

**“We should have brought the tank”: Hypermediated Interactivity in  
*Red vs. Blue***

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## **Abstract**

Machinima, the practice of adapting recorded video game play into short films, highlights an often unacknowledged but significant shift in the consumption of video games and represents a key and underexplored intersection between the two leading theoretical camps. Considering the landmark series *Red vs. Blue* through the lens of Bolter and Grusin's propositions about "new" media's relationships with other forms offers an entry point for theorizing not only machinima but also the intersections between the ludology and narratology positions in games studies.

Machinima, the practice of adapting recorded video game play into short films, highlights an often unacknowledged but significant still shift in the consumption of video games and represents a key and underexplored intersection between the two leading theoretical camps.<sup>1</sup> Considering the landmark series *Red vs. Blue* through the lens of Bolter and Grusin's propositions about "new" media's relationships with other forms offers an entry point for theorizing not only machinima, but also the intersections between the ludology and the narratology positions in games studies.<sup>2</sup> Although "interactivity" has long been one of the categories of video game criticism, it tends to obscure the fact that the consumption of any visual media is inherently interactive. The emphasis on the idea of interactive narrative (based on the influence of Henry Jenkins, Janet Murray, and other scholars) has led to video games studies which largely consider interactivity as a one-way process. As a counter, the *ludic* approach, favoured by Espen Aarseth, Marku Eskelinen, and others, eschews narratology in favour of considering games as distinct because the act of playing makes each encounter somewhat distinct. Indeed, Aarseth goes so far as to write, "the key elements, the narration and the game play, like oil and water, are not easily mixed" (50-1). However, many of the same arguments—on either side of the debate—could be made for a stage-play, whose audience often becomes a key element in any given rendition! It is little surprise, then, that we often read, both in academic

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<sup>1</sup>Traditionally, there has been a distinction between computer games and video games. While all video games require a computer of some sort, not all computer games are video games. Text-based adventure games, for example, rarely are considered video games. As well, many gamers and scholars prefer to make distinctions among console, arcade, and computer-based games. For the purposes of this paper, the popular term "video games" will apply, especially since the *Halo* series qualifies as such.

<sup>2</sup>While I prefer "digital culture" to "new media," this paper will adopt the latter term for the sake of agreement with the preponderance of theorists cited.

and in popular criticisms, of the effects of video games on players rather than the opposite being the case. Thus, machinima episodes reify the extent to which video game play has moved away from a consumption-based version of interactivity towards a relationship in which the player is clearly an always already producer of culture. While playing (with a game) is still a large part of the activity, the ultimate product hinges on a narrative. *Red vs. Blue*, one of the most popular internet-based machinima series, exemplifies this growing trend through its ongoing manipulations of the popular game, *Halo*, and its successors.

While video games (such as racing and amusement park “construction sets”) have offered players the opportunity to create their own levels and maps at least since the days of the Commodore 64, *Red vs. Blue*’s episodes, which purport to portray the life of the game’s characters when the game is not in play, represent a type of mediated experience that cannot be encompassed sufficiently by the prevailing trends in video game scholarship.<sup>3</sup> While it might seem logical to turn to cinema, to television or to “new” media scholarship, these betray their various biases via their concentration on the aspect the theoretical position approaches. As a symptom of this trend, there seem to be as many technical papers about the computational aspects of machinima, in journals such as the *IEEE Spectrum*, as there are about the medium itself.<sup>4</sup> Even scholars whose goal has been to bridge and to map these conceptual and scholarly

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<sup>3</sup>Here, Electronic Arts’ *Racing Destruction Set* stands out as a notable early example. As well, *Seven Cities of Gold* and *Lords of Conquest* were among the games that had creation routines to create new worlds for each particular game play session.

