Introduction

*Party of the Year* is an entirely new social game that gives players incentives for spontaneously performing in public - imagine 20 complete strangers simultaneously breaking out in dance while waiting for a train in Grand Central.

The game is predicated on a central premise - that real life it too boring, and that technology can help us bring more interaction, more creativity, and more spontaneity into our daily lives.

To date, the rise of mobile/ubiquitous computing has done precisely the opposite - it has in essence provided us with blinders, in the tempting form of LED screens and white earbuds, with which we can now completely ignore the community that surrounds us.

But these devices are not alienating in their essence, merely in their application to date. They could potentially be used to achieve the direct opposite, to strip away the layers of self-consciousness and self-defense that denizens of modern urban spaces have wrapped themselves in since long before the rise of the iPod and the smartphone. They could encourage us to connect in new ways - to make new “real” friends, to try new “real” things, to be new “real” people.

Genesis

*Party of the Year* is a project I have been thinking about since long before applying to Parsons. Indeed, the desire to stop simply pitching and discussing it and actually gain the tools necessary to begin prototyping the game was one of my primary motivations in choosing this program.

I first conceived of the project shortly after leaving Rockstar Games, where I worked in the QA and Creative Depts. on more traditional titles such as *The Warriors* and *GTA: San Andreas*. At the time, the Nintendo Wii had just been launched, and the potential for motion-based games seemed unlimited.

My friends and I played a number of the dance and movement games that immediately sprung up on the system, but I was disappointed that every single one seemed to feature a one-off structure: each dance or challenge was completely self-contained and thus involved little of the wonder of discovery that has always been a key part of my enjoyment of traditional video games.

As a result, we conceived of a new dance game, which we titled *Partytown, USA*. In this game, the player would travel around a fictional town and would gather a Dance Gang of followers by dancing in a way that would appeal to each individual - a nun would be won over with conservative dancing, a clown would be won over by goofy dancing, a dog would be won over by dancing on all fours. We even had ideas about a range of crazy peripherals that could be used with the game - from plastic bananas to pompons to telephones; a sort of surrealist, Noam Toran-ish take on Dance Dance Revolution.

As it no doubt did for many game designers, the launch of the iPhone in the Spring of 2007 and the subsequent opening of the App Store the following year redefined my perspective on what games can be and where they can be played. Making a game that encourages people to dance - or in fact act out in a huge variety of different ways - in public, in front of complete strangers, could have the possibility of fundamentally changing the way people relate to one another. It could lead to entirely new types of discovery, in this case about ourselves and the way we travel through our shared spaces and interact within our daily lives.

Thus *Party of the Year* was born.
Precedents

I have claimed that “real life is too boring,” so before we go any further, perhaps it would be useful to define exactly what I mean by “real life.”

Since a very young age, I have always viewed “real life” as everything that is not the act of pretending, an act that for me was long ago formalized as theater, and its descendants film and television. I’ve been acting, writing, and making home movies almost as long as I’ve been walking and talking.

While I love the theater, as an adult artist I’ve found it to be too limited, due to a concept inherent to its very nature - the “fourth wall.” This term, coined by the 18th Century French philosopher Denis Diderot, refers to the inherent divide that exists between audience and performer. It is perhaps best described by legendary New York Times film and theater critic Vincent Cranby as “that invisible screen that forever separates the audience from the stage.” (A.17)

Though this separation has been probed and tested since Ancient Greece, and certainly has become a fluid boundary in modern theater, it cannot be ignored. And theater itself is on the wane, having long since been replaced in the cultural consciousness by film and television, media where the fourth wall is thoroughly impenetrable.

Certain recent works have attempted to shatter this boundary and blend theater with the concepts of game design, by taking performance out of the theater and into the world at large. Perhaps the most notable is a work I’ve personally participated in multiple times, Improv Everywhere’s MP3 Experiment. Participants in this work, whom in recent versions have number well into the thousands, meet at a central location and simultaneously listen to an MP3 track that gives them a variety of instructions, from wrapping themselves in toilet paper to marching behind women with strollers. This quasi-theatrical performance is all played out in the urban landscape, observed by befuddled and often aghast city dwellers as they go about their daily lives.

