path to game-making is rocky. As students participating in the Gambit (Gamers, Aesthetics, Mechanics, Business, Innovation, Technology) Summer Programme 2008, we had the opportunity to experience the thrills and heartaches of creating a game.

Gambit is a game lab established jointly by Singapore and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to further digital game research globally.

When we first arrived at the MIT, most of us had epic visions of what games we wanted to make. These high expectations were quickly shot down to more realistic goals as we embarked on our journey. "There is the game that you want to make, and there is the game that you actually make," says Matthew Weise, lead designer at Gambit.

Time is a constant enemy in game production. This is true for many game companies but especially so at Gambit, which runs on an eight-week development cycle. Every two weeks, called a sprint, each of our development teams has to create a playable version of our game.

The lack of communication among team members is one of the key elements that can halt the progress of game development. We quickly found out that if an indecisive game designer does not convey his ideas quickly and succinctly to the team, teammates will get confused and the artists will not have a clear direction for their artwork.

Paul and Sharon (right) with their teammates.
PHOTO COURTESY SINGAPORE-MIT GAMBIT GAME LAB

To avoid such communication breakdowns, here at Gambit, Weise, together with well-known video games researcher Jesper Juul, urge us to write concise game design documents that all the programmers and artists will be able to understand. Good oral and written communication skills are crucial in game production.

The Gambit program has opened our eyes to many critical issues in game development. But if there is one thing that it has taught us, it is that as game developers, we need to be flexible and learn to adapt our game designs and production methods as problems arise. We have learnt not to be afraid to let go of our original ideas if they prove to be impractical.

At the end of the day, players will only experience the game that you actually make, not the one that you wanted to make. And if the game you made turns out great, players will never know that that was not the game you originally wanted to create. SHARON LYNN CHU AND PAUL YANG

The writers are Communications and New Media undergraduates at the National University of Singapore. 45 local tertiary students were sent to MIT for the 9-week Gambit summer internship, which ended last week.