

Machinima: Video Game As An Art Form?

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Abstract

This paper examines the new audiovisual form emerging from the video game field, Machinima. Machinima is the “art of making animated movies in a 3D virtual environment in real time” (Marino, 2004, p. 2). More simply, it means making films from video games. Studying this new hybrid form, this communication seeks to investigate the present and the future of these practices, which aspire to become a medium itself.

After the exploration of the characteristics of this new technology, I will investigate its consequences on the video game industry, demonstrating how video games are used in new ways, i.e. not as a playing hobby but as a technology for producing audio-visual art, animated films to be more exact.

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to consider a recent hybrid form emerging from the video game scene, Machinima. According to the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences (AMAS), Machinima is defined as “animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment” (Marino, 2004, p. 1). In short, it means making an animated film from a video game engine. For John Gaeta, the visual effects supervisor of the movie *The Matrix*, “experiential simulation and interactive entertainment have introduced a chaos factor to art unlike any seen before it” (Marino, 2004, p. ix). With the evolutionary but still dominant characteristics of traditional storytelling lately dressed up by new media forms, a mutation has emerged.

As we will see, Machinima as a hybrid form illustrates a convergence that is manifesting itself in many ways. As Henry Lowood said in “Real-Time Performance: Machinima and Game Studies”, a text that I strongly refer to:

The history of machinima illustrates a number of themes in the appropriation of game technology to create a new narrative, even artistic medium [...such] as technologies of modification, subversion, and community-developed content. (Lowood, 2005, p. 15)

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The convergence at work in Machinima can be found on several levels. Aesthetically, the cinema, animation and video games imagery are merging into a new hybrid form. From a theoretical perspective, Machinima illustrates the recent theories of inter-mediality and new inter-relationships between many research areas. Machinima recalls the legacy of cinema for the evolution of video games, as well as “the return of the repressed” as proposed by Manovich, since “animation [...] gave birth to cinema and slipped into the margins... only to reappear as the foundation of digital cinema” (Manovich, 2001, p. 302). Moreover, Machinima has finally allowed the encounter between art and video games. Thus, I will now explore the singular bond which has developed between video games and art in Machinima, bringing along new cultural practices such as art mods (modifications) and the emergence of a participatory culture to video games, as already was anticipated by Henry Jenkins with other media forms (Jenkins, 2003, p. 286-292). Finally, I will briefly emphasize the significance of Machinima for video game studies.

Machinima Studies

Machinima are usually associated with the video game world, mainly because the tools and settings for producing Machinima come from the game industry and Machinima are almost exclusively created by the gamers’ community. However, Machinima are also easily associated with digital cinema, since Machinima’s production techniques are similar to filmmaking practices. Nevertheless, the study of Machinima as a new form or movement has come principally from the new media and digital arts studies. Machinima’s imagery and practices can easily be analyzed through Bolter and Grusin’s notion of *remediation*, i.e. the appropriation of content of one media or art form by another (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Moreover, its exhibition system is similar to the online distribution of Web movies or Net art, as covered by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*.

The interest from art historians and new media scholars in Machinima can explain why Machinima has been regarded by many as an art form. Recently, discourses about Art Games (Cannon, 2003; Holmes, 2003; Ploug, 2005; Stalker, 2005) have been keen to include Machinima in their categorization. For Philippa Stalker, an Art game can be defined as:

...specifically a video game, normally PC as opposed to console based, that generally but not exclusively explores social or political issues through the medium of video games. This artistic appropriation of the video game medium, normally manifests in the form of a patch or modification on an existing commercial game, and is designed to change the way the game functions and thereby the way that the player/viewer interacts with the game. (Stalker, 2005, p. 3)

Therefore, she categorizes Machinima as a non-interactive art mod form. This singular consideration of Machinima brings a whole new perspective in the relation between art and video games, since the definition of Machinima as an art form is with regards to the art discourse as opposed to a video game discourse. Situating art games within the video game discourse would thus involve discussion of very different principles from those of the art discourse, as well as a completely different approach [...], as Philippa Stalker notes:

...the focus shifts to issues that are relevant only to the game within which they appear and the relevant modes of art critical discourse [...], as opposed to discussing things such as narrative [or rules], which are relative to most commercial video games [and video game discourse]. (Stalker, 2005, p. 2)

This kind of theoretical shift highlights the disjunction mentioned above between video games and art in Machinima. The art mod, which implies the modification of a video game engine to create something new, is a striking example of remediation, i.e. a re-appropriation and re-using of media content by another media or platform. The player, or should we say the artist, who creates Machinima draws on the game experiences and produces an artwork that looks as much like an animated movie as like a video game in which the player has no influence. The remediation process in Machinima can not only be seen as the “convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development” as claimed by Frank Dellario on the website of the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences (www.machinima.org), but also as the merging of the commercial and the contemporary. Herein lies the difficulty - what label is the creator of Machinima to be given? Is he or she a player-producer as Katie Salen (2004, p. 539) suggests? Is he or she a ‘poacher,’ as Henry Jenkins (2006, p. 39) contends? Or simply an artist? In the Machinima community, participants often call themselves “Machinimartists”.

Consequently, artist-scholars like Rebecca Cannon often distinguish Machinima art mods from Machinima fan mods (Cannon, 2003, p. 4). The two involve animations made using computer games, however, Machinima art mods are made by artists, with an artistic vision in mind. In this way, they may be used for “more conceptual, abstracted and/or purely aesthetic uses” (Cannon, 2003, p. 4). Paul Marino, co-founder of the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences and the first to write a book on Machinima, called this genre “Visionary Machinima” (Marino, 2005). German Machinimartist Friedrich Kirschner is renowned in the community for having created Visionary (or abstract) Machinima. For example, *The Journey* (2004) received many nominations from Machinima festivals and was the winner of the Unreal Contest organized by Epic Games in 2005. Another of his works, *person2184* (2005) received awards for Best Technical Achievement and Best Visual Design at the 2005 Machinima Film Festival. Both of these Machinima were filmed in real-time inside the game *Unreal Tournament 2004* (Epic Games, 2004), even if the aesthetic result is far from the actual gameplay of the Epic game.

