

Adelaide Thinkers in Residence Public Lecture

Matt Adams, Blast Theory

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When I was 14 years old a visionary visited my school. The man was a pioneer in new technologies and he had come to announce how the world I was growing up in was on the verge of radical change. He brandished a VHS tape, and announced that television was going to be transformed for ever. Using the power of VHS everyone would make their own TV programmes. Instead of accepting the bland output of comedy and drama from the existing networks we would simply take control ourselves and become producers as well as consumers. TV stations would close, corporations would fold and a new wave of creativity was about to be unleashed. To me it seemed like impeccable logic and the scenario he described seemed inevitable.

Over the following years it became clear that what he had predicted was certainly not coming true and I began to think of him as an idiot. Someone who was misguided and over confident. He had failed to understand that people are essentially passive, happy to consume what they are fed.

Then the internet happened and I became less sure. Suddenly there was exactly the kind of explosion that he had seen. Instead of making their own TV on VHS people were making their own comedy, drama and documentaries online. It was impossible to foresee the impact that the internet would have and yet, in a way, the VHS evangelist had done precisely that.

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The ideas I am going to present tonight have been developed collaboratively with Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj from Blast Theory. I have spent more time with them than with anyone else in my life and together we have shaped each other's ideas and identities. As the big mouth in the group I get to speak at intimate little gatherings like this, but the ideas are shared and have been developed through argument and discussion with Ju and Nick.

I want to show some of our work and talk about its relationship to mobile phones, games and new technology. I want to explore the relationship between art and society and how culture is being seen as increasingly important in economic development. And I want to talk about how new media has blurred some of the boundaries between science, art and commerce. But first of all I want to go back to our beginnings...

We chose the name Blast Theory in 1991 from an anarchist fanzine who in turn had stolen it from the British artist Wyndham Lewis. The phrase that made such an impact was "Blast Theory, Bless Practice". Against the backdrop of post modernism and a Thatcherite recession we set out our stall to be about doing, making and taking action. Nearly 15 years later our artwork is still the place where we can fully express ourselves. It is only in that context that our personal fears and our public concerns can be fully expressed.

For this reason I would like to start by showing a piece of our work. Uncle Roy All Around You was made in London last year. Like "I Like Frank in Adelaide" which we have just shown as part of this year's Fringe it is a game in which players online in a virtual city and on the streets of the real city are searching for someone.

[SHOW VIDEO - 3 mins]

This work is a hybrid of games, theatre and mobile technologies in which social interaction is the governing principle. But most importantly it is a work about loss and absence. Uncle Roy is never found, he is permanently missing. The internet, the mobile phone and virtual worlds all serve to create people who are both there and not there at the same time. The voice we hear in our ear sounds next to us but the person may be thousand of miles away. We are not cheerleaders for new technology. All three of us have very mixed feelings about these new devices but we are fascinated by how they are changing our society.

I would like to talk a little bit about why we have chosen to work in this area.

As mobile phones have reached near ubiquity in many developed countries, they have attained a distinct position as pieces of new technology. From the VCR to the home computer, from the Walkman to the internet no other technological development has reached so deeply into the social fabric. Mobile phones have become established within demographics such as pre-teenagers, the poor and rural dwellers who have traditionally been excluded from or resistant to new technologies. According to one study in the UK mobile phone usage was higher among the homeless population than among the general population because of the increased importance of a mobile communication device for those without a fixed address.

As artists, we have become fascinated by this seismic shift in how we talk to one another. While some outcomes – which are easily measurable and have revenue implications for telecoms companies - are well understood and frequently discussed, such as the rise in texting, what are the marginal or

invisible shifts that are taking place?

For example, social arrangements among high users of mobile devices have been profoundly altered. It is now typical in my experience for plans for a group of friends to meet to unfold in a new way. In the days of fixed phone lines friends would ring each other to arrange a time and place to meet a few days in advance. Subsequently the group would converge at that rendezvous. Now, the entire process proceeds on a contingent and ad hoc basis with many small communications between the group in which the members of the group, the time and the location may be revised on the fly up to a few minutes before the designated time. What does this do to our sense of friendship or our understanding of place?

