Gamers turn cities into a battleground

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Matt has been abandoned on Tower Bridge, London, with nothing except his clothes and a mobile phone. A woman dressed in black walks past, and Matt receives a text message to follow her. He doesn't know who she is, or where she is going. All he knows is that he must follow her if he is to find Uncle Roy.

Matt is playing Uncle Roy All Around You, where for one day he is the main character in an elaborate experimental fantasy game played out across the streets of London. He also happens to be a pioneer of a new social phenomenon, urban gaming. If you thought the computer games of the 21st century are only ever played by couch potatoes addicted to the new generation of Xbox, Nintendo or PlayStation consoles, you'd be mistaken. For urban gamers are harnessing the power of global positioning systems (GPS), high-resolution screens and cameras and the latest mobile phones to play games across our towns and cities, where they become spies, vampire slayers, celebrities and even Pac-Man.

Urban gaming started in the 1990s with the advent of "geocaching", where GPS is used to pinpoint exact locations. Players buried "treasure" then posted the longitude and latitude coordinates online, allowing others to hunt for the prize. Such treasure hunts have become extremely popular and are played by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, with prizes buried in ever more exotic locations, even underwater.

"The limitations of physical space makes playing the game exciting," says Michele Chang, a technology ethnographer with Intel in Portland, Oregon. There is also a social element, says Chang. Last year, as a social experiment to see how people behave with real-world games, she created Digital Street Game, which ran for six months in New York. The aim was to acquire territory by performing stunts dictated by the game at public locations around the city, such as playing hopscotch at a crossroads while holding a hot-dog. "People are more reserved than you would imagine," says Chang. Some players took to performing their stunt on rooftops to avoid being seen, she says, while others relished being ostentatious - like players of Pac-Manhattan, in which New Yorkers dress up as the video game icon Pac-Man and flee other gamers dressed up as ghosts.

While many of the first real-world games involved using separate GPS receivers and handheld computers, mobile phones and PDAs that integrate such technology are catching up. "I think we are going to see more and more games that blend with our real lives."

Uncle Roy All Around You is one such game, developed by interactive technology researcher Steve Benford at the University of Nottingham, UK.

Another phone-based game is a variant of the classic arcade game Tron. Two or more players, who may never have met, speed through a city leaving a virtual trail behind them that is plotted on their mobile phone screens. There is one rule: you can't cross your own trail or that of the other player.

Soon you may even be able to play games using phones without GPS hardware. One being played by 30,000 people in Sweden, Russia, Ireland, Finland and now China is called BotFighters. Produced by It's Alive, BotFighters is a variant on Dungeons and Dragons role-playing games.

The company has even bigger plans, developing a game that exploits a digital camera already built into the console. Virtual creatures live at specific GPS coordinates, and when a player views the location through the camera they will see the real world with a three-dimensional animated digital creature laid over the scene.

Game designers face the challenge of how to preclude "cyber-stalking", and protect the safety of the public and players, especially children, who might wander into unsafe situations or places. But ultimately, urban games may encourage a generation of console geeks to get off the sofa. "I have literally run around a park interacting with virtual creatures," says Hilton. "I'm going to have to get seriously fit if I want to develop one game I'm working on."

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