

Finding Baby Bear's Bed

A tale of two spaces

Jon Dron
Athabasca University
ElggCamp San Francisco 2012
<https://landing.athabascau.ca>
jond@athabascau.ca



We like social software for learning



Text

Saturday, 24 March 12

social software is a good idea for learning.

Content • **Sharing** of found and created objects • **Emergence** of patterns, computer augmented and visible • **Authenticity** as education activity aligns with business and social activity

Connection • **Discovery of others** with whom to learn • **Leveraging networks** that go beyond the formal classroom or workplace community • **Serendipity** as networks and sets interconnect • **Sustenance of sociability** with a positive association of social network use and traditional forms of social contact (Hua Wang and Wellman, 2010)

Control • **Empowerment** to be both a reader and a writer • **Adaptability** to varying needs due to flexible and mashable (soft) technologies

• **Communication** • **Collaborating** in teams and groups • **Engagement and motivation** brought on by persistence, visibility to and interaction with others

Once upon a time in a land far far away



Saturday, 24 March 12

community@brighton

Started early in Elgg's history, helped contribute plugins and stuff, neat system, well designed

90000 users

47 online

community@brighton

ADVERTISEMENTS

2 x double room for rent

2 x double rooms available (good size) within a 5 bed house. Currently 3 girls living here all currently ...

NEED ROOM ASAP!

Hi Im Post Grad Law student @ Brighton, need a room asap, ideal if someone has moved ...

5 bedroom house

House has 5 bedrooms (all good size), the rent is just over £70 per week. Its in lower Bevendean, ...

Third Year Student Looking for people to househunt with??

Im a placement student going onto third year and wondered whether anyone else is also interested in looking ...

[See all advertisements](#)

NEWS

St. Peter's House Library will be open this Sunday

16 hours ago | Comments (0)

Professor Elias Stipidis inaugural lecture now online: "Electronic Architectures: Organising vehicle sub-systems"

yesterday | Comments (0)

LATEST STADIUM EVENTS...

2 days ago | Comments (0)

[See all news](#)

DESIGN archives

- [Request membership](#)
- [Community discussion](#)
- [Community files](#)
- [Community pages](#)
- [Community bookmarks](#)
- [Community blog](#)
- [Community photos](#)

Design Archives

Owner: Dhrc Dhrc

Community members: 27

Description:

The University of Brighton Design Archives hold eighteen collections that enhance understanding of the designed environment, the design profession and design practice. With a focus on British design in the 20th century, there is also much of international significance, particularly in graphic design and communication design.

Our digital image collections are available through the

Saturday, 24 March 12

everyone arrived at once – no one knew what to do
got used in teaching
then enthusiasts left
now its main use is announcements and advertising plus a few doing teaching and a couple of special purpose groups: still big, but not thriving

some

lessons

diversity

owner-

ship

control

critical passion
matters as much
as
critical mass

Saturday, 24 March 12

not critical mass

and then I moved



AU's big problem

Transactional distance

(oh, and $-40^{\circ}\text{C} = -40^{\circ}\text{F}$)



Saturday, 24 March 12

- AU is an open university formed the same time as OU UK, with industrial model of course production and tutor support by phone/letter. It has evolved to embrace other pedagogical and organizational forms, and new technologies like Moodle usually take the place of letters, tapes and phone (though we still have students in isolated communities with limited access so such technologies are not dead). Unlike OU-UK it is fully distance (couple of v small exceptions) has no campus, and most learning is unpaced - students start any time and have 6 months to finish, however they like.
- distance for everyone, staff and students
- Michael G Moore's theory of transactional distance, a distance ed theory, suggests that it is not physical distance that matters so much as transactional distance: a psychological gulf between people but also an issue of control. The more structure you have, the less possible it is to have dialogue but that's OK, up to a point, because structure can work pretty well.
- for historical reasons, AU is built mainly on a structured approach to both learning and working. That is all technology allowed when it started in 1970.
- Many purpose-driven technologies: LMS (Moodle), Finance, Portfolio (Mahara), Library, etc, not to mention business technologies like processes, rules, policies, and procedures that are (well, should be) rigidly followed. This helps to prevent risks due to ambiguity and errors in communication.
- All part of a carefully designed machine
- But machines don't do everything: systems are defined by the holes they leave: what is outside the boundary as much as what is within it. Because we have structure everywhere, that means it is difficult for AU's systems to evolve rapidly or to adapt easily.
- gaps partly filled by a few general purpose communication tools: email, Connect, teleconference, Zimbra (for staff), Skype, etc as well as some face to face meetings (nearly all of the people some of the time, some of the people all of the time)

