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Entrevue avec Jason Lewis

André Éric Létourneau et Cynthia Noury

Jason Lewis est co-directeur d'*AbTeC, Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*, un réseau constitué d'artistes, de concepteurs technologiques et d'universitaires qui proposent des espaces et des territoires virtuels aborigènes sur le web, dans les jeux en ligne et dans les environnements virtuels. Il pratique également l'écriture et la poésie qu'il destine aux nouveaux médias en créant des formes graphiques de textualités à travers la réalisation d'applications et de plusieurs logiciels qu'il développe avec son équipe. Il a dirigé aussi des workshops dans les écoles avec des étudiants sur la culture autochtone et les jeux vidéo en leur apprenant à les créer et les structurer tout en faisant usage de différentes techniques narratives car l'objectif principal étant qu'ils puissent créer des univers dans lesquels ils sont représentés et pour leur donner des outils leur permettant de continuer ces mêmes activités au delà de l'atelier. Ainsi ces jeunes autochtones, qui ont l'impression d'avoir à choisir entre leur culture traditionnelle et la modernité technique, peuvent imaginer et décliner des représentations du peuple autochtone se déployant dans le futur. À travers ses productions artistiques, les objets techniques et les pratiques culturelles traditionnelles sont revisités à la lumière de développements évolutifs pour les générations futures.

Notre entretien avec Jason Lewis commence avec quelques commentaires à propos de l'un de ses projets qui s'inscrit la démarche de *TimeTraveller™* réalisé par Skawennati.

05:59

TimeTraveller™ Episode 01 de Obx Labs

Jason Lewis : *TimeTraveller™*, which is written and directed by Skawennati, is a project telling the story of a young Mohawk from the 22nd Century. Who travels through time, but he doesn't really do it. He uses the same technology as the holodeck on Star Trek, where he puts on these glasses that recreates scenes of historical

events. He uses this technology to travel back in time and visit events that are important to First Nations people in North America, Mexico and Central America; and as well as to visit events that are part of his past but also part of our future. It was both a way for Skawennati to revisit the past but also to dream and think about what our futures might be.

Cynthia Noury : Going back to *Skins*, what is different in those videogames that Indigenous youth are creating, compared to just the other ones?

02:50

SKINS 1.0 Otsi: Rise of the Kanien'keha:ka Legends Trailer

J. L. : The main thing is the content because the way we run technically the workshop, is the same as any other videogame workshop.

You can find hundreds of them now. But the way we teach them the production skills, we bring in storytellers from the community, elders, and mentors who tell stories from the community and talk about why the stories are important and what makes a good story, is special. So, when they get to the point where we have accumulated the basic technical instructions and they have to figure out what is the game going to be like and what is the story going to be in the game. Their heads have been filled by the characters and the places and the scenes from their history for 50 hours and so they then use this narrative material to build an interactive experience and build a game like a experience.

This is the main thing : you look at the games and that the first three games were set in the past and dealing with characters from specifically the Kahnawake Mohawk community and the stories that form its history. All the material culture that you see is based on Iroquois culture. The *big bad* characters that you are fighting against come from those legends like the *Stone Giant* for example. And then there is also some Mohawk language in there. Not a lot, we would like there to be more. The fourth game that we built with the students was actually set in the present day. The story is about a woman coming back from finishing her PhD and coming back to the reserve, and discovering that there has been some foul play going on with somebody stealing wampum belts from the community. So she sets about tracking this person down, and save the wampum belts and so forth. It is all about locating in the native culture. The primary purpose of the workshop was the training, and making a connection hopefully with the participants that does not have to be a division between their history and their traditions, and the modern day. The fact that they play and make videogames, does not mean that they cannot also be traditional. Often tradition is presented as if this thing happened all in the past but the communities are always in the process of evolving their traditions. Sometimes the message that gets sent is that traditions are sacred and so they cannot evolve. They cannot be touched. It is a huge message sent to the outside culture. There is people that have a very hard time seeing native people as contemporary actors, in a modern society. This message is received very clearly by the youth as well. And like something that they absorb and so part of the project is about to say : « look this is not a choice ». You don not have to make a choice between those things. And if you are making videogames, and playing videogames, it does not mean you are not native, it does not mean that you cannot also be engage with your traditions even as you are making videogames. In fact you

should! Because that is what you know. You can make games that do not refer to that, but it is a source of inspiration and illumination that can be used to design and create all sorts of things, and certainly videogames.

