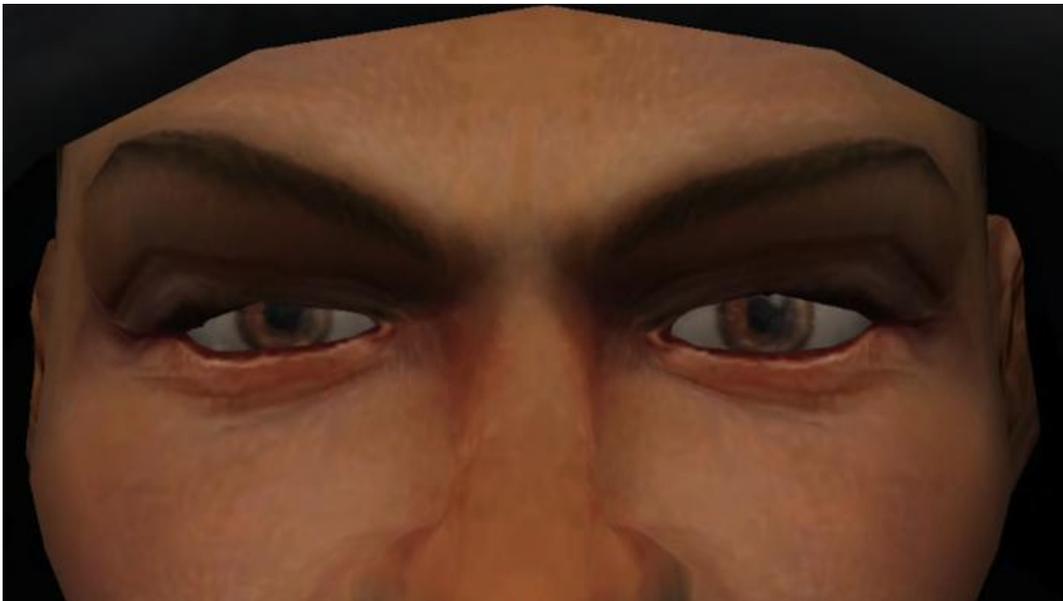


VOICES IN MACHINIMA AS A SITUATIONIST DÉTOURNEMENT OF VIDEO AND COMPUTER GAMES

Isabelle Arvers

Voices in machinimas appear as the human side of the virtual game environment. Behind the gamer performance that produces character actions, dialogs create the sense and the drama of the movie. Voices, through dialogs, songs, or voice-overs, also become game modifications, as they transform the original game function and offer a new set of meaning to the virtual realities initially created by game developers



The French Democracy, 2005, Alex Chan, Machinima directed with the game: The Movies, © Lionheads Studios

The word machinima mixes the idea of cinema, machine, and animation. It is the encounter between a film and a game, in which gamers become film directors. As a technique to produce films, machinima is a new cinematographic genre.

Voices in machinimas appear as the human side of the virtual game environment. Behind the gamer performance that produces character actions, dialogs create the sense and the drama of the movie. Voices, through dialogs, songs, or voice-overs, also become game modifications, as they transform the original game function and offer a new set of meaning to the virtual realities initially created by game developers.

In the art world, works making games, modifying games, and using games for machinima can be seen as following in the footsteps of Dadaism and Surrealism, which saw play and entertainment as the most subversive and also as the ultimate forms of art. Even outside of an art context, it is important to remember that as soon as the first personal computer was created, MIT computer scientists hacked the computer code to conceive the first digital creation: Spacewar! And Spacewar! was a computer game. So, if computer game history is related to the roots of digital creation and to digital code hacking, machinima can be understood to follow this tradition.

Machinima represents the particular moment when gamers begin to produce content and where games become tools of expression. These movies are mostly narrative, but they can also be experimental, artistic, or related to music, documentaries, ads, and feature films. They can be seen as a new way of representation in the digital age, along with 3D animation, digital cinema or video.

