

A Binary Within the Binary: Machinima as Digital Agency and
Growing Commercial Incorporation

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This thesis titled
A Binary Within the Binary: Machinima as Digital Agency and
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ABSTRACT

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A Binary Within the Binary: Machinima as Digital Agency and Growing Commercial Incorporation (128 pp.)

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This thesis traces machinima, films created in real-time from videogame engines, from the exterior toward the interior, focusing on the manner in which the medium functions as a tool for marginalized expression in the face of commercial and corporate inclusion. I contextualize machinima in three distinct contexts: first, machinima as historiography, which allows its minority creators to articulate and distribute their interpretation of national and international events without mass media interference. Second, machinima as a form of fan fiction, in which filmmakers blur the line between consumers and producers, a feature which is slowly being warped as videogame studios begin to incorporate machinima into marketing techniques. Finally, the comparison between psychoanalytic film theory, which explains the psychological motivations behind cinema's appeal, applied to videogames and their resulting machinima, which knowingly disregard established theory and create agency through parody. These three approaches culminate to reveal machinima's dual nature as an expression of fandom agency and corporate expansion.

To my brother Shane, my first videogame co-op partner

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Machinima, a portmanteau of machine and cinema, are films made from videogames. Or at least, that's the short definition. As videogames continue to expand, both technologically and in public and critical awareness, their mixture and interaction with other mediums is imminent. Videogames have breached literature, film, television programs, and music. An entire gallery in Los Angeles, iam8bit, is dedicated to showcasing videogame-inspired paintings, sculptures and multimedia installations.¹ While there are a notable number of skeptics eying the game industry's expansion,² the medium has enjoyed a great deal of support and fascinating medium blending. When videogames and cinema mix, most minds jump to either videogame adaptations filling the multiplexes to less-than-stellar reviews, such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton, 1993), or films featuring gaming aesthetics and narratives, highlighted in the more critically forgiven *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010).

As a longtime videogame and film fan, these combinations have consistently intrigued me. However, machinima's unique take on the videogame and film aggregation considerably sets the medium apart. To provide a longer and more specific definition, machinima are films created “within a realtime virtual 3D environment.”³ Machinima's instantaneous production, rather than forcing filmmakers to render their own imagery and animation from scratch, encourages amateur filmmaking. These films, or very often long-

1 <http://iam8bit.com/>

2 See Roger Ebert's highly controversial op-ed piece “Video games can never be art.” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 Apr 2010. <http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/video_games_can_never_be_art.html>.

3 Matt Kelland, et al. *Machinima*. p. 10.

running series, are primarily produced by videogame fans, both casual and hardcore alike. Although machinima had its start in early demo recordings and speed runs specific to particular games, the internet's rapid proliferation around the turn of the 21st century has encouraged a much larger viewing audience, and ultimately, a more diverse set of creators.

This thesis follows the trajectory of machinima from the outside inward, exploring the medium's political, social and psychological motivations. Machinima allows anyone with a videogame console to create films, thus opening the medium to an astounding amount of content, themes and ideas. My thesis aims to answer fundamental questions about machinima:

- ⤴ Why do people utilize this medium?
- ⤴ How do low production costs and informal procedures guide its usage?
- ⤴ How can a medium so tied to videogames effectively break away from its source material's narrative and visual content to tell new stories, or to comment on real life events?
- ⤴ How does machinima relate to other contemporary mediums?

Despite appearing prohibitively locked into a niche mode of expression, machinima has expanded considerably over the past 16 years, and covers a wide array of narratives and themes. This thesis breaks machinima into three categories, which move from machinima's outside toward its interior: 1) machinima as a historiographical tool, 2)

machinima as fan fiction, and 3) the persistence of cinema's psychosocial motivations within machinima, and the ongoing relevance of connections to psychoanalytic film theory to machinima. This breakdown attempts to highlight the different methods by which machinima creates a new media model of expression and the varying exterior and interior motives behind this creation.

1.1. A Brief History of Machinima

Machinima began in 1996⁴ when *Diary of a Camper*, directed by Matthew Van Sickler, emerged from *Quake's* demo mode. id Software's first-person shooter home computer hit proved to be a fruitful base of operations for the first machinima films. The game included a specific file extension type for "demos," or videos created using the game's prerendered imagery. These demo file extensions, initially created for the game's own demo films to be run in lieu of inactivity at a game's startup, were eventually utilized to record and share in-game footage, such as speedruns and match recaps. Eventually, Van Sickler and his *Quake* team, The Rangers, created a short fictional narrative by synchronizing gameplay and text input in a multiplayer match, and the first machinima, *Diary of a Camper*, was born. However, in these fledgling years, machinima was not a medium for the masses. Only individuals with with game in question could open the file and watch the films.⁵ It should be noted that the term *machinima* did not exist until 2000,

4 Robert Jones. "From Shooting Monsters to Shooting Movies: Machinima and the Transformative Play of Video Game Fan Culture." p. 274.

5 For more information regarding the technical specifics of demo mode, *Quake* and *Diary of a Camper*, see chapter three, pp. 53-56.

when Hugh Hancock created machinima.com, a website for uploading and sharing machinima works.^{6,7}

Early machinima, which I classify as machinima produced between 1996 and 2000, was mostly powered by *Quake's* engine, giving rise to the term “*Quake* movies.” *Quake* movies explored the boundaries of individual source engines, as well as the limits of storytelling. While early features like *Diary of a Camper* were markedly simplistic, perhaps even bordering on primitive, the medium evolved quickly. Whereas Van Sickler's film required a coordinated, controlled effort, other amateur filmmakers eventually tinkered with and modded a game's source code, allowing for completely predetermined character movement, as seen in a *Quake* film made four years later, *The Seal of Nehahra*, directed by J. Thaddeus Skubis. Films steadily grew longer in running time, and prerecorded, spoken dialogue slowly overtook typed text. Many films in this early era explored and expanded upon their parent game's established narrative, or retained the game's character types or settings. In short, with a few notable exceptions, such as the absurdist sketch comedy *Blahbalicious* (Mackey “Avatar” McCandlish, et al, 1997), machinima had not breached the realm of the abstract yet, at least on a collective scale.

This changed considerably with the rapid proliferation of both the internet and home gaming. As technology prices lowered (relatively speaking) in the 2000s, home computers and home videogaming consoles were much more commonplace as a leisure activity. Paired with the internet's swift expansion⁸ and online gaming which eventually followed, videogames, and in turn machinima, became a much more social and open

6 Paul Marino. *3D Game-Based Filmmaking: The Art of Machinima*. p. 12.

7 Although the term was coined in 2000, it is appropriate to label pre-2000 works as machinima.

8 361 million worldwide users in December 2000, nearly doubled to 719 million worldwide users in December 2003. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm>.

experience. Massively multiplayer online (MMO) games exploded in popularity. Suddenly, owning a specific game was no longer required to watch a particular machinima, and it was incredibly easy to share a machinima creation with friends or other fans.

Following along this path, more videogame production companies actively encouraged players to alter base code, and some games even encouraged filmmaking. Although Lionhead Studios never used the term “machinima” in marketing campaigns, *The Movies* (2005), which simulated a movie studio and came pre-packaged with a number of Hollywood genre pieces and parts, was basically a “machinima creation” game. The company encouraged budding amateur *Movies* filmmakers to upload their films to Lionhead's website. *The Movies*'s wide array of cinematic settings, props, characters, music and other elements allowed machinima filmmakers to come much closer to traditional cinema. Valve Corporation enthusiastically opened their products to fan modification, leading to new and unseen games,⁹ and hence, opportunities for machinima. As the medium grew, became more accessible and expanded, so did its narratives: machinima films now more commonly employed stories which did not strictly adhere to videogame characters or plots. Occasionally, these films took a fascinating allegorical turn, such as Alex Chan's *The French Democracy* (2005) which deals with the 2005 Paris Riots, or the Chinese anti-censorship film *War of Internet Addiction* (2009-2010).

⁹ The *Half-Life* mod *Counter-Strike*, originally created by two users, Gooseman and Cliffe, is one of the most prolific and profitable examples of fan modding in game history. Valve Corporation eventually made *Counter-Strike* a standalone series, and subsequently hired Gooseman and Cliffe to work on *Counter-Strike* games and patches.

Machinima and its filmmakers have recently come under fire over the medium's legal status. Because so many machinima filmmakers create their works using in-game assets, the origin game's production company must decide how to approach amateur appropriation of their images and stories. Modded work has its legal issues as well. While Matt Kelland argues that “[...] it is reasonable to say that any game that comes with mod tools supplied is fair game for amateur machinima,”¹⁰ works utilizing modded material can be considered unlawful “under a strict legal interpretation” because the creator is producing work in a copywritten proprietary game engine.¹¹ Most companies view machinima as free promotion for their videogame, and allow filmmakers to continue with their work.¹² Microsoft has this mindset when dealing with the game's most popular machinima creation, *Red vs. Blue*, a humorous take on the *Halo* universe: “Our initial plan with *Red vs. Blue* was to fly under the radar and hope Microsoft never noticed us but they contacted us pretty quickly... some time right after episode 2. They seems to really like *Red vs. Blue* and are really great to work with,” says Gus Sorola of Rooster Teeth. Some companies only step in when they feel that the machinima has taken a turn for the inappropriate, seen by Blizzard Entertainment's censorship of the *World of Warcraft* machinima *Not Just Another Love Story*, directed by Tristan Pope in 2005. Blizzard argued that the graphic love story bordered on pornographic. Blizzard officially disregards this film and does not allow discussion concerning it on official message boards, but the film freely circulates elsewhere online.¹³

10 Matt Kelland, et al. *Machinima*. p. 98.

11 Leo Berkeley. “Situating Machinima in the New Mediascape.” p. 69.

12 Christina J. Hayes. “Changing the Rules of the Game: How Video Game Publishers are Embracing User-Generated Derivative Works.” 568-569.

13 Henry Lowood. “Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima.” pp.187-190.

Regardless of legal involvement, machinima continues to grow in popularity, bolstered by high-traffic videos, such as the *Red vs. Blue* series and those appearing on machinima.com (*Freeman's Mind*, *Sonic for Hire*, and *Megaman Dies At The End*, among many others). Machinima has lightly broken into television, seen in the MTV2 music video program *Video Mods* (2004-2005), BBC Two's battle recreation game show *Time Commanders* (2003-2005), *South Park's* "Make Love, Not Warcraft" episode (2006), and Rockstar's decision to nationally air their promotional machinima *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* (2010). As of the time of writing, Valve's upcoming product The Source Filmmaker will likely be a huge draw for those already familiar with machinima filmmaking and newcomers alike. The program will allow players to "film on location" in their favorite *Team Fortress 2* environment, as well as import any original elements (sounds, character models, props, etc). Valve has been using this program for years to create their promotional comedy machinima *Meet The Team* web series (*Meet the Engineer*, *Meet the Medic*, etc.) (Fig. 1.1). The Source Filmmaker is currently in beta.



Fig. 1.1. *Meet the Medic*, part of the *Team Fortress 2* promotional machinima series *Meet the Team*, Valve, 2011.

1.2. Definitions and Chapter Topics

There are a number of terms and ideas in this thesis which do not derive from any particular theorist specifically or theory at large. Prior engaging with the text, clarifying some base terminology and concepts will be extremely helpful.

First and foremost, there are a number of contradictory words and phrases in the academic literature and popular culture surrounding *machinima*, many of which are unnecessarily confusing and convoluted. Technically speaking, any film or short created in demo mode and only playable *in* demo mode are referred to as “demos,” whereas films distributed under more free-range methods, like the internet, are “videos.”¹⁴ Under this model, *Diary of a Camper* is a demo, and *War of Internet Addiction* is a video, for example. However, for the sake of this thesis, all game-based films created in real-time

¹⁴ Matt Kelland, et al. *Machinima*. p. 32.

which deviate from pure gameplay (speedruns, glitch exposure, match replays and “trick” videos) and feature a narrative of any kind, traditional or experimental, is a machinima film. Most of the time, the difference between a gameplay video and an original narrative creation is clear, but there are occasional gray areas. For example, Peggy Ahwesh's film *She Puppet* features many short gameplay clips from the *Tomb Raider* videogame series cut together. *Tomb Raider*'s hero, Lara Croft, never speaks or completes actions outside of fairly normal gameplay in *She Puppet* (the character dies many times over from a variety of in-game hazards). However, Ahwesh's non-diegetic voiceover featuring quotes from Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* which contextualize Lara under different classifications (“the alien, the orphan, and the clone” according to Ahwesh)¹⁵ set the film apart as neither gameplay nor traditional narrative, but more in line with experimental cinema.

It could be argued that because these works never play in a commercial theater,¹⁶ and are never transferred to celluloid, calling them films may be inaccurate. I use the word “film” more liberally, allowing any audiovisual narrative work, regardless of length, to be a film. If the machinima is released episodically (*Red vs. Blue*, *Freeman's Mind*), it is a machinima *series*. Additionally, I specify machinima as a medium, not a genre. Machinima frequently incorporates traditional genre classifications: comedy, political, action, Western, and so on. Machinima can be used as an adjective (as in *machinima series*) or a noun (“Bernie Burns and his team at Rooster Teeth create machinima”).

Those who create machinima are occasionally referred to as *machinimators*.

¹⁵ <http://vimeo.com/9197535>

¹⁶ There are machinima film festivals, in which machinima is projected on a screen for a large audience. Matt Kelland, et al, *Machinima*. pp. 68-69.

A large, overarching theory behind the thesis is to discover how machinima operates as a psychosocially for those invested in its creation. This concept of the *psychosocial* is integral to understanding machinima, as the medium creates an outlet not only for marginalized expression, but also for the cultural products of this marginalization (the machinima films) to enter into the social realm. As explained earlier in machinima's brief historical narrative, this applies to filmmakers sharing their creations through demo files or within the much larger internet community. Machinima represents an emerging form of DIY and digital expression and communication. This communication unites gamers and machinima filmmakers together, evidenced most clearly by *War of Internet Addiction*, made by a large group of Chinese *World of Warcraft* players distressed by related issues.

To expand on this point, *DIY media* is the product of amateur creation, ascribed most frequently to products which are digital in nature. Amateur creation is vital to machinima's psychological undercurrents, although there have been small advances toward mainstream or corporate production. In the context of this thesis, amateur machinima, written fan fiction and amateur, live action fan films are all considered DIY media. In a broader scope, DIY media is often incorporated under the heading of technological education, such as utilizing videogames to kickstart the learning process in reluctant students.¹⁷

In relation to machinima, modding or mods refers to machinima creators who go beyond recording gameplay and create new imagery or environments by tampering with a

¹⁷ Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, ed.'s primary focus in *DIY Media: Creating, Sharing and Learning with New Technologies*. 2010, as well as Paula K. Hooper's "Looking BK and Moving FD: Toward a Sociocultural Lens on Learning with Programmable Media," and Sarita Yardi's "Whispers in the Classroom."

game's source code in software engineering. This allows for much more filmmaking flexibility, but not all machinima creators take this route. Some machinima producers mod quite liberally and create completely new characters, such as the team behind Blahbalicious, while others mod to slightly smooth out the game's obstacles for a more fluid filmmaking approach, such as Ross Scott's series Freeman's Mind. Creating new imagery in proprietary engines creates a difficult sidebar in legal implications surrounding machinima.

Chapter two of this thesis explains machinima's role in *historiography* of 21st century *sociopolitical* events. Historiography can alternately refer to history's recorded methodology, or a particular era or event's body of historical work. The two machinima featured in chapter two, *The French Democracy* and *War of Internet Addiction*, use the medium as a lens through which to record an interpretation of a pertinent national political event. To this end, machinima functions as a new *historiographical* tool, by which I mean a new method of recording historical interpretation, which falls more in line with historiography's first provided definition. *Sociopolitical* refers to the combination of political and social factors. In *The French Democracy*, France's republican politics and disenfranchised, marginalized and racially discriminated-against youth combine to create a sociopolitical issue. In *War of Internet Addiction*, China's official policies regarding the internet and “internet addiction” and *World of Warcraft* players uniting against this oppressive regime also create a sociopolitical issue.

Chapter three, “Machinima's Imaginary Space,” investigates three machinima pieces in depth: the 234 minute *Quake*-based epic *The Seal of Nehahra* (J. Thaddeus

Skubis, 2000), the long running *Halo* parody series *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles* (Bernie Burns and Matt Hullum, 2003-2007) and the commercially produced promotional machinima for *Red Dead Redemption* entitled *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* (2010). The three machinima highlight a miniature trajectory within the larger thesis: narratives and distribution methods which are initially bound to in-game components, and gradually shift toward mass distribution and narratives informed by other popular culture mediums, most notably cinematic genre conventions. This transition between the machinima works not only shows how the medium has gradually become infused with popular culture conventions, but also brings to light the shrinking ideals of machinima creation as an outlet for marginalized individuals or groups seeking agency.

