Machinima For Dummies

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A Reference for the Rest of Us!
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Chapter 3

Filmmaking 101

In This Chapter

- Using Cinematic Language
- Planning and shooting a film
- Applying filmmaking technique to Machinima

Just to warn you: This is the chapter in the book where we confidently expect, unless you’re already an experienced filmmaker, you’ll come out feeling like you know less than when you went in. Sorry about that. But filmmaking is a huge, huge topic.

Both Hugh and Johnnie learned their filmmaking via the School of Hard Knocks, or in this case the School of Poor Shots. Hugh discovered early in 1997 that hyperactive Quake players on three liters of filter coffee make better cameramen when they’re not trying to dodge the invisible rockets. It took another two or three films for Strange Company to start making movies that looked like, you know, actual cinema.

The reason isn’t that Hugh’s an idiot, although it’s always worth considering that as a potential cause. It’s because he didn’t realize, until about two months after he made his first movie, that in order to make a movie, you have to speak a new language.

Film Is a Language

We’re used to thinking of language as verbal. However, cinematography is a language, with a vocabulary of shots and techniques, and a grammar of editing and spatial awareness. If you can’t speak the language at least a little bit, you can’t make a film. Hugh and Johnnie speak it well enough to order a coffee and find the nearest toilet. Meanwhile, Ridley Scott and David Lynch are the equivalent of Graham Greene and Ernest Hemingway.
To shoot a film that will make sense, much less have an emotional impact, you need to unlearn a lot of obvious potential mistakes with a camera. You need to know how the eye interprets the camera’s vision, and how the brain will assume that one shot should flow from another, or how it will interpret a single frame.

This stuff isn’t Machinima-specific. It’s applicable to all forms of filmmaking, and some people have forgotten more than either Hugh or Johnnie knows on the subject. We give you some pointers to further sources of filmmaking expertise at the end of the chapter.

**Faking the eye**

To watch a film is not a natural act. The brain isn’t designed for it. We’re fooling our audience’s brains and eyes into thinking they’re watching actual events, when they’re seeing nothing of the kind.

If you’re making cinema, you need to know how the brain will attempt to make sense of the sequence of disjointed images you’re creating. Some movements and some shots will smoothly slot into each other, while others will jar and confuse their audience.

Here’s a quick thought experiment. A brown sedan races across the screen from left to right, followed by a police car. Then, in the next shot, the brown sedan shoots across in the opposite direction, again followed by the cop car. That means that the chase has turned around, right?

Not necessarily. It could just mean that the director has failed to take account of the line of action (see the section “Mastering Shot Flow,” later in this chapter) and as a result you’ve misinterpreted his intentions. You’ll get more confused later on in the movie, as you’re now working under an interpretation that the director hadn’t taken into account.

A shot doesn’t stand alone, any more than the word “artichoke” stands alone in a story. “Hugh hit Johnnie with the artichoke” is a totally different sentence from “steam the artichoke lightly with butter.” In just the same way, a shot of a guy looking up, followed by a shot of a girl at a window, suggests one thing. A shot of a falling piano, followed by a shot of a guy looking up, suggests something else; it’s a different sentence in the language.

Not only action, but intent, and even mood, carry across shots. A sequence of shots carries meaning that a single shot never can.
Painting with light

Just to make things even more challenging, you’re not just about to learn a new language. You’re also about to become a painter.

Filmmaking is an audio-visual medium. And that means that your movie will first be judged on its visual appeal. Does it look attractive? Do the visuals you’ve created stir emotion in your viewers?

Some of this appeal is down to the quality of your engine, obviously, but far more of it is down to the skill of the director or cinematographer. Which means you need to learn to paint, too. You’ll discover how to draw the eye, balance a portrait, strike a balance between empty space and a cluttered screen, and use light and shadow as your paintbrushes on a scene.

The best advice Hugh ever received as a filmmaker was to make sure that every shot stands on its own as a piece of art. Now, to be fair, he hasn’t managed that. Indeed, he’d say a fair number of his shots are a piece of something else entirely. But as soon as he started trying to achieve that, the quality of his filmmaking dramatically improved.

