

Joshua Rhett Miller

- FOXNews.com

- March 05, 2010

World Bank's Online Game Isn't a Real-World Solution, Critics Say

A World Bank-funded online game that bills itself as a "10-week crash course in changing the world" is misguided and will most likely not produce significant changes anywhere -- and especially not in its target continent, Africa -- critics say.

A World Bank-funded online game that bills itself as a "10-week crash course in changing the world" is misguided and will most likely not produce significant changes anywhere -- and especially not in its target continent, Africa -- critics say.

[Evoke](#), which was launched on Wednesday, offers young users points for completing 10 weekly challenges that call for "world-changing" skills like collaboration, creativity, sustainability and local insight. In May, the game's top performers will win prizes like online mentorships with "social innovators" and business leaders, as well as scholarships.

"We're looking to get people aware of and engaged in solving real problems that people in developing countries face," Bob Hawkins, senior education specialist at the World Bank Institute, wrote in an e-mail. "If games like EVOKE can raise awareness of real-world problems facing the poor in developing countries and encourage innovative, sustainable solutions to these problems, we'd like to see more people playing such games."

Dr. Kimberly Young, founder and director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, told FoxNews.com that while online gaming can be addictive to some, it can be a great way to promote social benefits.

"We live in a society that has declined in the volume of community service it provides, so games would be one way to help teach young people service values," Young wrote in an e-mail. "Online gaming is a great way to reach people that otherwise [more traditional] avenues may not."

Critics of the game acknowledge that it's a noble effort to empower some of the world's most impoverished people, but they say the \$500,000 venture is unlikely to produce tangible gains, and they question how many young minds in Africa will be reached.

"The best ways of communicating with African youth remain radio and newspapers," Mauro De Lorenzo, vice president of the John Templeton Foundation, wrote in an e-mail. "Only the most elite students have the regular access to a reliable Internet connection (and the free time) that participation in this game would require."

Lorenzo also questioned the site's usage of comic-book anime characters to market the game. "On a continent where formal-sector unemployment rates for young people exceed 50%, using comic book characters to

promote formless volunteerism seems like cruel satire," he wrote.

Herb London, president of the Hudson Institute, a Washington-based think tank, called the venture a "foolish gimmick" and said he doubted that the "return on the investment" will be sensible.

Instead of creating an online world, London suggested using funds to increase Internet access directly in African countries.

"I just don't see this as a reasonable way to proceed," he said. "Why not create a real spine for Internet communication?"

The online game was created, Hawkins said, after the World Bank received a direct request from South African universities to find ways to engage students in community development issues. So far, upwards of 6,500 people, more than 600 of whom live in Africa, have signed up to play the game.

"We're shooting for around 10%, so we're pretty close," Hawkins wrote. "But that's the point: the fact that people across the continent don't have access to the Internet -- or even electricity -- is one of the problems people there face. This is what we're trying to raise awareness of."

The game's first challenge calls for users to "master the mindset of a social innovator" by identifying up to 33 secrets of social innovation in a provided document. Users are then asked to share their thoughts on a blog to earn points.

"Don't just report your evidence -- own it," the Web site reads. "Tell us why you think this secret could help YOU change the world."

In order to get more Africans into the game, Hawkins said an advertising campaign will be launched soon in South Africa to encourage people to play.

"The World Bank is more than cognizant of the problems people in Africa face," Hawkins' e-mail continued. "In fact, because we know that telephony there has leapfrogged to mobile, we've built in a way to play the game using mobile phones."

But Marian Tupay, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, said he saw major hurdles to widespread use in Africa regardless of the medium,

"People who access the Internet there will likely be wealthy and have the leisure time to do work for others," he said. "But the vast majority of Africans doesn't have Internet access and are too concerned with day-to-day survival to worry about volunteering."

Asked if a more accessible format could have been used, Hawkins replied: "The fact is, a lot of gamers are online. To reach them, you go where the eyeballs are."

SEARCH

GO

[Click here for FOX News RSS Feeds](#)

[Advertise on FOX News Channel, FOXNews.com and FOX News Radio](#)

[Jobs at FOX News Channel.](#)

[Terms of use.](#) [Privacy Statement.](#) For FOXNews.com comments write to foxnews@foxnews.com; For FOX News Channel comments write to comments@foxnews.com

© Associated Press. All rights reserved.

This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright 2009 FOX News Network, LLC. All rights reserved.

All market data delayed 20 minutes.