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Machinima: Limited, Ghettoized, and Spectacularly Promising

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Abstract

The author assesses machinima's role in the contemporary cultural and academic milieu, and whether online video sharing sites like YouTube were important but not essential in the diffusion of machinima. Machinima's apparent user-friendliness is also questioned. The author concludes that machinima appeals to a traditional technophile demographic: white, male, middle class, age 14 to 45. Although the vast majority of machinima are self-referential and game-based, the medium as a whole could expand beyond gaming. Machinima is a powerful and versatile filmmaking practice, not a simple byproduct of gaming.

Keywords

3D • animation • democratization • etymology • fandom • machinima • production

I am a machinima professional. By that, I mean I am one of the very few people in the world (between 10 and 50, best guess) who derive most of their income from machinima. I am also one of the two people who coined the term, and have been using it to tell stories since it was referred to as '*Quake* moviemaking'.

As such, it is both gratifying and startling to see the rise in academic interest in machinima. Of course, it is a perfect topic for academic analysis – an almost accidental art form, derived from the heady stew of the computer games world and the internet, mostly typified by amateur rather than professional creators. It is a perfect microcosm, small enough to examine on its own. But to do that is, to use the popular phrase, 'Doin' It Wrong'.

I am very skeptical of attempts to examine machinima in a vacuum. It is part of a larger movement toward the democratization of visual media, as part of the long-term historical trend of technology-driven art forms becoming increasingly accessible. Print, audio, and moving pictures have all steadily come down in cost and up in flexibility over the second half of the 20th century in particular, but it is easy to argue that the trend goes back as far as Gutenberg.

What is machinima doing in the middle of this? It is the combination of two elements: one, the updating, via technology, of a mostly disused way of creating visual stories – puppetry; and two, the effect of ‘consumerization’ of high-end 3D animation techniques as a result of the real-time nature of computer games. Machinima is a subset of puppetry in many ways, i.e. direct physical control of a character model in real time. Puppetry, one of the oldest visual art forms, had fallen out of widespread usage by the 1980s with the exception of some special effects in Hollywood movies, but the ability to transfer real-world manipulation in real time to digital characters gives it a new lease of life. Even here, it is easy to argue that machinima is in the same wave as performance capture in that regard, and indeed I would argue that machinima and performance capture are very much converging with motion capture coming to the home with the Nintendo Wii and Microsoft Kinect.

The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences (2005) has defined machinima as ‘filmmaking within a real-time, 3D virtual environment’ for nearly half a decade now. At the same time, machinima is routinely considered by people studying or commenting on the genre to be at best a niche pursuit. This is clearly ridiculous. Real-time animated movie-making is not a niche pursuit unless you wish to claim that Robert Zemeckis and James Cameron are niche filmmakers; both of them used real-time 3D techniques for *Christmas Carol* and *Avatar*. What we are seeing now with machinima is the equivalent of the films of the 1900s – crude developments of what will become increasingly sophisticated technologies. Machinima’s combination of computer-generated expression from human-generated parameters (WETA’s *Massive* or *Moviestorm*’s timeline) and performance capture (whether that be capture in Cameron’s million-dollar performance capture volume or the capture of the *Red vs. Blue* team’s thumb movements on their Xbox controllers) are clearly the direction that one school of filmmaking is heading.

The restrictions on film have always been rather ridiculous for something claiming to be a true artistic medium. In order to tell made-up stories, we have to spend a lot of money recreating and faking that make-believe. Where film as a whole is moving is toward the freedom afforded to the comic artist or the novelist, where anything that can be imagined can be created. Currently, the techniques that were and are being pioneered by machinima creators look like they are a big part of that puzzle, just like digital distribution and reduced costs look like they are part of freeing the medium from the tyranny of up-front financing.

