Blast Theory’s *Desert Rain* (1999–2003), devised with the Computer Research Group of the School of Computer Science at Nottingham.

Figure 12 *Desert Rain*. 1999, interactive game, installation and performance. A collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab, University of Nottingham. Co-commissioned by ZKM Centre for Arts and Media, Karlsruhe and Contemporary Archives, Nottingham, in association with DA2, Bristol and KTH, Stockholm. Funded by the European Commission’s Kaleidoscope Fund and Arts Council England with Lottery Funds. © Blast Theory.
University, was one of the most complex and powerful responses to the first Gulf War to be produced within the sphere of theatrical practice. The piece may be seen not only as a comment on the war itself, but also as an exposure of the crucial role that technology played within both the making and the viewing of the conflict. Desert Rain, which has been described as a mixture of ‘performance, game, installation and virtual reality’ (Adams and Row Farr in Leeker 2001: 744), was inspired by Jean Baudrillard’s The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1991) (Clarke 2001: 44), in which the French philosopher argues that, despite the massive aerial bombardment of Iraq’s military and civil infrastructure, and despite the 100,000 estimated dead, the first Gulf War did not share any of the characteristics of previous ‘conventional’ wars, and so, in effect, the ‘war’ did not take place.

Desert Rain ‘attempts to articulate the ways in which the real, the virtual, the fictional and the imaginary have become increasingly entwined’ (Adams in Blast Theory 2002). Throughout the piece, the viewer could encounter a series of personae, environments and phenomena that were the product of both fact and fiction, and which could be seen both in the ‘real’ and in the virtual environment. Moreover, Desert Rain carefully constructed itself as an overlay of ‘real’ events and simulations referring to a conflict, the first Gulf War, which was, as Baudrillard has shown, in many ways a ‘mediated’ war, in that it was conducted – though of course not always experienced – through the media. Thus, during the first Gulf War everything was ‘performed’ and much coverage was ‘covered’, or even completely silenced. So, ‘the planes are hidden, the tanks are buried, Israel plays dead, the images are censored and all information is blockaded in the desert: only TV functions as a medium without a message’ (Baudrillard 1995: 63). Reflecting this, Desert Rain could be conducted and experienced only through other media, and even the performers were hiding from the audience, though carefully orchestrating its every movement. By shifting from one media to another, from the real to the virtual, from the fact to the performed, Desert Rain attempted to destabilise the viewer’s position continuously, in relation both to the practice of ‘conflict’ (by playing at being at war within the simulated environment of a computer game) and to that of making theatre, thus inducing the viewer into finally questioning the perceived relationship of real and virtual, as well as their own participation in and experience of the piece itself.

Desert Rain began with a performer leading six visitors into a kind of antechamber, where the audience members were asked to give up their coats and bags, and in return each received a hooded black jacket and a card with the picture of a person, their objective, who presum-
ably had to be found. The viewer was not told whether the objective was real or fictitious, whether they were alive or dead, or even what to do once they had been found. The viewer would not even know whether the objective was ever to be encountered in the flesh, or whether they were avatars, real people or characters in someone’s fiction. After this introductory moment, the audience was led through darkness into another chamber, which was divided into six cubicles, one for each viewer. Here, standing on platforms and facing a fine water spray or rain-screen upon which the virtual world was projected, they could travel through the virtual environment by moving their weight on the footpads that acted as ‘large joysticks’ (Blast Theory 2002). This moment marked the ‘second’ and virtual beginning of the piece, during which the viewers, temporarily transformed into virtual-reality players and avatars, could start to search the virtual environment for their objectives:

[w]orking largely with computer game logic of find, retrieve, kill or rescue, the target to find is a virtual person recognizable by both name and face within the virtual environment. The goal is to find this target and escape with the other five participants to a hotel room in the virtual environment within an allotted time of 20 minutes.

(Clarke 2001: 44)

After leaving the projected virtual motel room in which CNN coverage of the first Gulf War was broadcast, viewers found themselves in a desert that had been created as a projection on the virtual rain-screen (hence, presumably, the title of the piece, Desert Rain). Here, the viewers could meet one another through their avatars, which consisted of geometrical forms with flags representing the pictures of their objectives. The faces of these targets were ‘the only figurative attributes within the abstracted linear computer-game graphics’ (Clarke 2001: 44). The only known factor at this point was the fact that the targets had to be found, which raised the questions: ‘what are my targets for? Am I saving them? Are they annihilated when I find them? [. . .] if they are white, what are they being targeted for?’ (ibid.). The players did not know that they themselves were being monitored by two members of the company, who, invisibly, watched over them from behind the rain-screen and from the control room, and whose aim it was to ‘support, encourage and exhort the players via an audio link’ (Blast Theory 2002) so that the performance could progress smoothly. Players could therefore hear both the voices of the
other 'real' players and the voice of the helper–performer, who was, of course, just another kind of player in this game of desert and rain.

