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## The Xbox Auteurs

Though it shares with independent filmmaking a do-it-yourself aesthetic, machinima inverts the central tradition of indie film: smallness. With their skimpy budgets, indie directors tend to set movies in kitchens or living rooms -- and focus instead on providing quality acting and scripts. Machinima, in contrast, often has horribly cheesy acting and ham-fisted, purple-prose stories -- but they're set in outer space. Want massive shootouts? Howling mob scenes? Roman gladiatorial armies clashing by night? No problem. It is the rare form of amateur film in which the directors aspire to be not Wes Anderson but George Lucas.

Indeed, with video games played on computers, it is now possible to build an entire world from scratch. The core of any video game is its game engine, the software that knows how to render 3-D objects and how to realistically represent the physics of how they move, bounce or collide. But the actual objects inside the game -- the people, the cars, the guns, even the buildings -- can be altered, tweaked or replaced by modifications, or "mods." Mods do not require any deep programming skills; indeed, almost any teenager with a passing acquaintance in graphic-design software can "re-skin" a character in a game to make it look like himself, for instance. (Xbox and PlayStation games, in comparison, are much harder to mod, because the consoles are locked boxes, designed to prevent players from tampering with the games.)

I was able to see modding in action one night when I visited the ILL Clan, a pioneering machinima group. Their headquarters are the kitchen table in the cramped one-bedroom Brooklyn apartment of Frank Dellario; a lanky, hyperkinetic 42-year-old, he sat on a rickety folding chair, pecking at a keyboard. The table was littered with four computer screens and laptops, the remnants of take-out sushi and a hopelessly tangled morass of computer cords and joysticks; a huge wide-screen TV lurked behind them for viewing their work. On the night I visited, they were using a game engine called Torque to shoot a short heist movie for Audi, in which two thugs beat up a concert violinist and make off with an antique violin in a van.

To quickly create a gritty-looking city, Dellario and his colleague -- ILL Clan's co-founder, Matt Dominianni -- hired a local artist to build a generic-looking urban intersection

inside the game. To customize it, Dominianni went onto Google, found snapshots of a few seedy stores (an adult bookstore, a tattoo parlor and a furniture outlet) and digitally pasted them onto the front of the buildings. Then they went to a site called Turbo-Squid, a sort of Amazon for virtual in-game items, and for \$45 bought a van that could be plunked down inside the game. When I arrived, they were browsing the site and contemplating buying a few women. "My God, look at this one," Dellario marveled, as he clicked open a picture of an eerily realistic 3-D brunette named Masha. "I'm going to marry this woman. They've finally broken through to total reality."

Dellario put the van into the correct location in the scene, then logged into the game to figure out the camera angle for this shot. He frowned. It didn't look right. The lighting was all off, with shadows falling in the wrong places.

Dominianni figured out the problem: "The sun is supposed to be at high noon. It's in the wrong place."

"Oh, yeah," Dellario said. "Let me move it." He pulled up a menu, clicked on the "sun" command, and dragged it across the sky.

Now they were finally ready to shoot. Dellario realized they needed an extra pair of hands to manipulate one of the thugs. "Want to act in this scene?" Dellario asked, and he handed me a joystick.

I sat down at one of the computers and took control of "Thug1," a brown-haired man in a golf shirt and brown pants, carrying the stolen violin. Dominianni was playing "Thug2." Our characters were supposed to look around to make sure the coast is clear, then jump in the truck and race off. Dellario gave me my motivation: "It's like you hear a suspicious noise. You're nervous." I used the joystick to practice moving my virtual character, craning its neck -- my neck? -- back and forth. I have played plenty of video games, but this felt awfully odd. Usually when I am inside a game, I'm just worried about staying alive while the bullets whiz past my ears. I've never had to emote.

While Dellario and Dominianni fiddled with the camera angle, I grew impatient and wandered around, exploring the virtual set. I peered in a few shop windows -- they were strikingly photorealistic, even up close. Then I walked down an alley and suddenly arrived at the end of the set. It was like a tiny Western town in the desert: once you got beyond the few clustered buildings, there was nothing there -- just a vast, enormous plain, utterly empty and stretching off infinitely into the distance.