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Indigenous Peoples Are Decolonizing Virtual Worlds

In an industry marred by its lack of self-awareness, one project is creating a more inclusive vision of the world



Cecilia Keating · [Follow](#)

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“Hunter of the Altered Game” by Ray Caplin, 2015. Image courtesy of AbTec’s Illustrating the Future Imaginary project.

Your mission is to explore space until you find your missing sister. You set off for the stars in your grandfather’s space canoe. Along the way, you visit different planets and meet a galaxy of characters inspired by Hawaiian *mo’olelo* (stories) who help you on your quest. On a water planet,

you learn how the kukui, or candlenut, can make cloudy water bright blue — which allows you to meet a helpful shark. On a lava planet, you hula dance to make kukui trees grow from the ground of a pink-red desert, and on another, you wake the boar-like, eight-eyed demigod Kamapua'a from sleep by throwing kukui at him.

If you think this sounds like an unusual premise for a video game, you'd be right. *He Ao Hou*, which means “a new world” in Hawaiian, was created by 13 Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian) and two non-native teenagers at a three-week workshop in Honolulu last summer. The participants, who were inspired by their ancestors' tradition of long-distance navigation by the stars, created a game set in the future that is entirely in the Hawaiian language.



“Māhoe.” by Briana Makanamaikalani Wright, 2017. Image courtesy of Nā ‘Ānae Mahiki collective. 2017.

Video games have a malicious history of inaccurate portrayals of Indigenous characters. In the 1980s and '90s, they were the human targets of shoot-'em-ups like *Indian Attack*, *Cowboy Kid*, and *Hammer Boy*, and the repetitive rape of a Native American woman was the main aim of *Custer's Revenge*. *GUN*, released in 2005, required that gamers murder a set number of Native Americans in order to graduate through levels, and the “pan-Indian” stereotypes of mystic chief, ritualistic warrior, or Indian princess continue to dominate storylines. A 2010 academic paper that analyzed the race of characters in the 150 bestselling games in the United States in one year revealed that Native Americans were the most underrepresented segment of society and appeared only as secondary characters.

“It’s a rather poisonous state of affairs that it’s possible for gamers to imagine flying through space at the speed of light with a three-headed alien but can’t imagine playing as a brown person,” says Jason Edward Lewis, who has been trying to boost Indigenous presence in virtual worlds since he co-founded the research group Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) in 2005.

“Do we really want those biases trained into future technologies and A.I.?”

Lewis and his colleagues ran the workshop in Honolulu last summer. Firmly rooted in Hawaiian stories and traditions — in particular, the concept of *aloha aina*, or the love and care of land — *He Ao Hou* is a far cry from Western gaming storylines, Lewis explains. “It wasn’t about going to space to conquer and bring back resources. They were looking for something, but instead of conquering, they were exchanging knowledge with people.”

AbTeC’s work identifies and confronts the Western biases threaded throughout our virtual environments by encouraging Indigenous individuals to establish decolonized, Indigenous-led spaces on the web and in virtual worlds such as video games. It’s a mission that is important not just to empower Indigenous peoples, but also to inspire a richer and more inclusive digital world for everybody.

“Hardware and software is culturally biased. Robotic epistemologies are caught in a 500-year bubble, a particular way of looking at the world,” Lewis says. “It gave us some good things, but it also gave us colonialism, slavery, and sustained environmental degradation. Do we really want those biases trained into future technologies and A.I.?”

The workshop in Honolulu was just one of several that AbTeC runs each year for young Indigenous individuals across Canada and the United States. They cover Indigenous storytelling, 3D modeling, animation, game design, and

machinima (movies made in digital spaces online), and are named “skins workshops” after the practice of “skinning” or “modding” avatars in gaming environments — in other words, playing around with their features to give them different clothes or skin color.

Lewis hopes that by staking out Indigenous-conceived and -managed virtual spaces, and by helping Indigenous peoples develop technology skills, everyone benefits: Indigenous peoples gain exciting career prospects and improved on-screen representation, consumers experience more diverse virtual environments informed by different perspectives and philosophies, and future humans will use technology less plagued with cultural bias.

