JANE McGONIGAL

Becoming Part of Something Bigger Than Ourselves

Jane McGonigal is a designer of alternate reality video games created to help players confront real-life challenges. Her game SuperBetter is a good example, designed for players to take on health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and brain injury. McGonigal's PhD is in performance studies, and she has taught game theory and design at the San Francisco Art Institute and the University of California, Berkeley. She is a frequent public speaker on the potential value of games; you can view many of her talks and interviews from her website: janemcgonigal.com. This reading is from her 2011 book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World,* a New York Times Best Seller.

Here, McGonigal writes in a journalistic style, with very short paragraphs and frequent use of sentence fragments for stylistic effect (see paras. 8 and 9, for example). However, she still uses scholarly strategies to build her argument, drawing on other scholars' theories to situate her ideas in an academic "conversation." As you read, mark the references to other writers, and take note of the ways she uses these ideas to frame her own examples from *Halo 3*. Use a pen of another color, perhaps, to mark the sentences where you see her clearly articulating her argument. How does her argument build throughout this piece?

McGonigal opens this chapter from her book, titled "Becoming a Part of Something Bigger Than Ourselves," with a long list of statistics that are meant to spur our thinking about the relationship between virtual worlds (in particular, the virtual world of *Halo 3*) and reality. How does the "epic" scale of those numbers support her argument that she develops in the section titled "Epic Context for Heroic Action" about the difference between "value" and "meaning" (paras. 9–12)? As she moves between examples from the video game and her argument about "epic scale" and the power of "awe," pay attention to the places where you find her evidence most persuasive. To what extent does your experience with video game play (or playing other games that have a collective goal) confirm or complicate her claims?

In paragraph 67, McGonigal begins to develop her conclusion by quoting Johan Huizinga's concept that "All play *means* something." How does she build from this insight about collective play to the significance of these virtual-world experiences in the real world? If "reality is broken," as she claims, how exactly might video games offer a fix? Her optimism about the power of gaming isn't shared by everyone; how effectively does she address her critics? What will you take away from this "epic" argument about the power of play?

In April 2009, *Halo 3* players celebrated a collective spine-tingling milestone: 10 billion kills against their virtual enemy, the Covenant. That's roughly one and a half times the total number of every man, woman, and child on earth.

To reach this monumental milestone, *Halo 3* players spent 565 days fighting the third and final campaign in the fictional Great War, protecting earth from an alliance of malevolent aliens seeking to destroy the human race. Together, they averaged 17.5 million Covenant kills a day, 730,000 kills per hour, 12,000 kills a minute. 2

Along the way, they'd assembled the largest army on earth, virtual or otherwise. More than 15 million people had fought on behalf of the science fiction game's United Nations Space Command. That's roughly the total number of active personnel of all twenty-five of the largest armed forces in the real world, combined.[1] 3

Ten billion kills wasn't an incidental achievement, stumbled onto blindly by the gaming masses. *Halo* players made a concerted effort to get there. They embraced 10 billion kills as a symbol of just how much the *Halo* community could accomplish—and they wanted it to be something bigger than anything any other game community had achieved before. So they worked hard to make every single player as good at *Halo 3* as possible. Players shared tips and strategies with each other and organized round-the-clock "co-op," or cooperative, campaign shifts. They called on every registered member of *Halo* online to pitch in: "This could be something big, but we will need YOU to get it done."[2] They treated their mission like an urgent duty. "We know we'll be doing our part," one game blog declared. "Will you?"[3] 4

It's no wonder London *Telegraph* reporter Sam Leith observed in his coverage of the *Halo 3* community that "a big shift has taken place, in recent years, in the way video games are played. What was once generally a solitary activity is now . . . overwhelmingly a communal one."[4] More and more, gamers aren't just in it for themselves. They're in it for each other—and for the thrill of being a part of something bigger. 5

