

Game Over for Machinima: Fan and Creator Reactions to the Loss of Gaming Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The main case study in this project is the privatisation of all YouTube videos across the Machinima network which took place in January 2019, followed by the official closure of the company a couple of weeks after. Machinima here refers to the company founded in 2000 and multi-channel network of YouTube channels started in 2006, not Machinima the digital artform/medium itself (although Machinima videos were popular content (Ito 2011) on the channel). The privatisation of all Machinima channels resulted in an effective loss of 13 years of gaming fan culture videos that had been viewed almost 6 billion times. As news broke about this phenomenon many ex-Machinima staff and content creators shared their opinions and thoughts online, with the twitter hashtag #RIPmachinima trending after the channel privatisation.

Machinima as a YouTube entity was a multi-channel network, a singular content aggregate channel (Burgess 2018) that offered contracts to other videogame content creators in exchange for posting their video on the Machinima channel for increased exposure. In the early years of the Machinima YouTube channel, fan made content was the only thing uploaded, with in-house Machinima made productions coming much later (around 2010 onwards) when the company had become a successful brand. Machinima was extremely successful on YouTube, for the longest time being among the top most subscribed to channel on the platform.

The removal of the videos came as a shock not only to fans of these videos but the content creators who made the videos themselves as the privatisation was instant and without any warning to creators. This instantaneous loss prevented creators and fans from backing up their old content, some of which was only available on the Machinima YouTube channels. While the closure of Cyberworlds and online games have been studied before (Márquez 2014), and there are certainly similarities in the closure of this content aggregation network, the difference here being that most of the content was contributed by other creators, not the closing company itself.

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The reaction online was mixed, with posts displaying a range of emotions such as anger at Machinima as a corporate entity, humour and memes to cope with the loss, and nostalgia and reminiscing about the good times all appearing on different social media and news outlets reporting on the incident. Xanatos creator behind Machinima's most popular video "Counter Strike for Kids" posted regarding the loss of his "Legacy" on his Facebook fan page in response to the news; "with machinima's channel being completely wiped, my legacy is officially gone from the internet. people like you guys are the last ones keeping it alive. thanks for being here. this video was the #1 most viewed video on their channel, all time, with almost 19 million hits."

Some creators tried to rationalize the decision, in that while Machinima legally owns the content produced while under contract for the company, the sense of loss of an entire creator's body of work is understandable "I kind of made my peace a long time ago, that the kind of content production I'm in is recurring and disposable. So while I still invest a lot of effort into it, I'm not under any illusions that people will be watching this a month from now, much less years from now. I guess there is some emotional impact that you put all this work and time into something that is now gone. But I did that knowing that when I made that thing, I was getting paid to produce it for a company that they then owned." (Sonntag 2019)

Other fans lamented the loss of nostalgia or their "childhood" with many mentioning how Machinima videos they watched influenced current day content creators they now watch. This is similar to the way people discuss games they played as a child having influence over present day gaming choices (Suominen 2007).

The idea that the Machinima channel was somehow part of gaming history and culture is a recurrent theme among the coverage and reaction to the video privatisation. A tweet from Twitter user TRAFON, liked over 1300 times read "The saddest thing about Machinima's deletion spree is the sheer amount of internet History that is just lost forever. So many great series, starts, ends for so many people, since 2006. The growth of YouTube and its culture, gone. Otter Media are assholes for that."

Wes Fenlon writer for PCGamer covered the event with a piece titled "Machinima is a good reminder of just how disposable the internet is" generating much discussion from commenters as to how the videos could have been preserved. Some stating that Machinima should have preserved the channel as an archive, and some saying fans should have been archiving the videos themselves on sites such as archive.org. Online cultural loss and preservation of Machinima can be looked at in comparison to other intangible heritage preservation studies (Alivizatou 2016) and other examples of fan content removal such as with the livestreamer POOBear (Witkowski, Manning 2018).

A final thing to note is that this also has an effect on us as games researchers, as there is now an entire period of online gaming culture that influenced current videogame spectatorship culture that is unavailable or at least very difficult to access.

This paper aims to use virtual ethnographic practices (Pink et al 2016) collect and compare the reactions and ways in which both fans and content creators deal with the loss of a large part of online gaming culture, and the resulting collective and social memory (Assmann, Czaplicka 1995) of Machinima and the networked public culture (Russell et al 2008) it was a part of. This will take the shape of interviews with creators and fans, along with looking at comments and reactions across social media sites.

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