Keeping It Reel: Is Machinima A Form Of Art?

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ABSTRACT
The grumpy gamers amongst us are still smarting over the important, challenging and frustrating questions made famous by Roger Ebert and Steven Spielberg; whether games could be classed as artworks, as capable of raising nobler emotions, or whether as works of art they could even be uttered in the same breath as cinema or literature. And if games cannot be art, how could machinima stake claims to being a form of art? Not only will I suggest the hackneyed question "but is it art" or "could it be seen as art" is important, I will suggest why this question is of particular interest and relevance to machinima.

Author Keywords
Machinima, game theory, definitions of art.

INTRODUCTION
Game engines may create Machinima and so can real-time rendering engines in general however machinima's content is often that of the games associated with the engines that it uses, it typically has "genre baggage". Yet if games cannot be art, and if machinima does not have to refer to games, must we consider machinima as art only whenever and if ever it creates cinema-standard work [21]? Then how is it an artistic medium that is distinct from film? Some of the best or at least most recognized machinima is arguably when it is irreverent to cinema, an established medium of techniques and conventions that machinima frequently borrows from and parodies.

A major part of the problem of whether games or machinima can be considered art actually arises from a typically shared misunderstanding that we have a clear concept of what art actually is, and that people can agree on this definition. Generally, when we create grand theories of the nature of art and how works of art can be judged art, we are extrapolating from media or from specific works of particular personal relevance. Theories of art that attempt to be universal and equivocal tend to have a direction, a hidden priority system and emphasis; as well as a situated sensitivity.

Even if we try to avoid our own personal biases, for many of these grand theories, masterpieces and only masterpieces are used as examples. Hence, when we create this grand and unifying theory, it typically only suits a few works of art (that are of particular significance to us), or a few outstanding examples. In this regard, film directors and critics are likely to judge games and machinima against either canonical films or against specialized or localized criteria that are typically suited to films rather than to other media.

Myst, for example, may seem closer to cinema than other games, but it is arguably not advancing the particular potential of games as a new form or mode of art. In order to gauge the value of a new medium, it seems unfair to judge their unique strengths or potential by the conventions of what has preceded them.

On the other hand, attempting to create works that are solely examples of technical mastery may lead to works that are sterile, lack expression, or do not invoke a feeling of empathy. Art that simply follows the rules, canons, or expectations of artistic mediums in history, in theory or in practice, may also fail to inspire empathy or interest, and may require expert knowledge to consider it art. Art as expression and empathy arousing, is highly subjective, and may be vulnerable to changing fashions and social mores. Similarly, art defined as epiphany may require a unique combination of participant, setting, and background context. It may be experienced by viewers or participants only once or not at all, and the "shock of the new" may slowly fade over time.

For any of the above views of art, could the medium of machinima, or certain works arising from it, be considered art? If it is not yet capable of producing art, could it one day create works worthy of art status, and what kind of art would it be? To make matters even more complicated, even *if* we could agree on a definition of art, and agree on what qualifies as examples of art, it is quite possible that if Machinima *could be* a potential art form, it could be

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considered art in many possible and diverse ways. With its catholic tastes in technology, and its careening selection of parody, satire, cheese ball homage, or pathos, machinima as a cannibalistic genre oscillating between gameplay and cut scene and film further exacerbates the problem of defining and prescribing boundaries, standards, and achievements.

Machinima may astound us as an authorially controlled demonstration of an interactive game demonstrating great skill or innovative exploration of a game genre. It may also or instead approach art as a form of cinema (when we gain as great an aesthetic experience from it as if we were watching a great movie). However, the approach that I wish to advance is that machinima is fascinating insofar as it can combine different interactive and pre-rendered media that causes us to question what we are and what we have experienced, and how we may have taken our past experiences for granted.

The question as to whether machinima could be a form of art is significant even if no one seems able to convincingly state what art is or what art is not. For while "art" may bequeath some form of social status, a cultural tradition, or a subconscious euphemism for a judgment of quality, art can also be an aesthetic *and* philosophical exploration. Which is something I believe machinima is capable of, and which it sometimes plays upon, but is seldom recognized for doing so.

MACHINIMA AS TECHNIQUE: IF IT USES A GAME ENGINE HOW CAN IT BE ART?

Does mastery of the techniques of "animated filmmaking" adequately cover mastery of machinima? Machinima is typically defined as using real-time, interactive (game) 3D engines to produce videos, as a genre using these engines, or as emergent gameplay. Paul Marino declared that machinima could be explained as "animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment" [15]. However, it is important to note that machinima here is defined by how it is made, not by what it is capable of.

