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THEORY IN PRACTICE: BLAST THEORY IN AUSTRALIA

SAMARA MITCHELL SPOKE WITH THE UK-BASED NEW MEDIA ARTIST COLLECTIVE BLAST THEORY ABOUT THEIR RECENT PROJECTS IN AUSTRALIA, INCLUDING THEIR NEW WORK, *I LIKE FRANK IN ADELAIDE*, WHICH WILL BE STAGED DURING THE 2004 ADELAIDE FRINGE, AND WILL CONNECT ONLINE GAMERS TO PLAYERS ROAMING THE CITY'S STREETS.

No two treasure hunts are ever alike. The first one I can remember was a school trip Easter egg hunt when I was eight years old. For us the game was simple: split up, follow the clues, bring home the booty. For the teachers, I suspect the game was a more complicated one to conduct. Such a simple game could bring to the surface latent schoolyard hierarchies and competitiveness. In terms of game-play, were the eggs hidden well enough for it to be a worthwhile hunt? Were they too well hidden? Would we share the rewards of our efforts with those children who turned up with nothing? Based on hazy recollections of my brief stint with the Scouts, 'treasure hunts' became 'orienteeering exercises' by adding a bit of extra technology. Compasses and maps extended the geographical borders of the game, while hand-signals, animal mimicry and rudimentary tracking skills extended the range to which players could communicate within those borders. Borrowing amateur detective clichés from *The Famous Five* and the pursuit scenes of Spaghetti Westerns, we planted exaggerated evidence to lend a loose narrative to the exercise. Laughing at the 'snagged' threads tied to the bushes, the heavy footprints and the overtly snapped twigs, we nonetheless utterly embraced them as a rich component of the game.

During the 2004 *Fringe*, Adelaide University's North Terrace grounds and nearby parklands will be transformed into the base for an espionage-style game, designed by visiting UK-based artist collective Blast Theory. Matt Adams, Ju Farr and Nick Tandavanitj are Blast Theory's core members, currently participating in The New Media Challenge, the title and focus for this year's 'Adelaide Thinkers in Residence' program. Blast Theory are accompanied here by Professor Steve Benford, Martin Flintham, Jan Humble and Ian Taylor, as representatives of the Mixed Reality Lab [MRL], also based in the UK. The MRL are crucial partners in the development of the game *I like Frank in Adelaide*, connecting online players to those gamers roaming around the University precinct by using developmental third generation [3G] mobile networks. The combination of wireless and internet technologies will form what is possibly one of the largest geographical playing fields to date. *I like Frank in Adelaide* is based on *Uncle Roy all Around*, designed for and played out on the streets of London. Frank is a fictitious character, whom it is your mission, should you accept it, to locate somewhere within the wireless range of the city's East End. Street-players will be given a hand-held device, enabling them to send the co-ordinates of

their location in physical space to an online player, following their movements as a blip on a virtual 3D map of the game zone. Players will receive messages from 'Frank', acting as clues to lead the partnership of street and online players closer to Frank's hideaway.

Timing will play a major role in determining the atmospherics of game-play within *I like Frank in Adelaide*. Coinciding with the research for *Uncle Roy* in the few hundred square metres around Westminster and Piccadilly Circus in London, were the dress rehearsals for the Trooping of the Colour, a ritual procession for the Queen's royal guard. While the procession's rehearsals caused minor restrictions to the game's research in some respects, the Royal regalia and the presence of high security, helicopters and general S-11 paranoia lent an epic element to the game that would have required a Hollywood blockbuster's movie budget to manufacture. Random events notwithstanding, the group are collecting anecdotal histories of Adelaide and conducting research with local historian, Peter Callan, to find out more about the Rundle Street and Rundle Mall areas, which will also be a geographical focus of the game.¹

I spoke with Matt Adams and Nick Tandavanitj at the School of the Future, where they are busy working with the MRL on designing behind-the-scenes technology for the event. Developing a user interface for the hand-held devices each street-level player will require in order to communicate with online players around the world is perhaps a few notches above compasses and hand-signals. However engaging in its own right, the technology involved in *I like Frank*... remains secondary to the ethnological considerations of the game. Matt Adams, commenting on the relationship between game-play and game technology, notes:

What we are particularly interested in is how this kind of work can explore and excavate ideas of social infrastructure in relation to these new technologies. What kinds of relationships are created between online people and people on the street? What are the characteristics of those relationships, what are their limitations, the hidden and subtle changes that are going on in our relationships with one another as we all gleefully adopt this brave new world of constant connection?

