Subversive Street Games

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In our global situation where inaction is acceptance, I am not proud to say that I managed to, somehow, work my way through college – during wartime – without attending a single political protest. Perhaps this was because protests have evolved into elaborate performances for a line of police officers, not the public, and are becoming less and less appealing as a form of public discourse – or perhaps I was just timid or lazy. The fact being I had managed to avoid any kind of rally until the age of 25, when I rode my first Chicago Critical Mass. I was then not even half the bicycle enthusiast that I am now, but what managed to lure me out was that this action was not a protest – this was fun… with the added bonus of being some sort of social statement. That Critical Mass was not a direct challenge to authority, sidestepping personal jeopardy, is what made it personally permissible for me to attend.

This is the same strategy that served so well in the organization of Reclaim The Streets in London in the late 90's: participants were able to appropriate the tarmac for massive street parties which were difficult to antagonize because they did not appear to be political protest.[1] Naomi Klein describes that "RTS actions have been too joyful and human to dismiss, cracking the cynicism of many onlookers." RTS was eventually determined by the FBI to be terrorist threat in 2001[2], and organization of events have gone into decline. Argument against the FBI is that RTS is merely dancing.[3] A common response of Critical Mass riders, when onlookers wonder if they are witnessing a protest, is "oh, we're just some pals going for a Friday night ride." This attitude suggests that

[1] Klein, Chapter 13 "Reclaim The Streets"
[2] Freeh
[3] Floyd

participants in these massive actions may attempt to defend their participation by claiming that they act with innocence. As individuals, this is hard to deny, but the unified action of thousands of people is also indismissible. What the 'indismissible' meaning of the action is, however, would be good question: Critical Mass and RTS are too decentralized and unorganized to make any clear social or political statements – any participant of an RTS party will give a different answer for why they are there, from a political rally to a car protest to a rave.[4] This indeterminacy has also led to the decline of Critical Mass support (in Chicago, because the parade-turned-drunken-party had arguably outgrown its effectiveness, September 2007 was proposed to be the last ride).

The Flash Mobs of 2003 (and onward), where secret organizers use digital technology to inform massive amounts of participants of when/where/how to converge upon unsuspecting public space, are not unlike the quasi-protests of RTS and Critical Mass. That is, except that they have absolutely no sociopolitical message looming over them – they are purely playful actions spawned by the desire for community and spectacle.[5] If one links Flash Mobs to psychogeography, though, the repercussions of merely occupying public space is itself noteworthy, even if unintentional: "the Situationists viewed organized play as an essential design tool for moving culture away from mass-produced spectacle and toward more meaningful participation" (McGonigal, *This Might* p. 172). Since 2003, mob organizers have become more and more articulate with the selection of locations and actions, as with the projects of *Improv Everywhere*, who's

[4] Klein
[5] McGonigal, *Dark Play*

mission is specifically to cause "scenes of chaos and joy in public places."[6] San Francisco's November '07 Pie Fight organizer, Herbie Hatman, describes: "The mendacity of our culture is pretty pervasive… I was trying to break it up for people with the intent that, hopefully, it would spark some sort of creativity within them."[7] Flash Mobs, unlike RTS and Critical Mass, are very clear and precise in action, and highly organized, but they are still very limited in their ability to make commentary, as the mob's directed action must remain playful and innocent in order to dodge authority – anything more would simply be an overt protest. For meaningful social action to continue to evolve, a more advanced method of decentralized organization is necessary: I propose that large street games could fill this need.

Playing games in public urban spaces has an unfathomably long history, from childrens' games to adult sports, not all of which are legitimately definable as games,[8] and not all of which appropriate space in the Situationist spirit. Activities such as Debord's *dérive*, urban spelunking, "buildering," BASE-jumping, and Parkour, which are significant renegade responses to the inefficacy of the urban pedestrian, remain isolated individual sports that don't invoke collaboration on the Flash Mob scale. Games staged on the street, called "appropriative games," which include "assassin," scavenger hunts, and a plethora of designed games like "PacManhattan" or "Can You See Me Now?" have been successfully re-envisioning public space on a small scale, for brief amounts of time. In 2003, however, the possibility of involving a large number of participants in a single

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[6] http://improveverywhere.com
[7] interview in the San Francisco Chronicle, November 10th, 2007
[8] Chris Crawford defines games as 'play' with goals and conflict in *Christ Crawford on Game Design*, which eliminates non-conflict competitive play such as races.

organized public game was posed when the University of Minnesota's Design Institute staged a public spectacle artwork, "The Big Urban Game."

