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*Tad Hirsch, Editor*

# Time Travelers, Flying Heads, and Second Lives: Designing Communal Stories

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Six years ago, my collaborator, Skawennati Fragnito, and I set out to change the world. Our strategy for achieving this modest goal has been to combine our longstanding fascination with digital media technology with the desire to work with our First Nations communities to tell old stories anew and develop new stories to take us into the future. The vehicle for doing all of this is Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, or AbTeC, an international research/creation network of Native and non-Native artists, academics, activists, and technologists interested in the storytelling potential of digital media. The Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Video Game Design is one of two main AbTeC efforts; the other is *TimeTraveller™*, a machinima [1] series about a history-hopping Mohawk warrior from the 22nd century.

The two projects share similar goals but are quite different in their details. The Skins workshops—as suggested by the full title—integrate Aboriginal stories and storytelling techniques into the video game production process. We developed the project to encourage First Nations youth to be producers of media, not just consumers of it. We also wanted them to experiment with ways individuals and communities might leverage digital media as a tool for preserving and advancing culture and languages, and for projecting a self-determined image out into a mediasphere awash in stereotypical portrayals of Native characters. To date, we have run two major Skins workshops, one over the course of an entire academic year and one as a 14-day intensive workshop. The workshops produced two video game prototypes (*Otsi:! Rise of the Kanien`keha:ka Legends* and *The Adventure of Skahion:ati—Legend of the Stone Giants*), but more important, the workshops articulated a framework for remediating old stories into a new format.

*TimeTraveller™* is an artwork that leans far forward into the future. "Shot" in the shared online virtual environment Second Life, the work grows in part out of director Fragnito's frustration with the near absence of Native people from the future imaginary of popular science fiction. This absence is indicative of a difficulty popular media has in portraying Native people and cultures as anything other than historical phenomena with little or no presence within the contemporary world. (This is true even within Second Life itself, where the "Native" skins, or avatar suits, are almost all modeled on some imaginary pan-Plains Indian from the 1700s.) Even within our own communities, it can be difficult to find discussions about our future beyond the next few years. *TimeTraveller™* is an attempt to paint at least one possible future history while locating its genesis firmly in our traditions and our contemporary reality.

The two projects engage community in quite different ways. Skins is focused on a specific, local community—the Mohawks of Kahnawake—whose territory is located just across the St. Lawrence River from Montreal. Fragnito is from that community, and I am Cherokee, yet it was challenging even for us to navigate the (mostly informal) protocols of the Kahnawake community.

The Skins workshops entailed Kahnawake youth engaging with stories from the community, but the stories had rarely been told in interactive media, and, to our knowledge, never in a video game. When we told community members we thought video games might be a fruitful medium for telling some of

the old stories, we were met with a barrage of questions: Which stories? Who would be telling them? Who would see them? How would they be distributed (DVD, Internet, console)? Would somebody owning the game then think they owned the story?

Of particular concern was that the youth would make "Grand Theft Rez," turning the stories into blood-soaked shoot 'em ups whose only point was to simulate murder and mayhem. We spent much time talking to people about how the field of video games encompasses much more than the standard first-person

engagement with Aboriginal communities, where Aboriginal people were often treated more as research objects than as human beings, and where the research was done primarily to benefit the academics involved rather than the community. Even with today's somewhat more enlightened academics, skepticism abounded. Many researchers attempting projects in these communities are surprised by the lack of enthusiasm proposed projects encounter. One potential collaborator told us, "We get called all the time, by the universities or some

years developing relationships in Kahnawake, talking to people and organizations about the Skins project. We were asked several times about what was in it for us professionally, and we were clear about how we would use the outcomes to advance our research projects. We emphasized our own histories (Fragnito, in particular, naming her mother and grandparents) and the fact that we were doing this in part for our own (Mohawk-Cherokee) children. We participated at multiple levels in the community, from attending the annual pow wow to

▶ *TimeTraveller*™ Episode 1, Hunter (production still). 2012 © Skawennati Fragnito



shooters that most of their kids were playing on the Xbox, as well as showing them examples of how the medium could be used to tell rich narratives. Several potential partners never quite believed us, and, after initially expressing interest, decided to pass on collaborating with us to produce the workshops.

The other big challenge was the contentious history of academic

research institute, wanting us to get involved in one study or another" [2]. Over the years, community members had become weary and wary of such projects. The benefits have to be clear, substantial, and cost-effective before people will begin to consider participating.

Our work solving the first challenge is what made it possible to solve the second. We spent several

volunteering as judges for the district science fair. We spoke often about the multiyear nature of our funding, as well as how we were setting in place mechanisms, personnel, and financing to work with community members at the high school and university levels and were developing ideas to find ways for those students to bring their technical skills back to the reserve.

(left) *TimeTraveller*™ Episode 2, Dakota Uprising (production still). 2012 © Skawennati Fragnito; (right) Skins 2.0. Skahion:ati approaches the Stone Giant, from *The Adventure of Skahion:ati— Legend of the Stone Giants* game prototype. 2012 © AbTeC

In short, we showed in multiple ways that our commitment to the project, and to the community, was not just professional but also personal, and not just opportunistic but essential to who we were and wanted to be.

It took two years before we found our first partner, Survival School, the Kahnawake high school, and even then it ultimately came about because of a familial connection. Owisokon Lahache, Fragnito's cousin and a teacher at the school, shared our vision and enthusiasm. She took on the role

tionships while constantly repeating the grander visions we were pursuing and indicating our personal commitment—ultimately convinced the community to trust us to appropriately handle its stories.