When *Halo* players finally reached their goal, they flooded online forums to congratulate each other and claim their contributions. "I just did some math and with my 32,388 kills I have .00032% of the 10 billion kills," one player wrote. "I feel like I could have contributed more . . . well, on to 100 billion then!"[5] This reaction was typical, and the new 100 billion goal was repeated widely on *Halo* forums. Fresh off one collective achievement, *Halo* players were ready to tackle an even more monumental goal. And they were fully prepared to recruit an even bigger community to do it. As one gamer proposed: "We did that with just a few million gamers. Imagine what we could do with the full force of six billion humans!!"[6] 6

Halo's creators, a Seattle, Washington–based game studio called Bungie, joined in the celebration. They issued a major press release and an open letter to the *Halo* community, emphasizing the teamwork it had taken to get to 10 billion kills: "We've hit the Covenant where it hurts. Made them pay a price for setting foot on our soil. We're glad we've got you by our side, soldier. Mighty fine work. Here's to ten billion more."[7] 7

Perhaps you're thinking to yourself right now: *So?* What's the point? The Covenant isn't real. It's just a game. What have the players actually *done* that's worth celebrating? 8

On one hand, nothing. There's no *value* to a Covenant kill, whether you score one, 10 billion, or even 100 billion of them. Value is a measure of importance and consequence. And even the most die-hard *Halo* fan knows that there's no real importance or consequence to saving the human race from a fictional alien invasion. There's no actual danger being averted. There are no real lives being saved. 9

But on the other hand, just because the kills don't have value doesn't mean they don't have *meaning*. 10

Meaning is the feeling that we're a part of something bigger than ourselves. It's the belief that our actions matter beyond our own individual lives. When something is meaningful, it has significance and worth not just to ourselves, or even to our closest friends and family, but to a much larger group: to a community, an organization, or even the entire human species. 11

Meaning is something we're all looking for more of: more ways to make a difference in the bigger picture, more chances to leave a lasting mark on the world, more moments of awe and wonder at the scale of the projects and communities we're a part of. 12

How do we get more meaning in our lives? It's actually quite simple. Philosophers, psychologists, and spiritual leaders agree: The single best way to add meaning to our lives is to *connect our daily actions to something bigger than ourselves*—and the bigger, the better. As Martin Seligman says, "The self is a very poor site for meaning." We can't *matter* outside of a large-scale social context. "The larger the entity you can attach yourself to," Seligman advises, "the more meaning you can derive."[8] 13

And that's exactly the point of working together in a game like *Halo 3*. It's not that the Covenant kills have value. It's that pursuing a massive goal alongside millions of other people feels good. It feels meaningful. When players dedicate themselves to a goal like 10 billion Covenant kills, they're attaching themselves to a cause, and they're making a significant contribution to it. As the popular gamer site Joystiq reported on the day *Halo* players celebrated their 10 billionth kill: "Now we know for sure. . . . Every kill you get in *Halo 3*'s campaign actually *means* something."[9] 14

To experience *real* meaning, we don't have to contribute something of *real* value. We just have to be given the opportunity to contribute at all. We need a way to connect with others who care about the same massively scaled goal we do, no matter how arbitrary the goal. And we need a chance to reflect on the truly epic scale of what we're doing together. 15

Which gives us one fix for our broken reality: 16

Epic Scale

Compared with games, reality is trivial. Games make us a part of something bigger and give epic meaning to our actions.

"Epic" is the key word here. Blockbuster video games like *Halo*—the kind of games that have a production budget of thirty, forty, or even fifty million dollars—aren't just "something bigger." They're big enough to be *epic*. 17

Epic is one of the most important concepts in gamer culture today. It's how players describe their most memorable, gratifying game experiences. As one game critic writes, "*Halo 3* is epic. It empowers you the way no other game can. It doesn't have moments, but events. Experiences that tickle the soul, sending shivers down the spine."[10] 18

A good working definition for "epic" is something that far surpasses the ordinary, especially in size, scale, and intensity. Something epic is of *heroic proportions*. Blockbuster video games do epic scale better than any other medium of our time, and they're epic in three key ways: 19

They create *epic contexts for action*: collective stories that help us connect our individual gameplay to a much bigger mission.

