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## **Chapter 7**

### **Blast Theory**

#### **Maria Chatzichristodoulou**

##### **Introduction**

Blast Theory is an internationally renowned, award-winning British company based in Brighton, UK. Founded in 1991, the company chose its name from an anarchist fanzine that had, in turn, appropriated it from British painter and editor of Vorticist magazine *BLAST*, Percy Wyndham Lewis (Blast Theory, 2004, 8). The phrase that so impressed the young graduates at the time was ‘Blast Theory, Bless Practice’. Finding themselves against the backdrop of postmodernism and a post-Thatcherite recession, the group was keen to set about taking action rather than dissecting ideas (Blast Theory, 2004, 8). The company’s core membership shifted during the first few years but has been stable since 1994; Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj have led the company ever since.

Although this volume considers Blast Theory as part of a theatrical tradition, the company is not, strictly speaking, a theatre company. None of Blast Theory’s founding members is trained as a theatre practitioner: Adams developed an early passion for theatre and has a background as a performer and director, but his studies are in English literature and film; Farr trained as a dancer and fine artist in textiles; and Tandavanitj, the most technologically adept member of the group, studied arts and social context. The result is an interdisciplinary team that develops work as much through collaboration and convergence as it does through the differences that arise from the members’ divergent disciplinary viewpoints. Adams, Farr and Tandavanitj collaborate with a range of associate artists who also come from diverse backgrounds, such as drama, theatre and performance, dance and choreography, visual arts and communication design. Moreover, the company works closely

with partners in academia and the industry; those collaborations have provided the expertise, know-how and resources that have supported and often triggered the company's strong technological outlook.

Blast Theory has an ambivalent relationship with any kind of genre classification (Adams, 2007). Although Adams perceives the company's work as situated within a theatrical lineage, he considers it as 'incredibly divergent' from what he calls 'traditional theatre' (Adams, 2007). Perhaps more significantly, in a period when rejection of theatrical tradition is increasingly common, he sees the company's early work as originating from a position of 'tremendous naivety about experimental practice'; consequently, Blast Theory has never comfortably fitted within the context of live art either (Adams, 2007). It is not a coincidence, says Adams, that most of the seminal moments of live art history, such as the National Review of Live Art (1980–2010), do not include Blast Theory (Adams, 2007). The company tends to discuss its practice not in terms of genres, but in terms of characteristics. For example, although members resist defining their practice as theatre, performance, live art or new media art, they do describe it as 'performative'.

Performative elements are more prominent in some works than they are in others but can be traced throughout the company's trajectory. For example, Adams discusses aspects of *Day of the Figurines* (2006) as an improvisational theatrical process, whereby participants 'are invited to create characters, represent those characters and act out with other people interactive improvisational narratives' (Adams, 2007). He does not consider the piece to be a theatrical performance, but suggests that it has a 'strong theatrical position'. This applies to several of the company's projects that use formats immediately recognizable to anyone who is familiar with contemporary live art practice. So, although Blast Theory might not define itself as a performance company, its members are 'incredibly engaged with the idea of performance, the idea of a performer and an audience member having a live exchange or

interaction in a particular moment in time and place' (Adams, 2007). This, says Adams, is 'the animating principle' behind much of the work they make (Adams, 2007).

By resisting the pigeonholing of its practice within a single disciplinary stronghold, Blast Theory 'weave[s] in and out of other disciplines and other modes of practice', learning from different methodological paradigms (Adams, 2007). Indeed, several of its artworks fall within categories other than performance: from the very beginning, the company engaged with video work and has made several video art and installation projects, such as *TRUCOLD* (2002). In more recent years, Blast Theory has also made interactive installations and games, sometimes for educational purposes (such as the *Energy Gallery* installation at the Science Museum (2004)). In Blast Theory's practice, threads of creative process often result in more than one artistic output of different types. For example, *TRUCOLD*, a traditional video installation, is based on footage that was shot partly by accident while the company was working on a live project in Germany and had previously been used in the performance project *10 Backwards* (1999).

Whether seen as a theatre or performance group, an art ensemble that uses different methodological approaches including live performance, or a new media art company that creates works informed by cutting-edge technology, from the very outset Blast Theory has actively questioned, challenged and transgressed disciplinary boundaries, merging theatre, performance, interactive arts and gaming. Through its artistic practice, the company innovates by developing new models for active audience participation: using emergent technologies and interactive media in ways that have shaped the contemporary British and international cultural landscapes; exploring formats that merge practices and approaches; situating its work in unconventional or unexpected contexts; confronting audiences with tough questions and challenging demands; and, above all, being prepared to take risks. Though refusing to be defined as a theatre company, Blast Theory has certainly helped shape

the contemporary theatre landscape in Britain and internationally by inspiring companies to experiment with participative practices, locative media, mobile interfaces, pervasive gaming and the creation of complex and layered immersive experiences. Its influence can be perceived in explorations by artists such as interactive theatre company Coney, multidisciplinary ensemble Prototype Theatre, artist-led collective Active Ingredient, immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, social games festival Hide and Seek, and the Atom-r collective among others. Its influence is also palpable in contexts as different as dreamthinkspeak's ambitious large-scale performance/film/installation projects on the one hand, and Hannah Jane Walker and Chris Thorpe's intimate interactive work on the other. Furthermore, as the company is frequently presented as part of undergraduate curricula in theatre and performance, it is influencing new generations of performance makers wishing to experiment with non-linear, participatory, interdisciplinary or immersive theatre practices.

### **Company Development and Artistic Methodologies**

The group came together in 1991 as a hybrid collective founded by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Will Kittow, artists who happened to be working at the same cinema as ushers, cashiers and bar staff (Adams with Rieser, 2011, 401). The multidisciplinary nature of the group meant that, from early on, its members had to establish a basic language for talking about their practice with each other, as well as to the wider public. An intense engagement with technology was central to the group's interests from the early stages of its practice.

