



December 24, 2007

Education

## Net Game Boosts Vocabulary, Fights Hunger

by Michele Kelemen

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*Morning Edition*, December 17, 2007 · John Breen, a computer programmer, developed the Internet game FreeRice.com to teach vocabulary and help fight hunger.

FreeRice.com is quickly becoming all the rage for school children as well as immigrants learning English.

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Breen said the idea came to him one day in his kitchen in Indiana. He was sitting with his two teenage sons, preparing the older for the SAT.

"The younger one made a mockery of the situation. He kept saying, 'he doesn't know this word, he doesn't know that word,'" Breen said. "So I decided to do something on the computer to help my son learn vocabulary words."

What Breen came up with was a word game that he thought others might like to play on the Internet. He was already operating the Web site Poverty.com to inform people about hunger. So, he merged the two, and FreeRice.com was born.

Here's how it works: Contestants are offered four definitions for a word; by clicking on the right definition, a donation of 20 grains of rice is made to the U.N. World Food Programme. The U.N. distributes the rice worldwide.

English teacher Michael Hughes puts the Web site up on a large interactive screen and uses the game to warm up his classes at Alice Deal Middle School in Washington, D.C.

Hughes' class raised 280 grains of Rice during a short session.

While that's hardly enough for a daily ration for a starving child abroad, it still adds up, said World Food Programme spokeswoman Jennifer Parmelee.

"FreeRice.com is up to more than 8.2 billion grains of rice, which is one heck of a lot of rice and more than enough to feed 325,000 people for the day," Parmelee said.

The Web site earns money from advertising and gives cash to the World Food Programme. Some \$100,000 has already gone to buy rice to feed survivors of a recent cyclone in Bangladesh.

Parmelee said the Web site offers a greater gift – the gift of awareness about world hunger. In just two months, FreeRice.com has driven the most Internet traffic to the World Food Programme site.

"We are all kind of dazzled by the power of a great idea — an idea that seemed to have come completely out of left field," she said.

Breen said he has hired a dictionary company to put some more words in the game, which adjusts as you are playing to different levels from zero to 50.

"I myself can't get much above level 45, and it is rare to get above level 48. But there are some people who cruise right up to level 50. So for them we are going to add some super, really ultra, tough words," Breen said.

And, he said, his son's vocabulary "has improved markedly."

Breen said e-mails are coming in from around the world from people trying to learn English to teachers and college students. He wants them to take away something more than just a few new words.

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