

SCALABLE RELATIONS - PLAYING THE WORLD(S)

CURATED BY
CHRISTIANE PAUL

INSTALLATIONS BY
ANTOINETTE LA FARGE + ROBERT ALLEN
ROBERT NIDEFFER
GREG NIEMEYER

SCALABLE RELATIONS- PLAYING THE WORLD(S)



GALLERY @ CALIT2

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SCALABLE RELATIONS - PLAYING THE WORLD(S)

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INTRODUCTION

SCALABLE RELATIONS- PLAYING THE WORLD(S)

BY CHRISTIANE PAUL

* **Christiane Paul** is the curator of Scalable Relations, an exhibition series that brings together a shifting group of works by faculty of the UC Digital Arts Research Network (DARnet), to explore digital media's capability of representing a growing amount of data in constantly evolving relations. Paul is also Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where she directs *artpart*, the museum's online portal to net art. Her anthology on "Curating New Media" was published by the University of California Press. Paul teaches in the MFA computer arts department at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and has lectured internationally on art and technology.

Playing the World(s) brings together a group of new-media projects that expand the usually confined simulated world of a game to the 'real world.' The three projects in the exhibition — Robert Nideffer's WTF?!, Antoinette LaFarge's and Robert Allen's *Playing the Rapture* (Point of View), and Gregory Niemeyer's *CO2 Playground* — either use paradigms of gaming and play for understanding phenomena and concepts that shape the physical world or incorporate real-world concepts that one would seldom encounter within a commercial game.

The *Playing the World(s)* exhibition at the gallery@calit2 is a node in the larger network of the Scalable Relations exhibitions series, which presents media artworks by faculty of the UC Digital Arts Research Network (DARnet) across UC campuses from January 9 to March 15, 2009.

The connectivity and computational processes enabled by digital technologies have a profound effect on our societies and lives, changing the ways in which we communicate and shaping areas ranging from design, architecture and urban planning to information processing and cultural production in general. One of the distinctive features of the digital medium is its capacity to establish relations between large quantities of data through filtering and processing according to different criteria.

These constantly evolving, scalable relations affect both the production of meaning and a traditional understanding of aesthetics, which become subject to computational logic — the instructions given by algorithms — and a constant reconfiguration of contexts. Addressing a range of issues, all the projects in the *Scalable Relations* series illustrate the complexities and shifting contexts of today's information society. The format of the exhibition itself, in its distribution across multiple venues, mirrors the relational theme and the inherent connectivity of the digital medium.

The projects in *Playing the World(s)* all use computer games and play as formal umbrella and strategy to explore the above-mentioned ideas of changing relations with regard to narratives, cultural, philosophical, and environmental concepts. Consequently the artworks not only comment on the scalable relations supported by digital technologies, but also critically explore the field of computer games, which, over the past decade, have become one of the most fertile grounds for artistic exploration in new media art. Ranging from games developed by artists to mods (modifications of existing games), the spectrum of game art has critically examined the

architecture, politics, and aesthetics of its commercial counterpart. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), in particular, have increasingly gained attention and, intentionally or not, have nurtured the emergence of new forms of collaboration, governance, and economy in their respective virtual worlds.

Gaming references in digital art have occasionally been called a trend or a new style—a statement that neglects many of the inherent connections between computer games and new media art. Games are an important part of new media art’s history in that, early on, they explored many of the paradigms of digital art, such as navigation and the creation of 3D worlds, points of view, and non-linear narrative. Many, if not most, of the successful video games are violent ‘shooters’ that seem to be antithetical to art. At the same time, these games often create very sophisticated navigable three-dimensional worlds. It seems only natural that digital artworks would take a critical look at computer games and explore their paradigms in a different context. The fact that computer games now play a leading role in the entertainment economy has also contributed

to highlighting the concept of ‘play’ in human interactions. In his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, [Dutch](#) historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga suggested that play is a necessary condition of the generation of culture and that culture itself bears the character of play. *The artworks in Playing the World(s)* all point to this element of play in varying cultural contexts.

Robert Nideffer’s evolving project *WTF?!*, in collaboration with Alex Szeto, is a role-playing game inspired by the popular MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW), in which thousands of players assume the roles of Warcraft heroes as they explore and engage in adventures and quests across a vast world, fighting against each other in epic battles. While referencing the original WoW in the aesthetics of its medieval game world and quest, *WTF?!* also decisively breaks with the conventions of its commercial counterpart by reflecting on its underlying assumptions and introducing characters and concepts of the historical ‘real’ world. Players encounter contemporary and historical figures — including Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein and feminist theologian Mary Daly — trapped in the game world and have to assist them in making sense of it. While retaining



certain elements of violence and ‘social class’ that are part of the original WoW— which consists of ten playable races, nine playable classes, and multiple professions each with unique benefits— *WTF?!* frames quests in a way that subtly unveils, questions, or renders absurd some of assumptions of its commercial counterpart.

