

# CITYlife

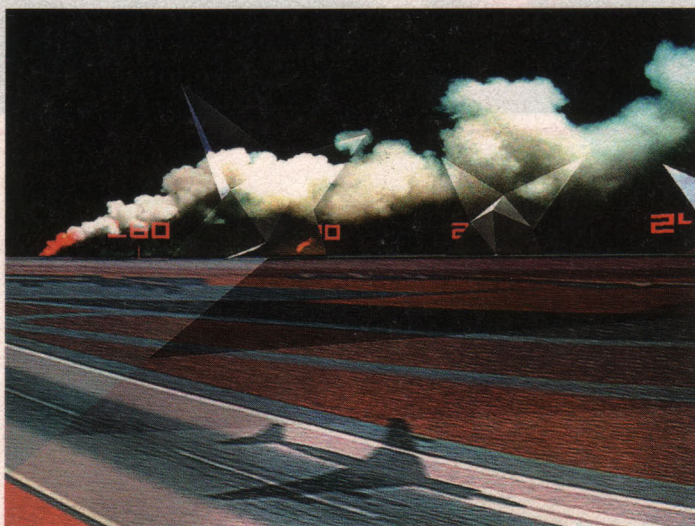
EVERYTHING THAT'S MANCHESTER

## anything that moves

**Tim Birch** straps himself in for virtual ethics of Blast Theory's new war game

**I**nterFace is a series of 'creative collaborations in arts and technology' promoted by Digital Summer. Aside from Function (see Snapshots, page 4), Blast Theory detonate their latest work rather fittingly in the spacious confines of Upper Campfield Market. As their name suggests, artist's collective Blast Theory have become rather notorious in recent years for work which tests the boundaries of digital discourse and the popular consciousness of wider society. In 1998 for example, they caused more than a ripple or two with their *Kidnap* project which saw a couple of (lucky?) lottery winners the victim of an enforced 48 hour stint of solitary confinement: nonetheless broadcast live across the web to millions. The group's new work, *Desert Rain*, could be loosely pitched as an interactive 3-D game-of-sorts. Yet significantly, it is intended as a virtual reality installation and performance in equal measures. Thus, the event promises contemporary 'digital' aesthetics plus much food for thought.

The piece is inspired by the dehumanisation of war, at least at the American end of things, given 'smart' bombs,



missile-mounted cameras, remotely-piloted military hardware, etc. So in a sense, *Desert Rain* ought to be a 'smart' experience all round. The title clearly references America's (virtual?) invasion of the middle east in the '90s, and the on site installation conjures up flashbacks of the televisual 'mediascape' that has been the recent transmission of war coverage: unnatural night vision, shadowy attack planes fading into the darkness, brilliant phosphorescent explosions; all without the direct involvement of American ground troops.

Accordingly, Blast Theory have nudged this consciousness further into the realm of the filmic or unreal. Visitors enter in groups of six and are given an electronic

swipecard of a person they must find. They leave their coats and bags and get suited up (hooded black jackets - Hmm, very Manc). Then in total darkness, visitors are led to an antechamber where they find themselves standing on a footpad (one foot in the future, eh?). Here, 'rain screens' provide for cinemascope surfaces of fine water spray which carry the projected image of a virtual world, navigable by that foot pad. 20 minutes later, having negotiated day and night/war and peace amidst the arid landscape, you're back in the 'real' world. Whether or not you've accomplished your rescue mission, you will probably have just had a unique, audiovisual experience to savour. But before you have a chance to, *Blast Theory* abruptly and effectively confront the 'playful' with other people's reality in the shape of video clips of soldiers recounting their experiences of warfare. Seemingly the final twist, there may still be a surprise or two planted in your clothing while you were at play. Intrigued?

*Desert Rain* is at Upper Campfield Market, Arcade, Deansgate, 5-9 October. It begins every 30 minutes from 12noon-9pm and advance booking is strongly advised. The cost of war is £6/£4 with groups of six getting a £6 discount: so get a group together. Contact the Cornerhouse box office on 200 1500. Meanwhile, you can preview it (stills only) at [www.blasttheory.co.uk](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk).