

# Slogans Won't Save Us

A response to "Branding"

by Damien O'Connell

I read with excitement 1stLt Davis Parker's rebuttal, "Branding" (*MCG* Jan20 online), to my article, "Can You Beat a Marine?" (*MCG* Jan20 online). I would like to reply with a rebuttal of my own and expand on the arguments presented in my previous article. My reply I should note is longer than Parker's article, not of any desire to argue, but because his views represent those of many more Marines, including many serving in Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC).<sup>1</sup> It is to them that I also direct this response.

Parker asserts MCRC should avoid focusing on using decision games as recruiting tools for prospects (he sees some application for poolees) and instead continue to recruit based on the tried and true aspects of the Marine Corps brand: the desire for challenge, to be part of the

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best and something bigger than yourself, the fighting spirit of never giving up, as well as honor, courage, commitment, and other intangibles that only the Marines can provide. He further asserts that significant focus on decision games will dilute "our core message and deviat[e] from what it is Marines do best ... and potentially set ourselves up for failure in years to come."<sup>2</sup> He also states that getting away from "classic Marine

Corps values" "will not likely ... recruit the types of young men and women the Marine Corps needs to be successful."<sup>3</sup> While 1stLt Parker makes an inspiring argument, I remain unconvinced. I will start with his claims about the Marine Corps' brand and then move to his views on gamers and, by extension, Generation Z (ages 7-22).

## The Marine Corps Brand: Setting the Record Straight

Parker suggests that the Marine brand has not changed much or evolved over time, that its values and image have remained more or less constant. This is not true. In 1883, after having had three other mottos, the Marine Corps formally adopted *Semper Fidelis*.<sup>4</sup> The Corps officially adopted its core values of "honor, courage, commitment" only in 1992 under Commandant Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.<sup>5</sup> Today, the Corps no longer asks for just "A Few Good Men." Instead, it seeks the best and brightest America has to offer.

Beyond the Marine brand's evolution of images, symbols, and slogans, some of the Corps' most iconic recruiting efforts contain strong elements of games. Take the two most popular recruiting commercials in recent memory: "Chess" (1991) and "Rite of Passage" (1998). Both ads rely heavily on metaphor and



**Slogans—honor, courage, and commitment—alone will not ensure that the best young people are being recruited into the Marine Corps.** (Photo by Cpl Brooke C. Wood.)

themes of perseverance and personal transformation. “Chess,” filmed during the forward-looking tenure of Commandant Gen Alfred M. Gray, depicts a dramatic battle—featuring wizards and lighting bolts—unfolding across a life-sized chessboard. Viewers are dazzled by a white knight on horseback, who fights similarly armored black opponents until he defeats them and mystically transforms into a Marine. Over the action, the narrator intriguingly declares: “To compete, you’ve got to be strong. To win, you’ve got to be smart. Maybe you can be one of us: the few, the proud, the Marines.”<sup>6</sup> The commercial left a strong mark on the public imagination. Adweek, the second largest advertising trade publication in the United States, cited “Chess” as one of “The 25 Most Epic Ads That Aren’t Apple’s ‘1984.’”<sup>7</sup> The goal of “Chess,” according to J. Walter Thompson, the ad agency that produced it, was to attract the “Marines’ primary target audience (primarily men age 17 to 19) ... [who saw] the need for a sharper intellect ... as a key to performance and success in the outside world.”<sup>8</sup> “Chess” built off of previous themes in Marine commercials, such as Marine lore, virtue, and honor “while driving home that physical strength isn’t enough.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1998’s “Rite of Passage,” filmed during the similarly progressive tenure of Commandant Gen Charles C. Krulak, we see a young man in an amphitheater brave a deadly obstacle course. When he reaches an otherworldly bridge, he must take up a sword and fight a giant lava monster. Having slayed the monster, the young man transforms into a Marine—all to the cheers of the arena. Like “Chess,” the commercial had staying power. *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright referenced it in his national bestselling book and HBO mini-series *Generation Kill*, and at least one former Marine has written online about the impact it had on him.<sup>10</sup> Even the popular satire new organization *Duffel Blog* ran a piece on it: “HOMELESS: Volcano Dragon From 1998 Marine Corps Ad Living In Van On Skid Row.”<sup>11</sup> If “Chess” and “Rite of Passage” are not the stuff of games, what is? Games and images

closely associated with games (like lava monsters and mystical lightning) are not new to the Marine Corps brand. In fact, they have been a part of it for over 30 years.<sup>12</sup>

