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It's a mind blast: urban riders blur line between real and virtual world

Clare Morgan

IT HAS been described by one reviewer as less of a game and more of an alternative counselling session, which elicits a laugh from Matt Adams, one of the founders of the British arts collective Blast Theory.

But Adams acknowledges it is an apt description for *Rider Spoke*, in which participants cycle around city streets and share their innermost thoughts with strangers with a hand-held computer.

"It's got this very strange mix of being very personal and being very public," Adams says.

In *Rider Spoke*, which begins in Sydney on Friday, riders cycle around the streets and lanes of The Rocks with a small computer mounted on the handlebars. They are asked a question via an earpiece and told to find a hiding place – a wireless hotspot – to record their answer. That done, they can either explore again and answer another question or listen to the answers left by others.

The questions range from the benign (How do you feel?) to the more confronting (Think of something you've never been able to tell. Think of how it shames you ... Tell me what your life would be like without your secret).

"The questions can be fairly personal, so how you choose to answer them is up to you," Adams says. "Some people treat it in a light-hearted way, but more people



Virtual city ... a rider searches for a hiding place with a wireless PC.

find it a very powerful and moving experience. Some end up in tears; some people say things they've never said out loud before."

When Blast Theory was formed in 1991 its major influence was club culture – an early work was *Stampede*, in which clubbers triggered pads on a dance floor to screen video clips from a police mind-control manual.

It has since moved towards what is known as urban or pervasive gaming, creating experiences using new mobile technology that blur the line between the real and virtual world and examine the social and political aspects of that technology.

In the 2000 project *Desert Rain*

teams of players tracked one another through a virtual-reality Gulf War simulation. The next year it was *Can You See Me Now?*, a game of hide-and-seek played online and on the streets. In 2003 *Uncle Roy All Around You* was another mixed-reality game in which players searched through the streets for Uncle Roy using hand-held computers and a virtual city.

The idea was to investigate social changes brought about by mobile devices, non-stop access to a network and technologies that have meant your location is never a secret. "We're in the middle of a communication revolution, with the internet, mobile phones and other

hand-held devices," Adams says. "That's changing how we talk to each other, what kind of communities we live in. We make artworks that take those conditions into account."

While not being cheerleaders for the new technologies, Blast Theory recognises the cultural significance of these new ways of communicating.

"In the UK right now everyone is talking about Twitter, which I have no interest in at all, to be honest. We're not trying to advocate this technology; we're just trying to acknowledge that there are tens of millions of people using [it] every day and to get people to think about the technology."

Adams says *Rider Spoke* offers people the rare opportunity of a private moment to reflect on their lives.

"Listening to others' responses, you get that connection with other people in your city."

"We were really shocked that almost nobody gave short superficial answers. Once you hear someone else opening up and speaking personally, I think that encourages others."

Rider Spoke runs from Friday to Sunday then February 11-15. Cyclists depart from the George Street foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art every 15 minutes from 5pm-9pm. Bookings are essential on 1800 067 676 or at therocks.com