

# PERFORMANCE/ TECHNOLOGIES

A User's Guide







# Game Boy/Girl

An investigation into Blast Theory's use of 'mixed reality'  
by Gez Wilson. All images by Blast Theory

Formed in 1991, Blast Theory have since established themselves as an innovative, artist-led company who cross the boundaries of visual art, performance and new media projects with work such as 'Kidnap', 'Desert Rain', 'Can You See Me Now' and most recently, 'Uncle Roy All Around You'.

Although they produce many different types of artistic work, the interest here is in the projects where Blast Theory use virtual and mixed reality in 'performances or games' and participants interact as 'street' players or 'on-line' players such as in 'Uncle Roy All Around You'. The use of mixed reality in art practice is new territory, mainly because of the very small number of artists who use the term to describe (in part) what they do and by the limited acceptance and use of 'mixed reality' as a term. Blast Theory have used the term to describe aspects of their work that involve combining virtual and physical environments.

Blast Theory work in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at the University of Nottingham. Steve Benford (professor of computer sciences at MRL) first became interested in Blast Theory after seeing a public presentation of 'Artlab' research and development where they projected video onto water spray. He could see where both organisations' work overlapped and they began working together on 'Desert Rain', an eRENA project, later nominated for a BAFTA Interactive award.

Benford describes Mixed Reality as 'a way of overlaying physical and digital worlds in such a way that they appear to be

precisely aligned or registered. That is the "augmented reality" style and is a common way of thinking about mixed reality.' (Interview with the author June 2003.)

Ju Row-Farr (co-founder of Blast Theory with Matt Adams) introduces mixed reality as 'what I think of as real, virtual, imaginary and what I think of as fictional'. (Interview with the author, July 2003.) Artists use the term 'mixed reality' when they cross over with scientists or academics or make artwork from a more technological starting position. It has been accepted as a term in computer science but not widely used in the arts.

Blast Theory's 'Uncle Roy All Around You' is their latest groundbreaking project in which computer games spill onto the streets of London. Street players search for Uncle Roy through the back streets and the tourist traps of Westminster with a handheld computer. Online players cruise through a virtual model of the same area, searching for the street players and looking for leads that will help them find Uncle Roy. Their publicity information describes Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality Lab as world leaders in mixing live performance and interactive technologies. In 'Uncle Roy All Around You', Blast Theory are using mixed reality but in the broadest definition – the worlds have not been overlaid. There are two adjacent realities but Benford's thinking is 'that it is all mixed reality... most broadly it is about finding some coherent mix of on-line worlds and physical space.'



So how do Blast Theory see themselves? Are they primarily artists, performers, computer scientists or game producers?

They see themselves as artists but also relate to computer science. They have developed an understanding of computer science (and needed to) 'to get money from that side of the fence... Artists that can describe themselves in these terms are being looked at more seriously than those that can't. It is a model funders can relate to. We are artists first and scientists only in collaboration. Some of Blast Theory's projects are definitely games, some a service, some artwork. No two projects are the same or go through the same route. It depends who is asking the question.' (Ju Row-Farr.)

Blast Theory are motivated by the ideas and not the technology. 'We definitely wouldn't call ourselves digital artists,' says Matt Adams, 'I think we see ourselves more as artists who are focused on a particular set of ideas, and who look for media which are appropriate to the ideas... we like to cross the boundaries between performance and live event – to make something that turns out differently every night.' (Quoted in 'Desert Rain' feature on website [www.adobe.co.uk/motion/features/blasttheory](http://www.adobe.co.uk/motion/features/blasttheory))

Stephen Armstrong looked at what Blast Theory are doing for theatre in his article 'Strange Bruin' (Times On Line, Theatre: 'Far from the West End, a new form of theatre is emerging', 29 June 2003). Armstrong featured Blast Theory and Shunt as two theatre companies where '... there is a feeling of a game – that the audience can affect the outcome... the players' final meeting with Uncle Roy turns the whole preceding hour of paranoia on its head.' Armstrong comments on the strength of the shows as theatregoers take on 'vast moral challenges bellowed from

