

'Something happened last night, and I was there!' Karen Charlesworth talks to London art collective Blast Theory about their BAFTA-nominated art installation, Desert Rain.

By Karen Charlesworth

#### Product used:

- [Adobe Photoshop®](#)
- [Adobe After Effects®](#)
- [Adobe Illustrator®](#)



London, 1991: the dawning of electronic art, the infancy of multimedia, the earliest days of interactivity. In the Renoir Cinema in Bloomsbury Square, one cashier, one usher and two bar staff are meeting to discuss their ideas for an artists' collective. The collective will go from strength to strength: in the year after their formation, founders Ju Row Farr and Matt Adams (an art graduate of Goldsmith's College and an actor/director respectively) will find a newspaper article on a Northern Ireland incident called *Gunmen Kill Three* and will hire a church hall in Islington to mount a reconstruction; by pure coincidence, they will stumble across a friend of a friend who can 'do' computer graphics, and they will incorporate these into the work. And that's how the story of [Blast Theory](#) begins...

#### Desert Rain clip 1

[View hi-res QuickTime clip \(1.6Mb\)](#)

[View lo-res QuickTime clip \(1Mb\)](#)

Time: 1m 09s

"We definitely wouldn't call ourselves digital artists," says [Matt Adams](#), Blast Theory founder member. "I think we see ourselves more as artists who are focused on a particular set of ideas, and who look for media which are appropriate to the ideas. Digital ways of working do come into the equation quite a bit, though - they have a particular relevance to the themes we're trying to communicate." Blast Theory's recent work uses a weird and wonderfully eclectic mix of the characteristic elements of computer games, installations and performance art pieces, with the accent firmly on interactivity.



But despite avoiding the term 'digital artists', since 1994, when Blast Theory collaborated with a group of Royal College of Art students on an interactive piece called *Stampede*, much of the collective's work has been put together using digital tools. "It's strange in a way to think that we didn't come across Photoshop until four or five years ago," Matt muses. "It's such a staple of our work now that we couldn't live without it."

#### Desert Rain clip 2

[View hi-res QuickTime clip \(745K\)](#)

[View lo-res QuickTime clip \(500K\)](#)

Time: 0m 32s

Mixing disciplines is a characteristic of Blast Theory's work. "We like to cross the boundaries between performance and live event - to make something that turns out differently every night," says Matt. "With *Gunmen Kill Three*, for instance, we offered a paintball gun to members of our audiences who hadn't fired a gun before, and invited them to shoot at members of the cast. It provoked full-on arguments and a lot of tension amongst our audiences. We aim to send an audience away with the feeling that 'something happened last night, and I was there!'"



Something definitely happened on the night that Professor Steve Benford of Nottingham University's Mixed Reality lab came to see a Blast Theory show. "We'd been playing with projecting video onto a water spray, and when Steve saw it he was immediately enthused," says Matt. "His work looks at the boundaries between real and virtual space: when he saw this permeable screen, that was so tangible, with such a strong atmosphere, and the sound of running water, he immediately realised the possibilities." And so began *Desert Rain*, a two-and-a-half-year collaboration between Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality lab that was nominated

#### Desert Rain clip 3

[View hi-res QuickTime clip \(632K\)](#)

[View lo-res QuickTime clip \(420K\)](#)

Time: 0m 25s

in this year's BAFTA Interactive awards.



Part computer game, part virtual reality installation projected onto a water spray screen, *Desert Rain* looks at the idea of representations of reality in the context of war - very specifically, the Gulf War. "It's fairly well accepted that the Gulf War was fought as much in press conferences as on the actual battle lines, and we were intrigued by how you create a - topography, almost, that copes with the bleeding between those different spaces," Matt says. "That's further complicated by the fact that so much military training these days is done by simulator." *Desert Rain* - which tasks its audience with finding six 'targets' in a virtual reality space who turn out to be real-life Gulf War veterans - hinges on a little-publicised Gulf War incident in which simulator-trained American soldiers on the USS Vincennes opened fire on a civilian Iraqi plane, believing it to be a hostile Iraqi fighter, killing all 270 people on board. "It's a terrible example of how simulations of reality corrupt one's tactile sense of the real, physical world," says Matt. *Desert Rain* considers also the idea of reportage, and how accurately or otherwise war events can be represented in the media: "It's almost an epistemological enquiry," Matt says. "It asks: in the age of mass media, how do you know what's real, what's really happening in Israel and Palestine and Iraq?"

Photoshop was Blast Theory's key tool for developing and manipulating images, while After Effects was used for titling and video compositing. "We did a lot of the designing and testing of the virtual world in Illustrator, which was great: simple and easy to use," says Matt.

After initial runs at the NOW99 festival in Nottingham, and the ZKM media centre in Karlsruhe, Germany, *Desert Rain* is now toured for part of each year. Cities participating in the planned 2001 tour include Middlesbrough, Rotterdam, Karlsruhe, Athens and Bruges: if you'd like to see and take part in *Desert Rain*, email [Blast Theory](#).

After experiencing *Desert Rain*, Adobe UK contributor [Karen Charlesworth](#) fears that she may never play another VR simulated computer game in her life.

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*Desert Rain* clip 4

[View hi-res QuickTime clip \(632K\)](#)

[View lo-res QuickTime clip \(420K\)](#)

Time: 0m 58s

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