Playing with Play: Machinima in the Classroom

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Playing with Play: Machinima in the Classroom

Abstract
“So, machinima is really a genre, and not a medium?”

The students in my Digital Media and Rhetoric course are grappling with both how to define machinima and how to evaluate whether one is “good” or not. I frustrate them by refusing to provide a definitive answer to this and other similar questions they have asked about the form. This intentional frustration continues as, after watching a few examples they ask me what grade I would give those machinima, if they were turned in for this assignment. Rather than providing a simple answer I redirect, asking them what criteria they would use to evaluate machinima and how the examples we’ve seen in class stand up to this scrutiny. At the beginning of this particular unit, when I announced that we wouldn’t be writing another research paper, they were exuberant. Now, however, the complexity of the task before them is slowly unveiling itself. While a majority of these students are gamers, few of them have experience in video production. None of them have previously looked at fan culture as a source of meaning and knowledge production. We are in unfamiliar territory, and they are getting restless.

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10 Playing with Play: Machinima in the Classroom

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PLAYING WITH PLAY: INTRODUCING MACHINIMA

“So, machinima is really a genre, and not a medium?”

The students in my Digital Media and Rhetoric course are grappling with both how to define machinima and how to evaluate whether one is “good” or not. I frustrate them by refusing to provide a definitive answer to this and other similar questions they have asked about the form. This intentional frustration continues as, after watching a few examples they ask me what grade I would give those machinima, if they were turned in for this assignment. Rather than providing a simple answer I redirect, asking them what criteria they would use to evaluate machinima and how the examples we’ve seen in class stand up to this scrutiny. At the beginning of this particular unit, when I announced that we wouldn’t be writing another research paper, they were exuberant. Now, however, the complexity of the task before them is slowly unveiling itself. While a majority of these students are gamers, few of them have experience in video production. None of them have previously looked at fan culture as a source of meaning and knowledge production. We are in unfamiliar territory, and they are getting restless.

Eric Klopfer, Scot Osterweil, and Katie Salen (2009) in “Moving Games Learning Forward” identify twelve possible means of incorporating games into classroom situations. Of these twelve, scholars of composition and rhetoric most often focus on just a few, typi-
cally those means that see games as content systems. In this article, I argue for another use of games, and one that more closely aligns with existing research on multimodal learning and pedagogy: the use of games as authoring systems. However, before discussing how games can become authoring systems and vehicles for the creation of multimodal assignments, I first examine how composition and rhetoric scholars have typically seen the value of games in pedagogy: as content systems.

Klopfer, Osterweil, and Salen describe the use of games as content systems as when educators use games to “deliver understanding about a particular subject or content area . . . reflection on and discussion of the content in spaces external to the game in order to allow students to see the game as part of a larger body of knowledge on that subject” (2009, p. 21). Rebekah Shultz Colby and Richard Colby’s (2008) use of World of Warcraft (WoW) in their first year writing classroom, described in “A Pedagogy of Play: Integrating Computer Games into the Writing Classroom” is an excellent demonstration of the productive uses games can have when seen as content systems. Colby and Colby sent students into the game “looking for rhetorical exigencies that create opportunities for emergent learning” (p. 309). They describe two different student projects, a quantitative study on in-game economics and an official proposal to game designers (p. 309). They explain that their use of World of Warcraft “highlights play as an important part of the writing process, intertwining work and play in ways that more productively highlight areas of the rhetorical canon that have often been underutilized within composition” (p. 309). In examples of student projects, World of Warcraft served as a content system, providing students with information on a particular subject (economics, for example) and offering spaces for connection with larger issues and structures.

Similarly, Ian Bogost’s work, which has been particularly influential for its focus on procedural rhetoric, focuses primarily on games as content systems for persuasion and learning. Games, he argues, “offer meanings and experiences of particular worlds and particular relationships . . . they remain coupled to a specific topic” (Bogost, 2007, p. 241). Thus, games present players/learners with the opportunity to learn (and be persuaded) through doing—precisely the characterization Klopfer, Osterweil, and Salen (2009) give of games as content systems. An example of this principle can be found in one of Bogost’s own games, Arcade Wire: Airport Security. In this game, players take on the role of an Airport Security Officer. At beginning of the game, players need only flag
NPCs (non-playable characters) whose luggage includes a gun or knife. However, as the game progresses players are asked to search for more and more difficult to see items of contraband. Some of these items mimic current TSA regulations (bottles and liquid containers) and others that poke fun at seemingly arbitrary restrictions (red shirts only, etc.). The game continues to increase in difficulty until it is impossible for players to do anything but allow security risks to pass through their checkpoint. In this example, the content is the purpose of the game. *Airport Security* has been thoughtfully designed to gradually reveal a critique of post 9–11 airport security measures and their effectiveness.

