

## Hide-and-seek with mobiles

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**Combine PDAs, the internet, a modern British metropolis and an imaginary uncle and what have you got? A big game of hide-and-seek.** It's the most hi-tech game of hide and seek you ever did see.

It is called Uncle Roy All Around You and is the invention of the Blast Theory group of artists.

Led by Matt Adams, the group specialises in exploring interactivity and relationships between cyberspace and city space, the virtual and the actual.

Participants in a round of Uncle Roy, which lasts up to an hour, play in the real world and online.

The first Uncle Roy games were staged in 2003, but it is back this year and is currently being played in Manchester.

The current round runs from 18 April to 8 May and is played between 3 and 9 pm every day.

### Start here

Manchester's Corner House and Urbis, its museum of the city, are the starting points for the game which can have up to 12 street players and many more online players at any one time.

Street players are equipped with PDAs to help them look for Uncle Roy, who regularly supplies them with clues about his whereabouts as well as a lot of other messages.

Catherine Williams, development officer for Blast Theory, says the clues can be poetry, lyrical descriptions of parts of the city, historical information or just blunt facts.

Even those who think they know part of a city well can be surprised by what Uncle Roy reveals to them about the play area.

"All the reference points that come through to look out for are things you would not notice walking through that part of the city," says Ms Williams.

Changing the way that people think about a city - which for most people is just a backdrop for their life - is one of the professed aims of Uncle Roy.

Instead of a blank cityscape, players have to interact and engage with it, asking people they have never met if they are Uncle Roy.

Instead of a city full of strangers, people become potential helpers and friends.

And it does not stop there.

### Online chat

The locations of street players are mapped on to the virtual Manchester that online players navigate around.

The computer players have to guide the real world players to several destinations to retrieve objects for them.

Online players can send text messages to street players and those on the ground can record voice messages for those in cyberspace.

Everyone that plays Uncle Roy enjoys it, said Ms Williams, but what they get out of it varies enormously.

"It can be a very powerful or a very profound experience," she said.

The interactive work is a collaboration between Blast Theory, the Mixed Reality Lab of the University of Nottingham and it also has technical support from BT Exact.

Early versions used GPS satellite information to plot positions but now this has been changed to use GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) to make it faster and more accurate.

The real Roy was the uncle of one of the Blast Theory members, Jude Row Farr, who knew him but not well. Playing Uncle Roy is supposed to repeat the same sense of connection and distance she felt towards him.

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