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## **VIRTUELLE MAUER: An Interview with Tamiko Thiel**

By Jonathan Taylor

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*Tamiko Thiel has become one of the world's great media artists, working in one of the most unusual and elusive mediums available - virtual reality. With an education at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, she has laid a foundation for career-making, socially-critical art that employs bleeding edge digital technology. Fresh out of college, she landed her first job working for Steven Spielberg, creating a 3D virtual reality world - a precursor to the popular Second Life - for seriously ill children. This experience would shape her work in virtual spaces for years to come.*

*As an independent artist, she has explored topics like the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II with *Beyond Manzanar* (2001). In *The Travels of Mariko Horo* (2006), she imagined a surrealistic exploration of the culture of the West, including trips to a Christian paradise, seen through the eyes of a young Japanese woman.*

*Her most recent piece, *Virtuelle Mauer*, is a form of historical preservation in of itself - allowing participants to explore and experience a literal and metaphorical structure that no longer exists in the physical realm.*

*Tamiko describes her art candidly, and reveals her inspirations, influences, and her hopes to connect with audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities.*

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**So let's start - you have an end user, they're not familiar with the work, they come to the exhibit and see your piece - what's their experience?**

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**Well I always try to provide some amount of information beforehand - just because so many who come to these exhibits haven't dealt with 3D worlds before.**

**I very specifically orient my technology in the presentation to more general audiences rather than gamers. Also, it's often that they're not always art audiences - especially with this Berlin**

Wall piece, the topic is interesting to a wide range of people who are not necessarily art museum goers. So I try and provide information before they go in. Depending on the venue, some curators don't want to provide any information at all except for the title and name of the artist.



In 911, there's a hallway before the installation space, and in this case, I'm working right now on a number of information panels that start out with the basics. You know, "Where is Germany?" "Where is Berlin?" (Laughs) "Why was the city divided?" Keep everything rather brief... but we do a very long chronology of events that will also be up.

We try to provide some context for people, because most people know, or have heard of the Berlin Wall at some level, but don't necessarily know what it was really about.

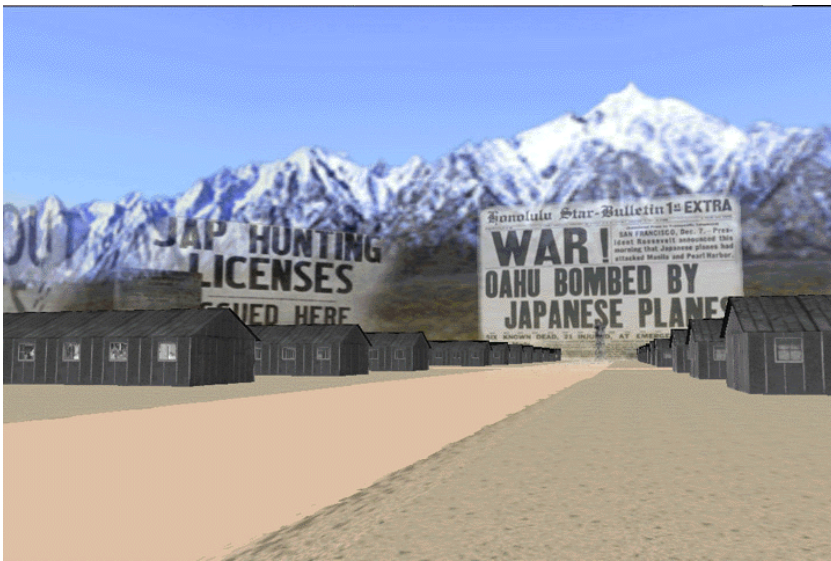
That's my own experience. I'm 27 years old, was never a huge history buff - I knew the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it divided Germany, was a symbol of East vs. West... but my own personal knowledge of it is very limited.

Right, and I suspect that's typical. Obviously, when we showed in Berlin the situation is very different. There were lots of people who came to the exhibit who had actually lived directly in our project area, during that time, in the houses that we show in the 3D space. The topics of my pieces are fairly diverse and if you're familiar with my previous piece at 911, *The Travels of Mariko Horo*, that's a very fantastical piece, more of a fantasy trip. In the case of *Virtuelle Mauer*, or the first piece I did called *Beyond Manzanar* which was set around the Manzanar interment camp where Japanese Americans were interned in World War II in California, it's very historical.

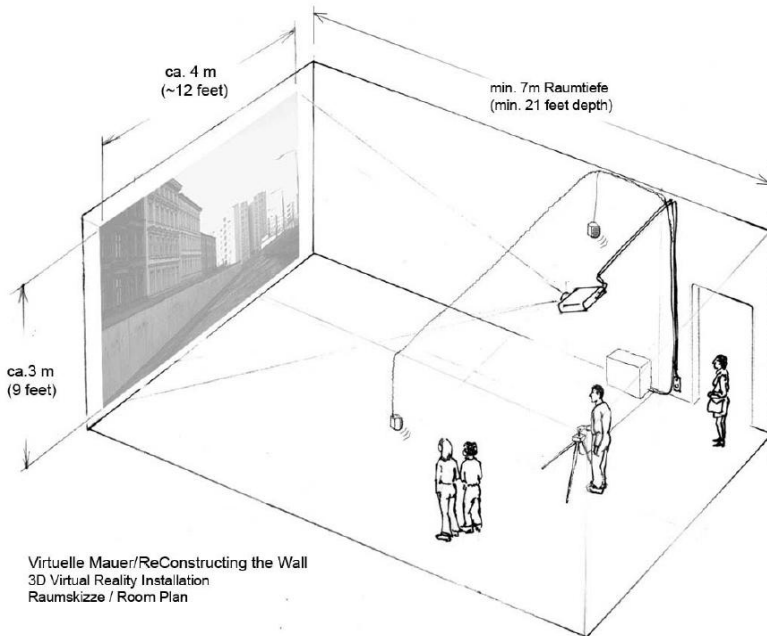
Any pieces with a real historical background I try and give that background, because partially they are, admittedly, political pieces and I'm trying to provoke people's interest -