<sup>4</sup>For example, David Kushner’s piece, “Machinima’s Movie Moguls,” appears in *IEEE Spectrum*, while the most recent (2009) version of the *Handbook of research on computational arts and creative informatics* (James Brahma, et al, IGI Global) contains a chapter on machinima production. The trend coincides with increased production costs for film and for TV and, since 2008, with the global economic downturn.

divides do not yet offer a means of theorizing that elucidates machinima productions, which weave play and story on many levels. In their book, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain developments in new media by first examining their relationships with previous techniques. The process of rejecting, revising, and reproducing other media, or what they call “remediation,” takes two forms: immediacy and hypermediacy. Immediacy refers to the tendency of media forms to be transparent, or realistic. The latter concept describes the tendency of a new combination of media to draw attention to its own artificiality, or mediated elements. First, the avatars and the space are obviously from a video game, whether or not viewers are aware of *Halo*. Regardless, it does not take long to discover that the source code of *Red vs. Blue* comes from a video game. Therefore, viewers already know that video game characters do not have “off-screen” lives. The characterizations, despite the uniform blandness of the “performers,” whose only distinguishing feature is the colour of their battle armour, furthers the sense of hypermediacy. There is also a “female” character, whose gender is only revealed during an episode in which an accident breaks the electronic box that alters her voice. This serves as a reminder that one can never be sure of the identity of an online player. Finally, the series is entirely web-based, which further removes it from concerns of immediacy. In contrast, its dependence on *Halo* renders *Red vs. Blue* as a project that is almost entirely an exercise in hypermediacy. At the same time, *Red vs. Blue* shares many affinities with other Internet shorts such as *Homestar Runner*. These, in turn, have followings that resemble “cult TV” and fan fiction. The current iterations may exist in digital realms, but the scholarship inevitably winds its way through Jenkins’ positions in *Textual Poachers*—or those like them—which again run counter to game studies scholarship, and which do not fully encompass the extra elements of play afforded by the video games. In this regard, the fan fiction approach does not

just focus on the story; instead, it focuses on a presumptive story about the form, and its creators, as enacting resistance to late-capitalism. In contrast, machinima openly celebrates the product, the technology, and occasionally resembles contemporary skateboard culture's pandering for corporate sponsorship over romanticized DIY politics. Nevertheless, the two species of Bolter and Grusin's remediation can help to locate intersections of narratology with more ludic approaches, though without naming or elucidating them as such. Thus, the task remains to identify and to elaborate these intersections to provide an approachable paradigm for analysis. While remaining mindful of *Red vs. Blue*'s cult status, my paper will examine *Red vs. Blue* and offer an approach to reading video game play, one which goes beyond concerns of interactivity and performativity, and which considers the form as an outlet for multiple simultaneous hypermediated productions.

### **Get the flag rookie: The case for immediacy**

According to the Machinima Academy of Arts and Sciences, the name of the hybrid form derives from a combination of machine and cinema. It refers to the art of creating movies using techniques adapted from 3D modelling and from 3D animation produced by and within a video (or computer) game engine. Machinima can also refer to the output, to the style or to the product of the process. Paul Marino, head of the New York-based academy, claims that a 1996 production based on the popular game, *Quake*, "was the first time that someone had broken free of the first-person totally immersed perspective" (qtd. in Whyte). Regardless of the origins, or of the methods employed by machinimators, as the creators call themselves, Marino echoes the double logic of remediation that Bolter and Grusin outline: "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). The central problem for most media producers has been creating the

impression of being there, no matter which media form is in question, because “immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented” (6). The desire for transparency causes some seemingly contradictory tendencies, even in largely hypermediated productions. Bolter and Grusin conclude that as each successive generation of technology allows a greater degree of media transparency, it is entirely possible for immediacy to depend on and even to be embedded in a hypermediated text or site.

The subtitle for *Red vs. Blue, The Blood Gulch Chronicles*, hints at its combination of immediacy embedded in hypermediacy. Simply put, “being there”—*i.e.*, the logic of immediacy—could not exist without the hypermediated game and its immersive environment. *Halo* is one of the most popular video games produced to date. In its first-person shooter form, it chronicles the exploits of Master Chief, the last surviving Spartan, as he battles the Covenant on a ringworld known as Halo. However, the multi-player variants of the game occur within more specific locations. Blood Gulch, the setting for *Red vs. Blue*, is one of those locations. Part of the immediacy, then, of *Red vs. Blue* might derive from its negotiation of its well-defined—and extremely well-known—world. Story development has been impacted by the limits of the game. For example, an early episode in which the blue flag is captured could only be “filmed” with the Red and the Blue characters within the space because of the (algorithmic) rules of the game. The appearance of orange, pink, black and green characters had to wait until another episode. The creators report that some of the special effects in the game—such as the flying bullet casings, to which fans negatively responded—were unknown until filming began. An ongoing source of frustration is the idle function embedded in the game, which causes an idle avatar to “wake up,” which in turns interrupts filming. Fan reception of *Red vs. Blue* confirms the importance of its authors’ ability to operate within the parameters of the game engine. In the commentary

