



CEO of [Schell Games](#) and a distinguished professor at Carnegie Mellon's [Entertainment Technology Center](#), Jesse Schell has been revolutionizing the gaming industry with his creation of transformational games. Jesse has worked for Walt Disney Imagineering, published two editions of his book *The Art of Game Design*, and his [TED talks](#) have millions of views online.

The [Center's](#) Julia Holber had the opportunity to catch up with him in preparation for the [3rd Integrative Conference on Technology, Social Media, and Behavioral Health](#), where he will be featured as a keynote speaker.



Julia: Can you tell us a little bit about [Schell Games](#)?

Jesse: Sure! [Schell Games](#) is an independent game development studio in Pittsburgh. We've been at it for about 15 years, and we have about 110 people working here. We do a mixture of entertainment games and also educational and transformational games.

Julia: Can you explain what exactly you mean by *transformational games*?

Jesse: The reason we use the phrase transformational games is because we are referring to games that change the player in some way. So, that certainly encompasses educational games, because education is a type of change. But there are lots of other types of change, too. There are changes in habit, there are changes in one's physical health, there are changes in attitude. These are all changes that games might strive to make, but you wouldn't necessarily call them educational games.

Julia: That makes sense, I like that phrase. Did you always envision yourself in the gaming industry?

Jesse: For me, when I was younger, the idea of working in the gaming industry was more of a fantasy. It wasn't something I thought could really happen! So, my early career focused more on traditional software development. An opportunity arose where I was able to take a position at the Disney virtual reality studio in California. That was a big deal for me because, not only was it my first time developing games professionally, but also because that was where I met Randy Pausch, who was doing a sabbatical there. He was one of the founders of the [Entertainment Technology Center](#). I got to know him very well while I was at Disney, and he brought me here to Pittsburgh where I started teaching at Carnegie Mellon at the ETC.

Julia: Well, we're glad you two met and he brought you to Pittsburgh! Since you've arrived here, you've done a lot. You're the CEO of [Schell Games](#), you're a distinguished professor at CMU's [Entertainment Technology Center](#), you've given TED talks, you've written books. What has been the most rewarding work for you?

Jesse: That's an interesting question because I get to work on so many different things, and different projects can be rewarding in very different ways. For me personally, working on games that really make a difference for the most people is most rewarding. It's exciting to create something that helps people, and beyond that, a lot of these games we're developing are somewhat pioneering and helping to pave the way for future games. So, I find working on those kinds of projects doubly rewarding.

Julia: Can you give an example of a project or a game that you felt did have an impact on a lot of different people?

Jesse: Certainly! So one that we worked on a few years ago with Yale Medical was a game called [Play Forward](#), which was a game designed to try and reduce the incidence of HIV in younger teenagers. This was a very interesting project because it was trying to do this with a game intervention. There recently has been a study published on the game which has been able to show that it's had some of the efficacy we had hoped for in terms of changing the attitudes of players over the longer term, which is exciting.

Julia: Are you working on a project or game now that you are really excited about?

Jesse: One of the ones I'm most excited about at the moment is a game called [SuperChem](#), which is a virtual reality project that basically allows for a virtual reality chemistry laboratory. This game has two sides to it. First, it's trying to simulate a standard high school chemistry lab so that students can do more experiments, more frequently, more safely with less cost. At the same time, we're also creating an entertainment game based around that where, in order to solve the puzzles, you have to learn to do real laboratory chemistry.

Julia: I wish my chemistry classes were taught like that! Speaking of students, our [Center](#) is a sponsor for the upcoming [Games4Health Jam](#), where students from all disciplines work together to create a health game over a 36-hour time period. What advice do you have for these students and aspiring game designers?

Jesse: Any time you're working on one of these rapid prototyping game jams, you want to pick a simple idea. It's often a good idea to choose an idea that is in some way informed by research if you're going trying to make a game that is meaningfully transformational. Whatever you do, pick something that can be prototyped very quickly. A good rule of thumb is that halfway through the game jam, you should have a working prototype, so you can spend the rest of the time polishing it up and making it great.

Julia: Great advice. Hopefully the participants will read this interview! Where do you see games, specifically health games, going in the next five to ten years?

Jesse: I think we're going to see health games continue to grow and flourish. The existence of smartphones has been a big boom for health games. Many of the most helpful games are helpful by being present in your life multiple times a day, by being able to combine some amount of monitoring along with frequent interventions. I think we are going to keep seeing people experiment with the smart phone space for health games. We're certainly doing a lot of work in that area right now. The key to moving that space forward is going to be doctors, medical institutions, and insurance companies starting to appreciate the value that these games can have.

Julia: Well, hopefully our conference can help convey the value of these games. Thank you again for taking the time to talk with me, and I look forward to meeting you and hearing you speak at the conference! We are all very excited.

Jesse: Hopefully! I am looking forward to it!

Want to hear more about Jesse's work? Come to the **3rd Integrative Conference on Technology, Social Media, and Behavioral Health** on **November 3rd** to hear him deliver a keynote address!

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/3rd-integrative-conference-on-technology-social-media-and-behavioral-health-tickets-36156559242>