

The New Boardrooms

Greying women bump elbows with Queen West scenesters as games nights pop up faster than you can say Bingo

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The slim twentysomething pushes back the newsboy cap on his shaved head, hunches over the board game Operation and slips metal tweezers into a slit, deftly plucking out a plastic wishbone to wave it, smirking. Behind him, a disparate Scrabble-playing foursome debates whether W-O spells a real word. From a corner comes a yelp and hysterical giggles as a tower of wooden blocks cascades to the floor.

Misha Glouberman, a tall man in a pressed brown suit, bounces onto the stage and taps a xylophone. "The Jenga game is free," he says as the high note reverberates through the speakers. "Anyone for Jenga?"

He has drawn about 30 people on a Sunday night to the Drake Hotel, where he hosts Games You Play Sitting Down, an evening of board-game action. But his aren't the only games in town.

Part party and part social experiment, games nights have been popping up at

unusual locations quicker than you can shout Bingo, driven by organizers and participants who have tired of the typical bar scene and want more creative ways to interact.

The options include heavy-metal euchre at the Beaver Café, party games at Lee's Palace's Santa Cruz galas and Scrabble tournaments at Fez Batik.

Mr. Glouberman's board-game event marks the tamest of a three-part series called Room 101. He also hosts Games You Play Standing Up (charades) and Games That Aren't Like Other Games, where participants improvise music using an experimental game called Cobra created by avant-garde artist John Zorn.

"Most of what we do for leisure is just sitting around doing nothing and consuming something. This is very different," says Mr. Glouberman, 36. "You walk into a bar and 10 groups of three or four people are wildly gesticulating and shouting. It's a very weird party."

Mr. Glouberman is intrigued by how the games push people to interact in unfamiliar ways. During the past 30 years, he says, ritual ways people mingle, such as church picnics, box socials, formal dances and social clubs, have faded away.

Likewise, participatory events have been eclipsed by the passive observation of others, from films and reality television to concerts and professional sports.

Mr. Glouberman sees his structured games and others like them as a healthy reaction to that decline. The approach seems to have struck a chord. Room 101 events have drawn as many as 70 people a night, spanning in age from barely old enough to buy beer to what Mr. Glouberman calls the "church-social scene."

On a recent night, grey-haired women bumped elbows across card tables with Queen West scenesters, cheering each other and jostling for bowls of Cheesies.

"It's not like going to a club, where you have to think up small talk," says Liane Fong, 21, an English student attending Room 101 for the first time. "It's a good icebreaker. There are no pretenses."

Others welcome a spontaneous interactive experience away from the Internet.

"This is more social" than on-line games and chat rooms, says Rishi Hargovan, 21, who studies political science at McGill University.

Mr. Glouberman -- who spent half the games night bounding about like a circus ringmaster and the other half watching in

silent glee -- taught improvisational drama for years and last fall offered a charades class aimed solely at making non-performers act out. Charades, Cobra and, to a lesser extent, the board games extend that experiment.

Nadia Halim, a 34-year-old print editor, found the charades course so exhilarating that she volunteered for a recent demonstration of Cobra. Ms. Halim, who had never before sang in public, found herself on stage surrounded by professional musicians, crooning out words and barking like a dog.

"It was a huge amount of fun," she says.

A similar urge to stretch participation into performance inspired Tyler Clark Burke, a visual artist who hosts the monthly Santa Cruz parties at Lee's Palace that draw as many as 600 people.

At one party held on a Friday the 13th, she handed out pieces of paper with "spells" on them, instructing participants what to say and do to avoid being cursed. At others, she has handed out numbers for people to wear and encouraged them to drop notes to each other in corresponding mailbags.

For a separate event, she created 200 masks with matching character descriptions and asked attendees to adopt the personas for the night.

"I wanted people to dance and be ridiculous and make out and have fun, let go of some inhibitions," says Ms. Burke, 30. "I want them to let certain aspects of vanity melt away and just kind of get lost in the moment."