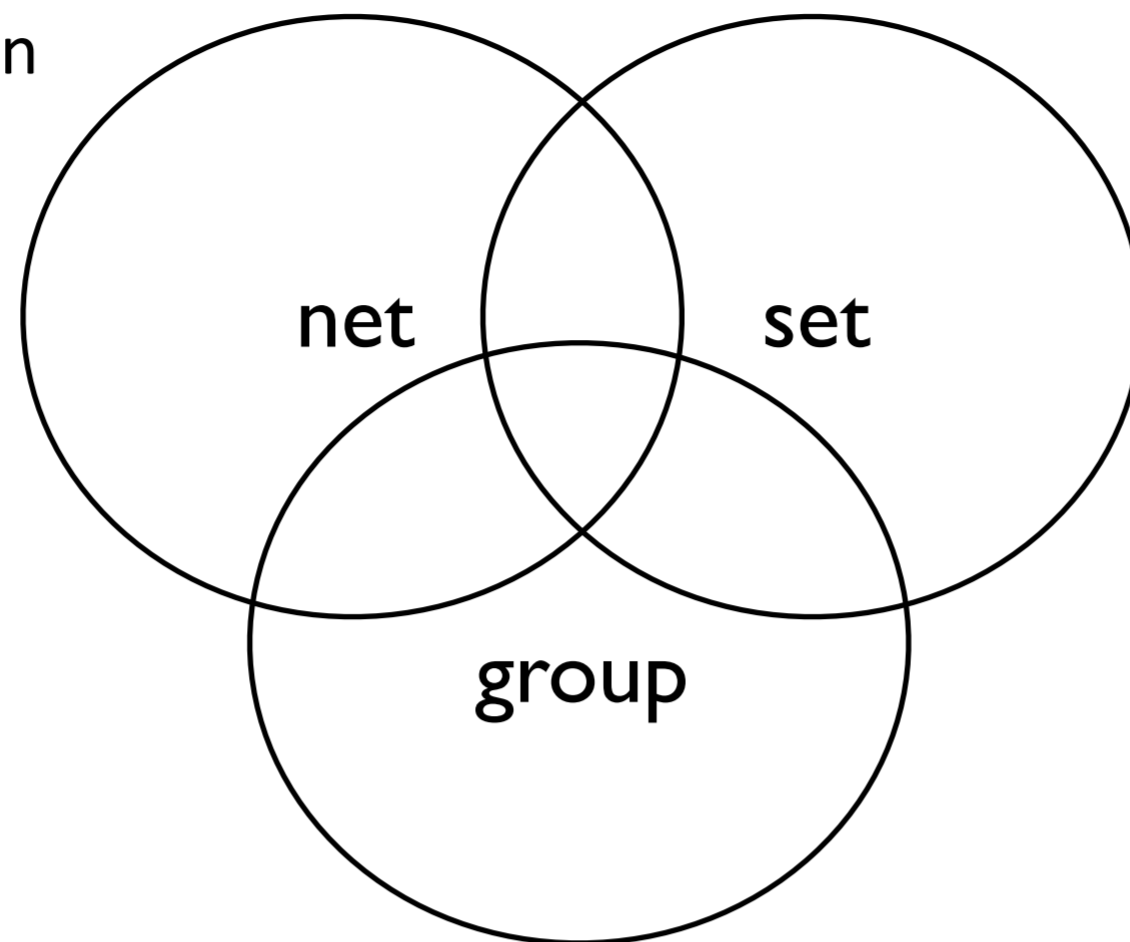
organizational Velcro

Saturday, 24 March 12



Saturday, 24 March 12

Sustaining ties
Making ties
Ad hoc networks
Knowledge diffusion
Social capital
Social presence



Cooperation
Sharing
Serendipity
Interest -orientation
Sense-making
Collective intelligence
Intentional discovery

Support for collaboration and sharing in:

Courses
Committees
Research groups
Centres and departments
etc

Saturday, 24 March 12

IT'S ALL ABOUT GIVING CONTROL TO PEOPLE TO MAKE WHAT THEY NEED IN A SHARED LEARNING COMMONS, WITHOUT HAVING TO ASK PERMISSION: TO DO WHAT THEY NEED WITHOUT HAVING TO USE PURPOSE-BUILT TECHNOLOGIES THAT WORK WELL BUT DON'T FULFIL EVERY NEED

Theoretical

- Social Presence
- Cooperative work in self-paced programming
- Interaction results in increased social, institutional and academic integration, leading to increased completion rates (Tinto, 1987)
- Need to develop a virtual campus supporting community beyond course interactions
- Social Capital Building
- Potential for community and alumni contribution

practical

- Communications is a continuing challenge in our workplaces.
- Too many of our faculty and staff are disengaged from our community
- We lack any sort of knowledge management system- all knowledge explicit, little connected
- It's hard to get to know people at Athabasca.

The image shows a screenshot of a social network group page. Three callout bubbles are overlaid on the page:

- group**: A bubble pointing to the left-hand navigation menu.
- net**: A bubble pointing to the group's profile picture (an elephant).
- set**: A bubble pointing to the group's description and metadata.