there's something interesting in the topic that I think is worth knowing about.

There's obviously a very big span - if you have 4-year-olds, I don't expect them to know much about history at all, if they're 12-year-olds, they may not also have much interest in history - God knows I didn't at that age - but what I've seen and I've learned from showing *Beyond Manzanar*, is that kids, even if they have no interest and no idea what the piece is about, are attracted to it. Even if they can't shoot anything, you know, they're still interested in the technology - they see it as something that belongs to them. It's there that they can show off their competence to their parents and grandparents and share it with each other. They have no fear of the joystick - they pounce on it and it's often hard to get them to let someone else on it. So the kids just jump on the joystick and sail off in the world, and have fun with the space. But in the process of doing so, they're also very open, because they're paying attention. Their defenses are down, and it's very easy then to talk to them about the content - they're interested in hearing about it.



So this was an effect I hadn't expected at all with my work. I hadn't planned on addressing any kids at all... and then it started happening with *Beyond Manzanar*. Grandparents started talking and telling me that they were able to talk to their grandchildren for the first time about growing up in an internment camp. There was a context all of a sudden where the kids could understand more of what that meant. Educators told me these pieces can be a bridge between generations - where the kids show the adults how to use the technology and the adults talk to the kids about the content. It's really worked out well in that way - with both *Manzanar* and the Berlin Wall pieces, I find all sorts of teachers bringing in their classes, parents coming in with their kids, and that's an effect I didn't plan and which really surprised me and delights me.



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**Let's talk about usability for a second. How did you arrive at a joystick control system to navigate throughout the 3D worlds?**

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**I started at Starbright Worlds, which was for seriously ill children, and all sorts of ideas for tricky and interesting interfaces fell by the wayside when you realize that the kids are connected to all sorts of machines - they'd have all sorts of ailments so accessibility really means giving them general devices. These were also spaces that were just running off of PCs and oriented around mouse and keyboard controls, and that's how I started, rather than starting from a game background. I'm really not a very good gamer at all, actually, I just don't have the patience for it.**

**When I did *Manzanar* one of my primary user groups was going to be adults over the age of 55 - people who were born the last year of World War 2 in the camps. Even the mouse and keyboard proved difficult for them - lots of them had never used computers before in their life, and I thought back to my earlier work with people with disabilities. People with very severe spinal cord injuries could often drive a wheelchair using a joystick, and I figured that if they could navigate real 3D spaces with a joystick, then they could certainly navigate virtual worlds with a joystick. Over the years I've often tried out different interfaces that would be interesting in various ways, but I always come back to the fact that I want to interest a very wide audience. They might be 4-year-olds, they might be six-foot-five, they might be in wheelchairs... they might be old and never have touched a computer in their life.**

**All this ends up boiling down to a joystick being the most accessible - they don't have to be able to stand, they don't have to be able to walk, they don't have to really do much more than move their fingers or maybe their arm around a little. So it's really the accessibility that boils it down to the choice of the joystick.**

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Speaking of making it accessible, and speaking about the differences in generations, do you have an agenda or narrative that you want to get across to an audience, or you just sort of let them explore, discover, and take their own experiences away from it? Or do you really drive them to a certain point?

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It's somewhere between the two. I think if I had a very specific message to communicate then I would prefer to write something, or make a film where I can control their experience very strongly. Although I do tend to have for each piece a number of things that I want to communicate, and it's a challenge for me to create a somewhat flexible space that the user has to explore on their own, see if I can set up the space in a way that brings across the sorts of messages I'm interested in communicating. A lot of this comes from my father Philip Thiel's work on experiential spaces - some of his life's work was with dealing with how you could design spaces as an urban planner or as an architect to be dramatically interesting and communicative, what sort of emotional effects that different types of spaces, and sequences of spaces can have on the user.

So these, for me, are all tools in order to try and communicate a certain type of meaning, but it's also a very wonderful experience to talk with different people who have used my works and to find that they've come up with all sorts of different interpretations and different experiences that I didn't necessarily plan. That's a certain aspect which, actually, any artwork has... you can't force the person to see an artwork in only one way. It's more interesting that they can bring in their own thoughts and experiences and interpretations.

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Going back to games, you said you weren't a "good gamer," but have you explored what's been offered, not only in the mainstream but the independent scene - see how people are using interactivity to elicit emotion?

