Interview

Interview with Paul Marino

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[0.1]   *Abstract*—An e-mail interview of Paul Marino, cofounder of AMAS, conducted by Geoffrey Long.

[0.2]   *Keywords*—Animation; Film; Machinima; Video game

1. Introduction

[1.1]   According to the Web site of the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences (AMAS), machinima is "filmmaking within a real-time, 3D virtual environment, often using 3D video-game technologies" (http://www.machinima.org/machinima-faq.html). The definition continues:

> [1.2]   [Machinima] is the convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development. Machinima is real-world filmmaking techniques applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can be either controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence. By combining the techniques of filmmaking, animation production and the technology of real-time 3D game engines, Machinima makes for a very cost- and time-efficient way to produce films, with a large amount of creative control.

[1.3]   In 2002, director, producer, animator, and author Paul Marino cofounded the AMAS to promote and organize the growth of this rising art form, and he currently serves as its executive director. In 2004 he wrote *3D Game-Based Filmmaking: The Art of Machinima* (Paraglyph Press), which is considered to be the first book on the subject. He is presently working as a senior cinematics designer at BioWare Corporation on such popular games as *Mass Effect* for the Xbox 360. The following is an e-mail interview conducted with Marino in November 2008.

2. Backstory: Origins and personal histories

[2.1]   **Q:** How and when did machinima first get started?

[2.2]   **PM:** Machinima got its start during the early 1990s, with games such as *Stunt Island* and *Doom*—games that allowed the player to create their works using tools that the developers included. However, it didn't take off until 1996, when a small team of *Quake* players known as The Rangers created a small film called *Diary of a Camper* using the demo-recording feature that id Software included with *Quake*. It was a short, insular comedic piece that became wildly popular within the *Quake* community and kicked off a small subcommunity of groups making films in *Quake.*

[2.3]   **Q:** Before you began working with machinima, you won an Emmy award for your animation work with Turner Broadcasting. How did you get started working with machinima, and what attracted you to the form?

[2.4]   **PM:** I was a film major in college when I decided to pursue a career in animation and broadcast design. However, while moving forward in my profession, I also had a love for computer games. I bought an Apple IIc, which then became an Amiga 2000, which then became a PC. This allowed me to begin playing with the tools that developers were including with a variety of PC games. Once *Quake* was released, I saw an opportunity to explore a number of my passions in one setting—filmmaking, animation, and game technology. It became clear to me that the future of filmmaking was surfacing.

[2.5]   **Q:** In addition to your work with the AMAS and at BioWare, you also cofounded the machinima production group the ILL Clan. Can you talk a little bit about your work with that group?

[2.6]   **PM:** The ILL Clan was formed from the start as a group of friends who enjoyed playing *Quake.* However, we had worked together in the past on a variety of media projects, specifically in developing a multiuser chat space using VRML [virtual reality modeling language]. During our *Quake* playing, we saw both *Diary of a Camper* and *Operation Bayshield* by Clan Undead. This inspired us to create our own *Quake* movie, *Apartment Huntin',* using entirely improvised dialogue, as a few of us in the group had been also part of an improv theater troupe. From *Apartment Huntin',* we continued down the path of developing works involving improvisation, taking advantage of *Quake*'s real-time environment. My favorite of these endeavors was *Common Sense Cooking,* which had us create an entire animated short with Larry and Lenny Lumberjack in front of a live studio audience at the Florida Film Festival. This included three puppeteers, a virtual cameraman, a director, and an improviser running sound effects for the show. The live show proved successful enough to create a small run of live shows in New York City immediately afterward.

[2.7]   **Q:** What other machinima works have you created, or been a part of creating? What was your role in their creation, and what did you learn in the process? How did

the process evolve over the years?

