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Millennials Are Playing With You

by Nick Shore | 10:48 AM December 12, 2011

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At MTV, we have long suspected that understanding the relationship between Millennials and game play is one of the keys to understanding the generation as a whole. Our 2011 study, "Let's Play Brand," attempts to understand some of the implications of this "meta-game-mentality" for brand builders and marketers. The study has given us startling reaffirmation of our intuition that a "game-like metaphor" applies to almost every aspect of Millennial life. Half of Millennials said "People my age see real life as a video game" and almost 6 out of 10 said "#winning is the slogan of my generation" (certainly #epic_fail seems to have become their anti-slogan!)

To anyone who has spent as much time with Millennials as we at MTV have (and certainly for anyone who employs as many Millennials as we do), it quickly becomes apparent how adept this generation is at navigating the loopholes, trap doors and "Easter eggs" of life, using their smarts, technological resources, and "peer power." They see the workplace as a multiplayer game where power players can find the back door to the top floor; cell phone contracts are riddled with exploitable loopholes; and navigating the car purchasing experience is akin to advancing levels, with 'experience points' gained along the way.

Perhaps we should be unsurprised by all this. Millennials learned to game the system early in their own homes, negotiating homework rules, privileges and punishments in family democracies with peer-like parents. Indeed, in the study, almost 7 out of 10 Millennials believe they "can successfully negotiate anything with authority figures." And Millennials' brains are — according to the game designers we interviewed in the study — "hard wired" differently than those of older generations. Older generations played analogue — chess with actual people who eventually got tired, sword-fighting with sticks that eventually snapped. Millennials played digital, with an opponent that never tired, that increased and decreased in intensity at their command. World-renowned game designer Jane McGonigal estimates that a 21-year-old has spent 10,000 hours gaming — about the same amount of time he's spent in school from 5th to 12th grade.

No wonder, then, that the hottest business trend of the moment is the gamification of marketing. Whether your brand is playing along or not, Millennials are already playing with you! We put together this "playbook" to further the conversation on how to create a gamified brand experience for Millennials:

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MTV's Playbook for Engaging With Millennials

Principle #1: Play fair or you are "fair game"

Millennials demand fairness, transparency, and clear, consistent rules in every aspect of life. And as consumers, they feel comfortable leveraging their power (individually or collectively) to "level the playing field" — with 70% claiming "If a company is unfair with me, I'll figure out how to make things fair." Millennials use their tech-savvy slingshots to take aim at Goliath brands and knock them down to their level. Consider how they more or less took down the record industry, demanding the right to buy and download single songs versus entire CDs.

As consumers, they look to "out" and outsmart companies that craft unfair contracts or even "change the rules" mid-game, such as offering reward points, but imposing unfair restrictions on usage. Not surprisingly, Southwest's "no red tape" program, which eliminates restrictions on rewards miles, is a #winning strategy. But Millennials don't expect perfection — they accept apologies from brands that have "wronged" them.

Principle #2: Leverage the leaderboard

A virtual addiction to constant feedback is a quintessential Millennial trait, as they love to know where they stand on the figurative leaderboard of life. A generation that's accustomed to feedback from peer-ents and teachers, as well as public kudos in video games and Facebook posts, craves that same feedback as consumers. Four out of five want to know how the deals they get compare to what others are getting. 74% percent feel that they've "won" when they get more than the average consumer. Our inventive Millennials even envisaged cleaning products that let you know how well you swept the floor versus everyone else — a floor cleaner with built-in public praise!

Zappos gets it — the brand surprises its best customers "randomly" with free overnight shipping upgrades on purchases (we discuss the concept of "positive randomness" more below).

Principle #3: Smart-cuts, not short-cuts

While many incorrectly stereotype this generation as feeling entitled to rewards without effort, MTV's research shows that they want to feel like they've used their smarts and resources to "level up," hack the system, or find cheat codes, trap doors, and back stairs to the next level. Halo marketing is now famous for the labyrinth of codified messaging buried in layers throughout its launch campaign, leading the savviest player through virtual wormholes to exclusive content. Part of the "intrinsic" reward of gaming (the pleasure of playing versus the end reward) is a sense of efficacy and smartness. There's a clear case for layering this into the marketing interaction.

Principle #4: Deliver dopamine/adrenaline fixes

Half of respondents in our study — perhaps those more prone to Millennial micro-boredom — believe that "life can be less stimulating than gaming." Game designers explained to us how games are constructed to deliver excitement/reward cycles, but that Millennials are so used to (perhaps burned out on) these cycles that they need more intense and higher frequency experiences to satiate.

