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Machinimateur Wanted: The Professionalization of Machinima

by Robert Jones

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What began as a tiny extension of gamer culture over a decade ago, the art form known as machinima has soared in its popularity, proving to be lucrative for software developers. Early machinimateurs appropriated the game engines (the core technology of gaming software that allows for the production and manipulation of 3D graphics) of first-person shooters like *Quake* to create short animated films. But as its reputation grew, developers began to package their games with toolsets that further enabled the engine to be used as a tool for virtual filmmaking. By opening up the games to this digital tinkering, developers have extended the shelf-life of their games and found an entirely new way to market their products. In addition to the necessary means for recording the gameplay, increasingly more and more games are being shipped with full-scale tools for modification of 3D realms. Games like *The Movies* and *The Sims 2* have parlayed this phenomenon through film contests and online communities dedicated solely to the creation of machinima using their games. Meanwhile, other developers have forgone creating any semblance of a game and released software that functions exclusively as a machinima studio (i.e. *Moviestorm*, *iClone*, and *Antics*). Couple the success of this software with Bioware's recent hiring of machinima pioneer Paul Marino to apply his skills to the cut scenes of their recent hit *Mass Effect*, and the landscape of this once DIY hobbyist subculture begins to look drastically different. As both a fan and member of the machinima community, I have enjoyed the recent growth that has brought the medium into the mainstream. However, what concerns me and what I would like to discuss here is how this professionalization poses a possible threat to the freedom and innovation that has been integral to machinima's history. That is to say, the monetization of game engines for purposes other than game development may lead to more powerful tools available for the production of machinima, but could also create economic barriers as to who gets to become a machinimateur.

Are You In or Out?

To better clarify the concerns as to who has access now and who will have access in the future to the tools of production as machinima software becomes increasingly more professionalized, it is important to understand that the culture itself is a divided one. Before moving forward with this argument, it is important to note that the term access is a problematic one, meaning that machinima has always required access to technologies like high-end computers and videogame software, which has historically been available only to a certain portion of the population. However, recent growth in the gaming industry as well as the growing ubiquity of powerful home computing suggests that the once-privileged access to videogames and digital video editing has opened up to new demographics. Regardless, machinima must be understood, not unlike traditional filmmaking, as a means of expression that is *still* not available to all. Therefore, any rhetoric that wants to anoint machinima as a democratizing means of expression for all must be tempered by the fact that the material conditions necessary to be a machinimateur simply are not shared by all. The concern being set forth here, then, addresses the

inevitability of the threshold of access becoming even more exclusive as the form becomes increasingly professionalized.

In a recent interview with Hugh Hancock, author of *Machinima For Dummies* and one of the two people who coined the term *machinima*, he explained one of the fundamental divides that has long existed within this subculture. Machinimateurs generally come to the art form from one of two diverging backgrounds, and he used the terms developed by new media artist and machinimateur Eddo Stern to describe them. *Inside-out* marks a machinimateur who originally began as a gamer and fan of the game. Therefore, the machinima they tend to create serves as an extension of their fandom not unlike works of fan fiction or fan films. Generally speaking, these creators tend not to have much training in the language of film production and draw instead upon their extensive knowledge of film based on being avid consumers of media rather than students of film. And while in many cases the lack of training may show in poor production values, more often than not these *inside-out* machinimateurs make impressive films. Moreover, as a gamer, their films tend to represent a rather significantly different form of cultural production than a traditional filmmaker. The manner in which they *play* with a game's engine reflects a similar impulse that has long been one of the primary draws to videogames.

