

MountainKeeping Column for Dec. 27

Increase Your Vocabulary and Feed the World!

By J.A. Jones

No, seriously!

Go to www.FreeRice.com and play the simple vocabulary definition game. For example, what does “vitrine” signify?

- a. character
- b. glass showcase
- c. seclusion
- d. eyelid

As soon as you answer, rightly or wrongly, the game flips you to the next word with four more choices of definition. The chosen words vary greatly in difficulty. Many are quite easy. Some – like “vitrine” -- are fairly difficult. For every word you correctly define, 20 grains of rice are donated through the United Nations to help end world hunger.

Don’t scoff. The game went on-line on October 7, 2007, and by the end of that month players had caused the donation of 537,163,380 grains of rice. By November, with the game receiving international publicity in the Washington Post, on the CBS News, and on the BBC (among other places), the website was responsible for 4,768,969,790 grains of rice going to the hungry of the world. On a typical day in December, FreeRice.com was responsible for over 200 million grains of rice.

According to Wikipedia, it takes approximately 20,000 grains of rice to provide enough caloric intake to sustain an adult person for one day. One month after the launching of FreeRice.com, users had earned enough points for one billion grains of rice. The United Nation’s World Food Program stated that this amount could feed 50,000 people for one day. The total amount of grains of rice, as of December 6, 2007, could mathematically feed over 345,000 adults for one day. Enough rice to feed 15,000 people for a day has been the average daily donation.

How can a mere word game on a non-profit website manage to afford such massive donations of rice? It’s not the website itself, nor its inventor/manager John Breen, an Indiana computer programmer, who buys the rice. Its advertisers who pony up the money. Every new word page in the game includes a small on-screen display ad for a product or a service offered by a major corporation, including Apple Inc., Toshiba, Fujitsu, Reader’s Digest, Liz Claiborne, Radisson, Macy’s, American Express, Time Life, and Office Depot.

Here’s the best part (and the interactive feature which makes the game a real intellectual challenge): for every three correct responses in a row that you get, the game automatically increases the difficulty of the words so that you’re constantly pushed to the

outer limits of your knowledge. And your ability is simultaneously scored on a scale where 50 is perfect. According to FAQs on FreeRice.com, a score of 48 is quite rare.

(I have to brag a little here: on the first day I discovered the site, I racked up a score of 49 and caused several thousand grains of rice to be donated in the process. My tired old brain cells were not only stimulated. They were *elated*.)

Incidentally, if you answered “glass showcase” to the quiz above, you’re doing better than I did already, and you’re clearly ready to attempt this fascinating word challenge. Where else could you expect to entertain yourself while making a positive impact on hungry people you can’t possibly know?

You might also wish to visit John Breen’s other hunger site, www.poverty.com.