Crossing Borders with Cookie Run: An Interview with Jongheun Kim

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Kim is the co-CEO of Devsisters (listed in KOSDAQ since 2014), a mobile game developer best known for its Cookie Run IP. Prior to joining Devsisters in 2011, he worked in venture capital (Storm Ventures) management consulting (PricewaterhouseCoopers), and telecommunications (SK Telecom) both in Silicon Valley and South Korea.

He received B.A. in Business Administration (summa cum laude) from Seoul National University and an M.B.A. degree from the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

KY: Could you please tell us a little bit about your academic background and how your education shaped your career journey?

JK: After studying business management at Seoul National University, I worked in management consulting and venture capital, focusing on gaining professional industry experience. Wanting to explore business outside of this frame and explore the entrepreneurial spirit of Silicon Valley, I attended Stanford Graduate School of Business, especially drawn to Stanford GSB's motto "to change lives, change organizations, change the world." Upon graduating with an MBA degree in 2003, I wanted to differentiate myself from my MBA colleagues and pursue a new path. I thus returned home to Seoul and explored the startup world.

KY: How did your time as a Stanford MBA student influence your interest in technology?

JK: I was always interested in technology and its role as an agent of change—an enabler. In fact, Stanford's position in Silicon Valley and the Bay Area was what largely drew me to attend the school. One of the most memorable talks I listened to was by Steve Jobs as part of the "View From The Top" speaker series. In this lecture, Jobs boasted how he aimed to transform the music industry through the launch of the then newly released iTunes Music Store. Looking back, I am amazed by the vision of leaders like Jobs and how they have truly changed the world we live in through the power of technology.

But what I was surprised to learn about was that technology is just one of many of the various disciplines and interests prioritized at Stanford. During my years as an MBA student, I came to know the need to understand other realms beyond just technology. In order to be a successful leader, one needs to view problems from a variety of perspectives.

KY: Can you describe Devsisters and how it has evolved over the years, particularly with regards to changing trends in the tech and gaming industries?

JK: As our name suggests, Devsisters is derived from "development" and the notion of sisters came from the collaborative nature of sisters, much like the relationship between the team in Charlie's Angels. There are many game studios that function like sisters under the family of Devsisters including Cookie Run: Kingdom, Cookie Run: Ovenbreak, Press A, and other new original games. Devsisters was founded a decade ago when the gaming industry was making a major transition from console and PC to mobile gaming. We rode this big wave brought on by the introduction of smartphones as can be seen by the exponential growth of the mobile gaming industry in these last ten years. We are now working on

conquering the next technological wave (which may include blockchain, metaverse, VR, etc.) to further enrich user experiences.

KY: How do you stay ahead of all the new technological advancements and trends around the world?

JK: This is perhaps one of the most difficult responsibilities I have as the head of a tech gaming company. Creating a game is a difficult, multilayered process. From the perspective of a game developer, we want to provide an immersive experience for users, whether that be on a mobile platform or in the metaverse. However, in the process of diving deeper and deeper into our product development pipelines, there can be a tendency to become over-immersed in our own games—so much so that we lose sight of new emerging trends and technologies. Especially given that many of our games have already been big hits, we are tasked with the need to exceed our previous successes and create even bigger hits. And with the incredibly dynamic speed at which the metaverse, blockchain, and gaming industries are moving at, it is more important than ever to be both informed and motivated by these technological shifts.

Previously, many looked primarily to Silicon Valley for new technological trends and advancements. Yet now we are seeing technological advancements emerge from unprecedented markets. For instance, the pioneering NFT-based game Axie Infinity was developed by Vietnamese studio Sky Mavis. South Korea has also been a major player in driving the blockchain gaming industry. As such, when keeping track of technological trends, I believe it is crucial to not only look at a single location but at the world at large. The increasingly globalized state of our markets and the brilliant innovative minds across the globe demands a global view.

KY: Cookie Run: Kingdom garnered an explosive response both within Korea and abroad. What do you believe is the secret behind your game that crossed borders?

JK: I am revealing the secret sauce to our recipe for the first time. The secret is that we knew we would succeed from the very beginning. Why? From a very young age, Korea's artists have consumed a wide range of cartoons and animated content including Disney and Pixar movies as well as Japanese manga and anime. In fact, Bong Joonho's directorial debut film *Barking Dogs Never Bite* was named after the European pet story *A Dog of Flanders* and the Academy Award-winning director is currently creating his first animated film that is based on a French scientific book on sea creatures. Korean creators have uniquely been exposed to American, European, Japanese, and, of course, Korean content.

