

# Preface: Sacred By Design

The thirty-seven months spanning the invention of “Labyrinth” to the writing of these words have been an incredible journey, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. It’s been my great pleasure to travel throughout the world, and delight audiences with the new face of cyberspace - its real visage, one accessible to any who desires to learn it. No longer locked into the ivory towers of academia or behind the barbed-wire fences of proprietary standards, VRML is a collective expression of what cyberspace should be. First and foremost, VRML is a technology of empowerment - available to all at no cost, and limited only by your ability to dream.

My own delight comes from the fact that VRML has sparked imaginations world-wide. Throughout the communities of the Web, individuals have taken the blank sheet of potential and - like molten metal cast and beaten into new forms - wrought it into a tool suited for their tasks. First the chemists, with their intrinsic need to see molecules in three dimensions, studied bonding sites along proteins and from this, proposed new drug designs. Then architects, working with clients half a world away, taking them through a building yet to be built. And geographers, who mapped their earth data onto the Web in VRML, and teachers, and physicists, and doctors, and on and on and on.

VRML is the open invitation - a call that can be answered by any one, and for any reason. And so, once built, released, and disseminated, thousands did come and add their own jewels to the mosaic now always under construction. Twelve months ago, my own turn came, when I began to work toward my own expression of the utility of VRML; I began to utter my first words in the language I had taught the world.

Six years ago, I caught a glimpse of something, in the deep recesses of my imagination, a vision so powerful that it has remained with me ever since. I beheld the beauty of the body of the planet before me, as if I floated above it, an astronaut sailing in the spaces above. I knew that this vision held a peculiar power; in viewing the Earth, it became impossible to separate myself from it. I had known - intellectually - that I was of the Earth, but until that moment, this knowledge had been sterile and unrealized. Yet, in this moment of seeing it, I understood it completely, in a space beyond the neat categories of reason - for my heart knew it to be true.

Five years later, as I prepared to make this vision manifest, I withdrew from the world, unplugged the phone, forgot the email, keeping the Web as my only topline. First I conducted a search for those who - like myself - found the image of the planet beautiful and sacred. One of these, Autodesk founder John Walker, maintained an extensive set of satellite imaging at his site in Switzerland (<http://www.fourmilab.ch/>). Walker collected real-time weather satellite imagery of the Earth, and “deconvolved” them (removes the distortion associated with making a flat image of a spherical surface), then composed these images so that - at the end of all of this mathematical magic - he could publish one unified map of the Earth’s surface, as it was seen via satellite, in real-time.

That discovery triggered a week of intensive work; I studied, I programmed, and I worked with the Web, for the first time. It's not that I had never worked on the Web, of course, but now I was using resources latent within the Web as the foundation for my own work - a second-order effect - using the Web to improve the Web. At the end, I had realized my vision - the start of it, anyway - for I looked into the screen of my PC and there I saw a three-dimensional real-time model of the Earth from space, clouds and continents portrayed as if I had mounted some great spaceship and headed out, beyond the moon, to look back down.

When I was done - after the VRML had been built, after the scripts to keep the model refreshed every hour had been put into place, after a week of intensive intellectual effort - I broke down and cried. Not at my own work, but at what I could feel beyond it; somehow this model had come to represent the Earth, and somehow it had come to live inside my heart. Now - at last! - I knew I was of the Earth, and now I could that share that emotion with others.

I named this little planet *WebEarth* (<http://tcc.iz.net/we/>), in large part because the initials spell out "we". For the Earth is all of us, yet the only way we can now experience that - and share that experience - is through our own ability to model it. I know - for I have seen it time and again - that others share the shock of joy when they behold this tiny home, floating in the black silence of cyberspace. Our planet is the foundation of who and what we are; that is the word that I spoke in this new tongue.

I believe that VRML can become the voice for many such words, that it will - in time - help us to articulate the sacred nature of our own being. For it helps us to see that which we could not; and - as William Blake said - when our perception is so cleansed, all things will appear as they are, infinite.