Imagination as Technology: Jason Silva's Optimism Unleashed at CES 2020

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More than 175,000 people descended on the Las Vegas strip over the course of this year's CES. As countless devices glowed, folded, hovered, or otherwise demanded wide-eyed attention, it was easy to feel overwhelmed. Even just within the Lenovo experience at CES, the range of innovation on display—from the reimagined Motorola razr to the first-ever foldable PC—was staggering.

As crowds surged through and countless bloggers documented every detail, few likely considered the underlying magic of our technological age. Fortunately, renowned futurist Jason Silva was there to connect the dots.

"I believe that fundamentally tech is human imagination literalized," he said, sitting in the restaurant Lenovo transformed into a showcase for our vision of the future. "It's the human mind turned inside out."



Courtesy thisisjasonsilva.com

This comes across, somehow, as both radical and unpretentious—the sort of elegant statement one wants to be true, particularly if you happen to work for a tech company. There's a deeper, more meaningful promise just behind all the buzz about unprecedented resolutions, exponentially greater computing power, and manufacturing precision.

Silva was almost inhumanly at-ease amidst the maelstrom. He greeted folks with warmth and intimacy, even as they raced over for a selfie with the host of National Geographic's Brain Games. For Silva, technology creates new opportunities to be present and engaged—a position that can seem at first to rail against the device deluge of CES. But technology can be used to reflect and share something otherwise ineffable, he said, like photographers preserving a passing moment.

Truly, opulent casinos and dazzling CES installations were an odd place for philosophizing, but where better to reckon with our complex relationship to technology? As Silva put it, "The world is increasingly tech-centric and tech-loathing." That schism creates a challenge and opportunity, so he creates work with emotional and philosophical resonance designed to change the way people think about tech. Lenovo invited Silva to CES for precisely this perspective—the broad lens on how technology can brighten our futures.JTNDY2VudGVyJTNFJTNDYmxvY2txdW90ZSUyMGNsYXNzJTNEJTIydHdpdHRlci10d2VldCUyMiUyMGRhdGEtdGhlbWUlM0QlMjJkYXJrJTIyJTNFJTNDcCUyMGxhbmclM0QlMjJlbiUyMiUyMGRpciUzRCUyMmx0ciUyMiUzRVBoaWxvc29waGVyJTIwTWFyc2hhbCUyME1jTHVoYW4lMjB3cm90ZSUyQyUyMCVFMiU4MCU5Q2ZpcnN0JTIwd2UlMjBidWlsZCUyMHRoZSUyMHRvb2xzJTJDJTIwdGhlbiUyMHRoZXklMjBidWlsZCUyMHVzJUUyJTgwJTlEJTJDJTIwc28lMjB3ZSUyM

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0UlM0MlMkZzY3JpcHQlM0UlM0MlMkZjZW50ZXIlM0U=For Silva, one of the greatest opportunities we have as humans is to go deep, to be radically present and engaged. This is the *awe* underlying his YouTube channel: a belief in transcendent experiences as a vehicle for transformation.

“I believe, especially in a world with such rising numbers of mental distress, the shortcut to most quickly address those illnesses is through a sort of inverse PTSD experience,” Silva said. “The birth of a child, or seeing the grand canyon, or honestly marveling at a foldable computer screen conceived by human imagination that gives you access to all the world’s information. Everything is framing and interpretation, and the stories we tell matter.”

Still, the idea that screen and software addiction drives us into a more shallow existence is both pervasive and decades old. The pushback is real and a product, in part, of the breakneck pace at which tech evolves and the singular way devices can hijack our brain chemistry, luring us in with the promise of dopamine bursts whenever an alert pings our phones. It doesn’t have to be that way. Silva takes a much more deliberate approach, silencing those alerts and engaging with social media as a choice rather than a compulsion.

“I love the term ‘information diet,’” he said, linking two disparate lifestyle choices: technology and food. Pushing the metaphor, one can consider how food, intrinsically neutral, can both elevate us through deep, singular experiences or tilt into extremes of unhealthy indulgence. “How are you using your social media in a way that’s nourishing?” he asked. “Who do you choose to follow?”

But how often do people use devices thoughtfully and consider their own wellness? How often is that even considered? You’ve got to be in the extreme minority, I said. He countered, “But so are people who eat healthy in this country.”Perhaps, then, we need to rework the

narrative around technology—rebuild our relationship and focus on empowering creation and connection. This is a two-way street, of course, with end-users and tech companies on the hook to encourage habit beyond consumption.

Silva likes to call technology value neutral: “Kind of like fire, right? You can use it for warmth or to cook your food, or you can burn the village next door.” But he readily concedes the reality is more nuanced. He cites Tristan Harris, another deep thinker who challenges tech ethics. In short, the incentive behind our tools matters and design itself has agency and impact. What did the designers intend? A device built to bombard with notifications is likely to do exactly that, while one designed to enhance creative workflows might encourage users to cultivate related skills and habits. Others might reimagine how we multitask or stay focused during meetings.



Video: Watch the video on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jUWZeUAMDM

We enter into relationships of shared influence with our technology. Given that, what responsibility does Lenovo have in designing and building a positive, empowering relationship?

“That’s why I love the ‘Smarter Technology for All’ idea,” Silva said. “It’s an invitation to design our values into the technology itself.”For Lenovo, *smarter* means providing real value and solving the most daunting challenges faced by humanity. *All* means making access foundational to our work, from considering the technology needs of people with disabilities to bringing devices into rural communities desperate for new opportunities.

Talking to Silva, it became impossible not to wonder just how expansive those commitments can be.

“It goes back to Helen Landon Cass: ‘Sell them their dreams,’” Silva said, leaning forward and holding out his phone. “I think of this as an extension of my mind. So rather than focusing on the features or specs, I view it as something that expands what I can do in the world. Technology collapses distance and geography as boundaries.”

With more than 300 million video views across platforms, Silva knows a thing or two about the unprecedented global reach we hold in our hands and often take for granted. “And look,” he continued, “if you make the experience deep, instead of getting that quick hit of dopamine, people might get serotonin or oxytocin and these other feel-good chemicals.”

Maybe the ThinkPad X1 Fold doesn’t inspire awe—but bias aside, come on, how could it not?—but consider the imagination and ingenuity that brought it to life. And one step further, seeing new form factors manifest, what new modes of expression and experience could this device and other breakthroughs create?

Video: Watch the video on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJYfbZizIy4

Stay tuned and we'll figure it out together, as boldly and thoughtfully as possible. As Silva put it: "Are you going to stuff yourself with the junk-food equivalent of content, or are you going to leverage the Library of Alexandria at your fingertips?"

Learn more about Lenovo's commitment to "Smarter Technology for All" here, and relive the highlights of CES here and here. Follow Jason Silva on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and his website.