The above examples are just two of many that show how pedagogical and educational studies traditionally approach games. I do not wish to critique these innovative uses of games, but rather to suggest an additional potential, a perspective Klopfer, Osterweil, and Salen identify as the use of games as authoring systems. Unlike the previous examples, which see games as systems that can teach students through gameplay experiences, using games as authoring system has "students use games to produce an artifact, be it a game (Spore), a mod (Starcraft), a video (machinima in WoW, the Sims, Second Life, etc.), a visual text (Sims Family Album), an avatar (Miis), a written text (MiLK, an sms-based game platform), or a body of code (Alice, Scratch)" (Klopfer, Osterweil & Salen, 2009, p. 22). This use of games in the classroom is not focused on traditional game play (playing a game as it was designed to be played). Instead, this approach might be called playing with play. Using games as authoring systems means asking students to create a new text out of game materials. Having students work, through games, to create new narratives and texts builds upon research both about games in the classroom and on the discussion of multimodality in composition classrooms, a discussion that has been taking place for quite some time. Prior to explaining how those conversations support the use of machinima, however, it would perhaps be best to briefly define machinima and present some examples.

As its name implies, machinima is very much a mixed media form. The word is a portmanteau of the two key aspects of the form: machine-animation (through a game) and cinema. Strange Company, a group that declares themselves the "world’s oldest pro machinima company," expresses the definition and value of machinima as “making films in 3D virtual worlds to tell stories that couldn’t be told any other way” (2007, “About Us”). The self-accredited Academy of Machinima Arts and Sci-
ences offers a similar, but more expanded, definition: “the convergence of film-making, animation and game development. Machinima is real-world film-making techniques applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can be either controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence” (2005, “The Machinima FAQ”). As the still image taken from “World of Workcraft” illustrates, machinima is a hybrid art that uses a game (in this case World of Warcraft) to create films. Machinima is, therefore, a hybrid media that sits on the border of film and gaming. It is also an almost entirely user-created form of media.

Figure 1. World of Workcraft.

Less than ten years ago few people would recognize the term machinima, much less have seen one. However, it is now an emerging video form that allows authors the ability to work within pre-existing environments. Indeed, machinima as a young art form may be hitting an adolescent phase, in which scholars and practitioners are pushing the boundaries of what the form can express. While some advocate for the emergence of machinima as a more serious and socially engaged form. Kate Fosk (2011) and Henry Lowood (2006, 2008) each argue for the importance
of highly political uses of machinima. Fosk explains how new virtual worlds, spaces that are only quasi-games, offer creators the potential to develop machinima that are less solidly tied to specific game systems than the examples I will present below. Because these spaces are not explicitly (visually) marked by their connection to gaming, they enable greater interaction and connection with more traditional media outlets (p. 29). Lowood (2008) demonstrates Fosk’s claims by providing the example of “French Democracy,” a thirteen-minute movie made only two weeks after a series of riots in France (p. 167). The availability of machinima, and the relative ease with which the author was able to learn the tools needed to create one, allowed “French Democracy” to be produced in record time and provide local commentary on events that had only just occurred.

Whatever purposes one is working toward, creating machinima requires authors to consider how their work is both constrained by the virtual environment that they use: setting, character models, costuming, and camera work must all be provided by the game engine they work in. Lowood (2006) explains how machinima helps viewers and creators to re-conceptualize both gaming and film: “like the cellphone camera craze, we also learn from machinima how the dissemination of accessible tools—even if they are not necessarily easy-to-use—creates opportunities for the emergence of unexpected content in a postmodern environment that places playful experiments and throwaway pieces alongside startling and original instances of creative expression” (p. 26). Creating machinima involves utilizing a variety of software programs in ways that they may not have initially been intended, what Lowood describes as the “emergence of unexpected content,” to create surprising new content, thus encouraging play with technology as opposed to simply through technology. Obviously, the most effective way to truly understand the potential of machinima would be to watch several different machinima and get a general sense of how gamers and creators are using this tool to critique, explore, and narrate. A variety of different genres or styles of machinima exist, and, as Lowood suggested, these range from fascinating and powerful to mundane and crude. For the purposes of this argument, I will briefly summarize three different types of machinima and offer a quick example for each.