Most shockingly on September 11th 2001 it became imprinted on our consciousness that the mobile phone collapses the distinct zones of communication that once existed. As relatives received their final communication from their loved ones in their cars, on buses and on trains during the morning rush hour, the appalling contrast between the banality of their location and the impact of what they were hearing added to the horror. On a more mundane level, users in many countries are now familiar with the juxtaposition of private, intimate conversations with a secondary, inadvertent audience. What does it mean to have an argument with your partner while simultaneously being aware that you are being overheard by acquaintances or strangers?

And with the advent of the third generation of mobile telephony these profound changes will take on a new dimension. 3G promises a constant connection to the internet, a high bandwidth (enabling live video calls) and ultimately, location based services. For example, TV news could be playing on your handset while you call a taxi which already knows where you are.

Combined together this means that the internet spills onto the street and so do many of the social anxieties that the internet has brought with it. If you only consumed the mainstream media you could believe that the internet was entirely populated by paedophiles, neo nazis and cannibals. This enormous sprawling world is, in my experience, an endlessly complex, subtle and fascinating place in which a ten year old can have a better home page than a multinational corporation.

Attempts by governments around the world to control the most fundamental transformation in publishing over the last 500 years are as unedifying as they are impotent. But they may not remain impotent indefinitely: behind the rhetoric of protecting our children and saving the helpless multinational recording industry lies a concerted attempt to roll back the free spaces that new technology has created. Attempting to make Internet Service Providers responsible for the content

delivered on their servers is the equivalent of making the telephone companies responsible for the conversations on their network. It is a regressive, restrictive step driven by a relentless overstatement of the dangers.

At its heart this is an old school battle for the control of information. Let's be under no illusions that the changes in global media ownership over the last two decades have restricted choice, undermined independence and inhibited the plurality of voices heard. If these are replicated online they will have profound and long lasting effects.

This is not to say that the internet is a paradise of free speech and democratic values. There are many legitimate concerns about the reliability of information that is distributed and about the potential abuse of the innocent. And in our work we try to explore these issues. In Uncle Roy All Around You online players and street players are asked whether they will make a commitment to be there for a stranger for the next 12 months. If they agree, they swap their email address or phone number with another player in order to activate that contract.

When we presented this work to a group of teachers here in Adelaide there was some unease that we were encouraging young people to trust strangers in direct opposition to current educational practice. But in a subsequent seminar with 120 students aged between 12 and 16 we found that at least 60% of them had pretended to be someone else in an internet chat room. It is not enough to take a "Just Say No" attitude to young people and the internet. They are already exploring these spaces for themselves and finding out for themselves that in the vast majority of cases the risks are very low. There is a tremendous challenge for educators to learn about what is going on out there and to engage positively with it. Sites such as Habbo Hotel provide a template for well managed, beautifully designed social spaces for young people.

But it is games that are the biggest driver of these changes. The cliché of a lone teen in a darkened room, shunning nutrition and social contact while pretending to be a wizard is long past its sell by date. Well, except the wizard part. That's worse than ever. But you can blame The Lord of the Rings for that. What has changed is that games are becoming social spaces. Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games are huge. These games such as Everquest, Lineage and America's Army involve virtual worlds in which you build up a character through your interactions with other players as well as by interacting with the game. Driven by the adoption of broadband this genre of gaming is growing fast: Lineage has over four million players, those playing Everquest spend an average of 20 hours a week in the game in return for paying a monthly subscription.

Alongside this there is a burgeoning interest among artists in games. As the first generation of gamers from the seventies and eighties has matured they have not stopped playing games. Instead they are looking for new ideas and new challenges beyond the fantasy and sci fi genres which have dominated mass market gaming. People are taking games engines - the software used to describe the world of the game - and making modifications for their own purposes. Machinima is the emerging genre in which movies are made using virtual sets taken from games.

