>Coordinating contributing members: how the Burning Man organization forms an 'alternative' artistic community in the Nevada Black Rock Desert

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ABSTRACT

Forming sustainable communities comprised of a thriving artistic and contributing population constitutes a challenge for most community planners. The Burning Man organization exemplifies how one group has successfully constructed such a community of approximately 29,000 members on a large-scale, week-long basis each year in the virtually infrastructure-less environment of the Nevada Black Rock Desert. The environmental constraints of the Black Rock Desert and the dependency of the organization upon volunteer contributions demand a higher level of member activity than that needed by most communities and events. Drawing upon extensive observation, interviews, and archival research, this paper specifically examines how the organization uses two interlinked means to establish a sense of place and community within harsh physical and organizational constraints. First, the organization has experimented with creating more structures that encourage desired civic behaviors and are also compatible with the demands of increasingly involved federal and state governmental agencies. Second, and more importantly, the organization disseminates cultural norms for participation by community inhabitants. Over the years, the Burning Man organization has institutionalized an ethos of active participation and self-expression to help elicit members' contributions in developing this community and de-rarefied art venue. The organization disseminates this ethos through various publications and discussion lists and by modeling behavior for newcomers. Members greatly value these opportunities to actively participate and conceptualize and initiate projects at creativity and output levels unseen within many organizations and communities. More importantly, members have applied lessons learned through this week-long exercise in community building to more permanent communities,

demonstrating how alternative forms of organizing and design can be successfully taught by example.

Introduction

The various economic, cultural, and logistical issues associated with establishing and maintaining a sustainable community has challenged community planners for centuries. Developing a community with a sizeable artistic and contributing population constitutes a specific but highly desirable challenge, as some experts argue that retaining involved and creative members conveys a distinct cultural and economic advantage (Florida 2002, Putnam 2000). The San Francisco-based Burning Man organization and its output of the Burning Man temporary arts community,[1] located in the demanding environment of the Nevada Black Rock Desert, constitutes an exemplar of the latter form of community planning. Originally a small impromptu summer solstice celebration of friends and family gathered for an evening in 1986, the event has undergone iterative experiments with community design and complex organizing for almost two decades, culminating in a week-long community of approximately 29,000 members dedicated to self-expression and participation. This event has thrived because its organizers intentionally design physical and cultural conditions that foster a community. Drawing on extensive research,[2] this paper examines how the Burning Man organization has successfully fostered the development of this community using mutually reinforcing (1) physical and (2) cultural structures to elicit desired actions by event participants. Successfully eliciting such actions is especially important since the environmental constraints of the Black Rock Desert and the dependency of the organization upon volunteer contributions demand a higher level of member activity. This paper first briefly discusses the community's unique aspects and the organization behind its development. This paper then investigates how the organization has changed the community's physical design in order to influence citizens' actions and comply with external agencies' demands. The second section examines how the

organization disseminates cultural norms for participation among community inhabitants and how some members react to the opportunities presented by this yearly "experiment" in community-building.

The community's unique features require complex organizing efforts

Several notable features differentiate the Burning Man event from other more conventional communities and events. First, members develop and dismantle a fully functional city in a physically adverse and unpredictable environment of extreme desert temperatures, windstorms, duststorms, and rainstorms, all while negotiating the demands of various governmental bureaucracies, interest groups, and local townspeople. Since the surrounding area lacks an infrastructure capable of supporting the event, the Burning Man organization must provide and outsource services, such as portable toilets and medical and fire protection, to supplement the resources of surrounding communities. As for the community's focus, Burning Man welcomes both trained artists' and laypersons' creations, with a specific emphasis on interactive art, which includes large and small-scale installations and performances. In comparison with the restrictions of conventional public space and art scenes, this venue provides more physical and institutional freedoms, liberating creativity from "being closeted in [individuals'] garages."[3] In addition, the arduous environmental conditions of the desert exert considerable experiential influence upon the art, creator, and audience. The community's adherence to tenets such as no vending, commercialism, or spectating sets it apart from commercial venues that feature paid performers, products, services, and corporate sponsorship. In particular, the prohibition against spectating establishes the expectation that participants will initiate and develop their experiences, rather than passively consuming a standardized predetermined product.

