

*Abstract for workshop at Magleås, 2010. This is a work in progress on analytical concepts.*

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## **Understanding Machinima: Applying a Dialogic Approach**

In this paper, I explore some ideas from dialogic communication that I am currently investigating in terms of how they facilitate my research into machinima and apply to data. Machinima is an emerging practice and a filmmaking technique whereby films are made inside virtual worlds (such as Second Life) and games (such as The Sims, World of Warcraft, Quake).

The core analytical concepts investigated in this paper are Bakhtin's dialogic notion and considerations of authorial intention. The dialogic principle evolves from Bakhtin's approach to novels (applied to texts, such as machinima films) and the multiple voices within texts, between various texts, and how this "multi-voicedness" relates to the multiple voices within the author and viewer. Texts are thereby seen as being open to multiple interpretations. A related notion is Bakhtin's chronotope (space/time matrix), which refers to how all texts construe an understanding of time and space, that builds on earlier, familiar chronotopes.

I want to discuss my application of the dialogic approach to six clusters of data, all involving crossovers between media platforms, film and theatre (see page 3). Below, I provide some background on machinima.

### **Background**

The emergence of machinima capitalizes on the rise of cheap digital tools for filmmaking inside video games and virtual worlds using computer software and hardware recently accessible for the amateur. Machinima blends a myriad of creative practices, for instance from multimedia art, animation, performance and cinematography (see Kelland et al, 2005). It is generally considered as started by fans making demo movies with the game Quake in the 1990's. The machinima term refers to machine, cinema and anime. Machinima.com is a showcase, which is now the most viewed channel on YouTube (in January, 2010: 7,032 Videos and 16,867,324 Views).

There is a wide spectrum of machinimators online (fans, artists, professional filmmakers, etc.) who push the limits of current technologies for filmmaking in virtual worlds. Machinima attracts interest of game companies and creative industries (for promotion of architecture, fashion, music videos, documentation of international seminars, job training simulations). Machinimators can be described as a mix of amateurs, pro-ams (people with some professional background related to film) and professionals<sup>1</sup>. A large group of machinimators are pioneers who have become involved in a community (such as in Second Life), and therein discover how to make films as a process of re-design and cross-reference to an existing scenography (again, their filmmaking experience vary). The machinima filmmaking process entails modification of pre-existing contents and tools in a concrete way, perhaps modifying a game engine, and certainly creating a re-mix of spaces from that particular game or virtual world with its implicit design of "space and time" into a filmic text.

A problem regarding research on machinima practice is the partial, fragmented knowledge and rapid evolution. Academic literature on machinima is sparse, especially from an inter-disciplinary approach to issues of media convergence, the culture and creativity of the agents (the

machinimators). However, machinima is gaining interest in research, given efforts to document machinima, such as at Stanford University<sup>ii</sup>, in the UK, Sweden, and spawning upcoming books.

Although it is a new phenomenon emerging from fans, machinima can be seen as part of an overarching development of user-driven contents on the internet, of computer generated imagery and of the diffusion of professional digital filmmaking tools to amateurs. The 3D animated or virtual stage has been used by the film industry for several decades to plan animated films (such as for making animatics, where storyboard images are synchronized with a soundtrack). The rise of 3D technologies and the mix of live action and computer generated “virtual puppets”, such as developed for the blockbuster film *Avatar*, 2009, are offering new digital tools to professionals. The developments in the professional tools and the emergence of pro-ams and amateurs altering tools for their purpose are innovating what, how and where audiences today view filmic texts.

### **My research interest**

My research interest is in particular the meanings that authors (here, machinimators) themselves ascribe to their filmic texts. This is my approach to data production. However, I find it necessary theoretically to reckon with the way that a viewer construes meaning, since an author is also a viewer, and intertwined with their cultural heritage at large. The notion of the chronotope includes examining how any author (or a machinimator, in this case) actively re-designs with the semiotic potential at hand, for instance, re-designing a game world or virtual world “space” in a film. This re-design involves a complex design practice that has trajectories to (or references to) numerous texts. So the re-design of meanings in a machinima film can be seen as involving a long history of interpretive processes, and bridging our past and present cultural histories. The concept of the chronotope and the notion of re-design are applicable in relation to the emerging filmmaking practices of machinima, since they offer particular ways of crossing and referencing different media platforms or transmedia, and narrative traditions. But the notions of the dialogic, re-design, and transmedia, are not new or exclusive to digital media or machinima.