They immerse us in *epic environments*: vast, interactive spaces that provoke feelings of curiosity and wonder.

And they engage us in *epic projects*: cooperative efforts carried out by players on massive scales, over months or even years.

There's a reason why gamers love epic games. It's not just that bigger is better. It's that bigger is more awe-inspiring. 20

Awe is a unique emotion. According to many positive psychologists, it's the single most overwhelming and gratifying positive emotion we can feel. In fact, neuropsychologist Paul Pearsall calls awe "the orgasm of positive emotions."[11] 21

Awe is what we feel when we recognize that we're in the presence of something bigger than ourselves. It's closely linked with feelings of spirituality, love, and gratitude—and more importantly, a desire to serve. 22

In *Born to Be Good,* Dacher Keltner explains, "The experience of awe is about finding your place in the larger scheme of things. It is about quieting the press of self-interest. It is about folding into social collectives. It is about feeling reverential toward participating in some expansive process that unites us all and that ennobles our life's endeavors."[12] 23

In other words, awe doesn't just *feel* good; it inspires us to *do* good. 24

Without a doubt, it's awe that a *Halo 3* player is feeling when he says that the game sends "shivers down the spine." Spine tingling is one of the classic physiological symptoms of awe—along with chills, goose bumps, and that choked-up feeling in the throat. 25

Our ability to feel awe in the form of chills, goose bumps, or choking up serves as a kind of emotional radar for detecting meaningful activity. Whenever we feel awe, we know we've found a potential source of meaning. We've discovered a real opportunity to be of service, to band together, to contribute to a larger cause. 26

In short, awe is a call to collective action. 27

So it's no accident that *Halo* players are so inclined toward collective efforts. It's the direct result of the game's epic, and awe-inspiring, aesthetic. Today's best game designers are experts at giving individuals the chance to be a part of something bigger—and no one is better at it than the creators *of Halo*. Everything about the *Halo* games—from the plot and the sound track to the marketing and the way the community is organized online—is intentionally crafted to make players feel that their gameplay really means something. And the one simple trick used over and over again is this: always connect the individual to something bigger.

Let's take a closer look at exactly how *Halo* does it.

Epic Context for Heroic Action

> It's five hundred years in the future. The Covenant, a hostile alliance of alien species, is hell-bent on destroying humanity. You are Master Chief Petty Officer John 117—once an ordinary person, now a supersoldier, augmented with biological technologies that give you superhuman speed, strength, intelligence, vision, and reflexes. Your job is to stop the Covenant and save the world.

That's the basic *Halo* story. It's not that different from many other blockbuster video games. As veteran game developer Trent Polack puts it, "To look at the majority of games today, one might think that gamers care only about saving the world." He would know: Some of Polack's previous games have asked players to save the galaxy from malevolent aliens (*Galactic Civilizations II*), save the universe from evil deities (*Demigod*), and save the world from marauding Titans (*Elemental: War of Magic*).

Why *are* so many games about saving the world? In an industry article about the rise of "epic scale" narratives in video games, Polack suggests, "When games give players the epic scope of saving the galaxy, destroying some reawakened ancient evil, or any other classical portrayal of good versus evil on a grand scale, they're fulfilling gamers' power fantasies."[13]

I agree with Polack, but it's important that we be clear on exactly what *kind* of power fantasy is being fulfilled by these save-the-world stories.

Any video game that features a slew of high-powered weapons and gameplay that consists largely of shooting and blowing things up is, at one level, about the aesthetic pleasures of destruction and the positive feelings we get from exerting control over a situation.[14] This is true of any shooter game on the market today. But we don't need an epic story about saving the world to get those pleasures. We can get them quite effectively, and more efficiently, from a simple, plotless game like Atari's *Breakout*. Games that come with epic, save-the-world narratives are using them to help players get a taste of a different kind of power. It's the power to act with meaning: to do something that matters in a bigger picture. The story is the bigger picture; the player's actions are what matters.