The page content includes:

- Group Name:** Soft things, hard things and invisible elephants
- Description:** This is a space to support Jon Dron's contribution to the #change11 MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).
- Brief description:** Jon Dron's contribution to #change11
- Tags:** change11, #change11, mooc
- Website:** <http://change.mooc.ca/week11.htm>
- Owner:** Jon Dron
- Group members:** 1
- Where to look first:**
 - Overview of the main ideas
 - Suggested activities
- Things to think about:**
 - Elephants in the room:** How should we go about researching the things that have nothing to do with technology - the passion, artistry, imagination and caring of a teacher, for example?
 - The Goldilocks effect:** The easiest and most efficient way of making technologies softer or harder is to assemble hard pieces, adding to make things softer or replacing to make them harder. But what's the best way to do that? What kind of glue is needed? Is an aggregator like [arssHopper](#) the answer? Or mashup

Saturday, 24 March 12

One reason for being lost is that it's a mishmash of mixed social forms – very hard to get sense of where you are because social forms overlap and are overlaid, with no central metaphor, just a bunch of tools. We are fixing that with social forms as navigational metaphors and context switching – tabbed dashboards, profiles, group profiles, configurable widgets, recommender widgets that adapt to context. But that's not what I am talking about today. It's another issue: the softness of the system.

Social network a feature, not a destination



Saturday, 24 March 12

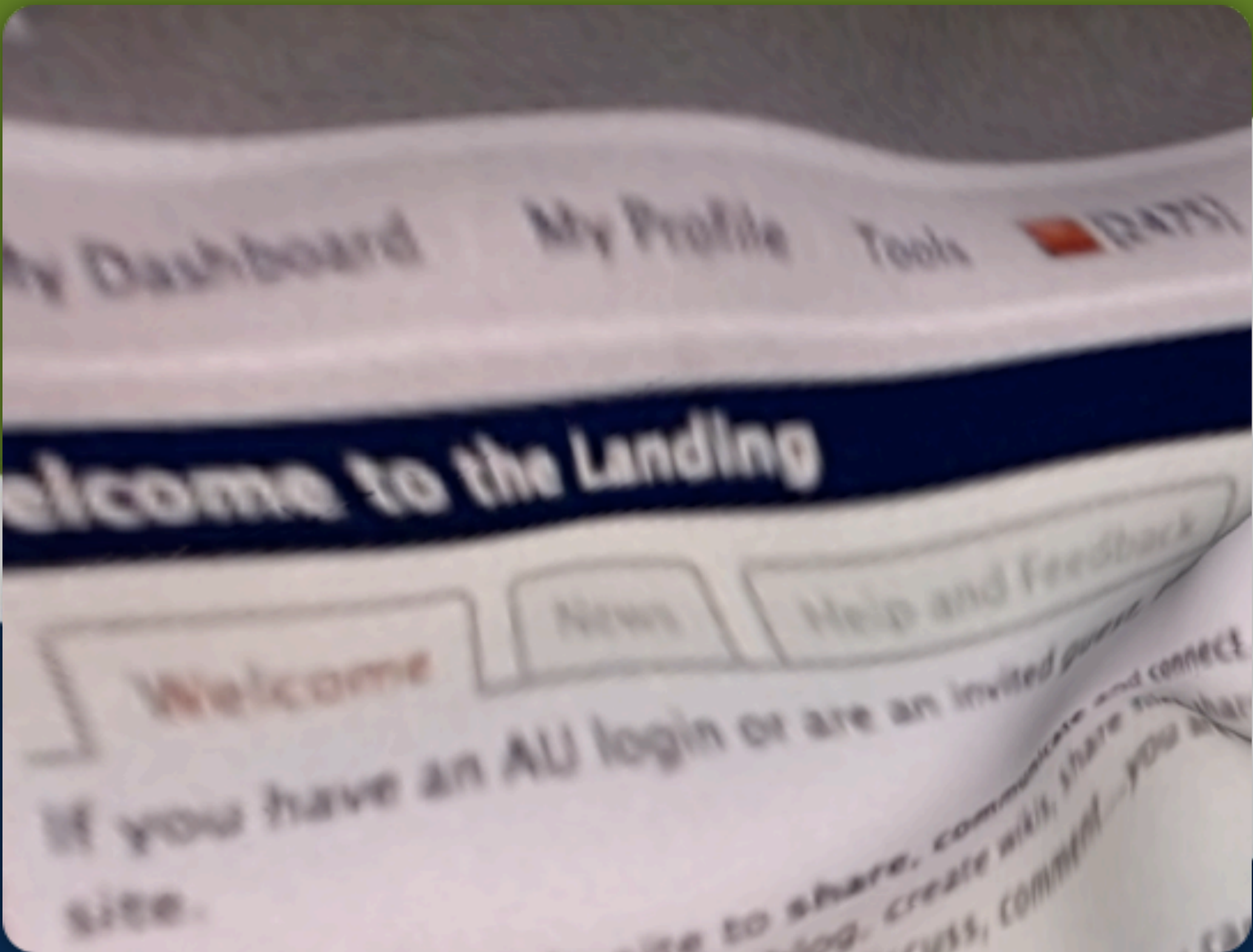
quote from Chris Anderson of Wired.

note odd figures here and there - people make things private and some rounding used

note that a lot will depend on soft processes - this is something that emerges from context

big feature: set-oriented (logged-in users and public) by far the most dominant form

A soft space



Saturday, 24 March 12

bear in mind - a social environment plays out in its context, which may impose very many constraints

- The Landing can be many things
- Limited structure
- Overlapping nets, sets and groups
- Processes laid on top (notably committee, group, class structures and requirements)
- highly controllable access
- Soft is hard, hard is easy

technology

“the orchestration of phenomena for some use”

(W. Brian Arthur)



Arthur, W. B. (2009). *The Nature of Technology: what it is and how it evolves*. New York, USA: Free Press.

