

The Guardian, 03.10.2007, page 28-29

Arts

Grab your helmet: it's showtime!

Previous works by urban gamers Blast Theory have featured kidnapping, war and mind control. For their latest piece, it's bikes – and **Leo Benedictus** is nervous

All I actually know about Rider Spoke, as I make my way to the Barbican centre one grey afternoon, is that it involves cycling around London, operating a computer and making art. And that it's not ready yet: I am here to test it. And that the interactive art company behind it, Blast Theory, became infamous nine years ago for organising Kidnap, a work that involved the abduction and 48-hour captivity of two willing volunteers, whose "ordeal" was posted online. Another journalist (name withheld) has, quite understandably, already backed out on grounds of fear.

I hover in the Barbican's underground foyer with eight other guinea pigs, waiting to find out what we have volunteered for. At last, Blast Theory's Ju Row Farr appears, handing out blank tickets and allocating numbers. Mine is 366502. "Let me welcome you to Rider Spoke," she says. "What we'd like you to do this evening is to ride through the city making recordings." She holds up the star of the show: a small computer console, which will be attached to the front of our bikes.

On the console, she explains, a question will appear. She presses a button, and, indeed, a question does appear. "Describe yourself. What are you like? And how do you feel?" it asks. "Then," she continues, "you need to find a place to hide your answer to the question."

It emerges that our job is to cycle around the city for as long as we like, planting our own recorded answers to various questions and listening to those left by other people. Instead of taping cassettes to lampposts, however, Blast Theory's wireless technology enables us to lodge our recordings in precise places in the real world – from an alleyway to outside a building – accessible only to other Rider Spoke participants who arrive in that place.

"While taking part in Rider Spoke it's important that you cycle safely," Row Farr adds. I have to sign a form, giving away my credit card details, approving such falsehoods as: "I know, understand and will comply with the road traffic laws under the Road Traffic Act 1988," and absolving Blast Theory from legal responsibility for any death I may experience.

At last, we are ushered outside. I put

on my luminous yellow jacket, select a medium-large helmet, and attach reflective ankle strips. Satisfied that I am now visible from space, I am then kitted out with a computer, microphone and earpiece. I take a deep breath . . . and pedal off.

Blast Theory was founded by theatre director Matt Adams and artist Ju Row Farr in 1991. The pair were joined by a third artist, Nick Tandavanitj, three years later. At first, their major influence was club culture. In their 1994 work Stampede, for instance, they fitted sensitive pads to a dance floor through which clubbers triggered video clips from a police mind-control manual. Since the late 1990s, however, the company has been working predominantly in what is known as urban or pervasive gaming, creating participatory adventures using new mobile technology that blurs the line between the real and the virtual world.

In 2000's Desert Rain, teams of players tracked one another through a virtual-reality Gulf war simulation. In Uncle Roy All Around You, in 2003, the company sent gamers on a treasure hunt around various real cities and competing computer operators showed

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them where to go. Blast Theory toys with the strange, dislocated sensation of living through a computer familiar to video-gamers. One might see the company as the intellectual wing of the flash mob movement, which uses the internet and mobile phones to organise sudden, vast gatherings in public places.

"It's not just a pranksterish teenage activity," says Adams. "Our interest has always been about the intersection between art and popular culture, and whether we could straddle that divide. We try to use the fact that we're coming from an artistic perspective to stake out new possibilities."

The Rider Spoke experience is certainly unlike anything I've done before. After I've travelled 20 yards, a noise like a lion's roar erupts suddenly from my earpiece. A planned intrusion, no doubt, designed to heighten my anticipation for the adventure. It works. As instructed, I head off in search of a quiet spot.

A cobbled incline called South Yard soon suggests itself, so I roll up to some iron gates and click "Continue". A familiar question appears. "Describe yourself. What are you like? And how do—" That's it. The "you feel?" has been cut off by a graphic. Undeterred, I press record and babble uncertainly about being a reasonable sort of chap, who feels a bit cold.

"Find a place that your father would like and record a message about it," says the screen. There are no bookmakers in sight, so I turn down Lamb's Passage and stop beside the delivery entrance to law firm Slaughter and May. My initials spell LAMB, and my dad, with his love of puns, would enjoy its combination with Slaughter. Having told me what to do a further four times, the computer finally allows me to record my message.

"Find a quiet place and tell me who or what makes it

Computer says no... Leo Benedictus tries to get to grips with the star performer

all right for—" the computer says next, cutting itself short again. As I cycle off, it begins to rain. In spite of this – and the technical hitches – I am enjoying it, and looking around with more interest and imagination than I would normally. Having to find connections with myself makes everything come alive.

After a brief jaunt around the area, I come to the YMCA. Disappointingly, it has attracted another participant, who is fiddling with his own computer. We politely ignore each other, and I find my own quiet place behind the bins. The smell of waste is not "all right" at all, I admit to my machine. There is an old pillow, and some rejected salad.

But the computer is no longer cooperating. It asks me another question while I am telling it about the YMCA. Then it gets permanently stuck between screens. I press the "Help" button, which, like all help buttons, is no use at all. "Describe yourself," the screen says eventually. "What are you like? And how do you feel?" It is time to give up and head back.

Is this sort of hiccup typical in the developmental stages, I ask Adams later. "It's absolutely typical," he says. "You don't know what people will do until you let them at it, and yet you can't let them at it until it's nearly finished. It's the nature of the work that you have this steep learning curve and go through a process of adjusting things."

Certainly, this would explain the calm reception I am given when I return to base with the test results. After hearing my catalogue of glitches – enough, I had feared, to sink the project – they merely smile and nod. So will they be doing another test at

some point? I ask tentatively. "We will, yes," says Row Farr, allowing a giggle to escape. "I think we, erm, really need to" ●

Rider Spoke is at the Roadway at the Barbican, London EC2, from Thursday until October 21. Info: 020-7638 8891.



PHOTOGRAPH SARAH LEE