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My Life as an Avatar, Ian Patterson

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The Horseless Carriage: Does Machinima create a new model for cinema or an even greater paradigm shift for narrative?

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Abstract:

In this presentation we will look at the emerging film genre of 'Machinima'¹, and investigate– through the use of practice – as to whether the creation of films within virtual environments, Second Life, World of Warcraft et al, can offer new opportunities for access and creativity.

It has been observed that technology in a state of transformation often evolves in stages, the initial stage of evolution being an imitation of previous practice. Perhaps the best paradigm of this progression is the 'horseless carriage'. The first automobile design was inspired by the horse-and-buggy; the initial pioneers in the field – Daimler, Maybach, Benz ² – would never have envisaged the paradigm shift the automobile was to have on transportation.

The ability to construct a narrative - whether fictional or non-fictional - has changed with the passage of time. In some cases the shift has been small, the same medium but just more, in other cases we see a paradigm shift. This is when the medium actually stops emulating what has gone before, to become an entirely new example.

To investigate this further we need to look at the way in which narrative has moved forward. Each shift having a convergence point where the narrative changes from one medium to another. But identification of these shifts presents a problem, expressed by interactive artist Toni Dove:

*"Making interactive movies is working in a medium that doesn't exist yet, like a Zoetrope inventor in the nineteenth century, working before film became a medium. Only the initial flickerings exist. It is working between things – between disciplines, between something that was/is and something that will be."*³

¹ **Definition:** fusion of machine cinema or machine animation; is both a collection of associated production techniques and a new film genre defined by those techniques.

² Gottlieb Daimler, Wilhelm Maybach, and Karl Benz built the first milestone automobiles in 1889.

³ Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (2002), "New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative", **The Space Between: Telepresence, Re-animation and the Re-casting of the Invisible** (Toni Dove) Pg. 219, BFI

Given this statement we need to formulate an approach by looking at the tipping points between paradigm shifts; examining the catalysts required for a shift in comparison to an expansion. An event already theorised by new media artist, theorist and critic Lev Manovich who comments:

*"I believe that the next generation of cinema – what I will call macrocinema – will add multiple windows to its language. When this happens, the tradition of spatial narrative, which twentieth century cinema suppressed, will re-emerge once again."*⁴

Annika Blunck in 'New Screen Media – Cinema/Art/Narrative', further defines this vision of narrative evolution as:

*"Whatever exceeds the cinema customary film projections and which questions the conditions of performance through including the passive spectator into the event, which only becomes clearer when he himself actively influences the designing & screening of the film."*⁵

The concepts of 'spatial narrative', 'macrocinema' and 'expanded cinema' foretell the next paradigm shift in narrative. But this convergence of narrative is not a new concept it has occurred before with the movement from theatre to cinema.

In the early nineteenth century Sergei Eisenstein was a pioneer of early cinema, his experiments in 'avant-garde' theatre brought about a new understanding of how cinema could be used to relay narrative. In his "Eisenstein as Theorist" essay, Dana B. Polan described this convergence as:

*"If theatre maintained its conventionality-that is, if it was honest to its own ontology-it would contain little possibility for a dialectical understanding of a dialectical substance outside the stage action, for traditional theatre contained little that was extra-theatrical. If theatre was filled with physicality imported from without, that very same ontology would be brought under attack and theatre would cease to be theatre. Eisenstein describes what happened next: "the cart dropped to pieces, and its driver dropped into the cinema" ("Through Theatre to Cinema," p. 8)."*⁶

This concept of a paradigm shift in narrative is further explained in Thorold Dickinson's essay "The Maturing Cinema". On Eisenstein, Dickinson writes:

"he naturally exploited environment, which was the asset of the silent film that was lacking in the theatre. Out of the abundance of his experiments, the most revolutionary was his demonstration of the cinema's capacity to generalise, to illustrate ideas. Until then, everyone had accepted the scope of cinema to be

⁴ Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (2002), "New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative", **Spatial Computerisation and Film Language** (Lev Manovich) Pg. 70, BFI

⁵ Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (2002), "New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative", **Towards Meaningful Spaces** (Annika Blunck) Pg.56, BFI

⁶ Dana B. Polan (1977), Cinema Journal, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 14-29, **Eisenstein as Theorist**, Pg. 20-21, University of Texas Press

limited to reflecting the particular, the anecdote, the story.”⁷

Given that we have established that narrative evolves with technological change and taking into account what has gone before; is Machinima the next paradigm shift in narrative or just another example unable to fulfil its potential?

This field of research is important because its development is a precursor to changes in the media industry as a whole. Like the development of non-linear editing in the early 90s changed television production, the tools developed for Machinima could provide new opportunities for virtual film production, and an even greater evolution in narrative.

Biography: Born in Manchester, he received a BA Hons. Television & Radio in 1998 and an MA. Documentary in 2000, both from the University of Salford. Since 1998 he has worked as an editor on independent productions, commercial features and terrestrial/satellite television. During this time he has worked on several programmes that have won North West 'Royal Television Society' awards: of which 'Best Factual' in 1998, 'Best Newcomer' in 2005 and 'Best Regional Programme' in 2006 stand out as highlights. He has certification in Avid's industry standard editing software and is 'Pro Certified' in several Apple post-production applications. Since January 2008 he has been based at the Adelphi Research Institute, where he is undertaking a doctoral degree in the field of 'Machinima'.

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⁷ Thorold Dickinson (1964-65), The Journal of the Society of Cinematologists, Vol. 4, pp. 9-19, **The Maturing Cinema**, Pg. 14, University of Texas Press