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WORKPLACE
Just Don't Shoot the Client

How do you train Nintendo-generation workers?

By Michael Meyer

Marc Prensky's epiphany came during a routine airline flight. "Everyone was sitting there, laptops open, playing solitaire. 'How could we make this useful?' I wondered." And so a business was born. Prensky, 52, is a vice president of human resources at Bankers Trust in New York --and founder of Corporate Gameware, the bank's interactive-learning subsidiary. His improbable mission: to bring the excitement of Nintendo and computer gaming to what he calls the needlessly "dry and boring" world of executive training.

Zap! Pong! Crash! Blam! The noisy fun coming from his computer might sound misplaced in the moneyed hush of a Wall Street bank. But brace yourself. Prensky's unorthodox methods of teaching young business people the rules of corporate life may soon be coming to a workplace near you.

Since his moment of inspiration, five years ago, Prensky has produced a dozen training games for Bankers Trust (and other clients) covering everything from derivatives trading to policies on sexual harassment. They range from simple card games and quizzes to twitch-speed extravaganzas modeled on Doom and Quake, the hugely popular PC games. His version of solitaire, among other things, tests employees on the arcana of administering Windows. In Straight Shooter, players negotiate their way through a 3-D maze of streets and offices in different cities of the world, zapping villains and winning points by offering answers to typical problems their clients might face. It sounds a bit hokey, but clients say it works. Prensky explains: "Do you think people thoroughly read those three-inch- thick employee manuals? Forget it! If you want people to learn everything they need to know for their jobs, you sometimes have to divert them."

For a Nintendo generation of younger workers, fun is often associated with computers and fast-paced videogames. Prensky's innovation is to meld that fun with business to create better and more engaging training programs. He's got company, of course. Organizations from the U.S. Marine Corps to university business schools have in recent

years discovered the education value of interactive computer simulations. But Prensky is going further.

Take his latest creation, commissioned by a California company, CadLab, as a tool for teaching industrial engineers how to use its new 3-D design software. The Monkey Wrench Conspiracy, as it's called, features an intergalactic secret agent (the user) dispatched to deep space to rescue the Copernicus station from alien hijackers. To succeed, he must design everything he needs for the job, starting with a simple trigger for his gun. Along the way there are spacewalks, bad guys and booby traps. If your designs are flawed, you die.

Joe Costello, chairman of CadLab, considers the game critical to getting designers to learn and adopt his software. He interviewed dozens of "computer-based training" firms, most of which offered to do little more than put a manual on the company Web site. "Turning the training into a game--and a good one--just wowed us," he says. Tom Cernikovsky, vice president for information services for Reuters, which uses Gameware's technology to train its foreign-exchange specialists, calls it "very cool stuff," adding that the games are also useful in ascertaining "what people know--and don't know." A little fun, it turns out, can go a long way toward narrowing the gap.