Owerà:ke Non Aié:nahne

Filling in the Blank Spaces
This text accompanies the exhibition

Owerà:ke Non Aié:nahne
Filling in the Blank Spaces

A project by
Jason Edward Lewis
and Skawennati

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Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery
Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace is a network of academics, artists and technologists whose goal is to define and share conceptual and practical tools that encourage new, Aboriginally-determined territories within the web-pages, online games and virtual environments that we call cyberspace.

The Initiative for Indigenous Futures is a collaboration between universities, arts institutions, community organizations and industry partners dedicated to developing multiple visions of Indigenous peoples tomorrow in order to better understand where we need to go today.
Somehow when you exit this site you definitely know you were in Indian territory.
Jolene Rickard

Writing in 1999 about *CyberPowWow* 2—one of the first ‘Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace’—the Tuscarora art historian Jolene Rickard identified a remarkable affordance of the Internet: community-determined use of networked media really could migrate Indigenous ways of relating into the digital age.

This was months before Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati met, years before they married, and far before they established *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* (AbTeC)—the acclaimed, international network supporting media arts. AbTeC was formalized in 2005 with the mandate to support and increase the number of Indigenous peoples creating digital media. For Lewis and Skawennati, and for their myriad collaborators, this was an effort to ensure that the future would hold spaces for Indigenous voices. This initial ambition has flowered through two decades of cultural work that advances long-term futures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

The Frontiers of Cyberspace

Communications technologies have parallels in the history of colonization, where imperial powers exercised Manifest Destiny across territories regarded by European settlers as terra nullius, or empty land. Digital networks recall this earlier chapter in colonialism, in which technologies such as mapping, printing, and telegraphy secured a controlled flow of information for colonial powers. As Lewis (Cherokee, Kanaka Maoli, Samoan) and Skawennati (Mohawk) have written: “If Aboriginal peoples learned one thing from contact, it is the danger of seeing any place as terra nullius, even cyberspace. Its foundations were designed with a specific logic, built on a specific form of technology, and first used for specific purposes.”

From its outset, the popular imaginary of ‘cyberspace’ possessed a distinctly neocolonial ethos. From William Gibson’s data cowboys, to metaphors of the Internet as an information superhighway and an electronic frontier, to popular applications like Explorer, Konqueror, and Navigator, the Internet’s prevalent mythology has carried a thoroughly imperial flavour through the colonial expansion of digital technologies across the planet.

Digital Natives

The first wave of Indigenous artists using digital media brought a critical lens to cyberspace, acting as a counterforce to this neocolonial imaginary. Digital technologies—still in their infancy—were set upon and reworked by these innovative artists. Looking to the future, they engaged in a concerted effort to make room for an Indigenous presence in these new virtual spaces, and, in the words of Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “to re-map the hegemonic cartography of cyberspace.”

Significantly, these technophiles were concerned not merely with the superficial production of images and the appropriation of existing tools, but rather were deeply engaged in the design of media themselves. As the Plains Cree artist Archer Pechawis recalls: “We saw the Internet not just as a new technology but a new territory, one that we could help shape from its inception.” They anticipated and revolted against the ostensible oxymoron of the digital native, in which the primitive ‘Noble Savage’ is meant to contrast the modern world of ‘the digital.’ Such self-actualizing endeavours flew in the face of clichés that misconstrued Indigenous peoples as pre-technological.

This occupation of ‘cyberspace’ in the mid-nineties came at a watershed moment for Indigenous artists using digital media in Canada. A proliferation of new media arts was born alongside networks of Indigenous cultural activism, grassroots and institutional changes in Canadian arts organizations, federal task forces and commissions on the state


6. The 1990 Kanehsatà:ke resistance marked a notable influence on Indigenous cultural activism, if only the latest in five hundred years of colonial resistance.

7. See for example Minquon Panchayat, 1992—the anti-racist coalition which promoted the structural reformation of artist-run culture, the initiation of Tribe (1995) and Urban Shaman (1996) artist-run centres, and increased support for Indigenous artists using new media at the Canada Council, Banff Centre, among other Canadian art institutions.
of Aboriginal peoples and cultures,\textsuperscript{8} and the development of important Indigenous cultural media networks.\textsuperscript{9} Parallel to this groundswell of cultural reform, the popular Internet arose and became crucial to an emergent generation of Indigenous artists.

