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The Innovation Diffusion Game

**A tool for encouraging
participation in positive cultural change -
or for doing something different at your next party**

by Alan AtKisson

One of the articles in [Making It Happen \(IC#28\)](#)

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Last year, IC founding editor Robert Gilman put together a briefing packet on innovation diffusion theory - drawing heavily on the work of theorist Everett M. Rogers - and circulated it around to colleagues. In a lovely example of what might be called "meta-diffusion," the theory got a lot of people excited - and spawned further innovations to further diffuse the theory.

This article is condensed from the facilitator's packet for a role-playing game invented by IC executive editor Alan AtKisson and published by Context Institute. It's designed to demonstrate certain basic principles in cultural change and innovation diffusion theory. Though not widely known, the concepts are easy to understand - and they can help you participate more effectively and proactively in the evolution of culture.

Culture is complex, and this game doesn't pretend to be comprehensive. But for the groups that have played it so far, it has sparked a lot of discussion, learning, and even a few Aha!'s. The full packet (which includes transparencies and reusable player instruction cards) is suitable for professional use and available for \$60 from Context Institute, PO Box 946, Langley, WA 98260. Also contact us at 360/221-6044 if you're interested in our "Making It Happen" workshops, of which the game is a central component.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world.

Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead

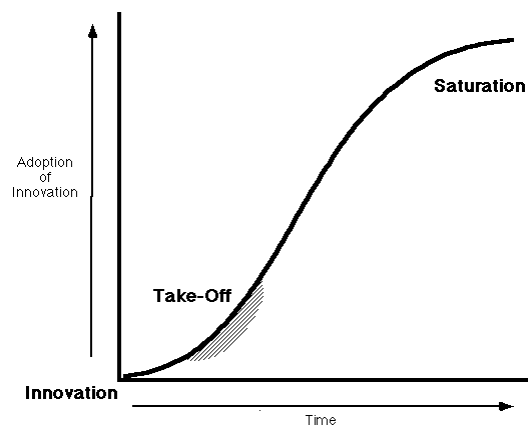
This famous quote hangs over my desk, as well as the desks of many people with the hubris and optimism to believe they can change the world for the better. It seems implausible, yet time and again history has proven it true. Virtually every major shift in cultural history can trace its origins to the work of a small group, often gathered around an innovative thinker or body of thought.

How does a small group spawn historical changes? How do new ideas (or technologies, or values) spread through an entire culture? Regardless of whether the innovation is a microwave oven, a slang word, or a new understanding of what it means to be a human being, the process by which it spreads is called *innovation diffusion*.

THE INNOVATION ADOPTION CURVE

Researchers have discovered that the adoption of an innovation in any given population follows a fairly predictable pattern [see figure below]. An innovation starts with an *innovator*, often a single individual with a new idea. ("New" here means unknown to the culture, even if the idea is very old.) After its conception, an innovation spreads slowly at first - usually through the work of *change agents*, who actively promote it - then picks up speed as more and more people adopt it. Eventually it reaches a saturation level, where virtually everyone who is going to adopt the innovation has done so.

The Innovation Adoption Curve



A key point, early in the process, is called *take-off*. After the forward-thinking *change agents* have adopted the innovation, they work to communicate it to others in the society by whatever means they believe appropriate. When the number of early adopters reaches a critical mass - between 5 and 15% - the process is probably irreversible. The innovation has a life of its own, as more and more people talk about or demonstrate the innovation to each other.

For those interested in changing the world, the moral of this simplified story is this: ***you don't have to change the whole world all at once***. If it's a good and valuable innovation, you need only work to get it up to the take-off point, and momentum (i.e., the work of a lot of other people who are now sold on the idea) will do most of the rest.

THE AMOEBAS OF CULTURE

Picture human culture - or any particular subculture of it - as a giant amoeba. Individuals are like the molecules that make up that amoeba. They move around, playing different roles at different times in different parts of the organism.

An amoeba moves by sticking out a small *pseudopod* ("false foot") into new territory. The rest of the organism inevitably comes sloshing along behind. Because of this sloshing effect, the *nucleus* or center of the amoeba arrives a bit late on the scene compared to the majority of the organism's molecules.

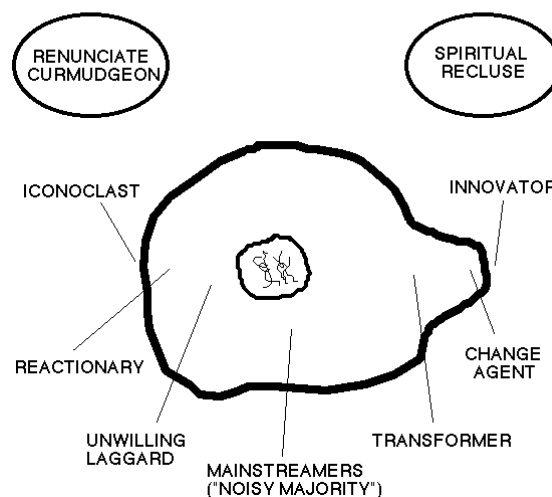
This review of basic biology provides an elementary model for how cultures change. The sloshing of the nucleus is akin to the *phenomenon of the lagging center* - the tendency for the mainstream (and especially the power structures) to be far from the forefront of cultural advance.

