

Integrating Multiple Narratives: *The Mirror That Changes*

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Introduction

This presentation describes an approach to interface and experience design in which fact and fiction are mixed in multiple narrative modes. *The Mirror That Changes* is a Flash-based Web project that integrates fact and fiction, introspection and information in several simultaneous narratives of animated text, voiceover, ambient sound and moving image. Designed to explore issues of water and sustainability from the multiple perspectives of personal use and global resource, *The Mirror* merges extensive research on water use with a sensual evocation of water so that information and symbolism mesh within a minimalist envelope.

Shaping Content

Over the last half-century, the loosening of the conventions of narrative structure has led to more plastic kinds of storytelling and has significantly ruptured the margin between fact and fiction. New media enriches this shift in narrative form by making the movement between hard information and subjective consciousness more fluid. This renegotiated relationship between information and emotional response offers a new entry point to complex subject matter. This project mixes narrative styles, oscillating between factual and fictive elements, using a range of discursive strategies as a way of reconciling information and subjective perception.



The Mirror That Changes explores problems of water scarcity and sustainability through pairings of water use in domestic environments and in nature. It integrates a body of autonomous factoids and fictional threads pointing to the connection between small scale actions and large scale effects. Commonplace uses of water in domestic environments (washing clothes, bathing, cooking) find their parallel in the wider forces of nature (rain, ice and flood). Information about water use and sustainability relating to access to safe drinking water, the depletion of freshwater sources, water treated as commodity, and water pollution resulting from development and industry were organized based on this pairing structure. Elements that did not have an exact partner were paired based on a series of water metaphors, or elements of water symbolism.

Along with narrative exposition, *The Mirror* uses the visual and aural qualities of moving water to create a languid atmosphere in which overtly romantic and lyrical representations of water intersect with narratives introducing issues of scarcity, purity and equity. This conjunction of information and contemplation brings intimate scale to a global problem and mitigates the sense of information overload. *The Mirror That Changes* is a meditation on the use of water and its limits. Its interwoven fragments of fictional narrative and fact link individual action and global consequence.

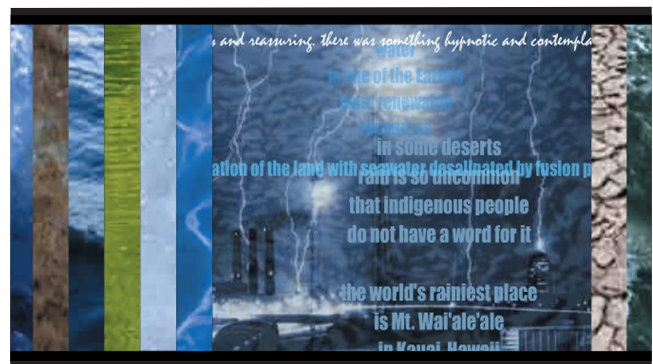
Interface and Narrative

A primary goal of this project was to take a complex and almost numbing profusion of information and make it comprehensible yet emotionally resonant. The project's interface design emphasizes the contrast among the different qualities of water images and sounds, creating a palette of landscape element with no visible navigation elements. As the viewer moves into the piece, the complexity of elements increases, as does the density of images and information, so that the viewer is drawn into a soup of text, voiceover and moving image while being lulled by water sounds.

Providing the viewer with a dense visual flow of images and information creates a viewing experience in which one extracts bits of images and data and is able to construct alternative narratives. The whole can't be perceived at once; instead it requires a looping viewing, or alternatively, extracting a subset of the narrative from the mix as the elements advance in time. A typical strategy for Web narrative is the use of a branching structure, in which the viewer chooses her own pathway through the information. In *The Mirror*, once a particular link has been chosen, several narrative threads play simultaneously, and the larger narrative is constructed within the process of viewing and listening. This approach emphasizes the density of information, which can be sensed while at the same time gives the viewer the opportunity to follow a particular narrative line. Additionally, the mix of objective and subjective elements creates a nuanced reading that bridges the duality of the otherwise incompatible public and private realms.

Project Design

The Mirror That Changes is a Flash-based work composed of numerous 'pseudomovies' which load into the primary interface animation of nine water elements. These 'pseudomovies' consist of video capture and still photo frames animated by panning, zooming and dissolve and their accompanying soundtrack of voiceover and ambient sound. Sound was a critical element in evoking the multiplicity of water, and the quality of sound was of particular concern, since severe compressions results in white noise, and not the sound of dripping, pounding, flushing, or crashing. Using Actionscript and compression in Flash, the multitrack image and sound elements preload into the interface page under the main animations. This project is contained in one HTML page.



URL: <http://www.virtualthemeworld.com/mirror>