

## BOOK REVIEW

# Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World

*Reviewed By Anna Baralt, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA*

*Reviewed By Albert D. Ritzhaupt, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA*

*Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*

Jane McGonical

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## INTRODUCTION

In her book, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, game designer Jane McGonical attempts to break the misconception that games are a waste of time. She argues that games have the potential to 'fix' what is wrong with reality by improving day-to-day lives and helping solve real world problems that are of relevant to society. McGonical discusses how games offer a better world than reality because they provide satisfying work, social connections, hope for success and the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to something bigger. The overall

thesis of her book suggests that our reality can be enhanced through the play of computer and video games.

The book is divided into three sections. Part 1 begins with the history of games. Defining traits of good games are highlighted, as are concepts from the positive psychology movement regarding happiness. Part 2 discusses the benefits of alternate realities while Part 3 introduces the potential of collaborative, immersive games to change the world. Throughout the book, she proposes 14 "fixes" or ways games can make reality better. Table 1 highlights her perceived issues with reality along with her proposed fixes.

## SUBSTANCE

According to McGonical, reality is not as motivating or rewarding as videogames nor does it take full advantage of human potential. The gaming world has grown to more than 668 million players globally playing 3 billion hours a week (a reality that McGonical would

Table 1. Summary of reality fixes

| Problem with Reality                     | How Game Design Can Fix the Problem   |
|--|---|
| #1 Reality is too easy.                  | Games provide unnecessary obstacles that challenge us with good, hard work (p. 38).                                 |
| #2 Reality is too depressing.            | Games are optimistic, boosting our “internal happiness systems” (p. 47).  |
| #3 Reality is unproductive.              | Games provide clear missions and satisfying work (p. 5).  |
| #4 Reality if hopeless.                  | Games improve chances for success with “flexible optimism” (p. 69).   |
| #5 Reality is disconnected.              | Games allow us to spend time interacting with others in social networks to generate “prosocial emotions” (p. 82).   |
| #6 Reality is trivial.                   | Games give “epic meaning to our actions” by making us part of something larger than ourselves (p. 98).              |
| #7 Reality is not motivating.            | Games encourage self-direction and self-motivation increasing engagement and enthusiasm (p. 124).                   |
| #8 Reality is pointless and unrewarding. | Games provide intrinsic rewards that push us to give our best effort (p. 148).                                      |
| #9 Reality is lonely and isolating.      | Games encourage social interaction and collaboration. Through games, we can “create powerful communities” (p. 172). |
| #10 Reality if hard to swallow.          | Games make it easier to try new things, take the advice of others, and create “happiness habits” (p. 189).          |
| #11 Reality is unsustainable.            | Participation in games is its own reward that provides “an infinitely renewable resource” (p. 244).                 |
| #12 Reality is unambitious.              | Games provide opportunities for epic wins showing us the power of social participation and collaboration (p. 253)   |
| #13 Reality is disorganized and divided. | Games provide focus and new ways to “collaborate, coordinate, and co-create” (p. 276).                              |
| #14 Reality is stuck in the present.     | Games help us “imagine and invent the future together” (p. 302).  |

like to increase). While these numbers are estimates based on the global reach of computer and video games, the Entertainment Software Association’s 2012 report suggests that the average United States household has at least one dedicated game console, PC, or smart phone. What’s more, the report suggests the average age of a game player is now 30 and that the average gamer has been playing video games for 12 years. The report projects increases in the use of computer, console, and mobile games. The reason for these growing numbers is that “the real world just doesn’t offer up as easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the powerful social bonding

afforded by virtual environments” (McGonical, 2011, p. 3). Playing games evokes positive emotions that bring us general happiness. Games make players work hard. This hard work taps into our best qualities—enthusiasm, motivation, hopefulness, collaboration, and resiliency in the face of disappointment. If reality can be made more game-like, increased happiness can extend into the real world too.

McGonical believes there are four essential traits in good games that provide flow and evoke happiness:

- **Goals:** Games have a clear sense of purpose that helps focus attention. These goals drive

participation and give the game community a feeling of unity.

- **Rules:** Games have logically defined rules and limitations on how to reach these goals. Therefore, gaming encourages creativity and fosters strategic thinking.
- **Feedback System:** Feedback is important to keeping gamers on course and serves as a promise that goals can indeed be achieved. Feedback occurs in real-time and motivates players to keep playing.
- **Voluntary Participation:** All players willingly accept the goal(s) and rules of the game. Choosing to participate in game play “establishes common ground for multiple people to play together” (McGonical, 2011, p. 21).

Games evoke happiness by providing stimulating challenges, constant feedback and incentives to work harder, and opportunities for engagement and socialization with others.

