

Against the Grain

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Considering Games and Gamification in Libraries & Associated Entities – How the Longing for Tabletops has Revitalized Games

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everyone the tools to say whatever they want to everyone in the world.

But the belief that if we can just get the technology right — or get the right technology — it'll finally empower our best natures and defeat our worst impulses continues to pump through the veins of the technophiles. Now we have the blockchain. And the breathless promises that it will fix the ills of the world including everything that's deficient with scholarly communication and education.

The most entertaining hype I've come across is from the **Tapscott** machine, purveyors of excitable business books since the late 80s. The latest, *The Blockchain Revolution: How the Technology Behind Bitcoin is Changing Money, Business, and the World*, imagines the technology ridding society of inequality and unfairness and empowering people in all economic strata.³ For a taste, check out the article in *Educause Review*, "The Blockchain Revolution and Higher Education."⁴ The rhetoric whipsaws between claims that the revolution is inevitable because the technology is so powerful, and warnings that we might miss out on the benefits if we don't get properly organized. All that's required is for everybody to get on board. Consultants are standing by to assist you.

To be fair, not all of the interest in blockchain is breathless hype. **Digital Science** recently announced a project to explore using blockchain to support peer review.⁵ **ORCID** is participating, as is **Nature Springer**. They're working with **Katalysis**, an Amsterdam startup that is exploring blockchain technologies "to democratize the value of online content." (Well, okay, they're a little breathless.) It makes sense for **ORCID** to explore this, since identity and trust are at the core of their mission. The rhetoric in the **Digital Science Blockchain for Research** report teeters on the edge of hype, but it is clear about the problems potentially being addressed by the technology as well as the challenges inherent in getting widespread adoption.⁶

Very far from breathless is the long, dense and sober report from the **European Commission**, *Blockchain in Education*.⁷ It cautiously concludes that, "blockchain could probably disrupt the market in student information systems and loosen the control current players have over this market." Not surprisingly, given the source, after enumerating the key areas where blockchain implementations have the potential for improving certain aspects of higher education, the authors warn, "For all this to come to be, regulation and standardisation will determine the extent and speed of progress either forward or backward." The libertarian enthusiasts who believe the blockchain will finally free us from the tyranny of centralization and governments will not be pleased. Nonetheless, the report does an excellent job of outlining the real potential for blockchain technologies in education, particularly in regard to certification and the management of intellectual property, while avoiding the hype and being realistic about the governance challenges.

Most of the enthusiastic writing about blockchain, even when it tries to rein in the hype, ignores the technical limitations — it's slow and uses obscene amounts of energy. (For a well-written and sarcastically sharp antidote to the **Tapscotts**, check out **David Gerard's** *Attack of the 50 Foot Blockchain*⁸). Read deeply into the articles and books imagining large scale transformations of social systems and it becomes clear that the core to solving the problems involves bringing people together to come to agreement on goals and desired outcomes, winners and losers, control and economics. Where the hard work of achieving consensus on difficult social problems has been done — and that certainly includes many of the issues we face in education and scholarly communication — blockchain technologies may provide helpful infrastructure (or might turn out to be superfluous). But the technology doesn't create agreement and goodwill.

It's been a little sad this week watching **Zuckerberg's** idealism being chipped at. He still believes that connecting the world is a good thing and that we'll all be better off in the long run. But it turns out that connecting us hasn't made us better people.

The blockchain hype cycle is like that. There are undoubtedly areas where the technology will help people implement solutions to particular problems. But the debates that have roiled scholarly communication for the last several decades are about goals and objectives and competing interests and visions and who gets to control what. Inserting blockchains isn't going to make it any easier for us to sort all of that out. 🐙

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Considering Games and Gamification in Libraries & Associated Entities — How the Longing for Tabletops has Revitalized Games

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About five years ago I was introducing a board game to students in a live classroom. (One of my colleagues characterizes this as a "butts in seats" class as opposed to an asynchronous online class). As I was explaining the rules to the class of 27 students, I noticed a sea of increasingly confused faces. "Sorry, **Mr. Seay**," one of the students piped up, "but I have never played a board game before." Astonished at this obvious outlier, I asked if anyone else shared his predicament. I was stunned. None of them had ever played a board game. It had finally happened. I was the "old school" guy with an 8

track tape in a room full of digital downloaders. I was officially old. It was only after I got over my shock of just being old that I was able to lament the end of the analog game era. Now, fortunately I think I was a bit premature. I am still old. But analog is back.

