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A globally dispersed alliance of musicians and artists unites under the name Quantum Natives to create new worlds of mutant electronic music and interactive online portals. Rory Gibb talks to Awe IX, Rosen, Brood Ma, recsund and more. Illustrations by Julien Simshäuser.

“HCVNT DRACONES” flashes a warning as the Quantum Natives website launches. Moments later you’re gazing down on a bruised far future world, pockmarked by industrial structures and symbols of insects, masked faces and half-remembered video game and corporate motifs. As you navigate its Google Earth-style interface, clicking these glyphs opens audiovisual rabbit holes to unexpected treasures: 3D net art galleries populated by abstract digital collages, hallucinatory films seething with chromatic information, playable adventure games, free album downloads of entrancing music. This surreal map-world is the portal to the hydraheaded work of London born label and collective Quantum Natives, who since 2013 have brought electronic music into freeflowing dialogue with literature, visual art, film and 3D animation. Each new release adds new hyperlinks, visually mirroring their expanding world of sound, from the psychedelic samplecraft and rave noise of co-founders Awe IX (Ornine/Yearning Kru) and James Stringer (Brood Ma) into adventures in digital noise and idiosyncratic electronics from a global collective of artists. Like most things in the Quantum Natives universe, the map encodes other meanings. Its permeable
geography is a riposte to the corporate lockdown of digital freedoms; subverting the airless user experience of Google Maps, users are encouraged to lose themselves inside an anarchic evolving world. “It doesn’t offer anything as a preference – there’s no reason why you would go up, down, left or right,” as Awe IX puts it. “It’s a lateral way of presenting information, it tries to get rid of the hierarchy that’s always there when you have a list of things displayed on a screen.”

Equally, the label’s loose network of collaborations and multiple pseudonyms suggest a shared desire for openended exploration – a low-key, collectivist mindset that contrasts with the current auteurs-centric climate of electronic and dance music. You feel this in the collective’s shared visual language of poly-iconography, VR landscapes and unsettling infoldings of organic and digital matter. Such an approach has precursors in rave, noise and net art, which Awe IX and Stringer cite as inspirations – all cases where audio and visual artefacts are never definitive but endlessly remixed, their context and meaning evolving as they’re refracted through the community.

This ambiguous topography captures much of what makes Quantum Natives exciting right now. If the map’s devastated landscape evokes a nightmarish future, its protean sprawl also represents a space of thrilling possibility, where contingency and imagination overwhelm algorithmic determinism, and new modes of social organisation take root in global server space, like fungi colonising contaminated land. The integration of sensory and interactive modalities – scrambled sonics, text, imagery, videogames – also imagines how networked technology could facilitate nourishing relationships between artists and participants. As such they occupy vital empty ground, perhaps somewhere between Lucas Aebla’s joyfully anarchic participatory sound practice, Hype Williams’s sharply political obscurity, and the networked resistance rhetoric of the NON crew. These currents collide in the label’s recent release schedule, where the austere beauty of electronic noise of oxhy’s Respite Unoffered meets the bubbling, absurdist techno-pop of recsund’s Interfectual Reject albums. The name Quantum Natives was first coined by James Stringer for an audiovisual club night in South London in 2011, which combined the pair’s interests in digital art with hi-def electronic sound, and featured performances by Brood Ma, Yarning Kru and recsund. Awe IX and Stringer had met while studying fine art in London in the early 2000s, sharing a love of sci-fi, fantasy and the emerging sounds of grime and noise. But Awe IX recalls the advent of platforms such as SoundCloud as a galvanising moment. “Treating sonics in the way you might treat conceptual art, in a collage way,” he enthuses, speaking over Skype from his home in Taipei. “Putting things on SoundCloud in this really free way, where you put a track up, people comment on it and you might answer it with another track. It starts to build a different kind of community, a different kind of language of music.”

The pair developed the Quantum Natives label and map to further these interests, as their friendship became mainly net-mediated when Awe IX moved to Taiwan in 2012. Their initial releases in 2014, Orin’s mix Live At Omega Point, Brood Ma’s Populous and Yarning Kru’s Forways, were hardcore yet veined with future facing optimism – part of a groundswell of net-borne music whose feel, as The Wire contributor Adam Harper noted at the time, was sharply distinct from the hardware fetishism of broader electronic music culture. The label, and likewise the map, have since expanded unpredictably, and there’s a wonderful pluralism to the catalogue, where the roaming bedroom noise of New Zealand’s Yeongnak and Taiwan’s Seivelized Sounds coexist alongside the virtual reality electronics of White Goblin and Zolitude.