One of the more interesting applications of machinima for those interested in new media studies is the use of machinima to explore how game systems forward and normalize certain actions. The process of cre-
Playing with Play

ating a machinima, when used to interrogate game systems, becomes a mode of critical, emergent play. As Irene Chien (2007) observes, this allows players to participate in the game in a unique mode, “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” (p. 25). The short mock commercial “Counter-Strike for Kids” offers one example of how creators can use machinima to creatively re-think the rules a game system imposes on players. In this clip authors have used the standard actions available to them through the first-person shooter game Counter-Strike, but they have re-skinned (a term for applying different visual attributes to something) many of the textures.

Figure 2: Counter Strike for Kids

“Counter-Strike for Kids” is a mock commercial for an imaginary game that promises to offer an alternative to the overly violent games currently on the market. The title frame, featuring a soldier wearing a clown wig and holding a toy gun, displays how this machinima re-contextualizes the brutal fighting game as a game for young children. In this imaginary version of the game grenades are presented as Pokéballs (a reference to the popular children’s game and cartoon series Pokémon),
knives are re-skinned as pillows, and a character’s death is explained as taking a nap. The video employs elements of crude gallows humor, but it also forces viewers familiar with the Counter-Strike gameworld to reconsider actions that may have become second nature. By de-familiarizing actions that, for players, have become ordinary, the machinima highlights the senselessness and violence of the game. As the “Counter-Strike for Kids” example demonstrates, machinima opens up new modes of critical play. Player/creators have the opportunity to question both the actions the game allows and the context the game provides (including not only the narrative but also the visuals, audio, and other thematic elements). In playing with these elements machinima creators destabilize traditional game systems.

If we might consider the “Counter-Strike for Kids” machinima to be a sort of game-based parody (one that inspires both creators and audiences to think about a specific game in different terms), another common type of machinima is parody that does not refer directly to the game system. This style of parody commonly involves taking game characters and placing them in real-world situations, blurring the line between on-screen avatar and player. “World of WorkCraft” is one example of a machinima that derives humor from placing heroic game characters in mundane situations, but also offers an interesting perspective on gaming culture and the real lives of gamers. The narrative opens with a group of World of Warcraft characters valiantly slaying a vicious dragon before it can destroy a small village. The townspeople cheer, but as the heroes leave the scene they complain about the tedium of having to fight yet another dragon. Eagerly, the group rushes home to load up their favorite online game, World of WorkCraft. We then see the dragonslayers in their gameworld, completing epic tasks that include making copies, changing memos, and equipping their casual Friday gear. “World of WorkCraft,” like “Counter-Strike for Kids,” repurposes common game mechanics, presenting them in a new light that comments on the game system and the world outside the game. Meetings are presented as “quests” and paychecks and vacation time are the rewards for successfully completing tasks in the parody game. Through a careful consideration of in-game mechanics and real life analogs the video inverts the stereotypical image of an MMO player, someone who works a dull office job during the day and relishes the excitement of slaying dragons online at night.

While the majority of popular machinima use humor to comment on game systems, a small but significant number of creators use machinima
Playing with Play

203
to dramatize a previously existing text. The examples I give here refer specifically to literature; however, machinima relating to all aspects of popular culture have found popularity on video-sharing websites. The Strange Company (2008) has made two excellent examples of this type of text, one an interpretation of Lord Byron’s “When We Two Parted” and the other a dramatization of Shelley’s “Ozymandias.”

Strange Company’s interpretation of “When We Two Parted” includes a reading of the poem and a number of scenes that loosely depict what is being described in the poem, although the scenes are re-imagined for a game setting. The short uses a variety of visual effects, including mixing black and white and color artistically, and appears quite stylized and ornamented. In contrast, “Ozymandias” has no audio track other than a whistling wind. The less than three minutes of the clip primarily depict a lone character walking in the desert. The character approaches the broken statue of Ozymandias, reads the inscription, and departs. The piece concludes with a black screen and the text from the poem. Both of these pieces use the elements game spaces allow to dramatize their sources and create new texts based on both the source material and the game engine. “When We Two Parted” presents viewers with a dramatization that pulls out the emotion from the poem, but re-imagines the action to fit a modern context. “Ozymandias,” a much more stark and bleak clip, presents a very literal scene of what the “traveler from a foreign land” claims to have seen. They intensify the emotion of their short film by placing only the sound of wind over the game images. This clip attempts to capture the emotion the poem itself hopes to convey, the desolation and emptiness implicit in the imagery.

