

Artistic Machinima and Britney Spear's Pink Mansion

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Do you know the feeling of buying a brand-new computer and realising that your favorite games will no longer run on your new system? This is also a big problem for Game Art, along with many other New Media art forms, that are using new techniques that are nevertheless aging quickly and will soon become obsolete. Game Art is a young art form, dating back to around 1995, but during the last twenty years much has happened with the development of computer hardware and videogames. Try to play older games like *Doom*, *Quake* and *Unreal* on a computer using the Windows 7 operating system, and you will see it doesn't work. You can always try to buy or save an old PC with Windows 95/98 and hope that the hardware never breaks in the future—if that happens, it will be impossible to experience the art work. Or, you can be more realistic and realize that the only way to preserve Game Art is by documentation as screenshots and machinima. Machinima, a shortened version of the term "machine cinema", are computer animations and movies created inside the games with the help of tools that are often included in the videogames themselves.

Since the early days of Game Art, machinima have been used to create walkthroughs of artistically-modified videogames, which is an important way to preserve and document the work for the future. Machinima has also served as an alternative way for artists to show their works as video installations in art galleries, instead of using a computer with the videogame installed. Today, when many artists are using online worlds and videogames to enact performances, machinima is frequently used to document and preserve these types of temporary works of art. Artists such as Joseph DeLappe and Eva and Franco Mattes, for example, are well-known within the contemporary art scene for their performances in online worlds. DeLappe's *Death in Iraq* is an ongoing performance piece and anti-war project that takes place within the online videogame America's Army. DeLappe has also been active in Second Life, where he has reenacted Mahatma Gandhi's famous salt march. Eva and Franco Mattes have also created synthetic performances in Second Life, where they have reenacted some of art history's most famous performance works. Machinima have played an essential role in documenting and preserving these performances.

Now, machinima is not only used for the purpose of documentation and preservation, it is also an independent genre of Game Art. Miltos Manetas and Eddo Stern are both considered to be pioneers in this field. As early as 1995 Eddo Stern began to make "machinima" by filming his girlfriend playing Tetris. After that he further developed the art of machinima with epic works like *Sheik Attack, 1999*, a non-fiction story about the history of Israel, and *Vietnam Romance, 2003*, about the Vietnam War, both told with the help of scenes taken from different videogames. Miltos Manetas also started around 1995 with a machinima series called Videos After Game. Here you could find such works as *Flame*, in which Manetas filmed a dying *Lara Croft* on a Playstation 1, as well as one of the most famous pieces in the series, *Super Mario Sleeping* (see the video at the top of this post) from 1997. Today, videogames such as *The Sims*,

The Movies, Second Life, Half Life, Halo and *Grand Theft Auto* are often used as sources of artistic machinima.

One artist who has consistently worked with machinima is Chris Howlett, an Australian artist based in Brisbane, Queensland. During the past year alone Howlett has created the short machinima films *Metropolis: Part I-III, Michael Jackson 4 ways: Part I-IV, Homesteads, and Homesteads: Part I & II*, with the help of video games like *Sims* and *SimCity*. In this interview, he tells us more about what machinima is, and how he uses it in his work.

MJ: *What is machinima for you and how do you use it in your work?*

CH: In a traditional sense, machinima just feels like any other methodology within contemporary art that you have at your disposal, such as a painting, animation, or photography; but for me, it starts to radically differ once you start to think about it as an emerging art genre within a global contemporary art context that is still in a state of evolution, much like performance art was back in the sixties. Personally, I'm not convinced that it will ever become an autonomous art category like painting or sculpture. The software and developer tools around it keep constantly changing due to advances in gaming technology, which force it to resist any set of core ideas that may form an art genre. At the same time, in the background corporate and international copyright laws try to catch up with the user's ability to mod, crack and hack a game's software and hardware.

