

Getting Gamers

By Scott Degraffenreid, 9 Jan 07

You have probably heard by now that the average American male, by the age of 21, will have spent approximately 5000 hours playing video games. That may sound like quite a lot but if you divide 17 years into that number, it comes out to only 294 hours per year or considerably less than one hour per day. Assuming that conservative estimate to be reasonably accurate it is easy to believe that the myriad of other activities that constitute a young life should outweigh or moderate any pronounced video game influence or long-term effects.

Consider two amplifying factors, however. First, the duration and frequency at which the games are played. Many children begin as early as age four (and 4 is incidentally the “hook” age the gaming industry is shooting for) and then may play literally every day for their entire lives. Secondly, the intensity of the experience; games are designed, in most cases, to generate surges of adrenaline and endorphins. The games also create an environment of astute concentration and almost trancelike focus.

At this point, let me take great care to say that I am in no way opposed to video games in general. Truthfully I believe they are a technological fact of life that can provide high quality, engaging entertainment. I am even convinced that in many respects, video games can be helpful in creating excellent hand-eye coordination but also can raise confidence and enhance emotional resilience. In any case, video and computer games are very much a fixture of contemporary American youth.

Even though girls are typically not as involved with video games; they are increasingly interested and quite sought after by game developers. So, while most of the following is based on observations of male gamers, it is more and more relevant in respect to young women.

So how is the mind of a gamer different and how does that affect their performance in the workplace? In order to answer those questions, especially if you are not a video game enthusiast yourself, you have to know a little bit about the basic design concepts that govern most games. Of course, these are just generalizations, as there are a huge range of games available and innovation is the lifeblood of the industry (please consider we are primarily referring to video games (Xbox 360, Wii, etc.) versus computer games (SYMS, Dungeons & Dragons, etc.).

First and perhaps most importantly, consider the fact that before video games there was one step required at the beginning of any game you chose to play before anything else could happen; you had to learn the rules first. With very rare exceptions, in the case of video games, you learn the rules only as you play the game. When you open a new video game cartridge or disc there are generally no rules to read. At first this may seem like a minor point and for whatever reason, it has been largely overlooked by most who are seeking to understand the Millennial generation (born between 1982 to 2001).

Based on observations in the workplace, I would assert that it might be the single most salient aspect of what has made Millennials seem so significantly different from previous generations. They learn the rules by trial and error. What may appear to a casual observer as random guesses on strategy, on closer examination, can be understood

as well-designed, often quite ingenious experiments that quickly identify the boundaries and parameters of a game.

In fact, because of the increased level of complexity of most contemporary video games, it would be nearly impossible to write out the rules in a concise and understandable format. This learning modality is very much at the heart of the term we refer to as “**Crash Test Geniuses©**” An oft-heard gamer quote is “*The secrets of the universe are revealed when you break things.*” What this means is simply that not just risk but failure is essential to advancing in the game. Knowing what works is only available as a result of exploring what doesn’t work.

In further contrast to most previous types of games there were always, by definition, winners and losers. Consequently, it is theoretically possible, in fact, necessary, that some inexperienced players of traditional (non-video) games and sports will win the first time they play the game and continue winning indefinitely. Video games are very different. No one wins the first time they play a video game. Certainly if they are experienced with similar games, they may rack up a few points but ultimately they will be dislodged, dismembered, disintegrated or in some way forced to start over without having come anywhere near the highest level of achievement possible.

In most video games, both skills and strategies must be acquired in a very iterative and even painstaking process that can require literally hundreds of hours. Some games are even designed such that the very highest level of play is almost humanly impossible to attain. In other cases, the point may be to achieve the very highest score among an extremely large group of players. In this case, there will be only one winner out of thousands or even millions of competitors. This doesn’t imply that everyone else is a “loser,” of course, simply that the customary 50:50 ratio of one winner and one loser per game is seldom to be found. This actually has significant impact in terms of deconstructing the standard zero-sum assumptions (I win = You lose). In a gamer’s world I have points and the fact that you have more does not in any way subtract from my potential. In fact the higher the score I can see realized by others the more I may be motivated to improve my game.

