

Chapter 7

Machinima: A Meme of Our Time

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an overview of machinima, an important socio-cultural movement that originated in the 1990s gameplay movement known as demoscene. The chapter presents a review of literature and key issues related to its evolution. Modes of its production (perfect capture, screen capture, asset compositing, bespoke machinimation) are described, along with the range of different genres that have emerged, including fan vid, parody, documentary, music video, advertising, reportage, reenactment, activist, pre-visualization and artistic forms. Thereafter, the chapter identifies channels of distribution and growth trajectories for each. The chapter then presents four key phases of the emergence of machinima, identifying the key actors and roles of organizations within each phase. As a movement that continues to evolve, the discussion presented is by no means a final analysis, thus the aim of the chapter is to present a 'state of the art' overview of its emergence and development.

INTRODUCTION

As a contemporary movement embedded within creative technologies practices, and a growing and rapidly evolving socio-cultural phenomenon, machinima is the making of original works using and reusing the content of 3D computer games engines. Since the first film, recorded and released in 1996 by the gaming clan known as The Rangers, there are now over 2B creators of machinima, using a range of platforms within games and more widely accessible social media to disseminate their creative works. Its latest manifestation can be seen in the Let's Play community, live action gameplay with dedicated virtual channels some of which regularly generate viewership of over 1M people. It is inherently a contemporary example of creative technologies in action, based on the artistic and aesthetic competencies of those making the work, but embedded within hacking and modding cultures, deeply rooted in new technologies typically associated with computer video gaming.

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This chapter explores the emergence and growth of machinima, drawing on findings from an Arts & Humanities Research Council (UK) funded Cultural Values Project undertaken by the author (see machinima.dmu.ac.uk). The project investigated the ‘state-of-the-art’ of machinima and provides a summary of perspectives from a range of stakeholders including professional and amateur artists, indie and AAA games developers and digital arts curators from around the world. Thus, this chapter will draw on this research to present an overview of the emergence and growth of machinima communities of practice alongside games technologies.

The chapter aims to present:

- A review of relevant literature in relation to the emergence and growth of machinima;
- An overview of the different formats of machinima, such as perfect capture, screen capture, asset compositing and bespoke machinimation;
- An evaluation of the evolution of machinima related to video game technologies;
- An analysis of the future of machinima and its socio-cultural evolution; and,
- A list of key artefacts with weblinks in relation to research findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Machinima is the making of original content using 3D computer games engines and gameplay recorded in real time. Machinima creators (‘machinimators’) now draw on a multiplicity of computer video games but this type of co-created and participatory content was originally popularised by the growth in fantasy and simulated role-play environments such as World of Warcraft®, Halo®, Grand Theft Auto® and The Sims®. It originates from the ‘demoscene’ whereby computer ‘geeks’ seek to promote the technical capabilities of their computers through demonstrations of gameplay in online fora.

The first machinima film is widely recognized as being *Diary of a Camper*, recorded and produced in 1996 by a group of gamers calling themselves The Rangers. Since then, machinimators have created and distributed tens of thousands of fan vids, parodies, satires, reenactments and original content through online fora in an increasingly complex ecology of technologies and new media. Its influence has been widespread, impacting digital arts, film, new media platforms and even politics through the user-generated co-created and produced content, some of which has been used as ‘pre-production’ for big budget films that have subsequently been realised in mainstream environments such as Hollywood (eg., The Lord of the Rings and Resident Evil).

Its growth in popularity has impacted games developers significantly because it challenges the ways in which they view their intellectual property and the role of their customers (games players) in the creation of commercial value, effectively testing the boundaries between authorship and ownership. In turn, this has resulted in a shift in thinking about the format and framing of end-user license agreements (by eg., Microsoft, EA Games). Content has now spilled out from the internet into digital arts festivals and galleries (e.g. Atopic, France; Animatu, Portugal; Bitfilm, Germany; Phoenix Square, Leicester UK): machinima is inherently a convergence of technology, digital social practice and culture.

Importantly, some commentators have described it as ‘the visual cultural phenomenon of the 21st century’ (Greenaway, 2010). Machinima is also uniquely used to provide insight into social ‘virtual’ actions that take place within 3D online environments such as Second Life®, through recordings and

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