

High Score



Credit Illustration by Brian Rea

Awful days, like childhood summers, flow together in a vague, compounding blur. Could your bad luck have begun on Monday, when a jumbo bottle of shampoo fell on your foot? Or were you fine until Tuesday, when your charming dinner partner—you were on a promising second date—made an excuse and bailed after the appetizers? Wednesday, fumbling to take an ill-timed call from your impatient boss, you dropped your smartphone in the toilet. By the time you got it fixed, on Thursday, you were quarrelling with your best friend, who did not appreciate your real talk on the subject of her fiancé. Now it's Friday, and you're due to give a terrifying presentation in three hours. Ragged and frayed, you leave the office for a cup of coffee and are served by a barista who is

showing all the symptoms of bird flu. While he coughs and doodles Art Nouveau leaves in your cappuccino foam, you discover that your credit card no longer works, and that you're down to one last dollar in your back pocket. Life isn't good.

Does the universe hate you, or are you simply coming at it the wrong way? What if, like Jason assembling his Argonauts, you made a competition of your needs and claimed your obstacles as part of an elaborate game? You have some strategies:

1. Challenge yourself.
2. Collect and activate power-ups.
3. Find and battle the bad guys.
4. Seek out and complete quests.
5. Recruit your allies.
6. Adopt a secret identity.
7. Go for an epic win.

When the bottle of shampoo lands on your metatarsals, you can turn the mishap into a game: your objective is to get from your home to your office in twenty-eight minutes, without once bending your painfully stiff foot. When your date abandons you, you might speedily identify a bad guy—in this case, the Monster of Feeling Boring and Unattractive—and spend the rest of the week battling it. You decide that this bad guy requires “adapting,” by going on dates that show your most exciting qualities (you are a swell ice-skater), and “resisting,” by buying smarter, more empowering date clothes. Boom! The monster is now in retreat.

On to your drowning phone. To fortify yourself, you enlist your tech-savvy colleague Daphne as an ally. “I am on a mission not to miss a call for twenty-four hours,” you tell her, “but I need your help to win!” True to form, Daphne redirects your cell-phone number to your laptop. Repairing your relationship with your best friend is trickier, so you frame it as a quest. Every day for the next week, you will find a different photo of you and your friend, write a little essay on the moment it depicts, and send these to her through the mail. The quest will make you better at expressing your appreciation, and may have the welcome side effect of healing your dispute.

And your cappuccino? This is a great time for power-ups: actions that make you sharper, healthier, more connected. Jogging is a power-up for you. “I need some cash—I’ll be right back!” you say, racing out to find an A.T.M. Another power-up is yogurt—its probiotics cue your brain to release anxiety-reducing neurotransmitters. Now you’re feeling potent. When you get back to the office, you assume your heroic secret identity, the Chipper Chief of PowerPoint Presentations. The Chipper Chief has a catchphrase (“Just in the click of time!”) and a theme song (“Slide Away”), and, after bucking yourself up with these supports, you stride into the conference room and give your talk with confidence. Epic win!

The idea that life’s challenges can be turned into a game in seven steps is the premise of Jane McGonigal’s “SuperBetter” (Penguin), a new book that seeks to bridge the gap between video-game culture and what is now called happiness research. Games, whether played on coffee tables or on digital screens, are usually described as escapist diversions; we don’t expect those hours of sweet nothingness to help us find fulfillment in our work, build strong relationships, cultivate confidence, or nurture other traits that serve the more amorphous cause of happiness. McGonigal, however, thinks that she can transform game-playing passion into a balanced life. She calls it “living gamefully,” and, according to her, it’s a regimen that has the power to fix almost everything that

aspirin can't.

People can use the seven principles of “the SuperBetter method” to get “stronger, healthier, and happier in the face of challenges like anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and PTSD,” McGonigal writes. “You will hear stories from people who have adopted a gameful mindset to find a better job, have a more satisfying love life, run a marathon, start their own company, and simply enjoy life more.” “SuperBetter,” like the endgame of a chess match, plays out in a world where every problem is a power move away from its inevitable solution.

According to people who track the nation's behavior, we are halfway there already. The Entertainment Software Association, an industry coalition, reports that forty-two per cent of Americans play video games for at least three hours every week. Three-quarters of players are adults, and forty-four per cent are female. Turning the appeal of games toward useful ends would be like harnessing the energy of nuclear fission: the power is tremendous, and the mechanism seems simple and clean.

