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The 'Lost Boys' generation

An era hooked on dodgeball, wizardry and four square

[Jeff Miranda](#)

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In teams of four, they don brightly colored gym shorts, sweatbands and tube socks up to their calves. Every few weeks, they meet in the Cambridge YMCA gym for a couple hours with red rubber balls and a stereo in tow.

Four square is their game of choice.

The four square grids are carefully marked with masking tape about 5 feet wide.

The sound of squeaking sneakers hitting the waxed floor echoes across the room. For all their nimble and graceful movements, there are an equal number of flubs among the players. Their skill level varies, but no one notices.



Media Credit: Photo Courtesy/ Paul Naddaff

Although it is a more familiar scene on elementary school playgrounds and parks across the country, these players have not been privy to the youthful indiscretions of childhood for years.

But four square games, along with a number of other activities perceived as child-like, are increasing in popularity with the college student demographic.

In 2003, Somerville resident Sean Effel co-founded SquareFour, Boston's first and only organized four square league, with two-time Four Square World Champion Dana Ostberg.

Effel said he has seen college students through the years who are nostalgic for their youth.

"A lot of guys played a lot when they were kids," Effel said. "And they want to go back to relive that because of its novelty. It's more accessible [than other recreational sports] and it doesn't require a large background of skills. [They] just come and dive right in."

Making Choices

On the brink of adulthood, college students are faced with the prospect of a plethora of choices - grad school, job opportunities and marriage.

As a means to adapt, students resort to a time when they felt flexible and safe, and childhood represents that, said Christopher Noxon, author of the book, "Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up." His book takes an in-depth look into the adult psyche pining for child-like methods of thinking.

Though his book is about post-college adults, he said his theory could easily be applied to students as they prepare to leave the carefree days of adolescence behind.

"The whole notion of adulthood [for college students] is becoming such a prominent problem to solve," Noxon said. "In your late teens and early 20s, the idea that you're out here on your own, that's where the prospect of adulthood becomes much more imminent and [students] resort back to things from their youth. They want to differentiate themselves from the adults they become."

Justin Keogh, a senior electrical engineering and philosophy major at the University of Pittsburgh, started his school's first four square league with a friend two years ago. Though they both played recreationally, after interest from their friends, they decided to approach the university to form a school-sponsored organization.

The club began with 10 members and a constitution, but Keogh said it now boasts about 600 students and is the largest non-governmental club on his campus.

Phil Thomas, the four square club's reservations officer and a sophomore information science major, regularly sees a stress therapist to help cope with school. He said four square becomes a form of escapist fun that distracts him from his heavy workload.

"[When you come to college], you don't have anyone that asks you if you did your homework," Thomas said. "You don't have parents to make sure you don't get distracted. A lot of students don't realize that until they're here. Suddenly they're like 'oh wow, I'm out here, I'm on my own,' and they start panicking. It's an escape. When you're playing four square, you're not thinking about your classes."

Fantasy music

Paul DeGeorge, a 27-year-old Tufts University graduate, sits patiently on one of the bright, red leather sofas at the June Bug Café on Centre Street in Jamaica Plain.

The other patrons' chatter creates a soft buzz as they sit at chrome tables sipping lattes and chai tea.

Though DeGeorge has not attended a college lecture for nearly five years, his face still exhibits a youthful exuberance. With his gray hoodie, brown corduroy pants and worn Pumas, his presence strolling through a campus quad would be seamless.

DeGeorge is one-half of the Boston-based punk-rock band, Harry and the Potters, whose origins lie within the pages of J.K. Rowling's famous book series.

DeGeorge plays guitar while his younger brother, 19-year-old Joe, tackles the keyboard. Both musicians serve as vocalists.

Since their record LP was released in 2003, they have recorded three other albums; their latest, "Power of Love," was released last June.

The elder DeGeorge embodies Potter during his seventh year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, (the school the book's characters attend) and the younger DeGeorge embodies Potter during year four.

While easing into the arms of the soft leather, Paul said his younger brother was the one who first introduced him to the novels, since he first believed the novels were just "kids stuff." Since then, the series has become a

global phenomenon, attracting readers both young and old.

The DeGeorge brothers sparked a following of their own, coining a new musical genre - "wizard rock" - now encompassing more than 150 bands around the world.

"These books have really positively changed so many people's lives," Paul said. "Maybe we can ride those coattails and as well as open people's perceptions of music."

Although the series was initially intended as children's literature, some of the series' most avid followers are college students. With Frostburg State University in Maryland and Pennsylvania State University, among others, offering Harry Potter classes for course credit, its popularity is not waning, according to CBS.com.

Paul said the boy wizard has been able to identify with a generation because of the threads of real life in the novels.

"I think a lot of the themes from Harry Potter can sort of tie over into reality," he said. "One of the most powerful themes from the book is the power for love to triumph over evil. And I think if there were more love in the world then I think we wouldn't have all the problems we face today."

Noxon also said Harry Potter's popularity rests with its ability to simplify a complex world. Because many of the motifs, themes and characters are connected to reality, students can color gray areas black and white.

"I think [Harry Potter] absolutely satisfies that need for definite answers, clear delineations for good and evil," Noxon said. "I think there is something else in Harry Potter - all the gadgets and the candy and the sweetness, those are qualities that abound in the J.K. Rowling world, but those are in very short supply in the cubicle and the lecture hall world of adults."

