

# HOW GIVING GAMES CAN SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT SMARTER CHARITY CHOICES

By Jacob Trefethen (/person/jacob-trefethen) 📅 2 Jun 2013 ↻ 10 Nov 2015

---

*Put your votes in this basket...*

Jacob Trefethen, of GWWC: Cambridge, details his experience with two types of Giving Games and their use in spreading the word about making smarter charity choices. His experience suggests that the games are a great way to get people thinking about effectiveness, for three reasons: (i) it's not their money they're forking out, (ii) direct comparisons are made between just two charities, encouraging rigorous debate, and (iii) it's actually pretty fun.

Giving What We Can has only been around for a few years, and the idea of choosing a charity based on its cost-effectiveness is still one many people have never consciously considered. Part of having a big impact is not only donating to the most effective charities yourself, but getting others to make their giving decisions more rationally. If you can get lots of people to change the way they think about charity, your impact could be **really big** (<http://80000hours.org/blog/135-the-power-of-effective-activism>).

But how can we do this? One inventive way to get people to think more strategically about charity decisions is to make a game out of giving. In the Giving Games run by **A Path That's Clear** (<http://www.apaththatsclear.com/>), a pot of money is provided by an anonymous donor, and participants are presented with a choice of two or three charities where the money can go. After hearing some information about each charity and discussing the options, they then cast their vote. The charity with the most votes wins the pot.

Giving Games are a great way to get people thinking, as they are completely frictionless. Since (i) it is not their own money they are having to fork out; and (ii) there are only a couple charities they are allowed to choose from, participants have nothing stopping them from thinking very clearly and doing a direct comparison between the charities. Taking part in the game is also pretty fun.

Though A Path That's Clear **runs these games online** (<http://www.apaththatsclear.com/online-games.html>), they can also take physical form. I am involved in the **GWWC: Cambridge chapter** (<http://www.givingwhatwecan.org/cambridge/>), and we have run two Giving Games in the last few months. Here's what happened.

## Giving Game 1: Schistosomiasis Control Initiative vs. Wikimedia Foundation

We staged this game at a stall in the foyer outside a conference on Higher Education. Every hour or so there would be a 15-minute break between sessions of the conference, where attendees would mill around with not much to do but chat. Due to the nature of the conference we picked two charities whose work has a large impact on education: Wikimedia is the foundation that funds Wikipedia, whose aim is to provide free knowledge to anyone with an internet connection, while Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (one of GWWC's **top recommended charities** (**/top-charities**)) cures children of parasitic worms, thereby increasing school attendance in the areas it operates.

The game worked as follows. We gave a penny to each person who approached the stall. This penny represented their vote: for each person who voted, the anonymous donor would donate £2, and if more than 50 people voted there would be a bonus of £250. Participants cast their vote by dropping their penny into one of two jars sitting in front of the charity of their choice. Whichever charity had the most pennies in its jar by the end would get the whole haul.

Since the choice involved one very well known charity, Wikimedia, this allowed us to attract people's attention and then tell them about the lesser known one, SCI. It also meant that they had some initial interest in the decision - for example, a few people mentioned how they had given to Wikimedia as a result of its banner advertisements in the past, and were now consciously considering the effectiveness of their contribution for the first time.

The idea was not to get people to arrive at the 'right answer'. Rather, it was to get them to think carefully about what the relevant considerations were that would lead to making a decision. It was very interesting to hear what people thought these were.

Here is a sample of some reasons that participants wrote down for voting the way they did:

Votes for Wikimedia:

'No one else does what Wikimedia do - while SCI are very important, organisations such as WHO already do good work in this field.'

'Because Giving What We Can and indeed all charities operate by informing people about global issues. Information makes people likelier to give to charity in the first place - wider impact!'

Votes for SCI:

'Wikipedia is brilliant but I think the priority has to be offering children basic good health & education (without which they couldn't access the information on wiki!).'

'Wikimedia would potentially be able to attract funding more easily.'

'[SCI offers] a more direct improvement in quality of life.'

One conversation with a passing student started very normally: he asked what was happening at the stall, we explained the premise and a bit about each charity, then asked him how he thought he'd go about making the decision. He then proceeded to fret, and stayed at the stall for 10 minutes, talking through the different considerations in favour of each charity with us and often staring at the ceiling in thought. He finally cast his vote for SCI, and wrote a paragraph summarising his reasons, ending with: 'I'm really unsure about this decision'.

We were impressed by just how much people were willing and keen to engage with the activity, and think seriously about where to cast their vote. This was the point of the exercise; not just to get as many pennies as possible into a jar.

## The Results:

- 52 people cast votes. There were around 110 people at the conference, so over the course of the afternoon around half of all attendees took part!
- 38 voted for SCI; 14 for Wikimedia.
- £354 was donated to SCI! ( $£2 * 52 + £250$ )

## Giving Game 2: Against Malaria Foundation vs GiveDirectly

In our second Giving Game, we let **GiveWell's top two recommended charities** (<http://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities>) duke it out against each other. The format of the event was very different. This game took place in the evening, with more time for presentations of each charity, arguments on either side, and discussion.