Influenced by club (sub-)cultures and intent on questioning and reinventing its dominant aesthetic languages, the company used projection and computers in the very first piece that it made, *Gunmen Kill Three* (1991), to explore issues of 'presentation and representation through the image' (Adams, 2007). *Gunmen* featured an early live 'video stream' in a scene where someone with a shoulder-held camera chased someone else; the scene was projected

live via a radio link (Adams, 2007). The integration of the recording device and live video feed meant that the chase was not only a live occurrence within the performance space, but also a screen-based representation of a particular viewpoint of the action. The technology, far from being sleek or intuitive, was in fact cumbersome and temperamental; the company depended on a massive, old video projector that kept breaking down, requiring a devoted engineer who travelled with the company in order to operate the machine (Adams, 2007). Despite the technical challenges, the company was able to launch its artistic trajectory with an immersive experience, where multiple actions and stimuli unfolded simultaneously, competing with each other for the audience's attention. *Gunmen Kill Three* asks questions about reality and representation, power and control, access and social responsibility, all in relation to digital technology – questions that have been central to Blast Theory's work ever since. As the company's first ever piece, it is already indicative of Blast Theory's aims, intentions and artistic vision, offering a glimpse of how these might develop in the future.

Blast Theory's structure as a collective means that its core members (Adams, Farr and Tandavanitj) share equal responsibility for all artistic and managerial decisions. Each member's role differs, reflecting his/her individual strengths. Adams is seen as the person who directs the vision of the company and generates the networks with various partners. Farr translates the bigger picture into smaller, concrete steps by developing detailed plans for every project; she also nurtures relations between the company and its audiences, the company and its partners, as well as between the company's members, staff and associate artists. Tandavanitj is the technical brain of the company; he writes the code for several of the works and tests out materials and software (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 19). Despite these differences in roles, all Blast Theory members are of equal ranking, and none of them undertakes to 'direct' the others. Because Adams often acts as the spokesperson of the group, he is sometimes mistakenly regarded as Blast Theory's leader; however, he is keen to stress

the evenness of the group's tripartite structure whereby decisions are taken collaboratively, and all core members have equal input (Adams, 2007). This is not always a smooth process: Adams, Farr and Tandavanitj often argue over contrasting views of how the work should develop. Blast Theory's creative process is based on lengthy discussions, arguments, and continuous challenging of each member, until they are all satisfied that each and every project is separate from any single person, representing all the different strands they each bring to the mix (Adams, 2007). In this way, Blast Theory has developed a working method whereby internal differences of opinion are used to safeguard the development of robust concepts and projects (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 20). Although the company's core is collaborative and non-hierarchical, Blast Theory can have clearly defined, hierarchical relationships with their associate artists and other collaborators. According to Dekker, the group can be rather 'rigidly structured in their adherence to the integrity of Blast Theory's artistic voice' (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 20).

The company operates both within and beyond artistic contexts. Individual company members hold professional roles in education (Adams, for example, is a visiting professor at the Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London). Some of the company's early works were developed with young people in formal or informal education settings. *The Gilt Remake* (1995) was created with students at De Monfort University and *Ultrapure* (1996) was a collaboration between Blast Theory and the Royal Court Young People's Theatre, among other partners. Since 2009, Blast Theory has taken responsibility for actively supporting and nurturing a new generation of artists through an international residency programme for artists, scientists and theorists working in the areas of pervasive gaming, interactive media, mobile devices in artistic practice, games design and theory, interdisciplinary and live art practice (Blast Theory website). The residency programme – based at the company's studios in Portslade, near Brighton, UK – offers mentoring, advice

and insights into Blast Theory's practice, working methods and research activities, and has hosted artists such as Andy Field (2009), Sheila Ghelani (2010), Natasha Davis (2010) and Francesca da Rimini (2012). Establishing the mentoring of emerging artists as a major strand of the company's educational and social activity, Blast Theory demonstrates a desire to use its own experience to support and nurture a growing artistic community. Through hosting artists, scientists and theorists working in relevant fields, the company aspires to 'create an interdisciplinary community of international significance' (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 20).

Moreover, Blast Theory has been involved in various types of research-informed or research-related practice from early on. The company's first research collaboration was with the Mixed Reality Laboratory (MRL) at the University of Nottingham for the eRENA (Electronic Arenas for Culture, Performance, Arts and Entertainment) research and development project in 1997. MRL brings together over fifty academic staff and research students from the fields of computer science, psychology, sociology, engineering, architecture and the arts aiming to 'explore the potential of ubiquitous, mobile and mixed reality technologies to shape everyday life' (Mixed Reality Laboratory website). The first public output of this collaboration was Blast Theory's seminal work *Desert Rain* (1999), a response to the first Gulf War. Branded as 'possibly the most technologically ambitious art installation ever made' (*The Times*, 2000) and nominated for a BAFTA award in Interactive Arts (2000), *Desert Rain* marked the beginning of one of the longest-lasting collaborations between an art group and a research laboratory, and impacted on Blast Theory's increasing interest in the use of new technologies in its artistic practice. Adams acknowledges that the group's 'exploration, project-related research and use of technology' could never have developed so strongly without its partnership with MRL, which has resulted in some of the company's major works such as *Can You See Me Now?* (2001), *I Like Frank* (2004) and

*Rider Spoke* (2007) (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 22). These projects explore the possibilities of interactivity in mobile devices and pervasive gaming and demonstrate the potency of art–science collaborations in ‘addressing technology problems that have social outcomes’ (Blast Theory, 2004, 15).