Soft is hard



Saturday, 24 March 12

by which I mean soft technologies are more difficult (and unreliable, slow)

We have to invent social technologies and to literally be a part of them - the orchestration of phenomena is done by people and made up/negotiated as they go along

Softer technologies increase the adjacent possible by enabling and/or making more likely new choices to be made. They enable creativity

More choices come at a price - we have to make them. That is one thing that makes them difficult or hard.

Soft is incomplete



Saturday, 24 March 12

we have to find ways to use soft technologies - without the parts we add, they are not technologies at all, just tools waiting for something to happen

e.g. a screwdriver or a stick may be used in infinite ways. those ways, and the phenomena they orchestrate, are what makes them into a technology

Incompleteness filled by people



Saturday, 24 March 12

we have to find ways to use soft technologies - without the parts we add, they are not technologies at all, just tools waiting for something to happen

people are the orchestrators (at least partly - it tends to be a dance)

Soft is flexible



Saturday, 24 March 12

because many different things can happen, we can orchestrate phenomena in many ways, so soft technologies are flexible

Hard is easy



Saturday, 24 March 12

hard technologies have their processes embedded - may be laws or rules or part of the software or hardware - notably, LMSs embed implicit pedagogies.

AU processes are embedded in technologies (some rules, regulations, processes, forms, electronic tools, etc)

orchestration of phenomena is built into the technology - humans do not have to think each time, it is done by the technology, whether it be a physical tool or a law/rule that we apply

hard technologies tell us what to do - they reduce choices. So, they make things easy. and reliable, fast, free from error

Hard is complete



<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Linkware.jpg>

Saturday, 24 March 12

the orchestration is part of the technology so a hard technology is complete

Hard is brittle



Design patterns

Soft

Hard

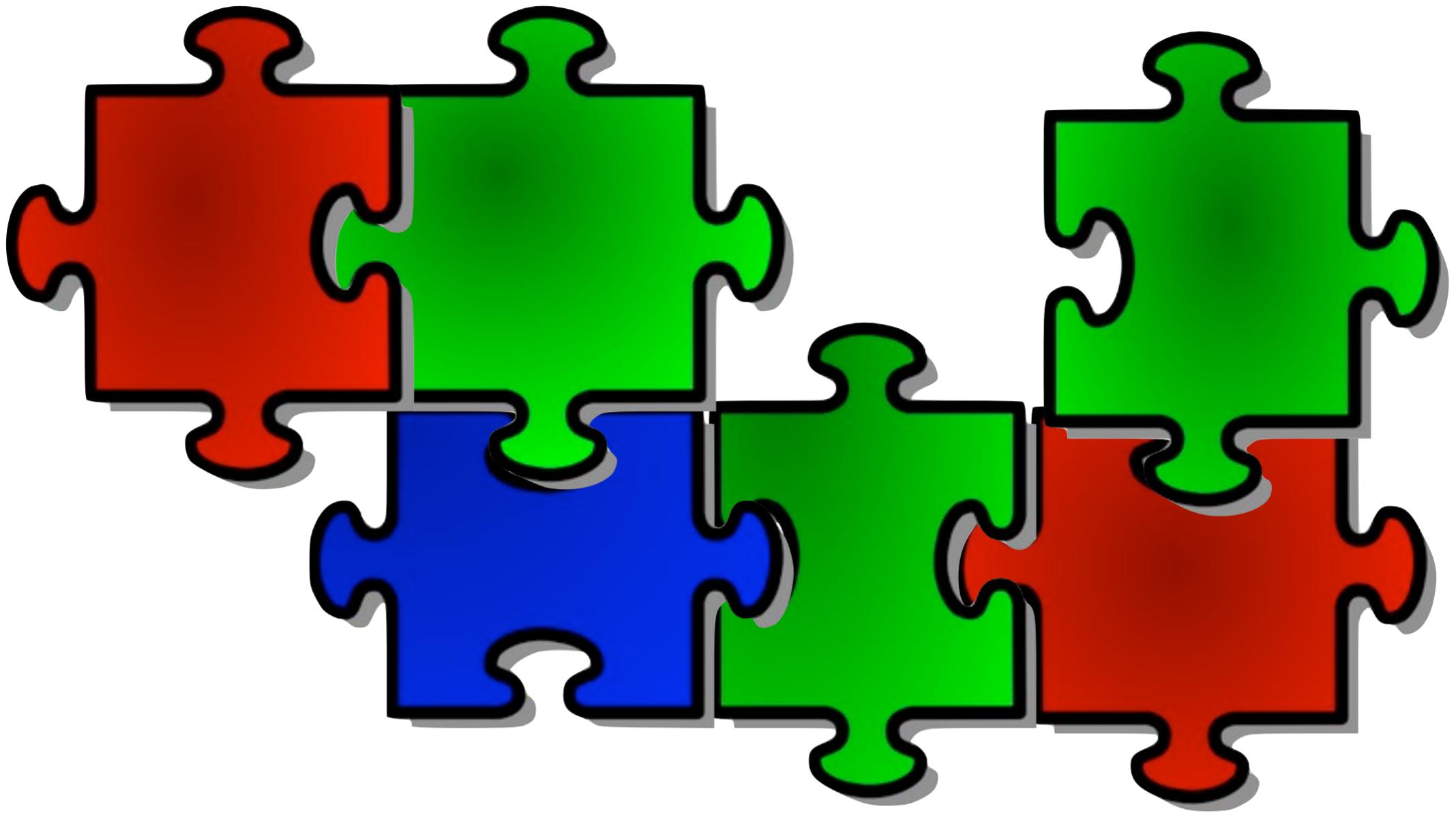
- Adapt
- Aggregate
- Recommend
- Extend
- Assemble
- Automate
- Replace
- Filter
- Limit
- Control