Few people realize that this seemingly spontaneous community requires constant and often Herculean feats of complex organizing. The formal organization of the Black Rock City Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) is responsible for overseeing the development of the Burning Man event. This organization, unlike its ad hoc predecessors, operates year-round and consists of a small board of paid core organizers, their support staff, and a predominantly volunteer force. Rather than rely upon corporate sponsorship to defray costs, the organization uses ticket sales and donations to secure goods and services that require

cash funds or outsourcing, such as the Bureau of Land Management land use permit, portable toilet rentals, and fire protection and medical services. While providing a basic infrastructure, the organization depends upon volunteer labor and participation to fully realize the output of the community. Members must construct, share, dismantle, and pack out their own shelter, provisions, art, and entertainment. A sizeable percentage of the population[4] formally volunteers, either during the event or around the year, by assisting the organization in building, maintaining, and striking the community infrastructure.

Organizers use physical structures to enhance civic behavior and comply with larger societal constraints

Understanding the community's current physical structure and character requires an examination of historical antecedents. The earliest events operated under the radar of authorities, with a small group of participants assembling for unapproved burns[5] on San Francisco's secluded Baker Beach. In 1990, a representative of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area Rangers curtailed an attempted gathering, so the event moved to a remote location in the Black Rock Desert and became a community camping experience. With this physical re-location onto the playa[6] and its ethereal backdrop of sky and mountains, some organizers made physically entering the community an experience, drawing a line participants would cross to enter into the "Zone." Unfamiliarity with camping in desert conditions led the unprepared to seek shade beneath their vehicles until dusk allowed for limited recreational activities:

We had 4 activities. We could get drunk, we could listen to music, we could rest in the shade of course, and that's right, we could go to the hot springs, and oh yeah, if someone had a tarp, they could drag us around behind the pick-up. That was it![7]

Some media and old-timers romanticize such "good old days" for their "anarchy" or lack of formalized rules since members could freely drive their cars about or discharge firearms into the outskirts of the site during these less-populated events. The tumultuous 1996 event's accidents and injuries, lawsuits, and other incidents convinced organizers to pedestrianize and control the density of the campsite, rather than allow spatial sprawl. In addition, organizers recognized that the Burning Man community's growing size and accompanying environmental constraints, namely increased governmental oversight, necessitated more conscious organizing and a re-examination of the design philosophy. Organizers agreed that if they were to

continue the event, then they needed to engage in more professional organizing efforts, rather than just a few months' worth of planning.

However, not everyone could agree what these efforts would go towards – in other words, organizers disagreed about how the community should physically develop. One of the major turning points for the community's development occurred when founder and lead organizer Larry Harvey and another organizer, John Law, a self-professed anarchist,[8] diverged in their preferred bases for the community structure after the 1996 event:

What I had envisioned was some sort of civic society that would support larger numbers of people. As a first step toward that, I designed lampposts [lining the outer city streets] on the simple notion that you need a superordinate order, something that is above everyone else to indicate that there are civic boundaries, that there is a greater central entity that people should respect...

I insisted that we have a strong civic center. We had a coffee house [as the city center]... but the basic dispute [with John Law...seemed to be that, that [Burning Man] should be essentially about autonomous anarchism. [Law] wanted to recruit primarily punk groups to direct separate enclaves dispersed throughout the playa from which they would sally out in their dangerous cars like Knights of Yore...I said that no, we want to put a strong organization at the center, so that strangers can be socialized and feel at home...[9]

This fundamental disagreement about the event's direction led to Law's departure, and Harvey's vision of a growing organized community prevailed. As in previous years, the sculpture of the Man, at least until its ritualistic burning at or near the end of the event, anchored the community center, providing a literal and symbolic compass for citizens. At events prior to 1997, participants could camp and drive wherever they pleased, but at events after 1997, organizers more systematically gridded and labeled city "streets" and camping areas in a crescent shape partially encircling the area near the Man and adjacent artwork. Over time, organizers developed a "downtown" area surrounding the Center Café, a 24-hour place where citizens could mingle over coffee, deemed a caffeinated necessity in the desert, along with other community services, such as an information center, medical services, and even a post office. Harley Dubois, Director of Community Services, and her staff carefully assign the "prime" real estate fronting the Man to theme camps, where members self-organize around self-selected themes which promote

interaction with the passer-bys. Population increases and site expansion led to experiments with practicalities such as locating portable toilets and service outposts at the city's outer ends, as well as organizational principles like agglomerating cooperative theme camps into larger village units.

