# Growing Up Gamer
### JANE M<sup>C</sup>GONIGAL

**T**he computer games I played as a kid, as a teenager, and as a young adult were much simpler and smaller than the massively-multiplayer and alternate reality games I make and play today. They took up as little as just 8KB of memory – the same amount of room as an empty Word document today. Some of them didn't even have graphics. They're about as far from today's cutting-edge games as you can get. But they are nevertheless an important part of the work I do today.

My experiences playing games have strongly influenced who I am and how I see the world. In fact, I consider my childhood games an important part of my life story. And it's not just me. Seminal game experiences are pervasive among the gamer generation, whether we talk about them or not. If we don't talk about them, it's mostly because we take for granted the role that games have played in our lives. Or maybe we're worried that non-gamers just won't understand.

For anyone who grew up without games, or who just never got their allure, it's important to hear these stories. It's important to understand that for millions and millions of us, gaming is a part of our core identity. In little and big ways, games made us who we are. And that's why the gamer generations – mine, and the ones that have followed – will never stop gaming. It's not something we want to grow out of. Computer and videogames make up some of the best parts of our real lives.

So these are just a few of what I consider my most important life stories: my experiences growing up as a gamer.

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I was born in 1977, the same year the original home videogame console, the Atari 2600, came out. I was right on top of the very first wave of the gamer generation. We never knew a world without computer and videogames.

My family couldn't afford an Atari 2600. We had a used Magnavox Odyssey 2, which meant we were not as cool as some of our friends. That didn't matter. I adored our Odyssey machine. Some of my best and earliest memories are of playing *KC Munchkin*, a knock-off of Pac-Man, with my dad and my twin sister in our living room. I was better than my sister, but not as good as my dad. Which always seemed to me exactly as it should be.



***KC Munchkin*** Screenshot, circa 1981

When I was 10, we got our first home computer. That was 1987. It was a Commodore 64, and it was easy to write your own programs if you learned a bit of Basic +. So I immediately started writing my own interactive games, modeled after my favorite book series, *Choose Your Own Adventure*. The game I remember most vividly working on was *You Be the Judge*, in which you were, naturally, a courtroom judge who was also a giant cat, because cat ASCII art (drawing pictures with regular keyboard letters and signs) was easier to make than human ASCII art. The gameplay consisted mainly of typing "Y" or "N" to rule on objections and "GUILTY" or "NOT" to give a final verdict. At the end, there was an animated ASCII sequence in which the screen blinked a dozen different colors while you, the cat-judge, banged your ASCII gavel. My mom and my sister were my main audience. They were very supportive, even when the programs would crash, which was most of the time. I think I may have convinced a few neighborhood friends to play *You Be the Judge*, but for me gaming was still primarily something cool I did with my family.

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**A 2008 recreation of the art from my 1988 game *You Be the Judge*.**

When I wasn't making games, I was hooked on a series of computer "text adventures" published by Infocom. They didn't have any graphics, just text, and they were full of stories and puzzles and mysteries to solve. I would spend hours and hours wandering the text-rendered halls of Victorian mansions and garden mazes and secret university tunnels, looking for strange objects to add to my inventory and interacting with even stranger characters. To my endless amazement, no matter what I typed—"Talk to the street urchin" or "Poke the street urchin" or even "Kiss the street urchin"—the computer was ready with a perfect reply: "The urchin grunts back warily" or "I don't think you want to do that. He looks dangerous." or "I REALLY don't think you want to do that. A dark tunnel is no place for romance." Although I played these games alone, I always felt like I was matching wits with some unknown genius who had created this story world just for me. It made me feel so grown-up and *smart*. Of course, I spent so much time trying to explore the entire possibility space of the text commands that I never made it very far in the games. That didn't matter. I just loved interacting with the game system and trying to figure out how it worked.

One of the highlights of my entire adolescence was the day in seventh grade that a boy named Junior walked up to me and gave me a dot-matrix printout of a "walkthrough" of my *favorite* text adventure, a Victorian-era murder mystery called *Moonmist*, which I had been trying unsuccessfully to solve for two years. The walkthrough consisted of a list of commands, in order, which would unlock every secret of the game. In addition to finally giving me the chance to actually beat one of these games, this was the first nice thing a boy ever did for me. I kept that print-out for years, long after we got rid of our Commodore 64.

