VIDEO GAMES FOR GOOD
BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER

Gaming for good: can virtual worlds change real lives? Professional gamers compete at the 2017 eSports World Convention in Paris, France. (Photo credit: Getty Images, Chesnot)

Your kid is holed up in the basement, alone in the dark except for the glowing screen and the alien invaders from their favourite video game. Again. Don’t worry; an alternative to space war is on the way.

Critics call video games a frivolous hobby, and lately the industry has got a bad rap for enabling gender discrimination and harassment. But a handful of game enthusiasts have been looking for productive ways to harness all that virtual time—and it’s a lot. The average gamer is plugged in for 10,000 hours by age 21, according to researcher Dr. Jane McGonigal. That’s around 417 days.

Now, gamers can set their crosshairs on solving pressing global issues like drought and pollution. Last month the UN launched World Rescue, a mobile game where players try to make progress on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Lane Merrifield is the co-founder of the massive online children’s game Club Penguin, another game for good. Players can give up their in-game coins to help the company donate real-world proceeds. Merrifield says about $33 million has been donated to various causes, including WE Charity.

“I feel a responsibility for kids dedicating hours of their lives to something we’ve created,” he says.

Here are a few other groups helping gamers use those 10,000 hours for good.

Extra Life
Victoria Enmon played video games to fill the long hours she spent at Texas Children’s Hospital as a leukemia patient. When her friend Jeromy Adams shared her story on a popular gaming website, she was flooded with donated games.

Enmon died in 2008, at age 15, and Adams founded Extra Life. The charity rallies gamers to livestream 24-hour marathons of their favourite games to fundraise for Children’s Miracle Network.

Last year, 55,000 logged on to bring the charity’s fundraising total to over $30 million since launch.

Epic gear upgrades
AbleGamers is driving the industry to make games more accessible for people with disabilities. The nonprofit consults with developers and provides grants to create games and assistive technologies.

Projects include redesigned controllers, eye-tracking software and custom-built gaming rigs to unlock new games for players with motion-limiting disorders like cerebral palsy and spinal muscular atrophy.

World’s worst road trip
Desert Bus has been called the “world’s most boring video game,” a simulator for continuously driving a slow bus from Tucson to Las Vegas and back.

A group of gamers in BC livestreams an annual fundraiser where they extend playtime for donations. Last year, their virtual road trip through the game’s endless beige desert lasted 159 consecutive hours, attracted millions of viewers and raised $3.2 million for charity.

Leveling up
If you’re worried about your kid’s 10,000 hours, challenge them to use some of that time to make a difference.

That console could be their link to mobilizing a real-life social movement. Nineteen million Canadians are regular gamers—that’s more than half the population.

If all those gamers come together, that’s nineteen million heroes stepping out of their virtual worlds. We’re excited to see the impact they could make in the real one.