This elasticity and its somewhat fashionable, transgressive characteristics are what really interest me within this entertainment medium. There is also as its future organic possibilities and perceived subversiveness rubbing up against the same corporate power structures which seek to control it, and as a result force new laws into existence; I don't believe anyone has the right to arbitrarily limit the scope of one's ability to absorb new techniques, processes and concepts into their field of knowledge and I think it's this complex tension between international corporate law, the entertainment industries, and the transgressive possibilities of one's agency that characterizes machinima, and how I see it translating over into my art practice.

I also think there is a developing trend within contemporary art circles to move away from linking itself too closely to machinima, game theory or games for that matter, even though it directly uses these forms in its art practice while trying to discover how to talk about these historical connections to video games in new or even traditional forms such as performance art.

By doing this, the artwork moves away from the way it has been defined within the last decade. I'm not quite sure I understand what they are yet, but there seems to be a rejection among artists of an over-arching reliance on terms like machinima or game art, and trying to resist conceptual links to entertainment and game theory within how they make sense of their artwork. I've always seen my use of this medium as being closely linked to video art or film, but in the last year my ideas have been moving away from these genres and into a more of a cross-disciplinary understanding combining interactive or static elements with live contemporary dance choreography.

MJ: *Which videogames do you prefer to work with and why?*

CH: One of the main reasons that draws me to videogames is affixing my own alternative histories to their game programming and trying to understand the performative side to role-playing within a

simulation and all the inevitable questions that arise when considering, Who is the subject and where is it located?

In the past I have preferred video games which are not sci-fi, fantasy or quest-related and which give me the ability to either see from the first-person position (POV) as well as the option for a God's Eye position. Both of these positions are understood in a conventional filmic space which does not distance the viewer from what's going on-screen, since they already understand the language of film. All of these video games I appropriate from are primarily centered around institutional structures which have close or indirect real-world connections to the viewer's body and their subjectivities. There is the family unit such as in *The Sims*, the American military-industrial complex acted out in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, which have their counterparts represented in games such as *Call of Duty 4*, *Medal of Honour*, and *Mercenaries 2*, or the GOD's eye relationship in *SimCity*TM Societies where you could easily be in an airplane flying over a large city or terrain. I actually like to work with the graphics of these videogames since they offer high detail and have immersive, hypnotic atmospheric tracks which lean strongly towards contemporary forms of propaganda music.

These particular games are important to me since I create audio narratives which both compliment and contradict my onscreen game play and give off an historical and political edge to the on-screen action. These audio tracks are often recorded from social network sites such as YouTube, personal websites, blogs, from shows such as Oprah and Dr. Phil or field recordings creating atmospheric tracks from my garden. These real-world audio narratives create a space where the viewer can question and intensify their own reality in relation to the narratives and game physics that I manipulate.

MJ: *Can you tell me about your work Metropolis: Part I-III? Is there any connecting in the title with the Fritz Lang's silent movie "Metropolis" from 1927?*

CH: My work *Metropolis* is divided into three different societies that all meditate on how the body is positioned within an ideological space. Firstly, I wanted to explore how the ideological processes within the game physics of *SimCity*TM Societies operated in virtual space once the society was subjected to a lack of freedom by fencing the society in on itself; and secondly, to also understand how our own subjectivities are based upon a certain kind of exclusion and conformity within our own socio-political environment, which prohibits and imposes limits upon what we do and who we should be.

Each society I planned, such as the Totalitarian society, Capitalistic society or the Upper Class society, were not intended to function like a "real" society in terms of how the game rules were designed, but meant to operate like an abstracted model of a psychological zone where the architectural model is more like a metaphor for the idea of a society, and the landscape represents the unconscious mind. Most people when they experience the work often comment upon the overwhelming dystopian and apocalyptic overtones of each society, but I think that the entropic forces which each are subjected to are quite uplifting and felt in an optimistic or even a sincere way. Whenever I see the Sims standing in line with nothing to do, or speed walking around like coked-up robots, I can't help but feel empathy towards them, especially when you zoom the camera in close to them and watch their programming trying to emote repetitive human behaviors like helplessness, pain, boredom, patience, sickness and servitude.