Finally, chapter four, “Machinima of the Mind: Psychoanalytic Practices, Film Theory and Psychosocial Function,” explores machinima's role as the bridging point between videogames and cinema, and the implications of ascribing psychoanalytic film theory to machinima. In this final chapter, I complete machinima's transition from the exterior toward the interior; having worked through the medium's historiographical possibilities and toward fan fiction as a form of marginalized social catharsis, the thesis concludes with a comparison between the psychological tenets of two machinima series and their parent games. In short, the chapter asks “why create machinima?” In this analysis, players' attraction and psychological connection to the parent game is explored, and is drastically altered in the machinima through humor and parody, which create control and agency over the cinema and videogame's dominant driving characteristics.

This chapter focuses less on broad social aspects surrounding machinima, and more on hypothetical, individual motivations driving the medium.

1.3. Review of Literature

My thesis breaks machinima into three sections, each moving with the medium from an exterior space toward an interior one. Within each section, I discuss the manner in which machinima serves as a burgeoning medium of self-expression and articulation for marginalized individuals or groups, how videogames and machinima fill a newly formed hole in interactive identification, and how different models of theory explain this trend.

First, a number of books and essays which provide general information on machinima, including the medium's history, explanation on its legal status under copyright laws, and even how-to guides, have been incredibly informative during early research. In their book *Machinima*, Matt Kelland, Dave Morris and Dave Lloyd provide an excellent beginner's guide to the medium. The book lays out a brief history of machinima, explanations of “demo mode” and modding, benefits and drawbacks in comparison to other filmmaking methods (live action, pre-rendered sequences, etc.), genre constructs in machinima, and predictions for the medium's future. The book also features “case studies” on popular and influential machinima and machinima filmmakers, such as *Red vs. Blue* and Hugh Hancock, founder of machinima.com. The book's last

section provides helpful information for readers interested in creating new machinima works (“Storyboarding,” “Planning vs. Improvisation,” and so on).

The Machinima Reader, a collection of essays edited by Henry Lowood and Michael Nitsche, easily provides the most contemporary scholarly work on machinima. The book examines the medium through many lenses and contexts, including gender studies (“Pink vs. Blue: The Emergence of Women in Machinima” by Robert Jones), educational pedagogy (“Everything I need to Know about Filmmaking I Learned from Playing Video Games: The Educational Promise of Machinima” by Matthew Thomas Payne) and machinima's semantics (“Undefining Machinima” by Erik Champion). The book does not conform to any one viewpoint or evaluation of machinima, and the editors stand by their promise “to introduce to a broad readership the various debates that have emerged in the machinima community and to provide a primary resource for the critical study of machinima.”¹⁸ The editors also incorporate the concept of machinima as “less an enigma than a moving target [...] continuously evolving and morphing – changing shape, markers, markets, and technology.”¹⁹

Two essays from a 2011 issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* have also provided useful introductions to machinima. First, Tracy Harwood's “Towards a Manifesto for Machinima” contextualizes machinima as “art,” a concept/phrase that many scholars seem to avoid. His essay discusses how machinima's future potential success and proliferation hinges on its ability to assimilate with more established art forms, particularly digital art, as well as the videogame industry's support and the continued use

18 Henry Lowood and Michael Nitsche, ed. *The Machinima Reader*. p. vii.

19 Henry Lowood and Michael Nitsche, ed. *The Machinima Reader*. p. vii.

of the internet as a distribution site. Robert F. Nideffer's essay "Eight Questions (and Answers) about Machinima" presents information in a creative and accessible manner, actually appearing in "Q & A" format. The essay is problematic because the questions' origins are unclear, but the general information still proves useful. Nideffer provides his conjectures on machinima's economics as an inexpensive and intuitive brand of filmmaking, and also addresses the medium's place in sociopolitical commentary.

These works provide helpful general information which provide foundation for the thesis as a whole, but each chapter additionally utilizes a unique set of works which specifically pertain to the addressed topics. Chapter two, entitled "Pixels and Polygons in the World: Machinima's Role in 21st Century Historiography," discusses how two machinima films, *The French Democracy* and *War of Internet Addiction*, utilize the medium's technology and format to record and interpret recent national sociopolitical events: the 2005 Paris riots and Chinese internet censorship, respectively. The films in this chapter are vital to contextualizing machinima as a medium for outsiders: Alex Chan, director of *The French Democracy*, is a French-Chinese young man living in the Parisian suburbs effected by the riots, and the group of *World of Warcraft* players responsible for *War of Internet Addiction*, credited under the collective moniker Tiger Oil Machinima Team, are treated as socially shameful outcasts who purportedly suffer psychological ill-effects stemming from alleged "internet addiction." The films rely on different ideologies of representation to portray their topics. *The French Democracy* takes a literal approach, prefacing the film's main story with a machinima re-enactment of the riot's trigger event, the police-related death of two French-African teens. *War of Internet Addiction* utilizes

allegory to tell its story, creating in-game personified avatars for all individual characters and impersonal entities; for example, Blizzard Entertainment appears as a burly ice king and rival server groups are represented as malicious clans made up of humans, elves, orcs and other *World of Warcraft* races.

Chapter two's literary sources are primarily imbedded in primary and secondary accounts of the sociopolitical events approached by the machinima, as well as retroactive scholarly analyses of the events. Articles on the Paris riots, including John P. Murphy's piece "Baguettes, Berets and Burning Cars: The 2005 Riots and the Question of Race in Contemporary France" and Harlan Koff and Dominique Duprez's essay "The 2005 Riots in France: The International Impact of Domestic Violence," are included to specify not only the specifics of the riots, but also to contextualize the larger cultural and political undercurrents, such as France's colonial past and the current French government's policies surrounding French youth and non-European French residents. Silvia Lindtner and Marcella Szablewicz's article "China's many Internets: Participation and Digital Game Play across a Changing Technology Landscape" and Rebecca MacKinnon's essay "Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China" provide information and history on Chinese internet policies, including the seemingly contradictory surge of Chinese globalization paired with restrictive legislation for Chinese internet users and extremely controversial electroshock therapy treatments for "internet addiction" sufferers.

Although most of the chapter's sources consist of these articles, as well as newspaper and magazine pieces which directly report on the events, I have integrated a

few pieces specifically connected to machinima which comment on the medium's abilities to make an impact beyond videogame niche culture. Both viewpoints are represented: Henry Lowood, author of "Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima" believes that the medium has realistic potential to become a viable source of sociopolitical commentary, while Robert F. Nideffer, author of "Eight Questions (and Answers) About Machinima" is not as confident.

Literature on fan fiction, transmedia storytelling and new media take precedence in chapter three, "Machinima's Imaginary Space." *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, provides a number of informative essays on different aspects of fan fiction. Most of the fan fiction addressed in the collection focuses on written fan fiction, but the internet's role in creating a fan fiction community through shared the writing and editing processes connects the literature to machinima. Two essays from the collection provide a great deal of helpful theory work for this thesis. First is Abigail Derecho's "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction" and second, Robert Jones's "From Shooting Monsters to Shooting Movies: Machinima and the Transformative Play of Video Games in Fan Culture." Derecho's essay provides a history of written fan fiction through the context of creating agency for marginalized creators, using examples from fan fiction appropriations of 17th century novels by women to comedic re-tellings of classic books from a disparate racial perspective (*The Wind Done Gone*, a *Gone with the Wind* parody told from the perspective of a slave girl at Tara Plantation). I argue in that machinima functions quite similarly, but frequently substitutes gender or racial minority

for social exclusion brought about by the “nerd” or “geek” labels. Jones's essay also comments on gender division in fan fiction, stating that written fan fiction typically appeals to females, while machinima's origins in first-person shooter (FPS) games appeals more to males. Jones also discusses the transformative role as fan fiction, discussing the fine line between machinima filmmakers as consumers and producers. This idea is quite interesting when contextualizing amateur machinima against commercial machinima.

Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide by Henry Jenkins, Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, explores new media, transmedia storytelling, authorship, mass culture and convergence, among many other related topics. The book has provided invaluable information regarding machinima's classification as a new media construct, as well as its place in the larger ideas of corporate and grassroots convergence creation and authorship. Jenkins only discusses machinima briefly in the book's footnotes, but his theories merge comfortably with the machinima as a *new media*. The book covers a great deal of topics, including *new media*, which Jenkins defines as a digital “socially realized structure of communication,”²⁰ *transmedia storytelling*, narratives that span multiple media platforms with each medium adding distinct information and *corporate convergence*, the “commercially directed flow of media content.”²¹ These concepts are integral to understanding fan fiction machinima, as well as corporate involvement in machinima creation and other media outlets as promotion for videogames. In two specific, “Searching for the Origami Unicorn”²² and

20 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. p. 329.

21 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. p. 322.

22 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. pp. 95-134.

“Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*?”²³ Jenkins addresses large media empires, *The Matrix* in the former and *Star Wars* in the latter, and their dealings in transmedia storytelling and fan participation and creation. The *Star Wars* chapter examines the roles and rights of fans and their subsequent re-tellings and re-imaginings of the series' universe, as well as the rights of its creator, George Lucas. Jenkins questions to whom *Star Wars* “belongs:” the fans, who financially support the series and its various offshoots and enthusiastically re-appropriate its characters, settings, and plots for fan fiction, or George Lucas, who wrote the original story and directed four of the films. This tension is alive and well in machinima fan fiction, particularly in the case of J. Thaddeus Skubis who stated, concerning *The Seal of Nehahra*, “I told the story that id Software wouldn't.”²⁴

Film theory by André Bazin and Christian Metz provides a bridge by which videogames, machinima and traditional cinema intersect in chapter four, “Machinima of the Mind.” On a general level, I utilize work by Bazin and Metz due to the theorists' role in comparing cinema to other mediums (such as Bazin's investigations of cinema and photography), a common strategy in the still relatively unestablished field of videogame studies and videogame theory. Videogames' technical evolution, rapid social acceptance but hesitant critical adoption marks a similarity with cinema. Also, I am intrigued by Metz's heavy integration of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories into work on spectatorship, which plays into the “active vs. passive” binary in videogames and machinima.

23 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. pp. 135-173.

24 “Director's Notes: The Seal of Nehahra.” machinima.com, 10/20/2000.

More specifically, I select work by Bazin due to his theories on cinema's role as an “idealistic immersion” in “The Myth of Total Cinema” and photography as an archival tool, which connects to my first videogame/machinima pairing, the third-person life simulation series *The Sims* and its machinima offshoot, a comedy series by Rooster Teeth called *The Strangerhood*. Bazin's discussions of the similarities between photography and mummification in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” informs a reading of *The Sims*, in which players create in-game avatars, frequently closely resembling themselves. In a way, avatars in *The Sims* not only provide an archived, idealistic version of the player, but also a completely idealistic *world*: “It is no longer a question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny.”²⁵ *The Strangerhood* takes many of these concepts and inverts them, highlighting the conformity, stereotypes and crass consumerism of the game, and in turn equates players who have emotionally invested his or herself in *The Sims* to avatars on par with *The Strangerhood's* stereotyped character cast. Additionally, the series devalues players who identify more readily with an omnipotent “god” role, by revealing the series's “god” character to be just a misguided, digital human member of *The Strangerhood's* universe. This reversal highlights the complicated relationship between machinima and film theory, and assists in explaining the process behind machinima's psychological drive through parody and comedy.

The second pairing also relies on comedy for its disparity. The *Half-Life* series, a violent, science-fiction oriented first-person shooter and the machinima series *Freeman's Mind*, a comedic reversal on the game's silent protagonist. Much of *Half-Life's* pleasure

25 André Bazin. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” p. 10.

derives from its silent and mostly “blank” main character, as the player projects his or herself into the role. I connect this feature in *Half-Life* to Metz's work on primary versus secondary identification and its role in Lacan/Freud's “mirror stage.” Metz writes that in order for a cinema spectator to understand and enjoy a trip to the movie theater, he or she must psychologically identify with either the camera (primary identification) or a character on screen (secondary identification). Metz discusses how the screen functions similarly (although not identically) to Lacan/Freud's mirror and creates an imaginary signifier, imaginary because the spectator is not actually reflected on screen, as would occur in a mirror.

In *Freeman's Mind*, spectators are subject to Freeman's incessant inner monologue, written and vocalized by the series creator Ross Scott. While *Half-Life* ascribed no real personality to Freeman, Scott paints him as sarcastic, rude and egotistical. Some scholars, such as Isabelle Arvers, believe that human voice functions as a vital piece for human immersion in machinima. This works into the difference between “active” and “passive”, as well as Metz's theories on “discourse” versus “story.” Like *The Strangerhood*, *Freeman's Mind* inverts the core tenets of its parent game, in this example taking an active game discourse with a silent protagonist and replacing it with a passive cinematic story with a talkative protagonist. In both cases, videogames and machinima interact with film theory to produce intriguing discourses surrounding immersion, identification and pleasure.

CHAPTER 2: PIXELS AND POLYGONS IN THE WORLD:
MACHINIMA'S ROLE IN 21st C. HISTORIOGRAPHY

Machinima has evolved considerably since its inception in 1996; early titles were usually limited to game-related plots, and distribution was also restricted to in-game formats, such as the “*Quake* movie” demo file type.²⁶ Machinima has mutated with the gaming industry's technological advances and shifts, and also with the internet's proliferation in the early 21st century. As videogames reach further toward academic discussion, understanding, and inclusion, its offspring products slowly follow suit. This process is expedited by machinima which responds to real world sociopolitical events. Political machinima grows in popularity each year: DIY films created in response to national and international events, frequently creating commentary on personal and political identities. Political machinima's unconventional nature points to a new historiographical method, particularly in regard to the relative technical and financial ease inherent in its creation. For this investigation of machinima's historiographical renderings, I will examine two films: *The French Democracy* (Alex Chan, 2005) and *War of Internet Addiction* (Tiger Oil Machinima Team, 2009-2010). These films exemplify different youth DIY approaches in machinima to record and represent recent history, as well as machinima's ability to create, transform and comment on personal identity and spatial boundaries all while circumventing traditional, restrictive media outlets. Most importantly, these elements combined create political and personal agency for the machinima filmmakers, for Chan as a racial minority in racially charged France and the

26 See chapter three, “Machinima's Imaginary Space,” pp. 53-56.

Tiger Oil Machinima Team members as socially and politically targeted “internet addicts” in China.

Machinima commonly falls under the “niche” product label with seemingly limited outside appeal or impact. In his essay “Eight Questions (and Answers) About Machinima,” Robert F. Nideffer addresses machinima's sociopolitical potential due to its “easy access” and instantaneous creation. He appears to believe in the concept hypothetically but not realistically: “That’s a bit like saying pen and paper give anyone a voice. While at a certain level, one can assert the potential to have voice is there for almost anyone; the potential to be heard is certainly not.”²⁷

Much like early cinema, games and game-based cultural products are still securing a foothold. Machinima's forays into sociopolitical commentary signify an expansion of the medium. This expansion indicates a step forward, and machinima will continue to gain momentum, bolstered by the efforts of young amateur and independent filmmakers. However, this expansion should not be labeled a success or failure based on its relationship with “political” content, or with more established mediums, on principle, but rather by its ability to connect individuals in service of expression and political, personal and technological advancement. Henry Lowood, author of “Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima,” makes an appeal to machinima scholars not to evaluate machinima's apparent quality based on its expansion to more “serious” art forms and topics. He implores machinima fans and scholars to consider the ways in which machinima not only learns from other mediums, but what the other

27 Robert F. Nideffer. “Eight Questions (and Answers) about Machinima.” p. 71.

mediums can learn from machinima, and how young, game-cultured filmmakers can be driven to connectivity and expression:

“Perhaps most importantly, the history of machinima provokes discussion of frequently debated points in the valuation of new media associated with 'fans, bloggers, and gamers,' as well as others of their ilk: in unlocking game-based moviemaking, what have players learned about connecting innovative uses of technology to the emergence of new cultural modalities made available to them?”²⁸

Machinima's nature of “pick up and go” production coupled with relatively uncomplicated online distribution encourages filmmakers who may not have otherwise possessed the finances or real world community to cinematically express his or her thoughts on major sociopolitical events and topics. However, this movement gains traction slowly due to social and political obstacles.

2.1. Separations and Distinctions

The two films I have selected are by no means machinima's solitary engagements with real world events, non-game topics or products. However, a sizable portion of non-fan fiction machinima has been produced for the purpose of a commercial gimmick. In these cases, the machinima is not made by amateur or experimental filmmakers, but

²⁸ Henry Lowood. “Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima.” p. 168.

usually by large production studios backed by corporations.²⁹ Although it is not my intention to evaluate the merit of these works, as I find them intriguing and entertaining in their own right, I do feel the need to bring them to light by way of a distinction.