“I just want people to be really idiosyncratic,” admits Awe IX. He compares the pleasurable disorientation of Quantum Natives to the music of the sprawling Wolf Eyes diaspora, in that “you can’t really see where the centre is”. If there’s a unifying character between Quantum Natives artists and music, it’s one of disruption – art that lays its processes bare and takes tangible pleasure in accidents, weird juxtapositions and textural rupture.

Quantum Natives often describe themselves as a collective; I wonder how this plays out practically, given that the members are globally dispersed. Awe IX replies that he mostly works after curation and artwork, with Stringer recently taking a backseat to focus on his 3D studio Workflow. Quantum Natives functions much like a label, then, albeit conventionally given that new releases are digital-only and hosted on Mixtapes. “When it becomes digital, things like record labels just become ideas, like cultural memories, or vestigial things like a tailbone,” he declares. “They’re artefacts that come from a time when they had a function.”

He raises the idea of skeuomorphs, design elements that emulate now-defunct objects, such as buttons on a touchscreen. “So increasingly, as digital things consume more and more of our landscape, you have functions being replaced by representations of them. But I like the word platform as well – I like the idea of something being a social network.”

While that platform was created as a duo, he tells me Quantum Natives is collectively emerging through collaborations with other members and associates, including recsund, Roseen’s Pirltals, Dane Law, curator and theorist DeForest Brown Jr and, recently, London’s oxhy and Xquisite Nihii crew. Conversations between the group are mainly online, but members have increasingly worked together on real world projects, for example performances this summer at London’s ICA and New York’s Issue Project Room. “Lots of different perspectives,” as he puts it. “This kind of nested idea; worlds within worlds, and worlds spilling out.”

Core to Quantum Natives are the opportunities afforded by digital tools to creative immersive realities, a process they frequently refer to as “world-building”.

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Right now it feels like new electronic albums rarely come without some (often rather forced) concept or story attached - perhaps a reflection of the need to attract press and listener attention in an increasingly crowded media environment. In contrast, the Quantum Natives universe is pleasurable cryptic, with any narrative coherence fractured by its recombinant web of references to video or role playing games (Quake, Final Fantasy, Warhammer), literature and comic books (Borges, 2000AD, China Miéville’s multispecies neo-Victorian epic Perdido Street Station).

Why create such environments? “The desire for some kind of space, as my world is more and more just a screen,” reflects Awe IX. “Carving out a territory that you feel you can have some control over. With my music, I don’t really feel motivated by narrative or songwriting, I’d rather just create something inhabitable.”

In his own work, this desire manifests as multiple distinct artistic personas with different constraints, which he likens to characters in role playing games: “You set yourself up with some basic rules and run with them.” Electrified, greyscale beats made under the name Onmine connect to the collective’s dancefloor heart, while 26m tracks are stark assemblies of processed white noise and sinewaves, and Slake Mob explores rough sample collage.

Most affecting is Awe IX’s remarkable improvisational music as Yearning Kru, whose ever-shifting radio interference, blurred voices and collage films evoke psychedelic derites through environments possessed by some eerily conscious (in the vein of Jeff VanderMeer’s haunting Southern Reach trilogy). “It’s like a free-associative wander, and you find a clearing or a glade or something like that, and you dwell in that,” he says of the process. “You kind of slow down subconsciously and try not to alter it too much or break it.”

It constitutes some of this decade’s most synaesthetic, emotionally involving electronic music. Begin perhaps with more conventionally structured works like Copper Vale (on Knives/Planet Mu), before dissolving into the crumbling urban meditations of Swampengelf, Runover In Zonarkand, and his vast live archive on archive.org. Awe IX describes Yearning Kru music as entirely process-based. Fragments of sampled music, some field recordings and acoustic sources (he’s enthusiastic about his Euler’s disc, which he describes as “like an analogue trance build-up”) are manipulated in real time, and recorded from his laptop’s stereo output to prevent further editing. “When there’s no grit or grain and no noise, there’s also no purpose,” he states. “The reason I like using samples and certain processes is because there are things you can’t remove, that you just have to deal with. There are sounds embedded within those samples, for example, that you don’t even know are there, and you could never replicate, but they’re just part of the shared language. And that’s fine. They’re not things that need to be eradicated. Also, on the [Quantum Natives] map, the idea that people have their differences is also fine – it’s celebrated, I hope.”