A similar work is Jane McGonigal’s “game” Top Secret Dance Off. This takes the opposite tack - performers dance in abandoned public spaces, but they do so alone, only joining a community when they later post recordings of their dances to a communal website.

Though she is nominally a game designer, in her dissertation This Might Be A Game McGonigal dismisses The MP3 Experiment as being fundamentally not a game, a point I agree with and that I feel can be equally leveled at her own Dance Off. She refers, as is practically de rigueur these days when discussing pervasive games or alternative theater, to the ideals of the Situationist International movement, and specifically its founder Guy Debord.

Both The MP3 Experiment and Top Secret Dance Off can labelled as “spectacles,” which Debord defines as “a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at.” (3) Though he doesn’t use the term
himself in his writings, for our purposes we can again call this the fourth wall - though no longer defined by a traditional proscenium or a name on a playbill, it is still present, made real simply by the status of being “in-the-know.” In The MP3 Experiment, those wearing earbuds are performing, all others are relegated to the role of audience. McGonigal makes this explicit in her Top Secret Dance Off, with the project’s website constantly making reference to an “underground network” and “super-secret shadow members.”

One cultural phenomenon that I believe begins to blur this line but that is almost never discussed in scholarly circles is karaoke. This cannot be truly labelled as “spectacle” in the Situationist sense, as audience members are encouraged, and indeed often pressured, to participate. By no means is this a work that “can only be looked at.” In this respect, karaoke pushes theater much closer to the realm of “situation.”

Games are in some ways the direct opposite of theater - they cannot exist without active participation on the part of their audience. There is no fourth wall here; indeed, if players choose not to play them, then games remain only pieces in a box, bytes on a hard drive, shiny slabs of plastic.

Yet the vast majority of games are not truly pervasive, not an active part of “real life,” for this very reason. Players must start playing games, they must enter a “magic circle” of game space, for the game to begin. This term, coined by John Huizinga in his seminal work Homo Ludens, is best defined for our application by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their indispensable primer on game design Rules of Play: “In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins.” (95) In short, one must consciously “play” a game in order to be “playing a game.”

There are numerous examples of the increasing permeability of this circle, from real world commerce in World of Warcraft to digital rape in Second Life, but the majority of the study of these examples to date has dealt with the creeping of real life into games, not the opposite.

Recently, however, there has been a flurry of commentary over the concept of “gameification,” referring to the “badging” or “achievement-pointing” of real life that occurs in such applications as FourSquare, Gowalla, Scavngr, and Facebook Places. Essentially this “gameification” (or as its detractors would call it “pointification,” as it involves no real sense of play or rules or gaming at all) is nothing more than rewarding people with points for things they’re already doing, or at most requiring them to go to new locations. None of these applications have yet bridged the boundary into true play.

They have, however, begun to fully penetrate people’s “real lives,” thus moving us closer to Debord’s ideal for the “spectacle’s” opposite, the “situation” - a truly interactive undertaking that destroys the boundaries that are so crucial to the very nature of a “spectacle.” As Debord states, “play, radically broken from a confined ludic time and space, must invade the whole of life.” (3) We can adopt this mantra as our own in pursuing Party of the Year, and can take FourSquare and its brethren as a launching point - they have laid the
groundwork for this “invasion” of real life; it is now up to us to bring the “play” to the table.

One final precedent that I believe bears mention, though it is neither game nor performance, is *The Oblique Strategies* by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. Created by the artists in 1975 and now in its fifth version (and of course, available as an iPhone app as well), *The Oblique Strategies* are brilliant in their simplicity. They are nothing more than a deck of cards with working principles written on them - simple phrases such as “ask your body” or “not making a brick wall but making a brick.” The artist is intended to carry them around and whenever he or she reaches an impasse, to draw a card randomly from the deck and use it to help them solve their problem. Though far removed from the technological implementation of *Party of the Year*, *The Oblique Strategies* are a close spiritual cousin and have proved a valuable tool in implementing the project.

