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## Towards a Manifesto for Machinima

Tracy Harwood

### Abstract

The author examines the past, present and future of machinima, hereby defined as an art form in transition. Although both socially and culturally embedded in gaming cultures, machinima could expand well beyond gaming, as it represents a successful example of convergence of filmmaking, animation and games development. Although the medium has a strong artistic potential, the future trajectory of machinima will remain indelibly tied to games development, reflecting gaming and internet cultures. The author predicts that machinima will further evolve in line with developing curatorial expertise in its presentation to wider audiences and positioning within the digital arts movement.

### Keywords

3D • art • community • creativity • curation • demoscene • machinima • modding • taxonomy

Machinima is an art form in evolution. A machinima manifesto would recognize its distinctive attributes, creative endeavour, its technological, social and cultural context, and political position in relation to digital commerce. It would also call for visual arts curators to develop their skills, reflecting the demand for a range of innovative and risk-taking art experiences, and to represent machinima in particular within the broader digital and contemporary art worlds. This article examines these aspects and considers a future trajectory for machinima.

Machinima has distinctive characteristics that render it an emergent art form from which the creators are gaining increasing recognition. It is both socially and culturally embedded in gaming cultures. Its historical growth and contextual development are functions of the advancement of computer games as role-playing

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environments; the emergence and recognition of computer art; the internet as a facilitator of multimodal communication; and the aspiration for virtually enhanced (imaginary) lifestyles. It is the convergence of filmmaking, animation and games development. The attributes of real-time creation of content from 3D computer game engines, puppeteering and manipulation of game resources, modding and post-production editing, often using third-party applications, remain central to its identity. Further distinctive features are its mode and space of consumption: it is available online where it can be streamed or downloaded (mostly) for free. The dissemination of collaborative creative work by artists was made possible by Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and content-sharing sites, as well as games community sites. Spectatorship and dialogue with creators is actively encouraged in its critical evaluation.

As a creative endeavour, machinima is following a typical trajectory in its emergence as an art form: as a programming challenge to the creator, it is undertaken to test some new technology; it explores the psychological processes of creating the artwork; it is about the art itself (Boden, 2007). Whereas the *demoscene* is associated with testing the technologies, machinima is often closely associated with a particular games environment. Early works primarily sought either to record for posterity the gaming prowess of a closely tied network of friends or to extend a game narrative for a looser network of fans. Thus, games environments have provided the common language and subtext for games-based community-led discussion that enables machinima makers to work together to produce filmic works. At a more holistic level, the machinima community resonates with talent and expertise in game manipulation and sophisticated preferences for different styles of genres, writing and expression. Machinima, therefore, often reflects the deeply embedded sociocultural context



Figure 1 Screenshot of *Red vs. Blue*, Rooster Teeth Productions.  
URL: <http://roosterteeth.com/archive/?id=836>

of the original games environment, be it a first person shooter or fantasy role-playing game. Without knowing that context, it becomes difficult to make sense of the films, their qualities and content. One example of this is the comedic *Red vs. Blue* series by Rooster Teeth Productions which parodies its original *Halo* environment (Figure 1).

Convergence between culture and context has also influenced the emergence of machinima. A growing recognition by the digital arts community has resulted in it breaking out of the virtual space inhabited by the community into the real world. There are now numerous festivals and events that celebrate creative quality, and debate trends in associated technologies and consumption patterns. These activities reinforce the social bonds and values formed online but are increasingly played out in a digital arts environment. The visibility of machinima in the real world has coincided with the needs of games developers to establish more commercially viable propositions. From a commercial perspective, the marketplace for games is becoming increasingly crowded. As a consequence, profit margins are squeezed and this, along with the development lead times, shorter product lifecycles and large-scale investment needed to launch and position games with consumers to maximize returns, has necessitated games developers seeking new business models. The impact of these forces upon machinima is evident in two significant developments that lead to the notion that it is now a culturally relevant art form: first, the redevelopment of end-user licences which, depending upon the views of the developer, variously tighten or loosen the legal obligations of filmmakers and content distributors, including festivals. This has had the net effect that many machinima makers focus their creative energy on a few games environments that support their endeavours, especially where machinima makers have ambition to commercialize their work. Second, the creeping involvement of machinima makers with games developers, where their range of creative and technical skills are seen as valued assets, has resulted in the move from amateur to professional status of these filmmakers (Harwood and Garry, 2009).

Whilst on the one hand these influences appear to both restrict creativity and deprive the machinima community of its core of opinion leaders, on the other hand this has given rise to the next generation of machinima creators. These are not necessarily fan-producers with a commercial leaning, but artistic directors seeking to orchestrate and express their individual vision whilst encapsulating their creative inspiration and situating their work within the machinima tradition. One such example is *Push* by Lainy Voom, filmed in *Second Life* (Figure 2). The film explores issues of time and mortality in a surrealistic tradition reminiscent of the animation practices of Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay, and it pushes the boundaries towards art. With the recognition of these types of films in digital arts fora, including festivals and events, machinima has jumped into a new phase of creativity, doing so with greater awareness of the machinima commercial environment. It is this evolutionary step that suggests machinima as a distinctive art form should be positioned within a broader digital arts movement.

