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## Eight Questions (and Answers) about Machinima

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### Abstract

The author argues that, unlike traditional filmmaking or video recording through inexpensive digital videocameras, machinima presents a high barrier of entry, remaining a relatively complex method of creating videos. In fact, producing rendered animations generated from recordings of gameplay requires fairly high-end hardware capable of running real-time graphics intensive 3D or pseudo-3D environments. Nonetheless, machinima has the potential to make a real impact on the political landscape and can be considered a relatively sophisticated form of art, although one has to remember that art is socially constructed and it is not an intrinsic quality of an artifact.

### Keywords

3D • art • cinema • creativity • democratization • distribution • history • machinima • online video games • visual culture • *World of Warcraft*

*1. Does machinima align itself with other contemporary media in being open to anyone as a contributor? Is it a visual medium that could only occur in the age of YouTube?*

Machinima is not really all that open to anyone as a contributor in my opinion – at least not at this point. It is certainly not as open as standard html authoring via basic text editors or third-party apps, image and sound editing, video production and editing via different types of cameras and phones, or participation in social media forums of various types using hosted and templated gateways provided either free of charge or for limited cost. There's a fairly high bar to entry. To produce it in the form most people think of – as rendered animations generated



Figure 1 *WTF?!* (Mario Land, Robert F. Nideffer, 2007-8).

from recordings of gameplay – requires fairly high-end hardware capable of running real-time graphics intensive 3D or pseudo-3D environments. Setting up sets and shoots, animating characters, doing post-production, and so on is pretty machine, labor, and time intensive. It has got better in certain cases, and on certain platforms, due to improved tools and the expanded interest on the part of some game makers to support the practice. There are a variety of other approaches of course, and one can be pretty creative and flexible about what counts as legitimate machinima, which then changes the equation. Just as experimental approaches to various media created in the context of a critically informed art practice has historically always pushed at the boundaries of that medium (whether it be painting and drawing, sculpture, photography, theater, performance, net art, etc.) in terms of methods and materials, where and how it is shown, and so on, the same holds true for machinima. For example, recently I've been using machinima tools and techniques to make playable Flash games instead of canned or pre-cooked videos played back on YouTube. The first of these, called *WTF?!* was a *World of Warcraft* inspired parody where I attempted to do a bit of game studies/critique in the context of a playable game.<sup>1</sup> Does or should that count as machinima (see Figure 1)?

With regard to the second part of the question, YouTube had nothing to do with the creation of the form; however, it is obviously serving as a key platform for distribution. Providing that level of accessibility to the material increases audience, popularity, and often, for better or worse, approaches to content creation.

2. *Is machinima bringing real innovation in the field of visual culture? How is this medium contributing to the democratization of production and distribution of ideas in an increasingly connected society?*

I remember the first time I watched a piece of this new type of 'in-game cinema' that was being called machinima. I was both fascinated and confused, and that confusion I was feeling, in a way, takes me back to the first question. I couldn't immediately figure out what it was. I knew I was watching a video, and it was clearly produced from a game. I was pretty confident it had not been done by the company that had produced the game. But I had no idea how it was done. Did the person(s) doing it have access to secret company technology? Was it clever recreation of the game characters' environment using tools external to it? I had no idea at the time, but formally it struck me as pretty innovative and creative, even though the actual content was pretty silly and conceptually unsophisticated. Around the same time, in early 2000, I curated a game art exhibition called 'Shift-Ctrl' with my colleague Antoinette LaFarge.<sup>2</sup> In that show I included some work by Eddo Stern, a young artist and recent CalArts grad who had been doing a lot of game inspired projects. One of the pieces was called *Summons to Surrender*, where Eddo was doing 24-hour 'video surveillance' of *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *Ashteron's Call* through the use of bots (customized computer controlled sentinels) that he had created to perform automated behaviors in the live online game environments.<sup>3</sup> He then recorded those scripted behaviors and the resulting interactions with other online players, and incorporated that into the piece. It was a pretty innovative game-art piece. Was it machinima? It certainly satisfied a number of criteria in the sense that it was using video recording techniques inside a real-time game environment with puppeted actors from the game itself. Eddo had also done an earlier piece called *Sheik Attack*, which I often show in classes and talk about as a kind of machinima (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

It's a straight video piece that weaves together Israeli folk music, Zionist utopian fantasies, and footage shot from real-time strategy games (RTS) and simulation game sessions. Or what about a work like *Velvet Strike* by Brody Condon and Anne Marie Schleiner, where they did a mod of the popular game



Figure 2 *Sheik Attack* (Eddo Stern, 1999–2000).



Figure 3 *Velvet Strike* (Brody Condon and Anne Marie Schleiner, 2002–4).