The complementary game dynamic we found fascinating was "positive randomness" — if a game is too predictable, it is boring, but if there are too many random surprises, it is too complex. The perfect combination is enough structure to understand the rules, with enough unpredictability to keep it interesting in perpetuity. A gum that changes flavor mid-chew, or a shampoo that surprises teen girls with different colors of hair streaks, is built for this dynamic. Forever 21 offers a retail

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experience that seems to be feeding directly into this speeding change-up cycle (if you have visited a Forever 21 lately, you can almost feel the cycle speed in the way the customer frantically shops the store). For a marketer, it's about finding a way for consumers to commit to your brand more fully while operating in product "versions" more swiftly.

Principle #5: Hand over that joystick.

Millennials are accustomed to having a voice, and having it heeded. And they're frustrated when big corporations don't give them a voice or a true "role" as a consumer in the game.

Clearly, the marketing world has recognized the importance of letting consumers be heard, evidenced by the massive investment in social media programs. But opportunities to truly give consumers the controls go well beyond listening. We've seen brands crowdsource TV ads, logo designs and product flavors, and of course there's the spectacular growth of Groupon. Our Millennials said, for example, they want "three lives," and "do-overs" on cell phone contracts — akin to pressing the "reset" button on an Xbox. It's about consumer empowerment on unprecedented levels.

To mashup a little Shakespeare, it would seem that for the next generation of consumers, "All the world's a game and all the kids and twenty-somethings power players." For the smart marketers who have seen the new rules, there's a world of opportunity to take it to a whole new level.

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NICK SHORE

Nick Shore is Senior Vice President of Strategic Consumer Insights and Research at MTV. He is responsible for all of MTV's research efforts across MTV, MTV2, mtv.com and mtvU platforms. Shore has spent his career helping organizations uncover & articulate their Brand DNA. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Fast Company*, *BusinessWeek*, *Brandweek*, *Adweek*, & *Mediaweek*; and he has guest-lectured on brand strategy at Columbia Business School, Wharton and NYU.

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 Rudy Charget 02/28/2012 04:44 AM

Honestly, this research takes things a little too far, doesn't it? There are some clever hypotheses in there - matching gaming and gen Y approach to life in a clever way, so...well constructed and well written! But this just feels to me like a very contrived piece of 'research', with the end game of a headline grabbing piece of PR that highlights how MTV appears to be ahead of the curve when it comes to Millennials. Some context comparing Gen X or Boomer coming of age perspectives (as earlier posts have outlined) would have helped your cause Nick.

1 person liked this.  

 Maxine 01/18/2012 02:16 PM

brilliant! so helpful in my consumer insight client work. succinct and right on point.

 euonymous 12/22/2011 02:23 PM

This is a great article. The one point I'll add to it is that it comes from a particular point in time and the experiences of the Millennials. The American Boomer generation, on the other hand, were not brought up from childhood to "negotiate" (as one example). Some cultures embody more haggling and negotiating opportunities than the US. My experience, growing up, was that stores sold something for a given price and that was that. Take it or leave it. My father happened to think everything was negotiable so I learned a viable alternative, but was slow to use it because I did not see that skill supported in the marketplace.

Many of the points you say the Millennials have acquired are things that other generations have acquired with time in the workplace and life experience. If humans can acquire useful learning experiences from the game environment, that is terrific. It's already known that surgeons who play video games before going into surgery tend to "do better." The video games seem to not only sharpen manual dexterity but something about how the mind and hands work together in a complex environment (and much of surgery these days looks like a video game!).

So, how do we go about setting up video games that will fascinate young people and teach them the values and skills needed to negotiate life in our time? There are many aspects of life which are not taught either thoroughly or at all in schools. How...

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 Alisson Avila 12/22/2011 01:39 PM

This article, like every text in the world, might have good intentions. But, I'm sorry... this one sounds really "shallow". Nothing personal! Maybe Mr. Shore kept the best part of the analysis hidden from the article, since research is a strategic investment where the key insights mean money and new business. So you don't use to share so openly. As a partner of a business innovation consultancy studio, with all our work based on ethnography and qualitative research, I dare to say that even the view of the article could be interpreted as "wrong", since there's no bottom-up or inside views. It sounds like someone looking to it from a distant place, not from the inside. To achieve innovation and business, I believe this kind of understanding isn't enough. Because it's made with our mindset, not the target mindset. Anyway, thank you so much for posting your article Mr. Shore.

2 people liked this.  

 Sal 12/22/2011 12:18 PM

I am a Millennial who read this article and laughed at how much it exposed about myself. Playing the game isn't about taking shortcuts or circumventing the system. It's about strategy-- having a game plan, knowing your game plan well enough, being smart, and working hard so that you win the game fair and square. Not because you're entitled, but because you've proven you're the best for the job.