At the same time, it is equally erroneous to believe that machinima could not exist without digital distribution or even without YouTube. Machinima.com

was founded in 2000, 5 years before YouTube launched, and the first 100,000 viewer pieces of machinima arrived a year or two later. Even broadband is not a requirement for machinima. I was running machinima.com for the first year from a dial-up connection, and my first two films were launched before broadband was widely available. What machinima in its current form absolutely requires is sufficiently powerful 3D technology that we can create reasonably convincing human characters on a home PC. Even digital video technology is not necessary – ‘*Quake* Movies’ were all edited in-game. Internet distribution is certainly very helpful, but there are plenty of examples of participatory media from the time before widespread internet access.

If the internet went away tomorrow, machinima would not disappear. It might become more limited and certainly there would be less international conversations about the topic, but it would still exist, just like fan-films existed before the internet. It is part of a larger wave – the increasing sophistication and fluidity of digital information. That advance is responsible for the internet, digital filmmaking, and machinima, and all of them are advancing in parallel.

The rhetoric around machinima, and around this larger wave, all implies that it is open to anyone; that now everyone can make any film they want. That’s a beautiful dream, but at the moment it is just not true. Machinima opens up participation to a lot of people, but by no means everyone.

Who can’t make a film with machinima? Anyone without a high degree of familiarity with computers and specifically games interfaces; anyone who does not have a moderately powerful computer; anyone who wishes to construct narratives that are not currently covered by the 3D assets available (try creating a period-costume version of Julius Caesar without expert knowledge and see how far you get); as far as actually contributing to the conversation, anyone who is uncomfortable with distributing their work on open internet channels and has no other access to distribution. Obviously, all of these limitations skew the machinima world toward the traditional technophile demographic: white, male, middle class, age 14 to 45. There are prominent machinima creators who defy this, but the vast majority of machinima is produced by white males for the consumption of white males. (Interestingly, in light of the traditionally almost exclusively male profession of film directing, the area that machinima has the least problem with is sexism. Many of the most prominent machinima creators are female, and *The Sims 2* machinima scene is almost female dominated.)

There is also spectacularly little non-English-language machinima. A certain amount of German and a little French machinima exist, but as for non-first-world countries, I am aware of exactly two pieces of Chinese machinima, no Indian machinima, and absolutely nothing from Africa.

Machinima is certainly providing access to the creation of visual media to many people who were previously excluded. But universal access is still a fair way off. Nonetheless, it is providing access to the creation of media to a vast number of people. In addition, machinima’s unique advantage is the way it opens up creation of specific types of story or setting which were previously extremely exclusive. Action movies, epic scenes, science fiction and fantasy films, all of



Figure 1 *When We Two Parted* (WWTP-Print-I) (Strange Company, 2008).



Figure 2 *BloodSpell* (Screen16 and *BloodSpell* Shot 1) (Strange Company, 2007).