Today around the world in pubs and public libraries (because, what is the difference really?) people are gathered in groups of actual people around actual tables to play board and card games. In fact the board game cafe¹ — where for a \$5 cover charge a group of friends gets a table and chooses from a myriad of

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board games to play — is a growing business and business opportunity. As a board game cafe manager in Austin, Texas said, “The thing that...we hear from our customers that’s appreciated is just the sense of community.” Another cafe manager says, “Customers also welcome the chance to put down their smartphones.”²

I think it no coincidence that board and tabletop games that involve the face to face interaction of live people are now experiencing an upsurge in popularity and a renaissance of design. As this column goes to press, International Tabletop Day is about to dawn. Thousands of libraries and game and hobby shops nationwide — not to mention board game cafes — will host the play of gazillions of games on boards, games with cards, games with plastic or cardboard pieces — games that have anything that can be touched, pushed, and manipulated on a tabletop. Face to face human interaction, like old blue jeans (albeit with many more holes this time), is back in style. Analog board and card games that involve real people and synchronous live communication (with full non-verbal interpretation capability) are competitive with immersive online video games. So, why is this even happening in our very high tech society where nearly everything we do is connected to a keyboard and a computer with reality rivaling digital special effects?

We are a fully wired and social media mad world. Ironically we communicate with other human beings both near and far more often than any human has ever communicated with any other human at any other time in human history. But, we do most of this communication through email, chat, text and insta-whatever while staring at a screen and typing on a keypad in solitude.

Even more troubling is that this solitaire, techno-only communication is happening more and more within sight and touch of other human beings. This was strikingly brought to my attention last Thanksgiving as my extended family gathered around the family dining table to play a game of cards. Everyone at the table who was 25 years and younger was glued to a mobile phone and frantically texting to another human being somewhere. Or so I imagined. When two of my nephews started giggling simultaneously (and still not looking up from their screens), the realization hit me. They were texting each other. They were less than a table’s length apart, and they were texting each other! Oh, the humanity! Oh, the lack thereof.

Obviously many people are so enamored of their wireless (and distance-less) technological communication ability that they use it much more than (and sometimes in place of) face-to-face communication — even when they are face-to-face. We play in online worlds with thousands of other people from around the world and never see

a single real human face. But, lately it seems that many people immersed in this sterile, high tech bubble sometimes long for real human interaction. They want high touch with their high tech.

This term “High Tech High Touch” was first coined by **John Naisbitt** in his 1982 best seller *Megatrends*. He theorized that in a world of ubiquitous technology, people long for personal, human contact. He re-examined the concept in his 1999 book *High Tech High Touch*. **Naisbitt** said we are creating a society that is a “Technologically Intoxicated Zone” in which we are assailed with technological stimuli. **Naisbitt’s** partial list of symptoms include: “we fear and worship technology; we blur the distinction between real and fake; and we live our lives distanced and distracted.”³ He further concluded that we seek relief and meaning by buying self-help books, popping Prozac, Viagra, and other supplements. We seek a tangential connection to nature and we yearn for human to human connection.³

It would be hard to argue that **Naisbitt** did not pretty much hit the nail on the head 36 years ago as to the effect of our current state of technology. The blurring of the distinction between real and fake is particularly chilling. But, besides those who are popping Prozac and Viagra, the need to experience tactile contact is also driving “old school” high touch. I recently conducted a quick anecdotal poll revealing that even the majority of

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spike holes, tears, blood stains, stretch marks and smelled more now than when new," he wrote in comments to a *Globe* story.⁹ And while the person who buys the boots at a garage sale to get the retail back from the company likely happened and did in fact cost the company money, it is possible that these stories also encouraged people to shop there who were likely never going to return anything — like my bomber jacket.

