PART TWO

Reinventing Reality

All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better.

—*RALPH WALDO EMERSON*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Benefits of Alternate Realities

Whenever I walk through the front door of my apartment, I enter an alternate reality. It looks and works just like regular reality, with one major exception: when I want to clean the bathroom, I have to be *really* sneaky about it.

If my husband, Kiyash, thinks I'm going to scrub the tub on Saturday morning, he'll wake up early, tiptoe out of the bedroom and silently beat me to it. But I've lived in this alternate reality long enough to have developed a highly effective counterstrategy: I clean the bathroom at odd hours in the middle of the week, when he's least expecting it. The more random the hour, the more likely I am to complete the chore before he does. And if this strategy ever starts to fail? Well, let's just say that I am not above hiding the toilet brush.

Why exactly are we competing with each other to do the dirty work? We're playing a free online game called Chore Wars. And it just so happens that ridding our real-world kingdom of toilet stains is worth more experience points, or XP, than any other chore in the Land of the 41st-Floor Ninjas, which is what we've dubbed our apartment in the game. (We live on the forty-first floor, and my husband has a thing for *ninjutsu*.)

Chore Wars

Chore Wars is an alternate reality game (ARG), a game you play in your real life (and not a virtual environment) in order to enjoy it more. Chore Wars is essentially a simplified version of *World of Warcraft*, with one notable exception: all of the online quests correspond with real-world cleaning tasks, and instead of playing with strangers or faraway friends online, you play the game with your roommates, family, or officemates. Kevan Davis, a British experimental game developer who created Chore Wars in 2007, describes it as a "chore management system."[1] It's meant to help you track how much housework people are doing—and to inspire everyone to do more housework, more cheerfully, than they would otherwise.

To play Chore Wars, you first have to recruit a "party of adventurers" from your real-life household or office. That means getting your roommates, family members, or coworkers to sign up online, where together you'll name your kingdom and create avatars to represent everyone in the game.

Anyone who creates an avatar is eligible to undertake any of the custom "adventures" that you create in the game's database —in my household, these include emptying the dishwasher and brewing the first pot of coffee. And because it's a role-playing game, you're encouraged to write up the chores with a fantastical spin. In the Land of the 41st-Floor Ninjas, for example, brushing out our Shetland sheepdog is "Saving the dog-damsel in distress from clumps and shedding," and doing the laundry is "Conjuring clean clothes."

Whenever you complete one of these chores, you log in to the game to report your success. Every chore grants you a

customized amount of experience points, virtual gold, treasure, avatar power-ups, or points that increase your virtual skills and abilities: plus ten dexterity points for dusting without knocking anything off the shelves, for example, or plus five stamina points for taking out all three kinds of recycling. And because you get to craft the adventures from scratch yourself, you can customize the in-game rewards to make the least popular chores more attractive—hence, the battle in my apartment to clean the bathroom first. It's worth a whopping one hundred XP.

The more chores you finish, the more experience points and virtual gold you earn, and the faster you level up your online avatar's powers. But Chore Wars isn't just about tracking your avatar development; it's also about earning real rewards. The game's instructions encourage households to invent creative ways to redeem the virtual gold in real life. You could exchange the gold for allowances if you're playing with your kids, or for rounds of drinks for roommates, or coffee runs for workmates, for example. My husband and I share a single car, so we use our gold pieces to bid on what music to play in the car whenever we're driving somewhere together.

But even more satisfying than all of my avatar powers, accumulated gold, and music privileges is the fact that after nine months of playing Chore Wars together, my husband's avatar has earned more overall experience points than I have. And avatar stats don't lie: for nearly a year now, Kiyash has definitely put in more effort cleaning the apartment than I have.

Clearly, this is a game that you win even if you lose. Kiyash has the satisfaction of being the best ninja on the forty-first floor, and I have the pleasure of doing fewer chores than my husband —at least until my competitive spirit kicks back in. Not to mention, it's more enjoyable to be partners in crime when it comes to housework, instead of nagging each other about chores.

And, of course, as an added bonus, our place is cleaner than it ever has been before. Chore Wars has transformed something we both normally hate doing into something that feels creative and fun. The game has changed our reality of having to do housework, and for the better.

We're not alone. Chore Wars is one of the best reviewed and most beloved, if little known, secrets on the Internet.

A mom in Texas describes a typical Chore Wars experience: "We have three children, ages nine, eight, and seven. I sat down with the kids, showed them their characters and the adventures, and they literally jumped up and ran off to complete their chosen tasks. I've never seen my eight-year-old son make his bed! And I almost fainted when my husband cleaned out the toaster oven."

The experience apparently works as well for twentysomethings as it does for kids. As another player reports: "I live in a house in London with one other girl and six guys. A lot of the time I'm the only one tidying up, which was driving me slowly insane. I set up an account for us last night, and set some 'adventures,' and when I got up this morning *everyone in the house was cleaning* . I honestly could not believe what I was seeing. All we had to do is make it a competition! Now the guys are obsessed with beating each other!"[2]

How, exactly, does Chore Wars do it?

We typically think of chores as things we have to do. Either someone is nagging us to do them or we do them out of absolute necessity. That's why they're called chores: by definition, unpleasant tasks. The brilliant master-stroke of Chore Wars is that it convinces us that we *want* to do these tasks.

More important, however, is the introduction of *meaningful choice* into the housework equation. When you set up your party, your first task is to create a large pool of adventures to choose from. No player is assigned a particular adventure. Instead,

everyone gets to pick their own. There are no *necessary* chores. You are volunteering for every adventure you take. And this sense of voluntary participation in housework is strengthened by the fact that you're encouraged to apply strategy as you choose your own housework adventures. Should you go for lots of chores that are fast and easy to complete, and try to rack up as many XP as possible that way? Or should you go for the harder, bigger chores, blocking other players from getting all that gold?

Of course, there are no good unnecessary obstacles without arbitrary restrictions. And for advanced Chore Wars players, that's where the real fun comes in. You can make it harder to earn XP and gold by adding new rules to any adventure. For example, you can set target time limits: double XP if you can put away your laundry in under five minutes. Or you can add a stealth requirement: you must empty the trash without anyone seeing you. Or you can simply tack on absurd restrictions: this chore must be done while singing, loudly, for example, or while walking backward.

It sounds ridiculous—why would making a chore harder make it more fun? But like any good game, the more interesting the restrictions, the more we enjoy playing. The Chore Wars management system makes it easy for players to dream up and try out new ways of doing the most ordinary things. Chores are, again by definition, routine—but they don't have to be. Doing them in a game format makes it possible to experience fiero doing something as mundane as cleaning up a mess, simply by making it more challenging, or by requiring us to be more creative about how we do it.

In real life, if you do your chores, there are visible results—a sparkling kitchen, or an organized garage. That's one kind of feedback, and it can certainly be satisfying. But Chore Wars smartly augments this small, everyday satisfaction with a more

intense kind of feedback: avatar improvements. As online role-playing gamers everywhere know, leveling up is one of the most satisfying kinds of feedback ever designed. Watching your avatar profile get more powerful and skillful with each chore makes the work feel personally satisfying in a way that a cleaner room just doesn't. You are not just doing all this work for someone else. You are developing your own strengths as you play.

Best of all, you are getting better and better all the time. Even as the laundry gets dirty again or the dust starts to sneak back in, your avatar is still getting stronger, smarter, swifter. In this way, Chore Wars brilliantly reverses the most demoralizing aspects of regular housework. The results of a chore well done may start to fade almost immediately, but no one can take away the XP you have earned.

Individual success is always more rewarding when it happens in a multiplayer context, and this is part of Chore Wars' successful design as well. The game connects all of my individual activities to a larger social experience: I'm never just doing "my" chores; I'm playing with and competing against others. I can see how I measure up to others and compare avatar strengths to learn more about what makes me unique. Meanwhile, as I'm working, I'm thinking about the positive social feedback I'll get in the comments on my adventure, whether it's friendly taunts from a rival or OMGs of amazement for getting such a herculean task done.

Chore Wars isn't the kind of game you'd want to play forever; like all good games, their destiny is to become boring eventually, the better you get at them. But even if household interest in the game dies down after a few weeks or months, a major feat has been accomplished: players have had a rather memorable, positive experience of doing chores together. And that should

change the way they think about and approach chores for some time.

So that's how Chore Wars achieves the seemingly impossible. It turns routine housework into a collective adventure, by adding unnecessary obstacles and implementing more motivating feedback systems. And it's the perfect example of our next reality fix:

FIX # 7 : WHOLEHEARTED PARTICIPATION

Compared with games, reality is hard to get into. Games motivate us to participate more fully in whatever we're doing.

To participate wholeheartedly in something means to be *self-motivated* and *self-directed, intensely interested* and *genuinely enthusiastic.*

If we're forced to do something, or if we do it halfheartedly, we're not really participating.

If we don't care how it all turns out, we're not really participating.

If we're passively waiting it out, we're not really participating.

And the less we fully participate in our everyday lives, the fewer opportunities we have to be happy. It's that plain and simple. The emotional and social rewards we really crave require active, enthusiastic, self-motivated participation. And helping

players participate more fully in the moment, instead of trying to escape it or just get through it, is *the* signature hallmark of alternate reality projects—the focus of this and the following three chapters of this book.

If "alternate reality" is an unfamiliar term for you, then you're not alone. Alternate reality development is still a highly experimental field. The term "alternate reality game" has been in use as a technical industry term since 2002, but there are still plenty of gamers and game designers who know little about it, let alone people outside of the gaming world.

As game developers are increasingly starting to push the limits of how much a game can affect our real lives, the concept of alternate reality is becoming more and more central to discussions about the future of games. It's helping to promote the idea that game technologies can be used to organize real-world activity. Most importantly, it's provoking innovative ideas about how to blend together what we love most about games and what we want most from our real lives.

