



**Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, Marian Quartly**  
*Creating a Nation 1788-2007*

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'Distinctive and highly successful history of Australia by four of our leading historians' Stuart Macintyre, Ernest Scott Professor of History; 'This is not just another feminist challenge to yesterday's orthodoxy, but an effective move to displace it ... Creating a Nation is a power-taking, centralizing exercise in mainstream national history -- one shaped by white feminist priorities, but designed for general use. This is a splendid achievement', Meaghan Morris, *Meanjin*

'This is a significant book, signalling a shift from "women's history" to a general Australian history foregrounding the relations between men and women ... Creating a Nation ... has made Australian history much richer, more complex and more interesting', Ann Curthoys, *Age*

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## blackBOX: Painting A Digital Picture of Documented Memory (<http://www.strangecities.net>)

Tatiana Pentes



*blackBOX* interface still, a digital media work by Tatiana Pentes.

It is inscribed, as on Pandora's Box ... do not open ... passions ... escape in all directions from a box that lies open ...  
 (Bruno Latour, 'Opening Pandora's Black Box', 1987.)<sup>1</sup>

This article is an examination and critical positioning of my current digital media project *blackBOX* — *Painting a Digital Picture of Documented Memory*. *blackBOX* is an interactive CD-ROM 'game' and also an internet work. *blackBOX* seeks to exploit and enhance the creative potentials of digitally produced music, sound, image and text relationships in an interactive and online environment. This work seeks to reverse, obscure and distort the dominating/colonialist gaze in a playful manner. *blackBOX* is produced through the hybrid meeting of visual arts practise, digital film production and documentary dance performance. It also interacts with the notion of 'electronic' (image/sound/text) writing, that was in fact prefigured in early Russian *avant-garde* practises. In the words of El Lissitsky:

The new book demands the new writer. Inkstand and goose quill are dead ... The printed sheet transcends space and time. The printed sheet, the infinity of the book, must be transcended ...<sup>2</sup>

The protagonist of the *blackBOX* digital media work, Nina, undertakes a journey, a struggle and search for virtual objects. The idea of mobilising a series of myths cross-culturally is at play both in the inner workings of the game device and in the computer interface strategy. The visual screens are composed of the virtual surface fragments of the archival materials and objects. These spaces form an electronic stage where the narrative elements unfold as part cinema, part computer arcade game.



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jewelBOX interface screen, a digital media work by Tatiana Pentes.

*blackBOX* has been devised for gallery installation. The digital story first emerges from the textile surface of heroine Nina's (a Russian/Greek girl) red velvet dress, adorned with roses, through a bed of oriental cushions, where she writhes in her chrysalis. Sanskrit, Greek and Russian text are projected across her body. Images of the girl move into representations of a modern urban metropolis. The player/participant is invited to explore this interactive metropolis, as filtered through the digital experiences and sensations of the girl, and to discover three metaphorical 'Chinese Boxes', which contain three symbolic performances. The key interface design metaphor at this stage is a Chinese ornamental window, and interaction with this interface frames the central narrative. Inside this framework the girl discovers performances from three 'imagined' Australian diasporic communities; rembetika (the Greek blues); classical Indian dance and music (Odissi and Kuchipudi traditions); and fragments of Australian jazz performed by musicians with Russian origins.

### Interface design metaphor

The interface design metaphor for *blackBOX* is an electronic stage/screen surface where performances appear as if conjured from the imagination, or a dream. The participant/player moves around the digital surface of the stage, exploring through opening boxes, musical and dramatic performances, interviews with the musicians and dancers, documentary fragments of performances, statements by artists, text documents, newsprint articles, archival radio fragments, televisual and other related material. The action/performance appear within the immersive environment of a series of Byzantine-(Greek), Sanskrit-(Indian) and 1930s Chinese-inspired screen frames. Electronic text and images in various assemblages trigger embedded material, a visual/audio hypertext.<sup>3</sup> Traditional modes of storytelling and music are challenged in this interface design, as the player/participant is provoked to engage with the music and performances. As the player interacts with the screen, they consider the ways in which (traditional) musical and dance forms mix in various 'compositions' to create a hybrid of different cultural forms. This 'game' also acts as a digital archive and documentation of the metamorphosis of traditional cultural and musical forms, through the creative potentials opened up for cultural producers in the digitally manipulated performance, sound, image and text environment of interactive multimedia. These 'compositions' provide perspectives on the emergence of a uniquely Australian contemporary sound/culture that is an amalgamation and integration of three diasporic genres of music achieved through the creation of 'electronic writing', the assembling of an ensemble of fragments into image/ sound/text 'compositions'.

