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PROTOTYPE; Why Work Is Looking More Like a Video Game  
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WORK is not play. But maybe it should be.

In fact, Paul Johnston has remade his company on the idea that business software will work better if it feels like a game. Mr. Johnston is not some awkward adolescent, but the polished president and chief executive of Entellium, which makes software for customer relationship management. Businesses spend billions of dollars on such software to try to track their sales staff, their marketers, their customer service -- anything that connects them with customers. Unfortunately, most of the software is the business equivalent of calorie counting. No one does it gladly. Worse, the software has a Big Brother aspect to it.

'C.R.M. software is designed to let your manager peek at you,' Mr. Johnston says. He notes that even at Entellium, based in Seattle, he has had trouble getting his sales staff to update their data consistently. Reasoning that sales people are wildly competitive, he thought that they would respond to a program that showed where they stood against their goals -- or their peers'. Hence, Rave, which Entellium introduced in April.

Rave adapts a variety of gaming techniques. For instance, you can build a dossier of your clients and sales prospects that includes photographs and lists of their likes, dislikes and buying interests, much like the character descriptions in many video games. Prospects are given ratings, not by how new they are -- common in C.R.M. programs -- but by how likely they are to buy something. All prospects are also tracked on a timeline, another gamelike feature.

Rave isn't exactly the business version of Madden N.F.L., at least not yet. But Craig K. Hall, president of Logos Marketing Inc., a graphics company in Albany, said it reminded him of video games he has played, like the Legend of Zelda. Mr. Hall, 31, says he likes the way Rave pops up information, including news that will matter to clients. He also said its use of sales stages and checklists, also borrowed from the way games progress through levels, had helped him rethink the way his company operates. "They've done a good job of it," he said.

Most people under 35 grew up playing video games. Many still do -- the average age of gamers is over 30 -- and video games have become a mainstream form of entertainment. While "twitch" games like Doom or Quake, in which a player has to react quickly, remain popular, there are now huge games run in online virtual worlds. World of Warcraft, for instance, has millions of players around the world who must organize themselves into teams to accomplish complex tasks. In some online games like EVE, these teams are actually called companies, and the politics involved would impress the most cutthroat executive.

The emergence of these complex role-playing games inspired the formation of **Seriosity**, which sells e-mail software. A Stanford communications professor, Byron Reeves, was a co-founder of the company in 2004, and, two years later, received \$6 million from Alloy Ventures. Mr. Reeves and an Alloy partner, J. Leighton Read, met poolside, and while their daughters practiced their swimming, they discussed whether work would not be better if it were more like a video game.

Early this year, **Seriosity** released a beta version of an e-mail add-on called **Attent**, which is being tested by about a dozen companies, some in the Fortune 500. **Attent** takes the idea of a virtual currency, common in online games as well as online worlds like Second Life, and applies it to corporate e-mail. Employees assign one another "Serios," the currency in **Attent**, for ideas, completing tasks and so on, and use them to help distinguish their e-mail from normal corporate spam.

Over time, **Attent** users can gain not only Serios but also badges of excellence for, say, linking engineering and marketing, much as public skills rankings are widely used in online multiplayer games. Others in the company can see the badges, and presumably tap those people for help when they need it.

Right now, **Attent** doesn't look much like a video game, and it will probably never have a dramatic, colorful three-dimensional appearance. But Mr. Reeves noted that virtual economies were key to most online games, and that **Attent** would help companies assign value to the collaborative aspects of work. 'Right now, we barter our attention and our willingness to attend a meeting, and we barter feedback and credit in collaborative groups, and it's just not very efficient,' he said.

Executives may find that software is not the most valuable thing they can get from video gaming. Jane McGonigal, an affiliate researcher and resident game designer at the Institute for the Future, said she had done research that showed the qualitative advantages companies gain when they hire gamers, including an enhanced ability to innovate rapidly and collaborate effectively, even across far-flung regions.

'Skills you develop in game worlds solve real-world problems,' Ms. McGonigal said, adding that 70 corporate executives came to a recent institute gaming event.

Gamers also tend to be more loyal to their companies and more likely to want to work with others than nongamers, according to research by John C. Beck, a management consultant who runs the North Star Leadership Group, and Mitchell Wade, chief executive of Choice Humanitarian, a nonprofit group that seeks to end poverty in the developing world. Mr. Beck and Mr. Wade were co-authors of the book 'Got Game.' (The book is out in paperback under the title 'The Kids Are Alright.') Mr. Beck says children who grow up playing video games typically have to figure the games out for themselves, because adults don't know how to play.

That's quite unlike, say, children who play baseball, where the adults tell them what to do. One downside to managing the gaming generation is that it associates 'bosses' with level bosses, the obstacle in their way to the next level in a game. (Mr. Beck tells managers to avoid this by becoming a strategy guide to their charges, something any gamer can appreciate.)

Mr. Beck says he sees a gaming generation gap in companies, but that he expects it to disappear in 10 years or so, as the gamers move up in management. In fact, he says, in the last three years, his reception from chief executives has gone from 'Huh? That's crazy' to 'Tell me more.'

OF course, there's already plenty of gaming going on in business (and not just gaming the system). Companies use simulation tools for product development and build games for marketing products, as well as for corporate training or education. Cold Stone Creamery, for instance, has used video games built by Persuasive Games to train ice cream servers and Cisco Systems used Persuasive's games for its engineers. Corporate executives routinely develop skills through role-playing and other strategy games, said Ben Sawyer, co-director of the Serious Games Initiative and head of Digitalmill Inc., a consultant group based in Portland, Me., that works with businesses to carry out gaming strategies.

Mr. Sawyer said that companies were beginning to see that they could use video games to develop skills and spread corporate culture through their ranks, even to help individual employees understand how they could contribute to the overall success of the company. He said that companies struggle to manage tens of thousands of people, of varying experience and skill levels, who are often dispersed around the globe. But the developers of games like World of Warcraft have created exactly that kind of environment.

Nobody knows just how much gaming will ultimately affect business. But it's clear that the game is changing.

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