Big thinkers and big businesses have taken note. In the past half decade, “gamification”—the process of giving hard and unfun things the structure of a game—has gained adherents, from the nonprofit basement to the corporate tower. In 2007, the World Food Programme launched a popular online game, Freerice, that it uses to attract advertising money to feed the hungry; more than three million pounds of rice have been donated so far. University professors have experimented with teaching through games, as has a middle and high school in New York. Entrepreneurs, inspired by networks such as Foursquare, tout the game mechanics of their transportation and health apps. Retailers have followed suit. If you have a sense that accruing frequent-flier miles is like working up the level structure in Super Mario Bros., you are probably breathing the rarefied air of the gamified free market.

McGonigal presides over the research wing of this endeavor. As a doctoral student in Berkeley's performance-studies program, she started looking at ways that games could creep off the console and into the real world. (Her dissertation traced the intersection of two emerging movements: ubiquitous computing, which aimed to weave digital infrastructure into everyday environments—think Google Glass—and multimodal digital gaming, which sought new kinds of platforms for play.) She now works at the Institute for the Future, a nonprofit think tank in Palo Alto, designing video games for the cause of human progress. One of them, CryptoZoo, calls for groups to increase outdoor activity for better health. Another, Superstruct, was a global-problem-solving challenge. Her first book, "Reality Is Broken" (2011), reported that the amount of time people had collectively put into World of Warcraft was 5.93 million years, which is roughly the time since our ancestors first stood erect. Imagine, she suggests, if that level of engagement had been turned to real-world problems!

As an example of fruitful gamefulness, McGonigal wrote briefly in her first book of a horrendous case of post-concussion syndrome that she experienced after hitting her head in 2009. For more than a month, she had near-constant vertigo, headaches, and nausea. She had trouble with names and the thread of conversation. She found herself, uncharacteristically, depressed. Determined to recover, she renamed herself Jane the Concussion Slayer and enlisted help from her family and friends. "I felt like I was finally doing something to get better, not just lying around and waiting for my brain to hurry up and heal itself," she wrote.

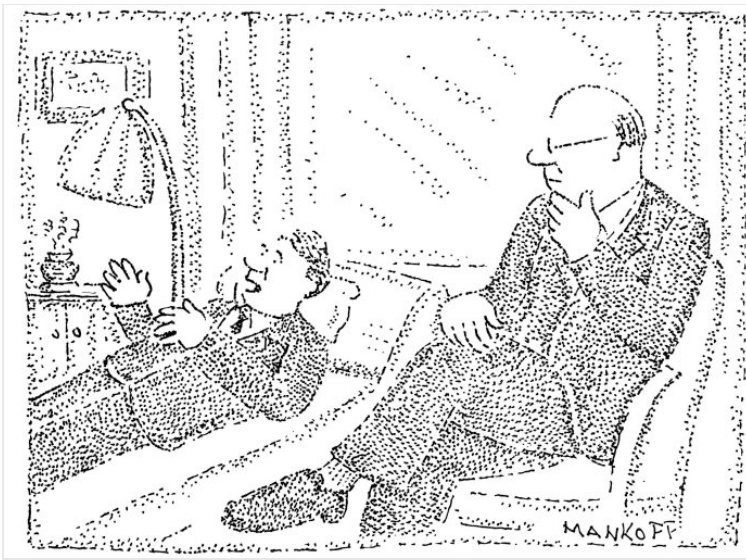
The SuperBetter method is essentially a body-built version of Jane the Concussion Slayer, with a popular game and a self-improvement empire thundering behind. If McGonigal's claims for her recovery were modest in "Reality Is Broken" ("I can't say for sure if I got better any faster than I would have without playing the game—although I suspect it helped a great deal"), they have since gained mettle. For one thing, McGonigal put her recovery game

online. More than four hundred thousand people used it, and she incorporated their feedback. In 2013, a grad student at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center led a trial of two hundred and thirty-six subjects, the larger of two SuperBetter studies. "The SuperBetter players felt better, faster, in every way we measured," McGonigal reports.

McGonigal often cites such research to bear out the rigor of her method. Mostly, though, "SuperBetter" is a how-to guide, and in this capacity it makes stringent demands. "Snap your fingers *exactly* fifty times," it orders—one of several dozen "quests" to achieve minor feats of self-improvement. (Counting snaps strengthens the brain, her research says.) "SuperBetter" is our culture's biggest foray yet into the gamification of the self, and, unsurprisingly, it goes down like a milk of twenty-first-century aspirations. It is pure, productive, upbeat, crowdsourced, putatively data-driven—proof that, in a world of knowledge and technology, the only obstacle to happiness is your own state of mind.

Alex, a public-radio producer in New York, sought relief after smashing his leg in a cycling accident:

"I was shocked at how motivating it is to have other people designing quests for me," Alex said. . . . His favorite one required him to buy his wife a flower and purchase two new toys for his cats. The twist: he had to travel to the flower shop and pet store on foot, ensuring he would get some physical exercise. "This suggestion was very smart, because I'm much more motivated to make my wife and cats happier than I am to do my own physical therapy," he said. He reported it "a huge success—I not only achieved my physical activity goal for the day, my cats and wife are looking at me like I'm their hero."