**Prototype**

If there is one point that has become completely apparent in both my studio practice and design theory writing over the past semester, it is that action is the most important thing. Ideas are by their nature inherently incomplete because they require the designer to talk in order to be expressed. If the designer makes something, however low-fidelity and incomplete, and puts it in front of someone, then the designer can listen.

Bearing this in mind, I went with the minimum viable product for this concept, a series of emailed challenges, which I sent directly to my Studio class from my own email address. The first challenge, which was indicative of the tone of this rapid prototype, read:

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SUBJECT: CHALLENGE ONE - Tenth Floor Dance Party, Pt. 1

I really like the new girl talk album! if you would like, you can download it for free from http://illegal-art.net/allday/.

It... Makes... Me... Want... To... Dance!!!

So, I'll be sitting in the 10th floor lab from 6:30-9:30 tonite. If you see me, you should come up to me and start a dance party! Just say "Dance party!" in a nice clear voice. And I'll turn on GT and get up and WE'LL DANCE for 15 seconds! I promise it will be fun and relieve all types of stress.... Plus you'll get 60 POINTS!!!

But wait... It gets better (and less embarassing)! You can stay around and participate in ALL THE REST OF THE DANCE PARTIES for everyone who comes after you! For 10 POINTS each time!

If you commit, you could really go a long way towards getting that $20 of CASH!

Scott

PS you may want to make sure that you're friends with me on facebook. I think that almost all of you are...
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I wanted to see how people would respond to a direct request from me, just to get the action of acting up in front of your friends out there and on our bodies. Other challenges had players emailing me pictures or video as confirmation.

The performances that did take place were reasonably fun for those involved, and memorable. One player shouted encouragement at a particularly embarrassing spot in one of our design theory lectures. People (admittedly, reluctantly) took part in the Dance challenge in our 10th Floor Lab. A few players came decked out all blue when asked to dress like Smurfs. But an equal number of people were turned off by the general tone.
Fig. 6 CHALLENGE TWO - King/Queen For A Day

It felt too much like completing challenges for me, and not enough like playing a game. The system needed to stand on its own. Eventually, it would need to let the users create, vote on, and perform their own challenges.

In the immediate, it was also unwieldy. It required my constant attention, which was completely inefficient and truly impossible in any long-term fashion.

Both problems would need to be solved by attempting a true implementation of the project - by actually making the app.

**Process**

I saw a couple of avenues at this point that could be pursued in the time remaining - to build something using an existing location-based API (most likely FourSquare) to make the challenges appear on location check-ins; to work on either a local iPhone app or a C++/Arduino prototype that would register advanced movements and capture the actual dance moves but would not be deployable and thus couldn’t test larger game dynamics; or, to rethink the entire notion of what participating in the game meant.

One new avenue that brainstorming presented would be to add a dynamic to the game that could simultaneously lower the technology cost of creating the game but also make it more inherently social and thus more “real” - to rely on the people playing the game as the method of capturing player participation.

It occurred to me that the entire app could revolve around this aspect of play - you would simply receive points whenever another player witnessed you completing a challenge. This could hopefully make the game feel more collaborative and democratic in the immediate sense, while still allowing for an achievable implementation.

Another benefit of such a system would be that it could have a viral effect - players would in essence be forced to convince their friends to play the game in order to use them as witnesses.

Finally, it seemed doable. PHP, MySQL and jQuery are relatively easy languages to learn, as they have been around for a long time and have thus accumulated very good documentation. This was a large, but manageable, task and was made even easier by Daniel Kaneda’s excellent jQuery extension called jQTouch, which provides a vast majority of the iPhone’s multi-touch interactions in a simple JavaScript-driven website. jQTouch is particularly useful as it handles almost all of the internal AJAX navigation automatically. All the developer needs to do are construct sub-pages within the application as direct children of the `<body>` element. Divs and forms are handled identically by the extension, which allows for very flexible development.