Indeed, the company has been instrumental in paving the way for art–science collaborations that develop on an equal footing and that advocate artistic methodologies as productive resources in the shaping of robust research processes. Blast Theory’s input has led Beaver, Gaver and Benford to argue for the benefits of ambiguity, often ‘considered anathema in Human Computer Interaction’, as a resource for design ‘that can be used to encourage close personal engagement with systems’ (Beaver *et al.*, 2003, 233). As ICT (Information and Communications Technology) is becoming integral to our daily lives, changing the nature of both social space and social interaction, sophisticated art and technology collaborations such as those between Blast Theory and MRL are becoming increasingly important, as they have the capacity to ‘stimulate novel solutions to challenges in technology and society and provide a new conceptual base for innovation narratives’ (Foden, 2012, 2). Other artist and scientist collaborators have also argued that artistic perspectives can challenge scientists to think creatively and with more freedom, question rigid rules and stimulate new ideas (Wright and Linney, 2009). D’Inverno and Prophet have gone so far as to suggest that it is the very gaps in one’s knowledge of a specific discipline that, in interdisciplinary collaborative contexts, can be harnessed to enable creativity and generate out-of-the-box thinking (d’Inverno and Prophet, 2004, 268).

Blast Theory stresses the importance of such thinking in its account of the collaborative development of games such as  *Like Frank in Adelaide*: the game relies on understanding the position of players in the city, which would traditionally have been achieved through GPS. However, the technical problems encountered in urban environments,

where tall buildings obscure satellites, led to a creative solution: audiences were asked to indicate their own position by clicking a button marked 'I Am Here' on a 3G phone (Blast Theory, 2004, 9). Allowing players to manually self-input their location removed the need for location-based hardware. When MRL came to analyse the results of this technique, however, conclusions showed that some participants understood and exploited it by inaccurately reporting their position. By sidestepping what would have been the 'traditional' route of computer science – that is, to improve the performance of the technology – and 'inverting' the problem, Blast Theory came up with a quick and cheap solution that enhanced player experience (Blast Theory, 2004, 15). While curious and excited about the possibilities and affordances (Gaver, 1991) of technological innovation, Blast Theory also develops work that critically reflects upon the social impact of technology. Works such as *I Like Frank*, *Day of the Figurines* and *You Get Me* (2008) research the social implications of mobile communication technologies, examining the technologies' capacities and limitations, and considering the extent to which these can help bridge social divides. In *You Get Me*, for example, the technologies were used to create connections between young people at Mile End Park and audiences at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden.

Although the company creates work that results in different types of artistic outputs, such as videos and installations, its live practice always aims to situate audiences at the centre. Furthermore, audiences are never present as witnesses – they are asked to immerse themselves in an experience, take an active part in the development of a piece by performing certain actions, making choices, playing a game, making decisions that will shape their own and others' experience of the work, solving problems, competing with each other and undertaking various challenges. Adams explains how the company developed the format of their early works (mostly promenade pieces) from a wish to invite audiences to each create their own version of the performance experience offered. Fully immersing them in rich

environments where a plethora of stimuli compete for their attention, ensures that individual audience members can make their own choices about where and how to position their body, where to turn, what to look at and which stimulus to follow at each point in time, co-creating a performance experience unique to them as a result (Adams in Chatzichristodoulou, 2009a, 108). The same desire to bombard audiences with competing stimuli and immerse them in complex, layered environments also led Blast Theory to adopt the use of digital technology from the very beginning of their practice.

Blast Theory's audiences do not, in general, get an 'easy ride': taking part in the company's work can be both a rewarding and a challenging experience. As an audience member you could be asked to exert yourself physically and take actual risks (by cycling in busy city streets while also trying to 'hide' secrets in specific locations, as in the case of *Rider Spoke*), or to commit yourself to demanding emotional undertakings (by making yourself available to emotionally support a stranger over the period of one year, as in *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003)). Alternatively, you could be confronted with tricky dilemmas that demand that you make tough decisions (as in *Day of the Figurines*, where participants' characters are placed in increasingly challenging situations that call for difficult decision making); you could be asked to share intimate information with strangers (as in *Rider Spoke*); or you could find that you have become part of the show, your actions and responses being recorded and exposed to other audience members to witness – and judge (as in *Safehouse* (1997) and *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* (2009)).

## **Funding Streams and Partnerships**

Blast Theory successfully attracts funding and support from a range of sources. The company's main funding comes from the arts: Blast Theory has received core funding from Arts Council England (ACE) since 1994 (Walwin, 2003). Specifically, the company received

approximately £140,000 per annum from ACE South East for the years 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15 (Arts Council England website), and remains as a National Portfolio Organization set to receive £402,472 over the period 2015–18. It has also received several ACE National Touring Programme Awards, and other arts funding such as research and development and production awards. Moreover, the company receives fees for presenting its work throughout Europe, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and Australia, and in prestigious contexts such as the ICC Museum in Tokyo (Japan), the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art (USA), the Sydney Biennale (Australia), the National Palace Museum in Taipei (Taiwan), the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin (Germany) and the Sónar Festival in Barcelona (Spain). Blast Theory's income streams are not restricted to the arts, however, as a substantial part of the company's income stems from its research collaborations, which ensure access to technological innovation and resources that would otherwise be out of bounds for an arts company. MRL is its most important partner, providing in-kind research and technical support for the company's most influential projects, including *Desert Rain*, *Can You See Me Now?*, *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), *Day of the Figurines*, *Rider Spoke* and *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* (Blast Theory website).

Following the success of *Desert Rain*, Blast Theory has been involved in major research projects that bring together academic and industry partners, such as IPerG (Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming, 2004–8), an EU project with partners including Sony Net Services, Nokia and the Swedish Institute of Computer Science. Feeding on Blast Theory's experience with developing pervasive games that expand in time and space, such as *Uncle Roy All Around You*, IPerG aimed to 'create entirely new game experiences ... tightly interwoven with our everyday lives through the objects, devices and people that surround us and the places we inhabit' (Blast Theory, 2004, 15). The project also aimed to develop new tools for pervasive gaming, and research new markets. Blast Theory pieces, such as *Day of*

*the Figurines* and *Rider Spoke*, were informed by the research undertaken through IPerG and were considered ‘exemplary’ by EU reviewers (Blast Theory, 2004, 15). IPerG was followed by the Participate research project (2006–8), which also featured major industry partners such as the BBC, British Telecom and Microsoft Research, and ‘explored convergence in pervasive, online and broadcast media to create new kinds of mass-participatory events’ (Participate project website). These research projects have not only informed Blast Theory’s artistic outputs, but have also shifted the company’s profile towards a more research-focused, creative-industries-related agenda. The company’s probing of issues around gaming, mobile platforms, mixed media, mixed reality, interactivity, engagement and participation has also led to its increasing reputation within the cultural industries as games innovators. Since winning the Maverick Award at the Games Developers Conference (2005) the company has been represented by the Creative Artists Agency in Los Angeles in relation to game design, and has been invited to contribute to ‘debates about the development of games as an artform that can be conceptually, intellectually and emotionally demanding while also engaging a wide audience’ (Blast Theory website). Blast Theory and individual company members also receive fees for services to the education and creative industries sectors (for example, through running workshops, or through production partnerships with the BBC and Channel 4).