In order to underpin this new recognition, it is worth reflecting on the emergence of digital art and to consider aspects of authenticity and acceptance as they



Figure 2 Screenshot of *Push*, Lainy Voom. URL: <http://www.vimeo.com/5543976>

relate to the machinima genre. As has been debated in the context of digital arts, which also includes generative and interactive works, these concepts are challenging because of questions around authorship and ownership, the role of the audience, the uniqueness of the art, and the potential of the art experience to be transformational (Boden, 2007; Scaff, 2010). Critically, it is the audience that accepts the work and thereby gives credence to an individual or collective group of artists. In the context of machinima, authenticity is best seen along a continuum of innovation and risk: moving from a self-reflective medium to one that is respected for its artistic value and contribution to contemporary visual culture within the digital arts movement. This is problematic since it is the context and mode of consumption that inform the scope of recognition of these new forms of art. In the case of machinima, acceptance emerges online and is evidenced through dialogue between artist and audience and extended offline through its curation at festivals and events. Unlike many other digital art forms such as those described by Shanken (2007), the trace of the dialogue is visible online to outsiders and provides an evidence base upon which the work may be evaluated. Moreover, traditional art forms are typically consumed by audiences some time after the production process has been completed but, in the case of machinima works, a fundamental difference is the simultaneous production and consumption of the work, where works may be iteratively developed online (e.g. *Those of you who watched my machinima xxxxx entry (latest briefs), should I redo it and act more comfortable or is it fine as it is?*). One of the great challenges, however, is the lack of experience within the contemporary arts curating community in navigating and synthesizing the evidence that brings relevant works to the surface. Until these understandings are absorbed, there will be great difficulty in describing and curating this form of visual art in its extrinsic diversity.

Whilst machinima may in its broadest terms fall within Shanken's (2007) theme of communities, collaborations, exhibitions and institutions, it is necessary to consider categorization in more detail to build curatorial skills. Looking to contemporary arts for guidance seems an appropriate step. In the past, different approaches to categorization have included Panofsky's (1962) iconology, where provenance and authenticity support the process of classifying works by identifying significant elements and situating the work in its historical stylistic context, and by codifying primary content and secondary cultural symbolism. However, the focus on subject presents challenges when interpretation is central to understanding the artifact because, for example, the original art creator may well deliberately imbue an object with multiple meanings, a certain opaqueness, obscurity and abstraction so as to tease and entice an audience (Winget, 2009). Another common approach is to analyse form, such as texture and colour, which has been used to categorize work according to its quality (Aristotelian tradition) but in a non-mimetic way, that is, devoid of cultural context and interpretation (Gombrich, 1963). Finally, Summers (1991) suggests that art, defined as anything that is made, should be classified by its creative context. Much machinima reflects an inherent humour that juxtaposes the dimensions of virtual and real worlds making any attempt to classify it using these criteria an extremely complex task for those outside its cultural and creative context. To address the challenges, Winget (2009) proposes a taxonomy that overlays more traditional methods with anthropological information to enable a better understanding of the artwork and its social and cultural values. This may include:

- biographical features (birth and travels of the art work, such as the creator role, the space occupied by the work, and the purpose for its generation, as well as a record of ownership and placement for viewing, for example, by its relative position to other works, the ways in which it is viewed or approached by an audience, its social and cultural setting when in view);
- subject attributes, such as generic and specific descriptors of what it is about including any substitutive values;
- exemplified attributes, an important aspect of which is the matrix of its creation, and format, such as the materials used in creation of the work. Machinima's matrix is the game engine itself;
- relational attributes, such as the preparatory works that have led to the finished art piece; and
- spatial or temporal presentation of the work in relation to the viewing audience.

Such detailed information as implied by this approach is relatively easily accumulated from the mainly online lifecycle of machinima art, at least in the early stages of its emergence as a relevant piece. In a sense, machinima is also categorized online by osmosis through the social and value constructions of the entire community. Evidence exists within informal and disaggregated archives, such as content sharing, games and community channels and fora, where work may be threaded and tagged, and the experience of transformation played out in video, audio and text-based response. Some of the response is

also seen in re-produced machinima works. In using this taxonomy, however, not all machinima works are likely to emerge over time as transformational and relevant cultural experiences. This is because of its contextual environment. There are many thousands of machinima artists with their catalogues of works available online and each with little or no trace of audience participation (a number growing at an exponential rate). As the number of more contemporary works increases, and familiarity with the art form and participation grows, so the visibility of other works will degrade in the elastic environment of the internet. Thus, proportionally few notable examples will rise to a prominent level, complete with the evidence to support their emergence and originality. Curators must, therefore, engage in dialogue not only with the artist but also with machinima and games communities that socially construct its value. This will determine the scope and scale of attributes for a particular work that supports its appropriate curation. It will also reflect the participatory nature of the art form, thereby embedding curation within the community of machinima practice.

Interestingly, what these approaches to evaluating works and their authenticity do is to offer a view of machinima without the imposition of protectionist commercial constraints. Machinima artists may therefore legitimately use games engines as matrices for their creativity and this will further expand the demand for innovative and risk-taking works. Moreover, despite the apparently restrictive practices of games developers, many will be more or less secretly thankful that the machinima art form has taken root, however politically incorrect it appears to be. This is because it enables the computer game to reach a much expanded audience beyond that which they are capable of reaching within their own finite resources and core strategic vision, in much the same way that graffiti is argued to expose the uninitiated masses to the virtues of contemporary art. Thus, the future trajectory of machinima is indelibly tied to games development, reflecting gaming and internet cultures. It will further evolve in line with developing curatorial expertise in its presentation to wider audiences and positioning within the digital arts movement.

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