

# Online Organizing for Bike Fun: Understanding Social Barriers to Participation

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## ABSTRACT

We discuss the role of an online calendar and social media tools in organizing Velopalooza, an annual festival of bike fun where participants attend bike rides organized by other participants. Seeking to improve Velopalooza participation, we establish a preliminary understanding of fundamental social barriers to participation. Finally, we propose a discussion of how these barriers may be removed or lessened using online technologies.

## Author Keywords

Grassroots Planning, Identity, Social Media, Bicycles, Fun.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces (Organizational design)

## General Terms

Human Factors, Management

## INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

Velopalooza is an annual grassroots festival of bike fun in Vancouver, Canada, currently (in 2011) in its second year. During Velopalooza, participants attend bike rides which are organized by other participants (“ride leaders”). Encouraging participants to make their own rides is a major component of Velopalooza and the festival plans to expand primarily by increasing the number of participant-generated rides.

Unlike other festivals, there is not a centralized place where Velopalooza happens. Rides are listed on the web site (velopalooza.ca), which shows the starting time and location for each ride. There is not a centralized programming committee for Velopalooza; anyone who wishes to lead a ride can do so by filling out a form to add an event to the web site. Participants find out about rides by browsing the calendar on the Velopalooza web site or through Facebook events.

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The aims of Velopalooza include:

- Have fun. Enjoyment is prioritized over direct advocacy or political ends.
- Facilitate a grassroots community of people who create their own fun with bikes, by providing space, encouragement, and support.
- Involve people beyond the “cycling community.” That is, be inclusive of people for whom cycling is a means of transportation or a fun activity, not a way of life. Be open to cyclists of all levels of skill and experience.
- Change the perception of urban spaces by connecting participants to the environment around them and demonstrating that city streets are suitable places for recreational cycling.
- Create a self-sustaining culture of bike fun in Vancouver. That is, even if the organizers of Velopalooza were to disengage, leaving the web site up, the community would still self-organize and promote fun events in the absence of a top-down organization.

Velopalooza is simultaneously a fun festival and an activist festival. Many of Velopalooza’s aims seek to bring about specific social change, and do so through fun means (as opposed to lobbying governments or other political actions). We believe that fun events have the power to engage people in ways that more serious forms of activism do not. This is discussed more fully in [8].

We, along with the other organizers of Velopalooza, are currently questioning how to increase participation. Clearly, online engagement through our web site and social media will be critical in reaching new participants. How can our technology support the goal of bringing in more participants, especially more ride leaders? And what obstacles stand in the way of doing so? This paper describes the origins of Velopalooza, the way technology is currently used for outreach, and some of the social barriers to participation. We want to use the workshop to discuss the role of technology in overcoming those barriers, as well as the logistics of deploying technology to do that.

## VELOPALOOZA ORIGINS AND RELATED WORK

Velopalooza is inspired by Pedalpalooza [10], an annual event in Portland, OR facilitated by SHIFT, an informal

organization of people who share a passion for cycling and wish to promote bike culture and fun [11].

SHIFT was formed in 2002 after Portland hosted Bike Summer, a month long celebration of bicycles. Bike Summer was organized by a core committee who provided the communications infrastructure for bike-related events to be put on by anyone in Portland. The month full of events drew more than 5,000 participants. Seeing this success, the organizers grouped together as SHIFT and decided to repeat the celebration with a Mini Bike Summer in 2003 and the first Pedalpalooza in 2004. Pedalpalooza has been held every year since and the SHIFT website is used year-round to organize bike events.

We hope Velopalooza can reach similar levels of participation as Pedalpalooza but at the same time, we do not envision following the same model for growth. While Pedalpalooza grew organically over several years, we would like to jumpstart Velopalooza's growth by taking advantage of increasing popularity of bicycles, more established use of social media and funding opportunities.



**Figure 1. A 1980s themed Velopalooza ride. (Photo by Maureen Cameron)**

### **TECHNOLOGY AND VELOPALOOZA**

The following online technologies are currently used to coordinate and communicate Velopalooza events:

The website, [velopalooza.ca](http://velopalooza.ca), shows a calendar and list of events taking place during Velopalooza on the homepage. Another page displays a calendar of current bike rides and events. Anyone can add events to the calendar; there is no sign up or sign in process so events can essentially be added anonymously. Moderation is done solely by Velopalooza committee members who monitor the website and can delete inappropriate events (although they have not yet needed to do so).

