

Deviation

Director, writer: Jon Griggs. Music: Nicholas J. Sumner. © 2006 Hard Light Films. Internet distribution: hardlightfilms.com/deviation.

Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles

Directors, writers: Bernie Burns, Matt Hullum. Producers: Burnie Burns, Matt Hullum, Geoff Ramsey, Jason Saldaña, Gustavo Sorola. Music: Nicolas Audy-Rowland. © 2003–07 Rooster Teeth Productions. Internet distribution: rvb.roosterteeth.com.

“Machinima” is an awkward portmanteau that joins “machine” and “cinema” to describe computer-animated movies that are shot within video games and distributed primarily online. Originating in the desire of gamers to capture and share their in-game experiences, machinima are created by recording onscreen video game play in real time, then editing that captured footage into a digital movie. The difference between machinima and traditional computer-generated imagery (CGI) is that machinima use the interactive 3D graphics engines of existing video games as virtual movie sets in which to perform scenes on-the-fly, rather than rendering custom animation for each scene indi-

vidually, one frame at a time. Animated films can therefore be created and distributed cheaply and easily by anyone who can control characters in a video game.

Machinima boosters assert that the true art of machinima will only flourish when it moves beyond its origins in gamer communities to embrace the narrative conventions and production values of mainstream film. Yet it is precisely the remarkable self-reflexivity of machinima—the way these game–movie hybrids use cinematic narrative to challenge video-game logic, and game culture to challenge filmmaking paradigms—that makes them, for the moment, so arresting.

PUPPET FACES

At the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival, audiences encountered the big-screen debut of the machinima short film *Deviation*. Accompanied by the staccato drone of helicopters, white text on a black background at the beginning of the film informs us that this is “A virtual film created online. With virtual actors performing across different U.S. states. Who have never met each other or the director in the ‘real’ world.” The film follows a team of four soldiers tearing urgently through underground tunnels. One discontented soldier named Macintyre cynically believes that they have experienced this suicide mission innumerable times before, and vainly tries to convince the others to break out of the



The 2006 Machinima Awards simulcast in Second Life



Deviation director Jon Griggs's avatar (left) at the Machinima Awards preview screening (right) in Second Life

rote cycle of carnage. Acted out through standard avatars provided in the online multiplayer video game *Counter-Strike*, the film imagines the existential horror of actually living one's life within the bloody, militaristic, single-goal-driven world of a first-person shooter game. As the soldiers charge through the claustrophobic maze of tunnels, under the omnipresent threat of attack, Macintyre becomes increasingly vocal about his misgivings. "Doesn't it strike you as strange, I mean we keep doing the same thing over and over again?" He is silenced by the team leader right before the soldiers climb up through a manhole to be slaughtered off screen in a rain of bullets and blood. Macintyre looks on in disgust.

Deviation startlingly recontextualizes the inexpressive faces, hyperbolic assault gear, and uncanny bobble of video-game characters by imagining that these characters could be capable of introspection. However, we realize that although they look thrilling in motion—streaking across the screen in a pack or aiming their weapons—game characters are poorly equipped for standing still and carrying on a serious conversation. Each character's pre-rendered visage is frozen into a scowl that reveals as much hidden life in close-up as a puppet's face. What is more, their bodies idle uncomfortably in a state of constant agitation, as if impatient to leap into action. The polygonal fabric of the characters' facemasks crudely bunches and stretches to indicate when they are talking, their eyelines fail to match, and their weapon-gripping bodies pulse restlessly in animated motion loops. It is precisely this dissonance between video-game graphics organized around combat and movie dialogue organized around angst that lends *Deviation* its defamiliarizing power. As the first

machinima film to premiere at a major festival, *Deviation's* theatrical screening at Tribeca marked the breakout of this Internet-fueled, gamer-geek mode of virtual filmmaking into mainstream cinema.

Deviation screened again several months later at the 2006 Machinima Awards Festival, also in New York, but with a significant twist. In a strange simulacrum of the mainstream cinema event that marked machinima's cultural legitimization, the preview screening and awards ceremony simulcast took place within Second Life (secondlife.com), an online 3D virtual world that allows its millions of members to interact with each other through their self-created avatars within an expansive, freeform alternate universe. Users unable to physically attend the festival in New York could log into Second Life, navigate their avatars into the designated movie theater, and find a seat in a crowd of other avatars (including a child with a pink-ribboned hat, a goateed man in a tux, a floating ghost, and a green-skinned fellow on roller skates) to watch the proceedings and hear from filmmakers who were in attendance via their own avatars. In yet another dimensional layering, if anyone was unable to attend the virtual events within Second Life, they could still watch the live simulcast supplied by Destroy TV (dtv.sheepslabs.com), a special avatar with a video camera who streams in-world footage to the web. These multidimensional machinima events both imitate the festival and award-ceremony rituals of film culture, and transform those rituals by moving them back to the online virtual spaces in which machinima films were originally created and exchanged.

