Dark Play in Public Spaces
confessions of a flash mob organizer

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When ‘Jane,’ a San Francisco organizer, sent out anonymous invitations to her friends in June…” New York Times Week in Review, August 17, 2003

Flash mob organizers admit to being a bit taken aback at how quickly their game has been adopted. When ‘Jane,’ a San Francisco organizer, sent out anonymous invitations to her friends in June, they deleted the e-mail, she recalled. When she asked about it, they told her that they thought it was silly.

But after Wired News, an online publication, posted an article about flash mobs on its Web site, interest began to spiral upward. Now, Jane says, ‘I’m getting invited by my friends to my own mobs.’ About 350 people showed up for the flash mob in Golden Gate Park.

Jane, 29, says the mobs answer a yearning for basic fun in a time of war, terrorism threats and recession. That it is a new kind of fun, not controlled by the usual entertainment conglomerates, adds to the appeal.
1. what is a flash mob?
2. issues in site-specific design & dramaturgy
3. flash mobs as power play
4. lessons from the flash mob phenomenon
what is a flash mob?

flash mob (FLASH mawb) n. A large group* of people organized through electronic media (email, listserv, bulletin boards, text messaging, e.g.) who gather in a predetermined location, perform some brief (usually silly or playful) action, and then quickly disperse. —v., —adj.
—flash mobber n.
—flash mobbing pp.


*depending on where the flash mob happens, a “large group” could mean anywhere from 20 to 500 or more people.
what is a flash mob?

A flash mob, in six acts:

• the announcement
• the meet-up
• the mob event
• the dispersal
• press coverage
• blogging

The following images and text are from San Francisco Flash Mob #1, “Whirling Dervishes”, July 16, 2003 @ 5th and Market Street.
what is a flash mob? the announcement

You are invited to take part in MOB, the project that creates an inexplicable mob of people in San Francisco for ten minutes or less. Please forward this to other people you know who might like to join.

INSTRUCTIONS - MOB #1

Start time: Wednesday, July 16th, 6:27 pm
Duration: 10 minutes

(1) At some point during the day on July 16th, synchronize your watch to http://www.time.gov/timezone.cgi?Pacific/d/-8/java.

(2) By 6 PM, based on the month of your birth, please situate yourselves in the bars below. Buy a drink and act casual. If you are attending the MOB with friends, you may all meet in the same bar, so long as at least one of you has the correct birth month for that bar. January, February, March, April: Union Square Sports Bar near Powell and O'Farrell. May, June, July, August: Gold Dust Lounge near Geary and Powell. September, October, November, December: Red's Corner at Ellis and Mason.

(3) Then or soon thereafter, a MOB representative will appear in the bar. He or she will pass around slips of paper with your instructions. Commit the instructions to memory and put the slip in your pocket. ONCE YOU ARE AT THE MOB SITE, NONE OF THESE SLIPS OF PAPER SHOULD BE VISIBLE.

(4) Leave the bar and walk to the MOB site. If you arrive near the final MOB destination before 6:27, stall nearby. NO ONE SHOULD ARRIVE AT THE FINAL MOB DESTINATION UNTIL 6:26.

(5) The MOB begins at the designated location at 6:27.

(6) At 6:37 you should disperse. NO ONE SHOULD REMAIN AT THE MOB SITE AFTER 6:39.

(7) Return to what you would otherwise have been doing.

**** SPECIAL NOTE: We need FOUR VOLUNTEERS to assist n passing out instructions. Please reply only if:

(1) You will absolutely positively 100% be at the MOB and can be in the area by 5:30 on Wednesday.

(2) You are not a squealy.

(3) You are not concerned that passing out small slips of paper may harm your future chances to run for office.

(4) Your initials are not L.G. (you know who you are)

If you meet the above criteria and would like to volunteer, send a message with your cell phone number to mobproject@yahoo.com.

-The San Francisco Mob Project
what is a flash mob? the meet-up
what is a flash mob? the mob event
what is a flash mob? the mob event
what is a flash mob? the dispersal
what is a flash mob? the dispersal
A Pearl of a Place Is Saved
North Beach Jazz Club to Be Revived

BY JIAN CHENG
OTT'S HOMESTYLE ASPAG

The melodious sounds of the saxophone and the velvety voice of jazz vocalist will soon reign once again in the last full-time jazz-only venue in the city. Jazz at Pearl's, which closed in April, has been purchased by jazz aficionados Steve Sherman and his wife, Kim Sabey, a jazz singer.

The project mobilizes large groups of people to move around in a relaxed, social setting, via internet and social media, in order to...with just a few people out. The Mob phenomenon started earlier this year in New York by a mysterious organizer who was only named as Bill. According to a source who was there, the New York mob and contacted Bill. Bill then arranged and gave her some advice. Bill agreed to meet the player at a fancy hotel in 15 seconds.