As Polack explains, "Story sets the stage for meaning. It frames the player's actions. We, as designers, are not telling, we're not showing, we're informing the *doing*—the actions that players engage in and the feats they undergo." These feats make up the player's story, and the story is ultimately what has meaning. 34

Not every game feels like a larger cause. For a game to feel like a *cause*, two things need to happen. First, the game's story needs to become a collective context for action—shared by other players, not just an individual experience. That's why truly epic games are always attached to large, online player communities—hundreds of thousands or millions of players acting in the same context together, and talking to each other on forums and wikis about the actions they're taking. And second, the actions that players take inside the collective context need to feel like service: Every effort by one player must ultimately benefit all the other players. In other words, every individual act of gameplay has to eventually add up to something bigger. 35

Halo is probably the best game in the world at turning a story into a collective context and making personal achievement feel like service. 36

Like many other blockbuster video games, *Halo* has extensive online community features: discussion forums, wikis, and file sharing (so that players can upload and share videos of their finest gameplay moments). But Bungie and Xbox have taken it much further than these traditional context-building tools. They've given players groundbreaking tools for tracking the magnitude of their collective effort and unprecedented opportunities to reflect on the epic scale of their collective service. 37

Every *Halo* player has their own story of making a difference, and it's documented online in their "personal service record." It's an exhaustive record and analysis of their individual contributions to the *Halo* community and to the Great War effort—or as Bungie calls it, "Your entire *Halo* career." 38

The service record is stored on the official Bungie website, and it's fully viewable by other players. It lists all the campaign levels you've completed, the medals you've earned, and the achievements you've unlocked. It also includes a minute-by-minute, play-by-play breakdown of *every single* Halo *level or match you've ever played online.* For many *Halo* players, that means thousands of games over the past six years—ever since the *Halo* series first went online in 2004—all laid out and perfectly documented in one place. 39

like professional chess

And it's more than just statistics. There are data visualizations of every possible kind: interactive charts, graphs, heat maps. They help you learn about your own strengths and weaknesses: where you make the most mistakes, and where you consistently score your biggest victories; which weapons you're most proficient with, and which you're weakest with; even which teammates help you play better, and which don't. 40

Thanks to Bungie's exhaustive data collection and sharing, everything you do in *Halo* adds up to something bigger: a multiyear history of your own personal service to the Great War.

But it's not just your history—it's much bigger than that. You're contributing to the Great War effort alongside millions of other players, who also have service records online. And *service* really is a crucial concept here. A personal service record isn't just a profile. It's a history of a player's contributions to a larger organization. The fact that your profile is called a "service record" is a constant reminder. When you play *Halo* online, rack up kills, and accomplish your missions, you're *contributing*. You're actively creating new moments in the history of the Great War.[15]

The moments all add up. The millions of individual personal service records taken together tell the real story of *Halo*, a collective history of the Great War. They connect all the individual gamers into a community, a network of people fighting for the same cause. And the unprecedented scale of data collected and shared in these service records underscores just how epic the players' collective story is. Bungie recently announced to players that its personal-service-record servers handled more than 1.4 *quadrillion* bytes of data requests from players in the past nine months. That's 1.4 petabytes in computer science terms.

To put that number in perspective, experts have estimated that the entire written works of humankind, from the beginning of recorded history, in all languages, adds up to about 50 petabytes of data.[16] *Halo* players aren't quite there yet—but it's not a bad start, considering that they've been playing together online for only six short years, compared to all of recorded human history.

One of the best examples of innovative collective context building is the *Halo* Museum of Humanity, an online museum that purports to be from the twenty-seventh century, dedicated to "all who fought bravely in the Great War." Of course, it's not a real museum; it was developed by the Xbox marketing group to build a more meaningful context for *Halo 3*.

