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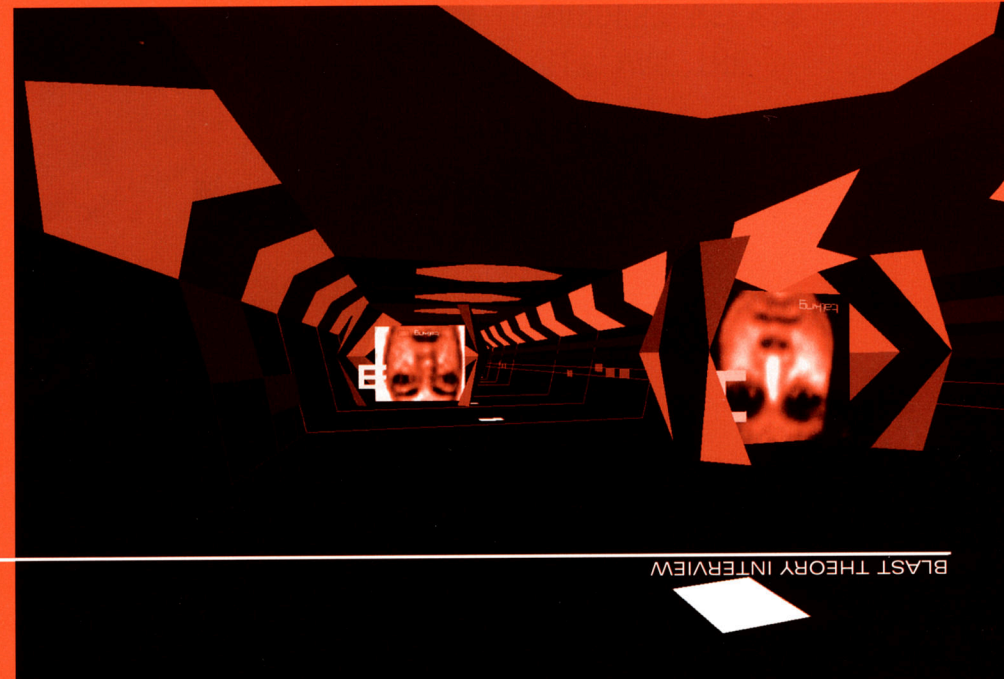
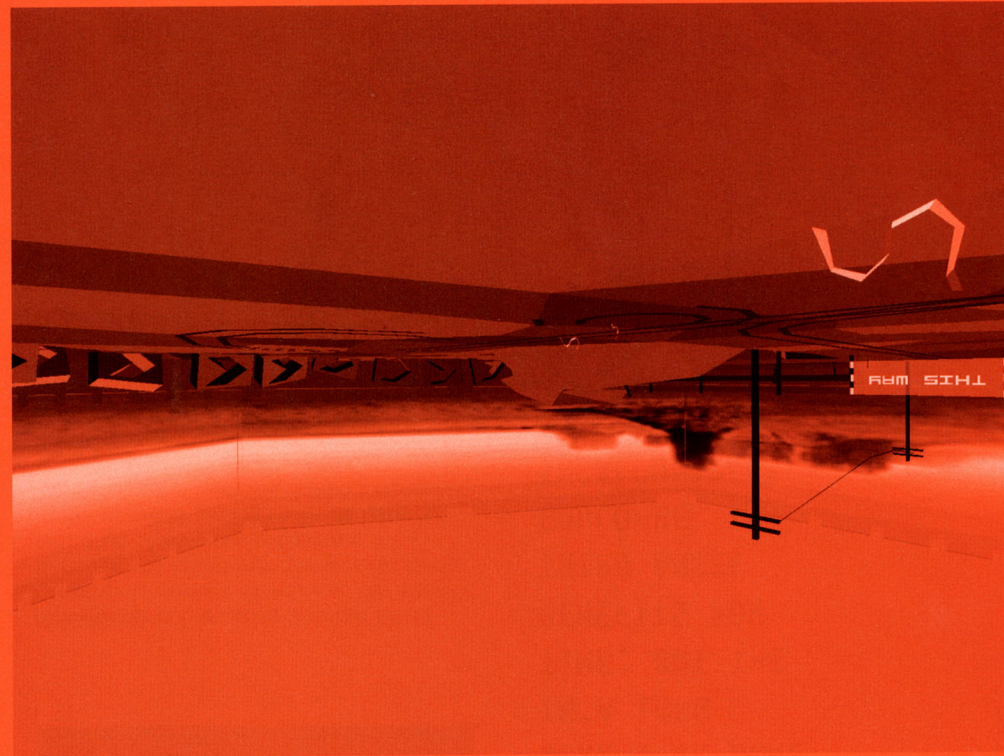
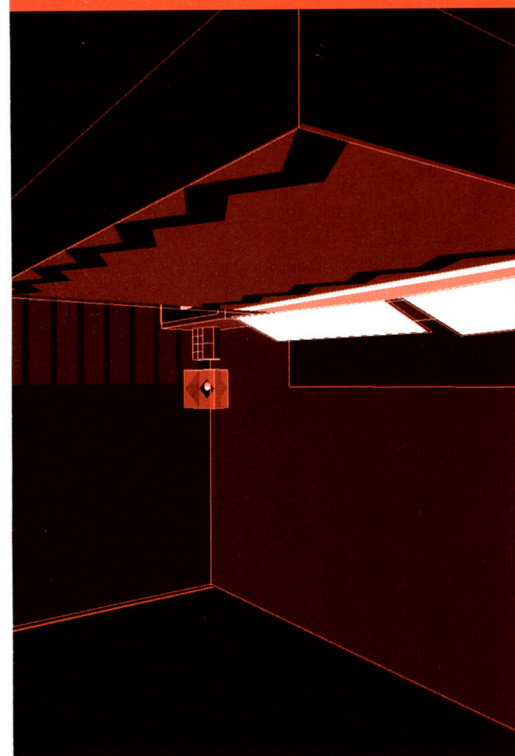
