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Lost in cyberspace and a hostage to fortune

PERFORMANCE

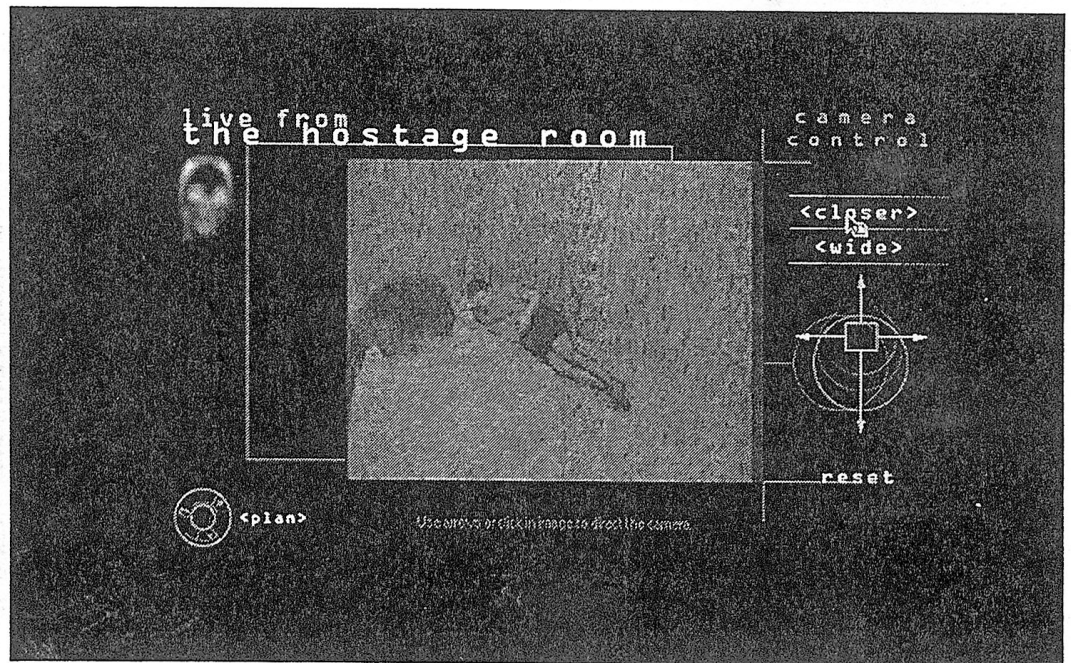
KIDNAP

BLAST THEORY

A YOUNG man in a khaki T-shirt stands up, sits down, fiddles with his sock, crosses his feet, uncrosses his feet, stands up, lies down, rubs his nose. Across the room, a woman with long brown hair coughs, adjusts her mini-skirt, tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, tugs again at her skirt, coughs some more. "Mumble mumble, Radio 4 mumble," says the man. "Mumble library..." says the woman. Silence. Cough. Silence.

It could have been a scene from a Harold Pinter play, but we are actually watching two kidnap victims cooped up in their safe-house, live on the Internet. A couple of months ago the hostages paid a £10 fee to enter an abduction lottery organised by experimental theatre company Blast Theory. Now the "lucky winners" have been nabbed and locked in a tiny featureless room, its ceiling, floor and windowless walls lined with coarse chipboard.

At home on the web, viewers peer at these two trapped flies. At the twitch of a mouse you can pan the camera round the cell, strain to catch a snatch of conversation, watch as the abductees don pillow-case hoods as their captors enter the room. "Can't you make them do something?" asks a net-watcher, typing into the on-line chat room. "This is so boring."



Kidnapped: hostage Deborah Burgess live on the Net

"Wouldn't it be lovely if they fell in love," coos Helen from Blast Theory, staring into the computer at the digital Kidnap HQ at London's ICA (there is another control room at Manchester's Green Room). "I keep looking, just in case."

"Describe your fantasy kidnap," the application forms had asked. Chocolate, buxom wenches, unlimited women's magazines, handsome aristocrats, replied the applicants. No one mentioned stale sandwiches and chipboard.

At 9pm on Tuesday, 27-year-old Australian temp Deborah Burgess went for a drink at the Rat & Parrot on Gloucester Road. As she headed off for the lavatory, three abductors frog-

marched her up the stairs and bundled her into a van. She should have received a letter warning her she was under surveillance: she had not. The Blast Theory application form was a distant memory. If she had remembered, she might not have gone out that evening in high heels, stockings and a crocheted mini-skirt.

She had read all the disclaimers, agreed to the conditions, begged the theatre company to "please pick me"; she'd been loving the past couple of months' travelling in England and this would be "the icing on the cake". Like an S&M experimentee, she could have stopped the action by calling out her safe word. So why

should we feel sorry for her? Was this any different from a TV gameshow grab?

Try seeing her red-eyed and lank-haired, snagged skirt and heavily laddered legs, 61 hours later, released into the camera-flashing glare of a press conference. Do Blast Theorists Matt Adams and Ju Row Farr feel guilty? "Why?" they ask. "We played by the rules. It was quite hard for us being bored watching you being bored."

Did it feel like theatre? "I know they were performing," says Deborah, chin quivering, "but for me it was real."

JUDITH PALMER

www.newmediacentre.com/kidnap/