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## Conference Notebook

Updates on key events in the nonprofit world

### November 10, 2008

#### Independent Sector

### Using Games to Solve Gritty Social Problems

Ruby Wood has just died, leaving a very special bequest: \$6-

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million for the six people who helped take care of her in her old age to give away to other people who care for others as well as other people in need of care.

That's the basic story at the center of a new online game to be unveiled by United Cerebral Palsy later this month, the organization's chief executive, Stephen Bennett, told participants at the Independent Sector meeting here today.

The game, tentatively called "Ruby's Bequest," is the latest example of how nonprofit groups are using online games and simulations to get people involved in, and thinking about, social issues.

"We thought, what if we could get people from multiple points of view to investigate the future of health care and of care giving, and look at the problems together, they could come up with some solutions," Mr. Bennett said.

Players will register for the game, and then be able to carry it to their own blogs, video-sharing sites, or other social networks and game sites. Already a few players who were invited to sign up early have posted videos of themselves talking about their ideas.

In one video on YouTube, a woman tells viewers that it's 2014 and she is pressed with the hardships of caring for her two young children and her elderly father, who is losing some government aid for his medications. She suggests that people link to her Web page and respond to her idea, inspired by the success of car-share programs, to create a cooperative care-giving program.

Mr. Bennett said the key to the success of the game is to be able to bring the ideas it generates into the real world, particularly at a time that his organization and others are preoccupied with dealing with the effects of the economic downturn.

"We have to bring it down to earth," Mr. Bennett said, "because there's plenty of people out there, including our offices around the country that are struggling to make payroll, and they are going to ask, Why are you playing virtual games?"

Chinwe Onyekere, a program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said a research project sponsored by her organization could soon provide answers to those concerns.

Robert Wood Johnson is spending \$8.25-million this year and

next to support research assessing whether interactive games make a difference in changing behavior, such as whether they can promote exercise.

— Debra E. Blum

Monday November 10, 2008 | [Permalink](#)

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