

Games Take it to the Street
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In the late 1980s skateboarders began to retrace urban space within a stylized language of physical choreography and street attitude, reimagining the city as a site of spectacular play. Curving staircases, open plazas, and handrails defined the game space of the urban traceurs and spaces were rewritten time and again through the art of the kick flip, slide, and grind. It was not long, however, before skateboarding found its way into videogames, and the dynasty known as Tony Hawk ProSkater was born. Where skaters once claimed the space of real city streets, they now killed time in their virtual counterparts.

This shift from play in the real world to play in the virtual worlds of videogames has certainly been all the rage in years past. But perhaps the lure of digital space has lost its luster, as an increasing number of players are returning to game the city streets, inventing new forms of urban choreography along the way. From Blast Theory's Uncle Roy All Around You, to Noderunner, Conqwest, and The Big Urban Game gaming the streets marks the newest frontier in "mobile" games.

Run, Search, Chase, Race

Videogames tend to offer players a range of game mechanics, from collecting and trading, to shooting, chatting, jumping, and exploring. Yet owing to the newness of the form, the current crop of urban games limits themselves to just three: run, search/chase, and race. Oddly enough, many seem to include the use of giant inflatable game pieces or tiny cell phones that players must yell into as they strategically maneuver the city streets. There is danger of being run over by oncoming traffic, of course, and almost all employ an element of social improvisation paired with a demanding degree of physical activity (there is a lot of running). The result, however, is a collection of games that take the language of urban architecture and the movement of the man on the street and point to new ways to play.

Run

Running through an urban space as quickly as possible may not seem all that original but don't tell that to players of the extreme sport known as le parkour, or "free running." In it, players take the city as their obstacle course, transforming everyday architecture—rails, walls, parking structures, and roof gaps—into opportunities for urban flow. The goal is to move as quickly and stylishly through the landscape as possible, vaulting, climbing, leaping, and tumbling. Unlike the speedrunners of games like Quake and Doom who simply run through levels like bats out of hell, the traceurs of parkour turn speed into an art infused with the grace and beauty of the human form.

Search/Chase

Treasure hunts have long been a staple of the neighborhood cul-de-sac. Two recent urban games, however, have brought mobile technology into the search and chase equation. Uncle Roy All Around You, a game developed by Blast Theory, the folks that introduced the world to the idea of players running through city streets tracking opponents they can't see through GPS (Can You See Me Now?), this time had players searching the city for a mysterious someone known as Uncle Roy. The game paired players on the street with players in a parallel virtual city—wireless technology allowed communication between the two. Speed and stealth went hand in hand, giving players a chance to rewrite their movement through the city in a language tinged with an accent of espionage.

While Uncle Roy Around You may be the most well known game of its kind, Conqwest, a recent game developed by Qwest as part of a viral marketing campaign, is certainly the weirdest. Teams of high school students in five cities (Minneapolis, Denver, Salt Lake

City, Seattle, and Phoenix) spent an afternoon racing around, snapping pictures with their camera phones of barcodes hidden on billboards, buses, and taxicabs, while unlocking clues to special bonus treasures. As if that weren't enough, they also moved large inflatable animal totems around the city, while secretly bidding for treasure against other teams. Small in scope (125 players could play at a time) yet large in spectacle, Conqwest took a basic treasure hunt and turned it, and the city, on its head, if only for the briefest of moments.

Race

Race games challenge players to move between point A and point B as quickly as possible, avoiding obstacles and managing what are usually a set of limited resources, like health, fuel, or money. Noderunner, a game that originated in New York City, had players racing through the streets to access and document as many wireless nodes as possible in a limited amount of time. Players had to manage knowledge of the city's wireless infrastructure, password protocol, as well as the sometimes-fragile signals emanating from wi-fi hotspots. Drawing on games like Tag and the territorial marking of graffiti artists, Noderunner was one of the first urban games to choreograph the capture of what cannot be seen.

Racing was also a mechanic used in the Big Urban Game, which took place over five days in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Three teams raced 25-foot tall inflatable game pieces through a series of five checkpoints, hoping to make it to each in the shortest amount of time. Thousands of players voted each day on the routes the pieces should take. Because the game pieces were literally carried through city streets, greenbelts, and alleyways, players had to negotiate the pros and cons of each route, taking into account variables such as traffic jams, low lying bridges, and busy intersections. Neighborhood connected to neighborhood as the pieces traced their circuitous routes. Citizens were left wondering what might be next in a game where game piece-as-architectural spectacle was the rule of the day.

While only a handful of these types of games have been made to date, there is a clear trend developing across gaming to explore spaces both connected to, and off the screen. Companies like Microsoft have thrown their hat in the urban gaming mix by designing games like The Beast (a promotion for the Spielberg film A.I. that had players collaborating both on and offline to solve cryptic puzzles) and I Love Bees (a game that preceded the release of Halo 2, and involved a single website, an enigmatic narrative, and 1,000 ringing payphones). Blast Theory, originators of sibling genre of gaming known as mixed reality games, have been commissioned to produce a site specific game in lower Manhattan in the spring of 2006, an event designed to activate both urban space and the worries of thousands of NYPD who will surely be on hand. With the growing ubiquity of mobile devices and increasing evidence of the ability of games to engage and create community, games that take it to the street just may pave the way for even newer forms of play.

Game Credits

Le Parkour: invented by David Belle and Sebastian Foucan (www.le-parkour.com)

Uncle Roy All Around You: developed by Blast Theory in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab, University of Nottingham. (www.blasttheory.co.uk)

Conqwest: Frank Lantz, Mattia Romeo, SS+K (<http://www.conqwest2004.com/>)

Noderunner: Yuri Gitman and Carlos J. Gomez de Llarena (www.noderunner.com)

Big Urban Game: Nick Fortungo, Frank Lantz, Katie Salen (www.playground3.com)