

The background of the entire page is a pixelated, retro-style Pac-Man game. It features a black field with blue lines representing the maze. Several ghost characters are visible: a cyan one in the upper left, a yellow one in the upper right, an orange one in the center, and a red one in the lower right. Small red and pink squares, representing pellets, are scattered throughout the maze.

DOWNTIME

# PLAYING TO LEAD

Video games may have  
a place in the workplace.



BY PATRICIA CRISAFULLI

It's Friday afternoon at the office, and there are still some important reports to get out. But off in one corner, a half-dozen workers are hunched in front of a large flat-screen TV. They're laughing, cheering, doing anything but work. Instead, they're all fixated on a video game, watching the score.

All of which would seem like a manager's worst nightmare, except the boss is there too, and, at the moment, is locked in a face-off with the summer intern. (Guess who's winning.) "We do these exact meetings on Fridays," says Mike Bilder, CEO of Jackbox Games, the Chicago-based developer of "Party Pack" games like *Guesspionage*, *Fakin' It!*, *Bidiots*, and *Bomb Corp.*, now in their fifth iteration. And, according to Bilder, they're as strong a team-building tool as any group lunch or conference gathering.

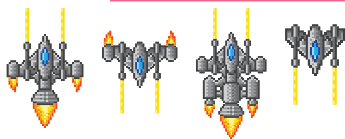
For years now, of course, the \$100 billion video-game industry has had a reputation largely for just sucking people into hours of mindless activity, including some games criticized for violence. But

proponents, ranging from those who create them to academics, say so-called "social" video games that involve several players not only bring people into one room, they're often performance-based.

Players are put on the spot, such as having to give a presentation. "It's very much like a leadership role in a corporate environment," says Bilder.

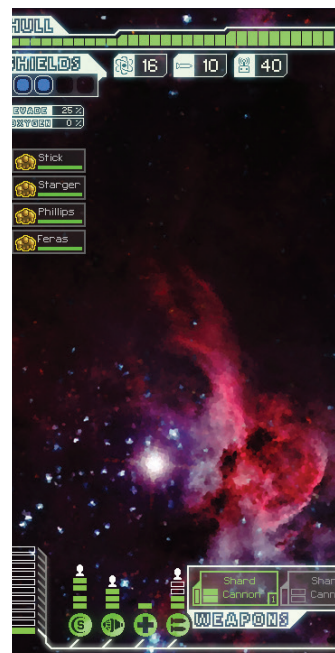
To be sure, no one is advocating

## GAMES FOR LEADERS



### CIVILIZATION VI

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video games as a primary office tool. But professor Isabela Granic, PhD, chair of the developmental psychopathology department at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands, says they can enhance creative problem solving and help executives manage stress. Based on her work with children, Granic has found that video games can be useful in practicing how to reframe problems, manage emotions, and develop social skills while playing interactively with others. “The secret is finding the balance—knowing how and when to use games to reframe your head space,” says Granic.

Problem solving is certainly needed in “tycoon games,” where the objective is to build something—a skyscraper, an amusement park, or even an

entire civilization—with limited resources. “Tycoon games are all about constraints. And within these constraints, how can I win this game?” says Matthew Viglione, founder of SomaSim, an independent game developer in Chicago, whose titles include *1849*, set during the Gold Rush, and *Project Highrise*.

As a group, about two-thirds of millennials are already playing video games. But other generations may get some benefits if they start playing, too; the games do provide more practice at new technologies and, oddly enough, can enhance learning agility—by applying past experiences and lessons learned to the new and unfamiliar. “You internalize all these systems; you internalize all the complexity,” Viglione says. “Then you have this ability to

scan the landscape and make some snap judgments going forward.”

Though not dominant yet, virtual reality is expected to become yet another new key tech feature, and games would be an easy way to experience it. But even without such advances, games have their potential pluses. “You’re constantly thinking on your feet, you’re constantly changing your pattern of behavior to match the environment you’re in,” says Dan Coleman, a tech director for Iron Galaxy Studios, the developer of such games as *Wreckateer*, *Divekick*, and *Extinction*, which has studios in Orlando and Chicago. “That’s what leadership is all about.”



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