A Force from the Future!

Greetings from GAMBIT. We have made some games for you. Yes, you. You can play them at http://gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/prototypes.php Why don't you go do that right now? We'll wait. Besides, how often do you get to say you played video games for research purposes?

Way more fun than reading papers, yes? No worries, we'll try to keep this short and amusing.

What is GAMBIT? It's a video game research and development lab at MIT. We make game prototypes that help MIT and Singaporean researchers do, well, research.

The more important question perhaps is who is GAMBIT? We're game industry rebels who got sick of the grind, researchers with crazy ideas, superheroes who pose as mild-mannered admins, mind-blowing grad students, and a ton of undergraduates with more enthusiasm than sense.

And yes. We have fun in the workplace.

Be excellent to each other! (Marleigh's Story)

I was just out of school when I first got called a 'resource.' I didn't think much about it at the time, other than it seemed to be used as some strange synonym for the word 'person,' but it made the manager with all the Microsoft Project sheets happy to say it that way, so I let it slide. Now, I find it particularly odd. Really, what's wrong with the word 'person?' 'I need more people to work on this project.' It's not an offensive statement, so why the euphemism?

I think it's the dehumanizing quality of the term that appeals to those who use it. Resources are just things. It's easier to talk about things than people. People are messy. People are whiny and demanding and opinionated and inefficient. They don't fit into neat little boxes or turn into nice little numbers on the chart. By thinking in terms of resources, there's a willing denial, a veneer of sanity over the chaos of humanity. People are harder to deal with than things.
But the fact remains that these are people. Isn't there an ethical obligation to treat them as such? Sure, some of these people's time has been purchased with full knowledge and consent, but is that really the end of it? Productivity über alles? Happy cogs in the great machine? I hear terms like 'quality of life,' but that usually boils down to allowing people to leave the office in a timely manner. That's a fine first step, but why is that the end of it? It's ok for a job to be soul-numbing drudgery, as long as you leave work on time? That hardly seems right. Isn't there a moral obligation as well, one of beneficence? Heck, call it decency. Courtesy. There are ways one treats their fellow human beings, and being in a workplace shouldn't excuse poor hospitality. Don't employers have a responsibility to try to make the workday pleasant?

Of course, like most ideals, it's easy on paper and hard in practice.

I once gave a pep talk to a group of incoming GAMBIT students. I had a list of rules, good ones that we'd carefully thought out to address problems of the past. But before we got into it, I told them the quote from *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, "Be excellent to each other," and explained that this was their goal. The rules were just to help them get there. We needed to be awesome. When in doubt, ask yourself, am I being awesome? If you're not being awesome, ur doin it rong. They laughed, as they were meant to, and we went on to talk about how being absent from work without telling anyone was hardly excellent, missing a deadline without speaking up was downright bogus, and so on and so forth.

Then I got to thinking, was I being awesome? Were the staff being excellent to each other and the students? Hard to say. On the one hand, we get a free pass on the fun factor. We're hiring students to make video games, and that in itself is pretty darn awesome. Then again, I had a reputation of being the strict staff member in the office. That's half the reason I was asked to take on the exercise in cat-herding which was our student worker program. If I didn't like how some project was going, my students knew it and had a clear set of instructions on how to fix it. It was usually not a fun conversation. But then I look at other projects, and I'm not sure those students were served as well. Sure, their supervisors were more lenient, but then they also didn't get what they needed, which was rather unpleasant for everyone. MIT students like solving hard problems, and there's a sense of accomplishment in knowing you did good work that is going to be used. It is, dare I say it, downright fun. I certainly don't know anyone in academia or industry who enjoys working hard on a project only to have it shelved. Or worse, have your work redone by those who came after you because it wasn't good enough the first time.

Maybe the notion of "fun in the workplace" is missing a step. Perhaps the first stage of being excellent to each other is the medical proverb, "First, do no harm."
Party on, dudes! (Philip's Story)

My previous work experiences were in bureaucracies that maintained a palpable atmosphere of mistrust. Most co-workers saw their colleagues and clients as roadblocks, charlatans, and miscreants maliciously preventing work from getting done. Bureaucracies function by instituting rules, metrics, and procedures so that substandard work relationships can still produce acceptable results. However, those same rules often remove the autonomy and risk-taking necessary for people to be awesome. Even someone who genuinely believes in their organization's mission is kept on a tight leash and prevented from acting on that passion. As a game designer, it seemed obvious that rules and expectations are often self-reinforcing. When you expect the worst from people, expect people to meet your expectations.

But what happens if you expect the best from people, and allow them to rise to the challenge?