\textbf{AbTeC}

The story of AbTeC takes root at this historical juncture. It is a story about a generation of artists and cultural producers, writers, activists, elders and kids, networked in technologies and in consciousness. AbTeC participates in a history of Indigenous media arts that has catalyzed artistic communities and research networks, and introduced practices of mentorship, education and collaboration.

\textbf{CyberPowWow}

Twenty years ago—still some years before AbTeC was formalized—Skawennati initiated the landmark online exhibition space \textit{CyberPowWow}. In step with the growing online activity of international artistic cybercultures and the first net.art exhibitions, \textit{CyberPowWow} uniquely laid out the groundwork for a distinctly Indigenous cultural presence online.\textsuperscript{10} Running for nearly a decade, the project commissioned online artwork from dozens of artists.\textsuperscript{11} Users who visited the site could choose 2D avatars in the form of Indigenous bodies and navigate through graphical chat ‘rooms’ designed to replicate traditional and contemporary Indigenous spaces. Importantly, this was also a space to meet others online. Far before the saturated, media-rich, social-network-driven cultures of today, \textit{CyberPowWow} represented an extraordinary experiment in creating online communities.

In four exhibitions over eight years, \textit{CyberPowWow} created Aboriginally-determined territories on the early Web. The project housed network-based art, written stories and critical texts (in English and several Indigenous languages), as well as a real-time, graphical chat service that was live year-round. Integral to \textit{CyberPowWow}’s aim of increasing public access to Indigenous media artists’ work were its \textit{gathering sites}, which coincided with the four launches held at twenty-one art spaces internationally. The first of these events took place in April of 1997 at both Circle Vision Arts Corporation in Saskatoon and Galerie Oboro in Montreal. By the last \textit{CyberPowWow}, in 2004, no less than a dozen organizations co-hosted the event.\textsuperscript{12} Each space supported simultaneous, two-day events—expanded ‘openings’—during which visitors were invited to eat and drink and, most importantly, enter \textit{CyberPowWow}’s virtual space.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{8} See for example the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada (1985), the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples (1992), and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996).
  \item \textsuperscript{9} See for example the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance (1991), Drumbeats to Drumbytes (1994), the Indigenous Media Art Group (1998), imagineNATIVE Film and Media Festival (1998), and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (1999).
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Canonical examples of early net.art exhibitions include \textit{Club Berlin} during the \textit{46th Venice Biennale} in 1995 and \textit{dX}, as part of the 1997 \textit{documenta X}.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} The participants included in all CyberPowWows were: Ahasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Archer Pechawis, Audra Simpson, Bradlee LaRocque, Edward Poitras, Greg A. Hill, Jason E. Lewis, Jolene Rickard, Joseph (Dega) Tekaroniaka Lazare, Lee Crowchild, Lori Blondeau, Marilyn Burgess, Melanie Printup Hope, Michelle Nahane, Paul Chaaat Smith, r e a, Rosalie Favell, Ryan Johnston, Ryan Rice, Sheila Urbanoski, Sheryl Kootenhayoo, Skawennati, Travis Neel, and Trevor Van Weeren.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} These included: The Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre; EMMEDIA Gallery & Production Society in partnership with MayWorks Festival, Calgary; Tribe, A Centre for the Evolving Aboriginal Media, Visual and Performing Arts Inc. and PAVED Art + New Media, Saskatoon; Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg; InterAccess, Toronto; Artengine and G-101, Ottawa; OBORO, Montréal; Eyelevel Gallery, Halifax; and Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.
\end{itemize}
Freely accessible to the public, *AbTeC Island* is an imaginative assemblage of virtual landscapes and architecture. At varying times, visitors will find the island of Alcatraz, an historical Iroquois village, the Aztec Empire city of Tenochtitlan, and futuristic houses, museums and cities. The sci-fi and fantasy appearance in many of the scenes of *AbTeC Island* conveys strong imagery of a future populated with Indigenous people. Outside the colonial borders of the reservation, and beyond mainstream settler imaginaries of the future, *AbTeC Island* is a decolonized space designed for Indigenous-determined futures.

**Skins**

The Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Video Game Design began in 2009 as a collaboration between AbTeC, a high school teacher and her students, and tribal elders from Kahnawake Mohawk Territory. Designed to mobilize communities in translating their traditional stories into video games, it since has spread to involve communities from Montreal to Yellowknife to Honolulu with AbTeC conducting five major Skins workshops over the past decade.