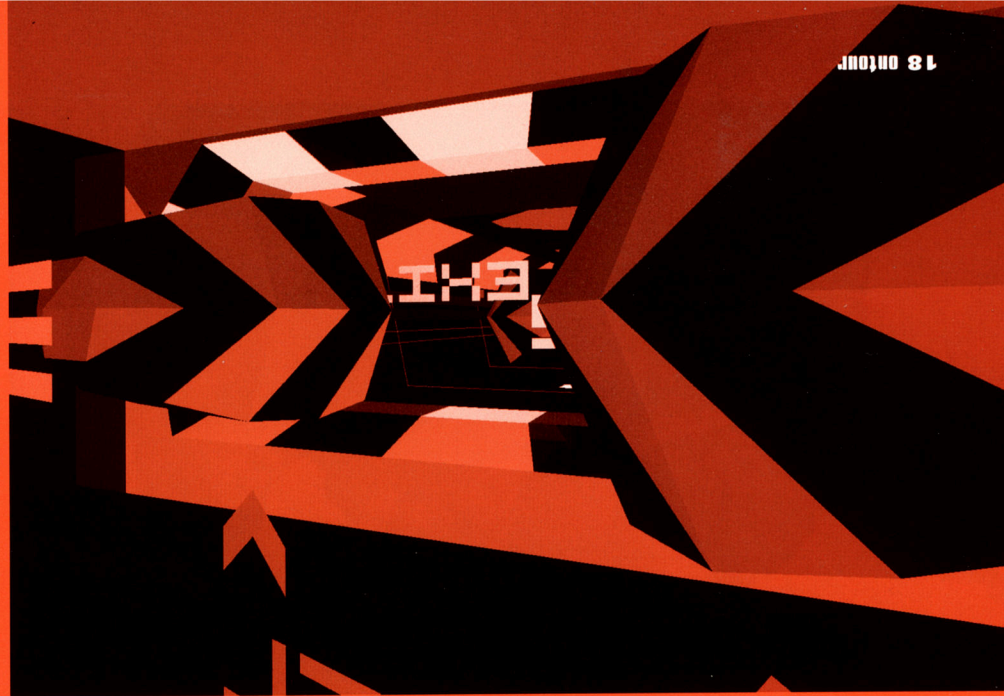
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Blast Theory's **Matt Adams** speaks about performance and computer games to **Andrew Jones**