*TimeTraveller*™ represents a very different engagement with community. *TimeTraveller*™ is a machinima series, a website and an ARG (alternate reality game) which together tell the story of Hunter, an angry young Mohawk man living in the 22nd century. Despite the fact that he possesses an impressive range of traditional skills, Hunter is unable

present, whose unique perspective on Aboriginal issues deeply affects him. Separately and together, over ten episodes, they criss-cross Turtle Island [4], visiting events such as an Aztec Panquetzaliztli festival in pre-contact Tenochtitlan in 1490, the Minnesota Massacre in 1862, the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, the Oka Crisis in 1990, and the Manitouahbee Intergalactic Pow Wow of 2112.

Whereas Skins is essentially an education project, *TimeTraveller*™ is an art project. This difference in nature entails a different approach



of liaison between the school and us. She also acted as a proxy for the community at large during our workshop discussions about what stories to remediate and how; the youth themselves also exhibited a strong sensitivity for such issues. It took another two years before we confirmed our second partner, the Kahnawake Education Centre. Our strategy [3]—of slowly building rela-

to find his way in an overcrowded, hyperconsumerist, technologized world. Using his Edutainment system, the TimeTraveller™, Hunter embarks on a fact-finding mission that takes him back in time to historical conflicts that have involved First Nations. ("Go ahead," he says, "call it a vision quest.") Along the way, he meets Karahkwenhawi, a young Mohawk woman from our

to dealing with stories of cultural identity. Fragnito carefully researches the events, location, and eras and individuals represented in each episode—Mohawks in Kahnawake and elsewhere, other nations in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Aztecs, the Dakota Sioux, the American Indian Movement, and so on. She uses the history as a launch point for both reimagining the

historical accounts from a Native viewpoint and for tracing lines forward from the actual present into a fantastical future. In other words, rather than remediating existing mythology as we are doing with Skins, Fragnito is creating a new mythology, a new set of stories to illustrate the values of an imagined future Native culture.

Creating anew gives rise to a set of design responsibilities different than those of remediation. Whereas in Skins we needed to be careful about telling tales that community members might consider unsuitable



for disseminating outside the community, or in remediating stories in a way that some might consider inappropriate, the *TimeTraveller*™ series paints a picture that consciously seeks to perturb accepted history and disturb settler culture notions of the modern Native. The community for which Fragnito is designing her stories is the entire Aboriginal population of Turtle

Island, whose distinct nations, despite vast differences in particular cultural details, all had a similar experience of violent colonization and are still looking for ways to ameliorate the cultural disjunctions and disruptions that followed.

"What inspired me to base the game on the stories of the Flying Head," says Tehoniehtáthe Delisle, "is…that I didn't really see any games out there that had our culture in it" [5]. Delisle is one of the participants of the first Skins workshops, who subsequently joined AbTeC as a junior research assistant and acted as a mentor for participants in the second workshop. The quote comes from an interview in which we asked him what had motivated him and his fellow participants to choose the particular story they did as the basis for a first-person adventure game. The Flying Head is a creature from the old stories of the Kahnawake community that make up the community's heritage. Scott Benesiinaabandan, one of the mentors in the second Skins workshop, points out the potential dangers in remediating such stories:

"The elements in traditional stories—they're all very important. So changing key elements in terms of the personality of the hero kind of changes the whole dynamic of the story" [6].

He also articulates our approach to doing so appropriately:

"Being able to identify what those elements are…is a lifelong process. Being immersed in the culture, knowing what makes your audience or community tick, what the issues are—ceremonial, historical, and present—that make those elements 'pop'… Learning to listen, listening with intent and a sense of knowing how essential some stories are for the future, [these] are essential skills to become equipped to make

those kinds of calls… Modern-day storytellers, not specifically traditional storytellers, can adapt the stories in such a way that while they retain their underlying meanings, they are dressed in modified clothing" [6].

Our work at AbTeC attempts to find a balance between Delisle's desire to see his stories told through video games and Benesiinaabandan's caution about the perils of simply treating those stories as content, a resource to be plundered when other inspiration fails. By moving along twin paths—the careful partnering with local communities to reimagine our stories in the Skins workshops, and the use of modern media technology to envision a new future for our communities in the *TimeTraveller*™ series—we hope that each will reinforce, inspire, and enrich the other. And perhaps, five, 10, or 20 years down the road, this approach will have changed the world… at least a little bit.

**ENDNOTES:**

1. Machinima = machine cinema, or the use of virtual environments to "film" movies.

2. Montreal has four major universities, and there is substantial grant money to be had if one is working with Aboriginal communities.

3. Post-hoc it looks like a strategy; at the time, it was simply trying to find any local optimal.

4. Turtle Island = a term for North America used by the Haudenosaunee and other indigenous cultures.

5. Skins 1.0 interview, June 6, 2009.

6. Skins 2.0 interview, July 23, 2011.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
Jason Edward Lewis is a digital-media poet, artist, and software designer. He founded Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media (www.obxlabs.net), where he directs projects devising new forms of digital text, developing systems for creative use of mobile technology, and using virtual environments to assist Aboriginal communities in communicating cultural histories. He is currently an associate professor of computation arts at Concordia University, Montreal.