911 Survivor is a modification of Unreal Tournament in which you are a victim trapped in the World Trade Center. Sometimes you can escape down the seemingly endless staircases, in other games there is no way out. Escape from Woomera, which is currently under development, invites players to play the role of a refugee escaping from a detention centre and poses many questions about who we identify with and why when we play games. At the moment, games such as this often attract opprobrium for combining games with serious issues. They are seen as trivialising important political questions. I see this in reverse: they bring a long overdue seriousness to games.

When we compare these tentative steps to the emergence of cinema as a bone fide art form 90 or 100 years ago the parallels are striking. Here is an industry that is making money (lots of money), that is seen as low brow and unworthy of serious comment, that generally sticks to tried and tested combinations of sex, violence and dazzling effects. In other words here is cinema in 1914, just before DW Griffiths, FW Murnau and Sergei Eisenstein between them created The Birth of a Nation, Nosferatu and Battleship Potemkin.

When we combine games on the internet WITH the internet on mobile phones WITH artists working on games we have the preconditions for a profound cultural shift. These are particularly reflected in the general move towards greater mobility. Whether it is refugees travelling thousands of miles, the number of cars in circulation or the rise of personal organisers, we are surrounded by evidence of the increased movement of people and objects. In this environment static things have less relevance and less purpose.

And I would now like to talk about how these changes have influenced my thinking about artistic practice.

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My background is in the theatre. At the age of 13 I fluked the audition into a professional production and found my passion. At the same time I saw a production of An Inspector Calls and realised that

theatre could combine the personal with the political in the here and now with a knock out punch. For a decade acting and directing was everything to me. But it gradually became apparent that the form of theatre was in crisis. As audiences worked longer and more irregular hours, as they travelled greater distances, as their time became more constricted theatre became less and less attractive. When we performed at 8 o'clock in the evening much of the audience would arrive directly from work without having eaten. Since the 18th century the format of theatre has changed little but our society has changed beyond all recognition.

This is not to say that traditional theatre is finished. But in the same way that painting was transformed for ever by the arrival of photography it does have to change. Especially if it seeks to reach a new, younger audience and to have cultural impact.

In the face of the social changes I have described we have sought to rethink the fundamentals of the performing arts. Given that the essential aspect of theatre that compels me is a group of people coming together at a particular time and in a particular place to engage with complex ideas and emotions how can the art form respond to these social and technological challenges?

Through our collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham we have explored the ways in which interactivity may provide a new set of possibilities. The MRL is a multidisciplinary team of around 30 researchers with backgrounds in computer science, sociology, ethnography and product design that focuses on the ways in which real and virtual space may be joined. Over the last 7 years we have made four major works together. For I Like Frank In Adelaide we have had up to four of our colleagues from the MRL working here with us programming the game engine, programming the 3G phones and developing the game in discussions with us.

What we have discovered is the combination of scientific and artistic approaches is a very powerful way of addressing problems that combine technology with social outcomes. As part of the backstage tours that we gave last week to members of the new media industry I gave an example of how this functions:

Games such as I Like Frank In Adelaide rely on understanding the position of players in the city. Traditionally this has been achieved with the Global Positioning System, an American military system that uses 24 satellites to pinpoint your location. However GPS is deeply flawed in urban environments because tall buildings obscure the satellites. We quickly realised that we would have tremendous problems explaining GPS to players of the game. Instead we wondered whether we could create a game in which players indicated their own position by moving a map. Inspired by the observation that

you only tend to look at the part of a map that shows where you are, we then rethought the game so that it would work in this way. We created a game in which if you cheated, the information you received would mean nothing and thus removed the need for any location based hardware. When the Mixed Reality Lab analysed the results of this technique several fascinating conclusions came out.

At first our technique of self reported positioning seemed less accurate than GPS. On closer examination however it transpired that as players came to understand the technique they were exploiting it: they were moving the map so that it showed them at a road junction 100 metres ahead of their actual position. They were doing this because they knew that the system has a certain latency: it takes 10 to 20 seconds for their position to be transmitted from the phone to the game servers and then out to the players on the web. Also they knew that a road junction was a key moment when they would need assistance: it was a more valuable place to be seen.