All of this requires an entirely new relationship to “losing” as previous generations have known it. Failure, for the experienced video gamer, is a natural and expected part of the learning process. It is not so much something that can be avoided as postponed. Even that postponement is useful only in so far as it affords greater insight that will provide an advantage in the next round.

Now, without becoming too alarmed, because there is light at the end of this tunnel, try and imagine how the mindset I have just described experiences the typical workplace. The avid gamer understands that there are rules but he is accustomed to finding them for himself, not reading them or hearing them. Add to this, the fact that he has very little risk aversion: quite the opposite, a nearly insatiable appetite for risk. In many cases, this can and does lead to behaviors that may make it appear that they are literally trying to get fired.

As if all this were not enough, throw in one more very interesting wrinkle. All good video gamers are wired to increase their level of difficulty or challenge once the current level has been mastered. Many games essentially let you decide whether you are ready to test your skills at a new level. How much does that resemble the typical workplace?

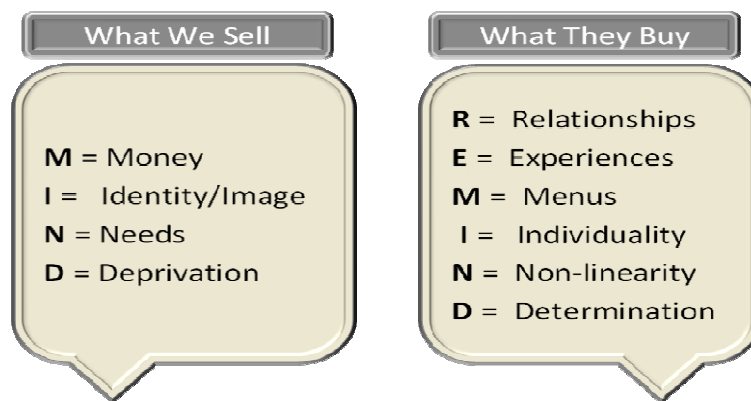
Every year since the late 1990's and accelerating significantly since 2000, more and more *Crash Test Geniuses*© have been entering the workforce. At first, primarily as entry-level wage earners but now as the oldest are in their mid-20 and having graduated from college, their distinctive style and atypical dispositions have become a significant concern for many employers.

The simple and most obvious problem is how readily and quickly they will leave a job. Some employers have responded to this issue by jacking up their hiring age, others by testing or screening. Neither approach is providing a satisfactory result.

Other characteristics attributed to the Millennials are poor work habits, tardiness, lack of commitment and generally bad attitudes. I'm going to ask you to consider the possibility that this is all a simple misinterpretation based on assumptions that cannot be fairly applied to them. What looks like disloyalty and a lack of commitment is simply an expression of their video game and computer training that has convinced them that if they are trapped in a bad game, the only reasonable choice is to punch out, hit reset and start over. They see no point in wasting time or postponing the inevitable. Rather than a lack of commitment, what they have is an unshakeable commitment to winning. No matter how many times they have to lose in the process.

Quitting and getting fired, in a situation where they can't see how to win is nothing more than a natural expression of their training. In a nutshell, what this means is that employers and educators must become more effective at helping them understand what a winnable game would look like in a particular situation. Employers must also take a fresh accountability for helping millennial employees operate at a level they consider challenging but not overwhelming. No experienced gamer worth his salt will continue to play at a level that is no longer developing his skill.

Metrics



Part and parcel to developing a winnable game worth playing for Millennials is the clear understanding of why they play. Millennials, as can be viewed in the comparison chart above, are generally motivated by an entirely different set of drivers than *most* members of previous generations. While the general inducements for earlier generations can be boiled down to the four elements in the acronym M I N D (Money, Identity, Needs, and Deprivation)

Millennials have generally elected to focus on drivers that are less susceptible to the perennial flux that they have grown up with. Clearly, in both their experience and observation, money and identity are very much subject to the transient and unpredictable winds of change. They have witnessed parents and family, corporations and even countries writhe incessantly in radical economic tumult. Feast and famine appear to them as an inexorable cycle that is seldom escaped. Even though they know the cycle will wax and wane many times in their lives, they eschew any notion of absolute or tactical control of the cycle. They realize intuitively that money or any of its' trappings, although perhaps desirable, are a poor way of keeping score.