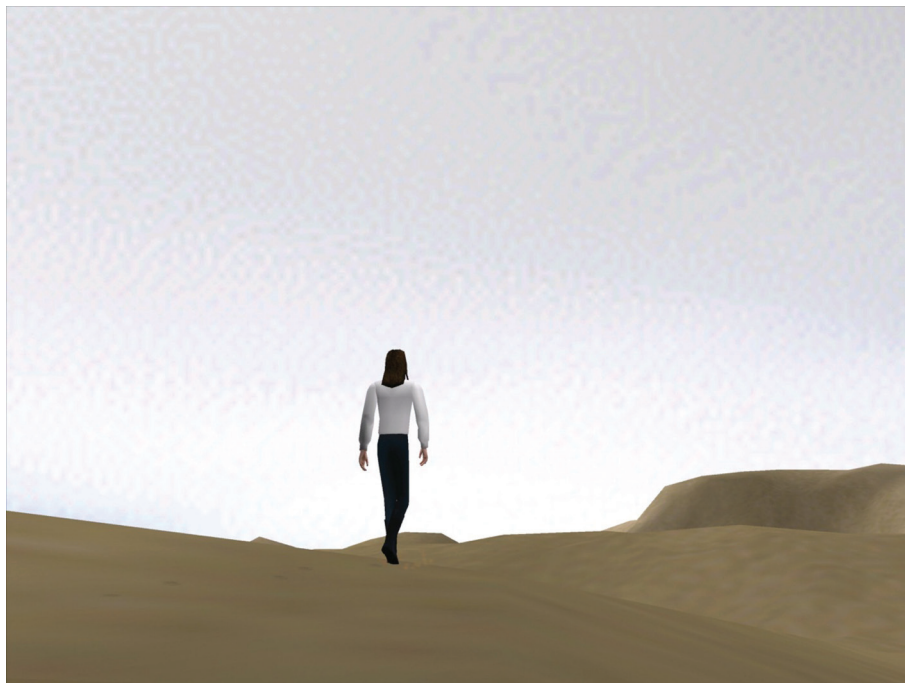


Figure 3 *Ozymandias* (*Ozymandias* - 3) (Strange Company, 1999).



Figure 4 *Ozymandias* (Screen 16) (Strange Company, 1999).

these were very difficult to create without millions of dollars before machinima, and now they are accessible to a far larger group.

But is it truly the same as film creation, or is machinima merely a byproduct of the video games it was birthed from? For me the answer to this is obvious, but many people seem to believe that because the act of creation may have initiated in technology originally designed for a game, machinima can be nothing more than an ad for the game. The Ill Clan's '*Hardly Workin*' (2001) bears no resemblance to the game used to create it in form or content. It is hard to see how a film about two mishap-prone lumberjacks working in a restaurant is an advert for the violent space opera of *Quake II*, the engine it was created in. My own *Ozymandias* (1999) and *When We Two Parted* (2008) are adaptations of the poems of Shelley and Byron, and are not tied to any game in particular. Creators using Moviestorm, iClone, 3D Game Studio and arguably Second Life are not using games at all, so it is rather hard to see them as free advertising or particularly heavily tied to games culture. Many of the creators involved in those areas aren't even gamers.

Much machinima can certainly be characterized as fan-fiction (Rufus Cubed's *The Return*, 2005) or commentary on the games medium (Rooster Teeth's *Red vs. Blue*, 2003), but there is a considerable body of academic research on the difference between fan interaction with a brand and advertising of that brand. And there is plenty of machinima, even when made in games, which has little or no connection to the brand of the game that was used as a tool to create it. My feature film *BloodSpell* (2007) was made using the game *Neverwinter Nights*, but contains no characters, locations, gameplay elements or references to or from the game; instead it creates an entirely new fictional universe. Hence, it seems rather simple to draw the line between promotion and self-expression. The vast majority of machinima created is clearly self-expression, sometimes born out of a love of a particular fictional world, sometimes not.

Whether machinima is visually accessible and consumed by the larger world is a more complex question. I have increasingly taken to referring to the 'gamer ghetto' in which the vast majority of machinima remains trapped, partially because the aesthetic of machinima is more accessible to gamers, partially because most machinima creators are peculiarly unwilling to publicize their efforts. However, a body of machinima has by now managed to break out into the wider world. Phil Rice's *Male Restroom Etiquette* (2005) made it as far as the Jay Leno show (although sadly never appeared thanks to copyright issues). *BloodSpell* garnered considerable interest from the literary science fiction and fantasy community – not the same as the gamer community at all. Film critic Roger Ebert commented on *Ozymandias*, which is being used in several universities as a teaching aid.

Much machinima is, intentionally or unintentionally, stuck within the gamer ghetto, but there is no reason why that has to be so for the entire medium. A person making a film using machinima is making a film, not performing some mysterious other process. Indeed, he or she is using the same core technologies as James Cameron, albeit in a radically different way.

And so we understand what we are seeing with machinima: one early implementation of the technologies that will unquestionably form the future of the visual media and storytelling as a whole. Machinima is nothing more, and nothing less, than one of the first dust clouds on the horizon of the 21st-century story.

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Hugh Hancock coined the term 'machinima', founded the website machinima.com and directed the ground-breaking machinima feature film *BloodSpell* (2007). After 13 years working professionally with machinima, he now works combining machinima and performance capture, most recently on *Death Knight Love Story* (2010), starring Joanna Lumley, Jack Davenport, Anna Chancellor and Brian Blessed.

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