

6 WEEKS. 5 BIG URBAN GAMES. 4 LESSONS TO SHARE

This past summer the Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si) took our Youth Activism Design Institute up a notch, mostly thanks to the skills and efforts of twelve youth interns who came to us from six youth organizing groups in Boston. Together we:

- Designed and led large-scale adaptations of childhood street games like 4 square, hopscotch, taps and tug-of-war.
- Involved over 200 youth and passers-by of all ages in Dorchester's Upham's Corner and Grove Hall, on the subway, in Downtown Crossing and in Jamaica Plain's South Street Projects.
- Explored the potential for intervening on social violence using unexpected tools like play, spectacle and delight.
- Introduced new tools for youth organizers to take back to their programs.



"NO ONE CAN THROW OUT A GAME OF TUG OF WAR."

One of our interns made this comment as a contrast to typically handing out flyers about an issue or event. We were realizing that intervening in unexpected ways and unexpected places really had an impact on players and passers-by. Reactions ranged from heart-felt thank-yous to folks pulling over in their cars to play, to participants asking us to play in spaces that had been rocked by violence. Operating in what our interns called "awkward spaces" turned out to be our biggest strength.

EVERYBODY LOVED THE POWDER FAIRY.

One thing we set out to test this summer was our hunch that that social justice needed more spectacle. Our final big urban game was a version of tug of war that included jokers, a cat in the hat and the Powder Fairy. Sure enough, everybody was convinced the Powder Fairy (giving out baby powder for our sore hands) was their secret to success. She might have been ours too! Never underestimate the power of a fairy...or spectacle!



NEW GAMES STILL BRING UP OLD RIVALRIES.

New games still bring up old rivalries.

Just like high schools which carry their rivalries from sport to sport, our games bumped smack into age-old tensions between police and youth. Despite (or because of?) the jubilant nature of a bunch of teens playing street hopscotch, five police cars came to tell us to disburse. Youth organizers who had come to play also got sucked into the familiar conflict, immediately refusing to leave and chanting at the cops. As a game design team, we saw this as a design challenge both in terms of safety and fun. In the following weeks we designed strategies for including cops in our games (even when they didn't know it) and deploying our most social intern to chat them up and forestall any conflict.



GO PLAY IN TRAFFIC!

We did, literally. Whether sticking our games in the midst of foot traffic or car traffic (playing hopscotch and tug-of-war in crosswalks during the brief "walk" signals!), our best results were when we plopped ourselves in the midst of hectic bodies living hectic lives. As one intern described, "We brought every place to life. We made an incredible scene. We had people wonder and just dominated their thoughts.... People were in a state of not worrying about their perm, the kids, what their day was like at work, mom/dad, tomorrow."



The summer left us with as many questions as answers. Can a big urban game shift the self-identity of a space or the people in it? Can the opportunity to play be as important in reducing social violence as the opportunity to work? What can games and spectacle teach folks doing on-going social justice work? Hopefully, a lot!