accompanying the Season One DVD, writer/director Burnie Burns and his colleague Geoff Fink explain the production methods, the content choices, and the fan reception of the web program. They frequently refer to the “game engine” of *Halo* and the challenges they faced. Burns calls *Halo* “a beautiful game” and a “great world for us to do all these videos in.” Nevertheless, operating within the parameters of the game can be difficult. For example, one of the first shots of the first season, which was meant to mimic a crane shot, required forty-five minutes of shooting to produce “five or six seconds” of actual running time.

The director and the actors also cite the responses of fans to the series, both in emails and in the online forums, which are included in the website, and which are cited in the commentaries for the DVDs of each season. As Burns explains, after episode one, “Griff was on top of Blue Base and Simmons was on top of Red Base. We didn’t think anybody would notice. I like the lighting better [ . . . ] but people knew the geography and they could see the logos in the background [ . . . ] Boy, they went nuts.” Thus, when filming subsequent episodes, *Red vs. Blue*’s creators responded to the reactions of fans. Similarly vociferous fan reactions occur whenever there has been a perceived a change in the voices of the characters. In such an instance, the creators reveal in the accompanying commentary of the Season Two DVD that they only changed the voice filters; that is, the filter which replicates the sound of speaking in the helmet. This type of fan ownership demonstrates the constant negotiation of the remediation process and will be a topic of further discussion.

There are some notable exceptions to the effort towards immediacy, at least as far as the game world is concerned. These occur through the efforts of the creators to maintain the limits of the game. The contemporary entertainment industry would call machinima a “repurposed property”; that is, something taken from one medium and reused in another (qtd. in Bolter &

Grusin 42). The creators of *Red vs. Blue* allow that they have employed Adobe Premier editing software to create some of the “ghost characters” who appear in the series.<sup>5</sup> As well, the multi-player version does not include the planes of the first-person shooter. To mimic a plane’s bombing run, the team edited and dissolved a series of grenade tosses. The sound, with the exception of explosions and gun-fire, is largely taken from “real” life. More telling is the obsession fans have for the character of Tex. Since the inception of the show, fans have claimed to see Tex, the only character with a cloaking capability, in nearly every episode. They have included the time at which the appearance occurs and have uploaded screenshots documenting the alleged apparition. In addition to its repurposing of *Halo*, *Red vs. Blue* also remediates television. The creators explain that their version of military humour derives not from experience—only one member of the team has any military experience—but from the stereotypical characterizations and what they term “office” or “bureaucratic” humour. In any case, they report, and their message boards confirm, that members of the armed services find affinities between their experiences and the humour employed by *Red vs. Blue*.

### **What’s a Warthog? The case for hypermediacy**

Bolter and Grusin explain this type of reception through the dual logic of remediation. They always conclude that transparency “remains the goal,” though they allow for refashioning the older medium or media “while still marking the presence of the older media and therefore maintaining a sense of multiplicity or hypermediacy” (46). This occurs, they argue, because the

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<sup>5</sup>A “ghost character” refers to a computational device game developers employ to track an avatar’s movements through the game world. While they can be used to test games, ghosts have become features of games so that players can watch their own gameplay or that of an idealized figure (Sandifer). Racing games, for example, often have ghost features to show players the best route around a given track.

“digital medium wants to erase itself, so that the viewer stands in the same relationship to the content as she would if she were confronting the original medium” (45). However, the act of refashioning and of leaving the viewer in the same relationship to the medium not only occurs because of hypermediation, it is a manifestation and a reminder of the hypermediated basis of that original production: “The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways” (47). This is not entirely the case, since there are at least two other reminders of the game besides its limitations: the targeting reticle and the efforts required to create the occasions in which it does not appear. In this regard, the targeting reticle—the circle with a concentric dot on the middle of the screen—is a nearly permanent reminder of the original game. It becomes more difficult to employ because it requires the avatar to have a gun in hand, often the shotgun, which is in turn a more challenging item to control. There is another, unacknowledged character/avatar in the space. The reticle changes colour based on a friend-or-foe identification system. It can be turned off provided the settings of the game have an extremely low response time selected. Players are not likely to do this in a multi-player game. It would make such play tedious and almost pointless. Here, some of Bolter and Grusin’s undertheorized or unconsidered corollary findings might provide a suitable basis for theorizing the process. They observe that “[r]efashioning within the medium is a special case of remediation, and it proceeds from the same ambiguous motives of homage and rivalry—what Harold Bloom has called the ‘anxiety of influence’—as do other remediations” (49). This line of thinking situates the theory of remediation among existing paradigms. Said another way, remediation itself remediates preceding theories. Northrop Frye, to whom Bloom pays tribute, and others would concur that the very act of authoring is itself the act of refashioning (*Anatomy*

