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Virtual race chases real players

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It is the ultimate video game that blurs the lines between reality and virtual reality, between wireless technology and running shoes.

Blast Theory: Can You See Me Now? has taken the simple game of tag and translated it into a technophile's dream. Using Global Positioning Systems (GPS), Personal Data Assistants (PDA) and the Internet, Blast Theory has brought new light to the social and political aspects of technology.

Can You See Me Now? was created by the Brighton, England-based group, Blast Theory, in 2001 in collaboration with Mixed Reality Lab. They were commissioned, "to make something that was live and online," said Blast Theory member Ju Row Farr.

The U.K. group is currently at The Banff Centre getting the game ready to be played from noon to 2 p.m. and again from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Aug. 11 to 14. The game has been played all over the world since 2001, including Rotterdam, Brighton, Barcelona, and Tokyo.

The artists originally created the piece out of a sense of longing to connect with people who are no longer with them physically, out of a wanting to know the strangers walking by them on the city streets, said Row Farr.

While the new media art piece is a game — in which the computer player tries to keep away from a runner, who is running in real time around the campus of The Banff Centre — the game brings people together.

A Blast Theory member carrying a PDA equipped with GPS and a walkie-talkie chases players running around a virtual Banff Centre campus. Players can be playing on their computers anywhere in the world. Row Farr said running in the real world, chasing a player who is right beside them in the virtual world, is a unique experience.

"We know that you are in proximity. Even though you are tens or thousands of kilometres away, you are right there. We know that you are right next to us even

though you are not there, it is like the ghost of you is there," explains Row Farr.

As for the online runners, she said the sound of hearing a runner literally chasing your online character is a real rush.

"You do get the sense of adrenaline because you hear someone out of breath trying to catch you."

"You would hear that down the road or across the world in Japan."

The sound is transmitted via the walkie-talkies and is in real time.

The game creates a sense of belonging, because for the moment, the limits of physical distance are temporarily made irrelevant through technology.

"People were there for you in that moment, trying to find you," said Row Farr.

The game is also used "as a strange meeting place" said the U.K. artist, for friends to meet and not be separated by space.

All of the real runners are members of Blast Theory, with the added help of two Banff Centre artists. Row Farr said it is harder for the artists to run in the higher altitude.

The boundaries of this game are limited to the campus and only include the outdoors. Anyone who wishes to play needs only to log in during the open times of the game.

The limitation of technology with a GPS signal that sometimes jumps around adds to the challenge of the game. The team has created a basic 3D map of The Banff Centre with pictures of the mountains in the background to create a more lifelike setting.

Software alerts the chaser and runner when they have been "seen". The chaser then takes a photograph of the actual area, which is uploaded at the end of the game so the runner can see the actual spot.

To play, visit their website www.canyouseemenow.co.uk

Several computers have also been set up in Room 204 in the Jeanne and Peter Lougheed Building at The Banff Centre for the community to use to play the game.