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).¹ 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 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.”² 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.”³ 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.⁴ The Corps officially adopted its core values of “honor, courage, commitment” only in 1992 under Commandant Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.⁵ 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 Won’t Save Us

A response to “Branding” by Damien O’Connell

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 lifesized 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.”6 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.”7 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.”8 “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.”9

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.10 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.”11 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.12

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, “[d]ecision games are at their best complements of the Marine Corps fundamental recruiting pitch: to work with, fight with, and be the best.”13 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.14 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 their 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 organizations and professional teams, like Twitch, the Electronic Sports League, and Evil Geniuses.15 For the Army, West Point now has its own esports club, and the Army Esports Team (USAE) has created the first official military table-top team for the game Warhammer 40K.16 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.”17 While the Army does not track whether its contacts become contracts, its esports efforts are bringing in recruits.18 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 distracts traditional brands.19 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.20 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.21 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 effec-
tively recruit the types of young men
and women the Marine Corps needs
to be successful.22

He also writes that he is “unconvinced
... seventeen-year-olds across the coun-
try will suddenly become interested in
military service because a recruiter was
playing StarCraft II.”23 In the face of
facts, these statements are hard to take
seriously. First, Parker oversimplifies
my argument in that I call for deci-
sion games of all kinds to be incor-
porated 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 see-
ing 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 associ-
ate 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 de-
cisions,” he would rather have young
people who “are motivated by a chal-
lenge, physically and mentally tough,
and embrace the warrior ethos.”24

Parker creates another false dichot-
omy here: the brain versus brawn ar-
gument, 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 oper-
ations, drone operators, data, commu-
nications, 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.25 In
their place, the Commandant wants
to double the number of unmanned
squadrons and armed unmanned air
and ground systems.26 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.27

Parker also quietly perpetuates ste-
reotypes that we must discard, namely
that gamers, especially digital gamers,
are weak and fat. Although more re-
search needs to be done in the United
States, the available data suggests oth-
erwise, 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 conduct-
ded a meta-analysis of 20 relevant studies
involving over 38,000 participants and
concluded that video gaming had little
effect on weight gain.28 They did find
a slight positive correlation, primarily
for adults, between playing video games
and excess weight gain but none for chil-
dren or adolescents.29 Indeed, the study
asserts, “Only one percent of a person’s
overweight can thus be attributed to
time spent playing...[video] games.”30

In research conducted in 2014, Ger-
man researchers concluded that the data
did not empirically support traditional
types of gamers as overweight,
unpopular, and socially inept.31 They
did, however, find a stronger relation-
ship between the stereotypical traits
of gamers and those people who were
more involved in online gaming than
others.32

Also contrary to Parker’s claim,
little evidence exists that gamers can-
not 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 con-
duct. 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 team-
work, carefully review team footage,
overcome personality conflicts, invent
and perfect techniques, and learn to
handle stress and failure.33 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 pro-
gram (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.34 The DEP gives
future recruits the opportunity to de-
velop not just physically but also men-
tally and morally before they ship off
to recruit training.35 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.36 The Ma-
rine 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 conver-
sation. The topic of decision games in
Marine Corps recruiting is too impor-
tant 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.


17. “Ready Player One: Navy Creates Billets for Games.”

18. Ibid.


20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. “Branding.”

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.


32. Ibid.


