

For One Long Night, Manhattan Was Turned Into A Massive Game For Hundreds Of Finance Workers

[Seth Porges](#) August 14, 2015

It's often said with some degree of hyperbole that the island of Manhattan is turning into a playground for well-off finance workers. On one recent Saturday night in August, from sundown until well past sunrise, that literally became true.

The occasion was [Midnight Madness](#), an every-couple-of-years overnight adventure that forces teams of (mostly) finance folks to criss-cross the city as they track down clues, solve puzzles, and unwittingly take part in what may be the largest and most ambitious immersive theater production the city has ever seen. It's one part *Sleep No More*, one part scavenger hunt, and one part caffeine bender: The game begins at sundown, and goes well into the next morning. In total, 21 teams of up to 10 people each took part, raising some \$3 million for [Good Shepherd Services](#), a youth development and education agency.

"My one piece of advice: You're gonna wanna bring a

toothbrush," says Lindsai Shine, CEO of Insider NYC, an events company that worked on the game

Needless to say, the logistics of an all-night, citywide event involving hundreds of people and dozens of performers (as well as a few pieces of custom-built gadgetry) are daunting, with a motley crew of some of New York's most bizarrely specialized talents tapped into action. In addition to the program's organizers, there was a technology-based puzzles and games company to design the challenges (Futurruption), an events production company to wrangle permits and places (Insider NYC), a graphic design studio to produce visuals (Linked By Air), an immersive theater company to supply actors and dancers (Third Rail Projects), a small army of off-duty and retired cops to serve as security, and all sorts of tinkers, tailors, soldiers, and spies. In all, the event involved two dozen locations, plus about a dozen sound, street-closing, and park permits.

"I thought we'd need more permits, but I like to go off the radar where we can," Shine says. "The Parks Department hates me. There's always gonna be a mall cop looking for that minute your permit has expired and wants to move you out."

At about 11:40pm, Shine's prophecy seemed to come true. "We're hearing Union sq is being closed down. Can anyone confirm from onsite?" somebody wrote on the private Slack

channel used by the event organizers. A minute later:
"Confirms that Parks Dept is kicking players out of Union Sq."

Participants spent the night running around the city solving puzzles (Photo credit: Joshua... [+]

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"Whatever you do, don't get followed," Elisha Wiesel, the game's producer and a partner at Goldman Sachs, tells the crowd at Game Control. "None of the teams know where Game Control is. If they see you come back here, they will know who you are and follow you to other parts of the game. They will try to cheat."

We're on the second floor of the Bryant Park WeWork, which has been temporarily transformed into the all-knowing and semi-secretive nervous system for the night's activity: Game Control, or GC, as everybody calls it. Deep into the night and well into the next morning, dozens of desk jockeys sit hunched over computers, pulling the strings that will guide the game's participants around the city. In the center of the room, a massive projection screen gives organizers a real-time look at exactly where each team is in the game and in the city.

Keeping all the moving parts together is an interlocking web of private Slack channels. There are channels for the game's

organizers, channels for individual teams, and every sort of mishmash of interested parties in between. When a puzzle doesn't work right or a venue is about to be shut down, it goes on Slack, and the organizers improvise workarounds and solutions.

"It's my job to be one step ahead of everyone to do a sanity check," says Mat Laibowitz, Midnight Madness' creator, an MIT Media Lab-trained game designer, and founder of Futurruption. "I run around the city and try to make it to every puzzle just before the players to test them and make sure they are working."

This year, Laibowitz says there was only one fatal breakdown. Players were given radio transmitters and thermometers that were key to solving a puzzle. In theory, using the thermometer on the right object would have given players the proper FM channel to tune in to receive the next clue. But minutes before the first players made it to the site, it became apparent that the radio transmitters simply weren't working well enough, forcing Laibowitz to pull a last-minute backup puzzle out of his pocket.

"In the past, I've had to make up puzzles on the spot," Laibowitz says. "One time, a puzzle got stolen. I ended up writing a new one on a sticker and putting it on tip of the needle sculpture in the Fashion District."

