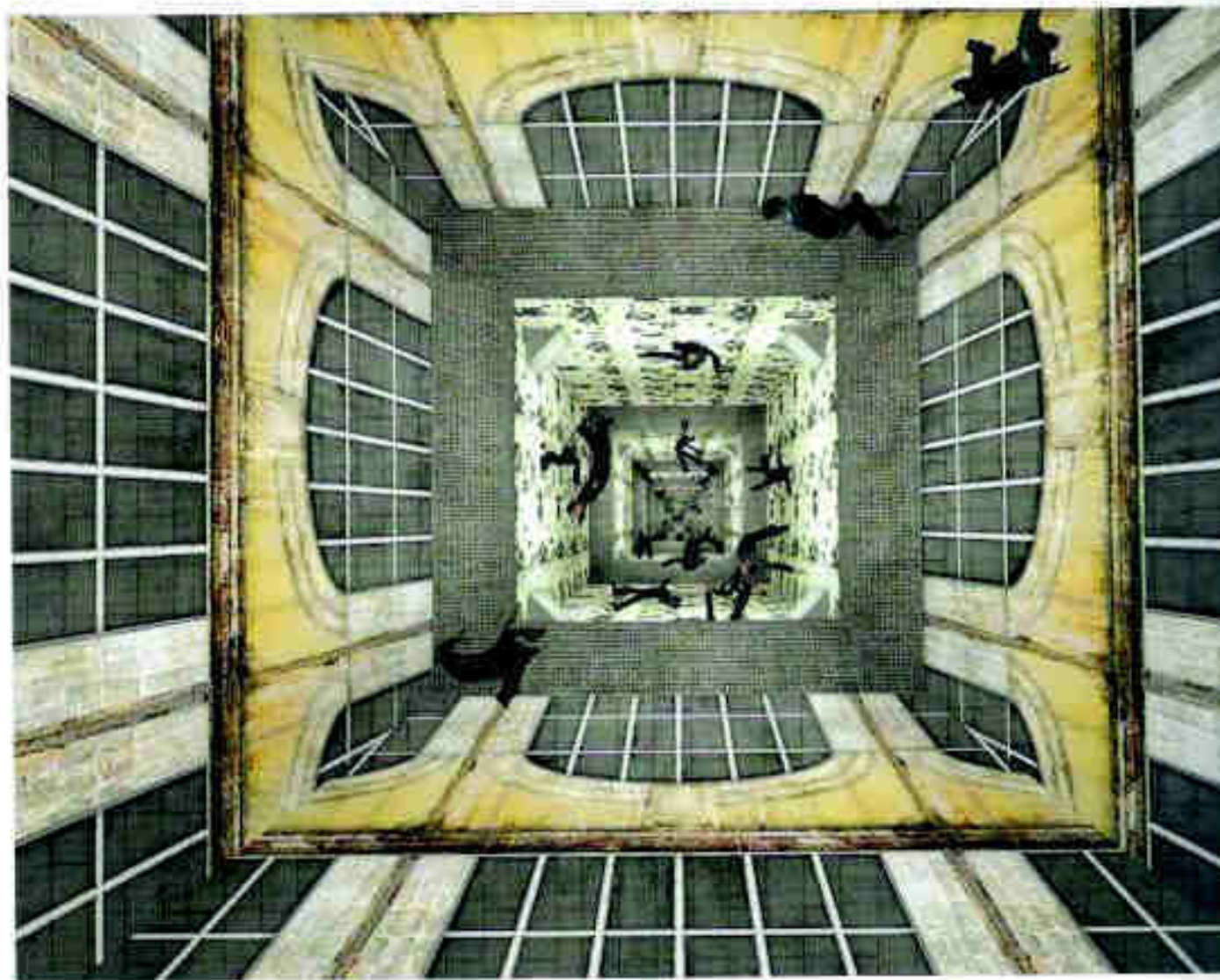


MACHINIMAS: A SELECTION

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Translated from French by
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Machinimas are a mixture of collage and reappropriation—indeed the concept itself is a mashup. The word “machinima” was created by contracting and combining two words, “machine” and “cinema.” It refers to the process of making films using video game equipment. This process constitutes a *détournement* in the Situationist sense of the term, a deflection away from the primary function of video games.¹ In other words, images



produced for video games become raw materials in filmmaking. Machinimas can also be seen as collages of two worlds, those of film and video games. This does not imply, however, that a machinima is necessarily a mashup.

When, for example, one uses software such as *Moviestorm*, *Muvizu* or *icône*, one can no longer talk of *détournement* or collage in the strict sense of the terms, because these software were designed specifically for making machinimas and incorporate film-making tools into gaming engines.

This film production technique appeared in the late 1990s when video game developers made it possible for users to record parts of games, first with *Doom* and, a bit later, with *Quake*. Gamers took advantage of this option to document their exploits and create what came to be called “speedruns,” i.e. video play-throughs made to show how one could master game levels in record time. These were the first audiovisual film sequences made with gaming engines. The addition of dialogue to such sequences was all it took to produce the first “Quake movie,” *Diary of a Camper*, in 1996.

