

OFFICE MINEFIELD

By **Joel Garreau**

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Dit Talley was on the phone with a customer the moment he cracked the Minesweeper computer game in a world-class eight seconds.

"Holy {expletive}! Holy {expletive}!" shouted the president of Washington's Corporate & Government Consulting Inc.

Luckily the customer, too, was a Minesweeper addict. He understood.

So do millions of others. As industry and government drop clunky old mainframes for networked personal computers, America is discovering the truly diabolical nature of Bill Gates's Microsoft empire.

Pre-loaded inside Microsoft's Windows software that controls 80 percent of the world's new PCs are two insidious games -- Solitaire and Minesweeper.

Does this mean that productivity software spreading through the nation's offices is instead sowing indolence, distraction and the collapse of American capitalism?

"Yup, sure," says Frank Burns, a principal in the area's largest regional computer bulletin board, the MetaNet. "You used to see offices laid out with the back of the video monitor toward the wall. Now it's the other way around, so the boss can't see you playing Solitaire."

"It's swallowed entire companies," says Dennis J. "Gomer" Pyles, president of Able Bodied Computers in The Plains, Va. "The water treatment plant in Warrenton, I installed their system, and the next time I saw the client, the first thing he said to me was, 'I've got 2,000 points in Solitaire.'"

As a result, airplanes full of businessmen resemble not board meetings but video arcades. Large gray men in large gray suits -- lugging laptops loaded with spreadsheets -- are consumed by beating their Solitaire scores, flight attendants observe.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates became so addicted to Minesweeper that he took it off his personal office machine, reports Libby Duzan, lead product manager for entertainment at the company. Instead, he went to the machine of Mike Hallman, then-president of Microsoft, when he felt compelled to play. That's where he set his personal record of five seconds. (Ordinary mortals have been known to take five minutes to solve this puzzle.)

To beat Gates's time, Tom Reeves, a development manager for Microsoft, wrote a small computer program (a macro) that attacked the puzzle automatically. When Gates found out how Reeves had cheated to achieve a three-second score, he fired off an e-mail message: "My critical skills are being displaced by a computer. This technology thing is going too far. How can one retain human dignity when computers do the important stuff better than people?"

Minesweeper is a logic puzzle made up of square tiles, some of which have "bombs" underneath them. The object of the game is to turn over all the tiles with no bombs, and none of the tiles that do hide bombs, using the clues provided.

Minesweeper is harder than Solitaire, which is the old rainy day card game. Figuring out how to get started on Minesweeper is not intuitively obvious. (Hint from the aficionados: Click on five or six tiles randomly right at the beginning. If you hit a bomb, start over. If your computer suddenly awards you a "bloom" of tiles cleared automatically, the odds are with you.)

Minesweeper is more addictive than Solitaire. Players are pitted against themselves, trying to beat their own best times. People have been known to dream about it. One woman claims that because of

Minesweeper, she now has trouble going to the bathroom. Every time she looks at the wall tiles, her eyes automatically group them into patterns of nine -- the key to winning the game.

Did Microsoft know the number of worker-hours American industry would lose to its nefarious device? Well, Duzan said, not for nothing can you disguise your game fetish by turning the Windows sound off.

In fact, "boss keys" are becoming ubiquitous on computer games. They are keystrokes that instantly cause the machine to switch out of fun-and-games display and into the appearance of work. Then, when the boss passes, the game returns, right where you left it. In Solitaire and Minesweeper, you hold down the "Alt" key and hit "Tab." In a game called Tetris, originally designed by Soviet software writers, pressing "escape" instantly displays a bogus spreadsheet resembling Lotus 1-2-3.

Now Microsoft is aiming a new package of games at "loosely supervised executives" in their mid-thirties with college education who spend a minimum of four hours a week playing games. In one year, more than 1 million copies have sold.

Microsoft originally put Solitaire into Windows to soothe people intimidated by the operating system, according to Duzan. It gave them something familiar and fun to do with their computer while it also taught them how to use a mouse. Not surprisingly, for years Solitaire was the most-used application for Windows, Microsoft officials say.

Minesweeper got in because, at the time Windows 3.1 was released in 1992, it was the favorite game of everybody involved in creating that software, including overlord Gates.

This has been going on long enough that there's now a trade in nostalgia items. One manufacturer soon will ship machines with Microsoft Arcade software that reproduces -- visual flaws and all -- five of those old Atari computer arcade games like Asteroids and Missile Command to which adolescents once devoted all their quarters.

From there it's a short jump to dialing up, say, CompuServe, finding the Gamers Forum and transplanting the custom-designed boss keys into your favorite games.

One Postal Service employee interviewed for an industry focus group was frightening, Duzan reported. "He was 44, and lived with his mother. He played Flight Simulator about 40 hours a week. He'd come home, grab a sandwich and go to his PC until 11 p.m."

Some companies, such as Boeing, routinely remove Solitaire and Minesweeper from the Windows package when it arrives, or, in some cases, demand that Microsoft not even ship the product with the games inside. Even PC Magazine banned game-playing during office hours.

"Our editor wanted to lessen the dormitory feel of our offices. Advertisers would come in and the entire research department was playing Solitaire. It didn't leave the best impression," reported Tin Albano, a staff editor. On the other hand, he said, "Arkonoid is sweeping the investment banks. It's like a Pong game. Everybody on e-mail is talking about it. Shearson Lehman, Prudential-Bache, First Boston."

The Windows games not only have a religious following, they have mysteries to be learned by the initiates. People seriously out to improve their Solitaire time, for example, know that if they double-click on a card ready for the final stacks of a single suit, the card will automatically fly there, eliminating the need to drag it with the mouse.

Windows training is a booming business as major government agencies, including the Treasury Department, the CIA and the Defense Department, upgrade their systems. Computer consultants sometimes debate whether the Solitaire function should be revealed to trainees.

"I don't think it corrupts anyone who isn't already on the delinquent side," said Marty Engle, president of Ballston Center for Computer Training. "You have to ask: Would the same guy be doodling or talking on the phone? Would he be picking his nose or what? He would have wasted time in some other way."

The Mine Warfare Division of the U.S. Navy has Minesweeper on its Windows setup at the Pentagon and "thinks it's a neat game," according to spokesman Lt. Conrad Chun. But it sneers at it professionally. "It's nowhere near the complexity true mine warfare is," Chun reports. "It's a two-dimensional game. There are so many aspects to real mine warfare that it would take a program the size of all of Windows to even scratch the surface."

The all-time records for Minesweeper are 87 seconds at the expert level, 27 seconds at intermediate, and one second at the beginner game, according to Microsoft. (If the mines are aligned in exactly the right way, a single mouse click will win the game.)

You can cheat at these games. Wes Cherry, who wrote Solitaire, was not going to put up with a tyrannical computer program. So if you set up the card game such that three cards are being dealt at a time, hold down the "Control," "Alt" and "Shift" keys simultaneously, then click on the deck, Solitaire will deal you a single card, and then rearrange the cards beneath to do everything in its power to give you the ones you need. We could, of course, also tell you how Robert Donner, who wrote Minesweeper, rigged his program to allow you to win every time.

But it would be wrong.

Staff writer Richard Leiby contributed to this report.