Scavenger hunts elevated to a new level

Players use the Net, mobile phones and digital cameras to aid in their quest

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They've been called urban races and modern scavenger hunts, but for players of these trendy new outdoor games, one's prowess with wireless technology is just as important as a good pair of shoes.

Just ask a player of "Navigate the Streets," Canada's homegrown answer to a sport some are referring to as "intelligent outdoor gaming." The event is the brainchild of Tim Shore, an interactive account manager at a Toronto ad agency, and it all began last summer with an idea for a unique fundraiser. Mr. Shore organized a challenge in which teams of two traversed the city, reaching a series of checkpoints for solving clues. Players were encouraged to use the Internet, mobile phones and digital cameras.

"It was mostly for fun," says Mr. Shore of the first event, which took place last October. "But we had a really good response."

So good that Mr. Shore decided to continue the event this year. Since May, races have been held in nearly all major Canadian cities. Montreal will play host to qualifying players at the championship event on Saturday.

Mr. Shore's inspiration for the game came from his interest in the "interactive space," which he's been a part of professionally for years. "I wanted to do something around innovative technology and applications," he explains, "and I had heard of different events in other countries."

Navigate the Streets isn't the first urban game to place an emphasis on technology. The British artists' group Blast Theory, which specializes in interactive media, and The Mixed Reality Laboratory research initiative at the University of Nottingham have been staging a complex game called "Can You See Me Now?" Competitions have been held in European cities since December, 2001. People equipped with global positioning system (GPS) receivers, handheld computers and wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) networking equipment travel the streets of a real city trying to "catch" other players moving and hiding in a virtual, online-model of the same city. Because they can't see each other, players have to catch their quarry based on feedback and clues transmitted by their electronic gear.

Another event called Urban Challenge has been drawing adventurers in U.S. cities since 2001, and it held its first Canadian race in July. Early players of Urban Challenge relied on phone books and city guides to help them get around. By year two, Verizon Wireless and LG Electronics had become the title sponsors, providing camera phones, phone service and wireless Internet access to players at each event. This year's championship is set for Nov. 20 in Miami, with $50,000 (U.S.) up for grabs.

"Technology is making the sport of intelligent outdoor gaming really exciting," says Kevin McCarthy, the game's founder. "And because we have the technology, we've been able to add new elements to the challenge."