95). M.M. Bakhtin's oft-cited "genre of genres" functions along the same lines (cf. 8). That said, a consideration of machinima offers an opportunity to propose a third level of remediation, one that resists immediacy in and through the acts of rivalry and homage, while simultaneously resting squarely on the intersection of ludology and narratology. The creators of *Red vs. Blue* frequently cite rivalry and (especially) homage as essential motivations for their remediation project and its intended responses. This is important because while they are playing for the sake of playing, the story as much as the game is the vehicle for that play. Moreover, the story is the product of that play.

As much as *Red vs. Blue* operates within the logic of remediation, it points to an unexamined observation in Bolter and Grusin's study. *Red vs. Blue*, and much of machinima, comprises a form that does not deny its technological basis so much as deliberately and explicitly celebrate it. Bolter and Grusin seemingly anticipate this possibility:

Computer programs may ultimately be human products, in the sense that they embody algorithms devised by human programmers, but once the program is written and loaded, the machine can operate without human intervention. [. . .] Programmers seek to remove the traces of their presence in order to give the program the greatest possible autonomy. In digital graphics, human programmers may be involved at several levels. [. . .] All of these classes of programmers are simultaneously erased at the moment in which the computer actually generates an image by executing the instructions they have collectively written. (27)

Yet, this passage reveals an important contradiction in the theory and in the medium that occasions it. Bolter and Grusin paradoxically reject authorial intent only to simultaneously reinscribe it. Human agency is not deferred in *Red vs. Blue*. Instead it is omnipresent. At the very

least, the targeting reticle on the screen serves as a constant reminder of the limits of the discursive space and of the intruding human agent within it. As well, Bolter and Grusin suggest that each successive layer of mediation attempts to mask or to render transparent the efforts of the programmers and operators who made it in the first place. They argue that immediacy generally renders the computer interface as an invisible, or an “interfaceless,” interface (23). Moreover, if the logic of immediacy leads one either to erase or to render automatic the act of representation, the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible. Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself – with windows that open on to other representations or other media. (33-4)

Given the various layers through which *Red vs. Blue* is mediated, the heterogeneous space includes the game engine, its multi-player world, television (and radio, by implication), Internet message boards, and websites (and print media, by implication). Regardless of the combinations, and their predecessor media, Bolter and Grusin always stress not only the centrality of immediacy, but also the overwhelming cultural tendency to turn to hypermediation to achieve it.

### **I Saw You: The Case for Paramediacy**

It is in terms of *Red vs. Blue*'s situation as a text representing both homage and rivalry that it steps outside the logic of immediacy as its ultimate and unavoidable aim. Although it is arguable that Bolter and Grusin overlook many forms of remediation when they suggest that the Internet remediates television, it is equally clear that *Red vs. Blue* does remediate television in several ways, including plots, familiar settings, characterizations, and its episodic structure. In

fact, the machinima makers show affinities with cult television fans, and fans of *Red vs. Blue* are even more similar to cult television fans. Here, it is worth recalling that John Fiske has described play as rooted in orientations of evasion or of resistance. This view still influences scholars and holds considerable weight among new media scholars, especially due to the influence of Henry Jenkins, one of Fiske's most notable students. Indeed, in his introduction to the recently released second edition of Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture*, Jenkins explains not only the importance of the "textual poachers" he and Fiske celebrate, but also reaffirms the usefulness of this framework by suggesting it as a method for analyzing user-developed content (xxx). Yet, the lack of an organized politics beyond an individualized idiosyncratic act betrays the existence of different, simultaneous motives.