There is a Velopalooza Facebook group with over 600 members at the time of writing this paper. Most ride leaders will also create a Facebook event and invite either their

network of friends or all members of the Velopalooza group. A number of Velopalooza organizers then actively promote events by sharing them within their networks and posting reminders to the Velopalooza group. The group is also used to collect and post photos and videos of rides that have taken place.

Twitter is used to a lesser extent to broadcast event notices and to tweet about events while they are happening. Finally, photos are also collected in a Velopalooza Flickr pool and videos are posted to YouTube.

Using these technologies, Velopalooza 2010 was fairly successful *for a first year* but we hope for more engagement in coming years. Most people who organized and led rides were already active in their respective cycling communities and the majority of ride participants also came from these communities. Ideally awareness of Velopalooza will reach a broader audience and more people will choose to participate and lead rides regardless of their previous involvement in cycling communities and culture.

This goal motivates our current plan to redesign and launch a new Velopalooza website (the current one is fairly outdated). We believe that a number of improvements such as a more visually appealing and usable site design as well as better social media integration could easily remove practical barriers to participation as discussed in the next section. It is the “social barriers” to participation that are more difficult to understand and design for.

In the rest of this paper we discuss these social barriers and propose that online technologies could help us remove or lessen them.

### **BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION BY NEW PEOPLE**

Anyone can choose to participate in or lead rides for Velopalooza. But just because they can does not mean that they will. There are various barriers to people becoming participants.

Some barriers are practical considerations, such as lack of access to a working bicycle, or events offered at times and places that are inconvenient for the would-be participant.

Other barriers stem from usability and design issues. For example, the web form for creating a ride event is long and intimidating. Techniques for addressing these issues are well understood in the HCI community; to solve them, we simply need the volunteer capacity to carry out those techniques.

Finally, there are social barriers to participation. Even if the form for creating an event were simpler, what would motivate someone to want to fill it out? Or more generally, what pre-conceived notions might prevent someone from seeing Velopalooza as an appealing event?

### **Self-Identifying as a Cyclist**

There is a perception that bicycle-related events such as Velopalooza are only for cyclists. On the surface that seems sensible - you need a bike to participate. But in practice, the term cyclist has many connotations beyond the dictionary definition of “one who rides a cycle or practices cycling” [1]. Many people who ride bicycles do not self-identify as cyclists, or they hold negative perception of other cyclists and therefore may not see themselves as being in the audience for Velopalooza.

Some people who ride bicycles avoid the label ‘cyclist’ altogether. Staff at the Community Cycling Center, a non-profit bike shop and outreach organization in Portland, Ore., found that many of their customers do not consider themselves cyclists; they use language like “I’m not a bicyclist. I just ride my bike’ or ‘I’m not part of the bike community. I just ride my bike’” [Graves, quoted in 7].

Other people see themselves as cyclists, but distinguish themselves from “proper cyclists” or “other (bad) cyclists”. In interviews with cyclists in Cambridge, UK, Rachel Aldred found many interviewees who felt that “‘proper cyclists’ belonged to an exclusive, sporty club which excluded them. They tended to say ‘I wouldn’t be fit enough’ to accompany ‘proper’ cyclists on a group ride. They were ambivalent about whether they would want to do so” [2, p. 43].

Aldred also found that cyclists tended to separate their own personal behaviour from that of cyclists perceived as bad, fanatical, or aggressive. This finding occurred in another study, also in Cambridge, where cyclists described other cyclists like this: they “often cycle at night without lights, they move around on the road unpredictably and without indicating, they ride the wrong way up one-way streets—and because of this they give all cyclists a bad name” [12, p. 92].

Given these perceptions, it is easy to imagine a potential participant skipping Velopalooza because it is perceived as a space that is only open to the bike community or “proper” cyclists, or because the other participants are imagined to be “bad” cyclists who will ride unsafely.

### **Choosing to Become a Ride Leader**

Velopalooza rides are generated by participants and the success of Velopalooza is determined by the quantity and quality of the rides that participants create. Because of this, we want to facilitate people who are interested in leading a ride. To learn how we can build interest and encourage people to become ride leaders, we consider the rewards of being a ride leader as well as the obstacles to leading a ride.

