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Panic in the Circle: Flash Mobs and Disrupted Spaces

Abstract

This paper is concerned with how virally-shared flash mob videos shape our understandings of the spaces and people involved in the performances. The paper argues that there is a practical language to flash mob recordings and that this visual grammar reflects a set of social agreements between performers and audience members. As such, this paper reflects on how flash mobs disrupt public spaces and suggests that their success also relies on the tacit willingness of observers and local authorities to observe the sanctity of performance spaces.

“Public space is the space of societal, meaningful interaction where ideas and values are formed, conveyed, supported, and resisted; space that ultimately becomes a training ground for action and reaction.”

Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*¹

On February 24, 2007 the performance art collective Improv Everywhere gathered 207 actors into New York City’s Grand Central Terminal for a “frozen minute,” in which all of the participants paused in place for a full 60 seconds in the middle of what appeared to be daily routines: reading newspapers, eating soft-serve ice cream, talking on cellphones, etc. Improv Everywhere strategically placed cameras around the terminal to capture onlookers’ reactions (Figs. 1 and 2); later uploaded to YouTube, the compiled recordings of this event became one of the earliest examples of the viral media flash mob phenomenon. It remains one of the most virally popular instances of flash mobs today, with over 34 million views (as of this writing).

Flash mobs are a true *meme*, as coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his

1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, in which he defines the term as “a new replicator” or “a unit of cultural transmission, or [...] imitation.”² Dawkins describes memes as cultural viruses, infecting through ideas and jumping from person to person; his prescient analogy has since become one of the key ways in which we now understand cultural transmission through social media. Flash mobs are only one of the growing thousands of Internet memes, which include trends at every level of significance and



Fig. 1: Performers in Grand Central Station “frozen” in the middle of everyday actions.

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Fig. 2

impact, from the silliest captions on “grumpy cat” photos to Korean performer Psy’s “Gangnam Style” music video to the “Kony 2012” social justice campaign for the organization Invisible Children. Among all of these, flash mobs have become one of the most popular and long-lived meme genres of the past two decades of Internet culture, capturing “clicks,” “likes,” “retweets,” and “views” from people all over the globe.

But what exactly is a flash mob? One might easily consider it performance art that lives both in the real world and on the Internet, but this, in itself, hardly answers questions about what truly makes a flash mob. For instance, are flash mobs truly spontaneous, as the “flash” in their name suggests, or are they organized? Exactly how many people constitute a “mob,” and can you have a flash mob of only two or three? And for that matter, what about the many flash mobs organized by corporate entities, such as T-Mobile, NBC, and FOX for their commercials and promotions? Are these latter examples “real” flash mobs, or are they *faux mobs*? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding, “Yes, but possibly also no.” In other words, flash mobs are a constantly evolving meme, to which only the broadest definitions can be applied. Rather, to borrow United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous sentiments on pornography, while it is difficult to pin down exactly what a flash mob is or is not, most of us seem to know one when we see it.

The point in recording these questions here is to highlight how mutable flash mobs are as a meme. Whether they involve a handful of Juilliard students playing Bach’s *Cello Suite No. 1 Prelude* on the New York City subway, the over 500 fans of the television

series *Glee* descending on downtown Seattle to sing and dance to their favorite songs, or the performers of Improv Everywhere’s “frozen minute” in Grand Central Station, they are all generally considered flash mobs by both organizers and viewers alike. Although some include musical numbers while others do not, and some are corporately organized while others are true products of the digital grassroots, the diversity of mobs is important to remember. Though this paper considers flash mob videos at large, the uniqueness of their performances makes it impossible to be too axiomatic about the phenomenon. For every characteristic identified in this paper, there exists at least one flash mob video that proves an exception. Still, this paper recognizes that, on the whole, certain trends and mechanisms of operation become apparent when examining flash mobs with a wide lens.

The main concern of this paper is not simply with the idiosyncrasies of flash mobs, but rather with how virally-shared flash mob videos shape our understandings of the spaces and people involved in the mobs. I argue that there is a clear and practical language to flash mob recordings that has evolved organically, and that this visual grammar partially reflects a set of social agreements between performers and audience members. As such, I also consider how flash mobs create disrupted public spaces and why it is important for onlookers and figures of local authority to recognize and respect the flash mob’s performance space in order for the phenomenon to work. Lastly, I consider similarities and links between flash mobs and other types of public demonstration (e.g., peaceful protest) and how the variables at play in flash mobs are still equally important, including the willingness of local authorities to respect demonstration spaces.

