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The Technology Enhanced Conference - A Board Game!

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Abstract

ITMEDIA at the University of Copenhagen have been working with taking the academic conference online for years. Streaming events, using backchannel chat systems and Twitter, producing introductory pre-event videos, setting up audio debates with keynotes to enrich and prolong the conference, and the sharing of knowledge beyond the event days.

But how can we help the organizers and participants realize the potential of an interactive conference? Because let's face it: the easier choice is to leave out the technology enhancement and stick with the well-known conference format.
We came up with a visual aid: turning it into a board game simply called The Conference Game. By making a children's board game, we let organizers play around with the options, get an overview – and the game element makes it just a little bit less dangerous, and more fun to play around with new technologies. Reception has been great, and maybe the board game can be used for other areas, where one needs to communicate complicated options for technology enhanced events or teaching and support organizers in making good choices.

Keywords

The Challenge

ITMEDIA at the University of Copenhagen have been working with taking the academic conference online for years. Streaming events, using backchannel chat systems and Twitter, producing introductory pre-event videos, setting up audio debates with keynotes to enrich and prolong the conference, and the sharing of knowledge beyond the event days.

But the challenges are many: Faculty have very different levels of ICT skills and IT-fluency – and even the ones well-versed in technology usually aren't familiar with all the different technologies – and especially the social media are alien to most. Those organizing a conference have a lot on their plate already – and quite a few have never done it before. So how do we help the organizers and participants to realize the potential of an interactive conference? Because let's face it: the easier choice is to leave out the technology enhancement and stick with the well-known conference format.

Organizing an interactive conference (with for both online and "offline" participation) is complicated. Most organizers are not aware of their options, what the gains may be, and they are faced with making choices about technologies they are not familiar with.

As the faculty's unit for e-learning (in the widest sense: audio, video and social media in education and research communication) ITMEDIA needs to communicate the many possibilities, make organizers aware of the deadlines involved, the additional tasks (like marketing the live stream in advance, or keeping a twitter account alive). Generally helping the organizers succeed and avoid any unnecessary mistakes or blunders.
But overwhelming already busy people with a ton of information, explanations of various tools and social media services tends to scare most people off, rather than help them. Also, there is a great need to communicate the possible gains: Why go through all that trouble?

To facilitate this process, and make it easier to get it right in the planning period, ITMEDIA came up with a simple plan – let's make a board game! Move along the board and get advice on what to do, in which order – get to move extra fields ahead when you're doing well, or get sent straight to prison if you forget to ask for permissions before you publish your keynotes!

The board game boils all the choices down to one: Would you like to play? If so, then we will guide you through the board safely, and help you make your conference interactive.

The full learning potential of a conference

Let's take a step backwards and look at the conference, and it's benefits. Conferences are a well-proven way of sharing knowledge in the academic world. Papers and presentations are recognised as a means of sharing academic knowledge, even though this could be done online nowadays, academics still travel to attend conferences all over the world. The reason being that the conference is not only a formal exchange of knowledge (in the form of papers and presentations) but also a great opportunity for informal sharing of knowledge and networking. You might strike up a conversation with the keynote during the coffee break, or have a great debate with your fellow conference participants over lunch.
In learning terms, one might say that the presentations and papers are in line with traditional thoughts of learning, as simple knowledge transfer - whereas the informal learning through conversations, discussions and deliberations over dinner later are much more in line with learner-centred theories of learning (which ever variety of those one subscribes to).
Another difference between the classical conference keynote and the informal exchanges is the content. A keynote will

most often present (the closest possible to) certain knowledge, finished projects and results of former work. The informal exchange of knowledge will more often be about perspectives the keynote has opened, its relationship with related areas, areas to explore further, the future of the field etc.

The two types of content complement and enrich each other - but when we talk about the outcome of a conference, we're often more focused on the formal content. Yet, when we consider not going to the conference, but watching the live stream instead, most of us are aware that we are missing out on something - though we may not always be able to put our finger on what exactly we are missing out on.

The potential of an "interactive conference"

Streaming a conference will make it available to a greater audience, but to make an event interactive, we want to engage the online participants. Use their comments and feedback to the presentations as equal contributions to the conference. Create debate, sparring, discussions and joint exploration of ideas between all participants, online or offline. Create a community around the conference, so everybody feels they are part of the same event - whether they are in the auditorium, or watching at work or at home.

A live stream can transmit the presentations, but tend to only transmit the parts relying on knowledge transfer, so how do we recreate the informal learning and networking of the coffee break or the dinner conversation online, or in learning terms; how do we support learner-centred activities and learning opportunities? There is a plethora of services and tools available to support informal learning and

networking for online participants, some of the options are:

• Creating an introductory video to give a taste of the event, and help promote the event.

• Use an online forum to allow participants to meet each other in advance - see who else is attending, and maybe make connections.

• Get the unavailable keynote, by letting them participate from a different location.

• Facilitate interaction and debate by using Twitter and/or a backchannel system.

• Record debates with pairs of keynotes before or after the event - as an appetizer or a follow up to the conference.

