Immortal combat

Want to replay the Gulf war as a video game? Blast Theory is staging one with a difference, says STEPHEN ARMSTRONG: you’re in it.

When I was 16, I used to play adventure games on a BBC Micro computer in the school chemistry lab with my mate Ed. We were speculating, as 16-year-old boys do, about the future of such games. Perhaps, we imagined, there would be a game one day where you actually found yourself in the world the computer created, where you could take part in adventures just as if it were real life. What we didn’t imagine was that when this finally arrived, it would be a piece of theatre.

But theatre it has turned out to be. Desert Rain is the new production from Blast Theory, the theatre company that last tweaked your cultural consciousness when it kidnapped two volunteers from 10 willing applicants and held them for 48 hours. For Desert Rain, the company worked with Professor Stephen Benford, from Nottingham University’s Computer Research Group, to produce an intertwining of computer game, installation, live performance and cultural polemic that it’s taking around Europe from November 11, returning to Glasgow in May. It warmed up at the Now magazine festival in Nottingham at the end of October and found the audience mixed traditional theatre-goers with mad-for-it teenagers.

Only six audience members attend each performance. They are picked up from a predetermined location and ferried to a deserted warehouse on the outskirts of town. They are led to a darkened waiting room, where each “player” is given a magnetic swipe card and watches a series of instructions unfold on a TV screen. They are to find a target — whose name is written on the back of a swipe card.

Then, at a time, they are led from the waiting room and zipped into a fabric cubicle, where they negotiate a virtual desert projected on to a wall of fine water spray as they struggle to reach the name on their card. Once through the game ends and they are led forward through the water and over a huge sand dune to a hotel room.

Here, there’s a television set through which they swipe their card. If they find their target, the real person that name represents appears on screen and talks about their experience of the war. There’s a soldier, a journalist, a tourist, a peace worker, a television viewer and an actor who played a part in the Gulf war drama The One That Got Away.

This change from virtual to real is remarkably sudden and strangely disconcerting. Previously, we have been within the well-accepted paradigm of the computer game. We know the rules. In the computer game, recent history can become a playground. We can romp across sand dunes and care little for the life-or-death consequences of our actions. If we had the power to shoot opponents or destroy buildings, it wouldn’t seem strange to us. It’s a computer game, after all, and in computer games, we are immortal.

Computer games allow us back in the schoolyard to play Cowboys and Indians or War without connecting to the lessons of such encounters. In the mock-up hotel room, the videos actually make that connection. Most of the “names” talk about casualties. None of them can agree as to how many Iraqis died. Very few, the journalist says. Hundreds of thousands, the soldier says. They talk about propaganda and about the desert, how vast and hot it seems. They discuss how the war made them feel. Some support it, some condemn it, some aren’t too sure.

“We used the videos to illustrate points about the war, using the theory of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard that the Gulf war never happened because it was a virtual event,” explains Matt Adams, a member of Blast Theory. “Of course the war did happen, but we recognise that this idea touches on a crucial shift in our perception and understanding of the world around us. It asserts that the role of the media, advertising and the entertainment industries in the presentation of events is casually misleading at best and perniciously deceptive at worst. If we can’t even agree on the casualties in a war that was filmed every minute of every day…”

It’s a powerful piece and it excites curious emotions in the few viewers who are able to take part in the game. As a company, Blast Theory seems finally to offer Britain a theatre group that delves into our popular culture to create deeply challenging work. According to Adams, this is a result of the way it began.

“In 1990, there was a group of us working at the Rondo Theatre in Bloomsbury Square,” he says. “There was a DJ, a dancer, an artist, a philosopher and a guy who used to work in advertising. We were all ursers or cashiers, and didn’t have a history of having watched much theatre. We were more interested in club culture and started from a position of total naivity.”

He’s particularly proud of the final minutes of the performance. As the audience leave, they pass a description of the shooting down of an Iranian airliner by a US ship. Their bags are returned and inside they find a bag of sand containing 100,000 grains. If you have trouble understanding casualties, the bag is meant to say, this is what 100,000 looks like.
FRINGE THEATRE: A giant computer war game has become the art world's most technologically ambitious installation, Hettie Judah reports

Deadly serious as the rest of the world may be about new technologies, by and large the art world only seems prepared to embrace them in a clever-clever smirky fashion. The idea, presumably, being that it is fine to learn how to use computer programs or digital film technology, but that if you engage in them too earnestly, you are in danger of losing your status as a bona fide boundary-busting art type and getting mistaken for something impossibly mundane, such as a graphic designer or, God forbid, a computer programmer.

There is, therefore, a tendency only to engage in new technologies on a level that makes the technology look defunct, or at least less intelligent than the artist. The overwhelming message seems to be that while new technologies have been accepted into the increasingly nebulous entity that is art, their entry has been lubricated by a considerable squirt of ironic humour. It is art, but it is art with a wink.

