

# Quiet Play: How Desktop Moyu Games Carve Out Enjoyment Inside the Workplace

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idle games, workplace play, interpassivity, digital labor

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A new category of “desktop moyu games” (摸鱼游戏)<sup>1</sup> has quietly emerged within the Chinese gaming landscape. Unlike traditional idle games, these lightweight farming, management, or virtual-pet simulations are designed specifically for the workplace: they sit unobtrusively as thin horizontal bars or semi-transparent windows on the desktop, running automatically while the user types documents, answers email, or attends online meetings. The defining feature of desktop moyu games is their camouflage. The player can instantly minimize the game, turn it fully transparent, or disguise it as a productivity widget whenever a boss or colleague walks by.

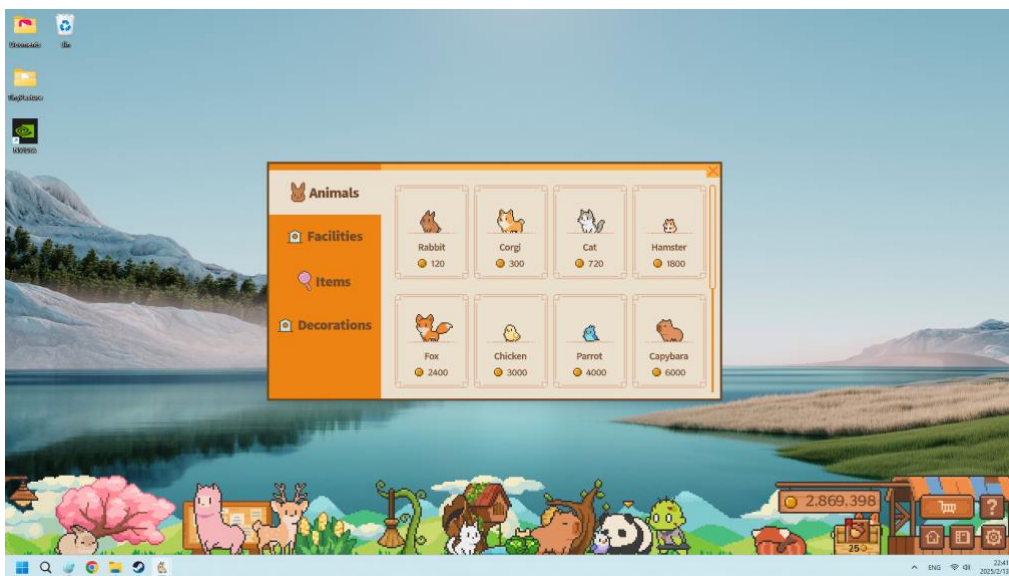
So rather than offering leisure outside of work, these games insert play directly into the workflow. In this sense, desktop moyu games can be read as metareferential interfaces (Krampe et al. 2022) that extend play into the operating system rather than enclosing it within a separate gameworld, making the desktop itself a layered site of work/play co-presence. Instead of opposing immersion to artificiality, their apparent “seamlessness” foregrounds mediation by inviting players to experience the familiar work desktop as a quietly reconfigured, playful environment. This arrangement, though slightly humorous, expose the tension of contemporary precarious digital labor and neijuan (involution) culture. Desktop moyu games become a subtle tactic through which workers reclaim micro-moments of rest and pleasure. Read as a reparative screen practice, these minimal, hideable, and semi-automated forms of

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play enable workers to reorganize the spatial and temporal rhythms of the desktop itself.