I propose that Bakhtin’s dialogic approach and chronotope assists with connecting newer practices, such as machinima, with much older storytelling practices and with untangling the recurrent tropes from, for instance, folk art or mythology. The recent terms transmedia and media convergence (by Jenkins) refer to the melting together of digital technologies and communication media, including the internet, games and virtual worlds as platforms of communication, which has wide implications for our means and affordances for communication.

Machinima can be seen as a storytelling practice referring back to folk, cinematic, literary, theatrical, and artistic traditions as varied as oral tales, puppet theatre, silent movies, or popular films. Machinima can be said to hold unique potential for three reasons: the *access to authoring tools* that are cheap and available to all kinds of filmmakers, the *semiosis* of machinima with its special expressive qualities and embeddedness in computer generated “spaces” (such as *Second Life*, *The Sims*), and the *creative ownership* of the resulting films. Creative ownership is an economic as well as a legal issue, since the game spaces were initially designed by commercial companies and mainly for gaming or socializing purposes, rather than filmmaking<sup>iii</sup>.

Given the current converging media landscape, an exploration of the meanings ascribed to machinima relate to the challenges machinima presents for the filmmaker as communicator – and the challenges machinima presents to its audience. To answer this, it is relevant to consider *who* is creating machinima film - what an author or group of authors intends to express to the viewer, given that their text has a particular way of viewing the world. Their intention and their text are

intertwined with interpretation, such as how does the audience interpret a computer generated world in a film, for instance, the representations of space and time in machinima films? Using Bakhtin's dialogic approach, any text is primarily seen as a mode of inter-personal communication and any author or viewer brings in their previous experience and culture to this communication. Therefore, outsiders to that community, may be unfamiliar with the "space and time" embedded in the machinima films, whereas the machinimators or anyone with experience from gaming or active participation in 3D virtual worlds, draw on more familiar semiotic codes.

There are two issues that I find especially relevant for analysis of the meanings that machinimators ascribe in regards to why they choose machinima, rather than some other technique – is the choice of machinima related to its "newness" and its "unique" semiotic potential. (The issues of newness and semiotic potential are sometimes mentioned in positive, congratulatory terms of being pioneers in machinima communities.) However, I regard newness and uniqueness in terms of gaining a critical understanding of what sorts of meanings that games and virtual worlds seem to "afford" for machinima filmmaking and its particular semiotic challenges. One such challenge is that sound is difficult to key directly to the speech of figures, since lip-synching is lacking, or poor. Machinima films therefore usually have a voice-over narrator, mock speech, use written text, or musical scores. This asynchronous sound and image also typifies silent film, such as those by Buster Keaton, which again connects machinima to the history of cinema and technology.

### **Six data clusters under consideration**

I am currently co-producing various clusters of data and considering what and how to select from possible data sources. I have roughly six clusters; all are film events that occurred in 2009-2010, and revolve around film and theatre as frameworks for storytelling. The type of data varies; it includes interviews with filmmakers, observations of events, finished films available to me. Five out of the six clusters include machinima filmmaking. All of the film texts are fiction, but span comedy, romance, drama, dance, war.

Data consists of the following (note that some are possibilities, not yet gathered).