The resulting SQL database includes just a few tables - a master list of users, a list of challenges, a list of witness events for these challenges, and a list of challenges completed by users. The challenges are divided into two types - ones where the player gets additional points for each witness they get on a challenge, and ones where the player must get a certain number of witnesses before they get any points. I plan on adding additional types, starting with a “mutual” type where both players have to witness each other in order to get points.

Everything else in the app was done with simple `.php` files, using AJAX to look up details and then jQuery to append the users’ information into the HTML.

That is not to say that the development process was without problems - I actually built the entire app using “onClick” instructions in the `<a>` calls within the master HTML file. This led directly to an apparently common problem with developing for the iPhone - the native iOS commands call for a
300ms delay after every touch event, as the iPhone uses rapid double touches to indicate that the user wants to zoom in on the image (a behavior I had used jQTouch to disable, but which still contributed the delay). This would have been bad enough if it had merely contributed a delay. Unfortunately, with the way I had structured the SQL queries this bug actually caused the web app to crash when the user double tapped on a link.

Further research revealed that jQTouch actually contained a .touch() function, entirely separate from the .click() function or HTML onCLick events. This obviously could not be used within the HTML as it would need to occur within a jQTouch function. While easy to implement, this required some drastic rethinking of the apps structure, as I now had no way to pass a Party’s identity into this function (previously this was accomplished simply by passing the variable name into the onCLick event in the HTML that was appended to the master file whenever a new party was displayed).

I solved this by combining the .touch() event with a $(‘#home’).ready() function that runs whenever the homepage is loaded. This had the side benefit of greatly improving the app’s speed by preloading all of the Parties at launch. It had the negative effect of forcing the user to refresh the page in order to update the Parties. Not a deal breaker to be sure, but something I plan on remedying in the short term.

Fig. 7 POTY homescreen

The user interface presents a minimum of options. The user can sign up or sign in with one tap, and they can view any current parties, past parties, or the overall Leaderboard even if they are not a member.

Fig. 8 Past Parties
The user can tap through to see lists of Current Parties or Past Parties, and they can navigate into these Parties’ Pages where they can then Witness other players and see which Players have witnessed them.

Feedback on the live app raised one immediate concern - an inability to see what other players had accomplished in the game. I simply added new tracking to see which challenges players had completed and then posted this all to simple a user page.

Players can now tap through the Leaderboard to see other players’ profiles as well as viewing their own profile with a single touch.

All told, this web app has a pretty minor footprint - three .js files (jQuery, jQTouch, and my own custom Java Script file), a single .css file built into a jQTouch theme (though clearly a web version will require its own CSS file, as will any Windows Mobile or Black Berry versions of the web app), 14 .png files (the largest of which is the toolbar background, a mere 27 KB), a single HTML index file (which contains mostly placeholder divs to be filled by the JQuery .appendTo() functions and their attendant .php files, which are mostly a string of mySQL queries and echo commands), and 13 .php files. The backend is simply a mySQL database, hosted on the site’s root URL.
**Current Results**

I have had the app live for a full week to date. The app currently has 20 users who have participated in 8 different Parties. The leader at this point has earned 115 points (and was, unsurprisingly, the winner of the prototype contest as well).

I hope to continue this playtest through the end of the year, rewarding all players who reach 200 points with a prize pack of Party of the Year merchandise. It will be interesting to see whether people are willing to participate now that the game is no longer within the context of a studio project. My hope is that user participation was suppressed by the presence of finals and by a sort of "project fatigue" that Parsons students cannot help but feel after being bombarded by appeals for participation in fellow students’ work. Hopefully the holiday-themed nature of many of the upcoming challenges will encourage players to participate in the game with their families while home for the break.

All of that said, I was pleased by the results and by participation overall, and was happy to see that I had addressed many of the concerns that non-participants had raised with the initial prototype and underlying dynamic. I feel that I have found a good avenue for continued development of the application and for further thinking about the concept.

