

Book Review by
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Jenna Ng (ed.), *Understanding Machinima.*

Essay on Filmmaking Virtual Worlds

Understanding Machinima. Essays on Filmmaking in Virtual Worlds (Bloomsbury 2013, edited by Jenna Ng) is an intriguing incursion into the world of machinima from a Media Studies point-of-view, trying to address the topic beyond game's environment, in connection with the evolution of the contemporary mediascape.

Machinima is a recent technology/performance/art/tool etc¹ (conventionally born in 1996 with Quake demos)² commonly defined as any kind of video artifact produced through real-time gaming graphic engines: in-game recordings, sandbox modes, hacked version of game engines or game-like professional tools are all valid sources to create machinimas. It's been a decade since it has been bought to the academic attention and to an increasing popularity on web broadcasting (mainly thanks to the web-series *Red vs Blue*, to *South Park's* episode *Make Love, not Warcraft* or to the political short *The French Democracy* by Alex Chan).

The collection is built around twelve chapters, split into two parts (respectively Thinking and Using machinima), bringing together contributions from researchers, gamers, directors, artists, curators and machinima makers; every chapter goes along with digital endnotes, that can be seen from the dedicated webpage thanks to QR codes included in every chapter.

This anthology aims to distinguish itself from recent academic researches, analysing mainly the nature of machinima in connection with the universe of cinema, gaming and animation in the eyes of a "convergent" mediascape (Jenkins 2006), regarding machinima as a native-digital medium involving crossbreeding with mediated realities (virtual, augmented, hybrid) and increasingly tied to artistic or political environment. The underlying belief is that, as Jenna Ng suggests, machinima «has become [so much, ndA] connected with many other tools and media forms so that it is now less a discrete, distinguishable media form than a fluid dialogue of and between media».

1. As stated by Henry Lowood
http://idmaa.org/?post_type=journalarticle&p=586

2. *Diary of a Camper, the Rangers clan*, 1996, is considered the first example of machinima.

Understanding Machinima manages to keep together contributions with different theoretical perspectives and aims, and to gather them up in a heterogeneous yet dialogic frame. As a result, the reader will easily identify several recurring themes; this well-directed dialogue among the authors reveals the complexity of the analysed issues, making for a work that is much more than the sum of the parts.

The first topic is machinima's hybrid nature. Born from game tools, borrowing movie language and techniques, continuously compromising with gaming, film and fandom culture, easily mistaken for digital animation, still unknown outside the gamer's niche; machinima is certainly difficult to describe and categorise. Several essays try to analyse its affinities and differences with (and within) gaming and movie worlds, its bounds with fandom and re-mixing practices; should machinima be defined through distinction with other media, or be accepted as a full-hybrid media form?³ Either way, machinima has become a privileged viewpoint to analyse contemporary mediascape and its evolution; an interesting debate emerges from the anthology about the possibility to fully understand it using previous generic critical categories like remediation, culture convergence or intertextuality⁴, or (as Jenna Ng claims) if we should give up talking about a «flow of content in the sense of media convergence (Jenkins 2006) but [rather, ndA] a flow of media and mediation itself⁵»

The issue of machinimas' autonomy comes as a direct consequence of its hybrid nature: being built using pre-existing tools, looking at older and more influential media, yet modifying them, machinima can be considered at the same time a subversive practice (shifting from documentation of high performance play to expressive and performative goals unknown in the original game) or a marginal subject in the mediascape. Some contributions deal with this duality: should machinima be independent, creating its own language and stop mimicking movies and animation (as Peter Greenaway stated in his lectures about *Second Life*)⁶, or should it accept its "minor" nature (in a deleuzian sense)⁷ and carry on a guerrillesque subversion of major languages from within, an act of survivance as described by Gerald Vizenor?⁸ Are these the only paths available for machinima?

It's not simply a matter of autonomy; at the heart there's the capacity of machinima to bring innovative contributions to the long-lasting aesthetic development as a full, native digital media, by creating a new visual language or re-shaping the old ones; and at the same time, its usefulness as a newborn practice and technology, its role of innovative digital tool. Currently it is on doubt if machinima is moving towards a continuation of cinematic language, or if it has already developed its own style; if it is pursuing a "gamish" aesthetic⁹ or a more realistic one. Some claim that emancipation from cinema's "tyranny"¹⁰ will lead to discover the potentiality of a new type of space¹¹ that could be experienced and shaped up to the physics, while others remember that machinima still need to obey to the laws and limits of the game engine itself. Moreover, limits and potentiality of game engines are tied with machinima's nature as a tool, operation or "craft"; as convincing as it may be Michael Nitsche's claim that

3. especially regarding second-generation machinimas, born from professional tools like *Moviestorm* or virtual persistent worlds like *Second Life*.