The importance of the performance space for a flash mob is preeminent, becoming one of the defining elements of flash mob nomenclature. Typically, a flash mob video title follows a generic formula: [song/content/activity] + [location]. In the case of Improv Everywhere’s “frozen minute,” the video appears on YouTube as “Frozen Grand Central.” Similarly, multiple recordings of a *Sound of Music*-themed flash mob at the Central train station in Antwerp, Belgium are listed either as “*Sound of Music* | Antwerp” or “Historic flash mob central train station Antwerp, do re mi.” Other

videos also include a date as third part of the title: “Lady Gaga Bayonne 2011,” “Shakira in Piazza Duomo a Milano 19/6/2010,” or “*Glee* Flash Mob at the Ohio Union 5/3/2010.” While somewhat prosaic, each title keeps to a similar pattern that both optimizes the video for search engines while also inextricably linking each flash mob recording to the site of the performance.

Just as there is a logic to the nomenclature of flash mob videos, there are accepted practices in their editing and composition. Admittedly, the production quality of these recordings varies widely, as some flash mobs are funded and organized by groups and institutions with material resources and manpower, while others are truly “captured” on camera phones by surprised onlookers. As a result, some videos boast hi-definition images with multiple camera angles and miked sound, while others are grainy and shot with only a single camera phone.

Despite this, most – if almost all – flash mob videos reflect the understanding that audience reaction shots are as important as shots of performers themselves. In the instance of the “Frozen Grand Central” flash mob, Improv Everywhere set up several camera angles specifically to record audience reception of the flash mob: some wide shots focus on the larger effect of the frozen scene on the onlookers, while others focus on close-ups and different people’s looks of confusion. One camera even caught a maintenance worker’s frustration, which eventually turned into panic, as performers “froze” around his truck and trapped him in-between their bodies, stopping him from continuing



Fig. 3: A maintenance worker driving a truck in Grand Central Station stuck between “frozen” performers.

his work or even moving his vehicle (Fig. 3). Each of these reaction shots establishes the surprise of the in-person audience for the online viewers of the video – these shots have become sought-after objects unto themselves as we, the virtual onlookers, pursue a vicarious thrill.

Even in recordings in which only a single camera angle is available (typically because it was shot on a cell phone), the same visual grammar appears. In the video “Flash Mob Haka Surfers Paradise 11.09.11,” an onlooker captures a flash mob at a pedestrian mall in Surfers’ Paradise, Australia on her camera phone.³ The video consists of an unedited shot that moves back and forth between the congregated audience and the performers, who begin the traditional “Haka” Maori war chant spontaneously in the midst of the unsuspecting crowd. The woman filming the performance makes an effort to include crowd reaction shots while recording the mob. Despite the lack of cameras, resources, or preparation that Improv Everywhere had for “Frozen Grand Central,” this suggests the video author’s understanding of an embedded visual vocabulary for flash mob recordings.

Reaction shots are not the only common aspect among these videos; most of the recordings mentioned in this paper also take a measured amount of the time to set up the scene, establishing the status quo for both the location and the soon-to-be onlookers before a mob disrupts the space. (The exceptions to this are the performances that were captured spontaneously, catching everything, including the audience member filming by surprise – as a result, many of these types of recordings seem to capture the performance *in media res*.) As viewers of these videos, our attention is continually brought back to these earlier, mundane settings as the videos frequently revisit these wide, establishing shots; in doing so, the recordings continually remind us of the spaces and routines that are being interrupted, thus creating a dual spectacle: the first ostensibly focusing on the mob, while the second focuses on the transformative and radical process that these everyday spaces undergo during the performances. What was mundane suddenly becomes fantastic and surprising—a contrast that the videos emphasize, perhaps suggesting something of our own fixation with flash mobs and their recordings. We have created a fascination not only around

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the performance but also around the shock of the onlookers. In essence, we seek our own vicarious thrill in viewing the immediate audience's vexation and pleasure.

From a more theoretical perspective, the transformative and disrupted spaces of flash mobs illustrate Michel Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*, defined as spaces in which sites of culture are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."⁴ He describes heterotopias as transformed sites that are so unreal or fantastic in their transformation that they draw attention back to the original space:

[The role of heterotopias is] to create a space of illusion that exposes very real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]. Or else, on the contrary their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.⁵

What Foucault describes are two complementary and contradictory aspects of heterotopias – they are either so illusory and fantastic or so precise in their orderedness that they cannot help but draw attention to those places that, in truth, rest somewhere between the two on the spectrum. Yet flash mobs manage to demonstrate both qualities. First, they become illusory sites through their performances, which invade everyday spaces and transport bystanders to something entirely apart from their daily lives. At the same time, the rehearsed order and mechanization of the performances, which can be quite shocking and overwhelming considering the sometimes *hundreds* of people involved in flash mobs, gestures toward Foucault's second characteristic. In essence, they interrupt the mundane milieu of people who are constantly traveling in different directions and talking at cross-purposes by compelling all of them to stop and take notice of the choreographed performances in front of them. It is perhaps these two qualities, both fantastic illusion and mechanized order, working together to disrupt common spaces that explains, at least in part, the shock—or in some cases, as with the maintenance worker trapped between

performers in "Frozen Grand Central," the *panic*—experienced by onlookers.

