

‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players, ...’¹

Figure 1 & 2: Screenshots from the trailer for World of Warcraft Burning Crusade



¹ Shakespeare, 1960, p. 311.

Abstract

In the last ten years something called Machinima has evolved from the creative community of computer game fans. As these productions grow in numbers and quality through the community it becomes interesting to determine more clearly what Machinima is and how it can be defined. I have therefore tried to analyse it according to, among others, Gunther Kress's theory on digital genres. This has proven beneficial in confirming that the knowledge culture of fan communities has great influence on media products.

Keywords

Machinima, fan art, digital genres, computer games/-genres, productive players, knowledge culture.

References

Gonzalo Frasca, Gunther Kress, Andrew Burn, Henry Jenkins. Dovey & Kennedy

Introduction

Having seen a few pieces of Machinima by accident I got curious about the motivations behind. I wanted to find out more about the phenomenon. I have since watched quite a lot of Machinima. Although I am not a gamer as such I found these short films very entertaining. I was unsure of what it was I was faced with. The term animation did not seem to cover it very well as it was clearly different to any animation I have ever seen.

Motivation and context for problem

I have tried to find out what Machinima is for a while now. Part of my motivation behind investigating this particular topic is the nagging sense that this phenomenon is not just a genre but something else altogether. I feel that it would be a gross oversimplification to just calling it a genre. To call Machinima a genre simply does not cover it. My point of view is, that it is the medium in which Machinima is created which makes it what it is, which gives it its distinguishing characteristics. And medium as far as I am informed does not exclusively define genre. Genre is also related to content and other factors and although in this particular case the content is, to a certain extent, medium specific I still see a problem in calling Machinima a genre. For several reasons: 1. there are many different computer game genres, the game being the channel for the Machinima surely this must have an influence. 2. Each piece of Machinima could be

interpreted as belonging to a certain genre other than that of the original game. The genre of Machinima is not always, in fact it is very rarely the same as the genre of the game itself. Often they are not even comparable in this way. 3. If fan art is a genre in its own right does that make Machinima a subgenre of that? There are many more reasons to doubt that Machinima is just a genre.

I am aware of the ‘dangers’ that as a result of my analysis I may just conclude in the end that indeed Machinima is a genre but I think it would be interesting to critically investigate this first before making any assumptions. But in order to discuss this we must find out what a genre is. We must also clarify other important definitions of terms related to this. Gunther Kress’s two texts give me the tools to analyse and dissect Machinima as a digital genre. He discusses genre in respect with social relations and the structures of power related to these. Here is a brief overview of Kress’s terminology. **Medium**, according to Kress medium is both the material resources and the tools used to shape these.² **Provenance**, signs that are imported from other contexts carry values and associations from those other contexts.³ **Mode**, relates to content and in my interpretation it is the structure of content.⁴ **Production**, articulates meaning from both material and construction.⁵ **Distribution**, relates to the medium of reception.⁶ We will get back to this later.

Research problem

I am studying Machinima, because I want to understand how it accommodates the social relations, which according to Kress are the conditions for determining the text as a genre. I am doing this because I want to know if his conditions can be used to describe Machinima as a digital genre in a satisfying manner.

Problem statement

So my question is: How are social relations and power structures afforded by the unique qualities of Machinima as a digital genre?

² Kress, 2001

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

Machinima Introduction

The following is a technical explanation of what Machinima is. It is taken from the Machinima.org websites FAQ section. I thought it would be more useful than me providing a long winded and probably not very accurate recount.

Machinima (muh-sheen-eh-mah) is filmmaking within a real-time, 3D virtual environment, often using 3D video-game technologies.

In an expanded definition, it is the convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development.

Machinima is real-world filmmaking techniques applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can be either controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence. By combining the techniques of filmmaking, animation production and the technology of real-time 3D game engines, Machinima makes for a very cost- and time-efficient way to produce films, with a large amount of creative control.

How is Machinima produced?

Machinima can be produced in a couple of ways.

It can be script-driven, whereas the cameras, characters, effects etc. are scripted for playback in real-time. While similar to animation, the scripting is driven by events rather than keyframes.

It can also be recorded in real-time within the virtual environment, much like filmmaking (the majority of game-specific Machinima pieces are produced in this fashion).

