

Trauma Engines: Representing School Shootings Through *Halo*

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“This Video was created for Educational Purposes only and is not, by any means, to insult the Virginal [sic] Tech Massacre.”¹

That the final on-screen text of Joshua Garrison’s film representing the Virginia Tech shooting of April 16, 2007 should misspell the university’s name as ‘Virginal’ stands as an odd piece of linguistic slippage, which singularly skewers the generic deviation of which Garrison’s work is a part: the representation of traumatic school shootings through machinima. Machinima is itself a textual form whose definition is changing as users discover exactly how they can utilize game engines to tell their own narratives. To approach trauma through such a forum is indeed to enter virgin territory, both in the production of such machinima and in their narrative scope. The producers of such works are distinctly non-professional, editing and disseminating films made through an orchestration of recorded videogame play and other aural and visual media texts. Aside from the acclaim garnered if a machinima video becomes viral, these amateur producers have little hope of profiting from their work, and their amateur nature is evident not only in spelling mistakes but in the willingness to engage in exceptionally original forms of story creation and convergent collaboration. As unprecedented texts representing trauma through videogame engines, these films’ approaches to school shooting—ironically recasting its occurrence through the very medium frequently criticized as a catalyst for youth’s violent outbursts—skirt potential offensiveness while problematizing trauma’s representation, denying through its visual form and blatantly constructed nature the reality of the events it portrays.

Both Garrison’s *Virginia Tech Massacre* machinima and 3NL’s “music video” of Christian rock band P.O.D.’s single *The Youth of the Nation*—which utilizes *Halo 3* to represent the Columbine High School shooting of April 20, 1999—memorialize specific traumas while they are themselves fraught with absence, displaying a dearth of visual markers that would denote the origination of these works. Specifically, a loss of differentiation occurs because the same videogame engine is utilized in the creation of both traumatic texts.² To distinguish themselves from each other and from *Halo 3* itself, each text must work against the formal stylistics predetermined by the videogame on which they are based.

Yet, as trauma representations employing videogame graphics and stylistics, these machinima texts reflect in their very form the incommensurability of the traumatic event itself. Through their paucity of dialogue, character differentiation, and potential expository modalities, they subvert any notion that the traumatic occurrence’s catalysts or meaning can be fully apprehended and clearly known. Trauma theorist Joshua Hirsch, in his work on cinema’s representation of the Holocaust, notes that there is an “*inherent* limit of representation” when depicting trauma and that trauma “is ultimately unrepresentable in any form” (Hirsch 5). There is no singular truth to be gained or catalyst to be discovered when addressing a cataclysmic event, and those representations most effective in apprehending trauma are those that can be opened to a multiplicity of interpretations and understandings. In representations of trauma that use machinima as a medium, the limits inherent in the text—due to the work’s construction through a

videogame engine, most notably the impossibility of an indexical relationship between the image (in the form of digital animation) and the event—open such traumas to a reinterpretation. This reinterpretation is both unprecedented in its formal attributes and troubling in the erasure of the original event's affectivity.

The difficulty of creating individuated representations when portraying two disparate events through the same videogame is most clearly intuited by the similarity between *Virginia Tech Massacre*'s and *Youth of a Nation*'s visual appearance. Each film is at pains to make its visual style unique, as any machinima created with *Halo 3* will share immediate similarities determined by the videogame's aesthetic form: long, shadowy corridors that are geometrically repetitive; camera angles that—while multifarious due to Bungie's acknowledgement that fans will indeed be recording their game play and disseminating it to others—share the marker of *Halo 3*'s own attempts at cinematic visualization; and the ubiquity of the main avatar in the game, Master Chief, the only character available in the multiplayer forum necessary for constructing choreographed films with multiple characters. Because of the similarities evident in any film created through *Halo 3*, the relation of other textual elements to the machinima's visual images becomes paramount, evincing authorial intentionality through the filmmaker's attempt to situate these machinimas as trauma representations, and figuring these texts as other than a simple recording of game play. Indeed, the subject of Garrison's and 3NL's machinimas must be overtly declared, positing the heightened importance of titular naming and onscreen text to machinima representing trauma, as without such declarations the visual similarity to other machinima texts and *Halo 3* itself tend to deny any specific orientation or subject.