This event took the structure of a simple board game, but physically blew it up to the scale of the entire city, with 2-story inflatable pieces and a 100-square-mile playing area. The community was invited to vote on the route of teams of racers, who carried the game pieces, and roll some enormous dice, thus affecting the outcome of the game. The press release was: "To promote visual awareness of the Twin Cities' urban environment, frame new perspectives, provoke fresh perceptions and encourage wide input on how the Twin Cities' public realm design could be improved from streets to transit to parks and other urban amenities."[9] While re-envisioning the urban environment was not part of the strict mechanics of the game, the spectacle that the game created certainly reframed the city. This is to say that the individual participant's action within the game was at once unrelated to the overall affect of the game, while also being integral to it – a Gestalt aspect of game design, of a sort, made very apparent with the involvement of so many people. This possibility of designing an event that has a larger implication than each participant's action is markedly similar to the strategies of Critical Mass and RTS, except that games can organize a mob with more precision. Like Flash Mobs, appropriative games can prescribe goals and actions to the participants by supplying game rules, but unlike Flash Mobs, which are prescribed direct actions, the implications of a large game is not directly linked to the game rules. The appropriative game, therefore, lends itself very well to social action because the players don't necessarily have to stick their neck

[9] Cox

out in order to participate. The question becomes, then: is it really possible to design large urban games for socio-political commentary?

In New York's first street game festival, Come Out & Play, in 2006, game designers Jane McGonigal and Ian Bogost presented "Cruel 2B Kind." In this appropriative game, players attempt to assassinate each other with compliments – except that they do not know who else on the street is playing, and therefore end up assassinating innocent bystanders. Jane McGonigal, a designer of Alternate-Reality Games like "I Like Bees" and "The Lost Ring," which involve hundreds or thousands of internet-networked participants in immersive puzzle-solving narratives, declares on her blog: "I make games that give a damn. I study how games change lives. I spend a lot of my time figuring out how the games we play today shape our real-world future." Bogost is the founder of *Persuasive Games*, who's aim is to use video games as rhetorical tools for "persuasion, instruction, and activism."[10] While both of these designers are working in the field of games and activism (McGonigal was recently involved in designing the World Without Oil game, which asked the internet public to help postulate what life would be like during an oil shortage), Cruel 2B Kind presents the activist game on a street level – possibly following the RTS slogan: "if you want to control the city – you have to control the streets." Hardly as transgressive as RTS, Cruel 2B Kind does make a social comment to both participants and non-participants concerning the state of personal isolation in downtown spaces. In 2007, the game was staged in San Francisco with over 200 participants, making it equivalent in size to a Flash Mob. The possibility of social

[10] Persuasive Games website

commentary is, of course, just being tested in Cruel 2B Kind, as its message is quite reserved in comparison to other social actions ("Take Back the Night," for instance). The event is incredibly accessible due to the fun aspect, like a Critical Mass ride. The massive participation not only facilitates the appropriation of space, but the act of playing the game teaches players something about their ability to interact with strangers in public places.

The chase-race game "Journey to the End of the Night," by Playtime Inc., was another large street game presented at Come Out & Play in 2006. Playtime is the creator of the Collaborive Production Game "SFZero," which exists as an evolving internet network of players, is what McGonigal defines as a "Reality-Based Superhero Game." In this type of game, players "are given *specific instructions* requiring them to take a more adventurous attitude toward public places, [and] they will surprise themselves with their own daring and ingenuity."[11] Journey is something of a one-night street-level adaptation of SFZero (to be overly simplistic, of course) by aggressively appropriating space in a similar way to an Alleycat bicycle race. In this game, players move through a series of checkpoints, at night, while avoiding being caught by "chasers." By the mere act of participating in this high-energy, high-anxiety game, players *teach themselves* a thing or two about how to move aggressively through a city (amateur Parkour?), general misuse of public space, and even trespassing. The transgressive nature of Journey hides cleverly behind the idea that it is merely a game of tag, while reeking of the Situationist slogan, "Beneath the pavement, the beach!" Journey also draws a large audience (as much as

[11] McGonigal, *This Might* (p. 374)

300 participants when it was run in London and Washington DC in 2007 and 2008, respectively), but it does little to cross the line between participant and bystander – it is an insular psychogeographer's training program, if you will.

Looking at the state of street games of the past few years, I believe the possibility is imminent for the design of new games which combine the playful transgression of Journey to the End of the Night with the calculated effect of Cruel 2B Kind and the spectacle of The Big Urban Game. This type of game could harness the momentum of Critical Mass and Reclaim The Streets, be as orchestrated as a Flash Mob, and still remain anonymously engineered. As McGonigal states in a 2007 World Without Oil post: "pervasive games are a powerful way to exert influence on spaces, to change public behaviors, to alter reality."[12] The desire is out there to design street games with teeth, and those games may be the next evolutionary step in subversive social events.

[12] http://avantgame.blogspot.com/2007/05/is-it-ethical-to-play-during-time-of.html

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