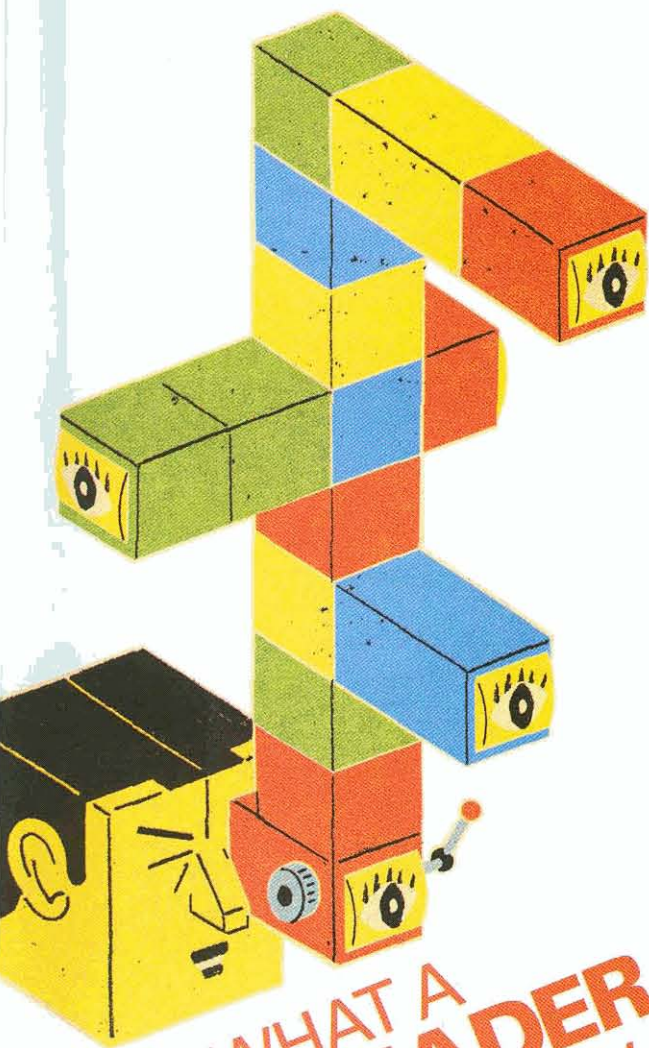


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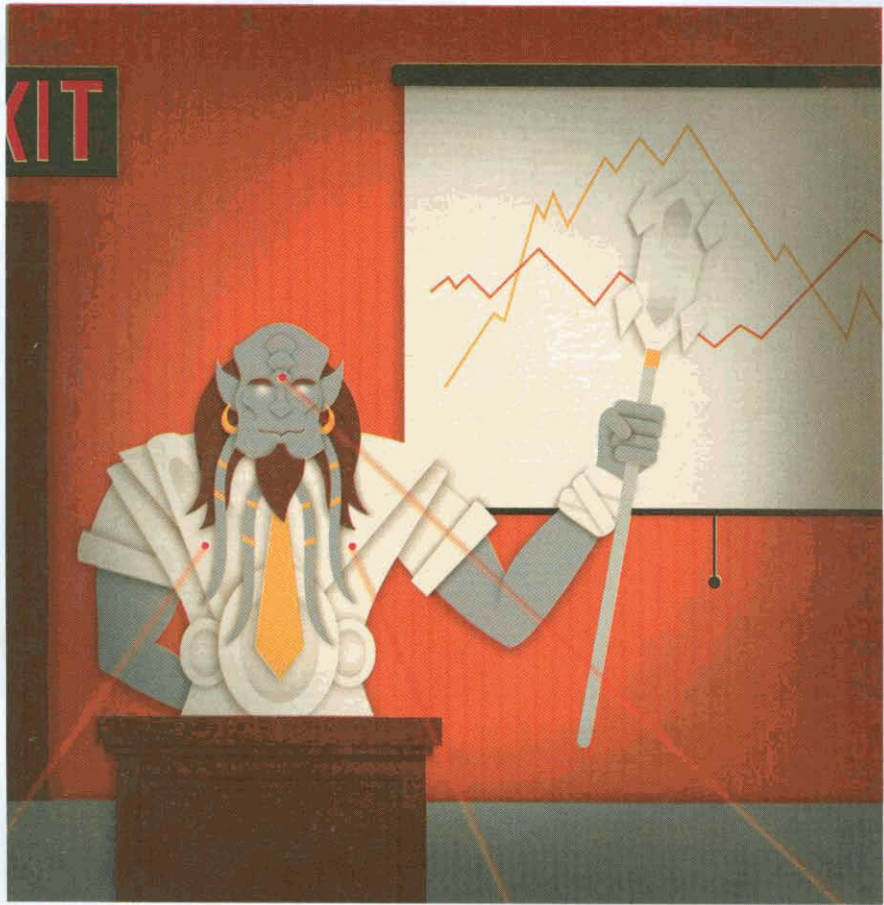
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The Gamer Disposition

BY JOHN SEELY BROWN AND DOUGLAS THOMAS Today's multiplayer online games are large, complex, constantly evolving social systems. Their perpetual newness is what makes them enticing to players. Each generation of games begets a new generation of participants who develop what we call the *gamer disposition*. It's exactly the disposition you should want in your workforce.

