

## Why Machinima is Different

Posted by [Peter Rasmussen](#) on April 29, 2007

To understand the potential of machinima we need to understand what has gone before.

Ancient history:

Even at the “independent” end the film industry has systematically been reduced in it’s scope. Like a “mini me” of the studios it has become intensely corporate in its workings if not in the actual budgets. There was a time when there was more balance. Big budget films employed a lot of people and payed for the infrastructure of the industry while independents kept the fresh ideas coming. Even big studios would occasionally put out films that could draw some critical acclaim. Now it has become much more homogenous.

At the moment the making of films has become so strictly regimented. Everyone has gone to the same “how to make a movie” seminars to learn that you have to have two clips to hold the script together not three. There is no room for descent. The result being that they cost so much and that they’re all the same movie.

Maintaining and expanding a profile in the industry has become such an art that there is a sense of reward that comes from being good at that alone. This contributes to a kind of decadents. It has become more about working the room and less about making the film.

Hal Hartley once said

“If I’m serious about film making  
I have to get out of the industry.”

The emphasis has been on impressing the industry with your value to get its support to make your projects possible. Now there is the potential to get that support directly from the audience you are making the film for.

Now we have digital video. Anyone can afford cameras and editing software that is capable of producing a film that at least has image and sound quality acceptable for commercial release. Now we have the Internet. Anyone can self distribute. Anyone can show their film to anyone who can find it.

Machinima is not a branch of an earlier kind of film making like video from celluloid. Machinima is a completely independent eruption. It is not just a new image recording medium. What used to be a video game add on is now a new approach to story telling that has it’s own community and culture. It’s a movement that is currently free of most of the intrinsic encumbrances of conventional filmmaking.

The greater population of machinima makers come from outside conventional filmmaking. Machinima was born out of the chaos of the warfare of first person shooters and the anarchy of excited gamers and hackers who were not restricted by filmmaking conventions or industry etiquette.

A great deal of machinima so far was made in existing games with no regard to copyright. This may actually have contributed to its growth. Not having to make the locations and characters made the process much more quick and fun at that early stage. Without copyright clearance the only way this work could be seen was for free. So the popularity grew. And other sources of revenue were explored. Like talking about how it is done at seminars like books on machinima like merchandising.

The feedback loop between trying something out and seeing the result is so much shorter. This is true of the day to day production and of the turnaround on entire projects. Techniques like real time puppeteering fuel spontaneity. The immediacy of machinima is a very powerful substance.

The best way to learn filmmaking is to do it. The budgets for conventional films these days have become so bloated filmmakers just don't get the same amount of practice. Starting out in the black and white era Alfred Hitchcock Made fifty films in his career. The ones he is most famous for are the ones in his later years.

With less time taken up by development and the raising of production money the turnaround for machinima is much faster. There is much less of a gap between having an idea and seeing how it actually looks on the screen. And straight away you can see if it works for the audience.

“Do what you like.

And If the audience doesn't like it get off”

– Noel Coward

It's not just the speed of production. It's very much about the attitude people making machinima bring to what they do. Machinima is propelled by the same sense of hands on discovery that drives the video game modding community.

Skills and practices drawn from conventional filmmaking can be applied but this must be done with care. With Main stream filmmaking you get development hell. There are so many people you have to convince that what you are doing will be successful. This environment rarely produces things that have not been seen before. Machinima seems to be in a position where it can avoid much of this at least for a while.

With conventional film making there can be a strange gap between the filmmakers and the audience, the “demographic” as they are sometimes called. With machinima it is much more fluid. There can be a conversation between the audience and the filmmakers even during production via blogs and forums. This doesn't mean that the work has been modified for the lowest common denominator it's more like an overture before the main event.

Fans of machinima are not looking for photorealism. The spectrum of kinds of machinima being made is quite broad. From popular entertainment to extremely conceptual art pieces. So broad that a vigorous debate continues to attempt to define machinima.

The 2006 Machinima Film Festival in New York ran for two days. The quality of entries had grown since previous years. Most entries ran for less than ten minutes. Two had a running time of more than an hour. Short titles rule at the moment. The most successful films at a festival of mostly short films are gag driven. A single clever concept well delivered with a strong punch line.

It's like Machinima is in the first few microseconds after its big bang. The particles are basic but very powerful. I expect that over the next few years we will see more long form productions as serious machinima makers settle in for the long haul.

There is an opportunity to, refine is the wrong word, to bring this new medium to a state where it can be produced for a return of revenue that allows the machinima makers to continue to deliver to there audience something fresh and original in a sustainable way without outside interference in the creative process.