Hollywood's widely reported box-office decline is frequently attributed to the rise of video games and the



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Deviation, clockwise from top left: charging through underground tunnels; close-up on Macintyre; *Counter-Strike* characters are unable to lower their weapons, even when conversing; Macintyre's troop

Internet as top competitors. And the declaration that the video-game industry now outpaces the movie industry in revenues has become commonplace. Yet it is increasingly clear that mainstream cinema is deeply imbricated in the much-touted development of Internet and video games. One suspects while watching the tiresome protractedness of racing and fighting scenes in CGI spectacles like the *Star Wars* prequels (1999, 2002, 2005), *The Matrix* sequels (2003), *King Kong* (2005), and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003, 2006, 2007) franchise that they were inserted specifically to sell the video-game versions of the films. At the same time, video games strive for cinematic photorealism—pushing processing resources towards rendering lush, immersive worlds that replicate cinematic devices down to camera angles, close-ups, and even lens flares. Games themselves commonly contain non-interactive animated movies called “cut-scenes” that narratively frame the gameplay and serve as rewards for progress through game levels. And video-game trailers solicit viewer anticipation not by emphasizing gameplay, but by directly poaching the voiceover narration, montage, special-effects spectacle, and genre conventions of film trailers. It should come as no surprise then that, having absorbed the visual language of cinema, video games would in turn be used to *create* cinema. Thus machin-

ima films register key tensions in the increasing synergistic convergence of these two supposedly antithetical forms, old and new media, cinema and video game.

Although it celebrates the radical possibility of filmmaking distributed across a network of distant collaborators who meet in the virtual studio of an online game, *Deviation* soundly condemns the pointlessness of video-game violence and shows no enthusiasm for gameplay. And that might explain the film's appeal to mainstream cinema. Cinephiles threatened by the incursions of video games into film culture *want* to condemn the emotionally vacant, compulsively repetitive “run-and-gun” logic of first-person shooters. *Deviation* therefore reveals the conditions of machinima's acceptance into mainstream cinema—cast off your in-joke, gamer roots and join the serious ranks of Hollywood narrative film. In fact, unlike most other machinima works, which are released online shortly after completion and become widely available through multiple, proliferating Internet sources, *Deviation* preserved the luster of the theatrical premiere by releasing only a trailer to the web, withholding the full work until after the film screened at Tribeca. Moreover, the film is now distributed online, but primarily through the broadband entertainment network AtomFilms, which offers a licensing contract and royalty payments to independ-

ent filmmakers whose work is selected to appear on their website. *Deviation* critically re-appropriates the capabilities and conventions of the game *Counter-Strike*, which is itself a fan-created modification of the commercial game *Half-Life*, which is itself based on a heavily modified version of the *Quake* game engine. But it eschews the democratized, free-for-all video-sharing typical of Internet phenomena like peer-to-peer networks and YouTube in favor of the institutionally authorized, carefully curated programs of the film festival or film distributor.

MALINGERING IN THE DESERT

Deviation's serious-minded critique of repetition and futility within the world of first-person shooters owes its “Why are we here” theme if not its tone to the most well-known machinima work to date, the ongoing comedy series *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles*.¹ Unlike *Deviation*, *Red vs. Blue* remains unabashedly saturated in the lowbrow world of game culture. In the first episode of the series, released shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the camera glides up the face of a precipice to show two Red soldiers in full body armor standing on the ledge of a desolate futuristic landscape. In addition to the familiarity of the battle-gearred figures, the ever-present target reticule in the center of the screen reminds us that this is *Halo*,² the best-selling Xbox game where you control a cybernetically enhanced warrior fighting a confederacy of alien races that threatens to destroy humankind.

