Games? Seriously!
A Candid Conversation with Ben Sawyer,
Co-Founder of Digitalmill

I caught up with Ben Sawyer between his many presentations at conferences around the globe. I was first introduced to Ben and his amazing expertise and energy at the Games for Health Conference where he served as the organizer, Master of Ceremonies, and keynote speaker. For quite some time Ben has been known as one of the founding fathers of health games, and I was delighted to have the opportunity to learn more about his seminal efforts in the field.

Bill Ferguson: Many people regard you as one of the important founders of the Serious Games Initiative, which led to the Games for Health Conferences you have hosted the past several years. What first got you interested in the practical aspects of videogames?

Ben Sawyer: I’ve always been a videogame player—since the days of “Pong.” So videogames have been an important part of my life for a long time. The entire videogame industry was also this amazing place. That it coincided with my learning how to program and the emergence of personal computers during my childhood only reinforced my love of it all. So that’s the underpinning.

As things moved forward I eventually found myself working on a project, Virtual U, a game-based simulation of university management. This was at the behest of Alfred P. Sloan Foundation program manager Jesse Ausubel, who in “another life” had been an advisor of sorts to Will Wright on “Sim City.” Jesse really was the person who got me started on it. My background made it easy for me to see the idea of videogames taking on this role, but it was Jesse, and then later on David Rejeski at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, who was my co-conspirator on the Serious Games Initiative, who threw me down the rabbit hole. Unlike Alice, I wasn’t too scared or uncertain of it all. As for health specifically, I will take some credit there. Dave had just had a wonderful conversation with Brenda and Mark Weiderhold, two huge pioneers of the cyberpsychology and virtual reality health space, and when he told me what they were doing, and as I looked more at the potential, I was quickly convinced this was the area of gaming that had the biggest untapped and unguided potential. The idea that games could make you better beyond just education was just so amazing and untapped—it just spoke to me. So with some help from Dave, I dove in headfirst. We started the first gatherings online and offline with help from Kay Howell, who was then at the Federation of American Scientists, and some friends at the University of Wisconsin, and from there it has just blossomed. It’s been incredibly amazing. It’s one of the most satisfying parts of my life so far.

Shortly after getting the field going, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Pioneer Portfolio came along and really gave us a boost. What was important about this support was it really was baseline, foundational support; we didn’t have any heavy mandate, except to focus on building the space, shepherding it, and learning as we go. That was critical. We’ve done lots of little things that have helped really define the space as more than one specific outcome, and that’s important because what we’ve said is that videogames can be a strategic health partner, and as such they deserve fundamental investment, time, and attention from the health, technology, and videogame development worlds. I can still remember key people coming to our Conference as things have matured from its earliest days, and they are literally speechless at the horizontal nature of games for health. The quote I hear so often from veterans of even the virtual reality health scene, or medical simulation space, is “I had no idea.”

Bill Ferguson: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been a powerful force for health games research. They are also a large sponsor and supporter of the annual Games for Health Conference, which you host. Tell us about the behind-the-scenes work that has led to the conferences and the sharing of the research and commercial activities.

Ben Sawyer: The Games for Health Conference is the key output of the Games for Health Project, which itself is a larger set of efforts involving growing the field. Lots of other meetings, phone calls, efforts, and knowledge formation take place. A lot of this culminates with the Games for Health Conference, but that’s not all we do. The Project itself predates the Health Games Research National Program Office actually. In fact, it started before Pioneer began funding it. The first RWJF [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation] grant was in 2004. Two years later, a key finding of the early work was
that the field needed more research activity, that there was an opportunity to help a budding field by buttressing it with research activity grounded in the U.S. university system with leaders like Debra Lieberman. Games for Health continued as part of the NPO [nonprofit organization] authorization from RWJF and maintained its work, but not specifically as a research-organizing organization.

