Play Nice

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Abstract

Play Nice is a game provoking people to appreciate,
perform, and be creative with kindness. Through three
prototypes, it uncovers how people express and relate
to kindness through personal and personalized stories.

Author Keywords

Acts of kindness; personal; games; social; community.

Introduction

This project set out to inject kindness and appreciation
in people through user-generated input. Multiple
studies have shown that both acts of kindness and
expressing gratitude are beneficial to mental health and
happiness [1]. Many existing games and applications
aiming to increase kindness are prescriptive, explicitly
telling users what kind acts to perform ("pay for the
coffee of the person behind you in line). This requires
an overseer who decides what those kind acts should
be and results in a limited library, restricted by
creator's ability to think of them. They suggestions are
also independent of the users, ignoring the multitudes
of personalities and ways in which different people
express kindness. Some people, for example, may not
have the means to share kindness through buying
things. By having a community-generated input, the
project hopes to show kindness that is more varied and
relatable, and thus more inspiring or thought-provoking
and able to ultimately generate more kindness.
Through this project, is there a community-based way
to have people recall and pass along kindness?

1st Iteration - Kindness Bingo

The first prototype borrowed from the classic game
bingo to create a framework for inputting and inspiring
kind acts. The instructions were:

Given a blank 5x5 bingo board:
1. Fill a blank square with a kind act that someone has
done for you recently.
2. When the board is filled, participants can mark
squares containing acts that they themselves have
done.

The bingo base allowed for familiarity with an already
understood win condition, and it could easily allow for
community input without affecting typical gameplay.
The first step of the game asks participants to recall a
kind act, allowing for player-generated input for the
game and in order to spur consideration and
appreciation for kindness bestowed on them. What is

considered kind is intentionally left undefined to let people decide themselves and hopefully produce a wider range of kindness. The exercise also potentially compels them to acknowledge what might have seemed mundane as kind efforts. To some, this task came easily, while others struggled, feeling there was nothing appropriately kind that happened to them. People's ability to recall kindness reflected their personalities and perspectives; revealing how they viewed daily interactions at different scales, from insignificant to worthy of recognition, and the different thresholds they have for feeling thankful. People also stated that the recall exercise gave them an opportunity to not necessarily think about kind acts but about the people around them in their life.

In the second step, participants play bingo on their newly-made board. Rather than rely on luck to fill the board, however, people have the agency to perform the act written in the square in order to mark it. The inherent motivation to achieve bingo (five in a row) would encourage people to be kind, choosing acts either based on their comfort level or abilities or their location on the board. Achieving bingo would also be a communal goal, with everyone contributing not only the inputs in the earlier round but also the performing and filling out of the board. Once bingo was achieved, the winning spaces or the entire board could be cleared and refilled with new recently-experienced kindnesses.

Figure 1 Kindness Bingo board with participants' handwritten acts of kindness received and orange dots marking acts they themselves had done.

This lo-fi iteration was created with paper and run internally with approximately eight to ten people. Ideally, a larger community would participate to generate greater diversity in the input acts and increase the capabilities of acts being performed. Because the game likely requires that people leave the space to perform acts of kindness before playing the board, it would also be located somewhere everyone would frequent upon or could easily return to, such as a physical board in a public space or digitally as a website.

The test proved overall unsuccessful, but significantly informative in the types of kinds acts people experience that resulted from step one. Acts ranged from general ("Friend shared their snacks.") to personal ("My girlfriend recently send me a 'late' bday card out of nowhere for no reason.") to situationally-specific

("Ordered a defective item and the seller told me to keep it instead of going through the hassle of shipping it back."). The general acts made the bingo aspect of the game trivial as they were easily markable by any number of people, while the more specific acts could be near-impossible to fulfill unless a larger variety of people played. However, reading acts others had written, particularly the more personal ones, was absorbing and inspiring. It helped expand people's views of what could be considered kind and what could be done to be kind. The element of time, of having people leave the game, perform an action at some point in their daily life, and return to complete the game, was difficult to test at this scale.

2nd Iteration - Exquisite Kindness

This second prototype aimed to better incorporate a concept of passing along kindness by modeling after games such as Exquisite Corpse, where the input of one player prompts action by the following player. In order to combat the specificity issues of the first iteration, it also borrowed from Mad Libs, replacing specificities with blanks. The game played out as follows:

1. Write a kind act that someone has recently done for you.
2. Each person's written act becomes converted into a first-person statement and "Mad-Libbed," where certain words are replaced with blanks and a hint of its original part of speech or type (noun, person, food, etc.) These new "Mad-Libbed" kindness acts are written on the back of the cards of the person to the left.
3. Fill in the new Mad Libs on the back of your card with kind act that you do.