Take, for example, the BBC Two series *Time Commanders* (2003-2005) and the MTV2 program *Video Mods* (2004-2005) (Figs. 2.1 & 2.2). These shows used videogame engines (a modified version of *Rome: Total War* for the former and a wide variety of games in the latter) for the purpose of commercial gimmicks. In *Time Commanders*, famous ancient battles, such as the Battle of Troy and the Battle of Cannae, were played out using a programmable game engine. Live people control the battles,³⁰ which created a sort of souped-up, broadcast version of strategy board games like *Risk* or *Axis and Allies*. This show existed to create a new and inexpensive spin on battle recreation television programs, rather than the more costly and time consuming process of either creating all-original CGI animations or filming live action battle reenactments. In *Video Mods*, a variety of games, like *BloodRayne*, *Destroy All Humans!* and *Silent Hill 4*, were modified to resemble music videos, with major characters filling out a band. Once again, this was in service of a gimmick and ultimately profitable corporate convergence, as the games and music are explicitly named and were fresh on the market at the time of airing.

²⁹ Machinima is also used by production studios as a game marketing tool. See chapter three, pp. 70-77.

³⁰ Each episode's "players" fall into some variety of a theme: a team of police officers, a group of martial arts experts or a family unit, and so on. Two military experts preside over each episode/battle, observe strategies and provide commentary for the home viewing audience.



Fig. 2.1. "The Battle of Cannae," *Time Commanders*, BBC Two, 2003.



Fig. 2.2. *Video Mods*, "Take Me Out" by Franz Ferdinand, as performed by Mace Windu, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda from the *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* videogame adaptation, MTV2, 2005.

This machinima is not inherently “bad” because of its commercial leanings, it is just different, insofar that it does not serve as an expressive tool for amateur or otherwise marginalized filmmakers or directly encourage connectivity. However, commercial, televised machinima can be an important exposure method for the medium,³¹ encouraging burgeoning filmmakers to turn to games for alternative production methods, and for people already familiar with gaming, possible inspiration to take the product a step further.

2.2. *The French Democracy* and the 2005 Paris Riots

Alex Chan purchased *The Movies* (Lionhead Studios, 2005) to promptly and efficiently create a film responding not only to the life-altering chain of sociopolitical events spreading through his nation, but also the international mass media's response to said events. Chan, a 27-year-old French-Chinese man living in the northeast Parisian neighborhood Seine-Saint-Denis, used the film studio simulation game *The Movies* to produce his film *The French Democracy*, which creates a fictional narrative within the larger context of the 2005 Paris riots.

First, it is vital to briefly contextualize the event that informs *The French Democracy's* narrative: the 2005 Paris riots. Tensions due to alleged discrimination and mistreatment against French-Africans and other racially marginalized groups had been rising for some time by the time of the trigger event; scholars and critics have blamed the riots on France's “color-blind Republican model” and French colonialism's lingering

31 See chapter three, pp. 70-77.

societal effects, particularly concerning African individuals,³² although debates and opinions range far and wide. As shown in Chan's film, the riots exploded on October 27th after two teenagers were chased by French police responding to a break-in report. The teens hid from the police in a power station and were electrocuted to death.³³ As word of their deaths spread, riots broke out in northeastern regions of the Paris metropolitan area, first isolated to areas closer to Paris but eventually included poor housing areas throughout France. Riots continued nightly for nearly three weeks, and while no one was killed, there was excessive property damage.³⁴

The short film opens with the riot's trigger event machinimized: teenagers French-Tunisian Zyed Benna and French-Malian Bouna Traoré pursued by French police forces and accidentally electrocuted to death in a power station (the film does not show the electrocution, only an ominous, electrical buzz dominates the sound track). From there, the film breaks into a fictional narrative of three marginalized, Moroccan men living in Paris. The men are bombarded by racial discrimination and violence at every turn: the police haul one man into the local station for not carrying a passport, officers savagely beat another man who resists his illegal arrest, and another man's vaguely "ethnic" name hinders job and apartment hunts. Their mounting frustration and anger eventually explodes, and the three men join other enraged citizens in riots, violence, and vandalism.

32 John P. Murphy. "Baguettes, Berets and Burning Cars: The 2005 Riots and the Question of Race in Contemporary France." pp. 34-35.

33 Harlan Koff & Dominique Duprez. "The 2005 Riots in France: The International Impact of Domestic Violence." p. 713.

34 Damage reports show that around 10,000 vehicles were destroyed with fire, and the total damage cost, including destroyed vehicles, buildings and other items such as trash cans, neared €200-250M (Koff & Duprez).

The film closes with a dedication to Benna and Traoré and an articulated sadness over the French Republic's abandonment of its treasured ideals: freedom, equality and fraternity.

Chan, a French-Chinese industrial designer, did not participate in the riots, but many of his friends' cars and other property were destroyed in the chaos. In the aftermath, he felt dissatisfied with the riot's representation in national and global media. Chan, the son of immigrants from Hong Kong and a minority in France himself, stated in an interview with the Associated Press that he made the film “to correct what was being said in the media, especially in the United States, who linked what was happening, the riots, to terrorism and put the blame on the Muslim community.”³⁵ With the goal of righting this wrong, Chan purchased *The Movies*. The purchase likely set him back no more than \$50-60 USD.

“Imagine you could make any movie you wanted to [...] Movie mogul, talent spotter or film director. You can be one or you can be all three. That's the magic of *The Movies*,” reads Lionhead's official website for the game.³⁶ A good portion of early machinima (1996-2000) originates from first-person shooter (FPS) games, such as *Quake* and *Doom*. Simulation (commonly shortened to *sim*) and construction management games were staples on home computers in the late 1980s into the mid-1990s; titles such as *SimCity* (Maxis and Infogrames, 1989), *SimTower* (Maxis, 1994) and *RollerCoaster Tycoon* (Infogrames and Hasbro Interactive, 1999) have sold immensely well over the years. However, with the debut of *The Sims* (Maxis and Electronic Arts, 2000) simulation games welcomed the previously absent human element to the mix. Creating its own

35 Joelle Diderich. “French film about riots draws applause.”

36 <http://lionhead.com/the-movies/>

subgenre, “life simulation,” *The Sims* series³⁷ became a popular site for machinima creation. *The Movies* takes this concept even closer to filmmaking by placing the player in command of a movie studio which must react to historical changes in the industry (the coming of sound and color, for instance) and keep a slew of Hollywood “diva” personalities satisfied and under contract. After following the game's rules on film genre, format, and style for the game's duration, the player finally unlocks sandbox mode³⁸ and can produce less restricted films. In this sandbox mode, Chan created *The French Democracy*.

Even though Chan unlocked sandbox mode, his filmmaking was still limited to elements the game's predetermined artwork and engine could materialize. Take, for instance, Benna and Traoré's escape to the power plant where they meet their demise. It is likely that *The Movies* simply does not have “power plant” as a playable/filmable location, so Chan improvised. His ultimate choice is quite intriguing: a cabin in the woods (Fig. 2.3), quite similar to the “cabin in the woods” location trope in horror films, like Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* trilogy (Fig. 2.4):

37 Official titles *The Sims*, *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3*. Expansion packs for the main series include *University*, *Nightlife*, *Pets*, and *Seasons*, among others. Spin-off titles include *The Sims (cont.) (cont.) Online The Sims Medieval*. For more information on *The Sims* series and *Sims* machinima, see chapter four, pp. 81-90.

38 A commonplace expression in gaming, *sandbox* or *open world* lifts many narrative, linear restrictions from the player, allowing him or her to explore the game at the desired pace and in a non-regulated order. The sandbox mode or design, although markedly more open, does eventually exhibit limitations, either by way of the game's physical memory constrictions (the game's engine can only produce so much expanded space) or by narrative limitations to keep some semblance of linearity intact.



Fig. 2.3. Cabin in the woods, *The French Democracy*, Alex Chan, 2005.



Fig. 2.4. Cabin in the woods, *The Evil Dead*, Sam Raimi, 1981.

The Movies machinima uniquely appropriates culturally codified cinematic imagery and tropes. Whereas most machinima requires a certain suspension of disbelief, or at least the ability to understand the produced allegory, on the part of the spectator to follow non-game narratives through game specific images and play (such as *World of Warcraft* in this section's other highlighted film), the *Movies*-based machinima creator has a great deal more control and influence over the film's look and style. The game comes standard with a number of genre-imbedded locations, costumes, music scores, props, and really anything else involved in producing a film, with certain limitations (as seen, Chan could not create a power plant for his opening sequence, and the game's default city location is New York City, which Chan used in place of Paris). It is quite intriguing that Chan chose to give his film's opening the horror treatment. By incorporating familiar genre imagery, Chan creates an entry point for those unfamiliar with machinima. Whereas a number of curious investigators may be turned off by machinima's videogame aesthetic, a program like *The Movies* facilitates a smoother bridging of the mediums, and as such encourages skeptics to view the work with less uncertainty. With a larger and more varied audience, sociopolitical can reach further than ever before, illuminating minority voices in the sociopolitical realm without mass media's filter.

Although the film is markedly sympathetic toward Benna and Traoré's fate, the film attempts to show how the national and international media warps all walks of French life. In the film, the white couple (Fig. 2.5) watching coverage of the riots in their suburban home are not to blame, but rather, the television program they are viewing. The film includes brief interludes of a smiling politician who attempts to calm the rioting

(Fig. 2.6). His speeches are laced with racism, accusations, and misinformation and do very little to quell the frustration.



Fig. 2.5. White suburban couple watches the news, *The French Democracy*, Alex Chan, 2005.



Fig. 2.6. Politician, *The French Democracy*, Alex Chan, 2005.

With a distrust of mass media, Chan created his video over the course of three or four days and uploaded his film to the official *Movies* website, two weeks after the riots ceased. He later stated, “through these tools you can get some more spontaneous reaction or reflection, not from mass media, but from a simple citizen like me.”³⁹ *The Movies*'s official website hosted a great number of machinima films in the weeks and months after the game's release.

The film's popularity on the *Movies* official website took off, and was soon uploaded to a number of video platforms, including YouTube. Eventually, the film was covered by a multitude of news outlets, such as *The Washington Post*, MTV, and *USA Today*, and screened in a handful of international film festivals in 2006.⁴⁰ Although not a native English speaker, Chan chose to subtitle the film completely in English to reach as many viewers as possible. *The French Democracy* is available for free multi-format download through a number of academic institutions.

Unfortunately, *The French Democracy*'s success has not solidified machinima's expansion. While machinima slowly grows by its ability to unify amateur filmmakers, who may have not collected otherwise in a common goal or idea, in-fighting within the machinima community prohibits an ideal support system. Lionhead Studios never once used the phrase “machinima” in its advertising or on official materials, thus generally discouraging filmmakers using their product defining their work as machinima. Self-defined machinima “purists” felt the game a cop-out and not “real” machinima, because of the uncomplicated interface.

39 Henry Lowood. “Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima.” p. 167.

40 Henry Lowood. “Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima.” p. 167.

“Within three months, more than fifty thousand machinima films made using *The Movies* had been released [...] by summer 2006, the number of published films made in *The Movies* had grown to nearly 100,000 [...] Curiously, neither the *Sims* nor *The Movies* community nor the games' developers thought of what they were creating as machinima [...] Many veteran machinimators felt that the essence of machinima was to show prowess at pushing a game engine beyond the limits intended by its developers, and the games like *The Sims 2* and *The Movies* simply made it too easy.”⁴¹

Without a unified movement to create a definitive label for machinima, the medium could squander in relative obscurity. Thankfully, for the sake of cohesion and unity, Chan did label *The French Democracy* as machinima, and encouraged the film to circulate under the label.

The critical acclaim and attention surrounding *The French Democracy* stems from a combination of the overtly political nature of the film, a relative rarity in the medium, and Chan's very open and vocal praise for machinima as a production method. Chan's open attitude in discussing his film's financially-friendly, instantaneous production and the political sentiment behind its creation, coupled with its origin in a cinematically accessible game *The Movies*, highlights *The French Democracy* as a prime example for the medium's potential expansion and connectivity to other mediums. Additionally, Chan's sympathy toward France's youth frustration opens the film for acceptance from

41 Matt Kelland. “From Game Mod to Low-Budget Film: The Evolution of Machinima.” pp. 27-28.

the young gaming demographic. These connections and inspiration are a major driving belief behind machinima, and internet's ease of use has allowed gamers to not only interact around the world, but also to distribute their game-inspired art to all corners of the globe.

2.3. *War of Internet Addiction*, Chinese Internet Censorship and Electroshock Therapy

But what if an online gamer was not able to reach the rest of the world? What if he or she was prohibited from interacting in an online game beyond the physical borders of a nation? What if the internet itself was looked upon with shame and distrust, and engaging in online gaming ran the risk of controversial and harmful “therapy?” To mainland China's *World of Warcraft* players, these are everyday challenges. In 2009 and 2010, a group of 100 or so disgruntled players under the direction of a player called “Corndog,” unified under the moniker Tiger Oil Machinima Team, created the hour-long machinima film *War of Internet Addiction*. It is not nearly as accessible or inviting as Chan's *The French Democracy*; the film is very dense and takes careful steps to analogize real-life issues through *World of Warcraft*'s characters and settings, in the roman à clef tradition, and contains a heap of Chinese pop culture and internet gaming references. In fact, the film is considered so daunting to the non-Chinese viewer that the YouTube uploader provides a Google Docs sheet explaining the backstory and various references in the film, with the suggestion to read it before an initial viewing.⁴² Although the film is

42 https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=19xAdUeuupGhOoEGWnRkiIkAN0_i_65QhHtnHShPiuRU

intimidating, it highlights another important example of machinima's capabilities to record history of sociopolitical events and policies through the viewpoint of a non-dominant power. The film's entire introduction plays out like an ancestral historical yarn of yore, granting *World of Warcraft*-like magic and mysticism to the real life issue of internet policies in China. Additionally, *War of Internet Addiction* illustrates machinima's ability to cinematically express online gaming's nearly limitless borders juxtaposed against governmental-controlled and imposed censorship, as well as social isolationism and shaming.

Unlike Chan's film, *War of Internet Addiction* presents an effort in group filmmaking, with a seemingly smaller initial target audience: Chinese *World of Warcraft* players specifically, with the possibility of branching out to international *World of Warcraft* players generally. Given the content and implementation of *War of Internet Addiction*, it is unlikely that those unfamiliar with machinima, *World of Warcraft*, Asian videogames or China's censorship policies would enjoy or even understand the film, given its dense, intertextual and intermodal storytelling (Fig. 2.7). However, *World of Warcraft*'s astounding subscription members, combined with China's population and the surging videogame fandom surrounding Asian products grant the film a much larger audience than initially anticipated. The production, topics and audiences differ between Chan and the Tiger Oil Machinima Team's film, but machinima aligns them by granting a voice to the marginalized outsider. In Chan's case, race, age and financial status were ostracizing factors. China's social shaming of "internet addicts" kept the Tiger Oil Machinima Team on society's perimeters.



Fig. 2.7. *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (Japanese Nintendo DS game) spoof in an argument between personified rival servers, The9 and Netease, vying for control over a *World of Warcraft* expansion pack, *War of Internet Addiction*, Tiger Oil Machinima Team, 2009-2010.

World of Warcraft, released by Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in 2004, is the most popular MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) in the world with around 10.2 million subscribers.^{43,44} Depending on the type of server the player prefers, the game can be mostly combat-based (player versus player, shortened to *PvP*) or can take on more of an immersive social interactive quality (role playing, shortened to *RP*).⁴⁵

43 As of February 2012. Adam Holisky. “*World of Warcraft* subscriber numbers dip 100,000 to 10.2 million.”

44 *World of Warcraft* is an extremely profitable product for Blizzard. With a monthly fee for European and American players averaging \$14.99 USD, Asian players paying an hourly fee of six cents USD, and a number of expansions for sale, the game makes a gross profit estimated around the \$1 billion USD mark. Mike Schramm. “How much money Blizzard is really making from 10 million subscribers.”

45 Other popular server type is player versus environment (PvE) which does not feature player in-fighting

The game is highly controversial; unlike other contentious videogames that are deemed troublesome because of purported gratuitous sex or violence, *World of Warcraft* is considered both a social catalyst and a social menace. Proponents praise the game's abilities to connect gamers to one another, thus creating friendships and other relationships; it is by no means unheard of for players to meet in the game, only to eventually marry in real life.⁴⁶ *World of Warcraft*'s naysayers claim that the game inhibits social development and has the ability to be as addictive and destructive as alcohol or hard drugs. These responses range from the not-so-serious (parodies and other humorous takes on the culture, produced both by *World of Warcraft* players and people only passingly familiar with the game⁴⁷) to the extremely grave: censorship and restrictions placed on *World of Warcraft* players specifically and internet users generally in mainland China, in addition to electroshock therapy, usually supported by anxious parents frightened by the amount of time their child spends playing *World of Warcraft* and other online games.

