

Drop that mouse! The boss is coming!

Government agencies and employers crack down on computer game playing at the office

By Mitch Betts

The officewide Minesweeper competition — not to mention all those peaceful hours spent with Solitaire, Tetris or Flight Simulator — may become work diversions of the past as more employers purge computer games from the office.

The Virginia state government and the U.S. Department of Labor, for example, recently ordered employees to erase from their office PCs all games, including the Minesweeper and Solitaire applets included in Microsoft Corp.'s Windows 3.1.

Game playing by state employees during business hours is unproductive and "a clear-cut example of misuse of taxpayer funds," said Cliff Schroeder, a spokesman for Virginia's Secretary of Administration office in Richmond. "We wanted to nip it in the bud."

Just last week, a national poll showed the extent of the activity. The survey by Coleman & Associates, Inc. in Teaneck, N.J., found that 23% of PC game players said their most recent game action was at the office rather than at home.

Covert action

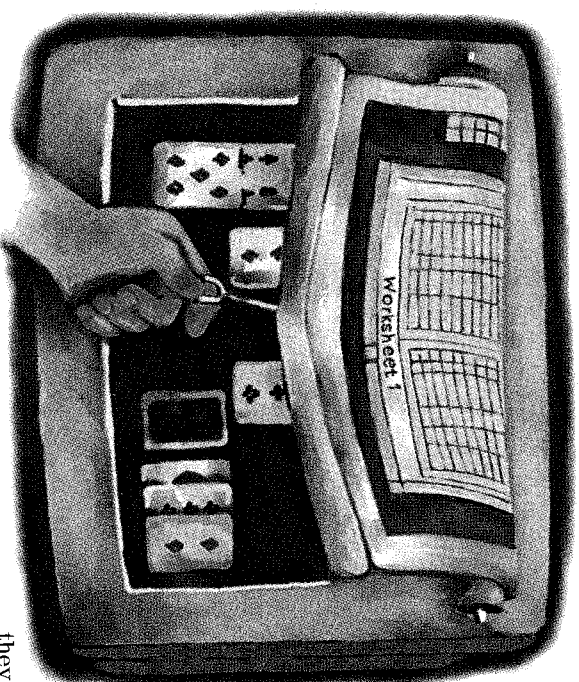
Emily Coleman, president of the market research firm, said her company's demographic breakdown showed that many of the office players are middle-aged middle managers. Another surprising tidbit, she added, was that women outnumbered men as office players.

As PC games have spread throughout the workplace — some equipped with "boss keys" that quickly switch the screen to a serious-looking spreadsheet — managers increasingly must face the issue of how to curb abuses without coming across like Big Brother.

Overall, Coleman said bosses ought to avoid micromanaging; lension-relieving work breaks and focus only on whether the job gets done. "Managers who need that

much control should be managing robots on an assembly line, not knowledge workers," she asserted.

Indeed, Virginia's action generated numerous complaints from users, a spokesman acknowledged. Corporate technology consultant Tom Nolle, president of CIMI Corp. in Voorhees, N.J., said he has counseled many companies to leave games on PCs and LANs and avoid user backlash.



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Nolle said broad attacks on games are demeaning to users, so games should be removed only in individual cases where there is suspicion that they are hurting a worker's productivity.

Even removing games may not fix the problem, he added, because someone determined to slack off will just find other means, such as "hiding in the restroom reading a magazine for 30 minutes."

Government agencies are taking a hard line, however, perhaps to dispel taxpayer notions that civil servants are goofing off.

A recent memo issued by John G. Dinneen, director of information resources management at the Labor Department in Washington, said office PCs "are to be used for official business purposes" with the possible exception of training courses where games are useful for teaching mouse skills.

"Otherwise, the playing of computer games is simply not in the interest of government, and games should be removed from all computers," Dinneen said.

No more playing around

Other organizations that reportedly have cracked down on PC games include Ford Motor Co., Sears Roebuck and Co., The Boeing Co. and Garber Travel Services, Inc. Boston-based Garber has deleted Solitaire, Minesweeper and Paintbrush from all 700 company PCs, said Rock Blanco, senior vice president of information technology.

"Actually, from an information systems point of view, I'm far more concerned about unauthorized software and viruses than about users playing games," Blanco said. But the company feared it would lose clients if they discovered travel agents playing games, he said.

Games are not the only time-wasters on the job. A 1993 survey by SPT Accounting Systems, Inc. in San Rafael, Calif., found PC users spend 5.1 hours a week "tutzing" with their computers — which could be anything from changing the wallpaper on Windows to loading fancy fonts or clearing out the hard drive. Extrapolated over 25 million PC users, that could amount to 5 billion hours per year at a cost of \$100 billion, the study said.