Marino and others are attracted to machinima as an accessible, cheap, and artistically unrestricted medium, at least in comparison to Hollywood and other mainstream filmmaking. As an operational definition aimed at explaining the advantages of machinima as a tool to budding filmmakers, this makes sense. Yet we are interested in the value and potential of machinima as it is experienced not as it is operated, and Marino's definition does not really explain the advantages of machinima to an end-user.

In 2005 the American film critic Roger Ebert wrote: [2]

> *I did indeed consider video games inherently inferior to film and literature. There is a structural reason for that: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control. I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art.*

Ebert seems to be suggesting that video games have fundamental and irresolvable limitations: video games can only be craft, as player choices cannot be pre-determined or predicted by an author. In this case, interactivity does seem an essential part of games, but it does not necessarily follow that games must contain as much interactivity as possible in order to be a better game. And I don't believe that games can only consist of interaction, or that a game must attempt as much interaction as possible in order to succeed artistically. The onus is on creating interaction that appears thematic, immersive, meaningful and innovative, not necessarily ubiquitous and ever present. However, given that games are considered interactive entertainment; do we have to concede that interaction interferes with authorial control in a way that destroys the possibility of art?

Improv Theater is based on the confluence of these two elements. Interestingly, as far back as 1967 [9] there has been interactive cinema which reputedly was popular with the audience. Modern literature, paintings and hypertext also challenge the notion of authorial control; perhaps Ebert is not a fan of Duchamp, or Pollock. Films can also incorporate "happenings" or spontaneous dialogue, narrative events, or emergent character change. The films Casablanca and Apocalypse Now spring to mind, films that emerged from a combination of personality, unpredictable set conditions and freak circumstances, not from tightly written and carefully followed scripts.

There is another aspect to gameplay that may not be obvious to less experienced gamers. Choreographers and composers consider themselves artists, but performers have some degree of individual expression when they dance or play music created by others. Like music, dance, and Improv Theatre, suggestive and coercive elements of gameplay can be stimulated, triggered, guided, and choreographed.

Ebert may have missed not only the creative potential of players, but also the careful choreography and attempts at supporting emergent drama that are motivating game designers and game theorists like Salen and Zimmerman [22], Adams and Rollings [1] and Henry Jenkins [12]. In this respect, perhaps gameplay is closer to musical performance or theatrical performance (or even, Improv theatre), rather than to cinema. For in these fields the players do matter.

MACHINIMA AS CONVENTION: FUNCTION LAUGHING AT PROCEDURE

I am not sure if he would agree with my summation, but Ebert has criticized computer games for not having created works of art with artistic value discernible to film critics [6]. Yet by comparison film critics are critics of relatively established media [7]. His criteria for what constitutes art

are also demanding, leading me to wonder if Ebert was comparing massively popular commercial games with the artistic highpoints of cinema rather than like with like. In fact, if games are structurally distinct from movies as Ebert has claimed, should the canons and conventions of films even be applied to games and to machinima?

If computer games (and by extension, Machinima) are only digital extensions of previous forms of artistic activity, and originality is a fundamental requirement of art, then perhaps they cannot qualify as art. Acceptance of this argument does however raise the possibility that all popular media are losing their value as great works of art, as they become accepted and institutionalized. If this is the case, Chekov, Shakespeare, and Picasso may all be considered creators of great art, but only because they got in first. The only good artist, in this extreme view, is a dead artist.

While the above is a reducto ad absurdum, Ebert's argument does seem to be predicated on the belief that a new artistic medium will immediately provide geniuses that identify and communicate its value to the wider public, unfortunately, out of history have sprung far too many trailblazers who died of loneliness, ignorance and neglect. However, it is not clear how Ebert views civilization as distinct from culture, (according to Oswald Spengler there is an explicit distinction, [23]). I would also appreciate knowing how computer games as a branch of popular culture could avoid reflecting the influence of the increasingly sensationalized and visceral focus of television, film and theater.

I should mention in passing that the above comments relate to computer games, Ebert has praised various examples of machinima, such as Ozymandias [2]. How do we really know for sure that Ozymandias is not in-game footage accidentally captured? And why is it that a game cannot be art but machinima can? If a player took an in-game camera filming an actual game and sent the video to a machinima festival and the recording could not be distinguished from machinima by an audience, would that not make the work capable of being considered art? If we cannot distinguish authorially controlled digital film making from spontaneous real-time player-based camera views we mistakenly believe to be authorially controlled, this argument falls flat. Perhaps I should call this a machinamatic Turing test.

