

Metro, 09.10.2007

The cycle of reflection

INTERVIEW

Blast Theory

The collective dons bicycle clips and wi-fi technology for its latest foray into the psyche of its audience, discovers ZENA ALKAYAT

A patch of industrial wasteland in West Sussex feels like an unsettling base for a trio famed for kidnap, simulated war and mind-control. In fact, as a forklift truck sallies past the window of Blast Theory's isolated studio, it's difficult not to feel nervous.

But the artists behind Blast Theory – a collective who fuse theatre with interactive media – are far less intimidating than expected. And, as one third of the company, Matt Adams, meets me for this interview dressed in a practical grey tank top, the fear that he may suddenly bundle me into the back of a car, as happened to participants in the company's 1998 piece *Kidnap*, seems completely unfounded.

'In the past we've often expected a lot from our audience and put them in difficult positions,' Adams admits. *Kidnap*, after all, asked members of the public to volunteer themselves for abduction, be held captive for 48 hours and allow video footage of it to be streamed over the Internet. 'But in the last few years we've moved away from that,' he insists. 'Not that *Rider Spoke* is any less challenging, it's just challenging in a different way.'

Rider Spoke, Blast Theory's latest project, takes place at the Barbican this week. The performance-based game invites players to saddle up (on your own bike, or one borrowed at the venue) and take to the streets with a specially made Blast Theory computer console and headset. What follows is less of a game, and more an alternative counselling session. 'A voice will ask you a question through your earpiece,' explains Adams. 'At first, the questions are simple, such as, "Tell me a time you've behaved really badly." But gradually they get more reflective and demanding.'

The performance element kicks in when you're asked to find a hiding place and record an answer on to your console – making your answer available on all consoles in the game via wi-fi technology. Other players hear your answer if they find the exact location you recorded it. The whole experience lasts for one hour and 15 minutes.



On your bike: Blast Theory members Ju Row Farr, Matt Adams and Nick Tandavanitj are turning art into a game

Picture: Gretel Ensignia

► Being on a bike allows you to get lost in your head and physically. It lets your brain float off in directions it doesn't usually take ◀

'The player is both the audience and the performer,' enthuses the softly spoken Ju Row Farr – Adams's wife and fellow founder of Blast Theory. 'They totally shape the work and that's what interactive art should be.'

Blast Theory was set up in 1991 by the then actor and director Adams, and dancer Row Farr, joined by artist Nick Tandavanitj three years on. The trio set out to explore the flexible boundary between actual and virtual experiences and interactive performance.

'There's an area between theatre and tech-based games that our work occupies and I think it manages to reach over the two,' says Row Farr. 'It's about feeling that you can step back and forth across that boundary to discover something new about your environment and yourself as well.'

With that in mind, Blast Theory has been behind some of Britain's most critically acclaimed, adrenaline-inducing interactive events, from city-wide games of 'it' in *Can You See Me Now*, to

Desert Rain, which saw players zipped into cubicles and charged with tracking targets in a virtual Gulf War desert.

Cycling around the city and sharing your innermost thoughts with complete strangers may not sound as riotous, but Row Farr assures us the experience is exhilarating. 'Being on a bike allows you get lost both in your head and physically. It's about letting your brain float off in directions it doesn't usually take,' she says, pensively. 'It may not sound as high-adrenaline but I hope it's a more intimate experience.'

This more sober, emotional challenge makes *Rider Spoke* a very grown-up game and Row Farr admits it comes from a personal place for all three of them. 'We can all identify with a need to talk about things and know that all the scary crap in life is OK. We felt allowing people to speak indirectly [through technology] to strangers would be therapeutic.' Tandavanitj, the quietest of the three, agrees. 'Cycling gives people a chance

to reflect on their problems. The questions in *Rider Spoke* just take it to the next level – not nailing people to a wall with interrogation – but using cycling a bit more deliberately as a means of reflection.'

For Adams, the project does more than offer people an outlet for their emotions; it presents a very real idea of what computer games might look like in the future. And it's this daring vision of our future that makes *Rider Spoke* every bit as scary as Blast Theory's previous projects – though whether it packs as much punch for players this week is yet to be determined.

'Being out in the city alone for an hour with only a computer console may rattle people,' says Adams. 'But being in this uncomfortable zone can be really life-enhancing and I hope that's what people will take away with them.'

Thu until Oct 21 (except Oct 15 to 17), Barbican, Silk Street EC2, various times, £10, £5 if you bring your own bike. Tel: 0845 120 7550. www.barbican.org.uk Tube: Barbican/Moorgate