Parker further argues that decision games would dilute the Marine Corps brand. He creates a false dichotomy here: Games *or* classic Marine brand. Instead, games could help significantly enhance, vitalize, and illustrate the brand. As Parker himself puts it, “[decision games] are at their best complements of the Marine Corps fundamental recruiting pitch: to work with, fight with, and be the best.”<sup>13</sup> Yes, but Parker does not give full weight to the value, power, and versatility of decision games as recruiting tools. For instance, recruiters could use verbally delivered decision-forcing cases featuring current-day Marines to help spark discussion, understanding, and application of the Corps’ martial virtues with prospects—not just poolees—all the while giving prospects a chance to test their decision making and critical thinking skills.

Parker also makes a curious comparison between two brand slogans: Nike’s famous “Just Do It” and the Air Force’s unremarkable “Aim High.” Ironically, he says nothing of Nike leadership’s initial reaction to “Just Do It.” “We don’t need that \*\*\*\*,” said Phil Knight, Nike’s Co-founder. “Just trust me on this one,” said the slogan’s author.<sup>14</sup> Lucky for Nike, they did and forever secured a place in the world’s collective consciousness. But what if they had not? Think of the opportunity cost if Nike had gone with something else. The same can be said for decision games in the Marine Corps’ recruiting process. What if Parker and other critics are wrong and games are the next frontier in recruiting? Plenty of data suggests that they are, and the other Services think so. Shouldn’t MCRC, even to hedge its bets, develop and enact *some* kind of national strategy for gaming?

Since the publication of “Can You Beat a Marine?” the other Services have made significant progress in their use of games for recruiting. The Navy has stood up its own esports team, Goats and Glory. It has also announced partnerships with prominent esports orga-

nizations and professional teams, like Twitch, the Electronic Sports League, and Evil Geniuses.<sup>15</sup> For the Army, West Point now has its own esports club, and the Army Esports Team (USAE) has created the first official military tabletop team for the game Warhammer 40K.<sup>16</sup> This is all nothing to say of the impressive results the USAE has generated recently: “more than 3,500 leads in fiscal 2019, and more than 8,500 in the first four months of the federal fiscal year that began on Oct. 1.”<sup>17</sup> While the Army does not track whether its contacts become contracts, its esports efforts are bringing in recruits.<sup>18</sup> The Marine Corps, as an organization, has done next to nothing to catch up. Some critics might say that the Services are turning to games, and esports in particular, because they are hurting for recruits. That may be true. But they may have also found one of the most significant sources for recruiting for Generation Z and beyond.

### Generation Z: Whom Are We Recruiting?

Generation Z distrusts traditional brands.<sup>19</sup> It wants “authenticity over propaganda.” According to a recent *War on the Rocks* article, Generation Z will see roughly 200,000 marketing messages by the time it turns 15. As a result, they

recognize when they are being sold to and don’t trust it ... [they prefer] ... real people, from comedians to video gamers who become YouTube stars, over traditional celebrities.<sup>20</sup>

Many Generation Z Marines share the same sentiment. To them, phrases like “honor, courage, commitment” sound like propaganda. They see nothing wrong with the time-honored concepts in and of themselves but turn off when they now hear the terms used “as pervasive messaging tactics rather than personally meaningful advice.”<sup>21</sup> To get around this, MCRC could use ethical decision games—exercises where there are no clear right answers—to let prospects and poolees experience what honor, courage, and commitment really look like in the real world with real people.

In Parker's eyes,

A recruiting pitch built upon eSports and board games will not likely effectively recruit the types of young men and women the Marine Corps needs to be successful.<sup>22</sup>

He also writes that he is "unconvinced ... seventeen-year-olds across the country will suddenly become interested in military service because a recruiter was playing *StarCraft II*."<sup>23</sup> In the face of facts, these statements are hard to take seriously. First, Parker oversimplifies my argument in that I call for decision games of all kinds to be incorporated into the recruiter's toolkit, not just digital and tabletop games. Second, he creates a strawman when he casts doubt on teenagers suddenly wanting to become Marines after seeing recruiters play video games. I agree with him—young people would not *suddenly* rush off to enlist. But over time, prospects—including those who are not drawn to traditional athletics but who do game—would positively associate the Marine Corps with games and might be interested enough to contact a recruiter. Third, and most important, Parker implies that those young men and women attracted to serve through games would not make good Marines, stating, although he would like recruits who "can think and make strategic decisions," he would rather have young people who "are motivated by a challenge, physically and mentally tough, and embrace the warrior ethos."<sup>24</sup>