Each workshop begins with the sharing of oral histories in which community stories are imparted, following which participants learn skills pertinent to the production of video games, from concept design and art direction to 3D modeling, animation, sound design, and computer programming. Qualified artists, game design professionals, and university students are hired to activate each workshop and guide the

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16. *AbTeC Island* may be visited in *Second Life* at maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/AbTweC/31/231/137.

Initiative for Indigenous Futures

We are now turning towards claiming territory in the future imaginary, or, better yet, creating our own.

Jason Edward Lewis

An expressly Indigenous vision of the future has underpinned much of AbTeC’s activities since its inception. The Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF)—an ambitious, countrywide, multi-partner research network—is the latest endeavour in this vision. The network is a wide-reaching project built to support a range of thinkers and creators committed to the future of Indigenous peoples. As with previous projects, the ambition is not merely to imagine the future, but to actively shape a space there for Indigenous creators. IIF engages artists, scholars, educators, and professionals from videogame, film and technology development industries to envision Indigenous peoples in seven generations—150 to 200 years—into the future. Undertaking such a wide-range of cultural activity, IIF is overseen by AbTeC and realized with partners across the country. IIF projects include: digital media workshops with youth and elders, residencies and commissions for respected Indigenous artists, the development of a media art archive, and a series of lectures, interviews and symposia highlighting prominent voices in Indigenous art and culture.

Illustrating the Future Imaginary

Among the outputs of IIF is a series of images commissioned from Indigenous artists prompted to illustrate their descendants of the future. As they launched IIF with their partners, one of the first impulses for Lewis and Skawennati was to ask artists directly: Where do you see your community seven generations from now?

The results—inventive, fantastic, and speculative—come from both younger and established artists who belong to a variety of communities and use a range of media. Some imagery is dystopic, but also envisions futures of community, kinship and harmony with the natural world. Freely accessible online, these images equally circulate as postcards.

Future Imaginary Lectures and Dialogues

Throughout the past year AbTeC has invited a line-up of distinguished scholars to Montreal to think seriously about Indigenous futures. The Future Imaginary Lectures and Dialogues series comprises interviews, seminars and public talks led by leading Indigenous artists, activists, academics and technologists. Each contributor in this ongoing program is invited to

19. Lewis, 37.
Each Branch Determined is a VR artwork developed by the Indigenous artist collective Postcommodity. The project visualizes the northern New Mexican landscape 150 years into the future, at a time when a gathering of American Indian and Xicano pueblos are working together to manage their land and shared community. The project plays with tropes of sci-fi and apocalyptic imagery to create fantastic and surreal spaces. However, these spaces are revealed as sites for community ceremony and managed processes of restoration. This is a future in which Indigenous knowledge of land and kinship proves to be essential.

Filling in the Blank Spaces

To be sure, much of AbTeC’s work for the past twenty years has revolved around imagination and speculation. The results have often been fanciful and far-fetched. But what’s more, this future-gazing has been matched by material productions and critical texts that build methods to realize such futures. These efforts affirm the presence of Indigenous peoples in the technological future and ensure the capacities of Indigenous people to create their own roles in digital culture. These are not mainstream images of the future focused on the myth of the pioneering individual. Instead, we see in AbTeC’s body of work cohesive and collective visions of the future enabled by communities and grounded in shared priorities. Through this impressive set of achievements, the research network has become an international criterion for active participation in digital cultures and a model for developing long-lasting

20. Postcommodity is Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martinez, and Kade L. Twist.
community engagements. AbTeC’s sustained effort in actively making a place in the future for Indigenous traditions helps ensure the continued vitality of their communities. As Lewis and Skawennati wrote over a decade ago upon the founding of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace:

We are confident that the lessons learned from Cyber-PowWow will prove useful in building new Aboriginal territories through which Native people can illustrate their stories to each other and to non-Natives. We are excited about these possibilities, and we invite members of other Aboriginal communities to come visit us, out where we are filling in the blank spaces.21

Mikhel Proulx is a PhD student and faculty member in the department of Art History at Concordia University, Montreal. He researches contemporary art and digital cultures and is interested in Queer and Indigenous artists working with networked media. He has curated exhibitions across Canada, Europe, and the Middle East.

