



## Now, I can see you.



### **The politics of presence in an intervention into 'Can You See Me Now?' by Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham**

9-11 May 2007, IFSC, Dublin, Ireland - Ian Russell with the assistance of Danielle O'Donovan ([Dublin CYSMN archive](#))

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Read it [here](#).

*We're all players now.*

During 9-12 May 2007, the renowned Blast Theory performance group staged 'Can You See Me Now?' ([Dublin CYSMN game archive](#)), a dynamic and interactive cat and mouse performance/game in the IFSC, Dublin, Ireland as part of [We Are Here 2.0](#) in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham.

On 9-11 May 2007, I staged a multi-phase intervention into the world of CYSMN and the Blast Theorists in order to test the boundaries of their new media performances and game(scripts). I wanted to explore the ironies evident in the dialectical opposition of 'virtual' and 'real' worlds in their game architecture focusing on the constructed drama/politics of absence and presence, engagement and detachment and participation and disillusionment.

### **9 May - Introductions**

On Wednesday I began by introducing myself to the game, familiarising myself with the rules, boundaries and scripts of the game and its performance.

The performance takes the form of an online game and a physical performance occurring in tandem in real time. A 'virtual city space' (the IFSC) becomes the stage upon which online players control the movements of their avatars and digital personas. Navigating the twists and turns of the city streets, the movements of the avatars are tracked and translated to 'real world' GPS information. This enables the Blast Theory 'runners' to hunt and catch the avatars by utilising GPS equipment and PDA's to physically run through the 'real city space' negotiating not only the digital information but also the 'real world' perils of traffic (both automotive and human), weather and terrain. The movements of the 'runners' are also relayed to the 'virtual' game space allowing the online players to elude their hunters (as long as they can). The drama, or perhaps humour, of the game is created by parallel yet detached communicative media - the online players only being about to 'chat' through text messages which appear on both the players' and the 'runners' screens and the 'runners' communications via walkie-talkies being streamed through the game portal to the players' speakers. This creates an amusingly parallel yet disconnected form of communication - allowing for an intimate awareness of the strains and emotions experienced by the 'runners' by hearing their voice (countered by the anonymity of their handles as simply 'runners') and the anonymous communication of the gamers' personas (countered by the proscriptive form of the game requiring them to input a name of both themselves and a long lost acquaintance).

As there are multiple gamers and multiple runners, the performance takes the form of multiple rhizomatic yet discrete and constellated game(scripts) which interweave and dynamically affect one another - the movements of the players affecting the movements of the runners and vice versa. Thus the graphic ('real' and 'virtual'), audio and textual encounters play off each other in a great unravelling of supposed roles of actors, audiences, controllers, gamers and players - the interface of the CYSMN acting as a tremendous shattering of boundaries between theatre/game as graphic user interface (GUI) and performance or play as tactile user interface (TUI).

A single game(script) begins when the online player is asked to input their name (first and last) (of course the use of alternate personas and elusive handles abounds). I played as myself (Ian Russell). Next, the player is asked if there is a person they have not seen for a long time and who they still think of, and the player is prompted to input another first and last name. I, again being innocent, naive, honest, what have you, put in names of ex-partners, family members who have long since passed on and long forgotten friends. Once this is completed, the player is tossed into the game flow

and the streaming audio begins as you are presented with a bird's eye view of the 'virtual city space' (the IFSC). Cat and mouse games ensue, and the drama unfolds as 'runners' struggle to run on gravel, avoid being hit by cars or stop to have chats with the locals and the players goad the 'runners' on with chiding remarks. The 'runners' maintain nearly constant radio communication – often with a militaristic flair – “crackle\*...over”, while the players' comments range from the confused gaming question about the interface to frustration over limitations of gameplay to derogative and abusive comments. The game continues until the 'runners' come within 5m (virtual/real) of the avatars. Then the online player is caught and the game is over. At this point, the thread of game(script) is concluded by the statement by a 'runner' that they have caught/seen 'Ian Russell (or another handle)' at a certain location and at a certain time. Then after a brief pause, they then say 'and I have just seen (insert the name of a long forgotten friend here)' and 'I am taking the picture now'. The game(script) concludes with the taking of digital photograph of an 'anonymous' bit of the architecture of the 'real city space' (see photograph below) . These photos are then archived online with the names of the players' long forgotten acquaintances.

