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Joichi Ito at his home in Chiba, Japan

# A Conversation with Joichi Ito

Cutting-Edge Web Guy Talks About Life, Work and The Next Big Thing

**W**hen Joichi Ito talks technology, people listen. An internationally recognized Internet pioneer and one of the world's most widely followed bloggers (<http://joichi.com/>), Ito traced an unorthodox path to prominence: He dropped out of a computer science program at Tufts University and then spent just one year studying physics at the University of Chicago before leaving to work as a DJ in Chicago. Ito is now at the forefront of investors and advocates who champion the phenomenon known as Web 2.0, the explosion of user-generated content, social networking and open-source software development that is reshaping the Internet. In addition to holding key leadership positions in some of the most important companies and groups driving the Internet's evolution (see CV sidebar), Ito distinguishes himself by actually using all of the technology that he promotes. He is also an inveterate World of Warcraft player, and believes that corporate organizations could draw valuable lessons from multiplayer online gaming. *Keywords'* Justin Neely recently caught up with Ito—by Web-based phone service Skype, of course—at his home outside Tokyo. >

### You have a great instinct for figuring out the next big thing. How do you do that?

I'm an early adopter of the technology. I get sincerely excited by it. Although now that I'm 40, I have to admit that I'm not the same as the teenagers using MySpace, but I still try to get my hands dirty and understand it from a first-person perspective.

### Does your personal experience with technology drive your investment strategy?

I never invest in a company if I haven't already become obsessed with its product as a user. I don't go into a field, whether it's online gaming or blogging or anything, unless I'm already obsessed with it. Almost every single business thing that I've done has started out as a hobby.

### How would you describe what you do professionally?

Ninety percent of the time, I'm just giving people general advice. And then sometimes I find an opportunity to invest, or to stick somebody together with a company I'm involved in. But it really is about participating in the community as a peer, and occasionally serving as a mentor to people who are looking for things.

I think of myself more as a participant in an ecology of companies, or people, that are building the Internet from the bottom up. I'm neither in charge or so important that I can get anything without contributing anything.

### How do you define Web 2.0?

David Weinberger [a technology commentator and Fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society] uses the words "small pieces loosely joined," and that's what the Internet is all about. Bubble 1.0 was all about the big guys trying to change the Internet from "small pieces" to big media companies. And for a while, it looked like the Internet had changed, but that crashed. Web 2.0 is all the people getting back together and saying, "Hey, let's go back to the old way." It's all the innovation that's on the edges.

### What is it about Web 2.0 that helps the little guys?

When Google started, it was an attack on the search engines that existed at the time. It said, "Look, I can compete with you by being small, being on the edge," because they were small guys back then. I think that's the whole point—it's not about centralized innovation. It's not about centralized power. It's about the fact that any small guy with a good idea can jump in and compete with a very low barrier to entry. You don't need a lot of resources to compete.

### Is there a lesson for a big company to learn from Google's success?

The current Google model is not necessarily a proven success. I think that Google has one revenue stream, advertising. The other revenue streams it's trying have not yet been successful. I think it's possible, still, that Google goes the way of Microsoft—I mean, becoming one of the biggest, richest companies in the world with only one real product—which is not necessarily a bad thing. The jury is still out on Google's method of innovation and its ability to diversify. In that sense, media companies—or IBM, or GE, a lot of companies—that have diverse products and revenue streams may be ahead of Google and Microsoft in their ability to do new things.

### How will user-generated content affect the role of traditional media companies as content creators?

When the cost of production and distribution was very high, by default everyone was a professional. The Internet changed the economics, which changed the way people participate, and I think we're still trying to figure out exactly how that works. I'm not one of these people who think that all professional content will go away, but I do think that the relationship between amateur and professional is still evolving.

### Intellectual property protection is one of the great challenges of the digital age. How does Creative Commons approach rights and content sharing?

The important thing to understand about Creative Commons (*see CV sidebar*) is that there is the all-rights-reserved world of Hollywood, and there's the no-rights-reserved world of the free culture and free software movement, but there are lots of people in between with different needs. Sharing is actually a really important part of marketing new kinds of content. Granting limited or partial rights to fans and other people who are talking about content is one way to get your content out there. I think this whole idea about reserving a right for commercial use but using noncommercial rights for marketing is becoming more established. I think we'll see some early successes, probably this year, with people actually making more money because they gave some of the rights away.

### Do you struggle to balance life and work?

I never do anything just because it's work. I only do things I really, really like. If I stop liking something, I dump it very quickly. This convergence between my obsessions and my personal life and my work is complete. Just about everything that I enjoy personally, I'm trying to figure out how to turn it into work, and vice versa. ■

## Look Who's Talking

### A Few of JOICHI ITO's Current Positions:

#### Chairman and Board Member Creative Commons

Nonprofit organization advocating and creating legal alternatives to traditional copyright licensing around the world

#### CEO Neoteny Co., Ltd.

Tokyo-based venture capital firm investing in Internet technologies and services

#### Board Member Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)

Nonprofit organization created by the U.S. government to manage Internet domain names and assignment of IP addresses

#### Board Member, Technorati

Prominent blog search engine company providing real-time tracking of online content

#### Board Member, Open Source Initiative

Nonprofit organization managing the definition and standards for the creation of open source software, and promoting open source development methods