Book Reviews

ELIZABETH ZWICKY, WITH SAM STOVER

Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us

Daniel Pink
Riverhead Trade, 2011. 272 pp.
ISBN 978-1-59-448480-3

It is a coincidence that this book and *Gamification* showed up in the same lot of books to review, but it is in most ways a happy coincidence, precisely because they come at things from pretty much opposite directions. *Drive* is about inherent motivation, doing things because they are worth doing. *Gamification* is about extrinsic motivation, offering people prizes in the hope that they will do things. Before you decide that gamification is the way you want to go, it's worth paying careful attention to *Drive*'s section on when straightforward reward systems make sense.

Drive is a convincing explanation of why working with rewards and threats is not an effective way to get great results; it ties nicely to other books I've recommended (there's a pleasant synergy with Carol Dweck's work on mindsets, for instance). It is, for me, just on the acceptable side of breathless enthusiasm and catchy naming schemes, although, frankly, "Motivation 3.0" does make me wince; if your tolerance for management-speak is low, *Drive* may be over the line. On the other hand, if you want to try to convert traditional managers of your acquaintance to a less controlling style, it's likely to be palatable to them. It should also be very useful if you are a non-controlling manager in a work environment where that's not the norm, and you need some way to get a stamp of approval for what may be seen as letting your people run wild.

The Economics of Software Quality

Capers Jones and Olivier Bonsignour
Addison Wesley, 2011. 559 pp.
ISBN 978-0-13-258220-9

This book is much like waybread is said to be: nourishing but not particularly enjoyable. It does have moments of humor, especially if you appreciate the spectacle of well-earned academic ire, but it is repetitive, full of useful but difficult tables, and generally a slog to read. On the other hand, if you feel that what you've always wanted is a good feel for the actual data about what makes better software, particularly when building big systems, this is what you've been looking for.

Agile? It actually helps people make better software! That is, as long as you're not building anything with 10,000+ users, so all you Web companies out there, feel worried now. Almost any official standard? Will help you not be completely lousy, but will not help you excel. Lines of code? Just as stupid a measurement as you might have imagined. All those claims, with dollar amounts, of how it's cheap to fix a problem you discover in the requirements stage, but expensive once you've deployed? The authors very carefully verified that, indeed, those claims appear to have been made up, and are for many reasons nonsensical. But to the extent they are true, they imply that you should very, very carefully test your requirements—which almost nobody does.

This is fascinating meaty stuff, and really fun to think about. It's worth the trouble if the topic interests you, but it would be nice if it were somewhat less arduous.

Think Stats

Allen B. Downey
O'Reilly, 2011. 112 pp.
ISBN 978-1-44-930711-0

This is a nice, experimental approach to statistics for programming types, with good questions, real data sets, and practical instructions on how to write programs to work with statistics (in Python, which might or might not be your first choice but is at least a general-purpose programming language). Unfortunately, it's a textbook, and it has exercises. What it doesn't have is answers to the exercises. If you can do the exercises (especially if you can, but you won't if you can look the answers up), this is not a problem. For the right sort of personality, this is going to be an extremely effective way of learning basic probability-based statistics. If you want a voyage of discovery, go for it; if you were looking for more of a guided tour, pick another book.

You should also be aware that this book is going to be of much more use to you in doing hands-on statistics than it is in passing statistics exams in any other course. The programming-based methods it teaches are useful, but they are not always mainstream approaches, which is entirely intentional on the author's part.

Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps

Gabe Zichermann and Christopher Cunningham

O'Reilly, 2011. 192 pp.
ISBN 978-1-44-939767-8

This time seems to be the column for recommendations with caveats. Suppose you have a Web site, or you're about to have one, and you have determined that what you want out of life is game features, some kind of a scoring system, but you're not sure how you would do that. What do you give scores to? What are the common pitfalls? How do you implement the system? If so, this is the book for you.