On a recent Saturday morning, I found myself on Twitter, trading possible definitions for "alternate reality game" back and forth with about fifty other alternate reality gamers and developers. We were trying to work out a short definition that would really capture the spirit of ARG design, if not necessarily describe all the possible technological and formal components.

Collectively, we cobbled together a description of ARGs that seems to capture their spirit more effectively than any other definition I've seen: alternate realities are the *antiescapist* game.

ARGs are designed to make it easier to generate the four intrinsic rewards we crave—more satisfying work, better hope of success, stronger social connectivity, and more meaning— whenever we can't or don't want to be in a virtual environment. They're not meant to diminish the real rewards we get from

playing traditional computer and video games. But they do make a strong argument that these rewards should be easier to get in real life.

In other words, ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life, as opposed to games you play to escape it. ARG developers want us to participate as fully in our everyday lives as we do in our game lives.

Apart from this common mission, great alternate reality games can differ tremendously from one to another, in terms of style, scale, scope, and budget. Some ARGs, like Chore Wars, have relatively humble ambitions. They pick one very specific area of our personal lives and try to improve it. Others have quite audacious goals, involving entire communities or society at large: for example, to reinvent public education as we know it, to help players discover their true purpose in life, or even to improve our experience of death and dying.

Of course, not all ARGs are designed explicitly to improve our lives. Historically, in fact, most ARGs, like most computer and videogames, have been designed simply to be fun and emotionally satisfying. But my research shows that because ARGs are played in real-world contexts, instead of in virtual spaces, they almost always have at least the *side effect* of improving our real lives.[3] And so while others might distinguish between "serious" ARGs and "entertainment" ARGs, I prefer to look at *all* ARGs as having the potential to improve our quality of life. Indeed, a significantly higher percent of newer ARGs (created since 2007, compared with early ARGs created 2001-2006) are designed with explicit quality of life or world-changing goals. You'll read about these "positive impact" ARGs in the chapters ahead.

Some ARGs are invented and playtested on a shoestring budget, whether by artists, researchers, indie game developers, or

nonprofit organizations. They're often developed for relatively small groups: a few hundred or a few thousand players. Others are backed by multimillion-dollar investments, receive funding from major foundations, or are sponsored by Fortune 500 companies. These bigger games can attract tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even, in a few extremely successful cases, millions of players.[4]

Still, for the most part, alternate reality games today are small-scale probes of the future. They're a showcase for new possibilities. No single ARG is changing the world yet. But taken together, they're proving one at a time the myriad and important ways we could make our real lives better by playing more games.

So let's look at a few groundbreaking alternate reality projects. As we do, you'll notice that there are two key qualities that every good ARG shares.

First and foremost, like any good game, an ARG must always be *optional*. You can bet that if you *required* someone to play Chore Wars, it would lose a large part of its appeal and effectiveness. An alternate reality game has to remain a true "alternate" for it to work.

It's not enough, however, just to make something optional. Once the activity is under way, a good ARG, like any good game, also needs compelling goals, interesting obstacles, and well-designed feedback systems. These three elements encourage fuller participation by tapping into our natural desires to master challenges, to be creative, to push the limits of our abilities. And that's where **optimal experience design** comes in. Without a doubt, some alternate realities are more fun and engaging than others, just as some traditional games are better than others. The best ARGs are the ones that, like the best traditional computer and video games, help us create more

satisfying work for ourselves, cultivate better hopes of success, strengthen our social bonds and activate our social networks, and give us the chance to contribute to something bigger than ourselves.

One ARG that achieves all of these goals is Quest to Learn—a bold new design for public schools that shows us how education can be transformed to engage students as wholeheartedly as their favorite video games.

Quest to Learn—And Why Our Schools Should Work More Like a Game

Today's "born-digital" kids—the first generation to grow up with the Internet, born 1990 and later—crave gameplay in a way that older generations don't.

Most of them have had easy access to sophisticated games and virtual worlds their entire lives, and so they take high-intensity engagement and active participation for granted. They know what extreme, positive activation feels like, and when they're not feeling it, they're bored and frustrated.[5] They have good reason to feel that way: it's a lot harder to function in low-motivation, low-feedback, and low-challenge environments when you've grown up playing sophisticated games. And that's why today's born-digital kids are suffering more in traditional classrooms than any previous generation. School today for the most part is just one long series of *necessary* obstacles that produce negative stress. The work is mandatory and standardized, and failure goes on your permanent record. As a result, there's a growing disconnect between virtual environments and the classroom.

Marc Prensky, author of *Teaching Digital Natives,* describes the current educational crisis:

> "Engage me or enrage me," today's students demand. And believe me, they're enraged. All the students we teach have something in their lives that's really engaging—something that they do and that they are good at, something that has an engaging, creative component to it.... Video games are the epitome of this kind of total creative engagement. By comparison, school is so boring that kids, used to this other

life, can't stand it. And unlike previous generations of students, who grew up without games, they know what real engagement feels like. They know exactly what they're missing.[6]

To try to close this gap, educators have spent the past decade bringing more and more games into our schools. Educational games are a huge and growing industry, and they're being developed to help teach pretty much any topic or skill you could imagine, from history to math to science to foreign languages. When these games work—when they marry good game design with strong educational content—they provide a welcome relief to students who otherwise feel underengaged in their daily school lives. But even then, these educational games are at best a temporary solution. The engagement gap is getting too wide for a handful of educational games to make a significant and lasting difference over the course of a student's thirteen-year public education.

What *would* make the difference? Increasingly, some education innovators, including Prensky, are calling for a more dramatic kind of game-based reform. Their ideal school doesn't *use* games to teach students. Their ideal school *is* a game, from start to finish: every course, every activity, every assignment, every moment of instruction and assessment would be designed by borrowing key mechanics and participation strategies from the most engaging multiplayer games. And it's not just an idea—the game-reform movement is well under way. And there's already one new public school entirely dedicated to offering an alternate reality to students who want to game their way through to graduation.

Quest to Learn is a public charter school in New York City for students in grades six through twelve. It's the first game-based

school in the world—but its founders hope it will serve as a model for schools worldwide.

Quest opened its doors in the fall of 2009 after two years of curriculum design and strategic planning, directed by a joint team of educators and professional game developers, and made possible by funding from the MacArthur Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It's run by principal Aaron B. Schwartz, a graduate of Yale University and a ten-year veteran teacher and administrator in the New York City Department of Education. Meanwhile, the development of the school's curriculum and schedule has been led by Katie Salen, a ten-year veteran of the game industry and a leading researcher of how kids learn by playing games.

In many ways, the college-preparatory curriculum is like any other school's—the students learn math, science, geography, English, history, foreign languages, computers, and arts in different blocks throughout the day. But it's how they learn that's different: students are engaged in gameful activities from the moment they wake up in the morning to the moment they finish up their final homework assignment at night. The schedule of a sixth-grader named Rai can help us better understand a day in the life of a Quest student.

7:15 a.m. Rai is "questing" before she even gets to school. She's working on a secret mission, a math assignment that yesterday she discovered hidden in one of the books in the school library. She exchanges text messages with her friends Joe and Celia as soon as she gets up in order to make plans to meet at school early. Their goal: break the mathematical code before any of the other students discover it.

This isn't a mandatory assignment—it's a secret assignment, an opt-in learning quest. Not only do they not have to complete it, they actually have to *earn the right* to complete it, by

172

discovering its secret location.

Having a secret mission means you're not learning and practicing fractions because you have to do it. You're working toward a self-chosen goal, and an exciting one at that: decoding a secret message before anyone else. Obviously not all schoolwork can be special, secret missions. But when every book could contain a secret code, every room a clue, every handout a puzzle, who wouldn't show up to school more likely to fully participate, in the hopes of being the first to find the secret challenges?

9:00 a.m. In English class, Rai isn't trying to earn a good grade today. Instead, she's trying to level up. She's working her way through a storytelling unit, and she already has five points. That makes her just seven points shy of a "master" storyteller status. She's hoping to add another point to her total today by completing a creative writing mission. She might not be the first student in her class to become a storytelling master, but she doesn't have to worry about missing her opportunity. As long as she's willing to tackle more quests, she can work her way up to the top level and earn her equivalent of an A grade.

Leveling up is a much more egalitarian model of success than a traditional letter grading system based on the bell curve. Everyone can level up, as long as they keep working hard. Leveling up can replace or complement traditional letter grades that students have just one shot at earning. And if you fail a quest, there's no permanent damage done to your report card. You just have to try more quests to earn enough points to get the score you want. This system of "grading" replaces negative stress with positive stress, helping students focus more on learning and less on performing.

11:45 a.m. Rai logs on to a school computer to update her profile in the "expertise exchange," where all the students advertise their learning superpowers. She's going to declare

herself a master at mapmaking. She didn't even realize mapmaking could count as an area of expertise. She does it for fun, outside of school, making maps of her favorite 3D virtual worlds to help other players navigate them better. Her geography teacher, Mr. Smiley, saw one of her maps and told her that eighth-graders were just about to start a group quest to locate "hidden histories" of Africa: they would look for clues about the past in everyday objects like trade beads, tapestries, and pots. They would need a good digital mapmaker to help them plot the stories about the objects according to where they were found, and to design a map that would be fun for other students to explore.

The expertise exchange works just like video game social network profiles that advertise what games you're good at and like to play, as well as the online matchmaking systems that help players find new teammates. These systems are designed to encourage and facilitate collaboration. By identifying your strengths and interests publicly, you increase the chances that you'll be called on to do work that you're good at. In the classroom, this means students are more likely to find ways to contribute successfully to team projects. And the chance to do something you're good at as part of a larger project helps students build real esteem among their peers—not empty self-esteem based on nothing other than wanting to feel good about yourself, but actual respect and high regard based on contributions you've made.