Thus, other scholars have situated signifying play as a postmodern strategy, as a troublesome, disruptive performative act that defies easy categorization. In their introduction to *Cult TV*, Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson differentiate between that phenomenon and the more commonly studied category of the cult film. The most significant distinguishing feature of cult television is that a significantly large proportion of the viewers are avid fans and that the fans have higher visibility than avid fans of other shows. Visibility arises from the distinctive practices of cult television fans, which include the formation of loose interpretative communities and the production of tertiary texts such as fan fiction, scratch videos, cultural criticism essays, folk music, Web sites, and fan art. (xvi)

These audience practices arise from "imaginative involvement with the cult television narratives that afford fans enormous scope for further interpretation, speculation and invention" (xvi). In other words, these are neither the resistant readers Constance Penley finds among *Star Trek* slash fiction writers, nor the "textual poachers" Henry Jenkins hopefully describes. Yet,

these are still the pre-eminent and defining positions in the scholarship if only because they were among the first to map (portions of) the terrain.<sup>6</sup> Gwennllian-Jones and Pearson differ most starkly in arguing that cult TV, like the “vast amount of fan fiction writing, together with the production of Web sites, fan art, and the like, stems not from resistance to capitalism but rather from an imaginative engagement with cult television programs encouraged by the textual characteristic [of the form]” (xvi-xvii). This position holds when considering machinima. *Red vs. Blue*, for example, depends on, plays with, and celebrates the extensive knowledge the creators and the fans have for both *Halo* and the XBox 360 console. In terms of the audience for cult productions, David Bordwell comments, “culturalists of all stripes promote reception studies, whereby audiences are often held to appropriate films for their cultural agendas. Indeed, within the Cultural Studies position, notions of subversive film have given way to conceptions of resistant readers” (10). The notion that the text represents a site of resistance is misplaced insofar as the machinimators and their fans celebrate the very technology they are using and watching. The hypermediation of the game interface never dissolves into the immediacy Bolter and Grusin presuppose. Rather than appropriating the game, the users are actually repurposing the 3D game engine provided by the creators of the game, not only to play *Halo*, but to play with *Halo* and ultimately to play *for Halo*, or at least for the creators and owners of the *Halo* franchise. Certainly, someone could appropriate the rendering capabilities of a game like *Halo* to challenge or “to promote an alternative vision of cinematic ‘art,’ [by] aggressively attacking the established canon of ‘quality’ cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthetic discourses on

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<sup>6</sup>Here, it is important to acknowledge that Jenkins was among the first, and among the most prominent, scholars to consider video games as something other than a symptom—or worse—of mass cultural productions perpetuating little more than sex and violence.

movie art” as do the “paracinematic” texts from which Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson differentiate cult television (x).<sup>7</sup> Simply put, *Red vs. Blue* and other machinima do not really question *any* ruling discourses. Rather, they celebrate the source text (or code) through the repurposing of the media. In fact, this is largely in keeping with the behaviours begun when games such as *Racing Destruction Set* and later *Doom* allowed players to create their own levels and, more importantly, to share these with their friends.<sup>8</sup>

Burnie Burns, especially, explains the motivations and goals of *Red vs. Blue* as celebratory. Among those to whom he “pays homage” are the creators of the game, with its “great visuals.” To these people, Burns adds the creators and producers of other web series, most notably *Homestar Runner* and *Penny Arcade*. These series are cited during *Red vs. Blue Public Service Announcement 3*, in which the characters debate the merits of getting a tattoo. They agree that a tattoo of one’s favourite character from a web series would be acceptable. Characters from *Homestar Runner* and *Penny Arcade* are offered as examples. This represents a kind of breaking of the virtual fourth wall. Similarly, the popular Warthog flip from Season One pays homage to Randall Glass and his website warthogjump.com. To make the Warthog—what Burns calls the best innovation so far in a first-person shooter—jump hundreds of virtual feet in the air, Glass carefully arranged a series of grenade explosions to propel the vehicle skyward. He recorded the

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<sup>7</sup>Here, one must wonder about the so-called “nude raider” patches for *Tomb Raider*, which allegedly allowed for Lara Croft to play the game without her uniform of tank top and shorts. Less apocryphal is the “hot coffee mod” for *GTA: San Andreas*, an animated depiction of sexual intercourse which, though hidden, was inadvertently—the developers allege—left in the game’s source code.