Film is audio-visual, not just visual. Sound plays a vital role in a movie, and without it, your movie won’t — or shouldn’t — make sense. You can use sound to tell the story, or to provide elements that aren’t otherwise present. Never, ever forget about it. See Chapter 13 for more on sound.

Interpreting Animation

You’re not using conventional film and conventional actors here, you’re using Machinima. That means three things:

✔ **You don’t have brilliant acting to rely on.** Whereas *The West Wing* can just sit on a shot of Martin Sheen for 35 seconds while he does all the work of the scene, you’ll need to draw emotion from your frankly wooden actors, using intelligent cinematography and framing.

✔ **Your film looks like animation, not real life.** Humans have millions of years of evolution to fall back on when trying to interpret pictures of real life — we can do so fast and effectively. By contrast, humans aren’t nearly so fast or effective at interpreting drawn images, meaning we need more time for the brain to figure out what they mean.
You have to convince your viewers that what they’re seeing is real. Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) filmmakers try very hard to mimic the look of real film, paying attention to how real cameras look, move, and act.

Making the Film: Anatomy of a Scene

Cinematography and shooting descend in complexity just like a story. In order, here are the levels to consider, consciously or subconsciously.

1. Style
2. Blocking
3. Camera positioning and shot flow
4. Micro-flow
5. Framing
6. Action

The preceding steps describe how we shoot a film, not The One True Way. It works for us, but different ways work for other people, many of them much more famous than us. We heartily, enthusiastically, and without even a hint of profit-sharing recommend you pick up as many books on filmmaking as you can!

Style

Style is the most obvious and arguably least vital element of a film. People like this level — it’s broad, sweeping, and sexy, and it makes good coffee conversation.

Style is also probably the last thing you should be thinking about. Sure, it’s good to make some stylistic decisions (like BloodSpell’s punk theme), and it’s worth thinking about the symbolism you’re using in your film (David Lynch is a master of this sort of filmmaking), but a lot of the style of your movie will come from your subconscious preferences and your view of the world.

Your personal preferences and view will affect you as you plan individual shots, but they’ll be consistent through the movie, and before you know it you’ll have a style. Later, when you’re a more experienced filmmaker, you can start to tweak that.
Confused? Here’s a (mostly) hypothetical example:

Hugh: “Okay, so I’m thinking that this is a very fantastic film, so we need to shoot in a very realistic way. I’m thinking Firefly and Battlestar Galactica here — handheld shots, shakey cam, not a lot of crane shots, keep it all very grounded.”

Johnnie: “Shaky cameras? In Machinima? Kill me now.”

Hugh: “No, seriously, it’ll be cool. We can totally do that. Dragal can write us a tool.”

Dragal: *Splutter* “I can?”

Hugh: “Relax. It’ll be fine.”

Blocking

Now we descend to a scene level. The first thing you need to do when you’re planning a scene — and we do mean planning, well before you point a camera at anything — is to decide how your characters move and react in each scene. In theater, these decisions are referred to as blocking.

We’re talking about the broad stuff. Where are your characters standing? Where do they walk to? Where do they fight? How does the flow of the fight work?

You need to think about the characters’ motivations. Where does your character want to end up standing, and why? You need to think about the way the scene will look; will the character be framed against a dramatic backdrop?

You need to think about keeping the scene interesting. How do you avoid two characters standing in the same place talking for five minutes? Can they move around? Step closer to each other? Turn away from each other?

Blocking is hard, because you’re acting for your characters at the same time as you are starting to design your shot flow. At the same time, remember that what you’re doing is about effect, not about physical realism: The characters’ locations should be chosen to interest the viewer and give them clues about the characters’ relationships. Think dramatic and symbolic.

Here’s an example:

Hugh: “And now they’re getting pretty intense, but I’m looking at this, and we’ll have been swapping back and forward in a couple of two-shots for about a minute here. So, Jered’s looking scared, the Master’s getting really angry, what’s happening?”
Johnnie: “Er... They move closer?”

Hugh: “Naah, dull, dull. Barely changes the shot. Okay, here we go. You’re Jered, right? And... *Rustling* This coat on a stick is the Master. Now, see, he’s getting angry, he’s intimidating.”

