



Chapter 8

Online Recreation and Play in Organizational Life: The Internet as Virtual Contested Terrain

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There are in fact very few activities which cannot be classed either as work or play according as you choose to regard them” (George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 1937).

INTRODUCTION

Online recreation and play are becoming new “contested terrains” in organizations as managers and employees both seek to understand and control them, often at cross-purposes. Advances in computer and network technology have brought new dimensions to recreation in workplace settings, from frolicking online agents and assistants to sophisticated Internet games with thousands of participants. Online shopping, stock trading, and gambling are adding to the already formidable roster of recreational opportunities. The problems organizations are facing that are linked to these technological applications have gained the attention of the popular media. Consider the following *Newsweek* commentary describing the average workplace: “With the Internet morphing into the virtual Mall of America, day trading, Quake playing, vacation planning and hard-core porn (not to mention gateways to

exciting new careers) are all just a click away” (Naughton, Raymond, Shulman, and Struzzi, 1999).

This chapter analyzes the emerging forms of online recreation and play in the workplace and addresses how their benefits and drawbacks are being defined. It discusses how online work and play are often becoming seamlessly melded and sometimes confused, as predicted by Orwell in the epigraph. Managers are responding to online recreation in a wide spectrum of ways, from restricting all “personal” uses of computing to openly encouraging them (often as a means of keeping employees at their desks for long hours). In turn, many employees are devising sophisticated ways of countering managerial restrictions and of utilizing online recreation and play for their own purposes. New terms are being coined to characterize these phenomena, including “cyberloafing” and “cyber-slacking” (Oravec, 1999). A growing number of organizations have embraced a variety of forms of recreation, food and beverage services, as well as other perks as ways of affording individuals who are rooted to their workstations the opportunity to take a break without leaving the confines of their workplaces. Some guidance as to how to make workplaces more appealing to those who occupy them have emerged, such as *Managing to Have Fun* (Weinstein, 1996) and *The Art of Napping at Work* (Anthony and Anthony, 1999). However, in many organizations the computer network has been transformed into a virtual battleground, with managers and employees at odds as to whether or when computers should be used for “personal” (and presumably non-work) purposes. There have already been many battlefield casualties: some employees have lost their jobs because of non-sanctioned recreational uses of computers, and the issues involved have consumed valuable managerial and personnel resources.

WHY IS ONLINE WORKPLACE PLAY SUCH A CONCERN?

With the Internet, a wide variety of online recreation can take place in the interstitial periods between various workplace activities— and without the direct face-to-face interaction of individuals. The shop floor was identified as a contested terrain in past decades (Edwards, 1978), with blue collar workers opposing their bosses on a variety of matters relating to everyday workplace conditions. Today in high-tech settings many managers and employees are wrestling with issues of whether or when online recreation and play are appropriate and as to how these activities are to be characterized and framed (which is in itself a kind of game). What nonwork uses of computers and the Internet are to be condoned, and which should be restricted? Which uses of

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