Parker creates another false dichotomy here: the brain versus brawn argument, which the Marine Corps has been trying to shed since at least 1991 with its "Chess" commercial. Indeed, he says nothing about how games might be used to help recruit for cyber operations, drone operators, data, communications, and other technical MOSs. These MOSs have become especially important in light of Marine Corps Combat Development Command's March 2020 announcement that, over the next ten years, the Marine Corps will cut 12,000 Marines from its end strength, with most of the cuts coming from the ground community: tanks, artillery, infantry, and engineers.<sup>25</sup> In

their place, the Commandant wants to double the number of unmanned squadrons and armed unmanned air and ground systems.<sup>26</sup> He also wants Marines who can conduct electronic and cyber warfare. Few members of the American public are better suited for these roles than gamers, many of whom regularly exercise science, math, and logic skills while playing.<sup>27</sup>

Parker also quietly perpetuates stereotypes that we must discard, namely that gamers, especially digital gamers, are weak and fat. Although more research needs to be done in the United States, the available data suggests otherwise, especially for today's children and adolescents. In 2019's "Exploring the myth of the chubby gamer: A meta-analysis on sedentary video gaming and body mass," German scholars conducted a meta-analysis of 20 relevant studies involving over 38,000 participants and concluded that video gaming had little effect on weight gain.<sup>28</sup> They did find a slight positive correlation, primarily for adults, between playing video games and excess weight gain but none for children or adolescents.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the study asserts, "Only one percent of a person's overweight can thus be attributed to time spent playing...[video] games."<sup>30</sup> In research conducted in 2014, German researchers concluded that the data did not empirically support traditional stereotypes of gamers as overweight, unpopular, and socially inept.<sup>31</sup> They did, however, find a stronger relationship between the stereotypical traits of gamers and those people who were more involved in online gaming than others.<sup>32</sup>

Also contrary to Parker's claim, little evidence exists that gamers cannot embrace the warrior ethos. In fact, many gamers, especially those playing on successful teams and in leagues, *have to practice* many of its traits to be the best. They must adhere to certain rules, customs, and standards of conduct. They must put in consistent—and often—long hours of practice and drills. They must develop goals and strategies with their teammates, refine communication skills, exercise teamwork, carefully review team footage, overcome personality conflicts, invent

and perfect techniques, and learn to handle stress and failure.<sup>33</sup> And when they compete, whether online or at in-person tournaments, they do so for pride, prestige, and prizes. To win, they must possess grit and discipline. They must also have courage. Yes, these are not contact sports or triathlons, but if competition—even in esports—is not a kind of courage, a courage that can be molded and built upon, what is?

Finally, it is worth noting that MCRC's one-year delayed entry program (DEP) exists for a reason. How many prospects walk into a recruiting office for the first time able to score a 300 on a physical fitness test? There are scores of stories about poolees losing weight, in some cases over 200 pounds, to become Marines.<sup>34</sup> The DEP gives future recruits the opportunity to develop not just physically but also mentally and morally before they ship off to recruit training.<sup>35</sup> I would further offer that, in general, it is far easier to make someone fit than it is to train their mind to think critically, make sound decisions, or act in the face of uncertainty. Games, especially when played with others, can help develop all of these skills and more.<sup>36</sup> The Marine Corps should actively recruit young people who have benefited cognitively from games, even if they lack the level of fitness the Marine Corps demands. After time in the DEP, they could, like so many others before them, shape up to serve as good Marines.

### Conclusion

I thank 1stLt Parker for his rebuttal and welcome others to join the conversation. The topic of decision games in Marine Corps recruiting is too important to be left just to us. Whether the Marine Corps acknowledges it or not, games, and especially online games, are becoming a new source of recruiting for tomorrow's warfighters. If the Marine Corps wishes to survive this century, it cannot simply rest on the laurels of clever marketing campaigns from the last. Brands can fail—even the Marine Corps'. Indeed, slogans alone will not save the Marine Corps, but perhaps with the help of games, it can remain the Nation's premier force in readiness.