Close contact with universities, game studios, and media companies made me realize that the best ideas often come from entirely unexpected sources. GAMBIT needed to top that; I was building the lab to become a thought-leader in the field of games. We needed to create an environment devoid of self-censorship. Interests, opinions, and critiques had to be shared without hesitation, without concern about relevance or hierarchy. This is doubly so for critiques of the boss' ideas! If a bad idea slipped through to implementation, or a good idea was left unspoken, we would have no one to blame but ourselves. An environment in which everyone is eager to share and discuss their ideas, especially the bad ones, results in better ideas. People had to be willing to act on impulses such as "everybody needs to hear this new album" and "that sounds like a really terrible idea" without a second thought.

This immediately had me thinking, "Wouldn't that make the water cooler the single biggest impediment to productivity? How would one deal with the hurt feelings, caustic criticisms, and the sheer amount of noise from all that random chatter?" Henry Jenkins, GAMBIT's principal investigator, gave me a different way to look at this problem. As a housemaster of an MIT dorm, when freshmen arrived at the beginning of the academic year, he would share this bon mot: "There are people who do whatever they want and say whatever they think. We call those people 'characters'. There are also people who do whatever they want and say whatever they think without regard for the well-being or feelings of others. We call those people 'assholes'."

GAMBIT needed to be full of characters, not assholes. For a small, tight-knit workplace, the people you work with make all the difference, far more than the rules they are subject to. The solution was simply to hire the right people, and trust them to do the right thing. So when we recruit for new staff, the personalities of each candidate are far more important than their qualifications. We've seen applicants with all-star, out-of-the-park talent, but what we really wanted to know is who showed confidence and generosity in sharing their expertise? Who was able to speak their mind clearly, freely, and diplomatically? Who could take criticism constructively and riff on it? Who would we want to talk with every day?

GAMBIT is staffed with people who want to get back to work and do awesome stuff, so the rules of the lab take this as a given. Knowing that we were a chatty bunch who really wanted to be productive, we adopted timeboxing as a rule for all meetings. Our longest meetings are brainstorming sessions, minimizing constraints when coming up with new ideas. These meetings are well-attended and energetic, typically lasting about two hours. Our research meetings have a time limit of 1.5 hours, in which one member of the lab
presents *incomplete* work to solicit feedback. All other meetings tend to be a half-hour or less, and can never last more than an hour.

Every person has the right to opt-in or opt-out of meetings, so meetings are more intimate and are attended by people who actually want to be part of the discussion. The only mandatory meetings are weekly status updates, in which all 16 full-time staff catch up with each other's projects within half-an-hour. All these rules about meetings drive home the same message: people's time is precious. Voice your thoughts, listen carefully to others, figure out what is awesome, and do it!

**Why Bill and Ted?**

There's a certain irony in requesting a position paper on fun in the workplace in a fussy, academic format, complete with keywords and 10 point Times New Roman font. We're particularly chagrined by the line in the formatting rules about avoiding humor and irony because it's 'difficult to translate.' We blatantly ignored that bit. You may have noticed.

We could have written your typical, dry conference paper, but wasn't this more fun? More fun for us (Marleigh and Philip), and more fun for you. And we don't mean the hypothetical you, we mean the actual you. The living, breathing, sentient human whose eyeballs are even now gliding over this text. We thought about you when we wrote this and frankly, we thought you'd be bored if we followed directions. If we believe in fun in the workplace, we need fun in our conferences and papers too. Let us practice what we preach.

And let's face it, of all the papers you read, you're going to remember this one. ;)

**Roll Credits**

**Marleigh Norton** is the Lead Interaction Designer at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab. She has worked on games about time traveling policy makers, ancient Incan goddesses, zoo detectives, nostalgia, virtual butterflies, woven jigsaw puzzles, and singing dancing anthropomorphic woodland creatures. She has also worked on projects about Mars rovers, voice-activated dialing systems, and Navy missions, which her employers insisted were not games, but she thinks they just have too narrow a definition. She likes voice acting and wants to be a pirate. Yarr!

**Philip Tan Boon Yew** is the US Executive Director of the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab. He makes games where people walk around pretending to be hardboiled detectives, Romanian princes, or vegetarian starships. He is very proud of his formidable collection of Nerf weaponry, plastic figurines, and video games. Philip recently delivered a presentation on the animation and remix culture of voice-synthesized Japanese pop music to his co-workers. There was no real reason for the presentation and it made very little sense.

They both have fun at work.

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1. Marleigh would like to add that it was completely fascinating and involved a leek that was later made into soup.