Blast Theory’s general attraction for funders and partners results not only from its creative use of emerging technologies within widely accessible performance and interactive contexts, but also from the company’s sophisticated approach to the marketing and documentation of its work. Its usage of video documentation, in particular, is explorative and creative, resulting in videos that serve not only as documents, but also as promotional materials. They document the atmosphere and general ambience of a piece, rather than the concrete detail of what occurs in the unfolding of the work, preserving tacit knowledge (that is, forms of knowledge that cannot be transferred through linguistic representation, such as

sensory information) (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 30). The company's diversification of income streams demonstrates an energetic and ambitious entrepreneurial spirit that, arguably, provides a model for a sustainable approach to arts funding that emergent artists could aspire to follow. Since 2009/10, several European countries have found themselves in the process of re-examining approaches to cultural policy and practice, as a response to an international economic crisis that has – so some argue – rendered reductions in public spending on the arts and culture inevitable (CultureWatchEurope, 2010). In times when arts funding is under threat in Britain and internationally, Blast Theory's business model could be put forward as a successful alternative to many artistic companies' complete dependence on arts funding avenues. However, despite its international profile and its skilful approach to accessing a wide range of funding, and regardless of numerous attempts, Blast Theory has rarely succeeded in attracting corporate sponsorship; the company puts this down to its 'lack of ability to speak the language of corporate professionals' (Dekker with Somers-Miles, 2011, 26).

## **Key Works**

### ***Gunmen Kill Three (1991)***

Blast Theory's first project was made over the summer of 1991 by Matt Adams, Lorraine Hall, Niki Jewett, Will Kittow and Ju Row Farr, and was indicative of what was to come. *Gunmen* was a thematically daring work inspired by current affairs: the title was appropriated from a newspaper headline story that described the shooting of three people by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in a shop situated within a Republican area. *Gunmen* launched the company's career trajectory through the challenging political issues of terrorism, nationalism, religion and violence. This difficult-to-classify piece integrated live performance with audience participation, live wireless video projections, an installation, live DJs and a bar run

by the artists. Despite a lack of means, the artists embraced technology by integrating a live video feed in the performance. The work was structured around a re-enactment of the shooting, and took the form of a promenade performance. This entailed audience immersion as, inevitably, audiences became implicated in the happenings. Wishing to test the boundaries between performers and audiences even further, the artists handed a paintball gun to an audience member, inviting him/her to fire up to three shots at two performers who were in their underwear. By placing a gun in the hands of an audience member, Blast Theory confronted its audiences with a challenging dilemma: they could either accept the offer to participate and engage in the performance through committing an act of violence on the vulnerable, semi-naked performers, or decline it, making the ethical choice of resisting the act of violence proposed to them, but potentially stalling the work's development. That difficult choice indicated the way that participation would develop in Blast Theory's works, where it would always be bound up with challenging ethical and moral choices, and loaded with responsibility. It confronted audiences with questions that, whatever their choice in that particular moment, were likely to linger in their minds and continue to trouble them long after they had left the performance space. *Gunmen* was presented at the Union Chapel in London, the Sheffield Independent Film Festival and Bournemouth Polytechnic, environments that demonstrate Blast Theory's non-conventional venue choices, as well as their early engagement with the creative industries (film) and educational sector. Other promenade pieces that followed were: *Chemical Wedding* (1992), a piece commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) to deal with the subject of HIV/AIDS, and *Stampede* (1994), which explored questions of crowd behaviour and rioting, asking what could induce people to take to the streets.

### ***Kidnap* (1998)**

In 1997 Blast Theory was offered a nine-month residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin with a proposed performance called *Succumbing*. Though *Succumbing* never materialized, the company produced the live installation *Safehouse*, which formed part of the research for its piece *Kidnap*. The work ‘used an interview format to explore the presence that kidnapping has in the life of each visitor, whether as a concept, a political tool, a media construct or in their own experience’ (Blast Theory website). For this piece, Blast Theory invited visitors to consent to being video-recorded while being interviewed; afterwards, visitors were offered the opportunity to browse through footage of other interviewees and watch their recordings. The practice of inviting audience responses to challenging questions, which first emerged in *Safehouse*, runs as a common thread in Blast Theory’s work, as does the idea of collecting intimate (one-to-one) testimonies that are recorded and made available to all participants to browse through. As a result, the very act of participating in Blast Theory’s work makes one a member of a community of people who might have never met face to face, but who have witnessed each other’s intimate testimonies. The Künstlerhaus Bethanien residency and the production of *Safehouse* led to *Kidnap*, one of Blast Theory’s seminal and most influential artworks.

*Kidnap* does what it says in its title by inviting audiences to be kidnapped. It was preceded by *Kidnap Blipvert* (1997), a forty-five-second video that was screened in cinemas around the UK. *Blipvert* carried a Freephone number, which allowed people to register their interest in being kidnapped. Blast Theory chose at random ten finalists from England and Wales who were put under surveillance for one month. Participants were given no clues as to the nature of the secret location or of the kidnapping experience; they were, nonetheless, reassured that they would not be harmed in any way, and were offered the chance to ‘walk out’ of the project by quoting a ‘safeword’. On 15 July 1998, as announced in advance, two out of the ten people under surveillance were kidnapped and taken to a secret location where

they were held for forty-eight hours. They were Debra Burgess, an Australian twenty-seven-year-old temping in the UK, and Russell Ward, a nineteen-year-old who worked at a convenience store. The whole process was broadcast live on the Internet; indeed, this was one of the first performance projects developed for live broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Visitors to the ICA (London) and Green Room (Manchester) could interact with the work online by controlling the camera inside the safehouse (sic) and communicating live with the artists/kidnappers via dedicated web terminals.

