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Grand Theft Auto IV players don't visit the Libertonian for the art.



Searching for Infinity at GameStop

The new generation of video games attempts to give us what real life can't: endless possibility
By STEPHEN MARCHE

Many, many millions more people have visited the Libertonian, Grand Theft Auto IV's fake museum, than have visited the real Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Met, with its collection of the finest achievements of human civilization, receives 6.24 million visitors a year. GTA IV, in which you can shoot digital avatars of those artifacts with a machine gun, sold 25 million copies. Video games account for the bulk of American culture today: Minecraft is Web-searched more often than the Bible or Harry Potter, and GTA IV's successor, GTA V, earned \$1 billion in its first three days, making it the fastest-selling cultural product of all time. No other art form has the same scale and no other art form is in such a constant state of reinvention. Every few years has brought a revolution in gaming, bringing the form to now stand at the threshold of what traditionally has constituted the mark of the highest expression of art: the freedom of the viewer and the illusion of transcendence. Video games, which everybody, including their biggest fans, treats as disposable and shallow, are among the most profound works of art being made today. They reveal the depth of the collective craving for contact with the infinite.

Almost all great video games, and even the not-great ones, operate under the same premise: Come for the violence. Stay for the world. It's the stuff you barely notice that makes a game great—the sound you make as you land on sandy soil, the way an elephant

bucks as it charges through a fence. In Grand Theft Auto, the water hazards on the golf course have lost balls at the bottom. In Assassin's Creed, you can pet street dogs—a gesture more pleasant and much weirder than the traditional conversations with hookers. Even in an iPhone puzzle game like Monument Valley, with its rich M. C. Escheresque designs, the environment and the peculiar sensation of moving through impossible architecture as you navigate its labyrinths provide the excitement. Pretending to kill people is fun, but the sense of a world, much more than the killing, is why you sit down and then stand up after five hours and have no idea what happened.

Unfortunately, the world always wears off. Even the most gorgeously detailed of the open worlds, like the Himalayas of Far Cry 4, reach the inevitable moment when you arrive at their edge, the little sadness of illusion's limits. The sense of infinite potential in Minecraft is so attractive—100 million subscribers, sold to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion—that everyone is willing to forget the crudity of every other aspect of the game. But Minecraft only seems infinite. In the "Far Lands," the algorithms underlying the game's graphics start to disintegrate. Of course, given human nature, a man named Kurt J. Mac has quit his job to voyage in search of the land where digital illusion dissolves. The journey will take him 25 years. He currently has 370,000 subscribers to the YouTube channel on which he is documenting his journey. Only 22 years left to go.

It is at the edges that the questions these games start to pose become far more profound than they have any right to be. In Shadow

of Mordor, the combinatorial game-play system means that player and random chance create distinct story lines; if you fail to kill an Orc, he's promoted; if you win, you are given new powers—the game responds dynamically to the play. Underneath all the Tolkien nonsense—wraiths and magical bows and all that shit—is a completely different response to dying then starting over: Life in Shadow of Mordor doesn't begin again.

No Man's Sky's "infinite procedurally generated galaxy," expected for release this summer and probably the most anticipated game of 2015, is more extreme than Shadow of Mordor or Minecraft, meaning artificial intelligence will generate the world as it is explored. No Man's Sky will have 18,446,744,073,709,551,616 planets. Visiting all of them would require 580 billion years, or roughly 42 times the age of the universe. This is not technically infinity, but it is close enough. The world of No Man's Sky is not just uncharted but also, to a certain extent, unchartable. Artificial intelligence rather than human beings creates it without the involvement of the designers. Einstein and Bohr famously debated whether God played dice with the universe. The creators of No Man's Sky do.

But even these newly invented worlds lose their newness, no matter how infinite they manage to be. Games always leave the same inevitable deflation after the initial rush of joy—that's why you always need to buy more. In SimCity, you were supposed to be able to do anything, except it turned out you could do only a limited number of things. In Second Life, you could do whatever you could do in the real world, but who really wants that? Video games are inherently ephemeral even though they are great works of art, because the sense of a world emerging dissolves on contact. Perhaps all discovery is ephemeral, and all infinities turn out to be merely human.

That is the existential despair at the heart of Grand Theft Auto and Far Cry and Minecraft and no doubt No Man's Sky as well: They throw themselves hard against the limits of the reality they make with all the cleverness and computational power they can muster. Then there's just another end, just another edge beyond which they cannot pass. There is another way to imagine an infinite game, of course: as actual life. The gamification of the everyday is already encroaching on the sum total of human experience. There are already apps to turn your fitness regime into a game, to turn your shopping into a game, to turn

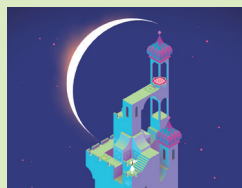
RECENT ADDITIONS TO THE \$46.5-BILLION-A-YEAR VIDEO-GAME INDUSTRY



GRAND THEFT AUTO V
Platforms: PlayStation, Xbox.
Earnings: \$1.98 billion.
Estimated cost to develop: \$137 million.
Setting: Fictional southern-California proxy Los Santos.
Chappelle's Show syndrome: The satirical treatment of violence, materialism, and easy sex in GTA V attracts players who enjoy violence, materialism, and easy sex.



FAR CRY 4
Platforms: Xbox, PlayStation.
Copies sold: 7 million.
Genre: First-person shooter.
Plot: A man returns to his Himalayan homeland and becomes a rebel leader in a civil war.
Uncontroversial sociopolitical stance: Anti-oppressive government regime.
Add-on adventure: Valley of the Yetis.
Yeti presence: Nominal.



MONUMENT VALLEY
Platforms: Mobile devices.
Number of downloads: 2.4 million.
Genre: Puzzle-solving, headache-inducing.
Puzzle: A series of mazes through which players lead the protagonist, Princess Ida.
Headache: A Japanese print- and minimalist-sculpture-inspired landscape that has been compared to the optical illusions of M. C. Escher.



SHADOW OF MORDOR
Platforms: Windows, PlayStation, Xbox.
Genre: Third-person fantasy.
Setting: J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium.
Legendarium? The fictional universe in which Lord of the Rings is set.
Plot: A ranger seeks revenge against the evils of Sauron for murdering his family.
Bummer! Totally.



MINECRAFT
Platforms: All of 'em.
Creator: Overweight Swedish billionaire Markus "Notch" Persson.
Objective: Players choose "creative" or "survival" mode, both of which involve world-building—resource gathering, domicile constructing—in an archaic agrarian setting.
So it's sort of like a medieval fantasy version of SimCity? Sure.



NO MAN'S SKY
Platforms: PlayStation, eventually Windows.
Genre: Single- or multi-player adventure.
Release date: 2015.
Protagonist: Interplanetary explorer/botanist/zoologist/space combatant.
Setting: Virtually limitless, procedurally generated open universe.
Not for: Completists.

your marriage into a game. Tinder turns sex into a game. Swipe left. Swipe right. For a few extra dollars, you can take back your last move. What happens when Facebook manages to combine the virtual reality of Oculus with the social network? How will that game—working title: Status—be different from what we used to call society?

The revolutions in gaming are the perfect product of a postrevolutionary age: They generate worlds of vast choice in which you can't really change anything. Exactly like the Internet or the mall. No matter how much variety you can blow up, the structures of life remain standing. Welcome to the fundamental condition of our time. It's available on Xbox or PS4.