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Q&A Joichi Ito
Internet visionary

As the new director of the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Joichi Ito brings his knowledge of Internet start-ups — including Flickr, Twitter and licence provider Creative Commons — to the lab that developed the ideas behind the game Guitar Hero and Amazon Kindle's E-Ink technology. Ito talks about the value of playfulness and freedom in scientific discovery.

How did you get interested in technology?
As a child, I wanted to become a physicist but spent more time playing with computers. My father was a Japanese polymer chemist recruited by a Michigan company, Energy Conversion Devices. As a teenager, I wrote software to measure responses to antireflective coating on photovoltaic cells for the firm. My mum was a college dropout and housewife, then joined the company, took us to Japan, and became president of its Japanese subsidiary. Later I was on the board, but I gravitated towards computers.

You dropped out of college twice. Why?
In the mid-1980s you could learn more about computers on your own than in the classroom. I dropped out of a computer-science programme at Tufts University in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1985, and out of a physics course at the University of Chicago, Illinois, in 1987. When I started working as a DJ in nightclubs, digging into the mess of AIDS-ridden working-class Chicago, university life seemed rather shallow. As a high-school student I had a great mentor, the physicist and inventor Stanford Ovshinsky, and it was hard to find that kind of stimulation at university. If I'd had Richard Feynman as a physics professor, I would probably have been fine.

How will you convince MIT students to finish their PhDs?
Ultimately, I want to admit and retain people like me, who would otherwise drop out because they want to build things and pursue projects. I jokingly asked MIT administrators about enrolling myself, but they said it would be awkward for the director to also be a student. Universities provide incentives to learn, but they have been designed on a scarcity model, where you pick only the smartest people and educate them, for a price. With the Internet, education should be more abundant and universities can become more open.

What are your research priorities?
I have my own biases but I'm not going to pursue my own research. The Media Lab itself is my work; everyone's work is my work. Hopefully we'll pursue even more diversity, including reaching out to hard-science departments such as physics and chemistry. We could collaborate more with theoretical scientists, such as anthropologists and sociologists.

How do you plan to change the Media Lab?
Media Lab scientists could get out and collaborate even more than they currently do. And people should come in, so the Lab is more of a platform than a container. Our corporate sponsors tend to be big firms and consumer-products companies, but we could also invite more non-profit organizations, foundations and others to collaborate.

Is there a downside to corporate-sponsored research?
Many companies pay consultants millions of dollars to massage their brains to make them feel a little smarter. The amount of money they invest at MIT is small by comparison. But transactional relationships can be difficult. You have to pick sponsors who want to be inspired by you, not just use you for your intellectual property. Hopefully there are enough of those to keep us afloat.

Do you share the Media Lab's values of playfulness and freedom?
I named my venture-capital firm Neoteny (http://neotenylabs.com), which in developmental biology means the retention of childlike attributes in adulthood. As adults, we tend to stop learning and focus on self-protection and retention, but as a child it is easy to feel wonder, to learn and adapt. Schools often teach children that they are stupid. Some teachers can cut children off, limiting their creativity and promoting self-censorship. The Media Lab attracts people who have not limited themselves, and encourages them to continue not to. In a changing world, activities that sound whimsical can be a great way to invest in your own ability to adapt. ∎

INTERVIEW BY JASCHA HOFFMAN