Johnnie: “Hugh, it’s a coat on a stick. I’m worried that you’re going to hit me with the blunt end.”

Hugh: “Work with me here.”

Johnnie: “Okay. So Jered’s feeling like he can’t show he’s scared, right? So perhaps he deliberately turns his back.”

Hugh: “... And that moves us into a new two-shot!”

**Camera positioning**

After you know where your characters are, you need to think about where you position your cameras. Note that you’re not actually looking through a camera at any point here, except maybe to scout the location. Plan your cameras on paper, for the entire scene. Then, and only then, move onto the next stage.

Of course, this is Machinima. You can put a camera anywhere you darn well want. You can use a different camera for each shot in a 200-shot sequence. You can shoot the entire thing from a spinning crane shot. And you really don’t want to do that.

Humans thrive on consistency. We’re also really good at spotting when something isn’t real, even when we’re trying to pretend it is. Real-life camerawork tends to be as simple as possible for cost reasons, so if you want to mimic real life, you should start there.

In addition, overly complex camerawork gets in the way of the story. As director, your job is to shoot the scene in the simplest way that gets the story and its emotional content across — but, under no circumstances, to get any simpler than that.

Imagine an invisible producer shouting about the cost of crane shots in your ear. Can you shoot that conversation more simply? Do you really need a crane shot there? Can you trim five close-ups elsewhere into a single long dolly sequence? Simple and elegant.

Of course, sometimes you’ve just got to crank the special effects up to 11 and get with the Peter Jackson mad flying camera action. But the less you use awesome-mad shots, the cooler they’ll look — and the more time you’ll have to make sure that your uber-camera shot looks incredibly awesome.
Here’s what we mean:

Hugh: “So I’m thinking that we shoot this conversation a bit like this.”

*Slaps Figure 3-1 down on the table*

![Figure 3-1: Camera positioning diagram from BloodSpell.](image)

Johnnie: “Good. Because I can totally understand all of those random squiggles.”

Hugh: “No, look, it’s simple. We’ve got a wide shot, a two-shot, and a reverse covering this conversation, and then when Jered turns, we’ll just dolly around to face him.”

Johnnie: “Into the coffee stain?”

Hugh: “Yup.”

**Micro-flow**

After you decide your camera positioning, you can start thinking about two or three shots at a time — maybe up to 12. This is the point where Hugh will generally start storyboarding — by which we mean drawing out rough images of his intended camera shots (see Figure 3-2).
In conventional films, storyboarding is a way of saving money — it’s cheaper to draw your shots than to crank up a film camera and get Sir Ian McKellen on set just to figure out what you want.

However, this is Machinima. We don’t have to pay for film by the foot, and even if by some miracle you’ve got the man we call Gandalf in your film, he’ll be looking confused in a closet lined with duvets (see Chapter 13), rather than on an actual stage. There’s very little point drawing detailed storyboards.

But rough drawings of the shots you’re trying to achieve are still useful, so that you can remember what you’re trying to shoot, and so that you can check that your proposed shot sequence will work visually.

Your storyboards don’t have to look good! Provided you as director can understand them and visualize the end shot, that’s all that matters.

Hugh will usually draw out a dozen or so shots at a time, in his inimitable — not to say unintelligible — artistic style, and then close his eyes and fly his hand around like he’s pretending it’s an airplane:

Hugh: “Okay, here’s a quick storyboard of the next dozen shots. Questions?”

Steve: “A squiggle attacks another squiggle, and then there’s . . . an incontinent elephant?”

Hugh: “Oh, shut up.”
**Framing**

Now we’re cooking with gas. Unless we’re using Neverwinter Nights. Then we’re cooking with ghast. My, that’s geeky even for us.

Finally, after all that nonsense, we get to actually shoot some darn shots. You’re in the map, you’ve got any assistants you need, er, assisting you. It’s time to figure out how each individual shot will look.

You’ll need to sort out framing — exactly where are your characters in your shot, and how does that relate to your background? If you’ve got moving characters or a moving shot, you’ll need to check your framing and composition at each key point within the movement and sort out the intended timing.

