

She's Playing Games With Your Lives

HER MOVE Jane McGonigal promotes her game SuperBetter at SXSW Interactive in Austin, Tex.



BEN SKLAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By BRUCE FEILER

THESE days, games aren't just for fun anymore. There was a time, not that long ago, when games lived in the game cabinet. The canon included Monopoly, Scrabble, Risk, a deck of cards and a backgammon set. Over the last 25 years, the game cabinet has been slowly replaced with the game console, the computer, the smartphone and now the tablet. Games became ubiquitous, but they were still mostly for fun. Now games are trying to make another big leap, from the world of recreation to the world of deadly serious. A rash of new games seeks to help you lose weight, save energy, cope with your chemo or cut back your drinking. The game cabinet is invading the kitchen cabinet, the medicine cabinet and the liquor cabinet.

THIS LIFE

The person leading this charge is a 34-year-old with a Ph.D. in performing arts, dyed strawberry blond hair, a wardrobe that makes her look like Laura Ashley's goth granddaughter, and a riveting personal tale about how a bump to her head led her to invent a new way to save your life.

Jane McGonigal is a cross between Tim Ferriss and Kelly Osbourne. SuperBetter, her new online game that was introduced last month, is designed to help users face down personal challenges, from getting in shape to getting over a breakup. And like everything associated with its designer, the game comes with a wave of publicity and skepticism.

Ms. McGonigal grew up in Moorestown, N.J., along with her identical twin sister, Continued on Page 8

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, APRIL 29, 2012

Playing Games With Your Lives

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Kelly, in a highly competitive environment that had Jane writing young-adult novels, programming on a Commodore 64 and becoming a nationwide debater. "I was super-geeky," she recalled, saying that her first date was a system operator on a dial-up bulletin board.

Games were always part of her life, whether it was forcing her boyfriend to perform elaborate courting rituals or solving an online puzzle with the homecoming queen. "The best way to describe my sister," said Kelly McGonigal, a psychologist at Stanford, "is she decides what's interesting, then convinces everyone else it's interesting, too."



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UP IN ARMS A receptive crowd for Jane McGonigal at SXSW Interactive in Austin, Tex. Left, a scene from her game SuperBetter.

told her husband, Kiyash Monsef, a documentary filmmaker. Within 24 hours she was experiencing slurred speech, headaches, nausea and vertigo. She couldn't read, write or leave her bed.

Doctors diagnosed a concussion and told her she'd be better in a week. A week later she wasn't, and they told her to wait a month. A month later she wasn't better, and they told her to wait three. At this point she became suicidal. "My mind was telling me I wanted to die," she said. Finally she announced, "I am either going to kill myself or turn this into a game."

She asked her family and friends to call her every day with missions to complete, like look outside the window and enjoy the view, and walk a few steps farther than yesterday. She devised a character, Jane the Concussion Slayer, based on her childhood icon, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Forbidden from drinking coffee, caffeine became a "bad guy"; baking cookies for the baristas downstairs was a source of points. She called her game SuperBetter.

"The main thing that worked was I stopped feeling helpless," she said. "It made me feel optimistic and like I had agency."

All of this can strike a nongamer as a bit much, particularly for anyone who's manage to raise children, grieve for a loved one or survive an illness without techniques from Words With Friends. Writing in Slate last year, Heather Chaplin described SuperBetter as sad. "What, you couldn't just pick up the phone?" she asked.

But for a generation raised on gaming, SuperBetter has clear appeal. And what's the downside? Ms. McGonigal raised \$1 million and has expanded SuperBetter into an elaborate online game. Users identify a problem they're focusing on, like getting over a breakup, sleeping better or reducing stress, and are given a "power pack" of activities to do.

SuperBetter includes detailed scientific explanations for its tasks (Kelly McGonigal wrote much of the material), but it eschews traditional approaches. "Ninja weight loss," for instance, forbids you from dieting and encourages you to sneak up on weight loss by writing down which foods make you feel energized or to exercise a little more. Ms. McGonigal said one test user dropped her goal of losing 20 pounds and set a new goal of running a 5K.