Equally, "identity" is a poor gauge of advancement or momentum in their game. Titles, positions and social status are not only transient but increasingly subject to interpretation. Worse yet, it may appear to them that the higher one rises on any scale intended to reflect status the more subject they are to negative scrutiny, predation and loss of power or control.

Having therefore foresworn the culturally iconic goals of money and identity, they have somewhat unconsciously but still quite deliberately adopted at least two very different scorekeeping criteria. For Millennials, relationship and experience are the new coin of the realm. They very much assess their progress on a playing field drawn and bounded by these criteria. And herein lies the rub. Just as video games are significantly more complex than nearly any board game, the way they keep score is proportionally intricate and sophisticated.

While money and identity were clearly lacking in many respects as a meaningful and empowering scorecard, they did have the endearing property of being very easily and cleanly evaluated. There is little ambiguity in financial success and while social and professional status may be somewhat subject to debate, it is hardly in question whether doctor trumps janitor or President is preferable to Vice President.

Relationship and experience although more informative and potentially empowering contain layers upon layers of complexity, distinctions and nuance. In fact, for relationship to be effectively employed as a meaningful gauge for success in the game of life, more than just a new set of definitions, an entirely new language is needed.

Even beyond that, however, a new more dimensional scale that completely escapes the old school linear notions of winning and losing must be evolved. In order for relationships to become a productive element of empowering, feedback levels of texture, nuance, granularity and scope must be continually explored.

Relationship in both a real and a fantastic sense stands to become the new capital. But far beyond old capital's ability to produce, the new capital of relationship will have a fundamentally generative characteristic. Rather than being protected and conserved, the new capital of relationship will attain its greater value only to the degree that it can be shared as widely as possible.

Employers and educators have a unique opportunity to help Millennials develop their new language of relationship and to help them map it onto a productive algorithm of fulfillment. Currently, as they explore the new territory of relationship as a primary life read-out, many are tempted to fall back into a simple quantitative model.

- How many relationships as defined by how many text messages
- How many friends as defined by their online buddy lists
- How many party invitations, etc.

While not entirely useless, this simple numerical strategy contains not only inherent practical limitations but is also clearly misleading. A bit more surprisingly, in the new *growthscape*© of relationship a qualitative approach can be equally vexing. It may be challenging at first to escape the traditional good-better-best, linear notion that presumes relationships can be laterally compared by any subjective criteria any more than they can objective ones.

In the non-linear meta-dimensional growthscape© of relationship, as Millennials will come to define it, one aspect of the scorecard will be the advanced capacity of all parties to the relationship to relate to every other party. Another all too brief example of relationship in the new continuum would be the enhanced capacity to adopt the perspectives of those who are different from us. There are clearly countless other directions in which the Millennial lexicon of relationship may develop. Some of them may be beyond the capacity of most previous generations to grasp. The basic point to keep in mind is that we can still be of support in evolving the new metrics of relationship at this nascent stage.

The second new coin of the realm, experience, clearly contains its own obvious and not so obvious pitfalls. It is very easy to be seduced by either or both the variety and intensity of experience. This seduction has and will continue to lead to a dangerous fascination with not just extreme sports such as base jumping, ghost riding, etc. but also to a predilection for any and all things “edgy” such as pharming parties, designer drug cocktails like “cheese” and dangerously imaginative and imitative sexual experimentation.

None-the-less, the appetites for experience have been thoroughly and insatiably whetted. Fully understood in the appropriate context, this is quite good news for employers and educators. Not just rewarding and fulfilling but enervating and unique experiences will become critical differentiating elements of both compensation and learning packages.

Employers and educators that realize one of the most challenging obstacles to engagement is the notion embodied by the text message abbreviation: BTDT (been there, done that). The ability to offer both goals and ideas, inside new frames of experience which are both mind-bending and menu-driven will increasingly define the modern corporation and educational institution.

This article is from the “Painting the Target” section of my upcoming book on the subject of Millennials, due out in spring '07. For more information on this go to my website at www.NecessaryMeasures.com

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