Now’s also the time to cue up speech and animations, either in the game or by discussing with your filming assistants. And lastly, you need to move and arrange your lighting, in whatever form you have it, to make your shot look both pretty and clear.

This is the “painting with light” part.


Johnnie: “I kill you. With my mind.”

Hugh: “And we’re done with the framing. Now, lighting. Someone get me an invisible glowing badger and put it next to Jered’s bottom.”

**Filming**

The next step is to shoot. Or rather, to try to shoot. Filming is where it all goes horribly wrong. In real film, and ten times more so in Machinima, this is where Mr. Reality stomps in the door, bleary-eyed and hung over, and proceeds to do something unmentionable to your lovely theoretical planning — which is why you planned in the first place.

Characters who just won’t go to the right place, timings that require your assistants to have the dexterity of a concert pianist, poor understanding of exactly what’s meant to happen — all these things will force you to re-do, re-try, think laterally, re-think the shot, or, in extreme cases, write entire new tools just to make this shot possible.

Given all these factors, you absolutely don’t want to be trying to figure out the creative details of the film at the same time! The actual process of filming will stretch your creativity to the limits, not to mention your patience. On
BloodSpell, it wasn’t uncommon for complex shots to take upward of an hour and ten takes to get right.


*CLICK*

Hugh: “Cue the Master.”

*CLICK*

Hugh: “And animation 3 at the same time as he looks . . .”

*CLICK* *CLICKCLICKCLICKCLICK*

Various crew members: “OH, S***** (*&($!!! O*&( *!! @@!”

Hugh: “And the Master turns into a giraffe rather than, as we’d hoped, playing his bow animation. Again. More coffee, anyone?”

Thinking about Aspect Ratios

You should make one very important decision when you start making your film: the aspect ratio you’ll be shooting in. By aspect ratio, we mean the shape of the screen. Figure 3-3 shows three popular aspect ratios you should consider.
16:9: We generally recommend 16:9. It’s the most commonly used ratio in film and TV and provides a nice filmic feel without the intimidating size of Cinemascope. Plus, if you’ve got a widescreen monitor, you can shoot in this resolution without cropping your footage later. If you can, you should aim to shoot at a high-definition resolution like 1,280x720.

4:3: The old TV format, 4:3 is also the format used by a lot of online video sites, notably YouTube. If you’re aiming primarily for YouTube, a 4:3 aspect ratio (800x600, 640x480, 320x240) ensures that you get the most use out of your available screen space.

Cinemascope is the high-end format used by blockbuster films. If you’re shooting something seriously epic, it can look great in Cinemascope. However, its size means that it’s difficult to display on non-widescreen monitors, and it’ll suck horribly on YouTube. The sheer available screen size can also feel quite empty if you don’t have epic vistas to deploy on it. And by vistas, we don’t, nor will we ever, mean Windows.

Framing Your Movie

Every time you set up a shot, you’re essentially painting. You’re constructing a 2D image that should convey both information and emotion. And you can ensure that both come across by improving your shot composition.

Painterly composition

You can learn a lot from painters and photographers. Here are some tips on creating an artistic scene:

Keep it simple! Don’t crowd your shot. A shot should have at most three important elements — more often one or two. Your audience won’t be able to follow more than three separate elements in a shot at the same time.

Keeping it simple doesn’t mean that you can’t have a flight of 50 dragons in shot — that’s a single element! But if you try to shoot a battle between dragons and eagles as your hero cleaves his way through an army toward the heroine, all in one static shot, your audience may get confused.

But don’t make it too simple. Most shots will work better with more than one element contrasting. That’s not a hard-and-fast rule; close-ups of characters, for example, are definitely the exception. But if you can, try to capture two elements in shot at once — a contrasting or important
element of the background, part of a crowd or passers-by, or two of your characters.

- **Remember the Rule of Thirds.** Divide your frame into thirds horizontally and vertically. You’ll have four points where the dividing lines cross. If you center key elements of your shot — a character’s face, for example — on one of those four points, you will tend to create a strong image. You can also sometimes center an element on one of the points where the lines meet the edge of the screen — for example, if you’re framing one character with another.

