



A future engineering genius at the Institute of Play

The Job's a Game

By combining digital tools and the principles of play, these entrepreneurs are adding elements of fun to the previously boring bits of our lives.

WORDS BY *Allison Mooney*

*"In every job that must be done,
there is an element of fun.
You find the fun and –
SNAP! – the job's a game!"*

MARY POPPINS

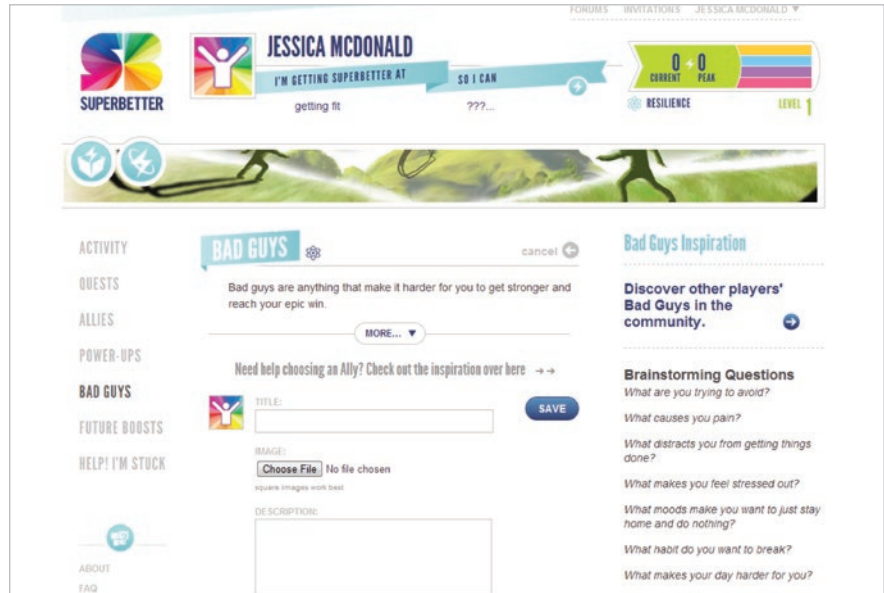
In recent years, 'gamification' has fast become an overused buzzword. But turning chores into a game is as old as, well, spoonfuls of sugar. It's just that technology is making it easier than ever to make the mundane – from finance to fitness – a bit more magical. These companies are combining digital tools and the principles of play to make our medicine go down in a most delightful way. ➡

MAKING HEALTH FUN

SuperBetter

In July 2009, Jane McGonigal hit her head – hard. The resulting concussion sidelined her for months. She became depressed, which made matters worse. Doctors told her she needed to keep her spirits high, so the world-renowned game designer turned to what made her happiest: Playing games. “There is a sense of agency that you get from gaming,” she says. “It makes you optimistic. You feel like you can do extraordinary things.” But rather than turning to her console, she turned the fight for her life into a real-life game. She was on an epic quest to get better, battling bad guys (things that hurt her) and collecting power-ups (things that helped her) on the way.

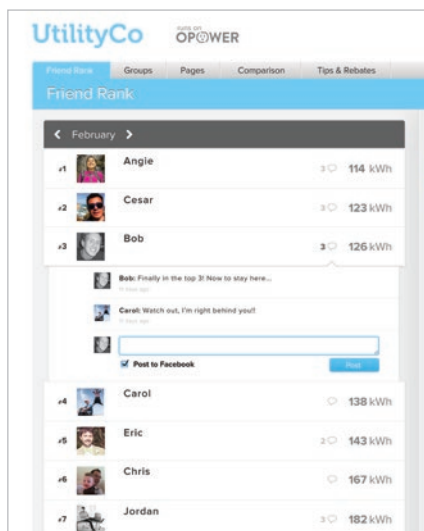
McGonigal won – she is now completely recovered – and she built a gaming platform so others can do the same. SuperBetter, which launched in March, is an online social game that helps people achieve their health goals by building up ‘personal resilience.’ The most popular ‘challenges’ are depression



and losing weight, followed by stress reduction and sleeping better. It's built on scientific principles you can find in psychological research or self-help books, but the game puts them into a fun framework. The point is to actually do what doctors say you should do.

While about half of SuperBetter's users are regular gamers, you don't need to be a Guild Master (or even know what that means) to play. It was inspired by an idea McGonigal

credits to Paul Tahini, Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “He said, ‘We need a Super Mario Bros. for health,’” she recalls. But of course, real life isn't a game and not every health problem can be vanquished. “You have to change your notion of what ‘winning’ means,” she adds, giving the example of a player with a terminal motor neuron disease. “He doesn't expect to beat it; he expects to increase his quality of life, to be happier every day.”



MAKING ENERGY FUN

Opower

We all cheat. When we don't know what's correct, we look for answers around us. Psychologists call this ‘social proof,’ and we rely on it in any number of situations – from a fancy dinner party to the scene of an accident – when deciding how to act.