While some design changes arose out of organizers' preferences to develop and strengthen community bonds, governmental agencies attempted to impose design preferences of their own. Organizers had to negotiate with agencies, which were used to enforcing certain design standards that were difficult to apply or irrelevant to the Burning Man event:

... the first year that the Health Dept. came along, they wanted us to show them a map where we had every single solitary lot for a person blocked out, KOA [Kampgrounds of America, Inc., a franchise of managed camping sites] style, with numbers for each camp site. And they wanted lighting, so they wanted us to put up power poles for the whole city, what are they thinking? ...KOA campgrounds was the only standard that they had, so they tried to take that and apply it to us. Ok, let's be realistic here. And so we had to educate them and bring them up to speed. So with every agency, we have to work with them to teach them what is it that we can do, what's going to work.[10]

As Mike Bilbo, a Bureau of Land Management recreation planner, admits, such guidelines were intended for urban areas supported by significant infrastructure, so agencies and Burning Man organizers had to co-operatively develop policies applicable to a desert environment with little infrastructure:

A lot of large-scale events occur in urban areas, like rock concerts and ball games and Reno Hot August Nights. There's a different structure in place to manage those. There's a place or facility that you can go to. But we looked at all of the examples to see what applied to [Burning Man], and we didn't find much.[11]

Organizers sometimes conceded to agencies' demands, but with a decidedly Burning Man flavor. For example, medical and fire protection services demanded labeled streets to facilitate quicker response times, so organizers named streets based upon the event's annual theme, such as "Feet" and "Anal" during a year celebrating the body. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which inspects the site for environmental impact and decides whether or not to grant the land use permit, has issued the most significant demands, spurring the organization to introduce a number of design practices, some of which have exceeded the BLM's demands. Organizers have introduced various lower

environmental impact practices, including developing a "Leave No Trace" program so that residents packed out their belongings and trash, gridding the site's surface post-event to check for debris, and building elevated burn platforms to protect the playa surface from the effects of fire.

Physical structure isn't enough: organizers utilize various means to disseminate cultural norms that develop community bonds The Burning Man organizers recognize that physical structures alone do not make a community. Unlike more mainstream societies, the Burning Man organizers devote significant efforts towards instilling cultural norms that encourage community development. As mentioned previously, this community's unique features include the expectation that attendees will actively participate and not engage in cash exchange. Participants and organizers believe that demanding more of individual members encourages the development of stronger community relations and creative problem-solving. Similar to the development of the community's physical structure, such norms developed and codified over time with the changing conditions of the community. For instance, the formal prohibition against sponsorship, vending, and cash exchange was unnecessary during the earlier years of the community:

Initially we didn't do [vending] for the same reason that you wouldn't do it if you went on a camping trip with your friends - it would be a little tacky...

But then [Burning Man] got a little bigger and this isn't commonly known – people started to try to make money, selling shirts, selling booze, selling fireworks in the forgotten years...they were trying to make a buck. They all failed.

Because if you've told everyone that this is survival and you've got to bring everything, there's no world without your efforts, then they're not going to buy a margarita from you, they've got more booze than they know what to do with, they've got too much booze! And they've brought batteries and if they didn't, someone has it.[12]

Feeling that such rudimentary vending attempts ran counter to the community's developing sensibilities, organizers formalized a prohibition against cash-based exchange. Organizers made exceptions for the Center Café and Camp Artica, where people could purchase ice, with the proceeds benefiting the neighboring town's community services, for their coolers. To counteract the demand for vending,

organizers encouraged a barter and gift economy and inculcated the need for self-reliance in preparing for harsh environmental conditions. Under such norms, most attendees over-prepare and willingly share needed items, with some members designing and hand-making memorabilia to bestow upon others. Indeed, interviewees cited the non-commercialism of the community as one aspect that they hoped would not change over time.