C. N. : And, does it seem to work ? Like what are their reaction as they are experiencing the videogame for the first time and then reflecting on it?

14:43

Skin 2.0 Documentary de Obx Labs

J. L. : Well it seems to work fairly well. It is funny the reception is hard to judge, in certain ways. What was really interesting to watch is when we did the very first workshop. We did the storytelling, we did the basic instruction and everything like that, the first one was actually over a full high school academic year, where we taught for two hours every ten days and then for two full day intensives every month.

We (the instructors) had to take a break for a couple of months but they continued their production and they designed an entire game with the narrative material that we exposed them to beforehand. They didn't need any help from us in figuring out how to remediate parts of the stories into the game format. They explained to us that the story « is part of me and part of my, part of my parents and my grandparents, my elders, and maybe even part of the longhouse and things like that. This is something that I believe in and I am really excited to see them playable form. I am really excited to see in a way that I can interact. I've been hearing stories about the Stone Giant for years. And now , we went and we made one! And now I can see it. I can have the character and interact with it." So there is something about bringing the culture to life in a particular way, that does seem very effective and very powerful. They are very proud of these games. They give them to all their friends and talk about the fact that they made them.

C. N. : Just the fact of integrating the indigenous culture to this digital world, is a matter of identity. All cross-over and mixtures are possible as long as they feel good with it. Can you tell us what about the *Initiative of Indigenous Future* ?

J. L. : The *Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF)* grew out of all the previous Skins work. After spending two hundred hours with these students one of the things that we saw is that these youth did not necessarily see themselves in these scenarios in a hundred years from now or five hundred years from now. First of all none of these games have indigenous characters in them. So there is just this literal, they do not see themselves. But also that, it was not clear that they even saw their communities as being part of these future worlds that were being painted. And we thought that is a really problematic thing on the individual level, to imagine that the community you are part of is not going to survive for the next two hundred years. It is problematic from the perspective of the majority culture--if what we think of as the future imaginary of the majority culture does not include our people, that is a really dangerous place to be. Because the majority doesn't have to think about us, if we're not going to be around in a couple of hundred years, why do they (the majority) have to worry about what we want now; or what we need now ? We in AbTeC and IIF see science fiction, and *Future Imaginaries* as an incredibly huge palette on which to paint dreams. And it is a really good way to think about how things might be changed in the present, in order to help get to whatever that future might be. So we built, starting with *AbTeC*, a

research partnership with three universities and six or seven community organizations, that are interested in working with us on both trying to understand this idea of future imaginaries, to understand what the indigenous future imaginary might be. So going and looking at people within the indigenous community who do dream of and talk about the future