We expect the pair of gun-toting storm troopers to bark out military gibberish and leap into action. Instead, they just stand around talking, and we slowly discover through their desultory exchange that they have no idea what they are doing there, nor why they are fighting: “I signed on to fight some aliens. Next thing I know . . . I’m stuck in the middle of nowhere, fighting a bunch of blue guys.” There is then a cut to the other side of the canyon, where two Blue soldiers impatiently observe their sworn enemies through a sniper rifle. But they save their sharpest hostility for each other as they bicker over how to read the Red soldiers’ puzzling lack of action. This lack of action, as if the soldiers were trapped in dead-end office jobs rather than engaged in high-tech warfare, is *Red vs. Blue's* central absurdist premise. With cinematic antecedents in both *M*A*S*H* (1972) and *Office Space* (1999), *Red vs. Blue* points to the affinity between militaristic aggression fantasies and the embittered “cubicle class” of the technically proficient but low-status, white male knowledge-worker.

Although it is filmed within the *Halo* game engine, *Red vs. Blue* undermines the enemy demonization and zero-hour urgency of the original game narrative, as



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Red vs. Blue, from top: “Why are we here?” (episode 1); “it’s just a box canyon in the middle of nowhere” (episode 1); a soldier’s dead body “rotting in the sun for all eternity” (episode 18); neurotically malfunctioning war machine (episode 42)

well as the game’s play mechanics based on conquest of space, constant action, and slaughter. Each team of soldiers in *Red vs. Blue* plots to obliterate the other team, but they actually spend most of their time malingering in the same bleak desert canyon, trading sophomoric insults, and complaining. Many of the gags seem lifted straight from the gamer wisecracks, trash talk, and performative play that accompany a round of multiplayer *Halo*. Because machinima is recorded in real time, it retains some of the spontaneity of gameplay, where quick decisions and reflex actions ricochet between players and game machine. Thus *Red vs. Blue's* satirical banter and meandering serial form reflect the shared social experience of multiplayer gaming from which the show emerged. In counter to alarmist claims, reminiscent of 1970s apparatus theory, that increasingly immersive 3D games absorb players to such an extent that they lose their grip on reality, *Red vs. Blue* reminds us that gameplay takes place in a structured but open-ended social space. It is a space of playful experimentation and therefore of unexpected behaviors and identifications that occur not only within the game world itself, but

also in the multiple on- and offline social networks that surround it.

Machinima emerged in the late 1990s as video-game players started to record their gameplay and then post these clips to aficionado websites in order to show off particularly nimble or audacious onscreen moves to other players. To make this raw footage of gameplay more compelling, players started setting their clips to music, adding their own commentary and voice tracks, and even staging elaborate maneuvers that involved multiple players. Players discovered what game designers now build into the gameplay experience—that adding strategic editing, propulsive soundtracks, and snappy wisecracks to video-game footage amplifies the affective drama of having your tautly coordinated team maneuver suddenly sabotaged by one player’s misstep, or of pulling off that perfect comeback attack while tottering on the brink of death. Players also turned their recordings to tricks and glitches within the game environment that are irrelevant to scoring points or leveling up. Instead of simply playing the game to win, players started to test the boundaries of the simulation itself, using the game as a playground, laboratory, or stage. Gamers orchestrated and captured virtuoso in-game stunts such as the synchronized hip-hop dance routine of two alien fighters who are usually fighting each other, the stratospheric pirouette of a military jeep when a live grenade is placed beneath it just so, or a programming bug that results in the disappearance of all vehicle animations from a freeway so that the drivers look like Wonder Woman flying her invisible plane.³ Machinima thus arose from the desire to document specific moments experienced in the sprawling, open-ended, imperfectly coded virtual worlds offered up by contemporary video games, and to share these experiences with other players.

Although the first four seasons of *Red vs. Blue* have been released as feature-length DVDs, the cult success of this now-canonical work of machinima is due primarily to Internet distribution across online gaming communities. A new episode of *Red vs. Blue* has been released from the Rooster Teeth Productions website (rvb.roosterteeth.com) approximately every week since the series debut, and the total number of video downloads per week now tops one million. Fans scramble to post the first comments in response to each new episode, usually dashing off brief, chummy exclamations of praise that are characteristic of online chatter, like “Awesome. Nice work.”⁴ But the paucity of expression in each individual comment becomes irrelevant when it chimes into a chorus of a thousand posts per episode. The point is not what you say, but that you announce your affiliation with this huge social network



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Red vs. Blue: recent episodes are created with the improved graphics of *Halo 2* (episode 94, top); another body no one knows what to do with (episode 69, bottom)

of other game enthusiasts. When I last logged in, there were 2186 other users online at the same time, and the total number of registered members is now close to 600,000. In addition to communicating with other members through forums, messaging, and comments, registered users can create personal profiles and online journals.

