Research Overview

## *Art Work as Argument*

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In 2006 we founded the research network called Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) (see Figure 1). Our goal was simple: change the world. It has been five years, and while the world still looks largely the same, AbTeC's team of academics, artists, community activists and media technologists have made progress, both in understanding how Aboriginal individuals and communities use digital media to tell our stories and in developing methods for encouraging greater participation by our people in the production of such work.

Figure 1: Aboriginal territories in cyberspace logo
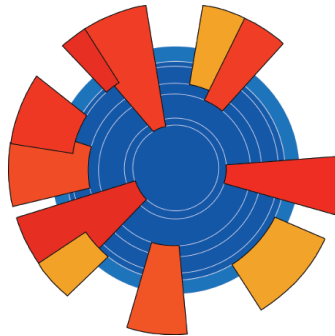
Credit: © AbTeC, 2012

From its inception, AbTeC's efforts have focused on two questions which combine issues in research and creation: how digital media is being used to tell stories in Indian country, and how to develop culturally-specific methods for teaching people how to be creative with digital media. Ultimately, the research network sought to generate

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work that could serve as examples of the powerful role digital media could play in the continual retelling of old stories and the imagining of new ones.

AbTeC's key research outcomes are creative works. These works serve as boundary objects that are much more effective as arguments than analysis and writing alone, particularly to our core audience of Aboriginal youth, artists, educators and cultural workers and their communities. We address the academic community in our dissem-ination, and hope to have an impact on ongoing conversations about Aboriginal cul-tural policy, educational approaches, and research methodologies. Yet screening episodes of the *TimeTraveller™* machinima series to elders is far better at generating a conversation about our questions than presenting a paper to them; playing a video game, designed by a team of Aboriginal youth in our Skins workshops, is far better at engaging youth in issues than asking them to read a journal article. Even within aca-demic and policy circles we find that the creative works themselves strongly reinforce the necessity of maintaining a broader, culturally-grounded underpinning to the (often abstractly narrow) intellectual focus of those conversations.

**Figure 2: *TimeTraveller™ - Jetpack*
Episode 01 production still, showing the main character Hunter**

Credit: 2012 © AbTeC

One of the core arguments we make in AbTeC is that the era of networked digital media presents a unique opportunity for Aboriginal people to present a self-deterim-ined image to the world. Since contact, we have had to contend with a lack of access to the means by which our lives were illustrated by others. The written and printed word, photography, film, and television, have all been used by the settler culture(s) to describe us while we were kept mute due to a lack of training, a lack of access to the technology, and a lack of access to the means of distribution. Aboriginal people have fought this silencing by adapting communication technologies to our own ends. As Fragnito (2002) has written,

> [t]echnologies and customs brought to us by Europeans … did not serve to assimilate us. Instead, we absorbed them and have learned to use them to our advantage. (p. 229)

**Figure 3: *TimeTraveller™ - Confrontation at Oka*
Episode 03 production still, showing standoff between
Mohawk warrior and Canadian soldier**

Credit: 2012 © AbTeC

Our operating premise is that this time, with this wave of media technology, we have
an unprecedented opportunity to harness it to our communities' purposes. Not only
can we appropriate existing technology, but we can be part of the shaping of that tech-
nology as well. Networked digital media is still in its early stages of development, and
advances in technology bring new creative possibilities every few years (or sooner!)
The World Wide Web is not yet twenty years old and every year shows us just how
much further it has to evolve. It is all taking form before our eyes, and the wide spread
of the network, the cheapness—compared to previous mass communication technolo-
gies—of the technology, and the substantial penetration of sophisticated communica-
tions technology into every day life has made it possible for Aboriginal people to be
centrally involved in how this story unfolds. We can be the storytellers, not just have
stories told about us.

So what stories do we want to tell? First and foremost, we are imagining Native
people in the future. Who will we be? What past achievements will we be proud of?
How will we participate in contemporary society? What technologies will we be using?
How will we contribute to their development, their look and feel, and their use? Our
TimeTraveller™ project explores these questions and more by telling a story about
Hunter, a young Mohawk man who lives in the 22nd century (see Figure 2). The story
is told via the emerging medium of "machinima" (machine + cinema), the practice
of making movies within virtual environments. We use Second Life as our virtual set,
allowing us a free hand to fully visualize worlds full of jetpacks and teleportation de-
vices in 2112 alongside recreations of the Oka crisis of 1990 (see Figure 3), the Dakota
Sioux Uprising of 1862 (see Figure 4) or the Kahnawake territory of Kateri Tekakwitha's
time in 1680. These past, present and future imaginaries provide us with a palette to
work through questions about historical accuracy and perspective, speculative history,
the dreams of and goals for the near and far future we have for our peoples, and the
contingencies of intellectual "proof."

