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Skawennati: Realizing the Virtual: A TimeTraveller™ Experience



Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™* installation view, 2015. Photo: Don Hall

EXHIBITION ESSAY

SKAWENNATI: REALIZING THE VIRTUAL: A TIMETRAVELLER™ EXPERIENCE

Back to the Future: Sovereignty and Remediation in Skawennati's *Timetraveller*™

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Timetraveller™ is a love story. It's a piece of science fiction. It's a history of colonialism and Indigenous resistance. But of all these things *Timetraveller*™ is a story about media and remediation. This is not to say that this work is more of an aesthetic than political piece. It is to say, however, that the import of Skawennati's politics is realized through the refashioning of "old media" in the new.

Skawennati's engagement with new media began early in her career. In 1997 she curated and launched *CyberPowWow*, the first interactive, online Indigenous art gallery. *CyberPowWow* was built in The Palace, pioneering software that provided access to chat rooms

where users interacted via graphical avatars.¹ In many ways *Timetraveller*™ is an extension of Skawennati's early work. Promoted as "a website from the future discovered by Skawennati,"² *Timetraveller*™ follows Ratorats "Hunter" Dearhouse, a Kanien'kehaka (or Mohawk) bounty hunter, through nine linked episodes. Each episode revolves around a futuristic gaming system called *Timetraveller*™, a virtual reality (VR) platform that compiles Internet data to render detailed representations of the past and the future.

In Episode 01 Hunter sets his VR headset to travel back in time to Fort Calgary, Canada. The year is 1875 A.D. He arrives just as a group of colonialists are finding their seats:



Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*, 2008-13, machinima. Image courtesy of the artist.

"It looks like there's going to be a show," Hunter remarks. Indeed, in his engagement with his own "new media," the *Timetraveller*TM, Hunter inadvertently stumbles across the "new media" of the nineteenth century, a moving panorama. One hundred and fifty years ago the moving panorama was one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the world. Hundreds toured Europe, the United States, and Canada. Moving panoramas were composed of a series of contiguous scenes that scrolled past an audience behind a proscenium, which hid the machinery and the person turning the crank. Kerosene lanterns illuminated the "moving pictures," while a "Delineator" narrated the story.³

The moving panorama in *Timetraveller*TM contextualizes Hunter's VR and locates Skawennati's piece itself within a layered history of "new media." Skawennati imagines Hunter's interface via a medium as novel to the twenty-first century as the panorama was to the nineteenth: machinima, an animated movie that uses computer or video game software to generate the characters and scenes. Then, through both her own medium, *and* the one she retroactively imagines for Hunter, Skawennati reimagines and refashions the 1863 *Minnesota Massacre* panorama in her own narrative.

This process of incorporating representations of past and future media technology into present day platforms is known in media

studies as "remediation." "The goal of remediation," Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, "is to refashion or rehabilitate other media."⁴ Remediation is also the way in which people engage with new media technologies through their familiarity and use of old media technologies. By incorporating the moving panorama, an early version of the film, Skawennati thus generates a genealogy of both Hunter's imagined interface and her own *Second Life* platform while reclaiming the narrative that *Minnesota Massacre* attempts to propagate.

Minnesota Massacre itself is a series of forty-five 42 x 42 inch panels depicting the 1862 "Sioux Uprising" in southern Minnesota, which ended in the largest single-day execution in American history. The Sioux resistance came in reaction to late and unfair annuity payments from the U.S. government, which was leaving many of them without food. On August 17, 1862, a hunting party killed five settlers when out on an expedition. That night a council of Dakota decided to drive whites out of the area. The war lasted several months. Soldiers captured over one thousand Dakota and sentenced thirty-eight to hang for treason. The hanging remains the largest single-day execution in American history and a vital example of the state's use of colonial violence. In its "grossly offensive depiction of the Sioux"⁵ as savage warriors preying on defenseless settlers, *Minnesota Massacre* was an effective propaganda tool for the burgeoning



Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*, 2008-13, machinima. Image courtesy of the artist.

settler state, instrumental in the colonial dehumanization of Indigenous peoples and thus serving as retroactive validation for racialized violence.

