◆ Description of the Work

Fools Paradise is a VR installation and performance created by artist Paul Hertz and composer Stephen Dembski. It is based on the "Proverbs of Hell" by visionary poet and artist William Blake. Dembski has scored forty-eight selected proverbs for soprano, cello, and flute. Hertz has created a virtual world where each song is associated with a large, colorful "jewel" embedded in a tableland on an island floating in a sea of stars. Seen from afar, the island is a tongue and the tableland is a book with a stream of words running down its middle crease to cascade over the edge of a cliff onto the tip of the tongue and into the sea.
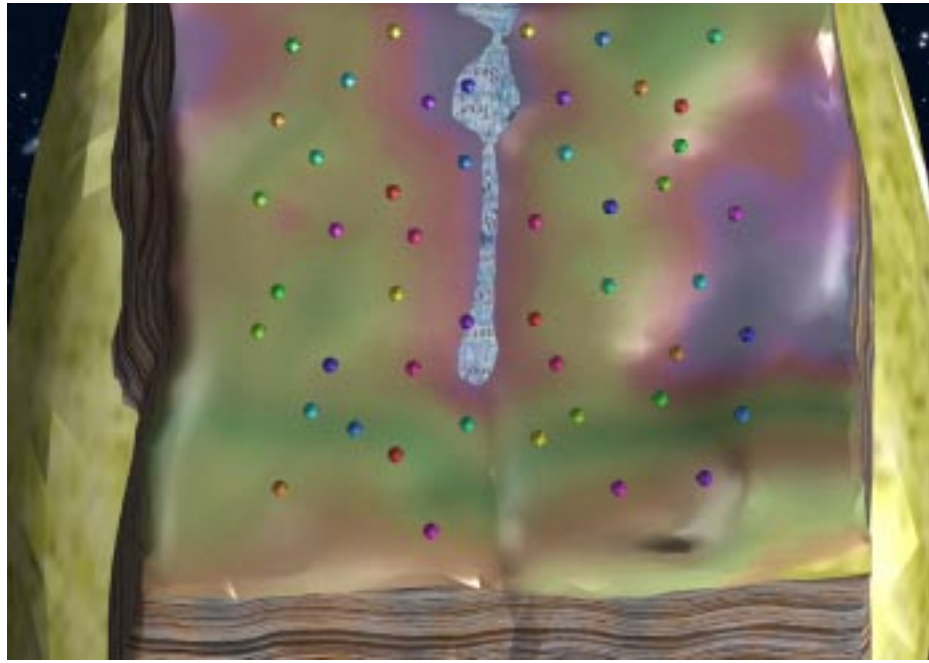
Participants navigate through the virtual world using a VR wand and head tracking gear. As they navigate, they trigger musical and visual events. In front the performer or participant (whom we shall refer to as the VR navigator) floats a mask whose position responds to the VR wand. By entering one of the jewels the VR navigator triggers changes in the jewel along with the performance of a song and the appearance of a new mask. The new mask accompanies the performer to the next jewel. Each jewel that has been visited is replaced by the image of its mask, floating in the air. All masks turn their gaze towards the VR navigator.

In the installation, the songs are digitized in multiple channels. The music and other sounds move through space, partially under the control of the VR navigator. Other sounds include a "wind" that is created by synthesized vocal formants and digitally processed samples of children at play, associated with the stream of words. Granular synthesis techniques also create an "aura" of fragmentary music around the jewels.

In performance, the songs are performed live in response to cues triggered by the VR navigator. VR navigation begins in a dark cave on the opposite side of the island from the cascade of words, ascends to the tableland to explore the jewels, and ends by flying up into the air ("No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings") to look back at the cascade of words and the island one last time. As an installation, the work does not have a specific beginning and ending, but will return navigation to the mouth of the cave any time the installation is left alone for a period of time. A few visual cues such as a stairway ascending to the top of the tableland from the cave help installation visitors decide where to go.

As a composition, *Fools Paradise* is grounded in abstract notational structures that help to determine its visual architecture, musical material, and event-flow. In other words, it is an intermedia artwork, where events in one sensory modality may be mapped onto events in another modality.

Fools Paradise approaches technology from a critical point of view and engages culture as a historically rooted enterprise. Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," from which the texts are selected, presents a critique of the tyranny of religious institutions and a plea for personal freedom of belief that resonates today. The use of VR as a performance medium rather than as a passively explored architecture, the blending of live acoustic music with electronics, and the use of hand-painted and scanned texture maps in the VR landscape all point to the continuity of human presence at the core of culture. As artists, first of all we create experiences—not precious objects or cultural values. We honor Blake as a multimedia artist *avant la lettre,* an artist who melds poetic language with printed and painted image in his books. We place ourselves within tradition that we may challenge our present moment as he challenged his own historical moment.

◆ Installation and Performance Requirements

Fools Paradise has different requirements depending on whether it is presented as a performance or as an installation. All the necessary equipment is available on the Northwestern University campus, through the Center for Art and Technology. For a performance, approximately $800 are required as musicians fees. This sum is still available from the grant, from the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts, that financed the production. Installation functioning will be well documented, and can be automated to a large degree.

Installation

2 computer video projectors (1024 x 768 pixels, 2000 lumens)
Rear projection screen for stereo images   VR Tracking equipment
Computer for tracking   Computer for VR world generation
Computer for audio generation   Interfaces for surround sound as needed
Stereo audio or surround sound equipment
Space: 12 feet wide by 20 feet long by 8-10 feet high.

Performance

1 computer video projectors (1024 x 768 pixels, 2000 lumens)
Optional: Second projector and rear projection screen for performer
VR Tracking equipment
Computer for tracking   Computer for VR world generation
Computer for audio generation   Interfaces for surround sound as needed
Stereo audio or surround sound equipment
Space: An auditorium or performance hall space larger than the installation space

Forty-eight water colors that were digitized to created the masks are available for exhibition. Most measure 4.5 x 6 inches, unframed.

◆ Contact

Email: paul-hertz@northwestern.edu
Portfolio: http://collaboratory.nunet.net/phertz/portfoli/

To create a little flower is the labour of ages.

Aerial view of central part of the virtual world

The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword. are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.