

Art

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A participant in Blast Theory's *Can You See Me Now?* 2001

LOCATION

Blast Theory's *Can You See Me Now?*, 2001, is taking to the streets again. It is a chase game played live online and on city streets, in which players try to outrun members of Blast Theory who are themselves running around the streets equipped with handheld computers and tracked by satellites. Online players are dropped at a random location in the virtual city while Blast Theory searches for you in the very real streets using GPS. An audio stream from Blast Theory's walkie talkies lets you eavesdrop on your pursuers: getting lost and out of breath on the streets. If a runner gets within five metres of your location, you are caught and a photo of where you were seen is taken. This work won the Golden Nica for Interactive Art at the 2003 Prix Ars Electronica and was nominated for a BAFTA Award in 2002. The work has just been performed in Brighton (Sept 27-Oct 1) on www.canyouseemenow.co.uk and can be experienced in Barcelona (October

28-31). For more info go to www.artfutura.org/03/advance.php. For more on locative media, read Michael Gibbs' Net Works column in this issue (p40). ■

>> NET WORKS

REVIEWS

■ Locative Media

Michael Gibbs

'Where are you?' is the first question that many people ask when talking to someone on a mobile phone, as though to suggest that location is somehow an important context-defining component of communication. At the same time, internet use is becoming de-localised, allowing you to log in anywhere at any time. The chip manufacturer Intel has even designed a surfboard containing an internet-enabled computer, so that you can surf the waves and the internet at the same time (although reception is reported to be poor when the board is underwater).

The Intel corporation is also interested in exploring other possibilities of wireless technologies. Noting that nearly 400 million new mobile phones are scheduled to be sold worldwide this year alone, while wireless networks (WiFi) hardware is being deployed at the rate of one every four seconds globally, Intel's research department at Berkeley is researching ways to connect 'familiar strangers' wirelessly, using an application for mobile phones that can distinguish the locational proximity of other people, in particular people you've seen before but whose identity you don't know. The idea, it seems, is to make us feel less lonely in urban crowds (and more afraid of 'unfamiliar' strangers?). So perhaps now the first thing we'll be asking is 'Who are you?'.

The widespread use of mobile phones, Global Positioning Satellite enabled Personal Digital Assistants and WiFi is also generating a new media art form that has quickly acquired the label of Locative Media, and as such is being vigorously pursued and promoted as the latest form of artistic intervention in public space. Locative Media involves the overlaying of digital information onto real space. 'Cellspace', as it is known, is invisible but not seamless or impervious. While surveillance extracts data from physical space, cellspace augments it with a mesh of conversations, messages, instructions, information, music, etc. Wireless technology already enables shoppers to be tracked and addressed

with special offers. Free, public wireless nodes are popping up in such sanctioned spaces as public libraries or schools, while private nodes without encryption are leaking from offices and homes, enabling internet access to be hacked and pirated. A new area of contested space has arisen.

Several media artists have been drawn to this new public arena, recognising the potential for spatial authoring, social networking and artistic interventions. Moreover, it is genuinely site-specific and is less dependent on the screens and projections that feature in most presentations of new media art. Pioneers include the Blast Theory group, with their games of electronic hide and seek, and Janet Cardiff's non-networked, Walkman-based pedestrian explorations of urban environments. The Canadian locative.net site lists a large number of Locative Media events and workshops taking place in various countries, including Latvia, Iceland and Norway.

Some of these focus on new applications (preferably using open source software) for notions of mobile geography, collaborative mapping and social organisation. A group of psychogeographers in the Netherlands, associated with the socialfiction.org site, uses algorithms to explore the city, in dérive-like fashion, on the basis of instructions like 'first street left, second street right, etc'. The Real Time software developed by the Waag Society in Amsterdam allows traces of walks to be made and projected in real time. In 2002 a number of Amsterdam inhabitants were able to create their personal cartographies of the city, revealing the routes they took on a daily basis. The same GPS tracking technology has also been used for a project by artist Esther Polak and Latvian researcher Ieva Auzina, mapping routes of several small-scale Latvian milk farms and of milk transportation throughout Europe. Interesting if you want to know where the powdered milk in your coffee might have originated.

The Futuresonico4 festival in Manchester earlier this year had a special section called Mobile Connections, devoted to art projects for wireless environments. (*Area*) code, a collaboration between centrifugalforces and Jem Southern, used an SMS mapping system to allow

mobile phone users to submit virtual graffiti to five urban sites in Manchester. Another event, 'mobile clubbing' involved participants wearing headphones to listen to their favourite music and turning up at prearranged places for a dance session, unheard by all other bystanders. Using GPS-enabled laptops, visitors could wander around Manchester, participating in user-driven narratives and soundscapes.

Mobility (and a certain passivity as well as technical know-how) seems to be essential to all these projects, with little opportunity offered for reflection, critical or otherwise. In exploring the Mobile Connections site, it came as some relief to discover a piece by Jody Zellen that introduces itself as 'a meditation on the nature of public space'. *Disembodied Voices* is a web project that offers a visual representation of the global social reality of mobile telephony. Formally similar to Zellen's earlier *Ghostcity* project and with a sense of humour sadly lacking in many locative media projects, it uses photographs of urban sites and situations, with rollovers producing visual tricks and snatches of sound. Icons float at random across a white screen, accompanied by a cacophony of telephone voices. Other sections use textual transcripts of calls, historical photographs of railway stations and postcard views of world cities, all interspersed with fragmented telephone conversations in different languages.

With the advent of mobile phones, space has become translocal. The boundary between public and private space is effaced as, oblivious to our surroundings, we now have private conversations in public. In fact, it no longer matters where one is, as long as one is connected. ■

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GALLERIES CREATING LEARNING

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Artnotes

Prizetime

In September, Blast Theory was presented with the Golden Nica for Interactive Art at the 2003 Prix Ars Electronica in Linz (see Net Works, p39) for their project *Can You See Me Now?* This is the first time British artists have won this coveted media arts award, worth €10,000, since 1991.