





Jane McGonigal welcomes 500 guests to the New York Public Library, which opened its doors for an all-night session of McGonigal's quest-adventure "Find the Future: The Game."

By Peter Hartlaub

Jane the Concussion Killer ended her battle against evil years ago, but See Jane Run is still vanquishing foes.

Both are the alter egos of video game advocate Jane McGonigal, whose slow recovery from a head injury was inspiration to turn wellness into a hero-themed game called "SuperBetter." With the concussion symptoms gone and migraines held at bay, McGonigal has resumed running. She's pursuing video-game-style achievements and eventually an "epic win," which should come later this year when she completes the last in a series of half marathons.

The San Francisco author and game researcher is taking "SuperBetter" global this month, as a free online game and app that launches on Friday. With partners, funding and a network of users who have already signed up, she's hoping "SuperBetter" can help people on their own heroic journeys to tackle depression, obesity and other health issues.

"SuperBetter" is fundamentally about a mind shift," McGonigal says. "It's about claiming your power to be in charge of how you spend your time and energy, and focusing it on the things that matter the most to you. Focusing on things that will bring real happiness, real well-being."

And if that means coming up with a tough-sounding superhero name and recruiting your friends and family as sidekicks? Just part of the fun.

Fun and games seem to follow McGonigal wherever she goes. Her hair is a blond fountain of curls, and she has little use for muted colors. She comes to her Chronicle photo shoot wearing a printed silk Leifsdottir dress and new sparkly green and gold Miia Mia earrings — which match the lightning bolts of the "SuperBetter" logo.

McGonigal, 34, says her fearless fashion sense comes from video games, which she's been playing since she was a child growing up in New Jersey. Her parents were schoolteachers who encouraged reading and following her passions, which included writing and creating programs on a Commodore 64. As a doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley in the early 2000s, she felt the need to look "serious." But she quickly realized that in her area of expertise, it's OK to come as you are.

"I remember the first year at the Game Developers Conference I wore these big red giant knee-high boots," McGonigal says. "Nobody cared. You can wear anything you love, because that's what you do in

Cover Story

STEP UP YOUR GAME

JANE MCGONIGAL, WHO CREATED A VIDEO GAME TO HELP HER RECOVER FROM A SERIOUS INJURY, SAYS 'SUPERBETTER' CAN ASSIST IN THE FIGHT AGAINST OBESITY AND DEPRESSION.



McGonigal addresses the Technology, Entertainment, Design conference, "SuperBetter" is being offered free online starting Friday.

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JANE MCGONIGAL

games. You make yourself who you want to be."

She was an advocate for the concept of "gamification" — using games to solve real-world challenges — then became a public face with her 2011 best-seller "Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World" (Penguin Press). McGonigal's ease in addressing non-gaming audiences (Google her memorable 2011 appearance on "The Colbert Report") made her bold statements easier to take seriously. Among other theories, McGonigal thinks we're going to see a game designer or re-

searcher win the Nobel Prize. "Reality Is Broken" talks about solving global problems with games. Among the projects she has been involved with is World Without Oil, where a group of nearly 2,000 players simulated a peak oil crisis that took some near-apocalyptic turns before humanity prevailed.

"SuperBetter" may seem like a step back in scope, but McGonigal says it is a natural progression. "Reality Is Broken" talks about adopting the stimulating challenges and rewards of video games when tackling real-life problems. "I still believe really strongly

that gamers can solve some of the world's toughest challenges, but some of the world's toughest challenges are very personal," she says. "Things like depression and obesity are global challenges."

McGonigal, who suffered a serious concussion in 2009 when she hit her head on a cabinet door, created "SuperBetter" as a way to jumpstart a slow recovery. She named herself Jane the Concussion Killer, recruited allies (friends and family to work as a support group) and took aim at the specific behaviors that were slowing her recovery. Inspired by video games, she

translated healthy accomplishments into power-ups, superhero points and medals — all in the pursuit of recovery, called an "epic win."

Fans who read about "SuperBetter" on McGonigal's blog and in her book wanted to try it themselves. She heard from readers who used the "SuperBetter" template to accomplish everything from getting a job to helping manage asthma.

"It was very urgent," she remembers. "The feedback was inspiring. People were writing, 'I want a version for my son.' 'I want a version for my wife.' It just felt like I was being called to focus on that."

Funding from the Ardmore Institute of Health helped make the project a reality. Starting Friday, anyone can set up their "secret headquarters" at the "SuperBetter" site (www.superbetter.com). "Quit smoking," "Psoriasis" and "Stroke" are three of the boxes first-time users can check. She's hoping a lot of people check "Other," and the project expands organically.

McGonigal says she can't wait for the launch. In the meantime, See Jane Run is hanging out with her Shetland sheepdog, Meche (named for a character in the LucasArts adventure game "Grim Fandango"), and hitting the pavement every day with her husband, Kiyash Monsef, a producer, director and collaborator on several projects.

She hopes to add the half marathons to a checklist of epic wins, including going vegan and giving up caffeine. She may find additional help from the book her twin sister, Kelly McGonigal, a psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University just published titled "The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It" (Avery; 272 pages, \$26).

The author and gamer hesitates to talk about other epic wins on her list. She doesn't want people to think "SuperBetter" is solely about becoming aggressively health oriented.

"One of my early wins was to spend the day not in bed," McGonigal says, talking about the early days of her concussion. "The epic win is whatever is aspirational to you. We don't tell you what your epic win should be. We're not your doctors, we're not your mom. We're more like a partner in finding what's reasonable and valuable to you."

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SuperBetter: Start your own "SuperBetter" or read more about the project at www.superbetter.com.