Because videogames not only allow for but require an agency to control the character within the environment and narrative of a game, the compulsion to extend that limited control granted to the player beyond the "golden path" created by the designer makes a great deal of sense. Those pioneering gamers who opted to shoot a film, rather than each other, within the then highly-popular first-person shooter *Quake* were engaging in a rather different form of play, but a form of play nonetheless. Game design scholars Salen and Zimmerman have termed this type of play as *transformative play*, whereby the player changes the rules within a rigid system that transforms the entire system. A piece of software that once functioned as a videogame becomes a tool for creating 3D animations in real-time for the purposes of filmmaking. Over a half a century ago, Dutch Historian Johan Huizinga coined the term *magic circle* to define the imaginary system we enter when participating in a game, a term that has since been appropriated and used rather exhaustively within gaming studies. In the instance of machinima's inception as part of those early *Quake* movies, the magic circle was the game itself that the players willfully entered on a daily basis to participate in highly competitive death matches. But that move from fierce competition to collaborative effort to create an animated film represents a profound transformation of the rules of play that completely shifts the boundaries of that magic circle to incorporate storytelling as a new avenue of play. This new dimension of what gaming software can achieve has since been harnessed by many developers like Maxis and Valve who have made efforts to provide their customers with toolsets that make this sort of play more accessible to gamers. It is precisely this form of transformative play that made machinima possible and that the encroaching professionalization of the medium stands to stifle.

On the other end of the machinima continuum stands the *outside-in* machinimateur, who represents a growing number of filmmakers/writers who have recognized the immense storytelling capabilities videogame engines have to offer. Versed in the language of film production and trained in the craft of narrative, these creators approach game engines not unlike other tools of their trade, like Final Cut Pro. That is not to say that these machinimateurs are not actual fans of gaming, but more to the point, that they primarily choose game engines based on what they can do and what they can achieve versus whether they are fans of the game or not. In fact, the growing success of software specifically designed for making machinima rests largely on these individuals because they understand the software as a tool first rather than a game. Therefore, entering a magic circle, no matter how vast the boundaries, is not the utmost concern of this particular machinimateur. Storytelling stands as their primary focus. It is important that these two groups *not* be pitted against one another as dichotomous rivals who are constantly at odds, but rather that this taxonomy serves to help us better understand where the motivation to create machinima originates. That being said, the continuing professionalization of machinima certainly stands to gain ground for the latter while inevitably restricting the freedom of play being enjoyed by the former.

For Money or Love?

So to avoid the trap of over-romanticizing the plight of the amateur in any field as the sole work of sweat and blood, let me just say that anyone who has ever labored over system crashes and frame rate issues while making a machinima film would love to have been paid to do so. But for those inside-out machinimateurs, they understand their creative endeavors as part of being a member of a fan community and have no real aspirations to quit their day job. In fact, the cultural capital of having someone post a positive comment in a forum about their film makes all that trouble worth it. For outside-in machinimateurs who represent filmmakers and aspiring game designers, the fact that game developers will be looking to hire machinimateurs as part of the design team bodes well for them. And it is not that they do not put their hearts and souls into their work so much as they understand this as a lucrative way to express themselves and aim to capitalize on it. So when a stalwart of the machinima community like Paul Marino, who has possibly done more than any other person in the medium's short history to push it into the mainstream, becomes an asset to the game development community, we have to be happy for him and the medium as a whole. And it should be clear that the concern being put forth here does not want to

undermine these kinds of success stories. The medium as a whole only stands to gain from gestures like these that further legitimize this art form.

Though the creation of a job title like machinimateur as part of a design team illustrates that machinima will not be a flash-in-the-pan moment in gaming's history, its likely professionalization could very well draw a line that forever separates the inside-out and the outside-in creators. Once game developers begin to see how companies like Moviestorm and Antics are successfully monetizing their engines as tools for the trade, what stands between them locking down their engines (which in most cases are far more powerful graphically) and not allowing those inside-out machinimateurs to play with them freely? Companies like Bungie and Valve continue to believe that providing these tools as part of the software package consumers purchase when they buy their games is a smart long-term strategy that extends a game's shelf life. But once machinimation becomes a craft that is taught in schools and a career path for those aspiring either to be in traditional animation or in game design, these tools will further develop and become necessary software for a cottage industry. When that day comes, allowing a powerful engine like the Valve Source engine that powers the *Half-Life 2* series to be used freely by the gaming community will simply not make much fiscal sense if that engine could be licensed to universities as part of the curriculum to train future machinimateurs. So while machinima continues to grow up before our eyes, making leaps and bounds into becoming something far greater than those guys playing around with *Quake* could have ever imagined, now may also be an important moment to pause for concern. Because as much as I would love to see machinima become a household word and a medium to be appreciated for the beautiful art form I believe it is, I would also hate to lose the possibilities that still abound within that magic circle.

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