

Notes on What One Can Learn About a Video Game Without Playing It

By: Deanna Gross

When Jonathan Cohn asked me to write a paper on machinima, I immediately accepted the challenge...and then I looked up the word on Wikipedia. I have never been a gamer, more for financial reasons than anything else. Around age twelve, I saved my allowance for a year to buy a Super Nintendo, and since then, I have been unable to maintain the same amount of fiscal foresight. So when it came to writing as a non-gamer, I substituted scholarly research for experiential knowledge, and I watched a whole lot of online videos.

What particularly fascinates me about machinima is the transition from an avatar-centered environment, in which players participate and act in a digital simulacrum, to the creation of a character-driven film. The "player" may experience machinima either as creator, viewer, or more often, both. As a creator, the player reformulates the rules of the game in accordance with his or her own imaginative desires (desires still held within the bounds of original game "footage"). As a viewer, the player relinquishes this agency of directed action within the game in exchange for the pleasure of watching the film. Additionally, machinima creates a space for non-gamers who can participate as an audience without learning the rules of the game or investing in the console.

The transition from an avatar-centered environment to a character-driven film also complicates questions of performance and participation. The player may self-identify with the digital character as avatar, but that character may also be other-identified as fictional representation. Writing from the perspective of a non-gamer, and as a literary scholar, my understanding of these identity categories stems mainly from "reading" the fictional representations of characters within machinima. Nevertheless, I find myself continually returning to the site of the "original" game, and questioning how the audience's/player's identification shifts based on their previous experience with the game.

One machinima series that particularly calls attention to these complex connections between game, film, and performance is Rooster Teeth's *Red vs. Blue*, now in its ninth season. Based on *Halo*, *Red vs. Blue* retains the laser "target" at the center of the screen that serves in the game as the player's main viewpoint and direction of action. While watching the series, then, the target causes the viewer to continually recall and reference their potential status as gamer; their perspective of the episode is filtered through a screen that mimics game play. The inclusion of the laser as the former sign of participation simultaneously draws the viewer into the series and prohibits the viewer from really entering; it is after all, just a show. As a comedic series, *Red vs. Blue* makes light of the hypermasculine, violent military mission of *Halo*, and in some ways this target serves as a "tease." The fantasy of shooting and destroying whatever is framed at the end of the target is ever present, but the fantasy of performance cannot be fulfilled.

Specifically, in reference to gender roles within *Red vs. Blue*, this "fantasy of performance" is part of a larger negotiation between the hypermasculine world of the game and the less

inhibitive, homosocial arena of the show. When playing *Halo*, the gamer embodies a masculine avatar. Regardless of the gamer's own gender identity, when playing the game, they self-identify as this avatar. Within the parameters of *Red vs. Blue*, however, gender becomes less an assumed masculinity, and more a spectrum of possible identifications. Gender as embodied identity is an impossible formation within the show. The characters' bodies are always hidden within armor and identified as masculine or feminine solely by voice. Additionally, the existence of "ghosts," as well as a number of human/machine cyborgs and robots, complicates the traditional binary of masculine/feminine.

In the first fifty episodes, the two female-voiced characters are Tex—a cold, calculated mercenary who is killed early in the show and becomes a ghost—and Shelia, the robot identity of a tank. Socially, these characters are aggressive, violent, and unpredictable, often disrupting the homosocial bliss of the two teams. Both characters are in heterosexual relationships, but these relationships are discussed and furthered by the "male" characters. The single exception occurs when Shelia's "romantic interest," a robot named Lopez, is possessed by Tex, she exclaims with pleasure that she's "got [her] wires crossed." Masculine gender is also problematized by Donut, a male-voiced character who wears pink, and is consistently referred to by other masculine characters as a "lady." Even the temptation to use voice as an identifier of gender results in elusive categories, and in an environment where the two "women" do not have traditional bodies, and the remainder of the characters are "men," heterosexuality as the normative condition is also questioned.

While machinima like *Red vs. Blue* imbues game footage with the possibilities of the creative fantasies of cinema, they do not require participation in the game for enjoyment. Nevertheless, machinima as a genre consistently references the game as its point of origin, highlights the negotiation and conflict between avatar and character, and with that division, problematizes the designation of other identity categories. As for myself, while I enjoyed laughing at the destabilization of gender categories and farcical military escapades in *Red vs. Blue*, I kept returning to the "target" in the center of the screen, wondering if somehow playing the game could make these characters more real for me. I suppose that is another of the fascinating possibilities of machinima: that at some point the "original" reference point becomes lost in the dialectic between film and game.