Notes

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2. Parker Davis, "Branding," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: January 2020), available at <https://mca-marines.org>.

3. Ibid.

4. Reference Branch, USMC History Division, Marine Corps University, "The Marine Corps Motto," available at <https://www.usmcu.edu>.

5. Reference Branch, USMC History Division, Marine Corps University, "QPME: History and Traditions of the United States Marine Corps: Ethics, Values, and Leadership Development," available at <https://grc-usmcu.libguides.com>.

6. Marine1763, "Chess," YouTube video, 0:31, (April 2008), available at <https://www.youtube.com>.

7. Tim Nudd, "AdFreak: The 25 Most Epic Ads That Aren't Apple's '1984,'" *Adweek*, (January 2009), available at <https://www.adweek.com>.

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9. Ibid.

10. Quora, Contributor, "Why Did the Marines Use a Dragon in Their 90s Ads?" *Huffington Post*, (October 2017), available at <https://www.huffpost.com>; Jack Mandaville, "These Fantasy-Themed 90s Marine Corps Recruitment Ads Are Both Totally Insane And Strangely Arousing," *Task and Purpose*, (April 2018), available at <https://taskandpurpose.com>; and *Generation Kill*, directed by Susanna White and Simon Cellan Jones, (Company Pictures and Blown Deadline, 2008).

11. Kate C, "HOMELESS: Volcano Dragon From 1998 Marine Corps Ad Living In Van On Skid Row," *Duffleblog*, (July 2015), available at <https://www.duffleblog.com>.

12. In a 1987 recruiting commercial, titled "Knight," a knight rides into a medieval hall riding an armored-plated unicorn and is transformed by mystical lightning into a Marine. Marines, "Knight," YouTube video, (April 2012), available at <https://www.youtube.com>. Another commercial, 1998's "Labyrinth," features game

and fantasy elements. Kent Gilbert, "Television - Marines 'Labyrinth'" YouTube video, (August 2008), available at <https://www.youtube.com>.

13. "Branding."

14. Marcus Fairs, "Nike's 'Just Do It' Slogan Is Based on a Murderer's Last Words, Say Dan Wieden," *Dezeen*, (March 2015), available at <https://www.dezeen.com>.

15. Courtney Mabeus, "Ready Player One: Navy Creates Billets for Games," *Navy Times*, (March 2020), available at <https://www.navytimes.com>.

16. Michelle Schneider, "West Point Cadets Develop First ESports Club," U.S. Army, (January 2020), available at <https://www.army.mil>; and Rebecca Nappi, "Soldier Helps Pave the Way in Army's First Tabletop Wargame Team," U.S. Army, (January 2020), available at <https://www.army.mil>.

17. "Ready Player One: Navy Creates Billets for Games."

18. Ibid.

19. KC Reid, "How the Network Generation Is Changing the Millennial Military," *War on the Rocks*, (March 2018), available at <https://warontherocks.com>. See also Deloitte, "The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019," Deloitte, (May 2019), available at <https://www2.deloitte.com>.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. "Branding."

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Shawn Snow, "The Corps is Axing All of its Tank Battalions and Cutting Grunt Units," *Marine Corps Times*, (March 2020), available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.

26. Ibid.

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32. Ibid.

33. See Staff, "Why Should Educators Embrace Esports," North America Scholastic Esports Federation, *NASEF*, (October 2018), available at <https://www.esportsfed.org>; Staff, "Benefits of Esports & Video Games," British Esports Association, (2017), <https://www.britisheports.org>; and Staff, "Benefits of an Esports Team: K12 & Higher Ed," CDW Corporation, (January 2020), available at <https://www.cdw.com>.

34. For one example, see Paige Verry, "Motorvating Marine Lost More than 200 Pounds to Join the Corps," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, (January 2019), available at <https://www.dvidshub.net>.

35. U.S. Marines, "Delayed Entry Program," available at <https://www.marines.com>.

36. See for instance, Peter P. Perla and ED McGrady, "Why Wargaming Works," *Naval War College Review*, (Newport, RI: Naval War College, Summer 2011), available at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu>; and Ralph Soule, "The Learning Experience of Tough Cases: A Descriptive Case Study," (doctoral dissertation, George Washington University, 2016).

