



Chapter 9

Play's the Thing ... on the Web!

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While the original architects of the Net developed it to withstand a nuclear attack, today's pioneers have adapted the medium to include a variety of leisure activities. Leisure and computers. Not long ago, those words would have been viewed as being contradictory—not even spoken in the same sentence. Today, we eagerly ask when's the next version of Doom coming out? Is the Sony PlayStation II all it's cracked up to be? Have you seen the new voyeur-cam of Survivor? As these kinds of questions become ubiquitous, what are the impacts of virtual play on society? Should we be concerned about social issues such as Internet addiction, reduced physical activity and decreased social interaction? These are some of the questions this chapter addresses.

Tragedies abound in the media of today. The aftermaths of school shootings highlight the role of computer games that depict graphic scenes of violence. Arguments about computer games and video arcades that seem to promote violence on-screen have taken on a new seriousness. Movies and television have pervasive effects, yet no one is sure of what those effects are or how to control their impact. One key question that has been debated in the public arena is the following: Are violent cyber-games merely reflecting the reality of living in a violent world, or are they helping to create that world?

Analysts agree that cyber-media have the ability to disconnect people from reality and thereby desensitize them to violence and graphic imagery. These media can offer a cloak of anonymity that can disguise people and personas. As children become increasingly exposed to such media, will

society become a collection of desensitized, isolated individuals connected to a virtual world that they play in but disconnected from the real world they live in?

A contrasting viewpoint suggests that cyber media can leverage social services and enhance some traditional leisure time activities. For instance, volunteerism has been a traditional leisure time activity, and many areas of society are organized around a network of people willing to become involved in the hands-on work of such things as elder care, pet adoption, homeless shelters, battered women's counseling, and so on. Nonprofit organizations such as Red Cross and Second Harvest have proven that the Web is a unique and effective mechanism to enhance such volunteer activities.

Thus, when we indulge in virtual leisure, the two ends of the spectrum—unwanted social influences and desirable social outcomes—are evident from the scenarios outlined above. A goal for society would be to promote the latter and reduce the former. However, no clear or easy answers exist for this and related dilemmas, but the issues they raise have been and continue to be examined via public discourse. Our goal in this chapter is to continue this discourse and provide an analysis of how our virtual world has affected and is likely to affect leisure at a societal level.

PLAYING IN THE PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

Leisure is an important and changing part of our culture. It is an area of study that has increasingly garnered academic attention over the last three decades and a large body of research literature has developed around it. As early as 1960, the term “new leisure” was used to describe a new awareness of leisure time and its growing role in overall fulfillment of people's lives (Brightbill, 1960). Clearly, leisure has different meanings in different cultures, but in the Western world, we typically think of it as time and activities that are outside of work and other responsibilities.

Consider the differences between traditional places and things for leisure versus the virtual equivalents of those places and things. Infrastructure for traditional leisure means parks, libraries, and other public places *where* people can play. A massive system for development, management, and public dialogue about these physical resources exists at the national, state, and local levels. Concerns for discussion might include environmental impacts, overcrowding, upkeep, accessibility, and so on.

In the virtual world, infrastructure usually means computer and communications networks. In many instances, to take advantage of virtual play, one has to connect to the vast network of the Internet. Accessibility to that

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