So what does this all mean? For over 100 years, **L.L. Bean** chose their own path and set out their own identity. While retailers and manufacturers were stepping back from guarantees and warranties, **L.L. Bean** defiantly asserted that their opinion of their goods AND their customers did not change. They had as much faith in their customers as they did in the goods that they put their label on. There were definitely people who were abusing the policy. Everyone knew that, but the numbers were very small, and are likely still so. The interesting part of this story is that bad actors have driven **L.L. Bean** into a new customer service model. These bad actors forced the hand of a company that put the customer first and foremost. Now, the customer is viewed in a different light.

In our libraries, we deal with the same situations. We set up rules about how long books can circulate and what to do when the items are not returned. We establish limits on the number of items people can download or how long they can work on our public terminals. Part of this is a means of ensuring that we enable equal access to as broad a group in our community as we can. But part of these policies remain more traditional and restrictive than what we might need. As we look at our services and the limits we put on users, we should be careful that we do not set up policies that protect ourselves at the cost of our community members. One very interesting study was from **Duane Wilson, Cynthia Frazier** and **Diana Harter**

of the **Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University**. They were assessing their circulation policies and decided to explore what other comparably sized **ARL Libraries** were doing. They wrote, "After evaluating the results from this study and other internal studies, the **Harold B. Lee Library** decided to adopt some non-traditional circulation policies in order to better serve the needs of its patrons."¹⁰

They further added two excellent points in their conclusions. First, "As circulation continues to decrease in academic libraries, updating circulation policies to provide a stronger patron focus can build good will and encourage patrons to use library materials."¹¹ They go on to say: "The non-traditional methods tend to be more liberal and to provide materials to patrons with fewer constraints. The libraries who use these methods report higher patron satisfaction and no additional problems with the return and preservation of their materials. It is time for libraries to more seriously examine their circulation policies and determine if they can better meet the needs of their patrons through more generous policies." So instead of being more traditional and restrictive, we should be more liberal and flexible with our users. There will be people who abuse our policies and game these systems we set. There always are. But our rules say a great deal about our institutions and what we believe in. So we can send the wrong message when our policies can be viewed as ones that solely thwart these bad actors rather than support the majority of the users who have no ill intent. It is clear to me that if **L.L. Bean** took this approach, they would not have changed a thing. 🍄

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librarianship and the information industry. No business degree required! He may be reached at <cseeman@umich.edu> or via twitter at @cseeman.

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college students these days prefer to curl up with a real book (with real paper and cover) rather than a glowing screen. They said they liked the smell and the feel of a book better.⁴

So, is there any surprise in the mighty resurgence of analog tabletop/board games? This is an industry that many thought would be killed by the advent of video games. Sales figures for 2016 place the hobby game market (the trade name for tabletop games) at over \$1.4 billion and growing at 21%.⁵ There are even board game versions of video games. Incidentally in an ironic anti-twist there is a growing number of video games based on board games.

With this resurgence in analog high touch, it is no wonder that teachers and trainers in all fields are leveraging it to enhance and inspire their instruction. I noted in a previous column

how libraries and educators are getting into the escape room phenomenon. Libraries have always been centers for community and campus activities. This analog immersive activity is itself an even more high touch, interactive game environment than tabletop games. It seems to me that this entry into escape rooms is only a beginning and augurs well for the potential of other immersive group learning experiences like LARP and megagames. Humans, after all, create their best synergy within an actual group of intermingling humans. Go figure. Everything old is new again and fully analog interactive.

To be sure, this analog resurgence will not replace or even overshadow the digital world we have come to know and love. But, it will greatly influence and shape it even as it is becoming a place of reprieve from the digital world. I for one am happy to apply my 8 track brain where it is still useful and experienced. Though I should still upgrade my music collection to vinyl while there is still time. 🍄

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