This is not the book for you if you need a thoughtful discussion of when gamification is a good idea, because its discussion of this is not deep or convincing. If you want your child to eat broccoli, eat broccoli happily yourself, serve very small amounts in varied ways, repeat often in a context where experimentation is safe—or, better yet, just don't worry about it, broccoli is not a deal-breaker, there is really no need for your child to eat it, there are lots of other vegetables in the world, and if you don't do anything silly, most kids will eventually grow up to eat and enjoy broccoli. That's not really unsolicited parenting advice; that's semi-solicited gamification advice. Making broccoli-eating into a game may "work." If done well, it will probably have no long-term ill effects.

But it's a waste of your valuable time and energy at best, and at worst, it's an invitation to turn a non-issue into a struggle. What works as a way to get kids to eat broccoli involves some general principles (model the behavior you want, provide different ways of reaching the desired goal, don't fight about it) and some domain-specific knowledge (kids often don't eat broccoli because it's bitter, and bitterness is best cut by sourness or by creating sweetness, for instance by roasting—my kid eats raw broccoli with balsamic vinegar, which is sour and sweet, very happily, partly for these excellent scientific reasons and partly because she'll eat anything with balsamic vinegar on it). Fortunately, child broccoli eating is not actually a Web or mobile app, putting it outside the book's actual scope, but it is almost impossible to resist discussing once the authors bring it up.

Making something into a game often changes the context. That's fine if you were already in a superficial context, but it can be a real loss. For instance, many of your worst customer service experiences were probably created at least partially by somebody's bright idea about adding a scoring system to the customer service process. Many of your worst children-and-food nightmares were probably created by somebody deciding that they needed to win some food-related game. Any deep meaningful human interaction can be turned into a power struggle if you're not careful. I find this book's discussion of these issues far too uncritical.

I'm also annoyed by the book's tendency to mention sites as if the reader will automatically know what's being discussed. I'm supposed to go to Huffington Post just to discover what is undesirable about their badges? There couldn't be an example? There were frequent references to games or sites without quite enough context; I often mostly knew what they were talking about, but sometimes, as in the Huffington badges, I had no idea. Perhaps you can only gamify things if you already hang out on every popular gamified site and play some version of every popular game, but it seems like this could be avoided.

Ghost in the Wires

Kevin Mitnick

Brown and Company, 2011. 413 pp.
ISBN 978-0-31-603770-9

Wow. Just wow. I know the topic of Kevin Mitnick is a volatile one, but regardless of your opinion, you gotta read this book. I've never experienced an emotional rollercoaster in a technical book before—this book steps out of the ordinary and takes you for a ride. I find myself alternating between condemnation and adulation. Some parts of the story aren't pretty (or legal), but it's all interesting. For everyone who doesn't know who Kevin Mitnick is, let me give a brief overview. Back in the early '90s he was one of a small group of hackers. I don't mean to say he was a member of a small group, I mean to say that in those days there weren't that many hackers. It was a different world back then, and security was a shadow of what it is now. I've heard a lot of criticism against Kevin along the lines of "all he did was social engineer some people—big deal," and I think this book should put that line of thinking to bed. It's chock full of techno jargon and I'm amazed at the level of detail used to describe hacks that took place 15 years ago. That's not to say there isn't a lot of social engineering going on, because there is, but to say that's all he was good at is not accurate at all.

Starting at an early age with magic tricks, Kevin slowly became obsessed with outsmarting other people. Once he discovered the telephone system, starting with learning ham radio, he had found a way to couple the rush of outsmarting people with his fascination with technology. As he progressed, he began to meet other people with similar interests, which added impetus to his activities. He and his friends soon began to try to outdo each other, which meant pushing the envelope further and further. This eventually led to investigation by the FBI, which caused Kevin to go on the lam. I found this part of the book fascinating—how many people can just relocate to a different state, construct a new identity, and basically start a whole new life? Amazing.

Ultimately, Kevin was captured and incarcerated in 1995, released in 2000, and kept under supervision until 2003. It's an amazing story, and I'm not going to go into the level of detail I would normally offer in a book review, for a couple of reasons. First, I don't want to spoil anything for you, the reader. Second, I'm marginally uncomfortable doing a book review about a person and not a technology. It's Kevin's story to tell, and I'm going to let him tell it. All I can do is try to convince you that you should listen. Whatever your feelings are about Kevin, I can assure you that this book will not be a waste of your time, money, or effort.

Kevin Free.

—Reviewed by Sam Stover

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