

## Unit 4 JANE MCGONIGAL

# Gaming Can Make a Better World

### Part 1

. . . This picture **pretty much sums up**<sup>1</sup> why I think games are so essential to the future survival of the human species. Truly. This is a portrait by a photographer named Phil Toledano. He wanted to capture the emotion of gaming, so he set up a camera in front of gamers while they were playing. And this is a classic gaming emotion. Now, if you're not a gamer, you might miss some of the nuance in this photo. You probably see the sense of urgency, a little bit of fear, but intense concentration, deep, deep focus on tackling a really difficult problem.

. . . Now, unfortunately this is more of the face that we see in everyday life now as we try to tackle urgent problems. This is what I call the "I'm Not Good At Life" face, and this is actually me making it. Can you see? Yes. Good. This is actually me making the "I'm Not Good At Life" face. This is a piece of graffiti in my old neighborhood in Berkeley, California, where I did my PhD on why we're better in games than we are in real life. And this is a problem that a lot of gamers have. We feel that we are not as good in reality as we are in games.

And I don't mean just good as in successful, although that's part of it. We do achieve more in game worlds. But I also mean good as in motivated to do something that matters, inspired to collaborate and to cooperate. And when we're in game worlds I believe that many of us become the best

version of ourselves, the most likely to help at a moment's notice, the most likely to **stick with**<sup>2</sup> a problem as long as it takes, to get up after failure and try again. And in real life, when we face failure, when we confront obstacles, we often don't feel that way. We feel overcome, we feel overwhelmed, we feel anxious, maybe depressed, frustrated, or cynical. We never have those feelings when we're playing games, they just don't exist in games.

. . . Gamers are **super**<sup>3</sup>-empowered, hopeful individuals. These are people who believe that they are individually capable of changing the world. And the only problem is that they believe that they are capable of changing virtual worlds and not the real world. That's the problem that I'm trying to solve.

. . . Now, I know you're asking, "How are we going to solve real world problems in games?" Well, that's what I have **devoted**<sup>4</sup> my work to over the past few years, at the **Institute for the Future**<sup>5</sup>. We have this banner in our offices in Palo Alto, and it expresses our view of how we should try to relate to the future. We do not want to try to predict the future. What we want to do is make the future. We want to imagine the **best-case scenario**<sup>6</sup> outcome, and then we want to empower people to make that outcome a reality. We want to imagine epic wins, and then give people the means to achieve the epic win.

<sup>1</sup> To "sum up" something means to explain it succinctly and clearly. Used together with "sums up," the modifier "pretty much" means basically. The two terms are often paired together. Another typical expression is "That pretty much sums it up."

<sup>2</sup> When you "stick with" something you stay committed to doing it.

<sup>3</sup> "Super" is used as a modifier for adjectives to communicate a sort of exaggerated sense of "really."

<sup>4</sup> The verb "devote" means to be wholly committed.

<sup>5</sup> The Institute for the Future (IFTF) is an organization in California with the mission of creating an ideal future today. The organization has a global network of leaders in various fields, and aims to support various projects focused on making a better world. McGonigal is a Research Affiliate at IFTF.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase "best-case scenario" describes a situation with the best possible outcome. The phrase "worst-case scenario" is also commonly used.

## Part 2

I'm just going to very briefly show you three games that I've made that are an attempt to give people the means to create epic wins in their own futures. So, this is World Without Oil. We made this game in 2007. This is an online game in which you try to survive an oil shortage. The oil shortage is fictional, but we put enough online content out there for you to believe that it's real, and to live your real life as if we've run out of oil. So when you come to the game, you sign up, you tell us where you live, and then we give you **real-time**<sup>7</sup> news, videos, **data feeds**<sup>8</sup> that show you exactly how much oil costs, what's not available, how food supply is being affected, how transportation is being affected, if schools are closed, if there is rioting, and you have to figure out how you would live your real life as if this were true. And then we ask you to blog about it, to post videos, to post photos.