Alex Lasky, founder and president of Opower, thinks it can also induce us to save energy. Right now, 20 percent of all household energy is wasted, but

most people are pretty clueless about how much they use. “The average person spends six minutes a year thinking about [it],” Lasky says. “It's not that people don't care, it's just boring and confusing, and no one knows what a ‘kilowatt hour’ is.”

To focus attention on it, Lasky decided that energy needed to be more appealing. So he turned to the principle of social proof, as explained in

Robert Cialdini's best-selling book *Influence*. (Cialdini has since become an advisor and investor.)

Opower shares your personal energy data alongside that of your neighbors. So it doesn't just tell you the norm, it gives you a score to beat, while also making you feel like part of something larger – it's massively multiplayer planet saving.

The company has energy data for 50 million households in the US now, and is able to identify patterns, show usage trends, and give tips or incentives for improvement. So far, it seems to be working. People with access to their service save about three percent in energy usage. With 14 million users, that adds up. In April, Opower passed the one terrawatt hour mark; the typical amount 100,000 homes use in a year.

MAKING LEARNING FUN

Institute of Play

With a name that sounds more like an amusement park than a non-profit, the Institute of Play sits at the intersection of games and education. "We are designing experiences that make learning irresistible," says Katie Salen, the Institute's Executive Director. Their first charter school, Quest to Learn, opened in New York City in September 2009, and a second one opened in Chicago last Fall. Both middle schools have about 230 students enrolled.

So how do the schools make learning more fun? "It's not about incentive structures and points systems; those are surface features," she says. "We reframe the experience so that learning happens by doing. It's hands-on problem-solving. And pupils are motivated to solve because it's interesting."

Every piece of the curriculum is set up as a mission, a 10-week challenge involving game strategies like role-playing, simulation, and collaboration. For example, one class teaches the American Revolution by pretending that ghost soldiers were locked in the basement of the American History Museum. The students write memoirs of the ghosts and create digital portraits, helping them to understand varying motivations and perspectives. In an integrated science and math class called 'The Way Things Work,' sixth-graders help a shrunken mad scientist lost inside the human body navigate its internal systems and report back to his research lab.

Students learn to be tech-savvy, but they're just as likely to be using a pencil as an iPad. "It's about the purposeful integration of technology," says Kalen, "when being connected really matters." That's not just at school, but at home too, where, she says, online environments and tools can give kids the ongoing support they're often missing. ➡



MAKING WRITING FUN

The Written World

If to hold a pen is to be at war (as Voltaire once said), then The Written World is a peace treaty. This story-writing game aims to make the writing process less painful and more collaborative.

The idea came to Simon Fox five years ago when he was running a writing group. Members worked together to overcome writer's block – the point was to inspire and motivate one another. However, “I noticed that it was something people found profoundly difficult to do,” Fox recalls. “It’s not easy to share a creative moment.” So Fox and a friend, Toby Green, built game software to battle the blank page.

Their platform follows literary principles established by greats like Goethe and Joseph Campbell. One player is established as a narrator, another as a protagonist. Together, they work their way through chapters, complete objectives, and add encounters. If they disagree, one can use ‘force’ to change something. (Romeo kills himself? No way!) For Fox, the whole point is

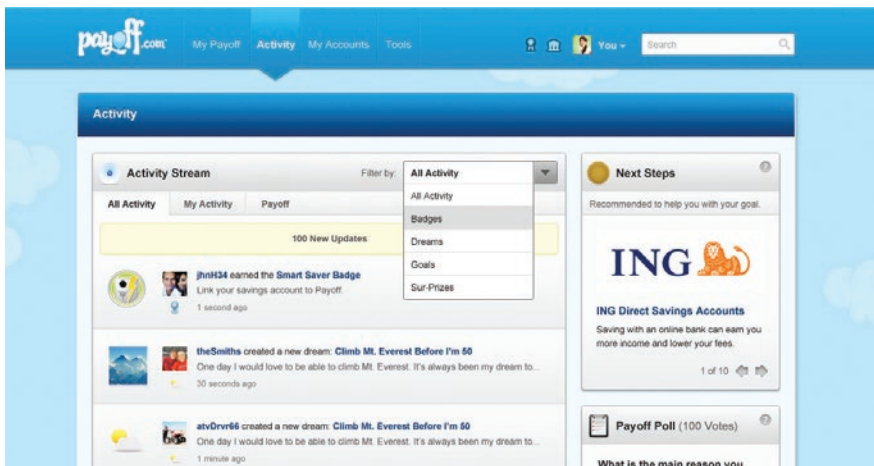


that language itself is a force. “Words are powerful,” he says. “They play a big role in defining the reality around us and in helping us imagine what’s possible.”

