

Regress to Recess: Room 101's Party Games

By Dale Duncan

I'm in the basement of a trendy new Queen Street West bar in Toronto. A woman I just met rolls a big imaginary joint and pretends to smoke it while me and three other strangers look on. "Smoking pot! Marijuana! Weed," we shout out. She waves her hands in encouragement. The more words we guess, the faster they get. She squints her eyes and takes an even bigger drag of her invisible joint. "Inhaling! Drugs!" She jumps up and down in frustration, then stops, pauses, and squats, her fists clenched beside her. She appears to be pooping. The rest of us are in hysterics. Funny thing is, she doesn't seem to be embarrassed that we are laughing at her expense. Perhaps this is because a few minutes ago I was dancing around in a make believe prom dress, and the gal next to me was flapping her arms and walking like a turkey.

We were here, along with the other fifty or so people in the room, to participate in a night of charades, part of Room 101, a games series created and hosted by Misha Glouberman. The clue we could not correctly guess turned out to be "Scooby doo." Our performer had opted for the "sounds-like" method (putting your hand to your ear to connote that the word to be mimed would rhyme with the target word or syllable). We had failed to guess "doobee" from her giant reefer, but were we clever to put "doobee" and "poo" together, we might have been able to blurt out the right answer.



Charades nights are but one component of the Room 101 events. In total, there are three parts to the series: Games You Play Standing up (such as charades), Games You Play Sitting Down (a much more low key night of board games complete with pretty lamps, card tables, and free snacks), and Games That Aren't Like Other Games, which at the time this article was written had yet to take place.

Of course, the term "Games night" may conjure up images of socially awkward young men engaged in serious role playing games, or a group of old ladies sipping tea and nibbling biscuits while playing cards, but we're talking Jenga, Operation, and Pictionary, not Dungeons & Dragons or bridge. The focus is not so much on the games themselves, but rather on using the games as tools to encourage different kinds of social interactions.

"I want to see how people interact with each other," says Glouberman,

who launched the series at the beginning of April. "There are all these different places where people go out to be with others, but there's not actually a lot of ways for people to be with each other. I think it's interesting to think of other mechanisms."

This isn't the first time Glouberman has experimented with using games as a way to bring people together in unusual social situations. He used to teach theatre improv classes to aspiring actors. The longer he taught, however, the more he realized that he wasn't interested in these classes as a means to an end themselves, but rather as something that people do instead of going to a bar or seeing a movie. Watching the students during the breaks, what struck him was the level of affection and intimacy that would rise up between them.

"They would be a group of people who had just done something really fucking weird with each other, and this abstract affection between them arose," says Glouberman. "For many, especially as you get older, there aren't a lot of people who you actually play with, so I think it creates a really interesting bond."

Experimenting with social situations from our youth as a means to interact and participate almost seems to be in vogue right now. Make out parties, such as the ones thrown by the Toronto based art collective Instant Coffee, are also making a comeback in the adult world. Complete with games of spin the bottle and blanket make out forts, these carefully constructed social settings have resulted in collective experiences we'd be hard pressed to find in any other night on the town.

Or how about changing the way we view and experience the town altogether? Instead of perceiving the city as simply a place to shop and work, graduate students in New York University's Telecommunications program are using the well-known

game of Pac-Man to transform the grid-like streets of New York into a playground (<http://pacmanhattan.com>). In this game, a player dressed as Pac-Man runs through the streets in an attempt to collect all the virtual "dots" in a specified area. Meanwhile, the four ghosts, Inky, Blinky, Pinky and Clyde, attempt to catch PacMan before the dots disappear. Each player is in constant contact via cellphone with a controller who updates their positions into specially designed software and lets them know how many more dots they have left to "eat."

The thing about games, whether it's real life Pac-Man, Pictionary, or spin the bottle, is that there's always some element of structure involved. From the stage at charades night, Glouberman jokingly refers to "the needless element of bureaucracy" that exists. And the weird thing is, the participants can't seem to get enough of it. During the question and answer period in between games, players take the time to ask him questions in order to get the rules straight, as though they really mattered. At one point a vigorous discussion develops about the use of props: If the word is foot, is it fair to simply point at your foot? If the word is lean, can you lean against an actual wall to convey the meaning?

But there are other benefits to structure besides obvious opportunities to play these sorts of meta-games. Structure is almost always absent from our regular adult activities, and for some, going to art openings, house warming parties, or smoky bars requires a bit of psyching up. The courage to approach someone new, think of a good opening line, and sustain conversation doesn't come easily to everyone. The beauty of Room 101 is that you can barely separate the introverts from the extroverts. Because you have to follow the rules or steps to a game, everyone has an excuse to draw attention to

themselves. Everyone can be a performer.

Case in point: after a vigorous round of charades, one of the groups proudly proclaims that they've just come up with a new international symbol for Britney Spears, and ask if they can show it to the crowd. Next thing we know, the guy who was reading a book in the corner while the rest of us mingled over drinks at the beginning of the night lowers his pants below his hip bones, raises his shirt to expose his mid-drift and does a little dance.

"What I'm really interested in doing is getting non performers to perform," says Glouberman. He plans to use familiar games such as Battleship and Jenga as a starting point to encourage people to experiment with weirder and wackier things. For the Games That Aren't Like Any Other Games part of the series, Glouberman will teach non-musicians to do vocal improv music. The first part of the night will consist of a renegade performance of John Zorn's musical improvising game "Cobra" by The Pickle Juice Orchestra, lead by Joe Sorbara. Afterward, the audience will be able to take part in a game

themselves, but only those willing to participate will be allowed to stay.

"I want to do as many experiments as I can," says Glouberman. "I want to do as many different things as possible and I really hope I can build up an audience of adventurous, curious people who are up for that. I want it to get weirder and weirder and I never want to lose the board games. I don't care if the audience gets bigger, I want it to get better."

As Glouberman points out to me, there's a reason why people choose to go out to see local bands or theatre instead of what's popular globally-the social element of the smaller group you share such events with is difficult to replace. Perhaps the more ways we can find to play with each other, the more intimate experiences with different kinds of people we will be able to have-whether it's planting a kiss on some guy while 50 other people look on, or pretending to poo in front of four laughing strangers.

For more information on Room 101, or to sign up for event listings, go to <http://beef-shoe-cheese.com/rm101/index.html>, or email room101@mglouberman.com.