2:15 p.m. On Fridays, the school always has a guest speaker, or "secret ally." Today, the secret ally is a musician named Jason, who uses computer programs to make music. After giving a live demonstration with his laptop, he announces that he'll be back in a few weeks to help the students as a coach on their upcoming "boss level." For the boss level, students will form

teams and compose their own music. Every team will have a different part to play—and rumor has it that several mathematical specialists will be needed to work on the computer code. Rai really wants to qualify for one of those spots, so she plans to spend extra time over the next two weeks working harder on her math assignments.

As the Quest website explains, boss levels are "two-week 'intensive' [units] where students apply knowledge and skills to date to propose solutions to complex problems." "Boss level" is a term taken directly from video games. In a boss level, you face a boss monster (or some equivalent thereof)—a monster so intimidating it requires you to draw on everything you've learned and mastered in the game so far. It's the equivalent of a midterm or final exam. Boss levels are notoriously hard but immensely satisfying to beat. Quest schedules boss levels at various points in the school year, in order to fire students up about putting their lessons into action. Students get to tackle an epic challenge—and there's no shame in failing. It's a boss level, and so, just like any good game, it's meant to whet your appetite to try harder and practice more.

Like collaborative quests, the boss levels are tackled in teams, and each student must qualify to play a particular role —"mathematical specialist," for example. Just as in a big *World of Warcraft* raid, each participant is expected to play to his or her strengths. This is one of Quest's key strategies for giving students better hopes of success. Beyond the basic core curriculum, students spend most of their time getting better at subjects and activities—ones they have a natural talent for or already know how to do well. This strategy means every student is set up to truly excel at something, and to focus attention on the areas in which he or she is most likely to one day become extraordinary.

6:00 p.m. Rai is at home, interacting with a virtual character named Betty. Rai's goal is to teach Betty how to divide mixed numbers. Betty is what Quest calls a "teachable agent": "an assessment tool where kids teach a digital character how to solve a particular problem." In other words, Betty is a software program designed to know *less* than Rai. And it's Rai's job to "teach" the program, by demonstrating solutions and working patiently with Betty until she gets it.

At Quest, these teachable agents replace quizzes, easing the anxiety associated with having to perform under pressure. With a teachable agent, you're not being tested to see if you've really learned something. Instead, you're mentoring someone because you really have learned something, and this is your chance to show it. There's a powerful element of naches—vicarious pride —involved here: the more a student learns, the more he or she can pass it on. This is a core dynamic of how learning works in good video games, and at Quest it's perfectly translated into a scalable assessment system.

Secret missions, boss levels, expertise exchanges, special agents, points, and levels instead of letter grades—there's no doubt that Quest to Learn is a different kind of learning environment, about as radically different a mission as any charter school has set out in recent memory. It's an unprecedented infusion of gamefulness into the public school system. And the result is a learning environment where students get to share secret knowledge, turn their intellectual strengths into superpowers, tackle epic challenges, and fail without fear.

Quest to Learn started with a sixth-grade class in the fall of 2009, and it plans to add a new sixth-grade class each year as the previous year graduates upward. The first senior class will graduate from Quest to Learn in 2016, and potentially from college by 2020. I'm willing to bet that that graduating class will

be full of creative problem solvers, strong collaborators, and innovative thinkers ready to wholeheartedly tackle formidable challenges in the real world.

SuperBetter—Or How to Turn Recovery into a Multiplayer Experience

Either I'm going to kill myself or I'm going to turn this into a game. After the four most miserable weeks of my life, those seemed like the only two options I had left.

It was the summer of 2009, and I was about halfway through writing this book when I got a concussion. It was a stupid, fluke accident. I had been standing up, and I slammed my head straight into a cabinet door I didn't realize was still open. I was dizzy, saw stars, and felt sick to my stomach. When my husband asked me who the president was, I drew a blank.

Some concussions get better in a few hours, or a few days. Others turn into a much longer postconcussion syndrome. That's what happened to me. I got a headache and a case of vertigo that didn't go away. Any time I turned my head, it felt like I was doing somersaults. And I was in a constant mental fog. I kept forgetting things—people's names, or where I'd put things. If I tried to read or write, after a few minutes my vision blurred out completely. I couldn't think clearly enough to keep up my end of interesting conversations. Even just being around other people, or out in public spaces, seemed to make it worse. At the time, I scribbled these notes: "Everything is hard. The iron fist pushes against my thoughts. My whole brain feels vacuum pressurized. If I can't think, who am I?"

After five days of these symptoms and after a round of neurological tests that all proved normal, my doctor told me I would be fine—but it would probably take an entire month before I really felt like myself again. In the meantime, no reading, no writing, no working, and no running, unless I was

completely symptom-free. I had to avoid anything that made my head hurt or made the fog worse. (Sadly, I quickly discovered that computer and video games were out of the question; it was way too much mental stimulation.)

This was difficult news to hear. A month seemed like an impossibly long time not to work and to feel this bad. But at least it gave me a target to shoot for. I set the date on my calendar: August 15, I would be better. I believed it. I *had* to believe it.

That month came and went, and I'd barely improved at all.

That's when I found out that if you don't recover in a month, the next likely window of recovery is three months.

And if you miss *that* target, the next target is a year.

Two more months living with a vacuum-pressurized brain? Possibly an *entire year*? I felt more hopeless than I could have ever imagined. Rationally, I knew things could be worse—I wasn't dying, after all. But I felt like a shadow of my real self, and I wanted so desperately to resume my normal life.

My doctor had told me that it was normal to feel anxious or depressed after a concussion. But she also said that anxiety and depression exacerbate concussion symptoms and make it much harder for the brain to heal itself. The more depressed or anxious you get, the more concussed you feel and the longer recovery takes. Of course, the worse the symptoms are and the longer they last, the more likely you are to be anxious or depressed. In other words, it's a vicious cycle. And the only way to get better faster is to break the cycle.

I knew I was trapped in that cycle. The only thing I could think of that could possibly make me optimistic enough to break it was a game.

It was a strange idea, but I literally had nothing else to do (except watch television and go on very slow walks). I'd never

made a health care game before. But it seemed like the perfect opportunity to try out my alternate reality theories in a new context. I might not be able to read or write very much, but hopefully I could still be creative.

I knew right away it needed to be a multiplayer game. I'd been having a lot of trouble explaining to my closest friends and family how truly anxious I was and how depressed I felt, how hard the recovery process was. I also felt awkward, and embarrassed, asking for help. I needed a way to help myself tell my closest friends and family, "I am having the hardest time of my life, and I really need you to help me." But I also didn't want to be a burden. I wanted to *invite* people to help me.

As with any alternate reality project, I needed to research the reality of the situation before I could reinvent it. So, for a few days, I spent the limited amount of time I was able to focus—about an hour a day at that point—learning about postconcussion syndrome online. From various medical journals and reports, I pieced together what experts agree are the three most important strategies for getting better and coping more effectively—not only from concussions, but any injury or chronic illness.

First: stay optimistic, set goals, and focus on any positive progress you make. Second: get support from friends and family. And third: learn to read your symptoms like a temperature gauge. How you feel tells you when to do more, do less, or take breaks, so you can gradually work your way up to more demanding activity.[7]

Of course, it immediately occurred to me that these three strategies sound exactly like what you do when you're playing a good multiplayer game. You have clear goals; you track your progress; you tackle increasingly difficult challenges, but only when you're ready for them; and you connect with people you like. The only thing missing from these recovery strategies,

really, was the meaning—the exciting story, the heroic purpose, the sense of being part of something bigger.

So that's where SuperBetter comes in.

SuperBetter is a superhero-themed game that turns getting better into multiplayer adventure. It's designed to help anyone recovering from an injury or coping with a chronic condition get better sooner—with more fun, and with less pain and misery, along the way.

The game starts with five missions. You're encouraged to do at least one mission a day, so that you've successfully completed them all in less than a week. Of course, you can move through them even faster if you feel up to it. Here are excerpts from the instructions for each mission, along with an explanation of how I designed it and how I played it.

> Mission #1: Create your SuperBetter secret identity. You're the hero of this adventure. And you can be anyone you want, from any story you love. So pick your favorite story—anything from James Bond to *Gossip Girl, Twilight* to *Harry Potter, Batman* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* You're about to borrow their superpowers and play the leading role yourself.

I chose *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as my story line. That made me Jane the Concussion Slayer, and that made my symptoms the vampires, demons, and other forces of darkness I was destined by fate to battle against. The point of this mission is to start seeing yourself as powerful, not powerless. And it underscores the fact that you *are* heroic for choosing to persevere in the face of your injury or illness.

> Mission #2: Recruit your allies. Every superhero has an

inner circle of friends who help save the day. Pick the people you want to count on most, and invite them to play this game with you. Ask each one to play a specific part: Batman needs a Robin and an Alfred, while James Bond needs an M, a Q, and a Moneypenny. If you're Bella, you'll want at least an Edward, a Jacob, and an Alice. Give each ally a specific mission, related to his or her character. Use your imagination—and feel free to ask for anything you need! When you're saving the world, you can't be shy about asking for help. Be sure to ask at least one ally to give you daily or weekly achievements—these are surprise accomplishments they bestow upon you based on your latest superheroic activities.

As Jane the Concussion Slayer, I recruited my twin sister as my "Watcher" (Buffy's mentor in the TV series). Her mission was to call me every single day and ask for a report on my concussion-slaying activities. She should also give me advice and suggest challenges for me to try. Before playing SuperBetter, I hadn't known how to explain to her that I really needed daily contact, and not just to hear from her on the weekends.