- **Break the frame.** If you’re shooting a crowd sequence, it’s tempting to shoot in such a way that all the background characters are neatly enclosed by the frame, rather than having arms or legs cut off by the frame. But that’s exactly the wrong way to shoot! If you arrange your frame so that key characters are in frame but background characters overlap the frame, it suggests a bigger, more continuous crowd.

- **Be dark or light — don’t be brown.** Don’t be afraid to use total darkness as part of your frame. Shooting through a doorway, for example, where only half the frame is light, is fine. If only the key character’s face is light and the rest of the frame is dark, great.

However, don’t shoot if the key element of your shot is poorly lit. If there is even a chance the audience won’t be able to see the action, add more light. It’s always better to be over-lit than to be a gray mush.

- **Use quick and dirty lighting.** You can write an entire book about lighting (and many people have). If you want a quick-and-dirty way to make your lighting look good, make sure that one side of your character’s face is darker than the other or lit in a slightly different color. Contrast between the sides of the face nearly always looks dramatic.

- **Include lines.** Diagonal lines look dynamic on-screen. If you can, shoot walls, doors, and pylons so they aren’t straight in frame. You can use suggested lines to point to key elements of your frame: a horizon pointing to your key character or shadows on the floor lining up to point toward your villain.

- **Shoot curvy lines!** Curves look great on-screen. In particular, paths that form an S-shape heading away from the camera look very nice indeed. *See Lord of the Rings* for about a million examples. Human shapes and silhouettes, particularly, ah, the kind of female silhouette you’ll get from many computer games, also look great.

- **Hang it on your wall.** Before you take any shot, ask yourself this question: Would you be happy to take a still from it, have it printed, and display it on your wall? If so, you’ve got a good shot.
Change your Field Of View (FOV). The default field-of-view for most games is 90 degrees. To make your work look less like a game and more like a film, if you have an engine that can change FOV, try changing to an angle closer to 40 degrees. Changes in FOV also alter how close objects appear to each other laterally. If you want to fit two objects into your shot but can’t quite manage it, try changing your FOV.

Framing characters

Knowing how and where to place your characters in frame governs the kind of story you can tell with them:

Don’t center your characters on-screen. Most of the time, your character should be on the left or right of the screen, talking either to the center screen or past the center screen. Only put them center-screen or directly facing the camera if you’re sure you know what you’re doing.

Handle sympathy. As a rough general rule, the closer a character appears to the center of the screen, and the more head-on he is shot, the more sympathetic he will appear to the audience. This effect is subtle but powerful. Set up two shots, one where your hero is talking from a bit right of center, almost head-on to the camera, and another where your villain is right on the left of screen, talking across to the hero. Suddenly, your hero and villain will feel heroic and villainous, respectively.

Frame! If you can frame a character with natural features, such as an arch, in the background it will make the image stronger. Likewise, on a wide shot, finding something — a rock, a candle, a doorhandle — to place in the foreground to give depth to the shot often improves your shot, too.

Shoot from up and down. You can dramatically change the impact and overtone of a shot by changing the vertical angle you’re shooting from. In general, shooting down on a character will often make him look vulnerable, while shooting up at him will make him look impressive.

Even in a field full of unreliable advice, this piece is particularly unreliable. For example, if you have a character look down (so that you’re shooting him effectively from above) and then have him look up at the camera, he’ll look menacing, in a Hannibal Lecter–style.

Mastering Shot Flow

On the other side of the filmmaking coin are shot flow and storytelling. If your shots don’t tell your story, you’re in trouble, no matter how beautiful they are.
Fortunately, you can follow a few simple rules to help ensure that your shots make sense:

**How will your audience know what’s going on?** Make sure that you’ve got shots that establish everything important in the scene. You don’t have to use them immediately — it’s an old trick to start on a series of close-ups and then go to an establishing shot that explains their relationship — but make sure that you know how and when your audience will find out what’s going on.

**Be consistent with direction of action.** If your character runs out of the shot from left to right, and the next shot is of him running in the same direction, he should run from left to right on-screen again. Direction of action is super-important in making a sequence viewable: Anything that moves out of shot moving one way across the screen should nearly always move the same way in the next shot.