• Collect the recorded presentations, the twitter chat, presentation slides, audio recordings and other relevant material on the conference web page.

Unlike the physical event, the online event is not limited in space or time - and many of these options take advantage of that. Organizing a conference is a lot of work, so why have only one days effect, when the fruits of the hard work can be enjoyed by the participants for months, and maybe get a long afterlife as a useful resource online.

Win fabulous prizes!

The Conference Game has prizes too! The rather long explanation above of the true benefits of the traditional conference, and the values of the online conference are presented as prizes. In ITMEDIAs folder The Conference Game is supplemented with a list of "Things you can win" - describing what the conference organizers can win if they choose to play the game:

• Further reach for your academic content: Making the conference available online makes it accessible for a much wider audience: When there are no expenses, all academic levels can participate - PhDs and students interested in the field.

• Engaged debate about the research. Not just in the allotted 10 minutes, but before, during, and after the conference online.

• Create and sustain academic interaction and networking within the field - across borders.

• Recreate the coffee break experience online, and let everyone participate in the debate.

• Supply your keynotes with a different kind of publication: Their content as video or audio.

• Allow those who can't travel due to health or finances to participate online.

• Engage otherwise silent participants. Online, there is room for everyone to voice their opinion - also those who prefer not to speak in front of a full room.

• Activate all the knowledge, remember "The smartest person in the room, is the room!"

• Turn your conference home page into a resource that can benefit students and researchers in the future.

• Create "added value" for your keynotes. When they debate their field for an audio recording, they get new input and ideas to take home - not just feedback on their own presentation.

Why a board game?

The Conference Game looks like a children's board game; full of colour, twisted roads and there's even a dragon in the lake! We're playing on the connotations of children's games: having fun, playing games, trying new things, collaborating with others etc.

A game is also a place where one can take chances without real risk and possibly win by doing it, the childish colourful world appeals to the imagination and "serious" is not the first mood that comes to mind. The connotations of play and games are very useful in dismantling preconceptions of technology being difficult and complicated, and underlining the metaphor that there are great prizes to be won.

But a board game is also a very clear visual aid outlining the route from beginning to end - making it a great way to humorously point out important deadlines and possible pitfalls to be avoided: trying to book streaming of your event the day before it takes place sends you right back to square one. By having a route the board also outlines an order of things - what needs to be done first, what can wait until later - also conveying the message that not everything needs to be decided today. Finally the board serves as a visual guide giving the organizer an overview of the options, choices and timeframe - or at least an illusion of this overview.

In terms of recent ideas of using game mechanics in education, The Conference Game is not a very elaborate game - and not necessarily meant to be played - but still there are still some game mechanics at play. A board with start and finish line does triggers our desire to get to the finish line - and completion is a widely used driver in many games.

Decision making tool

One of the problems when organizing a conference is the sheer amount of decisions to be made about academic programme, organization of peer review, name signs, lunch, webpage, the list goes

on and on. So trying to get an already busy organizer to make decisions about streaming, backchannel, hashtag, forum and a bunch of other things they've never heard of before is a tough job. And as neuroscience tells us: the more options we humans have, the worse we are at making choices. Give people more than 5-7 options and their brain panics and they tend to make really bad and irrational choices (see Lehrer: How we decide 2009). Also risk aversion plays a large role. When faced with too many choices we tend to not decide anything at all. This is not at good point of departure when you are inviting people on a journey into the unknown land of technology.

The board can function as tool to help make decisions. By delaying some decisions, it narrows the number of immediate choices - but it can also point out inherent dependencies: If you want to live stream the event, you also need to market the possibility to your potential audience or if you want to use Twitter, you need to decide on a hashtag and let people know. This can help make a more informed decision about which tools to use. Or on a larger scale narrowing it down to the one central question "Would you like to play? Then we'll give you an interactive conference".

Reception of the game

Before The Conference Game ITMEDIA tried explanations on a webpage, a form (with too many choices) and would mostly have to explain everything 1:1 with every conference organizer (a very time-consuming - and hence expensive method) - or had to turn down organizers who tried to book streaming too late in rooms without the required technical options. We're hoping the board game will minimise these problems - and while it is not the only factor in making the organization of conferences easier, the feedback so far is great.

Creating a board game called The Conference Game may just have been a funny little idea spawned by a silly remark about a really bad drawing during a brain storm - but it turned out to be a great way to reduce a process of make decisions about unfamiliar technologies to kid's play! Rather than struggling to understand many new concepts and their repercussions while trying to stay in control and not loose face by asking what may (not) be dumb questions - most conference organizers' first reaction is now: Wow, that looks exiting! A response showing a spark of interest, openness to new ideas and new possibilities, rather than the sense of being overwhelmed by too many choices and too much new technology.

Only the future will show if we get better organized, interactive conferences on a large scale at the University of Copenhagen - but The Conference Game is definitely a success when it comes to communicating complicated options for technology enhanced event and supporting organizers in making good choices. As such it may be a model for communicating similar things in the field of technology in education. It would be interesting to see if something like that could be used to introduce teachers to different ways of enhancing teaching and learning with technology