Using actual images from *Minnesota Massacre*, Skawennati brings the 152 year-old panorama back to life in *Timetraveller*TM, renaming it *The Great Panorama of the West*. This is both an aesthetic and political act. In remediating the panorama, Skawennati self-consciously locates the racist lineage of the “new media” that she now engages to tell Indigenous stories, but she also enacts what Kristen Dowell calls “visual sovereignty.” According to Kristen Dowell, visual sovereignty is “the articulation of Aboriginal peoples’ distinctive cultural traditions, political status, and collective identities through aesthetic and cinematic means.”⁶ Skawennati takes up visual sovereignty by refashioning colonial media in Indigenous contexts, thereby loosening the tight grip that colonialism has on popular media, generating space for Indigenous voices to circulate around and even within them.

Indeed, the “Minnesota Massacre” is the catalyst for Episode 02. After watching the panorama and noting the influence it has on its white audience, Hunter states, “If there’s one thing every Indian knows, it’s this: when it comes to history, always get a second opinion.” Typing the coordinates into his VR, Hunter then transports himself from 1875 to the

period and place represented in the panorama.

Significantly, Episode 02 then (re) tells the story of the “Minnesota Massacre” from the perspective of the Sioux, locating Hunter in the Indigenous hunting party that is, in colonial history, attributed with starting the “uprising.” Significant also is that rather than engaging with the scene from “Fly-on-the-Wall Mode,” as he does in Episode 01, Hunter switches his display to “Intelligent Agent Mode,” thereby allowing his character to interact with the Sioux characters and to participate in the action.

In this sense, by putting her protagonist in charge of the action, Skawennati asserts cultural self-determination and salvages the “screen” to tell Indigenous histories from Indigenous points of view. The racist narrative of *Minnesota Massacre* is recuperated into both Skawennati and Hunter’s media and that history is re-contextualized within Indigenous politics, history, and storytelling. By travelling back to the period initially depicted in the panorama, Hunter represents to events of the “Sioux Uprising” from the Sioux perspective that is effaced in the panorama and both he, and the audience, learn about the strength of Indigenous resistance, a theme that extends throughout *Timetraveller*TM.

Like *CyberPowWow* before it, *Timetraveller*TM enacts visual sovereignty in the way that it



Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™* installation view, 2015. Photo: Don Hall

inscribes Indigenous politics, identities, voices, and perspectives into the present, past, and future of screen culture, a medium that has historically worked to efface Indigenous presence. In engaging the past, *Timetraveller™* re-positions Indigenous presence and future and imagines new spaces to create and share stories. Hunter intervenes into the beginning of the “Sioux Uprising” providing context for the resistance and perspective on the Sioux’s strength and humour. As opposed to the flat, dehumanized images in the panorama, the *Timetraveller™* VR provides a rounded, interactive engagement with history and its marginalized subjects.

Timetraveller™ is a love story, a sci-fi romp, and an experiment in narrative form. It is an account of colonialism and resistance and a projection of forthcoming realities. *Timetraveller™* is a story about the history of Indigenous presence, but it is also a story about the future of Indigenous histories.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Skawennati is an artist and independent curator with a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal. Since 1996, she has been working in New Media, beginning with the pioneering, Aboriginally-determined, on-line gallery and chat space, CyberPowWow. Skawennati is currently Co-Director,

with Jason E. Lewis, of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, a network of artists, academics and technologists investigating, creating and critiquing Aboriginal virtual environments.

¹ <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/>

² http://www.rashid-and-rosetta.org/ros_skawennati_e.html

³ Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

⁴ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kristen Dowell, Introduction. *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast*, (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 2013), 2.



Skawennati, *TimeTraveller*TM, 2008-13, machinima. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*, 2008-13, machinima. Image courtesy of the artist.

