

The Labor of Fun

How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play

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Video games are often framed as sites of play and entertainment. Their transformation into work platforms and the staggering amount of work that is being done in these games often go unnoticed. Users spend on average 20 hours a week in online games, and many of them describe their game play as obligation, tedium, and more like a second job than entertainment. Using well-known behavior conditioning principles, video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better game workers. And the work that is being performed in video games is increasingly similar to the work performed in business corporations. The microcosm of these online games may reveal larger social trends in the blurring boundaries between work and play.

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There's a cultural premise that work and play are an inherent dichotomy. When we talk about video games, it's easy to frame them as sites of play and entertainment. The staggering amount of work that's being done in these games is often gone unnoticed, and it's this work that I would like to foreground. Video games play important roles in the increasingly blurred intersections of our social, economic, and political spheres, and articulating those blurred boundaries in the microcosm of video games reveals larger trends in our digitally mediated world. In this case, articulating the blurring of work and play in video games reveals how they may soon become indistinguishable from each other.

Every day, millions of players log onto a genre of video games known as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). These games allow players to interact with each other and explore a world in real-time 3-D graphics. Every player is represented by a customizable character, and communication between players typically occurs over typed chat. Game play in MMORPGs is both complex and somewhat open ended. It is unfortunate that the metaphors of swords and dragon slaying obscure and distract us from the true nature of the work that is being done. To that end, an example that employs corporate metaphors will be used that sidesteps these distractions while at the same time reveals the analogous work of dragon slaying.

Pharmaceutical manufacturing is one of many possible career choices in the game *Star Wars Galaxies*. Some other career choices include bioengineering, architecture, fashion design, and cooking. Third-party career planning tools are available for the undecided.¹ Pharmaceutical manufacturers create their products by combining raw resources. These raw resources, such as chemicals or minerals, must be located using geological surveying tools and harvested using installations bought from other players skilled in industrial architecture. Resource gathering is a time-consuming process that involves traveling and constant maintenance. Typically, pharmaceutical manufacturers rely on dedicated resource brokers instead. The attributes of the final product (i.e., duration vs. potency) depend on the attributes of the resources used; however, resources vary in quality, accessibility, and availability. Thus, manufacturers must decide which products make the most advantage of the resources available to them and must also take into account the demands of the market.

Raw resources are converted into subcomponents and final products using factories² (also provided by player architects). Mass production introduces a constant supply-chain management problem, and manufacturers must ensure a steady supply of needed resources in the correct proportions. With final products in hand, manufacturers now face the most difficult problem—each other. In *Star Wars Galaxies*, everything that is bought or sold has to be bought or sold by another player. The game economy is entirely player driven. Manufacturers must decide how broad or narrow their product line should be, how to price and brand their products, where and how much to spend on advertising, whether to start a price war with competitors or form a cartel with them. Manufacturing pharmaceuticals is not an easy task. It takes about 3 to 6 weeks of normal game play to acquire the abilities and schematics to be competitive in the market, and the business operation thereafter requires daily time commitment.

In other words, players in *Star Wars Galaxies* operate a pharmaceutical manufacturing business for fun. The work in dragon slaying is equally complex and is in fact more stressful due to time constraints, frequent crises, and management issues related to coordinating 20 to 30 players over typed chat in real time (Yee, 2005). In both cases, players invest a great deal of time in their virtual careers. The average MMORPG player spends 22 hours a week playing the game (Yee, in press). And these are not only teenagers playing. The average MMORPG gamer is in fact 26 years old. About half of these players have a full-time job. Every day, many of them go to work and perform an assortment of clerical tasks, logistical planning and management in their offices, then they come home and do those very same things in MMORPGs. Many players in fact characterize their game play as a second job: “It became a chore to play. I became defacto leader of a guild and it was too much. I wanted to get away from real life and politics and social etiquette followed me in!” (20-year-old male player) and “I stopped playing because I just didn’t want to commit to the crazy raid times (6+ hours in the evening?)” (27-year-old female player).

As these players point out, the game can become an obligation. One player put it more explicitly: “Was more like work then fun. One day got burnt out trying to get exp for level 55 and quit” (22-year-old male player).

The central irony of MMORPGs is that they are advertised as worlds to escape to after coming home from work, but they too make us work and burn us out. For some players, their game play might be more stressful and demanding than their actual jobs. And the most tragic irony is that MMORPG players pay game companies on a monthly basis (between US\$10 and US\$15) to work and get burned out.

Of course, the success of MMORPGs requires a minimization of burnouts. For these games to succeed, the player has to perform the work without becoming aware of its true nature. But this in fact is the purpose of all video games—to train a player to work harder while still enjoying it. And most games, including MMORPGs, employ elaborate designs that derive from principles in behavioral conditioning (Skinner, 1938). The timing and layering of reward mechanisms in video games train players to derive pleasure from the work that is being done. Video games condition us to work harder, faster, and more efficiently. In the same way that TiVO trains us to become better TV watchers (Andrejevic, 2002), video games train us to become more industrious game workers. Some players do eventually grasp the underlying nature of this digital treadmill: “The problem is that it goes from enjoyable to just work so gradually that unless you step back for a while and evaluate you do not even realize you’re working” (21-year-old male player).

But the success of MMORPGs and video games in general demonstrates how seductive and concealed the treadmill can be. And although I have singled out behavioral conditioning, it is clear that other game mechanics (i.e., social prestige, competition, etc.) also play an important role in this process. The point remains however that video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers. And the work being performed in video games is increasingly similar to actual work in business corporations.

Some may argue that game play can never constitute actual work because no real economic value is being generated, but as others have shown, virtual goods have real value (Castronova, 2002; Dibbell, 2003). In fact, there are companies such as IGE whose business model revolves around accumulating and selling virtual currency.³ Because of the amount of work involved to advance a character’s abilities, there are also companies, like TopGameSeller,⁴ that offer character leveling services—“Our primary work center is located in Shanghai, China. It’s a 45,000 sq. ft. building that houses over 400 of our employees. . . . We assign 2 or 3 expert players to your character to do the leveling” (<http://www.topgameseller.com/faq.htm>). For these employees of IGE and TopGameSeller, playing and working have become the same thing.

It is ironic that computers were made to work for us, but video games have come to demand that we work for them. What’s clear is that video games are blurring the boundaries between work and play very rapidly. Beck and Wade (2004) suggested that the gamer generation is acquiring skills and developing traits that will require businesses to adapt to them, but I believe a much larger intersection is occurring. Video games are changing the nature of both work and play. It is not so much that businesses will need to adapt to gamers as much as that work and play are starting to become indistinguishable from each other. And the following quote from a 30-year-old regis-

tered nurse who plays EverQuest with her husband leaves us with a haunting premonition of the consequences of this blurring:

We spend hours—HOURS—every SINGLE day playing this damn game. My fingers wake me, aching, in the middle of the night. I have headaches from the countless hours I spend staring at the screen. I hate this game, but I can't stop playing. Quitting smoking was NEVER this hard.

Ultimately, the blurring of work and play begs the question—what does *fun* really mean?

Notes

1. For example, see <http://swgcb.yogn.net/swg-cb.php>.
2. Factories in Star Wars Galaxies do not produce goods instantaneously. Instead, factory runs take anywhere from 1 to 4 hours.
3. See <http://www.ige.com>.
4. See <http://www.topgameseller.com>.

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