I recruited my husband as my "Willow" (Buffy's smarty-pants best friend who's also a computer geek). His mission was to do all of the score-and record-keeping for me, read me interesting articles, and in general help me with anything I wanted to do on the computer without getting a headache. Finally, I recruited my friends Natalie and Rommel, and their miniature dachshund, Maurice, as my "Xander" (he's the comic-relief character). Their mission was to come over once a week and just generally cheer me up.

Why recruit allies? Social psychologists have long observed

that one of the hardest things about a chronic injury or illness is asking our friends and family for support. But reaching out and really asking for what we need makes a huge difference. It prevents social isolation, and it gives people who want to help, but don't know how, something specific and actionable to do.

And why have achievements? Every fiero moment helps increase optimism and a sense of mastery, which has been proven to speed recovery from everything from knee injuries to cancer. But achievements feel more meaningful when someone else gives them to you—that's why it's important to have a friend or family member bestow them upon you. Kiyash gave me my achievements based on the titles of episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. (For example, I unlocked the "Out of Mind, Out of Sight" achievement for ignoring my e-mail for an entire day, and "The Harvest" achievement for eating vegetables for dinner instead of cookies and ice cream, which was one of my favorite postconcussion ways to drown my sorrows. At the time, both of those felt like epic struggles.)

> Mission #3: Find the bad guys. To win this battle, you need to know what you're up against. Pay attention all day to anything that makes you feel worse, and put it on your bad-guys list. Some days, you'll be able to battle the bad guys longer—some days not so long. But every time you do battle, you'll want to make a great escape. That means getting away from the bad guy before he knocks you flat. You can always add more bad guys to your list as you discover them—and if you vanquish one forever, you can take it off and claim the permanent victory.

My list of bad guys at the start of the game focused on activities I kept trying to sneak in even though I knew they made

me feel worse: reading and responding to e-mail, running or doing any kind of vigorous exercise, playing *Peggle*, drinking coffee.

The better you can identify triggers of your symptoms, the more pain and suffering you'll avoid. And making a great escape turns a potential moment of failure—*This is harder than it should be,* or *I can't do what I want to do*—into a moment of triumph: *I succeeded in recognizing a trigger and vanquished it before it did too much damage.* One of the highlights in my recovery was when I enlisted the entire crew at the Peet's Coffee down the block to help me modulate the amount of caffeine in my morning iced coffee, which I was really reluctant to give up. It was their idea to start me off with 90 percent decaf with just a splash of caffeine so that I could work my way up to half and half, and eventually full caffeine when my brain was finally ready to be stimulated again.

> Mission #4: Identify your power-ups. Good thing you've got superpowers. Maybe they're not your typical superpowers—but you definitely have fun things you can do for yourself at a moment's notice to feel better. Make a list, and be ready to call on them whenever the bad guys are getting the better of you. In fact, try to collect as many power-ups as you can every day!

For my concussion recovery, I focused on things I could do with my senses that weren't affected by my head injury. Touch was fine, so I could sit and cuddle with my Shetland sheepdog. Hearing was fine, so I could sit by the window and listen to a podcast. And the biggest superpower I discovered had to do with my sense of smell: I really started to enjoy smelling different perfumes. I would go to a perfume counter, spray samples of a

dozen perfumes on cards, then take them home and smell them throughout the rest of the evening, to see how they changed and to learn the different notes. It was one of the most engaging activities I could do without hurting my brain at all. And eventually, once my vertigo was improved, I was able to add to my power-up list long walks up San Francisco hills with my husband.

The power-ups are meant to help you feel capable of having a good day, no matter what. Having specific positive actions to take increases the odds of doing something that will break the cycle of feeling negative stress or depression.

> Mission #5: Create your superhero to-do list. Not every mission is possible, but it doesn't hurt to dream big. Make a list of goals for yourself, ranging from things you're 100 percent positive you can do right now to things you might not have been able to do even in your wildest dreams before you got sick or hurt. Everything on your list should be something that would make you feel awesome and show off your strengths. Every day, try to make progress toward crossing one of these superhero to-dos off your list. Be sure to get your allies' help and advice.

This final idea was inspired by a question I'd found on the website of a New Zealand occupational therapist. "If I can't take your pain away, what else would you like to improve in your life?"[8] It's one of the abiding features of a good game: the outcome is uncertain. You play in order to discover how well you can do—not because you're guaranteed to win. SuperBetter has to acknowledge the possibility of failure to achieve complete recovery. But it can also make it less scary to fail—because there is an abundance of other goals to pursue and other rewarding

activities to undertake along the way. That's why it seemed essential to make part of the game a project to discover as many positive activities that it was still possible to do. It increased my real hopes of enjoying life more, no matter what else happened with the recovery or treatment.

One of my easiest superhero to-dos was baking cookies for people who live in my neighborhood. I liked it so much, I did it three times. A more challenging to-do was finding an opportunity to wear my favorite pair of purple leather stiletto boots, which meant getting up the energy to go out and see people. (I crossed this one off my list by going to see a movie with a big group of friends. I was a bit overdressed, but I felt great anyway.) The biggest superhero to-do on my list was, of course, to finish this book.

Once you have completed the five big missions, your challenge is to stay in constant contact with your allies, collect power-ups by battling the bad guys and making great escapes, and tackle items on your superhero to-do list. You might want to "lock in" your gameplay by keeping a game journal, posting daily videos on YouTube, or using Twitter to announce your achievements.

Near the end of every day, hold a secret meeting with one of your allies. Add up your great escapes, your power-ups, and your superhero points.

Talk to your other allies as often as possible, and tell them what you've been doing to get superbetter. Ask them for ideas about new things to add to your to-do list.

Be sure you have at least one ally who is giving you daily achievements. Share these achievements with your friends online, using Twitter or Facebook status updates, to keep them posted on your progress.

So that's how you play SuperBetter. But does it actually

improve the reality of getting better?

The first few days I was playing, I was in a better mood than I had been at any time since I hit my head. 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.

My symptoms didn't improve instantly—but I was so much more motivated to get something positive out of my day, no matter what. Every day, no matter how bad I felt otherwise, I would score at least one great escape, grab at least one power-up, rack up some points, and unlock an achievement. Doing these things didn't require being cured; it just required making an effort to participate more fully in my own recovery process.

There's not a whole lot you can prove with a scientific sample of one. I can say only that, for me, the fog of misery lifted first, and then, soon after, the fog of symptoms started to lift as well. Within two weeks of playing Jane the Concussion Slayer, my symptoms were improved by roughly 80 percent, according to the log Kiyash helped me keep of my pain and concentration problems on a ten-point scale, and I was up to working as many as four hours a day. Within a month, I felt almost completely recovered.

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. What I can say for sure is that I suffered a great deal less during the recovery as a direct result of the game. I was miserable one day, and the next day I wasn't; and I was never that miserable again as long as I was playing the game. When my allies joined the game, I finally felt like they really understood what I was going through, and I never felt quite so lost in the fog again.

After declaring my victory over the concussion in a Twitter post, I received dozens of requests to post all the rules and

missions, so that other people could game their own injuries and illnesses—for everything from chronic back pain and social anxiety to lung disorders, migraines, the side effects of quitting smoking, newly diagnosed diabetes, chemotherapy, and even mononucleosis.

I published the rule set on my blog, and I gave it the more general name SuperBetter (after all, most people probably don't dream of being like Buffy the Vampire Slayer).[9] I suggested that people use the hashtag "#SuperBetter" for their own videos, blog posts, and Twitter updates, in case they wanted to find each other online. (A *hashtag* is a way to easily add context to your online content, and to find other people talking about the same topic.) And that was it. I didn't build a Web application, or develop an automated scoring system, or even set up a social network for playing the game. A game doesn't have to be a computer program. It can simply be like chess or hide-and-seek: a set of rules that one player can pass on to another.

An alternate reality game can be as simple as a good idea, a fresh way of looking at a problem. SuperBetter, of course, isn't meant to replace conventional medical advice or treatment. It's meant to augment good advice, and to help patients take a more active role in their own recovery.

When you're sick or in pain, getting better is all you want. But the longer it takes, the harder it gets. And when the tough reality we have to face is that getting better won't be easy, a good game can better prepare us to deal with that reality. In an alternate reality linked to our favorite superhero mythology, we're more likely to stay optimistic, because we'll set more reasonable goals and keep better track of our progress. We'll feel successful even when we're struggling, because our friends and family will define fiero moments for us every day. We'll build a stronger social support system, because it's easier to ask someone to play

a game than it is to ask for help. And we'll hopefully find real meaning and develop real character in our epic efforts to overcome what may be the toughest challenge we've ever had to face. And *that's* how we get superbetter, thanks to a good game.

THE THREE GAMES discussed in this chapter represent three of the main approaches to developing an alternate reality and solving a quality-of-life problem.

Chore Wars is an example of a **life-management** ARG—a software program or service that helps you manage your real life like a game.

Quest to Learn is an example of an **organizational** ARG. It uses game design as a guiding philosophy for creating new institutions and inventing new organizational practices.

And SuperBetter is a **concept** ARG. It uses social media and networking tools to virally spread new game ideas, missions, and rule sets, which players can repurpose and adapt for their own lives as they see fit.

These three methods aren't the only ways to create an alternate reality. In later chapters in this book, you'll also read about **live event ARGs,** which gather players at physical locations for a game that takes only an hour or a day to play, and **narrative ARGs,** which use multimedia storytelling—video, text, photographs, audio, and even graphic novels—to weave real-world game missions into a compelling fiction that plays out over weeks, months, or even years.