By setting up cultural expectations of participation and providing organizational support for "grass-roots" initiatives, organizers have created conditions that encourage participants to engage in creative measures that a purely top-down approach could not elicit. For instance, Recycling camp, where participants compact aluminum cans using a bicycle-powered can crusher or over-sized mallets (apparently a favorite among those who associate the cans with demanding bosses), started when two attendees, Simon Hagger and Diane Whitmore approached Harley Dubois with a recycle proposal in 1997. Similarly, volunteer manager Scott Shaner, frustrated by a low volunteer retention rate for ice sales, refashioned the visually obtrusive hay bale and cardboard structure into the thriving Camp Artica, a theme camp with an igloo-shaped shade structure and cut-out counters that ease the transfer of ice bags. In response to the growing expanse of the city and pedestranization, other members have independently designed, constructed, and run small and large-scale art cars as transportation systems, which include a fire-breathing articulated dragon and a cannon-ball riddled Spanish galleon. By participating in such creative activities, interviewees reported deriving a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction that they were unable to obtain elsewhere, such as their workplaces. Some considered volunteering, whether this activity involved helping to place artists' works or patrolling the city, their medium of "artistic" participation or self-expression. Based on their experiences with Burning Man, interviewees wondered how such norms of participation and interaction might infiltrate larger society:

Scott McKeown: ...after going to Burning Man...it's hard to go to a rock concert anymore, for instance, because I'm just sitting there ... the rock star ego is on stage...and the rest of the masses [are] kinda looking at the performers...where's the interactivity? Where's the participation here? ...[laugh] After Burning Man, all these other events just seem almost absurd... Burning Man changed my life, it really kind of restored my faith in possibilities.

Interviewer: Possibilities for?

Scott McKeown: For the way for people could interact with each other. My feeling was wow, this is the way it ought to be…And [with] everybody being so friendly, you can walk into anybody's camp and immediately start a conversation…[13]

Some members do carry over norms into their larger lives, for instance, by developing year-round social networks dedicated to art and socializing, adhering to the "Leave No Trace" ethic, and fostering changes in their personal lives.

While such norms may strike some as overly optimistic or utopian and thus ultimately doomed to failure if imported to a larger, more permanent society, how the Burning Man organization has disseminated and enforced norms for a massive, temporary gathering serves as the greater, more generalizable lesson. In the more recent years, members and organizers have been concerned about adequately assimilating influxes of newcomers. Part of the organization's strategy for managing population growth has included restricting or even banning full-scale media exposure, such as coverage by the popular music video channel MTV, as well as working with media to publicize pertinent information, such as the need to purchase tickets and prepare for desert conditions in advance of the event. For the most part, a combination of old and new technology facilitates the acculturation of the geographically dispersed and heterogeneous event population prior to members' physical amassing at the event.[14] The organization utilizes print, web-based, and distribution list publications, as well as in-person social interactions, to communicate and enact community policies. Each year, organizers focus on conveying two or three main messages that reflect previous event's problems, such as the proper disposal of trash or participants' rights regarding search and seizure, or how to build a community, such as engaging in a gift economy. Members receive a print information brochure, can access information on the web or receive emailed newsletters, and are greeted at the entrance to the community by volunteers who engagingly reinforce and up-date information. Discussion lists and bulletin boards reinforce behavior and beliefs on a continuous, year-round basis. Face-to-face meetings, work parties, and other social events provide additional opportunities for modeling behavior through inspirational stories or demonstration. For instance, at a meeting of volunteer coordinators, organizer

Harley Dubois shared how she assigned meaningful tasks to some initially reluctant volunteers, demonstrating how the organization can create conditions that enhance participants' experiences: … In 1996, it was a hell year, it was way too big, over the top to the organizers…It was great for participants though.