The project was piloted on crowdfunding site Kickstarter, where investors ranged from young teens to middle-aged moms. “It’s a disparate community of people around the world who have an interest in writing, but they need inspiration to get something done,” says Green. The game component

is an “arrow in the quiver,” just one way to give a nudge. “Designers have been using game dynamics for a long, long time,” Green continues, “but they called it ‘choice architecture.’”

The Written World is designed to guide players towards great pieces of prose, while improving their writing and collaboration skills, and, of course, having fun along the way. As Green concludes: “If the game isn’t its own reward, it’s not a very good game.”



MAKING FINANCES FUN

Payoff

There’s a reason its called ‘playing’ the stock market. High-stakes investing can be thrilling. Investing in a 401k? Less so.

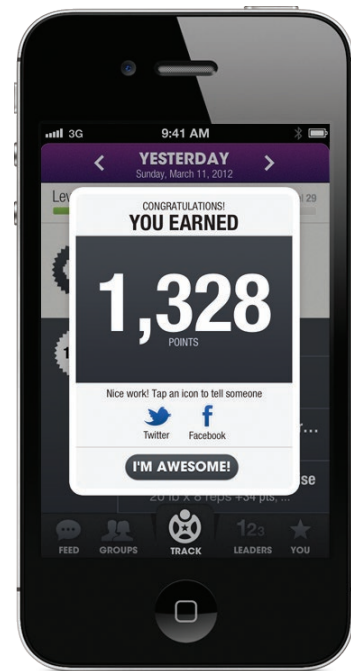
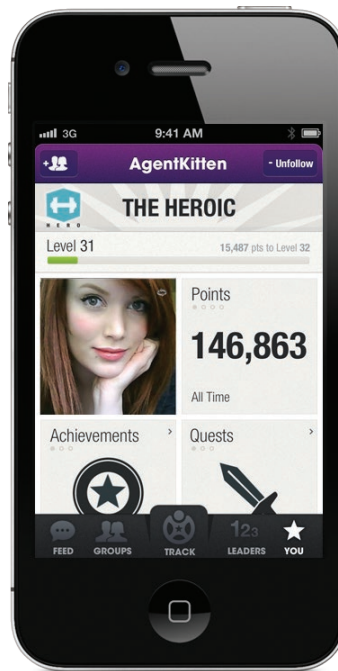
It’s much easier to get into debt than out of it, and personal financial responsibility has traditionally been as fun as, well, paying taxes. Payoff.com is hoping to change that. ➡

“People thought I was crazy,” says founder and CEO Scott Saunders. “They told me, ‘Finance is a very serious thing; people don’t want fun with their finance!’ I think people want it to be fun because it *is* so serious. We want to make it more light-hearted, engaging, and palatable to make those tough decisions.”

On Payoff, users link up their financial accounts and share their goals – like buying a new house or a cruise to the Caribbean. The system helps break these ambitions into baby steps and tracks progress, offering incentives and social support along the way. You might get a badge for saving, say, \$1,000 that brings some social value. It may also lead to monetary prizes from brands. If you’re saving for home improvement, Home Depot might kick in a coupon.

“Right now, you only hear from a financial institution if you do something wrong,” says Saunders. “This is about positive reinforcement.” It’s also about financial education. The site features quizzes based on personal spending with questions like, ‘What is the balance on your Capital One card right now?’ or, ‘Did you spend more at Starbucks or McDonalds over the last 30 days?’

“It’s contextual and relevant,” says Saunders. “Financial literacy in a box just isn’t effective.”



MAKING FITNESS FUN

Fitocracy

They were a cliché. As kids, Brian Wang and Richard Talens were “those video game-playing geeks of the world” who preferred Xbox to exercise. And it showed. Talens was a 230-pound teen. Wang was skinny and weak. But in college, they both started getting into exercise and eating right. Talens dropped 70lbs. Wang got buff.

As it turns out, their gamer roots served them well. Once out of college, they made the connection between working out and playing games. “There are lots of parallels,” says Wang, noting that both are goal-based and achievement-oriented, involving competition, collaboration, and encouragement. They saw fitness regimes as “levelling up your character in real life.”

The pair built an online game, *Fitocracy*, to help people visualize a better version of themselves. “We

want the game to hit those dopamine receptors and make people feel like they can actually take care of it themselves,” says Wang.

When they launched last year, there were plenty of fitness apps on the market, “Mostly workout trackers and journals,” according to Wang, “nothing sticky or motivating.” *Fitocracy* aims to get you “addicted to your fitness” by reimagining it as a video game. It’s deceptively simple. After players set goals, the game tracks their progress so they can see results, and offers motivating incentives.

Naturally, there is a strong competitive element; players often check the site multiple times a day to see how they’re stacking up against friends. Don’t people ever fudge the truth to look good? Wang is doubtful: “If you cheat, you’re missing the point.” ©