3 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Lengarden 12/19/2011 03:22 PM

Nick, great article and excellent wordsmithing! I especially liked 'peer'ents. As the father of millenials I can definitely say that our terms were usually that rather than the way I (a late boomer) was raised--parent authority being du rigueur. Kudos for the post.

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 Rmderryberry 12/13/2011 05:46 PM

One observation: did anyone notice that the M-Gen doesn't want me (business owner) to change the rules (Principle #1-they "demand fairness, transparency and clear consistent rules") but they want to change the rules (Principle #5- "they're frustrated when big corporations don;t give them a voice" - translated their way; "they want ... "do-overs on cell phone caontracts - akin to pressing the 'reset' button...") under the guise of 'consumer empowerment'. Really? If this isn't an entitlement mentality what is? Life IS a game, a serious one. There are no 'do-overs', no 'resets'. Actions have consequences. My girls are M-Gen but they know you must perform, not just play. You must produce and if you don't, game over. My girls will run the businesses and these gamers will work for them making less than their parents did. My girls will determine the future because they actually produce something rather than play 'games' all of their lives.

 Clay Forsberg and 13 more liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Jarvis 12/22/2011 01:31 PM in reply to Rmderryberry

I was thinking from a similar perspective when I read this. Yes, we will prifot from recognizing consumer needs and trends in consumer behavior like this one...and this does create a valuable frame for understanding a new generation of consumers. But, maybe this information is telling us that a new channel of feedback is needed. One that defines some basic rules of the game of life that these people are missin out on because of their entitled mindset. I might be wrong, I'm not an expert in any of the fields relevant to this article, but it does appear that maybe catering to these consuermrs on their terms is not enough. If they are so rule oriented...let's figure out how to create some rules that support how things always have been into the mix.

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 Wise Adz 12/13/2011 06:40 PM in reply to Rmderryberry

"(Principle #1 -they "demand fairness, transparency and clear consistent rules") but they want to change the rules"

You're missing the point, and then you present a false dichotomy to shut down those meddling kids. The rule was never that businesses get to make the rules. According to every capitalist apologist, the rule is that business live and die by serving their customers. If the business gets to make the rules, then everything that I learned in my High School civics class is irrelevant.

However, many people have noticed that, when businesses get to a certain size, or can exercise a certain amount of market power over a niche, then it really doesn't work this way. So, how do you solve this problem? When a company actually *can* jerk you around in the marketplace (regardless of how you feel about it), what can you do about it? When you're in the habit of convincing a hundred of your closest friends to play f'ing Farmville (and to get their friends to play too), the obvious solution is to convince a hundred of your closest friends (and their friends) to help amplify the message so that the company starts listening.

Of course, the answer is for a business to actually listen to and serve their customers, while attempting to avoid any negative consequences for 3rd parties. Is that really too much to ask?!?

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Rmderryberry 12/14/2011 05:48 PM in reply to Wize Adz

You know, I owe you an apology. I read your response several more times and then re-read the article again. It is clear that I was taking a much broader view of this article than Nick intended. It led me to respond to you in a way that was not constructive.

As a side note my intention was not to shut down anyone, rather I wanted to draw some distinctions and point out some contradictions. Its too bad my emotions ruled the day. Sorry.

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Rmderryberry 12/14/2011 04:30 PM in reply to Wize Adz

Really? That's what you got from my comments? Let me ask a question. You obviously have a problem with abusive companies who take advantage of the consumer. So do I. You also seem to support the idea that all companies should operate fairly, transparently and consistently. So do I. So, here is my question, what standards apply to the consumer? Because you totally ignored the 'do-over' issue I can only assume you have a totally different set of standards for the general buying public. Assuming a business meets all of the best practices standards, when a consumer wants a 'reset' ("Oh, I made a decision but now I don't really want to follow through."), what principle guides your decision making at this point? Where is the 'fairness' for the business owner who invested time and money into his product?

Your last question is fair. No, it isn't too much to ask. The problem is we are not operating in acadamia, this is the real world and technology has given the consumer the power position and low and behold they are using their new found power as unethically and abusively as those evil abusive companies who 'jerk' you around. Funny how the knife cuts both ways. I can't wait to read about those horrible abusive consumers who are abusing the businesses of America.

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Josh Schechter 12/13/2011 04:29 PM

Nick - I am a millenial as you say, and I definitely view life as a game. . . a real game with real consequences and rewards. Every decision and choice affects the outcome and the remainder of the game. I don't think that viewing life this way is diminishing or dangerous, but rather productive.

I am curious though - what did previous generations view life as? A Hollywood movie? Some sort of fairytale where this always a happy ending?