As Fosk and Lowood’s examples demonstrate, these are not the only types of machinima that exist. However, the four machinima discussed above illustrate how players take on the role of content creators in a way that is highly critical and demonstrates rhetorical awareness. Most machinima are small productions made by fans and gamers with limited commercial potential or value; however, it should be noted that machinima are gaining prominence and the limits of this technology have yet to be reached. Many pioneers, including The Strange Company, have already made full-length films using machinima that are available for streaming from a number of websites. Rooster Teeth Productions began a small machinima web series in 2003, which expanded to become an Internet sensation and many gamers’ first exposure to machinima. Their
series, Red Vs. Blue, is made using Halo and its sequels, and is now sponsored by Microsoft (the makers of Halo).

**Machinima as Design-Based Cultural Practice**

For homework my students have read the first chapter of Henry Jenkins’s (2006) Convergence Culture. The chapter does not once mention machinima, and only in passing does it mention gaming. Now, in class, I ask them a question I imagine they already are wondering: why did I have you read this? They have a good grasp on the chapter. They talk about narratives moving across different media types and they particularly enjoyed Jenkins’s description of trying to buy a phone that only made calls. They get that media technologies are increasingly converging. Despite their solid understanding of the chapter, they’re still not really sure why I’ve assigned it. I pull out my copy of the book and read a section out loud: “This book is about the work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system . . . Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other . . .” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). After reading about two paragraphs, I ask them again: why, in a unit on machinima, have I had you read this particular piece? After a moment one student speaks up. He references a different text we read earlier in the semester about interactivity, Eric Zimmerman’s (2004) “Four Naughty Terms in Need of Discipline.” Games, my student recalls, take us up to what Zimmerman identifies as a third level of interactivity, interaction with a system that responds to you. Machinima, he suggests, based on the Jenkins reading, has the possibility to take us to Zimmerman’s fourth level, interaction with culture and the social world. Now, I think to myself, we’re getting somewhere interesting.

There are a variety of compelling reasons to introduce students to machinima as a tool. Fosk (2011) and Lowood (2006, 2008) present examples that demonstrate how many creators turn to machinima for political and activist purposes, in part for the speed with which they can create content that responds to current events. Kenneth Morton, in his
article “Machinima-to-Learn: From Salvation to Intervention,” (2010) describes an assignment in which his students used the virtual world *Second Life* to make videos that offered a critique of their own campus culture. Morton’s project demonstrates a local application of machinima as social critique. While I recognize the value of other approaches, in this chapter I wish to propose machinima as a tool through which students can be invited to engage in participatory culture and think more critically about issues related to composition and design practices.

Engaging in participatory culture introduces students to new methods of thinking about authorship/ownership of texts and knowledge production, important skills in postindustrial society. Many authors have already provided anecdotal evidence that suggests the skills and opportunities students gain through interacting in a participatory culture. Henry Jenkins’s (2006) description of the student-run, imaginary newspaper *The Daily Prophet* in *Convergence Culture* and Jonathan Alexander’s (2006) presentation of the youth-created website *Hyperreal* in *Digital Youth* both present positive examples of young people using technologies available to them in productive ways. However, while these anecdotal cases are encouraging, statistical evidence suggests that the majority of American students have rarely explored their ability to create media content. Requiring students to engage directly with media culture through machinima creates a context in which new models of creation, knowledge production, and participatory culture can be considered.

Despite the importance of this work, statistical evidence suggests that students are not doing this kind of work in their day-to-day lives. Jenkins, citing a 2005 Pew study, claims that just over half of teens can be considered content creators. This particular Pew study defined content creation in alarmingly loose terms, including both posting one’s own content and commenting on another’s work. While this percentage seems encouraging, José van Dijk (2009) cites a similar survey from 2007 with drastically different results. Differentiating between active participants (those producing content) and passive users (who might comment in addition to simply viewing, but do not produce content themselves), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED) report she cites identifies only twenty percent of users as active participants. A similar survey, also conducted in 2007, also found that while many students and young adults knew about and visited content-sharing sites like YouTube, MySpace, and Flikr, only a fraction of those who visited these sites contributed their own material (White, 2007). Most users
(roughly 80%) fall into a category termed lurkers—those who exist on the periphery of content-creation communities but neither comment nor submit any of their own material. Finally, a more recent Pew study provides additional evidence suggesting that the participatory approach to media implied in the 2005 survey might not be so common. Taken in September 2009, this survey found that only 28% of teens maintained an online blog or journal, and only 26% create remix projects using music, text, or images. The largest percentage of content creators, those who share their own artwork, photos, stories, or videos, accounts for just under two-fifths of all users (39%). However, even this number may not reflect as much participation as some optimists suggest. Xavier Ochoa and Erik Duval’s (2008) quantitative survey of several popular user-generated content websites suggests that sustained engagement is substantially lower. Their study, which surveyed the content uploaded at document sharing sites, fan-fiction sites, and video sharing sites, found that participation on these sites is vastly unequal. The largest group of content creators, 90% across all sites, tended to produce only a few items. In contrast, single users could sometimes be responsible for as much as 10% of a site’s total content individually. The combination of these more recent studies presents a less optimistic picture of the interactions young people have with media culture, suggesting that occupy a relatively passive stance.

