

Mitchell's Musings 1-28-13: Playing Games or Serious Business?

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The recent news that the firm Atari is declaring bankruptcy is a reminder that “the latest thing” can turn out to disappoint expectations. In the 1980s, Atari – a computer game manufacturer – was seen as the latest thing. It was prominently featured in the 1982 futuristic film *Blade Runner* which envisions a technologically advance, but very polluted, Los Angeles of 2019, shown in the pictures on this page. The year 2019 is now only six years away and it is safe to say that we won't be doing routine interplanetary



travel by then or have the bio-tech knowledge to produce “replicants” who will work on other planets (except when they escape to Earth and have to be hunted down).

Not only was the name Atari prominent in *Blade Runner*, it also became prominent as a political appellation. There were “Atari Democrats,” a group of Democrats who were regarded as somehow tech-savvy and modern in contrast to old, New Deal-style Democrats.

All of this old history came to mind during a debate which is taking place at the University of California, in part thanks to California Governor Jerry Brown who has been pushing online higher education in his role as an *ex officio* Regent of the university. Brown never was considered an Atari Democrat; he served too soon when he was governor the first time in the late 1970s and early 1980s. And by the time he was back as governor in 2011, no one used that term any more.



In essence, there has been much excitement about the use of online education but varied different reasons. And, like their earlier dot-com counterparts, private firms have gotten into the online higher ed business but have yet to figure out how to make money from it. Online courses are nowadays called MOOCs for “massive open online courses,” because potentially tens of thousands of Internet users could take a course.

Many details remain unresolved, however, ranging from logistics – how do you establish identity so that the person taking the course is who he/she purports to be? – to grading – exactly who will grade tens of thousands of exams? There are issues as to how much learning occurs in a purely Internet-based course.

In short, it may be early to get excited about MOOCs or variants as solutions to the rising costs of higher education or creating greater access to higher ed. One is reminded of the radio parody by comedian Harry Shearer about “Zilch dot-com” from the height of the dot-com boom in which an entrepreneur is peddling the idea of a dot-com that does nothing but raise money for the day when it figures out something to do. (To hear about Zilch dot-com, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7xilzcYRpA>.)

One of the issues about MOOCs is that the idea actually has a long history, a history pre-dating the Internet. When I was growing up in the 1950s, if you got up early in the morning, you could tune your black-and-white TV to “Sunrise Semester,” a program that came on around 6 AM in the morning. There you would find a professor giving a learned lecture as part of a college course. There were mechanisms to register for the course, buy the textbook, and take a final exam at the end. If you passed the exam, you received college credit.



Now it’s true that TV signals don’t reach around the world the way the Internet does. But such signals in the 1950s could reach millions of potential viewers. And even before video tape became available to TV stations, kinescopes of the programs could in principle have allowed the programs to be broadcast in different regions by different stations. Never heard of *Sunrise Semester*? Take a look and learn about Proust: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_QMw6qH9k And, oh yes, when radio came along in the early 1920s, a station at Tufts broadcast college courses.¹

Over the years, the notion of video recording classes has come and gone and then returned again. In the 1970s at the UCLA management school, I can remember an effort to videotape certain classes with the idea that MBA students could just watch the tapes by checking them out of the library and then pass exams. At the time, video tape technology was becoming available and economical for business and home use – it was the latest thing. My recollection is that a good deal of money was spent on this effort. I have a dim memory that there may have been outside grants to make the tapes. (Ford Foundation?) Anyway, the tapes ended up in a draw somewhere. Students weren’t interested.

When video conferencing became more feasible in the 1990s, there was a push for “distance learning.” And, yes, UC put money into that approach, too. Students on one UC campus would be able via video conferencing to enroll in courses at another campus. But even the phrase “distance learning” seems to have vanished. Where are all of those courses now?

¹ <http://www.bostonradio.org/essays/wgi>

So is online ed – now the seeming latest thing – really going to do what *Sunrise Semester* and course video taping and course video conferencing didn't do? Or will the firms touting such online efforts end up like the many dot-coms that seemed exciting in the 1990s, i.e., defunct in the 2000s?

If there is any lesson from the dot-com era, it is that before universities jump into MOOCs and related course delivery systems, caution, patience, and limited experimentation should be the guidelines. Many dot-coms disappeared after the rush was over. But some survived. Amazon hemorrhaged money in the boom period but eventually established a viable business model. In the meantime, universities might ask themselves whether if online education is the answer, what the question is. Is it to reach people all around the world? Is it to make money by selling courses? Is it to cut the need for instructors and save money? Is it to make taking courses more convenient for students? What?

The impetus at the University of California seems to be about saving money. But exactly how much money might be saved seems not even to have been guesstimated at this point. It has been said that rising tuition and increased student debt loads are on an unsustainable trajectory nationally and that there is a higher ed “bubble” developing which will eventually burst. It would be ironic – if that view turns out to be true – that what might well be another bubble is seen as the solution.

Obscured by the excitement about MOOCs and such is the fact that universities and university faculty have not shied away from use of technology for courses and other purposes. Faculty members have websites, communicate with each other and with students by email, show videos and PowerPoint slides in class, etc. Students register for course online and have electronic records. And all of these developments have occurred as tuition and student debt loads rose, in part to pay for the new technology.

It's time to take a deep breath and let the online delivery of courses evolve.