When faced with the weakness of GPS the traditional route of computer science would have been to attempt to improve the performance of the technology. Instead by inverting the problem we created a solution that was quick, cheap, flexible and allowed the players to use it intelligently to enhance their experience.

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I would now like to talk about some recent changes in the debates about the value of art to the wider society.

As well as attempting to respond in our work to the society around us, we have been making work during a fundamental reappraisal of the importance of the arts. The role of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or of Tate Modern in London as tools of regeneration is widely appreciated. What distinguishes these projects is the bravery and risk taking required to make them happen. Frank Gehry who designed the Guggenheim Museum was considered a maverick by many in the architectural community up until that time. Herzog and De Meuron who designed Tate Modern were little known. Both teams were given the support and the scope to create their masterpieces.

These projects have an impact that extends far beyond their immediate roles of displaying art to an enthusiastic audience. They send powerful messages about the values of their culture and have transformed their immediate surroundings. Ju and I have twice experienced at first hand the ability of artists themselves to transform their surroundings. Firstly in Bermondsey in South London and then in Hoxton in North London small communities of artists have changed perceptions of these

neighbourhoods, brought new development, new wealth (and then, ironically, been driven out by the rent hikes that follow). In both instances it has not required large buildings to achieve results. And the rise of a more mobile society in which artists are working in more and more diverse contexts makes buildings less and less important. For the cost of one Tate Modern you could fund thousands of smaller projects for a decade.

In Hoxton a forward looking council and a canny property developer saw the potential created once hundreds of artists migrated into the area. As the column inches accumulated in the press, bars and cafes then restaurants and boutiques gradually clustered around Hoxton Square. By the late 90s the entire geography of the London art world was transformed as White Cube and other major West End galleries migrated East. In the earliest days, grants of a few thousand pounds were sufficient to nurture this process: the Fete Worse Than Death in 1994 was a summer fete in which performances, live music and stalls were created by artists in Hoxton Square. Now a legendary event that features in books on art in London, and which symbolised the rebirth of the area, it was created with enthusiasm and a tiny grant. It is a common misperception to view artists as people who are subsidised by the state, who take money out. In fact, the artists subsidise the work more than anyone. My friends and contemporaries earn many times what I earn. Most artists work for little or nothing in order to fulfill their passion and to make a contribution to their culture.

In education there is overwhelming evidence that engagement with art enables students to synthesise complex ideas, enhance their self esteem, be more confident of their place in a complex world and understand other points of view.

Even on the most narrow materialistic appreciations of the arts they can contribute significantly. In the last few years we have had increasing interest in Blast Theory's work from the commercial sector. Companies like Siemens, Motorola and Nike have approached us and in response we have established a new company - Everpresence - to exploit these opportunities. Having taken modest amounts of state funding in the UK we are now exporting our work around the world and through Everpresence starting a dynamic new company.

In a global economy in which knowledge and creativity is an ever more highly prized resource there is a fantastic opportunity for a small, vibrant and welcoming community such as Adelaide. We were shocked when, upon being invited here for the Thinkers in Residence programme, we discovered that of the six leading creative Australians that we knew around the world, every one was originally from Adelaide. Clearly there is no shortage of fantastic talent here. Equally telling however was the fact that they have all moved to Sydney, London or New York to build their careers.

Over the last 30 years the festival culture in this city has brought the cream of the world's culture here to the obvious delight of locals and visitors. It has given Adelaide a global reputation. I would argue however that in the future there needs to be a shift away from bringing global culture in to Adelaide and towards creating a globally significant culture in the state that is then exported outwards. The episodic nature of festivals may be good for audiences but is not ideal for artists because it leads to feast and famine. Artists thrive in a mixed economy in which there are plentiful creative opportunities at a variety of scales on a persistent basis. In London artists thrive on the piecemeal work generated by other richer industries such as music and advertising. I think it is a critical goal to establish and nurture a community of young artists and recent graduates in this city and to convince them that they can use this city as a platform to international success. For modest amounts of money it is possible to build a very significant creative community.

