

pLaceholder

landscape and narrative in a virtual environment

by

Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland

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 explored a new paradigm for narrative action in virtual environments. Directed by Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland, the project was produced during summer 1993 at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada, and it was co-sponsored by Interval Research Corporation. The geography of **pLaceholder** took inspiration from three actual locations in the Banff National Park — a 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 were employed to construct a composite landscape that could be visited concurrently by two physically remote participants wearing head-mounted displays. Participants were able to 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** were adapted from iconography that has been inscribed upon the landscape since paleolithic times. Narrative motifs that revealed the archetypal characters of landscape features and animals were selected from aboriginal tales. Four animated spirit critters — Spider, Snake, Fish, and Crow — inhabited this virtual world. A person visiting the world could assume the character of one of these spirit animals and thereby experience aspects of its unique visual perception, its locomotion, and its voice. Thus the critters functioned as "smart costumes", altering more than the appearance of the people wearing them.

Travellers sometimes leave marks in natural places — pictograms, petroglyphs, graffiti, or trail signs for example. In **pLaceholder**, people could create Voicemarks — bits of spoken narrative — that might be listened to and rearranged by subsequent visitors. The virtual landscape accumulated definition through messages and storylines that participants left along the way. We hope that ideas we explored in **pLaceholder** will foster the emergence of new forms of narrative play.