On Your Mark, Get Set, Unwire!

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MADRID, Spain -- Let's play a game, shall we? I say "wireless game," and you tell me the first thing that pops into your head.

Playing Snake on your cell phone while you're waiting for a train? NCAA Football on your side-talking N-Gage? A sneaky round of bluejacking?

Matt Adams has a different idea. He's the co-founder of Blast Theory, a digital-arts group based in the United Kingdom that creates mobile multiplayer games that fuse wireless virtual space with real space.

The group began in 1991, producing multimedia happenings at the peak of the U.K. underground club scene. Raves then were countercultural, often illegal, and held in isolated locales. Since then, the group's tech-art experiences have moved from after-hours clubs to handheld devices -- and it currently is developing a TV pilot for BBC Interactive based on Blast Theory's award-winning game Can You See Me Now?

Wired News caught up with Adams in Madrid, Spain, to learn more about "mixed wireless reality" -- and mobile games beyond Snake.

Wired News: So how did you move from multimedia raves to digital games?

Matt Adams: We're all used to surreal things happening between people online -- anonymous nicknames falling in love by IM, neo-Nazis trolling for recruits on bulletin boards, pedophiles grooming new victims in chat rooms. We wanted to explore more nuanced, subtle kinds of digital communication. We wanted the discrete boundaries of online community to bleed out into the real world, and we wanted to see how this might change people.

WN: Mobile devices are central to two of your most recent experimental gaming projects. Why?

Adams: Teens, elderly people, homeless people, rural residents, everyone uses mobile phones in the U.K. It's a powerfully transformative cultural force, because so many have adopted it so quickly.

WN: Can You See Me Now? launched in December 2001, and was the first of those wireless-world games. How does it work?

Adams: It's a chase played simultaneously online (by the public) and in the streets (by assigned participants). You're dropped into a virtual city, you use avatars to navigate, and there's a chat interface so that real-world and online participants can text one another.

You're chased in the real city and the virtual city, at the same time. Three runners on the street are equipped with PDAs, GPS devices and walkie-talkies. To "get" you, they have to come within five meters of your position. The game is physical and visceral, and we were amazed at just how clearly a sense of presence in time and space was communicated. Players in Seattle, Tokyo and Germany communicating with players on the ground in the U.K. could hear weather conditions, traffic, where the busy roads were -- "Hey, this road's jammed, why don't you zigzag back and forth here?" They learned where hills and valleys were along the game terrain -- "This one's too steep, go there instead."

When virtual players heard a runner say, "OK, she's really close now -- let's run up and get her," they told us the hair stood up on the back of their necks with an adrenaline rush -- "Shit! They're coming for me now" -- it was one of those things we thought would be interesting ahead of time, but had no idea there would be such a strong emotional and physical reaction in an online environment.

WN: How did your next mobile tech game, Uncle Roy All Around You, evolve from that?

Adams: We built the game around the ability to detect other players' locations -- they "self-declare" where they are at any given moment. In this game, everyone's looking for a character named Uncle Roy, in a real city and a virtual city. Communication between players is more collaborative than adversarial.

WN: How long do these games last?

Adams: Can You See Me? (is) maybe 15 minutes. It's great for adrenaline-crazed twenty-somethings. Uncle Roy is more sustained -- about an hour for street players, longer for the online players. But we can also imagine games like this being played on a semi-permanent basis, with players roving around online and real-space cities indefinitely.

WN: How does Uncle Roy work?

Adams: It starts with 10 players on the street being asked a series of questions -- "Would you be prepared to help a stranger if they were having a personal crisis? Would you give your phone number to someone, so they could contact you at any time for the next year if they need you to be there for them -- and in

exchange, they'll be there for you?"

They find Uncle Roy's deserted office, and in it, a postcard that asks, "When can you begin to trust a stranger?" They answer to a webcam overhead that's streaming their response to players in a virtual office, then they get a text message saying, "Get out of there now and go to the nearest telephone booth." They go to the phone booth and now they're getting a message that says, "Step into the white limousine parked across the street." Jump in the back, and a few seconds later someone enters, the limo pulls away, and this new person turns to you and says, "Uncle Roy wants me to ask you a few questions."

WN: How do participants react? I'm imagining that if I were in that situation, I'd freak out.

Adams: Some do. Are these questions real, or part of the game? Sometimes players stop midstream and say, "Look, I said 'yes' to the thing about being there for a stranger yesterday, but I thought about it and have to say 'no.' Please remove me from your database." But the game forces people to evaluate their connections to these ephemeral spaces, and how you move through the city -- where it ends and the game starts.

WN: What sort of location-based wireless technology does the game use?

Adams: GPRS. We dumped GPS because it's too flaky, and we knew it would mess with players' enjoyment. Through the game, we wanted to rethink how location ID works -- a small map appears on players' PDAs with a little icon for "me." The game map centers to that icon, but you can also say "I am here" and declare your location.

WN: Who pays for all of this?

Adams: We're funded by the Arts Council of England, Microsoft Research, British Telecom -- a variety of sources.

WN: What's next?

Adams: We're going to southern Australia to develop a version of this for 3G phones, through a project organized by Motorola and a host of telcos. We want to find a phone company who believes, as we do, that these games are something that could work for a large audience -- the carrier could purchase rights to games for customers just as they do ring tones. Try to imagine a cultural future that doesn't involve wireless devices. It's hard.

Want to know whether or not this could work on those devices? Just look at Everquest. Social relationships drive tech games -- not dragons.