INTERVIEW WITH JAMES PRICER

We're excited to feature some unique works by James Pricer. To mark the inclusion of his works in the Klio collection, we interviewed James including our first ever audio podcast.

James is a unique artist at the forefront of the emerging "Computational Art" movement, which in some ways is a reboot of the Computer Art movement that emerged from the mainframe era when there was a palpable relationship between data and aesthetic because we had to enter the era of photo-real CGI.

James has created 3 works especially for Klio based on data obtained from the Large Hadron Collider. We interviewed James about his approach to art and about these works in particular. The audio podcast goes into more depth and some of the more fundamental ideas conveyed in James's work.

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Computational Art - An Interview with James Pricer (Better quality) Share

Tell me about your background:

> I have worked as a Data Architect, Data Miner, and Data Scientist. My job was to invent pattern recognition data architectures and algorithms.

What kinds of data have you analyzed?

> I have analyzed human behavior in all its forms, from shopping habits to terrorists communication. I've looked for patterns in theft, market baskets, web activity, and many others.

How did you go from being a data guy to an artist?

> In a sense, I have always been an artist because the requirements of my consulting work required art as well as science. There is even talk these days of the role of Data Artists within companies.

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> Part of art is to look at the world in new ways and bring a vision to life. Finding patterns in vast amounts of data also requires a vision, so it's a similar process. Most of my patented work in industry involved inventing data mining methods that provided the technical infrastructure for a customer to actually change how their industry works, thereby allowing them to become market leaders and industry visionaries. This inventing process is more art than science in imagining a future industry.

Your art is actually a representation of real data, right? It's not generative or algorithmic per se. It's a kind of "Visualization as art" – is that a good characterization?

> Well, I guess I would say 'data as art'. Even though I do use generative techniques and algorithms, mostly I used the data to drive the aesthetic. The data determines such things as colors, color juxtapositions, shapes, shapes locations on the screen, and the camera angles from which the viewer sees the work. I am not constructing these. I leave it to the data.

What are you looking for in data that you might turn into art?

> I am looking for two very different things. The first I call reverse engineered dreams. In the past I would solve problems or take advantage of a business opportunity by dreams that would have colors, shapes, and locations. The data architecture and algorithms would somehow flow from these visions. I am now reversing this process and allowing the data to form the colors and shapes of a dream that becomes a vision. When the visualization comes close to matching a prior dream, then I know that the artwork has arrived. This is why I call it reverse engineering of dreams. The second thing I am looking for is the sentience of data. For me, data has a way of 'talking' to me about the world it represents. I am trying visualize for others the sentience that I see and feel in the data.

Mention your tools. I know there are a lot of steps and complexities to go from raw data to an aesthetic.

> My tools are the source data, then data mining before I take the data into Processing. That's where the dreams are reverse-engineered before I take the visualizations into After Effects and a few other post-processing tools.

When you start to view the data, is the aesthetic process emergent or do you have a strong mental image of how it might look?

> Just like Gerhard Richter talks about, I am amazed at the colors and shapes I see when I first start running the data through a few simple algorithms to start the process. I am reminded of Gerhard Richter's process of layering paint. Like Richter, I am always surprised by what is revealed in colors and shapes within the data.

What attracted you to the CERN data?

> CERN is a place where questions about nature and matter are being addressed at a very fundamental level where answers about our origins lies within the data. This goes back to the sentience of data. In my view, CERN is trying to be a place where art and science meet and interact, so naturally I was attracted to the data coming from the Large Hadron Collider (LHC).

Tell me something about the data? What is it? What does it represent – physically?

> It's the output of the collisions of protons by the LHC. These particles are collided at almost the speed of light, creating 600 million particles a second, producing 30 petabytes of data. The data is the mathematical attributes of the particles that get created, such as muons and, of course, the Higgs boson.

What does it represent, metaphorically?

> For me, the data is a metaphor for the essence of being. Both CERN scientists and data artists are attempting to reveal the essence of what it means to be human. I wanted to bring that adventure to another audience via the aesthetics of the data.

Do you find yourself iterating a lot with the data before you settle on a final form?

> Yes. Way too much iteration. This is why I am beginning to build a layer of AI in my process to do some of the upfront iterations. I can train the AI to do what I would do initially, then spend more time on the final abstraction.

Getting to the specific Klio works. One of my favorites is Kaleidoscope. What inspired this approach to the data?

> The physical design of the LHC reminds me of kaleidoscopes. Also, the CERN scientists are looking at the origins of the universe. I wanted the imagery of the Big Bang, the engines that shoot the photons, and the particles emitting from the bang to represent the data that drove this art.

What inspired the 'Dreams' aesthetic?

> The Dreams of the Creator is a good example of how I play with order and chaos, back to order, sometimes back to chaos. As the particles are being created by the collision of the photons they instantly start to decay. What you see is the creation, the decaying, and the superimposed dreams of the original creation where you glimpse the underlying engines and order.

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