

# Spiritual Art: Evoking the Numinous using a 3D Computer Game Engine

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## Abstract

The Seven Valleys is an interactive 3D installation based artwork inspired by mystical writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Created as a modification of the first-person shooter Unreal Tournament 2003 it subverts the original paradigm of the game to create an experience of the numinous, which in spirit, is diametrically opposed to the original intent of the gameplay design.

This artwork presents an exploration of, and allusion to, the often subtle and illusive concepts found in the sacred treatise The Seven Valleys in which the user engages in an experiential journey through the work. The user is faced with conditions and situations that provide motivation to question, explore and attempt to fathom the abstract sense of the numinous. Each of The Seven Valleys contains its own individual mysteries while at the same time contributing its part to the telling of a collective story. This paper describes the artwork, its inspiration and the key elements and symbols appearing throughout the work.

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## 1. Introduction

This artwork uses the First-Person Shooter computer game *Unreal Tournament 2003* to convey the numinous through creative interpretation of the mystical treatise *The Seven Valleys*. The story of *The Seven Valleys* is a common theme among many religions, so although it comes from the Bahá'í scriptures the work tries to present the journey in such a way that all users can engage with.

The work itself is a synthesis of east and west, using Arabic calligraphy and Persian chanting along with spiritual music from the Christian tradition and modern music from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds.

## 2. Spiritual Experience and Mysticism: the Numinous

The term 'numinous' [Ott23] 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 can not 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. *Mysterium tremendum* is an overpowering quality of something completely outside our realm of experience which induces stupor, consciousness of the self as nothing, and unworthiness.

The fascination element is referred to as *mysterium fascinans*, an almost irresistible force that draws people to the numinous and counters the dread invoked by the *mysterium tremendum*. A parallel can be drawn with the sense of fear experienced when watching a horror movie, and the sense of fascination which stops people from walking out of the cinema in the face of this terror. In its most extreme form *mysterium fascinans* leads to direct contact with the Divine producing mystical experience, the goal of the practice of mysticism.

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 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 type of experience given to the world by the technology behind First-Person Shooter (FPS) games, representing a subset of Virtual Reality, has qualities that make it particularly appropriate in representing the numinous. A core belief in most religions is the existence of another world or higher plane of existence. Although it can be argued that all art has the potential to transport the viewer to another world, FPS games provide a

demonstrable example that can be seen, heard, explored and interacted with.

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* [Bah91]. This treatise comes from the writings of the Bahá'í Faith and describes the seeker's spiritual journey towards God. The mystical theme transcends any specific religion and is found in all the world's major religions.

### 3. The Seven Valleys

The interactive 3D artwork 'The Seven Valleys' (the treatise and the artwork are both called *The Seven Valleys*, to distinguish between the two, the name is italicised when referring to the treatise) is comprised of eight distinct sections, one for each valley and 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 work has been designed as an exploration of, and allusion to, the often subtle and illusive concepts found in the treatise. The user is invited to take an experiential journey through *The Seven Valleys* where they are faced with conditions and situations which will 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.

#### 3.1 Symbols in the Work

The Bahá'í symbol of the 'Greatest Name of God' and the Taoist yin-yang symbol fulfill essential positions and provide continuity through the seven valleys. Allegri's *Miserere* symbolizes the divine state of the wanderer and is used to link the work together musically.

The Bahá'í symbol of the 'Greatest Name of God' is used throughout the artwork to represent the central figure in *The Seven Valleys*, the goal of the journey, the Beloved, who is none other than God himself. The topic of the 'Names' of God and the 'Greatest Name' of God can be traced back to Judaism, through Christianity and onto Islam with the tradition of the ninety nine "most beautiful names" of God [*Qur'an* 7:179] and the hundredth, 'hidden', Greatest Name [Lam93]. References to the Greatest Name can also be found in Hindu and Buddhist scripture [Fai98]. Thus the symbol of the Greatest Name of God both encompasses and transcends any specific religion and is an ideal symbol for the Beloved.

There are many renderings in Arabic calligraphy of the Greatest name. The one used as the central figure in this work is shown in Figure 3.1 [Mon90].