The maintenance worker's reaction is particularly important because, although most onlookers express shock, his more extreme response to the performance demonstrates the role that audience members also play in creating these disrupted spaces through a kind of tacit social contract. The *magic circle* is an idea first theorized by Johann Huizinga that conceptualizes a "space apart."⁶ This space is a place of play and performance that is fully dependent on the players' acknowledgement of the sanctity of the magic circle, as well as outsiders' and onlookers' willingness to not spoil the illusion and interfere.⁷ As Roger Caillois elucidates, the magic circle is a shielded space that lies outside the traditional contexts of everyday reality: "Nothing that takes place outside this ideal frontier is relevant [...]. In every case, the game's domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: *a pure space*" (emphasis added).⁸ This space of separation is not dissimilar to the "fourth wall" in theater or the pretense of "pretend" among children playing games; in essence, it is a mutual agreement—though often an unconscious one—between all parties, both active (the performers) and passive (the audience) to allow for an unimpeded space of suspended reality.

Flash mob videos offer us a particularly useful demonstration of the magic circle, as the recordings capture the often clearly-delineated perimeter—usually of a circular nature—around the performance space. At the station in Antwerp, a Flemish television company organized and recorded a large-scale, *Sound of Music*-themed flash mob involving two hundred participants dancing to a remixed version of "Do-Re-Mi." The visual manifestation of Huizinga's magic circle becomes one of the most striking elements of the Antwerp recording when, at the end of the video, the shot switches to an overhead view and the dancers quickly run toward the center of the floor. The effect is that of a bullseye; the onlookers form an outer ring and the dancers concentrate themselves in the center, while the momentarily empty space between the two groups creates a clear division—a magic circle—around the performance space (Fig. 4).

In instances like the "Do-Re-Mi" flash mob, it is the playful choreography of the performance



Fig. 4: The “Do-Re-Mi” flash mob’s performance in Antwerp Central Station illustrates the concept of the magic circle.

that transforms the location into an illusory and hyper-ordered heterotopia, to which onlookers are temporarily transported. Onlookers now straddle the mundane space at their backs and the disrupted space in front of them; their observance of and passive participation in the magic circle is what allows the illusion to continue. Thus, the question presents itself: what happens when the magic circle is broken? What happens if someone does not understand or respect the performers’ “space apart?”

Interestingly, there are very few videos of true interruptions to flash mob performances, yet there are a number of recordings in which flash mob organizers have staged conflicts between the performers and supposedly unsuspecting bystanders. The importance of these videos is that, although the confrontations are staged, these interruptions draw a certain amount of hype, giving the recordings viral appeal online. One such video includes another of Improv Everywhere’s performances, an April Fools’ prank entitled “Jar Jar Subway Car (Faked for April Fools 2011)”: together with the New York branch of the Upright Citizens’ Brigade, actors costumed as *Star Wars* characters—the villain Darth Maul and the much-reviled sidekick Jar Jar Binks—boarded a New York subway car. Several bystanders apparently took offense to the performance, resulting in a physical altercation. Later, Improv Everywhere released the video of the event online and declared the fight entirely staged, but only after several news outlets, including *Entertainment Weekly* and *The Huffington Post*, reported on the assault as fact.⁹ The crux of the prank relies on an almost universal distaste for Jar Jar Binks, such that

viewers are both surprised and yet not surprised at all by the bystanders’ aggressive reaction. Arguably, the shock for the viewer of someone violating the performance space so violently generated as much of the viral fascination with the video as did the pleasure of seeing the character attacked.

Although not a staged conflict, the “Surfers’ Paradise Haka” recording reflects a similar awareness of the fragility of the magic circle when anyone, but particularly a figure of authority, chooses not to recognize the unspoken social contract between the performers and the audience. At one point in the video, a police officer approaches the performance space after a number of men have begun the “Haka” chant. The YouTube user who posted the video includes a comment on the video, stating “this Cop walks past me and I thought oohhh no.” This sentiment is echoed by her and other onlookers in the video, who worriedly discuss the officer during his approach. This is a telling moment, as it illustrates the understood potential for conflict between those who are disrupting the space and those who are tasked with keeping order. Thus, it is this direct juxtaposition of disruption and order that makes the following moments of the “Haka” flash mob in Surfers’ Paradise all the more surprising, both to the YouTube poster and her friends as well as to the online viewer: as the officer walks into frame, he walks towards the “Haka” gathering and joins the chant, shouting and beating his chest in an animated fashion as the others in the performance. What appeared at first to be a moment of potential conflict between the mob and a figure of local authority turned out, in fact, to be a moment of shared experience and community; however, this was only made possible because the officer, a person of power and order, chose to respect the performance space.