The gamer disposition has five key attributes. More than attitudes or beliefs, these attributes are character traits that players bring into game worlds and that those worlds reinforce. We believe that gamers who embody this disposition are better able than their nongamer counterparts to thrive in the twenty-first-century workplace. Why?

They are bottom-line oriented. Today's online games have embedded systems of measurement or assessment. Gamers like to be evaluated, even compared with one another, through systems of points, rankings, titles, and external measures. Their goal is not to be rewarded but to improve. Game worlds are meritocracies where assessment is symmetrical (leaders are assessed just as players are), and after-action reviews are meaningful only as ways of enhancing individual and group performance.

They understand the power of diversity. Diversity is essential in the world of the online game. One person can't do it all; each player is by definition incomplete. The key to achievement is teamwork, and the strongest teams are a rich mix of diverse talents and

abilities. The criterion for advancement is not "How good am I?"; it's "How much have I helped the group?" Entire categories of game characters (such as healers) have little or no advantage in individual play, but they are indispensable members of every team.

They thrive on change. Nothing is constant in a game; it changes in myriad ways, mainly through the actions of the participants themselves. As players, groups, and guilds progress through game content, they literally transform the world they inhabit. Part of the gamer disposition is grounded in an expectation of flux. Gamers do not simply manage change; they create it, thrive on it, seek it out.

They see learning as fun. For most players, the fun of the game lies in learning how to overcome obstacles. The game world provides all the tools to do this. For gamers, play amounts to assembling and combining tools and resources that will help them learn. The reward is converting new knowledge into action and recognizing that current successes are resources for solving future problems.

They marinate on the "edge." Finally, gamers often explore radical alternatives and innovative strategies for completing tasks, quests, and challenges. Even when common solutions are known, the gamer disposition demands a better way, a more original response to the problem. Players often reconstruct their characters in outrageous ways simply to try something new. Part of the gamer disposition, then, is a desire to seek and explore the edges in order to discover some new insight or useful information that deepens one's understanding of the game.

Together, these five attributes make for employees who are flexible, resourceful, improvisational, eager for a quest, believers in meritocracy, and foes of bureaucracy. If your organization is receptive to these traits (and it should be), look for gamers and the disposition they will bring you. ■

The Gamer Disposition

In response to John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas's article "The Gamer Disposition" (HBR List, February 2008), I ask: Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that gamers would make the best workers *if* you could get them to stop gaming long enough to work? The problem is that employers generally don't offer such a democratic, meritocratic work environment, and expecting gamers' strengths to translate to a bona fide, traditional organization is highly unrealistic. Still, it's nice to think that such a workplace could actually exist.

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Brown and Thomas respond: We are confident that gamers provide a new perspective on thriving in a rapidly changing world. Nevertheless, we are unsure that the workplace itself is ready to unleash the power that their disposition offers.

We do not contend that the workplace simply needs more gamers or that keeping gamers happy will lead to greater productivity or job satisfaction. The key, we believe, is that workplaces must acknowledge and facilitate dispositions that embrace change. The gamer disposition offers one model of what must take place at multiple levels of the organization in order to meet the challenges and demands of work in the twenty-first century. It also illustrates the qualities that organizations should seek when hiring or developing talent.

Gamers of massively multiplayer online games provide a particularly good example of the kind of disposition we describe because not only do these gamers embrace change and treat it as a core challenge, they also actively seek it out. In fact, as one online commenter remarked, they even pay a monthly subscription for it. So the questions are: How do we bring this disposition—so tuned to the challenges the corporate world faces—into the workplace, and why is it more important now than ever?

Because of the constant rate of change, simply teaching people new skills, leadership techniques, or ways of thinking is not enough. We need to figure out how to entice employees to seek out, on their own, improved ways of working and of acquiring new skills. In essence, we need to unleash the gamer disposition. This may well require a radical transformation of the workplace, one that supports constant experimentation and allows problem solvers to define and redefine the issues as needed.

Workplaces that embrace such dispositions will find that new skills will emerge from the passion and drive of employees who are constantly meeting fresh challenges and engaging in critical and open reflection. Enterprises that aren't able to construct such environments may well find themselves outpaced and outmaneuvered by those that do.