Encapsulating the China's internet policies and general censorship is an extremely daunting task and comes loaded with over a century's worth of political policy and globalization theories. In short, the internet reluctantly arrived in China in 1994:

by default. Additionally, either PvP or PvE servers can be flagged as RP servers.

46 Winda Benedetti. "Is 'World of Warcraft' the future of online dating?", Anna North "*World of Warcraft* is the Future of Online Dating," *Warcraft* message boards:

<http://www.wowhead.com/forums&topic=84523/does-anyone-else-met-its-girlfriend-boyfriend-wife-husband-in-wow>, <http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/3295190703>,
<http://us.battle.net/d3/en/forum/topic/4926493449>.

47 See chapter three, pp. 60-61.

“The Internet may be new, but its challenge to the Chinese leadership is not. Balancing openness with control has been the central challenge for the Chinese Communist Party since Deng Xiaoping began his policy of 'reform and opening up' in 1979 [...] One of Deng's favorite sayings in the 1980s was 'If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.' [...] When the Internet arrived in China in 1994, the Chinese leadership recognized it had no choice but to open the window too – for the sake of China's global economic competitiveness. The Internet is yet another plane on which the Communist Party wages its ideological battles against foreign 'flies' – attempts via the open door to subvert the regime's power and legitimacy.”⁴⁸

Stemming from this contentious history, Chinese *World of Warcraft* players experience a great deal of resistance and red tape from the government and its subsequent cultural crusade against the game. The main topics specifically approached in *War of Internet Addiction* are:

- ♣ electroshock therapy conducted on sufferers of so-called “internet addiction,”
- ♣ the Green Dam Youth Escort filter, a then-compulsory, government-installed censorship program which limited internet usage and managed content,
- ♣ mainland-only servers, Netease and The9, vying for to host the game and its long awaited expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King*, and

48 Rebecca MacKinnon. “Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China.” pp. 32-33.

- ▲ bureaucratic squabbling between two government organizations: the General Administration of Press and Publication and the Ministry of Culture, and the groups' resulting game censorship.⁴⁹

A number of these issues have been rescinded since the time of the film's release and spread. For example, the Green Dam Youth Escort Filter was no longer deemed mandatory and reported as “easy to uninstall.”⁵⁰ In July 2009, the Chinese government officially stated that electroshock therapy for “internet addiction” sufferers would be outlawed due to “the uncertainty in the safety and effectiveness of the practice.”⁵¹ Whether or not *War of Internet Addiction* had a direct effect on this is unknown. The film gained popularity on special *Warcraft* machinima websites and won the Best Video award at the 2010 Todou Video Film Awards. Non-Chinese viewers responded with shock and outrage, having had no previous knowledge of these Chinese policies and practices.

The film is particularly interesting in its manner of representation. Each entity and group is personified as warring factions within the game's imaginary space, a kingdom called Azeroth. Even Blizzard, the game's publisher, makes an appearance as a cavern-dwelling ice lord (Fig. 2.8).

49 Perhaps the most famous example of *World of Warcraft* censorship came when the *Lich King* expansion pack was released in mainland China, two years after its North American release. Under pressure from the state, The9 server placed flesh over all skeleton bones in the game (skeletons on the ground represent fallen fellow players), stating “It's to promote a healthy and harmonious on-line environment.” Sources: “Skeletons Banned in Chinese 'World of Warcraft.’” and “Censorship reaches internet skeletons.”

50 <http://news.qq.com/a/20090610/000087.htm>

51 “China bans electro-shock therapy for internet addicts.” *Reuters*.



Fig. 2.8. Blizzard personified, *War of Internet Addiction*, Tiger Oil Machinima Team, 2009-2010.

By connecting the outside world with *World of Warcraft's* Azeroth, the filmmakers show the limitless world of online gaming invaded and shaped by external forces. To this end, *War of Internet Addiction* highlights, records, and makes known the unfortunately non-existent international interaction and missed potential friendships Chinese mainland gamers are forced to endure. Silvia Lindtner and Marcella Szablewicz declare that the film is not just a protest against oppressive censorship, but a impassioned plea for “gamer rights,”⁵² an issue which is rarely handled with as much government involvement and high-risk treatment methods as in mainland China, but is still prevalent in most developed nations with a viable leisure culture.

⁵² Silvia Lindtner and Marcella Szablewicz. “China's many Internets: Participation and Digital Game Play across a Changing Technology Landscape.” pp. 15-17

Though the sociopolitical issues are ultimately different, *War of Internet Addiction*, like *The French Democracy*, highlights comparable topics: first, how mainstream media misconstrues information pertaining to marginalized groups, and second, how videogames and machinima provide a convenient outlet to support these minority rights while bypassing traditional media outlets. Lindtner and Szablewicz cite a monologue near the film's conclusion as evidence that the film uses the lens of *World of Warcraft* to contextualize not only censorship, but perceived basic human rights, and a plea for other non-players to understand online gaming rather than shun it. In it, leader of the Skeleton Party, Kan, confronts the personified villainous forces and shouts out for aid from other Azeroth residents (*World of Warcraft* players):

“[...] we are the generation that has grown up playing games. Over these many years people have changed and games have changed, but our love for games has not changed and the weak and disadvantaged status of the gamers within this society has also not changed... What we are addicted to is not the game, but the feeling of belonging that games have given us. We are addicted to the friends and emotions we have shared over the past four years, to the nostalgia and the hopes and dreams we have placed on this game over the last four years [...] I know we are just commoners between all the injustice in this society [...] Lend me your voice, your strength through this nationwide LAN [Local Area Network], for our souls' home, speak out with me: We are *World of Warcraft* Players!”

The speech's words hit close to home for many gamers. YouTube users left comments like “man I got all teary. Ending was awesome” and “That speech was a gem.”⁵³

One last item I wish to discuss in regard to *War of Internet Addiction* is the role of player-created avatars in the game, and in the machinima. As I've already mentioned, various organizations and entities are personified in the film, in forms ranging from hulking ice lords to elves to gargoyles. In Chan's *French Democracy*, events are fictionalized to create a small narrative within a larger one, but under the guise of realism (human characters rather than mythological beings) and Hollywood conventions. In *War of Internet Addiction*, the heroes and villains are made into magical avatars of varying forms. To this end, the avatars and their subsequent supernatural abilities create a level playing field between a mass corporation, like The9 or Netease and a simple player at home. The film not only creates advocacy for Chinese censorship awareness and the nation's questionable health policies, but also constructs a fantasy, cathartic, wish-fulfillment space, where it is possible for enough united *World of Warcraft* players to destroy China's internet stranglehold and facilitate worldwide interaction, friendships and cooperation through online gaming.

53 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8ezt9z13V0&feature=plcp> , <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emVhTjBYchs&feature=plcp>

2.4. Conclusion

The French Democracy and *War of Internet Addiction* showcase a possible future for machinima expansion. Although machinima featuring in-game narratives, characters and settings continuously gain momentum as a form of fan fiction, films which hone in on sociopolitical issues help the medium gain more “outsider” support and awareness. As digital media and convergence culture continuously spread, the Chan's and Tiger Oil Machinima Team's works are machinima milestones, films which open the medium for newcomers and introduce political machinima for those already familiar with the medium. Also, the films prove that young amateurs without financial or organizational means are able to create a cultural product to record recent history in an intriguing manner without the mass media's aid. Machinima's instantaneous and inexpensive production method has primed the medium for a marked advance on slower, more laborious representational archives, and the community's support around projects like *The French Democracy* and *War of Internet Addiction* indicates that gamers are receptive to political content, and eager to express their opinions on issues that matter to them, national or international, game-related or not.

These films which interact with real events are, generally speaking, a minority in machinima. Although films like *The French Democracy* and *War of Internet Addiction* signify the medium's growth by examining and archiving world events through machinima's gaming lens, the real bulk of the medium falls under the “fan fiction” label. While the topics explored in fan fiction machinima don't always leave game narratives,

they serve a vital purpose similar to the films explored in this section: providing a voice for the voiceless. Fan fiction machinima uses game narrative expansion as a means of creative control and agency by impressing individual visions on videogame franchise stories. By filling out gaps in game narratives and creating new plots, machinima creates an outlet for grassroots convergence and trans-media storytelling, which has recently entered the realm of official game marketing and corporate convergence. The positive and negative implications surrounding machinima's growing commercialism provide the basis for my next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: MACHINIMA'S IMAGINARY SPACE

Much of machinima is produced *by fans for fans*. In this fandom, there is a common desire to expand upon a game's narrative. In fan created machinima, canonicity, in relation to the source game, greatly varies. Some fans wish to expand on an established game narrative, and others want to create an alternate or separate story in an established universe. However, machinima created by game makers and publishers is slowly emerging as well. The astounding variation surrounding machinima fandom, including the social and psychosocial underpinnings, present a fascinating subject for investigation. By creating and expanding imaginary worlds, machinima filmmakers gain the control to create and transform familiar narratives. This ability allows machinima creators to connect with the source material on a more intimate level, as well as share their personal vision of the game's universe with many others. As a form of fan fiction, machinima permits spectators to maintain a videogame visual aesthetic through customization, unlike many other forms of fan fiction. Machinima in this chapter represents the medium's fan fiction trajectory, from extremely game-specific to a more open approach, in terms of both content and distribution. Machinima's proliferation has its alleged detriments, namely the commercialization and intrusion of game makers impeding on fan fiction. Commercial machinima generally undermines the idealist, transgressive action inherent in machinima: players overtaking games to create personal, non However, the division is not nearly as solidified as some participants would believe; machinima frequently circumvents copyright laws because videogame studios view the material as free

advertising. In the end, the pros of exposure and expansion outweigh the cons, and that machinima's widening fan base will bring new fan filmmakers to the medium.

Although little machinima is officially sponsored by videogame studios and publishers, a number of machinima films work to complete a game's narrative puzzle, exemplified by *The Seal of Nehahra*. Alternatively, some machinima filmmakers create a new, imaginary space and story within the game utilizing the game's imagery or narrative. Machinima in the latter category frequently parodies their source material, or videogaming in general, as seen in *Halo* machinima *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles*. Not all machinima is a byproduct of fandom; Rockstar Games created and nationally broadcast *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater*, a thirty minute machinima film which presents a re-telling of *Red Dead Redemption's* first act. These films are paired with fandom and interactivity studies by Abigail Derecho and Robert Jones, as well as theories of convergence, folk culture and trans-media storytelling by Henry Jenkins.

3.1. *The Seal of Nehahra* Completes a Story

Clocking in at an astounding 235 minutes, J. Thaddeus Skubis's 2000 *Quake* film *The Seal of Nehahra* gives an in-depth backstory to the game's universe. Made in the “*Quake* movie” heyday's closing year, it is easily the most detailed and in-depth account of the in-game historical narrative. First and foremost, it is vital to explain “*Quake* movies” in greater detail.

Released by id Software in 1996, the first-person shooter game *Quake* doesn't provide much in the way of plot. The player controls an unseen, unnamed human character through a series of maze-like levels, or "maps." Various supernatural monsters and creatures inhabit the levels, and the environments appear Gothic or medieval, usually featuring satanic imagery (Fig. 3.1). To finish a map, the player fends off monster attacks and locates the exit. This structure is very similar to contemporaneous software titles, such as *Doom* (published by id Software in 1993) and *Marathon* (published by Bungie Software in 1994, the company which released *Halo* seven years later). *Quake's* provided background information is limited at best: brief and cryptic mentions of teleportation technology gone awry and monsters arriving in the human dimension to test our battle skills. The player must complete 28 levels to finish the game.



Fig. 3.1. Pentagram signifies satanism in *Quake*.

An innovative feature of the *Quake* games was the demo file extension. Most games have some type of pre-packaged demo file included. Often, these demo files are gameplay videos which run automatically after the game has been loaded but no one has started playing. In arcades, this is called “attract mode,” showcasing the game's features to lure quarter-toting customers. In *Quake*, the demo video was stored in the game's code under a different file extension:

“One consequence of the separation of game engine from [demo] files [...] was that the demo or “intro” movie was stored in a discrete file with its own format, .dem (demo) file in *Quake*. [...] Players could also record their own game sessions and play them back inside these games by saving, then loading and running, demo files.”⁵⁴

From these demo files, commonly utilized for speedruns,⁵⁵ other “stunt” videos, or recorded multiplayer matches (studied by rival players to learn opponents' moves and strategies), machinima was born. The first recognized machinima, *Diary of a Camper* (Matthew Van Sickler, 1996),⁵⁶ exemplifies the medium's primitive beginnings. Van Sickler and his gaming clan, The Rangers, recorded almost two minutes of

54 Henry Lowood and Michael Nitsche, ed. *The Machinima Reader*. pp. 6-7.

55 Completing a specific level or an entire game as quickly as possible. Speedruns remain popular fixtures on Youtube, some taking advantages of programming glitches, others using emulators for a tool assisted speedrun (TAS), and others playing traditionally.

56 Robert Jones. “From Shooting Monsters to Shooting Movies: Machinima and the Transformative Play of Video Game Fan Culture.” pp. 270-271, Matt Kelland, et al. *Machinima*. pp. 28-29, Phylis Johnson and Donald Petit. *Machinima: The Art and Practice of Virtual Filmmaking*. pp. 17-18.

choreographed gameplay in multiplayer “deathmatch” mode,⁵⁷ typing rehearsed lines for dialogue (Fig. 3.2).

From here, machinima's popularity exploded in the *Quake* and *Doom* fan communities. Because the films were made in the game's demo mode and could only be saved as .dem files, creation *and* distribution was extremely limited: only fans who owned the game could create or watch the films. To run the game, players needed required access to powerful computers, an expensive commodity in the mid-1990s.⁵⁸ Robert F. Nideffer writes on machinima's limited production process: “There's a fairly high bar to entry. To produce it in the form most people think of – as rendered animations generated from recordings of gameplay – requires fairly high-end hardware capable of running real-time graphics intensive 3D or pseudo-3D environments.”⁵⁹ Much of the early *Quake* and *Doom*-based machinima has a certain antiquated quality, exemplified by limited narratives and experimentally shaky code variations.⁶⁰ These early code variations and narrative expansions marked the beginning of transgressive machinima by revoking commercial control and replacing it with player control.

57 “Deathmatch” mode is a popular feature in a number of games, and not only in the FPS genre. They are often included in kart racing games as well. The closed-in deathmatch maps are usually referred to as *arenas*, and are designed specifically for multiplayer matches. The arenas are generally not a playable level in single player mode.

58 Although the computing power required to run games like *Quake* and *Doom* are positively archaic by today's gaming standards, contemporary games frequently push the limits of a computer's abilities, with equal (adjusted for inflation) expenses required. FPS *Crysis* (Crytek and Electronic Arts) was a benchmark for computing processing abilities in 2007, popularizing the humorous phrase “But can it run *Crysis*?” in computer-aficionado circles.

59 Robert F. Nideffer. “Eight Questions (and Answers) about Machinima.” pp. 66-73.

60 id Software released the source code of *Quake* and *Doom*, allowing gamers to make internal changes. This tinkering led to a number of playable mods and modded machinima.



Fig. 3.2. *Diary of a Camper*, Matthew Van Sickler, 1996.

Soon after, *Quake* fans began using machinima to tell more complex stories, both original and game-based. Websites chronicling fan fiction machinimas, such as the now defunct site The Cineplex,⁶¹ reviewed and categorized the films. However, from 1996 to 2000, *Quake* still did not have an id Software-sanctioned, detailed backstory. “Many people were upset about the plot of *Quake*, reasonably so, because there wasn't one,” wrote Stephen Lum for The Cineplex. With the goal of beginning where id Software had ended, J. Thaddeus Skubis produced *The Seal of Nehahra* in 2000.

The Seal of Nehahra's plot spawns from *Nehahra*, a single player fan edit of *Quake* source code. Using groundwork laid by *Nehahra* (set five years after the events of *Quake*), as well as the limited narrative information officially provided by id Software,

61 <http://www.quakewiki.net/archives/cineplex/>. The Cineplex was continued in spirit by machinima.com.

The Seal of Nehahra takes place in the years 2109 and 2110. Humans experiment with teleportation technology, and it eventually malfunctions. A monster from another dimension slips through the teleportation portal, but a panicked soldier shoots and mortally wounds the creature. The creature flees back to its dimension, motivating for *Quake's* monster invasion. *The Seal of Nehahra* pointedly grants sympathy and cause for the otherwise nameless, single-minded monsters on the rampage in *Quake*.

