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Scavenger hunts elevated to a new level
Players use the Net, mobile phones and digital cameras to aid in their quest

Photo: Deborah Baic/The Globe and Mail

Tim Shore, founder of the 'intelligent outdoor gaming' event Navigate the Streets, checks his cellphone.

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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 by 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 (WiFi) networking equipment travel the streets of a real city trying to "catch" other players moving and hiding in a virtual, on-line 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."

Consider, for instance, the Skip Man. When found, he allows Urban Challenge players to bypass a checkpoint, saving valuable race time. Thanks to the sponsors, challengers can receive text message clues pointing to his whereabouts.

Navigate the Streets has also received technological contributions that have enhanced the game. **Intel Corp.** recently provided a team of "mobile messengers" for one Toronto race -- they carried laptops allowing players to access the Web at WiFi hot spots in the city. Challengers who choose to haul along their own Internet-enabled hardware are able to surf the Net courtesy of WiFi carriers BoldStreet, FatPort, Spotnik Mobile, Tadaa Wireless and Wireless City, all of which provide free access to their network of public hot spots during races.

While wireless technology plays a major role in these new urban sports, using it while racing isn't the only strategy for success. Some players save time by stationing friends at computers around the city and phoning in their information needs.

Mark Calixterio, a network support assistant at media research firm in Toronto, has been one such auxiliary player, though he has also participated as a registered challenger with his wife, Geraldine. Noting that the event "enables two people to expand their thresholds of communication," both plan to get involved again next season.

Entry fees for Navigate the Streets events range from $70 (Canadian) to $120 a team, with proceeds going to charity. Participation rates aren't as high as they are for the heavily funded Verizon Wireless Urban Challenge -- a recent Toronto event attracted 80 registered challengers, compared with 300 at the first Ottawa Urban Challenge. But interest is growing.

"If you look at the traditional adoption curve of technology, you always get early adopters. That's who we've attracted so far," says Mr. Shore. "Hopefully next year we'll get an audience beyond the real tech enthusiasts."

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