

## **The Spectator Project: A Multi-user narrative in “Mediaspace”.**

*‘ palmeres for to seken straunge strondes’*

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This paper discusses the ‘Spectator’ Project, a collaboration between STAR (Science Technology Art Research, University of Plymouth) DA2 (Digital Arts Development Agency), and the Barbican Theatre. The ‘holding form’ for the Spectator project is Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, which provides the rich structure of a pilgrimage, which incorporates an integrated and malleable audience. Spectator explores the development of a narrative within a multi-user, distributed telematic system. This ‘Mediaspace’ is an integration of physical and virtual spaces developed through an ongoing series of interactive satellite transmissions.

**Keywords:** *Spectator, Mediaspace, Canterbury Tales, Interactive Satellite, VRML.*

### **1: Mediaspace:**

“But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,  
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,  
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun  
To telle yow al the condicioun  
Of ech of hem...”  
*(Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales)*

This paper explores the spaces and places generated across a series of satellite transmissions and multi-user VRML environments, and attempts to locate them within an appropriate context in order that they may be better articulated and understood. These technologies have for some time been at the heart of an integrated internet/publishing/broadcasting experiment called Mediaspace, the Spectator project builds on the experiences and experiments. The construction of these media spaces/places creates stress on the traditional framing and articulation of broadcasting and publishing activities. Neither of these practices adequately explains, incorporates or applies

synchronous and asynchronous multi-location interactivity within a single framework. The Spectator Project explores the impact of these attributes on the production and consumption of a narrative that is performed by actors, avatars and autonomous objects/texts within such a framework. The narrative structure explored through the Spectator Project takes on an architectural significance, a moment fractured across a distributed space only to be re-constructed by the passage of an audience moving through it. Within the Spectator Project narrative and telematic forms converge within a broader architectural form.

“The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses.”

(McLuhan M, 1964)

The complex layering of media form and technologies incorporated into the Spectator project is harnessed to allow participants (VRML avatars, studio audience, ISDN participants, etc) to engage in a dramatic narrative that unfolds across the interactive strata of spaces, which become intrinsically interwoven through the non-linear progression of the narrative. This empathic network generated from disparate perspectives presents a unified narrative whole, the shared experience of the hive mind. At the point of convergence of the ICT forms incorporated into the Mediaspace of the Spectator Project lies a new space/place that defines both the vehicle for the message and the mode of consumption by the audience. At the interstices of these forms lies a rich seam of unexplored potential, the co-ordinates for a telematic landscape of interactivity.

## **2: Synchronous and Asynchronous Space:**

The perception of the self within the interaction between the modes of communication and the participants is important. The projected body exists (whether in avatar or video form) within a fractured space-time structure, which relies on the memories of the other participants and the spaces being occupied and previous interactions. When this model of interaction is layered onto the globe (Figure 1), and is consequently distributed across several time zones, the problems created by asynchronous activity increase dramatically. Communications and conversations are extended over days within certain strands of the

model, where other strands provide subtle levels of social communications through a look or a glance, which is almost imperceptible. The failure of this map, although demonstrating a linear time based process, is that it cannot cope with the implosion of space and time, the shrinking of distances and the multiplicity of time that occur within the Mediaspace system.



Figure 1: Layered Map.

The virtual environments merged with the studio production also offers a vehicle for expanding the scope of each broadcast. The ‘place’ suggested by the VRML spaces extends the experience of the participants. The studio space is focused on generating a transmission through the convergence of the telematic activities. It is a focus point that is reproduced at the reception sites through the TV screen, homogenised and compressed down a satellite beam, and ultimately reduced to a television screen and the speaker of the monitor. This fractures the single point of view offered by the TV screen, a greatly reduced Renaissance perspective. By providing a global, distributed telematic landscape it is possible to extend the Albertian window, offering a high tech Baroque vista.

“The eye itself has not, of course, remained in the monocular, fixed construction defined by Renaissance theories of perspective. The hegemonic eye has conquered new ground for visual perception and expression. The paintings of Bosch and Bruegel, for instance, already invite a participatory eye to travel across the scenes of multiple events. The seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of bourgeois life present casual scenes and objects of everyday use which expand beyond the boundaries of the Albertian window. Baroque

paintings open up the viewer's vision with hazy edges, soft focus and multiple perspectives, presenting a distinct, tactile invitation, enticing the body to travel through the illusory space."

(Pallasmaa J, 1996)

### **3: The Story So Far...Away:**

The narrative that is constructed through this post-Albertian window by the audience traversing the structure, which is contained within the Spectator Project, is inspired by Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. This grand narrative provides a 'holding-form' for the Spectator Project through a series of narratives, which are episodic but inter-associated. The Tales are about story-telling and listening. The over-arching narrative is that of a journey undertaken by a diverse group of people on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. To entertain themselves, the characters tell stories to each other. In fact this is, structurally, the characters' main function, so that in turn they alternate the roles of audience and performer. The tales provide layered fictions within fictions, which engage and require the complicity of the audience and the other characters. Approaching Chaucer is a little like navigating through a virtual environment: you 'dip' into it rather than read it from beginning to end, it has a shape but no great consistency, and the stories are worlds within themselves that each have their own logic and style.

