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Underground machinima is making waves

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To date, Pixar's "Finding Nemo" has netted more than \$320 million at the box office, proving that, at the moment, computer animation is a big ticket. But it's a big ticket that comes with a big price. "Nemo" cost approximately \$90 million to produce.

Most of us don't have that kind of money lying around to draw together a team of computer-savvy graphics magicians. But what if you could create your own CG-animated feature at a fraction of the price? Say, 50 bucks?

It's called machinima, a train-wreck of the words "machine" and "cinema," and it's an underground art form on the verge of a big breakout. Machinima is essentially the art of computer-image moviemaking, but it uses a set of existing graphics engines -- namely those from the latest PC games, such as "Unreal Tournament 2003."

The budding art form started years ago, when gamers jamming to id's "Quake" started recording their game sessions, then used an editor to splice that footage into a cohesive story line, complete with dialogue. These rudimentary but clever vignettes found an audience, not surprisingly, on the Internet.

Narrated "Quake" matches became mini-movies, thanks to the widespread use of "mods" and "skins," personalized textures dropped over a game's graphics engine. With a little Photoshop skill, "Quake's" space cowboys easily become a chef, a gargoyle, or whatever imagination dictated. And once gamers/filmmakers had access to limitless casts and sets, machinima was truly born.

The almost-phenomenon even has its own peer group, known as the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences (www.machinima.org), located in New York City.

Paul Marino, executive director at the academy, helped create the organization in March 2002 because "several of the machinima teams around the world realized they were trying to get the voice out there. We created the Academy to be that one voice."

The makeup of the Academy reveals the art's global roots. Two of the founding members are animators from Scotland. Marino says there is quite a bit of machinima development occurring in Europe right now.

Marino is also a member of ILL Clan, a group of machinima artists founded in 1998 that has gained notoriety for "Hardly Workin'," their most popular short. At the 2001 Showtime Networks' Alternative Media Festival, "Workin'" won best of Show and best experimental short awards.

Another machinima group, Fountainhead Entertainment (www.fountainheadent.com), recently produced the first machinima music video for the British band Zero 7, which is airing on MTV. G4's "Portal" features a half-hour of machinima-esque animation from games such as "EverQuest" and "The Sims." Perhaps one of the most ambitious projects is Jake Hughes' "Anachronox: The Movie," the first feature-length machinima movie.

Machinima's potential has not been lost on the game developers, either. According to Marino, several gamemakers are including machinima tools with upcoming games, such as Valve's "Half-Life 2" and id's highly anticipated "Doom III." While these games will likely not be out in time for entrants in the Academy's upcoming 2002 film fest, bowing this October, expect to see some very impressive entries next year, based on these new, powerful graphics engines.



Machinima is not strictly for computer users, though. Microsoft's "Halo," still the Xbox's biggest seller, has inspired a few console gamers to get in on the scene. "The Blood Gulch Chronicles," by Red vs. Blue team, is a popular series of shorts using action-packed "Halo" clips set to deliriously existential dialogue.

Despite its explosion, is it likely that machinima will put Pixar out of work anytime soon? Probably not, but it is possible machinima could change the way computer graphics are handled on television.

The complex images in "Nemo" take days to produce, too long for television-oriented animators. With the latest generation of game engines promising (and delivering) outrageously detailed visuals on-the-fly, don't be surprised if the next kid's show sensation is produced via machinima.

"It has a really promising future," says Marino. Thanks to its speed, "it takes on a filmmaking approach as opposed to traditional animation."

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