However, if our students are not currently engaging with media culture, they should be. Doing so not only helps students develop a more nuanced understanding of the composing process and their own choices, but also invites critical reflection on contemporary media culture and disrupts the traditional separation between content producer and consumer. Such a disruption is a crucial part of media literacy. Jenkins (2006) identifies the following five characteristics as being markers that define participatory culture as distinct from traditional consumer culture: “relatively low barriers to artistic expression . . . strong support for creating and sharing . . . informal mentorship . . . members who believe their contributions matter . . . members who feel some degree of social connection” (pp. 5–6). He goes on to add that while not all members of a culture need to engage for it to be participatory, all members should believe that engagement is possible.

Some of these criteria are, I argue, essentially non-issues at this point in time. Low barrier, non-professional programs, both proprietary and open source (many of which are free), exist to allow users to become cre-
ators. While access to hardware is, of course, a perpetual concern in any production work, the resources needed are often little more than what one would use for a standard word processing assignment. Scores of websites and YouTube videos, as well as active online communities, exist to provide informal mentorship to those wishing to get started as creators. But while these tools and resources exist and are easily accessible, the mindset of a participatory culture—the sense of engagement that Jenkins argues is essential—seems to be less prevalent. As the evidence presented previously suggests, students are by and large not content creators. Most fall into the category both White (2007) and van Dijck (2009) identify as lurkers, moving at the borders of content sharing communities but never truly entering the conversation. They have found themselves, Jenkins suggests, on the wrong side of the new cultural divide.

Inviting students into participatory often requires them to reconsider authorship. Lawrence Lessig’s (2005) model, which he describes as a rip-mix-burn process, provides a useful model to consider how media content is continually shared, rewritten, and redistributed. This process is not unique to contemporary digital culture and has been available to mass media for decades. Lessig uses Walt Disney’s legacy to demonstrate the process in a professional context: “Disney (or Disney, Inc.) ripped creativity from the culture around him, mixed that creativity with his own extraordinary talent, and then burned that mix into the soul of his culture” (2005, p. 24). The distinction in a participatory culture, then, is in how this model is available not only to traditional mass media producers and major corporations, but also to media consumers. The rip-mix-burn model provides a new metaphor that presents cultural artifacts as open to play and critique, indeed, as the source materials for thoughtful reflection and commentary.

The goals I have identified, reconsideration as authorship/ownership of texts and knowledge production, are especially important in the new information age. As educational theorists such as John Seely Brown (2012), and Cathy Davidson and David Theo Goldberg (2009) discuss, contemporary educational systems are not preparing students to succeed in a knowledge culture that is highly collaborative and participatory. Davidson and Goldberg argue that students are increasingly turning to informal learning institutions, those that are self chosen and exist outside standardized education, to gain skills and knowledge that conventional institutions fail to teach them. Indeed, Brown recently proclaimed to a popular webzine “I would rather hire a high level World of Warcraft play-
er than an MBA from Harvard" (2012, "How World of Warcraft Could . . ."). He reasons that these high level players are better at brainstorming, finding and appropriating strategies, and sharing knowledge. Brown's description of players and the valuable skills they develop through their gameplay echoes Johndan Johnson-Eilola's (2005) description of symbolic-analytic work. This new model of labor is distinct from previous situations because Johnson-Eilola explains "in a postindustrial age, the most valued workers no longer produce concrete objects, but conceptual objects" (p. 28). For these workers, traditional understandings of authorship, productivity and creation are outdated and no longer useful. He writes "notions of authorship that prioritize the creation of original content and subordinate work that seems derivative and functional" (p. 30) fail to address the level of abstraction that contemporary workplaces value, abstraction that helps them to function in complex information systems. Symbolic-analytic workers spend much of their time sifting through information, relying on technologies and each other. In such an environment boundaries between authorship and ownership become unclear. Ultimately, in this model of postindustrial work, "creativity is no longer the production of original texts, but the ability to gather, filter, arrange, and construct new texts" (p. 134).