<sup>8</sup>In this regard, fan-produced machinima has been theoretically possible for decades owing to the eventual inclusion of separate inputs for audio and video on VCRs. Even so, many audiences as recently as the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century were confounded when I included recorded gameplay in conference presentations.

event and put it on the web in an act that virtually says “see what I can do.” Glass has been rewarded for his pioneering efforts with guest appearances as the voice of Blue Command in several *Red vs. Blue* episodes.

Yet, it should be noted that as it exists *Red vs. Blue* is neither resistant nor tending towards immediacy. Here again, it shows affinities with the audience of cult television. Admittedly, “unlike many low-budget cult films aimed at niche audiences of aficionados, cult television is fairly mainstream fare” (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson xiii). However, contemporary cult television shows are likely to take full advantage of the available outlets, especially the Internet, which offers rapid and easy access, which in turns facilitates connections between and among fan subcultures, well beyond those of the traditional “word-of-mouth” promotion. Clearly, *Red vs. Blue* has an available and easily tapped audience: *Halo* players. Burns explains that one of the goals for *Red vs. Blue* is to encourage other gamers to attempt to mimic the moves shown in the episodes. In the commentaries on the DVDs, they explain many of the methods used in producing the episodes. At its height, the site received over 700,000 downloads per month, and its message boards not only provide responses to the text but also suggestions for later episodes (qtd. in Whyte). Sidewinder, for instance, was added in response to viewer emails. Perhaps not surprisingly, the creators of *Red vs. Blue* describe themselves in terms not unlike those adopted by zinesters. As Stephen Duncombe has shown, the self-defined losers who produce zines actually embrace “loserdom,” but not necessarily as resistance to the dominant culture’s mythological meritocracy. Burns jokes that they are the “pompous assholes” providing the “director’s commentary also featuring Jeff.” The *Red vs. Blue* cast members frequently refer to late nights, which interfere with their day jobs, and they admit to having “played *Halo* to death.” Certainly, zines and machinima offer responses to the dominant culture, but these

responses are formed and mediated by the desire to be recognized by that culture in and through its own criteria. Machinima takes this another step by combining homage for what could be termed a technocratic innovation with the creative output of content users.

### **Blue Sucks: Conclusions**

As much as *Red vs. Blue* subscribes to the logic of remediation—by repurposing Halo and by remediating other forms—the double logic Bolter and Grusin originally set forth is insufficient for theorizing (this variant of) machinima given its other broad attributes. As Anders Fagerjord explains, to subscribe to the double logic of remediation, “we must be convinced that there are no more logics than these two, that the two are really different, and that they are connected” (303). In fact, the two can be indistinguishable. Fagerjord concludes that “*Remediation* is a theory of the status of media, of media’s different claim to *immediacy* or *reality*, and of how media respond to, redeploy, compete with, and reform other media” (304). Who, then, are the actors and where is the site of contestation? In the double logic of remediation, the actors are the media themselves. So, Fagerjord asks, “if competition among media and claims towards a ‘reality’ exist, these are realized in the opinions of media shared by people in a culture” (304). The limit of the theory of remediation, then, is its paradoxical treatment of reality. Bolter and Grusin’s bias towards immediacy—which mirrors the bias they attribute to our (contemporary North American) culture—posits the real in terms of the viewer’s experience. This renders immediacy—or transparency, or the unmediated “authentic” experience—an inherently unstable concept. The only real is (re)mediation since a receiver/consumer will have goals *other than* immediacy, transparency, or even “reality” upon occasion; less transparency might even be preferred. Regardless, “what gets in the way of finding the real is mediation” (305). Nevertheless, they do allow that sometimes “hypermediacy has adopted a

playful or subversive attitude, both acknowledging and undercutting the desire for immediacy” (34). Bolter and Grusin suggest that collage and photomontage act as hypermediated forms since they boldly appropriate and rearrange other forms and exemplify an ineluctable version of hypermediacy (39). Machinima does not necessarily aim to be transparently hypermediated. In other words, even deliberately playful hypermediated exercises remind us of the pull of immediacy by the act of resisting it; clearly a tautological argument.