GAMER CRITIQUE

Why should we be interested, then, when gamers use games to make movies about gaming for other gamers? For one, despite its geeky connotations, “gamer” is no longer such an exclusive or subcultural category: “gaming” has become an important paradigm for conceiving of interactivity, emergence, participatory culture, virtual communities, and other cultural transformations wrought by digital media. Moreover, the convergence of video games and cinema, so that video games feel more cinematic and cinema feels more game-like, is making it increasingly difficult to distinguish “gamers” from “cinephiles.” In addition, insofar as the video-game industry has intertwined with the war industry,⁵ *Red vs. Blue*’s send-ups of game logic become critiques of war logic as well. The series actively works against the elaborately detailed *Halo* mythology, in which humans battle for survival against a covenant of alien races unified by their religious fanaticism. In *Halo*, the protagonist is a hyperbolic incarnation of a masculine empowerment fantasy: a well-armed cyborg super-soldier known only as Master Chief, who is completely encased in battle armor from helmet down to prominent

codpiece. In *Red vs. Blue*, the combat suits and big guns seem ridiculous when the soldiers are cowards and the authorities incompetent. The majestic, gorgeously rendered landscapes that *Halo* is famous for are absent from the series, which is set in the gravel-strewn desert of Blood Gulch. Instead of penetrating into picturesque terrain that is ripe for exploration and conquest, the characters languish in this empty canyon, ambitionless and bored.

The few action scenes, usually ending in some sort of catastrophe, are the result of accident and incompetence rather than a strategically planned mission. Thus attacks are initiated by misrecognition and battles are initiated by machines gone haywire. By repeatedly staging gags around the accidental death and re-animation of soldiers on each team, *Red vs. Blue* points to the fundamental unreality of video-game death: it is impermanent. Getting killed in a video game like *Halo* is a frustrating but temporary setback, a brief hiccup in the drive toward mastering the game. Death is built into the game mechanics. Without taking risks that kill you, or learning through trial and error, you could never progress through each level. Moreover, the game's "rag doll physics" make each death a unique, kinetic spectacle of collapse. But rather than promising advancement or spectacle, the soldiers' inability to irrevocably die in *Red vs. Blue* contributes to the absurdity of their plight. There truly is no way out of this barren wasteland and meaningless war. Not only is warfare a lot of waiting punctuated by random blunders, but these blunders have no real stakes in the absence of permanent death.

Digital technology's transcendence of the human body is pushed to the limit as the characters' mech-warrior bodies become puppet shells to be comically brutalized, killed, and then discarded for better ones. *Red vs. Blue* reminds us that although video games like *Halo* are organized entirely around the thrills of violent attack, they have no capacity to register its material consequences. When the ghost of an accidentally killed soldier notices that days after his death, his old body is still ignominiously flopped on the ground where he fell, he demands to be buried. "Buried with what?" his comrade retorts. "All we have are pistols and rifles. What do you want me to do? Shoot you a grave?"

NOTES

1. The producers of *Red vs. Blue* recently announced that the series would be ending in May 2007 with its 100th episode. See the Rooster Teeth website, <http://rvb.roosterteeth.com/forum/viewTopic.php?id=2205248>.
2. In first-person shooters such as *Halo*, seeing is synonymous with targeting, so the target reticule remains a stark reminder of the analogy between camera and gun. See Alexander Gallo-way, *Gaming, Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 2006) for an account of the cinematic origins of the first-person shooter perspective. But the *Red vs. Blue* creators do block out the *Halo* game's heads-up display (the display of data such as player health and ammunition levels) with letterboxing over the top and bottom of the screen.

3. *Dance, Voldo, Dance* (2005) made in *Soul Caliber*; *Warthog Jumper* (2002) made in *Halo*; and *Buggy Saint's Row: The Musical* (2006) made in *Saint's Row*.
4. See the Rooster Teeth website, <http://www.roosterteeth.com/archive/episode.php?id=211>.
5. See Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006) for a history of the intersections between gaming and military culture.

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ABSTRACT Machinima are computer-animated films shot within video games that expose possibilities and pitfalls in the increasing convergence of cinema and video games. By satirically dramatizing the inner lives of video game characters, machinima works *Deviation* and *Red vs. Blue* undermine the cycle of combat and death that drives first-person shooters.

KEYWORDS machinima, video games, computer animation, new media, death