- A machinima contest in 2009 with the theme of superheroes, filmed partially in Metrotopia, an island in Second Life designed by my research group. The contest had 13 entries and was sponsored by RU. I have contact with 4 of the 13 filmmakers, who agree to interview.
- A machinima contest in 2010 sponsored by a Danish entrepreneurial company in Second Life, Pop Art Lab (music). The contest had 15 entries. Webcast event of contest awards is April 19 in Second Life - I am a judge. I can possibly contact them for interview.
- A film festival, MaMachinima, 2010, held as a live event in Second Life, webcast, and at a venue in Amsterdam. The event was a showcase for many machinima films and framed somewhat like the Academy Awards ceremony. I rely here on my own interpretations of the event and films, thereby bringing in more of an observer view than an active virtual worlds participant.
- A machinima film segment (a 6 minute segment shot in a virtual Baghdad), to be embedded in an indie film entitled *In-World War* which is mainly shot with live actors<sup>iv</sup>). I have interviewed the indie film instructor Brant Smith. I also interviewed the virtual stage manager Steve Hansted, and former manager Laura Kusumoto, both from Forterra Systems<sup>v</sup>.
- Interview with the multimedia artist Alan Sondheim and his art films / machinima captured in Second Life. He works with dancers and performers using motion capture, then re-works and re-programs this onto avatar movements, placed and captured in SL.
- An event at the Eye film institute in Amsterdam where a professional, live actor performed on a stage, interspersed with showing Buster Keaton shorts. This is a counterpoint to machinima. Again, I rely here on my own interpretations of the event and films as a viewer.

The data sources showcase filmic texts across media platforms and modalities; whether films within films, films within a live event or films created from live events, or machinima contests across platforms, or films presented in a movie theatre (irl). The variety may serve to illustrate and discuss the notion of the chronotope and the semiotic potential of machinima, given how it appropriates old forms of storytelling and builds on our experiences and interpretations of a variety of older (theatre-related) as well as contemporary mediated communication (screen based, such as computer games). The issue of newness is leveraged explicitly in comparing silent films (by Buster Keaton) and machinima films. This comparison may work both for bringing out the unique affordance of the asynchronous sound and image, and for discussing how an author deals with semiotic challenges as well as the host of technological challenges when using “new” and unstable media platforms.

## Discussion

There are three aspects I want to highlight for discussion: my theoretical approach, view on the spectrum of machinimators and selection of data.

Theoretically, Bakhtin’s dialogic approach is applicable for developing insights into the semiotic potential offered in machinima. I argue that by applying the notions of the dialogic, we can view a complex situation of texts, people and culture, with multiple voices interplaying in a text, in a person and between audiences and texts. I hope to discuss how to apply dialogic theories in order to clarify what is at stake when machinimators (authors) harness the semiotic potential of virtual worlds for telling stories. Machinimators may be seen as pioneers, who ascribe their own, particular meanings to the unique semiotic affordance of their chosen film technique. However, I also hope to integrate the point of view of the viewers, who may find machinima challenging to watch, especially the disjointed sound and image which influences the filmic structure (such as narrative progression).

A spectrum of machinimators created the machinima films in my data: amateurs, pro-ams as well as professionals. But, can this categorization capture the spectrum? In the instance of *In-world War*, a mix of pro-ams and professionals work together on various aspects of the film, including: a professional stage manager (giving time), the professional manager at the company Forterra Systems (giving time), a troupe of virtual actors (pro-ams giving time), who contribute to the film made by a semi-professional indie filmmaker.

In terms of selecting data, I appreciate feedback on selecting data: is the spectrum of people involved in machinima practice interesting for exemplification of re-semiosis regarding the emergence of machinima? Might silent films by Buster Keaton be useful for comparison?

## Notes

Notions of media convergence and transmedia refer to Henry Jenkins.

The term “multimedia chronotope” by Jay Lemke is not unfolded in this short version.

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<sup>i</sup> See report: <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy>

<sup>ii</sup> The *Machinima Archive* is a collaboration between the Internet Archive, the “How They Got Game” research project at Stanford University, the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences, and Machinima.com, see: <http://www.archive.org/details/machinima>

Lowood, Henry. “Found Technology: Players as Innovators in the Making of Machinima.” *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected*. Edited by Tara McPherson. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 165–196.)

<sup>iii</sup> Commercial companies realized that they could capitalize on machinima, for example: Linden Lab benefits from Second Life machinima indirectly and sponsors spaces for contests, Electronic Arts showcases films made with and in The Sims by fans (see <http://www.thesims3.com/moviesandmore/createmovie>).

<sup>iv</sup> See description of *In-world War* and update on the film’s process on <http://www.inworldwar.com/>

<sup>v</sup> Forterra Systems was sold in late 2009. They initially developed virtual Baghdad for the US military.