Yearning Kru is perhaps the purest representation of Quantum Natives’ conception of world building as a non-hierarchical, co-constitutive process. In the absence of clear narrative, the pleasure for both artist and participant is exploration. Since 2014 UK artist Rachael Melanson aka Rosen has developed similar ideas through her cross-media portals project, an imaginary game world that’s being brought to life through sound, visual art and conversations with participants on social media, instant messenger and in real life. Online, a portal glyph in the Quantum Natives map drops you into a hypertext based game, shrouded in her skeletal audio compositions, where you navigate click by click from a flooded landscape into a deserted tower. The broader imaginary portals world extends across mountainous islands full of incongruous objects and machinery, and devoid of human life following some unknown event. Participants have explored it through conversations with Melanson.

Dane Law
herself, who acts as guide, and their involvement has shaped the landscape. "Each time someone went in they could bring three different objects, and things have gotten moved around in the world, notes have been left and things have been taken out," she says. "All of those things just added to this source material."

Like Quantum Natives more broadly, pOrtals is an example of how ubiquitous, locked-in web tools--social media, Gchat, Skype--can be appropriated to collectively realise messy and borderless worlds. Reading transcripts of people's journeys and navigating the text game, you're infected by the game world's vividness and feeling of temporal slippage.

I'm reminded especially of surreal puzzle game Myst, while Melanson cites author Adolfo Bioy Casares and anime series Serial Experiments Lain as inspirations. She is currently developing another interactive web based pOrtals narrative, as well as AV performances.

"You have to really want to explore," she says. "The similarity between all of us is that we like to look at every single corner in detail and it's like, OK, I know where everything is now, I might go and do the actual game."

Such emotionally charged distortion of familiar cultural artefacts has a hauntological aspect that perhaps recalls projects such as The Caretaker or Daniel Lopatin's early work. But there's something sharply critical and contemporary in Quantum Natives and Melanson's meditations on the permeable membrane between physical and online worlds, and how each haunts the other: the traces of participants scattered through pOrtals, for example, or the subtle allusions to 1990s role playing games -- or RPGs for short -- whose geographies are, for much of my generation, indelibly etched into our emotional and cultural consciousness. You're reminded too of how violence now effortlessly transgresses that boundary. One of the label's most moving works is White Goblin's video for "100001362 (Seventh Realm)", centred around an online RPG player's fraught retelling of brutal treatment at the hands of other players. "I am losing all hope," the narrative concludes. "They are telling me that they are going to kill me. The end is near."

I meet James Stringer in central London at Werkflow, the 3D arts studio he co-founded in 2013 to develop immersive audiovisual environments, often in the Unreal video game engine. Their work has included hyperdetailed film for patten, rosen and Dane Law, live visuals with Kuedo and Rabbit, and a sound/videosgame interface for Quantum Natives' recent Grace Nexus event in New York. There's a curious tension, I say, between this interest in emerging human-machine interfaces and Quantum Natives' critical gaze on technology. "I'm quite ambivalent to technology, in that I research and stay on top of what's going on, but I also hate the hype cycle," he agrees. "There are a lot of cultures that resolve around it that are very fetishy."

That tension inhabits Stringer's music as Brood Ma, with its tempestuous collisions of mechwarrior computer noise and ravelike drums. Sonically it suggests the (un)natural continuation of darkside jungle's nightmarish cyberpunk thread, yet compositionally it's thrillingly subtle, sidestepping between rhythms and moods with an opaque logic recalling Autechre. Like Awe IX, Stringer brings a colleague's attention to texture and symbolic meaning. After growing up in a "very macho atmosphere" in his hometown in Kent, he explains that "a lot of the samples I use are exploring, or trying to disassemble, the idea of masculinity."

Stringer gives the example of his album Doze, whose weaponised sound design reflected on violent online culture, citing amped up movies like Crank, and seeing gamer communities carrying out "incredibly misogynistic, shocking acts, but in simulated space. Doze was thinking about that really dark space, and [it was made] before the rise of the alt right -- it wasn't something that people had managed to put a name to and understand yet."