### Through the looking glass

The heroine, Nina, is the character with which the player identifies and observes through the unfolding of the digital media text. Screen events unfold through her eyes, revealing her projected/imaginary dreams and creating a narrative. The areas of interactive program content are mediated through Nina's voice (Lou-Lou Sy), the voice of an Indian woman (Devleena Ghosh), fragments of a Chinese woman singing (Zhou Xuan recorded in the 1930s) and fragments of a Greek musician talking/singing (John Conomos and Rebetiki Ensemble). These voices are integrated with archival documents, voice-over material and sound atmospheres, which gives the stories a space for reflection. Visual and sonic devices form signatures marking out the areas of program content. These sonic devices denote both the present (time) and the recollection of previous events. Areas of program content map the music/dance archive: a set of pathways; chineseBOX, which plays a form of jazz music that migrated to Australia with Russian refugees from China; jewelBOX, the dance music culture that has more recently emerged from Indian communities in Australia, people who migrated from Indian diasporas in Fiji, Singapore and Malaysia as well as from the Indian sub-continent; pandora's BOX, Greek economic migrants/refugees, playing rembetika, a politically engaged 'blues'; and two conclusions, an electronic poetic reverie and a visual/audio collage of the various music/dance genres that speak of mixed origins.

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c/- Australian Research Institute  
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### API Network Website Upgrades

#### In Progress

The API Network website is getting a makeover. The API Network is a "one-stop-shop" for delivering knowledge and services for Australian public intellectuals and is available 24/7 from anywhere in the world. It's currently going through a re-vamp and will soon be providing you with more functionality and services. As we port our exclusive content and services to the new website, we ask for your patience and continued support. We would also appreciate your feedback on what you would like to see on the new website. [Please feel free to get in touch with us.](#)



chineseBOX menu screen. Virtual artefacts form an interface device. Tatiana Pentec.

Once the player/participant has entered an interactive 'composition', the program content is divulged through a series of virtual artefacts. These artefacts become icons that trigger areas of the program content, and through the exploration of these configurations, ideas about the music/dance forms are revealed. Inside the jewelBOX story pathway, the narrative is revealed through interaction with the virtual dance jewels, which become icons representing the different levels of the narrative. Interaction with these dance jewels triggers performative spaces, revealing a number of classical Indian dances and artefacts, embedded into stylised electronic stages.

#### Diasporic dance music

The aristocratic pleasure of counting differences is savored. I cut my hair, he plaits his...he uses chopsticks; I write with a goose quill, he draws characters with a paintbrush ...  
(Jean-Paul Sartre)<sup>4</sup>

As a creative producer of digital media, I'm working to interrogate an implicit ideological agenda of the 'colonial constructions of racial, cultural, and geographic difference ... [examined] through the channels of photographic production and consumption'.<sup>5</sup> The parallel discourse weaving its thread through this creative work and writing is to make visible the construction of identity as a fragile relationship between observer and observed, the colonising/dominant gaze and the marginalised ethnicity (the subject envisioned as both 'racial inferior' and object of fascination).<sup>6</sup> In taking up new media to represent my own subjective ethno-cultural identity, I am playfully disrupting the subject/object dichotomy, and articulating my own ethno-cultural hybridity. I am attempting to reveal the social contract (collusion) of racial stereotypes as a cultural, social and political fabrication.<sup>7</sup> Inside this intertextual work, fascination with the 'spectacle' of the Other, where 'the image of the colonial Other becomes a trope of desire for the Western viewer ... Through repetitive, fetishistic dissemination of stereotypes',<sup>8</sup> is manipulated. Engagement with this artful game reveals the artifice of its own shiny surface, projected onto the cave wall, like Platonic electric shadows. My research methodology is based on participant observation, working with (beside) and documenting (through film, video and sound) music/dance performances. The work I am making and the creative research in which I am engaged focus on imaging (imagining) and representing a number of different concepts through the production of a non-linear interactive multimedia work. The 'box' is a symbolic reference to software aesthetics and what can be revealed/unfolded in the interactive environment. Additionally, the box is understood as that which marks us out from 'others' as part of a distinct group or scientific catalogue. The concept of the 'song' is engaged with as a mode of cultural discourse/cultural expression, political persuasion and propaganda, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities. 'Dance forms' are understood as a symbolic strategy for moving in-between theories and cultural practices. The digital 'journey' is used as a metaphor for discovery of this new media and the different cultural forms. Image/sound/text assemblages, juxtapositions and arrangements are used as analogous to musical/painterly and choreographic compositions. A self-reflexive program articulating the 'open', 'ambivalent' and 'fragmentary' formal qualities of the non-sequential narrative is revealed.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the analogy between 'migration' as migration of people, music, memories, and the migration of the old media into the new media is explored.<sup>10</sup>

