

## Fun and Gameplay

*Review of Prensky, M. (2002) The Motivation of Gameplay, the real twenty-first century learning revolution, On the Horizon, Vol 10 No 1 pp 5-11*

This review article examines a topic close to my heart. I believe that fun is a motivator of happiness, leading to greater interaction, motivation, reward for both student and staff. Although the context of Prensky's (2002) article is a discussion relating to e-learning or computer based learning - the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning revolution - the notion of learning through gaming and fun is just as relevant to classroom-based activities through the enhancement of motivation.

Prensky suggests that fun is applicable to the learning environment due to the need for students to be motivated. 'Learning requires effort', it is painful, and the motives of students are not the joy associated with the engaging content of lectures, but rather 'intrinsic goals and extrinsic rewards, combined with psychological factors such as fear and the need to please'. Surely students should get up and go to class because they want to and look forward to it?

Prensky contrasts study with the outcomes and characteristics of video gaming, namely the rewards of scores, prestige and prizes, and the engaging nature of games, particularly interactive games, referred to as 'flow'. If only students would put as much effort into their studies as they do computer games! Learning hurts, games are fun and engaging; the game designer must keep the learner engaged; the educator must decide whether the learning process is to be a painful and rigorous one (the academic 'rite of passage'), or become more 'learner centred and fun'.

Although fun may relax the learner, enabling to the learner to become more receptive and 'put forth effort without resentment', Prensky places caution over the language of fun, the duality of meaning. Is fun perceived as amusement, or is it ridicule, cheat, trick or sexual? The connotation could be confusing for the learner and the educator: 'proponents of fun learning relate fun to enjoyment and pleasure – opponents relate fun to amusement and ridicule'. Do academics want to risk an atmosphere of frivolity in their classrooms? Prensky goes as far as to suggest that a 'quasi-religious double standard' might exist if fun was introduced into classrooms - the purity of education mixed with the sin of fun.

To achieve Gameplay, educators must learn from game designers their strategy to keep the learners engaged and motivated. Fun Gameplay is about 'doing, thinking and decision making'; motivation is about the physical, intellectual and emotional challenge; and Gameplay is about just the right amount of 'eye candy' to maintain attention.

Prensky's case for Gameplay has several implications for learning in higher education. Gaming should be more sophisticated than techniques suggested by Prensky. Introducing 'uncertainty' into lectures, for instance, is an unfair game to play with students, particularly those who are vulnerable or have special needs. Gameplay should be mindful of inclusion and the enhancement of the learning cycle by offering an opportunity for reflection and action planning, in addition to enhancing the concentration curve.

Fun will not be effective in large-group lectures due to the manageability of the group size. It is probably best used in small-group simulations and gameplay within a seminar context.

Fun will assist deep learning and the 'active experimentation' dimension of Kolb's Learning Cycle. It will help to realise the principles of Constructivism by creating opportunities for experiential learning and reflection within the group environment. Fun will match the 'convergent' and 'accommodative' learning styles suggested by Wolf and Kolb (cited by Fry *et al.*, 2003). It will allow practical application of ideas and plans and involve students in new experiences. However, while Fun might appear to support learning theories and learning styles, caution in its use must be exercised.

Does fun really influence motivation or in-class concentration? In an evaluation of the use of humour in corporate learning, Thomas & Al-Maskati (1997) highlight the traditional 'dominant position' of the teacher in a learning environment. Injecting fun into the classroom might undermine this hierarchy because 'pupils may reject their role and combine together to disrupt the classroom process' (Delamont 1983 cited by Thomas & Al-Maskati). A converse situation that they cite is the study by Salisbury and Murcott (1992) of maintenance of attendance at adult evening-class. In the face of overarching need to retain students, tutors relied extensively on fun in order 'please the students'. The need for lecturers to consistently develop fun activities for the students may lead to creative exhaustion.

Okan (2003) quotes Buckingham and Scalon (2000) to define this less didactic lecturing genre as 'Edu-tainment' and questions whether learning should be fun, noting the comment by Bloom and Hanych (2002) that 'if students are not enjoying themselves, they are not learning'. It is their assertion that fun and entertainment does not promote learning; 'it trivialises the learning process'.

Other evidence disputes such a conclusion. University is akin to the workplace. Ford *et al.* (2004) examined the importance of fun in the workplace and concluded that 'the most important benefits of fun workplaces are increased commitment (loyalty, dedication, low turnover)' in addition to the elevation of levels of 'enthusiasm, satisfaction, creativity and communication...and group cohesiveness'. Used wisely, fun and gameplay could perhaps enhance our students' engagement and learning.

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## **References**

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