


Serious Play: How the World's Best Companies Simulate to Innovate

By Michael Schrage



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Successful innovation demands more than a good strategic plan; it requires creative improvisation. Much of the "serious play" that leads to breakthrough innovations is increasingly linked to experiments with models, prototypes, and simulations. As digital technology makes prototyping more cost-effective, serious play will soon lie at the heart of all innovation strategies, influencing how businesses define themselves and their markets. Author Michael Schrage is one of today's most widely recognized experts on the relationship between technology and work. In *Serious Play*, Schrage argues that the real value in building models comes less from the help they offer with troubleshooting and problem solving than from the insights they reveal about the organization itself. Technological models can actually change us--improving the way we communicate, collaborate, learn, and innovate. With real-world examples and engaging anecdotes, Schrage shows how companies such as Disney, Microsoft, Boeing, IDEO, and DaimlerChrysler use serious play with modeling technologies to facilitate the collaborative interactions that lead to innovation. A user's guide included with the book helps readers apply many of the innovation practices profiled throughout. A landmark book by one of the most perceptive voices in the field of innovation.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Recall the old saying about all work and no play making Jack a dull boy? World-class companies today need play--serious play--if they want to make truly innovative products, argues Michael Schrage, an MIT Media Lab fellow and *Fortune* magazine columnist. In *Serious Play* he writes, "When talented innovators innovate, you don't listen to the specs they quote. You look at the models they've created." Whether it's a spreadsheet that tests a new financial model or a foam prototype of a calculator, what interests Schrage is not the model itself, but the behavior that play--be it modeling, prototyping, or simulation--inspires.

Schrage examines the approaches to successful prototyping at companies such as AT&T, Boeing, Microsoft, and DaimlerChrysler and describes the kind of culture that's needed for encouraging innovation. In the last chapter, he lays out the 10 rules of serious play, including: Be willing to fail early and often; know when the costs outweigh the benefits; know who wins and who loses from an innovation; build a prototype that engages customers, vendors, and colleagues; create markets around prototypes; and simulate the customer experience. Well-written and inspiring, *Serious Play*, is a first-rate user's guide for managers, project leaders, and other innovators. --*Dan Ring*

From [Booklist](#)

At such firms as Walt Disney, Microsoft, 3M, Sony, and Hewlett-Packard, serious play is serious work. Schrage, a research associate at MIT Media Lab and columnist for *Fortune*, sets out to explore "serious play," which he defines as creative improvisation in corporations. Serious play is taking place worldwide, and it uses such "toys" as models, simulations, and prototypes. With the development of sophisticated technology, the distinction among these three toys has blurred, and they all are used as an effort to recreate some aspect of reality that matters; their real value is the insight they provide an organization. The irony of innovation in any field, especially the most competitive, is that you can't be a serious innovator unless you are willing to play--which means seriously investing in the challenge of confronting the uncertainties that future markets will bring by rigorously questioning and revising the rules. This is a "must read" book. *Mary Whaley*

Review

In the late 1970s, a young Harvard Business School student figured there had to be a better way to crunch mergers-and-acquisitions numbers than manually recalculating them on printed ledger sheets. The grad student was Dan Bricklin, and his quest for a better way led to the creation of VisiCalc, the first electronic spreadsheet. Within five years, all Harvard MBA students used spreadsheet software.

Within a decade, low-cost spreadsheets had launched what Michael Schrage, author and codirector of the MIT Media Lab's eMarkets Initiative, calls "the largest and most significant experiment in rapid prototyping and simulation in the history of business." According to Schrage, it also helped kick off the personal-computer era, spawned the mergers-and-acquisitions boom of the late 1980s and made Michael Milken and legions of Wall Street analysts and traders rich.

Spreadsheets are one example of the simulations, prototypes and models that fill Schrage's newest work, *Serious Play*. Because spreadsheet software is so well known, Schrage devotes an entire chapter to it to illustrate his core idea: that a company dominates its industry when it designs prototypes quickly and

frequently, and when it uses its innovations to continually transform itself and its relationships with customers and suppliers. Microsoft, Boeing, Royal Dutch/Shell, Disney and Netscape all are masters of what Schrage calls "rapid prototyping."

If you crack open Serious Play thinking you'll get a breezy read, you'll be disappointed. Schrage's writing is intellectually dense, though not impenetrable. He defines play as "improvising with the unanticipated in ways that create new value." Companies play when they run simulations to test what changing the shape of a widget will do to the weight of an automobile, or when they model what lowering the price of software will do to sales.

Schrage argues that while prototypes and simulations are valuable in supporting an organization's existing behaviors, they're more valuable when they turn up surprises. After airline industry deregulation, for example, NASA investigated pilot fatigue. Instead of finding that well-rested pilots flew better, researchers were surprised by simulations that showed pilots who'd worked together several shifts in a row responded better under stressful flight conditions than fresh crews.

Prototypes aren't immune to failure. Companies can shoot themselves in the foot by creating elaborate prototypes then ignoring what they've learned. In a classic example from the late 1960s, Sun Oil built an incredibly sophisticated corporate financial model, but it was so complicated managers never used it. Even worse, companies that fail to question the underlying assumptions of their prototypes wind up with products no one will buy.

How does Schrage relate his theories to the Internet Economy? Unfortunately, he leaves it up to them to draw their own conclusions. However, it's not hard to see Schrage's culture of rapid prototyping happening all over the Web. The Web has become the world's biggest prototype laboratory, with companies slapping on features as quickly as possible to gauge consumer reaction, test revenue models and even figure out which business they should be in. [See Schrage's Jan. 31 column "(Serious) Playtime."]

It's also easy to see how the Web has led to what Schrage calls prototype "Christmas trees," products that designers keep adding features to because they can, not because customers want them.

Schrage closes with a few pointers that dot-com companies would be wise to follow, especially if they don't have cultures that support formal modeling or simulation. Before jumping into a project, understand who the beneficiaries of prototypes or models are: customers, the marketing department or the CEO? Don't be afraid to fail. Outline how prototypes will be integrated into commercial products. Above all, play. This is serious advice from a master on the subject. -- *From The Industry Standard*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Herman Ovalle:

This Serious Play: How the World's Best Companies Simulate to Innovate book is just not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you have by reading this book is information inside this reserve incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper you actually read a lot of

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