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By

S. L. Mintz /

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Can Video Games Solve Big World Problems?

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As the father of two sons I have spent a lot of hours waging war against video games, armed with statistics predicting the ruinous effects on young minds. I frequently recall a *New Yorker* cartoon showing two parents gazing at a son clearly intoxicated by virtual activity. Thought bubbles describe their high hopes for his career, sounding something like "Help wanted: Avid video game player with quick reactions and opposable thumbs. \$150k a year."

Maybe it wasn't so far fetched as I thought.

In [this TED lecture](#), video-game designer Jane McGonigal puts video games in a much more hopeful light. With feisty confidence, McGonigal starts with arresting statistics. By age 21, an average gamer logs 10,000 hours - roughly equivalent to all the time spent in school from fifth grade through high school, with perfect attendance. Worldwide, 500 million gamers spend three billion hours every week at controllers hoping for "epic wins," a victory so great that it exceeds expectation. To me, this just sounded like three billion hours that gamers will never get back.

Moreover, since the first version of World of Warcraft appeared, gamers have spent all told 5.93 million years waging virtual wars. That's just about the number of years that have elapsed since our human ancestors first stood up. And McGonigal predicts that the gamer cadres will triple in the next decade.

But wait a nanosecond, says McGonigal, who directs game research and development at the [Institute for the Future](#). There is a positive spin on the same data. By her lights, people don't spend *too much* time playing video games. They spend too little. For the world to survive lurking known and unknown 21st century challenges, from global warming to rampant disease and food shortages, McGonigal advocates a seven-fold increase in time spent video gaming, to 21 billion hours per week.

Think about four universal traits that video games and players exhibit, according to IFF research - traits worth imbuing in workers anywhere:

- Urgent optimism, or a desire to tackle obstacles accompanied by reasonable hope of success;
- Social fabric, or the weaving of relationships beyond usual borders with shared rules and implicit trust, irrespective of outcomes;
- Blissful productivity, or evidence that people enjoy being productive when their efforts can shape end results;
- Epic meaning, or the attraction to awe-inspiring missions with planetary stakes.

Imagine, says McGonigal, billions of hours every week devoted to solving planetary problems. Games mobilize people to compress millions of years of learning into a decade. If, as the [author Malcomb Gladwell](#) asserts in *Outliers*, 10,000 hours at anything is a prerequisite for great accomplishment, then an army of 21-year-olds is ready to do great things once directed toward important problems.

Toward that noble end, McGonigal and her IFF compatriots pioneer "[alternate reality](#)" video games (ARG) rooted in real world problem solving. "[World Without Oil](#)" simulates the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis, replete with a citizen nerve center that tracks and shares solutions. Players

create personal stories via any medium from email to blogposts to podcasts, and the game bestows daily rewards for excellence. McGonigal has also created "[Cruel 2 B Kind](#)" - "a game of benevolent assassination" and "I Love Bees," a viral hit one detected in a trailer for the video game Halo. (Note: A scary "I Love Bees" home page suggests a countdown to cataclysm. It's part of the game.)

Harnessing video games to rescue the world sounds great. But at the risk of sounding old fashioned, to me something fundamental is still missing. Daylight.

S.L. Mintz covers finance and investment strategy and was a writer of the best-selling Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission Report.
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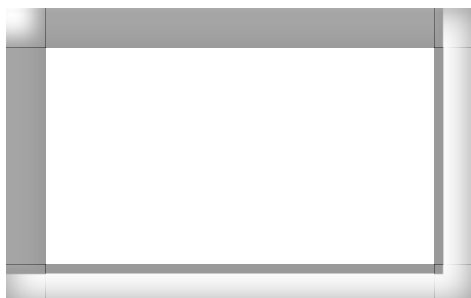


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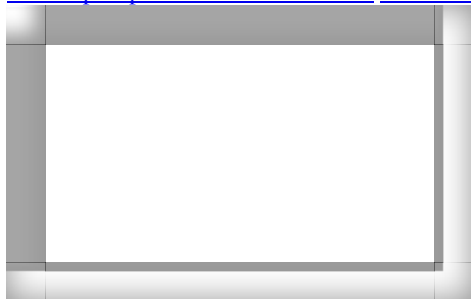


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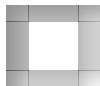
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