Conscious reflection on the game world also is a crucial aspect of *Playing the Rapture (Point of View)*, an installation based on an original performance by Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen, which premiered at the Baltimore Theatre Project, March 26-30, 2008. The project uses gaming concepts to explore the American evangelical belief in the Rapture—a moment when true Christians will leave the earth while the rest of humankind undergoes trials and suffering. The protagonists of the *Playing the Rapture* performance beta-test a computer game, created by one of them, that takes place in a post-Rapture world and gives the non-Christians left on Earth a choice between conversion to Christianity or joining the Antichrist. Navigating the game world, the two players engage in an intense struggle over rules and the concept of belief itself.



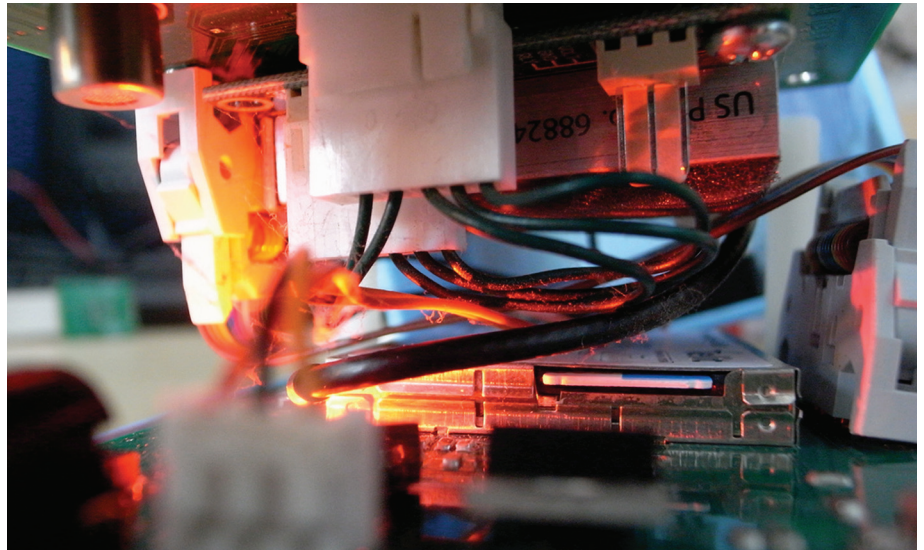
The *Playing the Rapture (Point of View)* installation combines monitors showing the players in excerpts from the performance as well as projections of machinima videos—movies shot within an actual computer game unfolding in a post-Rapture world. Both

the performance and installation version of *Playing the Rapture* formally fuse and entwine the physical world, the game world, and the stage world, highlighting the conceptual parallels between them. As computer games, religion creates a ‘virtual,’ imagined world that requires an act of belief for engaging with it; both games and religion operate on the basis of complex rule sets and rituals and shared metaphors. *Playing the Rapture (Point of View)* addresses the social implications of belief systems and shows how play provides both a model of culture and, as Huizinga would argue, condition for cultural production.

The connection between the physical world and concepts of game and play takes a very different form in Greg Niemeyer’s *CO2 Playground* project, which invites visitors to observe changes in air quality. At the project website, accessible in the gallery, visitors can browse live feeds of data from various air quality sensors. The gallery@calit2 becomes one of the sensor locations and access points within the larger *CO2 Playground*, which is simultaneously shown as an installation at the Beall Center for Art and Technology and consists of slides, plants, and air quality sensors. The slides suggest the activity

of climbing up (slow) and sliding down (fast), which is equated to the processes of generating and burning oxygen, while the plants absorb CO₂ and produce oxygen through photosynthesis. *CO₂ Playground* is part of Niemeyer's larger project *Black Cloud*, which addresses environmental conditions and air quality, in particular. In *CO₂ Playground*, the social principle of play is embedded in a system for collecting and sharing observations about the environment. The project gives an aesthetic form to the clouds of pollution that usually remain invisible, while also building a platform for agency that empowers people to take action.

Engaging with subjects that range from role-play in a fantasy society to the rules of religious beliefs and the monitoring of the environment, the projects in the exhibition investigate relationships between game worlds and the actual physical, cultural, and social environment that we inhabit. Using gaming as a formal and narrative framework, the artworks in *Playing the World(s)* reveal how we perform our lives within a rule set of complex relationships.



INSTALLATION
PLAYING THE RAPTURE
(POINT OF VIEW) (2008)

BY ANTOINETTE LAFARGE AND ROBERT ALLEN

The video installation of *Playing the Rapture* is based on an original performance work that examines American evangelical belief in the Rapture — a moment when every true Christian will suddenly vanish from the earth, leaving the rest of humankind to struggle through a period of extreme tribulation. *Playing the Rapture* explores the social implications of a belief that we are entering the “end times” described in the book of Revelation and revolves around two characters who are playing a computer game set in a post-Rapture world. Designed by one of them, the game posits a choice for those who have been left on earth between conversion to Christianity and joining the Antichrist. As the two gamers beta-test this new creation, they engage in an intense struggle over everything from the rules of the game to the problem of belief. In bringing the worlds of religion and computer games into collision, *Playing the Rapture* raises questions about the assumptions that govern each field. Are games really as trivial as they are often made out to be? Can religion be understood as the world’s most serious game? At what point does “just playing” turn into “playing for keeps”?