Game organizers monitor the real-time progress of teams (Photo credit: Joshua Schwimmer/Midnight... [+]

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Mat Laibowitz created Midnight Madness in 1996. Inspired by the 1980 Michael J. Fox movie of the same name, his idea was to create an event that forced people to get work together in person to experience the city in a new way—something Laibowitz viewed as a necessary antidote to what was, even in the mid-1990s, becoming an increasingly screen-filled existence.

“You could see the draw of technology and video games and the birth of the Internet,” Laibowitz says. “In Midnight Madness, you have to meet people and collaborate. We’ve taken reality and really activated it.”

In the pre-cellphone years, teams kept in contact with each other and with Game Control using payphones. Eventually, that morphed to cellphones and a smattering of custom gadgets Laibowitz built specifically for the game, such as something he describes as “a really early text message auto-responder that ran on a laptop that rode in a car.”

This year, virtually all Midnight Madness-related communication made its way to Slack. When teams fell behind and needed a nudge, their designated handler sent clues over Slack. When a team cracked open a puzzle, they

let Game Control know over Slack. When rumors flew that teams were slipping GPS trackers into rivals' bags in order to shortcut the game, it went on Slack. When the security guard at the Coca-Cola corporate office threatened to call the cops because too many sleep-deprived finance guys kept wondering in under the mistaken belief that a clue was sending them there, it went on Slack, along with a plea: "Please do not get arrested."

The 2015 event featured another first: The scavenger hunt doubled as a massive immersive theater installation. Its subject: Audrey Munson

Dancers and actors take to the steps of the National Museum of the American Indian. Next to them:... [+]

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The figure of Audrey Munson stands guard over countless New York City landmarks—and many more throughout the country. She is part of the Manhattan Bridge, the New York Public Library, Columbus Circle. She was a part of the old Penn Station.

Audrey Munson was once a real woman. A model plucked from obscurity in the early 1900s and turned by artists and sculptors into one of the most depicted and desired women in the world. She starred in silent films and inspired countless sculptures. Her beauty was supposedly so severe

that it drove men to madness. She was known as "Miss Manhattan". In 1919, her landlord killed his own wife so he could court Audrey.

By 1922, she was through with it all. Through with the literal objectification. Through with the artists who had her undress for their eyes and brushes. Through with the countless suitors. She was through with the fact that her figure could drive men to murder. And so, in May of that year, she attempted to end her own life by drinking a solution of bichloride of mercury.

Audrey Munson did not die that day, but she was never the same. She was eventually sent to a mental hospital, where she remained from 1931 until her death in 1996. Audrey Munson lived to be 104 years old and died in almost complete obscurity.

You've seen Audrey Munson a hundred times before, even if you didn't know it. That statue that you assumed was an anonymous amalgamation or Greek goddess was, in all likelihood, an Audrey. In New York City, her ghostly presence is everywhere.

"After walking by the Civic Fame statue at the top of the Manhattan Municipal Building about a thousand times, I decided to read more about it and discovered Audrey," Wiesel says. "I realized she was everywhere in NYC, and

that she was this tragic and amazing figure who deserved a return to the stage."

To bring Audrey to life, Wiesel recruited [Third Rail Projects](#), which is best known for the Lewis Carroll-themed *Then She Fell*. Over the course of the night, some 30 actors and dancers took on the role of Audrey in order to tell hushed stories to participants in Battery Park, dance with them in the Prince George Ballroom (only when they learned the proper moves could they move onto the next puzzle), and force them to draw her as if they were one of the actual Audrey's artists.

Interestingly, the very presence of actors and a theatrical element was a closely guarded secret, not revealed to players until hours into the night.

"None of the players had any idea they were going to encounter immersive performances until they solved the puzzle at the National Museum of the American Indian," says Jennine Willett, Third Rail co-artistic director and the choreographer for the Midnight Madness performances.

"They had to piece together light bulbs into a sculpture in a way that played a particular melody. When they did, this melody summoned performers from out of nowhere."

Indeed, at the proper moment, a parade of period-costumed actors walked into the plaza in front of the

museum and up onto its steps. There, they executed a lengthy ballroom-style dance routine, to the surprise of participants and just-walking-through-FiDi onlookers alike.

“Involving Third Rail was the single best decision we made in regards to Midnight Madness,” Wiesel says. “They just F-ing nailed it.”