**The cover art for the 1988 Infocom Game *Moonmist***

    I didn't play as many games on the computer during high school. That's because I discovered Bulletin Board Systems and Prodigy, both part of the pre-World Wide Web Internet. From that moment on, I was hooked on electronic communication. I spent easily a few hours a day uploading moody poetry to discussion forums and chatting with male teenage system operators, or sysops. But despite being temporarily distracted by boys and poems, I did come back to computer games the summer after I graduated from high school. That's when my twin sister and I found out that the most popular girl in our graduating class, the homecoming queen in fact, had a working Apple IIGs computer in her basement and a copy of *Tass Times in Tone Town*, an 1986 graphics-adventure game that my sister and I had played for years in middle school… but never beat. It turned out that the homecoming queen had played *Tass Times* for years in middle school, too—and she had never beat it, either. So the three of us, improbably, teamed up to finish the game together that summer.
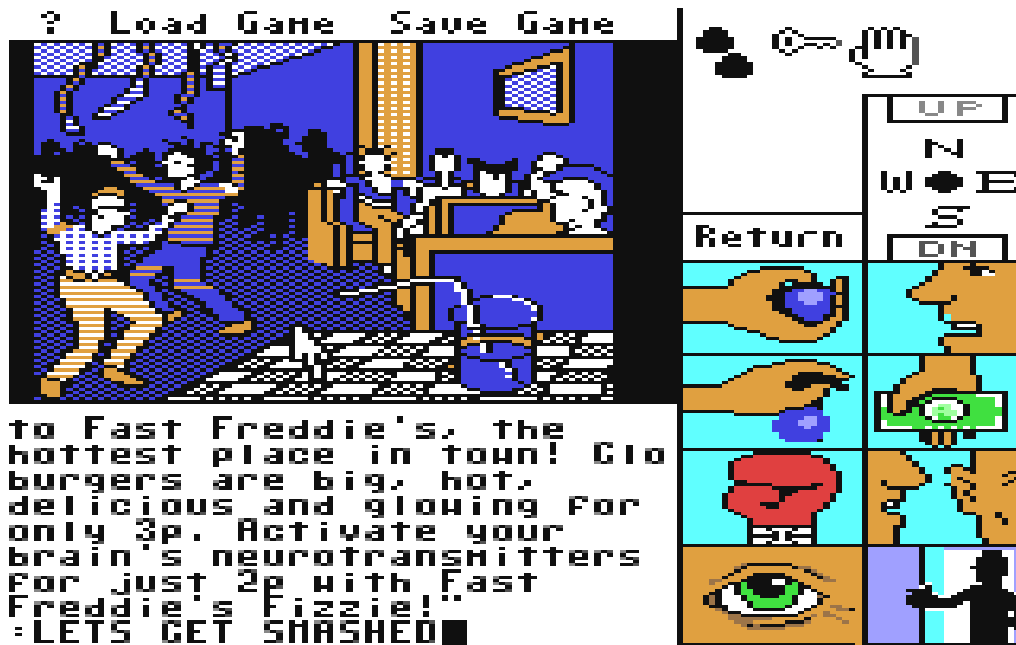
**Screenshot of 1986 adventure game *Tass Times in Tone Town***

I was not, by any stretch of the imagination, among the most popular girls in my high school. I still remember the tingly thrills of being invited to her house and collaborating on what felt, at the time, like an impossible mission. It took most of the summer, but just before we left for college, we beat the game, and then we went out for frozen yogurt to celebrate. I can still picture the three of us in the TCBY parking lot that night, high from the excitement of completing our adventure together, and talking about getting t-shirts made to commemorate the occasion. I was 17, and my last memory of high school was finally being a little bit cool… thanks to a computer game.

Games stayed a part of my life after that. I always preferred the adventure genre, and in 2000 when I met my future husband Kiyash, we spent the first two months of our courtship playing *Grim Fandango*, a film noir-style love story set in the Mexican "Day of the Dead" afterlife. Holed up in our New York City apartments, huddled together over my laptop, we fell in love by playing a game together.

**Cover Art for the 1998 adventure game *Grim Fandango***

So I guess you could say that I grew up with a very positive feeling about games, and that's never changed. Games let me spend quality time with my family. They were a real creative outlet. They made me feel smarter. They gave me something to talk about with boys. They made me cooler. And they even helped me fall in love.

The years passed, and videogames became more and more controversial, thanks to the graphic violent effects of games like *Doom* and the perception that online games like *Everquest* were anti-social and "addicting". But I never related to the controversy. It just wasn't what games meant to me. To me, computer and videogames have always been a way to bond with my family, to express myself, and to become smarter and more interesting. Games have always been a way to have real adventures with friends that

would forever shape our relationships to each other, adventures that I would remember for the rest of my life.

Among the gamer generations, I'm not an exception. I'm the rule. Most gamers have grown up with similar experiences. Whether we played text adventures or *Super Mario Brothers*, real-time strategy games or *Counter-Strike*, we're all passionate and sentimental about our favorite games. We're extraordinarily grateful to our favorite game designers. We cherish the time we've spent playing games. We love what games give us the power to do. We love *who* games give us the opportunity to become. And with every additional generation that grows up playing games, there are more and more of us who see gaming as a way to have the best kinds of experiences, to make the best kinds of friendships and lifelong partnerships, to do the most amazing work, and to become the best possible version of ourselves.

But now that so many of us have grown up gamer and reaped the benefits of game worlds, it's time to take a closer look at the game culture we've built. Games have shown us our own potential for happiness, change, and success. But they haven't helped us achieve that potential in our real lives. I see an increasing number of gamers who think they can only be their best selves, and do their best work, in game worlds. For them, the real world is broken. It just doesn't motivate them, or engage them, or reward them as effectively as their favorite computer and videogames.

It doesn't have to be that way. I believe games can make all of us happier in our real lives, not just in virtual environments. I believe as gamers, we can do more than save virtual worlds – we can help save the real world. And I have no doubt that the rest of the

world will want to start playing more and more with us gamers, when they discover how closely connected games and reality can become.

This has been the vision behind the past seven years of my work as an alternate reality game designer. And now, it's the inspiration for REALITY IS BROKEN, a book that will help everyone harness the power of games – to better our lives and to change the world.