The desert landscape contained three buildings. The first held a map of the environment; the second was a cylinder with six doors leading to pictures of each of the visitors on their respective platforms – an environment which therefore created a link between the virtual and the real (Adams and Row Farr in Leeker 2001: 745–6); and finally, the third building initially seemed empty but contained the viewers' targets. At this crucial moment in the piece, the virtual environment was unexpectedly penetrated by a real performer who slowly emerged through the rain-screen to hand each viewer another magnetic card. No words were spoken, and as quickly and mysteriously as the performer had appeared, they would disappear again, as if swallowed up by the world behind the screen. At this point the viewer did not know the significance of the new card, nor exactly what the consequences of finding their target had been. This moment of interruption of the virtual, of reappropriation of the virtual by the real, represented the most disturbing instance in this complex piece. So far, the viewers' only encounter with the performers had been, to some extent, functional, with the performers handing out instructions and escorting the viewers from one place to another. Viewers could therefore be mistakenly under the impression of not being in a piece of theatre at all. The spectacular coup de théâtre, however, brought the viewers right back from the virtual into the 'real', and from there into the world of performance, thus creating a kind of media vortex in which the various worlds explored by the piece suddenly manifested themselves to the viewer in rapid succession.

This momentary interruption of the game disrupts the telepresence experienced by the participant, for it fractures their solipsistic virtual engagement with the screen and points to the potential of something existing beyond the realms of the image [...]. It is therefore the performing live presence existing alongside the virtual world that enables a critique of virtual technologies to be considered.

(Clarke in Blast Theory 2002)

The exchange of one card for another led to the beginning of a third phase of Desert Rain in which viewers found themselves in a vast underground hangar containing numbers, which were estimates of Iraqi casualties. This part of the game could be successfully completed only if all the players reached the end of the corridor. Players who
had reached this phase were therefore encouraged to help others who still had to find their target.

Once the virtual-world experience was concluded, the final phase of the performance could start. Having left the virtual world in a ritual act of purification by walking through the water-screens, the viewers found that the narrow exit corridor was blocked by a large mountain of sand. Having climbed up and come down the other side, they would find that they had reached the final room of the piece. This space, simulating a motel room, contained a television that could be activated by swiping the card obtained from the performers during the virtual game. By swiping the card, each viewer’s target appeared on the monitor, sitting in the same motel room that the viewers now occupied. At this point, it became manifest that each of the six targets had had their life changed by the war. The targets were: Glen, a soldier who served in the war; Shona, a soldier who was bedridden at the time of the war and watched it on television; Richard, a peace worker on the Iraqi–Saudi border; Sam, an actor who played a soldier in a television drama about the war; Eamonn, a BBC journalist who was in Baghdad when the air-raids started; and Tony, an actor who was on holiday in Egypt at the time of the conflict. All six targets had been talking about their relationship to the events during the conflict and how ‘real’ it all felt (Blast Theory 2000). However, even at this point it was impossible for the viewers to tell whether the targets were real or fictional, and one of the two actors even spoke about the event as ‘layer upon layer of simulation reverberating from every surface’ (Clarke 2001: 47). At no point did the piece therefore offer a synthesis or clarification of its structure, thus suggesting that in today’s society of spectacle it is no longer possible to tell the real from the virtual.

Upon leaving the room, the viewers could finally change back into their own clothes, presumably thinking that the performance was now over. However, some time later, they would each find in their pocket a small box containing 100,000 sand grains and a quotation from General Colin Powell from the New York Times of 23 March 1991, in which, in reference to the possible number of Iraqis killed during the war, he said, ‘[i]t’s really not a number I’m terribly interested in.’