Despite the suggestions of their own theoretical rigidity, Bolter and Grusin level the same criticism at scholars in related fields. For example, cultural studies scholars “often assume that these new media must follow the same pattern of hegemonic production and resistant reception. They look for examples of new media forms that can be characterized as mass media, because they are comfortable with the broadcast model in which the control of the media form is centralized” (Bolter 22). Rather than elaborate their position, then, Bolter and Grusin point out what they see as the shortcomings in other approaches. This infers that an understanding of remediation is sufficient. Stian Groggaard, like Fagerjord, questions the totalizing nature of the double logic of remediation: “Remediation is a methodological tool for a media-saturated age in which every medium is bound to interconnect [ . . . ] what matters is the juxtaposition of medium, whether obsolete or just hypermediated, *and* its social context. [ . . . ] media has colonized ‘mediation’ in general, since it must be tacitly understood that there is a medium for every mediation” (282). Groggaard concludes that this results in Bolter and Grusin’s “bias toward immediacy, no matter how opaque or ‘hyper’ the medium is portrayed to be” (282). Said another way, remediation offers entry points and starting places for more site-specific types of analyses. Fagerjord concurs: “When Bolter and Grusin analyze Web media, the focus on the all-embracing double logic of remediation and its consequences for the status of new and old media obscures

the vision of remediations occurring in several directions at once” (302). In terms of reading a given text, then, remediation offers a kind of triage for unwrapping the multiple layers of form, genre, and medium. Since the theory of remediation does not fully address these multiple and simultaneous directions, it cannot encompass fully the signifying practices or the rhetoric of an intermedial production such as *Red vs. Blue*. When it remediates, machinima remediates many media. The resulting text is a tangle of remediations whose hypermediacy or immediacy is contingent not upon the media being remediated but upon the basis of production and of consumption.

Thus, it is not sufficient to adjust or to adapt the available analytical methods, nor is it necessary to focus only on rejection and innovation. It is precisely at the very moment when the user becomes creator that the need to construct other theories and methods emerges most clearly. In the case of computer games, Gunnar Liestol identifies several important aspects that cannot be accounted for adequately with “traditional, established humanistic perspectives: textual analysis has not, prior to the emergence of digital media, occupied itself with readers or viewers who actively manipulate the material existence of the textual object. Manipulation and feedback, however, are central features of the relationship between digital media texts and users” (393). In part, *Red vs. Blue* works because it has the faceless characters of *Halo*. One of the most frequently cited challenges the producers explain is the head-nodding that serves as a signal for speech. It must be negotiated with the idle function of the character doing the “filming.” They estimate that as much as “90% of the effort” arises from trying to have the characters “hit their mark.” The faceless characters allow for creativity not necessarily possible with established and more developed characters such as Lara Croft or the squad in *Gears of War*. The characters of Donut, the pink one, and Tex, the female who loses her voice box, highlight this aspect of the

productions.

As well, there are omnipresent reminders of the interface, which further highlight the intersection of, and even the blending of, technical and creative aspects specific to the form as it currently exists. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich dismisses the concerns of critics regarding interactivity because “to call the computer ‘interactive’ is meaningless—it simply means stating the most basic fact about computers” (55). However, as Bolter does point out, the shift “from consumption to production should matter to cultural theorists [. . .] As a consumer, one can only redirect the intended effects of media artifacts, but as a producer one can change the artifacts themselves” (27). This is what machinima accomplishes. The interactivity of the *Halo* engine is significant and worth mentioning because it provides the point of contact between the two media. None of this would be possible without the interface and the producers and viewers take pleasure from that fact. However, the point of contact is not the hallmark of immediacy that Bolter and Grusin suppose but is instead an always already reminder of *Halo* for the sake of reminding us of *Halo*, at least in the eyes of the creators and many of the viewers.

