

PREFACE

Productive Play

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The question of the convergence of work and play has become increasingly relevant to both the research community and industry. In the inaugural issue of *Games and Culture* in 2006, two articles discussed how, increasingly, the boundaries between what we traditionally think of as work and play are blurring. The first, by Nick Yee, explored the notion of gameplay as labor; the second, by Celia Pearce, presented the notion of “productive play”, i.e., forms of play that lead to creative production. Journalist Steven Poole has argued that the “grind” of many games, especially multiplayer games, provides perfect training for the repetitive labor of the industrial working class (2007). For games scholars, these insights are particularly significant because they cause us to rethink the very definition of play, which has traditionally been defined in direct opposition to work, as activity that is inherently “useless” (Huizinga, Caillois). Increasingly scholars are finding that this line is not quite so distinctly drawn.

As these new revelations have emerged among those who study mediated play, those concerned with mediated work have found themselves asking similar questions. On the academic side, scholars traditionally concerned with computer-mediated work, such as Nardi, have begun to explore the way game-software supports collaboration, and are increasingly trying to understand how spaces designed for play, such as Second Life, are being used to support activities clearly defined as “work”. Historically, industry experimented with the uses of play at work in terms of training and team-building, but increasingly, we are seeing virtual-play environments adapted as spaces for work-related collaboration. Ellis’ work in IBM’s Social Computing Lab develops team-building games in Second Life, and IBM is working with other “serious” business

entities such as Intel and Microsoft to develop an interoperable protocol for virtual worlds that, presumably, will be used for both work and play. No doubt anyone reading this issue is aware that professional conferences are regularly held in virtual worlds such as Second Life, and perhaps has even attended one.

Our goal in convening the workshop that lead to this special issue was to bring together a diverse range of scholars and practitioners to delve deeper into these phenomena and unpack their implications in terms of redefining both work and play. The fact that the National Science Foundation agreed to support a convening on this topic is a further indication of its significance. After two days of dynamic conversation, what emerged, as these papers demonstrate, was a consensus that it was no longer productive to define work and play as being, by definition, in opposition to one another. Within a nation where leisure and labor are traditionally viewed as diametrically opposed, this suggests a perhaps revolutionary paradigm-shift that causes us to dramatically redefine our notions of both.

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