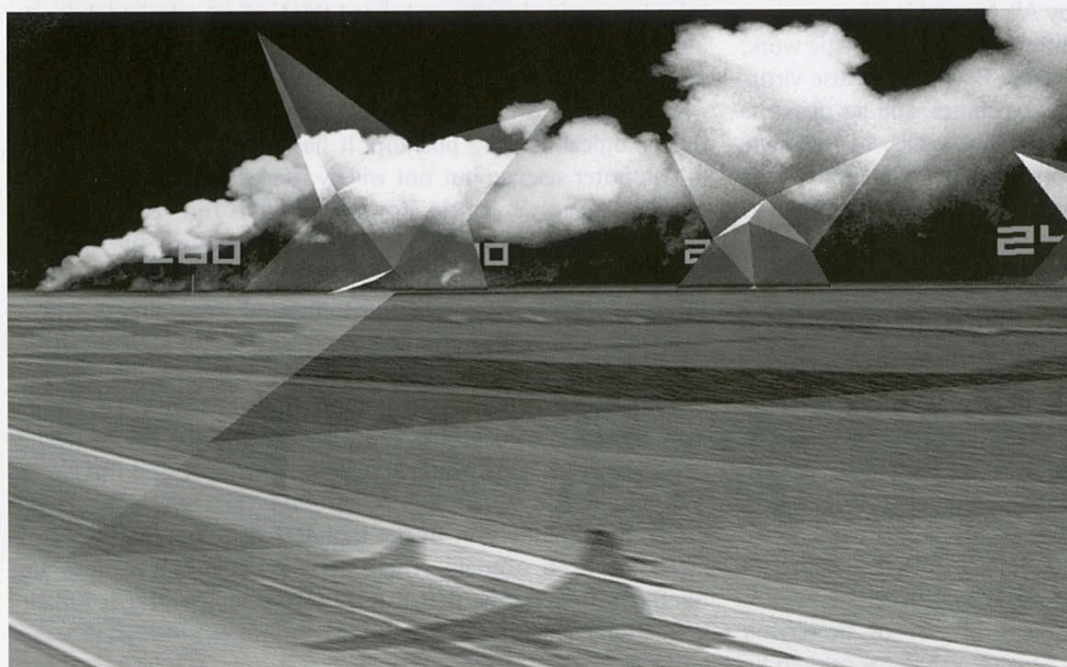


the stage and bring them down to a one-to-one conversation. For clubbers and gamers, they take the interactive leisure experience and imbue it with the kind of questions and riddles that a game or a DJ would never dream of posing. If such performances were nurtured and supported by the artistic establishment, Britain could produce its first new theatrical form for years.'

Is it right to categorise Blast Theory as theatre? They have created a new kind of space through using Mixed Reality but there is no performance to watch and there is no audience, only 'players'. There is scripting but no actors as such. Matt Adams had some interesting points to make about a new kind of theatre space at the Re:visions symposium (October 2002):

'The kinds of fundamental changes that technology has driven in the last 15 or 20 years seem to me to not only promise a new kind of space on the stage itself but a new kind of architecture for theatre... infer a new way of thinking about the entire nature of what it means to create performance. If you take the idea that performance is fundamentally about something that happens at a particular time at a particular place... This allows us to expand our definition about what performance or theatre might mean.'

On the question of whether Blast Theory are game producers, Ju Row-Farr differentiates artists and gaming producers by the commercial value of the product and the difference in the experience. Blast Theory revolve around the live, human element and manage the project as it is happening. Ju doesn't think it is common for visual artists to consider the person who is going to be looking at the piece but it is integral to their process. People being within the work and the social impact on the streets, political resonance and popular culture, all feed the kind of work Blast Theory make. They produce





games but come from a different understanding and background.

So what are Blast Theory? There is no neat term for what they do. They cross over into theatre, gaming and computer science. They use mixed reality to create a new environment or space that takes them into an entirely new category.

Their MRL collaborator Steve Benson's personal goal is to create and show people technologies that encourage new ways of interacting socially and give them new experiences: 'to get the technology out in the real world... I think that it is interesting for artists to work with emerging technologies rather than off the shelf technologies and to see if they can influence them at an early stage.'

Ju Row-Farr describes Benson as the 'vessel to explain ideas to people (MRL) who wouldn't get it otherwise and to translate it into their software development.' The software 'Massive' – a multi-user virtual platform – was developed by the MRL and specially adopted for use by Blast Theory.

Steve Benford is seen by Ju Row Farr as the crucial link in understanding the ideas and translating them to the team at MRL, who are concentrating on specific elements of projects or development. Steve sees the whole picture – the possibilities, the problems – and disseminates it.

Benford spoke about the difficulties of collaborative working. 'Satisfying everyone is quite difficult. Doing a piece of work that is both a credible artistic venture and yet also yields top quality research results is quite a difficult trick to pull off. You end up compromising one for the other if you are not careful.'

Blast Theory are doing things differently because of working with computer scientists. For the Mixed Reality Lab research they have been required to document their process, reporting on every change in thought process throughout the project including subtle changes in thinking.

Matt Adams also views using technology in art practice as a

long, experimental process where it is difficult to strike a balance between artistic and scientific needs.

'Because you are working with sophisticated systems and new languages you have to make something, see how that works, see if the technology works, see if it artistically works, then move on and do it again and again. The fact that it has been a year... and we are still not yet ready to show the next iteration reflects just how hard it is to be simultaneously driving an artistic agenda, a scientific research agenda and getting hold of this stuff which costs a fortune and make it work.'

Collaborations have the advantage of opening up access to different funding streams, often giving additional leverage benefits and the availability of different skills of the collaborators for utilisation. 'Artists are looking for ways of convincing scientists to give them access to certain equipment or certain skills or certain technologies,' commented Matt Adams, 'artists are getting diddly squat to research... The University of Nottingham, who we are working with, their research programme over six years is an £11 million project.'

In this case, the collaboration is important to both parties. They have a shared ambition of delivering work to the public, using and developing technology in new ways. Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality Lab have needed to think and act differently and to consider each other's needs and strike a balance and compromise.

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*Information about current, past and future Blast Theory projects can be found at [www.blasttheory.co.uk](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk).*



'Desert Rain'