[2.8]   **PM:** I've been involved with a number of different machinima projects since branching off from the ILL Clan. I developed a music video using *Half-Life 2* titled "I'm Still Seeing Breen," which was initially an experiment in using the tools included with *Half-Life 2,* such as FacePoser, which allows the user to lip-synch new lines of dialogue to the characters in *Half-Life 2.* In addition, I helped with a couple of projects with Rooster Teeth Productions, most specifically *The Strangerhood,* which is their series made in *The Sims 2.* In this project, I helped develop several sequences using *Sims* characters married with visual effects.

[2.9]   What came from these experiences is a realization of how important machinima is becoming to the game developers. Over the last few years, the growing support for machinima has shown up as included tool sets, developer-sponsored contests, legal terms allowing machinima creation, and stand-alone machinima applications.

3. Machinima as art form

[3.1]   **Q:** In your opinion, should machinima be considered a type of animation, like stop-motion, or should it be considered a completely new type of filmmaking?

[3.2]   **PM:** I think today it's very easy to see its animation and remix lineage. However, as machinima matures, the parallels to live-action filmmaking will become much more evident and gain acceptance as an evolved medium.

[3.3]   **Q:** What unique advantages do the particular affordances of video game technologies provide over traditional filmmaking or animation? Does the use of video game technologies limit the types of creations that machinima artists can make?

[3.4]   **PM:** The advantages machinima provides are numerous. In terms of animation, the real-time aspect of machinima allows creators to record action and events live, where unique moments can be captured and are nearly performative in their creation. With respect to live-action filmmaking, the virtual environment can take the shape of anything the creator has in mind. This can be the look of the environment or characters, the physics of the space, even how objects react to one another. By using artificially intelligent characters, scenes can be scripted with less effort than those that require handcrafted choreography.

[3.5]   It's true that limitations are a large part of machinima production. Machinimators have to cut around animations, approximate lip-synch, or avoid close-ups because the artwork doesn't hold up at such tight focus. Like most art, it's these

limitations that help craft the types of works being produced and that bring out the creativity in the filmmakers.

[3.6]   **Q:** Scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Louisa Stein, and Robert Jones have recently been questioning the influence of gender in the machinima community, most notably in essays such as Jenkins's "Complete Freedom of Movement" and Jones's "Pink vs. Blue," and in the debates between Jones and Stein on Jenkins's blog (http://henryjenkins.org/2007/06/gender_and_fan_studies_round_t.html, June 6, 2007; and http://henryjenkins.org/2007/06/gender_and_fan_studies_round_t_1.html, June 7, 2007). Have you noticed a strong dominance of gender, male or female, in the machinima community? Is there any notable difference in the gender of machinimators versus machinima audiences?

[3.7]   **PM:** I don't think there's any doubt that the machinimator group at large skews toward men. It was quite some time before machinima saw its first woman director (*Anna,* 2003, dir. Katherine Anna Kang). This likely comes from the direct line emanating from the demographics of those who play games and who subsequently pursue game-related materials. However, we are currently seeing the gender scales balance out. Games and virtual worlds have their share of women users *(The Sims, World of Warcraft, Second Life)* who are in turn looking at machinima as an avenue of creative expression.

[3.8]   **Q:** In the debate on Jenkins's blog, Robert Jones comments as follows:

> [3.9]   Women have historically been denied access to these more advanced technologies based on cultural rhetorics that situate men as "masters" of technology while women merely use them once user friendly interfaces have been developed. That's why I cite the proliferation of *The Sims* machinima among women being a corollary to the development of user friendly tool sets shipped with that game…The cultural rhetoric prescribed to women has created this assumption in many women's minds and thus stands as the barrier to them using them, NOT their own limitations. (http://henryjenkins.org/2007/06/gender_and_fan_studies_round_t.html, June 6, 2007)

[3.10]   Is this in line with your own personal observations? Have you perceived any reluctance on the part of would-be female machinimators as a result of the complexity of the tools? Alternatively, as Jenkins argues elsewhere, do you believe the apparent dominance of male-oriented games such as *Doom, Quake,* and *Halo* in machinima serves as a deterrence to such female machinimators? What do you think could be done, or is being done, to address these concerns?