The San Francisco organizer, who wished to be called only Bill, said she heard about the New York mob and contacted Bill. Bill then arranged and gave her some advice. Bill agreed to meet the player at a fancy hotel in 15 seconds.

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By Ethan Fletcher

A dose of the surreal
Hundreds spin across Market in mob project

The Mob project made its first appearance in San Francisco on Wednesday afternoon. This is what it looked like: 260 people laughing and sneaking on a sidewalk, each person moving around clockwise with their heads turned and followed by a Greenwich Village street, the place where the mob project started. The next step is a group of people meeting in a park, then walking through the streets until they reach the next location. The project mobilizes large groups of people to move around in a relaxed, social setting, via internet and social media, in order to...with just a few people out.

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what is a flash mob? the press coverage
what is a flash mob? the blogging

Were you there? Post links to your coverage in the comments below.

Filed under flash mobs at 07:49 PM | Comments (16) | TrackBack (1) | PermaLink

Snapshots from the First San Francisco Flash Mob

At least 150 flash mobbers spun in circles this evening while crossing busy Market Street in front of the Alexander Hotel at 4th Street.

The funniest thing I overheard was a tourist family: father, mother, 2 kids, with midwest accents. They turned, stopped, confused, about 50 feet away from the curb, for a few minutes. "Do you think we should cross from crossing? Let's go," said the father, then he grimly marched across through the spinners and his 4 kids in tow.

I have two favorite comments, both of which were questions asked directly to me:

Puzzled 4 something white guy in a suit: Is this mass hysteria, or just dumb luck??!

Beautiful, wide-eyed 8 year old Latina girl: Do you know what they're doing this? Me: (cheerfully) No Girl: (in disbelief) Do they WANT to be doing this?

I also just found out about this this morning! Where would I sign up to get the info for another one?

Posted by Jeff at July 17, 2003 12:50 AM

Jeff: That's hilarious.

Posted by sean at July 17, 2003 07:53 AM

Posted by Jane at July 17, 2003 09:46 AM

Posted by Nina at July 17, 2003 09:49 AM
flash mobs are an example of dark play in public spaces

**dark play:** play based on **deception** and **subversion**, in which some players may not even be aware they are playing, or in which there are **no metacommunications** that “This is just play” (xref Gregory Bateson)

“Dark play occurs when contradictory realities co-exist, each seemingly capable of canceling the other out.” (Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*)
flash mobs are an example of **glocalized** performance

glocalization: a mutual process whereby the local is made to contain much that is global, while the global is increasingly penetrated and re-shaped by many locals.
Flash Mobs Go Global: **100 cities & counting**


Boston/USA (73°) New York City/USA (74°) Philadelphia/USA (75°) Washington D.C./USA (77°) Palm Beach/USA (80°) Fort Lauderdale/USA (80°) Miami/USA (80°) Orlando/USA (82°) Columbus, OH/USA (83°) Huntsville/USA (86°) New Orleans USA (90°) St. Louis/USA (90°) Des Moines/USA (92°) Houston/USA (95°) Indianapolis/USA (96°) Kansas City/USA (96°) Minneapolis/USA (96°) Austin/USA (97°) Dallas/USA (97°) Fort Worth/USA (97°) Chicago/USA (97°), Billings, Montana/USA (104°) Denver/USA (105°) Tempe/USA (112°) Phoenix/USA (112°) Salt Lake City/USA (112°) Santa Rosa/USA (115°) Las Vegas/USA (115°) Los Angeles/USA (117°) Milwaukee/USA (122°) Santa Cruz/USA (122°) San Francisco/USA (122°) Portland, Oregon/USA (123°) Seattle/USA (124°)
Flash mobs go global: **SAO PAOLO**

**date:** August 13, 2003

**participants:** 100+

**location:** crosswalks at Paulista and Augusta avenues — one of the city's most crowded crossings

**action:** take off one shoe and bang it on the street while crossing in the crosswalk.
Flash mobs go global: CAPE TOWN

date: August 15, 2003

participants: 150+

location: Outdoor Adventure Expo at the International Convention Centre

action: “Be a duck.”
Flash mobs go global: **TOKYO**

**date:** September 27, 2003

**participants:** 9

**location:** atrium at Tokyo Station

**action:** a one-minute jan ken poi (rock paper scissors) challenge
Flash mobs go global: MUMBAI

date: October 4, 2003

participants: 70+

location: Outside Cross Roads shopping center

“DON’T STOP FLASH MOBS” – a banner in Mumbai after flash mobs were officially banned by the government
Can a flash mob be ever staged in Singapore? I don't think so. If you take part in one, most probably you will find yourself behind bars. You see, in Singapore, you need a license to organize yourself into groups publicly and to speak to that group. I am not kidding! *sigh* (resident of Singapore)
Flash mobs go global: SINGAPORE

date: August 30, 2003

participants: 50

location: Raffles City Mall

action: look for “something precious”

