Play peak oil before you live it

Collaborative intelligence wiz Jane McGonigal designs alternate reality games to solve the world’s biggest problems. Enviros love her -- but so does the military.

ELIZA STRICKLAND

TOPICS: GAMING, ENTERTAINMENT NEWS

On April 30, 2007, an oil crisis shook the world. Supply chains were interrupted, and in the ensuing weeks the price of gas pushed higher and higher, peaking around $7 per gallon. The American economy sputtered to a halt as shortages spread — Detroit’s car factories cited lack of
demand and shut down for the duration, trucking fleets scrambled for fuel to move their cargo, supermarkets jacked up their prices, and commuters bitched and moaned and grudgingly changed their lifestyles. Looting broke out, along with the occasional riot.

A month later, good news began to emerge. When gas hit $7 per gallon, America didn’t disintegrate into chaos with warring clans jealously guarding their oil tanks. No further Middle Eastern countries were invaded, although there was a surreptitious scuffle in the oil fields of Alberta, Canada. The U.S. government hastily invested in public transit and alternative energy, and the grumbling populace began making lifestyle changes. People carpooled and bought bikes. They moved out of the exurbs. They planted gardens in their backyards, and religiously visited their local farmers markets.

The oil shock and remarkable recovery were actually part of an elaborate online game, “World Without Oil,” another experiment in the budding genre of alternate reality games. In ARGs, thousands of players hunker down at their computers and delve into games that are impossible for any one person to play on his or her own. There’s no software to buy and players don’t have a clear set of rules or an objective. Instead, gamers happen across something strange on the Internet, “fall down the rabbit hole” into a fantasy world, and figure out together what to do next.

ARGs are the hippest thing in guerrilla marketing. Recently, Disney fashioned one to lend mystique to its third “Pirates of the Caribbean” movie, and Nine Inch Nails cooked one up to promote its dystopian concept album, “Year Zero.” But “World Without Oil” was a new kind of alternate reality game, one that came equipped with a social conscience. Sponsored by ITVS, the interactive entertainment arm of the Public Broadcasting Corp., its tag line was “Play it before you live it.”

The game began on April 30, and hundreds of gamers from Hawaii to New York proceeded to role-play the withdrawal symptoms of our oil-addicted country for 32 days. (In the game, one real day equaled one fictional week.) They envisioned how their own lives would be affected — how they would drive, eat and even listen to music without oil — and documented their imagined scenarios in blogs, Flickr photos, YouTube videos, and podcasts that were all collected on the game’s Web site. The game brought in players from more than 40 countries.

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The initial concept for “World Without Oil” was dreamed up by Ken Eklund, a San Jose, Calif., writer, who had been reading about peak oil scares. But the mastermind of its execution was the brilliant young game designer Jane McGonigal, who’s fascinated by the way games can harness the collective intelligence of their players. McGonigal played the role of several in-game characters. By instant messaging and blogging, she drew gamers’ attention to their fellow players’ narratives, orchestrating their responses to the crisis. Ultimately, “World Without Oil” used the imaginations of hundreds of people to peer into an oil-depleted future and brainstorm ideas about how to cope.

“A dramatic decrease in oil availability is not at all far-fetched,” McGonigal says. “We thought we could play our way to a set of ideas about how to manage that crisis, if it were to happen.”
The game was McGonigal’s most blatant attempt yet to test her theory that immersive entertainment has a unique capacity to change the way people think, and feel, and live. She’s calling it a success. Players didn’t just create a “citizen’s manual” for how to respond to such a crisis, McGonigal says, they also changed their behavior in the real world. About 1,800 players contributed their stories, and those who used videos or photos had to have something tangible to record. Gamers planted real apple trees in their backyards, and converted their real cars to run on used cooking oil. Beyond the active participants, McGonigal estimates that more than 45,000 people followed the game. It’s harder to guess how the game affected those observers, but McGonigal points to teachers who followed along with their classes as an indication that some learning was taking place. “So, yay!” she concludes.

McGonigal is earnest and enthusiastic, with a brand-new Ph.D. in performance studies, and the title, bestowed by MIT, of one of the most interesting innovators under the age of 35 (she made it with five years to spare). She’s got a mane of curly brown hair and a slightly wide-eyed, idealistic look. She explains her idiosyncratic career arc while sitting in her Berkeley, Calif., apartment, as her hyperactive Shetland dog sniffs her knee. McGonigal began the Ph.D. program at the University of California at Berkeley intending to theorize about theater, she says, but she left as an expert in alternate reality games. Now she keeps a day job at the Institute for the Future, the Palo Alto think tank that forecasts trends for business execs and bureaucrats; McGonigal designs role-playing games for these movers and shakers to play.

Not one to shrink from ambition, McGonigal says her overarching goal is to reduce human suffering in the world. To make sure she keeps moving in that direction, McGonigal picked a lofty benchmark. “Any time I consider a new project, I ask myself, is this pushing the state of gaming toward Nobel Prizes? If it’s not, then it’s not doing anything important enough to spend my time.” To explain why she thinks games can get someone that plane ticket to Stockholm, McGonigal likes to quote game designer Sean Stewart, whose company created the first ARG in 2001. “He said that these games create ‘a collective intelligence that is unparalleled in entertainment history,’” she says. “Because it is unparalleled, I believe it would be a real crime to use it only for entertainment.”

The best example of the gamers’ collective capabilities comes from the 2004 game called “I Love Bees” that Stewart’s company, 42 Entertainment, ran to promote a Microsoft video game. Thanks to the sponsor’s deep pockets, the team (which included McGonigal) put together a multimillion-dollar extravaganza that roped in about 600,000 players and observers. Game play started at the hacked Web site of an imaginary Napa Valley beekeeper, where a page of honey recipes had been rudely overlaid with a mysterious list of 210 GPS coordinates. There were no further instructions, other than a clock counting down to a date several weeks away. For the gamers, that was plenty to go on. They divided into groups to analyze the data — maybe the latitude and longitude figures actually referred to biblical chapters and verses? Or perhaps they could be transposed onto a star map. They proposed thousands of theories, and followed hundreds of leads.
In the end, the most literal-minded group found the key. That group sent scouts to almost all of the listed locations, which were scattered across the 50 states. When the scouts reported back to the group message board with photos of bus stations, street corners, shopping malls and 7-Elevens, one clever soul realized that each location had a pay phone. A week later, when the countdown clock hit zero, gamers all across the country were waiting by the phones. That was only the first challenge; when the phones rang, the game was truly afoot. In calls over the next three months, players heard snippets of a story about an artificial intelligence program that crashed to Earth in a spaceship, and had taken refuge on the beekeeper's Web site. By the game's end, the collective had helped repair the AI and were rewarded with the conclusion of the drama — an alien invasion of Earth that begins the Microsoft video game.

Eliza Strickland writes about science, technology, and the environment. She is the author of "The Illustrated Timeline of Science: A Crash Course in Words & Pictures."

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