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The New York Times

A Video Game With Awe as Its Quest

Elizabeth Bard. **New York Times**. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: Mar 21, 2004. pg. 2.31

Abstract (Summary)
You enter "World of Awe" (www.worldofawe.net) by clicking on a clear capsule of rainbow-colored candy sprinkles. A soft wind, not totally out of sync with the static hum of your computer, begins, and you are invited to follow the traveler through a fictional portal, at 319 East Sixth Street to be precise, into another world. Here there are six areas to explore, each located inside a folder on the screen. "The Traveler's Journal" is the central node, currently containing two chapters told through diaries and love letters. "Nowheres" is a series of beautifully articulated 3-D desert landscapes, bathed in twilight. "Music for World of Awe" contains seven musical compositions, a collaboration with the composer Yoav Gal. "Portal: A net.dance" is a series of flash videos, made with the dancer-filmmaker Evann Siebens, that show the traveler entering the alternate universe by hopping over a chain-link fence. There is also a "Love Letter Dispatcher" -- enter your e-mail address and you will receive the traveler's latest letter to the anonymous beloved.

In addition to its sprawling presence on the Internet, Ms. [Kanarek]'s work is currently the subject of a solo exhibition at Bitforms Gallery in Chelsea through April 10. Walking into Bitforms, you'd be hard pressed to locate the technology at all. In the central installation, code from the Linux operating system is printed in delicate italics on frothy pink ribbon, suspended from the ceiling like a wedding veil. A photograph of a young woman wrapped in the same ribbon, a common sewing pin attaching the cloth to her skin, is made exquisite by the tiniest prick of sadomasochism. The relationship of these objects to the online project comes from a certain warm, craftlike engagement with technology. "I don't want to make props," Ms. Kanarek says. "Each element has the responsibility of extending this world. It's never just a translation."

A screen grab from Yael Kanarek's "Portal: A net.dance," a segment of her online work "World of Awe," a fabulist journey into an alternate universe. (Photo by Yael Kanarek); "Sleep mode, 2004," Yael Kanarek's photograph of a young woman wrapped in coded computer ribbon, can be seen at Bitforms Gallery in Chelsea. (Photo by Bitforms Gallery)

Full Text (1240 words)

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[Author Affiliation]
Elizabeth Bard writes about digital art from Paris, London and New York.

YAEL KANAREK is having an online romance. Sitting at an Internet cafe near Cooper Union in Manhattan, she clicks open a message and reads aloud from a recent love letter: "The bump on my right toe was not a blister. It was the pearl that you gave me; it was under my skin." Not your typical mash note. Then again, this romance takes place in an alternate universe, in a place called "World of Awe."

Ms. Kanarek, a new-media artist, has been creating "World of Awe" a multimedia nether region, since 1995. It follows the story of a lone traveler searching for an elusive treasure. "I was painting at the time," she says, "and I was running out of room. It made perfect sense to have my studio on the computer."

The online project includes a complex narrative, told through diaries and love letters as well as through dance, music and graphic design. Judging from the title, "World of Awe" could easily be another mind-numbing, mutant-slaying quest game -- or worse, an ironic postmodern take on one. But for Ms. Kanarek, the traditional goals of a quest game -- kill the bad guys, find the treasure -- are merely a springboard, a framework that she uses to explore feelings of dislocation, loneliness, but also rapture.

"There is something simple about a quest," she says. "You place that goal there, then you can let it go and deal with everything else." Instead of a game, what emerges is one artist's search for a world view through creating an alternate world. The result has more in common with C. S. Lewis's "Narnia" than "Dungeons and Dragons."

"World of Awe," at its core, is a travelogue. It does all the things a travelogue does best: records the scenery, recalls near brushes with wonder and disaster, leaving ample time, of course, for deep and meaningful introspection.

"I like that it's a bit nowhere -- I like living in this imaginary space," Ms. Kanarek says. "Some tools extend your body; cars extend your legs; software extends your imagination."

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319 East Sixth Street to be precise, into another world. Here there are six areas to explore, each located inside a folder on the screen. "The Traveler's Journal" is the central node, currently containing two chapters told through diaries and love letters. "Nowheres" is a series of beautifully articulated 3-D desert landscapes, bathed in twilight. "Music for World of Awe" contains seven musical compositions, a collaboration with the composer Yoav Gal. "Portal: A net.dance" is a series of flash videos, made with the dancer-filmmaker Evann Siebens, that show the traveler entering the alternate universe by hopping over a chain-link fence. There is also a "Love Letter Dispatcher" -- enter your e-mail address and you will receive the traveler's latest letter to the anonymous beloved.

It's worth paying special attention to the folder marked mRB, short for moodRingBaby. According to the text, the traveler bought the item (a sort of cyber-pet conceived in collaboration with the design team bnode) for $1.99 at Duane Reade to soften the pain of loneliness on the road. The ring can have conversations, sing songs and, supposedly, store memories. And it works in this world, too: moving the cursor across its surface you can call up dissolving images of bacon, a Martian landscape or a shower-stall rendition of "Row, row, row your boat."

The mood ring, a human companion caught in a gadget's body, is one of many attempts on the site to soften technology, bring out its sensitive side. Ms. Kanarek's language, too, is a constant negotiation between man and machine: technical jargon is often paired with warm-and-fuzzy concepts -- you can "browse my memories" or "download bedtime story."

Listening to Ms. Kanarek talk about "World of Awe" is a bit like talking to a Trekkie -- one who can recite Captain Kirk's starlogs in order from 1976. She belongs to a line that runs through William Blake and Matthew Barney, artists with an entire fictional universes in their head.

Born in the United States to an American father and an Israeli mother, Ms. Kanarek, 36, grew up mostly in Israel, coming to America for art school at age 24. Her work is largely apolitical -- but when Ms. Kanarek does engage the potentially explosive, she does it though a veil of beauty. "Beauty is a superpower." she says. "It disarms." In the traveler's backpack is the "demilitarized" barrel of an Uzi submachine gun. She first encountered an Uzi while serving in the Israeli army. "There is a line carved on the inside of the barrel, to make the bullets spin," she says. "If you point it at the light, it glows. I spent a lot of time looking through the barrel."

The most charming parts of the site are deliberately low-tech. In Chapter 2, under "Computers Inventory," is a series of pop-out windows each containing an amateur photograph of an old computer. Open several windows at one time and you have a sort of patchwork quilt of outmoded machines.

There is a sense of nostalgia throughout "World of Awe" that is increasingly present among artists working with new technologies. A passion for the cutting edge is equaled, if not surpassed, by a fondness for chunky old computer consoles, awkward interfaces, even the uniform gray color of the screen. The digital age is beginning to develop its own art history -- artifacts that artists draw upon as readily as Michelangelo used classical sculpture or Picasso used African masks.

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Ms. Kanarek is unlikely to be coming back from her virtual travels anytime soon. She envisions a lifelong adventure -- in addition to further development on the Net, there are a "World of Awe" book, a CD and a DVD in the works; also possible collaborations with industrial designers, architects and theorists. By the time she's finished (if ever) "World of Awe" may make the "Cremaster" cycle look like a TV mini-series.

[Photograph]
A screen grab from Yael Kanarek's "Portal: A net.dance," a segment of her online work "World of Awe," a fabulist journey into an alternate universe. (Photo by Yael Kanarek); "Sleep mode, 2004," Yael Kanarek's photograph of a young woman wrapped in coded computer ribbon, can be seen at Bitforms Gallery in Chelsea. (Photo by Bitforms Gallery)

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