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Jane Austen, Game Theorist



Synopsis

Game theory--the study of how people make choices while interacting with others--is one of the most popular technical approaches in social science today. But as Michael Chwe reveals in his insightful new book, Jane Austen explored game theory's core ideas in her six novels roughly two hundred years ago--over a century before its mathematical development during the Cold War. Jane Austen, Game Theorist shows how this beloved writer theorized choice and preferences, prized strategic thinking, and analyzed why superiors are often strategically clueless about inferiors. Exploring a diverse range of literature and folktales, this book illustrates the wide relevance of game theory and how, fundamentally, we are all strategic thinkers.

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Customer Reviews

This book has strong and weak points, but the good outweighs the bad if you are interested in either Austen or game theory. The best part is the careful analysis: all of the author's points about Austen's "proto-game theory" or analysis of strategic thinking are supported by references to her texts. Another thing I liked was the set of references throughout to related work (e.g. on reference dependence, novels as models for social science). There were two aspects of the book that I did not like. One is that, given the title, I did not expect so much introductory material on "folk game theory" in other literature (the musical Oklahoma!, African-American folk literature). This material certainly complements the main thrust of the book, but could have been published as a separate paper. The

other drawback was that definitions of major terms--such as how Austen would define strategic thinking--are left until relatively late in the book. These two drawbacks were personal preferences, and the book is still a worthwhile read. If you are an Austen fan you will be introduced to a new theme in her work. If you are a game theorist you may see your work in a new light. Recommended, but with the qualifications stated above.

Michael Chwe is a smart and talented economist whose multidisciplinary predilections led him to the political science department at UCLA. I know and love Jane Austen, and was skeptical of the title of this book. Indeed, I think the title is somewhat tangential to the content of the book. There are no Nash equilibria, no common knowledge assumptions, no mixed strategy solutions---all the standard fare of game theory. What Chwe has authoritatively explored is the complex back-and-forth psychological dynamics of making decisions based on psyching out what other people are thinking, and taking actions that can reverberate three or more times from one mind to another, in the search for achieving one's goals. I had not thought just how central this idea is to the Austen novels. Indeed, it may just be what makes Austen the fine novelist that she is. Chwe is always interesting and insightful. You will not learn academic game theory from this book, but you can take what you learned back to your reading of the Austen novels, and see dimensions of human behavior you may have missed in previous readings.

Definitely an intriguing examination of Jane Austen's brilliant crafting of characters. I'm generally annoyed by analysts insisting that a long-dead author meant this or that, when no one knows for sure what an author may or may not have deliberately intended, but this book doesn't presume so far. It simply renames Austen's preference for "cleverness" as "game theory." There is some technical discussion, but any liberal arts or social science readers can skim over that chapter and still understand the basics of the author's point. A great bridge between math lovers and English majors. Probably best for college-level readers, not mass-market. The author also digresses into examples completely unrelated to Austen; while African-American folk tales and civil rights strategy are illustrative and fascinating, they seem completely out of place in a book that seems intended only for Austen lovers. Overall, a thorough and enlightening read.

I was attracted to this book because I am an economist who teaches and uses game theory, and I love fiction. The book made me appreciate that the careful analysis of strategic behavior was written long before formal game theory was introduced. I found the description of communicating strategic

thinking through African American fables, like Flossie and the Fox to be especially interesting. The book also demonstrates that Austen had a richer understanding of strategy than formal game theory. This is argued persuasively in the discussion of carelessness in Austen and in real life. The careful discussion of the sources of carelessness makes the concept important for the analysis of choice and behavior. Anyone interested in better understanding human interaction, real or fictional, would find this book interesting and valuable.

I bought it for mother as present, because she is Professor of Game Theory. She was happy, since it combines one of her favorite books and her work. She said that she would argue some elements, however she found the writing very interesting for people in this subject.

The 'review choices' appear to think this is fiction. I believe it's his thesis (that's how it reads) but it's interesting, applying game theory to folklore and Jane Austin books. He does dis the men in J-A's books - but as he points out, if you're leading from a position of strength, you have less reason to need to manipulate, you just give orders.

Brilliant, amusing, and very fully substantiated. Here is criticism that really gets to grips with the novels themselves. A pleasure to read.

Lots of insightful points about Jane Austen's work came together for me as I became more familiar with the underlying themes and character motivations of her lesser known works. I also discovered new ways to look at her most popular novels. Well done!

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