The Seal of Nehahra marks the beginning of a few intriguing trends transformation around machinima and its relation with the videogame industry. First, machinima made prior to *The Seal of Nehahra* plays with the form and explores a number of different styles and narratives, but do not openly challenge or expand id Software's vision of the game's universe. Skubis directly confronts the game makers; in his director's notes, Skubis states "I told the story that id Software wouldn't."⁶² Second, the film operates almost exclusively through Skubis's coding. Unlike *Diary of a Camper*, which features Van Sickler and friends actually playing through choreographed moves, *The Seal of Nehahra's* action was almost entirely pre-programmed in a hex editor⁶³ using *Quake's* open source code. Skubis's attention to detail and programming give *The Seal of Nehahra* a much more cinematic and polished feel than earlier machinima. Skubis uniquely combines gaming elements, such as first person action, and cinematic traits, like shot-reverse shot, cross cutting, tracking and crane shots, fade and dissolve editing, and a variety of framing angles (Fig. 3.3). By aesthetically and narratively altering the videogame to appear more cinematic, Skubis directly challenges id Software and the

62 "Director's Notes: The Seal of Nehahra." machinima.com.

63 Hex editors allow computer programmers to manipulate the fundamental binary of software, ie the foundational building blocks of software.

company's vision for their game, marking machinima's transgressive, individualistic qualities.



Fig. 3.3. Low angle in *The Seal of Nehahra*, J. Thaddeus Skubis, 2000.

Fans wishing to expand a seemingly incomplete narrative is nothing new. Abigail Derecho, author of “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History and Several Theories of Fan Fiction,” looks at fan fiction's archival abilities. Derecho follows Jacques Derrida's work by describing archives as “ever expanding and never completely closed.”⁶⁴ Derecho's work traces literature's archontic qualities from the seventeenth century into the age of the internet. Derecho discusses how fan fiction in recent centuries has given minority groups (she uses women and racial minorities as examples) a sense of power and agency in literature and popular culture. The ability to add on, expand and change a work signifies stepping above the consumer level and reaching closer toward the producer title. Machinima is a new digital outlet for archival content, continuously adding

⁶⁴ Abigail Derecho. “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History and Several Theories of Fan Fiction.” p. 61.

onto narratives and granting its filmmakers a power which blurs the line between consumer and producer.

Derecho claims that imaginative oral re-tellings of Euripides's *Medea* as the earliest form of fan fiction. As for written fan fiction, she uncovers evidence of women appropriating characters and narratives from *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney: *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, written in 1621 by Lady Mary Wroth and *Continuation of Sir Philip Sidney's "Arcadia,"* written by Anna Weamy in 1654. Recent novels such as *My Jim* (Nancey Rawles, 2005) and *The Wind Done Gone* (Alice Randall, 2001) retell *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Gone with the Wind* from the point of view of minor slave characters.⁶⁵ Some older novels, such as Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* continuously receive the fan fiction treatment from online amateurs and published professionals. Most of the fan fiction Derecho describes is written by women.

In machinima, the authors also represent a marginalized group: so-called “nerds” or “geeks.” Although the historical context in Derecho's article are quite different, the sentiments are really very similar. It wouldn't be appropriate to entirely equate the struggle of women and racial minorities from the 17th into the 21st century with that of “geeks” in the 20th and 21st century, but the demand to be heard, the blurred line between consumer and producer (“At the end of the day, gamers are still just buying a piece of software and playing with it”)⁶⁶, and the social marginalization associated with the gaming subculture incorporate machinima and its filmmakers into fan fiction's

65 M. Carmen Gómez-Galisteo. *The Wind is Never Gone: Sequels, Parodies and Rewritings of Gone with the Wind*. pp. 79-107.

66 Robert Jones. “From Shooting Monsters to Shooting Movies: Machinima and the Transformative Play of Video Game Fan Culture.” p. 273.

psychological undercurrents. What it means to be a gamer has changed considerably over time. In the era of *Quake*, gaming was usually a more solitary endeavor. Multiplayer modes were very popular, but more often than not, people playing together had to be in close quarters with all computers connected to one server. Playing a deathmatch with an opponent across town was simply not a feasible option. Because of this, a number of stereotypes surrounding games and gamers emerged: the socially inept, pasty, Mountain Dew-swilling, basement-dwelling, gamer-nerd is still an concept deeply ingrained in popular culture and media representations, even in the age of interactive online gaming (Figs. 3.4 and 3.5).



Fig. 3.4. "Friday night, third straight week indoors, *World of Warcraft*, leaning tower of pizza boxes, Code Red Mountain Dew. Pride? Nowhere. Dignity? Long gone. Virginitly? Totally justifiable to speculate on." *Zombieland*, Ruben Fleischer, 2009.



Fig. 3.5: Stan, Kyle, Cartman and Kenny become addicted to *World of Warcraft* in the *South Park* episode "Mark Love, Not Warcraft," Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 2006.

It is argued that such game-specific (both in distribution and content) machinima may not attract a substantial outside audience, and limit the future potential of the medium. Writes Robert Jones:

“The history of machinima has demonstrated that although the producers of these films were primarily [game] consumers, these gamers possessed talents that enabled them to transform their play into these narratives. So although the case

can certainly be made that gaming fans had the tools to make these things presented to them by open-system game design, a threshold of programming knowledge still separated those early innovations from casual gamers.”⁶⁷

However, from these origins, machinima has evolved beyond in-game narratives and dispersion methods. Machinima based on the immensely popular *Halo* series has branched out to embrace online distribution, as well as expanding narratives to encompass gaming in general, in addition to *Halo* specifically. However, *Halo* and *Red vs. Blue* has lead to two important schisms: first, the gaming community's splintering factions surrounding the gamer stereotype and community, and second, the division between totally unauthorized machinima and corporate acknowledged machinima.

3.2. *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles* Creates Imaginary & Parodied Space

The *Halo* multimedia empire simply began as a solitary videogame. The Bungie Software first-person shooter, officially titled *Halo: Combat Evolved*, was released as a launch title for the Microsoft Xbox home console's debut. The game's popularity exploded, bolstered by overwhelmingly positive reviews⁶⁸ and its eventual compatibility with Xbox Live online gaming support.⁶⁹

67 Robert Jones. “From Shooting Monsters to Shooting Movies: Machinima and the Transformative Play of Video Game Fan Culture.” p. 276.

68 <http://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox/halo-combat-evolved>

69 Xbox Live (trademarked and stylized as Xbox LIVE) debuted a year after *Halo*'s release on November 15, 2002. Prior to Xbox Live, players could jury rig multiplayer online gaming via Ethernet in a Local Area Network (LAN). However, *Halo* does not feature artificial intelligence, so a geographically solitary player wishing to engage in a multiplayer match was barred from such an endeavor. Xbox Live continues to update its interface and product tie-ins at the time of this writing, and features wide array

Unlike *Quake*, *Halo* gives a great deal of background information on the game's world and history. However, in the tradition that any effective trans-media endeavor aspires toward, the entire *Halo* narrative cannot be summed up merely through the original *Halo* videogame, its sequels or its prequels. *Halo*'s overarching plot involves player-character Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, usually referred to as Master Chief, a cybernetically enhanced superhuman soldier. In the 26th century, Master Chief and his allies fight an antagonistic, militarized alien alliance known as the Covenant in deep space. In officially licensed multimedia offshoots, the *Halo* brand covers music, books, and comics, and will likely break into film soon.⁷⁰ The *Halo* books and comics expand upon the series's origin story. Media scholar Henry Jenkins defines this practice, using Andy and Larry Wachowski's *Matrix* media empire as primary example, as corporate convergence, the “commercially directed flow of media content.” This corporate convergence serves the creators and producers of *Halo* well. But how does fan-created *Halo*-based machinima fit into a notion of convergence?

Red vs. Blue aligns with Jenkin's ideas of folk culture and grassroots convergence, as opposed to Bungie's official *Halo* offshoots, which classify as corporate convergence. According to Jenkins, grassroots convergence and folk culture are an informal and mostly cooperative form of exchanging images and ideas around a particular cultural entity, “[...] where all creators can draw from shared diversions of image banks” and “[...] it becomes easy for consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content.”⁷¹

of online products and services.

70 The proposed *Halo* film has been approached and ultimately dropped by a number of directors. As of this date, the script, written by Stuart Beattie and Alex Garland, is owned by Universal Pictures but there is no director attached to the project.

71 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. p. 326.

Jenkins traces folk culture's trajectory from the 19th century to a present culmination in the proliferation of the internet.⁷² In his chapter “Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*? Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry,” Jenkins observes fan fiction surrounding the *Star Wars* multimedia empire. He asserts that the internet has led to a shift in fan fiction: the easy access and instantaneous critical response (in this case, “critical” most often referring to fellow fan fiction producing and consuming peers) has introduced not only a larger audience for fan fiction, but a more fluid and flexible approach to its content. In his *Star Wars* example, Jenkins points to a popular web video *Troops*, an Imperial Stormtrooper-themed take on the police television program *Cops*. *Red vs. Blue* features similar absurdist pop culture diversions and humor.

Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles (Rooster Teeth Productions, 2003-present) takes place in *Halo*'s Blood Gulch Canyon, a popular map for multiplayer matches. Two forces, one wearing red armor and the other blue, each stake out a base in Blood Gulch Canyon. Neither side knows exactly why they are fighting the other, and thus, have little motivation to actually do so. Instead, they endlessly muse on the nature of their lives in the game's universe, showing general confusion or amusement about the laws that govern their world. An exchange between Simmons and Grif, two red soldiers, from the first episode of *Red vs. Blue*, “Why are we here?” (Fig. 3.6):

Simmons: Seriously, though, why are we out here? As far as I can tell, it's just a box canyon in the middle of nowhere, with no way in or out.

72 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide*. pp. 139-143.

Grif: Mm-hmm.

Simmons: The only reason that we set up a red base here is because they have a blue base over there. And the only reason they have a blue base over there is because we have a red base here.

Grif: Well, yeah, that's because we're fighting each other.

Simmons: No, no – I mean, even if we were to pull out today, and they were to come take our base, they would have *two* bases in the middle of a box canyon. Whopty-fucking-doo.



Fig. 3.6. Grif and Simmons chat about life in *Red vs. Blue*, Burnie Burns, Rooster Teeth Productions, 2003.

Simmons and Grif's conversation sets the stage for *Red vs. Blue's* particular comedic fan fiction. In other episodes of the long running series, the red team squabbles over what to name their new off-road vehicle (some prefer "The Warthog," while others

insist it actually looks more like a puma), the blue team speculates over what the red team could possibly be discussing, and so on and so forth. As the series continues, there are small bursts of action and character development, but idle chitchat provides comedy dominates the duration of screen time.

Unlike the examples from the *Quake* universe, the narrative takes on a self-referential/“meta” qualities, existing in the same universe as Master Chief and the Covenant but not seeking actual canonicity. Not only are the events of the series generally unrelated to *Halo's* narrative, but, the pacing and tone differ drastically as well. *Halo's* main draws are non-stop action and excitement, whereas *Red vs. Blue* produces humor from a decided lack thereof. This break from machinima's initial focal points of either widening narrative scope (*The Seal of Nehahra*) or exploring the source code's limits (*Blahbalicious*) indicates a new method of expression and the medium's evolution. The series, like *The Seal of Nehahra*, blurs the line between consumer and producer, in this instance creating agency through a self-aware treatment of the source material. The differs from *The Seal of Nehahra* in two areas: first, Microsoft acknowledges *Red vs. Blue*, and while the company doesn't directly influence Rooster Teeth, it is believed that they permit to series to continue because it provides free promotion for *Halo*.⁷³ Second, *Red vs. Blue* marks a crucial genre shift from *Halo*, whereas *The Seal of Nehahra*, stays closely aligned with *Quake's* overall tone. These elements working together simultaneously contract and expand the producer/consumer gap.

Red vs. Blue's tonal and content shift reflect influences from prior pop culture works, and their accompanying sentiments surrounding a technologically-informed

73 Matt Kelland, et al. *Machinima*. pp. 98-99.

“cubicle class.” This paired with military aggression escalating around the time of *Red vs. Blue*'s release makes for an interesting contrast, and exemplifies the “opening up” of machinima. Irene Chien writes:

“This lack of action, as if the soldiers were trapped in dead-end office jobs rather than engaged in high-tech warfare, is *Red vs. Blue*'s central absurdist premise. With cinematic antecedents in both *M*A*S*H* (1972) and *Office Space* (1999), *Red vs. Blue* points to the affinity between militaristic aggression fantasies and the embittered 'cubicle class' of the technically proficient but low-status, white male knowledge worker.”⁷⁴

The humor in *Red vs. Blue* frequently deviates from the *Halo* narrative, making the series rather accessible. Additionally, the production method is not nearly as technologically closed off as *The Seal of Nehahra*, signaling machinima's ever-growing fluidity. Beckoning back to *Diary of a Camper*, Rooster Teeth Production creates each episode of *Red vs. Blue* by networking as many Xboxes as there are characters in a given episode, and each character is controlled by a person following a movement script. Burnie Burns writes each episode, which is followed by voice recording. The players use these voice recordings to time character movements. *Red vs. Blue* frequently falls into parody: not only does the series poke fun at the *Halo* series, but also gaming and gamers in general, as well as the science-fiction genre. Given *Red vs. Blue*'s immense popularity,

74 Irene Chien. “Deviation/Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles” p.27.

it signifies that gaming, as well as machinima, has reached a new echelon of cultural impact and acceptance.

However, this success leaves a somewhat shocking dissent in its wake. Games like *Halo* have a much less geeky stigma than *Quake*, attributed to home gaming consoles' market penetration in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Due to this, the ideas surrounding the label “gamer” has drastically shifted. In the *Quake* era, an individual who frequently played games was likely to be labeled as a geek, and ran the chances of being socially and culturally marginalized. In *Halo*'s time, gaming has become more universally accepted, but this has insulted the pride or honor of some gamers. These angry individuals view themselves as “real gamers,” and are unhappy that “jocks” have invaded their territory, taking away their power, agency and safe environment. Online videogame message boards are rife with these complaints:

“Now that jocks are into 'video games' like *MW2* [*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*] what do us nerds have?” lamented one disillusioned gamer. A self-identified “gaming jock” fired back (emphasis mine) : “Jocks have always been into videogames like *MW2*, what the hell are you talking about. The launch of *Halo 2*, pretty much my whole football team was at the midnight release for it and we skipped school the next day playing it up until practice. *The day jocks start playing Everquest and WoW, come talk to me.*”⁷⁵

This exchange is abundant in accusations. First, the notion that games like *Halo* and *Modern Warfare 2* are not real videogames, indicated by the initial poster's quotation marks. Second, the idea that games like *Halo* and *Modern Warfare 2* are for everyone,

75 <http://www.ign.com/boards/threads/now-that-jocks-are-into-video-games-like-mw2-what-do-us-nerds-have.195195765/#post-195196173>

and nerds still have their gaming safe havens in *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*. Other forums accuse *Halo* players of being “retarded high school jocks,”⁷⁶ and the Urban Dictionary page on the word “gramer” provides a textbook example of the anger bubbling under gaming expansion's surface:

“Gramers are sort of casual players. They usually play the madden and other sports games, first person shooters and any game with a lot of explosions in it. They have very short attention spans which means they can't set [sic] down to play a long fulfilling games such as RPGs or action adventures and it means they almost never finish their games. Gramers are not like regular gamers, most gramers began playing games right around the time Playstation took over the market and starting producing more sports games and more mature games that would appeal to larger audiences. Before Playstation made games cool these gramers (mostly jocks) were non gamers that would make fun of real gamers, they would say 'games are for kids' or they would say 'dude, games are so gay'.”⁷⁷

These individuals who yearn for a more “closed-off” approach to gaming feel threatened by the integration of non-marginalized social groups. In a way, *Red vs. Blue* signifies a loss of agency for the persecuted nerd stereotype; “*Halo* jocks” understand and enjoy *Red vs. Blue*'s jokes, so machinima isn't just for geeks any longer. However, machinima's exclusivity realm is already disappearing even more quickly, now that game publishers

76 <http://forums.gametrailers.com/thread/black-ops-2-and-halo-4/1287334>

77 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gramer>

have officially entered into the mix, rather than the quiet acknowledgment Microsoft grants *Red vs. Blue*.