The generation of Young British Artists who have conquered the world such as Damien Hirst, Gillian Wearing and Tracy Emin almost all came from Goldsmiths College, a small and previously relatively undistinguished university in South London. Portishead, Massive Attack and Tricky are only the best known of a wave of bands who emerged from a tiny community of musicians in Bristol. So it is with the Dogme film makers in Denmark and with fashion from Antwerp. A relatively small city such as Adelaide has huge potential. This is a city of tight networks and informal contacts in which face to face interactions are the norm. That Adelaide is cheap to live in and has a fantastic quality of life provides a fertile ground for creativity. Now that trade is increasingly electronic or intellectual the city's distance from the great world centres matters less and less.

Creativity is widely understood as a vital part of a forward looking, healthy society. At all levels of education and training there is a renewed focus on how innovation is lead by creativity. We have done a range of consultancy work in Europe on this exact area and while here in Adelaide I participated in the Creativity Think Tank as part of the Department of Education's Learning to Learn project. We were also fortunate to be hosted by the Technology School of the Future in Hindmarsh who lead the way in using technology to foster creativity.

Like "Innovation", "Creativity" is a word that you can't argue with. It seems to inherently be A GOOD THING. But I would like to explore a little further what we mean by creativity. In my experience it is not a neat, sunny attribute like enthusiasm. It is often awkward, oppositional, disruptive and antagonistic. Looking at the seminal creative people of the last century they are often marginal up to their moment of greatest impact and, in many cases, revert to the margins soon after that moment. Jackson Pollock is one example of a man whose career was intense, transforming our understanding

of painting but began to fade almost as soon as he came to prominence. William Burroughs and Francis Bacon were unfocused drifters well into their late thirties.

We can all be creative. Expressing ourselves is a critical part of being human and to refine those skills – whether in DJing or in needlework, in our style of dress or in our use of language – is life affirming and contributes to our society. But most of us are fairly tame most of the time: my poetry would make anyone in this room shudder. Most of the time our attempt to be creative is merely aping what we have seen elsewhere. Witness the Sunday painter's crude pastiche of the great artists of the past.

The truly great creative people find their voice with such precision, such depth and surefootedness that we see their individual identity in a way that is shocking and delightful in equal measure. This applies to Woody Allen or New Order, to Krystof Kieslowski or Lucian Freud. Most of us cannot do this. Ironically many of them cannot stop doing it; they are to some extent trapped by their talent.

Britain has a great tradition of producing creative people but it is notoriously antagonistic. We rarely venerate our talent. We attack it, question it and often undermine it. Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin are mocked in the mainstream press with thudding predictability. This creates a febrile, overheated public dialogue with many problems such as a lack of serious discussion, damage to the individuals concerned and a focus on personalities rather than outputs but it also engenders a constant challenge to the status quo. You are no sooner top of the pile than you are being called upon to defend your right to be there. This is in stark contrast to countries such as France where respect for artists and creativity is very high. Their leading exponents of creativity are feted and treated as national treasures. Of course this is a more civilised system: it rewards creative people and respects them for their achievement. But it also enforces and upholds the status quo because those who are venerated stick around for years or for decades dominating the wider discourse. Neither the British nor the French approach can be deemed correct: but they create radically different kinds of culture.

Creativity cannot be corralled or neatly controlled. It doesn't usually arrive between 9am and 5pm. It is unruly and surprising. The very best ideas are often treated with scepticism and disdain. British inventor Trevor Baylis spent many years touting his clockwork radio before he could finally convince someone that this was a new technology that would transform the flow of information in the developing world. Marcel Duchamp's Urinal was seen as an insult, a mockery, childish, stupid, lacking skill and thought when it was first exhibited. Today we see it as important precisely because he saw so much further than anyone previously about the status of the artist and the art object.

