Singer: Research and design for kids
Prensky: Digital game based learning: why and how it works

Singer explores kid-based research in his (her?) chapter. His point is that the kid-demographic was taken seriously, indeed – perhaps even invented. It was studied, parsed and catered to. In the end, however, two key results could be viewed as questioning the value of this research, at least for the now-well-known brand Nickelodeon.

Focus groups found children to be neutral on the name. Although the children had no knowledge, presumably, of what a nickelodeon was, they had neither negative or positive responses to the name. The absence of revulsion was taken as a good omen, and the name stuck.

Likewise, the color palette ultimately selected by Nickelodeon was also met with disinterest. It was selected because the two colors were not reflected in any designs promoted by the adult designers.

Both the name and the color palette were selected because of a lack of negative response. This would seem to suggest focus groups are ripe for a method of testing that could get at more positive results.

In this week’s reading, Prensky delves into the rhetoric of games with a brief look at techniques of games. This chapter was the how and why of digital learning, and as a technical writer, this study of the tools of what can be considered a genre of writing is of great interest. This is a rich field, and one that could be a course in itself, especially combined with educational theory.

Perhaps this reflects that I spent years taking classes with a rhetorical bent. But I really learned from these classes, and they helped me become a better technical writer. Such a class, I think, would be the place to explore the benefits, from an educational perspective, of gaming versus engagement (p153), as well as what kind of content is suited for doing versus constructivist learning, or all the other types of learning Prensky lists on page 157. In his minimalist treatment of these on the following pages, he has only enough room to explain what these things are. This leaves a wealth of room for examples, case studies, pedagogical use, benefits, advantages, etc.

Such a class would have the time to include study of specific software and an evaluation of their rhetorical strategies. Ideally, it would be co-taught by a rhetorician, educator, and a software developer, but the co-teaching would need to be fully integrated rather than the typical approach of viewing the same content from the developer’s view, then the rhetorician, then the educator’s. Such a class should have a primary focus on learning games, but other games that handled learning well should also be included.
What would be the problems in such a course? There is probably no text for such material, but I am not sure that would be much of an impediment. With some fundamentals of learning theory, or some software experience interpreted through the lens of learning theory, students would have the tools needed for basic rhetorical analysis of learning software.

It could also be a problem getting people to teach this. Learning software does not seem to get much academic notice, and games as a subset of learning software gets even less. This class would probably only be taught by people not concerned about tenure!