In an attempt to capitalize on machinima's growing popularity and accessibility, Rockstar Games released *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* on May 29, 2010 to coincide with *Red Dead Redemption*'s Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 release on May 18, 2010. Rockstar elevates machinima to a new level of canonicity by providing an expanded version of the game's events, as well as a new height of distribution by airing the short film on national broadcast television. Some believe that this signals an irreversible taint on machinima, a medium for the underdog which has now fallen back into the production studio's hands. In reality, machinima's relationship with commercialism has always been at least semi-present, and *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* ultimately serves the medium for the better, expanding the viewing audience and increasing exposure.

3.3. *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* Provides an Official Expanded History

Rockstar nationally broadcast their promotional *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* on FOX. While the broadcast certainly did not qualify as “prime time television,” airing on a Saturday night at midnight, the fact that it aired on a television at all, no less on a national network, indicates machinima's expansion to a wider audience.

Unlike fan fiction machinima like *Diary of a Camper*, *Seal of Nehahra* or *Red vs. Blue*, *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* showcases an official, game universe-specific prologue for its parent game. The film is set in 1910 (the game a year later in 1911), and the “wild west” glory days are slowly fading in favor of railroad expansion and prosperous settlements, as well as political tension from the Mexican Revolution. The game and film's anti-hero, John Marston, and a collection of genre-informed character archetypes, including a sleazy snake oil merchant, a disgruntled sheriff and a deranged grave robber, track Bill Williamson, Marston's former partner, for a sizable bounty. After the group discovers brutalized settlers in Williamson's wake, the chase accelerates, and culminates at the outlaw's gang's base camp, an abandoned fort. Following an extravagant action finale, the credits roll and include a title card which promises to continue the adventure in *Red Dead Redemption*, available for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 (Fig. 3.7).



Fig. 3.7. Title card at *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater's* conclusion, John Hillcoat, 2010.

The Man from Blackwater is not only a machinima film, it is also a calculated genre exercise, as well as a testament to Rockstar's longstanding cinematic investments. Founded in 1998, Rockstar games have garnered attention for two primary reasons: graphic depictions of violence and sexuality⁷⁸ and an affinity for cinematic flair. Rockstar games such as *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), its sequel *Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire* (developed by Australian company Team Bondi and published by Rockstar in 2011) and the infamous *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997-2011) showcase a meandering open world,⁷⁹

78 The Hot Coffee mod in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, a hidden mini-game which depicts sexual intercourse between two characters, stirred up major controversy in 2004. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) stepped in to elevate the game from an “M” (Mature) rating to an “AO” (Adults Only) rating. Various retailers, such as Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy and GameStop, were given the option to return all copies of the game or place an AO sticker over the M-rating symbol on the packaging. The Hot Coffee mod became the rally point on videogames' alleged detrimental effects for politicians and public figures, such as Senator Hillary Clinton and noted anti-game attorney Jack Thompson. Curt Feldman. “Clinton calls for federal game regulation.”

79 Commonly referred to as “sandbox game” or “sandbox mode” see chapter two, p. 37.

populated by cinematic generic conventions and digressions. Recently, the studio has implemented advanced motion capture technology using professional actors to animate in-game body movements and facial expressions, notably in *L.A. Noire* with the character of Detective Cole Phelps, played by actor Aaron Staton (Figs. 3.8 & 3.9). These character animations go beyond non-playable characters (NPCs) or non-interactive cutscenes, instead allowing the player to effectively control an incredibly realistic human form with a real-world counterpart.



Fig. 3.8. Aaron Staton as Ken Cosgrove on *Mad Men*, AMC, 2007-2012.



Fig. 3.9. Aaron Staton as Cole Phelps, *L.A. Noire*, Team Bondi/Rockstar, 2011.

These technological advances are celebrated by critics who are intrigued by the gaming industry's rapid assimilation with cinema. In a review of *L.A. Noire* for *The Guardian*, Steve Boxer writes:

“Ever since it first worked out how to assemble pixels so that they resembled something more recognisable than aliens, the games industry has dreamed of creating one thing above all else – a game that is indistinguishable from a film, except that you can control the lead character [...] From start to finish, *LA Noire* feels like a film – *LA Confidential*, in fact, along with any similarly hard-boiled

example of film noir adapted from stories by the likes of Chandler and Hammett.”⁸⁰

The games *Red Dead Revolver* and *Red Dead Redemption*, and the machinima *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater*, take cues from the western genre, more specifically from Italian revival films of the 1960s and 1970s, commonly referred to as “Spaghetti westerns.” The anti-heroes Red Harlow and John Marston could easily fill a role in any Sergio Leone or Alberto Cardone film. The games and machinima feature music similar notable Spaghetti western composers Ennio Morricone or Luis Bacalov. Much like a Spaghetti western, the anti-hero's motivations and decisions are shrouded in moral ambiguity and uncertainty, and blood flows freely in action sequences.

Rockstar's games are entrenched in cinematic concepts, so the company's digressions into machinima is not entirely surprising, at least as a corporate convergence strategy. However, the implications of machinima moving beyond fan fiction are intriguing. The emergence of a corporate, promotional machinima raises a number of questions regarding the medium's future. Does a film like *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* eradicate machinima's amateur, game-consuming fan fiction base? Expanding on this question, what of the idea held in such high regard by original machinima artists of taking base source code, footage or gameplay and making it one's own, now replaced with Rockstar-backed director John Hillcoat, with complete access to not only *Red Dead Redemption's* cutscenes (much of the film consists of reused cutscenes), but also the game's voice actors and the official story?

80 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2011/may/16/la-noire-game-review>

Hillcoat, an Australian filmmaker and screenwriter, has directed feature films, including *The Proposition* (2005), *The Road* (2009) and *Lawless* (2012), as well as a number of music videos and music-themed documentaries. It seems that Hillcoat's endeavors in commercial filmmaking make him an appropriate choice to direct Rockstar's promotional machinima. However, what does this really signify for machinima? Surely Hillcoat, with all of Rockstar's content and financial resources backing the project, does not match machinima's "medium for the marginalized" definition. Additionally, it is highly unlikely that Hillcoat was suddenly struck with the inspiration to create this film. Whereas a filmmaker like Skubis produced *The Seal of Nehahra* to fill in the id Software's narrative holes without the company's consent or encouragement, Hillcoat was brought in by Rockstar to cinematically elaborate on the official narrative.

A significant factor is not only Rockstar's insistence on an official prologue for *Red Dead Redemption*, but doing so with machinima. As stated earlier, Rockstar's special connection with cinematic conventions would seemingly propel them in such a direction. Additionally, videogame marketing techniques more commonly venture away from gaming itself; the *Halo* series has done so for promotion, brand expansion and story elaboration, exemplified by the *Halo* novels and anime short films in *Halo Legends*. However, machinima's DIY reputation, both as a means of "pick up and go," real-time production and low financial stakes, presents the medium as a peculiar choice for a large and financially successful company to turn to. Did they only utilize machinima to save a few dollars?

Rockstar's parent company, Take-Two Interactive, is worth close to \$1B,⁸¹ so Rockstar likely had enough capital to produce any marketing material they wished.⁸² I believe that machinima was chosen in an effort to connect with more “elite” gamers, and by extension, to grant Rockstar some DIY credentials in the gaming and machinima communities. Whether or not the attempt was successful is up for debate. Airing at midnight doesn't point to a huge viewership, but the film was quickly uploaded online. Online forums mainly ignored the film, although a few people watched and shared their thoughts with the online community. This online conversation reveals some opinions about *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* before its release:

“Wait... it's a commercial aired machinima? That sounds... unentertaining [...] I just think if they're going to make a media tie-in they might as well throw some money into it instead of just making a machinima...”

“If you've ever seen Red vs. Blue, you know Machinima can be fantastic. If it's commercially aired (and, most likely, paid for by Rockstar) the quality and story should be fantastic.”⁸³

These comments, found in an online gaming forum, exhibit the skepticism and mixed feelings surrounding commercial machinima. Some potential viewers seemed

81 <https://www.google.com/finance?client=ob&q=NASDAQ:TTWO>

82 It can also be argued that the controversies surrounding Rockstar games (some before much information is even known about the game, in the instance of *Bully*, released in 2006) provides enough “free” marketing for the company. David Wilkes. “Let the Games Begin,” pp. 159-160.

83 <http://forums.sarcasticgamer.com/showthread.php?t=31060>

curious, bordering on perplexed, at Rockstar's marketing decisions, others seemed more optimistic. From the first commenter's tone, he/she seem relatively suspicious of producer machinima, an attitude rarely seen in connection with fan machinima, whether rough amateur work or polished, more professional pieces. Apparently, gamers value machinima when it is born from necessity (limited tools and finances), but remain partially incredulous when it exists outside of these specific parameters.

This simultaneously works for and against machinima. First, Rockstar's direct involvement in machinima production generally undermines the notion of socially marginalized creators. Additionally, there are implications for amateur machinima filmmakers who wish to engage with *Red Dead Redemption* as source for material. Although Rockstar did not create *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* specifically to deter amateur machinima filmmakers from taking up a similar project of his or her own, I do believe that a large corporation articulating a game's prologue or epilogue can hinder creative potential, as filmmakers could be anxious to stray from canon or could possibly fear their production aligning too closely with “corporate” machinima.

Production steps are becoming more complicated for machinima filmmakers. Videogames are changing, and so are the marketing techniques and transmedia storytelling surrounding them. Once considered a peculiar niche market with limited broad appeal, games must compete against more established mediums like cinema, and are partially accomplishing this by fleshing out game narratives to a much high degree than in the past. Gone are the days of *Quake* and *Doom*'s flimsy narrative premises. More

narrative material is initially presented in-game, because games generally cannot stand only on the merit of being technologically innovation anymore. In order for a “serious” or “hardcore”⁸⁴ videogame to garner critical support, it must cohesively provide in-depth narratives and character arcs, in a manner similar to more established storytelling mediums, or suffer the dreaded “gimmick” label. Shallow characters and an undefined plot are frequent complaints against “serious” games with low critical ratings. In turn, machinima filmmakers who pounce on a new game for source material usually create labels and classification for their product: is their machinima canon in regard to its source game? Does it exist in an EU (expanded universe)⁸⁵ or in an AU (alternative universe)?⁸⁶ How does it interact with trans-media storytelling which has been previously articulated? These extra steps could prove daunting enough to frighten off newcomers to the medium. This is expounded upon by online distribution and interaction, as fans can come together to discuss games and machinima much more easily, in contrast to early machinima, which could only be viewed by others with the game.

Rockstar's involvement with machinima has its upsides as well. By airing *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* on television, Rockstar pushed the envelope of machinima exposure. Although the approach was met with a mixed

84 Defining *serious/hardcore* as binary to *casual* gaming. Casual games are touted as “anyone can play” titles which do not feature complicated controls or complex narratives, or demand a heavy time commitment, and are usually very inexpensive to produce. Examples of contemporary casual game sub-genres include hidden object (*Mystery Case Files*), puzzle (*Bejeweled*), social network (*FarmVille*) and arcade (*Peggle*).

85 Expanded Universe (EU) fan fiction generally takes canonized characters and places them in previously unseen narratives, such as prequels and sequels, but usually attempt to remain canonical and franchise-bound, and add to official mythology. Will Brooker. *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans*.

86 Alternative Universe (AU) fan fiction takes canonized characters and places them in alternative timelines, settings or situations. A common trope of AU fan fiction is “what if?”, exploring the ramifications of major or minor plot changes or decision changes made by characters. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. p. 11.

reception, it nonetheless garnered attention for the medium. No additional major studios have created televised machinima marketing since *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater*, so it does not appear that corporate machinima will overtake amateur machinima. It is easy to empathize with the skepticism surrounding films like this, but ultimately, the detriments to fan fiction machinima are minimal. Although newer games can complicate the machinima production process by way of expanded, in-game stories and characters, machinima production is rarely discouraged. In fact, Rockstar's machinima could be read as acknowledgment and encouragement: "We've made a machinima for our game, so can you."

3.4. Conclusion

Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater is a prime example of machinima's flexibility to retain core characteristics while simultaneously meeting different ends. Specifically, each film in this section takes up the task of expanding on a game's narrative. Each film, *The Seal of Nehahra*, the *Red vs. Blue* series, and *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater* approaches content slightly different, usually in production and distribution methods, but all create narrative expansion in a manner which combines videogames and cinematic form, bridging the gap between the mediums. Additionally, the films in this section illuminate machinima's growing connection to commercial producers and the implications this holds for machinima's idealist definition as a mode of fan fiction expression for the marginalized gamer archetype. Like so many

inclusive groups, which I would classify machinima filmmakers under given the relatively small number of people involved, tension stems from “authenticity” and canonicity arguments, but at the end of the day, machinima gains momentum and exposure no matter what the source.

Machinima creates a new breed of fan fiction for gamers to experiment with. It is apparent from these films that game consumers feel a connection with their videogames, whether through an identification with the game's characters or within the virtual community videogames and machinima create. Machinima bridges videogames and film; the manner in which these psychosocial desires in machinima filmmakers and fans relates to similar theory surrounding psychoanalytic film theory provides the final step into machinima's interiority.

CHAPTER 4: MACHINIMA OF THE MIND

In previous chapters, my purpose was to trace the movement of machinima from the outside inward, beginning with films which use machinima to allegorically represent real world events, and working toward machinima which primarily functions as an outlet for trans-media storytelling and universe-expanding fan fiction. More often than not, these purposes serve the ends of creating agency for a marginalized creator, or group of creators (or, as seen in Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater*, machinima can be re-appropriated for commercial endeavors). In this final section, I want to take my inquiry into machinima one step further and identify the core psychoanalytic and psychosocial functions which drive machinima creation? Primarily, the methods by which machinima bridges the gap between film theory, informed by André Bazin's work on idealistic cinematic reality and Christian Metz's thoughts on identification, psychoanalysis and story versus discourse, as well as burgeoning videogame studies dealing with immersion, subjectivity, and the active/passive dichotomy are of great importance to this chapter. Games rich in subjectivity and identification are a natural jumping off point for machinima creators wishing to explore similar topics. *The Sims* and the *Half-Life*, although occupying very different gaming styles and genres, both deal with player immersion and identification. Each game has spawned rather intriguing machinima: *The Strangerhood*, a series from Rooster Teeth which uses *The Sims*, and *Freeman's Mind*, a series by Ross Scott which features *Half-Life* gameplay. This chapter will explain how the games function under the aforementioned critical discourse,

followed by the machinima, which mark a deliberate shift from the games' fundamental features and applications. Interestingly, while each videogame connects more strongly with film theory concerning identification and archival properties, an idea which appears contradictory due to fundamental differences surrounding passivity versus interactivity, their resulting machinima knowingly disregard these ideas. This stems from machinima's nature as a frequently referential medium toward videogames, which continues into cinema. In this unique way, machinima tenuously connects videogames and cinema together while simultaneously mocking both mediums in a way which conveys a sense of playful power and control in the machinima filmmaker over more the more established mediums.

4.1. *The Sims, The Strangerhood*, Individuality, and 'Author Abdication'

The Sims marked a drastic shift in simulation videogames.⁸⁷ Developed by Will Wright and Maxis, and published by Electronic Arts in 2000, the game allows players to create a human, in-game avatar. Players can create a solitary character, or a family of varying size. The avatars are created not only by selecting physical attributes, like facial features and hair color, but also by choosing personality traits: neat, outgoing, active, playful and nice (Fig. 4.1). The game⁸⁸ markets its casual, gradual and continuous gameplay: there is no true end, and there is “no scoring system, or winning conditions.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ See chapter two, pp. 36-37.

⁸⁸ Whether *The Sims* series classifies as a game or a toy is a matter up for debate in critical and social circles. Because *The Sims* has no end conditions and no marked prompts of success or failure, many liken the series to something more akin to a digital pet. Richard Rouse III. *Game Design: Theory and Practice*. p. 384.

⁸⁹ Brian Weatherson “Are You a Sim?” p. 425.

Players must keep their Sim(s) happy and functional by paying close attention to the Sim's needs and wants (Sims must eat to stay alive, and may have a cheerier disposition if the player remodels the Sim's home or provides them other creature comforts). There is little automation in-game; players input commands for Sims to pay bills, clean their homes, and other tasks. If the player decided to remove the ladder from their Sim's pool while the Sim swims, the Sim will eventually drown. Grease fires can burn a Sim's house down, and other undesirable events. (Fig 4.2.)



Fig. 4.1. Character creation in *The Sims*.



Fig. 4.2. A Sim's house burns down.

Admittedly, the game's marketability seems questionable. Why would anyone pay money to control an imaginary person who completes day-to-day tasks and engages in consumer culture in a manner so similar to real life?

“[...] a focus group conducted early in the project's development was so unfavorable that the game's designer, Will Wright, had trouble getting any staff on the project. And why would it be fun? 'Control a collection of characters at home in a simulated suburbia.' To hear that description of the game, it seems disturbingly too much like *real, mundane*, suburban life to possibly be entertaining.”⁹⁰ (emphasis mine).

