

Alexander Schwinghammer

Reporting / Narrating / Storytelling – Anthropological Explorations into Machinima & Its Neighbours

2008

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19807>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schwinghammer, Alexander: Reporting / Narrating / Storytelling – Anthropological Explorations into Machinima & Its Neighbours. In: Yvonne Gächter, Heike Ortner, Claudia Schwarz u.a. (Hg.): *Erzählen – Reflexionen im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung / Storytelling – Reflections in the Age of Digitalization*. Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press 2008, S. 283–290. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19807>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a Deposit License (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual, and limited right for using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute, or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the conditions of use stated above.

Reporting / Narrating / Storytelling – Anthropological Explorations into Machinima & Its Neighbours

Alexander Schwinghammer

Abstract

Beginning with the theatre of ancient Greece, proceeding to television news and ending with computer in-game generated machinima, this paper takes a look at the momentums of inter-mediality and inter-mediation interwoven with the event and the representation as an event. Ancient Greek Theatre and television news serve as points of reference to inquire game engine based machinima and its medial performative displays. Overall this paper aims to contribute to anthropological approaches to game studies and to trigger discussions rather than casting a theoretical paradigm in iron.

Event & Staging

With the question of media theorist Wolfgang Ernst whether “the past, that fragmented landscape of data [should] always be described in stories” (Ernst 1999, S. 53), this text explores the anthropological dimensions of reporting.

Theatre

The messenger of ancient Greek theatre is our first point of reference. As rhetorical figures of the ancient Greek drama, the – typically anonymous – stage figure tells of events occurring within the time scale of the narrative itself, in the immediate or the very recent past (Goward 1999). Messengers appear on stage to report about the *events* that lie or happen *beyond*. Therefore we concentrate on the relationship of event and presentation, while keeping the special moment of mediation in mind which the messenger definitely represents.

The Event

In regard to the *economy of attention*, the exceptional, the uncommon, the sudden, the surprising and the violation of the norm seem to be the very prerequisites to guarantee medial presentation. As what attains medialisation are *events*, the medium is the place where the event gains perceptibility. Most interestingly, the medial presentation itself becomes an event. But as the possible events roam the landscape of data, the event is, may it be factual or factitious, while prefiguring any kind of report, in the end intangible. These events may be the military action of the Persian war or it may be Thyestes killing his nephews and feeding them to his brother. On the whole, they can be considered *obscene* in the literal sense for being too gross, too bizarre to be put on stage, on the *scenae*. Therefore the incident needs to be mediated in a way as it is changed, incorporated into the messenger whose performance gives appearance to what seemed intangible. Considering this intangibility of the event (Derrida

2003), any attempt of representation turns out to be *staging*. Wolfgang Iser (1991) argues that staging is giving appearance to something ultimately unrepresentable.

Media: Means and Inter-Mediator

Reporting audiovisual media predominately pursues this task to make events look like *something*. Following the argument mentioned above that appearance is given to something intangible, a strange and peculiar *participation* in the event is rendered possible, offering the audience participation through eye and ear by giving it structure, visualization and narration (Gerhard 2004) especially through a narrative figure like a messenger or an anchorman. Therefore storytelling is not only a central mode of communication in reporting, which is emphasized by Mats Ekström (2000) among others. Storytelling also becomes a central category of an anthropological¹ approach to media presentations.

Presentation and *Präsentationsgeschehen*

What we see on stage or screen is something that can possibly be described as *Formgeschehen*, displaying the regimes of viewing and showing as well as the fields of tension in the multilayered network of integration and demarcation, appropriation and refusal, opening up the opportunity to inquire the medial presentations' emergence and advancement (Faßler 2005). It includes the necessary procedures for production, testing and defining and for developing strategies after which the materiality of a presentation is done *performatively*.

Medium & Machinima

Strolling through forms of medial expression, we stop at something that is either called *game movies* or more appropriately *machinima*.

What is Machinima?

Machinima is a technique and a medial format that relies on the use of game engines, – mostly 3D, – to generate a recorded performance in virtual environments of the game worlds. By certain practices of appropriation, computer gamers use a game engine for something that apparently it was not intended for originally. A development that can be described with Henry Jenkins' words as “consumers who also produce” and “spectators who also participate” (Jenkins 1999, S. 208). According to Michael Nitsche, “it [the emergence of machinima] is rooted in the gaming community that is part of gamers' nature but it also applies cinematic language” (Nitsche 2005, S. 210). Technically, it can be realized as a linear video clip, similar to found video footage or as a “live-performance”. Offering the highest level of interactive

¹ The term *anthropological* here refers not solely to an ethnological model but to a more general concept of anthropology as found in theories by Helmuth Plessner, Hans Belting, Wolfgang Iser, Manfred Faßler, and others.

functionality, the “live-performance” machinima has the most potential for interactive storytelling. Michael Nitsche’s argument points into this direction; key aspects are the testing of the limits of the underlying game engine, the remediation of cinematic effects and something that can be described as a form of visual puppetry. Considering the limitations, particularly in the actors’ controls and animations, especially in the early types, many machinima clips take the appearance of quite simple video clips or dance videos.