[3.11]   **PM:** Robert's take is an interesting one. I do believe women had been reluctant to develop machinima until games became more suited to their tastes. That's

a fairly general statement, I admit, but titles such as *Doom, Halo,* and *Quake* never appealed to women en masse. Possibly in part it results from Jones's theory that women inherited a belief system that made those games off-limits. When *The Sims 2* surfaced, it was embraced by a larger female demographic, mainly because of the game's focus on relationships. However, as someone who has dabbled in *Sims 2* machinima, I can attest that making films on that platform is not for the faint of heart. It's possible that women have been protected by society from technology, but making *Sims* machinima does not dictate that same belief. I'm not sure if the balance of male-oriented games acted as a deterrent to female machinimators, though; I do believe it's solely in the base of the source game. As games and virtual worlds that appeal more to women surface, more female machinimators will surface as well.

4. Cultural and corporate perceptions

[4.1]   **Q:** There is a possible perception of machinima creators as second-class filmmakers as a result of their use of tools, models, sets, and assets that were created by others. How does the machinima community address that issue? Does the community contest that perceived status, or does it embrace it?

[4.2]   **PM:** This is a very blurry space for machinima—the line of genre versus technique. Fans of machinima made for players of *World of Warcraft* love the effort poured into these productions because it's a work made for them. These filmmakers hold celebrity status in WoW because of how well they crafted a work that uses the game they devote so much time and passion to. Some works can transcend the machinima community (*Red vs. Blue*, for example); although they still cater to a certain audience, the appeal expands beyond the hard-core *Halo* gamer.

[4.3]   Machinima can fall into the fan fiction category to a degree, but because machinima can be a much more common creative canvas, it can sometimes break free from the "second-class" label and stand on its own. I'm sure we'll see more and more of this as the tools become more sophisticated and artists take advantage of them.

[4.4]   **Q:** Machinima is often billed as "user-generated content," but that label seems to imply that all works of machinima are inextricably bound to the game in which they were created. What is the attitude within the machinima community toward this association? Is this connection considered largely acceptable, or should works of machinima be considered on their own as independent works? What would such a shift in popular perception require?

[4.5]   **PM:** Most folks in the community that I've been in contact with seemed unbothered by this notion, mostly because they're more interested in the work than

how it's labeled. Most see them as independent works, again because they look at the machinima produced as art that stands on its own.

[4.6]   As machinima and the surrounding metamedium become more integrated, the notion of user-generated content will fall away, and machinima will be just another way to produce content.

[4.7]   **Q:** It was recently announced that Machinima.com, which bills itself as "the premiere online entertainment network showing original videos from your favorite video games," raised US$3.85 million in venture funding (http://news.cnet.com/8301-13772_3-10083692-52.html). What do you think this says about the perception of machinima in the business world? What are the perceived business models for machinima development? Is machinima in danger of becoming perceived as merely a new form of advertising?

[4.8]   **PM:** This is a very interesting development, which I largely see as positive. It sends a signal to the larger media that machinima is taking root with audiences that may have moved away from more traditional formats. Still, this business model isn't new to anyone—exclusive content that caters to a specific audience. The differentiator here is that the audience is hard to reach by traditional media outlets.

[4.9]   **Q:** Fan-made videos (or fan vids) have long served as a source for counterreadings (as in slash vids) or often very particular interpretations (as in character vids) of popular works. Recently, more fan vids have been addressing particular political issues, such as homophobia (Luminosity's "Vogue"), misogyny (Luminosity and Sisabet's "Women's Work"), or racism (Giandujakiss's "Origin Stories" and Lierdumoa's "How Much Is That Geisha in the Window?"). Is there anything comparable to that in machinima? That is, does machinima exist that explicitly criticizes the source text or the culture surrounding it? Does machinima tend to run exclusively toward parody and humor, or are there examples of "deeper" works and critiques?