When I get to the gate [the entrance where incoming event-goers buy their tickets], a gate person storms over and says for me to handle this. These two chicks had no money [for the tickets], no water, no food, nothing. They were getting more sassy 10 miles in and 10 miles out.

I said, "ok, you're going to work for your tickets." One [of them] whined, "You're going to make me scrub toilets." I said, "listen, bitch, I'm going to get you the best job," and got on the radio and called around for people needing volunteers. Finally [I find out that] Plundertown [a theme camp] was doing a life-size game of Mouse Trap, I send them over, and I never see these people again [during the event].

I come back to SF and go to a Chicken John event [John Rinaldi, a well-known performer/organizer in the SF underground art scene], and see this woman and man and another woman and man, it's Steve, Co, and Mark, they were their girlfriends. One [of the girls] said, "you were right, that was the coolest job ever."

So suss them [potential volunteers] out, find a match, it can be a good outcome…[15]

Finally, the Burning Man organization has empowered members to reinforce norms by responding to or alerting the organization to inappropriate behavior, such as opportunists who sell items with the Burning Man logo or record moving imagery without appropriate registration. When positively applied, peer pressure can be an educational experience for all involved parties, and most, especially newcomers, rise to the occasion.

Conclusion

Interviewees and anecdotal reports indicate that attendees agree that the Burning Man community effectively enacts special, desirable features not achieved elsewhere. Relative to other utopian experiments and events such as Woodstock, the Burning Man's continued longevity, its spread through global off-shoots, and its attaining cultural reference and influence in popular culture evidence its viability and appeal. Most

importantly. this community's experiences demonstrate how widespread the Burning Man impact is upon members. Members attempt to apply practices to the larger society, ranging from voluntarily picking up others' trash to formally organizing local art events that reclaim cityscapes for non-commercial enjoyment. More permanent communities can learn from this community's potent combination of experimenting with physical structure and cultural norms that both appeal to and expect much from members. Finally, other communities can also examine how the Burning Man community has accommodated growth via physical and cultural structures.

Bibliography

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(Footnotes)

[1] For more information, see the official website http://www.burningman.com.

[2] This paper utilizes three sources of data: (1) over a year's worth of on-site participant-observations of organizational meetings and activities from three time points in 1998, 1999, and 2000-2001, with follow-ups through 2002, (2) 78 in-person and phone interviews of 80 past and present organizers, volunteers, and representatives of outside entities, and (3) archival research of organizational and personal files.

[3] Interview with volunteer Stephanie Symanski August 10, 2000, San Francisco.

[4] 14% of the respondents for a 2001 convenience survey indicated that they had performed volunteer work for the organization before the 2001 Burning Man event.

[5] Organizers were supposed to submit plans and obtain permits from the Golden Gate National Recreation for these gatherings on federally-managed lands.

[6] The playa consists of a flat alkaline former lake bed bordered by mountains with elevations ranging from 4,800 to 8,400 feet (US Dept. of Interior "The Black Rock Desert & Playa: Natural and Cultural History visitor information.").

[7] Interview with original founder and head organizer Larry Harvey, October 25, 2000, San Francisco.

[8] Law focuses his disagreement upon the growth of the community, citing a preference for intimacy: "[The Burning Man event has] become more like a city, more like real life, and that's not where I like to go, that's a completely alien environment." Interview with John Law September 26, 2000, Oakland, California.

[9] Interview with Larry Harvey, October 25, 2000, San Francisco.

[10] Interview with Harley Dubois, October 19, 2000, San Francisco.

[11] Phone interview with Mike Bilbo, December 12, 2000.

[12] Interview with Larry Harvey, October 25, 2000, San Francisco.

[13] Phone interview with Scott McKeown, October 2, 2000.

[14] An April 2001 search of 2001 event ticket buyers' mailing addresses revealed that buyers represented at least 49 of the 50 states and U.S. territories and at least 26 different countries. A 2001 convenience survey indicated that respondents also represented a variety of occupations, incomes, and demographic groups.

[15] Observation of Greeters meeting June 13, 2000, San Francisco.