Figure 3.1 Calligraphic representation of the 'Greatest Name of God' [M90]

It reads as Yá Baha'u'l-Abhá' and usually translated as "O Thou the Glory of the Most Glorious!". The image is particularly evocative with the letters curling upwards to give the impression of the face of a tiger crowned in flame, reminiscent of Eliot's 'Christ the tiger' [Eli42a]. It conveys the dual destructive and creative aspects of God experienced in *The Seven Valleys* where the ego-self is destroyed and the divine nature is manifested through divine assistance. The image is at once both powerful and fascinating reflecting the two opposing forces found in the numinous.

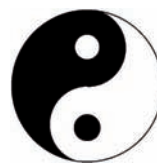


Figure 3.2 Taijitu

The Taijitu (Figure 3.2), translated as the "diagram of the supreme ultimate" [WB67] and commonly known as the Yin-Yang symbol, is a Chinese symbol often used in the West. It describes the relationship between the Yin and Yang principles from Chinese philosophy. The Taijitu appears in the Valley of Unity.

The entire artwork is held together by the spiritually haunting choral work Allegri's *Miserere*. It is the signature piece and appears throughout the artwork, in each of *The Seven Valleys* and the Introduction, signifying the state of divine bliss.

#### 3.2 The Introduction

*The stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities. And they say that until the wayfarer taketh leave of self, and traverseth these stages, he shall never reach to the ocean of nearness and union, nor drink of the peerless wine. [Bah91, p. 4]*



**Figure 3.3** *Opening scene in the Introduction*

The mystical treatise *The Seven Valleys* tells the eternal story of the soul's journey from its divine Source through the remoteness of material existence in this world to final return to God, its Source.

The work begins at the point before the soul has been drawn away from God. Golden spheres rotating around the luminous symbol of the 'Greatest Name' represent the pure souls. The seeker's journey begins as one of these souls circling in adoration around the Beloved.

This pure state of divine bliss, represented musically by an excerpt from Allegri's *Miserere*, is soon interrupted by a call to join with a physical body. The wanderer experiences the trauma of birth and is finally deposited into the material world, the Valley of Search.

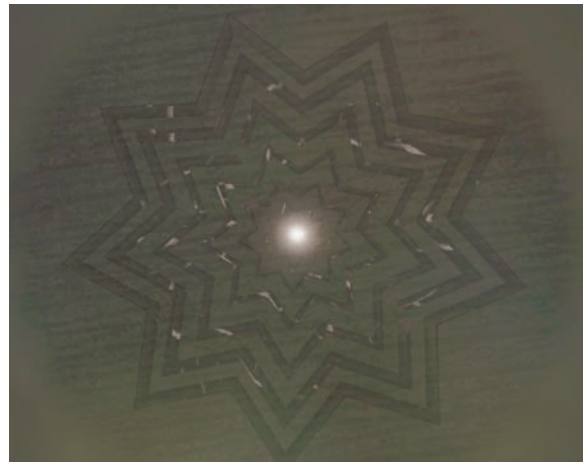
### 3.3 The Valley of Search

*"In this journey the seeker reacheth a stage wherein he seeth all created things wandering distracted in search of the Friend. How many a Jacob will he see, hunting after his Joseph; he will behold many a lover, hasting to seek the Beloved, he will witness a world of desiring ones searching after the One Desired." . [Bah91, pp. 5-6]*

The **Valley of Search** is the first stage of the wanderer's journey. The soul has joined with a material body and been born into the physical world. At this point the seeker is aware of the state of remoteness from God and begins the quest in search of the Beloved.

This valley is a large maze created in the shape of a nine-pointed star (Figure 3.4). It reflects the material world which, from a mystical point of view, confuses, distracts and disorients the wanderer, leading away from the ultimate goal. At the same time the wanderer is surrounded by shadowy, obscured, moving images of the Greatest Name. This symbolizes the elusiveness of the Divine which, although existing in everything, is obscured by the seeker's limited level of consciousness at this stage. This Valley is dark and monochromatic, representing the

wayfarer's remoteness from God and attachment to the material world.



**Figure 3.4** *Top-down picture of the Valley of Search*

Figure 3.5 shows the goal at the centre of the maze - the Greatest Name swathed in flame. For the observant, the goal is always visible and can be seen even from the remotest part of the maze. This reflects the belief that the sign of the Creator is in all things, yet limited consciousness blinds people from this reality.