The museum features a series of videos done in the classic style of Ken Burns' *Civil War* series: interviews with Great War veterans and historians, images from Covenant battles, all set to a hymnal score. As one blogger wrote, "The videos in the *Halo* Museum of Humanity seem like they could have been pulled straight from The History Channel. . . . It's nice to see video game lore treated with this kind of reverence."[17]

Reverence—the expression of profound awe, respect and love, or veneration is usually an emotion we reserve for very big, very serious things. But that was precisely the point of the *Halo* Museum of Humanity: to acknowledge how seriously *Halo* players take their favorite game, and to inspire the kind of epic emotions that have always been the best part of playing it.

It's worked. The video series packs a real emotional wallop, despite the fact that, in the words of one player, "it's meant to honor heroes that never existed."[18] Brian Crecente, a leading games journalist, wrote, "It left me with chills."[19] And online forums and blogs were full of comments expressing heartfelt emotion. One player put it best when he wrote, "Really poignant. They've made something real out of fiction."[20]

It's not that the museum is such a believable artifact from the future. It's that the *emotions* it provokes are believable. The online Museum of Humanity is a place to reflect on the extreme scale of the *Halo* experience: the years of service, the millions of players involved. The Great War isn't real, but you really do feel awe when you think about the scale of the effort so many different people have made to fight it.

In the end, as one player sums it up, "*Halo* proves that you can have a shooter game with a story that really means something. It draws you in and makes you feel like you're part of something bigger."[21]

But *Halo* isn't just a bigger story. It's also a bigger environment—and this brings us to our next strategy for connecting players to something bigger: built epic environments, or highly immersive spaces that are intentionally designed to bring out the best in us.

Epic Environments—Or How to Build a Better Place

An epic environment is a space that, by virtue of its extreme scale, provokes a profound sense of awe and wonder.

There are plenty of natural epic environments in the world: Mount Everest, the Grand Canyon, Victoria Falls, the Great Barrier Reef, for example. These spaces humble us; they remind us of the power and grandeur of nature, and make us feel small by comparison.

A *built* epic environment is different: It's not the work of nature, but rather a feat of design and engineering. It's a *human* accomplishment. And that makes it both humbling and empowering at the same time. It makes us feel smaller as individuals, but it also makes us feel capable of much bigger things, together. That's because a built epic environment—like the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, or Machu Picchu—is the result of extreme-scale collaboration. It's proof of the extraordinary scale of things humans can accomplish together.

Halo 3 is, without a doubt, such an environment.

The game consists of thirty-four different playing environments spanning more than two hundred thousand light-years of virtual space. From one level to the next, you might find yourself traveling from the crowded market city of Voi, Kenya, to the Ark, a desert far, far beyond the limits of our own Milky Way galaxy.

It's not just how big the *Halo* playing field is; it's also how diverse and carefully rendered the environments are. As Sam Leith observes, "The building of a game like *Halo 3* is a work of electronic engineering

comparable in scale to the building of a medieval cathedral." It took Bungie three years to craft this gaming cathedral, with a team of more than 250 artists, designers, writers, programmers, and engineers collaborating together. "You get a sense of the scale and intricacy of the task," Leith continues, "by considering the sound effects alone: The game contains 54,000 pieces of audio and 40,000 lines of dialogue. There are 2,700 different noises for footsteps alone, depending on whose foot is stepping on what."[22]

58 And that's what players are appreciating when they get goose bumps from *Halo*: the unprecedented achievement it represents as a work of computer design and engineering. Gamers aren't so much in awe of the environment itself as they are in awe of the work and dedication and vision required to create it. In this regard, *Halo* players join a long tradition in human culture of feeling awe, wonder, and gratitude toward the builders of epic environments.

59 The very first epic environments were constructed more than eleven thousand years ago, during the Neolithic period, or the New Stone Age. In other words, six thousand years before humans first used the written word, they were already building physical spaces to inspire awe and cooperation.

60 The world's oldest known example of an epic built environment is the Gobekli Tepe. Discovered less than two decades ago in southeastern Turkey, it's believed to predate Stonehenge by a staggering six thousand years. It's a twenty-five-acre arrangement of at least twenty stone circles, between ten and thirty meters in diameter each, made from monolithic pillars three meters high.