The pseudopod is the realm of the innovator and the change agent. Not every pseudopod rules the day; in a culture, there may be antagonistic forces trying to push another pseudopod out in the opposite direction. Again, the message for the would-be world-changer (or organization-changer) is clear: *the trick is to have a winning pseudopod*. But, as in biology, a pseudopod that leads the *whole amoeba* on to more nourishment and growth opportunities is far better than one that succeeds in leading the whole into the microscopic equivalent of a wasteland.

THE ANATOMY OF CULTURAL CHANGE

The gross features of the "amoeba of culture" can be broken down into nine basic types. These are the roles played out in the Innovation Diffusion Game:

The Anatomy of Cultural Change



Innovator * The progenitor of new ideas; the leading edge researcher, thinker, or inventor; sometimes considered "fringe" or "eccentric" by the mainstream; on the amoeba's very membrane.

Change Agent * The "idea broker" for the Innovator; the promoter of new ideas, solutions, directions; the innovation marketer and communicator; found in the interior of the pseudopod.

Transformer * The early adopter in the mainstream; open to new ideas;

wants to promote positive change; often a forward-thinking member of a mainstream organization; found near the point where the pseudopod is attached to the main body of the amoeba.

Mainstreamers * The "noisy majority," busy with the basics of life; the "average person"; neither for nor against change, often unconscious that it's happening; will change when other Mainstreamers change.

Unwilling Laggard * A Mainstreamer who doesn't like change in general; late adopter of the innovation; changes only under pressure from the majority.

Reactionary * Has a vested interest in keeping things as they are or in moving in the opposite direction; actively resists the adoption of the innovation; sometimes has an economic or power interest in the status quo; would put out a competing pseudopod if possible; changes only if unavoidable, and then very late in the process.

Iconoclast * "A person who attacks cherished beliefs"; actually a silent partner to the Innovator; also believes things must change for the better; often a journalist, critic, artist, or social gadfly; while the Innovator pulls the amoeba from in front, the Iconoclast kicks it from behind (and keeps the Reactionaries busy).

In addition, there are two key roles that operate outside the membrane of the amoeba of culture:

Spiritual Recluse * The monk, ascetic, visionary, meditator; more preoccupied with eternal truths than present realities; often a source of inspiration to the Change Agents, Innovator, or even the Iconoclast; produces a kind of "food" for the amoeba.

Renunciate Curmudgeon * The grouch who hates society and has abandoned it; often a source of inspiration to the Iconoclast; the backwoods pioneer, solitary crank, angry punk rocker, or even the criminal; sometimes creates an antagonistic subculture.

It's important to remember that **in real life, everyone plays *all* of these roles in different contexts**. For example, you may be an Innovator when it comes to cooking, a Mainstreamer when it comes to grocery shopping, but a Reactionary when it comes to microwave ovens.

Clearly, culture is far more complicated than this analogy suggests. Nevertheless, this is a useful way to think about it for the purpose of understanding the process of innovation diffusion.

SUCCESSFUL INNOVATIONS

What makes an innovation *successful*? Innovation diffusion theorists have identified **five critical characteristics** that may be helpful to think about in playing the Innovation Diffusion Game. Note that these are not *requirements* for a successful innovation; but their presence or absence could greatly affect the rate at which it gets adopted.

Relative Advantage * Is the innovation better than the status quo? Will

people *perceive* it as better? If not, the innovation will not spread quickly, if at all.

Compatibility * How does the innovation fit with people's past experiences and present needs? If it doesn't fit *both* well, it won't spread well. Does it require a change in existing values? If members of the culture feel as though they have to become very different people to adopt the innovation, they will be more resistant to it.

Complexity * How difficult is the innovation to understand and apply? The more difficult, the slower the adoption process.

Trialability * Can people "try out" the innovation first? Or must they commit to it all at once? If the latter, people will be far more cautious about adopting it.

Observability * How visible are the results of using it? If people adopt it, can the difference be discerned by others? If not, the innovation will spread more slowly.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

In thinking about how to spread an innovation or change a culture, it can simplify matters to consider the following *avenues for action*. A system-wide change to an innovative way of doing things requires that all three avenues be pursued. But any single individual may have particular strengths in a particular avenue, and an innovation diffusion process can be *initiated* via any one of the three - though particular innovations may need varying degrees of each at different times.