Thus, Bolter’s words serve as a call to educators to remind our students that the act of reading is just that: an act. This is to say, the status of the author and of authorial intent seems to change in the process of reading the game, making machinima, and reading the combined product. Readers make texts, but only within the rubric of a pre-existing model and only in furtherance of that model, its goals, and its aims. Like fan-fiction writers, but also akin to skateboard video producers, part of the project of machinima *writ large* is to be discovered, to become part of the officialdom of the franchise, and to gain entry into the profit-making machinery of the game industry. Indeed, *Red vs. Blue* eventually became just another product of the corporation that owns the *Halo* franchise. This acknowledges and reinforces capitalist motives as rationale and as

outcome for a supposedly creative endeavour. It also constrains and even forecloses potential readings of the text. This is not a circuit of culture, or the cultural change that Fiske, Jenkins, and others laud. Instead, it is a clear indication that consumer and late capitalism are so thoroughly imbricated and naturalized with contemporary culture as to be completely and utterly immanent. Commodification appears to be the only measure of success and of a product's legitimacy, or authenticity, as an artefact. Indeed, it is arguable that commodification is the only measure, criteria, and outcome.

It is crucial, then, that educators recognize and grasp the opportunities that machinima, along with other digital media, presents lest the pedagogies rest solely in the hands—and in the pocketbooks—of corporate entities. First and foremost, there does exist a democratizing potential since the technology is relatively inexpensive and accessible, at least in comparison to the wifi networks, touch boards, and tablet computers being hailed as necessary for current and future student success in any classroom, not to mention the cameras, editing suites, lighting, and other equipment associated with traditional film and video production. Here, educators need to acknowledge and to overcome critical commonplaces, and even phobias, regarding computers and video games, while embracing the likelihood of students being more fluent and more comfortable with the technology. In this regard, it is well worth mentioning the ongoing debate regarding the so-called crisis in boys' literacy. While space does not permit a detailed discussion of this debate, it does bear consideration. Given that boys still play video games more frequently than girls, this technology affords educators a ready and accessible means of engaging these students.

At the same time, a number of established practices highlight the opportunities for engaging students by integrating them with machinima. For example, the common "Reader's

Theatre” exercise, in which students engage in the (unstated) act of intertextual readings of a given text by combining passages from the text with passages from other stories, song lyrics, movie and other quotations, and/or images, immediately comes to mind as one that could be performed in and through machinima. The intent is to show that any text is related to other texts, that meaning is provisional, and that the reader is involved in that process. Similarly, many popular curricular aids include related activities, such as reading and producing graphic novels, storyboards, public service announcements, and zines.<sup>9</sup> Machinima offers a means of combining these activities to allow for an integrated approach to learning. Moreover, component pieces such as flow-charts and *mise-en-scène* composition, as well as the actual creation of the scenes, as in a common “Story Theatre” exercise, which asks students to envision and to enact particular episodes in texts, should help to demystify video production, among other curricular aims. In this regard, one of the challenges of teaching students to read film, television and other visual media is the tendency to dismiss or to ignore the editorial component of a given shot in favour of the belief that scenes simply “happen” thanks to the mere presence of a camera. Machinima, then, can be a preferable alternative to contemporaneous technologies such as *Shakespeare in Bits*. Rather than engaging in the act of reading, these “apps” represent several lamentable trends, including an obvious reification of the text, an emphasis on commercialization, a tendency to equate copying with learning, and an emphasis on “looking up” information rather than developing knowledge.<sup>10</sup> None of this is to idealize machinima in the way that Fiske and Jenkins

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<sup>9</sup>In my home province of Ontario, for example, educators are encouraged to use the provincial education ministry’s *Think Literacy* resource, which is available online in a series of pdf files. The resource contains sample handouts to aid in preparing these texts.

<sup>10</sup>I consider this last aspect of technology in the classroom in greater detail in “‘Veni, Vidi, Wiki’: Expertise as knowledge and a technocratic generation” (*Reconstruction: Studies in*

famously envision, for example, the idiosyncratic wearing of a pair of blue jeans as an act of opposition to the dominant culture. In this view, manipulating the tools of the dominant becomes a form of resistance. The lesson of *Red vs. Blue*, and its complete, utter and hoped for co-optation, stands as clear evidence to the contrary. However, the teaching and the comprehension of the literacies involved in these manipulations reveal the underlying structures in the creative and in the commercial process. Contemporary curriculum documents stress the need to empower students by making connections among media and texts and by fostering multiple and simultaneous media literacies.<sup>11</sup> Understanding machinima production, distribution, and consumption through its remediation of texts and media provides an experiential and kinesthetic means of achieving that goal, provided educators remain vigilant of the social, political, cultural, and economic ramifications of such an exercise.

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<sup>11</sup>In Ontario, for example, teachers are reminded that *every* teacher is a literacy teacher.

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