I think the main connection to Fritz Lang's movie "*Metropolis*", apart from the shared title, is the tense balance that exists between his two societies—one made up of the subterranean world of the workers, and

the other of “*managers*” who live in luxurious skyscrapers—and my own Metropolis that creates a tension between our lived experience of our own society and the impending doom that awaits each virtual society onscreen. I’ve always liked how Slavoj Žižek believes that truth is an understanding of the real power relations that control society and the ideologies that prevent society from realizing social and political freedoms; but once we find out what these underlying structures are, what do we do with that knowledge?

I don’t think each sequence in *Metropolis* overtly tries to represent this idea of truth, but through its hypnotic use of the cannibalized game soundtracks, cutting, editing and sound effects, it amplifies what is left out of each society to represent to the viewer how their own society may also be constructed along these same lines.

MJ: *You have also created a machinima about Michael Jackson. How did you come up with the idea and how was the machinima made?*

CH: *Michael Jackson 4 Ways* was in four chapters, and the initial idea for this was my interest in Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film “*Rashomon*”, where a serious crime is committed and the record of events are told four different ways to a judge, from four mutually contradictory perspectives. The purpose of the film was not to know the truth of who committed the crime, but to explore the multiple realities created by the film narratives and the disturbing subjectivity of truth statements. I’ve always hated characters like *Agatha Christie*, *Hercule Poirot*, *Sherlock Holmes* or television programs like *CSI* who solve the murder case and reveal everything to the viewer in the closing scene or chapter of the book. I prefer characters who seem to reject the possibility of a determinate meaning and keep role-playing to the very end, like Michael Jackson.

My interest in Jackson was firstly, the ongoing public discourse surrounding his music and child abuse charges, and secondly, how this crisis between moral and ethical judgments of whether or not he was a pedophile negated aesthetic judgments relating to the personal taste of his music—can you still listen to Michael Jackson if he is a pedophile regardless of whether or not he was found guilty in a court of law? Yes or No? Well of course you can!

Unlike *Metropolis*, *Michael Jackson 4 Ways* involved modding the game physics with the help of the online modding communities that have developed around previous versions of the Sims, and various screen and audio capture software. The current version I used for this work was Sims3, with downloadable packages from the *ModtheSims* website which you can directly import into your game that either add to your build menu, or directly alter the game’s physics. For example, two men cannot sleep in the same bed with the out-of-the-box Sims game from *Electronic Arts*, but once the mod is downloaded from the online community (by the way, this site is not endorsed by or affiliated with *Electronic Arts*) and the package is placed in the right folder, re-launching the game allows you to have two male Sims sleeping in the same bed. *Electronic Arts* must still think it’s “*too gay*” for two grown men to sleep together in the same bed! If you want genitals on your Sims, just follow the same method for modding the game program.

Both the Britney Spears pink mansion and two of the Michael Jackson avatars in my game were downloaded this way, and then manipulated and re-sculpted using the game’s software editing tools to achieve the desired bodily results. In all, there were eight different clones of Michael Jackson in the household, with varying degrees of dark skin tone, with different personalities, star signs and life goals

which are all programmable within the game. Gradually, each Jackson clone was starved to death [by refusing to allow the Sim character to access food] and cornered off into a stress room extending off the side of the mansion. Like Michael, the home ultimately succumbs to its own death, resulting in its own walls and rooms subtracted out of its own short gaming lifespan.

The audio narrative is often very didactic, with the opposing arguments pitted against one another. All are highly subjective without any real, factual evidence backing up any of the arguments, combined with a selection of interviews with Michael, trying unconvincingly to plead his innocence to the public through YouTube and other TV outlets. In one account, he actually says that he has been advised by his lawyer not to use this medium (the Internet) to prove his innocence since it is not the appropriate medium to use. But what is these days?

My reasons for focusing on Jackson were ultimately to force myself to think about how my own moral and ethical judgments position me ideologically and aesthetically, and whether my own positions control me, or if I control my own positions?