Of course, by the time you read this book, dozens—probably

hundreds—of new alternate reality games will no doubt be widely playable. This movement is just getting started. When we imagine how the ARG movement might unfold, we can—as always—look for guidance from the past.

In the early 1970s, just before the computer and video game revolution, another game revolution took place, with significantly less fanfare but a rather important and lasting legacy. It was called the New Games movement, and its goal was to reinvent sports to be more cooperative, more social, and more inclusive.

The New Games philosophy was simple, composed of two parts. First, no one should ever have to warm the bench because they're not good enough to play. And second, competitive gameplay shouldn't be about winning. It should be about playing harder and longer than the other team, in order to have more fun.

The founders of the movement, a group of San Francisco-based counterculturists, invented dozens of new sports, all sillier and more spectacular than traditional athletic activities. The most well known were the "earth ball" games (played with a ball six feet in diameter, so that it takes multiple people to move the ball together) and parachute games (in which twenty to fifty people stand around the rim of a piece of parachute material and flap and billow it together, working to create various shapes and ripples). They held large New Games festivals in the Bay Area and eventually trained tens of thousands of schools and parks and recreation departments across the country, so that they could include New Games in their physical education and public recreation programs.

Many of today's leading game developers grew up playing New Games at school and local parks—and it's not hard to see the influence of New Games on multiplayer and massively multiplayer game designers today. From the cooperative

missions in MMOs to the 256-player combat environments on consoles, video gameplay today often looks a lot like a New Game, set in a virtual world. In fact, New Games theory has come up at every single Game Developers Conference I've attended over the last decade—which is how I know that many game designers have managed to acquire for themselves a copy of the long out-of-print and little-known *New Games Book*, published in 1976.

The New Games Book includes instructions for how to play the new sports and, more importantly, essays explaining the philosophy of the movement. Many of my friends in the industry have acknowledged they've flipped through its pages for game-design inspiration.

I've nearly worn the print off the page of my favorite essay in the book. It's called "Creating the Play Community," by Bernie DeKoven, then the codirector of the New Games Foundation and today a leading play theorist. In the essay, DeKoven calls for a community of players to volunteer to be of service to the movement. He asks: Who will be willing to try these new games and help assess whether they are, in fact, better than the old games? If they are better, the community should teach others how to play. If they're not better, the players should suggest ways to improve them, or start inventing their own new games to test. He explains:

> Because the games are new, we get a sense that we're experimenting. No one guarantees anything. If a game doesn't work, we try to fix it, to see if we can make it work. After all, it's a new game. It's not official yet. In fact, we're the officials, all of us, every one of us who has come to play. We make the judgments. We each take the responsibility for discovering what we can enjoy

together.[10]

This is the kind of community that is currently coming together around alternate reality games. As we develop alternate realities, we need to be both open-minded and critical about what actually raises our quality of life, what helps us participate more fully in our real lives, and what simply serves as yet another distraction. There will be many, many different alternate realities proposed in the coming years, and it's not up to just the game developers to shape this movement. The players, more than anyone else, will get to decide if a new alternate reality is indeed a good game.

The "how" of alternate reality game design boils down to the game-design principles that best generate the four rewards we crave most. Traditional computer and video game developers are leading the way, constantly innovating new ways to reap these rewards; ARG developers are already borrowing and refining these design strategies and development tools as their go-to solutions for how to make the world work more like a game.

But as we playtest different possibilities to decide what makes a good alternate reality, three additional sets of criteria are certain to emerge.

First: *When* and *where* do we need an alternate reality? Which situations and spaces call for it—and when are we better off leaving reality alone?

Second: *Who* should we include in our alternate reality games? Besides our close friends and family, who else would we benefit from inviting to play with us?

And third: *What* activities should we be adopting as the core mechanics of our alternate reality games? Game design is a structure—goals, restrictions, feedback—but within that structure, we can ask players to do almost anything. What habits

should we be encouraging? What actions should we be multiplying?

These three different sets of criteria are the subjects of the next three chapters, which in turn cover three key kinds of alternate reality projects: alternate realities designed to make difficult activities more rewarding, alternate realities designed to build up new real-world communities, and alternate realities designed to help us adopt the daily habits of the world's happiest people in our real, everyday lives.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Leveling Up in Life

HOW ALTERNATE REALITIES CAN MAKE DIFFICULT ACTIVITIES MORE REWARDING

If I have one regret in life," I complained to the crowd at the Austin Convention Center, "it's that my undead priest is smarter than I am." Technically speaking, it's true: if you were to add up every A I've gotten in my real life, from junior high through graduate school, the total still wouldn't come close to my *World of Warcraft* character's intellect stat. Never mind the fact that there's no score at all for getting smarter once you're out of school for good.

I was giving a keynote address at the annual design and technology conference SXSW Interactive when I made this lament. The topic was, naturally, the failures of the real world to be as engaging as a good game, and what we could do to fix it. As I told the crowd, "I'd feel a lot better if I got plus-one intellect for every smart thing I said during this talk. Or at least a few plus-one public speaking points." Giving talks is exhausting, even when I enjoy it, I explained. It would be energizing to see some +1s pop up right on top of my PowerPoint slides as I worked my way through the deck.

A few days later, back home in California, I received an e-mail from an unfamiliar sender: ratings@plusoneme.com. The subject was "Clay has acknowledged your strengths." Clay who? I wondered. I didn't know anyone named Clay. I opened the e-mail anyway.

> A friend of yours, Clay Johnson, +1d you to acknowledge some of your strengths. Specifically they're acknowledging these attributes:
>
>
> +1 Intelligence
> +1 Public Speaking
> +1 Inspiration
>
> Enjoy your day. And congratulations!

A second e-mail arrived a few minutes later, from Clay Johnson himself.

> Your +1 in public speaking as you requested at SXSW! It should have arrived in your inbox a little while ago. When you said that during your speech, I thought, "Why shouldn't she be able to get a +1 in public speaking?!" and built plusoneme.com. Great talk. Check out what you inspired.

I followed the link, and sure enough, there was a perfect little Web application dedicated to giving and tracking stats in an array of thirty-seven different personal strengths: creativity, generosity, speed, fashion, listening, and backbone, for example.

It was definitely a broader and more diverse set of stats than I'd even seen in a role-playing game. For every plus-one you send, you can also attach a reason: "+1 backbone for sticking up

for our idea in the meeting," for example, or "+1 endurance for getting through the long drive home tonight." And you can send a plus-one to anyone via e-mail, regardless of whether or not they've signed up to play. If they join the site and create a profile, their plus-ones "stack," or add up over time. (So far, I'm up to +25 innovation, because I asked my colleagues to plusoneme when I do something innovative at work.)

You can add a plus-one feed to your blog or social network page so that your friends and family can see exactly how fast you're leveling up, in what strengths. All in all, Plusoneme is pretty much exactly what you'd wish for if you wanted to level up in real life—that is, if you wanted to have an objective measure of how much better you're getting at the things you're working hard at.

Since he gave me my first plus-one, I've gotten to know Clay Johnson better. It turns out that he's the director emeritus of Sunlight Labs, a community of open-source developers dedicated to making government more transparent and participatory. We've had some very interesting conversations about how to use game feedback systems to increase democratic participation. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised to see a Plusoneme.gov someday, to help constituents give better feedback to their elected officials.

Plusoneme isn't a game—there aren't any built-in goals, and there are no restrictions on how you give or earn a plus-one. It's more like a *gesture* toward a game, a kind of musing out loud: How would it feel to get constant, real-time positive feedback in our real lives, whenever we're tackling obstacles and working hard? Would we be more motivated? Would we feel more rewarded? Would we challenge ourselves more?

A growing number of alternate reality projects suggest that, for all these questions, the answer is a resounding yes. Systems

that help us *level up in real life*, by providing us with voluntary obstacles related to our real-world activity and by giving us better feedback really can help us make a better effort. And that gives us our next fix:

FIX # 8 : MEANINGFUL REWARDS WHEN WE NEED THEM MOST

> Compared with games, reality is pointless and unrewarding. Games help us feel more rewarded for making our best effort.

I hate flying, and I spend a *lot* of time hating it—on the order of over 150 hours a year.

I'm a nervous flier. I've gotten better over the years, but I still can't really work on planes, eat on planes, or sleep on planes. I certainly can't *enjoy* myself on planes. Half the time, I literally make myself sick with anxiety. Even after a good flight, I'm so exhausted from the stress and the jet lag that it takes hours or even a whole day or more to recover.

More than 25 million Americans have a fear of flying, while 52 percent of frequent fliers say that the number one word to describe air travel is "frustrating." [1] And this has significant consequences for our health and well-being.

Being out of control is a fundamentally stressful feeling. Researchers have shown that it takes a huge hit on both our happiness and our physical health. And it's not just in the moment that we're negatively affected. When we go through an experience that makes us feel endangered or powerless, our immune system suffers and we experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and pessimism in the hours and days that

follow.[2]

Games, of course, help put people back in control. Real gameplay is always by definition voluntary; it is always an exercise of our own freedom. Meanwhile, progressing toward goals and getting better at a game instills a sense of power and mastery.

The fact that commercial flying puts so many people on edge, so reliably, makes airports and airplanes the perfect target for a game-design intervention. If we could look forward to flights instead of dreading them, and if we could feel powerful at the start of our trip instead of helpless, the quality of life of frequent fliers worldwide would skyrocket. And the most fearful fliers would be able to go on more of the trips they want to take but currently avoid.

But what would make flying more authentically rewarding? Forget frequent-flier miles and other travel reward programs. If you're already frustrated or fearful about flying, earning more flights isn't going to make you any happier.

