

Church of Prom

So I was at home that night, at my computer. If you don't know me, I love to code. I had a terminal on the screen and a notebook with a scribbled checklist.

My goal for the night was to imitate agar.io, an online multiplayer game. Preferably before 11:00p.m. I wanted to improve upon my model from freshman year and was armed with new technologies, some less than a year old. And it was wonderful. That night I learned to use powerful tools that gave rise to many more utility web applications, including more multiplayer games and most recently the Safe Rides web-app.

But it's not really important that I was coding. What *is* important was the date: May 12, 2017. And that I finished before 11:00p.m., and that I had such a satisfactory time learning during this little activity. I went off to sleep all bubbly, and I am glad even now that I had spent that little chunk of time plowing through the tough technical details.

Because you know what else finished at 11:00p.m. on May 12, 2017? Prom.

I know at least sixteen of you are more open than me to social experiences like prom. But I'm the kind of guy that loves coding and Rubik's cubing and math for the heck of it. I've committed to a small school of very dedicated math nerds, where there are no sports and no homecoming. I'm not afraid of social events like parties, but I'm tired of them. They tire me. I can hold up a conversation, but conversations for high school boys often center around sports, TV shows, videogames, and girls, and I don't watch sports or TV shows, play videogames, or date girls.

I'm sure it's not just me: high school is that awkward time between having to ask to use the bathroom and driving whoever, wherever, whenever. You learn to make a lot of decisions on your own.

One decision that I don't agree is asking people to prom, especially at the cost of time and money. A national survey by Visa Inc. in 2015 found that households with prom-going teenagers in the northeastern US spent \$1,169 on average for prom preparations ("Cost of High School "Promposals" Hits \$324."). Here's a quick analysis of alternatives:

- Scenario 1: you have a significant other. Going to prom is expensive, awkward, and prone to public humiliation if you make the wrong move. Go take him or her out to a movie or a fancy restaurant for a tenth the cost.
- Scenario 2: you don't have a significant other, but feel like you need one. Do you really want to spend four hours of the "most memorable night of high school" with this partner you don't really know? This is a non-option. It's social pressure.
- Scenario 3: you want to celebrate the end of the year with your friends. Go do something fun like a paintball game or a pool party. Hang out at a friend's house afterwards.
- Scenario 4: you're an introverted nerd. The choice is easy.

If prom weren't such an established institution in society, a simple assessment of practical options like this would deter most people. Which means that social evils like peer pressure and outdated tradition feed prom. And the truth is that the Internet and social media and crazy YouTubers teach teenagers things like FOMO: the fear of missing out.

Think of it as a school gathering, surrounded by people you've known. It doesn't have to be fancy or organized to be fun. You won't fool anyone about who you are by dressing up or picking up a date.

And then there are ridiculous parts of prom culture. I'm sure some of you are familiar with social media groups specifically for girls to "claim" prom dresses. Last year my friend had a situation when her lab partner had the same dress as her and asked my friend to return her dress, but luckily she didn't give in to that pressure. But situations like this can end badly. An article named "Prom, Promposals, Promsanity" by the mother of boys going through the 2018-prom experience shows her absolute dismay at this new culture. She says:

"The concept isn't actually that new, as some small town specialty boutiques have kept records of dress purchases before, noting to potential buyers that someone from the same school bought that dress already. But this new social media method of putting dibs on dresses? Well, as you can imagine it lends itself to some serious trolling and keyboard shaming, because of course it does – this is 2018" (Fenton).

The article centers around the excessive-ness of the ceremony of prom. She mentions that teenagers these days are using “singing telegrams, balloon bouquet deliveries, flash mobs, and even fireworks” to ask others to prom.

A proposal is only supposed to declare one’s affection towards another and *ask* them to prom. But the same survey from Visa says that households with prom-going teenagers spend over \$300 on average for promposals (“Cost of High School "Promposals" Hits \$324.”). This extra flair draws attention and locks the proposee into saying yes, turning the *ask* to prom into a *demand* to prom. Because how can you say no to the hard work of an admirer of yours who uses bouquets, fireworks, singing telegrams, flash mobs, the efforts of an entire athletic team, already-bought prom tickets, and half the school as a crowd?

You’d be the jerk. People would say you didn’t even give him or her the chance. They put in all the effort to put this all together, and you broke his or her heart. It’s hard to say that you simply don’t want to go with them or you simply don’t want to go to prom. It’s this 2018 world of being “politically correct” and not offending anyone, even if it is the truth.

And you all know about the drug and sex problems. The website of Edgar Snyder and Associates, a personal injury law firm, reports that 54% of high school students had at least four drinks on prom night in 2015 (“Underage Drinking and Prom Night.”), and a survey by Seventeen Magazine (in conjunction with the CDC) found that 14% of teen girls have sex on prom night (“Prom Night Statistics”). But this is for wellness class to teach you, so I won’t elaborate.

The problem is that it’s all a part of the culture. Actually, the number one answer I get when I ask people why they are going to prom is, “It’s prom!” Or, “It’s tradition!” Nothing really sensible. Our society *religiously* accepts this as the “high school experience” and turns a blind eye to its vices. But if you think about your journey from a middle-schooler to a university student, you see there’s a lot more to the high school experience. Lots of learning and growth. But not towards prom. Towards something greater. My programming plans for morp are only one example of this fruitful “celebration of knowledge,” but there are so many activities that are

more meaningful (and fun) than prom, depending on the person, and it becomes very evident once you realize that prom isn't the only option. You just have to ask yourself, why do you *really* want to go to prom?

I could be getting everything wrong. I haven't been to prom. Prom is different for everyone, and certainly is a positive experience for many people. But I'm also sure that I don't carry any of the guilt or embarrassment or debt that some of the people who went to prom do now.

I hope you make good decisions as to what you'll be doing this May 11th, prom or no prom. You don't have to be typing away at a screen like I will be. You just have to be smart about it.

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Works Consulted

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