In the *Playing the Rapture* installation, the audience enters the gamers’

imaginary world via projections of machinima videos, created from an actual computer game set in a post-Rapture world. The real world, the game world and the stage world all co-exist, and protagonists discover that while they are playing the game, they are also becoming part of it.

Playing the Rapture originally premiered as a multimedia performance at the Baltimore Theatre Project, March 26-30, 2008. It was performed by actors John Mellies and Jay Wallace (also seen in the video) and directed by Robert Allen. Script: Antoinette LaFarge with contributions by John Mellies. Sound design: Philip White. Visual design: Antoinette LaFarge with Robert Allen. Video projections: Antoinette LaFarge.



INSTALLATION

WTF?! (2008)

BY ROBERT NIDEFFER

WTF?! is a World of Warcraft (WoW)-inspired Flash-based role-playing game (RPG) done in collaboration with Alex Szeto. An odd assortment of historical and contemporary figures such as Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, feminist theologian Mary Daly, Albert Einstein and others have been trapped in a re-creation of WoW. *WTF?!* is structured to be episodic and the player's task is to help the characters make sense of the game world.

WTF?! was built with a custom software development kit created by the artists called "!" (the symbol in WoW indicating when a quest is available). "!" was made freely available to the player community upon release of *WTF?!* Using "!" and a highly flexible scripting environment, players/developers can easily create custom terrains, characters, equipment, spells and effects, inventory, levels and experience metrics, stats, weather and particle effects, scripted events, quests and many other advanced features related to the genre of action-adventure RPG design.



INSTALLATION

CO2 PLAYGROUND (2008)

BY GREGORY NIEMEYER



The *CO2 Playground* installation — consisting of slides, plants and sensors in its full-est incarnation — is a site of exploration for visitors to observe changes in air quality due to human and plant activity. It allows visitors to affect air-quality measurements through their activity and it is monitored via the website of its parent project, *Black Cloud*. The activities involve active exercise, still contemplation, as well as human presence and absence (due to gallery opening hours). The slides facilitate exercise (as allowable by venue regulations) and encourage a form of activity—to climb up slowly and slide down fast—that expresses the slow process of Oxygen generation and the fast process of burning Oxygen. The plant activities involve CO₂ absorption and Oxygen production through photosynthesis, which is regulated by the quantity of available light. The proportion of plants and slides address how many plants are required to sustain human life. The project website shows continuous live feeds of data from the air-quality sensors, which have been placed in several of the exhibition venues.

WTF?!



DUNDERHEAD

LUMPEN

GNOME ROGUE

Stromwound

Level 7



RESET

PHALLCITY

BLOOD ELF PRIEST

Level 1



RESET

INTERVIEW

WITH ANTOINETTE LAFARGE AND ROBERT NIDEFFER

BY NATE HARRISON

* **Nate Harrison** is an artist and writer working at the intersection of intellectual property, cultural production and the formation of creative processes in electronic media. He has produced projects and exhibited for the American Museum of Natural History, Whitney Museum of American Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Kunstverein in Hamburg and Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, among others. He has also lectured at the Whitney Museum, Experience Music Project, Seattle and the University of Rochester, among others. In 1997 Nate founded the New York electronic music microlabel töshöklabs, which has been featured in publications such as XLR8R, URB and CMJ. He has also recorded for the CO.AD and Record Camp labels. Currently Nate co-directs the project space ESTHETICS AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (www.eslprojects.org). He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Michigan, a Master of Fine Arts from California Institute of the Arts, and is a doctoral student in Art and Media History, Theory and Criticism in the Department of Visual Arts at UC San Diego.

When Nate Harrison sat down to speak with two of the artists behind Scalable Relations - Playing the World(s), it was appropriately in a virtual venue: Skype. The ensuing discussion was as much debate and commentary as it was a Q&A session.

NATE HARRISON [NH]: I'd like to start by saying that my own research involves appropriation art and intellectual property. In that sense, I am familiar with some of the ways software and gaming culture appropriates retro and current technologies, as WTF?! does – not only of Worlds of Warcraft (WoW), but also of Super Mario Brothers and also, I think, the older games like Moon Patrol. At the same time, I have to admit I am not much of a “gamer,” so in playing WTF?!, with its references to past and present games, but also in paying homage to modern thinkers like Marx, Einstein and Daly, who do you imagine your audience to be?

ROBERT NIDOFFER [RN]: To be honest I'd like to know the answer to that question too—I think one of the things we'd have to do is participant observation or evaluation of the people who play. To respond in general about who the intended audience is, I'm afraid I am not going to give you a very satisfying

answer. The genesis of the game was really just a dialogue with my collaborator, Alex Szeto, which emerged between us being pretty hardcore WoW players at various times, and having a fascination with the game and its mechanics. And then I had my own critical interests in contemporary social theory. I wanted to try to introduce a different kind of dialogue into the context of a sort of parody of WoW, in the form of a Flash-based side scrolling game environment. I wanted to try to get in a little bit of game theory or critique in the context of the game itself.

I wasn't really thinking, as we were developing the project, “who is the intended audience?” I was just thinking we're having a heck of a lot of fun, we find it interesting, and we'll throw it up [online] and see what kind of feedback we get. So we did that with the initial release of WTF?!, and we were pretty overwhelmed by the response. It got referenced in a number of popular Web sites and generated a lot of traffic—in fact our service provider still has us throttled, there is still so much traffic! I apologize if you had to wait a long time for stuff to download.