During the riots in Paris in 2005, Alex Chan, a graphic designer based in the northern suburbs of Paris, directed the short film *The French Democracy* using The Movies game engine, from a game created by Peter Molyneux. This was the first political machinima. It explained how and why the riots began. Alex Chan had never made a movie before, but faced with the media coverage of the riots, which was massively biased against the youngsters, he decided to give them a voice by the means of a game. He directed the movie in one week, subtitled it in English, and posted it on The Movies website. Alex Chan's movie was downloaded more than a million times.

Alex Chan chose to subtitle *The French democracy* in English to be able to post it on The Movies website, but also because he wanted it to be watched by the international machinima community. As Cillian Lyons, resident machinima artist and producer for Machinimasia (The Asian Machinima Festival), also explains, voice is something they specially discussed for Asian movies because the majority of the machinima community is English-speaking. [1]

Apart from the gamer's performance that creates the action in the movies, voices are the human side of machinima. As machinima are entirely shot in 3D environments of games, they are made of digital images. These images are part of already existing worlds, and even if machinima directors modify them, they remain digital and mostly unchanged. Each of these worlds bring their own visual imaginary: a fantasy world with World of Warcraft, an urban modern life with The Sims, futuristic landscapes with Halo, or a violent suburb atmosphere with Grand Theft Auto, for instance.

More than an aesthetic, it is a 3D vision of the world—a digital representation of it. And in these environments, voices transform the meaning of the scenes. Originally imagined by hard-core gamers, machinima are a way to come back to the virtual universes with which they feel so comfortable. Voices are a tool to appropriate these worlds by adding their own stories, thanks to dialogs between characters. Voices bring sensitivity, a sense of humor, or an absurd touch to these virtual spaces.

Games are created to be fun, rather than to make you laugh or cry—even though this sometimes happens. Nevertheless, machinima voices offer a new set of emotions and allow us to perceive images in a different manner by getting closer to game characters and landscapes. It also brings an “as if analog” feeling to the machinima—a counterpoint to the digital. There is a sort of uncanny feel here, as the voice and image are out of phase with the warmth of the voice and the coolness of the image. The performed and scripted quality of the voice gives a not-digital feel to this very digital world. Polygons

and avatars take a new dimension, a new personality—as if a human body would fill them up and breathe inside.

Furthermore, the voice works to bring about a reverse engineering of a mass consumerist object into a tool of narrative and artistic expression. With machinima, we can talk about an emerging game play: an unsuspected use of a game for an artistic objective. Here play operates in the fullest, most artistic sense of the word. Even though, of course, now ads are also created using the machinima techniques—for commercial purposes—nevertheless, machinima remains a tool that is available to anybody who has a game engine at home and who wants to express themselves by combining voice with the games' visuals.

By using virtual spaces and changing the perspective as an artistic strategy, machinima allow a distanced critique of a simulated world. They tend to erase the boundaries between reality and fiction and redefine the transgressive power of the game. "There, where the real world is changing into simple images, simple images become real human beings and efficient motivations for an hypnotic behavior." [2] They reactualize the Situationist conception of cinema, in which images, voices in dialogs or interviews or voice over, act as different layers of content. Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, in a joint text written in 1956, added to the Situationist theory of *détournement* [3] the point that cinema is the most efficient method of *détournement* where *détournement* tends to pure beauty. It doesn't need to be a parody or a critique of a movie. In this text, both authors argue for the strategy of diverting a movie like the racist one *Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith by just changing the soundtrack in order to denounce the horrors of the war and the KKK activities.

Some machinima, like *This Spartan Life (TSL)* by Chris Burke, or *Landlord Vigilante*, written by artist Eddo Stern and writer Jessica Hutchins, could, I would argue, be compared to Situationist movies. *This Spartan Life* is a talk show about digital and gaming culture directed in the virtual space of the network game *Halo 2*. Chris Burke, aka Damian Lacaedemion, has special guests in the game: for instance, he interviewed Bob Stein on the future of the book and Malcolm McLaren about the 8bit music and the roots of punk music. As the talk show is filmed, players are fighting around Lacaedemion and his guests. Sometimes, other gamers, who don't realize that a talk show is happening live in the game, actually kill the guests. For instance, while Damian Lacaedemion was defending Malcolm McLaren against futuristic monsters, we could follow McLaren walking through the digital landscape, in the shape of a strange purple animal, talking about "magnificent failures better than little successes." [4]