In his book Definitions of Art, the philosopher Stephen Davies has argued that definitions of art are typically functional or procedural [4]. That is to say, the functionalist believes that an object is a work of art only if it performs a particular function (such as providing or affording a rewarding aesthetic experience). By contrast the proceduralist believes that something is an artwork only if it has been created according to certain rules and procedures.

Machinima works may be seen as more procedural than functional, and hence can be judged as digital film-making art, or they may be judged like film as they often contain cinematic elements, film genre references, or are informed by cinematic technique. Yet while it is true that Machinima classics tend to be mining other genres using a certain type of equipment, in a certain way, they do so by subverting the intended procedure, such as the limitations and expectations we automatically assume when presented with what appear to be understood game genres. And at least part of our aesthetic experience of machinima, the functional aspect, is informed by this procedural subversion.

Game theorists have written how constraint is design [5], or even that constraints actually inspire creativity [18, 19, 20], and of course this is not new to theatre designers and playwrights. But machinima takes this further by reminding us of the diegetic illusions of games and how quickly and powerfully they can stimulate default player response. Machinima can also allude to our shallow treatment of the avatars' virtual bodies when we are in "game" mode, and juxtapose serious philosophical and social issues against the typical stock behavior of shoot and run. To parody one's own creator and the ludic teasing of that segment of the audience who are "in" on the jokes, i.e. game players, is an interesting media development. Machinima reminds us of the diegetic bubble as it mocks its own cinematic ambitions and limitations.

This Spartan Life is an example of machinima as a live talk-show available to Halo players and often mistaken by them as a computer game and not as a virtual show being filmed. This means that guests may be gunned down by players totally ignorant of what is going on, and who are acting purely in competitive game-mode. I am not the only one to see this use of as machinima as innovative, Darcy Norman has also written: [17]

> *If you've seen Red vs. Blue, or some of the similar movies made using "in game" videography from some games like Halo or Quake3, you'll know what machinima is. But This Spartan Life takes it one step further - instead of being a scripted "in-game play" being acted out, it's a full-blown talk show. Complete with guests, interviews, cameramen and crew, perimeter security snipers, stray rocket fire from nearby newbies, and the Solid Gold Elite Dancers.*

So in a way machinima is similar to theatre, as the software and hardware constraints can actually help create thematic design, and machinima can use those constraints in an imaginative and reflective fashion.

For example, the Achilles heel of games masquerading as both interactive entertainment and as drama is, at least in my opinion, inadequate facial expression and orientation, as well as a lack of gestural expressiveness or freeform body language [25]. The complexity of real-time human facial movement is just too difficult and demanding for mainstream computer games. Expressive actors (game avatars) are still a chimera, although new game editors such as Source may change this.

The game Halo avoids this problem of dynamically embodied expression, by confining the player to run, jump and shoot, by using bulky robots and strange little creatures as protagonists, and through concealing the avatars' faces with helmets. Red vs Blue, for example, constantly reminds us of the blank visage of a Halo avatar. The dramatic conflict of the characters and the speed in which they can be antagonized by each other, and their ability to (apparently) see what each other is looking at or facially expressing, is a startling contrast with Halo the game, where the expressive qualities of the face is unimportant.

This technique is both humorous and startling. We are reminded how we forget about other players as fully embodied expressive agents when we play a game, and we are asked to imagine that the avatars inhabit their own world which has its own laws and motives that are independent of the game world that we can see and interact with. Of course there have been many stories of toys that come alive at night when humans are asleep, toys or cartoons that appear to have their own secret lives. Yet machinima has an additional feature that This Spartan Life partially exemplifies; machinima can be pre-scripted yet run as a real-time medium with spectator intervention or interaction.

MACHINIMA AS EMOTIONAL AFFORDANCE: MUST ART ALWAYS MAKE US CRY?

