



The Dead Souls: An Interactive Virtual-Reality Installation presents the most recent collaboration of Janine Cirincione and Michael Ferraro, two artists who have been working together in the medium of digital interactive art since 1992. The Dead Souls represents the expansion of the artists' ideas, themes, source materials and technological expertise as they have evolved from two previous projects, The Sacrifice Game and The Imperial Message. The Sacrifice Game, the structure of which was based on the game board Parcheesi, drew upon ancient Mayan culture and explored the notion of violence and victory in traditional computer games while commenting on the larger questions of cowardice and dignity. The Imperial Message, for which Cirincione and Ferraro received a Wexner Center Residency Award in the Visual Arts at Ohio State University in 1993-94, was inspired by Franz Kafka's parable of the same name. Using ancient Chinese history and the game Go as general context and structure, this virtual-reality game allowed the player to make choices that revealed character traits which determined the development of play.

Generally speaking, these two earlier projects dealt with the individual facing his or her values in relation to a group's benefit. The Dead Souls also addresses the issue of self-definition, but involves the ways in which we present and perceive ourselves, the ways in which we are perceived, and the conflicts that often arise when those two senses of perception meet. The visual format is like that of a game sending the player/protagonist on a journey-quest with the narrative based on themes explored in the writings of Nikoli Gogol, Herman Melville and Jim Thompson.

Following a path in an open landscape, the player is introduced to a disorienting situation that he/she must explore in order to discover what is happening and how to remedy it. A "chorus" of body parts emerges and serves as a mediating agent by supplying the player with bits of information. It is discovered that a mysterious stranger, a Con-man, has been buying up individuals' genetic rights by means of a Faustian bargain and for years has been gathering a coterie of victims known as "The Dead Souls" who have lost the integration of their body and spirit. The player, in danger of falling into the same trap, must accumulate enough information regarding the Con-man's whereabouts to prevent his/her own disintegration. Throughout the experience, the player has to pursue and hold onto certain body parts that periodically come into view in order to keep from completely decomposing. Often, the player must choose between interacting with various characters to further the long-term goal of finding the Con-man or chasing the body parts to extend life expectancy in the game.

For this project, Cirincione and Ferraro have collaborated with three other artists: Katie Merz who created the characters' visual design; Edwin Torres who wrote the script; and Michael Sweet who composed the music and is responsible for sound integration. Working at a theatrical and poetic level, the artists attempt to use the computer's internal environment as a meeting place for a gamut of creative expressions--visual and literary arts, music, architecture and design--in order to investigate our sense of self. The Dead Souls also attempts to affect different levels of interactivity not only in the direct relationship between player and digital environment, but in the ambient relationship between and among visitors and the environment created in the gallery by the installation's immersive effects.

Support for this project was received from Digital Equipment Corporation, Elias Associates, Evans and Sutherland, Sense 8 Corporation, and Sony Corporation. Additional support was received from the UMass Arts Council and University Alumni Association.

The University Gallery, located on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, is open Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. The Gallery is also open during evening performances held in the Concert Hall of the Fine Arts Center. For more information, please call the Gallery at (413) 545-3670.