PIONEERS IN MACHINIMA

The Grassroots of Virtual Production

by

Tracy G. Harwood

and

Ben Grussi

Cover image: Machinima Europe 2007.

Cover design by Vernon Press.

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Key Terms

.dem	Type of file, demonstration file
AAA (Triple A)	Top tier games developer, best funded for game development and marketing
AMAS	Academy of Machinima Arts & Sciences
AR	Augmented reality
BBSs	Electronic bulletin boards
EULA	End user license agreement
Indie (Independent)	Independent game developer or film studio
LAN	Local area network
LED	Light emitting diode (screens)
Machinima	3D real-time animated filmmaking (machine-animation-cinema)
Machinimator	Machinima creator
MMO	Massively multi-user online [game/environment]
Mods/modding	Modification, process of modifying
NCP	Network channel partner/ship
P2P	Peer to peer (sharing)
SFX	Special effects
VFX	Video effects (a variation of special effects, SFX)
VJ	Video jockey
VR	Virtual reality

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It's funny, recently the term and practices around 'virtual production' are making waves across film, VFX and animation studios… one only needs to review the history of Machinima.com to see virtual production's roots are directly linked to it. That, to me, is how impactful the site was. It provided practices and language to a creative process before that process had fully formed. History should honor the site's foundation and how its grassroots filmmakers had nurtured this innovative approach that's causing fundamental shifts in how stories are now being told.

Paul Marino, Lead Cinematic, *Aspyr Media* and
Founder, *Academy of Machinima Arts & Sciences* (*AMAS*)
(interview, 2020)

1.1 Introduction

This text explores the emergence of machinima through the lens of the original pioneers of the form. Much has now been written about machinima from theoretical and critical perspectives, from the roles of technological advancements to reviews of the machinima films that creators have produced since it was first recognized in 1996. We have not set out to provide a critical review the work of other authors on the subject or indeed a comprehensive review of the vast body of creative works that have been produced over the years, rather we have sought through this text to provide a different perspective which is complementary to others albeit one which they have not reported, or only fleetingly commented on.

We begin the text with a Prologue, an interview with Kim Libreri who is now the chief technology officer for *Epic Games* but whose previous roles and experiences have made him one of the world's leading figures in virtual production today. Whilst Libreri is perhaps best known for his work on the *Bullet Time* shots in *The Matrix*, his use of machinima tools and techniques over the years, and his passion for enabling emerging filmmakers to connect with increasingly professional tools for virtual production through his recent work at *Epic* on *Unreal Engine*, provide a unique insight into the convergence of film and game for real-time experiences. His words will resonate with many machinima filmmakers, and the stories he refers to give additional context to

the battles faced by machinima creators and their emergent creative technologies practices. There are numerous touchpoints throughout the book that link back to Libreri's comments through the voices of others we have attempted to capture.

Through the chapters, our aim has been to tell the pioneering stories of creative practice which led to the now global recognition of the machinima phenomenon and its impact beyond into other creative forms, social contexts and creative industries. We do this by providing a detailed overview of the most influential key events from our perspective. We explore the producers and works that shaped how the community evolved from its earliest days to most recent times, reflecting the voices of members of the community by telling the stories through their memories and insights. Some of the key events we report will be familiar to some, but it is clear from our extensive research (which between us has been collected over 25 years since its earliest days) that the reach of machinima has far exceeded the roles of the original community of creators. Thus, we have attempted to bring the story of its evolution up to date: its boom and bust and re-emergence, reflecting the state of the art in 2020.

Specifically, our discussion leads us to conclude with four key themes emerging from our analysis of the earliest pioneers' works. These are the multifarious roles of community in shaping the trajectory of machinima's development; how the tentacles of commercialization impacted that trajectory; the influence of demand for converged media; and the potential of real-time creative practice.

We acknowledge that others may select different production lenses to review the world of machinima as it has evolved and, indeed, there are many perspectives that can be added to our text. This is our story and our selection but we are certainly open to discussion and welcome additions to this effort by others in the future.

1.2 Our roles in the Machinima story

As authors, we are connected with the machinima community in different ways.