“But I like living in the past. It’s where I grew up.” [Buy the print »](#)

Most of the successes narrated in “SuperBetter” are huge, just as most of its practitioners are, in McGonigal’s eyes, heroes. The video-game vocabulary supports a high-flown register. (An epic win, for gamers, is a long-pursued, improbable success; power-ups bolster your onscreen avatar.) McGonigal follows the philosopher Bernard Suits, who defined games as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” Golf’s whimsical constraints, according to Suits, are exactly what make it gameful. McGonigal, building on the idea, holds that life’s challenges become more entertaining if we add new, fun constraints to their basic demands.

Does it work? Yes, to the extent that Alex took a walk and now believes his cats find him heroic. If mood and outlook start in the mind, they can be manipulated there, too. Still, checking off a to-do list is hardly the far boundary of human happiness. And proof remains elusive for McGonigal’s loftier promises: that her method yields physical vigor, mental harmony, and—perhaps her most remarkable claim—a life “free of regret.”

McGonigal often turns to biological phenomena to elaborate the seven rules of the SuperBetter method. The bodily sensations of anxiety and excitement are

nearly identical, she writes, and, if you convince yourself that every threat is a challenge, “your brain can’t always tell the difference.” Having friends—or allies—around can cause cortisol levels to drop, indicating a decrease in stress. Power-ups raise “vagal tone,” the activity of the vagus nerve, which governs parasympathetic function. The catalogue of benefits proceeds from there.

Unfortunately, physiological processes tell us little about the circumstances, or the mind, that created them. If you blush, it might be because you’re embarrassed; or it might be because you’re sexually aroused. It would be wrong to conclude that all blushing people are turned on by whoever is talking to them. But this is the logic that McGonigal often follows.

Take the matter of “self-efficacy,” a trust in one’s ability to do what needs to be done. Many psychologists believe that it’s a big part of sustained, productive happiness. McGonigal concentrates on one of its measurable traces, dopamine, the neurotransmitter involved in motivation. Another thing that raises dopamine levels, she points out, is playing video games. She cites a study in which kids who played at least nine hours a week showed high dopamine levels, and more gray matter in their reward-processing centers, than kids who didn’t. She generalizes from here. “Work ethic is not a *moral virtue*,” she writes. “It’s actually a *biological condition* that can be fostered, purposefully, through activity that increases dopamine.” If you want your daughter to be President, in other words, make sure she gets her daily hours of Candy Crush.

Yet dopamine levels increase under the influence of many things: sex, blackjack, sunny days, and brownies of all recipes. If this were all it took to get ahead, then Charlie Sheen would be the highest-functioning man in the world. That a focussed pursuit involves some neurohormonal surge doesn’t mean that you can translate the surge back into the focussed pursuit—work ethic is shaped by more than just the presence of dopamine. Perhaps there’s even insecurity or other bad guys in the mix.

In the SuperBetter realm, though, every leisure act must have a purpose. Games have long served a socializing function (mah-jongg nights, Wimbledon), but McGonigal makes stronger claims for video games: she says that they establish measurable mind-body melds between players. If you want to mind-meld gamefully but lack a console, she advises that you and a partner go for a walk, sit in twin rocking chairs, or lift heavy furniture—an activity reported to be “like playing a video game,” because “you have to successfully anticipate your partner’s thoughts and movements.”

This is the crest point of a culture that holds “productivity” to be a value in itself. It doesn’t really matter what you are producing, as long as you’re doing it constantly; it’s fine to sit in rocking chairs with a friend or buy your wife flowers, provided that you’re getting something measurable from the transaction. “SuperBetter” lies at the intersection of self-improvement and selfishness. It channels human strength so beautifully that most things human in it gradually fall away.

For most of history, counting one’s daily steps or tracking one’s heart rate would have seemed pointless and insane. Now it’s something to discuss at lunch. Advances in mobile technology have brought many great things to our world, but perhaps the greatest is a new potential for data collection and, only a bit behind that, ideas about what on earth to do with all that data. Self-improvement has fared well. Previously banished to the back shelves of the bookstore—or, worse, the front shelves—self-help is cool again, because it comes with numbers. Progress is trackable, like Venus through the night sky. Data has become our diet.

“SuperBetter” purports to march in this positivist parade. But sometimes its suggestions are obscure in origin. For weight loss, McGonigal counsels that you imagine yourself as a ninja and summon the *godai*, the five elements in Japanese Buddhist theology. Elsewhere, she proposes that, for a better self-

image, you might try reordering the letters of your name. The less nutty ideas in “SuperBetter” are, generally speaking, less new. There’s nothing specifically gameful about surrounding yourself with people who care, whether they are called “allies” or not.