Desert Rain was in many ways about ‘the fragility and interconnectedness of the physical and the virtual, the fictional and the factual’ (Clarke 2001: 44). The participants were taken through a journey, from the real to the virtual and then back again, only to find out that what appeared as virtual could in fact be real and hence also leave a real trace (of sand) in the viewers’ lives. Likewise, what appeared to be real was mainly performed and thus, in other words, simulated.
As suggested by Rachel Clarke, 'the route feels more like a labyrinth, and disorients the body in a very corporeal way' (ibid.: 47). Even in the virtual environment, '[t]he participant is often floating in a void that has only compass and degree points to show the way' (ibid.: 45). The very set of Desert Rain was a combination of 'the real and the virtual, each mirroring the design of the other, and connected through the permeable and physically traversable rain curtain' (Blast Theory 2002). In this space, in which the various performance places mirrored one another, the rain-screen represented the liminal gateway linking the worlds of the image and the real. It was a hypersurface that disturbingly allowed for slippages between the two worlds: that of the cloaked performer approaching the viewer from behind the screen once the target had been found and then the viewer's own exit through the rain screen into the next phase of the performance. Here, just as in the real conflict, 'the real penetrates into the virtual and vice versa' (Adams and Row Farr in Leeker 2001: 744).

In The Gulf War Did Not Take Place, Baudrillard argues, '[n]o question that, in their war, the Iraqis went to war. No question that the Other came from their computers' (Baudrillard 1995: 63). So, the same event can be virtual for one set of people and real for another. Much of the war, of course, was conducted virtually, at a distance. Thus, virtual environments were incorporated into operational warplanes, 'filtering the real scene and presenting aircrew with a more readable world' (Patton in Baudrillard 1995: 4). American agents even introduced a computer virus into Iraq's air defence command and control system (ibid.: 5). So, arguably, the development of flight simulators provided an early example of the computer technology which allowed the boundaries between reality and simulation to become blurred: the images and information which furnish the material for exercises and war games become indistinguishable from what could be encountered in a real conflict.

(Patton in Baudrillard 1995: 4)

But, while it is true that the war was conducted virtually, it is also true that there were many real casualties. And so, while on the one side politicians conducted a spectacle of war and soldiers fought their war as if they were playing a gigantic computer game, on the other side people were really dying.

In Desert Rain, the weak boundaries between reality and simulation were equally exposed, so that, in many ways, the viewer witnessed successions of slippages, contaminations even, of one world into the
other. Even the very environment used for the performance was symptomatic of this choice. The space of Desert Rain felt immersive without being so. As indicated by Blast Theory, '[t]he rotating world is “leaking” over to the fabric walls by “mistake” not by intentional design. On the other hand the feeling and experience is that one is completely surrounded by water, light, graphics and sound' (Blast Theory 2002). And so, if on the one hand the viewer was under the illusion of being an onlooker, an audience, on the other the performance was continually pointing out to them that they themselves, like what they were watching, were also always inside the medium – that they could not just be an audience; that they too had participated in the making of this conflict.

As in other virtual-reality environments, the audience experienced some virtual events that left them feeling ‘real’ emotions. Clarke, for instance, summarises her feelings during the piece as follows: ‘I am in no present danger, as I rationalize my participation, I am only navigating myself around symbols of danger. Yet in negotiating these symbols, I am energized, perplexed, uncertain, frightened. I inhabit a whole reality of emotion and experience’ (Clarke 2001: 50).

Desert Rain suggested that the understanding of a virtual phenomenon as a non-phenomenon was incorrect. The main artistic concern of the piece was of course virtual warfare, whether as a game or as actual warfare. As suggested by Clarke, 'there are obvious allusions to the problematic association between computer game playing and military systems, the “dramatisation of life” that war seems to encapsulate and the pleasure taken from such effect' (Clarke in Blast Theory 2002). Here, the blurring of the boundaries between real and virtual events meant that the viewers ultimately did not know whether what they witnessed was derived from the news, a video game, a film, or was 'just' part of a piece of theatre. The most 'real' element of the piece was perhaps the discovery of the sand box, an event which for the majority of people took place long after the end of the performance, as if to say that whether what one saw was mediated or 'real', the long-lasting effect was the same. Baudrillard's reading of the figure of 100,000 Iraqi dead was that the dead still serve as an alibi for those who do not want to have been excited for nothing; at least the dead would prove that this war was indeed a war and not a shameful and pointless hoax, a programmed and melodramatic version of what was the drama of war.

(Baudrillard 1995: 74)
Virtual Theatres presents the theatre of the twenty-first century in which everything – even the viewer – can be simulated. In this fascinating volume, Gabriella Giannachi analyses the aesthetic concerns of current computer-arts practices through a discussion of a variety of artists and performers including Blast Theory, Merce Cunningham, Eduardo Kac, Forced Entertainment, Lynn Hershman, Jodi, Orlan, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Marcel-lí Antúnez Roca, Jeffrey Shaw, Stelarc.

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Virtual Theatres not only allows for a reinterpretation of what is possible in the world of performance practice, but also demonstrates how 'virtuality' has come to represent a major parameter for our understanding and experience of contemporary art and life.

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Theatre/Performance Studies