Comrades in virtual war

INTERACTIVE ART
Desert Rain
Tramway
Run ended

ART guerrillas Blast Theory made a critical splash two years ago when they held a series of raffles and then kidnapped the winner for two days. This blurring of crime and art happening caused a bit of a brouhaha, even though the kidnappee was complicit with the group.

But their latest project, a touring work produced with Nottingham University’s School of Computer Science, doesn’t take any such prisoners. Using the hyper-reality of the Gulf War as a jumping-off point, Desert Rain combines installation, video, water, sand and – woo hoo! – an interactive computer game with walkie-talkie communication to create a surprisingly insightful and thought-provoking critique.

Would-be commandoes are deployed in groups of up to six, each kitted out in drab macs, assigned a specific target to track down and led into the isolation of a fabric tent. Inside your own little theatre of war, a pair of headphones hooks you up to ambient battle babble while a microphone allows you to awkwardly communicate with other players.

The first-person perspective game engine is smooth and well-executed, and the usual blockiness of computer-generated virtual reality is diffused by the clever use of falling water as a projection screen. Your mission is to rescue your target and escape to the exit with all your comrades-in-arms within 20 minutes.

Swiping the credit card bearing your rescued target’s name conjures a video of their real-life experience in the Gulf War. And when you’re ushered out of a side-door, blinking and disoriented in the sunlight, you find a tiny box of sand in your jacket pocket containing roughly 10,000 grains, alluding to the unclear number of Iraqi dead.

A beautifully realised and unexpectedly involving experience.

Graeme Virtue
Performance
Desert Rain, Tramway, Glasgow
Keith Bruce

I was taught to swim three times (I forgot twice), so it is no surprise that I am completely rubbish at video games. Hence the fact that I cannot tell you what happens at the end of the virtual reality sequence of Blast Theory’s devastating critique of the Gulf War. I did find my target, Tony, who turned out to be a tourist who found himself in the wrong place at entirely the wrong time, but I fear I failed to find my way out of the war zone. Rather more fatally true for others, that was.

*Desert Rain* takes the memories most of us have of the Gulf War – the CNN pictures of cruise and scud missiles – and puts them in context. Briefed and sent on our way, the first part of the experience is a less boisterous version of *Laser Quest*. Others are clearly better qualified than I to assess that but it is certainly involving, if disorientating.

You exit through a shower and over a hill of sand into a mock-up of an anonymous hotel room, much like the one where the people you and your fellow players have been stalking have videotaped their testimonies. Every word they utter alters your view of the experience you have just had – and subsequent reminders of the downing of the Iranian Airbus and a post-match programme listing the songs the BBC un-playlisted at the time only reinforce that revision process.

It is brilliant, brief, and to the point – and available every half-hour between 4pm and 9 pm until next Saturday. Incidentally, this was the third different show I’ve attended at Tramway since it
'Til the wheels fall off

Pedal the special bike lanes, catch some Santa action or join the dreaming in Bicentennial Park.

BEST SMOOTH RIDE
RTA Cycle Sydney
Tackling Sydney on a bicycle is usually a tough ride along tight streets full of traffic. Sunday will be different as cyclists take advantage of special traffic-free lanes on an organised ride from North Sydney to Parramatta. There are two options: the 50km ride starting in St Leonards Park, North Sydney, or the 20km ride starting from Bray's Bay Reserve, Rhodes. Both finish at Parramatta Park. Bicycle lanes will be open on the Harbour Bridge, around The Rocks and Pyrmont.

BEST BEARDED BLOKE
David Jones Christmas Concert
Christmas comes early for the kids with a free, 90-minute family concert in Hyde Park featuring Bob the Builder, Fireman Sam, Blinky Bill and the Hooley Dooleys. Santa will make a grand entrance at 10am aboard Thomas the Tank Engine. He will then be joined on stage by Christmas fairies and carolers. After the show, Santa will ride back to David Jones's Good Food, Wine and Coffee weekend includes tastings of about 100 wines from Western Australia. There will also be coffee workshops, including instructions on making coffee cocktails, at 11am, 1pm and 3pm each day. Food will be cooked up by the Forum Piazza cafes and restaurants and celebrity chef Bart Seck will hold cooking demonstrations. Saturday and Sunday, 10am-6pm, $20 (for wine tasting), Italian Forum, Norton Street, Leichhardt, 9518 3396.

BEST HORSE FLESH
Dangerously Volcanic: Liverpool and the Boer War
Forty-six men from the Liverpool region were among the soldiers who fought in the Boer War. The world's first modern conflict, it incorporated guerrilla militia and media-driven battles. This exhibition includes the stories of the Liverpool soldiers and examines the commercialisation of their commitment. It opens at noon on Saturday with a special display by "K" Troop New South Wales Lancers, and a South African barbecue, including boerewors (sausage) and biltong (dried meat). Monday-Saturday until January 25. 10am-4pm, free, Liverpool Regional Museum, corner Hale Highway and Georges Drive, Liverpool, 9602 0315.

BEST COLD SHOULDER
Meet Live Saltwater Critters
Get up close and personal with a live baby saltwater crocodile, slithers (non-venomous) snakes, lizards and freshwater turtles. Brave souls with quick hands can hold and pat the reptiles. Keepers from the Reptile's Galore park will talk about the animals, their diet, habitat and the threats to their continued survival. Weekends until December 1, 1-3pm, free with museum admission $10/$6/$25 family, Australian National Maritime Museum, 2 Murray Street, Darling Harbour, 8929 3777.

BEST YOUNG WRITERS
Juvenile Conference
Before they wrote the works that established their literary reputations, writers such as Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters created imaginary worlds peopled with romantic heroines and brooding heroes. Speakers will examine the juvenile works of great writers, hoping to uncover their enduring appeal. Sunday, 10am-4pm, $55 (includes lunch and refreshments). John Rees Lecture Theatre, Australian Graduate School of Management, University of New South Wales, off Botany Street, Kensington, 9380 5984.

BEST ORGANS
Len Rawle and Cherubim & Seraphim
British theatre organist Len Rawle has 40 years' experience at the keyboard and his own Wurlitzer organ in his living room. This weekend he will play well-known orchestral hits and the best of the British composers on an original Wurlitzer Organ. Sunday, 2pm, $10/$5/$2.50, Marrickville Town Hall, Marrickville Road, Marrickville, 9429 2225. Music ought to be heavenly. Listen to the divine sounds of Guerrero, Vaughan Williams and William Harris with performances by organist Bernard Kirkpatrick and Sydney's cappella group Coro Inmonatika. Sunday, 3pm, $10/$5, St Scholastica's Chapel, corner Avenue and Arcadia roads, Glebe, 9641 4400.