61 In comparison with other stone houses, tombs, and temples from the same period and location, this building was constructed on an extreme scale: It was much, *much* bigger, taller, and more formidable in its design than anything archaeologists had seen before at the time of its discovery. One archaeologist on the scene described it as "a place of worship on an unprecedented scale—humanity's first 'cathedral on a hill.'"[23]

62 And it wasn't just the scale of the building—it was its particular winding design. The Gobekli Tepe features an intricate series of passageways that would lead visitors through the dark to a cross-shaped inner sanctum, almost like a labyrinth. This particular architecture seems designed intentionally to trigger interest and curiosity, alongside a kind of trembling wonder. What would be around the next corner? Where would the path take them? They would need to hold on to other visitors for support, feeling their way through the darkness.

63 Crucially, the Gobekli Tepe wasn't an isolated example. As researchers have discovered since, epic stone cathedrals were common across the Neolithic landscape. Most recently, in August 2009, archaeologists working in northern Scotland unearthed the ruins of a 5,330-square-foot stone structure with twenty-foot ceilings and sixteen-foot-thick walls, also of a labyrinthine design, and also dating back to the New Stone Age.[24]

"A building of this scale and complexity was here to amaze, to create a sense of awe in the people who saw this place," Nick Card, director of the archaeological dig, said to reporters when the ancient cathedral was first unearthed.

In the wake of unearthing these types of structures all over the planet, archaeologists have recently proposed a startling theory: that these stone cathedrals served an important purpose in the evolution of human civilization. They actually inspired and enabled human society to become dramatically more cooperative, completely reinventing civilization as it once existed. In an in-depth report in *Smithsonian* magazine on these Neolithic cathedrals, Andrew Curry wrote:

> Scholars have long believed that only after people learned to farm and live in settled communities did they have the time, organization and resources to construct temples and support complicated social structures. But. . . [perhaps] it was the other way around: the extensive, coordinated effort to build the monoliths literally laid the groundwork for the development of complex societies.[25]

In fact, as Curry quotes one scientist in his article, "You can make a good case these constructs are the real origin of complex Neolithic societies."[26]

No wonder epic environments inspire gamers today to collective efforts. They have been inspiring humans to work together to do amazing things for eleven thousand years and counting. . . .

Johan Huizinga, the great twentieth-century Dutch philosopher of human play, once said, "All play *means* something."[27] Today, thanks to the increased scale of game worlds and advances in collective game design, gameplay often means something *more.* Game developers today are honing their ability to create awe-inspiring contexts for collective effort and heroic service. As a result, game communities are more committed than ever to setting extreme-scale goals and generating epic meaning.

When our everyday work feels trivial, or when we can't easily be of direct service to a larger cause, games can fulfill an important need for us. As we play games at an epic scale, we're increasing our ability to rise to the occasion, to inspire awe, and to take part in something bigger than ourselves.

Earlier in this chapter I quoted a *Halo* player who wondered, "Imagine what we could do with the full force of six billion humans!!"

Of course, there aren't enough Xboxes in the world to do it. Nor could everyone afford them, of course. But it does make for an interesting thought experiment: What *could* you do in a game like *Halo 3* if you had the full force of humanity playing together?

On one hand, this is an absurd idea to even consider. What would be the point of assembling 6 billion people to wage a fictional war?

But on the other: Can you imagine what it would feel like to have 72
6 billion people fighting *on the same side* of a fictional war?

I think it's pretty clear that such an effort would have real meaning, 73
even if it failed to generate any real-world value. If you were able to focus the attention of the entire planet on a single goal, even if just for one day, and even if it just involved dispatching aliens in a video game, it would be a truly awe-inspiring occasion. It would be the single biggest collective experience ever undertaken in the whole of human history. It would give the whole earth goose bumps.

That's the epic scale that gamers are capable of thinking on. That's the 74
scale gamers are ready to work at.

