

Aug. 6, 2005. 01:00 AM

Games without frontiers

Life-sized games of Capture the Flag, Scotland Yard, Manhunt and Pac-Man have hit the streets

It's not just adults refusing to grow up — it's about making better use of public spaces, *by Raju Mudhar*

RAJU MUDHAR

This city is a playground.

While most of us have fun in the city in conventional ways — heading to bars, restaurants, concerts, theatres and, occasionally, the park — there is a new breed of fun that is literally taking to the streets.

Large-scale adult versions of traditional kids' games such as Capture the Flag are being played in some of the most urban areas of Toronto and other cities. They have attracted a sometimes nostalgic audience looking for cheap alternatives to the typical outing. Known as urban regressive games, big games or street games, these large-scale events are taking on a life of their own.

This morning at 11:30, people are meeting for the second round of Live Action Scotland Yard. Joel Friesen, a 27-year-old graphics designer and delivery guy originally from Victoria, came up with the rules and concept for the adult, human-sized version of the kids' board game created by Ravensburger Games. He organized the first match two weeks ago.

"I played board games and I used to play this game a lot when I was a kid. When I first moved here 18 months ago, I was looking at the subway map, and I was just trying to get myself oriented in the city, and I started realizing that this would be a pretty cool map to play a game on. And I just started thinking about it, and the more I did, the easier it was for it to become a reality," says Friesen, whose father is a mapmaker.

"It's got a good mixture of everything. In the original game, you need three different types of transportation and Toronto has them — the subway, the streetcar and the bus."

Scotland Yard and other urban games may be seen as the next generation of scavenger hunts, aided by cell phones and the Internet. Cells have allowed games to become more complex (rather than having to find a pay phone to communicate with other players) while the Internet has meant organizers could attract a wider audience and play against total strangers.

Friesen put the idea for Scotland Yard up on his site at <http://www.culturehole.com> and it was quickly forwarded around the web, winding up on the front page of Slashdot (<http://www.slashdot.org>), which immediately sent "like 6,000 or 7,000 hits to my web page in the first hour," he says.

Two weeks ago, 15 people showed up for the fun and the group played two full games that lasted about two hours each. By all accounts it was a rollicking good time.



Participants in last month's inaugural round of Capture the Flag in Kensington Market. More than 70 people showed up.

"One person, this girl Amy, just missed Mr. X (the fugitive) as he got on a streetcar, so she jumped into a cab and yelled, 'Follow that streetcar!'" he says with a laugh.

Another game, Manhunt, which describes itself as "regressive hide-and-peek that's totally rad" on its home page (<http://www.manhunt-toronto.com>), is the local granddaddy of these games. Organizer Matt Collins, 26, who works in an art store and plays in local bands Ninja High School and Robocopp, started the games last year. The players meet each Thursday at 9:30 p.m. in a different part of the city. This week it was the Distillery District. Next week: Bay St.

Collins started the game for a simple reason: he was bored.

"It really was a looking-for-more-to-do kind of thing. I mean, you can only go to so many bars over and over, and be in the same spaces over and over again, spending all your money," he says. "I started thinking about the game a lot, and I used to play Capture the Flag a lot when I was 13, and I just figured that a lot of those games had a lot of socialization that I thought would be totally applicable to people my age, and older, for that matter."

Collins has been told to grow up and act his age, but he's unapologetic.

"People talk about growing up. It's not what you do, it's why you do things," he says. "Does that mean throwing your bike away to get a car, because that's the grown-up thing to do? I don't think like that ... and people who do haven't really thought about why they do things."

Collins's Manhunt has also had a viral effect. Kevin Bracken, 18, and Lori Kufner, 19, played the game once, then organized versions in New York. When that was a success, they tried Capture the Flag. When they moved back here (Bracken is from New York, Kufner from Stouffville) they decided to try it again. Two Tuesdays ago, they organized a Capture the Flag game in Kensington Market via their website, <http://www.newmindspace.com>. To their complete shock, more than 70 people showed up.

The games have taken on some hipster cache, and also attract a share of role-playing-game geeks. Bracken believes it might be a generational thing.

"It seems like people are pulled toward it because we've got this generation called the twixters, and it seems like the people who are between 18 and 25 now are going to take, on average, a decade longer to get married than the generation before, and move around from job to job and apartment to apartment, and regressive gaming in urban settings seems to fit their way of life," says Bracken. "It's about recapturing youth or perhaps not falling victim to the same kind of drudgery that their parents did."

"It's important to change places," says Kufner. "We're into interactive arts."

The couple have organized citywide Easter egg hunts in Manhattan and this weekend are also holding a First Sunday Picnic at Christie Pits, an event that began in Sydney, Australia, where people hold a picnic the first Sunday of every month. The idea is to try to simultaneously hold picnics all over the world.

"Public space is our medium," says Bracken. "We're hoping to transform cities."

Taking back those public spaces is a big part of this trend.

Frank Lantz is a veteran games designer in New York, another city that is a breeding ground for these large-scale urban games. He was also an instructor for NYU's Interactive Telecommunications program, which came up with Pac-Manhattan (<http://www.pacmanhattan.com>), a live-action version of the classic arcade

game that took over the streets. Participants actually dress up like ghosts, in hot pursuit of a guy (or girl) in a yellow suit.

"I think there are a couple of different reasons that these games are around. Gaming is evolving as a bigger part of popular culture and play is becoming a bigger part of grown-up lives. People are also exploring different kinds of games," says Lantz in a phone interview.

"Right now, a big part of some of the street-game culture is a bit of childhood games. People in their 20s and 30s are playing kickball or hide-and-peek and nostalgia is driving that. But it's also driven by a new sense of public spaces and being open to the playful uses or misuses of those spaces," he says.

It's a phenomenon that shows no sign of losing steam. In fact, it's spreading, as news of these games travels via the Internet. There have been copycats of many of these games around the world, and they have also found interest at the corporate level.

"There are people wanting to play Capture the Flag, or perhaps they already have, in Edmonton, Ottawa and London, England," says Bracken.

"And Manhunt was played in London and Paris just after we played in New York, because some people who used to play in Toronto went there," says Kufner.

Lantz sees our increasingly technology-driven culture as a driving force behind this adult play; we long for tangible sources of stimulation and socialization. He says in the future people will find better ways to use technologies such as cell phones and incorporate them into large-scale games.

Recently, Lantz helped start Area/Code, a company that specializes in creating these games. His company is working on a project for Nokia and is in talks with several ad agencies.

Friesen has also been approached by a company to come up with a new game. He's thinking of doing something zombie-based and hopes to have it ready by Christmas.

Just like Toronto's various *Amazing Race* knockoffs, such as the Bell CityChase — which prove that urban games can be a viable marketing tool — corporate sponsors could seize on these grassroots events. But would pushing large-scale games into the mainstream cause a backlash?

Hard to say. At this point, the only ideology behind the movement is to capture flags — and the spirit of youth in the process.

> [Get great home delivery subscription deals here!](#)

[FAQs](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [My Subscription](#)

[Home](#) | [GTA](#) | [Business](#) | [Waymoresports](#) | [A&E](#) | [Life](#)

Legal Notice: Copyright Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Distribution, transmission or republication of any material from www.thestar.com is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. For information please contact us using our [webmaster form](#). www.thestar.com online since 1996.