Adams has described *Kidnap* as a piece concerned with the notion of giving up control. It asks in what ways we, as audience members, give up control to the performers on stage, and why do we do that. The work explores the process of relinquishing control within a performative setting as an experience that might illuminate surrendering control in other aspects of our lives, such as when getting angry, drunk or high on drugs, through politics, or by following religious leaders. 'Clearly', says Adams, 'there is something about giving up control that we actually like, that we are drawn to. And this is so counter to the Westernised notion of the agency of the individual. [...] Why do we leach so much agency away from ourselves?' Inviting audience members themselves to become the protagonists of the work was the 'ultimate destination of that process of enquiry' (Adams, 2007). *Kidnap* captured the zeitgeist of its times, predating *Big Brother* which was launched a year later in 1999, by interrogating issues of surveillance and control in a poignant, challenging and daring manner. A unique piece of work, it was bound to generate both strong responses and some numbness. James Rampton of *The Independent* asked the (ever-present) question, 'but is it art?' while trying to understand what might induce audience members to pay an entry fee of £10 for the privilege of being spied upon, abducted, imprisoned and 'generally abused for two days' (Rampton, 1998). In the same paper, Judith Palmer repeatedly compared *Kidnap* to an S&M experiment, focusing on Debra who, (apparently 'chin quavering') responded to the press

straight after her experience that, though Blast Theory were performing, for her ‘it was real’ (Palmer, 1998). *Kidnap* was a daring piece of work that raised potent political questions about issues of agency and control, responsibility and surveillance. In many ways *Kidnap* was ahead of its time, predating several artistic practices that have since used surveillance and live broadcasting in different ways, including works that use surveillance technology to subvert its dominant practices, known as ‘surveillance art’ (see McGrath, 2010 and Dixon, 2007, 437–56).

### ***Desert Rain* (1999)**

*Kidnap* was followed by another seminal work, *Desert Rain*, only a year later. A milestone in the company’s developmental trajectory, *Desert Rain* was created in collaboration with MRL, and was Blast Theory’s most technologically ambitious work to that date. A hybrid between a game, an installation and a live performance, the piece remained consistent with Blast Theory’s practice of merging formats and disciplines. In *Desert Rain*, participants were grouped in teams of six and were each asked to find their ‘target’ – a person they were given a photograph of – and to achieve their mission within twenty minutes. Though each person was sent to his/her adventure alone, participants were asked to work together as a team to find the exit and leave the world once they had achieved their individual missions; indeed, the group’s success depended on group members escaping together. The piece was a response to the First Gulf War, and confronted participants with relevant fragments of information. Some of these were clearly related to the Gulf War, such as extracts from interviews with people whose lives had been affected by it: a journalist, a soldier, a peace worker, an actor, a tourist and a consumer of media coverage. Others pointed to the war more loosely, for example, through a virtual space that contained a floating field of numbers, all of which were estimates of Iraqi casualties; participants had to physically push their way through those numbers to

reach for the exit. On leaving, participants collected their coats and bags (which they had previously left with the artists) to discover, at a later point, a small bag of sand concealed in their belongings. The bag contained approximately 100,000 grains of sand, a reference to a speech by General Colin Powell who infamously responded to a question regarding estimates of Iraqis killed during the US invasion: 'It's really a number I'm not terribly interested in' (Powell in Dixon, 2007, 616). *Desert Rain* was influenced by Jean Baudrillard's article 'The Gulf War did not take place' first published in *Libération* on 29 March 1991. In this article, the philosopher suggested that the Gulf War, though very real in terms of direct casualties, was in fact virtual – or attained a virtual nature – due to its mediatization. Drawing on Baudrillard, Blast Theory explain that,

Whilst remaining deeply suspicious of this kind of theoretical position [we] recognise that this idea touches upon a crucial shift in our perception and understanding of the world around us. It asserts that the role of the media, advertising and of the entertainment industries in the presentation of events is casually misleading at best and perniciously deceptive at worst. ... while televisual information claims to provide immediate access to real events, in fact what it does is produce information events which stand in for the real ... (Blast Theory website)

By confronting audiences with a mixed reality environment that appropriated elements of the Gulf War, while also constantly blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, *Desert Rain* aimed to bring a 'new understanding of ... the role of the mass media in distorting our appraisal of the world' (Blast Theory website), raising awareness of the 'virtual' nature of all media news gathering and presentation. For that reason, Adams suggests that *Desert Rain* perhaps represents the most profound level the company has reached in trying to make sense of the world 'when we are so overwhelmed with different sources of information, and when there is such a fluid boundary between fact and fiction'

(Adams, 2007). As the first public output of the ongoing collaboration between Blast Theory and MRL, *Desert Rain* marked a shift in the work of the company. From this point onwards, Blast Theory's work became more technologically complex, being situated at the forefront of ICT research and innovation.

*Desert Rain* was a technologically ambitious piece that incorporated a collaborative virtual reality environment (CVE) and 'a physically permeable mixed reality boundary' (Shaw *et al.*, 2000), aiming to foster new relationships between performers and participants, as well as between the participants themselves. The piece also employed various interactive and gaming practices, projections on water screens that operated as (literally) fluid interfaces between the real and the virtual, as well as live physical performances. Blast Theory rightly argues that *Desert Rain* 'has become a significant work in the world of performance and new media' (Giannachi, 2007, 52). Indeed, the work has been described as 'a seminal experimental production fusing the technological complexity of hard science skills with a truly original artistic vision' (Dixon, 2007, 616), and as 'one of the most complex and powerful responses to the first Gulf War to be produced within the sphere of theatrical practice' (Giannachi, 2007, 52). The piece was nominated for an Interactive Arts BAFTA Award (2000), won an Honorary Mention at the transmediale Awards, Berlin (2001), and received wide critical acclaim in the UK and Europe.

