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Podhoughts by Colin Marshall: Seminars About Long-Term Thinking

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Vital stats:

Format: lectures and debates to do with long-term thinking

Episode duration: 20m-2h

Frequency: usually monthly, though some months have their own miniseries

It always comes back to Brian Eno, doesn't it? I mean, everything in my life does; I've got no reason to assume yours is any different. Rarely do I pick up an interest without soon finding out that Eno — music producer, visual artist, *oblique strategist*, public intellectual about the very basis of culture, and author of my favorite book, *A Year With Swollen Appendices* — got there first. This has reached the point where, instead of looking for new things to get interested in, I just look up what he likes at the moment and get interested in that. Easier that way.

Brian Eno counts long-term thinking among his interests. He counts it so hard that he, along with other perpetually fascinating thinkers like Stewart Brand, sits on the board of [The Long Now Foundation](#), an organization founded to further the cause of long-term thinking. Long Now people, so I gather, think of us as sitting smack in the middle of a 20,000-year story of human civilization, and if we want to do a better job in the next 10,000 years than we did in the first 10,000 years, so the logic goes, we'd better consider our actions in the context of all the rest of the story. The Long Now Foundation encourages this with a variety of projects, most iconically a [10,000-year clock](#), but most directly a lecture series, hosted by Brand, conveniently available as a podcast: [Seminars About Long-Term Thinking](#) [RSS] [iTunes].

If you have any familiarity at all with what I think of as [TED culture](#), you'll know many of the Long Now lecturers. The group boasts heavyweight names like Lera Boroditsky [MP3], Paul Romer [MP3], Michael Pollan [MP3], Craig Venter [MP3], and Nassim Taleb [MP3]. Sometimes these luminaries give straight-up lectures, perhaps with a Q&A session following. Other times, the events take on more unusual forms, like debates structured into a series of rounds where, not only does each participant state their case and respond to the others', but each participant also explains the *opposing* point of view. In lots of venues, debates can wind up as time-wasting shams; performed Long Now-style, they achieve actual engagement between the ideas involved — a rare thing — pretty much every time.

Unlike the TEDs of the world, The Long Now Foundation doesn't just bring people in to flog their pet theories. When they announce a Seminar About Long-Term Thinking, it stays about long-term

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thinking. So these guests from myriad different domains — astrophysicists, historians, engineers, writers, politicians, “technologists” — all have to consider and explain their own ideas within the frame of the next 10,000 years, the last 10,000 years, or preferably both. Some of the seminars get quite creative to work within this frame, as when PC game designer Will Wright and Brian Eno get together [MP3] to talk about the common long-term-y elements of their separate work with generative systems. Eno has built generative music systems that can crank out single pieces that last thousands of years; Wright has built games that simulate thousands of years of evolution.

Seriously, guys. This podcast has a good deal Brian Eno in it. How much more do I really need to tell you?

[Podthinker [Colin Marshall](#) also happens to host and produce *The Marketplace of Ideas* [iTunes], a public radio show and podcast dedicated to in-depth cultural conversation. Please hire him for something.]

Colin Marshall Podthoughts

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