Breaking into the Fulcrum Arena:
A Concept Paper Looking Beyond Next Generation LMS

Shalin Hai-Jew
Office of Mediated Education
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS USA
shalin@k-state.edu

Abstract

In the spirit of futurist probes into what a next-gen learning management system (LMS) may look like, the author uses a sci-fi scenario to touch on some distant possibilities. This fictional work follows J4 in his quest to break into the Fulcrum Arena and emerge with the information and strategic relationships he needs to achieve mysterious aims.

This story envisions a learning space that integrates various databases, global positioning systems (GPS), and other technologies into an integrated digital enclosure. It focuses on informational elites, those who have the rawest and freshest information, vs. those who get processed versions through public channels. Here, identities are persistent and coalesced through information collected by *'bots*. The learning is all strategic, it's immersive, and it directly applies to the lived world.

Keywords: next generation learning management system, future learning, forecasting, immersive learning.

Story

Breaking into the top echelons of Fulcrum was no easy feat. It would have been much easier if the cost of entry for a young as yet un-credentialed student was about sending financial credits to an account in cyberspace. Or if it was about getting letters of recommendation from renowned professors and a record of high academic achievements. Or if it was about his parents' connections in their social club and hallway conversations. Or even a face-to-face in 3D space.

Rather, J4 had to run the virtual gauntlet. And, ironically, there was nothing to "do". Pieces of his identity from the past 27 years were now collected in his own digital dossier. His need-to-know did not justify access to his own documented past. He could not do much more to change his profile now, as any number of 'bots had been deployed to collect the pieces and to formulate his profile. Compiled from any number of sources (both public and private)—his past was analyzed by 'bots, and with some unknown formula, he was determined to be "fit" to join the Fulcrum. The arena: law. He was coming in at a high level because of his well-traveled, multicultural and connected past. The more shadowy aspects of the credentialing rankled J4, but he understood that most communities had unspoken rules of admittance, and he had to accept this as part of the price of entry. So while he didn't have the traditional credentials of a full *juris doctor* yet for this Fulcrum Arena, he would have access to most of the resources and most of the individuals in this space. Both were his targets: the hard information and the wetware, the ephemeral data, the flitting thoughts of the powerful.

His entry into the Fulcrum Arena meant that the last piece of the puzzle had been put into place, and the plan was moving into its final stages.

The Profile

J4's profile had been years in the making. He had been purposive in the information he revealed and what he concealed. His sense of personal self was deeply nestled within layers of digital cover. He had a handy mixture of digital avatars, some light cover, some deep, created for different occasions. While many around him had digital signatures online, they were not meticulously constructed ones that left the impression of an incidental sort of self. Rather, J4's career trajectory in Information Services meant that he had a smooth resume of cover companies that had hired him through the years. J4 himself was unsure of the origins of the various flows of cash that came his way. He just knew that those who employed him wanted information on potential directions in policy, and, as a law student, he would now join the Fulcrum Arena and hopefully make contact with the shadowy elite who could sway policy, delegate funds, determine R&D, move armies, and with these choices, affect millions of human lives.

Like many of his colleagues, he could affect different languages and accents. His video self could "pass" as any number of persons as long as the camera wasn't on him long. He was conversant in the mannerisms and expectations of those from other cultures, and he knew how to speak to the camera. His organization had committed many resources for his training.

At best, he would flow with his colleagues. He would not raise hackles with his innate competitiveness. He would plant pieces of information into the gossip-sphere and make the proper persona to fit the workspace. They would work with him personably and trustfully through the years of his working life. He would retire with his secrets and a fat pension. At worst, he would be discovered and rooted out. He could face deletion—with 'bots that would be set loose on his digital tracks on the various systems and erase every digital shadow from the caches, from the hard drives, and from all servers. Persona non grata. And somewhere, all these digital scrapings would be on a private-held dossier (sold for a price) and a sub-public black-list. He'd be out, on a wafer-thin pension, and his life would have to start over with freelance day jobs; he'd have to take all comers.

Working his Way Up

His engagements with the Fulcrum Arena went back many years. He first started in the public spaces related to law and policy. Here, anyone with an inclination could join and participate. They could post whatever they wanted, and the unwary would start with small fabrications. Soon, some would have giant fabricated identities that would continue until some intrepid hackers would find documents or information to disprove particular assertions. Authentication would come with a price, but as databases got more connected, and the digital images of various cameras were brought together with global positioning systems and databases, it was much easier to know where each individual was at and who they were. The technologies offered a counter perspective to the human-made stories, and these came apart the most dramatically in the courts of law. Technologies had to authenticate technologies, given the manipulability of digital images and databases. Every moment, transfinite lines of code were registering and remembering, cross-referencing, and drawing conclusions. Deploying queries were simple matters now—to ask the mass of wireless 0s and 1s for answers to any number of questions, and the mass responded with sentience and .0001-second accuracy. Authentication, while it still was a business (given the human need for informational symmetry), involved a lot less footwork.

