Blast Theory first hit the headlines by kidnapping people in the name of art. Now it is restaging the Gulf War. Lyn Gardner signs up for the duration

A few minutes, hours, or even weeks after experiencing Blast Theory’s Desert Rain you could be rooting through your bag or pockets when you suddenly discover something you didn’t know you had. It is a small plastic box that contains 100,000 grains of sand.

One hundred thousand is the figure some put on the number of Iraqi civilians in the Gulf war. Others claim less, while some argue that only a few hundred died, maybe fewer. When, after the war, General Colin Powell was questioned about the number of Iraqi dead, he replied: “It’s really not a number I’m terribly interested in.”

The tiny, densely packed box in which every grain represents a life suddenly makes you interested. Turning it over in my hand, I thought of Lady Macbeth’s belated sense of horror at her own deeds. “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”

There is an irony in the fact that the Gulf war was the most reported conflict in history, yet nobody knows how many died. Blast Theory plays cleverly on this in Desert Rain, an event that is part performance, part installation and part computer game.

Blast Theory is the company that attracted admiration and approbation in 1998 for their project Kidnap. For this, members of the public paid £10 to enter a lottery, the winners of which would be put under surveillance, kidnapped and held in a secret location for 48 hours. Two entrants were duly selected, and video footage of their captivity was broadcast on the internet. While some criticised this blurring of the lines between crime and art, the project raised questions about the way media coverage of an event affects our perceptions of it. A typical response of those in the Kidnap internet chatroom was that they wanted the captors to be more horrible to the captives.

Desert Rain continues the company’s interest in new technologies and the way that major incidents are mediated through 24-hour news coverage. Here, the Gulf War — the first virtual war — comes under the microscope.

Blast Theory has found a way of presenting the Gulf War that makes it as accessible to teenage computer freaks as it is to academics. Six at a time, ticket-holders are invited into a briefing room and given human targets to locate. They are then each slipped into a tent-like cubicle, where they enter a virtual world of deserts, bunkers and tunnels projected on to a screen consisting of falling water. Using a foot-operated control panel, they must find their target and the exit within 20 minutes.

Unlike most computer games, the software used in Desert Rain allows the players to talk to and help each other. What’s more, the boundaries between real space and virtual reality become confused. Is the figure looming at me out of the light real or virtual?

Geeks may be disappointed that the graphics don’t measure up to PlayStation, but the experience does recreate some of the fear and disorientation that those on the ground during the Gulf war must have felt. Anxiety makes you start behaving in ways you wouldn’t have predicted.

When, with time fast running out, I accidentally locate the exit, I head for it, ignoring the others’ cries for help. Afterwards, as we head for the room where we will come face to face with video of each of our human targets, all turn out to have been real participants in the Gulf war; each has a distinct point of view — I cannot meet the gaze of my team-mates. I feel as if I really have let someone to die in the desert.

As with Kidnap, some will question whether Desert Rain is art or merely a prank; just a game or a genuine attempt to harness new technologies to performance. What seems certain is that Blast Theory’s piece is part of a growing trend in performances and installation that blur the line between spectator and participant.

“One of the things I’ve always found most exciting about theatre and performance is the way it creates bonds between total strangers,” says Blast Theory’s Matt Adams. “This project just takes that idea further. There’s no real difference between the participants in Desert Rain and the audience at the theatre looking at an actor in a tinfoil crown and believing he is a King.”

Desert Rain is at Riverside Studios, London W6 0DD. Tel: 020 837 7111. From Sunday, 10th hours to 3rd July and 9th July.