Yet the Quantum Natives iconography emerged from a similar cultural milieu -- a world of repurposed images, wargames, memes and mystical ciphers. Has the last year shifted their feelings about the power of these practices? "It really has shifted," he replies, admitting that he wouldn't make an album like Doze again. "[Initially], a lot of those symbols were part of this new internet language of reappropriation that was forming, so we were embracing that. But that kind of mindset can also feed into that alt right side of things, and feeling like you can own something without understanding where the labour came from."

Nonetheless, he remains positive about the artistic and political potential of this methodology. "Going back to the China Mieville influence of Perdido Street Station, I liked that [the book] was an abstraction of city space and had a very social element, that these different species and races had different ways of modifying or co-existing in the city. I always imagined it as an architectural, physical, manuscript, with different cultures embedding their culture into the literal fabric of a city. I think both me and [Awe IX] understand that..."
“I used to be convinced that Derek Bailey and Autechre were basically exactly the same, in terms of music that feels like it’s this improvised state of flow”

Dane Law

kind of language, of layering cultural meaning into stuff and letting it turn into mould,” he laughs. “That was always the feeling: like it was something dirty, but that’s something to be embraced,” he adds. “I think [the online map] has got that. If you get past some of the ideas about colonisation that could be pushed onto it, there’s also this idea of putting your mark on something, and celebrating culture, and allowing that to have an indelible mark on that space.”

Among the most entrancing recent Quantum Natives artefacts are Clifford Sage aka resound’s video game-style videos for Intellectual Reject. Created by Sage, they’re gloriously strange sensory adventures: in “Buddha Geometry Brain Toy” you follow Sage’s Janus-faced avatar the ProDancer through a dizzying landscape of sci-fi machinery, before blasting onto an interdimensional dancefloor hosted by HR Giger’s xenomorph. They’re sections of a game Sage is developing and hopes to eventually release. “I like things if they’re trying to be a bit of a headfuck, so the game is that you have to make Intellectual Reject, the album, in the game,” he laughs. “You have to pick up cogs and slot them into the device, and with the ProDancer’s arms you have to push and turn the wheel, it’s got this kinetic thing to it.”

Becoming interested in 3D design several years ago was, Sage says, a turning point in his musical practice. “The whole world building thing, which is actually the same thing as making albums – I’ve always seen that as making worlds, a bit of escapism.” Sage has been self-releasing music as resound since 2001, when he started crafting loop-based tracks on his family’s PC from dictaphone recordings. “Sounds of gates and wood, stones, water,” he recalls, “and when you get it back you can hear other ambiguities.” Later he fell in love with electronic music through artists like Aphex Twin and Meat Beat Manifesto. Throughout, he emphasises, “each album was more about the process – each one had to be quite different. It was like a diary, some way to encapsulate some kind of weird mood.”

The result is a deep, rich back catalogue spanning noise, techno and gorgeous ambient. Type resound into archive.org and you’ll find many of his 80-odd records free to download – “There’s a whole world of stuff there,” says Awe IX admiringly – from his Caretaker-inspired Deadsound series, to the whirling drums and cosmic rifts of Forever Packing Continuum and A Guided Discourse, to the circuit-fried electro of Power Forever.

The Intellectual Reject albums, romantic post-rave dreamscapes of delirious rap-singing and spliced breaks, are among Quantum Natives’ most recent releases, but he’s one of the collective’s longest running members. Sage’s performance at their first party back in 2011 set thematic ground for the label – he played a self-built 3D video game onscreen, triggering tracks through his in-game actions – and has subsequently closely collaborated on visual work with Stringer and Werkflow. You sense his influence in the collective’s interest in 3D visual and sonic environments, such as this summer’s Grace Nexus performance, which was based around Werkflow’s playable 3D version of New York’s Issue Project Room (soon to be publicly released). By navigating the game onscreen, Rosen, Yarnging Kru and Brood Ma triggered and spatially shifted sound around the audience, again conflating the border between virtual and physical environments. You also feel Sage’s sensibilities in the arcane humour permeating the Quantum Natives universe, such as the Werkflow
Bailey and Autarche were basically exactly the same, in terms of music that feels like it’s this improvised state of flow,” Parkinson says. “I wanted to do something that had that same character.” Much of his collaborative work with Quantum Natives has involved realising these interests visually. Shortly after United In Dance Quantum Natives also released a software bundle containing Parkinson’s PureData patch alongside several example tracks by other producers. Despite the same underlying audio processes, they’re strikingly different listening experiences: Omine’s steely glitch-grime, Renick Bell’s fried circuits, blissy ambient from Nico Niquo.

video for Dane Law’s “United In Dance”, whose emoji-like figures dance across archaic-looking footage of Hackney Marshes in East London.

