

# *Being here: An interview with Char Davies*

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Virtual Reality Sorceress *par excellence*, Charlotte Davies was born in Toronto in 1954. She studied at Bennington College, from 1973 to 1975 and obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in 1978. She is now a Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy of Media Arts at the Centre for Advance Inquiry in the Interactive Arts, University of Wales College, Newport, Wales.

Her art has been widely recognized through numerous exhibitions and awards such as Prix Distinction for Computer Graphics at *Prix Ars Electronica*, Linz, Austria, 1993, the Prix Pixel Image for Computer Graphics at *Imagina*, Monte Carlo, Monaco, 1991; and the Honorary Mention for Computer Graphics at *Prix Ars Electronica*, Linz Austria, 1990.

The interview took place during the Consciousness Reframed II Conference in August of 1998. This event is a yearly gathering of specialists from diverse disciplines in the arts, sciences and the humanities. It is organized by Roy Ascott and the Center for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts at the University of Wales College, Newport, UK. During the interview Davies talks about crossing boundaries in her evolution as an artist working in the medium of representational painting into the world of immersive, virtual reality.

**(Lily Díaz)** You spoke about transparency, about sound spaces, the use of a full color palette... You come from a traditional medium and I am interested in knowing how you have transposed your knowledge of the art practice into the realm of high end virtual reality systems.

**(Char Davies)** Well I stopped painting in 1987 which is when I went and got involved in building the software company Softimage. And many people ask, well don't you miss painting? Well, I continue to paint, I continue to express similar ideas, similar themes. It is an evolution of the same theme... an evolution of the same visual aesthetic and the style that I was using in painting. But now the medium has changed. Because the medium I am using now, in bodily immersive space, is really centered in reconstructing a sensibility of being bodily enveloped in a voluminous, embracing surrounding, luminous, spatiality.

But it is very, very, closely related to the similar themes, because if you saw my earlier works there are these themes that have to do with metaphors, with nature, that for me are very numinous

It is also very consistent and similar with this whole aesthetic or style of working with transparency but just to go back to the difference, for me the challenge of moving to an immersive space as opposed to painting and by immersive I mean not a panorama, but as if you are inside, you are fully, fully enveloped up, down, behind you, to work in a space like that created a lot of paradoxes for me, because on the one hand, as a painter I was very aware of composition, that is spatial composition within the frame of the work. As when I did the 3-D still images in the early nineties. The frame, the edge of the composition was very important because whether the edge was a quarter of an inch this way, or that

way, could make or break the image. Because the way I have come to work since the mid eighties was to deal with creating ambiguities through compositions. Like almost the *Gestalt* figure ground or using a vase, or using a face, like that kind of to keep it more open ended and richer. And therefore, the frame was very important because if you move it this way you could say: Oh it is nothing it is just very abstract, then if you move it this way you can say oh now this shape balances this form, and creates a kind of a kind of a buzz etc.

But working with an immersive virtual space you loose the frame and so you loose a certain amount of control as the artist in terms of composing, pre-composing in fact, meaning. So what I have tried to do is to create an enveloping space whereby, it is rich enough and ambiguous enough, in terms of the forms that it still fulfills that original intent of mind of terms of the meaning of the work but also, in terms of keeping open ended because I think ambiguity is key, rather than tying the work to something that is illustration or where I have set out one meaning it opens it up to multiple meanings, and in engaging the participant's mind in a kind of a fluctuation, between this and that, this and that...

I developed this mode of using transparency back when I was painting. (I started as a representational painter.) I have found that the transparency is a way to get beyond these hard edged objects in empty space. By working with multiple layers of transparent 3-D forms, you can create something that to me is perceptually, and therefore conceptually, much more, meaningful.

When I make one of these spaces, the idea is to go in it so much that from every angle is working because I know when it goes dead or I know when it goes too literal or when it gets too abstract. And then its a matter of you are composing in full envelopment instead of composing on a 2-D surface, but the principles, the artistic principles, are the same in terms of what I want to convey and how I convey it. But that gets us on to a second difference between this and painting, which is that painting takes place in a basically 2-D surface. And I think I went through this whole transition from working with painting in a representational manner wanting to describe space as something that is voluminous and embracing. And therefore, I really became interested in re-creating a sensibility of begin enveloped. Now it is very difficult to do that in a two dimensional surface. And I did a painting in 1985, that maybe you could reproduce, that shows me struggling to create an image of a voluminous, enveloping space, without form but where you could read the space. And it wasn't just a painterly space. And I consider that painting a failure and never sold it, and in fact you can see all my aesthetic on that painting in 1985. And then the whole reason I moved to get involved with a software company and started working with these tools was because I sensed when I first saw computer graphics in 1983, that it would offer me potential, if I could ever get access to it, to an enveloping, a virtual 3-D space, that I could work in.