### ***Can You See Me Now? (2001)***

Although, by the turn of the millennium, Blast Theory was already known in the UK and Europe as an innovative performance and media art company, *Can You See Me Now?* (CYSMN?) was instrumental in establishing the company's international reputation. Another MRL collaboration that is seminal in the company's trajectory, *CYSMN?* was Blast Theory's first pervasive performance-game project. The piece, which 'draws upon the near ubiquity of

handheld electronic devices in many developed countries' (Blast Theory website), employed cutting-edge mobile technologies and locative media to create a mixed reality in which boundaries between real and virtual space were blurred. Structured on a traditional chase game, *CYSMN?* unfolded both in the streets of a real city and online, within a virtual simulation of that same city. In fact, the project took place in several cities; it has been presented in the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Spain, Ireland, Denmark, the USA, Canada, Japan and Brazil, over a period of nine years. Online players, based (almost) anywhere in the world, were pitched against Blast Theory members called 'runners', who were based in the real urban environment. Using GPS tracking, the runners' positions in the real city were identified and 'translated' into the virtual simulation of the same city, in relation to the online players. The runners chased the online players using hand-held computers that displayed the players' positions within the simulated world. With up to a hundred people playing online at any one time, the multiplayer aspect of the game allowed players to collaborate and exchange tactics. Players could also 'eavesdrop' on the runners' discussions through an audio stream running from their walkie-talkies. *CYSMN?* examined the distortion of the boundaries between public and private space as mobile telephony has encouraged users to broadcast private conversations into public arenas, rendering passers-by the inadvertent audiences (or eavesdroppers) to their personal dramas (Blast Theory website).

In each *CYSMN?* performance-game, two cities, a 'real' and a virtual, would meet and merge into one hybrid city built from overlapping layers of physical and digital space-time, each with different qualities and behaviours. As Blast Theory puts it, 'the virtual city ... has an elastic relationship to the real city. At times the two cities seem identical ... At other times the two cities diverge and appear very remote from one another' (Blast Theory website). Each time two cities merged and then were torn apart, a new space was produced. This was neither exclusively physical nor exclusively virtual; it was, instead, a hybrid space created

from the players' interactions with each other, which pertained to the interstices between physical and virtual. This hybrid city was shaped by the relations developed between the different layers of space-time and the people who 'inhabited' them. As I discuss elsewhere (Chatzichristodoulou, 2009b), *CYSMN?* used the overlay of this emergent city to explore ideas of distributed presence and absence, and of the grey areas in between. For example, the online players were both present (in the hybrid city) and absent (in a corporeal form, from the physical city); the runners were also present (in the hybrid city) and absent (in the proximity of the players). Finally, when a player was caught, the runners took photos of the exact physical location where each player was 'spotted'. These photos, called 'sightings', were then uploaded to the website, functioning as an abstract but poignant documentation of each game. As players became mapped onto the physical terrain they had abandoned, the sightings functioned as poetic acts, interweaving the digital, virtual city into the physical, tangible one, while augmenting real space with yet another layer of relationality. Through their weaving of the physical and the digital, these sightings linked the player to a fragment of cityscape that, possibly, s/he might have never visited. The work's visceral nature, which resulted from the intensely physical activity of the runners battling against natural elements, hostile urban environments and the limitations of their own bodies, kept juxtaposing itself against the smoothness of the virtual realm the players occupied, not only through the sightings, but also through the runners' walkie-talkies. Blast Theory succeeded in creating a rare hybrid: a computer game that invited real life to burst into the virtual realm, 'contaminating' it with its unexpected, messy and often paradoxical essence.

In developing *CYSMN?* the company posed the question, 'when games, the internet and mobile phones converge what new possibilities arise?' (Blast Theory website). This focus on convergence media proved to be particularly pertinent at the time, and an area of fruitful investigation for successive works, such as the research project *Participate* (2006–8).

*CYSMN?* won Blast Theory's first major award, the Golden Nica for Interactive Art at Prix Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria), among several others. It launched a series of important live gaming projects, such as *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), also a mixed reality game that unfolded simultaneously within a virtual and a real city, and *I Like Frank* (2004), which (according to Blast Theory) was the world's first 3G mixed reality game. *CYSMN?* also opened the way for the development of the company's locative media practice, which has not always been dependent on gaming structures. Locative media pieces that do not function as games include *Rider Spoke*, *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* and the locative cinema piece *A Machine to See With* (2010).

### ***Day of the Figurines (2006)***

Blast Theory's first 'game' that unfolds over short message service (SMS), *Day of the Figurines (DoF)*, was a durational piece that invited players to engage with it over a period of twenty-four days, each of which represented an hour of the figurines' time. Like previous work, *DoF* merged different layers of space-time, bringing together the physical and virtual to create mixed experiences. In this case, the physical space was an actual installation of a vast model town (the piece opened at the Lighthouse in Brighton, where the model was installed), inhabited by one thousand plastic figurines. Each figurine was moved by hand once every hour for the duration of the game. To take part in the game, players had to physically visit the installation and register their own figurine, by naming it, answering questions about its past (for example, describing a place in the fictional character's childhood), and considering how the figurine would like to be remembered, 'invoking feelings of mortality and legacy' (Adams and Delahunta, 2006, 149). The figurine was then placed in the town and, from that point onwards, the game unfolded via SMS.