Back then, his behaviors online were added to a vast profile created on him. He was flattered at how much digital analysis was spent on him, and the customized information and contacts sent his way enhanced his ability to achieve his professional aims. He was also an adventurer, heading off on serendipitous trails of learning.

By habit and nature, he was close-mouthed and hyper-aware of information use around him and the nuancing of that data. He himself was purposeful in releasing information about himself. When he considered his publics, he ticked down a fairly long list of individuals in his authorizing environment. Why not maintain a strategic ambiguity whenever possible? And when he had to go on record, he could focus on the nebulous.

He assiduously honed a reputation for incisive commentary in areas of international policies—with special focuses on patent laws and also the rights of indigenous peoples. He was tempted to split off identities because of the apparent disparateness of his interests, but his contacts lay in both areas, and both areas contained his professional passions. He became aware of the high variances between the laws and policies in different countries through the Fulcrum Arena. He liked how the law arena was run with a non-political-involvement, objective approach to the studies of laws and policies globally. And maybe as a more naïve younger man, he'd assumed that it was a totally apolitical body.

The scholarships and funded research followed shortly thereafter. His work had caught the attention of investors who wanted to see thought work done in particular areas, and he was a low-cost method for forwarding that agenda. He was thereafter always aware of potential head-hunting wherever he was, in both public and private space (as if the latter existed at all—beyond a concept).

Part of his survival meant avoiding sniffers. In online spaces, he could see very clearly the gestures towards friendship, the sharing of "personal" information or some valuable tidbit, and then the elicitation for him to respond in kind. The dangle, the hook, the reel. He was careful not to simply dismiss all who approached. Rather, he would send out a gentle probe, figure out if there may be a mutual benefit…and if he couldn't see anything possible in the next couple months, he let the contact go. If there was some potential benefit, he'd dribble some digital sugar and see if the relationship went anywhere. No point in giving out freebies, and the moment one person knew something privy, he could as good as guarantee that that information would be out in the vast wastelands of cyberspace. The point for him was to cluster where the information was good and fresh, even if it cost to get it.

His social life was enhanced by his participation in the public areas of the Fulcrum Arena. He had several online relationships with law students he met online, but because he didn't get into law school until he was in his mid-20s, the relationships fell through in what he thought of as an imbalance of social power.

While online, he'd participated in moot courts. He sat in on various live court cases and enjoyed the live translations in text. High-profile international cases were often broadcast with voice translations—to make these even more accessible. He would hang out after these broadcast cases and weigh in with his opinions as part of a gallery of watchers. He'd read various cases and engage in long and drawn-out arguments of principle and ethics with other participants online. Yet, even in the heat of white-hot arguments, he knew better than to get drawn into the digital undertow of revealing too much about himself. His opinion? It depended.

Once logged on, he would pull up various tools to create digital objects for the shared spaces—simulations showing theoretical models, slideshows of places he'd traveled and his travel notes about different bodies of law, live real-time maps of his trips, and other ways to share through his blog, which he'd quietly let disappear after a number of intense years of daily coddling.

Years later, he checked this space and then its library for his contributions. He easily found his works and found that others had annotated his work. They had built on his learning. And as the years passed, his work receded into the past, and the more recent work would echo or challenge some of his ideas and then add newer fresher insights. Versions of his works were predominant in some cultures and languages, but he had long decided that certain truths were more desirable in some cultures than others. And for all the ways he could argue a certain stance, he knew that dozens of others could uphold their own ideas equally well. What should a client nation do? How should it proceed? It depended.

He almost treated this space like a long-running video game, and he purposefully avoided the occasional real-time meatspace gatherings. What could possibly be gained by coming out of the moon glow of the immersive wrap computer screens to meet in 3D corpulence? It wasn't that he didn't care to meet some of these people he'd worked with or communicated with online but that he figured that their cognitive part was what was engaging, not the other aspects—which he considered voluptuous baggage.

Now, as a bit of an older man, he's grateful that he didn't express all his opinions, that he didn't fall into a particular dogma, and that he didn't obviously "pattern." His usefulness as an information gatherer would be less if he had too strong of a persona, too much of a name or identity. His role was to hide in plain sight, though, and that did not mean invisibility: that would not mean leaving no digital footprint.