As with everything these days, this ironic technology tendency comes with its own anarchist fringe: a group of artists who are profoundly serious not only about the role of technology in the modern world but also about the way that it can be harnessed as an art form. Of primary importance within this fringe is a company called Blast Theory, whose work Desert Rain, opening at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, on Friday, is possibly the most technologically ambitious art installation ever made.

Blast Theory is probably best known for its last work, Kidnap, which invited members of the public to offer themselves as potential kidnap victims. From the hundred-odd volunteers, two were selected, submitted to secret surveillance and then kidnapped and confined to a room, where their experiences were transmitted live on the web. Desert Rain is equally audacious — the technology involved is the result of a two-year project with Nottingham University’s Computer Research Group — but this time Blast Theory has set its sights on more concrete adversaries than privacy intrusion and real-life television. This time the targets are the military, the makers of computer games and those responsible for news coverage in a conflict zone.

Sombre as its aims may be, Desert Rain is exhilarating to experience at first hand. On the most obvious level it is a giant game for six players, each of whom is zipped into a canvas pod facing a screen of rain. On to this rain screen is projected a virtual world, roughly based on the desert terrain of the Gulf War. Linked by headsets, but unable to see each other, the six players must find their designated “target” and then negotiate their way out of an underground bunker together within an allotted timespan. Those who fail die. At the end of the game, each target is revealed to be a real person — soldier, reporter, aid worker and so on — and they tell the story of their experiences in the Gulf.

Blast Theory wants to explore Baudrillard’s description of the Gulf War as being the first virtual war, one experienced by most people through the medium of television, and to indicate the complexity that lies behind glib portrayals of the conflict by film and computer games. It also suggests that military training through action simulators, such as the ones used in the game, contribute to eliminating such worrisome variables as empathy from the effectiveness of a strike force. Desert Rain shows just how effectively virtual-reality devices dehumanise the enemy, suggesting that the pernicious effect of playing violent computer games is not that they glamorise violence, but that they teach the player to think of the world in terms of virtual targets rather than real people.
SCOTTISH THEATRE

Same Time, Next Year/
Desert Rain
Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh/
Tramway, Glasgow

Neil Cooper

WHEN the fag-end of the
free-love Sixties turned into the
Me Generation hangover of the
Seventies, the trickle-down
democratisation of the alleged
"permissive" society manifested
itself in many ways. Suddenly
everyone was swinging,
smoking "pot", talking
psycho-babble and still
managing to stay cool. Above
all, though, the Affair was the
thing, and adultery was in.
Stateside, glamour was the
allure, as mistresses became the
ultimate accessory.

Dating from 1975, Bernard
Slade's Same Time, Next Year
explores sexual and social
mores over 25 years in America
through the eyes of Doris and
George, an extended
one-night-stand who agree to
meet on the same weekend
every year.

In 1951, George is an all too
eager bunny who swithers
between feeling bad about
whether his wife will find out
and being too horny to care.
Doris's street-smart lack of
remorse shows signs of her
emancipation to come, as she
moves from motherhood to
sisterhood, from blow jobs to
nose jobs, if you will.

George, too, steps out on a
voyage of discovery. Both
eventually settle for a very
special form of non-committal
intimacy that would only be
spolit by over-familiarity.

David Robb's production,
featuring himself and Briony
McRoberts, is a slight if
well-executed affair that starts
in pithy, Neil Simon territory,
but moves in the second half
into more serious realms of
self-awareness, confusion and
out-and-out terror. Vietnam,
dropping out and midlife crises
are paramount. It is tender and
sincere, and, considering its
mid-Seventies premiere, not a
little risque in its frankness.

But, given what came after,
Same Time, Next Year now
looks far too frothy a period
piece. One wonders how, for
instance, Doris and George
would have coped with Aids
and the awful Eighties that
blighted generations beneath
them.

A generation was blighted in
a different way when the dawn
of the Nineties brought us the
Gulf War, now remembered
largely for being the first global
conflict to receive on the hour,
every hour television coverage.

With Desert Rain, Nottingham's
Blast Theory have tackled the
battle between disinformation
and out-and-out propaganda in
a suitably high-tech fashion, as
they put their six-strong
audience in the virtual frontline
care of an interactive computer
game scenario.

After being assigned targets
to seek out and destroy, each
individually surfs through a
digitally generated terrain, and
when mission is accomplished,
keeps to manoeuvre their
way to the safety of a hotel
room. Time is of the essence,
and not many return alive.

As a microcosm of the
pressures faced in battle
conditions, Desert Rain is
sweaty and not a little scary.
This is especially when one
makes it back to base to
discover, via video link, that
one's target was a real-life peace
worker or accidental tourist.

This is where the visceral
thrill of the chase becomes
ambiguous, and not a little
hollow, as the consequences of
military actions become clear.

Desert Rain probably works
best for video-game addicts, but
in tackling the ongoing
cartoonification of and
de-sensitisation to violence, it
opens up the body bag and lets
the wounds speak for
themselves.