4. Lisbeth Frolunde discuss about Bakhtin's intertextuality and text hybridity in chapter 5. "Facing the audience. A dialogic perspective on the hybrid animated film."

5. See Introduction.

6. See Chapter 6, "Dangerous simulation crossing. Framing the Second Life art machinima".

7. As claimed in "Machinima. Cinema as a minor or multitudinous key?", Chapter 1.

8. There's a curious similarity between machinima's minority and Native Americans' concept of survivance, defined in "Call it a vision quest. Machinima in a First Nation context", chapter 10.

9. As suggested by Sheldon Brown in "Be(ing)dazzled. Machinima in virtual worlds", Chapter 3.

10. Peter Greenaway's interview with Jay Jay Jegathesan can be read <http://uwainl.blogspot.com/2011/05/peter-greenaway-interview-following.html>.

11. As suggested in Chapter 2, "Beyond bullet time. Media in the knowable space".

machinima can be considered XXIst century puppetry¹², indeed an essential part of its creation deals at the same time with avatars and camera movement¹³, being more some kind of “puppetry in a cinematic environment”. Can really technology’s evolution shape new possibilities for machinima, or is it a practice born out of its limits and short-lived?

Certainly, whether machinima’s future will be movie-centered or game-dependant, looking at digital animation or at the art of puppetry, it seems that its evolution is getting it closer and closer to trends of digital audiovisual world: realism in animations and in body movements’ capture, growing hybridization in the audiovisual message, demand for affordable and flexible professional tools; all suggesting that machinima’s destiny is deeply tied with recent developments in digital audiovisual culture. Lastly, there’s the recent growing popularity of machinima outside the gamers environment, towards the universe of Digital Arts and for Political Activism; hibridity is not limited to different formats and quality of visual messages, but also in machinima being a part in complex artistic and political performance (live-events); as any remix-remake practice, its full potential lies when the main engine is used to convey a meaning that refers or conflicts with its own source. It’s the opposite of historical “archival machinima”, created to document high-performance play of skillful gamers, actively contributing to the gamer’s community; nevertheless machinima has proved to be a useful and flexible tool in videogame art¹⁴ or in digital activism¹⁵, being both a mediation form and the tool for gaming culture jamming.

Besides, acting and filmmaking in virtual world imply several new issues in game-related ethics; making a documentary by filming Second Life’s avatars¹⁶ can be done without anyone noticing; gamers playing in online matches could unwillingly find themselves within “game-interventions”, being unable to avoid or ignore culture-jamming actions made during the match. They become performers in a double sense, being players and active-spectators of these “digital happenings”[As claimed in Chapter 8, “Playing politics”]. Certainly, as we experience the rise of persistent world in online games, we believe there will be an increasing need of machinima as a “capture-based technique” for documentation of digital worlds. The ever-growing popularity of massive multiplayer games and the importance of documenting virtual environment could similarly lead to new pedagogical practices: Barwell and Moore¹⁷ attested that teaching students how to create a machinima let them learn-by-doing new media literacies far beyond simple tasks involved in everyday computer use; machinima as a new digital craft (as claimed by Barret and Ng)¹⁸ could be a useful training ground for digital literacies, requiring competences in audiovideo editing software as well as living and operating in virtual worlds.

In conclusion, *Understanding Machinima* is a well-written and captivating book, especially for those who want to analyse machinima in connection to

12. For Nietzsche, Mazalek and Clifton, «machinima is a form of digital puppetry in which the virtual characters in a real-time game engine are used to perform an event and often to tell a story.»

13. Among others, the above-mentioned *Diary of a Camper* and the majority of first-person machinimas.

14. Cory Archangel’s or Eddo Stern’s works, described in Chapter 7, “*The art of games*”.

15. See chapter 8, “*Playing politics, Machinima as live performance and document*”.

16. See Chapter 9 “*Virtual lens of exposure. Aesthetic, theory and ethics of documentary filmmaking in Second life*”.

17. Authors of “*World of Chaucer. Adaptation, pedagogy and interdisciplinarity*”, Chapter 11.

18. Chapter 12, “*A pedagogy of craft. Teaching culture analysis with Machinima*”.

the universe of media. It’s reasonably not a book for beginners, but it needs to be considered mainly as a starting point for further and more in-depth contributions: recognising machinima as a digital medium, studying its bonds with the worlds of digital animation, game art, cinema, political activism and pedagogical goals, will eventually help us understand several core issues of the contemporary mediascape.