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Immersed in Soft Space: An Interview with Melinda Rackham

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Melinda Rackham is an artist and theorist based in Sydney. She has been working online since the mid-1990s in her domain http://www.subtle.net. Her award-winning web works include *empyrean* (http://www.subtle.net/empyrean) and *carrier* (http://www.subtle.net/carrier). *carrier* was winner of the Faulding Award for Multimedia, Adelaide Festival 2000, while *empyrean* won the Sound-Space Award for Virtual Worlds, Stuttgart Filmwinter 2001. Her works have been shown extensively at international festivals, while she has participated in numerous conferences and residencies. Her writing appears online and in print arenas such as Ctheory, Culture Machine, Leonardo and Real Time. She is also producer of the International New media mailing list –*empyre*– (http://www.subtle.net/empyrean/empyre). She was interviewed by John Potts for Scan Magazine.

SCAN: 'Interactivity' has been a term associated with net-based activity for many years now. Much of the early enthusiasm for hypertext and net art was founded on the user's freedom to interact with the work. More recently, however, many critics have refuted the notion that interactivity equates, in most cases, to freedom, or even multiplicity of choice for the user. What are your views on the status of interactivity, particularly with regard to your works?

I am a firm believer that interactivity is really about the enthusiasm and imagination of the user rather than the technical possibilities of a work. It was incredibly over-hyped in the 90's as the thing which distinguished this media from other screen-based media, and we have swung the other way. The reality lies somewhere in between. For example in both *carrier* and *empyrean* there is a large set of possibilities with distinct pathways to follow, and the viewer has an array of choices, each producing a different experience according to their choices - however every possibility is already scripted and predetermined. As a 3D work *empyrean* has a massive yet finite possible points of view. However occasionally my graphics card maps the wrong textures to the wrong objects resulting in random mutations and variations in the worlds, which are fascinating. This is my favourite iteration of the work, the one which is beyond my control.

SCAN: There is the sense when negotiating *carrier* that the user is at the mercy of the computer. Was there a conscious decision to have the user follow the program's instruction to some extent, as if in violation of the standard 'freedom to choose' rhetoric of interactivity?

I wanted to give the user the sense that they were linked in a symbiotic relationship with the machine - their choices are defined by the virus 'infectious agent' who guides them through the site. They will experience either friendly seductive texts, warm colours and soothing sound or confronting texts, cold colour combination and harsh sound depending on their answers to questions, so the sensual experience is self-determined. There is a choice at the end of the infectious agent script, after journeying through the site's seven sections - sort of like a prize for persistence - where the viewer can choose to see the other areas that they haven't been allowed to visit by the software agent.

SCAN: *carrier* plays on several levels with the idea of the virus. How seriously did you take contemporary discourse of the virus, that links organic bodies with computers as receptacles of viruses?

I love viral and immune discourse - if I was a little more geeky I’d be the sort of person who has a computer zoo just to collect and house viruses. They are absolutely the smartest bits of code (biological and machine) on the planet as they infest, utilise existing bodies to multiply and go forth. Smart viruses don’t decimate their hosts - they just share resources to ensure survival in the ultimate symborgian relationship. I have written a lot about this in my paper 'carrier: becoming
SCAN: Has carrier developed as a site in a way that could be called 'organic'? Or at least in ways that you didn't expect?

carrier was meant to be much more complex in its individuated delivery however the coding was too difficult at that time (in 1997). In one sense some of its development was shaped by feedback I received from a small site I had up on the net for a year prior to completing it where I asked for people’s experience with viral illness. And in a way it developed organically from the input of Damien Everett who wrote most of the java and did the sound for the site. Damien’s input helped to evolve my ideas in a different way and more sharply focus my intent of the work. I always work with a sound person - Mitchell Whitelaw did the great sound on empyrean - which enhances and expands any original concept I have. The aural scapes work with the images and text and animation to complete that sensorial sense of being drawn into the screen reality.

SCAN: 'Empyrean' is apparently a medieval term denoting the space beyond physical existence. How much do you regard the immaterial zone of cyberspace as a contemporary equivalent? How does empyrean play with this idea of the immaterial?

