

GAME ON

Making the World a Better Place By Playing Video Games

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because your geeked-out gaming nights might make you a better citizen than you think

Brigitta Blair was 14 when a video game first made her cry. Sitting on her couch in Haymarket, Virginia, Blair was at the end of a *Final Fantasy X* bender, having binged on the role-playing game six to 12 hours a day for two weeks. In the final moments of the game, one character sacrifices himself to save another; the woman he saves calls for him, but he's vanished. Blair wept.

It's this kind of emotional impact that administrators, professors and students are chasing at the American University Game Lab, where Blair and a cohort of 20 to 25 students will enroll this fall in the first-ever master's degree program in

persuasive gaming.

That's correct: People are studying how to use games to change a player's interests, activities or opinions — not merely for entertainment, but for social benefits as well.

Nobody wants to change how they live just because it's good for the world. ... But if you immerse them in an epic adventure...

— JANE MCGONIGAL, *WORLD WITHOUT OIL* PRODUCER

Persuasive game designers have set themselves a daunting list of goals: They aim to promote **physical fitness, mental health and nutrition**; nurture **affection, social skills and fundamental empathy**; and teach about **green energy, endangered species and flu shots**.

“There are all these games like *Halo* and *Call of Duty*, which are what most people think about when they think about games,” explains American University computer science Professor Mike Treanor. But this new breed of gaming is riskier.

Take *Papers, Please*, a “dystopian document thriller” that the *New Yorker* named the best video game of 2013, in which players act as immigration inspectors of a fictional communist state, faced with a long line of hopeful migrants. The objective? To make people feel greater empathy for immigrants.

Or *World Without Oil*, a 2007 game produced by Jane McGonigal in which players have to survive an oil shortage by making adjustments in their real lives. As McGonigal explained in a [TED talk](#): “Nobody wants to change how they live just because it’s good for the world. ... But if you immerse them in an epic adventure and tell them, ‘We’ve run out of oil. This is an amazing story and adventure for you to go on.’ ... Most of our players have kept up the habits that they learned in this game.”



Jane McGonigal

I'm not a gamer; I can barely keep the car on the track in Mario Kart and have no interest in shooting enemies from my living room in games like *Battlefield*. And like [many Americans](#), I've long believed there's a connection between video games and violence. But persuasive game designers like Treanor, or the director of American University's Game Lab, Lindsay Grace, want to make video games that transform players for the better.

Much of the research on the efficacy of persuasive games is still underway, though early results suggest that games can affect a wide variety of behaviors. [One recent study](#) published through the MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning found that teens who have civic gaming experiences, such as playing games that simulate government processes or deal with social or moral issues, report higher levels of civic and political engagement than teens who don't play those types of games.

It's hard to imagine that video games can have an effect on anything — except, maybe, your ability to date. But gaming is a huge industry, and persuasive gamers are on the front lines. Fifty-eight percent of Americans play video games and [spent \\$20.77 billion](#) on video games, hardware and accessories in 2012.

Which means there's an open door for newcomers to break into this lucrative world.

What if, instead of crushing the enemy, you practiced how to heal, negotiate with, vaccinate, hug or compost him?

Historically, established game companies like Electronic Arts have ruled the industry. But now, thanks to mobile devices — where indie games can go viral — smaller game companies are flourishing; in 2012, [68 percent of all mobile gaming sessions](#) occurred in games made by independent companies.

Game designers rely on what psychologists call a “flow state,” a term coined by [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) that describes a state in which people become hyperfocused and fully immersed in whatever they’re doing, whether math, martial arts or gaming.

And the bonus for designers? Play is practice. Most video games present problems and provide players with prescribed ways to solve them. In *Super Mario Bros.*, for instance, you practice the art of squashing your enemies, meaning that thousands of kids are squashing targets every day as way to solve problems. What if, instead of crushing the enemy, you practiced how to heal, negotiate with, vaccinate, hug or compost him?

At American University's new program, students take classes in a computer lab/gaming studio, headed by four tenure-track professors and — get this — a game designer in residence. Grads leave the two-year program with a portfolio of their own games, which they'll develop in partnership with D.C. organizations like the Newseum. Grace says he's also in conversation with politicians, major newspapers and education companies.

Blair, for her part, is already designing persuasive games under the guidance of Lindsay Grace. In her game *Flicker*, players are tasked with lighting up a

city that has been shrouded in darkness. Everything in the world of *Flicker* is black-and-white and square, with the exception of the player's character, which is represented by a glowing yellow orb. As the player touches the objects around her, they brighten, and at the end, everything is light.

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