Here's a brief run-down of the evening:

1. Introduction to idea behind Giving Games and to the structure of the evening by our moderator, then President of GWWC: Cambridge.
2. Intuition game, based on the **charity assessment module from The High Impact Network** (<http://www.thehighimpactnetwork.org/modules/charity-assessment>). One of the team presented participants with three neutral descriptions of social interventions that have been implemented in the past, and asked them to consider whether they thought the intervention had a positive effect, negative effect, or no effect. A show of hands was taken for each option, and then the actual effect of the intervention revealed. This encouraged participants to reflect on the reliability of their intuitions in assessing charities, and broke the ice before our main charities were presented.
3. Presentation of charities, AMF and GiveDirectly. Four of our committee members split into two teams and acted as 'charity representatives', presenting information about 'their' charity and making the case for why it should get the vote.
4. Wine, nibbles, and informal discussion of what had been heard so far.
5. Questions and discussion. Our four 'charity representatives' took questions from the audience, transitioning into a more fluid discussion between all participants.
6. Vote! Participants filled out ballot slips asking them for both their choice of charity and a reason.
7. Very brief GWWC presentation and presentation of results.
8. Informal discussion continued, and wine was finished off.

Again, we were pleasantly surprised with just how engaged participants were in the discussion of the different charities. An interesting debate arose on both the empirical level and theoretical level, about whether there were benefits in the 'ground-up', empowering approach of GiveDirectly that outweighed the proven track-record of AMF. In the end, though, GiveDirectly could not hold its own against the heavyweight charity champion of the world...

## Results

- 21 participants stayed for the whole evening

- 18 voted for AMF; 3 for GiveDirectly
- £10 was provided per vote, meaning £210 was donated to AMF!

## What do Giving Games teach us?

The two Giving Games we have hosted in Cambridge have had a few major benefits. Based on the participants' decisions, £354 was donated to SCI and £210 to AMF.


This represents £564 going to the most effective charities out there. But it also represents a lot of people who may think about charitable decisions in a different way going forward, who have now thought in terms of cost-effectiveness. It is hard to quantify how much this will cash out in the future, in terms of money that will later be donated to the most effective charities. But when you factor in how many people took the events very seriously, and how many are now more interested in GWWC: Cambridge, I wouldn't be surprised if it's quite a bit more than £564.

Giving Games are a great way to introduce people to thinking about charity and effectiveness for the first time. And they can be really fun both to participate in, and to run. A lot of the feedback we received from people who took part in the second game said that they enjoyed how much more interactive the evening had been than a normal talk - so Giving Games can be a great way to build a local GWWC chapter too.

Anyone interested in holding a Giving Game should get in touch with Rob Gledhill, at [chapters@givingwhatwecan.org](mailto:chapters@givingwhatwecan.org), and check out **[apaththatsclear.com](http://www.apaththatsclear.com/)** (**<http://www.apaththatsclear.com/>**) to learn more.


Thanks to Clara Marquardt for writing parts of the 'Giving Game 2' section of this post.

Image credit: **BY-NC-ND mell242** (**<http://www.flickr.com/photos/16981151@N00/2068891793/in/photolist-49PBsa-4cqxo5-4D3Toa-4ZWpgc-52aBga-55KHtD-56Ymp6-57d583-58CUyj-5cTCdL-5njQiM-5q5CQ6-5BZdZK-5X4Jt1-6aTWo3-6fEXKR-6gBs2K-6sgFfM-6skWqd-6sRPEW-6G6VYB-6KLLYT-6WFjcv-6WJVD5-7gR4RR-bYzcNL-9GxJYE-9Jb5n7-8vLRmV-8vLMEB-8vLLYe-8vLQee-b5Aaic-9GAh4D-cVCWZN-cVCYQ9-cVD9j5-cVD5xU-cVCZX1-cVDb1h-cVD3VL-cVD4DY-cVD7Ps-cVD8PE-cVCXMy-cVD2Xj-cVDaiL-d2vZfU-b6cMTc-7PCuyW-9cToD4>**)

Share this post 

— Jacob Trefethen





Jacob is studying Philosophy at Cambridge, and is former president of the 80,000 hours Cambridge Chapter.




Join the discussion...

LOG IN WITH


OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS



- 


Anonymous • 4 years ago

Nit-picking here, but "One of the team presented participants with three neutral descriptions..." (Giving Game 2, 2.)  
I believe "team" should be plural. :)

^ | v • Reply • Share
- 

Giving What We Can • 4 years ago

Amended. Hat-tip to you, 5566hh!

^ | v • Reply • Share
- 

Anonymous • 4 years ago

"Wikimedia is the foundation that funds Wikipedia, whose aim to provide free knowledge to anyone with an internet connection" (Giving Game 1 section, first paragraph)  
I think you need to add an 'is' after 'aim' in this sentence.

^ | v • Reply • Share

ALSO ON GIVING WHAT WE CAN

**What's so special about GiveDirectly's basic income pilot?**

2 comments • a year ago

Brandy Moore — Many people given a basic income do start businesses.  
The idea is that a basic income will eventually be given to every ...

**How To Overcome the Disappointment of Not Receiving This Year's Nobel Prize for Medicine**

1 comment • 2 years ago

Brad — Brilliant!

**It's Good to Talk - the Giving What We Can Blog**

1 comment • a year ago

Adam Millest — Great article!

**My Journey to Taking the Giving What We Can Pledge**

2 comments • 2 years ago

David Holmes — Thank you for this inspiring article. I'm currently  
hesitating about taking the GWWC pledge, and this has definitely helped  
...