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'Karma' Video Game Promotes Altruism

By Nicole Wallace

Do Something, a youth organization in New York, has created Karma Tycoon, a free online video game it hopes will introduce teenagers to the nonprofit world, encourage volunteerism, and teach financial responsibility.

Players have to watch their budgets carefully as they set up a nonprofit organization — a homeless shelter, youth center, senior center, animal shelter, or performing-arts group. They also have to apply for grants and loans, and decide whether to pay for their organizations' expenses with cash or credit.

Players earn "karma" points by the number of people or animals they help, but they can also lose points if they spend too much and their organization has to close.

The game was inspired by the success of Lemonade Tycoon, an online game where players try to earn as much money as possible running a lemonade stand, says Aria Finger, director of business development at Do Something.

Staff members, says Ms. Finger, were talking about the game and asked, "Why couldn't we have a game where instead of maximizing profits you were maximizing your karma and trying to help as many people as possible?"

The JPMorgan Chase Foundation awarded Do Something a grant of nearly \$600,000 over three years to develop the game.

The nonprofit organization has also created a guide to help teachers integrate Karma Tycoon into their lesson plans for grades seven to 12.

The organization tested the game with eighth and ninth graders in Brooklyn. Ms. Finger says the students were eager to learn things like the difference between a grant and a loan.

"Since it's part of the game, they kind of get into learning about it," she says. "It's that sneaky kind of learning."

To play the game: Go to <http://www.karmatycoon.com>.