NH: No I didn't, it downloaded pretty quickly.

RN: Oh good. Now what was interesting and I think a little frustrating, for both Alex and me, was that people across the board were really positive about the game play and the game mechanics, and how faithfully we reproduced that, and how fun and challenging it was to get to the end of the initial series of quests. But, there were maybe one or two critical responses that seemed to “get it,” that we were trying to talk about gaming in an intelligent way. I think that people did get captivated by the game play and the visual aesthetic and all of that, more than by what we were trying to “write into” the quest sequences, and some of the critique that was going on.

NH: Could you perhaps expand on that a little more? I am not exactly sure what your critique is, perhaps because I am not familiar enough with the history and state of WoW and related culture.

RN: Some of it is pretty simple—the idea of initial game quests dealing with thing like repetition, of “questing,” the constant killing, the things you do in the environment, the kind of mindless “grind” that is a part of a lot of these games. In an over-the-top, parodic way we tried to play with some of that. And then it moves from there to what might

be a little deeper critique having to do with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, economy, and how some of those things work in the context of massively multi-user game environments. Now, it might just be scratching the surface, because the original plan was to release a much longer, fuller, more extended version, but in any event, those were some of the issues we were trying to address.

NH: I have to say I got a little chuckle when I came across Gramsci in the game, and I did actually perform two of the Einstein quests, the sort of “physics tests,” which were really hard! But I did eventually figure them out.

RN: Well kudos to you because those were tricky, those two for Einstein were Alex’s special contribution; they’re fun when you get them, but they are tough.

NH: But I wondered in playing, if a user would think, “Hmm, what, after all, did Einstein do?” or “I’m not that familiar with his research, so after this quest, maybe I will try to go learn more about Einstein,” or something like that. I wonder about the efficacy of including the historical characters in these kinds of quests.



RN: I think I understand what you're getting at; certainly with the initial release, and perhaps in future releases, I don't know that I would try, in the way you might with an academic book, to go into depth biographically, theoretically, conceptually, philosophically, in regards to the figures, but rather remain in the realm of the playful and parodic. I hope this would pique people's curiosity, so they may go off and say, "Well who was this Gramsci character?" and do a little bit of study on their own. But when it becomes overly didactic, or too overtly educational – and a lot of serious games do that – I don't find them fun at all. They become something else. I think we worked really hard to retain that sense of fun, but hopefully not to the exclusion of at least introducing some of these more complicated or critical perspectives.



ANTOINETTE LaFARGE [AL]: If I can jump in for a second, I beta-tested *WTF?!* and I really enjoyed using it for all the reasons Robert describes. I also think one of the things it does exceptionally well is complicate the range of player reactions to a bunch of computer-generated characters. Famously in game development, the Holy Grail was always the game that "could make people cry," instead of being just cute

or fun or something. What I find funny is that WoW is filled with Druid quest givers who break down weeping all the time over one tragedy or another, and they are just comical. It's very hard to do that kind of thing well; a number of the quest givers in WTF?! can actually be very irritating if you don't share the point of view they're putting forth. The ones I am particularly thinking about are the women with their feminist viewpoints, which I would think would be quite irritating to some players but similarly would be greeted by other players—some female players—with a certain joy: “Oh good, not another guy sending me out to rescue some girl in trouble,” which is the quest model you've seen over and over. So even if they irritate you, they engage you. The running back and forth actually has the same dynamic as the running back and forth of an argument. And yet, as Bob said, it is really fun to play. It's not didactic, it's done with a very light touch, and I think that's extremely difficult to do.

NH: Forgive me for possibly opening up a can of worms here, but what I am hearing from you two is that a big part of this is its enjoyment as a game. How do you think about that in terms of whether or not this should be called an “art project,” how it



functions in a gallery setting, even if it's a new media-type gallery setting? I am trying to contrast this with the way that I first experienced the game, which was online. How do you think about this being considered as an art project?

RN: I don't think I am going to try to get too deeply into what is and what is not art, other than to say that from my own motivation and method, and the way I have produced and distributed work, it's probably fairly obvious that gallery, museum, or other institutional contexts, those affiliated with the 'Art World' with a capital 'A', have never been a motivation for me. If opportunities come up, of course I am not philosophically against it. It's another opportunity to get something out to another public. For me, as I have been interested in what's often called Net Art or Net Culture since my graduate student sociology days in the late 1980s and early 90s, and then when browsers came about in the mid-90s and things started to happen, that was "the public." I was interested in engaging and putting stuff out, and that continues to be the case. Whether or not people call it art, I am in the context of an art department at a university as an art professor, so I guess that confers some sort of legitimacy on me to a public, allows me to say what I do counts as art.

AL: I think it's also important to remember that a great deal of what ends up in galleries and museums was never intended to be there in the first place, whether you're talking about Flemish altar pieces or 3,000-year-old Inuit tools. So there are really two reasons to put something in a space like that. One is for the access issues that Bob mentioned, although that's less important for something that lives online. The other reason is to have it in a physical context with other things of different kind, so they can be experienced in a group setting. I don't think the value of that should be forgotten.