Canada's 1.7 million Indigenous people make up 4.9 percent of the population. In the United States, 5.2 million Native Americans represent 1.7 percent of the population, yet account for only 0.42 percent of the “high-tech” industry, according to a U.S. Equal Employment and Opportunities Commission study from 2016. Combined, that's 6.9 million self-identified Indigenous people in the United States and Canada. But, says Lewis, “we are sadly at the stage where simply stating Indigenous presence is a still a radical thing, in both the real world and within virtual spaces.”

Lewis grew up in Northern California before studying at Stanford and researching human-computer interaction in Silicon Valley in the early 1990s. The burgeoning technology industry's lack of diversity bothered him — particularly as Silicon Valley culture had “hybridized San Francisco hippy culture from the '60s” and proudly proclaimed that technology was a deeply emancipatory practice.

The industry was marred by its lack of self-awareness, Lewis says. “It was — and still is — the same white dudes getting the opportunity to build up this world and make money from it. That didn’t get flattened out at all.”

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While Lewis was lecturing in digital arts in Alberta, Canada, in the late 1990s, he met Skawennati, who at the time was curating an Indigenous art gallery and chat room called CyberPowWow, one of the first Indigenous-conceived and -directed projects on the web. CyberPowWow explored the more revolutionary aspects of new media, where individuals of all backgrounds could publish immediately to a disparate global audience, free from gatekeepers and at a fraction of the cost of running a printing press, equipping a radio room, or purchasing a broadcast license.

“Pueo” by Briana Makanamaikalani Wright, 2017. Courtesy of AbTec’s Illustrating the Future Imaginary project.

This was revolutionary, Skawennati says, because the legacy media of film, photography, and writing was under the control of white European men.

“They came, they took our pictures, and then they told stories about us that were their version of who we are,” Skawennati told the CBC in May. “And it took a long time before we started taking our own pictures. By that point, the damage had been done. The stereotypes had been created.”

In 2015, AbTeC commissioned a series of digital artworks called *Illustrating the Future Imaginary* from emerging and established artists from across the globe, including Mohawk, Plains Cree, Cherokee, Anishinaabe, Inuit, S’Klallam, Maori, and Navajo individuals. They were tasked with imagining what the future would look like seven generations from now for themselves and their communities.

And in a recent skins workshop, high school students in Kahnawake, a Mohawk reserve just south of Montreal, created 3D models of what people in their community would look like 150 years from now. According to AbTeC workshop leader Kahentawaks Tiewishaw, envisioning your future is a simple but powerful exercise that helps assert your identity in the world.

“A big problem with First Nations youth, especially those living on reserves, is that you don’t really have a clear picture of where you see yourself off the reserve or in the future,” Tiewishaw says. “You are put into this box, where you are raised in a community, and you are comfortable there. This gives you an opportunity to push beyond that and realize there is a future outside of that box.”

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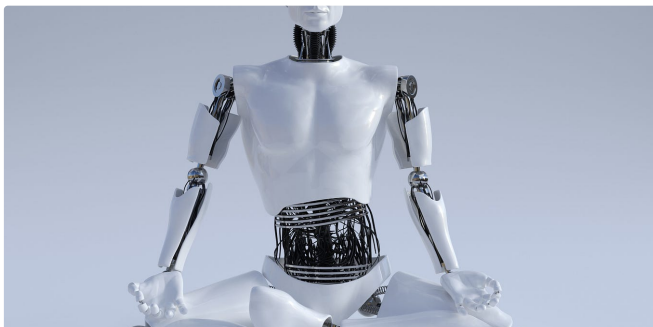
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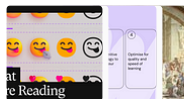


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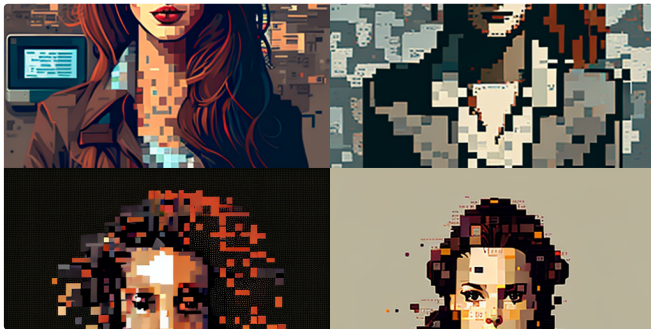
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