As increasingly televisual creatures, we are constantly having to upgrade the perceptual tools that guide us through a heavily mediated white-wash of virtual and material realities. Blast Theory's game installation, *Desert Rain*, exhibited in Sydney during November 2002, presented a tangible threshold upon which to examine the nebulous veil between virtual and

physical reality. With clear references to the role of the media during the televised military operations of the Gulf War, *Desert Rain* dropped six players at a time into the middle of a military-style mission in order to find a specified target. A 3D interactive landscape, projected onto a fine 360° screen of rainwater, surrounded the gamers, who navigated their way through the game by swivelling upon a small platform beneath their feet.

Interactive gaming is big business, grossing higher returns than any other entertainment industry. In terms of experimental game design however, big name developers have become ensnared by demands for increased realism, lots of weapons and faster frame rates.² In a typical 3D shooter, your on screen avatar has superhuman strength and reflexes. Hyper-realistic graphics and tricky code – mediating between the rapid firing of thumbs, lots of pre-teased neurones and little else – can have a powerfully disembodied affect upon the user. The interface within *Desert Rain* is much different. Interaction with a landscape projected onto running water holds the experience of immersion to a 'surface tension', contrasting with the consciousness-suck of a seventeen inch monitor. The game controls respond best to a measured human pace, rather than the frenetic mouse or joystick action evident in most console-based games.³ As Adams says,

*what we try and do is create a game dynamic that doesn't subscribe to these kinds of console values, so there's not a hierarchy; in a way what we try and do is undermine people's natural hierarchies... Certainly in Desert Rain you saw that hot gamer-people thought they knew everything about it and tripped up, and people going around thinking 'oohh I think I must of done the wrong thing' are in fact doing really well.*⁴

Aside from the occasional hardcore *Quake* fan, *Desert Rain* has received accolades from avid gamers through to participants with little or no experience with interactive gaming.

While playing with the personality of technology and its presence within popular culture, the technology within a Blast Theory installation or performance serves as a looking glass for more conceptual, political and experiential ends. In contrast to the design complexity of the group's other works, *Trucold* is positively numinous in its simplicity. Imagine that NASA sent a probe destined for Mars and it fell undetected back to earth, landing one foggy night amidst the quiet streets and half constructed buildings of an industrial London suburb. The resulting footage relayed back to ground control would appear something like *Trucold*.

Shown at the 2002 Biennale of Sydney, the looped video installation was filmed at night with a medium-scale digital camera. The absence of light necessitated the dropping of the shutter speed to the point at which the frame rate updates every thirtieth of a second. Accompanied by an ambient and minimal score of electronica, *Trucold* is a work of gorgeous humility, meditating with an alien eye upon the simple movements of people and things in public spaces. According to Adams,

*"[Trucold] operates a little bit on the border between the city as this vacant space that's full of potential and like you own it, kind of like you've just come out of a nightclub at three o'clock in the morning and there's a sense in which the city's absolutely there for you and all of the competition around public space has ebbed away and how that's coupled by a slight sense of anxiety and dread that actually anyone could do anything to you."*⁵

Multimedia performance artists, mixed-media dramaturges, ethno-technological activists of leisure – whatever buzz terminology has been used to coin who Blast Theory are and what they do – their aims are refreshingly straightforward and hype-free. As artists and expert collaborators, the group has stirred up welcome partnerships between the arts, entertainment and telecommunications industries internationally, a form of communication necessary to maintain and improve the quality of cultural life within the public domain.

Notes

¹ Matt Adams, interview by the author, 9 January, 2004

² Nick Tandavanitj, interview by author, 9 January, 2004

³ Ibid.

⁴ Adams, loc. cit.

⁵ Ibid.

BLAST THEORY WILL BE PRESENTING A PUBLIC LECTURE AT THE ADELAIDE TOWN HALL ON THE 16TH OF MARCH, JOINTLY PRESENTED BY THE ADELAIDE THINKERS IN RESIDENCE PROGRAM AND THE BOB HAWKE PRIME MINISTERIAL CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF SA. FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT www.thinkers.sa.gov.au.

FOR BOOKINGS TO BE INVOLVED IN *I LIKE FRANK IN ADELAIDE*, VISIT THE ADELAIDE FRINGE WEBSITE: www.adelaidefringe.com.au.

AT THE TIME OF WRITING THIS ARTICLE, BLAST THEORY ARE CONDUCTING MASTER-CLASSES FOR LOCAL AND INTERSTATE ARTISTS, HOSTED BY THE AUSTRALIAN NETWORK FOR ART AND TECHNOLOGY [ANAT] www.anat.org.au.



Opposite page: Blast Theory (left to right), Matt Adams, Nick Tandavanitj and Ju Row Farr
This page: Blast Theory member Nick Tandavanitj playing *I like Frank* in Adelaide
Photos courtesy the artists