(There are a few exceptions to this rule — notably if you’re pulling out from a close-up to a new wide shot, or if you’re going from a character running into screen to the same character running out of screen.)

**Follow eyelines.** Viewers follow the direction a character is looking. If you’re going to go from one character to a new character entering the scene, it’ll make a lot more sense if the first character looks around in the direction of the second character’s entrance before you cut. Likewise, if you’re setting up two characters who are talking to each other, make sure that they look like they’re talking to each other. Watch out for eye heights in frame in particular.

That doesn’t mean they actually have to be looking at each other. Perception is king. If your character is in reality looking right at his co-conversationalist, but it looks a bit funny when you shoot it, by all means move him around until it looks right on film, even if he’s now staring at your lighting badger’s left nipple.

**Left, then right!** If you’re shooting two characters, an easy way to make the scene make sense is to put one on the right and one on the left. This positioning holds if you’re shooting a close-up, a wide shot, or a two-shot. At some point, if it’s a long scene, you’ll want to swap them around somehow (see the sidebar “The line”). But until then, shoot them left, right, left.

**Remember the details.** Forgetting to shoot close-ups of items, characters holding items, characters opening doors, and other such things is easy to do. But these little elements really add a lot to the intelligibility of the scene. If you can, shoot close-up inserts of action that may be even slightly unclear — or even just action that looks cool. It’ll help the flow of your sequence.
The Components of a Film

Before you construct your novel, you need to know what words you have to work with. Here’s a whistle-stop tour through the varieties of shots available to you.

You’ll notice that we very rarely give specific details as to how to shoot a particular shot. Most shot types are more general categories than specific

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The line

It seems that every area of technical knowledge has one deeply arcane and highly specific piece. With the programming language C, it’s pointers. With Machinima, it’s Half-Life 2. And with filmmaking in general, it’s the line.

The basic rule is this. Any time two characters are interacting, an invisible line of action extends through both of them (see figure). If you ever cut over that line, you’ll confuse your audience.

Now, nothing stops a camera from moving over the line, using a dollying shot, or the line from moving over your camera, if one of the characters moves. Both methods are reliable ways to change the line — if you want to reverse the positions of characters on-screen, for example. But you must never, ever (well, almost never) cut over the line, or everything will reverse places, and you’ll confuse your viewers.

Sounds simple, right? Well, it is — provided that you’re dealing with only two characters. If five or six characters are all talking to each other, determining where the line is at any time is difficult. As a general rule, the line is between the two most active characters at any time. But really, once you’re past fairly simple scenes, you’ve just got to take your best guess, go for it, and fix the results in pickups!

---

If the camera starts this side of the line...

A talking to B

You can’t cut to this side!
framings. The way you frame each shot layers on top of its general intention to give the meaning and purpose of that shot and that sequence.

Sounds complicated? Don’t worry. Just come up with a rough idea, try it, and then junk it if it doesn’t work. You’ll get the hang of filming soon enough.

**Shot types: Wide**

Arguably the simplest type of camera shot, a *wide shot*, shown in Figure 3-4, captures an entire scene or large part of a scene. A wide shot shows spatial relationships, gives the viewer an emotional break in intense scenes, shows action happening over a wide area (or full-body action, as in a martial-arts fight), and establishes a scene.

Whatever else you do during filming, make sure that you take a wide shot of your action. You’ll never know when you need it.

**Shot functions: Establishing**

Above all else, your film must establish in the viewer’s mind what’s going on, and where it is happening. Your establishing shot, or shots, set the scene. It may be a single wide shot that shows the area and the characters, or it may consist of a close-up shot of a sign or other salient detail, followed by a wide shot. Your establishing shots may even be a series of close shots followed by a wide shot (à la the bar scene in *Star Wars*), or a mixture of general visual shots around an area.
A new establishing shot is often required after a period of action. Cut to a wide shot to update the viewers on what’s happening now, who’s still up, and who’s lying down bleeding.

