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The Art of the Virtual

Are video games starting to—gasp!—mean something?

STEVEN SPIELBERG SPOKE OUT ON VIDEO GAMES LAST month at the EA Game Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California. “I think the real indicator,” he said, “will be when somebody confesses that they cried at Level 17.” Spielberg was talking about video games and art, and the increasingly less absurd question of are-they-or-aren’t-they. The mere fact that U.S.C. has a Game Innovation Lab is probably an indicator that something is afoot, but I’m here to accept Spielberg’s challenge and come clean. A video game made me cry.

The game is called *Halo*, and it wasn’t actually Level 17; it was Level 5. I had been slugging it out for what seemed like—and probably was—hours with a bunch of aliens in an icy canyon. Just as all hope was fading, I seized an alien aircraft and made my escape. I sailed up into the darkening sky with light snow sifting down around me. Moody music, like something from *Carmina Burana*, swelled in the background. The sounds of battle faded beneath me in the dusk. It was like the end of *Platoon*, and I was Charlie Sheen. Then the waterworks started.

Listen: I am a grownup, no-dorkier-than-average person. I don’t consider myself susceptible to hysterics (my eyes remained miraculously dry throughout *The Terminal*, Mr. Spielberg). So what happened on Level 5?

Right now video games are the world’s largest cult phenomenon. Those who play them (fully half of all Americans ages 6 and up) love them, and those who don’t play them regard them with virulent distaste. It’s time that changed. Those of you in the latter group, if you have any curiosity about the future of your own culture, and if you haven’t already put down this magazine in favor of Flaubert or croquet or whatever, take a look at three new video games that expand our notions of what a video game can do.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (for PlayStation2) sounds like a game that glorifies delinquency, juvenile and otherwise. And it does. But it’s also an extraordinary experiment in interactive storytelling. You play a playa, a Snoop-style gangbanger wandering through a vast, absurdly detailed virtual version of California. There’s no hard-and-fast narrative. You go where you wish and do what you like, and the game makes things interesting accordingly. This is something that’s possible in no other medium. *San Andreas* combines the richness of art with the freedom of real life to create some-

thing entirely new, totally unclassifiable and really, really cool.

I’ve already confessed my unmanly affection for *Halo*, which may be the single most perfect video game ever made. *Halo 2* (for Xbox) hits stores Nov. 9, and it offers more of the same adrenalized, flawlessly orchestrated, hyper-realistic combat (the new game lets you rock two weapons simultaneously, John Woo-style, which is not actually that useful but hella fun), but its real genius lies in its architecture. It’s staged like Wagnerian opera: you fight through vast, Olympian structures, combating mind-hurtingly titanic forces, and the effect is precisely that mixture of awe and terror and wonder that the philosopher Edmund Burke called the sublime.

The original *Half-Life* borrowed technology from hard-core shoot-’em-ups and used it to spin an absorbing tale about a scientist on the run from scary-gross interdimensional aliens. This had never been done before. *Half-Life 2* (PC), which arrives Nov. 16, after six years of work, is one of the most frighteningly atmospheric games I’ve ever seen. Humanity came out of its interdimensional scrap holding the silver medal, and now we live in an alien-run police state enforced by collaborationist thugs and towering

three-legged monstrosities. Long, ringing silences, too bright sunlight and empty streets deepen the sense of Orwellian despair.

Art is generally supposed to mean something, although it’s not always easy to say what. Whatever these games “mean” to the people who play them—whom, ah, ever they may be—they mean a lot. Fifteen years ago, video games were barely more than a cottage industry, if by *cottage* you mean the sticky back corner of a strip-mall bowling alley. Last year game sales hit \$7 billion, in the same exclusive ballpark as movies (about \$9 billion). We should count ourselves lucky. The video game is a brand-new medium, and we get to see it evolve from the very beginning.

Are video games art? Nobody knows yet, but the cool thing is, we’re the ones who get to decide. Should games be like Hollywood? Or like interactive novels? Or maybe the NBA is the model? China already sponsors a national video-gaming team, and ESPN is covering the launch of *Halo 2*. So grab a joystick, sink back into the couch, and get in on Level 1. I promise, nobody has to know. Just keep some tissues handy. ■