If, as I have argued, the importance participatory culture and symbolic-analytic work provides the motivation for incorporating machinima into curriculum, the scholarship on multimodal composition provides a theoretical framework that demonstrates precisely how elements of machinima can approach these issues. Multimodal composition has been a rich topic of scholarly discussion in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, and multimodal composing practices are perhaps one of the most discussed issues related to technology and composition. Of course, identifying multimodal composition as either only mediated through technology or as a predominantly recent phenomena are both problematic assumptions, as Jody Shipka (2011) and Jason Palmeri (2012) respectively demonstrate. Given the breadth and depth of literature on multimodal composition, this brief discussion focuses specifically on that element which ties multimodality most strongly to the symbolic-analytic work and participatory culture: design.

Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001) create a four-tiered heuristic for both creating and analyzing multimodal artifacts, which includes discourse, design, production, and distribution. It is important to note here that Kress and Van Leeuwen identify design as a mode
of creation distinct from production. They argue that in an era of “monomodality” design issues are elided—“representation was treated as monomodal: discrete, bounded, autonomous, with its own practices, traditions, professions, habits” (p. 45). Thus, in a monomodal knowledge culture, such as what students traditionally experience in their education, design concerns and practices are unquestioned assumptions. Composing often moves directly to the production stage. Multimodality forces us back from the teleological process-in-service-of-product aspect of production to the more abstract design phase. Anne Frances Wysocki (2004), in her introduction to one of the foundational works on multimodal composition in the field, *Writing New Media*, emphasizes the importance of digital media for scholars and writers as “encourag[ing] us to consider not only the potentialities of material choices for digital texts but for *any* text we make” (p. 10). From Wysocki, and Kress and van Leeuwen, we have the argument that critical engagement with and production of multimodal text strengthens one’s understanding of the composition project as a whole. However, if multimodal composing has the potential to deepen rhetorical awareness, it is not something that is innate. As Mary Sheridan-Rabideau and Jennifer Rowsell (2010) demonstrate, even digital natives (those who have grown up with technology and are comfortable creating with it) often lack a “meta-awareness” to describe their rhetorical choices and process in creating (p. 32). Thus, as Cynthia Selfe (2004) argues, “teachers of composition should not only be interested in new media texts but using them *systematically* in their classrooms to teach about new literacies” (p. 44, emphasis added). Approaching new media systematically requires both conversations about the materiality and affordance that specific design choices entail and theoretical backing in participatory culture that situates the importance of these composing practices.

Jody Shipka (2005) argues that multimodal remix assignments, a heading machinima would certainly fall under, place many students in unfamiliar territory and encourage more thoughtful reflection not simply on an assignment prompt, but on “systems of delivery, reception and circulation” in the contemporary knowledge culture (p. 278). Some examples of projects her students have turned in include games, websites, organized gift boxes, and puzzle tests. These types of projects require an attention to the material aspects of composing not traditionally attended to with written composition. Shipka’s remix assignments are not by necessity digital, but she emphasizes that they require students to
“draw upon multiple semiotic resources as they compose work” (p. 300); the importance, Shipka argues, is “that students are doing something that is at once more and other than writing” (p. 300). The ‘more and other’ that Shipka’s students are doing involves interacting with multiple media, and learning to recognize the affordances and limitations of each. When coupled with reflective assessments of the composition process, these assignments teach students both about new media authoring and about written composition, as they explore how each enables and constrains different arguments, assumptions, and modes of persuasion. In addition to constructing greater knowledge both about the written media and about other media forms, introducing students to remix compositions, to new media authoring, requires students to directly tangle with and attempt to sort out concepts which are still in flux: copyright issues, design issues, questions of authorship. Of course, students could simply read about how new media is distinct or different. Asking students to create a machinima contextualizes these theories by giving them the opportunity to literally play with these concepts. Doing so invites a deeper exploration of their meaning, as Shipka suggests, and opens up a space for thoughtful reflection on the creation process involved in new media texts.

**Practical Concerns**

The final projects for these units are often the most interesting and nuanced pieces of student writing I receive the entire semester, and yet this course unit is the most stressful to plan. How do I balance the theoretical material that situates the unit as rhetorical practice with technical instruction into the process of creating a video project? Will any of my students have production experience that I can draw on to assist total novices? The first time I assigned a machinima project I gave students the option to write a rhetorical analysis instead—not a single student choose to do the paper. They were anxious about the process of multimodal composing, but they were also eager to create.