Landlord Vigilante combines the visuals of a car chase with the musings of a cab driver about the economy. It allows a second level of reading the images. Based on a true story about their ex-landlady, *Landlord Vigilante* is an artistic monologue of a women cab driver directed in the game *Grand Theft Auto*, according to its makers, because of its gritty depiction of Los Angeles and prospective violence, and the Sims, which is property/real-estate oriented. Each game presents a "world" or narrative arena confined by a set of prescribed, "rules"—we wanted to stretch and play with those rules to tell our own post-traumatic story. [5]

Why do I compare these machinimas to Situationist movies? Because, thanks to the voices, they add an artistic or a theoretical content to the images of violent games, and for that reason they are close to a Situationist film like *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* This movie, produced in 1973 by the French director René Viénet used a martial arts film—*The Crush* by Doo Kwang Gee—overdubbed with French revolutionary philosophic ideas. It was a radical critic of cultural hegemony designed to entertain and amuse, while demonstrating a number of artistic and political points.

With machinima, the images come from a video or a computer game but are then transformed into short films. Though the Situationists had the idea of using a movie as the most efficient détournement because of cinema's capacity to reach a popular audience, new kinds of audience encounters are now possible with the extensive games audiences. Machinima began in the gamers' community, but it has expanded very quickly. The audience tends to be quite young and movies are often downloaded millions of times on websites such as Machinima.com or The Movies, YouTube and Dailymotion also distribute these films widely. Among the varying kinds of machinima, some like TSL or others mentioned earlier offer an alternative vision of the world. And it is voice, in particular, which gives the detoured edge to these machinima.

As Roland Barthes wrote, the grain of the voice is an "erotic mix between the language and the tone." [6] In the human voice, the body travels from thought to its expression as language. Joseph Beuys once said during a conference given at the *Dokumenta VI* in 1977, that voice is a sculpture of the thought. [7] It is the information sculpted by the air through the organs. It transforms the immateriality of thinking into materiality by bringing the body inside the sound.

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. With recorded voices in cinema, the grain of the voice takes another dimension: it is the "anonymous body of the actor in my ear." [8] As we move into the digital domain, this materiality of voice is essential to machinimas and their virtual game spaces. Besides the narrative in the dialog writing, the voice over represents a huge part of machinimas. Paul Marino talks about it as the "humanness that is otherwise missing from the digital package":

The voices of actors in machinimas "animate" the virtual spaces. They give life and personality to digital puppets, which were not a priori conceived by the game developers to have dialogs with each other. And as machinima directors cannot play with the facial expressions of their digital puppets in the way cinema does with live actors, or in traditional animation, they need to work very precisely on the voice-over.

To illustrate the importance of this voice-over matter, the machinima *Bill & John* tells the story of two advanced pilots inside a military flight simulation game: *Lock On: Modern Air Combat*. The directors took the opposite of the cold atmosphere of the game by the use of hilarious and absurd dialogs between the two pilots. The first scene begins with two military flight aircrafts on the ground, and one of the pilots amazed by the beauty of a flight aircraft yells:

"What-the-fuck, mo-ther fu-cker, that's fucking beautiful! Hey John! See, even after all these years, I'll never get tired of it . . . That's when I think to myself . . ." "Bill! You piss me off! You've been pissing me off for ages! But now you're really pissing off! You yell, you yell! It pisses me off hearing you yelling from the minute you get up . . . and you, you, and you yell, You never shut up. ""Well, You're in a great mood this morning . . . we're gonna have a great day. ""But do you realize that because of you . . . we are stuck in these shit wrecks!"

As they try to take off, the more foolish of the two pilots has forgotten how to begin and launches a missile instead: "All right, now, let me see, slowly give it some gas . . . and ease up on the brakes. Wrong switch. So, brake, switch . . . and releasing brakes. Wrong switch again. Oh right . . . there it is . . . and let up on the brakes."