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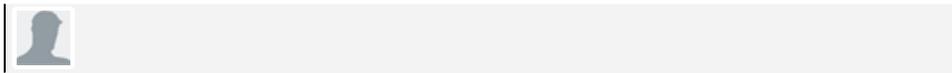


Banana 12/22/2011 01:49 PM in reply to Josh Schechter

I grew up as a child of the 60's, literally, I was born in 1960. Parent of M-gen'ers. My life philosophy was heavily influenced by the Beatles! Ah, music. "All You Need Is Love" made me relationship-based. I am the serious type who is concerned for the individuals involved in every transaction. My peers are playful on "yellow submarines" with "Uncle Albert". Like the M-gen, I make my own happy endings. Life as a game, life as a song, life as happy. Let's all "do good" and get along. Thanks Nick for the posting that helps me to understand my children and the young people in my work place.

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David Kaiser 12/13/2011 03:39 PM



I will be curious to see how well the millennials do in a quagmire sort of situation, where this is no way out, certainly no easy way out, and no quick feedback loop or leaderboard. There are plenty of examples of this, in government, diplomacy, research, business. How will they do? I don't know. Perhaps some will grow into it. Perhaps they will abandon and move on, perhaps for good, perhaps for ill. For the most part I admire the Millennial's unwillingness to tolerate BS, just because it's part of the game and others before them had to do it, but there are time when it is necessary to sit down and grind out the work, for your own good and that of others. Will they have the grit? We'll see.

David Kaiser, PhD
Executive Coach & CEO
www.DarkMatterConsulting.com

4 people liked this.



Old Millennial 12/14/2011 04:13 PM in reply to David Kaiser

"Abandon" and "grit" are strong words for what most people would consider a job change.

1 person liked this.



Wize Adz 12/13/2011 06:41 PM in reply to David Kaiser

That sounds almost exactly like the job market that they face...

UnclGhost and 3 more liked this



UnclGhost 12/13/2011 03:37 PM

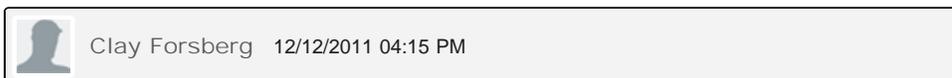
Using terms like "joystick" isn't exactly helping the ethos of this article, but there are some fair insights.

1 person liked this.



Shore India 12/13/2011 02:30 PM

I agree 100% with what you are saying Nick! Well done! Excellent Article!



Clay Forsberg 12/12/2011 04:15 PM

I pose a question to you Nick. Are the Millennials really any more game players than any other generations? Or is it that this generation is just playing different games? Aren't we in a sense a product of our environment? Gen Y has the opportunity to literally have any type of game at their disposal with the proliferation of electronics. But then again, so does Gen X. In the past we didn't have these options.

I suppose you can link characteristics of the Millennial Generation to the attributes of video games. But to what end. Are you saying by playing all these games this generation is more competitive. I would differ with you on that one if you took that position. Gen Y is much more cooperative and collaborative than their predecessors the Boomers and Gen X.

Should marketers link their efforts to gamification. I would differ with that one too. Gamification, in my humble opinion, is more or a novelty than anything, and one not isolated with the Millennials. A lot of companies are trying it ... but that just means a lot of companies are trying - nothing more. In addition, any seasoned game player will look at a gamified marketing effort as more trite than anything.

I will give you that gaming, specifically video gaming is huge, especially with the Millennials. But I don't know

how much we can extrapolate from that in terms of marketing approach let alone a description of entire generation.

 UnclGhost and 13 more liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Wise Adz 12/13/2011 06:27 PM in reply to Clay Forsberg

As someone slightly removed from the millennials (I'm in my 30s), but deeply involved in the digital/social culture, I think this article is great. But it's only accurate if you consider the game as a metaphor for what's changed while people who were happy with the old way weren't looking. This article is a great way provide some context about what's changed for those who've managed to avoid N-way media (as opposed to 1-way broadcast media) over the last decade or two. I don't think that the gaming itself is relevant, though, beyond the fact that it's a symptom of the modern digital era and it's easy to talk about.

What's relevant is that people today (who aren't stuck in their ways from a previous decade) are accustomed to being able to share notes with a billion of their closest friends. That means that any business model or customer service experience that depends on the fact that customers don't talk to each other is doomed to fail in the long run.

I too am frustrated when big companies don't listen to me. I always was frustrated by this but now, I can organize or find a "peer power" response to a company that happens to be jerking me around for no good reason. When you can share notes with a billion of your closest friends, the power dynamic changes a bit. The Occupy Wall Street protests are a symptom of this, because a lot of disaffected people realized that they were not alone...

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