Fig. 1: Dance Video (“She’s a Lady”; World of Warcraft Game Engine)

Machinima: The Medium, the Visual, the Form

The general argument concerning machinima is that it offers access to new forms that combine cinematic visualization and live performance.

The type of machinima we inquire further is one that takes television news as a starting point:



Fig. 2: Machinima News (World of Warcraft Game Engine)



Fig. 3: *Gnomogan News (World of Warcraft Game Engine)*

Definitely such newscasts do not pretend to cover real events, but those of the game world, which may refer to so-called “real” events of the World of Warcraft world, which are an issue at that moment in the gaming community or they are just made up for the machinima clip.

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin introduced the concept of “remediation” to digital media defining it as “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter & Grusin 1999, S. 45). It describes the use of many pre-existing media elements in newer formats. Certainly, the “looks” of machinima clips show the game engines by which they were created, but the more interesting aspect is the appropriative use of it. As mentioned before, most acting figures are controlled through virtual puppetry, making a collaborative approach necessary to create a machinima. The producers use the visual and structural pre-figuration of television news shows to create a television news re-mediation and use it to create some kind of comedy about and in the Warcraft World.

But, apart from offering specific aesthetics, do these features translate into new forms of storytelling?

In general, machinima clips are mostly linear computer animations coming at low development costs and fast production cycles. The question remains whether Michael Nitsche (2005) is right in his claim that the post-production edited machinima offers just a limited range of new forms of interactive storytelling. These machinima forms are more or less heading towards linear video formats. That – concerning interactive cinematic storytelling – the ‘live’ machinima could be a more promising form is still a topic of the ongoing debate.

So far it can be said that, while the online games as a whole gave birth to a new kind of participatory culture, machinima is a concentration of appropriative practices that show a shift to – what Olli Sotamaa called – “participatory design and beyond” (Sotamaa 2005, S. 14). Might machinima therefore be a point of departure to discuss Marie-Laure Ryan’s statement, that it is “the task of the writer, in the digital age, is to design a narrative experience that grants agency to its users” (Ryan 2004, S. 357)?

Anthropocentrism?

Coming back to visibility, to the event and to the question of the storyteller, we start with television.

If one inquires the presented continuity of television news, they seem to consist of news footages, live reports, experts, interviews, anchormen, trailers etc. The experience of watching is one of fragmentation, of heterogeneity: a “splintered window”, as Felix Guattari called it (Guattari 1996, S. 6). Parts are put together; visibility is transformed, perhaps re-mediated. If one refers to the notion of staging or *Inszenierung*, one can describe the transformative processes and also the strategies to assemble texts and images into the communicative architecture of medial presentation, which heavily draws on imagination as a part of storytelling. Neither texts nor images show what an event really *is*, they probably show *how* it was seen and *which* forms of medial expressions are created or are brought forward. Central to all this is the anchor, who apparently fulfils the classical tasks of a storyteller: holding the structure together, sorting out what can be considered “important” and establishing wider connections in creating a specific narrative framework. While he or she offers the audience participation through eye and ear, the peculiar participation in the event is rendered possible. However frightening, disastrous or inexpressible an event might be, it gets domesticated as part of the narration, stabilized by the calm demeanour of the anchor. Thomas Macho (1996) as well as Sacha Knoche (2007) pointed out noteworthy approaches by emphasizing the visage or the facial spheres as important aspects of an anthropological thinking about the media.

The anthropologist Sacha Knoche argues that “in view of the history of civilization and media, facial perception, biological and technical facial recognition, ritual and artistic representations of faces and, more recently, virtual creation and surgical shaping of faces are meaningful processes, which are not just intertwined with anthropogenesis itself; within the procedures and used techniques, of which some are relatively young, we repeatedly encounter strong indications of the creativity and complexity of acts of human self-perception, self-observation, and self-description about and through the face” (Knoche 2007). Quite convincingly Knoche stated, “the face becomes fascination”. Thus the question of the possible changes for storytelling in the digital age shifts to the question where the storyteller might be located. But how to deal with this problematic anthropocentricity that seems to appear regardless of the used media?