The research portfolio of Health Games Research (HGR) was done in two phases and focused on understanding not only if games could be effective, but how and why. Could we begin to better understand the design traits and affordances of games that might better inform the development of future games? Also, we looked to improve the overall understanding of the efficacy of games. To me, however, it also helped support a cadre of researchers who are now building a foundation of citable articles and research that will make it easier for further work to build from. It’s an icebreaker of sorts, and in 2006 and 2007 as HGR took shape; this was considered a key deficit where the Foundation could help. Today, as the work comes forward, we’re all learning so much more, and I’m excited to see the results of projects like Lit 2 Quit and the fMRI work of Adam Gazzaley at the University of California, San Francisco and Adam Noah at Long Island University.

**Bill Ferguson:** How have the papers and conference changed over the years?

**Ben Sawyer:** Games for Health is an emerging field. When I look back at the quality of work of early conferences, I really see how much we were holding the cohesive presentation of the field together with toothpicks, duct tape, and a tiny bit of superglue. Not that there was shoddy science or work, just that there wasn’t a lot of it, or a lot of it finished yet. Over time, this has gotten far better, but isn’t that the case with all such fields?

Overall the field has grown, and its quality of work is better. Although one of the things we try to be careful of at our Conference, and in our non-Conference work, is to qualify *everything* to make sure it’s not misinterpreted as perfect fact, incredible science, and pure destiny because that’s just not the case.

Innovation is never delivered on day 1 in a perfect form, but too often it’s expressed by people that way. That’s never going to be what we want to do, and so I hope that while it’s less toothpicks and duct tape, we’re never going to see smoke and mirrors in this field. That would ruin it.

At the same time, we need to recognize that the games for health space is about cross-disciplines; it’s about many different worlds and cultures coming together to create something new so we have to account for all kinds of different ways of validating work, expressing good and bad ideas, etc. I think that’s a challenge to some when they attend our events or listen to our work: To see how we blend a variety of interests into something that moves the field forward together. One of the goals of the Games for Health Project for RWJF is learning how to bring different cultures together and blend them toward unique, validated resources for health and health care. You can’t be any more different than a videogame developer and a doctor—trust me.

So changes I’ve seen overall are just the maturity, the blending, and, as such, the growing enthusiasm in the field, as well as a sense that this is a field that clearly has its contribution to make for many years going forward.

**Bill Ferguson:** At the Conference this year I sensed that there was an increase of field applications and companies employing health games, such as your company Digitmill, as well as Kognito, “Zamzee” [from HopeLab], and Makoto. Can you give us a brief analysis on commercial health games?

**Ben Sawyer:** The commercial health game space basically consists of three product areas: Exergames built by major mass-market publishers; cognitive health games built by mass market publishers; and a multitude of small-to-medium startups, some with considerable venture capital behind them, and then work-for-hire/b2b offerings. I am actually a bit down on this area overall, I think the mix of products isn’t right, and the successes, while interesting by certain financial standards, are not great by public health impact standards. There is a long way to go.

“Zamzee” is not quite to market yet, and it’s a very different game experience than, say, “Wii Fit,” Makato, and others like them that are trying to fill a location-based exergame experience, which is interesting but not the mass market that an “EA Sports Active” fills. I think companies like that are wonderful—the dedicated, small business in games for health is critical to its long-term sustainability, but it’s not the same as what an EA or a large-scale health interest like United Health, GE, or Johnson & Johnson could do. So really, it’s a mixed bag; there is a lot more work to be done, but the promise is still so significant that I expect this to be a different story over the next decade.

**Bill Ferguson:** Attendance for Games for Health seems to be steadily increasing each year. There are now conferences in other parts of the world. Is there a single global conference that may take hold?

**Ben Sawyer:** I think there will be Games for Health Conferences all around the world over the next few years. Then as long as there is a global network of ambassadors we can work to bring them together and coordinate activity, but I’m not sure the best answer is a “global” conference. The best thing to do is to see it blossom into lots of great events that grow the field uniquely in each important region of the world.