On the journey through the Valley of Search the wanderer comes across everyday sounds such as trains, birds, the beach and a crowded pub. The doorways that lead the seeker ever closer to the Beloved echo with ethereal chanting taken from the *Miserere*. Towards the centre of the maze thunder shakes the ground signaling a rise in tension and the imminent meeting with the Beloved and a consequent transformation to a new state of consciousness.

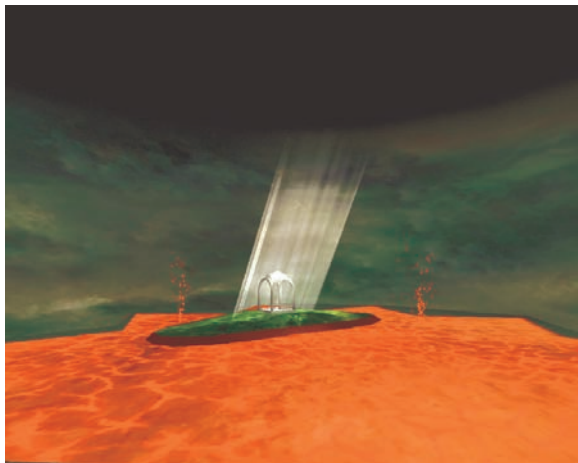


**Figure 3.5** *End of the Valley of Search*

When the seeker walks through the flame they are lifted up, transcending the limits of this valley, to a point where they can see the entirety of the maze in which they have been trapped. They are then transported to the Valley of Love.

### 3.4 The Valley of Love

*And if, by the help of God, he findeth on this journey a trace of the traceless Friend, and inhaleth the fragrance of the long-lost Joseph from the heavenly messenger, he shall straightway step into The Valley of Love and be dissolved in the fire of love. [Bah91]*



**Figure 3.6** End of the Valley of Love

The Valley of Love is dark and sinister in character. Sickly green clouds swirl across the sky. The ground is rocky and barren and rivers of lava block the way. To move through the valley the seeker must pass through archways, often guarded by fire, which transport them to a higher level in the valley closer to the goal of the Beloved.

This Valley is modelled on a volcano reflecting the theme of fire and of the lover being "...dissolved in the fire of love" [p. 8] This love is likened to a 'refining fire' [Eli42] [Han41] that burns away the dross of ego and self and leaves the 'pure gold' of the 'true self'.

Pain is a strong theme of this valley and the wanderer must endure the pain of crossing through fire and lava to reach the end. When the seeker passes through one of these barriers, the avatar screams out in excruciating pain.

The landscape is rocky and desolate. The lover is still far from the Beloved so the theme of darkness continues from the Valley of Search. Added to this, the colour scheme reflects a gangrenous hue which symbolizes the lover being afflicted with the sickness of love.

Some of the gates leading the lover on are in unusual positions, such as just off the side of a cliff. To carry on the lover must take a leap of faith and literally jump off the edge of the cliff through the gate.

The first level of this Valley is silent enhancing the feelings of isolation and desolation caused by the lover having glimpsed the Beloved and yet having to exist in separation from Him. On the second level music can be heard in the distance: 'The Mercy Seat' by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds [C98]. As the lover continues on, the music gets louder and louder finally reaching a crescendo as they stand at the edge of the volcano gazing upon the Goal. The final volume is meant to be uncomfortably loud.

'The Mercy Seat' suits this Valley on a number of levels. It is a song about a man on death row facing the prospect of the electric chair. It has strong religious (Christian) overtones and reflects the common preoccupation with spirituality of those who are suffering, and particularly those who are facing death. The line 'The face of Jesus in my soul' reflects the drive of spiritual yearning well. The grinding, cacophonous quality of the song talks about pain and agony and the inevitability of death:

*I've got nothing left to lose  
and I'm not afraid to die.*

### 3.5 The Valley of Knowledge

*And if, confirmed by the Creator, the lover escapes from the claws of the eagle of love, he will enter The Valley of Knowledge and come out of doubt into certitude, and turn from the darkness of illusion to the guiding light of the fear of God. His inner eyes will open and he will privily converse with his Beloved; he will set ajar the gate of truth and piety, and shut the doors of vain imaginings. [Bah91]*



**Figure 3.7** The centre of the Valley of Knowledge

In this valley the wanderer emerges "...from the darkness of illusion to the guiding light of the fear of God." The valleys of Search and Love were dark and foreboding, unpleasant places while the Valley of Knowledge is like the dawn of a new day following a night of storms and turbulence.