According to the game's background story, all figurines were refugees who had just arrived in a British city, where they had to learn how to survive. Like all of Blast Theory's works that employ gaming structures, and unlike most commercial games, *DoF* had no clear objective or set of rules. Players were told that their main goal was to help others, while they all tried to survive within a fictional town that shifted 'from the mundane to the cataclysmic' (Blast Theory website). Players received at least one text per day that updated them on the progress of their figurine and invited them to make certain decisions about its actions. Figurines' 'health' levels could decrease or improve according to their actions and objects acquired (such as food and drink). Players received communications of 'events' via authored messages that provided the underlying narrative of the game; 'dilemmas', which were 'events that demanded a multiple choice response' and which impacted upon the figurines' health levels; and 'missions' which were more complex structures that combined 'multiple events, dilemmas, destinations and objects' (Flintham *et al.*, 2007). Players could become increasingly ill and eventually die if they responded wrongly to dilemmas or failed missions. As the day became increasingly challenging for the refugees, culminating with the appearance of an occupying army in the town's High Street, players were faced with more complex moral dilemmas, such as how to respond to abusive soldiers, and whether to help other people survive. As a result, players had to make some difficult decisions about the fate of their figurine, its relation to and impact on other refugees and the town as a whole, and the responsibility – and risk – their character was prepared to undertake. Furthering issues raised by previous works, *DoF* 'continue[d] Blast Theory's enquiry into the nature of public participation within artworks and electronic spaces' (Flintham *et al.*, 2007), raising concerns about social awareness, engagement and responsibility, and testing ideas relating to 'trust, community and democracy' (Adams and Delahunta, 2006, 151). Although previous works had engaged participants through the use of visually rich virtual environments, *DoF* was

almost an exercise in minimalism: once they had registered their character, participants were invited to engage via the narrow channel of SMS messaging. Therefore, the restriction placed upon the mode of joining the game (through visiting the real space installation) was important in providing ‘a rich and stimulating aesthetic experience at the outset to imprint the geography of the town into the minds of the players’ (Adams and Delahunta, 2006, 150). At the same time, says Adams, this real-space encounter undergone by the players with a tangible representation of the fictional city, their own figurine and other players, helped retain ‘a performative aspect’, as players saw each other joining the game and witnessed the moving of their figurine for the first time (Adams and Delahunta, 2006, 150). From this point onwards, the low-tech nature and durational aspect of the piece set a dynamic that was distinct to it: Blast Theory attempted to create work that was ‘situated within players’ daily lives and c[ould] be accessed at any time’ (Blast Theory website). Adams suggests that the long duration of the piece ‘add[ed] to the sense that the game is personalized’ as the information provided by each specific player is processed and addressed back to him/her (Adams and Delahunta, 2006, 149). Though players were not required to return to the board after having registered their figurine, some did occasionally do so to observe the changes in the town from close up. A website also allowed players to stay abreast with developments in the town and ‘current affairs’. As is often the case in Blast Theory’s work, *DoF* operated on different levels of player engagement, to create a layered narrative: not only did players co-author, to some extent, the narrative of their figurine through their actions and choices (and also, as a result, the narrative of the whole town), but visitors to the venue where the installation was exhibited were able to follow the game on a meta-narrative level, as observers, via video displays. Developed with MRL, Sony Net Services and the Fraunhofer Institute as part of the European research project IPerG, *DoF* was a complex and demanding piece to produce and orchestrate, and was only performed in Britain twice, in Brighton and

Birmingham (Blast Theory website). It was followed by *Ivy4Evr*, another piece that used SMS to target a teenage audience, inviting them to engage in discussions on issues such as sex and drugs, by going to ‘places that other dramas can’t go – onto your phone and into your pocket’ (Blast Theory website).

### ***Ulrike and Eamon Compliant (2009)***

This is one of Blast Theory’s few pieces (along with *Desert Rain*) that has sought to explicitly engage with actual political events, posing profound questions such as: ‘What are our obligations to act on our political beliefs? And what are the consequences of taking those actions?’ (Blast Theory website). Building on previous locative media projects, Blast Theory invited participants to walk through the city of Venice (the piece was commissioned by the De La Warr Pavilion for the Venice Biennale), while receiving instructions on their mobile phones. The locative media aspect of the work was low-tech and depended on the participants’ mobile phones, with no specialist gear required (as in *Rider Spoke*), rendering the work widely accessible.

*Ulrike* drew on the lives of Ulrike Meinhof, leading member of the Red Army Faction,<sup>ii</sup> and Eamon Collins, member of the Irish Republican Army.<sup>iii</sup> It asked participants to assume the role of either Ulrike or Eamon, thus placing them as the main protagonists at the centre of a convoluted, treacherous and morally contentious world. The format of the work furthered dramaturgical and stylistic threads that had developed in pieces such as *Safehouse* and *Desert Rain*, where participants were invited to observe live interviews with others, without knowing that they would themselves become the subject of observation at a different point within the piece. In the case of *Ulrike*, interviews were layered; participants first watched the video of a live interview, then they were interviewed themselves and, finally, they were led to the realization that their interview was being watched, as they were invited

to watch someone else being interviewed through a two-way mirror. Through this layering of surveying and being surveyed, Blast Theory exposed our willingness to sit back and witness others being challenged, while feeling secure in the shaded anonymity that the role of audience can provide. Once more, the company denied its spectators any comfort, not only through ‘turning the tables’ on them to make every single one a protagonist of the work for a brief passage of time (although they were not addressed as such, when interviewed participants assumed the roles of Ulrike or Eamon), but also through inviting them to watch others respond to challenging questions. The interviews invited participants to engage with the contentious ideas of political conflict and terrorism, and to consider aspects of their character with which they might not previously have been confronted. For example, they were asked what they would fight for, whether they would kill, and what they would do if people came into their area and killed their friends and neighbours (Blast Theory website). Blast Theory consciously probed for inconsistencies in people’s stances, looking for ‘the gap between [their] ideas of social engagement and the reality of [their] lifestyle’ (Blast Theory website). *Ulrike* sought to reposition terrorism, often viewed through the prism of Islam and other racial, linguistic and religious divides, as a ‘home grown’ phenomenon, examining it as the corruption of a noble purpose. The work tested the participants’ ethical stance towards terrorism by confronting them with difficult moral dilemmas to highlight the consequences of their imagined actions, asking ‘what are the norms and bounds of fairness and justice?’ (Blast Theory website). The locative film project *A Machine to See With* (2010) followed *Ulrike*, using similar technologies in inviting participants on a guided walk through the city using their mobile phones.