**Shot types: Two-shot**

A two-shot (see Figure 3-5) is, unsurprisingly, any shot with two characters who are significant to the shot in frame. This type of shot is typically used for interactions between those characters.

A particularly strong type of two-shot is one arranged so that both characters’ faces are visible. While this type of shot is sometimes a nightmare to shoot, being able to see both characters’ interaction makes for a very strong image.

The infamous *over-the-shoulder shot* is arguably a type of two-shot. In this shot, part of one character’s body (usually shoulder and head, hence the name) is used to frame another character in shot. This shot is usually used during dialoged sequences. Many directors hate it, but it’s still worth having in your toolbox.

**Shot types: Reverse**

A reverse shot is — er, well — how do we put this? It’s like the shot before it, but backward. So, for example, if you’re shooting two characters head-on, looking out over some battlements, and then you go to a shot from behind them looking out over their shoulders, you’re shooting a reverse.
Reverses can be useful for revealing plot elements — a shadow appears at your heroine’s shoulder as you’re looking at her from behind, and you then reverse to a shot in front of her. Reverses are also a rare example of a shot that is acceptable to use even though they (often) cross the line. (For more about the line, see the earlier sidebar in this chapter.)

A reverse has to have some obvious clue that you’ve reversed. So, if both characters are looking forward and you’re cutting from looking at their faces to looking at their backs, that’s okay. But if they’re facing each other, and you cut from one side of them to the other, that shot will jar as you cross the line, because the visual clues aren’t obvious enough.

That’s not the only meaning of the term reverse in filmmaking. As distinct from a reverse shot, filmmakers or editors will sometimes refer to a reverse, which is an opposing shot in a conversation sequence. Which might sometimes also be a reverse shot. Or not. Aargh!

### Shot types: Point of View (POV)

A Point of View (POV) shot is taken as if from the point of view of a character, usually just after or just before a close-up on that character, which cues the viewer as to which character’s POV you’re using. You can break all sorts of rules in a POV shot. Most notably, you can shoot other characters head-on, as you’re saying to the viewer, “Okay, so this is what it looks like for this character.”

Use a POV shot when you want to put the viewer in the character’s place — when the character’s creeping through a shadowy house, when an authority figure is shouting at him, or when he’s watching his love interest anxiously after she’s been shot.

### Shot types: Close-up

You know what a close-up is — a shot with only a character’s face in shot (see Figure 3-6). These shots are great — they’re emotionally intense, and they’re simple to shoot because there’s rarely more than one or two elements in frame.

There’s another use for a close-up, too: When you’re short on time and need to get a scene wrapped. A close-up is almost always the easiest type of shot to take — there’s not a lot else in the scene.
Don’t over-use close-ups. In general, you should save close-ups in conversations for emotionally intense moments. The closer you are to a character, the more strongly you feel his emotion.

You can have a two-shot close-up, where two characters are close enough or appropriately positioned that you can fit close-ups of both of them in frame. You can also go in closer on a character, to mouth and eyes, for an Extreme Close-Up (XCU). Don’t be afraid to use them; they can be very powerful.

**Shot types: Medium shot**

The absolute workhorse of character shots, a medium shot, shown in Figure 3-7, shows a character’s torso and perhaps a little bit of her legs. It’s the shot used for news reporters, interviews, and any shot where you’re not in a wide shot, but you don’t want the intimacy of a close-up. Get used to medium shots — you’ll be using them a lot.

Be careful with the framing on a medium shot. In general, never cut a character off at the waist — either frame above it, at chest level, or below it, around the hips to mid-thigh.
Go watch any James Bond movie. Wait for him to travel to a new country. See that you’ve got a couple of quick shots of flavor of the country — Big Ben and a big red bus for London, a guy in a kilt for Scotland, the Kremlin for Moscow? That’s a GV (see Figure 3-8). It’s used to immediately establish the look and feel of the area, which carries over to the main scene (which was probably shot in Burbank, but now feels like it’s in Scotland!).
**Shot types: Reveal**

Any shot that reveals a plot element is a (what else?) *reveal shot*. The absolutely classic reveal is the two-shot over a heroine’s shoulder, shot from in front of her, which then changes focus to reveal the villain standing behind her.