In September 2004 Anthony Breznican wrote that Steven Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis believed "video games are getting closer to a storytelling art form – but are not quite there yet." Spielberg sets down a benchmark for reaching this level: [3]

> *"I think the real indicator will be when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17…It's important to emphasize story and emotion and character. This is one of the things that games don't do," Spielberg said. .."Is the player in charge of the story, or is the programmer in control of the story?" Spielberg asked. "How do you make those two things reconcile with each other? Audiences often don't want to be in control of a story. They want to be lost in your story. They come to hear you be the storyteller, but in gaming it's going to have to be a little bit of both, a little bit of give and take."*

I partially agree with Spielberg that computer games will be hard pressed to reach the expressive and controlled level of films. Game characters are simplified in form and in movement; they have a limited range of animation. The typical plot is skimpy at best, for the player has to concentrate on surviving as well as on what to do next. The camera is also limited, and lighting is limited, restricted, and reduced, to save on rendering time and processing power. The games that use game engines that in turn are used for machinima are also geared towards panic and hurry, not towards viewing picturesque scenes and contemplating the universe. So game engines will have trouble approximating the emotional impact and aesthetic beauty of film, they simply lack the control and finesse in character expression, setting, and cinematic tools (cameras, filters, lighting). On the other hand, as Zemeckis admits, films have borrowed from game techniques, ""In the '80s, cinema became influenced by the pace and style of television commercials…I think the next decades are going to be influenced greatly by the digital world of gaming" [3].

Ebert appears to agree with Spielberg that games do not currently exert great emotional hold on us, but he went further in suggesting that by their very nature games can not gain the status of art as that which is morally uplifting, and art as that which has the ability to enculturate us.

> *To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.*

Do the structural features of games preclude games from creating meaningful experiences and also prevent games from being capable of being considered to be great art? Jeremy Reimer believed that "a closer examination of Ebert's comments seems to indicate that he is critical of the artistic value of the games themselves, not their structure" [21]. I am not so sure. Yes, Ebert also put forward the claim that "video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic." He also said that games cannot be "worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers." However, as we mentioned previously, he also said "There is a structural reason for that: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control."

Do the repetitive features of mainstream computer games preclude games from creating meaningful experiences or raising moral issues, and therefore prevent games from being capable of being considered to be great art? Quite often aesthetic theories rely on the premise that because an activity contains a significant amount of X, that therefore X is an integral, essential feature of this activity. This is not necessarily true however much it would help simplify definitions of art. To make universal claims about the evils inherent in computer games, these critics must not only prove that games currently have these flaws, but also that these flaws are inescapable, and native to that medium.

For example, Ebert criticized games as being anti-social or of questionable moral value yet films can be as well, even artistic ones of the caliber of Clockwork Orange. I can see his underlying point here, for a typical computer game does

not allow reflection and contemplation during the playing, but that does not mean reflection on moral or social issues cannot be induced by the game after the game-play has finished.

However, Ebert seems to be saying that the activity of playing games cannot lead us to be "cultured, civilized and empathetic." Hence, their inability to be considered art relates to their content, not to their intrinsic structure. Strangely, television no longer raises the same complaints even if television can be as mundane, addictive, and meaningless, without the benefits of strategic decision-making, player choice, and player action. Critics and gamers against the regressive and mind-numbing commercial games churned out by the larger companies can also point out films that just as easily (and inadvertently) induce in us a zombie-like state [26].

ART AS EPIPHANY

In the nineteenth century Konrad Fiedler argued that art is an immersion in the study of perception by the individual. Fiedler believed that people are too quick to turn their perceptions into feelings, or, into concepts. In order to be artists they must instead be able to "hold" onto and explore their perceptual knowledge without relegating (i.e. binding) perception to either abstract knowledge or to emotion. In other words, art works as a form of portal of self-discovery and expansion of our understanding of how we perceive or can perceive the outside world as long as we don't automatically categorize and compartmentalize it.

Fiedler believed that only by exploring the world as an infinite and ever-changing inter-play of perceptual knowledge does the artist become an artist. Art is thus a process of discovery, a questioning: [7]

> *...how can it emerge out of the artistic consciousness? At that very moment the work of art attains true life for us. Immediately we see ourselves drawn into the activity of the creating artist and we grasp the result as a living, growing one.*

Thus the appreciation of art involves the notion of recreating artistic activity. In the viewing of a work as a work of art, we in turn explore question and expand our perceptual knowledge of the world. In the viewing of art we in turn become artists.

So for Fiedler, art is differs from nature in that it is essentially an intentional activity and the creative purpose is the only essential aspect of art. But that does not mean that the public determine what art is. Fiedler in fact believed that the more people viewing a work of art, the more likely it is going to be misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Fiedler also argued that art is not art because of people attempting to put it into a historical framework, for knowledge of historical form does not necessarily lead us to a deep and vivid knowledge of the worth of individual works of art. It should not be surprising that Fiedler rejected art classifications as also being peripheral to an experience of art. He believed that the history of an artwork is not the same as the appreciation of the work itself. The above approaches to art, Fiedler thus argued, are in fact approaches to the appreciation of artistic effects, and do not lead to the appreciation of art itself. If we are to appreciate art, we must, like artists: [7]

> *...grasp its [art's] very existence, and they [artists] feel the object as a whole even before they break up this general feeling into many separate sensations.*

In order to further explain art as epiphany, I feel compelled to refer to the writings of a mid-twentieth century philosopher, Martin Heidegger. He argued that the notion of art couldn't be merely the response to sensations [11].