What we need are *intrinsic* reward programs—and two new games for fliers show exactly how it could be done: Jetset, the world's first video game for airports, and Day in the Cloud, an in-flight scavenger hunt designed to be played plane versus plane, at ten thousand feet and higher.

Jetset and Day in the Cloud

Jetset, an iPhone game created by Atlanta-based developers Persuasive Games, is a cartoon simulation of an airport security line. Load the game and, on your iPhone screen, you get to watch virtual passengers march through a cartoon metal detector while virtual luggage rolls through the X-ray machine. Your role in the game is to play the part of the security agent: tap the screen to confiscate banned items and to pat down suspicious passengers. Go too slow, and passengers miss their flights; go too quickly, and you might miss a banned item or let the wrong passenger slip by. The longer you play, the longer the line gets, the faster the security belt runs, and the harder it is to keep up with new security restrictions, like "no pressurized cheese," "no pet snakes," "no pudding cups," and "no robots."

    The game's lead designer, Ian Bogost, is a frequent business traveler who came up with the idea for the game after suffering endless frustration in the security line himself. The game has a decidedly satirical bent, and player reviews often mention laughing out loud as they play.[3] That's one of the main goals of the game, Bogost told me: to make players laugh during a stressful situation. "Hopefully, it helps frequent fliers laugh at the absurdity of the airport security process instead of being overwhelmed or infuriated by it."

    Technically, you can play Jetset anywhere you take your mobile phone. But the only way to officially level up and unlock souvenir prizes to send to friends and family is by playing the game at real-world airports. That's because Jetset uses the GPS data from your phone to figure out where in the world you really are. If your actual GPS coordinates match any of the hundred

airports in the game's database, you get access to a customized airport game level that perfectly matches your real-world location. Complete that level, and you unlock a local achievement, or, in Jetset-speak, a "souvenir." For example, at Albuquerque International Sunport you can earn a virtual green chili pepper, while at Los Angeles International Airport, you win giant virtual sunglasses.

Every time you earn a souvenir, you can use the game's mobile Facebook application to send the virtual object as a gift to a friend or family member. The gift lets them know not only that you've scored a game victory at the airport, but also clues them in to the fact that you're just about to start or finish a trip. In other words, Jetset helps you provide real-time travel updates to your social network as you play.

The more airports you visit, the more strange items you can amass for your souvenir collection and the more travel trophies you can collect. And if you're always flying in and out of the same airports? Then you can work on harder and harder levels to earn premium versions of your local souvenirs. Fly often enough in real life, and you'll get promoted up the virtual security ranks at your local airport. It's essentially FarmVille for airports, providing players with a sense of blissful productivity and social connectivity in an otherwise stressful environment. And that's what makes Jetset an alternate reality game, and not just another diversion. It's meant to improve players' real-life experience of a real-world environment.

Do the virtual souvenirs and power-ups have real value for the players? Bogost certainly hopes so. He specifically designed them to give frequent fliers something more fun and personally satisfying to aim for than miles and upgrades.

"Too many business travelers are obsessed with getting more miles even as they complain about how much they travel,"

Bogost told me. "It's a self-defeating system: it rewards you with more of what you already hate." Not to mention, relying on rewards of significant monetary value to keep people happy and motivated simply isn't a scalable solution. There's only so many free seats airlines are willing to give away, and only so many VIP members they're willing to recognize. As soon as too many people start earning rewards, Bogost notes, airlines simply change the rules to make it harder to win. That's not a very fair game.

By contrast, the potential intrinsic rewards of a good game like Jetset are nonexhaustible. Positive emotions can be provoked for everyone who plays, without limitation, and personal feelings of satisfaction, pride, and social connection are completely renewable resources. You can simply reward more people more often when the goal is an intrinsic reward.

Nothing epitomizes mandatory, mindless activity more than waiting in line at the security or boarding lines at the airport. But Jetset is a special, *voluntary* mission you can undertake while waiting—in other words, an unnecessary obstacle. By focusing on the unnecessary obstacle of the game, instead of the mandatory obstacle of the real security and boarding process, you can instantly change your state of mind from negative stress to positive activation. You can't opt *out* of security and boarding rituals, but you can opt *in* to the game. It's a subtle, but powerful, way to change the dynamics of the situation. Instead of feeling external pressure, you're focused on the positive stress of the game.

What I like about Jetset most is the fact that when you play, you're not just sleep-walking through a part of your life that you hate. You're actively participating in the moment, taking full advantage of your location by undertaking a game mission you could *only* play while at that airport.

Taking full advantage of the moment is an important quality-of-life skill: it builds up your sense of self-efficacy by reminding you that you have the power at any time to make your own happiness. Jetset might not permanently resolve the ongoing frustrations of airport security and boarding, but it reminds us of our power to improve our own experience. And for that reason, it's an excellent signal of the role that *location-based games* can play in improving our quality of life in the future.

A good location-based game can transform any space into sites of intrinsic reward. Imagine the possibilities. Three of my favorite potential game sites are dentist offices, the department of motor vehicles, and public transportation.

Wherever there is a mandatory experience that is unpleasant or frustrating, a surefire way to improve it is to design a good game you can *only* play in that space. Jetset effectively tackles that problem for airports. But what about the experience of actually being in the air?

Enter the Day in the Cloud challenge.

> Accept the challenge.
> Scour the earth.
> Please remain seated.
> —Invitation to play Day in the Cloud[4]

Take two ordinary commercial flights, flying at the same time in opposite directions between the same two airports. Pit them against each other in an epic battle of online wits and creativity. Passengers spend the duration of the flight working together to earn as many points for their plane as possible. When both planes land, everyone on the plane with the highest score wins.

Day in the Cloud was a promotion dreamed up by Virgin America and Google Apps. It was initially run as a small

playtest, on planes traveling between the Los Angeles and San Francisco international airports. And while it hasn't yet been implemented across the Virgin America fleet, it serves as a powerful indication of the kind of innovation that is possible in the air, using technology that's already fully in place.

The game takes advantage of Virgin America's sophisticated in-flight entertainment system, which includes seat-to-seat chat and instant messaging; a real-time Google map that displays the plane's location, altitude, and speed; and WiFi Internet access for laptops, mobile phones, and PDAs.

Once the plane gets above ten thousand feet—which is when the plane's WiFi system is turned on—players can power up, log in, and join the game, which consists of a series of several dozen puzzles and creative challenges that must be completed before the plane descends back below ten thousand feet.

Each puzzle and challenge corresponds to a different altitude —the higher the altitude, the trickier it is. A low-altitude puzzle, for example, might be as simple as completing a maze or answering a movie trivia riddle, such as: "*Ma'am, I believe you are doing more than just flirting with me*. What 1967 movie features a more memorable version of that line?" (Check the footnotes for the answer.)[5]

Higher-altitude puzzles involve trickier tasks, like Mensa-level code breaking, and juicier goals, like snooping through a game character's "real" online e-mail account to find secret bits of personal information. And if you're not a puzzle person, you can tackle creative challenges, like: "Write a theme song for Day in the Cloud. The lyrics should have one four-line verse and one catchy four-line chorus. You must include at least one rhyme for 'cloud,' 'cirrus,' 'stratus,' 'cumulus,' or 'nimbus' somewhere in your lyrics."[6]

The collection of puzzles and challenges is designed to be virtually impossible to complete alone over the course of the flight. That's where your planemates come in. ("Planemates" might not be a recognized English word yet, but that's simply because we've been woefully underutilizing planes as social spaces.) Travelers are encouraged to work together, dividing and conquering the various challenges, and sharing solutions. You can partner with someone in your row, sharing a laptop together. Or you can use the seat-back communications system to trade ideas and answers.

The more passengers who play on a given plane, the higher the plane's potential score. So there's a real incentive to reach out to people who look friendly, curious, or just plain bored. And it's not just planemates that you can collaborate with during the game. The online game requires players to connect to the Internet, and once you're online it's easy to pick your friends' and family members' brains via e-mail or Twitter or IM. In fact, many Day in the Cloud players set up informal Twitter teams on the ground to help them out during the game. (Not everyone on the chosen flights knew about the game in advance—but one of the game's organizers told me afterward that about a dozen people on board each flight came prepared to play.) These on-the-ground collaborators serve as a kind of personal support system during the flight—not only good for the game, but also good for any anxiety and boredom you might ordinarily feel while flying.

A game timer shows you how long you have left in the flight, which is how long you have to finish solving your puzzles and completing your creative challenges. After the plane descends below ten thousand feet, the final scores are calculated and reported to both planes. As one player blogged after the flight, "Suddenly, I hear a big cheer come up from the whole plane

behind me. 'We've won!'"[7] Winning passengers are greeted by Virgin America gate agents like conquering heroes when they walk off the plane.

All in all, it makes for quite a brilliant image: two planes passing in the sky, one heading north, the other south, trying to solve the same problems from above the clouds as they race along at hundreds of miles an hour.

Okay. So maybe this sounds fun, but you're still thinking: Why bother? Why add games to flights, when they already do what they're supposed to—get us safely from one part of the world to another? Do we really need to have "fun" and "adventure" and make "progress" all the time?

No, of course we don't.

If you're a good sleeper or worker on flights, or the kind of person who can relax and read a good book or just enjoy the view, then tuning out the game would be easy. You can and should go about your travel reality as usual. Many people will—during the Day in the Cloud playtests, roughly half the fliers on the test flights chose to play, while the other half went about their business.

But flying is difficult for many millions of people. It causes untold stress, anxiety, exhaustion. When something is that hard for so many people, when it causes so much daily suffering, needlessly, we should try to make it better if we can. If you're a nervous flier or get bored easily or just can't sleep on planes, an in-flight game could provide the kind of engagement and positive stimulation you need to actually start to enjoy and appreciate flying.

