

Prensky, Gee, and Educational Video Games

by John W. Rice

[Column 6 for Converge Online; Spring, 2006]

I had the great pleasure of attending the Texas Computer Educators Association ([TCEA](#)) conference again this year. If you've never heard of the TCEA [conference](#), think of the National Educational Computing Conference ([NECC](#)) on a state scale ... a big state. TCEA draws in thousands of teachers, professors, school administrators, techies, and vendors from all over Texas and elsewhere. The Austin Convention Center is filled the second week of February with booths, presentations, lectures, dinners, and general hobnobbing as some of the biggest names in educational technology mingle with thousands who work in the field.

On one of the TCEA listservs, a conversation started several months ago surrounding a critic's diatribe against the use of technology in Texas schools. I pointed the group to Marc Prensky's famous article "[Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants](#)," and suggested the critic sounded like a digital immigrant. In Prensky's classification, such folks have trouble adapting to newer technologies. They retain an "accent," and do things like print out e-mails, or calling to check and make sure a recipient got their most recent message. Most adults over 40 or so probably retain an accent to some degree. Meanwhile, young students tend to be digital natives, fluent and accent-free with the latest technologies. These students have no qualms maximizing the use of technology for work, social, recreational, and educational purposes. Prensky asserts their brains are wired differently.

Along with several articles, Prensky wrote a book entitled [Digital-Game Based Learning](#). Released in 2001, the book opened the eyes of many in education and industry as it detailed what was being done in the fast-growing realm of instructional video games.

Prensky served as a [keynote](#) at NECC in 2005, and sometime after the listserv conversation TCEA folks invited him to speak at the Texas conference. Prensky spoke [twice](#) at TCEA '06. The first was the same presentation he delivered at NECC '05: "Engage Me or Enrage Me." The gist of this presentation is that engagement trumps content. A teacher cannot reach students with significant content until they are engaged. Unfortunately for traditional teachers, Prensky says, multimedia content and the high tech tools students use have exploded in recent years. Traditional schooling operates on a much lower level when centered around paper worksheets and teacher lectures.

His second presentation was based on his forthcoming book, *Don't Bother Me, Mom — I'm Learning: Video Games Are Preparing Your Kids for 21st Century Success*. In this presentation, I was intrigued to find him pulling in quotes from the realm of research. Among others, he brought up the most famous scholar to promote the idea of video games for classroom use: James Paul Gee. Dr. Gee wrote a highly influential book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, and its publication in 2003 created a [stir](#) in the academic realm.

Additionally, Prensky mentioned the book, [Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever](#) by John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade. Published by Harvard Business School

Press, the book details results from a survey that indicated superior work practices among habitués of video games.

Pulling academic research into the argument for instructional video games is good (I say this speaking as something of an academic myself). “Show me the research” is a popular mantra among jaded teachers who have watched one instructional fad after another peak and crash over the years. Whilst promoting one method or tool or technology, nothing lends more gravitas to ones assertions than pulling in published research.

As a businessman, Prensky has struck me in the past as more concerned about making things work than with research. This is not a bad thing, especially for those in the “real” world. His business, Games2Train.com, is focused on providing learning objectives for workplaces and schools through electronic games. Academic researchers arguably are more interested in experimenting and discussing theory than in meeting the deadlines and expectations of the business world. Interestingly, Prensky took Gee to task in a [review](#) of Gee’s book shortly after it came out. Although supportive of Gee’s research, Prensky fussed at Gee for using argot. This, Prensky maintained, tends to obfuscate the practicality of educational video games for those outside the academy.

Still, applications of new technologies in the classroom almost always have their research foundations in the academy, argot and all. The practice of using the technology often runs ahead of the research, partly due to the time required to get the research approved, done, and published. In the case of games for classroom use, however, the opposite seems to hold true. It seems researchers fancy the idea of using video games for instructional purposes, but face trepidations teachers, administrators, and parents tend to hold regarding the notion.

So scholars have turned to advocacy, trumpeting the potential video games hold for education. Professors such as [Joel Foreman](#) have written about the nascent “[revolution](#)” in educational instruction through the use of video games. Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins have written several articles on video games for educational use, including an [influential one](#) appearing in the journal *Insight* which discussed much of the research in the field. Even a columnist I know has written two or three on the topic, one of which focuses on research-based evaluation [criteria](#) teachers can use to assess the suitability of video games for classroom use.

So is there a conflict between practitioners and researchers when discussing video games in the classroom? Perhaps one may be symbolized by Prensky, and the other by Gee. But I suspect both camps are ultimately on the same side. After all, engaging students in education remains a top priority for all of us. In the meantime, Prensky and others will continue presenting at ed tech conferences. Teachers will continue trying out new technologies and electronic instructional strategies in the classroom. Researchers will continue researching what the teachers are doing, and making suggestions as to what they ought to be doing. And I’ll keep going to TCEA. Hope to see y’all in Austin next year.

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