Saturday, 24 March 12

The general principles of softening involve making things adaptable, using signposts rather than fence posts, opening up new uses and, above all, aggregating: adding new technologies to increase the adjacent possible. These may involve automation but, if so, not involving the loss of previous capacities.

To harden typically involves automation of things that were formerly manual but not just automation per se – it has to replace something softer. Automation that forces a particular way of doing things is hard. Filtering means removing of possibilities (good example: adaptive systems that only show what they think is relevant, rather than those that suggest possible alternatives or highlight things of value). Hard technologies explicitly limit choices.

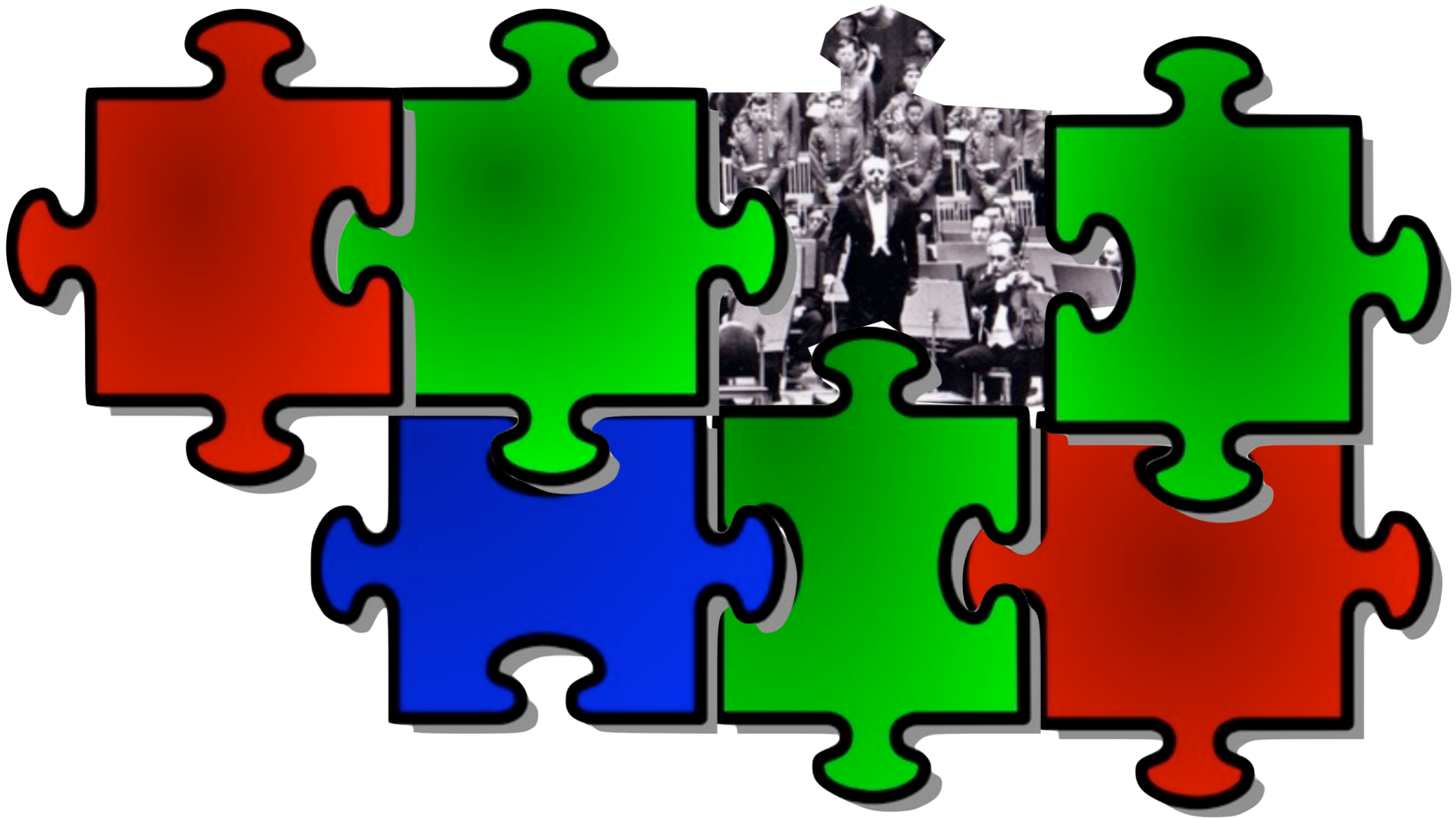
