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*T_Visionarium II*, 2007
Immersive interactive environnment.
Screen shots showing spatial distribution of displayed video clips.

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**Experimental aesthetics and the evolution of interactive narrative: *T_Visionarium* →**

*"Reality is mobile. There do not exist things made, but only things in the making, not states that remain fixed, but only states in process of change... All reality is, therefore, tendency, if we agree to call tendency a nascent change of direction."* Henri Bergson

*T_Visionarium* is an ARC funded experimental project that transforms cinema into a kind of Platonic cave wall onto which viewers project, then respond to, the episodic shadows of their journey through a vast database of televisual material.

The project forms part of a portfolio of projects undertaken at the iCinema Centre at UNSW. In a broad sense the research program at iCinema focuses on research into immersive digital interactivity for applications across the arts, humanities, sciences and related industries. The program is focused on the following key problem: in what ways can the digital be developed to assist us in imagining new ways of living in the contemporary world?

This problem is addressed through three strands of research.
- The experimental exploration of interactive narrative systems which allow the viewer to interact with digital environments using a new media framework.
- The technical exploration of immersive visualization systems which provide the settings for these interactive narratives using a cognitive science and ICT framework.
- The analytical exploration of interactive narrative as a way of imagining the contemporary world using a socio/cultural theory framework.

In a specific sense the research program at iCinema focuses on a key issue in current global research, namely the search for new levels of integration between the physical and the digital to inform the growing demand for interactivity in public and private domains. Heading this agenda is the development of interactive narratives which allow viewers: (a) to navigate and interact with large-scale immersive settings; (b) to interact with intelligent virtual characters. The success of this agenda hinges on providing compelling landscapes for interaction. On the one hand, this entails developing viewer-generated re-composition of complex digital narratives. On the other hand, this entails developing virtual characters with autonomy so that the virtual characters can respond to human interaction and co-develop the narrative in partnership with human participants. The development of such narratives provides new aesthetic and experimental possibilities in art and cinema, while also satisfying the practical needs in art and industry for aesthetic engagement and social development.

As already noted, iCinema's research into immersive

digital interactivity draws together research from four distinct domains: new media, cognitive science, ICT and socio-cultural theory. This type of research is intrinsically multi-disciplinary, involving collaboration across major disciplinary boundaries. By focusing on trans-disciplinary research projects, these boundaries can be successfully bridged. Put another way, all four domains are interconnected so that experimental (artistic) questions are also technological (ICT, cognitive) and theoretical (socio/cultural) questions.

In *T_Visionarium*, for example, to provide viewers with new ways of artistically interacting with a vast database of narratives requires the development of new technical digital interfaces along with a theoretical understanding of how this narrative operates. *T_Visionarium* has been designed to overcome the disciplinary fragmentation effecting much current research into interactive narrative and anticipates the fundamental change implicit within the history of digital innovation. Central to this undertaking is the development of transcriptive narrative.

*T_Visionarium* introduces the concept of transcriptive narrative as a model for the production of interactive narrative within digital cinema. Aesthetic transcription refers to the cinematic capture and reconstruction of complex forms of information within digital environments. The value of the project is set against the fact that while narrative is central to conventional cinema, emphasis upon simulation rather than composition has caused the narrative potential of digital media to be overlooked in favour of notions of randomness and free play. *T_Visionarium* addresses the concern that it is limitations in narrative,

as opposed to any technical understanding, which have restricted the aesthetic development of digital cinema. Through its focus on viewer-generated re-composition of digital databases, the project addresses the experimental aesthetics underlying current digital media research.

Transcriptive narrative integrates the multi-temporal qualities of narrative with the multiplicity of modes built into digital information. As an experimental integration of these temporal qualities, *T_Visionarium* aims to test the simple proposition that interactive narrative occurs by means of the transportation of the multiple modalities of digital information across virtual time. In testing the transportation of information within virtual time, however, we anticipate evidence of the previously undescribed multi-temporal qualities of narrative. In this multi-temporal form of narrative viewers not only recompose complex information into distinct temporal episodes, they also simultaneously experience the unanticipated temporal consequences of these virtual episodes as real events. This dynamic form of engagement with time, involving the emerging and looping intersection between virtual time and real time, produces a mode of narrative that contrasts dramatically with the temporal sterility of the closed narrative menus typically found in computer games and database formations.

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