

[Joe Edelman](#)

# Notecard Parties

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FAQ v0.1

## what is a notecard party?

A party in which everyone in attendance receives a set of notecards, each indicating an action that must be performed and a time at which to perform it.

## what's the point?

Usually the actions on people's notecards interweave in surprising ways. For instance:

1. one person is told to put newspaper and scissors in the bathroom
2. another person is told to gather friends and have a boat race in the bathtub
3. a third is told to go to the bathroom and give a play-by-play of the events there

Each person is pleasantly surprised by the others' cards, and by the support they receive in their activity unexpectedly. This creates an attitude of trust and adventure at the party. In addition, it can be a good way for strangers at the party to get to know each other, and it certainly makes for a more eventful occasion than the average chips and beer event.

## who came up with this?

I did. So far as I know, no one else has orchestrated these kinds of little events that are surprising even to the people who participate in them.

It is, however, very similar to something Neal Stephenson made up for his Diamond Age book: the "Reformed Distributed Republic" described on page 377 of the paperback. An anarchist nation that is held together as a mutually trusting community by these kinds of trustfall events.

There are also resonances with the short story "The Lottery of Babylon" by Jorge Luis Borges, in which an entire society is run by lottery.

And of course they are always compared to Happenings and Flash Mobs.

## how many of these have you done?

I have done about 10 parties, ranging in size from 20 people to about 120, although it should be able to scale to much larger groups (e.g., nations) just fine. The first was a dinner party in 2001 in which all of the food was prepared without anyone knowing what the recipes were, shifting from task to task when bells rang according to their cards.

I have also done about 10 more intimate notecard events. For instance, in London I distributed the following four cards, each to be performed outside St.Paul's cathedral:

1. Stand pointing for a few minutes at St.Paul's, wearing a red hat.
2. Look for someone wearing a red hat. Pull their finger.
3. You will need a small bell. Someone will be wearing a red hat. Someone else will approach that person and pull their finger. Then: ring your bell.
4. You will need a small bell. Someone will be wearing a red hat. Someone else will approach that person and pull their finger. Then: ring your bell.

## how do I throw a notecard party?

I have used different techniques for producing the cards:

- 1) For intimate occasions, I have just written them myself. I am clever.
- 2) In 2002 I used the following technique: I sat with the other planners of the party in a circle. Each of us would write a single card that was somehow risky for the person doing it. Then we would pass the card to our left. We would look at the card we received and make a new card that could somehow support that card. Then pass both cards. If/when a set of cards received was deemed to be complete, it was set aside with a paperclip. At the end, these "vignettes" were ordered and given times appropriate to the timespan of the party and the density with which we wanted things to happen.
- 3) In 2003 & 2004 I started basing the cards off of "wishes". I had everyone at the party make a wish, and actually had volunteers from among the party participants work with me to make each wish into 2-5 notecards that were related to the wish. Coordinating all of this proved to be a lot of work, but it is especially fulfilling when someone shouts "that was my wish! my wish came true!"
- 4) This year I plan to make a hybrid between technique #2 and #3. I will have everyone at the party make a wish *in the form of a notecard* (i.e., with a time, place, and action on it). Rather than supervising volunteers at the party and making all the supporting cards for these wish cards at once, I will build a "wish realization station" with instructions and a chart.

A good trick in difficult environments is to hand out a few cards early, then wait till they go off. Ask the crowd for a show of hand of people who were involved and liked it, and then ask who else wants to try a card. Pretty soon you will be deluged.

I have also generally let people trade cards, but this trading must be done covertly so that the secrets don't come out.

## Where can I see more examples?

Here are some from Ben's birthday party in 2002. This was the 3rd party I threw, and Carla and Ben helped me with the cards.

7:54pm - SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER \* Pick out a 70's groove for the stereo. Turn on the disco ball while you = play the music. (DJ: BrookBoardman) \* When you hear disco music, pretend to be John Travolta. (Sex Symbol: = NateHuckelbauer)

7:58pm - HAT GIVING \* Locate a bag of hats behind the broken mirror in the upstairs bathroom. = Give them to people, but instruct to "pay it forward": everyone who = receives a hat gift has to make a hat for someone else and give it away. = Show them the hatmaking supplies in the hatmaking room. (Actor: = RobinUnknown)

8:05pm - SHY PERSON \* Follow someone around as if you were shy and wanted to meet them. Smile = from a distance. Pretend you are Hugh Grant or a Japanese woman if that = helps. (Actor: BrianFife)

8:14pm - ALL PRAISE BEN \* Find a glass & silverware. Tap the glass and make a toast in honor of = Ben. (Speechwriter: LizzieHamilton) \* Announce to the room that Ben is Great. All Praise Ben! Here ye Here = ye! (Towne Crier: RobinUnknown)

8:35pm - LOS ANGELES \* You'll find a pair of sunglasses ("shades") in the downstairs bathroom. = Wear them and pretend to be a talent agent from L.A. Tell people to "stay = cool" and make the "call me" gesture. (Sex Symbol: MartyVona) \* If you don't have a camera, find one near Ben's bed upstairs. Choose a = model. Go up on the roof and do a photo shoot. (Photographer: = EllenKovacs)