#### Historical research

The objective of this creative research is to extend, complicate and sophisticate my earlier experiments with the music of Russian jazz in China, in my production of an interactive nonlinear multimedia work entitled *Strange Cities*. In my earlier work I focused on a vinyl recording, *Strange Cities (Stranyie Garadnye)*, recorded by my Russian grandfather Sergei Ermolaeff, which I stumbled upon after his death. This record was a body of both original compositions and folk ballads from pre-revolutionary Russia. Most songs, including the title track, were the laments of diasporic peoples looking back to their 'homeland' — in this instance, their 'home-town/city', St Petersburg — and nostalgically longing for 'motherland', a place that was no more: an imagined space.

The original songs were composed in exile by Sergei (a stateless person) in the treaty port of Shanghai, China. Sergei went on to record and play these songs in his adopted home of Sydney, Australia, as a foreigner once more. *blackBOX* extends this investigation by incorporating the cultural expressions of Other diasporic experiences, as expressed through the music of the displaced people. This creative work is informed by the multimedia design I developed in collaboration with Professor Andrew Jakubowicz for the *Menorah of Fang Bang Lu* interactive documentary.<sup>11</sup> This is an online project exploring the lives of seven families and is structured around seven cultural and social themes, evoking the complex and multidimensional fabric of Shanghai as a crossroads for the Jews of China as well as those who came to Australia.<sup>12</sup>

#### Hypertextuality/intertextuality

*blackBOX* is an intertextual non-linear narrative, and has its origins in modernist collage and montage aesthetic practices. New-media theorist Lev Manovich traces the historical lineage of the new-media text to European and Russian modernist *avant-garde* aesthetics in film, the visual arts, cinema, architecture, engineering, literature and music.

He suggests that there are a number of traditional media paths that can be traced and which are brought together in this new form of electronic writing. One can trace the modernist practise of visual montage to the film concepts espoused by Sergei Eisenstein in the early twentieth century in Russia. Sequences in film utilising editing strategies that juxtapose images, sounds and texts to create dramatic meaning within the cinematic frame have now been synthesised in the virtual editing environment of computer software's non-linear editing interfaces. These interfaces:

simulate the multi-track environment codified and theorized by Eisenstein in his early film work. The convergence of media into the software environment has transformed the capabilities for digital media production. It is possible to shoot a digital film/video and post-produce the media on the desktop of a multimedia computer.<sup>13</sup>

Simultaneously, writing practises have been transformed. However, Tatiana Nicolova-Houston argues that the open-ended hypertext is in fact significantly prefigured in Byzantine and medieval manuscripts. She attributes the following characteristics to the hypertext (informed by the research of George Landow): non-linearity, multi-vocality, intertextuality and decenteredness.<sup>14</sup> Nicolova-Houston argues that medieval manuscripts:

act as agents of historical and spiritual illumination, possessing a human feel and touch, with each one being a unique creation of a unique scribe and illuminator, a piece of art, and, frequently, its creator's masterpiece.<sup>15</sup>

She claims that these manuscripts:

like hyper textual Website or electronic books, consist of composite works of different layers of texts, illustrations, marginal and interlinear glosses and annotations. Medieval Bibles, chronicles, works of the Law, and textbooks present examples of a high level of hypertextuality.<sup>16</sup>

### Aesthetics of interactive media

Melanie Swalwell argues in *Aesthetics and Hyper/aesthetics: Rethinking the Senses in Contemporary Media Contexts* that the 'immersive sensory experience' of the interactive environment of convergent media (mediated through the intelligent technological systems of the computer) has produced new kinds of artificial (virtual) engagement. These new modes of engagement include an 'ability to provide a greater range of sensory stimuli, all at once'. As a result, claims were made by promoters of various media — new and old — that consumers were 'driving' convergence by their demands for 'more realistic and "immersive" (multisensory) experiences'.<sup>17</sup> This implied that immersion resulted from 'stimulating all the senses, often to heretofore unimagined degrees'.<sup>18</sup> The production of creative and experimental interactive art draws from a multitude of disciplines — and has a number of various outcomes which include — cyber art, digital art, web art, information art, interactive art, active art, reactive art and connective (networked art).<sup>19</sup> However, these categories, under the rubric 'digital artefact', and non-material (art) object can be traced back to experiments in modernist *avant-garde* conceptual art, which questions:

the relationship between ideas and art ... [and] de-emphasizes the value traditionally accorded to the materiality of art objects. It focuses, rather, on examining the preconditions for how meaning emerges in art, seen as a semiotic system.<sup>20</sup>