90 Richard Rouse III. *Game Design: Theory and Practice*. p. 383.

The series' sales truly evidence an unexpected outcome: the original *Sims* game for the PC shipped 16 million units,⁹¹ and the entire series, including two official sequels and an array of expansion packs and spin-offs,⁹² reached 125 million units sold in 2010.⁹³

Explanation for consumer attraction originates in a combination of film history, film theory and via the mechanisms of the game's parody and spoof. Historiographical division of the films of Auguste and Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès separated into *realism* and *fantasy* are just as relevant in videogames as in other mediums. Spectators in the crowd at the Lumière Brothers' early exhibitions, including titles *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*) and *Repas de bébé* (*Feeding the Baby*), were enthralled by the spectacle of experiencing everyday actions and routines via a new technological method. *The Sims* follows along a similar, yet ultimately fundamentally deviated path, over 100 years later.

Whereas the thrill in watching Lumière films occurs because of the spectator's helplessness and passivity in the face of events unfolding on screen (the oft-cited, perhaps fictitious incident of audience members panicking and jumping out of the way of the train's entry into La Ciotat), videogames are a notable entry in new media forms due to the aspect of control. All games, across all genres and styles, are marked by varying degrees of player control. In *The Sims*, this has been compared to “God-like” control, where the player behaves as a “household deity,”⁹⁴ entirely due to the fact that basic human actions and interactions are filtered through the player and inputted through the console controller or computer mouse. To some media theorists, this links videogames

91 <http://www.tmcnet.com/usubmit/2005/feb/1114806.htm>

92 See chapter two, footnote 37, pp. 36-37.

93 Brendan Sinclair. “The Sims turns 10, Tops 125 million units.”

94 Tanja Sihvonen. *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. p. 129.

with older media forms, like literature, and helps to define the appeal of control and power present in videogames:

“In *The Sims*, [the god perspective] is the primary mode of interpretation of the game events and a design choice that seems to strongly encourage story creation and making narrativized, casual connections between actions within the game world. I would even go so far as to say that it is close to the classical third person view of narration in novels, in a certain sense.”⁹⁵

The videogame player experiences the pleasure of “writing” a story outside of his or her own life. In a lecture at the Game Developer's Conference, Doug Church referred to this as “author abdication.” Richard Rouse III contextualizes this concept further, “[...] instead of the game designer coming up with the game's story ahead of time, the authorship of the story is abdicated to the players.”⁹⁶

The game's virtual, yet still recognizably human, landscape classifies the game more as realism than fantasy. As such, it appeals to players not only because of its meandering style, but also for its ability to create a virtual world and life which either: a) validates the player's own real lifestyle by creating in-game “successes” in its emulation or, b) allows the player to invert their real lifestyle, thereby experiencing transgressive vicarious excitement or enjoyment.

95 Satu Heliö. “Simulating the Storytelling Qualities of Life: Telling Stories with the Sims.” p. 3.

96 Richard Rouse III. *Game Design: Theory and Practice*. p. 384.

“[...] some players aim at creating the 'perfect' suburban home, inhabited by an ideal family [...] the recreation of the middle-class suburban dream could be interpreted as a replication of the ideological frame the game-as-product purposes its player to assume through interpretation and configuration, at least on a superficial level.”⁹⁷

In either case, the player derives pleasure from active creation and control. Under this model, the player's creation reflects his or her individuality and singular consciousness. Additionally, the game's digital archive allows it to function similarly to André Bazin's concepts explored in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” Videogames have allowed individuals to create representational avatars which will live on after the creator's death. However, unlike the photograph which halts one particular moment in time and thus embalming the dead, the videogame avatar can continue to exist and carry out tasks, should one pick the controller back up. So often, the still-developing tenets of videogame theory evolve very similarly to early film theory, that is finding as many ways possible to distinguish the medium in question as a separate and respectable art form. Although videogames and cinema have many blatant differences, they are quite similar, both in their similar development process as well as the satiated psychological desires in their consumers. Bazin's theory on photography providing mummification, which seeps into film's psychological functionality, also unites cinema and videogames under a common goal.

97 Tanja Sihvonen. *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. p. 129.

The Sims is a highly malleable, and in turn, personal game. No two games will ever be the same at the micro level, due to character design, setting choices, items purchased, and the multitude of possible interpersonal relationships. However, at the macro level, by removing these minute choices the overarching point of the game does not change, nor do the Sims' responses to identical stimuli. A player who creates an outgoing, yet unfriendly “doctor” Sim must attend to nearly identical needs as someone who creates an introverted, yet amiable, jobless Sim.

To this end, the game itself is a spoof of consumer culture. The game's primary designer, Will Wright:

“If you sit there and build a big mansion that's all full of stuff, without cheating, you realize that all these objects end up sucking up all your time, when all these objects have been promising to save you time... and it's actually kind of a parody of consumerism, in which at some point, your stuff takes over your life.”⁹⁸

The machinima series *The Strangerhood* takes the parody one step further, and in turn creates an element of power over the theory which unites cinema and *The Sims* by directly inverting its core ideas. While the game hones in on the absurd nature of consumerism, Burnie Burns and his production team, Rooster Teeth, make a bold statement on the nature of individuality, agency and personhood. The series, consisting of 17 short episodes (most around three and half to four minutes long), three “special episodes,” and six related shorts which take place outside of Strangerhood Lane but

98 Brenda Laurel. “SimSmarts: An Interview with Will Wright.” p. 45.

feature the series's characters. The series is featured on both Rooster Teeth's website, as well as the official *Sims 2* website.

The Strangerhood uses *The Sims 2* for its content; production is accomplished by playing the game on three computers and creating multiple save files under the save character in order to display different facial expressions. Basically, the game is played within the engine's set limitations in order to arrive at the desired outcomes. "If we need them to kiss for a scene, we have to develop their relationship until they're attracted to each other," says Burns.⁹⁹

The series follows the virtual lives of eight Sims personalities who wake up one day on Strangerhood Lane with no recollection of their past before Strangerhood Lane, including how they arrived in the neighborhood. The eight characters undergo numerous pop-culture-informed events, such as murder mysteries, scandalous affairs, pregnancies, and kidnappings, many of which are similar to reality shows and soap operas (specifically spoofed programs include *American Idol*, *Desperate Housewives*, *24*, *LOST* and *Survivor*). Additionally, there is a mysterious voice, humorously referred to as The Omnipotent Voice, which channels orders and instructions to the Sims via diegetic news outlets, such as computers and newspapers. The series ends in true melodramatic fashion, with the main character, Sam, wondering aloud if it was all just a crazy dream.

In *The Sims* series, players can alternately project themselves onto his or her Sims, referring to them in conversations as "me" and "I,"¹⁰⁰ or identifying more closely with the "God" role, referring to the Sims as "they" or "my Sims" or "mine."¹⁰¹ Ultimately, *The*

99 "Meet the makers of *The Strangerhood*." *Wired*, January 2005.

<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.01/play.html>

100Clare Bradford. "Looking for my corpse: Video games and player positioning." pp. 57-58.

101Francis F. Steen, et al. "What Went Wrong With *The Sims Online*: Cultural Learning and Barriers to

Strangerhood makes a mockery of both concepts. First, The Omnipotent Voice is eventually revealed to be a diegetic character, a sort of surveillance-minded “G-Man” type, and a rather incompetent one at that (the final episode's montage reveals that he ends the story unemployed). Second, The Omnipotent Voice explicitly refers to the eight Sims as a group of stereotypes: the stoner, the elderly curmudgeon, the dumb blonde, the straight man, and so on. For viewers who have played *The Sims* series and modeled a character after themselves, referring to the Sims(s) in first-person, as an extension or alter-ego of themselves, the *The Strangerhood* implies that the game creates nothing but stereotypes, hence revealing the player him or herself as a stereotype as well. For players who identify more closely with the “God” concept, looking at the Sim(s) as a product (in the most literal sense) of his or her creativity, the idea is crushed as just an illusion: the God concept is just another stereotypical character in the game and machinima's universe.

While mercilessly poking fun at its source game (and its players) and the applicable film theory, *The Strangerhood* is a remarkably transgressive and subversive machinima creation. Through the lens of pop culture parody, the series goes about spoofing the viewer and consumer culture as a whole. In *The Sims*, players derive enjoyment from any number of approaches to the game, and given the enormous sales figures for the series, it is clear that videogame consumers have discovered various ways to enjoy this series.

Rooster Teeth's machinima series indicates the theoretical and psychological depth to which the medium is capable. As seen in previous chapters, machinima is capable of contending with historiography and the psychological drives behind fan

Identification in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.” pp. 366-368.

fiction. However, *The Sims* and *The Strangerhood* probes even further into gaming psychology and psychosocial functions: why people game, how they feel when they play and what overarching societal constructs are at work while they do so. Additionally, games and machinima productions of this nature show the intricate lattice of film and media studies and theories which surround critical thought in identification in games and machinima.

As a middle-ground between videogames and cinema, the manner in which film theory, such as Bazin's work in idealistic cinematic immersion. As stated earlier, games in which players create avatars (either as a realistic representation or in a fantastic, alter-ego manner),¹⁰² construct an archive similar to Bazin's mummifying, image-based archive. Although videogame avatars have not crossed into “true” human representation yet, the emotional connection in creating an avatar in a human likeness, whether moderately realistic in *The Sims* or a more abstract rendering, like the Nintendo Wii's Mii feature, is a prominent marketing feature. Videogames like *The Sims*, which place a great deal of stock in mimicking and miming the real, share in Bazin's concept of idealistic immersion in visualization and representation:

“Today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose. It is no longer a question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny.”¹⁰³

102 See *World of Warcraft* avatars, chapter two, pp. 49-50.

103 André Bazin. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” p. 10.

Videogames are an extension of Bazin's ideas surrounding an idealist, completely immersive “total cinema.” In his essay “The Myth of Total Cinema,” Bazin describes a hypothetical cinema so lifelike and so immersive in every sense that the viewer would not be physically or mentally able to differentiate between the real world from the cinema. With each technological videogame innovation, the industry attempts to reach a similar outcome. Although *The Sims* series does not include “reality simulation” advances touted by videogames of past and present, like virtual reality or motion control, its very content narratively appeals to the notion of “a complete representation of reality”¹⁰⁴ in all of its mundane and microcosmic glory. *The Strangerhood* machinima utilizes many of the same theoretical concepts but directly toys with the ideas present.

The Sims is a third-person, casual game, and yet is still rich in subjectivity and psychology. Players can create whomever and whatever they choose, which creates the potential for parodied sense of personhood. How does identification and immersion function in a first-person shooter linear videogame, with a set protagonist? Most first-person shooters grant their title character a voice and a visual representation, which assist the player in understanding and relating to their playable character. However, not all FPS videogames create immersion and identification under the same constructs.

¹⁰⁴André Bazin. “The Myth of Total Cinema.” p. 20.

4.2. *Half-Life*, *Freeman's Mind* and First-Person Identification

“Man of few words, aren't you?” - Alyx Vance, *Half-Life 2*

Developed by Valve Software in 1998, *Half-Life* is a science-fiction/horror themed first-person shooter. The player controls a theoretical physicist named Dr. Gordon Freeman, who works underground at the Black Mesa Research Facility. An experiment goes awry, and creates a “resonance cascade” which tears open a portal between earth and an alien realm called Xen. Xen's hostile aliens invade earth via the portal at Black Mesa, and as a response, the Hazardous Environment Combat Unit begins killing the aliens *and* Black Mesa employees as means of a cover-up. Freeman must find trustworthy allies both in the Black Mesa facility and on the surface above, as well as combat and evade environmental hazards and aliens. Eventually, he connects with scientists at the Lambda Complex, who propel him to Xen with the mission to kill the alien entity driving the attacks, all while under the observation of the mysterious G-Man. Through the course of *Half-Life* and its sequels, Freeman becomes a hero and revered symbol of the human resistance against hostile aliens.

The game's style and mechanics are notable for a number of related reasons. First, the player never sees or hears Freeman in-game, other than segments of his arms and hands which enter through the bottom of the frame. However, players are not completely in the dark about his appearance, as his likeness appears on the game's packaging (Figs. 4.3 & 4.4).



Fig. 4.3. How players see Gordon Freeman in *Half-Life*.



Fig. 4.4. Gordon Freeman on *Half-Life*'s box art.

Commenting on this feature, Ste Curran writes, “... as the game is played entirely in first-person perspective, the bond between player and character is as strong as it can be. While most games would have you control Gordon Freeman, in *Half-Life* you are him.”¹⁰⁵ This is enhanced by the second element: no cinematic cutscenes. In most videogames, cinematic cutscenes halt gameplay and revoke player control and point-of-view. In a first-person game, a cutscene usually exits first-person perspective, allowing the player to see playable and non-playable characters from a variety of cinematically conventional angles and shot types.¹⁰⁶ Cutscenes traditionally play out utilizing classical Hollywood structures: establishing shots, shot-reverse shots and eyeline matches, among others (Figs 4.5 & 4.6). In *Half-Life*, the player never loses Freeman's first-person viewpoint, because cutscenes are scripted into the game's code, allowing for a nearly seamless transition between gameplay and expository cinematics (Figs. 4.7 & 4.8).

¹⁰⁵Ste Curran. *Game Plan: Great Designs that Changed the Face of Computer Gaming*. p. 109.

¹⁰⁶Cutscenes are generally divided into three sub-categories: live-action cutscenes, animated cutscenes and interactive cutscenes. Live-action cutscenes have declined in popularity in recent years, but are most commonly found in videogames based off movie franchises (such as *The Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings*) or in games where live action cutscenes have become a kitschy staple of the game itself, like the *Command & Conquer* series. Animated cutscenes are the most common, and most often feature pre-rendered full motion video (FMV), a trend which is changing as game engines become more powerful, allowing for cutscenes rendered “on the fly” which integrate more smoothly with gameplay. Finally, interactive cutscenes feature “quick time events,” instances in which players are not in full control of the character, but are given prompts to quickly press specific buttons to further the sequence. Source: Tim Rogers, “Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment: Incorporating Quick Time Events into Gameplay.”



Fig. 4.5. Cinematic cutscene from *Halo*, Shot A: Master Chief looks off-screen during conversation.



Fig. 4.6. Cinematic cutscene from *Halo*, Shot B: beginning of shot-reverse shot sequence.



Fig. 4.7. Cutscene from *Half-Life* in Freeman's point-of-view.



Fig. 4.8. Cutscene from *Half-Life 2* maintaining Freeman's point-of-view.

Half-Life's structure and content aligns the game closely with the horror genre, represented by frightening monsters, sudden scares, copious amount of spurting blood, and most importantly, a heavy reliance on secondary identification. However, Freeman's complete lack of voice or third-person appearance differentiates *Half-Life* from most other first-person horror videogames. Freeman's absence of voice and in-game visualization is vital for player identification and immersion.

Videogame analytic theory is on the rise, but remains anchored by film theory in “new media” studies, including important works by scholar Henry Jenkins and frequent *Film Quarterly* contributor Irene Chien. However, I believe that Christian Metz's psychoanalytic work concerning primary and secondary identification provides a sturdy theoretical backbone for *Half-Life's* point-of-view style. Metz's work on identification is heavily informed by Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic practices, primarily in connection with the “mirror stage.” In his essay “Identification, Mirror,” Metz explores the human drive to attend the cinema, contextualizing this desire through the semiology of the “mirror stage,” theoretical moment when a baby recognizes himself in the mirror as an entity detached from his mother. This is described as an imaginary signifier because the reflection is not a true signifier, a real object in the world, but a visual site of ego manifestation. The cinema exists as an extension of the mirror stage, expanding on its general principles but not directly emulating the concept: “...contrary to the child in the mirror, he cannot identify with himself as an object, but only with objects which are there without him. In this sense the screen is not a mirror.”¹⁰⁷ This creates an outlet for humans

107 Christian Metz. “Identification, Mirror.” p. 48.

to identify, and thus assists in facilitating a psychological and psychosocial whole for the spectators. Metz writes:

“But *with what*, then, does the spectator identify during the projection of the film? For he certainly has to identify: identification in its primal form has ceased to be a current necessity for him, but he continues, in the cinema – if he did not the film would become incomprehensible, considerably more incomprehensible than the most incomprehensible films – to depend on that permanent play of identification without which there would be no social life.”¹⁰⁸

Metz then breaks identification down into two categories: primary identification and secondary identification. Primary identification “inscribes an empty emplacement for the spectator-subject, an all-powerful position which is that of God himself, or more broadly of some ultimate signified.”¹⁰⁹ Secondary identification is “identification with the human form appearing on the screen.”¹¹⁰ Horror films take a certain pleasure out of ambiguously interchanging primary and secondary identification, such as the opening sequence to John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). In *Half-Life*, the player perpetually resides in secondary identification with Freeman. Like Carpenter's *Halloween*, the identification is enhanced through a lack of vocal expression; although the spectator or player knows that he or she is seeing through the point-of-view of a character, visualized by body parts reaching into the frame, the lack of vocally-impressed personality allows

108Christian Metz. “Identification, Mirror.” p. 46.