Ben was part of the original core community whose earliest engagement with machinima began long before the term was coined. He describes himself as 'lucky to have been in the right place at the right time' for all the major developments in the story of machinima. In the early 1990s, he was knee-deep in the world of pre-internet and wandered the bulletin boards (BBS) following the Demoscene, enjoying pieces by *Future Crew, Renaissance* (*Second Reality/Panic*) and *Amnesia*. He intertwined this with PC gaming and, like most gamers back then, chewed through games and almost anything else he could get his hands on, amazed and hungry to see the next evolution of everything in the PC/gaming space, both technology and content. He explored *Wolfenstein3D* and *Doom* mods, then

hooked on *7th Guest* and full-motion video storytelling, before finding *Quake*. Fascinated with *Quake* movie productions, starting with *Diary of a Camper* and everything that followed, Ben's pattern of curiosity and engagement continued until, purely by chance, he stumbled upon *Machinima.com* just a few days after it launched. As a committed fan, Ben offered a helping hand.

Figure 1.1: Ben Grussi with Ricky Grove, image captured at *Machinima Film Festival* 2008.

Author: Ben Grussi.

Little did he know this would be life-changing. Like many that became part of the machinima community, its force pushed Ben in an entirely unplanned and unexpected direction. He became a core part of the *Machinima.com* community, ultimately earning the distinction of once being described as its own *Wikipedia*! Ben was actively involved for twelve years in a variety of roles. He has also been news reporter, tech support and a community manager as well as a bit part actor from time to time. Most notably, he was the primary curator of machinima creative work from its earliest days. Even today, Ben describes himself as a bit of a ghost, happy to pop up here and there, surprise friends and colleagues, 'help out a bit' and equally happy to then disappear and observe from afar. He jokes that considering his role has involved every aspect of machinima right from its inception, the real surprise is that he never made any of his own films – but he did not need to, since he left the creative part to the community itself! This text draws on Ben's deep knowledge and insight of games, film, people, and events, from within the world of machinima as it emerged and evolved.

Figure 1.2: Author Tracy Harwood at *Machinima Europe Festival Awards* 2007.

Author: Tracy Harwood. Back (l-r): David Asch (Deputy Vice Chancellor, *De Montfort University*), Andrew Hugill (Director, *IOCT*), Christian Kosta-Zahn (Best Commercial), Hugh Hancock (Keynote), Paul Jannicola & Kerria Seabrook (Best Series); middle (l-r): Alex Chan (Keynote), Xavier Lardy (*AMAS*), Ann Garner (Moviestorm), Ricard Gras (Best Technical Achievement), Toby Moores (Keynote); front (l-r): Friedrich Kirschner (*AMAS/Movie Sandbox*), Tracy Harwood, Paul Marino (*AMAS*).
Image used with permission, source: De Montfort University ©.

Tracy came to the machinima party much later as director of the *First European Machinima Festival* that took place in Leicester, UK in October 2007. The festival was the first major project to be developed by the newly formed *Institute of Creative Technologies* at *De Montfort University,* Leicester (IOCT). As a transdisciplinary institute, the *IOCT* was keen to support new practices that demonstrated the convergence of different disciplines drawing on science, arts, technologies and business. The festival reflected the institute's interests in time-based visual arts and multimedia technologies which collectively informed performance and production in both real and virtual environments. It was co-hosted with the *Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences* (*AMAS*) including an annual awards ceremony (see Figure 1.2). The event was supported by transmedia academics, creative practitioners, games developers, media publishers (such as the *BBC, ITV*) and professional bodies (e.g., *TIGA*) with keynotes and panels by key innovators such as Paul Marino (*AMAS*), Hugh Hancock and Johnnie Ingram (*AMAS/ Strange Company*), Friedrich Kirschner and Klaus Neumann (*AMAS/Movie Sandbox*), Matt Kelland (*Moviestorm*), John C. Martin II (*Reallusion*), Ricard Gras (*La Interactiva*), Xavier Lardy (*AMAS*),

Burnie Burns and Jason Saldana (*Rooster Teeth*). Hancock and Ingram's 2007 book *Machinima for Dummies* was launched at the festival, as was *Moviestorm* (*Short Fuze*). The festival was also sponsored by *BEEPA (*maker of screen capture software, *FRAPs)* and attended by many community members who had hitherto struggled to attend the mainly US-based events that had taken place, drawing in an international audience. Subsequently, Tracy has researched community aspects of machinima and its impacts on digital culture, digital creativity and creative technologies practices, publishing in leading business and digital creativity academic journals, based on interviews with numerous community members over the intervening years. Her work on machinima has been funded by and contributed to the UK's *Arts and Humanities Research Council*'s major project on the future value of arts and culture, *Cultural Value Project* (Harwood, 2014; Crossick and Kaszynska, 2014).