**Next Steps**

There is a massive todo list of further development needs that can be broken down into short-term fixes, mid-term features, and long-term questions.

In the short term, I plan on immediately fixing issues with page reloading, so that players can gain instant gratification when they witness other players. I also feel that it is very important to add end dates for Parties on the Party list screen, and to indicate when time is running out on certain Parties to encourage players to immediately complete these Parties. Finally, I plan on styling the app for web browsers in a new CSS file, to both make it a more visually pleasing user experience and to render it compatible with non-webkit enabled browsers (i.e. Internet Explorer and older versions of Firefox).

In the medium-term, I believe it is absolutely essential to find a way to implement push-based notification, updating players when new Parties become available, when Parties are set to expire, and when another Player has Witnessed them performing a Party. This could be done in a number of ways short of building a native application - in particular, through email, text, or Facebook Connect integration. The benefit of implementing Facebook Connect would be that all of these various administrative updates would serve a dual purpose as viral marketing for the game. It also would give me access to players’ Facebook Places data, which could be used down the road for check-in based challenges.

I also plan on exploring Java Script and HTML 5 solutions for cross-client timers, geolocation implementation, camera integration, and accelerometer data, as all four of these would be vital to any full, robust version of the game.

Team functionality has been one of the most requested features - the ability to join up with your friends in the game and complete Parties as a group. Since this has very light technical requirements, it should be easy to implement quickly.

Finally, I will be using a piece of software called iPhoneGet to export the app from HTML to Objective-C and will upload that app to the App Store. Though this will be far from the finished version of the application, it should give some useful benchmarks for approval times and other logistical considerations. I will also look into exporting a Java applet for deployment on the Android store.

**Key Questions**

In the long-term, there are many key questions raised by this web app that will need to be explored through further development and prototyping.

Perhaps the biggest question raised so far is a simple one - “So What?” Even if this app does achieve the desired effect of making real life less boring, I do not want this game to be a mere distraction; I actually want it to change the way people relate to one another.

On that note, the horizons might need to be broader than even I initially assumed. Could this app be used to tap into the the vast, unused stores of cognitive surplus currently floating around the web? That term, coined by internet culture expert
Clay Shirky, refers to the vast amount of human-hours spent every year engaged in unpaid online labor - from trading animals in Farmville, to creating LOL Catz, to charting human rights abuses in central Africa. Indeed, for every hour that passes, an estimated 60 million human hours are spent playing the game Angry Birds. Shirky contends that we have not even determined a way of classifying how this time is spent, much less of influencing it towards productive, humanitarian, or even directly active ways. Could Party of the Year serve as a platform for harnessing this potential, for using this idea of challenges that intrude into daily life as a force for good in the world?

Another question that has been raised is whether this game could eventually loop back around to my professed first love, theater, and be used as a tool to craft narratives that take place on city-wide scales. Would it be possible to move beyond mere instances of “acting out,” such as spontaneous singing or dancing, and actually craft a story that involved hundreds or thousands of actors simultaneously playing out, or even creating, tales set across cities, countries, or continents?

Finally, and most important, this initial implementation raises the question of how to let go of control over the app’s future. Despite all of my technical achievement, this remains an application where people must complete challenges that I set for them. It seems vital that this change, that the game move towards a system where the players themselves set the challenges. This can happen on a large scale, with players submitting and voting on challenges that will then be seeded to the entire game, or on a small one, with players setting challenges only for their friends, or for strangers within a certain proximity.

This brings us back to this semester’s most important lesson: the value of acting as a means of listening. Only once this app was live could I actually listen to the players and to the situation of their play, which in turn merely affirmed the importance of listening on the largest possible scale. If I hope for this app to become a popular pastime, or to transcend this and actually grown into a social movement, it is not enough that I listen. The software itself must listen, must allow the players to mold it into what they truly want, truly need, it to become.

References

Bell, Elizabeth S. *Theories of Performance*. Sage, 2008.


The Oblique Strategies website: [http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/](http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/)