## **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that Blast Theory <sup>was</sup> one of the most influential art and performance groups operating in Britain before and after the turn of the millennium. The group's innovative, ground-breaking practice, which fuses disciplinary contexts, questions conventional understandings of theatre and pushes both technological and artistic boundaries, naturally lends itself to analysis, turning Blast Theory into the darlings of the academic establishment. As might be expected, the extended list of bibliographic references to the company's work originates from different disciplinary areas, primarily, drama and theatre studies, human-computer interaction (HCI) and game studies. The company's long-term collaboration with MRL at the University of Nottingham further ensures the critical reception of its work, as its artistic projects constitute research in their own right. Blast Theory's work has been discussed in relation to its use of locative media (see Gordon and Souza e Silva, 2011), urban, mobile and pervasive gaming (see Crogan, 2011), the design of interactive experiences (see Adams and O'Grady, 2011), and the performance of mixed reality (see Benford and Giannachi, 2011) among other issues, as well as in numerous overviews studying new media art and digital performance. The nature of the company's work – complex but accessible – also means that Blast Theory is studied in many drama and theatre departments in the UK as a successful example of a company engaged in interactive and participative theatre practice, and invested in the use of digital technology in contemporary performance.

Though highly respected in the academic world, Blast Theory is not always well received by theatre critics, who tend to approach the company's unconventional performances with some scepticism, and to be critical of the technology's shortcomings. Howard Loxton found *Rider Spoke* 'insufferably slow', and criticized Blast Theory for having made 'no attempt to construct a narrative or to give the experience a dramatic structure' (2007), while Simon Tait comments in relation to Blast Theory's *I'd Hide You*

(2012) among other digital performance projects, ‘I’ve seen the future of theatre ... and it doesn’t work’ (2014). This is in contrast to the reception accorded by games journalists such as Keith Stuart, who describes the company’s works as ‘astonishing’ (2011) and Liat Clark who, unlike Tait, enjoyed *I’d Hide You*: ‘Blast Theory and Sheffield Doc/Fest are making interactivity what it should be: really, really fun’ (2014).

Although acclaimed within artistic circles and studied in academia, Blast Theory has always been inspired by and concerned with popular culture. The company is unique in creating work that is conceptually sophisticated, thematically challenging, mentally, emotionally and physically demanding, while being accessible and indeed attractive to a vast range of audiences, crossing boundaries of nationality, age, gender and class. Blast Theory’s engagement with popular culture is key to its success. The company confronts its audiences with challenging social and political questions, which emerge through familiar formats and settings such as club nights, computer games or one’s mobile phone. This strategy lures audiences into the work with the promise of playful entertainment, averting the danger of alienating them by its conceptual complexity, technological mindset or political content. It is my belief that the company’s virtuosic merging of the sophisticated, innovative and challenging with the everyday, familiar and popular is the cause of its wide appeal in many different circles, including those audiences described as ‘hard to reach’. Blast Theory also owes its success to its use of digital and mobile telecommunication technologies, balancing technological innovation with user-friendly and intuitive low-tech solutions. Unconcerned with ‘showing off’ technological competences, Blast Theory uses emerging technology to focus on the art. As Rohan Gunatillake suggests, ‘It’s about time we gave the arts the chance to influence digital technology as much as the other way round’ (Gunatillake, 2013). Blast Theory succeeds in employing technological innovation to advance art and social interaction and influence the way technology itself is being developed and applied. Gunatillake further

argues that ‘we need more art that takes digital tools and digital thinking and uses it to express and curate beauty, meaning and debate’ (Gunatillake, 2013). To achieve this, we need more companies like Blast Theory.

## **Key Works**

*Gunmen Kill Three*, 1991, London  
*Chemical Wedding*, 1992, Hull  
*Stampede*, 1993, Cambridge  
*Invisible Bullets*, 1994, London  
*The Gilt Remake*, 1995, Leicester  
*Ultrapure*, 1996, London  
*Blipvert*, 1997 (video)  
*Safehouse*, 1997, Berlin  
*Kidnap*, 1998, Manchester  
*10 Backwards*, 1999, Bristol  
*Desert Rain*, 1999, London  
*Can You See Me Now?*, 2001, Sheffield  
*TRUCOLD*, 2002, Venice (video)  
*Uncle Roy All Around You*, 2003, London  
*I Like Frank*, 2004, Adelaide  
*Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming (IPerG)*, 2005–8 (research)  
*Day of the Figurines*, 2006, Brighton  
*Participate*, 2006 (research)  
*Rider Spoke*, 2007, London  
*You Get Me*, 2008, London  
*Ulrike and Eamon Compliant*, 2009, Venice  
*Ivy4Evr*, 2010 (SMS drama)  
*A Machine to See With*, 2010, San Jose  
*I'd Hide You*, 2012, Sheffield

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\_\_\_ *Something American*, video recording. Brighton: Blast Theory, 1996.

\_\_\_ *Stampede*, video recording. Brighton: Blast Theory, 1994.

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<sup>i</sup> Other surveillance works that predate *Kidnap* are *ArTistheater* by Parkbench (1994), who claim to have created the first live web performance, and *Jennicam* (1996–2003), a durational self-surveillance project by Jennifer Ringley (Dixon, 2007, pp. 437–56).

<sup>ii</sup> The Red Army Faction (RAF), also known as the Baader-Meinhof gang in its early days, was a terrorist organization founded in West Germany in 1970 by Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof and others. The group fought against a capitalist West German establishment killing more than thirty people over two years (BBC News website).

<sup>iii</sup> Created in 1919, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was a paramilitary organization that sought the end of British rule in Northern Ireland and the reunification of Ireland (Encyclopaedia Britannica online).