Softworld 2.1:
The Imperial Message

The Imperial Message is an interactive virtual reality experience – a new medium somewhere between architecture, film, and game.

Softworld 2.1 is an "anti-war game" inspired by the Kafka parable, "An Imperial Message", which deals with the vast distance between the Emperor and the Individual. The program attempts to extend this sense of scale to present inherent conflicts between the individual and the state and between the unspoken, secret "Law" and its corrupted representation. The viewer or player navigates through the softworld, finally arriving at the "Source of the Law." As the player makes choices, they reveal the player's "character," which in turn determines how the experience develops. Individual play

times are approximately ten minutes; at the end of that period, the player has reached one of several possible conclusions.

The player's interaction with The Imperial Message raises questions about the relationship of interactive media to surveillance, authority, and control. For example: What structures of power will apply in digital space? What new social systems may emerge?

Technically, the software integrates real-time, computer-generated simulation and role-playing-game strategies, incorporating systems originally developed for military simulations. The program also makes some use of artificial intelligence programs using active agents with some degree of "free will." The musical score is by avant garde composer, Alvin Lucier.

Artist-in-residency award at the Wexner Center for the Arts

Softworld 2.1: The Imperial Message was designed and developed in residence at the Wexner Center for the Arts, an interna-

tionally renowned multi-disciplinary contemporary arts center located at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. The purpose of the Wexner Center's artist-in-residency program is to encourage and support vanguard artistic initiatives.

Beyond the production of The Imperial Message, the residency award has provided a forum for discussion regarding interactivity and aesthetics. Throughout the year, Softworlds' members have participated in workshops, symposia, and lectures utilizing the resources of The Ohio State University and in particular its Advanced Computer Center for the Arts and Design (ACCAD).

This project draws on the resources of several generous corporate sponsors, among them Kubota Pacific Corporation, which manufactures the high-end, real-time geometry and texture processor. The original model, animated sequences, and textures are produced by BlueSky
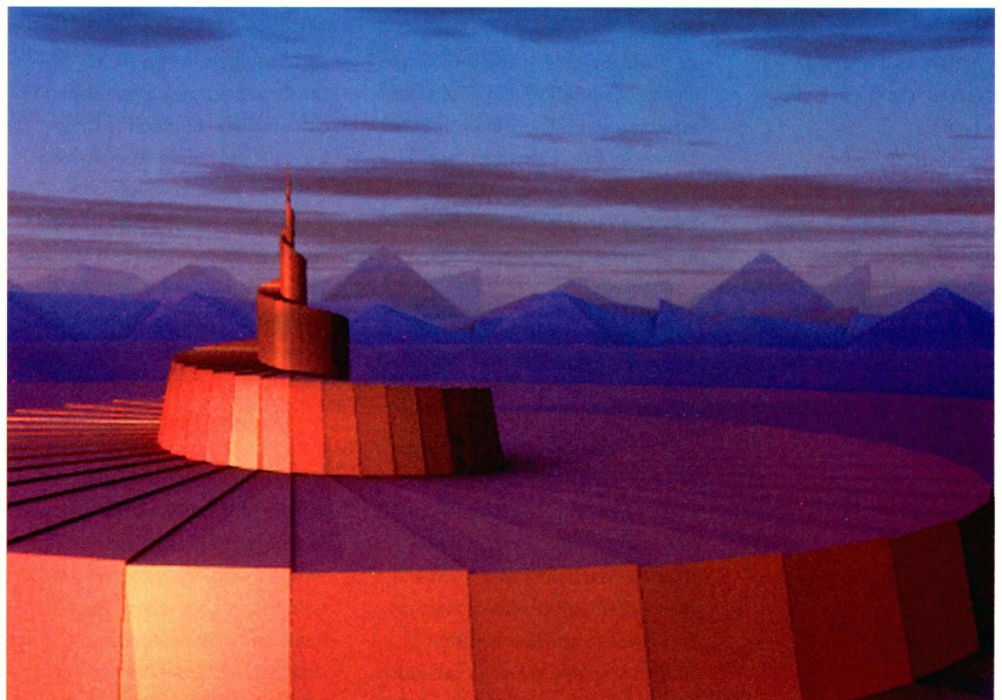
Productions' proprietary rendering system. Real-time simulation software is by Sense8 Corporation. Elias Associates produced and "designed" the audio components of the piece. IBM donated the PC that is used to process sound, along with Crystal River Engineering's Beachtron Sound Board. Virtual Research donated the head-mounted display, and Polhemus, Inc. donated the tracking system.

Softworlds, Inc.

Softworlds, Inc., founded in March, 1992, is an artist collaborative formed to create and publish interactive and digital art. Its members include Janine Cirincione, Curator and Partner/Director of the Jack Tilton Gallery, New York; Brian D'Amato, novelist/artist/critic; and Michael Ferraro, Vice President and System Architect, BlueSky Productions, Ossining, New York.

The studio's main objective is to create interactive literary works and digital world designs that integrate developing technology with aesthetic concepts. Ideally, these world designs or confrontive architectures will become important structures through

which people will experience the expanding digital environment. In researching the language of interactivity and helping it grow as a viable artistic medium, Softworlds hopes to redefine the role of the subject through new forms of experience.

Softworlds also believes it is necessary to make its interactive art works accessible to the public. To this end, the studio will employ digital information networks to bring art to people beyond the reach of the traditional art world via consumer technologies. The studio hopes to add cultural value to these networked systems by providing them with provocative and engaging interactive experiences.

The studio focuses on intellectual content and not on the novelty of new technologies. Because the content of Softworlds' work is independent of its technological delivery systems, it can be realized through several media, including CD-ROM and virtual reality systems.

Softworlds' first interactive digital world design was Softworld 1.2: Sacrifice, presented at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, as part of The Final Frontier exhibition. The nature of this interaction is derived from both pre-Columbian Mayan themes and the format of Parcheesi and chess-based board

games. The objective of Sacrifice is to "kill" yourself as often and as spectacularly as possible. Depending on intuition and nerve, the player is reincarnated in progressively more advanced landscapes, eventually reaching the "Heart of the Sky."

The Edge

Softworld 2.1: The Imperial Message is an important paradigm for interactive art works. What sets this project apart from most other virtual reality experiences is the attention to aesthetics and content. The Imperial Message brings together the resources of many singular talents from a variety of disciplines such as fine art, music, computer science, theatre, film, architecture, and philosophy. From design to production, The Imperial Message seeks to push the boundaries of what is currently available in a real-time virtual reality experience. By integrating BlueSky Productions' high-end proprietary rendering software with Sense8's real-time system running on Kubota Pacific Denali workstations, Softworlds has developed a new standard for visual quality and interactive responsiveness.

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