RN: When I was talking with [Scalable Relations curator] Christiane Paul, a curator at the Whitney for a number of years now, she showed some stuff I did in the 2002 Biennial. It was really interesting because a number of people she had included had a very different engagement or interest even in attending something like the Whitney show. Historically the Whitney has been the American show, and people would sell tickets on eBay. It was a big deal to get into and to go to, to be part of. But for that community that I was part of, it just wasn't. A lot of us didn't even end up going to the opening. Not that it wasn't a wonderful opportunity, but it was just a different type of relationship.

AL: I also have this problem with my work. For the last ten years at least, most of it has started out as live, “hybrid reality” performances, using network performers and real-space performers. So the initial and intended experience is for people in a particular physical space and possibly an online space as well. Well what do I do then? I am left with documentation that no museum or gallery will show. Nobody wants to look at theatrical documentation, period. In effect, what that means is that for every project I do, I have to do two projects, where the second is I re-perform for the camera and then do something with the video, because video is a more portable medium and something they understand better. But in the end the gallery installation will really only bear a minimal resemblance to the original theatrical version of the piece. Another problem is that the work doesn't really exist within the realm of the collectible either. It's a problem I have not solved, and that a lot of new media artists have not solved. The earlier video artists who went on to fame, like Bill Viola and his ilk, they didn't solve the problem either, until 25 years later, when museums decided they could buy the DVDs and put them in their archives.

NH: Perhaps there was enough historical distance: the documentation

of past performances had enough of distance?

AL: So there was that sense of historical value, yes.

NH: Maybe it's just a case where not enough time has gone by yet!

AL: Yes—remember too, a lot of those people were working off grants, they weren't making any money off this, they weren't performing in big venues.

RN: That's actually a great transition to the point I was going to make, which is that there is a reason a lot of us find ourselves in academia, as instructors. It's a different relationship that we have. A lot of times, if you had ended up in the university as an artist, it was perceived as a failure, you weren't “making it out in the world.” But for a lot of us, given our practice, what we need access to in terms of equipment, resources, and people to collaborate with, the university is probably one of the best places we could end up.

AL: Amen!

NH: Changing topics slightly, in WTF?!, did you seek permission to appropriate the forms of Moon Patrol and Super Mario, or WoW for that matter? I

imagine the creators of WoW, it generating a relatively new subculture based around a concept of community and the sort of DIY ethos in much of techno-culture, might be a little more lax in “putting its foot down,” as it were, on derivative works like WTF?!. On the other hand, I know that manufacturers of arcade “classics” seek to prevent any of their games’ re-use outside of legal licensing regimes. Does this worry you at all? Am I making a big deal out of nothing?

RN: Of course the issue of appropriation in art is huge. In terms of my own practice, I started really moving back into the arts, into media and computers, net art, etc., with my dissertation. I was doing an analysis of the Gulf War in the early 90s as a CD-ROM title. So I’d collected about an hour and a half of video, tons of images, all kinds of sounds, scanned in thousands of academic articles I was referencing; all that was part of this thesis. There was a lot of interest with publishers at the annual meetings, but none of them would touch it, because they realized it would have been a quarter of a million dollars to get the licensing to produce something that would sell to maybe 5,000 people if they were lucky. And my master’s thesis in the arts was

called the “Fine Art of Appropriation,” and used all kinds of found materials. So, in the end, I think about it, but I don’t really worry about it. Now maybe I should; I am interested in hearing what Antoinette has to say, because she has been doing a lot of deep thinking about it. I kind of stopped at the point where, “I’m able to parody, or a kind of critique, and I’m not making profit from it.” I have the comfort of a university position that pays me, so I’ve never worried about profiting from my projects, so I figured that would be enough, that would get me out of any potential quagmires. I have certain philosophical positions about this stuff, like with the war, I was being bombarded with this stuff, why couldn’t I grab some of that stuff and bring it into my dissertation? With WTF?! I’ve got gigabytes of WoW data sitting on my hard drive just to play the game; so why can’t I, like other people doing machinima, mine that data, and recycle it, reuse it, rework it for my own project? I was actually talking at Blizzard (the creators of WoW) the other week and mentioned the project, and so far nothing has really happened.

NH: I remember ten or so years ago when emulation software first started coming out, I would get emails from friends about the Commodore

64 emulator, or the Atari 2600 emulator, and I downloaded them and all the old-school games, and I loved it! But almost as soon as the ROM images (the games) were online, they were gone.

RN: They were there for a little while. Actually I had a student burn me a DVD with all the games on it. I'm still looking for it!

NH: Of course, Atari and Nintendo realized, "Hey wait a minute, we have this whole untapped market of nostalgia users now." And of course the following Christmas my brother showed me this officially sanctioned, new-school Atari 2600, which had all the games already built into it.