The experimental meeting of 'software', 'information technology' and 'art' can be traced to a number of sources, but was pioneered in the museum environment by Jack Burnham in the late 1960s, specifically with his curation of the exhibition *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning For Art at the Jewish Museum in New York* (1970). Here, Burnham designed software to function as a testing ground for public interaction with 'information systems and their devices'. He conceived 'software' as being parallel to the aesthetic principles, concepts or programs that underlie the formal embodiment of the actual art objects, that is, the 'hardware'.<sup>21</sup>

### Virtual archive of cultural memories

In *blackBOX* the subjective figure of the protagonist, Nina, through whom the player/participant experiences and interacts with the virtual spaces and performances, has been informed by psychologist Jean Piaget's educational theories on perception, learning and development. Piaget:

argued that learning occurs as a direct result of interaction with the environment ... children learn from actions rather than passive observations, and so construct knowledge and understanding themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Piaget's theories have been widely debated, and his research has contributed to a 'taxonomical' understanding of cognitive learning, affective learning and psychomotor development. This work has implications for the conceptualisation of interactive media as an educational, informational system for social interaction and learning. As the player/participant navigates the *blackBOX* interface, they not only gather information but also learn through exploring the way in which the program operates. It is this that allows the player to move through and apprehend the narrative text. Through the participant's direct interaction with the multimedia text, meaning is produced. Knowledge of Nina's cultural origins are discovered in a non-sequential manner and then ordered through the imagination of the participant.

### blackBOXES — digital media as a journey of discovery

The key concern of *blackBOX* is to call attention to the iconic value of symbols in the virtual environment of digital media. Symbols possess a universal imagery and thus address themselves to the needs of specific individuals or cultures, but in a mythological and psychological language.<sup>23</sup> The mobilisation of a series of myths cross-culturally is strategically at play in the inner workings of the game device. The fact that the icons, signs and symbols from outside dominant western culture are legible inside *blackBOX*, and can be interwoven into the storytelling and narrative process, suggests that there may be a reservoir of symbolism that can be tapped into and which shapes many societies' myths. For example, a central theme operating in *blackBOX* is the quest. The quest has long motivated narrative progression within the trajectory of storytelling. In particular, this project is influenced by Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, a film based on Philip



K Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* *Blade Runner*'s protagonist, the 'hardboiled' Deckard, searches for his origins (android or human) through the Los Angeles of 2019. The film's *mise-en-scène* centres around an imagining of a futuristic 'Chinatown'. Similarly, Nina's quest is constructed in the work to unveil aspects of her self and her cultural origins. The participant and the girl search together for virtual objects whose meaning represent aspects of her outer world and reveal to her aspects of her inner self. This search mirrors for the player/participant's own search through the text and for self-understanding. In comprehending the text, the viewer is provoked to consider the cultural artefacts that shape the individual and tap into a deeper reservoir of mythological ruins.<sup>24</sup>

Mapping a history of the term 'blackbox' incorporates an investigation of the technological implication of the notion 'box': a device, an instrument and an idea created as a piece of equipment, a vessel for containing cultural artefacts, in the contemporary sense. Lev Manovich argues in 'Avant-garde as Software'<sup>25</sup> that the software and windows environment of the computer is indebted to techniques invented by Russian *avant-garde*, left-wing artists in the 1920s. He traces basic computer operations, such as drop-down windows and 'cut and paste' commands, back to Lissitzky's use of movable frames in his 1926 exhibition design for the International Art Exhibition in Dresden.<sup>26</sup>

