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 intermeshing 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 ninety9 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 preordained 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, one 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 mocked-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 were a group of us working at the Renoir 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 ushers 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 naivety."

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. ❑

WWW

blasttheory@easynet.co.uk
Official site, including tour details

Cyberwar and the six deadly sims

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
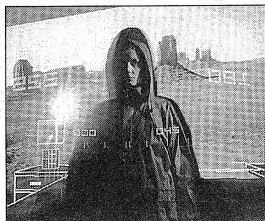
Virtual violence: Blast Theory's ambitious Gulf War installation, *Desert Rain*

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 spoilt 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, attempts 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.