> *Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly.*

Heidegger argued that we hear sounds not acoustic sensations, and thus by implication all aesthetic phenomena (i.e. those sensations that the brain responds to) are actually distillations of past experiences codified and responded to as the outcomes of deliberate, intentional activity. There is thus, Heidegger argues, something to works of art, the "thingly character," which is not encompassed or created by the perception of mere sensations. Art has a thingliness.

A work of art brings out the unique, significant aspects of an object, and these aspects reveal the object as a distinct thing. The revealing of such distinctness is part of the encountering of a work of art. When we encounter art, we are experiencing it as a thing, and we are experiencing our relation to it as a thing, as if our eyes have been opened for the very first time. Hence our encounter with art can sometimes be seen as an epiphany.

MACHINATIONS SO FAR: INTERSTITIAL MEDIA AS PROCEDURAL SUBVERSION

We could extend Heidegger's explanation of art versus aesthetics to suggest there is an aspect of 'thingness' to our perception of our world that should be considered in designing virtual environments in general, and to games and machinima in particular. And Heidegger's argument has been recently bolstered by experiments in virtual environments. Researchers have suggested that there is indeed a 'toolness' quality to certain objects in virtual environments, certain objects have a special compelling feature or attachment that induces us to pick them up and use them for no apparent reason [10].

In a Gamasutra article John Hopson has also mentioned how the computer game is a behavioral skinner box, a

reward system consisting of reinforcers, contingencies, and responses [12]. Because machinima often uses or evokes images and associations with playing a game, and because these resources are such powerful triggering mechanisms, the game-player as spectator is caught between viewing the machinima as film, and reaching for a keyboard mouse or joystick to shoot the bad guys, strafe to avoid danger, rotate the camera view, or run towards a portal. Computer games have their own acquired language of perceived affordances, [17] and reacting to these perceived affordances becomes second nature to the experienced gamer [25].

Machinima is typically created from the camera functions of game engines. However, they are also typically made from resources associated with the game engine, and hence they carry genre attachments. The repetitive nature of games conditions us to automatically respond by enacting game-behaviors, dodging, shooting, running, strafing, and so on. So there are triggers, but there are also "things" that stimulate the player vocabulary. In another Gamasutra article, Brett Johnson has explained how game level designers deliberately develop a "player vocabulary" so that the game player instinctively acts, "As designers, we can carefully build a vocabulary of game mechanics and shape what the player knows about the environment, and when they know it" [14].

To say that the power of machinima is derived from its refocusing on what we have previously taken for granted, or previously adopted without reflection, relies on previous gaming knowledge. Yes my interpretation of machinima as an art form may rely on creating a reflection on what some hardened critics of games consider a zombie-like or "blinking lizards" state when playing, but like Steven Johnson [15] I believe that the way in which games are designed to trigger and overload certain cognitive processes is deliberate, intricate, and difficult. To trigger behavioral responses while at the same time causing the player/observer to reflect upon them and still stay engaged is sophisticated and skillful. It is not easy to play on our Pavlov-like tendency to reach for an all-so-shiny gun a Halo character is toying with while he recounts how he survived severe teenage acne and a dominating mother.

And yes I understand that this perspective means that machinima may not appeal to, or be widely understood by, a non-gaming public. Yet machinima is not alone in this regard; cinema, architecture, and even painting can be self-referential or disparaging of other media, and in doing so they require from the spectator knowledge of the other work that they are targeting or to which they pay homage. The primary experience is still dependent on the immediacy of the connections; machinima does not have to gain its power from the linkage between different fields, but from the thoughts created by the synthesizing of these links.