Hard spaces



Saturday, 24 March 12

Hard systems that interlock (well – somewhat) that fulfill their purposes well. But their purposes and the purposes of real human beings are inevitably not perfectly matched. An education system is about people, not just processes, and people do unexpected things – creative things, mistakes, bending of rules, novel things, different things

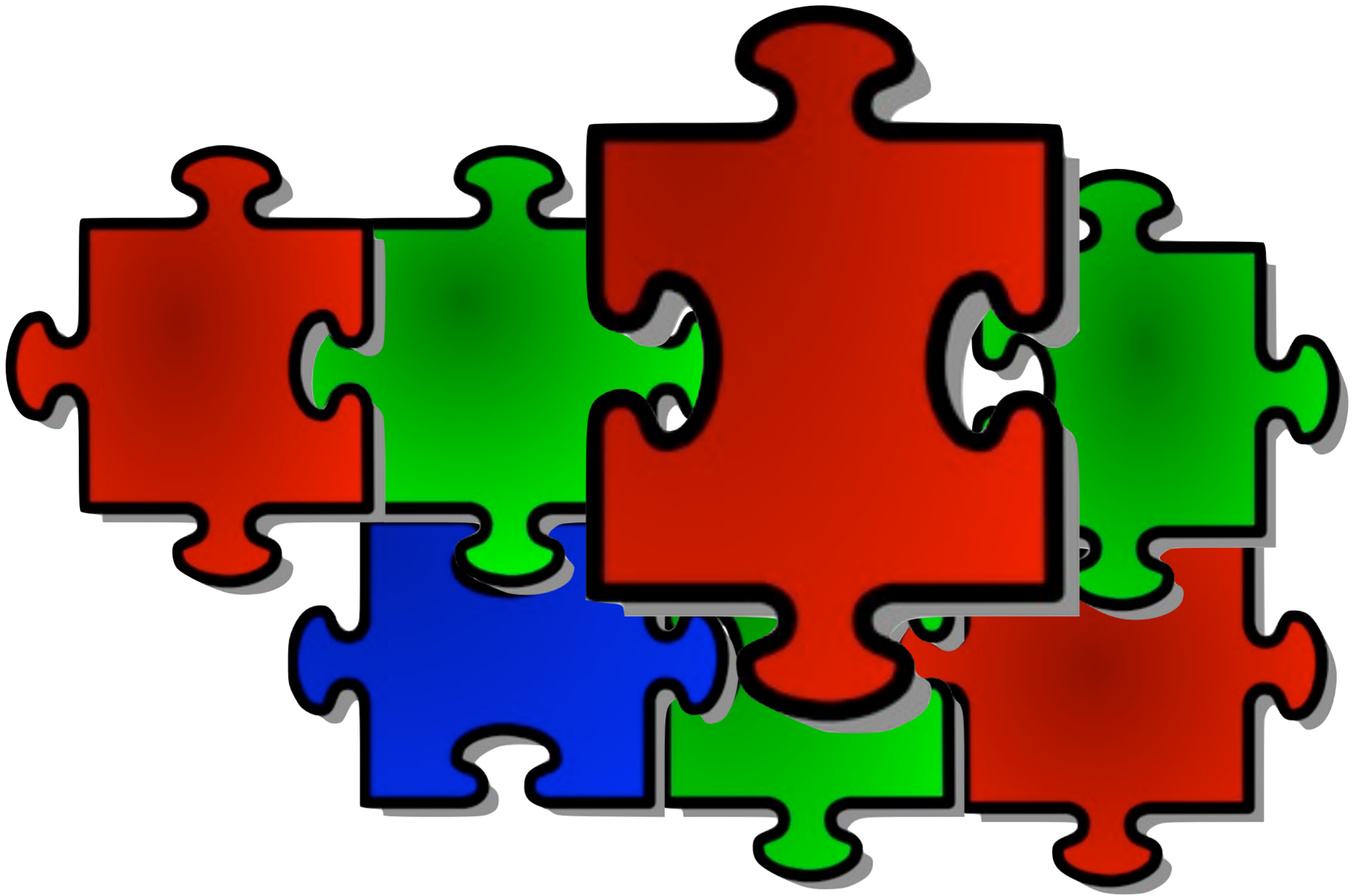
Filling gaps with people



Saturday, 24 March 12

If you are working face to face or have ubiquitous and continuous communication then it is easy enough to fill gaps with people – just ask someone in the office, chat with an administrator, catch someone in the hall. But that's not much use when working at a distance with just a bit of email and maybe a phone, Skype or webmeeting. Too sporadic, no serendipity

