



Transcript Title: Playing Games at Work

Date: June 2007

Podcast Length: 9:06

Summary: Byron Reeves, a professor at Stanford University's Department of Communications, the faculty director of the Stanford Media X program and co-founder of a startup called Seriosity talks about gaming environments and how they can be applied to the work place.

Host: Dan Briody, Global Innovation Outlook, IBM

BRIODY: Hello, and welcome to The Global Innovation Outlook Podcast Series, where IBM demonstrates the innovative value of collaboration. My name is Dan Briody, and today I'll be speaking with Byron Reeves, a professor at Stanford University's Department of Communications, and the faculty director of the Stanford Media X program.

Byron is also the co-founder of a startup called Seriosity, a company that develops solutions to help businesses improve collaboration, communication and motivation through the use of gaming principles. Byron, welcome.

REEVES: Thank you, Dan. Happy to be here.

BRIODY: Now, Bryon, what relevance do games have in the workplace?

REEVES: Well, the one we're most interested in right now is the very significant collaboration that is required to do well in any of the games, so we really need to differentiate those games where I do well because I have a particular skill -- I hunt things, shoot things, and I get points for it -- versus these complex, multiplayer games where I don't do well unless we do well.

GIO Podcast Series: An Innovation Conversation About Gaming And The Workplace

BRIODY: Now, most managers spend at least part of their time trying to get employees to play fewer games and do more work. So how do you go about convincing old school business managers that this is a viable concept, that bringing gaming principles into the workplaces is something that is going to be valuable to the company?

REEVES: I think we can make two lists of things that we could steal from the games. One list would be the obvious things... Dungeons and Dragons, the pictures, the shooting, the loud sounds, the Hollywood, the entertainment value of the games, the narratives, et cetera. So that's one list and there may be something in that list that are very important for the enterprise.

The other list that's more subtle and maybe even more significant... so the different ways in which collaborative groups are formed, the different communications channels that they have in the games.

The incentive structures in the games. The points. The leveling. The way reputations are handled in the games, namely that they're transparent and persistent. The economies of the games. The ability to trade virtual currency and to get digital assets.

And so all outside of the narrative and the skin of the game, that is really interesting and I think should be very

GIO Podcast Series: An Innovation Conversation About Gaming And The Workplace

familiar absent the Dungeons and Dragons pictures, be very familiar to anybody trying to manage a collaborative group.

BRIODY: Now many companies sort of view transparency as a bad thing and are a little bit fearful of their employees having too much of a view into how the organization is working.

That's got to be a difficult construct to break down, and that's something that gamers are very familiar with, right?

REEVES: It is. This is a new generation that has a different idea about what is private and public, a different idea about the trade off between transparency and value. And yes, if you and I are having a relationship and I'm competing with you it is in my vested interest to know everything about you and not have you know anything about me [LAUGHTER].

That seems pretty obvious. But when we're collaborating and we actually need to share information there's a great value in you being transparent and in exchange for that I have to do the same. And that's not only in a personal relationship with a single individual but it's across large work groups in a company.

It's one of the things that's really kind of magical in the games. If I'm part of a guild that does things together,

GIO Podcast Series: An Innovation Conversation About Gaming And The Workplace

goes on raids, solves puzzles, what not, in that guild it's very important that I know exactly the talents of everybody else involved, that I know how I'm going to be rewarded, where I rank relative to other people... and that there's a great value in that.

But it's a good question. There is a tension between the trade off, the value of transparency and the fear of actually losing control.

BRIODY: You started to talk about this a little bit. Let's talk a little bit about specific examples of how gaming environments can be applied to the work place either examples that you've seen in the real world or hypothetical examples.

REEVES: Well, one I'm particularly interested in now is the game economies. So almost all of the games, the complex multi player games, this is World of Warcraft, Star Wars Galaxies, Eve Online, Everquest, have an economy where virtual currency can be traded.

And progress in the game can be tracked in relation to that currency. So I might sell you a sword, or a shield, or indeed an entire character. I might buy game pieces from you. I might reward you for a collaborative action with this currency.