Together, the authors have examined the history, backstories, recollections and impacts of machinima from its various annals which have been collated by ourselves (and many others) over the years.

1.3 Structure of the Text

Following this chapter, the text is divided into six core chapters and a conclusion chapter. The chapters are centred on pioneering contributions inspired by either a film, a producer or production studio. With each chapter, we highlight key games and tools used by the machinima community during the period represented in a series of vignettes. The final core chapter is focussed on the real-time concept as it was developed and evolved by a series of industrial contributors.

Chapter 2: In the Beginning: Diary of a Camper

A machinima text without *Diary of a Camper* is simply impossible! It is the story most often told by others in their review of all things machinima. In our chapter, however, we explore how it inspired others in the community directly and indirectly as the community began to take shape and coalesce around key creative practices, contributors and films.

Chapter 3: Machinima! [.com]

Founded by Hugh Hancock in 2000, *Machinima.com* was originally a part of his *Strange Company* production studio. It quickly grew and became a focus for the rapidly expanding machinima community, culminating in Hugh finding it a new home. Thereafter, the story of *Machinima.com* becomes blurred with a commercial pool of entrepreneurism under *Machinima Inc. Machinima Inc.* ultimately exploited the community and queered the term yet the community

pioneers have survived. We review the trajectory of *Machinima.com* from beginning to its end in 2019, when it became subsumed by *Warner Bros.*, an *AT&T* company.

Chapter 4: Rooster Teeth Bites

As the most prolific and successful machinima production studio of all time, *Rooster Teeth*'s story is examined from the earliest days of its seminal *Red vs Blue Halo*-based series to most recent times as a let's play and podcast producer. As we were writing this text, its original founders had reached the end of their journey with the studio, albeit it continues as part of a major media conglomerate under *AT&T*'s ownership. We bring the story of *Rooster Teeth*'s longevity and successes up to date.

Chapter 5: The French Democracy in Action

This chapter examines the impact of a small film by a previously unknown filmmaker, Alex Chan. The film is raw in its storytelling power but impactful in its contribution to filmmaking, video journalism and politics as well as the machinima community. *The French Democracy* is often cited in media texts as an example of the democratizing capabilities of machinima, but few have examined how the full story of Chan's film was harnessed by others.

Chapter 6: Stolen Life Lives On

The chapter tells the story of the award-winning feature-length machinima film *Stolen Life*, produced by Peter Rasmussen and Jackie Turnure and released in 2007. The chapter particularly focusses on the contribution to the machinima community by Rasmussen. His repertoire of work was not large but its impact was significant, not least in the context of innovation in the Australian filmmaking scene. Rasmussen's life was sadly short but the struggles he faced as a pioneering filmmaker were recognized by his colleagues, culminating in an annual award at the *Sydney Film Festival* between 2009-2012. The chapter examines both the impact of the film and the award.

Chapter 7: Begin Again?

This chapter reflects the search for real-time 3D animated glory. We examine how machinima was viewed from different industry perspectives, focussing on pioneers from both the game and film sectors. Ultimately, the search is for new ways to tell stories, reflecting how audiences have evolved and developed their interests alongside technological advancements. In the end, nothing is new! We present a yardstick of *Epic Games*' *Unreal Engine* as a current force against which machinima is recognized as the foundational inspiration for future growth.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Within this chapter, we summarize the key themes identified in each of the preceding chapters, setting out the contributions made and the future trajectory of machinima.

1.4 Contributors

The text draws on numerous contributors directly and others indirectly through their comments published in secondary sources. Specifically, we would like to thank the following contributors for their time and energy in answering our questions and providing us with meaningful details. Sadly, we were only able to use a fraction of the information collated from each in the process of writing this text:

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Finally, we dedicate this book to the machinima community whose creative endeavours and pioneering works have founded a global interest in the convergence of game and film through real-time 3D production techniques, as reflected in Marino's quote at the beginning of this chapter. There are numerous others whose voices we have not had a chance to specifically include but whose contributions are nonetheless important to the story of the emergence of machinima.

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