

Economies of Representation

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A consideration of how rapidly changing demographics and/or evolving technologies impact the ways in which artists and arts organizations across the region connect with audiences.

Technology is often cited as being the source of disruptive shifts in the arts community. This is echoed increasingly as the Internet and digital technologies become pervasive in the production and consumption of the arts. The arts community is in fact rapidly approaching an *event horizon* beyond which it will be impossible to discuss the creative community without implicitly reflecting the imprint of digitization and networking. It is often assumed that these twin forces are responsible for the challenges of **audience engagement** and **digital dexterity** that arts organizations increasingly struggle with. Arts organizations make such assumptions at their own peril as this framing subverts the very reason for their being and undermine the economics of the public interest in the United States by ceding the rights to innovation and community relevance to the consumer market which is failing faster in adjusting to the tectonic shifts occurring in our demographics than the non profit sector in general, and the arts community in specific. For the arts community, the strategy is often to look to the market on issues of what people want. I will argue that in fact the opposite is true. I will argue that the arts hold the key **isomorphism** to interpreting the changing demographics and evolving technologies most clearly and effectively for artists, arts organizations and audiences.

The misstep happens early in the discussion of technology and demographic. A common generalization describes generations in terms of a leading technology or platform of the time. For example, many arts organizations will lament the challenge of reaching the ‘mobile’ generation, or the ‘gaming’ generation, or the ‘internet’ generation, ad infinitum. While it is of course acknowledged that reaching audiences in a time of media saturation is difficult, the definition of the problem does a disservice to both the organization and the community it is intending to serve. Technologies don’t create communities- communities create technologies. **The world wasn’t waiting for the telephone to become detached from the wall to start a new generation.** It was increasingly mobile and extended communities that created the need for mobile communications, and in turn led to the commercial market emerging to fill this need. As increasingly service and knowledge oriented labor forces collide with rapidly changing family structures, mobile phones become a requirement for survival (the example of adoption in the developing world is even more striking). **The Internet did not give birth to globalization.** The world was integrating in an international network of migration, monetary and trade policy, as well as impending climate calamity when the Internet became a sudden phenomenon. If Universities had not already created the Internet, it would have had to be invented to accommodate the ever-expanding universe of information, security, and geographically distributed communication that Globalization demands. It is not the sudden introduction of disruptive technologies that compel the world forward. **It is the need of communities, aligned in ever changing ways, which force the hand of innovation.** It is here where the arts community should be excelling yet find themselves in a deficit.

The arts community has always held the responsibility for binding communities to dialogue on who we are, what we are doing, and where we will be in the near future. If ever this was a conversation that needs to be happening, now is the time. If ever the arts were needed to light the

way in obvious and surprising ways, now is the time. **The collision of technology and demographics will not result in new combinations we are unable to anticipate, it will result in new particles and forces we have yet to imagine.**

The only reliable and tested way of preparing for this brave new world is by capturing the equity communities hold through their creative expression and engagement. This is in the lifeblood of artists and arts organizations. This is the point of departure for moving past the event horizon of assumptions about technology and the arts that will always expose our organizations to the possibility of oblivion. By reflecting a place of ownership and potential in the economies of representation that have emerged to fill the gap of the post-industrial marketplace – where people troll the network of games, information and communication in search of human connections – we can extend rather than obviate the audiences we currently serve in our arts community.

In order to achieve this extension we have to prescribe a clear and simple path based on the principle of *emergence* – a concept critical to the gaming community – where simple rules enable complex and evolutionary strategies and revolutionary discoveries.

Here are the rules:

1. **Expect to change the world with your work.** Otherwise, why bother? Be bold, be strong, and take risks. Don't plan on retiring from your current job. You should fail more than you succeed. People should think you're crazy often enough to be brilliant occasionally. Above all don't bore the following people: your co-workers, your constituents, your friends, yourself, strangers. Boring means no one is listening.
2. **Strengthen your community with every action.** If you can't point to exactly how what you're doing matters to the people you serve and work with stop immediately. If you are confused then ask directly. Don't have a meeting to decide if you're having an impact. Go ask. This process should take no more than two weeks for any organization. If you need to change what you're doing, *and everyone will need to change many times*, then do so within two weeks. This gives you a one-month period for changing directions when you need to and leaves plenty of time to succeed. If you can't change something in a month, then you're not set up to succeed.
3. **Refuse to pay for anything having to do with the Internet.** Hire one young person to live and breathe the search for cool new free applications online. There are many dropping every week and non-profit arts organizations are the worst at finding them. This is easily resolved by getting a young person on the job. Additionally, cancel all the software you're paying to custom build for just you. By the time you're done with the project it won't work like you expected and there will be something better for free online.
4. **Challenge your web thinking constantly.** There is too much good intelligence and creative thinking going on to ignore. Don't isolate your thought process. Be a part of the world when it comes to ideas and vet them constantly with a clear connection to the other people thinking about the same things. Make new friends online with people you can collaborate with. Invite people into your idea space and watch it get better instantly. Make maps of your ideas using information visualization tools and share them.

5. **Take responsibility for clarity in your use technology.** If you can't explain it to your newest employee, newest constituent, biggest funder and oldest board member with the exact same language then you are on the wrong path. Test-Fix-Repeat constantly. Worry if you can't map your ideas and work flow on one page.
6. **Stop using the words 'digital'.** We no longer describe our home appliances as 'electrical'. Using the term 'digital' is unnecessary and counterproductive. Using the term strategically exposes you as out of touch. Excise it from every nook and cranny of your organization and thinking. Creative thinking is guaranteed to follow.
7. **Engineer for the future possibility.** Every moment you spend on something that is simply addressing your needs right now, you're sabotaging any relevance to the changing world you live in. Beware. Engineers regularly apply future assumption in their work, so should your organization.
8. **Expose your approach to constant criticism and gather data.** The most important aspect of the Internet is connecting people to information and honest feedback. Listen and acknowledge. Challenge those around you to be direct and open at all times. Don't have a staff retreat every time something hard comes up. Put the butcher paper away and stay focused on the work to get through it. If you are doing #1, then it matters enough to live through the pain of actually doing something that's tough. Go on retreat when you've succeeded, before then do the work.
9. **Treat connectivity not as a tool but as the emergent space you exist in.** Forget about your Facebook and My Space pages being a new communications initiative. Stop referring to Web 2.0. The community you serve is a networked community deploying distributed applications for exploration, communication, and survival. Can you say the same for you and your organization? If not, then make it critical for your own survival and mission. Don't talk about social networking and gaming as critical spaces for colonization with your old way of thinking. Be about those things in your life and work. If you don't play video games regularly you have no idea what's going on. Gaming is the platform for *community emergence*. Go there.
10. **Believe that time is running out.** The world is changing fast and teeters on the brink of disaster for humans. The Internet is the only thing capable of producing and disseminating the information we need for understanding what's happening. It has also led to the greatest explosion of Art ever. Art is our best means of translating change and inspiring heroism. We need heroes. **Be about it.**