For example, a participant recalled that someone "bought me toothpaste." This became "I bought (person) (noun) . "Cookies from Chris" transformed into "I gave (food item) to (person) . There were three participants and they had two days to act and fill out their kindness card before meeting again to share. The cards were designed on textured card stock at business card size to give an appreciable physicality to the acts of kindness and so participants could easily carry the cards in their wallets where it could serve as a reminder.
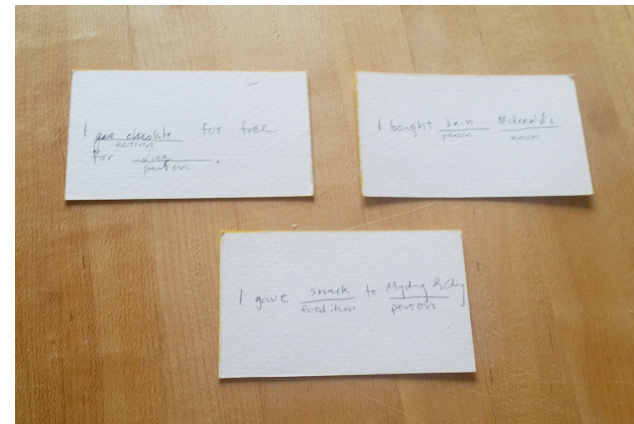

Figure 2 Mad Libs kindness cards, filled out by participants.

This iteration lacked a proper motivation for participants and a clear progression path, and step 2 was complicated and required intervention by the designer. Despite consideration for the nicer card, all three participants forgot about the card and activity. Some unintentionally fulfilled their card with acts that had performed regardless of the card while others filled it at the last moment with something simple. Even with the blanks, the Mad Libs kindness statements felt too

prescriptive, and an arbitrary statement should not be the motivation behind acts of kindness. The game space was also too open, with players wishing it was performed among a closed group of people or had a more intentioned social interaction. One participant became paranoid that all kind acts done to her recently following the testing only arose from the game and were not entirely genuine.

This test in combination with the first iteration's input illustrated that kind acts tend to fit in certain categories and expressions of them fit certain forms, usually involving the actor (the person performing the kind act), a receiver of the kindness, and medium through which the kindness is passed along such as an object or service.

3rd Iteration - Play Nice
The third iteration built upon the knowledge gained from the previous two. It aimed to maintain the elements of player input and personal stories while creating an activity contained within a closed group of people to maintain social engagement. The instructions were:

SET UP
+ There are 2 teams.
+ Each person writes his/her name on the back of a Name Card and puts it in a stack with their teams'.

RULES
+ Team 1 draws a Topic card and a Name card from Team 2's stack.
+ Each person on Team 1 writes on a blank card describing a kind Act that the Named person would do involving the Topic and places it face down in the

middle.
+ Team 2 shuffles the cards and reads the Acts aloud.
+ Collectively, everyone on Team 2 except for the Named person agrees on the best Act.
+ The writer of the best Act wins the round and keeps the Name card.
+ Repeat round with Team 2.

Topic cards contained single nouns, such as "floor," "blanket," or "water," to serve as prompts around which people could describe kind acts. The words were chosen to be common items with potentially multiple connotations. "Water," for example, could relate to thirst, refreshment, or cleanliness. By choosing common objects, participants could potentially see the item in everyday life and recall their experience of the game. The game requires that participants know each other to some degree of familiarity, and by having players write about each other, the game maintains the individual player input and allows for personal stories which captures people's interest and encourages involvement more than those of strangers. By requesting acts that people "would do" rather than "have done," the game extends beyond facts of what has already happened and encourages participants to be creative about the kinds of kind acts that could happen.

The second portion of the round, where the opposite group reads and votes on the best Act, has the participants come together to collaboratively decide on the judging criteria of "best;" the most kind, the most characteristic, the most creative? This in turn would hopefully provoke discussion on these matters amongst the groups. The Named person was allowed to contribute to the discussion but did not get to

ultimately vote, adding a social component of people's perceptions of others.

