

Koster: on learning, evolution, and fun
Prensky: the boredom of mere learning

What games are (Ch 3), What games teach us (Ch 4), and What games aren't (Ch 5)
From *A theory of fun for game design*, Koster, 2005

Digital game-based learning for adults (Ch 8)
From *Digital Games-based Learning*, Prensky, 2001

Because I missed last week's class, I am combining this week's response and last weeks, thus demonstrating transfer of knowledge from one realm (last week's class) to another (this week's class). If this is not acceptable, please let me know. Thanks.

Koster and Prensky look into the learning in the context of games and conclude that either learning is the fun part (Koster) or learning is the part that has to be disguised deep inside something that is fun (Prensky). These conclusions are polar opposites and reflect a fundamental schism in educational philosophy that needs to be closely examined, understood, and ultimately reconciled before education can address the myriad of issues and directions currently being pressed under the general banner of educational reform.

Koster and Prensky both present games as addiction, but those drugs are very different in nature. Koster maintains (p40) that "with games, learning is the drug." He writes:

One of the subtlest releases of chemicals is at that moment of triumph when we learn something...This almost always causes us to break into a smile. After all, it is important to the survival of the species that we learn – therefore our bodies reward us for it with moments of pleasure (p44).

Koster says games are boring when they present no cognitive challenge (p42). "Fun is just another word for learning" (p46).

Prensky, on the other hand, cites games as an addiction of the type parodied in Koster (cartoon, p97, 99): Prensky cites a log of EverQuest that recorded 126 hours of playing in a week (leaving fewer than 42 hours 6 hours a day for sleeping, eating, personal hygiene, etc.). He begins his chapter discussing people who find games addictive: his wife, a plane passenger, a "40ish operations technology manager at Bankers Trust." But he also consistently calls learning without bells and whistles boring.

This difference reflects motivation, which Koster and Prensky seem to fundamentally differ on. Prensky seems to believe it must be external. He describes a training simulation, saying "This may work – assuming you care enough about your job and the program to want to actually practice it and get the right answers. But it typically still feels like *training*" [emphasis in original]. There is little room in Prensky's world for people to be adults. I suspect that almost everybody's job appears at most levels, to be boring to others. I write. My husband teaches. A friend juggles hospital beds, doctor demands, and patient needs. A dental hygienist has a never-changing view of the same 32

teeth, in varying states of decay, day in and day out. (Ugh.) If we cannot be motivated to train for these jobs (inherently more interesting and varied than actually doing the jobs), we cannot possibly be expected to perform them. Yet we do, because as adults, our motivation comes from internal sources: shipping the 100-page grant application, feedback from a student we reached, knowing that we managed demands of large hospital and exacting physicians, or improving the quality of lives. Or motivation comes from economic reality: work is the most tolerable thing we can do to support the standard of living we find acceptable. These motivations have no place in Prensky's world.

Koster, however, groks motivation. He cites accomplishment as a form of fun. He does not look for external motivation, even ascribing it to evolutionary forces: I learn, therefore I succeed. (Not at all Darwinian, but I grok what he is getting at.) Motivation is key here, and I like that Koster, unlike Prensky, seems to realize that good teachers make a difference. Good teachers can make us want to learn, just as good material can engage us and sugar coat material for those not motivated by a topic.

Understanding that not all are engaged by the same content is also important. My grocer loves his job. He greets nearly everybody who comes to his store by name, and the store has only been open since late June. I would rather have a root canal than schmooze with people all day, but Bob thrives on it. Bob is motivated to do this.

I, on the other hand, am motivated to play with words. I present the same content for different audiences. I string together lots of words to persuade people to give money. I take other people's words and incorporate them into larger collections and spend hours making the whole thing appear coherent (or not...), relevant, clear, concise. Bob, I suspect, could not handle a day in my office. Our motivations are just too different.

Prensky and Koster do find common ground, though in presentation of the material: The best teachers "make learning fun" (Koster, p46). "To keep most learners engaged you have to keep making it fun" (Prensky p216). Koster is succinct:

One wonders, then, why learning is so damn boring to so many people. It's almost certainly because the method of transmission is wrong (p46).

This is the ground educators have to mine for reform: learners do not need learning to be hidden from them. This is a dead-end route, where learners with the attitude of "Teach me, I dare you" are taught by teacher with the attitude of "Ha! Fooled you into learning!" Co-evolution is a costly game of one-upmanship in which nobody can ever win.

Rather, students need to understand why learning is relevant to them. They need to learn to be internally motivated to learn. Good teachers can do this. Prensky's teachers, however, are boring, unhip people bent on lectures and testing. Koster, for all his comic book approach, groks a better way.

End aside: Prensky seems to have a hard time keeping games and reality straight. He actually strings together the phrase "authentic sales-call role-play" (p215).