The first time I played, I entered the name of my last partner. I entered the game and was so engrossed by learning how to navigate the world and understand its rules and boundaries that I had forgotten both about my name as well as the name of my last partner. When I was caught (about 5 minutes later - see photograph below), I heard my own name read out – which was fun to hear, but this was then followed by my last partner's name. I was suddenly filled with emotion and confusion. Was she playing the game as well, did she know I was there, should I try to say hello. The absence of this person from my life was suddenly converted into a palpable presence through the dynamic physical and mental responses of my body to the emotions which came from hearing her name.



Sarah Ling, 9th May, 1217pm - taken by Runner 4 (a.k.a. Paul Dungworth)

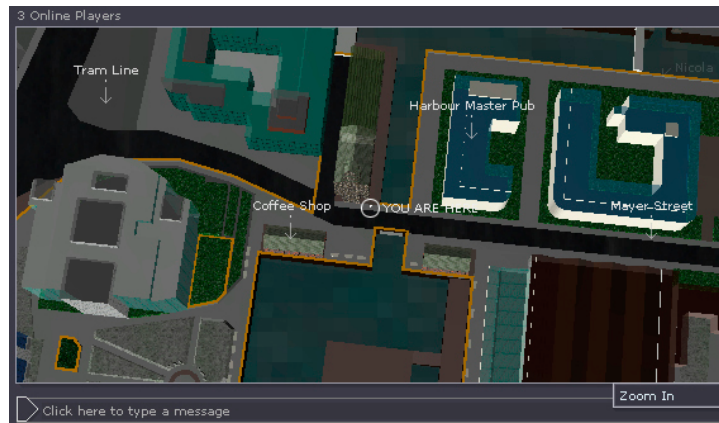
On a subsequent game, I attempted to last as long as possible. I succeeded in being uncaught for over 63 minutes, being finally caught by Peter Crawley who was guest runner (Runner 7). During this time, I was initially excited for lasting so long and outwitting the runners. Yet, after hiding for quite sometime in the virtual carpark, I suddenly felt the futility of my desire to be absent and uncaught from the game. Truly, if I wished to be uncaught then I should merely leave the game and be absent. I was, however, compelled to want to secure victory through and absent presence in the virtual world – taking up an online player position and being able to listen and see the happenings of the virtual city. I found myself disillusioned by my desire to render a false absence both physically and virtually.

#### 10 May - Interventions (presences & absences)

On Thursday, I intervened in the performance of CYSMN by locating myself physically in the 'real city space' of the IFSC. With the assistance of my colleague Danielle O'Donovan, I situated myself at the Harbour Master Pub on Mayer Street (seen below) and logged into the game through a publicly available WiFi hotspot.



I entered the game under the handle 'Ian Russell' and entered the name 'Danielle O' as my long lost acquaintance. By controlling the movements of my avatar, I placed it at the 'virtual' correspondent to our 'real' location (seen below).



I began by exploring the tactics of representations of the CYSMN GUI. By ceasing the movement of my avatar, the game view immediately tracks to a spinning 360 degree horizon view, a behind the p.o.v. of my avatar if you will. Locating myself physically at the same GPS location, I noticed discrepancies between the GUI and my own 'real' (if that indeed exists) visual perceptions – represented below by a screenshot and a digital photograph.



Beyond the ironic absence/presence of myself with my digital self, there were striking absences such as the lack of the Dublin mountains in the GUI and the presence of a fabricated 'iconic' Dublin skyline (including new apartment blocks, Georgian buildings from the Liffey and Guinness brewery buildings. Although the schematics of the buildings, layout and architecture of the 'virtual city space' held up to scrutinising use value, absences such as, lightpoles, trees, pedestrians and traffic made me feel disillusioned in both 'spaces'. In which 'space' was the game now. Where was I supposed to 'play' – who were the 'players'?

My response to this (as a interventionist) was that we were all players now. Thus I sought to turn the game on the 'runners' and play with them – testing the boundaries of their 'script', 'direction' and probing the boundaries and the proverbial theatrical 'fourth wall'.