Immersion in Fulcrum

The trajectory of his career has brought him to this place, in digital immersion, in the Fulcrum Arena. Here, the best minds of the legal profession from around the world interacted in virtual spaces. They shared their expertise because this was *the* place to be for showcasing intellect, acuity and achievement. An automated system tracked new ideas, and the ones who posted their work were credited. Their online achievements went directly to their dossiers, which remained for life. The trust-less environment of the WWW's wilds meant that any sort of endorsement would enhance the chances of some sort of beneficial interchange. A lack of a history would mean an instant delete…or the sending of an aggressive 'bot probe after an individual.

In the same way that he noticed a jump in the quality and grandeur of the furniture in top-flight law firms vs. hometown ones, he noticed right away that the quality of information at the top echelon of the Fulcrum Arena's law section was markedly superior. The information posted here was raw—applicable to live cases in motion. There was a thin elegance to the words, and the legal logic was impeccable—none of the syncretic postings in the public spaces, the messy rants, the self-righteous vitriol without logical proofs or backing. The research was fresh and channeled from the universities globally. It came from front-line investigators on the streets. The issues were nascent and appeared nowhere yet in the world press. The moment new work was posted, an ardent subgroup within this space would have the ideas commented upon and analyzed in a short period. Participants would propose questions for research, and any number of individuals would offer their insights and launch new research projects.

While nothing could be taken out of the online space except through wetware, he could wander into various forums at any time of day or night to find issues of law and policy that would affect numerous people's lives. He was not interested in the street and its uninformed conspiracy theories, which abounded. He wanted in at the level of those who were actually concocting the conspiracies.

When he spoke, he was treated respectfully. He was defined by his role. His extensive vetting gave his colleagues confidence in his abilities that was not wholly earned, but he knew that he was in elite company. He was among peers - that was the culture - even though he hadn't yet finished his full studies or even taken the bar yet.

The noise from various commercial endeavors had quieted here: no online bazaar with digital neon. In the public realms of the Fulcrum, there was a constant flow of classifieds—and services, materials, and digital artifacts moved with great speed. When he progressed through such spaces, he thought of himself as a brand name. His own business entity.

There were many come-ons for volunteerism. It seemed that at these higher levels, the board memberships and pro bono opportunities still somehow related to corporations and high-status work. There was not any sense of anonymous giving or the sharing of real expertise. There was a deep sense of quid pro quo.

He identified his target within a week of his invitation into the elite status of the Fulcrum Arena. His immersion in the highest echelons brought him into live forum sessions on different legal issues. He would participate in various trainings. Days into an immersion, he would emerge bleary-eyed, with his muscles atrophied like an astronaut coming off a long space walk. He'd long learned that the digital cocoon offered an illusion of protected space and control, an illusion which dissipated quickly when virtual became real in short order…and there was no real curtain or division between those spaces.

He would have to put on the digitized calisthenics program or put himself under for electronic toning. His 3D self-maintenance would be a critical aspect of his overall fitness, and his clients, whom he would meet now and again in meatspace, would expect no less of him.

He never expected quite to give up the face-to-face to go digital and virtual as an information services agent, but here he was, immersed in 0s and 1s for most of his waking hours and dreaming digital dreams the rest of the time. While he had more privacy in 3D, even with the ubiquitous cameras, he knew how to control his digital self in cyberspace. To fully vet him would require quite a draw on the various machines, and even then, a majority of the findings would be materials harvested through automated archival…and most of it planted there, deeper than a mere backstop and years in the making.

While J4 had nothing implanted in his body, he felt like a cyborg, half-machine, less man. He was respectful of the rules of engagement with others in online spaces, and he knew how to create a sense of solidity and telepresence among any number of users and cultural groups. His finesse took him into the back alleys of cyberspace. Breaking into the Fulcrum Arena had to be a clean front-door entry—not a hack job. Any digital trails he left behind would have to make sense in light of his self and public identity. He had the training to be a threat, but he would make sure that that would not show up on his profile. The high vetting he'd already received would buy him some early and fast trust. The rest, he'd have to maintain by avoiding anomalous behaviors. He would have to avoid falling into risk profiles.

J4 would have to protect his place in this heady elite environment, where he'd have the privilege of certain conversations, the privilege of certain company. He would make alliances with members of this community. Maybe, if he earned their trust, he would meet in synchronous F2F spaces in black box rooms for the privilege of rolling out policies and strategies. He would attune his hearing to the far edges of the spectrum where the privileged only hear, and the majority perceived only silence. He would be one of the first to know.

He would be able to read draft documents that hadn't yet been formalized for implementation and for history. He would meet the personages behind the online identities. He would see the raw information behind the prettified, made-for-public documents and digital objects. He would be one of those who would create virtual news releases and emotional experiences for the masses via cyberspace. He would augment their realities. He would create the simulations in virtuality and remoteness. And he would do all this for his clients.

Disembodied. Connected. Hooked up. J4 made himself a cup of hot black tea and settled in.

Acknowledgments: