

New media artist uploads escape with online world

By Vanessa Schneider

Though new media artist Yael Kanarek is not a religious woman, she finds the philosophical ideas of the Book of Genesis intriguing.

“And God said let there be light,” Kanarek said. “A physical event takes place. That’s a mystical thought,” she recently said to a classroom of NYU journalism students whom she visited to discuss her art.

For the past nine years, the Israeli artist has taken her own words and created a virtual universe called “World of Awe,” an online world (or “worldview”) based on the traveler’s tale genre.

Through a portal on E. 6th Street, a traveler enters the Sunrise/Sunset valley in search of a treasure. “World of Awe” (www.worldofawe.net) is divided into chapters based on the person’s journal (the viewer reads the logs as if it were the laptop used by the explorer). With this basic plot, Kanarek has built an award-winning piece that delves into political and social issues through role-playing fantasy.

“Reality is an option. Here, it’s not necessarily fact,” she said.

When Kanarek speaks, she inserts confident, yet reserved, political comments.

“For Chapter Three, I wanted to do three languages that are now politically charged: English, Arabic and Hebrew,” she said. “These languages have been hijacked by corporate media. We don’t see anything but fire. They can’t be all that bad.”

At first glance, Kanarek’s appearance does not give away her profession. No eccentric dress patterns, no brooding black clothes; the artist wore a comfortable gray shirt and slacks. Behind a computer she navigates through her on-line world as if by second nature, sometimes forgetting her listeners are not as well “net-versed” as she.

Kanarek was one of the first artists to learn the potential of the Internet in the mid-‘90s, and much of the nostalgia for this past era (though only 10 years ago) appears on the screen. “World of Awe” uses minimal colors, focusing on the gray scales of early computers. As each chapter progresses (or upgrades), the grays become lighter; graphics and icons improve in quality. She cleverly created an inventory list of 127 computers, including pictures of the Apple I and the Epson PX-8, all machines found in Silicon Canyon, “World of Awe’s” deserted graveyard of computer hardware.

Reminiscent aspects again appear in the traveler’s love letters, passages central to the idea of “World of Awe.” Some letters use an early 19th century romantic style, others are slightly unconventional.

“I saw other storage media but no floppies... I was baffled. Could it be that technology has advanced so much since my departure? Will I come back to a world with no floppies?”

The new media artist’s love for fantasy and adventure began years before “floppy disk” would become part of her vocabulary. She recalled her love of cartoons, a feeling most adults sadly never acknowledge, but certainly can relate.

“I remember when I was a kid how I felt when I was seeing old Disney movies, like *Cinderella* or *Snow White*, that feeling of wanting to enter that world and the joy of being encompassing in it,” she said. “But then the movie ends.”

The idea of this online universe began in a series of “30 mid-size, kind of juvenile” landscape paintings Kanarek hopes to put on display in 10 years. Because she had meager funding, with inadequate room to store



or create the paintings, the artist moved to an internet medium where space was not an issue. She would also be able to reach numerous on-line audiences no single gallery show could ever touch.

With this advantage, complementary to the open-ended depths of her project, Kanarek has connected “World of Awe” to dance and music mediums. Yoav Gal composed the music for the site under Kanarek’s only two conditions: that the soundtrack be performed by an Atari 800 XL and the voices used be digitally manipulated and layered. Kanarek is currently looking for a record deal.

Evann Siebens, a dance filmmaker, also collaborated with Kanarek on a net.dance called PORTAL. The experimental dance plays in three parts: the first segment shows the genderless traveler on 6th Street and the second segment shows the traveler in the portal. The third segment places Siebens’ physical movements in a digital desert terrain. The dance is shown in small segments of loops and repeats, much like the soprano voice who is singing the words of the love letter’s endings (“yours forever/ your sunset/sunrise forever yours/ yours forever yours.”)

The artist makes no mention of God in her piece, but acknowledges that the word “awe” describes a reverence in religious believers.

“A lot of what makes our worldview is a set of beliefs, not facts,” she said.

But while most religious believers look to God as an end, Kanarek looks to her own digital world as a beginning.