MCGONIGAL PSi#10

www.avantgame.com

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Flash mobs go global: **SINGAPORE**

date: October 4, 2003

participants: 30

location: City Link Walk

action: “The Big Freeze”: create real-world bullet-time
Flash mobs go global: **SINGAPORE**

**date:** October 4, 2003

**participants:** 30

**location:** City Link Walk

**action:** “The Big Freeze”: create real-world bullet-time
Flash mobs go global: **SINGAPORE**

**date:** August 16, 2003

**participants:** 20

**location:** Orchard MRT underpass

**action:** ride the escalator as if it were a roller coaster
Site specific design and dramaturgy

MCGONIGAL PSi#10  www.avantgame.com  janemcg@berkeley.edu
Site specific design and dramaturgy

Two main strains emerged:

Site specific PLAY vs. Site specific PERFORMANCE

“What would be FUN here?” vs. “What would be FUNNY here?”

interaction vs. spectacle

paratelic focus vs. audience focus
Site specific PLAY

“Duck Duck and Cover” massively multi-player duck duck goose in Mission Dolores Park, San Francisco

MCGONIGAL PSi#10  www.avantgame.com  janemcg@berkeley.edu
Site specific PLAY

“Black and White” massively multi-player, cooperative tag in the Jardin du Luxemborg, Paris

MCGONIGAL PSi#10  www.avantgame.com  janemcg@berkeley.edu
Site specific PLAY

“Chalking it Up” sidewalk treasure hunt, Prince Arthur and De Buillon streets, Montreal

MCGONIGAL PSi#10  www.avantgame.com  janemcg@berkeley.edu
Site specific PERFORMANCE

“Ode to Bill” Hallmark Greeting Card Store, Boston

MCGONIGAL PSi#10  www.avantgame.com  janemcg@berkeley.edu
Site specific PERFORMANCE

“Paparazzi Mob” Supermarket Entrance, Amsterdam

MCGONIGAL PSi#10          www.avantgame.com    janemcg@berkeley.edu
Site specific PERFORMANCE

(l–r) “Pirate Ride” Shopping Mall, San Diego; “Escalator Parade” Shopping Mall, Seattle; “Escalator Merry Go Round” Shopping Mall, Minneapolis

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FLASH MOBS:
Changing the world?...
...or just changing the channel?

Flash mob in Sao Paolo, Brazil
date: August 19, 2003
participants: 100+
Site specific design and dramaturgy

Both strains attend to:

**AFFORDANCES** (see Donald Norman’s *Design of Everyday Things*)

The performance strain attends to:

**CONTRAST**
Site specific design and dramaturgy

Both strains attend to:

AFFORDANCES (see Donald Norman’s *Design of Everyday Things*)

The performance strain attends to:

CONTRAST

To date, NO EVIDENCE of a flash mob designed for “commentary” on the site.

MCGONIGAL PSi#10  www.avantgame.com  janemcg@berkeley.edu
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:

1. Participants vs. “state”
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:

1. Participants vs. “state”
2. Participants vs. non-participants
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:

1. Participants vs. “state”
2. Participants vs. non-participants
3. Organizers vs. participants
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:

1. Participants vs. “state”
2. Participants vs. non-participants
3. Organizers vs. participants
4. Participants vs. participants
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:

1. Participants vs. “state”
2. Participants vs. non-participants
3. Organizers vs. participants
4. Participants vs. participants
5. Press vs. organizers and participants
Flash mobs as Power Play

Six vectors of power play emerged:

1. Participants vs. “state”
2. Participants vs. non-participants
3. Organizers vs. participants
4. Participants vs. participants
5. Press vs. organizers and participants
6. Organizers vs. organizers
Lessons learned from the flash mobs

1. Play is controversial. Play is inscrutable and perceived as dangerous.
Lessons learned from the flash mobs

2. Public space is not the same as “space where the public is.”
Lessons learned from the flash mobs

3. Network technological practice varies locally.
Lessons learned from the flash mobs

4. Physical manifestation of the information network is possible and desired.
Lessons learned from the flash mobs

4. Cybernetic systems are inherently dramatic and spectacular.
Lessons learned from the flash mobs

5. Social networks are real and performative – i.e., there is a point.
Dark Play in Public Spaces

MORE INFO:

www.avantgame.com