109Christian Metz. “Identification, Mirror.” p. 49.

110Christian Metz. “Identification, Mirror.” p. 47.

the spectator/player to immerse themselves into the character more fully. This can produce desirable effects, as seen in the positive critical reaction to intense player immersion/investment in *Half-Life*, or intriguing yet disturbing counter-focalization present in *Halloween* and other horror films.¹¹¹

Metz's work on story versus discourse also applies to *Half-Life*'s silent protagonist. In "Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)," Metz elaborates on the idea that films are, at the same time, voyeuristic and non-voyeuristic. Throughout, Metz explains the difference between story and discourse. A story is narrated or told by an all-seeing and all-knowing but unseen intelligence which unfolds "from nowhere, that nobody tells, but which nevertheless, somebody receives."¹¹² In a story, the spectator is a voyeur upon the screen and the cinema. Discourse is the manner by which the film's author creates an ideology to impress upon the spectator, which hence acknowledges the presence of a sentient viewer/voyeur. The essay questions where spectators gather the meaning of a cinematic experience through the film as a text or through known or unknown author's, or another authorial position's, intentions.

This idea carries over into videogames and is modified under the "passive" versus "active" dichotomy, in which I pair "passive" with "story" and "active" with "discourse." Most videogames contain a mixture of passive and active elements: these elements can range from the game's virtual world layout (linear or "sandbox") to character type (created avatar or assigned protagonist) to ending (identical for all in-game choices or variable depending on in-game choices). Cutscenes also fall into the "passive/active"

111 Mieke Bal. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. pp. 142-159.

112 "Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)." p. 97.

binary; in most games, cutscenes render an active game temporarily passive and voyeuristic.

However, *Half-Life*'s lack of cinematic cutscenes paired with total control of and immersion into Freeman marks the game as entirely active, at least in terms of literal point-of-view. This also codifies the game more as a discourse than a story; players create meaning for themselves as they complete the game while acting as Freeman's brain and body. By allowing the player to behave in the place of Freeman, exhibiting complete control over his movements, even as scripted cutscenes play out, *Half-Life* encourages participants to become one with Freeman. It does not appear that the developers are ready to change this formula, either. When asked if Freeman would receive a voice in upcoming games by the United Kingdom gaming publication *Edge*, Valve founder and *Half-Life* creator Gabe Newell responded, "we're not philosophically opposed to this, but we don't have any good reasons to do it. Right now making your companions more interesting and compelling seems a more fruitful avenue to explore."¹¹³ It seems that Valve is fully aware of the unique circumstances surrounding Gordon Freeman, and will continue to tout his silence as a virtue for players. In this analysis, Metz's work provides a theoretical foundation similar to Bazin's, in which film theory closely aligns with videogames, displaying the usually disregarded interconnectivity between the mediums. However, much like *The Strangerhood*, *Half-Life* machinima *Freeman's Mind* directly inverts the grounding theory, once again exhibiting a sense of agency and control over the ideas through parody.

¹¹³Tim Ingham. "Gabe Newell: Next *Half-Life* won't change Gordon Freeman: Protagonist to remain an arm and a crowbar."

In the machinima series by Ross Scott, viewers watch *Half-Life* gameplay unfold in Freeman's first-person view, just as it would were they playing the game. However, *unlike* the game, the viewer is privy to Freeman's nearly constant inner monologue, commenting on everyone and everything around him in a sarcastic and sardonic tone, with a frequently egotistical attitude. His commentary focuses on background imagery that the casual player may have never noticed, mundane in nature (Fig. 4.9) and possibly far less trivial (Fig. 4.10). It's never implied that other characters can hear these diatribes, yet Freeman's thoughts (vocalized by Scott) alter along with environmental changes (Freeman underwater, for instance, creates a muffled voice). The series debuted in 2007; episodes range from five to ten minutes long, and as of this writing, there are 43 episodes (0-42), the most recent appearing on machinima.com and YouTube on June 15, 2012.



Fig. 4.9. In *Freeman's Mind*, Freeman observes a fellow employee from the underground tram. "Ahh... I'm not the only one who's late! Sucker!"



Fig. 4.10. Freeman spies a conspicuous missile in the alleged 'high security' area of the Black Mesa Research Facility: "Oh, what's this? Yeah, 'high security.' That's why we leave armed missiles around for everyone to check out... it's part of the tour!"

This is obviously a rather dramatic departure from *Half-Life*'s silent protagonist, with whom the player creates a surrogate for themselves. Part of this change is motivated by a reversal in the active versus passive dichotomy; whereas *Half-Life* engages players with an active discourse, *Freeman's Mind* operates with a passive story. The passivity is amplified for viewers who have already completed the game. Scott uses a modified version of *Half-Life* which accommodates a smoother walkthrough (stronger weapons, weaker enemies, etc.), but nearly every other narrative element remains identical or nearly identical. Additionally, *Freeman's Mind*'s constant narration and commentary is

entertaining and humorous for individuals who have not played the *Half-Life* series. Freeman's self-described lack of scientific knowledge or basic social/worked-related skills encourage non-players to connect with the characters and the story. In short, the series fits in rather comfortably with internet-era machinima, which supports consumption by a wider audience with more inclusive distribution methods and more broad subject matter.

Although the series can appeal to players and non-players alike, the silent-hero turned blabbermouth is rather jolting for those who have grown accustomed to creating Freeman's personality in his or her own likeness. In fact, the very inclusion of a real, human voice not native to the game's digital landscape, is initially startling, but ultimately vital machinima feature. Scholar Isabella Arvers is particularly interested in the human voice as an element of machinima.

“Voice reflects the idea of alterity and the relationship to another person. Voice is the simultaneous presence and absence of human corporeality. Voice is the content and the meaning in language but also the sound of a person and their body through time and space. [...] As we move into the digital domain, this materiality of voice is essential to machinima and their virtual game spaces.”¹¹⁴

Arvers interviewed machinima filmmaker and the founder of the Machinima Film Festival Paul Marino on the importance of non-game-based voice in the medium:

¹¹⁴Isabella Arvers. “Cheats or Glitch?: Voice as a Game Modification in Machinima.” p. 234.

“Without the vocal performance, we lose all connection to relationship – between characters, between creator and audience and between audience and the narrative. The vocal work in a machinima piece grounds the work in reality. It makes it not only digestible, which is paramount, but also makes the piece much more enjoyable.”¹¹⁵

While I agree that including a supplemental, non-diegetic voice (specifically, non-diegetic in terms of the original source game) is helpful to bridge the gap between active and passive involvement (even more appropriately in machinima which serves as a middle ground between videogame and the cinema), this drastic shift in character representation, coupled with a change from active to passive, entirely changes *Half-Life's* psychoanalytic and psychosocial functions. Gamers who had been attracted to the idea of a silent protagonist upon whom to project and ego manifestation are now denied that option, instead finding alternative ways to identify with the very vocal Freeman. In the *Half-Life* videogame series, players can imagine any personality he or she wishes for Freeman, aside from conditions the game prescribes via the narrative playing out; for example, the player understands that Freeman is inventive, intelligent and brave, just from the game's linear progression.

In terms of Metzian film theory regarding primary or secondary identification, *Freeman's Mind* still falls under secondary identification, but Ross Scott's/“Freeman's” constant vocal presence noticeably reduces the potential for deeply ingrained “mirror” behavior while watching, mostly on a subjective level. If *Freeman's Mind* existed in the

¹¹⁵Isabella Arvers. “Cheats or Glitch?: Voice as a Game Modification in Machinima.” p. 234.

world as a brand new product, an animated film using all new imagery, characters and narratives, similar to any other computer animated film released in multiplexes, the objective identification would be on par with any other cinematic production. However, machinima has an additional level of audience awareness which derives from its origins as an interactive, deeply subjective videogame product and experience. This awareness is enhanced in the face of parody which plays with both videogame expectations and the film theory that anchors them.

4.3. Conclusion

As shown in two machinima series based in very different videogame franchises, the medium has a peculiar relationship with traditional film theory. Bazin and Metz's work on cinematic immersion, illusion and identification provide an intriguing, if flawed, foundation for the new wave of videogame critical studies, highlighting that the two mediums are not as different as is commonly thought. While many of these theoretical constructs apply to videogames, the machinima which has expanded from the games drastically alters the psychoanalytic functions driving the appeal behind the games. In a medium which resides in flux between two larger ones, film and videogames, the application of media and film theory proves to be an interesting exercise in uncovering subjectivity and psychosocial experience's malleable nature in machinima, as well as machinima's continued function as agency, this time shown through its dismissal of traditional notions surrounding its location as a theoretical median.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Emerging digital and DIY medias prove that filmmaking, as well as other forms of visual expression, are no longer isolated to upper echelons of financial and social hierarchies. Machinima exists in a fascinating space between two media giants, the cinema and the videogame industry. However, rather than prominently featuring major tenets and attributes of its two parent industries, machinima knowingly rejects many of their characteristics, opting instead for a more personal and anti-establishment approach. This stems from machinima's beginnings in inventive gamers wishing to infiltrate their favorite games, changing or expanding upon the games' narratives or even meddling with source code.

Frequently this is done out of love for the game, and the desire to see a more personal vision in its imagery and story. The videogame industry, although continuously expanding, is an ideal, though sadly usually unrealistic, employer for gamers. Due to the industry's high level of entry and relative exclusivity, the dream of creating a new game or a sequel in a beloved franchise will stay just that: a dream. Machinima is a bridging tool, and while it *does* create a middle ground between videogame and cinema, that is not its main draw. The primary psychological and psychosocial fascination with machinima lies in its ability to shrink the gap between consumers and producers, hence creating a sense of agency in machinima filmmakers.

This is achieved in a number of ways, and as machinima expands conversely into the realms of the abstract and real world issues, “producer” does not always signify the

videogame industry. For example, the films in chapter two, *The French Democracy* and *War of Internet Addiction*, do not directly comment on the diegetic world of their parent games, *The Movies* and *World of Warcraft*, respectively. *The Movies*, as a film studio simulation game, only has the diegetic world which the player creates and functions as more of a blank slate. Using this blank slate template, Alex Chan creates a startling digital retelling of an event which had very recently impacted his life and his nation, the 2005 Paris riots. In Chan's case, the “producer” label falls unto the international mass media, and entity that Chan rather vocally protests against. He specifically creates his machinima interpretation of the riots to circumvent the mass media, despite possessing limited funds and professional connections. *The French Democracy's* exposure and praise in both the online machinima community as well as traditional mass media, seen in *USA Today's* coverage of the film, indicates its median point in producer and consumer, with Chan as a videogame consumer who has elevated to historiographical producer. *War of Internet Addiction* functions similarly. Tiger Oil Machinima Team has a deeper connection to their parent game, *World of Warcraft*, because the game itself and its surrounding politics serve as a relatively microcosmic element in a much larger issue: internet censorship in mainland China. Taking a much more metaphorical approach and littering the film with not only *World of Warcraft* jokes, but videogame and Asian culture spoofs and parodies, the Tiger Oil Machinima Team personifies companies and corporate entities which have become caught up in the race to monetize and socially shame *World of Warcraft* players. Once again, the filmmakers are videogame consumers who pay an hourly fee to play the MMO and have utilized it as a direct commentary on the oppressive

Chinese government, particularly concerning controversial mental health practices issued to so-called “internet addicts.” Although the film has difficulty circulating in mainland China due to censorship issues, it travels freely in other nations and has created international awareness of the issues. Like Chan's film, *War of Internet Addiction* creates a historiographical record of an ongoing national issue from the point-of-view of a marginalized group targeted by media misconceptions, and its low budget paired with online distribution, has promoted its international circulation and knowledge of these issues.

Machinima also bridges the gap between consumers and producers as a form of fan fiction. Machinima seen in chapter three, *The Seal of Nehahra* and *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles*, show how videogame fans have taken game they enjoy and expanded on their diegesis. Like written fan fiction, a tradition which dates back as far as the 17th century,¹¹⁶ machinima and other “new media” fan fiction creates a sense of power and agency in its creators over its source material, and in turn, over that source materials' producers. Derecho uses literature examples to highlight how women and racial minorities have utilized written fan fiction to create agency, a trend which continues in machinima fan fiction, instead relating to the socially marginalized “nerd” or “geek” subculture in 20th and 21st centuries. In *The Seal of Nehahra*, filmmaker J. Thaddeus Skubis directly challenges id Software's vision for their first-person shooter game *Quake*, expanding on the game's extremely sparse narrative arc. In this instance, Skubis modifies *Quake's* source code to allow for a more cinematic look and feel, implementing

116Abigail Derecho. “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History and Several Theories of Fan Ficion.” p. 67.

traditional cinematic camera angles and shot types. In *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles*, Burnie Burns and his team at Rooster Teeth Productions films *Halo* multiplayer matches and provide a humorous take on the *Halo* universe, as well as videogame culture and the science-fiction genre at large. Both films not only classify as fan fiction, but also represent the growing “technically proficient but low status [...] cubicle class.”¹¹⁷ Machinima fan fiction allows the “technically proficient but low status” groups or individuals transgress the label of “consumer,” and come closer to “producer.” The videogame industry has begun to implement machinima of their own creation into marketing materials, hence undermining the medium's core feature, as seen in Rockstar's promotional machinima *Red Dead Redemption: The Man from Blackwater*. However, machinima fans seem skeptical of this approach, and a number of members in online gaming forums were perplexed at the extremely profitable company's choice of machinima, a medium usually connected with low budgets and amateur, DIY creation.

Finally, machinima's psychological implications as a direct reversal of reigning videogame theory informed by film theory shows the medium's foundations in anti-establishment sentiments. Film theory by André Bazin and Christian Metz on image archives, immersion, identification and story versus discourse inform videogames' appeal, and highlight how the mediums are not entirely different from one another. Games like *The Sims* and *Half-Life* allows players to project ego manifestations onto videogames and their playable characters, created avatars in *The Sims* and the silent hero Gordon Freeman in *Half-Life*, in a manner quite similar to the imaginary signifier of the movie screen at a theater. Additionally, the videogame industry's frequent technological

117Irene Chien. “Deviation/Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles.” p. 27.

advances utilizing human movement (Nintendo Wii and Xbox Kinect, for example), virtual reality and 3D align closely with Bazin's theoretical notion of “total cinema.” Machinima conceived of these games, *The Strangerhood* and *Freeman's Mind*, directly work against the fundamental notions driving the videogames and film, which produces a problematic foundation concerning machinima's median location between the two. As stated earlier, machinima's main attraction lies not in its combination of cinema and videogames, but rather in the creator's power to inverse these tenets and shrink the gap between the consumer and producer levels. Like the machinima featured in previous chapters, the machinima in chapter four highlights the medium's functionality as a tool for agency and power, this time by knowingly disregarding popular theories and concepts surrounding film and videogame identification and immersion.

Where will machinima go from here? The medium is slowly coming around to commercial endeavors, seen in the aforementioned *Red Dead Redemption* film, as well as other televised works like *Time Commanders* and *Video Mods*. Some believe that machinima will be absorbed by traditional, animated filmmaking as just another step in the continuum of technological advancements:

“But a decade from now, machinima will almost certainly be just one of the many techniques in the filmmaker's arsenal. Just as CGI experts were assimilated into the industry ten years ago, so the machinima experts will go in their turn [...] just as hand-drawn 2D animation gave way to computer-generated 2D animation, and

now even that is giving way to 3D animation, so traditional 3D animation will inevitably give way, in part, to machinima.”¹¹⁸

If machinima's future finds the medium as just another tool for dominant, corporate production, new media, fan fiction and “geeks” will have certainly lost a precious creative resource. Machinima's short lifespan, so far, has barely given the medium ample time to grow into full potential as a powerful instrument of expression. Its inexpensive and instantaneous production, paired with rapid online distribution potential, indicates its true vitality. Although commercial machinima generally threatens the medium's principles and potentially infringes on its solidarity, one hopes that more exposure will appeal to curious filmmakers with something to say but not much money or experience to express themselves. Machinima is a highly transgressive and occasionally subversive medium, but only time will tell how those sentiments will evolve as its related mediums, film and videogames, do likewise.

¹¹⁸Matt Kelland, et al. *Machinima*. p. 70.

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