For example, the creator of This Spartan Life has said: [23]

> *A big topic for me in every interview is: What does it mean that we're walking around this virtual space.. Obviously, if you really want to get [McLaren's] meaning it would be better to see his face as he's talking, but I think what we've lost [by showing him as an avatar] is replaced with the aspect of being in a virtual environment and having a lot of what he talks about be subtly reflected in what's going on around us.. I want to be able to keep it going in an interesting direction, keep it fresh and on the edge of new media. Media is just the most fascinating thing to me. It's how we see ourselves.*

I suggest that the uneasy and unfaithful alliance between machinima as aesthetic experience, and machinima as an accidental offspring of game replays, should be teased still further. If there are no hard and fast rules, machinima could potentially be partially or entirely real-time (just as the early demo recordings of games were) rather than fully pre-rendered. Bots may be controlled by actors or by script or alternate between the two. Off-scene dynamic data or even audience biofeedback could be fed into the scene or affect the environmental conditions, motivation triggers for the characters, and change story pathways. Even in the final presentation or exhibition, designers could layer machinima between real-time user-controlled artifacts with script triggers or commands, and traditional film clips, allowing viewers to explore and play with what is interactive and what is not.

CONCLUSION: ESSENTIAL MACHINIMA FEATURES?

I hope to have shown that machinima, even if it is an uneasy offspring of computer games (let us momentarily equate them with Ebert's talk of video games), actually can have elements of authorial control, and embodied expression. That does not mean machinima is art, for Ebert's criteria conflict with each other, and are not necessary and sufficient conditions to determine what art is.

However, we are surely right to question whether machinima wants to be classified by institutions as a form of art, as then it may lose its subversive power. This subversive power or appeal may be due to many different creative possibilities. I have suggested some of the possible features are reflective game genre and impulse criticism, and aesthetic provocation and puzzlement around what is interactive and what is not, around what appears to be scripted, emergent, or chaotic, real or virtual, or even around levels of sentience, from automated through preprogrammed intelligence, to human intelligence.

Defining the boundaries may satisfy the academics (or least give them more ammunition to argue with each other) but it may also limit a creative future aspect of machinima not currently envisaged. These possibilities may never be tested if we see machinima in an essentialist light, an auteur in-game FPS video capture, or a poor if disrespectful cousin to cinema. To separate activities or objects through classification may describe these activities or objects, but it often leads to an essentialism based on easily perceivable

differences without actually meaningfully explaining why the creation of one is more intrinsically valuable than the other. And while Davies' bifurcation of theories of art into the functionalist or proceduralist is an initially interesting approach, it does not really highlight the more interesting features of machinima, for part of the appeal of machinima is that it is not so easily bifurcated and even deliberately confuses the two.

I would like to suggest that current operational definitions of machinima do not interest designers; they already understand the advantages of machinima as a filmmaking tool. For theorists, exploring essentialist definitions of machinima are an interesting exercise as long as they both highlight important features and reveal the blindness or apathy of their proponents to other features. For the public, for the spectator or end-user (and hopefully the former is merging into the latter), to enjoy experiencing a self-reflective jolt when their gaming impulses or genre-detection facilities are provoked, challenged, or questioned by machinima, is surely a worthy (if difficult) challenge. And interactive media has a long way to go to achieve this.

Machinima as epiphany has implications for teaching; machinima can act as a catalyst for students to question their own held opinions and conventions. Their tacit acceptance of game conventions becomes self-evident, for example, when they are asked to create, or reflectively critique and challenge mediums or genres that their compatriots value.

Allowing students to use their favorite game engines and game genres does not necessarily encourage them to build fresh and innovative new games. Yet encouraging their ambitions of a cinematic-quality experience in such a way that they are confronted with the practical limitations of current machinima and game engines in particular could prove to be a far more valuable experience. Although students are often attracted to the latest and most advanced game engines, the constraints of earlier (and probably more stable and accessible) game engines can actually aid creativity rather than merely stymie it.

This leads me to suggest that yes; machinima can be viewed as a design procedure. It is possible to say it is machinima if one uses certain tools in creating it. Yet machinima may also be an experience that either reminds or hides from the end-user its origins as a fairly primitive virtual camera in a game engine attempting to be a cinematic experience. For example, the way in which early machinima attempted to downplay or emphasis a limited field of view as it was using the limited camera functions of early shooter games is technically interesting to experts, but unlikely to be noticed by an infrequent gamer.

So machinima could be seen as a reflective and aesthetically directed re-experience of game-play, game genre, and game level resources that gains impact from its new take on cinematic conventions. Innocuous games like the Sims could used to parody the homogeneity and shocking plot devices of say a Television soap opera. But a more powerful interpretation is to consider machinima as an interpretively amorphous vehicle that questions and challenging our understanding of what is static, dynamic, alive, sentient, responsive, or automated, and what is not.

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