Conclusion – Back to Machinima

To conclude on the different medial presentations and their peculiar interferences with pictures, texts and sounds in regard to changing frames, *machinima* projects have a strong momentum to evoke a trajectory for an anthropological thinking about mediality. I would agree that we should research those moments of work *in* and *with* the machine or the Internet. Agency cannot solely be attributed to the machine. The emergence of forms is linked to what can be called *Entwurfsprozesse* (Faßler 2005), therefore stressing an anthropological thinking of the medium as the expression of the medial, and as an anthropological process. Concerning

storytelling, the art of it definitely underwent great changes and probably suffered severe crises during the 20th century. It may be true that “through the centuries, the narrative craft – traditionally understood as describing the course of actual or imagined events – has not only looked to societal and political changes for inspiration, but, through formal modifications, has also signalled and itself become an expression of these societal developments” (Dinkla 2004). Many theorists claim that storytelling as a cultural practice apparently seems to have experienced a “Virtual Renaissance” at the end of the 20th century. But the question remains whether these narrative practices really *do* constitute a renaissance of storytelling. And do they generate new forms or do these changes rather represent a step back in time to the era prior to post-modern criticism and before widespread questioning of representation as an acceptable means of reflecting reality? Agency might be a key-term for these new forms.

In regard to Marie-Laure Ryan’s statement that it is the challenge for the writers, the designers, to create experiences that grant agency to its users, it is the task of the researchers, the critics and the theorists to clarify and explain what is gained by meeting this challenge.

References

- Bolter, J & Grusin, R. (1999) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Derrida, J. (2003) *Eine gewisse unmögliche Möglichkeit, vom Ereignis zu sprechen*. Berlin, Merve.
- Dinkla, S. (2004) Virtual Narrations. From the Crisis of Storytelling to New Narration as a Mental Potentiality. Available from: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/narration/> [Accessed 23 January 2008].
- Ekström, M. (2000) Information, Storytelling and Attractions: TV Journalism in Three Modes of Communication. *Media, Culture & Society* 22, pp. 465–492.
- Engel, L. (1996) Das Amedium. Grundbegriffe in Auflösung: Ereignis und Erwartung. *montage/AV* 5 Jan., pp. 129–153.
- Ernst, W. (1999) Modular Readings (Writing the Monument): The Case of the Lapis Satricanus. *Rethinking History* 3 (1), pp. 53–73.
- Fassler, M. (2005) *Erdachte Welten. Mediale Evolution globaler Kulturen*. Wien/New York, Springer.
- Paul, G. (2004) *Bilder des Krieges Krieg der Bilder. Die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges*. Paderborn, Schöningh.
- Goward, B. (1999) *Telling Tragedy. Narrative Technique in Aeschylus, Sophokles and Euripides*. London, Duckworth.
- Guattari, F. (1996) Vers Un Ère Post-Média. *Chimeres* 28, pp. 5–7.
- Iser, Wolfgang (1991), *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre, Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Jenkins, H. (1992) 'Strangers no more, we sing': Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community. In: Lewis, L. (ed.) *The Adoring Audience*. London: Routledge, pp. 208–236.
- Knoche, S. (2007) *Im Angesicht! Zwischen Faszination und Immersion. Bemerkungen zur Magie fazialer Räume*. Conference paper given at the "Internationale Forschungskonferenz I hoch 4 – Interaktivität/Information/Interface/Immersion", 24–26 October 2007, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt.
- Macho, T. (1996) Vision und Visage. Überlegungen zur Faszinationsgeschichte der Medien. In: Müller-Funk, W. & Reck, H.-U. (eds.) *Inszenierte Imagination. Beiträge zu einer historischen Anthropologie der Medien*. Wien/New York, Springer-Verlag, pp. 87–108.
- Nitsche, M. (2005) Film live: And Excursion into Machinima. In: Bushoff, B. (ed.) *Developing Interactive Narrative Content*. Munich, High Text, pp. 210–243.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2004) Will New Media Produce New Narratives? In: Ryan, M.-L. (ed.) *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 337–360.

- Sotamaa, O. (2003) *Computer Game Modding, Intermediality and Participatory Culture*. Paper presented at the PhD course “New Media? New Theories? New Methods?” 1–5 December 2003, Aarhus University. Available from URL: <http://old.imv.au.dk/eng/academic/pdf_files/Sotamaa.pdf>
- Thompson, J.B. (2000) *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*. Cambridge, Polity.