It's news from the desert front – and you're calling the shots

Lenny Ann Low

Sealed inside a virtual war game, your mission is to define the lines between fiction and reality.

Amid four tonnes of sand, a motel room and a maze of desert warfare, the British-based art collective Blast Theory is seeking members of the public to enter virtual conflict.

Within a large-scale work, Desert Rain – a combination of performance, art installation and computer game – participants must negotiate a virtual and real-life world mimicking CNN-style coverage of the Gulf War.

“It's not really about the Gulf War,” said Matt Adams, a member of the group.

“It's about the way that you try and know the world in an age of electronic media.

“Because you’re getting information from so many different sources, in so many different ways, in so many bite-sized segments, there’s this incredible sort of slipperiness around what is tangible.”

The installation, which cost $63,000 to bring to Australia after touring Britain and Europe since 1998, investigates the new ubiquitous presence of instantaneous news coverage of global conflict.

In collaboration with the Communications Research Group at Nottingham University, the Blast Theory collective explores the way world events are mediated by 24-hour news services and how media coverage of an event affects our perception of it.

After surrendering their possessions, six members of the public don anoraks and microphone headsets and are zipped into individual tent-like cubicles.

Briefed to locate human targets, they use foot pedals to travel virtually and physically through deserts and underground bunkers.

Participants work together to survive a world projected on a curtain of falling water and interact with human performers along the way.

At the end of the 20-minute piece, players are led to a room to discover the effects of their action and meet their targets.

The group insists it is not describing all news services as “evil”, but Adams points out that news coverage increasingly imitates computer games modelled on past conflicts.

“During Operation Desert Fox in 1998, when the US and the UK were bombing Iraq again, they were using graphical icons of tanks,” he said.

“During the Gulf War itself, they were using names like ‘Showdown in the Gulf’.

“One of the most exciting, and scary, moments of touring Desert Rain was doing it in London and BBC journalists coming and going: ‘You just don’t know how scary it is. You're right, but it’s even worse than you think’.

Desert Rain is at Artspace in Woolloomooloo from tomorrow.

Almost as scary as the real thing... Blast Theory's Ju Row Farr performs in the Desert Rain installation at Artspace. Photo: Andrew Meares