[4.10]   **PM:** Machinima, for the most part, is still in the pains of adolescence—self-infatuated and uninterested in issues at the periphery. However, with its maturation, there are a few artists who have used machinima for more critical purposes. Joseph DeLappe's *Quake/Friends* looks at the celebration of violence as promoted through games, and both Eddo Stern and Jessica Hutchison's *Landlord Vigilante* and Jim Munroe's *My Trip to Liberty City* add commentary about how games symbiotically create and color our worldview.

[4.11]   **Q:** Do you have any theories as to why machinima has become so popular, whereas fan vids largely remain fairly obscure? Is it because the tools are now being

included in the source materials themselves? Is it because machinima may be viewed as less threatening to the original intellectual property owners? Or is it perhaps the result of the aforementioned gender issue, with machinima a largely male community and fan vidding a predominantly female one?

[4.12]   **PM:** It's hard to pinpoint the exact cause, but I believe there's a number of reasons why machinima has connected with a larger audience. The rise of gaming as mainstream entertainment, the accessibility of powerful creative software (by both developers and the community), the seemingly insatiable desire for self-expression—this mix of ingredients has paved the way for people to both emulate and discover artistic expression, particularly within the comfort zone of extreme familiarity.

[4.13]   Additionally, machinima has been seen as an extension of intellectual property, offering much more room to grow, whereas vidding is seen as reworking what's already been completed. Although both machinima and vidding involve the fine art of contextual remixing, machinima stands out because of its manipulation of camera and point of view. This literally brings a new perspective to the context and grabs attention more readily. To that, one could look at vidding as the practice of "this means something different," whereas machinima leans toward "let's show something different." And to take it a step further into gender-related territory, we could consider that machinima is a more brute force approach, associated with more masculine traits, whereas vidding is a more finessed art, for which women have shown more aptitude. However, this conditioning seems to be slowly finding a balance over time.

5. Moving toward a machinima canon

[5.1]   **Q:** I'd like to close with a reading list, to give interested readers some homework. What are the works that currently make up a machinima canon—that is, what machinima works should audiences new to machinima seek out first, and why?

[5.2]   **PM:** There are quite a few works out there that I think define machinima, but here are a few that are a good introduction to the medium:

Video 1. *Diary of a Camper (1996). The very first machinima work by Quake clan The Rangers is somewhat hard to watch (and impossible to hear—it's mostly silent), but this seminal piece is the foundation of machinima history.*

Video 2. *Warthog Jump (2002). Randall Glass exploits Halo's physics engine to comedic effect, interspersed with sound bites and song samples that make for one of the first truly entertaining examples of machinima.*

Video 3. Red vs. Blue (2003). Rooster Teeth creates the de facto example of machinima, a series embraced by gamers and nongamers alike, showing firsthand that machinima can reach beyond its initial audience, with approximately 1 million downloads per episode. They have recently completed their 119th episode, capping off the sixth season.

the photographer from Friedrich Kirschner on Vimeo.

Video 4. The Photographer (2006). A lone photographer is searching for his subject through the crowded city. Filmmaker Friedrich Kirschner mixes various media elements in his machinima, thus emphasizing that the medium not only can be devoid of game assets but also can break free of its commonly known framework.

Video 5. *Ignis Solus (2007). This Team Fortress 2–based machinima is the dictionary definition of making narrative stand above the game platform. Zach Scott directed this Pyro-as-Everyman piece, making the locations of the game seem designed from the ground up as places of solitude.*

Video 6. *The Snow Witch (2007). This Japanese ghost story is adapted from Hearn's "Yuki-Onna" (Kwaidan). Two woodcutters—an old man and his young apprentice, Minokichi—get trapped in a snowstorm in the forest and take refuge in a hut. That night, Minokichi is forced to make a bargain that will later be forgotten. This is an extremely well-made machinima by one of machinima's top female directors, Michelle Pettit-Mee.*