

Serious Play

Much to the surprise of the organizational man, play is turning out to be the key to business. According to research by Michael Schrage, uncertainty is the only sure thing in business, and the way to confront uncertainty is by "serious play." A business engages in serious play when it constructs electronic spreadsheets and fiddles with alternatives, or when it can produce rapid prototypes, or assemble large-scale virtual models—all in order to reduce uncertainty. Fast-and-dirty demos, pilot programs, beta releases and scenarios are yet other ways of managing mistakes and learning. The genius of this book is that it focuses on the cultural consequences of simulations, and pays equal attention to the many ways in which models fail, or mislead their makers. Schrage sums up by saying, "The central thesis of this book is that organizations manage themselves by managing their prototypes."

—KK

Even the simplest simulations can yield counterintuitive insights. The message is that model surprise may be even more important than model affirmations.

The value of prototypes resides less in the models themselves than in the interactions—the conversations, arguments, consultations, collaborations—they invite.

The conventional interpretation—in science, academia, and business alike—is that we build "virtual worlds" to better understand the problem to be solved or the opportunity to be exploited. This is accurate without being true. The real reason we need to build and seriously play with prototypes is to get a better understanding of ourselves and our priorities.

It is increasingly apparent how often people are lured into creative collaborations by "charismatic prototypes"—prototypes that invite participation and enhancement.

"I've learned that you learn far more about an organization from what they won't model than from what they do." Asserts political scientist Garry Brewer... "Organizations frequently leave out the very assumptions that are most important or most threatening to their sense of themselves."

Most organizations wouldn't hesitate to videotape a customer focus group interacting around a new product prototype. But how many design teams videotape themselves interacting around their proposed innovation?

Serious Play

How the World's Best Companies Simulate to Innovate

Michael Schrage
1999, 244 pages
\$27.50
Harvard Business School Press



All-Star Games

From All-Star Youth Leaders

One of the things I picked up from the Japanese was their appreciation for group games. My initial response to join a bunch of Japanese adults playing clapping games at a youth hostel was "No way. That's for kindergartners!" But once I gave into the hilarity, it was the most fun I had had in years. Good clean fun seems in short supply these days, but one place it prospers is in "youth ministries" at churches. Youth leaders have the job to keep American teenagers engaged, responsible, helpful, generous, and highly entertained, without demeaning others. The games included in this book are the best games some of the best youth leaders know. Because they are church ministries there is a small amount of church lingo, but mostly the "all-stars" trot of some very funny and high-spirited games that will work for anyone. The selections range from competitive photo scavenger hunts to New-Games-style encounters with no "winners." These were all designed for teenagers, but good clean fun is highly contagious among adults, too.

—KK

All-Star Games

From All-Star Youth Leaders

Mikal Keefer and Bob Buller
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\$15
Group Publishing
www.grouppublishing.com



Blackout Musical Chairs

Play this game in a completely dark room. If you can't darken your meeting area, have kids play blindfolded. Set up a circle of chairs, all facing out. Place one less chair in the circle than you have kids in the game. Tell kids that they'll be playing Musical Chairs...with a twist. Unlike regular Musical Chairs, this version is played in the dark.

Ask kids to form a circle around the circle of chairs and to stand with their arms folded across their chests. When the music starts, kids are to march slowly around the circle in the clockwise direction while maintaining the crossed-arm position. When the music stops, kids will have five seconds to find a chair. Anyone still standing or sitting on someone else after five seconds will be eliminated from the game.

Bob in the Basin

This game will create memories for your kids, especially if you bring a camera and take pictures of the contestants. To prepare for the game, find a new toilet. Toilets are surprisingly inexpensive at builders-supply stores or department stores, or you can borrow a toilet from a local plumber or plumbing-supply store. Make sure the toilet is completely clean and then seal the trap with duct tape or an easily removed plug—the toilet needs to hold water in the bowl. Set the toilet in your meeting room before kids arrive. Then cut the bottom out of the cardboard box and set it over the toilet. Make absolutely certain no one knows what's in the box until you're ready to reveal the secret. When the kids arrive, have them form two teams. Explain that teams will compete in a game many of them played as children: Bobbing for Apples. Show the apples you'll be using and assure the kids that you have towels for drying their hair. Explain that, just as in the usual game, kids must grab the apples with their teeth or lips—no hands!—and lift them from the water.

If everyone understands the rules, remove the cardboard box to reveal that kids will be bobbing for apples in a toilet. Pause a few seconds, giving kids a chance to reconsider. Don't force anyone to participate, but remind kids that their team has a better chance of winning if everyone on the team participates.

It is essential that you have an absolutely new, unused, never installed toilet for this game. Of course, you don't necessarily have to share that information with your group. It adds a certain elegance to the game if—as kids participate—you hint broadly that you picked up the toilet at a very reasonable rate when the old city bus station closed.

Christmas Wish List

Photograph as many of the items listed below as you can in thirty minutes:

- a package wrapped in red ribbon
- an aluminum Christmas tree
- a yard display featuring Santa and the homeowner hugging Santa
- a wrapped package that looks like a bike
- a person drinking eggnog
- a team member posing with the wise men in a nativity scene
- someone wearing a Santa Claus hat
- a member of your group sitting on Santa's lap
- someone you don't know with a candy cane hung on his or her ear
- someone your group doesn't know holding a Christmas stocking
- someone you don't know kissing a team member under mistletoe
- a child in pajamas decorating a Christmas tree
- Christmas stockings hung by the chimney with care
- a reindeer
- a bathroom that's been decorated for Christmas
- a stranger performing "The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies"
- someone you don't know holding two Christmas cards

Kings of the Mountain

Ask kids how many of them have played King of the Mountain. The idea of that game is to see who can claim the top of a pile and then kick and throw off any challengers. Explain this is a cooperative version of King of the Mountain. Instead of seeing how many people one person can toss off, the goal is to see how many kids can simultaneously stay on top of or in a certain space.

- Sofas can hold far more people than you might expect. The usual safety concerns about keeping the sofa firmly planted on the ground apply – but any sofa that has made it into a youth room has plenty much sagged to capacity already.
- How many kids can fit into a phone booth? Note: Do not close the door! For an even greater challenge, use a cellular phone to call the booth after your kids have packed themselves in! (You got the number first, didn't you?)
- How many kids can get at least part of their bodies into a Hula Hoop? Count fingers, toes, ears – whatever. Better yet, how many kids can fit into a Hula Hoop so that their bodies don't touch the ground outside? Encourage kids to link arms so that their bodies hold each other in the Hula Hoop.