A new film genre developed within the community of *Quake* players. But the game developer, Id Software, raised the issue of intellectual property and refused to let gamers use the name *Quake*. This brought the burgeoning movement

to a halt. To circumvent the problem, Hugh Hancock, founder of the website *machinima.com*, decided to rename such films machinimas. In 2000, the first Machinima Film Festival was organized in New York and Paul Marino, author of the book *The Art of Machinimas*, set up AMAS, the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences. In 2003, the Ill Clan, which included Paul Marino, would infuse new life into this growing scene by producing live machinima performances, such as *Common Sense Cooking*. The members of Ill Clan, who came out of living theatre and improvisation backgrounds, performed a *Quake* film live by inviting the public to interact with them. 3D video-gaming technologies underwent rapid development and publishers began to show a more pronounced interest in the newly emergent practice. In 2004, *The Sims 2* appeared with a whole new set of filmmaking tools. At the same time, Peter Molyneux created a game called *The Movies*, which allowed users to act as if they were film producers, holding casting sessions and directing movies. During the same period, a series of short films based on the game *Halo* would meet with enormous success and serve as a springboard for the machinima scene. This series, entitled *Red vs. Blue*, employed schoolboy humour in recounting the adventures of its two eponymous heroes in a world of the future. It featured absurdist scenarios reminiscent of the



¹ The French word *détournement* means deflection, diversion, derailing, diversion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose. It has sometimes been translated as “diversion”, but this word is confusing because of its more common meaning of idle entertainment. Like most other English speaking people who have actually practiced *détournement*, I have chosen simply to anglicize the French word.” Ben Knabe, *Situationist International Aphorisms* (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2004). No copyright. <http://www.bepress.com/ill/>



graphic artist, made the first political machinima using the game *The Movies*. *The French Democracy* dealt with the then-recent riots in the Paris suburbs. Frustrated by media coverage of the events, he decided to give his version of the issue, in the process lending a voice to those who were without one. Chan posted his film (which explained why, in his opinion, the riots began) on the website of Lionhead Studios. It was downloaded over 40,000 times in one month. A new director was born, along with a new means of expression accessible to anyone who owned a video game and had a message to get out.

Because they make use of real-time 3D virtual spaces but employ art strategies to alter the messages that video games normally convey, machinimas make it possible to step back and take a critical look at a world made up of simulacra. They blur the boundaries between fiction and reality and reshape video games' potentially transgressive power. "Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of

theatre of Samuel Beckett. In *Why Are We Here?*, one of the characters is preoccupied with existentialist questions about his place in the universe, while the other's concerns are totally practical.

Beginning in 2005, the machinima phenomenon took a more democratic turn due to the availability of tools designed specifically for the creation of machinimas. Software like *Machinimation*, *Moviestorm* and *Muvizu* allowed for greater freedom in the design and production of films using real-time 3D video-gaming technology. From that point on, machinimas were no longer the exclusive preserve of hardcore gamers and seasoned developers capable of manipulating gaming platforms to make films.

In 2005, an athletics coach by the name of April G. Hoffmann pointed the way to new developments in the world of the machinima. Since this film form emerged from gaming circles, most of the stories it told stuck closely to the worlds depicted in the games then popular in those circles. In her series

The Awakening, which Hoffmann made using the *Sims 2* platform, the characters wonder about the world they live in and the strange things that happen there. At this point in the history of machinimas, narrative finally parted company with standard game scenarios. In the same year Alex Chan, a young Paris-based



© April Hoffmann, *The Awakening* (video still), 2005. *The Sims 2* modification. 30 minutes, 2 seconds. Courtesy of the Artist.

© Alex Chan, *The French Democracy* (video still), 2005. *The Movies* modification. 15 minutes. Courtesy of the Artist.



hypnotic behaviour.¹² Machinimas update the Situationist concept of cinema, one in which images, voices, dialogue and interviews act as different layers of meaning. And in the purest tradition of pirating, machinimas can be seen as *détournements* of the mass media (in this instance, video games) and ways of reshaping it into a means of political and artistic expression.

This Spartan Life is a talk show created by New York artist Chris Burke on the platform of the online video game *Halo*, a game which features interstellar warfare between aliens and genetically modified supersoldiers. In *TSL*, the theatre of war is transformed into a sort of sound stage

where each player becomes, as it were, a camera or shooting angle or actor. Burke, alias Damian Laceademon on the talk show, has his guests talk about digital culture, art and video games. His guests include the new technology guru Bob Stein, founder of the Institute for the Future of the Book, video artist Peggy Ahwesh, and the late Malcolm McLaren, along with other figures from the video game world, who discuss their art-making from the *Halo* platform. In fact, each *interview* is an ongoing battle that pits Damian and his guests against aliens and other, hostile players. The resulting feeling of being constantly on the cusp of life and death imparts a certain sense

of urgency to the guests' statements. The return of the real into the virtual (i.e. being required to talk while under attack from all sides) forces them to ask essential questions about the meaning of life, violence, death, communication and so on. Can the art of the machinima help keep the Web unconstrained and free; can it prevent it from becoming nothing more than a showcase for commodities? This, in any case, is how Malcolm McLaren portrayed it in an interview he gave for episode six of *TSL*. There, he went on to talk about the emergence of a new generation of hijackers who, by misappropriating the mass media, would give it new meaning.

12. Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), p. 120.

13. Chris Burke, *This Spartan Life: Episode 3, Module 3* (video still), 2006. *Halo 2* modification, 9 minutes, 17 seconds. Courtesy of the Artist.