Creators of machinima begin, of course, with a game. The most commonly used games among popular creators are *World of Warcraft, Counter-Strike,* and *Halo.* Each of these games has a distinct theme and game system, inviting strikingly different opportunities for critique and cus-
tomaization. However, each of these games requires a paid retail copy, and some require monthly subscription fees for multi-player use. While students may have copies of these games available, there are a number of other options for creating machinima. Any game or virtual world that allows multi-player interaction and can be played on a computer can potentially be used to make machinima. Morton’s (2010) students use Second Life, a virtual world with a free basic version that many universities have institutional access to, and Lowood (2006) provides examples of how activists in France have used The Movies, a game designed solely for the purpose of creating machinima. The game a creator chooses immediately limits the options she has available to her in terms of setting, character design, and background. Thus, when multiple options exist, this decision is highly rhetorical and one that students should reflect upon carefully.

While a game is the most necessary and obvious tool a potential machinima creator will need, a few more programs must be acquired for the technical production of the project to move forward. These tools, like the games a student might choose to work with, range from paid and complex to free and fairly simple. Students will need:

- a screen capture tool
- a video editor
- an audio recorder
- (optionally) an audio editor

Screen capture software is used to record the video portion of the machinima. These programs will begin recording whatever is being displayed on the screen of a computer at the push of a button, and stop recording at the push of the button, turning a student’s computer screen into the set for their machinima. As students “play” their game, moving their characters to motions that they have scripted, they record their footage using screen capture programs as the machinima equivalent of a camera. Most students will not already have these programs, but they can easily download free tools from the Internet.

While a screen capture tool will almost certainly have to be downloaded, students that own a desktop or laptop computer should already have access to basic video and sound editors, though it is quite likely that most students will not have used them. Both Windows and Mac machines come with a video editor, either Windows Movie Maker or iMovie. These programs are both perfectly serviceable. Neither program
easily allows for some of the complex content editing that Adobe and Sony video editing software might make possible for students, but what they lack in functionality they gain in usability. Students simply need to be able to import clips, shorten them as needed, put them in proper order and layer an audio track on with the video.

Similarly, most computers come with some program that will enable voice recording. Windows PCs are equipped with the basic program Sound Recorder and Macs have an equivalent program called Simple Sound. For a basic machinima, students simply need to record their voice acting and integrate it with their video. Sounds effects can be used, and many of these programs have stock sounds included. If students wish to do complex sound editing, or if instructors wish to encourage it, Audacity is freely available as a trial version. Students can play with mixing their audio if they wish, to add effects or change the sound of their voices, but like complex video editing this is solely at the students’ discretion and not required for a successful machinima project.

Having discussed several examples of machinima in popular culture in the first section, I conclude this section with an example of a student-created machinima. As I’ve already discussed, assigning the creation of a machinima can be an excellent way to teach students about new media, both from a theoretical perspective and a technical perspective. In the class focused on narrative, I tasked my students with using machinima to dramatize an aspect of Joseph Campbell’s (1949) explanation of the hero’s journey. This project thus required students to synthesize a number of important concepts. First, they had to understand the hero’s journey well enough to depict some aspect of it in a scene. Second, they had to think critically to construct a scene that logically emerged from the limitations and availabilities of a game system. Finally, they had to develop the technical skill to capture video, edit footage, record music and voice tracks, and mix them appropriately. One of the better projects followed “Sir Epicus the Epic, the Chosen One, Future Master of the Four Corners of the World.” Having read Hero with a Thousand Faces, this group chose to dramatize several elements of the first stage of the hero’s journey. In their narrative Sir Epicus meets his mentor, a harbinger of fate who presents to him a portal that represents his call to adventure. However, Sir Epicus doubts the caliber of his portal (thus refusing the call) and demands that he be shown a more heroic call. After being rebuffed in her initial attempt to lead the hero to his path, the Harbinger takes Sir Epicus to a several different portals until he finally accepts one.
Sadly for our “hero,” this call to adventure is not his, and he is quickly dispatched by a dragon.

In this project my students integrated a several elements from stage one of the hero’s journey. They not only demonstrated their knowledge of this specific portion of the content I asked them to learn, but also incorporated jokes and allusions to other elements of the book. While standing in front of a portal imbedded in a tree, Sir Epicus asks the Harbinger “Has not this book already had a chapter on the world tree?” Both characters pause for a moment, startled by the meta-awareness, and then continue their argument about Sir Epicus’ destiny. This project not only identifies and plays with concepts from the hero’s journey, but also pokes fun at the relatively commonplace occurrence of being a hero in an online role-playing game, in other words, a game in which every player takes the role of hero. The original assignment sheet called for a three-to five-minute video, but this group’s project (which includes edited video, voice acting, several sound effects, and a number of musical numbers) is just over seven minutes long.