Machinima and Performance

The convergence of art and video games in Machinima can also take place when we look at Machinimartists not only as players-producers, technical experts or artists, but also as performers. For Henry Lowood, Machinima is in this way an example of “high-performance play”, emerging primarily from “the inter-relationships of gameplay, technical virtuosity, and storytelling” (Lowood, 2005, p. 11).

For example, the Machinima *Dance, Voldo, Dance*, by Chris Brandt (2005), is a distinctive dance video taken from the gameplay of the fighting game *Soul Calibur* (Namco & Yotoryama, 1999) for the Dreamcast. The two players, or performers, have meticulously choreographed their moves, to achieve a superb example of gameplay as performance. Another example of performance, but this time as technical virtuosity, is the Machinima *Game On* (Vogt, 2005), a hybrid live-action and real-time gameplay movie created with the Unreal engine, which

received the Best Picture award at the 2005 Machinima Film Festival. This short movie underscores a strong tendency for storytelling among Machinima community. Looking at the history of Machinima, Lowood made clear that the advent of Machinima could not be explained merely as technological appropriation, but instead in the social nature of gameplay performance:

Machinima movies depend on the interest game players have in watching other players. Machinima is created within and for virtual communities of enthusiasts devoted to multiplayer and competitive games. A technical and social infrastructure built around computers, the Internet, and computer games [...] accounts for the distribution of these movies. The “participatory” culture of game development, with its blurring of the line between producer and consumer of popular media, has grown out of this strong linkage of game technology and virtual communities. (Lowood, 2005, p. 11)

The history of Machinima began with players who wanted to show their skills to other players in early First-Person-Shooter games (like *DOOM* or *Quake*), as a way for players to built their reputation, rather than to share their skills for any instructive purpose. These demo movies and speed-running videos radically changed the position of the player within a game:

Spectatorship and the desire to share skills were the cornerstones of the creation of a player community eager to create and distribute gameplay movies. The result was nothing less than the metamorphosis of the player into a performer... [As a result] game-based moviemaking has woven technology, virtual communities, play, and public performance together. (Lowood, 2005, p. 13-14)

Transforming the cultural context of gaming, early Machinima exemplified what Katie Salen has called “transformative play” (Salen, 2004, p. 305). The play of game modifications for artistic or narrative purposes altered the rigid structure in which games takes shape in the first place, i.e. inside the game industry. The transgression of the boundary between the player and the industry by Machinimartists reveals a convergence that is more conflictual than it seems initially.

Machinima and Subversion

Even when Machinimartists just want to use the game engine technology for narrative or aesthetic means, they nevertheless create a friction, a strategy of resistance between the game creators and game consumers. This subversive model has quickly attracted attention to the game industry. Game developers (like id Software [*DOOM*, *Quake*], Valve [*Half-Life*], or Epic [*Unreal*]) decided to release their game engine source code and even include modification tools with their games to allow gamers to modify the games according to their needs. Other companies, like Microsoft, saw these practices as “unhealthy” for “building a mass market and making powerful, easy-to-use software broadly accessible to consumers” (Cannon, 2005, p. 2). Recently, Microsoft stopped the three-year development of a *Halo* fan mod called “Halogen”, claiming that using ideas and designs from the *Halo* universe infringes on the intellectual property of Bungie's original game.

Microsoft's reaction to what it considers a threat to the industry reveals the social and political issues behind art mod forms such as Machinima, where game-movie making requires a mixture of technical expertise (normally reserved to the creators inside the industry) and subversion. Technology, as well as the media of video game and cinema, has become a field of play for players-producers. And the industry cannot fully anticipate "how the rules will play out", as players go beyond the formal structure of industrial game production.

Machinima and Game Studies

As we have seen, Machinima has transgressed many conventional limits, first in cinema, video games and animation, then between art (underground) and the commercial (popular), and finally between industry (system) and the community (subversion). As a result, we can now see the significance of Machinima for game studies. First, it helps to bring art discourse into video game studies, with the categorization of Machinima as an Art game and a performance play. Of course, Machinima is only one form of game-based performance, but, as Lowood indicates, "its significance for game studies lies in showing how game players can open up the performance process to technology and play" (Lowood, 2005, p. 15). For him, the importance of machinima for game studies is "that it exemplifies the three-fold, interlocking nature of high-performance play: as performance of technical exploits, as performance of game skills, and as public performance for an audience" (Lowood, 2005, p. 15). In continuity with many video game researches, this gives video games a higher cultural value, where they can now be seen as social and cultural interactive entertainment instead of as mindless amusement for young lonely boys.

Moreover, Machinima compels the game industry to consider the player's activities (community), needs (openness) and interests (creativity), beyond the limited vision of the player as consumer. As Aphra Kerr states, "a weakness with much political economic work to date is that it focuses on the formal market while tending to ignore the work of academics, artists and user/fan groups which operate on the fringes of the market" (Kerr, 2006, p. 73). While the content that this community produces is not (yet) bought and sold, it may nevertheless "contribute to overall innovation and diversity in the industry" (Kerr, 2006, p. 73). And in the same way, even though Machinima may not be relevant to renowned video game theories such as ludology or narratology, they may nevertheless contribute to the overall growth of game studies.

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