Games Without Frontiers

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The relationship between cinema and video games is becoming increasinly incestuous

Strange things are happening to the video game and movie industries. They have been close for years, but now they seem to be merging. We are entering an era of interactive entertainment in which video game players, game developers and filmmakers switch roles seamlessly. The traditional demarcation between games machines and movie players has become irrevocably blurred.

 The Sony PSP, launched last year in Japan, is ostensibly a hand-held games console, but it also plays Hollywood movies on special discs and allows users to download short films from the Internet, to be viewed in transit. A Japanese website, PSPunch, offers amateur filmmakers the chance to upload their works as MPEG files, which are then specially formatted so that PSP owners can download and view them. It's an amazing forum for unknown talent – many people who are unlikely to surf the net and watch short movies at home (too much choice, too many distractions) are happy to collect these disparate clips to view later on their hand-held games machine, perhaps during a long journey or a boring lecture. This is the filmmaking equivalent of Podcasting, where people create audio files and put them on-line so that anyone can download them and listen to them on an iPod. It is the future of independent distribution.

 Meanwhile, games players are turning into filmmakers. Machinima, most usefully defined as, 'moviemaking within a real-time 3D virtual environment', has its origins in the mid-1990s, when first person shoot-em'-ups such as Quake and Unreal started to include tools that let gamers record live in-game footage as they played. At first, participants used these recordings to show off how fast they could complete certain levels, but gradually narrative elements were added using basic editing software – dialogue, plot, rounded characterization. Stories emerged from the bullet-spraying chaos.

 Soon machinima makers were exploring the curious relationship between the intricate realism of game environments and the essentially playful act of engaging with them. A key example is the hugely successful Red vs. Blue, created using the futuristic X-Box shooting game Halo. This series of short movies follows a group of soldiers who bicker pointlessly between themselves while a largely unseen war rages around them. They remind me of Samuel Beckett's tramps or Quentin Tarantino's hitmen – comic protagonists simultaneously unable to comprehend or escape from a world of tragedy and danger. The title itself strips the conflict of all context and meaning. It's either an amusing commentary on multi-player gaming or a rumination on the futility of war, I'm not sure which; I just know it's very funny.

 What's really fascinating about machinima is the way it combines different storytelling media. It shares, of course, some aesthetic and procedural elements with hand-drawn animation and the computer animation of movies such as Toy Story (1995) and Shrek (2001). But in some ways machinima production is more similar to live filmmaking, because, unlike the CGI we see in the cinema, where each frame has to be rendered over hundreds of hours by a bank of dozens of computers, the action is recorded as it happens. The visuals are rougher, of course, but this has been used to great comic effect and helps separate these usually sardonic and edgy works from the doe-eyed

hyper-realistic Utopias constructed by Disney and Pixar.

There is a puppetry element too. The characters must be manipulated directly by human hands, either using a video game controller or a PC keyboard and mouse. One company, Ill clan, which has its roots in improvisational comedy, even performs machinima puppet shows to live audiences.

Until very recently machinima was something of an illegitimate art form, the tools it used never intended for the production of animated movies. But now developers are taking a keener interest in the phenomenon, building fully realized and easy-to-use machinima facilities into their games. The Sims 2 is a massively successful social simulation in which the player controls the life of a character as he/she grows up, gets a job, finds love, has children, etc. But the game also features a Movie Maker mode, in which players can create their own characters, set up cameras and record story sequences. These movies can then be uploaded to the Sims community website and entered in dedicated filmmaking competitions.

For Electronic Arts this is just a great way to generate publicity and maintain brand loyalty, but nevertheless the Movie Maker mode has had a vital impact on the machinima scene, provoking wider interest and introducing new creative possibilities. Previously most games employed in the construction of machinima were first-person shooters; unless filmmakers have been willing and able to hack in and change all the graphics, this has meant something of a limited palette – lots of muscle-bound men in military uniforms hanging about in dark corridors or barren, bomb-blasted landscapes. It is very difficult to produce a critique of contemporary metropolitan life with a cast of characters wearing armour and carrying laser rifles. The Sims, however, provides a range of domestic outfits and locations, and can therefore allow machinima producers to explore situations we're all familiar with. Intriguingly, though, early examples work just like Red vs. Blue, satirizing the rules and functions of the video game universe. In The Awakening, for example, a young man comes to realize that his life is controlled by a higher power, against which he is powerless to rebel, while in The Strangerhood a character wakes up in an apartment filled with strangers and no idea how he got there; both comment on quirks in the game and make a few existential jokes at the same time.

This autumn The Movies, a simulation of the Hollywood film industry created by famed game designer Peter Molyneux, will be released on PC. The game includes the most user-friendly machinima movie-making tool ever produced – it is entirely self-contained and allows the creation of films with a library of different actors, sets, scenes, costumes and sound-tracks. Players are able to attach a mic and provide dialogue; they can even scan in photos of themselves so that they become virtual actors. Machinima is going mainstream.