

DEPARTURES

NEWTHINK |

Were he still among the living, George Bernard Shaw, the Nobel Prize-winning playwright, might be pleased to see at least one of his ideas about elevating the species finally gaining traction. His famous quote "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing" has become the mantra of a diverse and growing faction of digital luminaries who see online social games as the next big thing—one that has the added benefit of possibly helping to solve the world's problems, from an individual to a global level.

Twitter now has more than 200 million users and generates something on the order of 200 million tweets a day. Harness a fraction of that tweeting mass and maybe, with the right game, they could raise enough money to provide thousands of clean-water wells in Africa. Or at least help each other lose weight. In fact, this seems to be what Twitter cofounders Biz Stone and Evan Williams have in mind for their new venture, The Obvious Corporation, which they describe as an effort to "make systems that help people work together to improve the world."

Online games are growing at a phenomenal rate. They generated \$15.7 billion in 2010, and that figure is expected to double in the next five years, according to market research and consulting firm DFC Intelligence. (Though perhaps not always through legal means, as an investigation into a popular poker site recently revealed—it allegedly turned out to be a giant Ponzi scheme.) In January, research firm eMarketer projected that the number of Internet users in the States who play games on a social network at least once a month will reach 27 percent this

ONLINE ODYSSEYS

Can Social Gaming Save the World?

Games played over social networks have the potential to leap from the virtual to the real world, helping players improve their own lives and the state of the planet as well.

By Spencer Morgan



year, an increase of 15 percent from the year prior. And a new study by market research firm NPD Group reports that nearly 60 million Americans have played a game on a social network. Entrepreneurs from Stone and Williams to executives at Google are betting that it's only the beginning.

The former director of Microsoft's Xbox LIVE, Michael Kim, recently got into the "serious gaming" industry by forming his own company, Kairos Labs. Kim believes the power of technology and social gaming—playing online with others, as opposed to the traditional solo video-arcade experience—has only just begun to be harnessed. When played en masse, games contain a potent mechanism for people to address real-world challenges, what he calls "well-being" goals. From motivating people to eat more vegetables to inspiring political revolutions, nothing is impossible when life is but a game.

Joshua Fouts, executive director of the New York-based Science House Foundation, describes himself as a "technologist, futurist, gamer and entrepreneur." Fouts organizes games into three categories: "Lifestyle games" are the typical "massively multiplayer online role-playing games," or MMORPGs, such as World of Warcraft. "Life-and-style games" are less violent and more altruistic but until recently were designed only to entertain. CityVille is one of the best-known examples: Players run a small city and advance through levels by helping neighbors, constructing buildings and collecting rent. A free game played over Facebook, it attracted 61 million players after just 50 days online. CityVille's developer, Zynga, the world's largest social-gaming company,

is beginning to transform its popular games into Fouts's third category: "games for change," or G4Cs, which rise above mere entertainment to breach the wall of social activism.

G4Cs introduce an element of play to the higher purpose of educating the world and effecting large-scale paradigm shifts. With the right game mechanics, it seems, any challenge, from natural disasters to disease to financial meltdowns, can be solved through crowdsourcing and a combination of incentive and reward. France is using *Cyber-Budget*, an online game that asks players to manage France's budget issues, in an effort to find real solutions to the country's financial problems. In *PeaceMaker*, by Impact Games, the user assumes the role of either the Israeli or Palestinian leader and works to resolve the conflicts in the region. MTV's *Darfur Is Dying*, which teaches players about the dangers of living in a refugee camp in a genocidal environment, garnered 700,000 players its first month in 2006. Though a game of this sort may seem to trivialize the atrocities committed in Darfur, it did have a real-world impact: Tens of thousands of players, through one area of the game, signed petitions and e-mailed politicians urging their intervention.

FarmVille, another wildly popular Zynga game (this one has people managing virtual farms), first crossed over into G4C territory when it incorporated fundraising for earthquake-devastated Haitian families into the price of virtual sweet potato seeds. Last March, after an earthquake and tsunami rocked northeast Japan, the game offered a special on virtual daikon, the Japanese radish, and donated 100 percent of the proceeds to charity. Over the

last two years, Zynga, which boasts a total of 275 million unique monthly users, has raised more than \$6 million for charitable causes, giving entrepreneurs and humanitarians alike hope that the collective digital culture is on the verge of a mind shift. Recent history has demonstrated that when something goes viral on Facebook, anything can happen—including revolution. (Though, to be sure, the events of the Arab Spring came from something deeper than a Twitter meme.)

With the private beta release this summer of *Livn.it*, a gaming network that encourages the development of sustainable, positive habits, Michael Kim's Kairos Labs is helping to develop

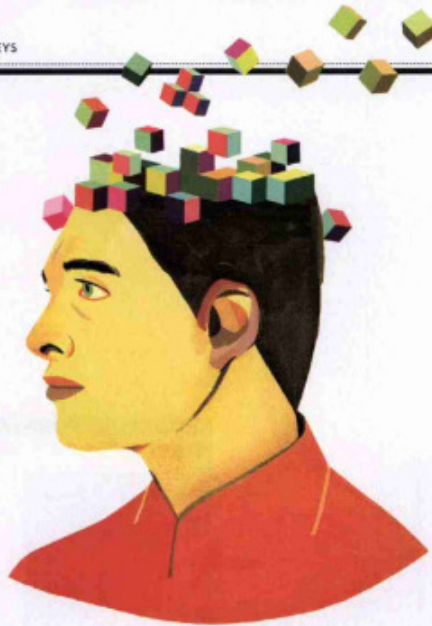
a fourth category of online play called "behavior-change games." Kim helped develop technology that was used in the Xbox Kinect, the gaming system that uses a motion-detection device to track users' movements. "In our research, we found people were open to the idea of body sensors," he says. The explosive popularity of the Kinect—it sold a record eight million units in 60 days after its release last November—coincides with the flourishing biofeedback-technology industry, involving body monitors, like the Nike+, Fitbit Tracker, *BodyMedia* FIT, Basis Band and Jawbone's new UP, that track and analyze all kinds of stats: steps taken, miles run, calories burned, sleep patterns, heart rates, body temperature, stress levels and

so on. The devices then automatically relay this data back to proprietary sites and mobile apps. Free sites like *EarnIt.com* allow participants to compare stats and compete with others. *Runkeeper.com*, which has six million users, is positioning itself as the place all of this information can be stored and shared—the Facebook of fitness-crazed bio-techies.

These devices amplify the element of play in exercise by making it easy and transparent. They turn daily activities into social games; athletes or dieters can know immediately how far they've come and what they need to do to continue. It's the computer as ultimate caretaker. "The fact is humans are lazy," says Andres Moran, cofounder of *EarnIt.com*, which launched in 2010. "People don't want to have to keep a journal of how many hours they spent at the gym or how many miles they ran." Consumers across the globe have welcomed digital body-monitoring devices to the degree that investors see a market in their surgical implantation.

Other sites in the behavior-change category, such as *MeYouHealth.com*, use a combination of games and daily reminders for healthier living to help users drink more water, eat better and stay connected to friends. *EarnIt.com* offers points for good behavior, earning users gift cards for clothing, jewelry and snacks.

But Kim's conclusion is that the real reward is the process, the feeling of being a part of a team, the recognition of your peers. And, as Fouts notes, "whether it's killing aliens or improving your health, the key is the element of play." ■



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FACT!

Players of eight Zynga games raised \$2.5 million in just two weeks for the Japan earthquake relief effort.