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I've explored a little, but... the games where you have to solve problems or, you know, reach a certain skill level before you can proceed to the next point - I don't get very far with those. At some point I got *Myst* and Lara Croft [*Tomb Raider*] because I was very excited by the games... and found that I couldn't even get out of the first scene and I wasn't willing to, for instance, go online and find out all the cheats or all the information to proceed further. So that for me is a serious handicap - I'm always delighted when someone who is a better gamer or more knowledgeable will show things to me.

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Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* fame. Copyright Eidos, 1996.

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**I think it's a deficit of mine and I'm hoping that I'll get to know more people involved with gaming - I've been to a lot of conferences that really deal with issues of gaming, and the way people think about things are so different from what I personally want to do. It hasn't been that helpful, which is too bad, but it seems like the purposes of what those people want to do and what I want to do are very different.**

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**That might be an inaccurate statement - "deficit as a gamer." To enjoy a movie, you don't have to be a good 'film watcher'... or a 'good reader' in the sense that you can't enjoy a book. Of course, some skill and proficiency are involved in terms of vocabulary and things of that nature, but the actual challenge that many games present can definitely be a limiting factor in what people experience.**

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**Yeah, and that was actually a reason for me to want to do my 3D worlds. I thought that there was a lot that could be done in 3D environments, that the majority of people (including people like me) weren't able to get into. That's also why I stress the access issue - so that I can reach those people, just like me, who would never devote the time to mastering a game just to get to the next level.**

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Does *Virtuelle Mauer* have a definitive end point, or is it more open-ended and anyone can just come in and pick up at any time?

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Because I share in installations, I specifically want to have the large screen about 9ft by 12ft screen so that it's an immersive experience, 'virtual reality,' so to speak, without the hardware. And that sort of installation means that you have to deal with the fact that people can wander in and wander out, so *Beyond Manzanar* actually had a circular structure. It was really only a loop, although people didn't realize that.

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None of the pieces have a real beginning and end - *Manzanar* had a specific sort of high point and low point, but the other pieces have multiple smaller and dramatic sequences, but there's definitely no beginning or end point. And therefore each person's experience is different depending on where they come in and what they do as their first thing. That's also an interesting challenge to create a piece that has some sort of dramatic structure and dramatic pull, without having that set beginning and end. Of course, it goes against all classic drama theory, so it's one of my favorite challenges.

There are definite sequences that are controlled - the theorists like to have a set of infinite possibilities that are infinitely combinable and each time you go into the piece it's completely different and stuff, but I'm not interested in creating a piece that sort of fits someone's theories about what would be the coolest ludological structure to have, I'm interested in conveying a certain set of material of experiences, of information, of images. I want to build dramatic arcs that have very definite sequences of events. The piece as a whole consists of a collection of these dramatic arcs, and depending on what order you encounter them, things will happen to the user in a different order but they're not really changing things at all. I decided early on that my interest was in creating this specific type of dramatic structure rather than creating, so to speak, a machine that could generate any number of possibilities.

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So it's easier to get your message across if you have these pre-ordained events. Otherwise if things are a little random happenstance, then it leads to confusion and...

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Yeah. It's not a fully open experimental space, there's definitely control and I usually use a balance of free will and determinism to try and also create a certain amount of dramatic structure. To give the user the impression that they have flexibility, that they have freedom of movement, and then at some specific points, confront them with their lack of control in order to convey a dramatic point or convey a message about imprisonment.

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Speaking of control, do you implement any tutorials to guide the user experience?

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No, no, I try to keep the navigation simple enough, so when people say "How do you this?" I can say, "Push it up to move forward, push it back to move back, right to move right..." and they get it. If they can get up the courage to actually move the joystick then they get it, and I employ real world analogies - up a stairway, down a stairway, then a door...

There are other pieces that I've done where going in a doorway can change the world substantially. It's not quite so strong in the Berlin Wall piece, but that's a very conscious decision to try and use real-world situations so that I don't have to have a tutorial. Also, say there's three people in a room using the installation, a fourth person comes in and watches the first three for a while, the other three people go out... It's sort of like, at what point do you bring in the tutorial? And if they're a person who's never used a computer before... where does one even find a tutorial? I could have something on the screen that says, "Tutorial - click here!" But if they don't understand how to click on it, then that won't work either, so this also means having to animate the user sometimes for more complicated sequences where I know that a lot of people won't be able to do it themselves.

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So have you have had any focus group testing or have you ever incorporated anyone's feedback?

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Nothing formal, but I do have a large number of people who are not gamers. I can just ask my random friends to come test out the piece and then I learn very quickly where the problems are. And also, what do they recognize, and what do they not recognize? In the Berlin Wall piece, we have a more specific set of content that we do want the people to get, and there we've taken the expedience of putting in characters in the world who are kind of markers to say, "If you go up to these characters, something will happen." And then some of the characters are interactive at a very simple level. If you go up to the border guard then he'll ask you for your passport or your ID... real world sorts of actions - you know, walking through an area and you see a couple of people who are obviously being tourists and one is explaining something to the other, so you kind of go up and eavesdrop on them, again using a real-world situation that is understandable to people who don't play 3D games. And I really don't want to have little buttons that say, "Click here for the next scene." I really don't want that because then I should have made a movie and not try to make a 3D space.

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This could also detract from the immersion you're trying to achieve.

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Exactly, yeah.

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Talk about these characters... I understand you've incorporated some archival footage and photography. Have you re-created scenes using the 3d models?