Personal * *Anything one can do directly in one's own life*. Examples include recycling, gardening, inventing new technologies, meditating, reducing consumption, biking, walking, purchasing choices, taking care of one's health, studying ...

*In innovation diffusion, the personal is the **direct adoption** and modeling of the innovation in your own thinking or behavior.*

Media * *Anything one can do to reach out to someone else*. Examples: conversations, letters, telling stories, calling radio talk shows, T-shirts, press releases, TV ads, movie scripts, posters, fliers, poems, songs, dances ...

*In innovation diffusion, media includes **anything that communicates** something about the innovation to someone else.*

Politics * *Anything you can do to influence social organization*. Examples: Creating recycling systems for your office, new family rituals, running for office, changing non-profit bylaws, protesting and demonstrating, starting a new group, forming a shadow government, proposing new policies, launching citizen initiatives ...

*In innovation diffusion, politics includes **anything that institutionalizes** the innovation or creates a system that encourages institutionalization.*

There is a certain amount of crossover between these three avenues, but

remembering them can help the game-player (or world-changer) get ideas for "what else needs doing."

PLAYING THE GAME

You need not absorb all of the proceeding information in order to play the Innovation Diffusion Game, but it will help to make sure all players are familiar with the roles outlined in "The Anatomy of Cultural Change." If you are facilitating a game session, be sure to stress the importance of *courage* and *creativity* in playing one's role, no matter what it is. Word etymology is a helpful here: *courage* comes from Latin roots that mean simply "of the heart" - which points to personal presence, authenticity, and involvement. *Creativity* can be traced back to a Sanskrit word meaning "to make" - which does not restrict people to thinking they must be artists to be creative. *Making a difference* of any kind is a creative act.

The Innovation Diffusion Game was designed for groups of at least 25 people (it can be adapted for slightly smaller groups, but bigger is better here). Everybody plays, including the "audience." The instructions can - and should - be adapted to your particular group and setting.

First, create a space with clear boundaries to be the "Game Area" - 20' by 20' is a good size. Choose a context: a cultural situation that may need to be changed. (Examples from past game sessions include compulsive shopping, cutting down forests, and handling excessive announcements at church. Shopping is a good one, and the one the game was designed around; the "Game Area," for example, can be a shopping mall.)

Ask for 20 volunteers. Let them know that they'll be doing role-playing, and explain the situation: each will be playing a role in the process of cultural change. The general population will be engaged in some activity; an innovation to replace the activity will be conceived, demonstrated, and marketed to the population; a new society will (you hope) be born.

Each volunteer will select a role at random (see "Player Instructions" on the preceding page). Again, whatever roles they select, the players need to be encouraged to play them with creativity and courage, regardless of whether they agree with the views of that role in the given context.

Players are given a few minutes to read the instructions for the roles they've selected, and they should be instructed not to announce their roles to each other; the instructions will tell them how to identify each other in the course of the game.

Throughout the game, the Facilitator should be available to answer questions, interpret rules, determine the length of play, etc. The game should take no longer than about 20 minutes, but it's not played against the clock; the game is over when the innovation has successfully spread through the culture - or when it becomes apparent that it's just not going to take off.

The Facilitator can also nudge players along or give them hints. For example, make sure the Innovator gets moving on innovating, finding the Change Agents, getting advice, etc., or nothing will happen (which is a lesson in itself).

While the players are reading their roles, the Facilitator briefs the Audience Members on *their* roles - as the "Muses", the imagination of the Innovator. If you prefer, they can also be characterized in terms of "Unrepresented Nations," "Future Generations," or any combination of similar roles. Audience Members are empowered to *suggest* things to the Innovator and the Iconoclast, but they may not join in the actual game.

Once play is begun, it should not be stopped until the Facilitator judges that the process has come to a natural conclusion. **Important:** Be sure to let everyone know that the *process* of the game will be a confusing babble of activity - just like life - and that a debriefing will follow. Audience Members should watch to see if they can discern who is playing what roles, and when key turning points occur, but they should not expect to be able to follow everything. *The debriefing time is very important.*

The game also requires the *Facilitator* to be courageous and creative, to respond to fast changing circumstances, and to interpret rules on the spot (or even make up new ones), so that the process doesn't slip completely into chaos.

THE DEBRIEFING

Follow up the game with a discussion: What happened? What worked? What didn't? Why? Who was playing what role? How did it *feel* to play that role? What thoughts went through your mind? Have the players - one from each role, if you have time - read their instructions out loud. How does the simulation of the game compare to real life?

If the game worked (and there are no guarantees that it will), critique the innovation. Why was it good (or not so good)? How well did it take the Five Critical Characteristics into account (Relative Advantage, Compatibility, Complexity, Trialability, Observability)? Try to identify ways that the game process did - or didn't - illustrate the basic theoretical concepts.

