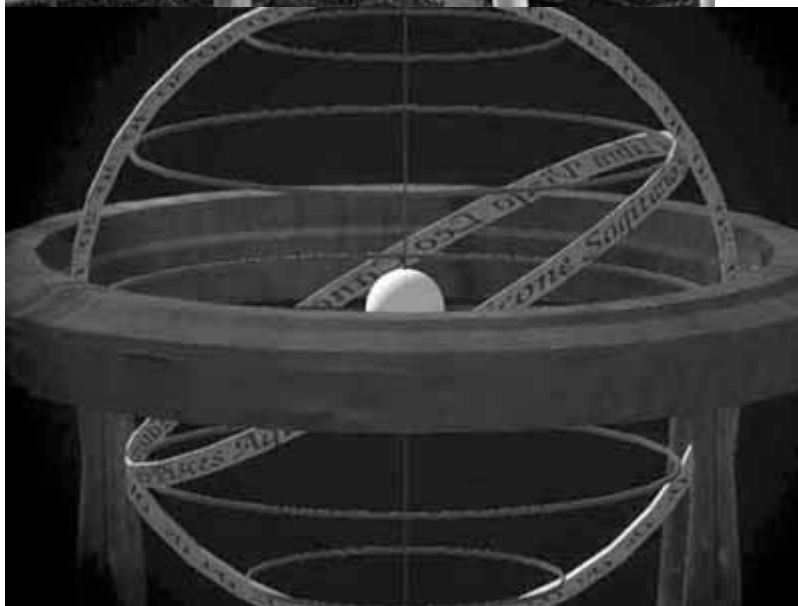


**Maria Roussos/Hisham Bizri**  
**Mitologies**



"Ptolemy's terrestrial globe in the geography room of the Mitologies virtual labyrinth"

**Introduction**

Mitologies is an interactive virtual reality artwork which attempts to utilize the virtual reality medium as a means of artistic expression for the exploration of historical, political, musical, and visual narratives. The thematic content of Mitologies draws inspiration from medieval and contemporary literary endeavors by capturing their intertwining relationships. The work is loosely based on the Cretan myth of the Minotaur, the *Apocalypse*, or Revelation, of St. John, Dante's *Inferno*, Dürer's woodcuts after the *Apocalypse*, and Borges' *Library of Babel*. Music from Wagner's *Der Ring der Nibelungen* is used as a motif to structure the narrative. The enigmatic relationships between these sources are captured in a *mise-en-scène* that is rooted in the illusionistic narrative tradition of other media, such as film and literature.

Mitologies is the culmination of an extensive body of work, both as an art project and as a software design prototype created for the CAVE virtual reality system.

### **The Virtual Experience**

The word Mitologies derives from the Greek word "mitos," the thread Ariadne granted Theseus to help him find his way out of the Cretan labyrinth. The viewer in Mitologies re-experiences, allegorically, the journey of Theseus, but also that of another historical and literary figure, Dante Alighieri. The narrative is introduced in a storytelling fashion, a structure largely unknown to virtual reality worlds, but familiar in other media, such as film and literature.

As the narrative proceeds, the integration/interaction of long navigation, blurred hallucinatory landscapes and foggy passageways, accelerated and decelerated motion, sudden shifts from color to black and white, eerie Wagnerian music, bizarre and distorted decor, labyrinthine structures and parabolic style, temporal pressure and spatial discontinuities, engage the viewer in a kind of "action" plot, dramatize the journey, and fuse the overall narrative with a dream-like feel.

The audience entering the CAVE is initially located on the bank of a river, in a dark forest, an allusion to Dante's sinful forest. From a distance, the viewer hears the creaking sounds of a wooden boat and the subtle sound of water washing against the river banks. The boat slowly appears, led by a statue: a model of Donatello's Zuccone. Can this be Virgil accompanying Dante into Inferno? As the boat approaches the shore, the viewer is swiftly transported onto it and the journey down the river begins. In the physical space of the CAVE, two benches are placed in a configuration that corresponds to the virtual seats of the boat. Hence, the illusion of traveling in the boat is realistic, as the viewers look down at the floor of the CAVE and see the virtual boat swaying beneath their feet.

The intention of this opening scene is to establish an explicit sense of a story line narrative. The slow and smooth flow of this introductory sequence is lethargic and meditative, setting the pace the work seeks to accomplish throughout. The opening river motif from Richard Wagner's opera *Das Rheingold*, used for the river scene, contributes to the impending sense of danger and heightens the expectation of the unknown yet to come. Upon closer examination of the visual and auditory metaphors, the participants may begin to recognize the elements and start drawing the connections that will guide their exploration later on. The river scene eventually fades out while the next scene, that of a brighter and more ethereal space, fades in. The transition is aided by the sound which serves as a structural motif for the unfolding narrative. Once in this space, the viewer has disembarked from the boat and can now start using the interface device, the 3D wand, to continue the journey by navigating across a large plain. Far in the distance, a magnificent church, surrounded by horticultural maze gardens, appears. This grand cathedral is modeled after a Leonardo da Vinci sketch of a church that was never built. The viewer has the opportunity to travel up high and around the intricately detailed brick domes and examine da Vinci's magnificent architectural vision.