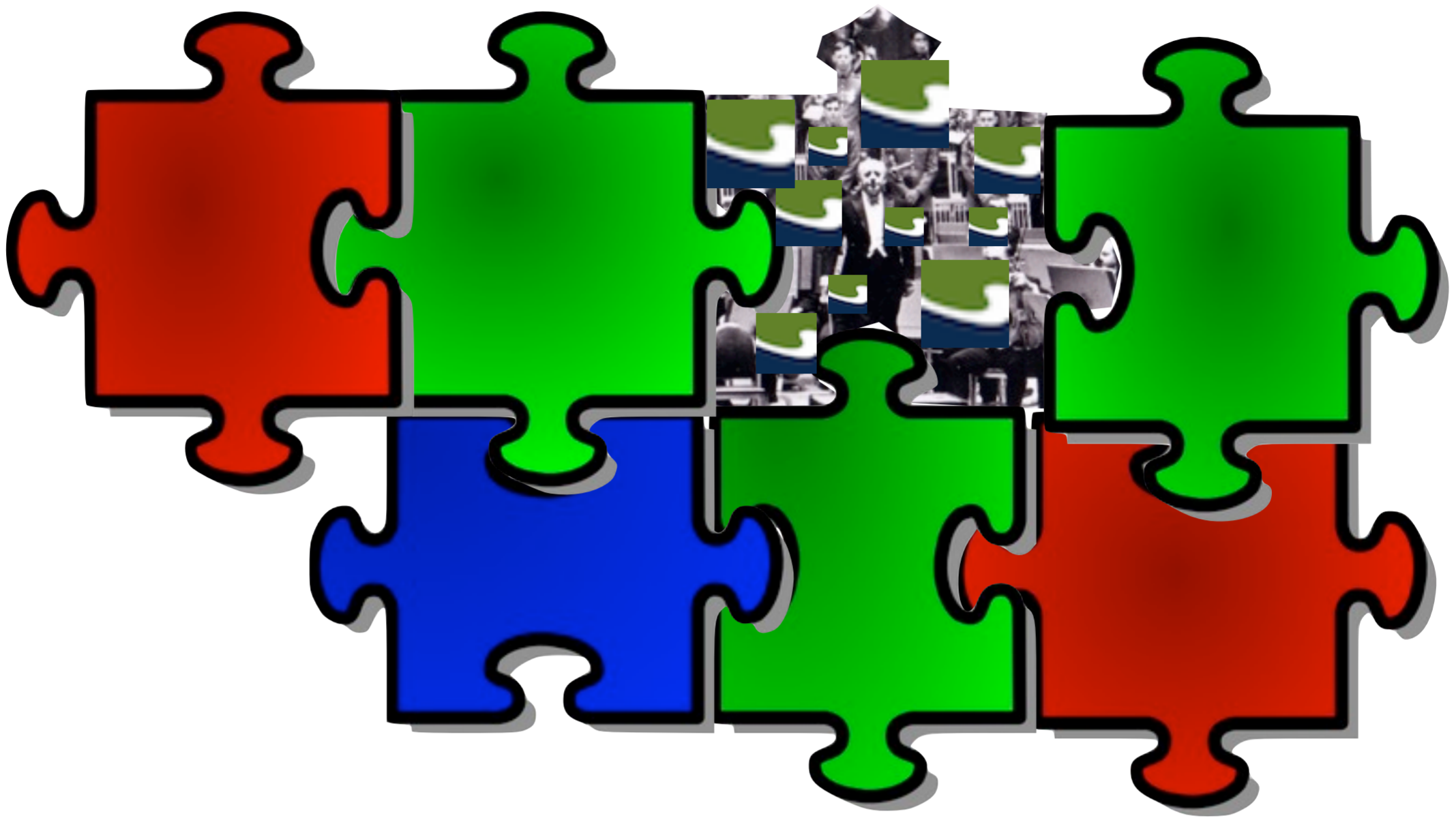
Over-filling gaps



Saturday, 24 March 12

We could build more purpose-built tools but they tend to overlap too much: as well as what you want will be lots of things you don't want. That way confusion lies.