Moments of transformation from threat to participant contribute something of the sensational to a performance’s recording; this is perhaps one reason why Improv Everywhere and many other flash mob organizers so often stage these mitigated threats of authority in order to further increase the “shock value” of the videos. Yet arguably, part of this value also rises from our fascination with what is being “played at” or performed in these spaces. In Gregory Bateson’s theorization of human social development, performances or games of pretend

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function as a form of metacommunication; what is demonstrated, acted out, or “played” gestures toward another action or communication that exists in external reality.¹⁰ To borrow from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s description of metacommunication, “the playful nip connotes the bite,” and as a result, the playful metacommunication “reframes the events of the situation at hand” into something that is both harmless and yet potentially threatening.¹¹

Thus, when considering flash mobs, what is “played with” and gestured toward in these performances is something much more sensational and even frightening; simply put, within all flash mobs there is the tacit gesture toward a violent mob or protest. As such, in the illusory heterotopias of flash mobs, the underlying metacommunication of the mobs’ performances is that of urban mobilization, demonstration, and protest—a tacit threat evinced in the gatherings’ very names (flash mobs). Yet the mobs continually render this concern harmless, in part through their playfulness and transience and, in part, because the unspoken social agreement between performers and onlookers that what is being enacted is only *pretend*.

Though discussing flash mobs as “tacit threats” may initially appear alarmist—after all, what threat can a group of school children singing “Do-Re-Mi” in a train station pose? —we need only look at recent examples of “peaceful” demonstrations that have occurred in the past few years to understand the still-volatile nature of any urban mobilization or disruption of public spaces. Unlike the police officer who joined in the Surfers’ Paradise flash mob, in 2011 a university police officer at the University of California, Davis infamously pepper-sprayed students who had gathered non-violently as part of the nationwide “Occupy” protests as well as part of continuing internal unrest among students in the UC system. The protest shared many of the same characteristics as many of the flash mobs discussed

in this essay: its participants assembled through social networking sites with the intent to disrupt the everyday space of their campus quad with their demonstrations. They even recorded their efforts and posted them to YouTube. In this case, however, there was no mutually-acknowledged magic circle, no respected safe space or social contract, to protect the students as they staged their protest. The absolutely essential difference was a matter of severity and of *play* versus *protest*.

Looking forward, future scholarship on flash mobs will hopefully keep these dichotomies in mind: protest/play, politics/performance, and those tasked with keeping order/those intent on disruption. It is important to note that, as of this writing, the decade-long fascination with flash mobs appears to be winding down; although still popular, the viral speed and intensity of these performances give all appearances of having decreased, now replaced by other Internet memes at the forefront of social media flows. Flash mobs have been more than just a passing trend in our culture, unlike similar viral video memes like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge or Gangnam Style spin-offs, which usually run their course in a matter of weeks or months.

It is worth asking why are flash mobs beginning to fade out now? And is it a coincidence that the decline in phenomenon parallels a rapid increase in the media’s focus on international unrest, violent protests, kidnappings and assassinations, police militarization, suicide bombers, and public shootings in our local schools, shopping malls, and movie theaters? At first glance, flash mobs and these recent events might seem unrelated, yet considering how essential it is for participants, onlookers, and figures of local authority to recognize and respect the sanctity of the performance space, it is important to at least question if there is a connection: perhaps we have lost our fascination with safely disrupted public spaces the more we are reminded of exactly how unsafe most public spaces are.

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Notes

- 1 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 301.
- 2 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 192.
- 3 “Haka” is a traditional Maori war chant recently popularized by New Zealand rugby teams. The dance that accompanies the chant involves a large group of (traditionally) men stamping their feet and beating their arms and chests while they shout. With the rising popularity of flash mobs, videos of Haka flash mobs show how far the Haka chant and dance have traveled, with users uploading their recordings to YouTube from locations across the globe, including Beijing, Munich, and Austin, Texas.
- 4 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York City: Routledge, 1997), 332.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 335.
- 6 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 8 Roger Caillois, “The Definition of Play and the Classification of Games,” in *The Game Design Reader*, eds. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 2006), 125.
- 9 Darren Franich, “Jar Jar Binks beaten up on subway train,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 1 April, 2011, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2011/04/01/jar-jar-binks-subway-improv-everywhere/>; Patrick Hedlund, “Jar Jar Binks Character Beat Up On The Subway (VIDEO),” *The Huffington Post*, 1 April, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/01/jar-jar-binks-character-b_n_843588.html.
- 10 Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, eds. Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 316.
- 11 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, “Games as the Play of Meaning” in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 371.