

Nov 04, 2016 by [Joshua S. Fouts](#)

State of Play 5 (It's a Small World After All) ^[1]

I'm just back from the State of Play V conference in Singapore. Congratulations to Dan Hunter, Beth Noveck and Aaron Delwiche for having the vision to host State of Play in Singapore, and the perseverance to keep it there despite the challenges of fundraising for and coordinating a conference 8,000 miles away. Thanks to the MacArthur Foundation for supporting it financially.

As with previous State of Plays I came away intellectually enriched. Moreover, I learned something new and unexpected—and not necessarily from the sources I anticipated.

Thanks to the generous invitation of Drs. Chee-Kit Looi and David Hung, I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon at the National Institute of Education at Nanyang Technical University and see a demonstration of their current research projects on innovation, virtual worlds and games.

Singapore has approached the rapid growth of the gaming culture in Asia head-on and is trying address, embrace and understand what it means on a fundamental, cultural level. Most importantly, they are trying to understand what it means for the future of education and learning in their society.

David Hung piqued my interest by telling me that while Singapore feels that it's done a solid job of teaching kids how to get excellent grades and ace standardized tests, they have not focused enough on facilitating innovation and creativity. As such, their focus now is on supporting and understanding the roots of innovation. And they see games and virtual worlds as a gateway to this.

Supporting innovation through games

I found this particularly resonant. Having a child in a U.S. public school under the “No Child Left Behind” curriculum, I am acutely aware of how retrograde our education system is. Or, as Connie Yowell lucidly put it on her panel at State of Play 5, “The U.S. education system is doing a great job of preparing our children to enter the 1950s workplace.” A personal example: At the end of the school year this past June, I asked my son, who had just completed kindergarten, if he was excited about summer vacation. “Daddy,” he said, “I don’t want to go on vacation. Vacation means more work.” What he was referring to was the fact that each and every “break” he got this year, he was sent home with some 40 books to read. The notion being that by hammering him with reading assignments, he would learn to read. Instead, I learned that my son has an astute capacity for memorization: He could recite all 40 books without even looking at the pages. More importantly, in kindergarten, he is beginning to associate and internalize a negative image with learning. We need to find a way to bring back the fun in learning. There is an untapped opportunity in the rapidly growing U.S. world of

games—specifically games and virtual worlds that emphasize the freedom to explore and play.

NIE has a number of interesting games that they have designed and are introducing experimentally into the classroom. One game, sort of an analog to Sim City, allows students to play an allegorical Singapore in the form of a small society living on a space station. Students learn the challenges of managing an infrastructure as small as Singapore's. They also gain perspective on the political challenges of being a small island nation next to so many larger and dominant cultures.

They understand that for virtual worlds and games to be successful learning environments, the goal should not be to teach and instruct by telling, but through experience and humility. They hope that the students will come away with a better understanding of issues relevant to Singapore and want to learn more about those issues. More importantly, they also hope to learn from the students. They realize that they don't have the answers and that letting students tell their own story through their observations on games and virtual worlds, you learn, and perhaps learn more.

More collaboration with Asia

We in the U.S. would be well-served to work as closely as possible with our Asian counterparts. The Asian (especially Singaporean) perspective on virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online spaces is robust and mature. It's no news that they have an order of magnitude with more players than we do in the U.S.

The good news is that we have much to learn from their insight and perspective on this space. Better still we have new colleagues who are willing to share their ideas.