List of Works and Documents

1. Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati
   Thanksgiving Address: Greetings to the Technological World, 2002
   Adobe Flash, 3 min. 50 sec.
   Commissioned by Horizon Zero and originally presented online by Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg
   Courtesy of the artists

2. Jason Edward Lewis
   P.o.E.M.M.
   iPads, Objective-C application for iOS
   Touch screen, Java application for Mac and Windows OS
   The P.o.E.M.M. series was produced in collaboration with Bruno Nadeau and with production assistance from Charles-Antoine Dupont, Chris Drogaris, Christian Gratton, Clem Lui, David Mongeau-Petitpas, Elie Zananiri, Eric Gagnon, Frédéric Bouin, Ian Arajwo, Julia Wolfe, Max Young, Sam Cousin, Serge Maheu and Tristan Kurtz. Paul Dolden created the music
   Courtesy of the artist
   Apps can be downloaded to your iPhone or iPad at www.poemm.net

3. Skawennati
   Imagining Indians in the 25th century, 2001
   Website on iPad: www.skawennati.com/imaginingindians
   Courtesy of the artist

4. Illustrating the Future Imaginary, 2015-2017
   Projections of digital images
   4a. Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinabe), Joseph Erb (Cherokee), Moanaroa Te Whata (Maori of Ngapuhi and Ngati Porou tribes), and Darian Jacobs (Mohawk)
   4b. ᦲᓇᕒᐲᐅᐣ/Connor Pion/piihkonikewin (mixed non-status urban Cree/Atikamekw/metis/settler living in Tkaronto/Dish with One Spoon Treaty Territory), Heather Campbell (Nunatsiavut Inuit), Steve Sanderson (Plains Cree), Kaleikulaakeliokalani Makua (Native Hawaiian)
   4c. Jeffrey Veregge (Port Gamble S’Klallam), Nā ‘Anae Mahiki collective (Briana Makanamaikalani Wright (Kanaka Māoli), Chad Brown (Kanaka Māoli), and Jasmine Elidas), Teyowisonte Tommy Deer (Mohawk), Ray Caplin (Mi’kmaq), Kaia’tanoron Bush (Mohawk)
   Courtesy of the artists
5. **Videos games created in the framework of Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Video Game Design**

*Otsi!: Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends*, 2009
Created by the Skins 1.0 Collective
Kahnawake Survival School, Kahnawake First Nation

*Skahiòn:hati: Legend of the Stone Giant*, 2011
Created by the Skins 3.0 Collective, Concordia University

*Skahiòn:hati: Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends*, 2012
Created by the Skins 3.0 Collective, Concordia University

*Ienién:te and the Peacemaker’s Wampum*, 2013
Created by the Skins 4.0 Collective, Concordia University

*He Ao hou*, 2017
Created by Nā ‘Anae Mahiki Collective
Skins 5.0: Telling Mo'olelo Through Video Games
Hālau ʻĪnana, Kamehameha Schools, Honolulu

6. **Postcommodity**
*Each Branch Determined*, 2017
Virtual Reality Environment on Samsung Gear
Courtesy of the artist

7. **Scott Benesiinaabandan**
*Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky*, 2017
Virtual Reality
Environment on Samsung Gear
Courtesy of the artist

8. **Machinima Screening Program**
Machinimas by Skawennati
*She Falls For Ages*, 2017
20 min.
*TimeTraveller™*, 2008-2013
75 min.
Courtesy of the artist

9. **Skawennati**
*Hunter Mega-Figurine*, 2011
*xox Mega-Figurine*, 2017
Full colour sandstone 3D prints
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery ELLEPHANT, Montreal

10. **CyberPowWow**, 1997-2004
iMac G4, Palace server software
Courtesy of the artists

11. **Skawennati**
*Imagining the Next Seven Generations*, TEDxMontrealWomen, 2015
Video, 9 min. 4 sec.
Courtesy of the artist

12. **Jason Edward Lewis**
*The Future Imaginary*, TEDxMontréal, 2013
Video, 15 min. 30 sec.
Courtesy of the artist

13. **AbTeC Archives**, 1996-2017
Interviews, ephemera, research documentation, photographic and video documentation, preparatory sketches and media coverage of AbTeC activities

14. **Activating AbTeC Island**, 2008 -
Virtual land in *Second Life* owned by AbTeC since 2008
A project by Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati
Archive Curator: Mikhel Proulx
Project Management: Sara England
AbTeC Technical Direction: Sabine Rosenberg
Title Design: Valerie Bourdon
AbTeC Island Environment Design: Nancy Elizabeth Townsend
Gallery Visitor Avatar Design: Roxanne Sirois
Docents: Sara England, Darian Jacobs, Suzanne Kite, Maize Longboat, Nancy Elizabeth Townsend

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