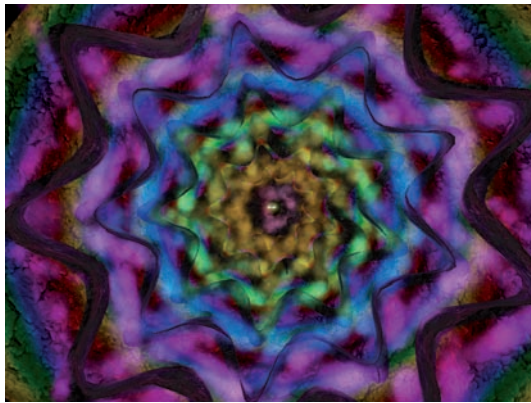
The Valley of Knowledge is a refuge to the soul, nestled among high snow-capped mountains like a modern day Shangri-La [Hil33]. Dawn is breaking through the clouds and soft dappled light falls upon the peaceful scene while soft Persian chanting is heard in the background. In the centre of the valley is a pool of clear blue water and a gently flowing fountain.

Green hedges have been used to limit the user's view and increase visual impact. The curved ribs that create the sense of the outer structure of the scene are part of the Greatest Name. The archways along the elevated path are created using the same mesh, symbolizing an intrinsic connection to the architecture. Again the nine-pointed star forms the basis to the shape of the structure.

The central shaft of light connects the whole scene, rising from the central pool to the Greatest Name at the top of the temple. The glowing spheres are the holy souls on their journey towards God.

### 3.6 The Valley of Unity

*After passing through the Valley of Knowledge, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer cometh to The Valley of Unity and drinketh from the cup of the Absolute, and gazeth on the Manifestations of Oneness. In this station he pierceth the veils of plurality, fleeth from the worlds of the flesh, and ascendeth into the heaven of singleness. [Bah91]*



**Figure 3.8** Top view of the Valley of Unity

The wanderer is now deposited into the abstract beauty of the Valley of Unity where, what once appeared to be solid walls of rock, are now seen to be simply part of the cosmic flow. Stars slowly move upwards on the outer walls, pockets of mysterious coloured mist appear throughout the valley. Everything is consumed by a constant monotonic drone punctuated by occasional snippets of dialogue from physics and mystical texts.

In the Valley of Unity the seeker is immersed in an abstract representation of reality. The structure they are exploring is itself a diagram depicting the functioning of the world of creation.

The whole space evokes questions. It is deliberately abstract and obscure, hinting at hidden meaning but ever refusing to spell it out. The work provides 'road signs' pointing the way, but the user must do the work of understanding.

The inner wall of each of the seven tiers is made up of an outer shell of solid rock with an ethereal substance flowing beneath it. This symbolizes the difference between the reality perceived by the senses and the reality described by physicists and mystics. The senses of sight and touch portray rock as a solid and dependable substance while in reality it is something quite different.

The seeker begins at the top level and works their way down through archways similar to those found in the Valley of Love. In each level the aural stillness created by

the chakra tones is punctuated by occasional voices describing theories of physics and quotes from mystical traditions. Stephen Hawking provides an overview of the four dimensional view of space-time, while Einstein describes his special theory of relativity.

When the seeker reaches the lowest level they are shown the Source of all radiance and of the diverse colours experienced in the Valley of Unity. Singularity, the divine Sun, symbolized by the Greatest Name, produces duality, represented by the Taijitu, and ultimately produces the multiplicity of the created world (Figure 3.9).



**Figure 3.9** The Greatest Name as the source of multiplicity

### 3.7 The Valley of Contentment

*In this Valley he feeleth the winds of divine contentment blowing from the plane of the spirit. From sorrow he turneth to bliss, from anguish to joy. His grief and mourning yield to delight and rapture. [Bah91, p. 29]*



**Figure 3.10** The Garden Gallery in the Valley of Contentment

In the Valley of Contentment the seeker is transported to a pleasant walled garden on a warm sunny day. The grass is green and lush and the atmosphere is filled with the sense of springtime and renewal (Figure 3.10).

