

NEW MEDIA: FEATURES

FEATURES Menu

ROY OF THE ROVERS

Go and play in the sun, or stay in with your cosy virtual world: Performance group Blast Theory blur reality into virtual worlds. *Chris Waywell* asks what the Roy is going on?



"Are you Matt Adams?"

I'm looking for Matt Adams. I've arranged to meet the Blast Theory man in a café in London Bridge's Borough Market and guess what? I've no idea what he looks like, and vice versa. When you set up an interview, you can hardly go "I'll be wearing a yellow carnation". Even so, this place is packed, it's pissing down and heading for lunchtime in the City.

What do you do? Yep, I ring his mobile. Turns out he's right next to me.

Looking for Roy

That's pretty typical of city life: you're surrounded by people but you know a fraction of them. Once in a while you bump into a friend, but otherwise they're just strangers. That's what Blast Theory's work is all about.

Their recent piece, *Uncle Roy All Around You*, which premiered at the ICA in June this year, combines online players with players on the street in a quest to locate the elusive 'Uncle Roy' within 60 minutes. As the virtual players give (mis) guidance, those on the ground rely on their handheld display units for information, location and some sense of where the game is leading them.

What's out there?

Matt explains this unique gaming environment: "You've got people playing on the street and online simultaneously, and for the ones playing on the street a lot of it is about their sense of what the city holds and who's out there."

"We had lots and lots of feedback from players who were going up to total strangers and asking them if they were Uncle Roy, and going into offices and saying, 'I've got an appointment to see Uncle Roy.' Their sense of where the game ended and where the city began became fluid."

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Let's go back a few years. Blast Theory came together through one of those arbitrary encounters that characterise urban living. According to Matt:

"The beginning of the group was that we all worked at the same cinema, the Renoir in Bloomsbury, which tells its own story about how these things cross-fertilize. The four of us who started Blast Theory used to sit around in the times between screenings going, 'We should be doing something better than this.' So we made a performance and it just went from there."

Where it went was into developing ways in which an idea for a piece of work could interact with the audience, and, more importantly, could interact with as wide an audience as possible.

Using computers as part of a performance seemed to be one solution, although neither Matt, nor his partner Jude came from a technical background.

"The shift into using technology was quite gradual," says Matt. "I always attempt to learn as much as possible, but I'm also happy for a lot of it to go over my head."

Making the link

Hooking up with the University of Nottingham's 'Mixed Reality Lab' gave Blast Theory access to new areas of technology in which to develop their work, specifically in the ways in which multiple users might interact with a certain environment.

"It's an intentionally multidisciplinary team," explains Matt. "It includes psychologists and sociologists as well as interface

designers. We've been working with them for six years and it's all about how real spaces and virtual spaces are linked - using artistic projects to test how things work in the 'real' world."

Talk to one another

'Uncle Roy...' had a precursor in *Can You See Me Now?*, originally performed in Sheffield in 2001 and revived this summer in Holland. Online players appeared on a map of the city, whilst members of Blast Theory, actually on the streets, hunted them down. A live audio stream allowed you to hear them getting cold and fed-up in the process.

The big development with 'Uncle Roy...' is having members of the public playing online and on the street, and is the product of nearly two years' dedicated research.

"The software is a collaboration between the 'Mixed Reality Lab' and British Telecom's research labs, 'BT Exact,'" says Matt. "The whole structure of the game engine is hung around a piece of software which has been developed by the 'Mixed Reality Lab' in collaboration with five other universities. It's a system for allowing multiple, different devices to talk to one another."

Lab rats escape!

Street players have a handheld PDA with a map of London on it. It remains for them to tell the system, and the other players, where they are on the map - something that caused Matt a certain amount of worry beforehand:

"It's quite a big risk in a game that's based around location, because people can cheat or lie. So for months we looked at all kinds of strategies to discourage people from lying, and in the end it all worked fine. What we hadn't anticipated was people who just got it so wildly wrong and who thought they knew where they were - but they didn't."

"In the first few days we had several people who had their map upside-down, who were walking in the diametrically opposite direction. We didn't catch them quickly enough and they just wandered off."

Online dating

In keeping with the spirit of the 'Mixed Reality Lab', this kind of thing is all good research into patterns of social interactivity; part of the motivation for the piece in the first place, according to Matt:

"The idea of the game rules is that they're sufficiently broad to allow you to interpret them and develop them in your own way, and a lot of the way the piece is structured is to do with social dynamics. It's to do with how *you* as an online player talk to people who are playing on the street, how *you* talk to other online players and what kind of relationships develop."

Roy down under

Blast Theory want to take this a step further and use the most insidious piece of human communication technology: the mobile phone.

Matt explains, "Mobile phones reach much more widely and have made much more profound an impact than anything else, Internet included. With the advent of 3G we really felt that there was going to be a chance that a space would open up for new forms of interaction and behaviour. We wanted to find a space so that artists could influence those developments."

"The aim of 'Uncle Roy' is that it will work on 3G phones. The next major project we're doing will be in Adelaide in early 2004 and it will be 'Uncle Roy' for 3G phones, with potentially dozens or hundreds of handsets."

Meanwhile, back at the caff... Which takes us neatly back to the start, like all good games. Without a mobile I would eventually have had to go up to a stranger and say, "Are you Matt Adams?" Matt sees a huge potential for technology that is socially active:

"If I have a phone that knows where I am, that can talk to me based on that, not just where the nearest post office is, but can say, 'Oh, you'll never guess what, Fred is just round the corner from you,' those kind of social things, then that is a very powerful tool."

"For every time you bump into people in the street, there must be ten times as many when you just narrowly miss each other."

Roy?

Before we head out into rain-soaked London Bridge, Matt answers the dilemma of who Roy is:

"He's Jude's uncle. He had a really bad sense of humour, and she would see him at family events where he'd be cracking really awful puns, but she always had this soft spot for him. She didn't really know him that well. The only thing that joined them was that blood link, but he was someone in her life."

"We liked the idea that he represents people who are on that line between being total strangers and people you like very much."

Have you got an idea for a feature? If so, email the editor and let them know!