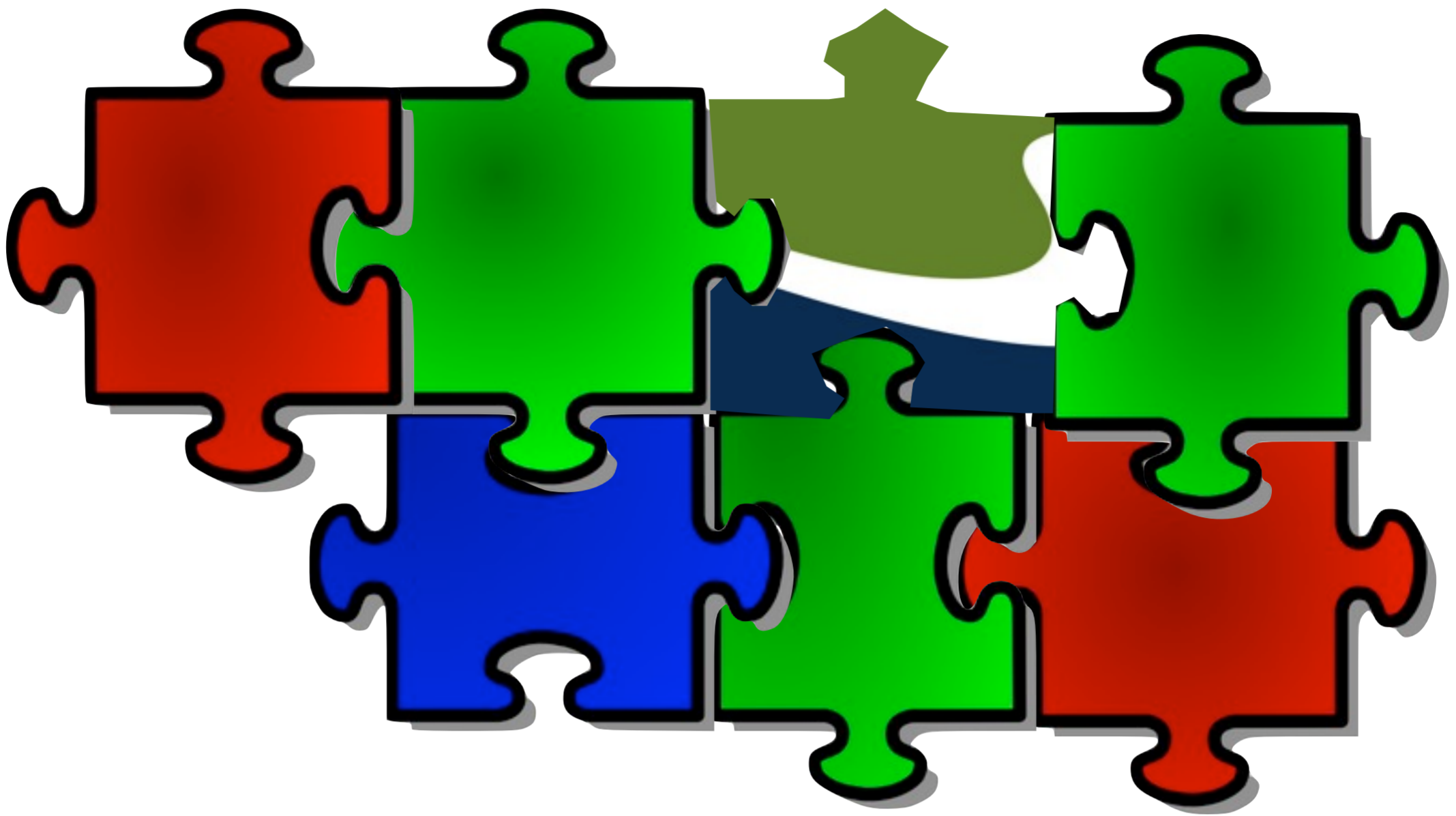
Filling gaps the Elgg way



Saturday, 24 March 12

So the Landing is about filling gaps with smaller pieces made out of Elgg that are themselves fairly hard. Lots of small pieces. It is the assembly that provides the softness at all levels, from the plugin-based architecture to the widgets on the profiles and group profiles. The rich communication tools allow people to fill in remaining gaps.

The Baby Bear space



Saturday, 24 March 12

What we really want is to give people more power to shape the Landing to be precisely what they want – a social authoring tool that fills any gap perfectly, interlocking with others. We have already built things like authenticated RSS and RSS import that provide tighter interlocking with systems like Moodle and Mahara. We are building context switching tools to make profiles and group profiles more configurable (already good with widget manager and our own customisable widgets eligo). Will have multi tabs, different layouts for each tab, more configurable look and feel of widgets and pages, better tools aggregated to support more precise needs



Saturday, 24 March 12

not too hard, not too soft: just right
need to give control to build the space with small pieces
shared with others as and how (discretionary access
control really important)
so: more customisable widgets, different layouts, tabbed
profiles, to present different facets to different
people, recommender widgets



Athabasca University

Technology Enhanced Knowledge
Research Institute

- <https://landing.athabascau.ca>
- <http://community.brighton.ac.uk>

- <http://jondron.athabascau.ca>
- jond@athabascau.ca

