

Psychedelics and the Creation of Virtual Reality

Excerpted from an interview with Mark Pesce at the 1999 AllChemical Arts conference

MAPS: How have psychedelics affected your creative process?

Mark Pesce: I'm not sure that I'd be doing *any* of the work that I'm doing now. I don't know. I think I'd probably be some silly software engineer working in New England, unenlightened and bored with life, without psychedelics. I can almost guarantee that. My use of psychedelics and my intellectual career essentially began synonymously somewhere in the first or second year of college. And so there was an opening up that came from the psychedelic experience, which resulted in my becoming attracted to certain types of ideas...certain types of research. It's not that it established the agenda, but it gave me a magnetic center—that's what the Gurdjieffians would call it. But a sense of self that is very particular. And from that, what I had to do was just follow where that center would take me, and listen to it. And the times in my life when I've gotten fucked up are the times when I haven't done that. By the time I got a little bit older, I was into what Joseph Campbell would call "following your bliss." Well, my bliss was *revealed* through the psychedelic experience. It wasn't *achieved* through the psychedelic experience, but it was revealed through the psychedelic experience. Now, I won't make any attributions to what the divine is, but if psychedelics *reveal* the divine, or allow you to eminentize it, to see it physically, or this sort of thing, wouldn't it make sense for that moment to be synonymous with the moment of revealing of what your bliss is? I mean it would be sort of silly for a divine being to show itself, and to not show you what *you* are. That would only be a half revelation, because beholding the divine also means beholding the divine in yourself, and that's part of what you are—what you're doing, why



MAPS: Do you ever use psychedelics for problem-solving tasks? Where you have a specific question in mind, and then you take psychedelics in search of an answer?

Mark: They've certainly been facilitators or catalysts for that. The most striking example is all the cyberspace protocols that came to me. I mean "wham," it came to me like that, and I just saw them. I got the big picture, but the big picture said, "Okay, well you know roughly how to make it work. Now you have to go in and do the detail, right?" I spent three years doing that detail work, and out of that detail work came VMRL, and some stuff which you'll probably still see in a couple of years. So in that case it was very direct... I've done a bunch of research work on the ethics and the effects of virtual environments. And that also was catalyzed specifically in a psychedelic experience. You know, it was like "snap." It's a moment of clarity. Not like the same AA moment of clarity, right? But it's a moment of clarity, you see it. Just because you see it, doesn't mean that you're immediately able to talk about it. I spent six months with that, and managed to sort of piece it together, and say, "Okay, well I've got this great tapestry up there. All right, I think I see a relationship within the elements, let me spend some time with it and get it codified into something that's visibly solid in feel."

MAPS: It seems to me that one of the things that you are getting at is the idea of *working with* the inspirations. I know that there are a lot of people who take psychedelics and have inspiring thoughts, or get into an inspiring realm, and then come out of that and then they're just looking for their next trip, where they enter into that

anything with it. So how do you bring it back? What is it? Is it just *so* inspiring that it causes you—when you are straight—to think, “Yeah, I gotta get to work on this!”

Mark: I know that there are people who just go right back to that space, but I think that if you go right back to that space you’re just going to be in the same space again. But with the same question. And where’s that going to get you? In the cases that I’m talking about, the vision doesn’t fade for a second, right. It’s still there. It’s still as tangible as it was the moment it came. It’s not psychedelic. It’s not possessed with that same eminence, but it’s still as present. I could ignore it, I suppose, although I’ve never done that and I wouldn’t really want to know how it felt, because I think that I would feel enormously frustrated inside—that I’d gotten this thing and I wasn’t doing anything with it.

In particular with all this stuff that’s become VRML, and all that. I didn’t get all the details. I got the chunks. And part of that is, you know, I get the chunks, and it’s software. Well, I’ll just go work on it. You know. And I’ll turn it up. And I’ll sit and I’ll think on it, and think on it, and think on it, talk it out with other people. I mean after I did that, I actually talked it out with other people while we were

tripping. And this is a case of specific usage. I’d go back into the space and take a look at specific parts of it again. And, the funny thing is I’d be very methodical and rational—which is not my normal mode of experience. Normally I’m just “experiential.” But in these cases I was very methodical.

MAPS: While you were tripping?

Mark: Yes! And I had to go back to the person I was working with, who was my partner in the endeavor when we were doing it. He understood that, and came right into the space with me, and we were methodical. We were giggly and all that stuff, but we were methodical about it. And so we were able to really say, “Okay, well here’s this block right here. Okay, let’s take that block and go from one side of the block to the other side of the block.” And we did. We did this on a number of occasions over about a month period. And managed to take everything that I had gotten and *really* get it out.

MAPS: What particular compounds were you working with?

Mark: That was LSD, I think entirely. There were some mushrooms at the beginning, but I think that at that time it was entirely LSD. •

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Mark Pesce (www.hyperreal.org/~mpesce) co-invented Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML) in 1994. He is the author of a new