AL: I'm a strong 'copyleft' person myself. I think it's clear the copyright regime as it exists today is way out of whack with actual practice. It's not good when ordinary citizens' habits are criminalized to such a degree. It's also counterproductive in so many ways. So it's always an issue in my work, in particular this one that I just finished, the Rapture piece. I did screen captures of a lot of game play, and then used those to create machinima videos that were the entire set of the piece. So for an hour, the entire visual field is composed of appropriat-

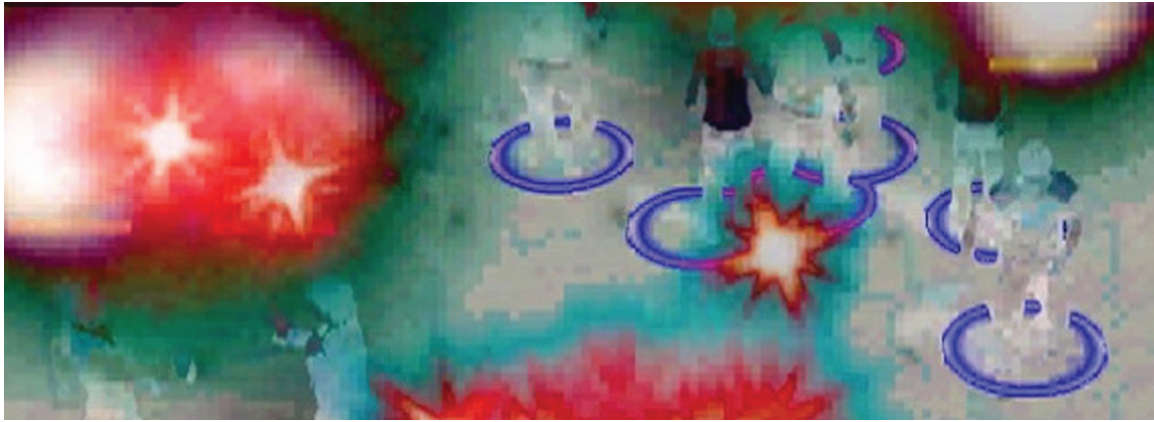
ed game imagery. There is something of a fair-use argument, and of course the piece is strongly critical of the game from which we borrowed, in a number of different ways. The level of appropriation is such that it's questionable if that would really save us if somebody really wanted to come after us. My approach to this whole thing has been to be reasonable about what I take and not just plunder meaninglessly: it has to be important to the piece, and there's no question that the piece is mostly mine, the appropriation is just a fraction of what the gestalt is. But I'm also a lot more careful than Bob is, in the sense that in the run-up to a piece like this, my strategy has been to conceal the extent to which I am appropriating. I was careful not to use the machinima imagery heavily in our publicity before the performance, because what was most important was for me not to be shut down. I knew that if I could have the piece happen, then it couldn't be undone; I really believe in the *fait accompli* with these things, that once they're done and can be released out onto the Internet, you're never going to be able to call it back. And these people can sue me from now until Tuesday, but they don't have anything they can take because I'm not rich. I ultimately don't worry about the consequences any more than Bob does, but I'm a good deal more careful not to make for the possibility of preemptive strikes, particularly in this case because it was a Christian game based on the Left Behind books, and the people behind those books and that particular aspect of Rapture theology are pretty bloody-minded! There was a huge controversy over the game even before it came out, and so it wouldn't have surprised me if they had decided to come after me. They are clearly not "live and let live" types.

NH: This segues nicely into my next question for you Antoinette. A major theme of your work is religion, and in particular the fundamentalist strain of Christianity which involves some element of Rapture prophecy. Why did you pick this



topic? I think it's interesting to focus a lot of global anxieties right now (the environment, the economy, terrorism, etc.) into the single dimension of religion/Rapture. Yet I imagine that for some, even to try to address the Rapture in anything other than its own discourse, is a sign of some degree of "non-believing," which may come across as offensive in that it trivializes it. For instance, it conflates video aesthetics and youth culture with the "end times." Could you share your thoughts on this? Perhaps I could also provide some additional context: this exhibit is taking place at UC San Diego, which is in an area that is not only near to U.S. Navy and Marine Corps bases, but is also, demographically speaking, fairly conservative and religious. And you are speaking to us from a similar place, Orange County. There is the very real possibility that students or others who see the installation in the gallery@calit2 will be strong believers. How do you imagine a hardcore believer reacting to your work?

AL: I should start out by saying that I am not a Christian myself. I wasn't raised in any religion, but I take religion very seriously. I have been interested in Rapture theology for quite a long time, because I find that the central images



are incredibly vivid, the idea of being snatched from earth, being freed from its travails, is very powerful. When I started looking into it, I discovered it's actually a very strongly American flavor of theology. It was born in the United Kingdom, but it really took off here in the States, and has never taken off to such a degree anywhere else. So I was wondering: What is it about the American Protestant mentality that made it so hospitable to Rapture theology? I discovered the Rapture game quite by accident. It is set in a post-Rapture, post-apocalyptic New York, where the people who are left behind have to decide whether they're going to play on the side of the Antichrist, or fight the Antichrist and try to get another chance at salvation. It's a real-time strategy game, but it's not a very interesting game, it's very boring. As one reviewer said, "It's not bad theology, it's bad game play."

NH: Is there some notion of a “second chance” in Rapture theology?