Garrison's *Virginia Tech Massacre*, its subject indicated by its title, opens on a still video image of a candlelight vigil held on the Virginia Tech campus. The words "Virginia Tech Massacre By: Joshua Garrison" overlay the image in multiple fonts, situating the film as a representation of the massacre, to be understood as a memorialization of the dead. That the machinima is to be recognized as honoring the shooting's victims is corroborated at the film's close, where the text quoted at the beginning of this essay acknowledges the potential for reading the film as offensive due to its representation of trauma in a medium commonly understood as solely an entertainment technology. Such overt declarations of the film's subject are coupled with subtitles that appear as the Master Chief avatar representing Cho Seung-Hui, the attack's real life perpetrator, is shown shooting other avatars, denoting the locations in which the violence occurs, moving chronologically from West Ambler Johnston Hall, where the first two deaths occurred, to the post office where Cho mailed a video package to NBC news, to Norris Hall, where Cho killed thirty more people before executing himself. Such onscreen text is necessary to imply any spatial and temporal progression in the avatar's actions not directly presented onscreen, and to indicate which avatar is meant to represent Cho specifically, as all the Master Chiefs in Garrison's machinima are colored and dressed identically.

Embed Youtube clip here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Birq2u-TDfA>

While Garrison's film utilizes onscreen text to identify both the subject of his machinima and to denote the narrative progression of the film, 3NL's representation of Columbine is structured through its soundtrack, the P.O.D. single "The Youth of the Nation," itself a media text

addressing school violence. That the film particularly pertains to the Columbine massacre is only noted through onscreen text at the film's close. As each Master Chief avatar wears different armor skins and symbolic decals on their torso (a skull and crossbones appearing on the attack's two perpetrators), the individual naming of different characters via onscreen text and intertitles becomes unnecessary. Instead, the film's editing and focus is determined by the words on the soundtrack, offering visual interpretations of the song's lyrics. As P.O.D. vocalist Sonny Sandoval sings, "Instead of taking the test I took two to the chest," the first three murders occur onscreen; when Sandoval sings, "Little Suzie, she was only twelve / She was given the world with every chance to excel," a dead Master Chief avatar, clad in bright pink, is visually focused on in close-up. Finally, when Sandoval vocally expresses a potential catalyst for school violence, namely social exclusion and clique discrimination, a brief flare of white signals a flashback in which one of the attack's perpetrators, approaching other avatars outside the building in which the shooting will later occur, is abandoned as the other characters turn away and disappear off-screen. In this instance, a temporal technique commonly employed in cinema and television texts is imported into machinima, an advancement that displays the importance of cinematic expressivity to this burgeoning medium's attempts at formal communication.

Embed youtube clip here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6Kr4E17p0Y>

Garrison's *Virginia Tech Massacre* and 3NL's Columbine representation display the wide disparity that can exist within amateur machinima production. While Garrison's onscreen text is rife with spelling errors, and adherence to any particular avatar is confused by the characters' identical visual appearance, 3NL's film employs comparatively advanced cinematic structuring and editing, containing flashbacks to allow for an (admittedly minimal) presentation of character interiority, while a cut at the film's end reveals the shooting as a fantasy that the perpetrators abandon after perceiving the possibility of their own death. Similarly, while Garrison's film engages in a chronological representation of a traumatic event focused entirely on his machinima's protagonist, 3NL's film displays the perspectives of the perpetrators as well as those of numerous other characters, including other avatars that hide within the building from the approaching gunmen. While the *Halo 3* videogame engine with which both works are constructed predetermines their visual style, the differing prominence of character individuation, soundtrack, and onscreen titles in each work displays the potential representational complexities available to each machinima's respective producers, utilized to distinguish both works from each other and from the videogame necessary for their creation.