Paul said he hopes his band will galvanize a generation of young people into understanding that successful musicians don't need a million-dollar record contract or an expensive tour bus to be successful. He said he sees an independent spirit similar to his own fostered in Rowling's novels.

"Harry is just an everyday kid," he said. "That's why so many people can relate to him. Everyday people are capable of great things."

Noxon said college students miss the imagination and creativity they once experienced during their childhood which draws them to things meant for children, like the Harry Potter novels.

"I don't think [college students who read Harry Potter] are very childish, I think they are human," he said. "There's a great tradition of magical realism, and there's a basic human need to believe in the supernatural."

Changing Environment

Constance Flanagan, a Pennsylvania State University professor with a Ph.D in developmental psychology, is one of the main investigators on The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, a MacArthur Foundation-funded research initiative that examines the changing environment of young people, and the social and cultural shifts that affect them.

Flanagan attributes the growing trend toward childhood pastimes to a changing social landscape.

Since college degrees are more common now than in past generations, students are pressured to achieve more. A bachelor's degree is often not enough in a competitive job market, said Flanagan. She said students become anxious about the financial uncertainty of life after college.

"Although lifetime earnings are much better, college students understand a college degree doesn't guarantee stability or security," she said. "This wasn't true in earlier generations, when there was a steel industry and an auto industry - those were good-paying jobs where a college degree wasn't necessary."

Noxon said because it is common for young people to change career paths as often as they change their majors, there is no longer a company hierarchy to climb.

"Now that economy is changed so much, you just can't have one skill anymore," he said. "You have to be able to be adaptable; the idea that you're going to get a job right after college and get the gold watch after 40 years, it's insane."

Adam Blatner, author of the book, "The Art of Play: Helping Adults Reclaim Imagination and Spontaneity," which examines adult resistance to playfulness, said the emphasis on work during college is wrong. He said there should be a well-rounded mixture of having responsibilities, while also making time for play.

"You can make a game out of things, you can pretend to be someone else when you do the dishes," Blatner said. "Part of the problem is that our culture has artificially distorted the game of leisure. They say, 'when you're at work, you can't have fun,' but there's a lot of time for fun."

Flanagan said universities have failed in fostering this ideal.

Much of Flanagan's research is devoted to the belief that higher education should enable students to think beyond just getting a job upon graduation, and more about having a balanced lifestyle.

"We set people up for failure," she said. "There are other things that give purpose and meaning to life in addition to training for jobs; that to invest all of your identity into work is a very shortsighted preparation for adulthood, ultimately it's going to be elusive; people are rarely going to find jobs that they will enjoy for a lifetime."

Becoming a well-rounded individual is important, Flanagan said.

"There's something to be said for people having variety in their life," she said. "A big thing about the college years is exploring who you are, and if Harry Potter is a way to do that, then presumably that's what people are supposed to be doing anyways [in college], discovering who you are."

'Big Kids' have fun too

Ten burly members of Wheaton College's "Wheaton Ballers" huddle together and throw their hands in the middle of the tight circle.

"Team Ballers!" they shout unanimously before jogging to one side of the court.

A line of small orange cones and yellow dodgeballs divides the "Ballers" from their opponents, "The Land Sharks."

When the whistle blows, the teams sprint to the line, aggressively fighting for the coveted spheres of rubber.

The players who reach them first immediately thrust the balls toward the opposing team in a single smooth movement.

Fits of agony and distress are heard when the balls hit flesh, and cheers erupt when it becomes two "Land Sharks" vs. four "Ballers."

This marked the first game of the season for the Big Kids Dodgeball Tournament, the largest and most comprehensive dodgeball league in Boston. Sixteen teams totalling 150 people meet in Basketball City at the TD Banknorth Garden every few weeks to play.

Paul Nadaff, director and founder of the organization, said, "it gives people an opportunity to blow off some steam."

"It's pretty therapeutic in a way. When they let go of that ball, you hear them kind of release just a little bit," Nadaff said. "I was a psychology major in college, so I kind of look at it that way - we provide them with a good service."

Like the rest of his team, "Dance Party Vietnam," John Tyler, a sophomore media arts and animation major at The Art Institute of Washington in Arlington, Va, wears a pair of gym shorts and a sweatband.

Tyler's team often travels to compete in dodgeball tournaments, though they also frequently get together with friends to play for fun.

"Playing relieves a lot of stress," he said. "For the first time all day I don't have to worry about school or work."

Although integrating imagination and play with a strong work ethic is paramount to a healthy lifestyle, Noxon warns it is important to realize the difference between partaking in some childlike activities and being immature.

"It's very easy to fall into [this] kind of childishness," he said. "When you fall into some 'kiddie' fascination, now you're sort of acting like a 9-year-old brat. Childishness is no virtue, and you should pick through what is and what isn't."

One reason this childhood complex has been allowed to grow and thrive on college campuses is students' closer ties with their families, Noxon said.

Parents are becoming more accessible and less "authoritative" than in past generations. Now it is common for students to become "best friends with their moms," Noxon said, and parents foster a belief system that makes it OK to integrate fun into students' lives.

This shift is important as students reach the cliff of maturity and wonder whether to make the jump or turn

around, Noxon said.

"I want to maintain our social consciousness and our responsibilities and our long view, but in developing those skill sets we lose some of the great joys of being alive," he said. "I think there's a way to create a new kind of adulthood. It's my hope that we can find a way to become grown-ups that are just as playful and spontaneous and flexible as kids are."

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