Day in the Cloud demonstrates quite clearly that the technology and desire is already here for a very different travel reality.

Consider some other possibilities. For example, an in-flight-

only role-playing game that remembers exactly where you left off and picks up again whenever you board the plane. Its fantasy maps would overlay perfectly on top of the real-time Google maps. Each quest could be undertaken only while you're actually flying through that part of the realm.

Collaborative, GPS-enabled challenges would require you to partner up with someone on the ground within a hundred-mile radius of your plane and synchronize your virtual actions together as you fly overhead. Suddenly, flying over Nebraska is very different from flying over Kansas—because perhaps you have allies in Nebraska who can help you score more points, if you can get them to log on and play during those exact fifteen minutes you're flying overhead.

Of course, frequent-flier miles could also be made to be much more useful than they are now. For instance, you could distribute them as experience points across various categories of skill, talent, and ability to power up your in-flight avatar.

In-flight games even suggest a new model for earning seat upgrades—first player to score a certain number of points wins a first-class seat. As one Day in the Cloud player reported from the playtest, "At this point one of the attendants asks if I would like to move to first class since there's more room and I'm effectively the star player. I'm a bit reluctant, being that I'd lose my newfound friends sitting next to me."[8] (In case you're wondering, he eventually convinced the attendant that they should all move up together, so they could keep collaborating.)

Ultimately, when every mile you cover in the air is a chance to rack up more mission points, and every passenger on the plane is a potential ally, and flying over a town or city is a chance to connect with the people who live there, the whole experience becomes charged with potential to do more than just get where you're going.

206

THE EXAMPLE OF in-flight games presents the basic case for developing games that connect with our everyday lives: these games can help people suffer less and enjoy the real world more. When an experience is difficult for us, offering challenging goals, tracking points and levels and achievements, and providing virtual rewards can make it easier to get through the experience. Ultimately, that's the most important work that game designers can do in the future: to make things that are hard for us as rewarding—as *intrinsically* rewarding—as possible.

But what about activities that we already enjoy?

Can games motivate us to make a better effort, even when we already love what we're doing?

Trying to improve an already enjoyable activity by adding points, levels, and achievements has its risks. Economists have demonstrated that offering people an extrinsic reward (like money or prizes) for something they're already doing—and already enjoying—actually makes them feel *less* motivated and *less* rewarded. But game points and achievements don't have extrinsic value yet—so as long as the main prize is glory, bragging rights, and personal fiero, the danger of devaluing a pleasurable experience with game feedback is relatively low. But it's not nonexistent. Like money or prizes, the opportunity to earn points and level up could potentially distract us from the initial reasons we like to do an activity.

Clearly, we have to be thoughtful about where and when we apply game-like feedback systems. If *everything* in life becomes about tackling harder challenges, scoring more points, and reaching higher levels, we run the risk of becoming too focused on the gratifications of positive feedback. And the last thing we want is to lose our ability to enjoy an activity for its own sake.

So why risk it at all? Because measuring our efforts with gamelike feedback systems makes it easier for us to get better at any effort we undertake. As the great nineteenth-century mathematical physicist Lord Kelvin famously said, "If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it." We need real-time data to understand our performance: are we getting better or worse? And we can use quantitative benchmarks—specific, numerical goals we want to achieve—to focus our efforts and motivate us to try harder.

Real-time data and quantitative benchmarks are the reason why gamers get consistently better at virtually any game they play: their performance is consistently measured and reflected back to them, with advancing progress bars, points, levels, and achievements. It's easy for players to see exactly how and when they're making progress. This kind of instantaneous, positive feedback drives players to try harder and to succeed at more difficult challenges.

That's why it's worth considering making things we already love more gamelike. It can make us better at them, and help us set our sights higher.

Nike+

Let's consider the gamelike Nike+ (or "Nike plus") running system, a motivational platform that is wildly popular among people who already love to run—especially those who want to run farther and faster.

> *Nike+*
> Stats! Stats! It got me out of bed to run this morning cuz I need BETTER STATS. It's real world achievement points!
> Who else will play with me? I seek challengers![9]
> —Message board post from a new Nike+ runner

The very first time I went running with the Nike+ system, I ran faster than I had in my entire life.

I was running my favorite route, a four-and-a-half-mile course in the Berkeley Hills. In six years, running it a couple times a week, I'd never once finished faster than 41:43. But on my first Nike+ run, I clocked in at 39:33, more than two minutes ahead of my all-time personal best. How in the world did I suddenly get so much faster? It's no mystery: I was motivated by better, real-time feedback and by the promise of online rewards when I got home.

Running, of course, is its own reward. You feel the endorphins, you clear your mind, you build stamina, you burn calories, you get stronger. But it's also a struggle—to find the time, to convince yourself that you have the energy when you'd rather sleep late, to go out whether it's hot or it's raining, and to fight off boredom doing a highly monotonous activity. Runners love running, but motivation is still an issue. So Nike+ is

designed to provide an added layer of intrinsic motivation, beyond the runner's high and the physical results.

If you've never seen it in action, here's how Nike+ works. An inexpensive sensor—it costs about twenty dollars and is smaller than a poker chip—fits imperceptibly inside the sole of almost any standard Nike sneaker. It's activated by movement (thanks to an accelerometer) and communicates with your iPod (via radio transmitter) to tell you exactly how fast you're running and how far you've run. As you're running, presumably to your favorite music, the iPod screen displays your stats in real time.

Getting feedback in real time makes a huge difference when it comes to running faster and longer. Just being able to see when you're slowing down—something that happens unconsciously as you tire or lose focus—helps you bring your attention back to your pace. Meanwhile, pushing yourself to run faster is instantly more rewarding, because you get to see the numbers drop lower and lower the faster you go. It's one thing to set a time goal and try to reach it; it's another thing entirely to know every step of the way if you're running fast enough to achieve it.

When you get home, you can plug your iPod into your computer, and the Nike+ system will upload your data and add it to your running profile. That's where the online rewards come in. Every mile you run earns you a point; score enough points, and you level up. There are six levels currently on Nike+, which follow the same color grading as martial arts belts: yellow, orange, and green; blue, purple, and black. Like any good MMO, you advance Nike+ levels quickly at first, but over time it takes more and more effort to reach the next level. Right now, I'm a level green runner, having logged 272 miles since joining, and I have 348 more miles to run to reach the blue level. That's an intimidating number, but I'm so motivated to level up that I bet I'll run the next 348 miles in even *less* time than I ran the first

272.

Based on the data the Nike+ sensor collects, you can also earn personal online trophies for best times and longest runs, as well as achievements for meeting training goals, like working your way up to a 10K distance or running a hundred miles in a hundred days. And when you've had a particularly good run, a famous athlete like Lance Armstrong will cheer you on before you even catch your breath, with a congratulatory audio message like this: "Congratulations! You've just recorded a personal best for the mile" or "Way to go! That was your longest run yet."

You can keep your running profile private and your accomplishments to yourself—if you want. Or you can push your stats and achievements out to your Nike+ friends online, to everyone you know on Facebook, or even to the whole world on Twitter. Perhaps my favorite Nike+ motivational feature is the "power song." It's the musical equivalent of a health pack or a power-up in a video game. Whenever you need a boost of energy or extra motivation to keep running or pick up speed, you simply hold down the center button on your iPod. That quick gesture automatically triggers your favorite, preset running song. For me, pressing the center button during a hard run feels like I'm unlocking some secret super-running power that I didn't even know I had. The faster pace, the pounding beat, the lyrics ringing in my ears like a personal mantra—it's the one time in the real world I feel like I have the ability to summon the kind of magical powers that I'm used to deploying in virtual worlds.

Add all that up—real-time stats, a leveling system, personal achievements, and your own personal power-up song—and Nike+ makes for a very good running game, one that uses better feedback and reward to help you put in a better effort and aspire to more than you would otherwise. But why play alone when you can play with others? It's the online community built around

the Nike+ system that turns it into something really spectacular: not just a running game, but a massively multiplayer running game.

The Nike+ online community has more than 2 million active members, all of whom are collecting and sharing data about their runs in order to compete in challenges and contribute to team missions.

Anyone can design their own challenge and invite whomever they want to play with them. It can be competitive—everyone tries to get the best score—or collaborative—you try to get all of the participants to successfully finish the challenge before time runs out. Challenges can be as small as a two-player rivalry—husband versus wife or brother versus brother, for example: Who can log the most miles in a week? Or they can be set up as a team event for a group of friends or coworkers, with a dozen, or twenty, or fifty runners, or more—one neighborhood races another, for example, or every department for itself: how many teams can collectively log a thousand kilometers before time runs out?

The challenges can also be public free-for-alls, with hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of competitors. As I'm writing this, there are more than seven thousand user-created public challenges to participate in, including the collaborative individual challenge of "running around the earth," in which each participant runs 24,902 miles—the challenge expires in the year 2027, making this ambitious goal seem a bit more reasonable—and a competitive team challenge for runners who go out with their dogs. (In this public challenge, players can join a team based on breed; out of fifty different teams, currently Labradors and beagles are leading the total mile count, followed closely by the mutts, but the Australian shepherds have the fastest pace.)

The challenge puts the runner's personal goals into a larger social context, which gives each jog more meaning. Every run is adding up to something—and depending on what motivates me most, I can join challenges that stoke my competitive spirit or call on my sense of responsibility to my teammates.