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Some of it, yeah... There's a fair amount of information which we're not using or putting the archival material directly in the piece right now. We've got some of it, some of it is on the Wall, on the Berlin Wall as graffiti, and some things are re-enacted... one of the escape attempts is re-enacted in a kind of abstracted way. To be truthful, there are a number of things that we weren't able to build into the piece yet because we had technical problems with the underlying 3D browser. Which were fixed last Wednesday, like three days ago, so...

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So would there be time to incorporate those assets into the show here in Seattle?

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A little bit more, but seriously I think the middle-end of next year there will be more, there's certainly enough right now. There was enough in August to make the piece interesting, so all of the Berlin Wall historic preservationists got very excited about the piece and want to re-show it in their own various venues.

I'm comfortable that there's enough material in the piece right now to cover a lot of ground. There's still a number of things that I'd personally want to put in, so for me it's a little bit of a work in progress, although it's primarily done. I still want to incorporate a little bit more of the archival material that we came up with and because of these technical problems weren't able to build in just yet.

But that's also a point where I'm very interested in getting feedback in Seattle. We've shown this piece in Berlin to an audience who obviously tended to be more familiar with Berlin. There were people who knew the areas of Berlin that we're showing, and people who had actually lived in that area during the time of the Wall. Obviously in Seattle the situation is a lot different... a lot of people won't even really know why they should be interested in the Berlin Wall in the first place, and also, obviously, the number of people who will be able to understand the German language content is a lot smaller than in Berlin.

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Is the piece subtitled?

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There are no subtitles, there's some content which is purely audio files in German and the future I'd like to interpret those visually in a different way because if I put in English subtitles, then what am I going to do in Korea or Spain, what am I going to do in Tajikistan?

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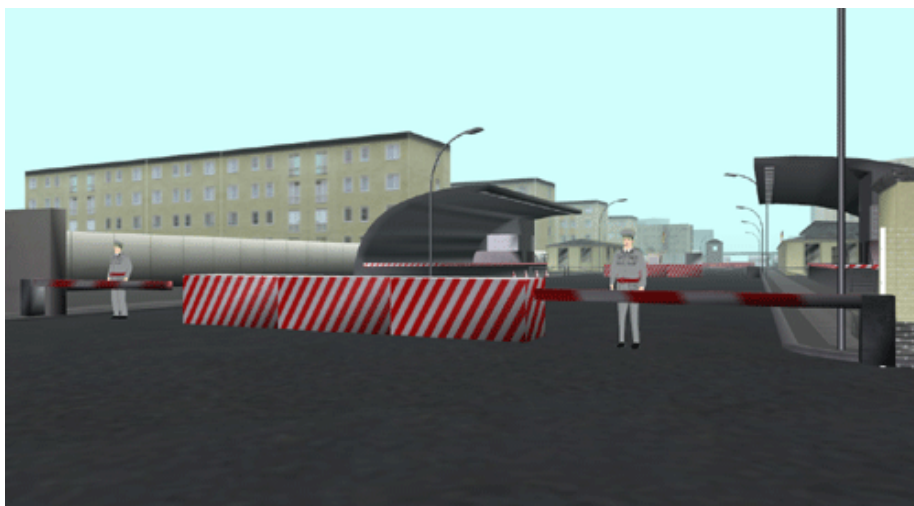
So it would not be worthwhile to simply translate the assets for a multitude of languages?

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All of it!? And who's going to pay for it? (Laughs) How many Tajiki translators do you know, and what do they charge?

*Beyond Manzanar*, for instance, had poems in Farsi, in Japanese, and then there were translations into English. And it was interesting to see the reaction in Japan, obviously the audience there paid more attention to the Japanese than the Farsi or English poems. But you know, how many languages can I put in the piece? How much time and money do I have to do that? So my approach, my hope, is to interpret a lot of the information visually, and also through tone of voice. There's one audio file spoken by a female actress - she's just got this great tone of voice that just makes your blood chill. It's clear to the audience that it's sort of an official police or military or secret service report, and her tone of voice just adds this whole element.

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And I've also been working in multicultural areas since I was two years old. I'm used to the fact that you don't understand everything, and that you have to think and look for yourself. And I guess that's one thing that I do require from my audiences: they're not going to understand everything and they're going to have to think and look for themselves - there's some material that they won't get and some material that they'll think about it, and maybe they'll interpret it in the way I meant it and maybe not - I'm really not sure how the piece will come over for an American audience. That's going to be a learning experience, and I expect to have a lot of criticism - I hope some of it's positive, and I know some of it will be negative. That's also a lot of my feeling of 'a work in progress,' that this is the first time it will be in front of an American audience. And because of that, it's quite likely not to be perfect, it's quite likely to need a bit of work - Seattle is one of my home turfs, and it's also important to me that Misha Neininger, the director of 911, is German but has lived for a long time in the U.S., so he knows both sides also. I'm hoping that by having the U.S. premiere at 911 with Misha there, that there will be some very fruitful discussion and feedback. So in a sense, Seattle is my 'beta test.' Well, that's not quite true - Berlin was the first beta test, and Seattle is the first non-German beta test.

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Where else do you plan to exhibit?

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Well we've got... I can tell you where we already have exhibits lined up. Boston, Washington D.C., Berlin next year, Lübeck, which is a Northern German city, and we're in discussions with a city in Spain, a city in Italy, and a couple of other locations in the U.S. But Boston, Washington, Berlin (again), and Lübeck are confirmed.