If the game *doesn't* work - if the players get too confused, or the innovation doesn't come off well - critique the game itself as an innovation. *Why* didn't it work? What would make it better?

Be sure to save enough time for in-depth discussion - and be prepared for some strong reactions. The first time this game was played (by a wonderfully creative group at the International Earth and Spirit conference in Seattle), shopping was the problem - and singing Christmas carols was the "innovation" that successfully replaced it. Several players reported feeling strongly about what happened to them in their role. For example, one Reactionary (a store owner) noted that when it became clear that people were abandoning shopping, her first thought was to call the police!

Whatever the outcome of the game, we at Context Institute would appreciate hearing about what happens, so that we can continue to improve it and develop other similar learning tools.

When the game session is over, thank all the players and the audience, acknowledge their courage and creativity - and tell them to go out and change the world!

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Player Instructions

Copy the following on index cards to be selected randomly. If you like, replace the references to [shopping] with a situation of your own devising.

Spiritual Recluse (1 Player) * Circulate around, in or out of the Game Area, pondering eternal truths (from whatever spiritual school you prefer), and saying them softly out loud so people can identify you.

Others may seek you out for inspiration, but don't give them *direct* advice on how to wean people off [shopping]. Stick to general truths and spiritual insight. At some point early in the Game, go to the center of the Game Area. Speak one sentence of spiritual insight *firmly and loudly*. Then continue circulating.

Curmudgeon (1 Player) * Find yourself a spot away from the group, and stay there. Mutter things like, "The whole thing's rotten to the core!" You can talk to others about what's wrong with society, but that's all. You've given up, and you're doing your own thing. Even if a "new society" is born, you'll keep to yourself. Unless it's *very* inviting....

Innovator (1 Player) * It's your task to come up with an innovation to replace [shopping]. You can mix in with the crowd, but you are also free to venture outside the Game Area. Find the Spiritual Recluse and ask for inspiration if you need it. *Important:* Consult with the members of the audience (or the Facilitator) to get ideas - they are your "muses."

After you've selected an innovation, find a Change Agent. Walk around the Game Area saying things like "I've got an idea!" so the Change Agents can identify you. Explain your idea to them. If they're not convinced, it's back to the drawing board - or they may help you to refine it. Then it's their job to market it, and you become an expert source.

Iconoclast (1 Player) * You're the gadfly. Hang around the edges saying sarcastic things about [shopping]. Your main job is to identify the Reactionaries and *keep them occupied* (so that the Change Agents can do their job). You can seek advice from anyone. Humor is your best weapon; but you can also resort to insults and statements of disgust.

Change Agent (2 Players) * It's your job to find the Innovator. If s/he has developed an innovation that can replace [shopping], persuade others to try it. Walk around saying things like "There's got to be a better way!" Team up with the other Change Agent. And try to find the Transformers - they seem like Mainstreamers, but they have doubts - and build relationships with them (by acting Mainstream). You'll need to work with them later.

If the Innovator's idea is unworkable, tell him/her. If you think it's close to workable, help refine it. Model it yourself. Then seek out the Transformers and persuade them to help you sell it to the mainstream.

Reactionary (2 Players) * Not only do you love [shopping] ... you profit from it! Wander around saying things like, "[Shopping] is our way of life!" and "Without [shopping], all would be lost!" Form an alliance with the other Reactionary.

You'll both fight and argue against the new idea. You may get increasingly desperate (but don't go overboard) as more and more people change. But when it's clear that most of the culture has changed, one of the two of you will betray the other and join the "new society" with a great deal of show and bravado.

The other, shocked, will become a Curmudgeon.

Transformer (3 Players) * You usually talk like one of the mainstream, saying things like "[Shopping] is fun." But once in a while, say something like, "Gee, [shopping] can be a drag." If someone presents a new idea to you, be receptive, but cautious. If it seems worthwhile, and you can try it without feeling too "weird," try it. If you like it, get other people to try it.

Laggard (3 Players) * You're resistant to change. Wander around saying things like, "I can't imagine life without [shopping]!" You'll be slow to adopt the innovation. Only when it seems obvious that most people have switched should you consider it ... and maybe find it's not so bad after all!

Mainstreamer (6 Players) * You're just [shopping], and you're having a good time. Wander around talking to people about how much you like [shopping]. At first, don't pay much attention to anyone who doesn't talk similarly. You may hear talk about "the trouble with [shopping]" - but don't acknowledge it unless another mainstream-seeming person brings it up with you!

Eventually, someone will try to persuade you to do something else. Others will argue against it. Look around - is anyone else like you doing it? Does it look pleasant? Is the person who's trying to get you to try it pleasant and persuasive? Then try it! But not before.

Oh, and when the Spiritual Recluse speaks a clear message of wisdom, say "Ahhhhh!" Then continue about your normal business.

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