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Network Playa

When I was originally presented with the idea of creating a site-specific art project in Death Valley I was more than excited. I saw it as a great opportunity to escape the confines of the screen, which the majority of my work has been based on up until this point. It was rather difficult coming up with an idea for a project that made sense in the context of the class. There were a number of issues to take into account, the most important of which was the protective nature of the space we were dealing with. First and foremost, the project needed to be environmentally sensitive. Keeping that in mind, I was forced to go back to the drawing board a number of times after having an idea fail during the research and development phase.

The overall goal of my project was to create a task-oriented network of knowledge distribution in the area known as the Racetrack Playa. I decided the best way to accomplish this was to loosely model my network after the sea and anchor detail of ship navigation because I found that there were many similarities between the two. Most importantly, I wanted to carry out some sort of computational task that was distributed amongst my team of volunteers and myself, similar to how a team works while piloting a ship at sea.

In order to carry this out, the initial decision needed to be made as to how to establish a network out on the Playa. The simplest way to do this was have my project take place in three different places at the same time, using a low bandwidth, low-tech communication system. The best solution was to use handheld FRS/GMRS radios. They were well suited for the terrain since they operate on batteries and their range was more than sufficient for the area in which we were operating.

Coming up with a way to implement this network was a much more difficult undertaking. I decided there needed to be some sort of task: simple, but at the same time one which relied on communication between the members of my team and myself in order to be completed. Even though the project was taking place in three separate places, I needed to make each place equally important.

The most important aspect of my network was the role of the spotter. The spotter was situated on top of The Grandstand, a forty-foot mass of rock near the North end of the Playa. The Grandstand served as an ideal place for the spotter to set up since it offered an unobstructed view of the entire North end of the Playa. From atop this rock perch, the spotter was equipped with a pair of binoculars and a two-way radio.

On the other end of the radio was myself, at a separate location near the road. This location served as the communication hub. At this location I had a tape recorder set up to record the communication that would be taking place. I was also equipped with another two-way radio tuned to a separate frequency that the spotter could not listen to. This frequency connected me to my volunteers out on the Northern flat of the Playa.

The Northern flat of the Playa is where the actual task took place. It was at this location where a volunteer put on a blindfold, got handed the radio to which I was

connected, and was then spun in circles enough times to become disoriented. As this was being done, an assistant took six green racquetballs and distributed them onto the Playa in the vicinity of the volunteer, not too far apart. When everyone was in place the network would start.

The basic goal of this network was to have the blindfolded volunteer navigate the space and collect all six of the racquetballs. The spotter would take a visual bearing of the blindfolded volunteer and their relation to the nearest racquetball, then radio a set of simple instructions (e.g. take two steps forward) to me at the communication hub. This information was then relayed to the blindfolded volunteer on the Playa, where they proceeded to carry out the instructions and eventually recovered all of the racquetballs.

I was able to run this network three separate times, each time using a different blindfolded volunteer to collect the racquetballs. Overall it went very well, although it was definitely a learning experience. The first thing that became apparent was the spotter had a very limited depth perception when locating racquetballs on the ground from atop The Grandstand. This obviously made things more difficult by increasing the number of commands needed to locate the racquetballs and ultimately slowing down the network.

Another factor that impacted the speed of the network was the small size of the racquetballs. It was sometimes difficult for the blindfolded volunteers to locate the exact location of the balls, despite the repeated commands from the communication hub that they were “right on top of it.” I should have chosen objects that were larger and probably not round, since a number of times the balls were accidentally kicked as the volunteer was attempting to recover them. Although, one could make the argument that using round balls and having them move accidentally added to the project since it caused a chain reaction of cognitive processing from all members of the network when triggered.

Originally I had planned to record everything that was being communicated on both frequencies using a tape recorder, and then take that data and interpret it in a number of ways. Ideally, I wanted to create a visual diagram similar to an activity score that shows the temporal relations among coordinated activities of members of the network. But, much like life, this project was not without problems. To my dismay, the head of the tape recorder got fouled up by all of the dust and dirt turning the majority of the tape sounds into unintelligible static. In retrospect, it would have been useful if I had logged all of the commands by hand into a book, but that solution posed a number of problems. First, there would have been no concept of time had I written everything down and, more importantly, the network would have gotten incredibly slow if the team was constantly waiting for me to write down each command. This is one area of the network where an additional task could have been allocated to another volunteer.

Despite the fact that the recorded data from my network did not survive, I still feel the project was successful on a number of levels. It was definitely an exercise in cultural computation and worked from a performance piece standpoint if nothing else. After returning from the Playa I was able to gather some good feedback from my volunteers. We were all in agreement that the network was successful.

The group consensus was that the job of the spotter was ultimately the most important aspect of the network. According to the spotter, the most difficult aspect of his duty was dealing with the change in perspective created by looking through the binoculars. That was definitely one of the main factors affecting the speed of the network. Most of the volunteers were surprised at how smoothly everything went, and anyone who

wore a blindfold was very thankful we staged the performance in the area in which we did. They felt it was much easier walking around blindfolded when you knew there was nothing in your way to trip and fall over.

While I was definitely disappointed when I realized that the recording of my data didn't exist, it should be noted that some times good things can come out of mistakes, and that is certainly the case here. I had decided on the trip out to the performance area that I should test my equipment to make sure it worked. This was not hard to do since our caravan of cars was already utilizing some of the technology. Each of the eight cars in our caravan was equipped with an FRS/GMRS radio tuned to channel seven so we could maintain verbal contact throughout our travel down the twenty-six mile washboard known as "the road." I hooked up a spare radio to my tape recorder and proceeded to record the activity that was taking place on channel seven. While this test may have ultimately led to the demise of my tape recorder, the result might have been worth it.

What I did capture was a thirty some odd minute conversation that took place during our voyage between Ubehebe Crater and Teakettle Junction. I have since edited the tape down to about six minutes of intelligible conversation and created an mp3 file so all of the members of the group can listen and attempt to decipher what was going on during our caravan.

After listening to the tape, I was amazed at how similar this network (our caravan) was to the network I had created on the Playa with my project. In essence, both the caravan of cars and my project are task-oriented systems of knowledge distribution. While the overall task of my network was to collect the racquetballs, the task of the caravan was to make sure everyone got to where we were going safely, and in an orderly and systematic fashion. There are also a number of similarities when viewed in the context of navigation of space.

Another interesting similarity between these two events is that in each network there is a definite hierarchy to the system of knowledge distribution. At the top of my network was the spotter, whose computations and cognition was integral to the functioning of the network. This is very similar to the role played by Brett, the point-man of our caravan, whose job it was to make sure that all members of the caravan got to the correct place in a safe manner. Also, in each of these networks the tasks were allocated amongst the members so that the network would be able to function as smoothly as possible.

In conclusion, both of these networks were interesting experiments in cultural computation. I feel one factor that positively influenced every project done at the Playa was the fact that we had such a wide variety of participants. I think anytime that people with such diverse backgrounds and interests are given the opportunity to collaborate, it is bound to be a good experience. I know that for me, it was certainly an unforgettable one.