life's a blast

With a remount taking place in Prague in March 2002, our Projects Manager for Central and Eastern Europe, **Andrew Jones**, talked with Blast Theory's **Matt Adams** about *Desert Rain*, a project inspired by the Gulf War that truly fuses performance and science.

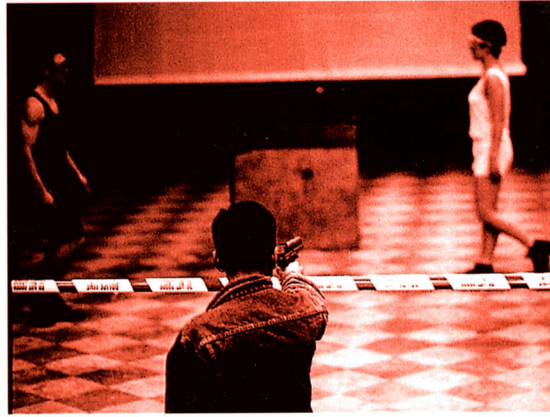
photos and images: Blast Theory

AJ: *The Times* described *Desert Rain* as "possibly the most technological-ly advanced art installation ever made" when it was premiered here. That sounds pretty impressive, so what does the viewer/participant actually experience?

MA: *Desert Rain* is a hybrid of a computer game, an installation and a performance. Six players are given a briefing in an ante-chamber, given little magnetic swipe cards with photographs of different people on them and told that they have to go into a virtual environment to search for these people - their targets. They're then led into a second space - an individual cubicle that separates each player physically from the others - and they're looking at screens made of falling water spray, on to which is video projected the virtual environment. They each stand on a footpad

(which is essentially a joystick that you operate by moving your whole body). They wear headphones fitted with a small microphone to allow them to communicate, not only with each other if they get close enough together in the virtual environment, but also with a performer, who manages this experience in real time and responds to the ways each particular group is using the environment.

Each team of six spends 20 minutes in that space - essentially participating in a hi-tech computer game where they have to complete a series of tasks - before being led into two further spaces and finishing up in a replica of a hotel room; apart from the fact that all four walls are made out of life-sized photographs, so there's no real objects within it. The players get a chance to



"POSSIBLY THE MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY

◀ swipe their credit cards for the first time and they see video clips of the people they'd been looking for in the virtual environment. They realise that these were real people who were involved in the Gulf War and each one of them talks about the ways in which it was mediated.

So, rather than being an anti-war piece, the project as a whole attempts to deal with the ways in which information flowed around during the war and how this was a sort of seismic shift in the way in which we understood and continue to understand the world around us. And the idea is that through watching those video clips retrospectively, your whole view of what you were doing in the virtual environment is changed and what you thought was a game within quite narrow rules suddenly has all sorts of repercussions and ramifications.

AJ: Tell me how the project first came about.

MA: It was developed over two years in collaboration with the Computer Science department from the University of Nottingham. A lot of their research is around virtual environments, and specifically the boundaries between virtual space and real space, looking at how the two can be integrated in more interesting ways than just via a monitor. What also fascinated us from a position of making theatre and performance was that their focus was very much on social virtual environments, collaborative environments; versions where you can have up to 100 people in a shared virtual environment at the same time so they're much more social spaces. In terms of theatre practice that's much more interesting I think, because a lot of our performance work is about how to interact with an audience and try to use technology as tools to augment that. Suddenly we were presented with this whole technological framework that was precisely about these issues and that was really the common ground between us.

AJ: Presumably you came up the idea first and then approached Nottingham University because you needed assistance with the technology?

MA: No, it was really fortuitous actually. We got a grant from an organisation called Arts Lab in Nottingham, who paid for us to do two weeks totally agenda-free research and development. We were playing with this notion of projecting video on to water spray and did an informal showing to a group that included someone from the University. His eyes immediately lit up at the idea of this projection surface as a boundary between real and virtual space. The core of the *Desert Rain* experience is in fact when you find your target playing the game and a real performer walks through the water. Most players are completely fooled; they think it's the projection for several seconds before they realise it's a real person. Anyway, the direct way in which you can overlay a projection on to a person to create ambiguity about what is real and what is virtual was the spark, and from there we decided to see if we could find a way to collaborate.

We worked for maybe nine months before the ideas that became *Desert Rain* really started to manifest themselves. The idea of basing the piece on the Gulf War came quite late. We became more and more interested in virtual space and wanted to try and find a non-technological way of dealing with it because there's obviously a lot of interest in virtual spaces purely from the point of view of technological development. As is probably true of a lot of our work, we were trying to find a social or political angle that would make that meaningful for us, and make us feel that the technology was demanding to be integrated in this piece rather than being a fancy thing where everyone would go, 'wow, you're working with virtual environments'.

AJ: So the piece is still kept in the domain of theatre as well?

MA: Yes, I suppose so. This whole issue of

categorisation has always been a difficult one for us. In a way, one of the nice things about *Desert Rain* was knowing that we had to get people into a virtual environment and use it within three or four minutes of entering the space; so we decided to use a simple metaphor that most people are familiar with, i.e. the computer game. It was really nice in a way once we had that decision to say: 'OK, we've got a computer game, so we're not talking about a piece of theatre or an installation or a performance or a new media project, it's a game. It has to operate on those principles, it has to have a structure, it has to have rules, it has to have outcomes, it has to have consequences to your actions.' It set up a whole different way of thinking about how a piece of work might be structured. Instead of looking for a climactic moment in the way that you might in a theatrical piece, we're actually looking for some sort of structural point at which you say, 'The game is now finished.' That was kind of liberating actually, I think we all really enjoyed that.