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I want to go back to what you were saying about adding more assets in August of next year.

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More like November (laughs). Well, more sort of over time... there's no specific date, there's just things that I'd like to add, and if I can get around to them, I'll add them.

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Do you find this revision process unique in the art world? Like someone exhibits a painting, then they touch it up, or a film is shown and is then recut, or...

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I think it's definitely something that artists very often do. I mean, there's paintings that have developed over 25 years, and have been shown over those 25 years... That's maybe a flexibility that artists can allow themselves that a commercial production doesn't have. You can't tell your customer, "Well it's kind of finished, but I want to add to it over time."

But now, if I'm my own my own boss, then I can say, "Well, this is Version 1 and over time I might develop more."

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So where or when do you think you'll arrive at an endpoint for this project? Do you think you'll constantly be revisiting it?

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Hmmmm, I doubt it... the piece itself does not have an endpoint. Probably at some point I'll just get too busy with other things. And you know, maybe I won't put in anything else at all (Laughs) - that's also a possibility! I'm just talking about a personal feeling of, "Well, did I get everything in that I wanted to get in...?"

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Suppose you had absolutely no budgetary concerns, you can do everything that you want to do, unlimited resources, translators, everything... how would you improve your art to reach other people, or even just be more satisfied with your work as a whole?

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I don't know... I suppose that in the sense of reaching wider audiences, maybe there would be value in putting in more translations... Well, no - scratch that. I'm not convinced that in an artwork that you have to understand everything. I'm not convinced that in any artwork there is anyone who understands everything in that artwork. I mean, I know that my own experiences as an artist I've created things and then had other people find things that I'd never thought about, when they tell me about their experience - I think the wonderful thing about creating artworks is the fact that they contain more than what you consciously put in.

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An artwork doesn't have a single thing that you're supposed to 'get' and that you either get it or you don't get it, and that if you don't get it you've somehow lost... that's not my concept of what art is, or how it works, or how art should be. And so in terms of what I would do if I had unlimited funding, I'd definitely would then want to enlist people who can do things that I can't. I mean, I already do that at some level - I'm not a musician or sound artist, so in all my pieces I've relied on people with more expertise in those areas.

But, you know, there's lots of people who can do things better than me, who can do better 3D than I, better animation, whether 2D or 3D, who can program better than I... So it would be wonderful in the future to be able to work more with other people who have capabilities that I don't have. On the other hand, at some very basic level, I want to keep control of the program structure - the main program and the integration and I do all the programming because I'm the only one who's going to be interested in keeping it working in 50 years. And if I had massive amounts of money, I'd be hiring some poor programmer who'd try to understand my code. (Laughs)

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How many people are currently involved in the creation of *Virtuelle Mauer*?

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Currently? Two. And over the last year, around 35. Currently we have completely run out of money, so the only people currently involved are those who are willing to work for free. (Laughs) That would be myself and Theresa. That's not quite true, we've got a couple of people who do small things for us, as favors, but yeah, we can't pay anyone anymore - we've run out of money!

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Speaking of audiences and trying to reach them, and getting them to experience your work... are you familiar with the new downloadable services? Xbox Live, Playstation Network, things of that nature - would it be possible to ever adapt one of your works so that they could work in these environments? There is an art community surrounding games. Most gamers are playing shooters and platformers and such, but there is interest in artistic works, I don't know if you've heard of Jonathan Blow's *Braid*, which has become sort of the poster child of art games. It sold very well, so there's really an artistic-minded community that could support something like this. So if you have the option of putting it on a console like the Wii or Playstation, would you do that?

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Well, I'd love to do a piece using the Wii... the Wii seems like the one interface that might be more interesting than a joystick. That's another thing where it would be lovely to have gobs of money! And pay someone to redo the interface, that would be wonderful.

With the pieces, there is a large audience, especially among teachers who say, "When can I get this piece on a DVD so I can use it in the classroom?" And we haven't gone that route, partially because at least with the new pieces, the Berlin Wall piece in particular, it barely runs on a machine that I can afford. It's not going to run on most of the machines that most people have, and those that could, it's not the audience I'm interested in. I'm not interested in high-end gamers, but rather a much more broad, general audience.

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**Another point is that I really want to show the piece on a 9×12 projection. If someone's running it on their PC or on their Playstation on a small screen, for me it's another piece altogether - and frankly, everyone who I've ever talked to who's seen it on a small monitor and then as a large projection, what they're constantly telling me, even without my prompting, is that it's like two different pieces.**

**So that is very strongly working against putting it on a games console or distributing it as something that people can use at home, because I want them to have that immersive experience of the large screen.**

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**Is there an element of control there as well? How often are you watching people participate in the art?**

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**Actually not very often - the first couple of days, I try and go in and watch it for several hours to make sure it's working and make sure that there's no bugs and things like that. But you know, when it runs for three months in a country or city I'm not living in, I can't be there, so that's definitely not a part of it... Wanting the users to have an immersive experience, you can call that a control if you want - that's the way I want my artworks to be shown, and every time I've shown it on a monitor I've regretted it. It gets stuck over in a corner, and people go to the show, and say, "I couldn't find your artwork." And that's not what I want - I want people to see it!**

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**So are you at liberty to talk about your funding?**

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**Well, yeah - my funding is now non-existent! (Laughs)**

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**I was wondering. You get grants, I'm assuming...**

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Yeah, what usually happens... I've done three pieces now and two of them took 5 years and this one only took 4 years. On the other hand, like I said, I'm continually working on it because I want to add more content, so in effect all of them take 5 years.