"What I really want to do is help people suffer less," she said. "What games do successfully is help you tap into certain gamer traits like optimism, resilience and learning from failure that are really useful to have when you're tackling a tough challenge. It's because gamers develop these giant calluses that help you work harder in the face of failure."

Speaking of which, what happens if Ms. McGonigal, who according to her sister has been taking charge and being No. 1 since she was in kindergarten, has a product that doesn't catch on as she hopes?

"Oh, I'm not worried," Jane McGonigal said. "I'm a gamer. I'm used to failing."

After graduating from Fordham and working briefly in theater in New York, Ms. McGonigal moved to Berkeley to seek a graduate degree in the intersection of physics and performing arts. She began dabbling in the nascent field of alternate reality games: large-scale interactive narratives, from scavenger hunts to elaborate chases, involving players in multiple cities.

After watching a group of alternate-reality players step forward after 9/11 and try to use their problem-solving capacities to penetrate Al Qaeda, she switched her studies to focus on gaming. Soon, she was designing these games herself.

Her high-profile ventures included World Without Oil, a six-week simulation where players had to survive an imaginary oil shortage, and EVOKE, a futuristic game designed for the World Bank in which players support global efforts to ease poverty.

The popular term for such initiatives is "gamification," using techniques from gaming, including multiple levels, points, badges and leader boards, to address real-world problems. As Kris Duggan, the chief executive of a company that uses gaming techniques for corporations, told The New York Times in February, "People use gamification to measure and influence user behavior to meet their business goals."

But Ms. McGonigal bristles at the term. "I don't do 'gamification,' and I'm not prepared to stand up and say I think it works," she said. "I don't think anybody should make games to try to motivate somebody to do something they don't want to do. If the game is not about a goal you're intrinsically motivated by, it won't work."

Whatever name you use, Ms. McGonigal suddenly found herself at the tip of a spear of the gaming industry just as it was exploding around the world. Gaming generated \$60 billion by 2010 and is projected to reach \$70 billion by 2015. Three-quarters of American households play computer and video games. Ms. McGonigal's counterintuitive message was that games are actually good for you, and she wielded considerable evidence to show how they do everything from promote creativity to reduce depression.

As she said in a widely viewed TED talk in 2010, the planet spends 3 billion hours a

week gaming. "If we want to solve problems like hunger, poverty, climate change, global conflict and obesity," she said, that number should balloon to 21 billion.

After that, she became known as the queen of games. "You know that old saying the best way to predict the future is to make it?" she said. "I got out there as an evangelist for this idea and said it would only happen if people invest and experiment."

Her sister was not the least bit surprised by Ms. McGonigal's popularity. "The thing about my sister is, she was always Number 1 in everything," she said. "Jane is the

'I am either going to kill myself or turn this into a game.'

kind of person who would be walking down the street and suddenly end up having lunch with the mayor."

But fame comes with a downside. Last year, Ms. McGonigal expanded on her views in a book, "Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World." The first half looks at gaming through the prism of positive psychology and discusses its ability to make users happier; the second half discusses how gaming techniques can "fix what is wrong with the real world."

The critics were waiting like, well, angry birds. In The Times Book Review, William Saletan lambasted her idea that gaming could make hauling garbage or emptying hospital bedpans fun. "This work isn't designed for your pleasure or stimulation," he wrote. "It just needs to be done."

Andrew Klavan, in The Wall Street Journal, was even harsher. "Ms. McGonigal's notions about how to enliven what gamers call 'RL' ('real life') run the gamut from shallow to, well, that's it," he said, adding, "She writes like someone who has never seen a Shakespeare play or volunteered at a soup kitchen or fallen in love."

By that point Ms. McGonigal had moved on to her most personal project. In July 2009, two months before her book was due, she bent down to pick up some papers in her office and hit her head on a cabinet on the way up. "That wasn't good at all," she

Bruce Feiler's newest book, "All Happy Families: The Secrets of Successful Families," is to be published next year. This Life appears monthly.