

Against the Grain

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Considering Games in Libraries and Such – Space Guardians: New Year’s Musings of How Libraries of Old (Including but Not Necessarily Old Librarians) Have Returned Just in Time to Save Us from Digital Anxiety

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Considering Games in Libraries and Such — Space Guardians: New Year’s Musings of How Libraries of Old (Including but Not Necessarily Old Librarians) Have Returned Just in Time to Save Us from Digital Anxiety

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Column Editor’s Note: *Due to the sentimentality inducing effect of the holidays upon my usual stoic brain functions, the following narrative mostly waxes philosophical and contains little of the hard hitting technical information historically associated with my written accounts. Regular readers are encouraged to interpret this article in this light and to imagine that past columns actually contained hard hitting technical information. — JAS*

I really love it when I actually get to be a real librarian. My first week back to work in the new year involved real librarian work. It involved touching real books. Really. You remember books — those things with sensual spines and paper with words printed on them? I actually got to immerse myself in touching and interacting with them like a librarian of old — if only for an hour or two. It was a bitter sweet experience though, because my librarian colleagues and I had assembled to rummage through our print reference collection to weed out 90% of it. Alas, it was to be banished to the regular circulating collection. It seems that students and faculty of the 21st century rarely use this rich source of reference material anymore. I could be cynical here and lament about how no one uses print reference sources anymore and *Googles* everything. But, while true, the fact is that there exist many good online sources that cover much of the material previously covered by our paper reference collection. While not as tactilely satisfying as thumbing through a multi-volume set of subject encyclopedias to be sure, these online sources of course allow quicker and more searchable access. Also, these great sources are only available via our library databases. So, take THAT, *Google!*

But, while we have gained efficient access, we have given up the soothing book aroma generated by gentle browsing... along with the whole concept of browsing itself it would seem. I was at least comforted by the fact that our giant atlases have no peer in the digital realm. Still, those rows of noble books destined for even greater obscurity brought a tear to my eye. I don’t think it was just the kicked up book dust either. So, I ran my hands along the spines of those titles and occasionally picked up a bulky volume that creaked in my hand as I teased open the pages. I had never contemplated how satisfying was the act of slowly turning pages as I scanned the printed words. Great **Gutenberg’s** ghost, I really am old school! To be fair this hyper nostalgia and longing had started

two weeks before during the holiday break. Hope sprang eternal not long after.

The holidays usually fill me with a combination of gloom and thoughtful pensiveness. Some might interpret this as depression, and it certainly suggests sadness. But, I would describe this particular feeling this year as melancholy... a good melancholy. It was a time of reflection and memory and more reflection. This is a good thing to be sure I think, for I often find during these times of mental reflection that I can be quite physically productive in mundane activities such as sorting my sock drawer and going through my closet to throw out clothes I have not worn in more than two presidential administrations. My house gets cleaned up at least... mostly.

While it is a good idea to stay away from digital media in such productive times of deep reflection, the melancholy is eased — or even positively enhanced — by listening to mind soothing music or banter. Thus it was that while contemplating differential sock colors, I found myself listening to a thoughtful and stimulating podcast. Since we are now over three paragraphs into this article and I have yet to mention the word *games*, it may now come as little surprise to you that this was a podcast about games. To be precise it was a podcast that reviewed board games. It is called “*Shut Up and Sit Down*” and is hosted by three British lads from London. Because, where else would they be? In my opinion it is the best podcast about board games out there today bar none. Anyway, this is not really an advert for that podcast (though I do highly recommend it).

Binge listening to these guys humorously and methodically reviewing and dissecting board games hour after hour over several days calmed me somehow. It was downright soothing. Ok, call me retro, but the vision of cross-table, face-to-face interaction and manipulation of wooden blocks and rolling dice was actually soothing. I think that in my break from digital drowning, it satisfied a yearning for tactile stimulation. But, even more it satisfied a longing for the tactile interaction of fellow humans. Ok, chalk this up to holiday nostalgia and my overworked sense of sentimentality... and my analog obsession. After all, I still write paper checks. But, my epiphany merely

confirms the trends I have talked about ad nauseam before. It feels good to be trendy (it helps with the nausea).

In his book *Present Shock* **Douglas Rushkoff** observes that **Alvin Toffler’s** *Future Shock* is now here full blown and describes the condition he calls *digiphrenia* — digitally provoked mental chaos.

“We live in a continuous ‘now’ enabled by Twitter, email, and a so-called real-time technological shift. Yet this ‘now’ is an elusive goal that we can never quite reach. And the dissonance between our digital selves and our analog bodies has thrown us into a new state of anxiety: present shock.” (from the cover)

The resurgence of board games, indeed the whole movement back to analog (think turntables, vinyl records, and mixed cassette tapes) is a direct response to the whole information overload and immersion (drowning) in information and digital social media: *digiphrenia*. It is clear that the whole thing with libraries as new centers for community and new gathering places for human interaction is part of this trend as well. Golly, are librarians actually becoming relevant and trendy?

In the final paragraph of his book **Rushkoff** suggests that one significant thing we can do as a society as a solution to our condition of *digiphrenia* is to “stop the demands on our attention” and “create a safe space for uninterrupted contemplation” (p. 265). **Rushkoff** was speaking metaphorically, but we certainly know such a real physical place that is fast becoming just such a “safe space.” Coffee and board game cafés have sprung up to satisfy the social longing for analog contemplations and activities. But, we librarians have a three thousand year head start on these upstarts on providing the public a safe and comforting gathering place for analog ruminations. As we stock our libraries with board games and makerspaces to satisfy the social longing for such things, I think it possible that our historical role as the guardians of books will serve us well into the future. Indeed, we shall become the guardians of analog. To be sure, if analog games are enjoying such a resurging trend, can the resurgence of analog books be far behind? Combine these two trends and — Great **Gutenberg’s** ghost — we have the making of a mega trend! (Apologies to **John Naisbitt**.) Now I think I will go curl up with a good book, put on a mixed tape, and light my candles for the night. Maybe I shall even seek out the company of real fellow human beings. How positively retro. 🕯️