While both of these approaches have their pros and cons, they are both Machinima-making techniques.⁷

There are a few different explanations concerning the name Machinima depending on who you consult. These are the different explanations for the etymological background of this word: *machine animation*⁸, *machine cinema*⁹ or the *Japanese word for puppetry*¹⁰. This is in itself motivating for further investigation and interestingly it refers to both medium of execution and of reception.

⁷ <http://www.Machinima.org/Machinima-faq.html>

⁸ <http://www.machinima.org/>

⁹ Dovey & Kennedy, 2006

¹⁰ Burn, 2006

Methodology

I will observe and analyse Machinima in general in order to get a solid basis for comparing and contrasting differences and likenesses. I will do a more in depth analysis of ‘Silver Bells and Golden Spurs’¹¹ using Kress’s definitions and tools. I will observe and analyse Machinima mainly from the perspective of his work but I will also use the works of Burn, Jenkins and Dovey & Kennedy for further references on various aspects.

Brief review of references

Apart from Kress I will use the following texts to give perspective and support to discussion of this theme. Here is a brief outline of who does what.

Burn’s ‘Reworking the Text: Online Fandom’

Burn also refers to Kress in his ...text. This text gives an insight into interesting and relevant aspects of fan art. Although Burn’s text does not directly deal with Machinima, he does raise some relevant points, which could be used when considering an analysis of Machinima: ‘*First, how does the nature of the game make a difference?*’ Burn concludes by saying that in computer game fan art ‘*the representational system and game system pull apart.*’¹²

Jenkins’s ‘Interactive Audiences? The ‘Collective Intelligence’ of Media Fans’

This text presents some of the conditions for productive players. Jenkins states that not only are consumers enabled in new ways (because of technologies) to participate in media consumption, but the subculture is also influenced by a DIY discourse.¹³ It also provides us with an idea of how the fan community works. This also provide an insight into the larger perspective concerning productive players in relation to Kress’s views on genre being created between social relations.

Frasca’s ‘Simulation versus Narrative’

His text will only briefly be touched upon as it only serves to illustrate how the game rules themselves may be of importance.

¹¹ This years’ winner of the Best Commercial Machinima at the 2006 Machinima festival

¹² Burn, 2006

¹³ Jenkins, 2002

Although he says that ‘...simulation cannot be understood just through its output’¹⁴ Frasca’s claim is ‘*that simulations can express messages in ways that narrative simply cannot.*’¹⁵ But do these characteristics have influence on the premises that Kress list as important factors when taking apart a genre?

Dovey & Kennedy’s ‘Interventions and Recuperations?’

This text highlights and stresses some of the points made by Kress. Notably they talk about ‘...*all software art is after all a ‘remix’ of a pre-existent artefact.*’¹⁶ It goes a bit deeper in supporting some of the points made by Jenkins about the creative community surrounding a game.

Observations

From the numerous pieces of Machinima that I have seen so far, this being quite a few since each piece is seldom more than a couple of minutes long, I believe it is possible to divide them into the following general categories: spoof, music video, tutorial, home video as well as comedy series and advertising. I am sure there are many more but these are the most common. The length is relevant here because it influences the content. Perhaps spoof is the most interesting category because the medium seems to encourage this. It looks as if it mocks reality even if this was not the intention.

I have observed quite a few pieces of Machinima. Please see the list provided at the end of this article. What we are looking for are patterns in the collection of Machinima. It is not hard to see different patterns within. What is difficult however is to see where Machinima belongs in the grander scheme of things. It has great potential but is still in its infancy. I have chosen the following examples because they for one reason or another stand out.

Silver Bells and Golden Spurs

It is easier, simpler and more productive to analyse one piece in depth. I have chosen this piece because it is not typical of Machinima. And therefore should illustrate both the typical and the non-typical aspects of Machinima.

