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THE SEVEN VALLEYS: CAPTURING THE NUMINOUS IN A 3D COMPUTER GAME ENGINE

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If an artist of the calibre of Leo Tolstoy had access to the creative, interactive technology provided by first-person 3D computer games, what would he create?

Tolstoy's famous novels are an example of where a classic literary genre has been used to minutely examine the human condition with depth, insight and compassion. The success of this undertaking is reflected in the continued popularity of these works, and the constant references that are made to the conceits and constructions made within them. This paper asks the question: is it possible that an artwork intended to deal with equally serious human issues could be created with this new interactive technological medium?

Introduction

Over the past 15 years a new creative medium has been introduced in the form of 3D computer games. The revolution began in 1992 with the release of the first-person shooter computer game *Wolfenstein 3D* [1]. Today millions of people over the world spend hours each day engaged with this powerful cultural phenomenon. Most games are produced as light entertainment and are based on action, fantasy or horror, relying on fast-paced violent gameplay as their main attraction.

Artists have been quick to pick up on the new medium and have begun to explore its potential [2]. Although the technology behind computer games has been put to some serious use, examples that examine the human condition with depth, insight and compassion are rare. The interactive artwork entitled *The Seven Valleys* aims to explore this largely uncharted territory.

Religion and spirituality are a core part of human experience and are often seen as the topic of artistic investigation [3]. The nineteenth-century theologian Rudolph Otto coined the term "numinous" [4], which he used to describe the *a priori* non-rational human response to religious experience. The numinous relates to close or direct contact with the

Fig. 1. Image from the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. (© Chris Nelson, Saadatollah Monjazebeh)

Divine, a theme that is also found at the centre of the practice of mysticism.

This paper describes the interactive 3D artwork inspired by *The Seven Valleys* [5] and created using the first-person shooter game *Unreal Tournament 2003* [6, 11]. The artwork has been designed to portray the numinous and mystical qualities of *The Seven Valleys*, highlighting the ability of the medium to tackle serious human issues.

Spiritual Experience and Mysticism: The Numinous

The term 'numinous' [4] refers to the mysterious non-rational, fundamental quality found in religion and religious or spiritual experience. Non-rational in this context refers to that which cannot be grasped by the intellect. Human response to the numinous is comprised of two almost paradoxical reactions: dread and fascination. The dread element Otto refers to as *mysterium tremendum*, which is likened to normal mortal fear, but is also fundamentally different and peculiar to encounters with the numinous. *Mysterium tremendum* implies three qualities of the numinous: absolute unapproachability; power; and urgency and energy. The fascination element is referred to as *mysterium fascinosum*, an almost irresistible force that draws people to the numinous and counters the dread invoked by the *mysterium tremendum*. According to Otto, human beings have

an in-built *a priori* capacity to experience the numinous. Although everyone has the potential to perceive the numinous not everyone has it to the same degree. It is also impossible to accurately describe the numinous to another soul, since it is a fundamental state of mind and irreducible to any other state. It can only be evoked in a person, or alluded to from one who has experienced the numinous to another who has also experienced it. Thus art has a special place in attempting to convey or evoke the feelings of numinous experience.

The Mystical Treatise: The Seven Valleys

Numinous experience and mystical experience deal with the same theme: personal communion with the Divine. In exploring the numinous, the main inspiration and structure for this creative work is taken from the mystical treatise *The Seven Valleys* [5]. This work of literature comes from the writings of the Bahá'í Faith and describes the journey of the soul through seven stages of consciousness: Search; Love; Knowledge; Unity; Contentment; Wonderment; and True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. The journey is characterized by the lover's search for the divine Beloved, a theme made famous in Arabic lore in the story of Majnun (literally *insane*) and his quest for Layli. This mystical theme

transcends any specific faith and is found in all the world's major religions.

The lover (user) begins this journey in the Valley of Search, where eventually he/she catches a glimpse of the Beloved and is transported to the Valley of Love. Here, the pain of separation acts as a 'refining fire' [6] [7] that burns away the dross of ego and self and leaves the 'pure gold' of the 'true self'. When the lover "... escapes from the claws of the eagle of love" [5 p 11] they find themselves in the Valley of Knowledge, where they "privily converse with [the] Beloved." This state leads to still higher levels of consciousness and in the Valley of Unity the lover perceives the whole of creation as reflecting the qualities of the Divine. In the Valley of Contentment, suffering and hardship become "delight and rapture," leading to the Valley of Wonderment, where the lover is "... struck dumb with the beauty of the All-Glorious." Finally the lover yields up everything in the path of the Beloved, leaving self behind and entering the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness.

The Interactive Artwork: *The Seven Valleys*

The work has been designed as an exploration of, and allusion to, the often subtle and illusive concepts found in the treatise. It is comprised of eight distinct sections, one for each valley and one for the introduction. The sections are designed to be traversed linearly, although each one stands as a separate artwork and can be explored on its own.

The user is invited to take an experiential journey through *The Seven Valleys* where they are faced with conditions and situations which motivate them to question, explore and attempt to fathom what is being presented. Individual sections contain their own mysteries while also telling a collective story. Figure 2. shows sample images from each of the valleys. Further information can be found at www.thesevenvalleys.com.

Exhibition Feedback

The goal of creating *The Seven Valleys* was to capture and reflect the numinous quality of the mystical treatise. The work has been shown internationally [8, 9] to a variety of audiences and the response has ranged from people walking out after a few minutes to others giving it their rapt attention through the entire 40 minutes. The most poignant unsolicited responses have come from two individuals: one who in an obviously emotional state

described how moved he was by the experience; and the other commenting on the spiritual depth and multiple layers of the work. As Otto explains, the numinous can only be evoked in a person, or alluded to from one who has experienced the numinous to another who has also experienced it. The fact that even a small number of people are able to connect deeply on an emotional level to *The Seven Valleys* gives credence to the claim that the technology of FPS games is indeed capable of dealing with serious human issues.

Conclusion

The Seven Valleys is just one step along the path of exploring the power and potential depth of this new medium. Responses from a number of individuals who have experienced the work provide credence to the claim that the technology behind first-person computer games can be used to effectively tackle topics of depth and meaning. Over time, as people become more familiar and comfortable with this technology it will come to encompass themes as diverse as those seen in film and literature.

References and Notes

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9. Nelson, C., *Exhibition of The Seven Valleys*, in *ACSW*. 2007: Ballarat, Australia.
10. Nelson, C., *Exhibition of The Seven Valleys*, in *Computational Aesthetics*. 2007: The Banff Centre, Canada.
11. The treatise and the artwork are both called *The Seven Valleys*. To distinguish between the two, the name is italicized when referring to the treatise.

Fig. 2. Images from each of the valleys.
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