Once I began to make still images in that space, I was very satisfied with the 3-D space but when that work was reproduced and exhibited it was still 2-D dimensional, and static and so that's when I started to think: "Oh my God I feel this picture plane is a huge barrier, I want to be beyond it!" I was really wanting to do something that painting, I don't think could allow. If you ask me what my greatest influence was I would say that it was Turner. Especially his late work. A third, thing in my work, which is through painting that has carried into the work that I am doing. In painting I was not interested in doing narrative painting, in terms of telling stories in the painting. I wasn't interested in linearity. Nor was I interested in some hyper textual linearity particularly I have wanted to create

meaning by taking things and relating them spatially in the same composition. So that by creating simultaneous spatial relationships, you found your meaning...

Spatial relationships between the compositional elements And then you could get this *Gestalts* of figure ground, and ambiguity, and you can create the meaning that way but you see by working with transparency, it was as if I was able to combine several, non related things to ideas or elements in the same space and by working with varying degrees of transparency you could say one thing but then be saying something else, but at the same time, the mind would create a relationship between them. So I have always, in fact, for a long time, talked about my desire to create simultaneous spatial relationships rather than narrative. And that led me through the work I was doing with the 3-D stills and then, into immersive, fully bodily immersive virtual space , because, again by working, composing these elements in each of the realms in *Osmose* or *Ephemere*, its fundamental to my use of transparency as a technique, to create, have things occupy the same space. And to me that is a way to rupture the whole Cartesian illusion of space.

**(LD)** So its like being inside a mirror?

Yeah! And so you put unrelated things or the same things twice from a different view in the same space in a way like the Cubists were trying to fracture space its another way to do it. Its maybe a little more gentle. So that is all tied and it goes back to the painting and there is probably a few other things that would go back to the painting. But I would say the most challenging was to create work with no frame, no careful composition, create work that was not based on 2-D spatial relationships. And bringing sound, because these two works are as aural as they are visual, and the sound plays a huge role and that is not my background so I am still coming to terms with the sound but I have worked with very good people and we have had a wonderful working relationship. And that ties to another aspect which is the process of creation such work. It is not possible for me to do such work without other with other people who are very good at what they do. And that has been quite an interesting process but in a way it is a great solutions to the over abundance of solitude that you can experience as a painter.

And you come to move into team work. An artist cannot just start working with a programmer or an engineer, you need to have a certain sensibility. For instance the team I work with, the two guys who have done the graphics, and the programming with me, are both very sensitive, gentle, men. And very much believe in what I am doing, have wanted to be part of that to help bring that up.

**(LD)** You have been very lucky to find such people.

Well it is very interesting because when I first formulated *Osmose* in 1993, I was at Softimage, I wrote up a mission (Softimage was being bought by Microsoft) and I wrote up a mission about what I wanted to do that was not about just doing products, or something they could test. I wanted to advance the field by showing people that it is possible to create work that is alternative to the usual conventional stuff. I wanted to push the capacity of Virtual Reality for emotional and artistic expression. And in fact I did those two things. Except I did not know that I would be able to do them. But that is what I wrote. And I so, I got the funding and the support and then I thought, I now need to find a developer, or a programmer.

**(LD)** You mentioned in your presentation that the work is as much about a sense of presence as it is about a sense of loss. That is quite a paradox. I would like to hear more about this because I found it very powerful.

I think that Heaven and Hell is here. And I think that mixed up with presence is absence. The more you can feel presence, the more you feel absence. The more you feel alive, and ecstatic over having being alive, the more you feel loss for the people who are not here. Both for generations who are not here, and for those you have not known because their lives ended because we are mortal, but also for people you have lost in your life. For the personal, how this has affected me is in 1988, I lost my stepfather and then a month after that the father of my partner at the time died of lung cancer and then three weeks after that my thirty year old brother was killed in a car accident.

I used to think that death is something that happened when you are eighty. Its like when you are walking down a dock and then you drop off when you are eighty and then that is it. There are doorways all around us through which any of us could go at any time. ...[some text has been edited out here] Death is like a silk veil all around your body nestling against your skin, and there was actually and there was actually a sensuous aspect to it that it was quite startling. And a comforting aspect, but one of a huge sense of loss because when a young person loses their life because of someone else's misjudgment, like somebody passing a double line and they are just gone it is a shock and it actually re configures all your psychic structure. And so then I felt death was against my skin. ...[some text has been edited out here]... And death is with you all the time.

Death is not something I think about consciously, but that whole initiation into death has really, I am sure affected my work, in terms of loss, and I also feel a huge sense of loss for what is happening environmentally. Because I was very aware, even when I was younger about the loss of wilderness, loss of rural land, farmland, the loss of woods to shopping malls, freeways and housing. Which is why I left Ontario when I was about nineteen and I have never lived there again. I have become more and more aware of how habitats for non-humans are shrinking and how global warming is affected very much by human action. So there is the sense of loss of nature as we knew it in our childhood. The sense of nature that we probably all had of endless fields, and a wilderness out there, and it is really, conceptually, the whole notion of nature and wilderness is very much changing for younger generations. Those two senses of loss have really come to permeate my work. So you get the desire to celebrate the extra ordinariness of being here, coupled with this sense of loss on both fronts. In a way that is my philosophy of life.

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