Gamers can imagine 6 billion people coming together to fight a fic- 75
tional enemy, for the sheer awe and wonder of it. They are ready to work together on extreme scales, toward epic goals, just for the spine-tingling joy of it. And the more we seek out that kind of happiness as a planet, the more likely we are to save it—not from fictional aliens, but from apathy and wasted potential.

Jean M. Twenge, a professor of psychology and the author of *Gen- 76*
eration Me, has persuasively argued that the youngest generations today—particularly anyone born after 1980—are, in her words, "more miserable than ever before." Why? Because of our increased cultural emphasis on "self-esteem" and "self-fulfillment." But real fulfillment, as countless psychologists, philosophers, and spiritual leaders have shown, comes from fulfilling commitments to others. We want to be esteemed in the eyes of others, not for "who we are," but rather for what we've done that really matters.

The more we focus on ourselves and avoid a commitment to others, 77
Twenge's research shows, the more we suffer from anxiety and depression. But that doesn't stop us from trying to make ourselves happy alone. We mistakenly think that by putting ourselves first, we'll finally get what we want. In fact, true happiness comes not from thinking *more* of ourselves, but rather from thinking *less* of ourselves—from seeing the truly small role we play in something much bigger, much more important than our individual needs.

Joining any collective effort and embracing feelings of awe can help 78
us unlock our potential to lead a meaningful life and to leave a meaningful mark on the world.

Even if it's a virtual world we're leaving our mark on, we're still learn- 79
ing what it feels like to be of service to a larger cause. We're priming our brains and bodies to value and to seek out epic meaning as an emotional reward. And as recent research suggests, the more we enjoy these rewards in game worlds, the more likely we may be to seek them out in real life.

Three scientific studies published in 2009 by a consortium of research- 80
ers from eight universities in the United States, Japan, Singapore, and

Malaysia studied the relationship between time spent playing games that require "helpful behavior" and the gamers' willingness to help others in everyday life. One study focused on children age thirteen and younger, another on teenagers, and the third on college students. The researchers worked with more than three thousand young gamers in total, and in all three studies they reached the same conclusion: Young people who spend more time playing games in which they're required to help each other are significantly more likely to help friends, family, neighbors, and even strangers in their real lives.[28]

Although these studies weren't specifically looking at epic-scale games, the core findings seem likely to remain consistent, or even increase, at larger scales. As Brad Bushman, one coauthor of the studies and a professor of communications and psychology at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, puts it, "These findings suggest there is an upward spiral of prosocial gaming and helpful behavior."[29] In other words, the more we help in games, the more we help in life. And so there's good reason to believe that the more we learn to enjoy serving epic causes in game worlds, the more we may find ourselves contributing to epic efforts in the real world.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow famously said, "It isn't normal to know what we want. It is a rare and difficult psychological achievement."[30] But today's best games give us a powerful tool for achieving exactly that rare kind of self-knowledge.

Games are showing us exactly what we want out of life: more satisfying work, better hope of success, stronger social connectivity, and the chance to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. With games that help us generate these four rewards every day, we have unlimited potential to raise our own quality of life. And when we play these games with friends, family, and neighbors, we can enrich the lives of people we care about.

So games are teaching us to see what really makes us happy—and how to become the best versions of ourselves. But can we apply that knowledge to the real world?

By supporting our four essential human cravings, and by providing a reliable source of flow and fiero, the gaming industry has gone a long way toward making us happier and more emotionally, resilient—but only up to a point. We haven't learned how to enjoy our *real lives* more thoroughly. Instead, we've spent the last thirty-five years learning to enjoy our *game lives* more thoroughly.

Instead of fixing reality, we've simply created more and more attractive alternatives to the boredom, anxiety, alienation, and meaninglessness we run up against so often in everyday life. It's high time we start applying the lessons of games to the design of our everyday lives. We need to

engineer *alternate* realities: new, more gameful ways of interacting with the real world and living our real lives.

Fortunately, the project of making alternate realities is already under way.

NOTES

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