The outer section is a garden gallery displaying large framed photos from the artist's private collection. The realism of the photographs creates a tension with the surrounding 'not-quite-as-realistic' virtual environment. Which is the real world; the virtual world or the 'virtual world' within this virtual world? There is a sense that these photographs are doorways to worlds more real than the virtual world they appear in.

The inner garden is lightly forested and a waterfall cascades gently flowing into a stream which surrounds a central island. As the seeker moves through the trees they are met with the sounds of children laughing and playing. Crossing the bridge to the island, the seeker comes across more innocent laughter and a pair of swings moving gently, propelled perhaps by the unseen children.

Once again the seeker discovers the goal of the journey, the Greatest Name, and is taken to the Valley of Wonderment.

### 3.8 The Valley of Wonderment

*At every moment he beholdeth a wondrous world, a new creation, and goeth from astonishment to astonishment, and is lost in awe at the works of the Lord of Oneness.*  
[Bah91, p. 32]

Upon entering the Valley of Wonderment (Figure 3.11) the seeker surrenders their will to the will of God and is shown the wonders of the universe. They pass by Earth rotating in space, then onto the sun, galaxies and other celestial phenomena. At this point the user has no control and is simply taken on the journey.

The valley concludes at a stellar scale image (Figure 3.12) of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man [Cre06] overlaid by a rotating spiral galaxy. At the centre of the human figure resides the Greatest Name, together symbolizing humanity's divine and celestial nature.



**Figure 3.11** *Spiral Galaxy in the Valley of Wonderment*

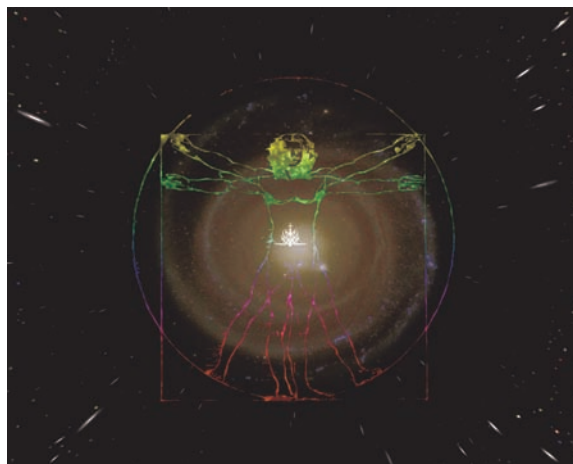
*Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.*

[Bah85 Arabic No 13]

This picture symbolizes the dual nature of human beings who are at once lowly forms of dust and vessels containing

the secrets of divine mysteries. The relatively tiny microcosm reflects the celestial macrocosm of the universe.

*Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form  
When within thee the universe is folded?* [Bah91, p. 34]



**Figure 3.12** *Vitruvian Man, Spiral Galaxy and the Greatest Name*

### 3.9 The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness

*For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.* [Bah91, p. 36]



**Figure 3.13** *Holy souls circling around the Greatest Name*

This is the final stage of the wanderer's journey, the conclusion of their life's work and return to God.

*"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."*

[Eli42]

In this valley the lover rediscovers the peace and tranquility of giving up the ego's existence and attachment to the material world. The self of God is perfectly reflected in the surrendered lover's souls, represented as the golden spheres reflecting the image of the Greatest Name. After traversing the trials of existence in the material plane the wanderer returns to their pure state of existence circling around the divine Creator.

*And when thou hast attained this highest station and come to this mightiest plane, then shalt thou gaze on the Beloved, and forget all else. [Bah91, p. 38]*

The closing scene is of the lover's soul joining the other holy souls in a state of pure bliss circling around the Greatest Name surrounded by the spiritual sound of Allegri's *Miserere*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Seven Valleys is an attempt to use existing technology from the First-Person Shooter computer game genre to represent and evoke numinous experience. Throughout history religion, spirituality and the numinous have been deep and fundamental aspects of human experience on a personal and community level. Using the Bahá'í mystical treatise *The Seven Valleys* as inspiration this artwork has explored the concept of the numinous using the FPS game *Unreal Tournament 2003*. In doing so, the medium has been applied to an area previously uncharted. Utilizing specific capabilities of the technology has shed new light on the topic of the numinous and allowed people to look at it in a way previously unavailable. The fact that the whole work exists as a virtual world gives credence to the claim of religions that other spiritual worlds, perhaps with other states of being or consciousness, exist apart from, or even within, this world.

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