*Counter-Strike* where players were equipped with spray paint cans instead of automatic weapons, and could tool around the game space making graffiti that often provided socially, politically, and sexually charged commentary on the activities of the other players (see Figure 3)?<sup>5</sup>

Could this perhaps be thought of as a performance-based type of machinima? It also was staged, scripted, and recorded in the context of a real-time game session, then subsequently disseminated. What about pieces such as Condon's *defaultProperties* and *Waco Resurrection*, where he is using what are essentially machinima processes to recreate iconographic northern European religious paintings out of game assets that 'play back' for the viewer in a non interactive fashion (see Figure 4)?<sup>6</sup>

From my perspective, all these projects connect to the advent and development of what we call machinima, and bring innovation to the field of visual culture. Many of them also forge connections between things not commonly perceived as being in dialogue: games and medieval religious paintings, Israeli utopias and RTS games, first-person shooters (FPS) games and socio-political intervention, MMORPGs, and 24-hour puppeted surveillance. This, I believe, is significant work. All these works were done with little or no budget, using commonly available tools and techniques, and made electronically available, at least in part, to a variety of publics that in the recent past would not so readily have had access to them. This is certainly transformational. As to whether it's democratizing? Well, in the sense that increasing numbers of



**Figure 4** *Resurrection (after Bouts)*  
(Condon, 2007).

people now have the possibility to participate in a production and dissemination process, I suppose. But the result of that participation, and the ideological reproduction that often occurs as part of it, is another question.

3. *Do you expect that real-time animated movie-making – machinima – will exert a long-term influence over visual culture? What is the future of machinima? Will it remain a niche pursuit? Will people still be talking about it (or something like it) in 50 years?*

Machinima is already getting historicized. Thanks in no small part to Henry Lowood, Paul Marino, and many others – as well as to venues such as the one that culminated in this! The term has entered the lexicon in pretty significant ways. Machinima is being taught in a variety of contexts inside and outside academia. It has been curated and exhibited in significant cultural institutions. It has been professionalized with the advent of organizations that now function as clearing houses and material stewards. It has sponsored competitions, corporate buy-in, and enjoyed more mainstream adoption in venues such as GDC, MTV, Hollywood, the games industry itself, and so on. So, yes, I think it will be remembered 50 years hence. As to what its future is ... well ... that's hard to speculate. I believe that if it continues to exist, what currently



is regarded as constituting the range of machinima will radically expand in terms of materials, tools, and techniques, and how those get deployed in relation to ideas and interaction. The boundaries between what we currently perceive as physical or real-life (RL) environments compared to virtual ones will completely blur. I'm continually surprised at how conceptually constipated we remain around these notions and at our apparent need to maintain such distinctions.

*4. As we spend more time in 'virtual' spaces, is there a need for a new documentary medium to record our experiences in those spaces? Is that medium machinima?*

Ha! Case in point. I didn't realize what a natural transition point the end of my last response would be to this next question. At least you had virtual in quotes! So my answer to this would be 'yes' and 'no', or 'maybe so'. There's always need for new documentary mediums – that's what mutates the form and keeps it interesting. What those are, I haven't a clue. Machinima's certainly been an important part of that mutation recently. As game culture and technology matures, so too will the various approaches to working with the platforms, creative contexts, and content they provide. It may well continue to be referred to as machinima, but I'm sure it will look and feel quite different. I'm also pretty confident the evolution of the form will happen far more rapidly than it has with other media such as writing, photography, film, and video.

*5. Does machinima have the potential to make a tangible impact on the political landscape in the sense that it gives anyone and everyone a voice through this new outlet for expression? Or does it require too much effort to make or to understand to have this sort of widespread influence? How has machinima affected the domain of politics thus far?*

Yes, I think machinima, just as is the case with other media, has the potential to make real impact on the political landscape. Of course, how we conceive of terms such as 'political', 'impact', and for that matter 'landscape' is also a difficult and challenging question. I would take issue with the notion that it gives 'anyone and everyone a voice' however. That's a bit like saying pen and paper give anyone a voice. While at a certain level, one can assert the *potential* to have voice is there for almost anyone; the potential to be *heard* is certainly not. That potential becomes skewed along a whole host of dimensions, as many, far smarter people than I have demonstrated. Hell, it wasn't so long ago (early/mid-90s) when anyone with a home page had a bigger 'footprint' on the internet than any corporate entity, since none of them had yet figured out an economic angle that would justify their participation. Good times. But I digress. If you mean the political landscape in terms of setting public policy, machinima's had very little if any impact I'm aware of. If you mean impact on the political landscape in the sense of influencing corporate policy with regard to their approach to product, machinima's done quite a bit. In fact, I think it's played a very important role in seeding and supporting the user-created content community, and in direct relation to that, in adopting a fairly progressive approach to issues of ownership, fair use, and copyright. These are important contributions. They've played a key role in ushering in new populations of players/creators using strategies of

mixing, mash-up, appropriation, reverse engineering, and the like, as core parts of their creative process. This has been happening for quite some time in music, video, and fine art – so it's interesting to see it embraced in relation to game culture, increasingly by the makers of the platforms and content being hacked (i.e. some of the major game companies such as Blizzard and Microsoft). This, to my knowledge, is rather unique. We didn't see, for example, music labels providing tools to the public in order to make recording songs from their albums, cassettes, CD-ROMs, and DVDs easier – in fact, we saw quite the opposite.