Figure 4: *TimeTraveller™ - Episode 2, Dakota Uprising*
Production still showing Sioux warriors confronting a settler

Credit: Hunter. 2012 © AbTeC

At AbTeC, we also work with others to help them tell their stories. The Skins Aboriginal Storytelling and Digital Media Workshops integrate instruction on digital media production with stories from our communities (see Figure 5). Three Skins workshops have been held to date, two on video game design with the Kahnawake Mohawk community and one on machinima production with Toronto urban Natives. Our goal with the project is to facilitate the creation of a new generation of media producers while attempting to answer questions about how our stories are told and how these can be remediated via new media. Such questions include

Are games a useful media through which to engage with our cultural history?
Our preliminary evidence is positive. Aboriginal youth, just like their peers in the wider society, are highly engaged with videogames. Many are interested in creating their own games, and the videogame workshops enable that learning within a context of community storytelling. Our communities are rich with stories full of amazing characters,

Figure 5: Skins 1.0 - Clay model of the *Otsi:!*
***Rise of the Kanien'keha:ka Legends* video game level**

Credit: 2012 © AbTeC

monumental obstacles to be overcome, and a vibrant material culture to serve as a basis of engaging visual environments—all useful ingredients for creating an engaging videogame. Within the context of the AbTeC research, the participants' were quite sophisticated in their understanding of videogames as a storytelling medium. For instance, they developed original game mechanics with minimal guidance from the research team, deciding, for example, which legendary monster was "easier" and which should be the "big boss."

The resulting playable game prototypes *Otsi:! Rise of the Kanien'keha:ka Legends* and *The Adventure of Skahion:ati: Legend of the Stone Giants*, centre on characters that are instantly recognizable to any member of the Kahnawake community as coming from the old stories. The narratives underlying the gameplay expand on those stories in much the same way that storytellers embellish and improvise new details in response to a particular audience, as the *Lord of the Rings* video games expanded on the universe created by Tolkien in the books. In both workshops the team spent considerable time discussing how to execute that expansion in a way that would accommodate the new elements required to make a game while maintaining continuity with the existing community understanding of those characters and their stories.

How do we remediate traditional stories in a way that respects the community's ownership, particularly in the absence of any single, formal locus of approval?
Aboriginal communities have protocols about which stories can be told by whom and when. These protocols are rarely formally codified, and often no one person or body has been designated as being responsible for deciding these questions. It can often be difficult to discern which stories the community desires to be protected, and which stories are considered to be public. We addressed this issue by working closely with organizations such as the high school and the education centre in Kahnawake that have an explicit role in promoting the community's culture and by integrating individuals that the community recognizes as having sound cultural knowledge into the planning and execution of the workshops. Additionally, the workshops included student and mentor storytelling into the core curriculum of the workshops, as well as reflective discussions of how the stories are told and what that might say about the worldview embedded within them. These conversations have shown us that the students themselves have a sophisticated sense of appropriate ways of telling the stories, and which stories are not suitable for wider dissemination. It is interesting to note that in both video game workshops, the students wanted to tell stories that they could distribute far and wide.

Can these stories continue to attract the younger generation if transmitted orally, or must they be remediated in order for the younger generation to respond to them and integrate them into their lives?
The continued reliance on and respect for the oral storytelling tradition in Aboriginal communities is cause for celebration, as it creates continuity with the past, grounds our claims to nationhood and treaty rights, and reflects the particularities of each local

community. The challenge is that Aboriginal communities are embedded in a settler culture that tells many of its stories through technologically-mediated means such as film, television, games, and the Internet. Given the substantial amount of time that contemporary youth spend with these media, many Aboriginal communities worry about how to keep their old stories alive.

Figure 6: Skins 1.0 – Participants, mentors, and staff

Credit: 2012 © AbTeC

Yet, in both Skins workshops, participants were able to contribute personal experiences with these stories, indicating that the tales are percolating down the generations through many avenues (see Figures 6, 7, and 8). Some of the participants traced their knowledge to family members, some to books from the cultural centre's library, and some to classes taken in the reserve's school system. At the same time, though,

**Figure 7: Skins 2.0 – Skahion:ati: Approaches the Stone Giant,
from *The adventure of Skahion:ati: Legend of the Stone Giant***

Credit: 2012 © AbTeC

several participants spoke about how the workshop was one of the few instances where they had been asked to reflect on these stories, their structure and their role in the community. They also took ownership over their interpretation of the stories embodied by the videogame prototypes, exhibiting tremendous excitement about showing the games to their peers. Our experience suggests, then, that while remediation may not be necessary for the stories to be alive to the next generation, the workshops provided a fruitful context in which to engage youth with those stories at a level deep enough to induce participants' desire to share those stories to others.

Five years into what we see as a multi-decade project, AbTeC is just beginning to understand how digital media technologies and networks can be best used to tell our communities' stories. Whether it be through AbTeC created artwork such as *TimeTraveller™*, or through the Skins workshops teaching others the skills to create their own

Figure 8: Skins – Skins 1.0 Otsi:! Rise of the Kanien'keha:ka Legends videogame poster.

Credit: 2012 © AbTeC

stories, we are striving to increase the vitality and integrity of media representations of past, present, and future life within our communities. By working creatively within popular media genres such as videogames, by making that work freely available on the Internet, by imagining Aboriginal people in the far-future, and by actively engaging in the conversations influencing the evolution of the technology, we can mount arguments within the discourse we want to change as opposed to simply conducting arguments about it.

Reference

Fragnito, Skawennati. (2002). Five suggestions for better living. In Lynda Jessup & Shannon Bagg (Eds.), *On Aboriginal representation in the gallery*, (229-237). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Museum of Civilization.