AL: Oh yes, there are four or five flavors of Rapture theology, all of which articulate differently when exactly the Rapture happens, when and how the Millennium happens, and when and how the Second Coming happens. There are no agreements on any of these, because they are based on interpretations of vaguely phrased Biblical passages. But essentially at some point, if you fight on the side of good, after the Rapture, when Christ returns for (I guess) a “Third Coming,” then anyone who shows themselves to be doing a “much better job” will get a second chance.

I actually do take this seriously, and I think the piece reflects that. It's essentially a long argument between the two gamers over theology and the game, over good and evil, and of course at the same time, they're trying to beat each other. But I don't think you can look at this piece and think it's trivializing: you may disagree with what one character or the other is saying, because we put a lot of different opinions in people's mouths. But I think that anyone who is involved in serious Christianity in America ends up having at least discussions, if not argu-

ments, with somebody somewhere along the line, because we are a culture with many different, competing beliefs.

NH: Part of why I asked the question was my realization, upon starting to teach at UC San Diego, that a good number of my students were fairly right-wing, conservative and very religious. When having to write papers about evolution or abortion, they took very extreme positions.

AL: I find that certain kinds of issues, deeply emotional ones, you can only go so far with argument. You can only convince people so far with logic. Especially since belief is not subject to logic—it's an a-rational process. So the piece is actually very poetic, elusive, and elliptical. It tries to plunge you inside the issues, taking you from the worst kind of violence to the kind of exaltation and the ecstasy that must be behind some of the attraction of the Rapture. In a way this piece is very experiential, in a way that games and theater have in common. Trying to make it experiential for the audience, we tried to get them to step outside their beliefs and be inside the subject in a slightly different way. I remember one night in Baltimore where we premiered the piece, this woman came up to me afterwards in tears. It turned out that she was raised a Christian and had been grappling with all the issues in the piece unsuccessfully, talking to her pastor and so on. I think there were some big life issues at stake; from something she said, there was an impression that either she or someone in her family was really sick. She said that this piece had been cathartic, had helped her to reach a point, not a conclusion, but a point where she could go on. That's the kind of experience I am always hoping to generate, and it's hard because you just can't touch that many people that deeply. But that's the sort of thing that this kind of work can do that 100 arguments on National Public Radio cannot do, however valuable they are in their own way.

NH: Could you say just a little bit more about the difference between this video installation and the original theatrical version of the piece?

AL: The original piece was an hour long, and consisted of about 15 short episodes. So for the installation what we're doing in San Diego, we decided to foreground the "duel" nature of this piece. We're taking excerpts that, when they're chained together, will show the arc of the piece, but will last no more than 10 minutes, because as Christiane said, three minutes of video is all people will watch in a gallery. We divided it up with two monitors for each of the two players, which are immersed within the projections. We have sort of recreated the set of the theatrical piece, so you can get a little flavor of the intensity of the relationship.

NH: I think I've exhausted my questions. Thanks, Robert and Antoinette, for enduring them. I look forward to seeing the exhibit!

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

ROBERT ALLEN

PLAYING THE RAPTURE (POINT OF VIEW)



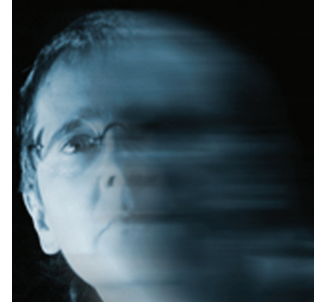
Robert Allen is an independent theater movement specialist who teaches movement for actors when he is not directing. Recent projects include: *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg (Theatre of Generations, St. Petersburg, Russia; 2008); *Playing the Rapture* (2008); *For a Better World* by Roland Schimmelpfennig (UMBC, 2006); *Demotic* (2006/2004); *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg, adapted by Courtney Baron (Cal State Long Beach, 2003); *The Roman Forum Project* (2003); *Zwischen Fear und Sex: Fünf Proben* (Hellerau, Germany, 2002); *Twilight* by Anna Deveare Smith (Cal State Long Beach, 2002); *Virtual Live* (Location One, NY, 2002); *How I Got That Story* by Amlin Gray (NY, August 2001); *The Roman Forum* (Side Street Projects, 2000); *Dear Anton* (Chekhov Now Festival, 1999); *The Creditors* (New York International Fringe Festival, 1999); “August in January,” a festival celebrating August Strindberg’s 150th birthday (Theater 22, 1999); *Le Ménagement* (LaMama E.T.C., 1998); *Still Lies Quiet Truth* (New York International Fringe Festival, 1998); and *The Good Night* (Theatre for the New City, 1998).