All of which shows that if we are serious about fostering risk, innovation and creativity we have to be brave, open minded and intellectually enquiring. The only reliable method of achieving these goals that I know is to search out creative people and give them space, time and support in order to enable them to reach their potential. And in terms of returns for this nurturing, the maximum gains are reached by supporting people early in their career. In effect, we are talking about research and development.

In corporate circles L'Oreal is held up as a template for the successful application of R&D. The fortunes of the company were transformed during the 90s by an aggressive expansion of research and development with a budget in the hundreds of millions of dollars. A steady flow of market leading products began to flow and repaid the investment many times over.

In the UK the funding bodies for Higher Education have long championed R&D but now they are beginning to see the value of interdisciplinary collaborations. The Arts and Humanities Research Board has created an Innovations fund and has created Research Fellowships to support this activity and Nick is currently a recipient of one of the fellowships. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council is now following suit. The European Union has a track record of supporting major multi partner collaborations between artists and scientists and companies. Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality Lab are part of a consortium with Sony, Nokia, It's Alive - a Swedish company that has pioneered mobile phone gaming - and five other research organisations that will spend 3 and a half years researching pervasive gaming.

What is crucial in all these processes is that the outcomes are not certain. This is the difference between development and innovation. In development we can plan for the outcomes in advance and measure the subsequent achievements against that plan. In order to innovate we must step into the unknown. This is not to say that the process should lack planning, rigour or careful assessment. This is not about handing resources over in return for a vague promise. It is about calculating the risks, weighing up the options and then taking a chance. It involves being prepared for the unexpected, for the oblique. It requires faith in the medium to long term: results do not come at a predictable time or in a predictable way.

But as many artists have begun working with digital tools their skills have dramatically converged with the new industries of gaming, special effects, web design and so on. Artists who can script, who can programme, who can edit, who can design are increasingly common.

All of this means that the potential for partnerships between artists, scientists, games developers, broadcasters and the wider new media industry are growing fast. Now is the perfect time to take action to foster this process. One of the international tasks that needs to be achieved in order to maximise this process is a thorough overhaul of the Intellectual Property laws. As currently configured they offer scant protection to small teams of creative people: the painstaking lobbying by large corporations is inscribed in every facet of the international system.

Our work *Can You See Me Now?* was commissioned by a consortium of BBC Online, the Arts Council of England, the advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi, a television production company and a conference. We received £10,000 in cash to create a new work. Professor Steve Benford who heads the MRL supported our idea and through staff time and the loan of hardware leveraged our initial funding three or four fold. We then created a work that ran for a total of six hours to a few hundred people in Sheffield in December 2000. Then it began to attract attention overseas. Then it was nominated for an Interactive Arts BAFTA. Then BBC Interactive approached us to make a TV programme based on the idea. Then the piece won the Golden Nica for Interactive Art at the Prix Ars Electronica in Austria.

At the same time we were creating a range of other works, some more expensive and more high profile. We had no way of knowing ourselves where the most successful outcomes would be. Any funder, assessor or potential partner would have had equal difficulty identifying those outcomes. And it is in that kind of trust and faith that the strongest partnerships are built. Blast Theory has no written agreement with the Mixed Reality Lab that covers our collaborations: we have worked on trust and will continue to do so.

Throughout the early years of Blast Theory's development we relied on the support of a few key funders and partners in order to survive. It was only after nearly a decade of promise and incremental development that we found our voice and widespread recognition.

Part of the key to our success was the fostering of regional and national funding agencies. The Arts Council played a key role in brokering relationships with the BBC and with universities. Key officers at the British Council helped us to build relationships with foreign promoters and curators.

I believe that the kind of strategies that I have outlined:

- fostering a vibrant, local creative community through seed funding
- government support to build relationships between art, science and commerce

- exporting Adelaide's creativity around the world
- creating a broad commitment to innovation and creativity in the widest sense

have the capacity to build a thriving new media economy, arts community and research environment in South Australia.

We have had a fantastic three months in this city. I want to express my gratitude to all the partners in the Thinkers In Residence programme who made this trip possible.

Thank you very much.