Give some thought to your reveals. As a general guideline, if it’s genuinely a dramatic reveal, you either want to ramp up the tension as high as you can in earlier shots or (as more modern films like *The Descent* have started to do) simulate the randomness of real life with a sudden reveal with no warning at all. The latter technique’s hard to get right and relies a lot on genuinely shocking material, but if it’s used well, it hits really hard.

**Shot types: Insert**

Bond’s sitting in the villain’s office, pointing a silenced gun at the unfortunate Blofeld. But secretly, the man with the white cat is going for the button that will dump Bond into a tank full of sharks. How do you show that? With an insert, of course.

An *insert* is a close-up that isn’t centered on a character’s face (see Figure 3-9). It can be of something that is hidden or just something that wouldn’t otherwise be obvious. Martial arts movies live, eat, and breathe inserts to show off the neato blocks, punches, and brutal violence that’s going on.

*Figure 3-9: An insert from Strange Company’s *Matrix: 4x1*. 
You nearly always need more inserts than you’ve got. Sprinkle them in liberally. If a scene doesn’t quite flow and you don’t know why, chances are that you either need another wide shot or another insert.

**Moving camera: Pan**

When you’re turning the camera without moving it, you’re **panning**. Pans are among the cheapest of camera moves in real life — all they need is a tripod. They’re also quite hard to use well.

In general, a character’s movement should suggest a pan — panning to track a character through a crowd, for example, or panning to follow a character’s eyeline as she looks off-screen. They can also serve to introduce a scene. Otherwise, pans with no obvious cause and no other movement tend to look forced.

**Moving camera: Dolly/crane**

Any time you’re moving the camera in two dimensions, without changing height, you’re **dollying** — so called because the platform on which a real camera is moved is called a dolly. Add height to that mix and you’re probably looking at a crane shot, so called because — oh, right, you got it.

Both dolly and crane shots are comparatively cheap and common in real film, meaning that you can afford to use them relatively freely in your Machinima, too. It’s worth thinking about how a crane, in particular, actually moves — it’s a platform on the end of a long lever. Try to fake this movement for more realistic-looking shots.

Cameras moving in real 3D space are great for adding life and movement to a scene; many Machinima filmmakers have made a style out of continual subtle movement within a scene. They’re also great ways to change your position in relation to the line, move between a wide shot or medium shot and a close-up, or shift from one character shot to another.

**Moving camera: Zoom**

A **zoom** isn’t actually a camera movement at all, but a change in the FOV of the camera, which appears to make some things closer and other things further away. Zooms went out of fashion through the '90s, but the handheld style of series like *24* and *Firefly* have ensured their return to popularity, at least in hand-held-shot series.
Zooms tend to look rather clunky, which you can sometimes use as a deliber-
ate feature. You can effectively use a subtle zoom to heighten tension in a
scene, à la classic Sergio Leone Westerns. Otherwise, you won’t have a lot of
uses for them unless you’re going for a hand-held style.

It’s worth noting that by zooming in one direction while tracking in the
opposite direction, you can achieve a very weird effect, as the entire scene
appears to foreshorten or lengthen. Peter Jackson is a particular fan of this
trick, called a dolly zoom, which was pioneered in the film Vertigo.

### Moving camera: Handheld

Jerky, blurred hand-held camerawork has become increasingly prevalent in
modern filmmaking and TV. Handheld camerawork is almost more of a style
unto itself than a technique, and it’s very hard to replicate in Machinima.
While you can achieve something similar using mouse control, the typical
handheld shake really has to be added in post-production or camera control. Medieval II: Total War does particularly fantastic handheld simulation (see Chapter 12).

Nonetheless, a handheld feel — characterized by rapid swish pans between subjects, fast crash zooms, and jerkiness — is a great way to achieve a feeling of realism, particularly in Machinima. If your film would benefit from such a style, it’s worth considering, particularly for fast action and fight scenes, where the blurriness and jerkiness of the style can conceal a thousand dodgy Machinima animations. See the trailer for The Return 2 by Rufus Cubed for a very good example of handheld simulation in Machinima.
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