It is a Second Life production from the hands of Bedazzle Studio and Linden Lab this is a 7minutes

¹⁴ Frasca, 2003

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Dovey & Kennedy, 2006

and 11secs long production based on a poem from an anonymous source. It is written and directed by Eric Call of Linden Lab. On the Machinima.com website this piece is labelled as drama as its genre. This film received an award at the 2006 Machinima Festival for: Best Commercial Machinima. This means that it '*Honors the best commercially made Machinima (corporate production with a budget in excess of \$5000)*'¹⁷

The film sequence opens with a shot of the title in ...typeface on black background with the music 'Hang 'Em High' ¹⁸ What follows are panoramic views of a mining town out west along with the voice over reciting the first couple of stanzas. There are lots of 'provenances', the music, the typeface and the long shots of scenery. These are all borrowed from the film genre of westerns.



Figure 3 & 4: Screenshots from 'Silver Bells and Golden Spurs

The voice over however is not usually associated with westerns and neither is the form of poetry. One of the aspects of this particular piece, which makes it stand out is not just the high quality of editing but also the lip syncing which is usually seen in animation. What normally signals speech within Second Life is the vigorous tapping of an imaginary keyboard. I have not been able to ascertain the reason for this choice to manipulate the system of rules but I assume that the author would find it ridiculous for more reasons than one, that two rivaling cowboys in the old west should be tapping invisible keyboards just before dueling.

¹⁷ <http://festival.Machinima.org/mackies.html>

¹⁸ It does say 'Hang 'Em Low' in the credits but that does not make any sense and I have checked with bellsandspurs.com and the correct title is 'Hang 'Em High'.

It is only the visuals, which refers to Second Life. This is actually a bit of grey zone since pretty much anything, can be scripted by users within Second Life and therefore gives free reins to producers.

Kress says that *'Distribution technologies are generally not intended as production technologies, but as re-production technologies, and are therefore not meant to produce meaning themselves'* later in the same paragraph *'In the age of digital media, however, the functions of production and distribution become technically integrated to a much greater extent.'*¹⁹ In a somewhat strange twist it has turned back on itself again. I have watched a few pieces of Second Life Machinima within Second Life through my avatar. It was a significantly different experience compared to watching on a regular webportal.

Provenances in Machinima in general are usually most notably the sound effects and music. But as we have just seen nothing apart from the production of mode is original in Machinima.

The trailer for the World of Warcraft Burning Crusade

Watching this is a bit like being at the movies. This is a very recent example, it was posted on the machinima.com website on December 15th. It was clearly made by professionals with a lot of resources. It gives the background story for the game incentive. It is appealing to new possible audiences, myself and others included, as well as to the existing audience of gamers. But rather than having a punch line or climax and point of no return it simply gives possibilities. There is no narrative as such, not in the strictest sense of the word at least. It illustrates very clearly what Frasca says *'Games always carry a certain degree of indeterminacy that prevents players to know before hand the final outcome.'*²⁰ The voice over tells us that we are not prepared. There is no dialogue, only this voice over telling us, among other things, that we are not prepared for the spectacular experience or the challenges ahead.

The graphics are unrivalled and at the very vanguard of visuals for computer games as far as I am informed. Please see the rather poor reproductions on the cover. Strangely they seem to me to be less 3D than before. Being an illustrator myself I have always been irritated by the, in my limited knowledge of computer game graphics, very poor examples of 3D graphics. The visuals have always been what turned me off games because they did not live up to my expectations. The

¹⁹ Kress, 2001

²⁰ Frasca, 2003

anatomical appearances of avatars have resembled the work of first year students at Art College. Flat-ish faces and horizontal shoulders being some of the give aways. This can also be seen in these screendumps from the aforementioned Silver Bells and Golden Spurs. It is typical of the novice draughtsman to draw the head and hands too small.



Figure 5 & 6: Screenshots from 'Silver Bells and Golden Spurs'

One more note I would like to make on the screenshots from the Blizzard trailer is that it is shown in widescreen. This and the blood splatter on the 'camera lens' leads us in the direction of epic cinematic experience.

These two examples were used to describe some of the exceptions I have found in Machinima. There are also some general characteristics I have observed in Machinima. What follows is a description of some of the more general traits observed in my sample of Machinima.

In Machinima there is a lot of borrowing from other texts. And it is of course this borrowing, which enables us to classify Machinima into groups such as 'spoof', 'tutorial', 'music video' and 'advertising'. I am here referring to Dovey & Kennedy who say that remixing is inherent in game culture. Part of what makes 'spoof' in particular funny is that it borrows from other media and indeed other genre.