Robert has an M.F.A. in Theater from Columbia University, where he studied directing with Anne Bogart, as well as an M.F.A. in modern dance from UCLA, and a B.F.A. in visual art from the San Francisco Art Institute.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

ANTOINETTE LAFARGE

PLAYING THE RAPTURE (POINT OF VIEW)



Antoinette LaFarge is an Associate Professor of Digital Media at the University of California, Irvine. She is an artist-writer with a particular interest in constructed realities, including mixed-reality performance, computer role-playing games, textual improvisation and fictive art. Recent mixed reality and intermedia performance works include *Playing the Rapture* (Baltimore Theatre Project, 2008), *Demotic* (Baltimore Theatre Project, 2006; Beall Center for Art + Technology, 2004), *The Roman Forum Project* (Beall Center for Art + Technology, 2003), *Reading Frankenstein* (Beall Center for Art + Technology, 2003), *Virtual Live* (Location One, NY, 2002), *The Roman Forum* (Side Street Projects, LA, 2000), and *Still Lies Quiet Truth* (New York International Fringe Festival, 1998). LaFarge has co-curated two groundbreaking exhibitions on computer games and art: “ALT+CTRL: A Festival of Independent and Alternative Games” (2003) and “SHIFT-CTRL: Computers, Games, and Art” (2000) at UC Irvine’s Beall Center for Art + Technology.

LaFarge is the founder and artistic director of the Plaintext Players, a pioneering on-line Internet performance troupe that has appeared at numerous international venues, including the 1997 Venice Biennale and documenta X. She is also the founder and director of the Museum of Forgery, a virtual institution dedicated to opening up the cultural dialogue around forgery and related practices such as appropriation. She is associate editor and designer of the anthology *Searching for Sebald* (ICI Press, 2007), and her recent publications include “A Meditation on Virtual Kinesthesia” (*Extensions*, 2007) and “Media Commedia” (Leonardo, 2005).

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

ROBERT F. NIDEFFER

WTF?!



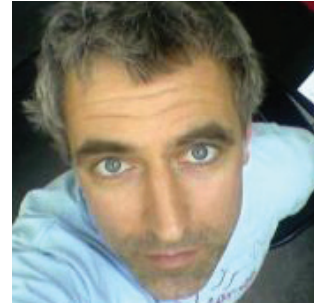
Robert Nideffer is an Associate Professor in Studio Art and Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. His work resides in the areas of virtual environments and behavior, interface theory and design, technology and culture, and contemporary social theory. Nideffer has lectured at a variety of professional conferences and his work has been shown internationally at venues including: the Perth Biennial; the 2002 Whitney Biennial; the Museum of Image and Sound, Sao Paulo, Brazil; and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte, Spain.

Nideffer holds an MFA in Computer Arts and a Ph.D. in Sociology. At UC Irvine, he is currently Director of the Arts Computation Engineering (ACE) graduate program (<http://www.ace.uci.edu/>) and the Game Culture and Technology Lab (<http://ucgamelab.net>). He also directs a related academic Concentration in Game Culture and Technology housed between the School of Information and Computer Science, and the School of the Arts (<http://www.editor.uci.edu/08-09/ics/ics.2.htm#gen3>).

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

GREGORY NIEMEYER

CO2 PLAYGROUND



Gregory Niemeyer is an Assistant Professor for New Media at UC Berkeley. He was born in Switzerland in 1967 and studied Classics and Photography. Niemeyer started working with new media when he arrived in the Bay Area in 1992 and received his MFA in New Media from Stanford University in 1997. While at Stanford, Niemeyer founded the university's Digital Art Center, which he directed until 2001, when he was appointed to the UC Berkeley faculty. At Berkeley he is involved in the development of the Center for New Media, focusing on the critical analysis of the impact of new media on human experiences.

Niemeyer's creative work focuses on the mediation between humans as individuals and humans as a collective through technological means, and emphasizes playful responses to technology. His most recognized projects include: *Gravity* (Cooper Union, NYC, 1997); *PING* (SFMOMA, 2001); *Oxygen Flute*, with Chris Chafe (SJMA, 2002); *Organum* (Pacific Film Archive, 2003); *Ping 2.0* (Paris, La Villette Numerique, 2004); *Organum Playtest* (2005); *Good Morning Flowers* (SFIFF 2006, Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, Egypt, 2006); and, with Joe McKay, the *Balance Game* (Cairo 2007, London, 2007). His current project – *Black Cloud*, an Alternate Reality Game – is funded by the MacArthur Digital Learning Initiative.

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Many people made possible this instantiation of the Scalable Relations series on the UC San Diego campus. The series curated by Christiane Paul – from January 9 to March 14 on UC campuses – was made possible by the UC Digital Arts Research Network.

To stage the Playing with World(s) component of the series, Christiane Paul enjoyed the active support of the committee overseeing the gallery@calit2, a wonderful new forum for cutting-edge art with a technological bent. Thanks go to the co-chairs of the committee, Visual Arts professor Ricardo Dominguez and former Jacobs School of Engineering dean Lea Rudee, for their guidance, and UCSD division director Ramesh Rao for his ongoing support of this arts venue in the headquarters of the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology.

Gallery Coordinator Trish Stone facilitated the production of the show and this catalog, for which two Calit2 staffers get much of the credit: Cristian Horta, who designed the publication, and Doug Ramsey, who edited it. Special thanks also go to Nate Harrison, who stepped in and did a wonderful job as moderator of the discussion with two of the show's artists. We are also especially lucky to have a crack team of audio-visual staff at Calit2, led by Hector Bracho, who made it possible to showcase the artists' installations with the very best technology available.

gallery@calit2 reflects the nexus of innovation implicit in Calit2's vision, and aims to advance our understanding and appreciation of the dynamic interplay among art, science and technology.



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