Such exposure to diverse, multicultural content has enabled our nation's artists to create art that appeals to a global audience. From Day One, Devsisters' concept artists and game designers have understood what characters and art styles appeal to users from across the world. What is important to note though is that our success today was not instantaneous but instead was the culmination of a decade of hard work and dedication. This grit and determination from our teams of artists, designers, developers, and more contributed to the multinational success of Cookie Run: Kingdom.

KY: As the co-CEO of Devsisters, how do you ensure that your products are contributing to the betterment and not detriment of society? How does CSR play a role in the steering of your company?

JK: In today's modern society, users are more conscientious than ever about what items they purchase and products they consume. Users want to be informed about how products are made and whether a company's interests align with their own beliefs. Broadly speaking, this often comes up in issues pertaining to diversity and inclusion or environmental concerns. In terms of content IP, our players want to know the behind-the-scenes of how our products are developed and released.

Devsisters takes very seriously the impact of our games and its characters on users. When developing our stories, we deliberately try to remove any preconceived notions and prejudices. For example, to counter stereotypes that scientists are generally male, we designed one of our cookies to be a grandmother scientist. Moreover, our cookies were initially created without genders. We strive to ensure that our content has a positive influence on our players.

KY: Devsisters is a company composed of individuals from a variety of different backgrounds and skillsets. How do you encourage conversations among people from technical versus nontechnical backgrounds?

JK: Creating a game requires a diverse team of individuals including programmers who write bugless code, artists who craft charming characters, game designers who build immersive user experiences, community managers who connect developers with players, and so much more. As expected, varied skillsets often raise difficulties in understanding as it is as though they are all speaking a different language. To encourage conversation among these diverse peoples, one must rely on not just one but several methods.

To begin with, our company deliberately encourages teams to share common tools including Slack, Notion, Wiki, and Google Suite. This enables members across different departments to communicate deliverables and works-in-progress with one another. Through this exchange, non-developers can observe how developers operate with agile

practices while non-artists can see how artists review portfolios and provide feedback via multiple channels.

Of course, one might argue that the most efficient results are attained by siloing members into different departments. However, I am of the belief that over-communication and collaboration is always better than none. Although Devsisters' sister studios may have their respective roles and responsibilities, the company is a family that works together towards a shared goal. If a game from one studio succeeds, for instance, that studio can transfer information and share tips to the other sister studios.

KY: The tech industry is exhibiting a shift towards the metaverse. What are your thoughts on this transition and how do you hope Devsisters will approach these changes?

JK: Just a year ago, the industry was dominated by the conversation surrounding VR, AR, MMORPG, and open world. Now these different technologies are referred to as one word: the metaverse. With regards to this new trend, Devsisters is situated in an ideal position because games are essentially a form of the metaverse. Cyworld and Second Life, for example, can be considered early forms of the metaverse. In fact, the core fundamental elements and ideas behind the metaverse have been discussed by many companies and artists prior to the trend. The question remains, though, what is something that these companies didn't do before? We need to solve this question to achieve the metaverse.

The history of games can be divided into three main generations. Play 1.0, the flat-rate game era, was defined by game consoles where customers had to physically wait in line to purchase a CD, cartridge, or download a digital code. The goal was to reach the ending wherein the time spent to complete a game would vary depending on a person's skill and how much time they invested in playing. With the dawn of smartphones, Play 2.0 saw a shift towards PC/online and mobile gaming where games were playable whenever and wherever. The biggest innovation was the popularity of free-to-play games as users no longer had to purchase such games as Candy Crush.

Now we are entering Play 3.0 with the growth of new technologies such as blockchain and NFT. In particular, gaming and blockchain are converging to create a new business model where users can make money. This P2E (play to earn) model aims to motivate users to find fun in making money by creating content and producing goods, going beyond simply playing a game. Is this really the future? Or is this a mere fad? Will this be irreversible just like how using a flip phone feels archaic after using a smartphone?

KY: Thank you for your insights. Before we conclude, do you have any final remarks?

JK: Although many years have passed since my time at Stanford, my heart is always in Palo Alto. I try to visit the campus at least once a year when I attend the annual Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. Ten years ago, my friends would always introduce me to tech-related startups like Zoom, Uber, and Box. Recently, however, I have been introduced to companies across a diverse range of industries like DoorDash. As a Stanford graduate, I am proud to see the university's alumni conquering all industries and innovating in all areas on a global scale. Whether your major is Symbolic Systems or Sociology, there are so many ways and methods to transform the world. Who knew that I would end up leading a mobile game company?