In Part 2, McGonical advocates for the growing field of alternate reality games (ARG) as a means to bring game play into day-to-day experiences and raise our quality of life. ARG'S are games that feel like real life but capture the essential traits of gaming – goals, rules, feedback, and voluntary participation. In ARG's, participants are encouraged to interact with a fictional world via the real world. They help ‘fix’ reality by encouraging deeper and longer participation, rewarding best efforts, and bringing people together.

Finally in Part 3, McGonical looks to the future and the potential of ARG's to unite people around the world to achieve “epic wins.” Epic wins occur when individuals feel capable of accomplishing much bigger things because of their participation in “extreme scale collaborations” (McGonical, 2011, p. 97). It is these grand collaborations that “improve human survivability” (McGonical, 2011, p. 343). She presents the games World Without Oil and Evoke as examples of ARG's that ask gamers to consider problems such as the energy crisis, poverty, and climate change. More recent examples of her ARG works include Super-

Better or Find the Future, both of which are highlighted on McGonical's personal website (McGonical, 2013).

## ANALYSIS

*Reality is Broken* offers an inside view into gaming and the qualities of games that attract so many to spend so much time playing them. While McGonical asserts the book is written for gamers and non-gamers alike, it is non-gamers who will garner the most from the volume. While not a purely academic text, academicians will also appreciate her thoughtful reflections of current research and practice. The book is written for the general public, but the implications span several relevant demographics. McGonical takes great care constructing her arguments for game play through the positive psychology movement and its goal to make our everyday lives more fulfilling and meaningful. She provides rich practical examples for readers to understand. However, her examples are not always research-based. Any reader of this book would not argue that they want the world to be happier and better place, but asserting that gamers can ‘fix’ the world through 21 billion hours of game play each week over the next decade, is a fanciful vision. For instance, some question whether excessive game play can have detrimental effects on an individual's well-being. Though limited research is available to draw from, McGonical's vision of 21 billion hours of game play should be examined from a research base. While games alone may not solve all of the world's problems as she suggests, the underlying themes of creativity, collaboration, co-creation, urgent optimism, and epic meaning that are garnered through game play are fundamental concepts that can certainly help us move forward.

One group that would benefit greatly by reading this text, especially the first part of the book addressing game qualities and game design, is educators spanning PK-20 education. Many educators are out of touch with the digital worlds in which their students participate in

outside of school. This text provides insight into what students experience through game play. It could potentially spark educators to reevaluate their curriculum and classroom practices to embody some of the principles of gaming. Another reason for educators to read the book is related to the use of games in the classroom and their potential alignment to the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills framework that is defining education today (P21, 2011). At the center of the framework is the teaching of core subjects and 21<sup>st</sup> century themes related to global, financial, civil, health, and environmental literacy. These are topics McGonical touches on throughout her book as problems that need to be solved on a global scale through collaborative, epic games. The second layer of the Century Skills Framework is related to the various life skills students should attain to help them lead a productive life in a global society – critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation (P21, 2011). These life skills parallel the learning that McGonical believes takes place during game play and is the reason for her encouraging the entire planet to play more games. Well-designed video games engage the players in these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Others authors, such as James Gee, have also written about this critical connection (Gee, 2003).

## FINAL REMARKS

Despite the overly optimistic view of McGonical's future, the message of *Reality is Broken* is important. McGonical's book is a valuable

asset to educators and researchers. Educators can consider the ideas for their classroom practice, while researchers can continue to examine the efficacy of computer and video games in society at large. Overall, games are good and the essential qualities of game design have the potential to spark innovation in a variety of settings as well as promote essential life skills that will take us into the future. Several concepts in the book would benefit from further exploration either by McGonical or other game experts; especially the potential game design can have on our education system. It will be interesting to see how McGonical will expand her message about gaming in future years, and whether or not she will explore gaming in education. *Reality is Broken* is a timeless contribution to the study and practice of gaming.

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*Anna Baralt holds a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Florida. She has taught preschool and elementary students for the last twenty years at Shorecrest Preparatory School and has recently joined the school's administrative team as Director of Educational Technology. Anna was recognized as a Teacher of the Future by the NAIS in 2008 and a Superpower Educator in 2009. She has presented at numerous conferences over her career including ISTE, FETC, FKC and K-12 Online.*

*Albert D. Ritzhaupt is an associate professor of educational technology in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida. His primary research areas focus on the design and development of technology-enhanced learning environments, and technology integration in education. His publications have appeared in multiple venues, including the Journal of Research on Technology in Education, Computers in the Schools, Journal of Computing in Higher Education, Computers & Education, Behavior Research Methods, Journal of Interactive Learning Research, Journal of Computers in Mathematics and Science Teaching, Journal of Educational Computing Research, and Computers in Human Behavior.*