The first three years are spent coming up with the concept, doing background research and writing a lot of grants, and it takes about 3 years before I get some grant that says "Okay." And they'll pay me for maybe half a year, two years of my time, and I will use that to try and get as much of the project done as possible. And, so the first time it was around \$15,000... the second piece over \$40,000, and this one was \$110,000. So that's why we were able to employ 35 people, and that's why we were able to do the piece in a year instead of two years with an immense amount of content. We had 150 façades that we had to process and each façade took 3-4 hours. Sorry if this getting overly techie, that's just what it took in order to create the textures for the buildings that we had. And not all of the buildings, just all of the residential buildings.

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Each project that you've worked on has grown in complexity, would that be a fair assessment?

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Yeah - and I really want to do small. (Laughs) The more complex the project, the more time we spend managing, the more complex your team structure and the more time you spend managing other people instead of doing it yourself, so at this point I would really love to do a three month project that I could do all by myself! That's my dream right now, but I won't be able to get around to it for a while, I'm afraid.

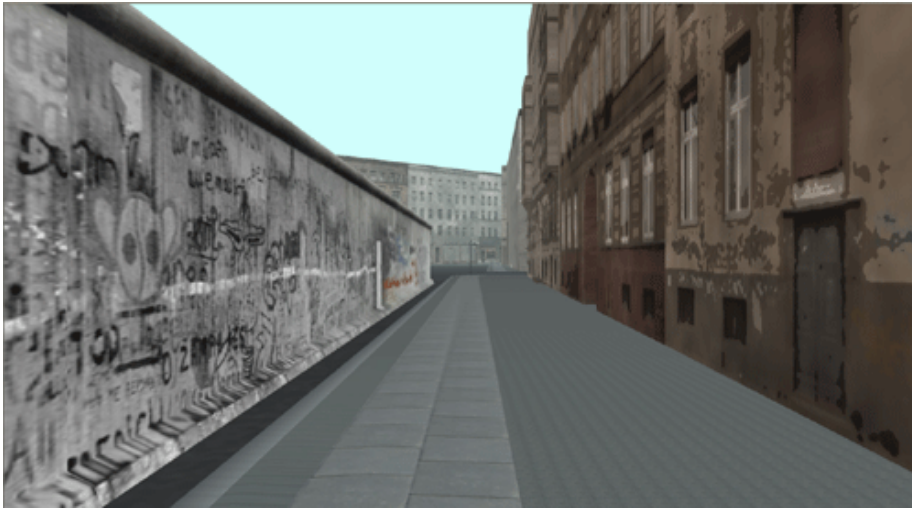
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Do you find that the cost of producing these has gone down over the years?

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Well, that's been counteracted by the increased complexity of the projects - the Berlin Wall was definitely the most complex - not in the sense of the interactive structure that we have, but the amount, the size of the virtual world. I mean it's nothing compared to World of Warcraft - it's tiny. On the other hand, I also don't have half a million dollars and a team of 20 people working for three years - that makes a difference too.

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**It's more like, as the technological capabilities increase, then certainly the size of my textures increase and the complexity of what I try increases. So it doesn't have to be a direct correlation, but I've used these opportunities. Which is also why I think why I would love to do a small, simple project!**

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**So who else has worked in this field? I'm very familiar with games, but in terms of actual VR... is it 'VRTists,' is that the term?**

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**Yeah, people call themselves different things depending on kind of where they come from, and then it also depends a little bit on how you want to break that down.**

**Maybe you know of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, who do 3D work involving artificial lives. They have really beautiful 3D worlds with a lot of behavior, a lot of organic and biological rules - they do really wonderful stuff. And then, Char Davies is also a very well known 3D artist who does incredibly beautiful 3D worlds. She helped start SoftImage and therefore has some pretty good resources - in books, in 3D graphics, and programming - she's done some really amazing pieces. And there's a bunch of other artists... I think those two sets are probably the most well-known people. Bill Viola has come out with an interactive 3D world which was very specifically a project initiated together with the University of Southern California, so there you had a whole department of USC working with him on the project. (Laughs) But those are probably some of the most famous and well-known.**

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**Going back to what you were saying about the pieces being used as pedagogical tools, if were to adapt *Virtuelle Mauer* to a DVD, would you try retain some interactivity (i.e. the menu system), or would you simply allow it to become a passive experience?**

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**That's not quite clear yet - again, the technology is a bit of a problem. *Beyond Manzanar*, which came out in 2000, just now runs on Windows XP machines.**

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Well, you were saying teachers were asking for a DVD of a piece, so if you were to provide merely video footage of the piece... DVDs have a simple menu system which allow for some form of interactivity. Would you be interested in that? You would essentially be adapting your work.

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I mean that's the question - would we give them the full interactive 3D piece or produce something completely different? And this is also sort of an art market question, I sold one of my installations to the San Jose museum, and I'm hoping to sell other installations in the future.

