



## Unlock New Fundraising Potential with Video Games

For generations, high school sports have given young men and women a place to learn teamwork, to become leaders, and to build friendships that can last lifetimes. Unfortunately, high school sports face a number of dangers, not the smallest of which is a lack of funding. Federal funding for education as a whole has declined in the last decade, and a nationwide trend points to states following suit, within many states starting to cut funding and more states yet implementing second and third rounds of cuts.

Even in states or school districts where funding is not as big of a challenge, outspoken critics rage against every dollar spent on equipment and facilities because that money could ostensibly be “better spent.” As a result, sports programs are relying more heavily on booster clubs and tasking their students with fundraising, going door to door trying to sell whatever fundraising product is in vogue.

In the wake of these challenges, high school sports programs need a reliable way to fundraise that does not continue to put pressure on families to fundraise and amplifies the efforts of booster clubs.

The solution: video games.

Through a branded video game, high school sports programs can harness the power of passive fundraising. Parents don't have to buy a stack of magazine subscriptions or push a cookie dough sale on their coworkers. Instead, they can take a few minutes from a busy day to play a fun mobile game. With that little bit of time, they push their child's sports program forward in a small but powerful way.

To understand this fundraising model, let's explore the state of fundraising in general.

### Donor Behavior is Changing

Instead of pursuing one-time donations in the form of big events or campaign drives, more nonprofits are using the internet and the power of peer-to-peer fundraising to generate consistent monthly donations.<sup>i,ii</sup> Donor fatigue is one driver of the change, but the other factor is likely that Gen X tends to donate far more frequently than other generations and alongside Millennials is most likely to donate to causes related to children and youth development. Boomers, on the other hand, tend to invest more in religious causes.<sup>iii,iv</sup>

Gen X and Millennials are traditionally more tech savvy and thus are more open to fundraising initiatives driven by technology. At the same time, their ubiquitous use of social media and mobile devices have helped to empower these individuals to be champions for a cause, fundraising on the behalf of nonprofits by spreading the word to their friends and being active participants in the causes they care about (1 out of 3 donations are now a result of peer-to-peer fundraising).<sup>v</sup> The individual donations that result from this activity might be smaller, but they are more frequent.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite the rise of new fundraising opportunities, nonprofits across the board struggle with retention. Less than 25% of first-year donors will return to donate a second time, and the overall retention of multi-year donors is not even 60%.<sup>vii</sup> This could be because donors are bombarded for pleas for support from the over 1.5 million nonprofits in the U.S.



Figure 1. The Barn hired Synersteel to develop a branded mobile video game based on their film to increase interest in their crowdfunding campaign and to capture more media attention.

In this landscape, there are 3 key opportunities:

- Give whales (the consistently largest and most passionate donors) more ways to contribute without making them feel exploited. Most nonprofits see 88% of their dollars-raised coming from just 12% of their donors. <sup>viii</sup>
- Arm tech savvy donors with a fun and socially-driven way to not only stay connected with their cause but also to share and spread it to their friends. Currently, 73% of nonprofits don't connect their donations with a social share option, an easy way to amplify the reach of a singular donation. <sup>ix</sup>
- Integrate a cause into a stakeholder's life in a passive, unobtrusive way to increase retention. This retention could potentially lead to more engagement, increases in donations, and more participation in cause-related events.

A well-crafted mobile game can capitalize on each of these opportunities, giving you a new and powerful tool for engaging donors.

## The Power of Games: Kim Kardashian and Fighting World Hunger

From the outside, the video game industry is easy to underestimate. It has a reputation for being aimed at kids, and while it's true that a lot of young people do play video games. The average gamer is in fact 35,<sup>x</sup> and the Pew Research Center found that 58% of people between the ages of 30 and 49 play video games, 40% of people between the ages of 50 and 64 play video games, and 25% of people over 65 play video games.<sup>xi</sup> Yes, a lot of children play, but men and women enjoy games as well.

In fact, 155 million Americans play video games, with an average of two gamers per household.<sup>xii</sup>

Given the far reach of video games, it's not a stretch to imagine that many of your target donors are gamers themselves. To be fair, we are not saying that these people identify themselves as "gamers" from a lifestyle perspective, but they do play games on a regular basis. In fact, the demographics who stereotypically might not be interested in video games can be fiercely connected with the right game.

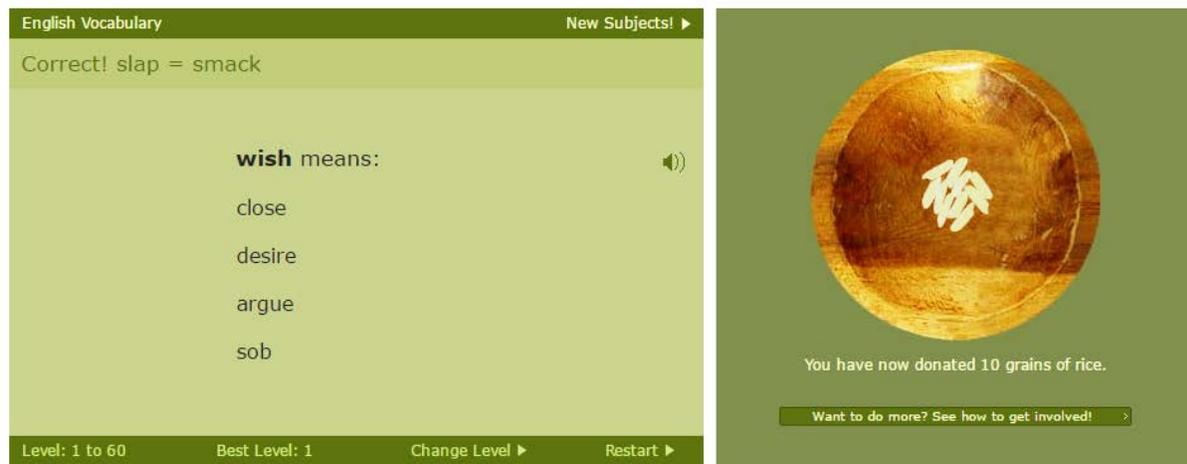


Figure 2. Freerice takes a simple mechanic and ties it to a powerful visual: How much of a difference on click can make, so why not make a few more clicks?

