

Skins 1.0: A Curriculum for Designing Games with First Nations Youth

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) conducted the Skins workshop to explore a pedagogy that integrated North American Indigenous cultural frameworks into the design of video games and virtual environments. Skins provides instruction in digital design, art, animation, audio and programming within a context of Aboriginal stories and storytelling techniques. In the pilot workshop with Mohawk youth at the Kahnawake Survival School, students developed interactive environments based on traditional stories from their community in a process that required them to reflect on how they knew those stories, who had told them, and which stories were appropriate for such remediation. In the process, AbTeC found that the discussions about these stories in the context of the technical skills development provided substantial motivation for both further inquiry into the stories and greater participation in the skills development. This paper describes the curriculum and strategies of the Skins pilot workshop.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A. General Literature [GENERAL]: Conference proceedings

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

Keywords

Game design, education, curriculum, workshops, youth, First Nations, Aboriginal, American Indian, Native American, Indigenous, storytelling, remediation

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples' survival, recovery, development, and self-determination hinges on the preservation and revitalization of languages, social and spiritual practices, social relations, and arts [26]. Video games and virtual environments, with their unique combination of story, design, code, architecture, art, animation,

and sound [15], provide a rich medium through which to explore different strategies for pursuing such preservation and revitalization. It has even been argued that the fluid, open, and networked characteristics of modern digital media make it particularly useful as a tool for Aboriginal storytelling, with Loretta Todd, Cree/Métis filmmaker and Director of the Aboriginal Media Arts Lab, suggesting "the experience of cyberspace offers the reversal of narrative as derived from storytelling, a return to oral tradition" [27]. Furthermore, due to the radical decrease in the costs of the means of production and distribution, video games and virtual worlds present Indigenous people with a powerful opportunity to widely (or narrowly) communicate stories in which we shape our own representation.

However, many challenges to successfully making these media 'our own' exist. Lameman (néé Dillon) has conducted extensive investigations into Indigenous representation in both game content and production teams. Her research has shown that, while North American Indigenous youth are known to be avid video game players [8], they rarely appear in commercial games, and when they do, they are misrepresented in aspects including culture, behaviour, and language [3, 4, 6, 7]. In 2006, the Association for American Indian Development (AAID) launched a boycott against *GUN*, in which the player character hunts Apaches. Although *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs* (Fig. 1) treats American Indian/Alaska Natives positively as allies to European colonists, the game has been criticized for its revisionist approach to history [1] and its lack of incorporating Indigenous thinking in the gameplay [5]. For example, in *The WarChiefs*, players have to replenish resources by planting trees, which results in a map of demolished tree lines. Where North American Indigenous characters are playable, they are stereotyped, and where they are side-characters, they are targets of violence [4].



Figure 1. Icons for Character Units from *Age of Empires III*.

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FuturePlay 2010, May 6-7, 2010, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

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