Interview with Yael Kanarek
T.Whid

Yael Kanarek's World of Awe (http://www.worldofawe.net) is the documentation of a fictional 'traveler' exploring a magical landscape in search of a 'lost treasure'. We encounter the traveler through an interface, which is both magical and mundane. It looks suspiciously like a Mac or Windows desktop, there are icons on the desktop and pull-down menus at the top of the screen. But click an icon or choose a pull-down option and you'll be instantly transported to the world of the traveler. The World of Awe.

Yael builds World of Awe through images of desert landscape, descriptions of the traveler's tools, pages from the traveler's journal, and love letters that the traveler sends to a lover left behind. All these elements are seamlessly integrated through the interface, which is a wonderful technical use of dynamic HTML, much of it written by programmer Luis Perez.

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Twhid: Yael, why did you choose to use the utilitarian GUI (graphical user interface) standards as the guidelines to build your interface for the magical environment described in World of Awe? As if World of Awe is an application running on a desktop?

Yael Kanarek: I think of an application as a private environment to execute ideas. Working in an application is usually a solitary experience and therefore seemed appropriate for a journal containing the particular narrative I have been developing. Also, I was hoping to increase usability, as visitors are familiar with standard navigation system and by that guide them directly into the narrative. But I don't really think it worked out that way. Instead of becoming transparent the interface becomes very apparent and as a result of re-purposing conventional functionality it ends up revisiting the language that is used in GUI. For example, words such as NEW and SAVE in an application indicate certain actions, but their usage in language is wider and in the context of WOA we are reminded of that. In that respect the interface becomes part function, part fiction. Another reason for using GUI stems from the narrative. In [the chapter] Silicon Canyon the traveler is rebuilding a laptop from old hardware and software. What we are seeing as the website is a mirror of the content restored from the laptop.

Twhid: Do you want people to think that the interface is from the

traveler's laptop?

Yael: Yes, but it's not critical. Though this idea serve well as a link between the fantastical narrative and reality. The website becomes a player in the narrative allowing the story to spill beyond its original territory.

Twhid: There has been talk in the net art community about going 'beyond the browser', Jodi (http://www.jodi.org) created SOD, there's Netomat, and other artists' applications are being developed that aren't browser-based. Why did you choose to create a browser-based application rather than a downloadable application?

Yael: The web has proven to be a great environment for exploring the blurry borders of fact and fiction. The McCoys do it in Airwold, you have been playing with it in MTEWW. Also, the web is a more impressionable environment for a project that is constantly developing. I can easily update and I like that. Luis and I are working on another environment that will expand the visual experience of World of Awe. That one is being built on a game engine and will be a downloadable application.

[At this point, there is some convoluted conversation prompted by t.whid's vague and ill-formed questions. The one interesting point that arises from this part of the conversation is that the edges of the story of the traveler are meant to be "open ended, the gender of the traveler isn't defined, whether or not it's even human isn't defined."]

Twhid: Why do you want to keep the edges of the story ambiguous?

Yael: It's right in line with the reader-generated interactivity that the web encourages. So in addition to the conscious decisions the readers make when choosing a link I create space for some subconscious ones such as whether the traveler is male or female.

Twhid: So a real plot isn't that important?

Yael: I don't think that keeping the edges of the story ambiguous negates a plot.

Twhid: It seems like plot is less important than in a traditional story because of the hypertext nature of the web, you can enter the story from an arbitrary place.

Yael: True. Find a link and enter. I preferred if visitors read pages from beginning to end though because the humor and the twists are in the details. For that reason I restricted the use of hypertext by excluding links from the body of the narrative so once you open a page you are actually exposed to a mini plot.

Twhid: What does the Lost Treasure mean to you Yael?

Yael: Wow. Now we're sliding right into an ambiguous edge. What does it mean to you?

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T.Whid is one half of MTAA (M. River & T. Whid Art Associates), a Brooklyn-based conceptual and net art collaboration. Recent exhibitions include: 'The Art Entertainment Network' (http://aen.walkerart.org) — created by the Walker Art Center, 'Three Suitcases' Art & Idea in Mexico City, and '9/9 Review of Practical Art', published in Paris, France. MTAA's online artwork and more information at MT Enterprises WorldWide (http://www.mteww.com).

This interview will appear in Sandbox#8: BANG! which focuses on experimental music and sound art and features interviews with Diamanda Galas, Granular Synthesis and Willy le Maitre and Eric Rosenzweig of the Appearance Machine. The magazine will be released at a live performance event at Galapagos on Tuesday October 3rd (70 n. 6th st in Williamsburg). Copies can be purchased by sending a $5 check (or $8 for a 2 issue subscription) at PO Box 150098 Brooklyn NY 11215.