



Martin Kozłowski

'Tis Not Simple to Give Gifts

By CHRISTIAN C. SAHNER

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The moody graphics and pulsing soundtrack of Karma Tycoon convey the look of your typical video game. Absent, however, are the M-16s, camouflage humvees and vampires that fill the screens of most of its competition. Karma Tycoon is all about another type of thrill-seeking: youth philanthropy.

Confused? Karma Tycoon is a joint venture between the Web-based youth volunteerism organization Do Something and corporate partner JPMorgan Chase. Their goal: to teach middle- and high-school kids about "fiscal responsibility and social entrepreneurship." Players are encouraged to support charitable causes, such as community centers and senior citizen homes. The greater the effect these initiatives have, the more a player's "karma" increases. Along the way, players learn the mechanics of philanthropy, from soliciting grant applications to dolling out loans and reviewing the success of their projects. "We want to convert the time kids spend playing video games into time they spend learning how to help their communities through philanthropy," Nancy Lublin, CEO of Do Something, told me. "Karma Tycoon is like a vitamin in a Twinkee."

The game is part of a recent general effort, taking various forms, to teach young people about charitable giving. It's not hard to see why such an effort is needed. The nonprofit sector has witnessed phenomenal growth in the past 20 years, and it will be looking for even more philanthropy-savvy workers and leaders as baby boomers -- not a few of them embarrassingly prosperous -- retire and funnel some of their money to charitable causes. Americans gave a record \$300 billion to charity last year, according to the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.

Classes at more than 125 universities expose students to the nonprofit world, mostly

through managerial training, accounting and study of nonprofit policy. Classes at a smaller number of institutions try to examine philanthropy using a wider lens. Robert Rycroft, a professor at Mary Washington University in Fredericksburg, Va., teaches a philanthropy course "from the perspective of economics." But at other colleges, he told me, "they approach philanthropy from political science, commerce, sociology, leadership studies. This is a topic that embraces a lot of different fields."

Many of the new philanthropy courses are being offered thanks to grants from outside foundations. At Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y., a \$10,000 gift from the Brennan Family Foundation established the Upstate Institute Student Philanthropy Council, a year-long noncredit course in which students learn to run a nonprofit. After studying the history of philanthropy and management strategies, students solicit applications from local community groups. This year, 16 proposals came in, which students then judged according to criteria they designed themselves. The selection process included on-site visits and a formalized review process, culminating in awards from the foundation given to four groups. "This was our first year, and so it was very risky," Ellen Kraly, the program director, said. "But the students were not bleeding hearts; they were serious, and tried to stretch their dollars as far as they could."

Critics say that courses whose budgets come from outside grants or from university funds miss a critical component of any philanthropic enterprise: fund raising. According to Leslie Lenkowsky, a professor of philanthropic studies at Indiana University and the former head of President Bush's Corporation for National and Community Service, "the best undergraduate courses engage students in raising money, not just receiving it. The key to a successful program is not simply acquiring managerial skills but a holistic sense of how philanthropy works."

But a well-rounded education should mean not only learning to bring in and give out money but also studying the philosophical foundations of charity. James Smith, whose work at Georgetown University has provided a model for newer courses at Colgate and elsewhere, said that he draws heavily on Aristotle, Cicero and Tocqueville in his courses on philanthropy. "My objective is to show there's a long charitable tradition rooted in many traditions throughout history." American Humanics, a national alliance of colleges and nonprofits, offers students a certificate of competency in nonprofit work if they fulfill course requirements in a range of fields, including ethics.

The momentum behind these courses comes from a new generation of civic-minded students eager to take volunteerism to the next level, according to these professors and other philanthropy experts. "'Volunteering' is something your grandma did," Mr. Lenkowsky explained. By contrast, when young people use language like "philanthropy" and "social entrepreneurship" these days, they are trying to give their community outreach a greater sense of scope, sophistication and seriousness.

Nancy Lublin, of the volunteer organization Do Something, notes that philanthropy plays a part in young people's choice of heroes. "Kids in middle and high school idolize Warren Buffett, but they have no idea what Berkshire-Hathaway is," she remarked. "They think he's cool because he gave away \$30 billion last year." The shift

from the lemonade stand to the philanthropy desk may be emblematic of a generation known for its impatience and sense of entitlement, but it also shows the group's admirable desire to address problems outside their local universe.

On one level, today's youth philanthropy movement is intensely pragmatic: It's about adults equipping students with the tools to run nonprofits and effectively distribute charitable funds. But on another level, it points to a new sensitivity and shrewdness students have toward giving and its impact on their community. As Aristotle wrote in the "Ethics": "To give away money is an easy matter in any man's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in every man's power nor an easy matter." That's where the video games come in.

Mr. Sahner is a Robert L. Bartley Fellow at the Journal this summer.

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