The authors played with the rhythm of each scene during the editing:

The silences in the sound track were more than essential to give life to characters we do not see on the screen but from which we guess the gesture. . . . The succession of uncontrolled events provoked by the two protagonists creates a distance effect which puts the spectator in the skin of an accessory witness. [9]

In a game, the imagination of players is driven by the actions of the play, scripts, and maps. In machinimas, our imagination can fill the empty spaces between the dialogs and, as with books, we can imagine what is happening inbetween. As in traditional cinema, we find elliptic narration in machinimas, which allows us to take an active part in the story and to go back to a more personal perception of what the images mean.

Bill & John reminds us of Beckett's absurd theater, where clownish characters hold discussions in strange spaces—cold and mostly empty. This confrontation between humorously edged and warmly human dialogs and “cold” digital spaces is also prominent in the voice performances of the famous machinima series *Red vs Blue*. Shot in the futuristic game *Halo 2*, it tells the story of the battle between Red and Blue. These two characters seem to be lost in the game space, talking endlessly about the meaning of life and death. The dialogs' script and its deep sense of humor is what made the series enormously successful and allowed machinima in general to achieve significant success.

Interviewed about the link between the dialogs written for the serial *Red vs Blue* and the Theater of the absurd, Burnie Burns agrees: "Yes, especially the early episodes. We wanted to know what would happen to videogame characters after the games were turned off. It's funny to think that these guys would have a life where they wait for someone to come along and play their game." [10]

This shift in meaning isn't only used for comic effect in machinima. To create a fictional effect and an artistic work by a détournement of game images, Eddo Stern and Jessica Hutchins worked differently with voice. *Landlord Vigilante* is a monologue and the tone of the voice is monotonous. Based on a true story that happened to the authors with their ex-landlady who tried to dupe them, as mentioned previously, we follow the thoughts of a woman cab driver. The authors chose third-person narration because it "gives the whole (first-person) monologue a disembodied, artificial feeling. Maybe these qualities allow it to be perceived as a subjective work of fiction, instead of blatant slander!" [11] Watching *Landlord Vigilante* is like traveling constantly from the text of the voice to the images, as if sometimes they couldn't be connected to each other, operating on different levels of perception.

This unnatural voice deals with the complexity of human identity and the boundaries between the fake and reality. We are lost, because we'd like to believe in 3D images, but we know that it's a fiction, and the monologue reinforces this feeling, because it doesn't seem to take any side. It doesn't entirely reveal the identity of this woman.

Even though there are some machinimas that are not dubbed with voice for technical or linguistic reasons, I have tried to demonstrate that voice in general constitutes the major game modification in machinima. Following the hacking tradition, voice gives another dimension to the use of games, transforming them into a form of expression. Voices in machinima provoke a shift in meaning similar to the way that Pascal Bonitzer discusses in relation to voice-over in cinema—they reopen the doors of our imagination as we watch preexisting digital images.

"To bring the focus to the off screen space, as another screen space," writes Pascal Bonitzer, "is to displace the focus from the gaze onto the voice, to release the voice from the dictates of the reality of the image." [12] Voices move our mind to another range of perception, diverting us to immerse totally in digital images and allowing us to keep a critical distance while getting closer to characters.

References and Notes:

1. Cillian Lyons, e-mail message to author, February 24, 2008. ("The voice matter is something we have discussed previously for machinima and more so how it relates to Asia and as a foreign language as the majority of the community would be English speaking.")
2. Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1971).
3. Guy Ernest Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Mode d'Emploi du Détournement," in *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 8 (May 1956).
4. "Malcolm McLaren Interview," *This Spartan Life*, Episode 3, Module 5, Online Video, dir. Chris Burke (2006).
5. Eddo Stern, e-mail message to author, January, 2008.
6. Roland Barthes, "Le Grain de la Voix," in *l'Obvie et l'Obtus* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 238- 243.
7. Joseph Beuys, "L'Entrée dans un être Vivant" (lecture, Free International University, at documenta 6, Kassel, 1977).
8. Roland Barthes, "Le Grain de la Voix," in *l'Obvie et l'Obtus* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 238- 243.
9. Bertrand Le Cabec, e-mail message to author, December, 2007.
10. Burnie Burns to author, March, 2008.
11. Eddo Stern, e-mail message to author, January, 2008.
12. Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Regard et la Voix* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976).