



## Quarantine and geometry

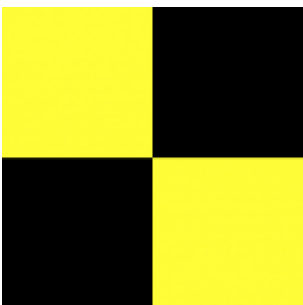
### Description

This forced quarantine should last forty days, and forty nights. "Forty" is apparently the highest number ever reached in Sesame Street counting lessons. It's also the number of squares around a Monopoly board. Forty years is a good biblical number, not least as it gives a clear sweep between generations. It was 40 years before the Hebrew people could enter the promised land.

The season of Lent, which we are in now, is a period of abstinence that lasts for 40 fasting days (plus 6 Sundays) — except that church buildings are closed at the moment. Forty also combines two cultural obsessions: the numbers 4 and 10. See post: [Four-fold reality](#) and [The power of ten](#).

A friend in Australia who lives near the beach said he and his neighbours marked out a grid of 4 metre squares in the sand. Each stood in the middle of their square and ate their own party food. That enforced the 2 metres of social distance rule. There was no sharing or touching.

As I'm interested in [codes](#), here's the maritime flag for "L" (Lima), which also means that the ship is in quarantine. A single yellow square would be "Q" (Quebec), for quarantine.



Forty days was a reasonable period of time to isolate people with a disease before they could enter the country. The Latin for "forty" is *quadraginta* (Italian *quaranta*, French *quarante* and Spanish *cuarenta*) from which derives *quarantine*.

Dubrovnik used to be a Venetian outpost (called Ortigia), and was effectively an island. That's where the term *quarantine* was first applied. To isolate something is effectively to turn it into an island. That

relates to the Latin *insulam*, meaning island. Here's Dubrovnic, taken in 2016 when we could still have holidays.



## Sequestered

Like office work, all teaching has now moved online, which has forced teaching staff and students to plunge into video conferencing, exchanging short videos and new forms of interaction. Online learning has been simmering for several years. I predict it will boom once the quarantine is over.

On Thursday I met not with 40, but 14 postgraduate students, each hunkered down in student accommodation. Actually, 2 were still in transit to China and unavailable. Two were already in China in hotel rooms near the airport, escorted from the plane and immediately tested and quarantined, not for 40 days, but 14 days. We could see one another of course, and talk. After our discussion we each sent 3-minute videos to one another explaining how we are coping.

## Revenge of the introverts

Quarantine is not unusual for introverts. The writer Timothy Stanley was on the BBC yesterday morning and said it is almost normal for writers to be isolated with only their words for company. He said that introverts in quarantine are in their element now.

At last, we can feel sorry for people who are naturally extroverted and gregarious. I think people who like to write are in the company of programmers, video gamers, geeks, [otaku](#), [hikikomori](#), incels, shut-ins, tv addicts, night security guards, hermits and hackers. [Edward Snowden](#) and [Julian Assange](#) consented readily to voluntary confinement for very long periods.

Thanks to the Internet now we can really be "alone together," a term coined pejoratively by Sherry Turkle to describe voluntary, technology-induced isolation due to mobile phone obsession. For the moment we don't have a choice. If we ever needed justification for the expansion of social media, this is it.

## References

- Mackowiak, Philip A., and Paul S. Sehdev. 2002. The Origin of Quarantine *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, (35) 9, 1071-1072.
- Manaugh, Geoff, and Nicola Twilley. 2019. YouTube "Spatial Fictions of Quarantine". *Strelka Institute*. 5 August. Available online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CT\\_-Q8XGUU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CT_-Q8XGUU) (accessed 25 March 2019).
- Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each other*. New York: Basic Books

## Notes

- Talking of China, I wanted to finish my review of Kai-Fu Lee's book about artificial intelligence in China. That's on hold.
- See posts on video conference and the flipped classroom model of learning: [Flipped classroom 101](#).

## Category

1. Culture

## Tags

1. isolation
2. online learning
3. quarantine

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