Six people, all quite close with each other, tested the game, forming two groups of three. The first session was left to run its course with the players, resulting in much silliness, sarcasm, and increasingly diminishing nods towards kindness. Naturally humor, followed by fun, dominated the game style and people primarily wrote caricature stories to attract laughs from the opposing team and win rounds. Kindness in this first test manifested in many backhanded ways, from kindness with caveats; reserved only for certain people or during certain times ("hang up a blanket... to create a calm and controlled environment for her chosen studiomates"), insulting kindness ("saw a fat person eating at McDonald's... and took away their fork! So he/she couldn't exceed the calorie count for the day."), or as unkind acts done to common enemy or a person who "really really deserves punishment." At a certain point, kindness dropped out of the acts completely ("can cut her own hair sitting on a couch blind folded").

Figure 3 View of the tabletop of people playing Play Nice, showing the topic and name cards and the written stories. Video still, video footage by James Addison.

A second session with all the same people was run, this time with the instructions to write the most genuinely kind act that the Named person would plausibly do. This version proved more difficult and "less fun" to participants, and debates on plausibility vs possibility arose. Would the person actually do it or not? Does it count if the person would do it though they might never be put in that situation to do it? The resulting acts did however become more realistic while remaining hypothetical. In writing these, people tended to fixate on the Named person's unique skills and motivations, such as fabrication, medicine, social issues, or children ("would design a beautiful system of water towers for a city in drought" or "picked out a nice shirt for me because she is rather fashionable").

As overall feedback, the players proposed instead of topic cards, context cards that could prompt with situations under which people might act kindly such as "It was Monday morning and..." or motivation cards dictating whether to aim for the funniest, sincerest, most fantastical, etc. story to balance between the silly and fun and the genuine.

Analysis
Experiences from the various prototypes revealed a number of key ways in which people consider kindness. The research confirmed that people cannot and will not necessarily do acts of kindness under and type of instruction, regardless of how specific or open-ended they are.

Unsurprisingly it is also much easier and, apparently, more humorous for people to be unkind. The unkindness, however, was pointedly directed at people outside of the group and who were known for sure to

be generally disliked. The direction of the game, whether trending towards sincerely kind or poking fun, was determined by the tone of the players. Certainly if the game were played with people who were less comfortable talking about hurting others or people who were generally less comfortable with each other, the stories written each round would have had a different flavor. This supports that kindness, or unkindness, is contagious, and, like in most social situations, people will follow the norm.

The tone of each round also depended on the character of the Named person being written about. If that person's character tended towards being more thoughtful than sarcastic, for example, participants would likely write more thoughtful stories. Even though the Named person neither wrote nor voted on any acts in that round, they passively shaped the behavior of the others. More nefarious people would be determining the winner, but both writers and judges strayed from what might be their personal preference to align more closely with the "kinder" person. This suggests that those who are more kind are more likely to attract kindness from others regardless of where the actor naturally falls along the scale of kindness.

Based on the second Mad Libs testing where the activity was too open or unconstrained and feedback from the third prototype where people would have preferred context prompts, the research shows that people tend to think of kindness primarily within a context. Though kindness itself does not necessitate a particular situation in order to occur, when thinking about performing kindness, people desire a situation to explain why someone would do something kind. When considering kindness received however, people seem to perceive no context, with the kindness occurring "for no reason" or "out of nowhere." This reveals that there is a disparity between what motivates people to perform kind acts; helping someone in need, and what they appreciate about kind acts; that there seems to be no motivation behind them.

Ultimately, the game proved to be an effective framework not necessarily for considering kindness but in exploring how people know and perceive each other. The most successful rounds of the game were when people felt the written stories truly and succinctly captured the character of a person, whether it was with regards to kindness or absurdities.

Conclusion

Though this project did not succeed in actively compelling people to kind acts, it did unveil many aspects and nuances of how people consider and exhibit kindness in their everyday lives, particularly among company they know. Though varieties of backhanded and sarcastic kindness come more readily and seem more humorous, when describing more sincere act of kindness, people pick out and appreciate the unique skills of individuals. Motivation or context also become important to people when doing kind acts, but are perceived less prominently when receiving them.

Perhaps making the game more fictional or hypothetical would provide participants with an environment they would be more willing to express genuine kindness in. By setting up more fictional situations, for example, participants could express more sincerity without the overall situation becoming too real or losing enjoyment.

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