Manovich thus historically links the development of interface metaphors that we experience today in computer environments to the visualisation of abstract data as compartmentalised 'windows' and 'boxes'. But can we take this analogy back further to antiquity or across cultures? These visual metaphors, the bases of operating systems worldwide, are legible across cultures. Visual literacy and perception exceeds the boundaries of language. The ability of the 'icon' to convey meaning and narrative is comparable to the religious icon and the contemporary digital icon (which is emptied of any spiritual connotation). However, certain grammars of the visual are undeniably culturally specific, though it could also be argued that a new global visual language is emerging through the internet. While readable text inside the frame is expressed in the national language, the *lingua franca* of the computer screen is clearly transnational. The framing structures of the Microsoft Windows operating system is reminiscent of antique forms of representation. Nicolova-Houston's exploration of Byzantine and medieval manuscripts, discussed earlier,<sup>27</sup> can be extended to the religious 'icon' as a window into spiritual meaning, and the picture space as a window into an imaginary landscape in modernist western abstract and figurative painting.<sup>28</sup> However, the new environment of digital media converges images, sounds and texts with a different ability, an interactivity with the text. Interaction is extended beyond eyes and hands to the creation of a new 'book' where the hand electronically manipulates and interrogates each new 'composition'. Manovich proposes that the emergence of the term 'new media' in Europe was a reference to 'European artists, designers, architects and photographers', such as Le Corbusier's *New Architecture*,<sup>29</sup> Jan Tschichold's *New Typography*<sup>30</sup> and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *New Vision*.<sup>31</sup> Manovich states:

Although nobody, as far as I know, published something called *New Cinema*, all the manifestos written during this decade by French, German and Russian filmmakers in essence constitute such a book: a call for a new language of film, whether it was to be montage, 'Cinéma pur' (also known as 'absolute film'), or 'photogénie'. Similarly, although not declared in a book, a true visual revolution also took place in graphic design thus 'making it new' as well (Aleksander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, etc.).<sup>32</sup>

Manovich explains the return of the word 'new' in the 1990s as not being aligned with a specific media type but, rather, as a generic media.<sup>33</sup> This has now perhaps been replaced by the term 'digital media', referring to the potential *neo-avantgarde* practises and radical cultural innovations inherent in these new cultural forms of electronic media (CD-ROM, DVD, URL websites, computer software games, hypertext and hypermedia applications).<sup>34</sup> What once were cinematic, design, architectural, graphic and textual experiments, such as Dziga Vertov's quick cutting techniques in *The Man with a Movie Camera* and his split-screen experiments, and Sergei Eisenstein's montage film making techniques, are reinterpreted. They coalesce and mingle in the televisual, video and internet spheres, due to the availability of imaging programs (Adobe Photoshop) and moving image (compositing) editing software programs (Adobe After Effects).<sup>35</sup> This is also true of contemporary music making software.

### Poetic reverie

In the creation (authoring) of non-sequential narratives for the interactive multimedia environment of the internet, and other digital work, my central concern has been to reconfigure the gestures of both the parent media (cinema, painting, composition) and the parent cultures. These are mingled alchemically to form the production of a new hybrid text, a convergent media articulation, in the digital realm. The software programs that produce the creative non-linear narrative metaphorically unleash the 'genie' from the 'lamp' or the 'magic' from the 'box'. The 'genie' is coded as generically Other. Sanskrit, Greek, and Russian (Chinese) culture stand in for the orient, the 'foreign', as represented in orientalist styles of western music, film and literature. However, the 'lamp' becomes the 'box' — the jewelBOX, the chineseBOX, the pandora'sBOX, and the 'blackbox' of the program that I am creating. Metaphorically, the player/participant simulates the mobile agents moving through the electronic service frameworks, entities consisting of code, data and control information,<sup>36</sup> migrating between different nodes in the system. This syncretic text weaves together the threads of diasporic cultures; it is a virtual archive, a box of music and memories.

### Notes

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- 20 Press release, 'Philips Digital Convergence Product Defines Multimedia Home Cinema', August 1997. Accessed 18 July 2000. <http://www.us.sv.philips.com/news/press>
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- 21 Gerhard Bachfischer, 'A Constant Flow of Thoughts', unpublished creative journal, Master of Interactive Multimedia, Institute for Interactive Media and Learning, University of Technology, Sydney, 2002, p 12.
- 22 The 'dematerialization' of the art object theorised by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in 'The Dematerialization of Art', *Art International*, February 1968, reinscribed in Lippard's *Six Years: The dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966–1972* [1973], where the 'dematerialization of art' can be seen as a 'strategy for repositioning art in relation to politics — not a shift from material per se, but a shift from an artworks value as an object of commercial exchange to its value as aesthetic and political interchange'. Cited in Edward A Shanken, 'Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art', *Art & Culture Papers*, Electronic Art and Animation Catalog: SIGGRAPH, 2001, pp 8–9.
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- 34 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Frederick Etchells (trans.), Architectural Press, London, New York, Praeger, 1963.
- 35 Manovich, *op. cit.*, p 1.
- 36 *ibid.*
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