So understanding what is going on there and undertaking various projects to help sketch out different ideas about what might be happening in the future. What the seventh generation might actually be like or what the twentieth generation might actually be like. We are going to continue the *Skins* workshops, to create a technical base so that those people can make the future.
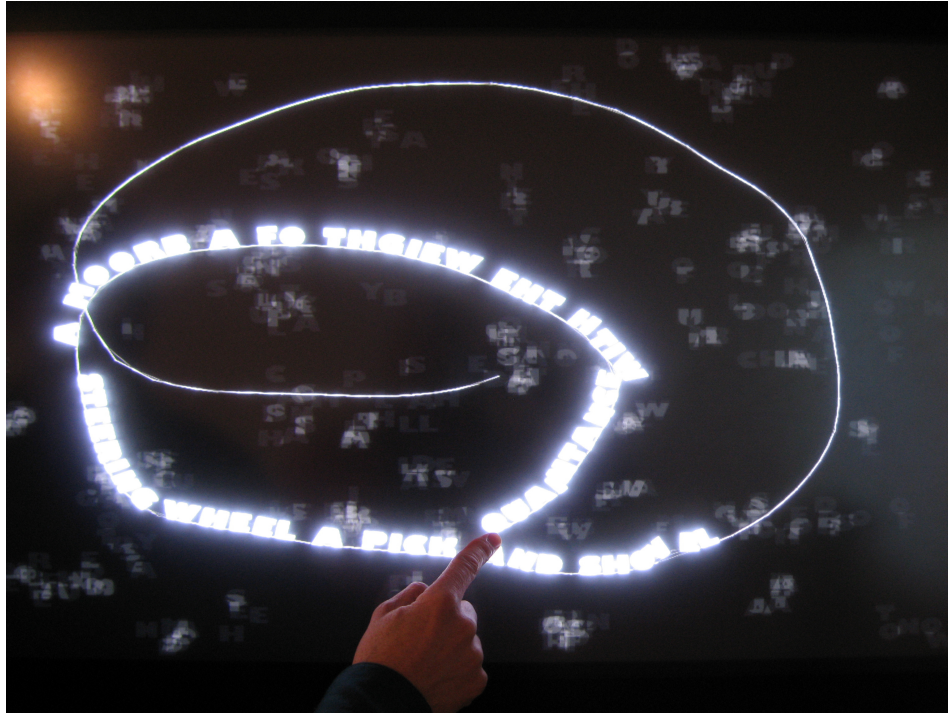
What They Speak when They Speak to Me, 2011

We are starting a residency series. The idea is to get one artist in every year. The only constraint is that he need to do work that envisions his community or some indigenous community in the future. There is people already doing that in lots of different ways. We are also going invite two non-artists. Because there are people who are not artists who are doing really interesting work, trying to think about the future of indigenous sovereignty, legal orders, sustainability, food sovereignty issues and health. So we want to bring those people in with the same thematic constraint. The same constraint is we want you to imagine whatever your domain is, whatever your expertise is, we want you to imagine what the implications are for that seven generations from now. For either your particular community or the Canadian native community or North American or Maori or Australian Aboriginal or kānāka maoli (Native Hawaiian).
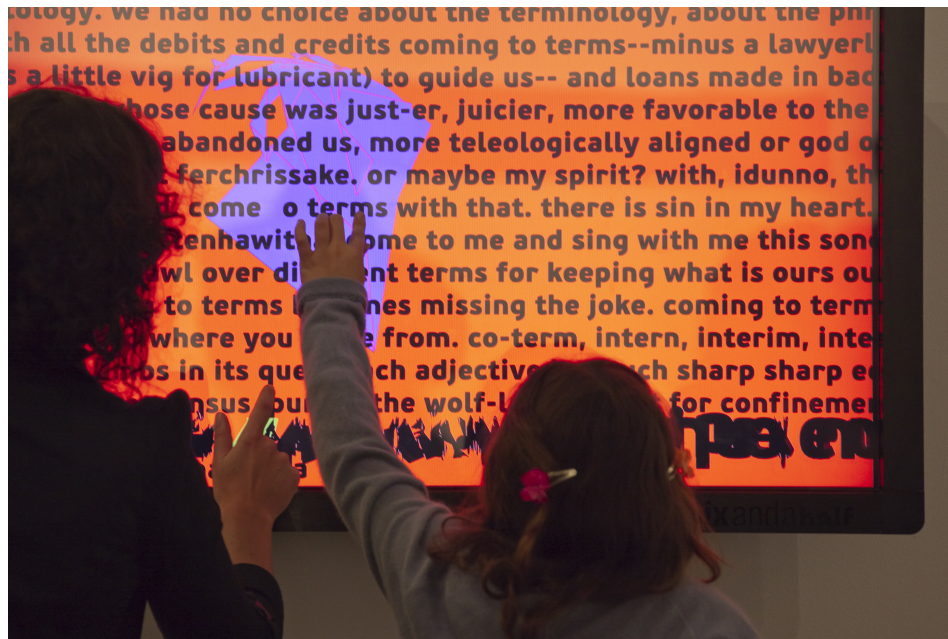
No Choice About the Terminology, 2011

We are going to do a symposium every year and we are archiving indigenous new media artwork. What was really interesting about the *Initiative for Indigenous Future* was that, when we were putting together the partnership, we had built up a reputation so that many people already knew about the workshops. And now we are constantly getting requests from parents telling us : "Our child would really like to do this. When is the next one going be ?"