For example, Kim Kardashian (love her or hate her) faced a wave of criticism when she announced her mobile game because her target audience, primarily young women, did not fit public perceptions of who plays games. Instead, *Kim Kardashian Hollywood* has become a runaway success. In addition to topping Apple and Play store charts, *Forbes* reported in 2014 that the game had made \$200 million in revenue at the time of the article. With only \$10 million in expenses related to the development and management of the mobile game, Kardashian was expected to walk with as much as \$85 million in profit. According to *Forbes*, Kardashian's other businesses netted her a total of \$28 million in 2013.<sup>xiii</sup>

But games can be harnessed for good as well.

John Breen founded Freerice in 2007. A relatively simple vocabulary game, Freerice used ad revenue to fund food donations, which is not unlike how many modern mobile games monetize player interaction. In 2009, Breen donated the game to the UN World Food Programme. To put the work of Freerice into perspective, the site donated 43,942,622,700 grains of rice in 2008, which is roughly 1,515,262 pounds of rice. Currently, the site reports that it averages about 4,000,000 grains of rice a day, or roughly 150 pounds.



Figure 3. MC Lars has used hip hop to raise money for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and to save the Edgar Allan Poe house from demolition. He recently partnered with Synersteel to develop a game based on his music.

Breen's initial idea was a simple one, but he took the time to pick mechanics and design elements that resonated with his target audience. Even now, Freerice is a relatively simple site when it comes to aesthetics, but they make a good job of making the game easy to play, making the gameplay addictive, visualizing the impact a player is making, and encouraging players to compete against other players to raise even more rice.<sup>xiv</sup>

A mobile game built around your student athletes can tap into the same cultural dynamic that made *Kim Kardashian Hollywood* and Freerice such big hits.

## Transforming Fundraising for Your Sports Program

A mobile game can be a powerful force for high school sports because they allow you to capitalize on the key opportunities in the nonprofit space while tapping into the engaging and revenue-driving potential of mobile games.

Here is what a mobile game will do for your program:

- Give your most passionate supporters a way to contribute to the sports and students they love *every day* without feeling like they are being pressured to donate.
- Make alumni and parents feel like they are actively involved in a school's program instead of simply being spectators.
- Integrate your causes and your games seamlessly with the reach of social media, giving your fans an easy excuse to talk about your athletes on Facebook and Twitter.
- Keeps your sports programs and athletes top of mind for your community in a way that is fun and unobtrusive.
- Arm teachers with hands-on learning opportunities, connecting classes in business, marketing, video editing, and art to the real-world promotion of the game.

And all of this occurs while **the game generates revenue through ads and in-app purchases.**

That's a big win for any sports program!

As you decide whether a mobile game can help your program grow, here some suggestions for making the rollout even more successful:

- Host an assembly to celebrate the launch of the game.
- Send an email blast to your students, parents, and alumni.
- Encourage boosters to run contests around the game during the season. For example, the player with the highest score at the end of the season wins a prize.
- Hang a sign for the game at your sports facilities. Better yet, hang a real time leaderboard.
- Tie the launch and ongoing promotion of the game to meaningful educational experiences. Video students could make a commercial. Art students could make posters. Business and marketing students can get real world experience planning promotional campaigns.
- Integrate the game into your sports culture. Keeping the game top of mind will in turn help to keep your sports programs top of mind.

Video games are not our future. They are our present, and you have a unique opportunity to grow your fundraising in a unique and compelling way. Don't wait!



### **About the Author: Marshal D. Carper**

Marshal began his career in game development at 19, writing a portion of the character dialog for the Nintendo DS title *The Black Sigil: Blade of the Exiled*. Today, Marshal has authored and coauthored more than 12 books, and he also provides marketing consulting for clients ranging from international medical device manufacturers to New York Times bestselling authors. He drives marketing and business development efforts for Synersteel. Contact Marshal at [mcarper@gmail.com](mailto:mcarper@gmail.com) or 724-825-2817.



### **About Synersteel Studio**

Synersteel believes in the power of collaborative gaming. We work with organizations with an interest, but no presence, in the gaming industry to create meaningful, community-building games. Our team members bring a distinct blend of skill sets resulting in a unison in which every contributor's voice can be clearly heard.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.peertopeerforum.com/run-walk-ride-resources/research/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.classy.org/blog/infographic-the-value-of-peer-to-peer-fundraising/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.blackbaud.com/nonprofit-resources/generational-giving-report>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.abila.com/lpgs/donorengagementstudy/>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.classy.org/blog/infographic-the-value-of-peer-to-peer-fundraising/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.nten.org/article/the-2015-nonprofit-benchmarks-report-is-here/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.blackbaud.com/files/resources/downloads/ReactivatingLapsedDonors.Whitepaper.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://bloomerang.co/blog/infographic-2014-fundraising-effectiveness-project-survey-report/>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.dunhamandcompany.com/onlinefundraisingscorecard/#sthash.GrJKGcvZ.dpbs>

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- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-2015.pdf>
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/15/who-plays-video-games-and-identifies-as-a-gamer/>
- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-2015.pdf>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2014/07/17/kim-kardashian-may-make-85-million-from-her-video-game/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <http://freerice.com/frmisc/totals>