As the doors of the church slowly open, the interior reveals the elaborate space of a model of the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain. The sound motif from Wagner's *Ring* intensifies the sense of elevation and progression from one space to the other. The viewer has the freedom to travel inside the realistic representation of the mosque at a low level, to almost feel the carpets, or fly high up over its arches. As with the church, the textiles and ornamental details of the interior of the mosque are drawn from a variety of sources related to the model, the

period, and the thematic content, but also adapted to the unfolding of the narrative. The progression is intensified further when the darker and more ornamental spaces of the mosque become the entrance to the even darker and mysterious labyrinth underneath.

In *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid notes that Daedalus built a house in which he confused the usual passages and deceived the eye with a conflicting maze of various wandering paths.

In *Mitologies*, a myriad strange, dark, and misleading passages are constructed to create a labyrinth reminiscent of the labyrinth built by Daedalus. The labyrinth is a web, or rhizome: every path is connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, and no exit because it is a potential infinite. As the viewers proceed through the maze, they find themselves on paths that lead to medieval curiosity rooms, rooms based on Dürer's woodcuts of the Apocalypse, rooms populated by statues and icons, or rooms that require from the viewer to make the right choices in order to proceed.

Each of the woodcut rooms brings to life, in 3D, one of seven Apocalyptic woodcuts by Dürer selected for this work. The first room encountered presents the Seven Trumpets woodcut room, in which the Book with the Seven Seals rapidly unfolds on a scroll, while the loud trumpet sounds from Wagner's *Das Rheingold* are juxtaposed; in the Apocalyptic Woman room, a female voice from *Die Walküre* follows a woman's torso as water starts to rise, eventually flooding the room; the Four Horsemen room translates the horror of the most famous and ever popular sheet of Dürer's Apocalypse with the violent motion of the horsemen, as the four-colored walls close in on the viewer; in the Opening of the 5th & 6th Seal room, multiple semi-transparent layers illustrating the lower part of the woodcut rise from the ground like blades; the Torture of St. John, the most unusual of Dürer's woodcuts that is not part of the Apocalypse narratives, is realized with a modern interpretation of torture in the four cross-like spaces of the room; finally, the woodcut room of St. Michael Fighting the Dragon, one of the last in the series of woodcut rooms, is presented with words from the Book of Daniel.

Other rooms in the labyrinth attempt to capture the mystery and beauty of the popular medieval curiosity rooms. The Metaphysics/Astronomy room invites the viewer to gaze at the Sistine Chapel paintings of hell through the eyepiece of a large telescope; in the Music room, the viewer can play one of four instruments and browse through the score sheets. The Insects, Geography, and Alchemy rooms resemble damp study rooms where knowledge is classified through elaborate taxonomies. In the first of these rooms, tables of insects are adapted from medieval entomology books. The Geography room displays the beauty and accuracy of medieval cartography through the numerous examples of maps, including a central terrestrial globe model representing the fundamentals of Ptolemy's geographical system. The third-mentioned room, the room of Alchemy, is saturated with the ten words of God mentioned in the Cabbala.

Each of the rooms in the labyrinth involved careful research for the artistic content as well as the historical and political contexts they represent. The virtual implementation, however, does not attempt to perfectly recreate, interpret, or realize the contexts of these rooms, but to capture their emotional essence. The constructions of the rooms include a complex web of metaphors and signs. The path from one room to the other may be linear, circular, or truly labyrinthine, depending on the viewer's choices. When the last room of the labyrinth is finally reached, the viewer's tedious journey concludes. The shape of this room resembles a figure six or the shell of a snail, as do the two rooms that proceed it. The viewer enters at the narrow tip of the room and circles around it until the center is reached, where the encounter with the

minotaur himself takes place. The representation of the minotaur seated in his magnificent temple is based on Cesare Ripa's death metaphor from *Iconologia*: "The same fate awaits all; we hasten toward a common goal, black Death, who claims all under his power."

While the viewers will surely attempt to approach the minotaur, a hidden crypt opens under their feet enabling them to escape from the labyrinth. Once again, as with the beginning sequence, navigation is disabled and the viewer is dragged down into a tidal pool, while the sound excerpt from *Das Rheingold* reaches a climax. Enmeshed in a maddening spiral, where voices and sounds swirl down along with them, the virtual reality viewers have finally landed back on the boat on which the journey started out from. Only now, Donatello's statue is no longer standing on the bow of the boat. Instead, a few scattered feather remnants, symbols of daedalian wings that led to the escape, have replaced the monumental figure. The voice and sound motifs have also halted with only the creaking sounds of the boat breaking the silence. The narrative, that of a labyrinth but also a labyrinth in itself, has completed its cycle.

## **Conclusion**

The *Mitologies* project may be considered an experiment with the state-of-the-art in technology, as well as an attempt to approach the twentieth century world through cultural glimpses of the past and from a perspective other than the technology it has been created with. Although it is left up to the viewer to synthesize the historical, literary, or mythological material into contemporary relevance, it is still the focus of this work to create an alternative to the usual fast-paced, choice-driven synthetic worlds and make a profound and lasting impact within virtual reality and technologically-based art in general.

## Acknowledgements

*Mitologies* was created by a multi-disciplinary group of artists and scientists at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Electronic Visualization Laboratory. The group members include Joe Alexander, Hisham Bizri, Alan Cruz, Tomoko Imai, Alan Millman, Dave Pape, and Maria Roussos. An extensive collection of resources, images, and text about *Mitologies* can be found at: <http://www.ev1.uic.edu/mariar/MFA/MITOLOGIES>.