Though the Project has moved beyond this text as the main source of narrative The Canterbury Tales has become the key structural reference point because it gives a recognisable scope and context to a performance but does not need to offer a narrative closure. Chaucer intended there to be some one hundred and twenty separate stories within the meta-narrative of the pilgrimage, on his death there were little over a score completed with several incomplete and fragmented. For this Project the meta-narrative will be used as the model with which to define how the writers and participants engage with each-other, how narrative can shift from space to space, and how characters can take alternative stories and personas.

The world of the Spectator is the indefinable space/place in which stories are told: the place of storytelling. Like the pilgrims, everyone entering this world has the potential to be a story-teller, or to interject or challenge any story element. The interest is as much in the act of telling of the tales as it is in the actual story itself.

#### **4: A Squamous Tale of Farting:**

The 'Millers Tale' is a 'noble' story told by the drunk Miller, and follows the Knight's long narrative of chivalry (since revealed to be a catalogue of military disasters and atrocious blunders : "it's the story of an old carpenter, his young wife and the student who made a fool out of him"). The narrative reveals each of the participants and their peculiarities: A lengthy portrait of Nicholas, the student, a skilled astrologer, particularly good at weather predictions with a modest look, "lyk a maiden meke for to see", and a musician who can make "all the chambre rong"; Alison, the carpenter's wife, described in very sensual terms, young, lithe, strong and beautiful ... "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, /Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth"; Absolon, the second suitor, vain, self-obsessed, effeminate and "squamous of farting"; The carpenter, John, rather stupid, easily fooled, and possessive.

A love-pact is formed between Alison and Nicholas on the condition that he can outwit the carpenter, a simple task for the multitalented student. Nicholas convinces the carpenter that by reading the stars he has found out that there is going to be another great flood, the whole of the earth is going to be destroyed by this cataclysm. Completely taken in and terrified he takes the students advice to haul three large wooden tubs into the rafters of the house. All three will sleep in the roof until the flood waters reach the level of the tubs, John must then take an axe and cut the ropes holding them, so that they can then float free and wait for the floods to subside. Exhausted by all his hard work, John falls asleep, whilst Nicholas and Alison creep down their ladders and have their night of lust.

Growing desperate Absolon takes himself around to the bed-chamber window to press his suit once more. He agrees to leave for a kiss, Alison agrees to this on condition that he shuts his eyes. Sticking her bottom out the window it takes a little while for Absolon to realise what he is kissing. Instantly cured of love, Absolon is fired up for revenge. Borrowing a red-hot coulter he returns to the carpenter's house and knocks at the window and asks for another kiss. Nicholas decides that it would improve the joke further if he stuck his bottom out of the window to be kissed, and farting as vigorously as possible he is branded by Absolon. All hell breaks loose. Nicholas in his distress calls for water. John, waking and hearing the cries of "water" imagines that the flood has come and cuts the rope holding his tub. The tub crashes to the ground and John breaks an arm. The neighbours come running. John tells his story of the flood – everyone takes him to be mad. So ... the possessive carpenter has been cuckolded and carted off to bedlam,

Absolon has had a taste of true love, Nicholas has need of a skin graft, whilst Alison has got clean away...

### 5: The Present Moment Divided:



Figure 2: Spectator Model.

The Spectator Project explores the application of a narrative through the Mediaspace system. Here the complex layering of media form and technologies is harnessed to allow participants (VRML avatars, studio audience, ISDN participants, etc) to engage in a dramatic narrative that unfolds across the layered system shown in figure 2. Here the interactions between the studio 'actors' and the studio audience is extended into the video conference space, allowing remote actors to integrate with those in the studio. An extended audience is enabled in a similar way. The studio audience engages with the production through their presence in the studio, but also views the ISDN participants on studio monitors. The remote audience are able to engage through the satellite TV reception, and the ISDN conference (which is also incorporated, through chromakey, into the TV signal). The convergence of these two layers within the single video signal generates a complex level of interaction, along with a non-linear and multi-spatial layering of the narrative structure.

However, the narrative is further extended by the incorporation of a VRML replication of the event. The actors and the studio space are replicated within a VRML world. This multi-user environment also allows a distributed audience (which may include those with

the satellite reception and ISDN conferencing equipment) to participate with the actors (some of who are also avatars). These elements also converge within the chromakeyed video signal, and are transmitted over the geographical space of the satellite footprint. As the participants / spectators engage with each other and the system, the physical structures which surround them, the environments of brick and plaster that house the audience and the equipment, slowly dissolve. As they suspend their disbelief and consume the narrative exchange between the layered spaces they are slowly drawn into the psychological, imaginary, social and virtual place that the system constructs. Within this new place a complexity of spaces and times become intrinsically interwoven through the progression of the narrative.

The various elements that make up the Millers Tale are distributed through the Spectator structure. The VRML environment is constructed from many separate worlds, each containing a separate element of the narrative. Figure 3 depicts these fragments, peeling away from the central narrative. Each separate fragment represents an aspect of the story, the listeners, the characters, the props the text. By fragmenting the whole, the VRML worlds provide a series of discreet experiences, all revolving around the moment where red hot iron meets skin, or the tub crashes through the floor, or the love pact is made. The moment of the narrative is fragmented into a spectrum of separate elements, which are brought together for the viewer as they traverse the worlds and interact with others.



Figure 3: Peeling Narrative.

**Notes**

The Spectactor Project and MEDIASPACE projects can be found @: CAiiA-STAR.net

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