Discussion

Jenkins supports Kress in his description of fans being creative and productive because of discourse and the fact that they have been enabled by new technologies.

When Burn says that the game system and representation pull apart it makes me think that we can and perhaps should add to this, the aspects of agency and game rules. Games are more than just representations, they are also simulations. The system of rules may in turn influence the way in which fans shape it. And it is for this reason that I briefly mention Frasca as well. In many cases the meta rules that Frasca points out provide players with the opportunity to generate new content.

He describes different levels of rules, the most interesting in this context are the manipulation rules, which define what possibilities players have, some of these may provide possibilities which are not necessary in order to win, goal rules, which obviously define winners and losers and what must be done in order to win, and meta rules, these rules allows users to change the previous and thus gives greater power to the users. E.g. some games allows for tampering with scripting and enables whole new games to be created as modifications AKA mods. Interestingly that although created in part as a result of these rule systems this is not seen in the representation. Even though production depends on this I have only come across a single piece of Machinima where interpretation assumes knowledge of the game itself.

This in turn makes me think that it is in fact important where you watch Machinima. Say that you are doing a study of Machinima created in a particular game engine and the distribution medium is an internet portal. How does that influence the context and thus the premises for interpretation?

Kress's statements that genre is created in the social relations which are linked to a text, whether it is multimodal or not, is actually supported by the Jenkins text, which outlines the conditions necessary for such a thing as a Machinima to come into existence in the first place. The Machinima, which I have discussed in depth in this paper I have used mainly to illustrate the exceptions, which confirm the rules. Machinima is moving from the subculture of fan art within a creative gaming community into the commercial world of advertising. I assume that according to Kress this would mean that the genre changes because there is a shift in the power structures. The move from subculture to commercial product also proves that it is recognised that it is a result of consumer loyalty rather than simple theft. This is pointed out by Dovey & Kennedy.

Conclusion

Kress's definitions have been very useful in dissecting Machinima. Machinima is in fact a product with a lot of social relations exactly because it is the product of a community of creative fans and productive players. Machinima strengthens the fan community but it can also build brand loyalty. At the outset I thought that genre was just used to label complex texts for easy interpretation and identification mainly based on the theme of the content. I see now that, although this is useful and on many occasions how this is used, it is a simplification, which is clearly not helpful in analysing what is labelled. Machinima is clearly created in a medium. What makes it so special is that it is a medium of distribution and that this medium of distribution has a very particular audience. So in round about ways it is partly the medium, which helps us determine the digital genre of Machinima. It is exactly this unique quality, which both affords and depends on the social relations and power structures of the genre. Of course it is much more complex than that and I would like to work with this in more depth in the future. This I feel has just been a teaser of things to come.

‘Polonius: What do you read, my lord?’

Hamlet: Words, words, words.’²¹



Figure 7: Screenshot from ‘Silver Bells and Golden Spurs’

²¹ Shakespeare, Cohen, 1960, p.316

List of Machinima observed

The list is sorted by channel. Some pieces were watched within Second Life, some on producers own websites and some on Machinima.com and yet some on YouTube.com. I have watched countless pieces of Machinima. I have tried to put together an accurate list but I have had to exclude quite a few since I simply do not remember where I have seen it.

Second Life

Silver Bells and Golden Spurs
Stage
Whale Tale
Scary Hole
Lip Flap
Better Life
Birth of Eagleman
Sec Life: Get One
Noob Be Gone
Machinima Island Trailer
Second Life Death Tube
Sweet Dreams of Second Life
Adidas Store in Second Life
Another Wedding
Big Brother SL the Opening Ceremony
Big Brother Second Life

World of Warcraft

The Internet is for Porn
Make Love, Not Warcraft
Beach Part 2
I Am Too Sexy
Burning Crusade Trailer
Oxhorn Tells Off Xfire

The Sims 2

The Strangerhood episode 1, 2...

The Phantom of The Opera

Halo

Red vs. Blue

Machinima Bloopers

Tenacious D Wonderboy Halo 2

Unreal Tournament

Inside the Machinima

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Urls

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<http://bellsandspurs.com/>