One benefit that we need to effectively convey is that leading a bike ride is a form of self-expression; in some ways it’s a creative endeavour akin to performance art. It can also be an excuse to learn more about the city and then be recognized for that knowledge. Finally, leading a bike

ride is an opportunity to have fun – to meet new people and to enjoy the activity.

But the social pleasures of leading a ride can also be social anxieties. Many of the participants will be strangers and the number of riders is unknown ahead of time. There is a measure of public speaking involved, especially with larger groups, or on rides where the leader stops to give talks along the way. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the process and behaviours of leading a ride can be unclear or unknown. They are not particularly challenging or complex, but there is not a well-defined behavioural script to follow. Because of all the above, potential leaders may perceive a high risk of social judgment and choose not to lead.

### **Perceiving the Urban Setting as Appropriate for Recreational Cycling**

The conventional uses of a space determine which activities are in-place (in alignment with the common uses of the space) or out-of-place (transgressing against the social norms in a space). There is a strong social barrier against acting in a way that is out-of-place [3]. This is a concern for Velopalooza, because many rides occur in urban spaces where recreational cycling is seen as out-of-place.

In a literature review of how people perceive places for cycling, Dickinson and Robbins [4] found a recurring theme of people going to a special place for recreational cycling. These special places are often “away from it all” [Downward and Lumsdon, cited in 4, p. 81] or otherwise separate from the places people inhabit in their daily lives. They found leisure cyclists drove their bikes to special places to ride, because they did not want to cycle around their homes.

Rather than taking riders to a special place, Velopalooza rides often occur in everyday places. They propose that the neighbourhoods of Vancouver are enjoyable places to bike. For some riders, this involves a change in perspective of where recreational cycling takes place.

However, many Velopalooza rides travel on bikeways – streets that have amenities for cyclists and are often heavily used by cyclists. Still, this may not be enough to make leisure cycling seem in-place. Many bikeways are perceived as being for utilitarian cycling, not recreational cycling. One study found “a conflict between the image of leisure cycling as calm, peaceful and liberating, and of utility cycling as dangerous, demanding and stressful, and as requiring immense self-discipline” [9, p. 74]. It is possible that would-be Velopalooza participants see the routes as occurring in stressful places for bike commuters, not enjoyable places for having fun.

### **OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION**

Having noted the above barriers to participation, we are currently exploring how to address these problems. Many of the ideas we have right now are best suited to offline

events. We want to explore ways to use online technologies to overcome these barriers.

Negative perceptions of the kind of people who come on Velopalooza rides can be best debunked through participation – by showing that participants really are friendly, non-judgmental, and safe. Likewise, regularly holding urban rides can help re-frame the city as a good place for fun bike rides. Though there is a chicken-and-egg problem with these in-person persuasions: to be persuaded to participate, you have to participate. We think that online photos and videos, as well as social media, could help spread this message.

In Portland, SHIFT supports new Pedalpalooza ride leaders with in-person workshops before the festival [5]. Workshop participants also get a handbook on leading rides [6]. But our impression is that most Pedalpalooza ride leaders do not go through that workshop. Instead, they are inspired and learn by watching the leaders of rides they participate in.

There are two drawbacks to attracting new ride leaders in this way. First, learning how to lead rides by watching others is a slow process – it can take several rides over a long period of time – and we want to grow quickly. Second, in-person workshops reach people who are already strongly inclined to lead a ride, but we want to reach people earlier in the consideration process.

We are considering how social and other online media could be used to demonstrate the personal benefits of leading a ride or to provide extra incentives to potential ride leaders. One example might be a “Ride Idea Board” where an individual can post an idea for a ride and other visitors can vote whether or not it is a ride they would like to attend. The person could then garner interest in the ride before making a commitment to leading it.

## CONCLUSION

We have developed a preliminary understanding of possible barriers to participating in Velopalooza and have some ideas for how they could be lessened or removed entirely using online technologies. Still, we believe that a lot could be learned from discussion with other HCI researchers, activists and artists who have or are facing similar experiences. We hope that participating in the HCI, Politics & the City workshop provides new ideas and inspires us as we begin our website and social media strategy redesign efforts.

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