Despite these benefits, there are a few cautions those interested in assigning machinima should be prepared to address. First, as with any digital media creation project, students can easily get frustrated by the technology. Many students, particularly those in a first year composition course, will have little to no experience in working with video and sound editing software. While this represents one of the main reasons to incorporate a unit like this, it is also a clear stumbling block for many students. There are a variety of ways that this concern can be dealt with. The primary way to help students overcome this obstacle is to place them in groups. Each time I have assigned a machinima project it has been as a group project. Working as a team, students can more easily and quickly overcome technological difficulties and can, with proper instruction, rely on each other rather than their teacher to work through a project. As Jenkins (2009) points out, one of the key features of a participatory culture is the ease of access to tools and informal mentorship on the use of those tools. I instruct my students in production basics, but I also teach them to search for and identify the resources that will help them teach themselves. Any program or strategy I can teach them will likely become outdated in a relatively short amount of time, but the ability to locate and utilize informal learning tools will help them succeed in a postindustrial work environment. This strategy has been overwhelmingly successful, as I have yet to see any insurmountable technical difficul-
ties. However, even with students collaborating and learning together, teachers must be prepared for the occasional emergency. In these cases, it is best that teachers are able to direct students to useful resources. A number of guides exist online, both for creating machinima and for using each of the different software applications required to complete a machinima project. Being prepared to direct students to online technical resources, troubleshooting, and FAQ guides can stave off a number of problems.

Another potentially more problematic issue is student resistance to the project. In my experience this has been minor, and students are generally more excited by the idea that they can make a video than concerned with the gaming aspect. Still, contrary to popular media depictions, many students do not play video games, and approaching this as a project specifically for or about games may lead to student resistance. One way to combat this concern is to provide students a number of platforms with which to create machinima. An engine like Second Life, or even The Sims, has a less identifiable style and often provides many more customization options to allow students to create something less game-like and more film-like. Another possibility that allows students the ability to integrate a variety of digital source material without involving games, would be suggesting the creation of videos that still use screen capture software but do not require games. An excellent example of this style of film is Michael Wesch’s (2007) “The Machine is Us/ing Us.” This video uses screen capture software to record webpages, editing, and Microsoft Word; and to make a persuasive argument about the nature of web 2.0 technologies. Many of the same principles of creating a machinima apply directly to the creation of this style of video and do not require the use of gaming technologies.

**Conclusion**

As one of the final daily activities for this unit I have asked my students to get into pairs and create rubrics. While I intend to keep the purpose of this activity a surprise, my students jokingly accuse me of using their labor to create a rubric I will then grade them on. “Not so!” I gleefully exclaim. You are making a rubric that you will grade yourselves on. This twist shocks them into a momentary silence. Seizing the opportunity, I continue: fifty percent of their grade on the video project will be in their hands, but they must defend the grade
they assign themselves in a reflection paper that explains how their video meets each criterion. The other fifty percent of their grade will be my assessment of the project’s strengths. And, as if this information is not shocking enough, one final twist. While they will produce rubrics in pairs, they will vote as a class to decide which rubric best assesses a well-designed machinima project. I worry that their rubrics will be largely arbitrary, including superfluous categories like “meets the time limit requirement,” but I am impressed by the results. Categories like “Cultural Context” (which counts for 30% in their rubric) and “Thematic Development” (which counts for 20% and refers to the thoughtful incorporation of game elements) suggest that they have developed an awareness of the issues I have tried to put forward in this unit.

Using machinima in the classroom offers teachers and students a chance to look behind the screen, so to speak, and explore the theories and assertions that many contemporary theorists make about new media. While we can certainly lecture students about current copyright laws and the restrictions they place on creativity, situating students in a space where they can actually experience these issues firsthand provides a much more compelling learning environment. We cannot expect students to come to us ready to create exciting and challenging multimedia projects without significant scaffolding, and yet it nonetheless seems crucial that, for students to be savvy media users and consumers, knowledge about multimedia and multi-modal composition is imperative. Whether students intend to make another machinima ever again or not, creating one provides a valuable experience that can, hopefully, make other forays into the creation of new media projects more appealing and less intimidating. Perhaps more importantly, even if students never intend to make another machinima, we might hope that creating one will engender a new and more nuanced relationship with all media objects. After creating machinima projects, concepts like the modularity and remix-ability of new media are more evident and relevant to students, who have now experienced them. As Olli Sotoma (2007) writes “if we assume that the consumption of film allows a certain amount of play through interpretation, then the making of fan fiction becomes an act of transformative play” (p. 386). Inviting students to play in machinima invites them to play in media, to push against the boundaries in technology and forms, to find out what is and isn’t possible, to question, to challenge.
References