*6. Is appreciation of machinima too closely bound to game culture to expand its reach into other areas of visual culture? Is it simply a form of free advertising for game companies glorified as user-generated content? Can we draw the line between promotion and creative expression? What role does brand recognition play?*

No. No (though sometimes it may seem so). No (well we can try, but it always ends up non-linear). Relatively little, if I understand the question. In terms of recognizable product, it's certainly often there in terms of the platform/game engine used. I suppose you can tell *WoW* machinima from *Call of Duty* machinima from *Halo* or *Half-Life* machinima, etc. But in terms of the content being expressed through those forms, we don't really yet have the 'big-boys' (and boys they all were) of machinima like we think we have of film – the Hitchcocks, Godards, Kubriks, Kurosawas, Renoirs, or Bunuels that have been written into history. We rarely even hear about the Alice Guy-Blanches, Lois Webers, Dorothy Arzners, Germain Dulacs, Maya Derens or Shirley Clarkes. I'm actually really curious how the sex demographics break down in the machinima-making/directing community. I'll bet it's not so different from the early (and for that matter present) days of film. Let's hope development of the form facilitates more rapid change, and the histories to be written are more inclusive and permeable. Even something as deceptively simple as Wikipedia, specifically when looked at from a platform/infrastructure standpoint, plays a very important role in facilitating a more open process.

*7. What makes a piece of machinima 'art'? How do the choices made by the creators of machinima influence whether their work is considered artistic or culturally important? What are the trademarks of culturally relevant machinima? Is there anything intrinsic to the artifact itself or the notion of 'artistic machinima' that is simply a social construct?*

What makes something 'art' is probably one of the most hated and debated questions in the arts. I remember shortly after I took a job at UC Irvine I was invited to present some of my work to a group of social scientists and technologists who were part of a research organization on campus. They were very polite and seemingly interested. At the end, a rather eminent senior professor raised his hand and asked, 'So what makes this art?' I thought for a moment and replied, 'The fact that I'm in the Art Department.' At least they laughed. I guess I'm recounting this to make a fairly simple point, and this is where the sociologist in me stumbles out, that what comes to be counted as art is largely the result of those in positions of power defining it as such. So if, for example, Paul Marino or Eddo Stern get asked to curate a reel of machinima as part of an officially

sanctioned art exhibition, machinima becomes institutionally recognized, at least to a small but significant degree, as art.<sup>7</sup> As to the question of creative choices, it's as important to think about that from a curatorial standpoint as it is from an authorial one. I'm sure when Paul Marino and Eddo Stern were going through the growing archives of machinima, they had fairly clear ideas about what they thought would be 'fit' for display in a fine art context. Often it has to do with thwarting convention, doing the unexpected, bringing to light things that tend to remain hidden from view, clever critique, and so on. Ultimately, I'm more of a social constructionist than an essentialist, so I believe that processes of gate keeping, which includes the ability to define and create consensus by those in positions of power, play a far bigger role in determining what counts as art than does asserting some notion of 'intrinsic value' unique to the artifact itself.

8. *Specific iconic images, scenes, and encounters from machinima stay with us. Which, if any that you have experienced have had the most visual, critical, satirical or politically motivating impact, and why?*

*I'm Here For Hugs, Not For Fucks, Just Like Your Mother* by Acephale. Hands down. Because it captured in a flash, the tension and confusion manifest between two beings wanting entirely different things from each other at a moment of great pain and struggle, and the difficulty of either of them ever feeling satisfied, or able to meet the other's needs. It was all about the timing.

## Notes

1. *WTF?!* can be viewed and played at <http://aoedipus.net/>
2. More information on this exhibition is at <http://beallcenter.uci.edu/shift/home.html>
3. Eddo's piece *Summons to Surrender* is viewable at <http://stern.aen.walkerart.org/>
4. Eddo's piece *Sheik Attack* is viewable via his personal website at [http://www.eddostern.com/sheik\\_attack.html](http://www.eddostern.com/sheik_attack.html)
5. Information and images from this collaboration are viewable at <http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/>
6. Condon's piece *defaultProperties* is viewable at <http://www.tmpspace.com/baptism.html>; *Waco Resurrection* is viewable at <http://www.tmpspace.com/resurrection.html>
7. A move toward integrating machinima with officially sanctioned art exhibitions has already begun. For example, myself and Antoinette LaFarge curated 'Alt-Ctrl' at the Beall Center for Art and Technology in 2004 (<http://beallcenter.uci.edu/exhibitions/altctrl.php>); and in 2009, Grace Kook-Anderson curated 'WOW: Emergent Media Phenomenon' with assistance from Blizzard's curator Tim Campbell and Eddo Stern (<http://lagunaartmuseum.org/wow-emergent-media-phenomenon>).

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