

"With I Like Frank, we're really trying to play with the city as a very banal space in which we commute to work and buy toilet paper, and an incredibly fantastical space in which anything may happen," Adams says.

"The limits of the game are very unclear; you know that members of Blast Theory are out there so you're not quite sure who's in the game and who's not in the game".

That is a key point for Katie Salen, co-author of game design textbook *Rule of Play*.

"Usually we think of games being quite clear in their separation from real life," she says. "We generally know who is at play and who is not, but many of (these) games blur the boundaries, particularly for citizens in the streets who do not know what is going on."

"I also like the social relations they build between the different kinds of players in the game and the fact that this relationship, while competitive, seems very collaborative in the end."

Those relationships are vital to Adams, who believes this form of gaming partly addresses isolation and fear in urban spaces.

"Games give you permission to act slightly differently than you might normally," he says.

"Your experience of I Like Frank is about who you talk to and what you say to them, who you trust, whether you're willing to help people or not."

It also means the game can be unpredictable.

For Rohan Hamden, 35, one of the online players, the loose nature of the game resulted in an unexpected encounter with one of the players on the street.

"I'm looking at my screen and I see this red dot and he's right behind me," he says. "I was absolutely startled."

"For this real person to be there covered in sweat from running, holding a 3G (third-generation) mobile phone in one hand and a piece of paper in the other, yelling 'I like Frank'."

While face-to-face meetings are not part of the game, it shows that anything can happen.

"I was too shocked that he'd actually turned up," Hamden says. "I should have given him my card but that was the last thing I expected."

Hamden, a senior policy officer with a government department, plays first-person shooter games "maybe once a month" and believes I Like Frank takes gaming "to the next dimension".

He has never played an online game before but, thanks to the human dimension of I like Frank, he is more interested in trying one.

"There's a person there, an extra element of reality that you can't predict, that's beyond your control," Hamden says. "It's not just a programmed parameter like a computer game."

"When you're the one typing little messages on the screen and this real person follows them, you think what's going on here?"

Adams agrees that the interactions have drawn a great deal of interest, even from unusual quarters.

"Our partners from the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham often bring ethnographers to study the work that we do and look at what those relationships are," he says.

"With (the team's recent game) Uncle Roy All Round You, we recorded every single text message throughout the game to see how long conversations were sustained and so on."

"We're fascinated by those kinds of things from a research point of view."



Matt Adams, from British group Blast Theory, is one of the creators of the game I Like Frank.

PICTURE: BRYAN CHARLTON

"I think reality television has demonstrated that people are very interested in creating semi-artificial situations in which non-scripted interactions happen."

Projects such as last year's Big Urban Game are certainly changing people's perception of their urban environments, Salen says.

"BUG was definitely interested in the idea of looking back to the street as a social space, as a place where communities of people could come together under the rubric of play and explore their city together," she says.

"Put a giant, colourful, inflatable object into that landscape and people are going to look at that landscape in a new way."

But is this a new form of gaming or just a passing fad?

Games and play have been around for a

long time and they are unlikely to disappear. Salen cites theorists Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois who believe that "play is at the very centre of what makes us human".

As new technologies become more widespread, Adams sees the potential for games such as I Like Frank to become a regular part of people's lives, "a persistent, self-sustaining world that has more of the characteristics of a massively multi-player online role-playing game than it does of a live event".

"Our assumption is that games are going to be the art form of the 21st century, that they are in the same position now that cinema was in 1904 maybe," Adams says.

"We're then saying, 'Can we try and expand the language of games, can we create a deeper and more subtle set of codes to operate in game play?'"