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placeholder



landscape
and
narrative
in a
virtual
environment

Banff Centre
for the Arts

Interval Research
Corporation

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theatrical design

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pLaceholder

landscape and narrative
in a virtual environment

It depends where on earth one goes. Experiences are said to take place. One comes to know a place with all senses in concert and by virtue of the actions that one performs there, from an embodied and situated point of view. The mind, observes naturalist Barry Lopez, is a kind of projection within a person of the place which that person inhabits; "Each individual undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the exterior landscape." The environment proceeds to record our presence and actions and the marks that we place there — this is a reciprocal affair.

pLaceholder is the name of a research project which explores a new paradigm for narrative action in virtual environments. The geography of **pLaceholder** takes inspiration from three actual locations in the Banff National Park of Alberta, Canada — the Middle Spring (a sulfur hot spring in a natural cave), a waterfall in Johnston Canyon, and a formation of hoodoos overlooking the Bow River.

Three dimensional videographic scene elements, spatialized sounds and voices, and simple character animation have been employed to construct a composite landscape that may be visited concurrently by two physically remote participants using head-mounted displays. Features and objects found in the actual places are reassembled here to serve as venues for exploration and play. People may walk about, speak, and use both hands to touch and move virtual objects.

People's relationships with places and the creatures who inhabit them have formed the basis of many traditions and spiritual practices, as well as ancient stories and myths. The graphic elements in **pLaceHolder** are adapted from iconography that has been inscribed upon the landscape since palaeolithic times. Narrative motifs that lend expression to archetypal characters of landscape features and animals have been selected from aboriginal tales. Four animated spirit critters — Spider,

Snake, Fish, and Crow — inhabit this virtual world. A person visiting the world may assume the character of one of these spirit animals and thereby experience aspects of its unique visual perception, its way of moving about, and its voice. Thus the critters function as "smart costumes" that alter more than the appearance of the person within.

The people who visit **pLaceHolder** will change it. Travellers sometimes leave marks in natural places — pictograms, petroglyphs, graffiti or trail signs, for example. In **pLaceHolder**, people may create Voicemarks — bits of spoken narrative — that can be listened to and rearranged by subsequent visitors. The virtual landscape accumulates definition through messages and storylines that participants leave along the way. We hope that **pLaceHolder** will foster the emergence of new forms of narrative play.

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