If you can buy it on a \$25 DVD, are you going to be interested in paying thousands of dollars to buy the installation? I know what my answer would be! (Laughs)

So frankly, with the hope of being able to sell the installation and with the technical problems that people are likely to have, our tendency with the Berlin Wall project for instance is to say that we would make a DVD that provides more of a pedagogical treatment of the issue and we would use machinimas of the piece or potentially simplified 3d models with the piece to present more complex material in a more intellectual, pedagogical way. So yeah, that would be more of our tendency right now.

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So going to back to gaming, do you feel games have potential as an artistic medium?

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Oh, definitely.

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Roger Ebert came under fire from a lot of people in the gaming community because he said games were not art - that games required choices of the player, and the author did not have control because players were 'interacting' with storyteller and thus it was not art... People really jumped on him for that.

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(Laughs)

Oh, I know these discussions: "Is it art or not?" It took photography about 100 years to go through that discussion, it took video art actually a lot less time - took only several decades, and now we're going through it with interactive art. So I hope at some point people just stop asking the question, and say well, you know...

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You mean "What type of art is it?" rather than "Is it art?"

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The definition of what art is changes with every artist, also. I'm quite happy with the idea of if the artist says it's art, it's art - and I don't bother spending much time debating the question. (Laughs)



Jordan Mechner's *The Last Express*. Copyright Broderbund, 1997.

How you experienced any games or interactive works of art that have really affected you? Judging from what you've been telling me and reading up on your exhibit, I'm reminded of what Jordan Mechner did with *The Last Express*. The game was a recreation of the Orient Express prior to the outbreak of World War I. All of the characters in the game are drawn in an art nouveau style, and they've meticulously recreated the train, almost down to the last screw. It's almost educational... of course there's a story and intrigue and mystery, and great, eclectic cast of characters... Being a game, it's more narrative centric. I didn't know if you'd played anything that struck a chord. You mentioned *Myst*...

Yeah... I think the three games I've fooled around with a bit and that are, for me, very inspiring are *Myst*, Lara Croft [*Tomb Raider*], and *World of Warcraft*.

I was also very involved in the online multi-user world a long time from 1994 till basically 2002 when Black Sun had crashed. But that whole experience with Worlds, Inc. and Black Sun essentially doing the same things that Second Life is doing now. There's another one called *Deuxième Monde (Second World)*, that we would also run around in a lot. I've spent a lot of time in online worlds. Not so much in *Second Life* in the last year, because I've had no time, but that's essentially where I come from, where I 'grew up,' so to speak.

And then, right now, I'm looking at graphic novels, and anime also, because I'm interested in 2D space again, and how you can deal with space in two dimensions in a way that is difficult in 3-4 dimensions.

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Have you read Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*?

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Oh yeah, that was one of the must-reads at Worlds, Incorporated when we started. He's really terrific. He's wouldn't like hearing this, but he's definitely the 'Grand Old Man' of the field. And also from childhood I've been a fan of Frank Frazetta. I thought for a long time that I wanted to grow up to and be Frank Frazetta, and how he creates this world of his own.

And also, medieval art - the kind of weird narrative structures you have in medieval art, where you have all sorts of different parts of the story in one painting or in a series of panels, or in Japanese and Chinese scrolls. They're almost more like films except that you unroll them yourself instead of having them unrolled for you.

In terms of gaming, there's a lot going on out there and I should try and find more connections to the gaming community. As I was saying, in the more academic circles where I've encountered more people who are sort of game researchers, a lot of their interests have been elsewhere. For instance, developing realistic characters, which is not an interest of mine at all.

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Interest in lifelike depictions... in terms of artificial intelligence, or 3d modeling, or both?

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I'm interested in AI in terms of the behavior, but when I started thinking in terms of virtual worlds having a dramatic structure, all of the theory that I could find, on theatre or dramatic structure in any way, was focused on characters.

They were saying, "Well, you have to have a believable character - if you don't have a believable character you can't have drama." My counter to that is always, well, anyone who's climbed a mountain has experienced drama without having a character. Anyone who's sat on a beach and watched the sun set has experienced drama without having a character. And lots of times, you'll have some character saying, "Oh, look at this beautiful sunset!" It's like, shut up! You know? (Laughs) The character doesn't necessarily add to it. You can have an encounter with space that is truly dramatic and truly mind-boggling and that's what I wanted to learn. In teaching myself, I ended up having to go to a book on music theory, actually, by Leonard B. Meyer, called *Emotion and Meaning in Music* where he talked about how music can create emotional meaning without references to real-life. And that, plus my father's work on architectural spaces... Those two elements are what really gave me the theoretical structure to think in terms of dramatic structure and using encounters with space, separate from using encounters with characters.

The Berlin Wall piece has characters, because I felt like if you leave the border guards out, then you're missing a vital element of the Berlin Wall. Because when the Berlin Wall fell, as soon as people knew that the border guards wouldn't shoot, all of a sudden the whole thing had lost its meaning, the whole thing was harmless. So it was really only the threat of these people with guns that turned the Berlin Wall into what it was. So I thought, "Okay, the Berlin Wall piece has to have characters, and those characters have to, in some way, convey this

regime is willing to shoot in order to keep people from crossing that border.” But that, for me, is very different from saying, “Okay, if you don’t have a character who talks to you, then you can’t have drama.” That’s a completely different point.

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The art style of the characters themselves seems to be fairly representational.