I began by entering text chat messages alerting the 'runners' that they could find me at the Harbour Master Pub and that they should call over for a coffee. The spirit of digital conceptual play won out as they merely assumed that I was asserting the location of my avatar – and not myself. Thus I watched as runners moved about my physical space, aloof, disengaged, unaware of my presence. Although intellectually and artistically fascinating and amusing, I also found it somewhat cruel as I ran my avatar down Mayer Street and subsequently watched as Runner 6 (a.k.a. Becky Edmunds) ran past – clearly fatigued by the game. My participation as player had switched to controller or at least instigator or voyeur or surveillance operative. I suddenly felt a tremendous responsibility for the actions of the runners and an uneasy feeling of implication into voyeuristic fetishes of controlling and viewing the actions of people through new media.





In one instance, Runner 2 (a.k.a. Hannah Talbot) 'saw' me at the Harbour Master Pub, and proceeded to take a photograph of my long lost friend 'Danielle O' (see photograph below) who was actually sitting next to me having a coffee.



Danielle O, 10th May, 1244pm - taken by Runner 2 (a.k.a. Hannah Talbot)

When Runner 2 reported over her walkie-talkie that she had seen 'Ian Russell' and 'Danielle O' and that 'she was taking the photograph now'. I announced, 'I can see you Runner 2!'

I had expected that this might have prompted Runner 2 to be aware of my physical presence. I was, however, surprised to see that she gave me a polite, detached smile and kept on with her 'work' – in much the same way as you would seek to ignore any 'stranger' who spoke to you unexpectedly on the street, particularly when that stranger might be 'taking the

piss' out of your role in a piece of theatre. Although Runner 2 was seeking to catch/see me and Danielle, the proscribed form of her action in the game and potentially also skills of urban survival (by not engaging in conversations with strange men who shout at you) forced the erection of a firm fourth wall between the play and the players – a mutual detachment between the players who, though only being a few feet apart, were only communicating through satellites miles above their heads.

Part of my desire to participate in the 'real city space' was also to get a sense of the physicality of the performance. Thus, I was also subjected to the same weather as the 'runners'. In one instance, I had to use an umbrella to protect the laptop I was using.



Again, I was caught – this time by Runner 6 (a.k.a. Becky Edmunds). I had alerted her that I was at the Harbour Master and that I 'had a red brellly', but again the runner did not make the leap to assume that my information was 'true' (if truth indeed is even a possibility).





Danielle O, 10th May, 1249pm - taken by Runner 6 (a.k.a. Becky Edmunds)

My next step was then to employ my 'real world' observations in an attempt to make the runners aware of my presence. I decided to make Runner 6 run past me again, and I subsequently sent a text chat saying 'runner 6 – I didn't know you had red hair' (see below). I was caught at the other end of Mayer Street.



Eamonn DeValera, 10th May, 1257pm - taken by Runner 6 (a.k.a. Becky Edmunds)

Although I said I just saw her run past and that I would buy her a coffee next time she came to the Harbour Master, I received no comment on my presence in the 'real city space'.

Finally, I positioned my avatar one final time out front of the Harbour Master and waited for Runner 6 to arrive. As she approached, my colleague Danielle O'Donovan walked my avatar across the street as I walked across the street. My avatar was caught. 'Danielle O' had been seen as well, but just before she took the proscribed photograph, I approached her and said 'hi, I'm Ian'.

Met first by a laugh and moderate disbelief, Runner 6 still continued with the game(script) and took a photograph of the 'anonymous' phonebox which I was standing next to (see below) – despite the fact that I was actually present (see my own photograph below). She then said over the walkie-talkie, 'I've seen Ian Russell. He's actually right here, and he has red hair too'. We then had a polite chat about the game, who I was and things in general as she caught her breath. She



admitted that when I had said 'I didn't know you had red hair', she had thought that I was somewhere on Mayer Street - and that I certainly wasn't on 'one of the terminals' at base. I told her about my plans to intervene and play with the play, and we chatted some more before she continued with role as runner.