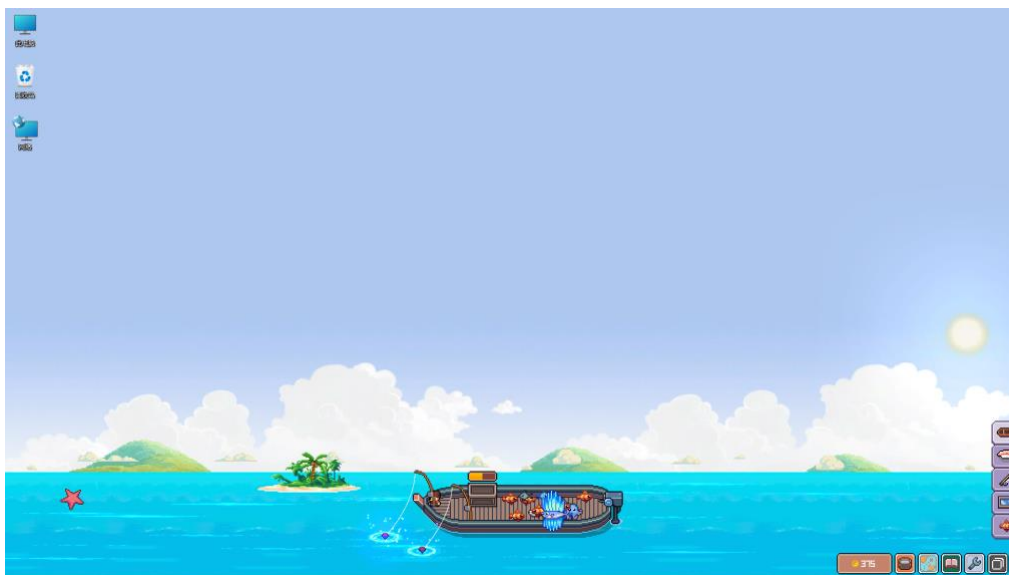
Existing research on idle and incremental games has largely examined their mechanics and the shifting boundaries of player agency under conditions of automation. Alharthi and colleagues (2018), as well as Cutting and colleagues (2019), have mapped the genre’s typologies and emphasized its minimal-interaction, “from playing to waiting” logic, while design-oriented scholarship such as Spiel and colleagues (2019) highlights how idle games originated as a self-reflexive commentary on grind-based, labor-like play and later developed affective dimensions of care, attachment, and letting-go. More recent debates link idle games to “cozy” aesthetics, exploitative monetization, and the optimization pressures of contemporary game economies, noting how automation can simultaneously comfort players and erode their sense of agency. Yet across this body of work, idle games are almost exclusively theorized through leisure-time contexts: browser tabs, mobile apps, moments of waiting. What remains underexamined is how automated, minimal-input play operates within workplace environments shaped by 996 schedules, where play must remain hidden. Likewise, although public debates around involution and “lying flat” in sociology foreground the structural precarity faced by contemporary Chinese youth, they rarely attend to the small, improvisational, and alternative imaginaries through which workers navigate these pressures in everyday life. While cozy games are frequently framed as a form of escape from real-life obligations, desktop moyu games embed a cozy, low-intensity landscape directly into the rhythms of office labor. Moyu games, instead of promising an elsewhere, stage coziness as a way of inhabiting work differently (Bódi 2024), carving out modest moments of comfort and care inside the same screen that organizes precarious productivity. “Moyu”, stealing moments of play and rest within work, offers precisely such a micro-tactic, one that desktop moyu games materially and playfully mediate.



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of *Tiny Pasture*.(Source: Steam store page)

To theorize this hybrid workplace play, this paper draws on interpassivity in idle playing (Fizek 2023) and screen studies. Interpassivity describes situations in which actions or enjoyment are delegated to external objects, allowing subjects to

“outsource” what they cannot (or are not allowed to) perform directly. Desktop moyu games operate precisely through such delegation: they play themselves, accrue resources, sustain a sense of progression when players are working, and later present the small desktop landscapes it generates to the player. What is conventionally a flat, utilitarian workspace dominated by spreadsheets, slides, messaging apps, and meeting software is subtly reshaped into a dynamic, viewable micro-landscape of miniature gardens, aquariums, or pet-raising interfaces. This transformation reconfigures the screen from a site of productivity and monotony into one of ambient pleasure, companionship, and visual rest. In this sense, desktop moyu games enact a reparative force, resonating with Sedgwick’s reparative reading and Braidotti’s “ordinary micro-practices of everyday life.” Delegation and camouflage do not simply hide play within work; together with this re-landscaped desktop environment, they open a small but meaningful surface where labor, rest, and play overlap.



**Figure 2:** Screenshot of *Fish to Dish: Idle Sushi*(Source: Steam store page)

Methodologically, this ongoing project draws on game analysis and interviews with players of representative cases, including *Tiny Pasture* (CaveLiquid, 2025), *Fish to Dish: Idle Sushi* (Kygua Tech, 2025), *Cornerpond* (foolsroom, 2023), and *Rusty’s Retirement* (Mister Morris Games, 2024). By examining their visual design, automation cycles, camouflage functions, and spatial integration with everyday work software, alongside insights from interviews, the analysis traces how they construct a peripheral, low-intensity landscape of play within the rhythms of office labor. Supplemented by paratext like player reviews, promotional materials, and online discussions of “moyu culture,” the study situates these games within broader practices of digital labor and everyday micro-resistance.

By bringing idle mechanics into workplace contexts, this ongoing project contributes to discussions of idle games, screen ecologies, and the politics of digital labor. It highlights desktop moyu games as a distinctive cultural form through which automated, low-intensity play is quietly embedded into the work desktop, subtly reconfiguring the micro-politics of the desktop interface in everyday digital work.

## ENDNOTES

1. “Moyu” (摸鱼) is a widely used internet slang term in contemporary Chinese workplaces. Literally meaning “touching fish,” the phrase metaphorically refers to stealing moments of leisure, idleness, or low-intensity relaxation during work hours. The expression has evolved into a playful and often self-ironic way for office workers to describe micro-breaks, checking social media, daydreaming, or secretly playing games.

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