
Compressed Data; Sit, Roll Over, Work: An 'Employee Pet' Game



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Managers who grumble about ungrateful employees and seek solace in the loyalty of their dogs might take a shine to a new hire this week: cyberhumans implanted with the genes for canine obedience.

Players of a new online game called Metapet (www.metapet.net), which is scheduled to make its debut today, assume the role of corporate managers at one of three fictional biotechnology companies in the year 2006.

Metapet players are given "employee pets" and the task of making the transgenic humans as productive as possible at the least cost with incentives that range from vacations to pills and plastic surgery.

Metapet satirizes corporate life and the biotech industry, but its co-creators say it has a heart, too. "We think of this as a training manual to help managers do their job better," said Natalie Bookchin, one of the creators of Metapet and a faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts, a college in Valencia, Calif.

Ms. Bookchin and Jin Lee, an artist in Chicago, created Metapet as a nonprofit project with financing from two arts groups, Creative Time and Hamaca.

A manager's console in Metapet puts an employer's full range of incentives and punishments at a player's fingertips, as well as gauges indicating a worker-pet's health, morale, energy and discipline. Managers compete against each other, with continual rankings based on profits tied to worker productivity and employee retention. A manager is given only one worker-pet at a time, but it can be fired and replaced, or even worked to death. Slave-driving managers, however, will find that "even a Metapet might quit, join a commune, found a start-up or form a union," Ms. Bookchin said.

Being too lavish is not wise either, because incentives cost money within the game. While a manager who thinks an employee might be happier and more productive if he or she lost a few pounds can spring for liposuction, players should be wary of a backlash from fiddling too much with the "visual standards" tools.

Paul Muchinsky, an industrial psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, said the game was a wry commentary on the