

Why Playing Video Games Can Actually Be Good for Your Health

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There are 1.23 billion people worldwide who spend an hour a day, on average, playing video games. Jane McGonigal thinks this is a great thing.

McGonigal is a game designer and author, and she spoke at The Nantucket Project Saturday morning about why she believes playing video games is good for people and for the world. The first speaker of the day, McGonigal took the stage on a warm, breezy morning in Nantucket in front of an audience still sipping their espressos and Nantucket Nectars from breakfast. (Tom Scott, the founder of Nantucket Nectars, started the annual speaker series on the island.)

McGonigal began her talk by acknowledging that there are some statistics about gaming that are, admittedly, discouraging: worldwide, we spend 1.75 billion minutes a day playing Candy Crush. Surely there must be something better to do with that time?

But throughout her talk, the designer explained to the audience how to rethink their perceptions of what gaming is. When people play games, she posits, they are “wholeheartedly engaged in creative challenges.”

Her point is borne out by science: gaming, McGonigal says, is the neurological opposite of depression.

When we play video games, we have a “real sense of optimism in our abilities and our opportunities to get better and succeed, and more physical and mental energy to engage with difficult problems,” McGonigal explained, “and that is actually the physiological and psychological state of game play.”

According to McGonigal, when people play video games, brain scans show the most active parts of the brain are the rewards pathway system, which is associated with motivation and goal orientation, and the hippocampus, which is associated with learning and memory. These are the two main parts of the brain that don’t activate when people are suffering from depression.

So when McGonigal suffered a traumatic brain injury a few years ago, she created her own game to help herself heal. Called *Jane the Concussion Slayer*, McGonigal came up with a secret identity for herself, sought out allies to help her get better and gave herself “power-ups” when she reached new benchmarks in the healing process. She’s turned this into a program called

"SuperBetter" to help others work through depression, anxiety, brain injuries and chronic illnesses. And she says activating this "gameful mindset" helps people heal better, and faster.

This is why McGonigal prefers a different term for people who love video games, besides the term 'gamers': "I like to think of people who spend a lot of time playing games not just as gamers, but as super-empowered hopeful individuals," she said.