Smooth Second Bastard, 2012

The Great Migration i.Exhibition, 2010
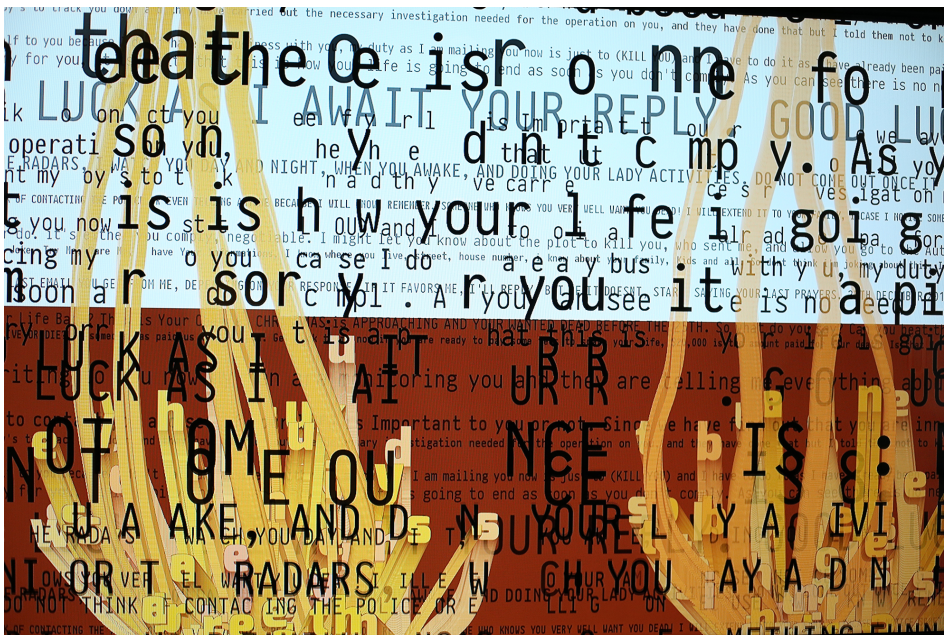
The_World_That_Surrounds_You_Wants_Your_Death, 2014

A. É. L. : I'm interested to know for how long have you been working on these indigenous issues ? This is not your first work about it ?

J. L. : My story is very complicated. I was adopted by a white family, born and raised in California, but not in my culture. I did not really encounter it until I went off to university. I went to Stanford University. As an undergrad and ended up as the chair person of the Stanford American Native organization. But then when I got out of the university, I maintained the personal ties, the community ties, but my work was not focused around that for many years. I started going to the *Banff New Media Institute* in the 90s in which there is a strong aboriginal arts program. And so it was one of the few places if not maybe the only place in the world where you would find a significant population of native artists and creators, with a significant population of people working in digital media. Sarah Diamond, the director of the BNMI in that time, did a really good job pulling those of us coming from the native community into the digital media and bringing the digital media folks over to hang with the aboriginal artists. This is where I started re-engaging with the culture as part of my professional practice.

Skawennati invited me to be a co-curator for the fourth verskion of her *CyberPowWow* online exhibition of Indigenous digital media art.

In 2004, SSHRC started an aboriginal research envelope and that is what gave us our first grant. And that is what funded the first workshops, and all others activities. That helped get us the first few bits of recognition and support for working with Indigenous new media.

C. N. : It is actually touching to see you so engaged and dreaming about the future, it is way of providing hope. By the way you were talking about it, I saw a link to the other work that you are doing like poetry. How did you get to poetry ? And how does that influence your body of research ?

J. L. : Poetry was my first art form. I love language and actually part of the reason I got in, I got into computer science was actually because of language. I was looking at programming as a writing practice. And, so, when I went off to design school I had to propose a project and I was like I am going to make the ultimate multimedia poetry writing tool. Because at that time it was hard to combine images and sound and text and make the text move. I did not end up doing that but I produce a series of interactive poems with the idea that interactivity had a semantic function. At the time this approach was relatively new, to consider interactivity beyond instrumental functions like navigation.