AJ: Did it feel like a big departure from your previous work or did you think of it more as a logical extension?

MA: In many ways it definitely was the former, but I think if you look back and see it in the lineage of our work there are principles that are absolutely clear about trying to reach as wide an audience as possible. Trying to deal with social and political realities, trying to use new technologies in a way to augment interactivity, trying to use content to really grab people's attention, make work that would make non-theatre or dance or art attenders go 'I reckon I'll go and check that out'; some hook. All of those things are very much in common with what we are trying to do. In a way *Desert Rain* was the first time we found a satisfactory solution to that; the first time we went 'That's what we've been trying to do for ten years. That's what it should have been'.



ADVANCED ART INSTALLATION EVER MADE"

AJ: A lot of projects exploring the cross-fertilisation of art and science in some way don't seem to get much further than the drawing board or if they're lucky, the work-in-progress stage, but the process has certainly had concrete results for Blast Theory. MA: The University of Nottingham has been really supportive throughout. We've gained a massive amount from the experience of working with the team there and are keen to collaborate with them on future projects. In addition, we've continued our links with the Royal Technical Institute in Stockholm that helped initiate *Desert Rain* and with the ethnographic team at Kings College, London, who also studied the piece. So three separate universities are all now involved in our practice in an ongoing way, which is a really nice thing for us.

I think our work is particularly appropriate for them because we're interested very much in interactivity, in monitoring how people are engaging with our work. *Desert Rain* is structured in such a way that there's very heavy monitoring by the performers of how people are doing at every stage of their journey, just to help them through it. We have a whole range of surveillance mechanisms that enable us to check where the players are and how well they're doing. A lot of our projects have incorporated questionnaires or feedback mechanisms that can be useful both to scientists studying how users might participate in an interactive piece and to us, wanting to do that in any case.

AJ: Considering the innovative nature of *Desert Rain* and the fantastic feedback there's been from both the press and the public, I'm surprised that the show hasn't really toured that much. Is that because you need to have partners with fairly substantial resources on board to get it up and running?

MA: That's certainly been the case so far. In

the UK, it's only been presented in London and a few of the major cities as a result. Outside of this country it's been to the ZKN in Karlsruhe and to the KTH in Stockholm, and that's it. That's been a disappointment for us, but not an entirely unexpected one just because of the scale. It's a very demanding piece of work needing a big space in which to show it. Its hybrid nature has also been an issue. We had a film festival come very close to taking it, we've had new media festivals come close to taking it, but basically in terms of economics it's only really performing arts festivals and bigger theatre venues who've had the budgets to stage it.

AJ: Has finding suitable spaces been another problem?

MA: Although the piece is greedy in terms of size, it is fairly flexible in terms of the nature of the space housing it. We've done it in disused factories with no theatre lighting, just on a domestic supply; we've done it in museums and we've done it in theatre spaces. When we were in Stockholm we did it in a disused laboratory. An enormous place - it was amazing. It was a real Frankenstein thing; a thunder and lightning laboratory that they don't use any more because of course thunder and lightning research is a bit old-school. Having such a great space to work in was certainly an advantage.

AJ: Tell me a little about Prague. There's been an interesting development regarding the remount there; something that means that it'll be easier and more cost-effective to tour the show overseas in future.

MA: We'll be collaborating on the project with local theatre practitioners there. They'll be trained to run the software we use and perform in the show. The bulk of the Blast Theory team, apart from a programmer, will only be around to set up and dismantle it, meaning that the logistical

costs incurred in keeping the company in the country will be substantially reduced. We tried this out to a limited extent before, when we were in Stockholm. We invited a local person to come in and perform with us and trained her up during the get-in period. We were keen to have a native Swedish speaker involved because a lot of the performer's role is simply listening in and just seeing what people are doing. Obviously, in certain countries, people have a good understanding of English, but of course two Germans together, they're going to speak in German. So we felt it would be nice to have that extra added dimension, to be able to monitor what was happening more accurately, to find out if people were saying 'I'm stuck, what's going on' in Swedish. In Prague, we'll be taking this idea a step further.

AJ: And obviously this'll make it a more immediate experience for the people who attend.

MA: Yes, that's right. It's also a really nice thing to offer promoters, so that they end up with something that's not just a big show that splashes down, sucks in the punters and then heads off to the next destination without leaving any resonance for the local community. It's actually something that's integrated into that context. Another possible development we're considering that augments this is staging a distributed version whereby you could have the six players split over two or three places. I think promoters trying to integrate several cities into a festival might find that quite an attractive proposition.

For more information on Blast Theory, see Company Profiles.

For more information on the Desert Rain Prague project, contact:

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