Dane Law aka Adam Parkinson’s United In Dance and r. bit albums do similarly absurd things with time, exploding pop and techno into cathedrals of euphoric shattered tones. Sonically there’s kinship to Mark Fell’s meditative Sensate Focus 12’s, but where Fell’s angles are tightly controlled, Parkinson’s hum with accidental rhythmic synergies and moments of high emotion. This headrush character seems attuned to the rave experience; after all, there are moments on United In Dance where you can practically taste the laughing gas. The connection is there, agrees Parkinson, but echoing Sage’s description of many recsound albums as inspired by the British landscape, he’s more interested in the leylines of rural magick linking dance music and the pastoral, from Coil through AFX, Boards Of Canada and Leyland Kirby’s post-Vin music. He recalls the moors around his family home near Manchester: “There are these concrete overflows coming off the heather, because of the reservoirs. You’ve got fields and these brutalist structures, somehow the music feels like it’s similar.”

Dane Law tracks emerge from extended improvisation sessions, mangling sounds from YouTube and sample packs through a custom PureData patch, “I used to be convinced that Derek

The critical self-reflection inherent to Quantum Natives feels, for a listener, like crucial breathing room in an often homogeneous branding-heavy music and art culture. There are however clear downsides, most obviously that as a free label it offers no economic security. Equally, the title of Xquisite Nihil’s compilation Seize The Means Of Production has a bitter aftertaste: reliance on corporate online platforms creates opportunities for communication and distribution, even as it capitulates to surveillance and data capture. How do they navigate the tension between the two? “It’s almost putting people into this feudal mindset, where things are owned by the lords and you’re just working — you’re tilling the land, literally you’re farming data,” chuckles Awe IX.

“You’re creating data that’s being sold off, and you ore the data as well, so you’re somewhere in between a serif and a cow, or something.” Yet he admits to

a fascination with the inherent transience of it all, citing science fiction writer Bruce Sterling’s concept of social media platforms as digital favelas: spaces in which people create vibrant lives and communities, despite having no claim to ownership. “So the website gets sold, or SoundCloud shuts down, and everything just gets bulldozed, and everyone moves along and has to build again, in this really ephemeral way.”

Again, the porous, ever-changing Quantum Natives map is symbolic, against the legacy of mapping as a political project that solidifies certain histories and futures while erasing others. “I’m reminded of Rebecca Solnit’s atlases that recentre people erased from the

histories of US cities, and also Shannon Mattern’s writing on how cartographic technologies are increasingly shaped not for people but for machines, laying the algorithmic groundwork for a self-driving future. There’s something vital in how Quantum Natives focus not on the outcome of world-building projects, but on the act of building, whether via interactive software and games, Rosen’s pOrTals world, or an online art platform that’s infested with cultural ghosts, fleshy things and vestigial ideas.

“The messiness is very good, and the weirdness is important,” agrees Awe IX. “An efficient vision of the future is quite close to fascism in some ways, right? It’s a machine-like view of humanity, it’s getting rid of the fleshiness, but it’s ultimately pointless. In terms of the design, I feel there’s a puysy element to what we do. When we started there was this net art influence, and a lot of that was quite iconoclastic, it’s playing with iconography and these symbols, these new alphabets we’ve been given. So I think it’s important to have this messiness and these remnants left over.”

He pauses to consider. “It’s like noise and signal, I suppose. The world that Google or Silicon Valley envisages is pure signal. Nothing obstructs the flow of capital or information. But the meaning is found in the noise, in the details, right? In the things that don’t make sense, and that you just have to deal with. I think that’s what life is.” Ó Chox’s Respite Unoffered and recsound’s Interdict! Reject are released by Quantum Natives, quantumnatives.com

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