Danielle O, 10th May, 112pm - taken by Runner 6 (a.k.a. Becky Edmunds)



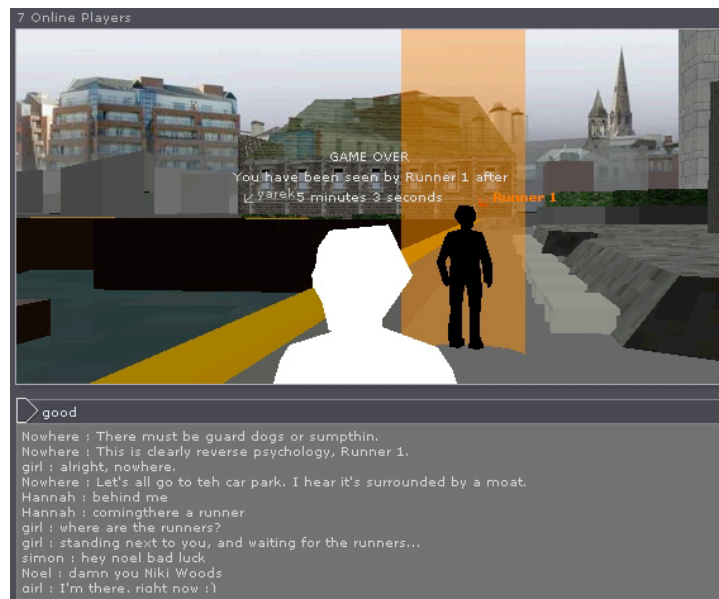
#### 11 May - Interventions (absences & presences)

On Friday, after having met some of the Blast Theorists the night before, I played out my next level of intervention aimed at the contrast between the constructed anonymity of the runners through their serialistic handles and the requested identifications of the players through the provision of first and last names. My target was Niki Woods (a.k.a. Runner 1). From home while having lunch, I entered the game with the handle 'Niki Woods' with the long lost acquaintance name 'Ian Russell'. This was designed to test the scripting of the piece by seeing how she would react to being approached by an avatar based on her own handle/identity/persona. Initially, she was surprised to find herself chasing herself, and unfortunately it was not herself but Runner 4 (a.k.a. Paul Dungworth) who caught Niki. Ironically then, Paul was standing beside Niki in the Stone Circle in the 'real world' as he said 'I have just seen Niki Woods, and I have seen Ian Russell. I'm taking the photograph now'.



Ian Russell, 11th May, 1211pm - taken by Runner 4 (a.k.a. Paul Dungworth)

My final intervention was then to enter the game as myself with my long lost acquaintance being 'Niki Woods'. I then proceeded to chase Runner 1 to force her to catch me (see image below), and upon so doing, she said, 'I have seen Ian Russell, and I have just seen myself. I have seen Niki Woods. I am looking at a dark reflection of myself in the water at George's Dock. I am taking a photograph of myself now' (see below) .



Niki Woods, 11th May, 1219pm - taken by Runner 1 (a.k.a. Niki Woods)

Runner 1 then made a call out on the audio channel to all runners to tell them to 'be on the look out for Ian Russell. He could be on top of a building. He could be anyway. Look out for Ian Russell'. Thus the scripting of the game shifted from one of structured cat and mouse to an inverted situation of paranoia through absence. Although I was not present physically in the 'real city space' of the game this time, the residual memory of my physical presence from Thursday rendered a possibility of my presence despite the scripted supposition of absence.

## Conclusions

There were many other levels to which this intervention could have been taken, but I felt that these phases were sufficient for making the artistic and intellectual critique of the work of Blast Theory. The richness of the fabric of the piece allowed for a very fruitful and rigorous intervention exploring the politics of presence and the impact of rendering, through new media, digital/virtual space based on a supposed or assumed absence. This intervention, I hope, has illustrated that despite the discourse of the impact of new media on conceptions and perceptions of place, agency, presence, etc., the embodied, present participation/intervention of a human physically can have as much, if not more, transformative potential. Thus, it may be possible to conceive of humans as *humedia* – as capricious media which transform not only physical space but also digital or 'virtual space' and can effortlessly trip and flit between these supposed distinctions as a liminal player simultaneously absent and present in the game.



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