Virginia Tech Massacre and *The Youth of the Nation*, while formally differentiable, exist at a distinct remove from the events they portray, due to their very nature as machinima. This threatens an erasure of the event itself, as the expansive gap between actual violence and videogame entertainment is sutured together through each film's recasting of real trauma in the form of *Halo 3*'s digital animation. Marita Sturken, in her analysis of the photographic image's ability to effect memories of history, discusses how the reinterpretation and representation of past traumatic events in new media forms changes viewers' memories of the events themselves, not bringing latent memories to the fore so much as creating new ones. While "memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze" (Sturken 20), the memories brought forth act as screens, privileging certain remembrances while occluding

others. The representation of school shooting through machinima appears, at present, to construct a memory of both the Columbine and Virginia Tech massacres that erases those individual lives lost, replacing them with nearly identical avatars that mask—through their proliferation—the individual nature of victimization. Simultaneously, the recasting of traumatic violence as videogame violence threatens to deny the terribly affective power of school shootings' brutality, drawing it closer to the comparatively limp aggression of *Halo 3*, where the results of any violent encounter can be erased through booting from restore points or resetting the system.

Conversely, however, the representation of trauma through the videogame displays the inaccessibility of the traumatic event itself. If the viewer is unable to identify with a certain representation because it appears to deny the represented event's affectivity, this may in itself signal the impossibility of truly knowing or explaining trauma. Frustrating individuation (either of one film from another or of individual characters from each other) and denying an overt visual interrelation between the machinima and the actual school shooting plays upon the very notion that any representation of trauma is a form of erasure, a denial of certain catalysts in favor of others, and any rationalization or explanation is little more than a different corridor taken to attain the same goal. That a machinima representing trauma screens out the affectivity of the originary event may denote the constructed nature of the traumatic event's original dissemination, in which media texts are organized so as to accentuate the shocking nature of the event itself. The very question of how an event is represented is made blatantly evident in machinima's construction, whereas the news media's approach to depicting trauma operates to deny evidence of mediation. If any claim toward knowing the catalysts for a traumatic violent outburst is made in these machinima, it is the denial of videogame violence as a causal factor. *Virginia Tech Massacre* and *The Youth of the Nation*'s creators apprehend the videogame engine as an expressive medium that does not simply conduct and instill within videogame players an understanding of violence and vengeance as productive. Though recreating the shocking nature of the traumatic event through the videogame may currently be impossible, the existence of such machinima make a strong case that the videogame alone cannot be responsible for traumatic violence.

The limitations imposed upon trauma representation by the *Halo 3* videogame engine and its predetermined stylistics at once work to subvert any clear interpretation and singular understanding of the traumatic event, while concomitantly denying the affective potential of witnessing or recalling the terrible violence of school shootings. Currently, the digitally animated nature of machinima frustrates the potential affectivity of *Virginia Tech Massacre* and *The Youth of the Nation*'s subjects. What both machinima films portend, however, is that the exploration of traumatic subjects through videogame production will expand, with amateur producers creating works that encompass a wide range of formal attributes and technical proclivities, and new potentialities inherent to this convergent medium will be discovered that, in time, may heighten the palpability of trauma's representation through videogames.

¹ [Virginia Tech Massacre](http://www.youtube.com/user/Skatedawg27). Date of Posting. Youtube.com. Date Accessed.
<<http://www.youtube.com/user/Skatedawg27>>

² Youth of the Nation Music Video (3NL). Date of Posting. Youtube.com. Date Accessed.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6Kr4E17p0Y>> 3NL, which stands for Third and Long, is a machinima production group dedicated solely to creating machinima films using the *Halo* videogames.

Works Cited

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