



Knowledge Games: How Playing Games Can Solve Problems, Create Insight, and Make Change

Schrier, Karen
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016

Book Review

Tags: collaborative learning | epistemologies | games | pedagogy of play

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The first section of this book is devoted to working through the complex definition of what constitutes a “knowledge game,” and more specifically, what does not. Schrier’s book is a substantial literature review of the vast – and rapidly growing – field of games that contribute to knowledge production. “Knowledge games,” by her definition, are “the set of practices, contexts, designs, and relationships that emerge from and around those games with a goal or sub-goal of generating new knowledge about humanity, society, the universe, and any previously unknown phenomena” (26). In contrast to games such as “citizen science games,” “crowd games,” “collective games,” “participatory games,” and “human games,” Schrier takes great care to delineate that she is exploring only those games which seek to produce knowledge, solve authentic, applicable problems, and/or “generate new ideas and possibilities for real world change” (25).

A few of the games she examines include those she designates as “cooperative contribution games” (*Happy Moths*, *Citizen Sort*, *Reverse the Odds*), “analysis distribution games” (*VerbCorner*, *Who Is the Most Famous?*, *IgnoreThat!*, *Apetopia*), “algorithm construction games,” (*The Restaurant Game*, *Foldit*, *EteRNA*, *The SUDAN Game*, *Which English?*), and “adaptive-predictive games” (*SchoolLife*), although she notes this final category is not yet robust, being instead “the next frontier of knowledge games” (30-31).

The second section of Schrier’s book tackles the challenging question of “why” knowledge games. That is, in what ways might knowledge games contribute to problem-solving? What kinds of motivation to play exist within these games, which are often produced very cheaply and without access to the million dollar production budgets of games in the entertainment

world? Further, to what degree is social interaction nurtured or constricted by such games? Schrier acknowledges that these are complicated questions that require deeply contextual responses. She does not really offer answers, instead choosing to sketch out a brief summary of relevant research findings that point to principles related to motivation and games.

The final section of this book turns towards “perspectives, potentials, and pitfalls” to be found in the midst of knowledge games. While Schrier draws on significant theorists and wider literatures here (for example, Lave and Wenger, Jenkins, Benkler, Gee) she only lightly engages issues of ethics, and leaves entirely untouched pragmatic questions of pedagogy.

This book is not likely to be of much interest to people teaching in the fields of religion or theology, with the limited exceptions of those for whom shared knowledge creation in the midst of significant amounts of data are of pressing concern, or those for whom games are a specific focus. In that case Schrier’s appendices, where she lists categories of knowledge games along with examples, and where she enumerates a significant set of design principles, will prove useful. Aside from those small exceptions, this book is not likely to be pertinent to the readers of *Teaching Theology and Religion*.

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