McGonigal goes further, though, suggesting that her more purely gameful instructions—the proprietary parts of her method—are just as demonstrably beneficial. If the premise of her earlier work was that a spoonful of sugar can indeed help the medicine go down, “SuperBetter” insists that the sugar is nutritious, too. Like many pop-science writers, she likes the idea that research has rendered a binary verdict (does the experiment show something, or not?), ignoring the magnitude and the context of the results (are the effects distinct enough to matter?). The result in a self-help context can be strange. “If you want to be physically stronger,” she writes at one point, “hum for 60 seconds.” Really?

Her research is more compelling when it sticks to the science of game-playing itself. One study shows that when people play Tetris within six hours of seeing a disturbing image they are much less likely to have flashbacks. The results are replicable with other video games, but only those which involve non-stop visual-pattern processing. The theory is that flooding the visual-processing centers of the brain with something else distracts the mind—though subjects seemed to have no trouble voluntarily remembering details of the image. McGonigal points out implications for P.T.S.D. treatment: offering victims a Tetris console in the chopper as they leave the battlefield could spare them a great deal of suffering. In a related experiment, patients were made to play the 3-D virtual-reality game Snow World while having their severe burn injuries cleaned and dressed. The game reduced their sensation of pain by thirty-five to fifty per cent (a greater effect than morphine, in some cases). It seemed that the demands of a fast-paced 3-D challenge monopolized the patients’ cerebral resources. Their brains didn’t have the bandwidth to process all the pain

information coming from their nerves.

Discoveries like these make a powerful case for the effects of certain games on minds and bodies. They're refreshing in McGonigal's book, too, because they are actually about using games in life, rather than about turning life into a game. It's inconvenient, then, that these studies also hobble the premise of the SuperBetter method. McGonigal's program aims to build on the "connection between the strengths you naturally express when you play games and the strengths you need to be happy, healthy, and successful in real life." Yet the Tetris and Snow World studies show a disconnection between the game mind and the mind we use in life. The immersive world of video games, they suggest, numbs us to our own.

What we're doing, when we imagine real tasks as quests, is tuning out. Rather than moving through the world, attentive to its logic and form, we're following a story created by someone else. A gamefully minded person can find life models in "any heroic narrative, real or fictional—film, comics, TV, mythology, video games, literature, history, religion, social activism, or sports," McGonigal writes. (In other words, find a story in the media and emulate it.) Her own favorite examples seem to come via the multiplex; she cites *Mulan*, *Rocky Balboa*, and *Katniss Everdeen*. But what about *Inspector Clouseau*? Kids look to superhero stories as beacons in a world they're ill equipped to understand. Adults, probably, can manage more.

Gamification flies the flag of innovation, but its effect is the opposite. Far from freeing the mind, the approach habituates us to the tidy mechanisms of effort and reward, to established paths, and to prefab narratives. In life, most stories do not climax in the third act and end in heroism. In a 2011 essay on morality, the late political and legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin suggested, "The final value of our lives is adverbial, not adjectival—a matter of how we actually lived, not of a label applied to the final result." He meant that the shape of a life, the

arc of its story line, was beside the point—if that were all it was about, fiction would serve just as well. Instead, he thought, the value of a human life came in the act of its performance, “a rising to the challenge of having a life to lead.”

When McGonigal urges us to pave over real life with the smooth surfaces of her laminated play scripts, her goal is to hide the bad stuff. Is that heroic? Say a family member dies. According to the SuperBetter method, you should turn your regret into a bad guy, do your power-ups, tell trustworthy people that you need their gameful help to lick the grief and move on with your life. Maybe you're successful; you feel better quickly and go back to work. Have you, in that case, won the game? “SuperBetter” aims to eliminate unpleasant feelings or weakness—anything, really, that gives human character its distinctness and depth. Living gamefully means tuning out so much of the experience of actual life that you can wonder whether the gains are worth it.

If the stories of most lives were transformed into objects, they'd look ravaged: torqued, misbalanced, bent at awkward angles, fascinating. Few people would, on reflection, trade theirs for sleek and well-formed heroes' arcs. Imagine that, as Friday nears its close, you take stock of your gameful day. You're happy. Things at work are going well. Your friend is speaking to you again, and you have made a date—at the rink—for tomorrow afternoon. Is that much better? As the sun goes down and you head home, you let yourself unravel for a moment in the street. Your feet are tired. You're alone. This isn't what you dreamed of, but the realization is reassuring: it carries the unexpectedness of your own future. Maybe, you think, you're ready to stop getting SuperBetter for a while. Or are you? You decide that it can wait until the morning. In the end, it's just a game. ♦