8:42pm - THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING \* Tell several people something wonderful you noticed about them. = (Observer: PaulNicklas) \* Collect a flashlight from under the sink in the upstairs bathroom. Go = outside and collect clean and pretty leaves. Present them as gifts to = people at the party. (Editor: LydiaGuaraldi)

8:47pm - SLOW DANCE \* Pick out a sappy love song from the CD's near the stereo under the bar. = Put it on and start a slow dance with partners. (DJ: PaulNicklas) \* When the slow dance starts, make sure everyone has a partner. Dance = with anyone who doesn't. (Philanthropist: MichelleSavage)

8:55pm - ANIMALS \* Act like a fish. Pucker & crouch. Use your hands as flippers and weave = around. (Animal Impersonator: AnneDeWitt) \* Tunnel through the floor like a worm! (Worm Dude: BrianFife)

9:10pm - THE HOLY TRIANGLE -> PI=D1ATA DESTRUCTION \* Gather five other people. Use your bodies to make a triangle shape on = the floor. Sing "Halleluyah!" when it is complete. (Pythagoras: = JoeEdelman) \* Pretend you're a Franciscan monk in a 13th century abbey and expound on = the symbolism of the father, the son, and the holy ghost. Praise the = Lord! (Heretic: DanLutz) \* Get Kevin's Pi=F1ata; gather a team of three; perform a ritual = sacrifice. (Actor: DanLutz)

9:20pm - LIGHTS OUT \* Find some candles in an egg carton on the bar. Place candles around the = room and light them. With three friends, find the four house = lightswitches (kitchen, red room, living room, hallway). Give a signal = and turn off all the lights at once. (Interior Decorator: BenGuaraldi) \* When the lights go out, sign "When you wish upon a star" or find someone = who can. (Singer: EllenKovacs)

9:25pm - EXPEDITION MEETS MONSTER \* Gather a group of people for an expedition. Develop a treasure map of = Ben's room. (Explorer: BrookBoardman) \* You are The Monster of Ben's Room. Go to Ben's room and defend it from = whomever tries to enter. Roar! Throw pillows and things. Eventually, = tell them you're not really a monster, you're just a guest at a party. = Shake hands, let them in. (Tough Guy: MartyVona)

9:30pm - TAKING NOTES \* Sit in a corner and take notes about conversations you can hear nearby. = Make sure they are legible, as they will be read later. (Ethnographer: = PaulNicklas) \* Look for someone taking notes in a corner. Ask if you can copy their = notes later for the big "exam." Act nervous about it. (Student: = KevinStaszowski)

9:40pm - INTRODUCTIONS \* Introduce two people you don't know to each other as if you know both of = them well. Call them by the wrong name, ask them to remind you where they = live, what they do for a living, etc. (Actor: KevinStaszowski)

9:45pm - A SECRET WISH \* Pick someone up (get help if you need it) and transport them outside. = Tell

them to look at the night sky and make a wish. Carry them back = inside. Repeat as necessary. (Director: LizzieHamilton)

9:50pm - DRAMA \* Go off to a corner and pretend to cry. See if you can get anyone to = notice and console you. (Actor: MichelleSavage) \* Find someone who is crying and console them. Cover them with a blanket = and sing "My Favorite Things", "Everybody Hurts", or another appropriate = consoling song. (Actor: PaulNicklas) [!It was "Bridge Over Troubled = Water"]

10pm - POLITICS \* Be a political candidate and solicit votes. When questioned, always = give meaningless conflicted, or confusing answers. (Politician: = JoeEdelman) [!"Jim Downright, state senate. Equal rights for women and = slaves!"] \* When a political candidate appears, try to get a straight answer on a = particular issue like taxes, the war, or gay marriage. (Skeptic: ???)

10:05pm - THE DIVISION OF LABOR \* Act like a janitor. Push a garbage can around, sweep, hang a towel from = the back of your pants, clean up spots you see. Stoop. (Caretaker: = NateHuckelbauer) \* Seat people like a maitre dee. (Miss Manners: NancyBloomfield?)

10:10pm - AND NOW THE WEATHER \* Get people's attention. Give a forecast of Ben's future, presenting it = like a weather forecast. (Weatherman: AnneDeWitt) \* Someone will give a forecast of Ben's future. Get next to them. When = they are done say "And now the news!" and point at someone. (News Anchor: = CarlaNomaia)

10:20pm - ART \* Draw a picture of Ben and give it to him. (Painter: LydiaGuaraldi)

10:30pm - AIRBORN PRODUCE \* Throw peppers; you'll find them behind the blue-gray chair. (Actor: = NancyBloomfield) \* Find the peppers behind the blue-gray chair in the living room. If = someone starts to take the peppers and throw them, that's okay, but do = your best to catch them and put them back behind the chair. (Actor: = BenGuaraldi)

UNSPECIFIED TIME - PORK TALK / PIGS WRESTLING \* Spread the word (but not to Ben) that at some point during the night = everyone will switch to having conversations using only the word "Pork." = (Conspirator: WillGuaraldi) \* Wait until you hear the word "Pork"; find a partner, pretend to be pigs, = Wrestle! (Animal Impersonator: CarlaNomaia)