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Technology in the wild
An interview with Professor Steve Benford, Director of the Mixed Reality Lab
By **Clare Richards**

If you've seen someone acting strangely on the streets of Manchester recently, don't worry - they're probably participating in one of Professor Steve Benford's latest experiments. Uncle Roy All Around You is a computer game with a difference - designed to be played on the city streets as well as online anywhere in the world. Street players use hand-held computers to navigate through a city in their 60-minute search for the mysterious 'Uncle Roy'. Simultaneously, online players move through a virtual map of the same area, tracking street players and sending them clues. Rather like hide and seek but with web cams and text messages. Uncle Roy is the latest collaboration between Benford's Mixed Reality Lab and the radical art group Blast Theory. Their previous works Desert Rain and Can You See Me Now? both met with critical acclaim, and Uncle Roy pushes the concept of merging real and virtual worlds even further.

People who have played the game on its previous run-outs in London and Adelaide have described the experience as both 'uncomfortable' and 'paranoia-inducing'. "A good thing," according to Steve, who is collating and analysing players' reactions for his research. Not that making people uncomfortable is his primary aim - he wants to nudge people out of their comfort zone for a purpose: "The unusual experience that you have may provoke you to reconsider everyday things in a new light," he says. As well as being a mysterious experience, the game is also an exploration of trust. It opens with the question: "Could you trust a stranger?" - a provocative notion both in today's security conscious cities and, of course, on the internet. "We wanted to provoke the players to examine their trust in online players, the technology, the game and ourselves as the artists," he explains. The game also deliberately encourages the street players to cross boundaries and there is apparently a major surprise at the end (top secret).

Throughout his work, Steve is interested in how people interact with new technologies rather than technology for its own sake. Indeed, the overall goal of his research is to develop new communication technologies that maximise the potential for social activity across computer networks. "Technologies are part of our everyday life and they have to be built to fit into our social communication. They aren't special - just like paper isn't special," he says. I ask Steve whether he sees any parallels between academia and virtual reality, ie a hypothetical place disengaged from the real world. "We take our technologies out of the lab and create professionally touring public art works with them. So that's how we engage with the real world and we do that in order to learn about how technologies are really used in a real situation by real people," he says. He also has a passionate belief in the role of academics in society: "The key thing that academics should do is generalise and openly share their results," he says.

So does he think that in the future Britain's cities will be milling with people participating in games such as Uncle Roy? "I'm not sure whether it will become a genuine theatrical form or just an interesting blip," says Steve. Whatever form they take, however, he firmly believes that computer games will be the art form of the 21st century. Looking ahead to the future, Steve doesn't envisage the disappearance of the computer interface, unlike some in his field. "I think that in order to be able to use something you need to be able to see it and be aware of how it's configured and what to do with it," he explains. But he does think that interfaces will become more designed and more specialised, citing the museum context as one area that is increasingly seeing technologies designed to be part of the experience.

And what is his favourite digital device? "My laptop is an essential part of my life. My ambition for the year has been to print zero pieces of paper. So far this year I've printed less than a hundred." So how does he see laptops evolving? "The major transition I would love to see would be some form of interactive screen that you could fold, carry and treat much more like paper. The laptop has lots of attractive features that paper doesn't have but it still lacks that flexibility of use," he says.

And where will his field be in five years time? He was a little bit cagey so maybe he's on the cusp of something big. "Five years isn't very long so kind of where it is now but just a bit better. There are some things I'd like to deal with in terms of scaling up experiences, making them more persistent and long-term and continuing the thread of how people understand these technologies. I'm a bit distrusting of big visions!" he said. It was refreshing to meet someone with deep technological understanding who was also obviously guided by a strong sense of social motivation. I hope he gets what he wants and I look forward to the day when I can scrawl my electronic To-Do list and stick it in my pocket.

Links

Uncle Roy All Around You is appearing in Manchester during 28 April - 8 May and as part of tHE pUBLIC and Fierce Festival in West Bromwich during 27 May - 5 June. You can take part as a street player or an online player. Details are on the Blast Theory website: http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/

To play the game as an online player visit: http://www.uncleroyallaroundyou.co.uk/

Find out more about the work of the Mixed Reality Lab: http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk/