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Blast Theory
Uncle Roy
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ICA
London

Review by Ophra Wolf

Uncle Roy's been all around me since I left the ICA on a grey Friday last week. In any case, I've been interacting with the ideas and questions it's brought up for me a lot more than I did with the game itself.

In the immense build-up to my actual foray into the streets, I had plenty of time for questions to brew. When I showed up on Wednesday for the 5pm 'show', the system was down for the day: mobile technologies depend on the infrastructure of service providers, and when service is down, so is the game. Anyone who has worked with technology in performance knows this tune by heart. The infrastructure that enables the mobile technology for the game mediates between the street players, on-line players and the game conductors – without it there to facilitate interaction, there is no game. Luckily an even greater infrastructure – language – was still in full operation. That afternoon, instead of interacting with a fictive Uncle Roy, I spent my time talking to Blast Theory's Matt Adams and Catherine Williams, who got me going long before a hand-held computer had me running after Uncle Roy.

And I do mean running. When I came back Friday, the game was working, albeit with a few delays. See, ten people are booked in for every hour, but only three are sent out at a time. The bit of anxiety that accrued during the hour-long wait for my turn was minor compared to the state I found

myself in next: stripped of all belongings, on my own in central London, with 45 minutes and counting to complete a task whose magnitude I could only imagine. So I'm running, in circles for the most part, negotiating with my own sense of direction and tendencies of interpretation as much as I am with the instructions the computer is feeding me. This little computer, mind you, is the primary tool for maneuvering within the infrastructure of the game, it's what lets you get by. But your maneuverings are taking place simultaneously within a different infrastructure – the city – for which the primary tool, the wallet/handbag, has been confiscated. Displaced in a familiar place! The city's streets are cast in a new light, familiar structures take on new meaning, and people's questioning glances heighten your sense of self-awareness even more than knowledge of Uncle Roy plants secretly observing you.

Where the game succeeds is in making you aware of this paradox of your physical participation in two different infrastructures within the same time and space. This is not the 'suspension of disbelief' traditional theatre calls for, it is a paradigm shift which affects a physical reorganization of your self – the game redefines how you move from place to place, how you look at the world and how the world looks at you. There are powerful suggestions here: that we can shift paradigms willingly; that we participate in more than one paradigm simultaneously; and that we play and create games out of which various paradigms arise.

So what kind of game are we playing here? It's a chase, explains Matt, for the sake of a simple metaphor on which to base the game. But unlike their previous work, Can You See Me Now? Uncle Roy is meant to be more exploratory, along the lines of a search. Except what I am searching for is not quite clear. And why mobile technologies? To explore the new spaces for social interaction which are afforded by these technologies and the cultural changes they bring about, Matt answers.

This is the point in my mind I keep coming back to, because in this 'new space' of social interaction into which I had entered, my agency felt limited rather than expanded in any way. I had no interaction with the other street players, and any communication from someone on the net (a rare occasion, at least on Friday evening) or with the Uncle Roy team was always hierarchical – they knew and I didn't. I'm roaming around the streets blindly following instructions with my input to the game being restricted to moving a little dot around a screen or recording audio messages that for the most part go unheard. There is very little creativity required of me – in fact my creativity is what had me walking in

circles much longer than necessary.

What the mobile technology does highlight, perhaps, is that we are not looking for reality in matter any more – Uncle Roy and online players, for example, are not made real for me by knowledge of their physical existence but by my ability to receive information from them, just as my body and the city landscape can pertain to various realities at once, each transmitting and receiving different information. Reality is constantly changing, and we have begun to look for it in the experience of change: both in how we are changed within a certain context and how we change it. The search for Uncle Roy leads to the first, but doesn't approach the second.

Maybe a way to think about mobile technologies is less in the sense that they create new spaces for interaction and more in the sense that they may be used to expand our creative agency within these spaces. The great thing about many of these new technologies is that they facilitate and increase our possibilities for networking. Out of human interaction grow networks, networks form infrastructures, infrastructures facilitate certain paradigms of existence. In art as in business, 'it's all about networking'. The infrastructure of Uncle Roy seems to be one in which we are wholly dependent on higher forces to guide us. In order to solve Uncle Roy's riddle you don't have to work creatively with other people, you need only follow instructions. And when the grand facilitator (Orange in this case) goes down, so does all ability to communicate. In our search for new paradigms of communication and interaction, we should keep in mind that it is not the new technologies that will provide them but the manner in which we employ them.

I would agree with Matt, that the game is more about a search than a chase. There is a wonderful but dormant suggestion in Uncle Roy that in this game (possibly in every game we play?) we are in fact searching for ourselves. Perhaps the questions that come in near the end about how we would respond to strangers begin to point in this direction. Now if we could only become more active and creative in this search!

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