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Part of that is technology - I don’t have the skills to make 3D characters myself, but we were working with this company in Berlin, Lunatic Interactive, and they were developing these characters. So I was looking at what they could do, and there’s all these games that have life-like characters or convincing characters that are wonderfully animated and detailed, with floating capes and flowing hair and God knows what else, but we didn’t have those resources. And characters, as I said, are not the main point of the Berlin Wall piece. They’re part of the scenery, if you will. (Laughs) So there, we took a conscious decision to flatten out and reduce/abstract the characters ala Scott McCloud in order to show these are symbols of characters rather than characters themselves, and that the content of the piece is not these people, it’s the space. The people are devices that illuminate or animate the space in certain ways, but the focus is not on the characters, it’s on the space.

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And you might also risk the audience members falling into the ‘Uncanny Valley’ where the models are literally rendered creepy in efforts to make them more lifelike.

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That was also the reason for simplifying them, to get away from the Uncanny Valley.

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Does this project have any personal connection with you? I understand you grew up in Seattle - what was your personal experience with the Berlin Wall?

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Well I had grown up essentially Japanese-American. My mother's Japanese-American, a true blood, and my father, we said, was American. That meant he was a European American, and what he really was, was German-American, but third generation. So he essentially knew no German, had never been in Germany, didn't want to go, (Laughs) was not interested in Germany, etc. But at some point as I was getting older and started wanting to become an artist, the German arts scene in the early 80's became very interesting - the so-called 'Young Wilds' started painting figuratively at a time when anyone who painted figuratively was considered to be behind the times by a couple of decades. And then it was very much the so-called Young Wilds in Germany who brought the figure back into painting.

That was right at the point where I wanted to leave the engineering world and enter the art world, and so I ended up moving to Germany. And it was also a feeling like... I know Japan a little, I know America a little, but how about the rest of world?

And that was something in the 80's, the Cold War still raging, the Berlin Wall dividing Germany - it was a symbol of a divided world, into the West Bloc and the East Bloc. Everything sort of came together. I thought, well, I want to move to a foreign country, I want to study art, I want to know more about the world, and it all came together in Germany. And the Berlin Wall, of course, was the symbol of that - it was the primary political structure at the time.

I ended up moving to Munich instead of Berlin for various reasons, but in 1988 I met Teresa Reuter, who, along with my now-husband, had friends in East Germany. So we visited going through West Berlin to East Berlin, and sat up late night drinking bad red wine and talking. "Well," we asked, "will you be able to come visit us in the West?" "Well," they said, "probably not."

So that was '88 and then it became '89 when the entire world seemed to be changing, and every week I woke up and said, "Okay, what country is falling this week?" And, the powers were coming down one after another. I think that year will remain one of the most amazing times I've lived through, because the world changed within one year.

And, you know, the Berlin Wall was only one of those changes, but it was a change that was incredibly symbolic for the entire West & East conflict. And then, several years later in 1996, I was with my sister, who'd studied history at Yale, and knew the whole history of Germany, and divided Berlin and East and West Bloc and everything like that, and we were searching for a piece of the Wall - she'd never seen it before. And we finally found a piece - it was all chipped up and covered with ivy. It was only a segment and her first, spontaneous reaction was, "You know, it really wasn't that tall." And that's really, for me, the moment when I realized... Historic preservationists can say what they want about preserving natural pieces, but the actual pieces don't necessarily convey what the thing was about.

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As you were saying earlier, as soon as the border guards were gone and they wouldn't shoot people, the Wall ceased to exist in a sense.

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**Right! The guards were still there for probably another couple years, but on that evening of November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989, as soon as the East Berliners realized they weren't going to shoot, they just walked right over. They said, "Come on, step aside, we're going to go over. Your bosses said it's okay, we're gonna go. Just leave us alone, don't stop us." And that was, you know, it was a revolution. It was a revolution that just came because someone said "Well, yeah, it's probably open." And everyone just walked right over.**

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**Is this moment depicted in your piece?**

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**No, because there's so much already. I mean, most of the stuff that's done on the Wall is about that. And we thought, well, there's plenty of people who've covered it. And you know, the video footage, the film footage, it's all so moving - there's no way you can compete with that and there's no reason why you should compete with that. That was reality, and it was a reality that was more fantastical than any art piece I could ever make.**

**So, we very specifically said, "Our piece is not about the fall." It's about what it was like when it was still there, and what it was like when it was still a threat.**

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**So what do you hope that visitors to 911 Media will take away from experiencing your work?**

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**I hope they'll take away a curiosity, to find out more about the situation and more about what was going on, how the situation got that way in the first place, and also think about the Walls that are going up, or exist in other parts of the world. Why are they there, and what does it mean about the people on both sides of it?**

**Each Wall means something different, but each Wall does mean there's some intractable situation between the government on one side and the government on the other. Or the structure on one side and the structure on the other. And that says nothing about blame,**

who's to blame for it - like I said, in each situation, it's different. But it is an expression of intractability, and of a government system that then produces an intractable situation for just normal people who have to live and deal with it. And you know, it's usually not about the people themselves who actually live there, it's about the systems that are on opposing sides of that fence.

So that's what I hope that people will take away, more than anything else. I don't really care if they can then recite what happened on which street in which year... just curiosity about why systems build Walls... and what would it mean to a society that's divided by them.

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