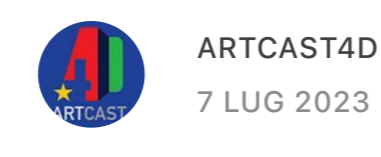


# From Mainframes to AAASeed

The Maa Berriet Interview, Part II



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Maa Berriet

**The Battleground:** Tell us about [AAASeed](#). From a layman's perspective, is it analogous to something like Max MSP, or is it closer to Adobe Illustrator?

**Maa:** The closest software is [Touch Designer](#); it comes from game culture, like Unity and Unreal Engine.

Max MSP is really oriented towards sound process and music. Then Jitter was added to handle visuals.

AAASeed is a little bit the reverse. It's more like starting with Jitter. And saying, OK, the sound is read by other people. I will not compete on this.

**The Battleground:** Right. You're visual, not sound.

**Maa:** I try to explain that all the time to people at conferences. One of my main things is the concept of "plug-in, plug-out". You have plug-ins for Photoshop. I want Photoshop to be a plug-in. And there is no provision to do that.

So long-term, the ideal thing is to have different tools which talk to each other and the output of one is the input of the other one: plug in, plug out. And that's, I think, in the long term, how the direction toward the production paths will evolve

**The Battleground:** What got you started doing this kind of work?

**Maa:** My first shot at computers was a huge mainframe with sixteen mechanical switches and a red button on the front panel. I started on punch cards. And so I tried. Week after week, I learned for fun.

My first program was graphic, and it never worked. But I really liked computers from the start because it's something which fits me.

The second very important thing I have is my parents. My father, Yann Berriet, was a pioneer of slide projections. I realize later the influence.

**The Battleground:** Wow.

**Maa:** When my father started, there was nearly no way to do multi-projection with slide projectors. There was no machine, nothing

Instead of putting the images side by side, one image covered part of another image, which is pretty interesting

You put the sound on one track. On the other track, you put bumps to trigger a small machine that could read a teletype where you could have eight holes.

My mother was also a photographer and graphic designer, and my father would talk to me about Marshall McLuhan.

In the late 1970s - early 1980s, a cousin, Sylvain Aubin, locked himself in a student room on the top floor of a Paris building for two years and made some electronics that led to the Manoline (*musical camera*).

This machine was really crude. But you could control sound and music using a camera

**The Battleground:** That's brilliant.

**Maa:** One afternoon, I spent, I don't know, two hours in his apartment trying to figure out how to use it. I was triggering it and changing sitar sounds.

Then, after three hours, I went to buy cigarettes. I walked into the street, and I have this strange feeling, what you call a sentiment d'étrangeté.

And in fact, it was coming from the fact that I was not making any more sound when I was moving. Because I had been making sounds continuously. It was following all my movements and so on.

I realized that if, in three hours, my brain can get used to this, it means that if the interface is adapted and real-time, it makes the process natural. It's a symbiosis between machines and animals and humans.

I recognized the power of this interaction. It made me want to work on the interactive part of this.

**The Battleground:** So, to return to today, you design 2D and 3D immersive experiences, and you create remarkable prints that are incredibly detailed and clearly linked to your video work.

It's unusual to find an artist who is equally comfortable doing both kinds of work. How do you account for that?

**Maa:** It's just a matter of speed of execution, but it's still the same thing. You build and interact with the process.

What I would like to do at some point is to transform the processes that I used doing these "drawing" sessions to make a real-time installation.

You bring your hands inside, and just by moving them, you can explore the possibilities of the graphic process.

I want people to be able to explore space just by moving their hands

**The Battleground:** Sure, by making the drawing process an immersive experience.

**Maa:** I would have to rework the thing because of the way it was produced. To be flexible, it's not so fast. Before I plot, I only have an idea of what I'm doing.

So it's basically the same thing, except that there is a physical part at the end.

I was a technician at the beginning. And I think in France, where I grew up, there is a big separation between techniques and art.

For example, when you go to an engineering school, you don't have any courses in art history. This is totally crazy.

But as an engineer, I think the boundary between engineer and artist is a matter of what you play. There are a lot of intersections in all of this.

I wanted to study movies and make movies. But I had no clear will or message.

And also, I didn't have the means. My family was not in a good situation. I had to work early.

So I said, OK, I don't know exactly what I want to say. But I wanted to play with the process first.

Becoming an artist, I learned a lot from my wife. She's a painter. I saw the kind of drive it required.

And I'm more of a practitioner. I like to play with digital materials the same way you play with physical media.

I was trained as an engineer in electronics and mechanics. I always wanted to make images with computers.

When I was in the US working on games from 1993 to 1995, I became an advanced graphic programmer.

So, when I came back to France, I was asked to do VR and interactive installations

I start to grow all of this from the tools I had and extend it slowly. At some point, I realized that this had to be pursued more.

And I started a company where the goal was to, more or less, the business plan of Unity software twenty years ago. It was like I was a seed.

That's a time when I was explaining to people that I wanted to sell software for \$4.99.

It was before the app, before the smartphone, so people thought that was crazy.

**The Battleground:** Tell us a bit about the Epidemik project that you worked on.

**Maa:** Epidemik was a competitive bet for the science museum of Paris.

We started to think about what we could do to make people experience what an epidemic is.

Let's say that Epidemik is like a giant multi-touch tablet that you can play with. But you're inside it.

Epidemik was four games of 15-20 minutes with different scenarios. The instructions were given by the sound and the virtual screen.

Everybody entered a 32-meter by 16-meter area and was given an avatar and identity, which was just a circle with a number and some information about your state.

We gamified the thing because when people start to play, they get involved, and then you can start to give them content to understand and feel what an epidemic is, how you transmit it, and how to protect yourself from it.

And this was done in 2008...

**The Battleground:** How does this lead you back to Artcast4D and your AAASeed software?

**Maa:** I told you about how I wanted to make tools.

After kind of failing at my company, I went on to produce plenty of different things like Epidemik and Aquarium of Monaco, one by one. And I realized that my software is very stable.

When you are working live on TV or in theatre, you can't fail. The thing has to run all the time.

I started to look at the other software and realized that there are things missing in them.

One of the big differences is that we added this very light scripting language, Lua, from the University of Rio.

This transforms very static, C++, hardcore, old-school software into jelly. It made it so flexible. And this totally changed the way we produce and work.

The main thing when you work for yourself, on a certain type of production, is the ability to explore design incrementally.

Take a big installation like Epidemik where you have a dozen PCs and plenty of people interacting. You can't change what's happening on the fly.

You don't need to stop all the stuff where I go to C++, compile, rebuild the whole applications, relaunch it, and say to people, "Okay, you can test it again."

And you can change it on the fly without them knowing.

Alternatively, the logic of the process using the scripts is something quite precious that most of the solutions don't have.

The other solutions are more oriented towards graphic programming - what we call a data flow interface.

So I'm more, I would say, agnostic. I didn't choose my camp.

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