Book Review

Gaming for better life: A review of Jane McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken*

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Jane McGonigal. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011, 416 pp., ISBN NO.9781594202858.

Jane McGonigal, a digital game designer who earned her Ph.D. in performance from the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, has been recognized as one of the early game designers and researchers that initiated the inquiry of the positive values of digital games in the contemporary society. In light of the rapid growing realm of positive psychology, *Reality Is Broken* stretched her influential exploration of how digital games contribute to an individual's sense of well-being, how gaming activities improve the quality of real social lives, and how games function as platforms to provoke people's civic and political awareness.

The author began her book by clearly determining the nature of game as a type of "hard work" (p.28) that fits into the intrinsic needs of human beings. She suggested that an ultimate goal, a set of rules, a timely feedback system, and voluntary participation constitutes the four fundamental shared traits of all games. Within such frameworks, gamers are able to experience "positive stress" (p. 32) throughout all types of hard work in the game. An important outcome of game playing, according to McGonigal, is the perception of *fiero*, which is an Italian word (meaning "pride") standing for a powerful neurochemical high. It typically happens when someone triumphs over adversity. Likewise, a state of *flow* that accounts for

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the enjoyable stress from immersing in games marks the other type of cognitive reward of game playing. Such a psychological state demands specific prerequisite, that is, a combination of clear goals, proper levels of difficulty, and immediate feedback. The author pointed out that fiero and flow are two types of intrinsic payoffs rather than extrinsic payoffs from the game. Games not only gratify intrinsic needs for happiness, but also "do it safely, cheaply, and reliably" (p.51).

With the basic proposition of game as hard work being stated, the author then echoed the title of the book and explained why good games create worlds better than real lives: Compared to reality, people are more productive and effective in the game setting, regardless of their individual capabilities; the swift feedback mechanism maintains their enthusiasm in the virtual work and helps them monitor their progress. What's more important, as McGonigal emphasized repeatedly, is that the achievement of success does not necessarily lead to satisfaction *per se*; rather, it is the hope of achieving the goal that is enjoyable. This explains why gamers often times perceive stronger positive emotions when they failed rather than succeeded.

In explaining how the virtual game world became more meaningful and larger than a single gamer, McGonigal used the example of *Halo 3* where millions of gamers across the world fight against the virtual enemies. She argued that the game itself is an "epic" because it 1) creates an epic context that provokes participation, 2) its enormous gaming world stimulates curiosity, and 3) it contains/enables gamers to work in a massively cooperative manner. To McGonigal, people's enthusiasm toward this type of epic games seems to build the basis for gamers to implement beneficial behaviors in reality within a positive, prosocial game context.

In later chapters, McGonigal examined how games might influence real world behaviors that benefit individual lives. She did this by providing several vivid and well- chosen anecdotal examples. Within the case of the author playing the game *Chore Wars* to reduce household work and of a public school in New York City using game design to guide students' learning, the author stated that these Alternate Reality Games (ARG) not only altered real life activities but also introduced people to a new (and better) way of working, learning, and living. Moreover, games like Bounce, which helps promote communication between different generations, seemed to attach more social values to game play and game design. In addition, the book provided facts that games are being used as platforms for accomplishing sophisticated, intelligent tasks and for facilitating civic and political participation. The author concluded her work by stressing that gamers are not merely playing games—they are actually engaged in work that enhances reality.

As a result, this book adds substantial qualitative evidences regarding the positive role of digital games in the modern society. Nowadays, playing digital games, particularly violent video games has become a highly politicized issue for scholars and the general public, as it

is often times associated with gun violence and other types of negative behavioral change. However, the fact is that most studies on the effects of video games have significant publication bias, and once we eliminate those bias, the connection between playing games and negative behavioral change became rather weak (Ferguson, 2007). In that sense, the value of McGonigal's work is to show the general public a tremendous amount of easily accessible examples that games are not only harmless with proper use, but also improve the quality of our lives and offer promising ways of change the reality. Therefore, it sheds some new light on the negative-effects-oriented rhetoric of game criticism.

Among this elaborate work, scholars who study media psychology may find some arguments interesting and thought provoking. Above all, the discussion of the hedonic experience of game playing overlaps with the accumulating body of literature on the concept of "media enjoyment" (cf. Zillmann & Vorderer, 2000). Vorderer (2001) suggested that entertainment is essentially a form of "play", which is a fundamental human behavior/need. Meanwhile, this type of "play" serves as a coping strategy for daily life. Consequently, it has different functions for different people. McGonigal's view on why we enjoy digital games has no difference from the reason that ancient Lydians play games of dice: It serves for fun, but it also maintains the well-being of the individual and society. In other words, playing digital games is simply a way of mankind pursuing entertainment, one form of playing that should not be judged as an aberrant by-product of human civilization.

Although the author provided an excellent construction of game as hard work, certain statements remain open to debate, possibly because the author's lack of psychological training in this realm. For instance, in discussing flow and fiero as the two fundamental rewards of game playing, McGonigal fails to clarify the prerequisite for obtaining rewards (at least for flow), which is the balance between the difficulty of the task and the skills of the user. If the task is too easy, the participants might encounter boredom. In contrast, if the tasks require more skill than the participants possess, they will experience anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Moreover, media psychologists have revealed that flow exists not only in game playing but also in other types of media use, such as movie watching and book reading. In fact, studies on psychology and communication science have identified many other variables, such as involvement, (tele)presence, and transportation, that help us better understand media enjoyment. In that sense, flow might not be the (only) variable that makes gaming differ from other types of media entertainment. In addition, while McGonigal listed various ARGs to prove how games might change the real world, few systematic empirical studies were provided to support the possible effectiveness of these games.

Despite lacking empirical evidence for certain arguments, this groundbreaking work of McGonigal certainly deserves researchers' attention. It reconciles the contradictory relationship among games, individual well-being, and social change from a game designer's perspective. As a book targeted at the general public, Reality is Broken is well written and easy to understand. By adding specific examples in its conceptual explanation, the book becomes more

interesting and digestible. Although extra work needs to be done in order to increase the salience of certain points, it provides an excellent beginning, as well as a refreshing perspective on digital gaming, which should be considered by media psychologists.

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