We **piloted**<sup>9</sup> this game with 1,700 players in 2007, and we've **tracked**<sup>10</sup> them for the three years since. And I can tell you that this is a transformative experience. Nobody wants to change how they live just because it's good for the world, or because we're supposed to. But if you immerse them in an epic adventure and tell them, "We've run out of oil. This is

an amazing story and adventure for you to go on. Challenge yourself to see how you would survive," most of our players have kept up the habits that they learned in this game.

So, for the next world-saving game, we decided to aim higher: bigger problem than just peak oil. We did a game called Superstruct at the Institute for the Future. And the premise was a supercomputer has calculated that humans have only 23 years left on the planet. This supercomputer was called the Global Extinction Awareness System, of course. We asked people to come online almost like a **Jerry Bruckheimer**<sup>11</sup> movie. You know Jerry Bruckheimer movies, you form a dream team—you've got the astronaut, the scientist, the ex-convict, and they all have something to do to save the world.

But in our game, instead of just having five people on the **dream team**<sup>12</sup>, we said, "Everybody's on the dream team, and it's your job to invent the future of energy, the future of food, the future of health, the future of security, and the future of the social safety net." We had 8,000 people play that game for eight weeks. They came up with 500 **insanely**<sup>13</sup> creative solutions that you can go online, if you **google**<sup>14</sup> Superstruct, and see.

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<sup>7</sup> Something that is "real-time" is happening in the present, at the exact moment you are seeing or watching it. In McGonigal's game, players get fake news updates that are relevant for them in that exact moment in the game.

<sup>8</sup> "Data feeds" refers to updates about news and other relevant information.

<sup>9</sup> When a product is "piloted," it is tested out on a small group before being introduced or sold to a larger market.

<sup>10</sup> When a research study "tracks" its participants, it follows them over a certain period of time to get updates.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Bruckheimer is an American movie director, well known for his action-science fiction movies following a similar storyline of a threatened world saved by an unusual group of people.

<sup>12</sup> The term "dream team" refers to a group working together, made of very talented members. In this case, "dream" is a synonym for ideal or perfect.

<sup>13</sup> McGonigal uses "insanely" here as a modifier meaning extremely.

<sup>14</sup> "Google" is commonly used as a verb to mean search online.

So, finally, the last game, we're launching it March third. This is a game done with the **World Bank Institute**<sup>15</sup>. If you complete the game you will be certified by the World Bank Institute as a Social Innovator, class of 2010. Working with universities all over sub-Saharan Africa, and we are inviting them to learn social innovation skills. We've got a graphic novel, we've got **leveling-up**<sup>16</sup> in skills like local insight, knowledge networking, sustainability, vision, and resourcefulness. I would like to invite all of you to please share this game with young people, anywhere in the world, particularly in developing areas, who might benefit from coming together to try to start to imagine their own **social enterprises**<sup>17</sup> to save the world.

So, I'm going to **wrap up**<sup>18</sup> now. I want to ask a question. What do you think happens next? We've got all these amazing gamers, we've got these games that are kind of

pilots of what we might do, but none of them have saved the real world yet. Well, I hope that you will agree with me that gamers are a human resource that we can use to do real-world work, that games are a powerful platform for change. We have all these amazing superpowers: blissful productivity, the ability to weave a tight social fabric, this feeling of urgent optimism, and the desire for epic meaning.

I really hope that we can come together to play games that matter, to survive on this planet for another century. And that's my hope, that you will join me in making and playing games like this. When I look forward to the next decade, I know two things for sure: that we can make any future we can imagine, and we can play any games we want. So, I say: Let the world-changing games begin. Thank you.

*This is an edited version of McGonigal's 2010 TED Talk. To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.*

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<sup>15</sup> The World Bank Institute is an organization with the goal of reducing global poverty.

<sup>16</sup> In gaming, "leveling-up" happens when a gamer has played enough of one game to get a new skill or weapon or get to a new level of the game. The term is also used outside of the game world to describe doing something to improve yourself or your work situation.

<sup>17</sup> A "social enterprise" is a business that has the main goal of improving a problem in society.

<sup>18</sup> To "wrap up" means to finish. In speeches, the term is often said before giving a final review or summary.