I originally came across the term in Margaret Wertheim’s The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace and although I like the equation of the net as something immaterial, I don’t believe it is. It is etheric, but it is also an amorphous organism. Softspace is alive, pulsing and full of potentiality, not an empty void. It buzzes with data packets, information transfers, and to use the old metaphor - which I still like - it is the nervous system of our planet. In fact its materiality is now so integrated in our lives that we take it completely for granted as a physicality. For example it was a common topic of conversation that recent sun spot activity disrupted our email delivery - a pretty direct physical cause and effect. empyrean is sensuous and visceral, so the viewer gets the experience, that they weren’t in a mind space but part of a larger body.

SCAN: How do you conceive the users' relationship with their avatars in empyrean? It's certainly well removed from the typical characterisation found in computer games...

The user often forms a very close protective or affectionate relationship with the avatars. Embodied as an empyrean avatar you are a cute amorphous creature rather than a humanoid. There is nothing to kill, or no mission to complete, so there is no aggressive or adrenaline outlet and users slip into a more relaxed playful mood. The avatars cannot speak, and communicate only via five gestures with accompanying sounds - 'blush' 'wiggle' 'blink' 'squawk' and 'gurgle'. This pre-verbal state tends to induce empathy, sympathy and identification with them as autonomous creatures and redresses the tendency for written (US) English between silicon-enhanced white avatars to be the dominant form of communication in online space.

SCAN: empyrean is a beautiful, lyrical space to navigate. In the past, digital artists have tended to avoid the overtly beautiful, wary of the 'ideology of beauty'. You have no qualms in this regard?

My early net work and my previous sculptural work was a lot about sexuality and identity and although there was some murky imagery my prevalent aesthetic has always been seductive, textured and luscious. There is a sense that if something is beautiful it is not serious. But seduction or the aura of a object or work - the special energetic something that draws you to it - is a very powerful tool. Behind, beneath, below the surface there is something, another edge to contemplate like random textual elements embedded in the work which question some assumptions that viewers make about VR space. For example there is a disquieting sense in empyrean that as a viewer you never have a horizon to orient yourself against, that your most stable familiar point of visual reference in everyday life is missing. You never quiet know where you stand, as in fact you don’t stand anywhere! Your expectations are thwarted and that can be either frustrating of enjoyable for the viewer. One of the empyrean scapes is actually called 'beauty' - it is a constantly shifting web of connected lines and jostling avatars, which you can literally get caught up in and not be able to move your avatar out of.

SCAN: empyrean is constructed as a 3D multi-user space. What are the advantages of 3D?
It’s about mutability of scale really. 3D specifically in Virtual Reality Modelling Language VRML can be simultaneously minuscule or macrocosmic. This is perfect immersive material as we can place ourselves within the space, sometimes literally as in VR head sets and CAVE environments, sometimes conceptually with a small screen. Whatever the scale, with 3D there is a sense that we are transported through the screen into another space. We go through the looking glass, not sit passively outside as one would do as an observer in cinematic sense. 3D with its often low polygon modelling aesthetic can be the arena in which we break free from that all pervasive cinematic conventions of screen media, and start to form the visual language specific to soft space.

SCAN: Where do you see your work going in the near future?

After working in the massive immersion and freedom and complexity of 3D space I don’t think I can ever go back to the flatlands of 2D. My new work in development is called “in.finite” – about the sensorial nature of technological space. It’s multi-user and networked and I’m looking for more stable platforms to drive it - perhaps open source games engines. I envisage it as luscious yet ephemeral, conveying a sense of bathing in white space: immersion in Marie Antoinette's milk bath perhaps. I also have some large scale projection ideas, and am delving into quantum physics! I am extremely interested in working with light and the notion of pure energy.

SCAN: Finally, you operate a mailing list called Empyre, for practitioners and theorists in the media arts. What purposes do you think a list such as this serves?

-empyre- is an online community which is invaluable for anyone who works in online arenas. Originally the list was conceived of as a discussion space which would explore topics specific to 3D spaces on the web. I had been working in that area of practice for a few years and discovered a vibrant global community discussing the technical issues associated with web3D, but there were no avenues for the more aesthetic or theoretical discussions of networked dimensional environments. But more importantly, I saw other lists where the culture of the Internet and impacts of technology were being discussed by writers and academics, but not by artists who were making work in the field, so I started –empyre- as a place to showcase artists, writers and producers. It allows exposure and discussion of work and concepts in an accessible, moderated, structured monthly thematically driven format, to a large and informed Australian and international community.

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