My Nike+ Mini trash-talks me.
(Nike Corporation, 2009)

Of course, no good MMO would be complete without an avatar. Nike+ is no exception. When you join the Nike+ community, you get to create a "Mini," officially described as your "tiny running partner," whom you can customize to look just like you. Your avatar's energy level and animations are based on your run activity: how far and how often you run. If you've put in a few good days in a row, your Mini is ecstatic and bouncing off the walls. If you've slacked off for a week or two, your Mini pouts and mopes and gently teases you for being such a slacker. Just a few days ago, my Mini was making faces at me

and saying, "If only I practiced running like I practice paddleball."

Your Mini greets you whenever you log in to Nike+, you can embed it into your Facebook profile or blog (so others can see your avatar), and you can even download a screen saver starring your Mini at play (so you have to come face-to-face with your avatar even when you're not thinking about running).

Recent research suggests that this kind of ambient avatar feedback is remarkably effective. In a widely cited experiment conducted at Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL), researchers demonstrated that watching customized, look-alike avatars lose or gain weight as we do exercise makes us work out longer and harder.[10] Participants who received "vicarious reinforcement" from their avatars volunteered to do on average eight times more exercise repetitions than participants without avatar feedback. That bodes well for the potential use of Mini-like avatars at home or at gyms, where people are more likely to work out in front of screens. (And, in fact, many home fitness games, including *Wii Fit* and *EA Sports Active*, use avatar feedback to engage players in harder workouts.)

But there's no reason that people working out need to be stuck in front of a screen to get the benefit of avatar feedback. In another experiment, Stanford VHIL researchers discovered that simply showing subjects a short animation of their look-alike avatar running in the laboratory inspired subjects to spend on average an hour more running in the first twenty-four hours after they left the laboratory. (There was no motivation effect watching a random avatar; it worked only when the avatar was highly customized to look like the subject.)

The researchers theorized that seeing virtual versions of themselves doing a positive activity stimulated memories of the

subjects' own real-life positive experiences, making them more likely to reengage in the activity. They were careful to note in their findings that participants in the study, all college-age students in northern California, were generally healthy and fit. There was no evidence to suggest that someone who hates running would be likely to run for an hour after seeing their avatar do it. The avatar reinforced positive feelings about running, rather than creating them from scratch.

Yesterday, after my first run in a couple of weeks, my Mini danced around my iPod smiling, saying, "I can hardly contain myself! I'm a running machine !" Today, after another run, she's leaping over hurdles and shouting, "I can do anything! I feel amazing!" I have to admit—the animations are a fairly accurate depiction of my own inner runner. It's definitely working the way the Stanford researchers theorized it should: my Mini reminds me of why I love to run and therefore makes me more likely to get out of the house and do it.

But there's also something else going on. I find that I want to run more in order to make the Mini happy.

Though it might seem ridiculous, this kind of emotional connection happens in games all the time—especially in tending and caretaking games, like the Xbox *Viva Piñata* series, in which players have to support an ecosystem of "living," wild-roaming piñata animals, or the Nintendo *Pikmin* series, which puts the player in charge of an army of eager-to-please but dumb and highly vulnerable creatures. MIT researcher Judith Donath has studied the emotional attachment we form to virtual creatures. She argues that game characters programmed to appear dependent on us for their well-being provoke a hardwired human desire to nurture and care for them, and it doesn't hurt that they are cute, helpless creatures. "Time spent playing with them feels like care-taking, an act of responsibility and altruism," Donath

215

explains. "We develop empathy for them and become invested in their well-being."[11] Naturally, then, the happier our virtual creatures appear to be as a direct result of our actions, the more satisfied we are as effective caretakers.

Virtual-creature happiness is not nearly as obvious a feedback system as points, levels, and achievements. But it's part of a larger potential field of reward innovation, as we continue to learn how to better motivate ourselves by applying the best design strategies of games to our real-life activities.

THE MORE we start to monitor and self-report our daily activity, whether through GPS, motion sensors, biometric devices (to track heart rate or blood sugar levels, for example), or even just with manually entered status updates, the more we'll be able to chart our progress, set goals, accept challenges, and support each other in our real lives in the way we do in our best games. Given the overwhelming success of the Nike+ system, it's not difficult to imagine adopting some of the Nike+ strategies for other activities that we want to do faster, more often, or simply at a higher level.

I for one would have loved a Writing+ system while writing this book. I'd have a "mini" writer whose mood and energy was based on my daily word count. I'd have the opportunity to earn achievements, like showing up to write ten days in a row, or to set a personal best for most words written in a day. The system could also keep track of the complexity of my writing—how many words I use per sentence, and how many sentences per paragraph, for example. I could use this data to improve the clarity of my writing and vary its structure. I could set up friendly rivalries with other authors—both friends in real life and authors that I'm a fan of. I think I would have been a lot more

inspired to write if I knew I'd be able to compare my daily writing stats against the real-time stats of my favorite fiction writers—Curtis Sittenfeld, Scott Westerfeld, Cory Doctorow, and Emily Giffin.

Any project or challenging hobby that we're working on that we want to see through to completion would benefit from more gamelike feedback and ambient support. We may be looking at a future in which everything we do can be "plus": Cooking+, Reading+, Music+.

Maybe even . . . Social Life+?

That's the idea behind Foursquare, a social networking application designed to motivate players to lead a more interesting social life.

Foursquare

The premise of Foursquare is simple: you'll be happier if you get out of the house more and spend more time face-to-face with your friends.

Created by independent New York City-based developers Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai, Foursquare takes its name from the classic red-rubber-ball playground game. To participate in Foursquare, you simply log in to the mobile phone application whenever you show up somewhere public that you deem fun, then tell the system where you are. That's called a "check-in," and you might find yourself checking in from a restaurant, bar, café, music venue, museum, or wherever else you like to go. Whenever you check in, Foursquare then sends real-time alerts to your friends so they can join you if they're free and in the neighborhood. It also lets you know if any of your friends are already nearby, in case you want to meet up with them. Most importantly, Foursquare keeps track of where you've been, when, and who you've checked in with, if they're playing Foursquare, too. By mid-2010, more than a million people were tracking and sharing data about their social lives using the Foursquare system. And more than three-quarters of those users were checking in thirty or more times each month.[12]

Out of all this data, Foursquare produces a series of online metrics about your social life: how often you go out, how many different places you visit, how many different people you spend time with each week, and how frequently you visit your favorite spots. On their own, these metrics aren't that interesting. They're just data, a way to quantify what you're already doing. What really makes Foursquare engaging is the challenge and reward

system built around the data.

The most popular Foursquare feature is a competitive challenge called The Mayor. The rules read: "If you've got more check-ins than anyone else at a particular place, we deem you 'The Mayor' of that place. But once someone else comes along who has checked in more times than you, they then steal the 'Mayor' title back from you." As soon as you become mayor, Foursquare sends an announcement to your friends congratulating you. Even better, some bars and restaurants have set up special deals for whoever happens to be mayor at any given time. The Marsh Café in San Francisco, for example, lets the current mayor drink for free. Of course, this is also a smart move on the part of the café—players have extra incentive to bring their friends there nightly to try to achieve or hold on to the mayor status, boosting business throughout the week. It's also a good example of how traditional brick-and-mortar companies might be able to augment their services by more actively taking part in this popular reality-based game. Currently, hundreds of venues—from the Sacramento Zoo to a Wendy's fast-food restaurant in the student union at the University of North Carolina Charlotte—offer deals or freebies for Foursquare players.

Why do people love the idea of becoming the mayor? Because trying to become mayor of your favorite city spots gives you a chance to keep doing something you already love, but do it more. It gives you an excuse to spend as much time as possible at the places that make you happiest. And when you notice someone else vying for your mayor status, you get an instant friendly rival, motivating you to visit your favorite places more often, the same way a Nike+ challenger pushes you to run faster and longer.

Foursquare is also a personal achievement system, consisting

of virtual trophies and badges. Trophies automatically unlock in your profile when you celebrate checking in to your tenth, twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and hundredth different venues in a single city. In order to earn these trophies, you can't just be content with being the mayor at one place. You have to venture outside your usual spots and expand your social horizons. You can also earn badges like the Foodie badge, earned by checking in to Zagat-rated restaurants in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other major cities, or the Entourage badge for checking in at the same time and place as ten or more of your Foursquare friends.

In the end, what makes a Foursquare social life better than your regular social life is the simple fact that to do well in Foursquare, you have to enjoy yourself more. You have to frequent your favorite places more often, try things you've never tried before, go places you've never been, and meet up more often with friends whom you might not ordinarily make time to see in person. In other words, it's not a game that rewards you for what you're already doing. It's a game that rewards you for doing new things, and making a better effort to be social.

There's one more significant benefit to adding compelling stats to your social life. Because players want their statistics to be as accurate (and impressive) as possible, they're more likely to remember to check in and send status updates about where they are. That makes it easier for their friends to find them, and therefore more likely to make plans to see them.

Ultimately, the real reward of seeing friends more often and breaking outside your routine has nothing to do with virtual badges or social life points or online bragging rights. The real rewards are all the positive emotions you are feeling, like discovery and adventure; the new experiences you're having, like hearing more live music and tasting more interesting food;

and the social connections you're strengthening by being around people you like more often. Foursquare doesn't replace these rewards. Instead, it draws your attention to them.

Some people, of course, are natural social butterflies or nightlife adventurers. For others—workaholics, homebodies, introverts—getting out and doing something new is no small feat, especially when there are so many compelling reasons to stay in our own living rooms.

There's a popular gamer T-shirt that shows an Xbox Live-style badge of a door ajar with these words alongside: "Achievement unlocked: Left the house."[13] It's a joke, but it also speaks to the real challenges of trying to lead a meaningful, balanced life in the nonvirtual world. As we struggle to find the right balance between virtual and real-life adventures, a game like Foursquare can nudge us in the right direction and help us put our best efforts where we can reap the most satisfying rewards: back in the real world, with the help of a good game.