GIO Podcast Series: An Innovation Conversation About Gaming And The Workplace

And it's treated very lightly. But it's important. And it's tracked, and you can actually see where people are relative to the currency, who's got more of it, who's got less of it.

And it's also traded moment by moment. So we're able to reinforce action very quickly. If I need some information from you I can say, here's 10, I'd like to know this. Or I might even say, nice hat, here's five units of currency.

That economy can actually be dropped on the enterprise in places that currently don't have the value of a market system. And that economy can actually go to work to allow us to reinforce each other, to signal each other as to the value of information that we might have. And to collaborate and share the rewards of collaboration in ways that currently aren't available.

BRIODY: Now, some people may argue that economy already exists. We get rewarded in monetary terms for the job that we do. Would you be suggesting that this kind of economy would replace that monetary reward? Work hand in hand with it?

REEVES: Totally parallel to the dollar economy. So the dollar part of my economy as a professor in a university here is determined annually and I get feedback on the work of that year.

What happens in the games is that moment by moment, I try out a sentence, I try out this particular idea, I send you an idea for a new sales tool, or I'm trying to put currency on information. Things that are happening moment by moment I'm getting reinforcement for and we're actually bringing a quantitative market system to a place in business that really doesn't have one right now.

BRIODY: Now, what kind of effect would these gaming constructs have on leaders in the business world... both positive and negative. What do you think the impact or the implications for business leaders would be?

REEVES: Two different answers for the potential leaders and the current leaders.

One of the things that happens in a game that I think would be a little disruptive with respect to current leadership is that the games actually become meritocracies with all the information that's available on how people are doing, the fact that it's a computing system that can keep track of how long you spent, how well you did.

So, you really have a lot of information that can actually be used to signal to the entire group that some people are doing well and others aren't. Some people have led well and other's haven't.

And so one of the things that's happening in leadership there is that it's really changing the timeframe of leadership. First of all, leadership is very much accelerated in the games. It's something that we may take turns doing.

I may do today or this hour, and you might do the next hour, very different from current notions that leaders are nurtured and have established positions that endure over the course of years.

I think that's really different in the games that leadership is something that happens quickly and that we really come and go from.

And I think if you look at it from the other angle of someone aspiring to be a leader, the experience that the gamer generation has in the context of these games, is that I can do that.

I've been practicing it, which is quite possible in the games. It looks as if to people who are just beginning as if they can actually aspire to being in a leadership position and have a good prospect of actually achieving that relatively quickly.

BRIODY: Now all of this begs the question -- Byron, and

GIO Podcast Series: An Innovation Conversation About Gaming And The Workplace

you and I have talked about this before. Is it possible by infusing these gaming constructs into the workplace, work could actually become more fun?

REEVES: I think that was the original idea that we had when we were thinking about Seriosity and the research here at Stanford, is that the entertainment value, the engaging, involving characteristics of media, whenever they're allowed to be loose beyond the traditional entertainment forms that we think of, going to the theater, watching television, opening up a board game, et cetera...

Whenever those sensibilities get loose in serious contexts, some interesting things happen. So we started thinking about just in the game world, I think there was a lot of thought initially, well, we could take the games to the places where people are being trained, where they learn. And maybe it wouldn't be so boring.

And that in fact I think is the case. And but what I think is really the Holy Grail here is that we could also take them and rebuild the places where people actually conduct their work. And since those places are very much controlled by computers now, or are screens attached to computers, the prospect of doing that is pretty good. And the prospect of fun winning is pretty high.

BRIODY: So then I guess we can't call it work anymore

GIO Podcast Series: An Innovation Conversation About Gaming And The Workplace

at that point?

REEVES: Yes, one caveat on that, though. But it's not fun in the sense of a party and yuks and jokes. It's fun in the sense of a feeling of involvement, engagement, personalization.

But that kind of concentration and engagement... so that's the sense in which I mean fun. I mean, there is really a science of fun. By fun I don't mean necessarily just laughing and joking.

BRIODY: Byron, thanks so much for joining us on this Global Innovation Outlook Podcast. For more information on the Global Innovation Outlook, please visit ibm.com/gio.

[END OF SEGMENT]