There was a lot of work I was seeing that was essentially interactive demos masquerading as this interactive art. I actually think that it is still the case. Working with poetry provided me with the language to articulate that. In poetry, structure is very important and it is also much more explicit than in prose. There is well developed languages for both, but I was familiar with the language for talking about structure in poetry. I started to thin: what are the equivalent, in interactive world, to rhythm and rhyme ? What is the equivalent of spacing between words or using punctuation ? What is the equivalent to affect in the voice in oral poetry? How do we do we translate such structures into computational form? How do we look at what the computer can do and, figure out what it is really good at doing, that we could not do before? Not that we leave those other things behind, but , why for me it was like… What is the point of slapping a poem up on the screen and calling that digital poetry ? There is a reason why the text is in motion. There needs to be a reason why you can, poke and pry at the text and the text does something. This arguments became the central theme of all my work. What is the meaning of the interactivity that I am asking people to engage in, with the poem and what the poem is about? You would not consider E.E. Cummings poetry without thinking about the way he structures his texts, and without reading that structure as part of the what the text is trying to do. It is challenging to hear it only because you don't get the structure of some of those poems without seeing the way it is laid out on the page. There is also the whole history of Concrete Poetry. My goal was to produce work where the text component, the visual component, and the interactive component were all so deeply integrated that you could not pull one or the other of them out without doing serious damage to the text. And by text I do not mean just the words. This is why I am very happy with the *Poetry for Excitable [Mobile] Media* project, because I feel like I got to a point where I was able to pull all those things together, in a way where I felt like I was writing poetry, by doing all of them together. All eight pieces are very different because they are different poems.

C. N. : From what I understand, it is the poem and the structure of the poem that dictates the digital experience ?

J. L. : That is how it was at the beginning. But by the time we were working on the last three poems, everything was being developed together. Probably the first three or four would start out with some snippets of text, some lines that I had written. And then I had start thinking about which one to activated. Sometimes a fragment of a poem, sometimes a typographic font that I found original, sometime with a visual element, sometimes I start sketching a piece of functionality via programming. I'd get obsessed with that computational gesture for a while and then ideas for a text would start coming from that. Or I would pull in text from some other things that I had written and think about if and how interactivity could augment that text in a meaningful way. My long-term collaborator on the project, Bruno Nadeau, would also come in with amazing ideas for the interaction that would support all the text and the visual design.

What They Speak When They Speak to Me by Jason Edward Lewis & Bruno Nadeau

C. N. : I guess that would be worth actually directing your listeners to your website of poems because there are examples of each of these eight pieces in action. And as you said it is very different, sometimes there is a line with text moving, sometimes, things that almost look like a medusa. I can really see that is creating very specific as you said so it is not even the poem influencing the creation anymore, it is completely a dialogue.

J. L. : It is coming together. And they start off their lives as large scale, about fifty inch touch screen pieces for exhibition. And then we move then to iOS. Seven of the eight pieces are free to download at poemm.net, the eighth one (*Smooth Second Bastard)* is a limited edition. We are only going to sell a hundred of them, and then pull from the app store.

This was a probe into using the app store as a kind of a way of selling art. And also a general conversation on how do you sell digital art, questions of reproducibility and maintainability.

We had to figure out a novel way of programming an edition number so it can be attached to a single person's iTunes account. So if people upgrade or change any device (iPhone or iPad) it is still possible to download the app.

That was the aspect of how do we do it functionally, and then there was the social kind of engineering aspect of it which is : How do you tell people about it, like how do you convince people to buy it ? There is where we were probing the political economy of the App Store. After trying to convinced the App Store reviewers about the value of art they were never convinced that the App Store was the right place for artwork. It is a paradox because Steve Jobs would talk about the importance of art as well as a liberal education. But it did not fit in their world view.

C. N. : It is actually impressing how far you are starting from digital poetry to getting into…

A. É. L. : Into the real business.

Notice biographique

Jason Edward Lewis is a digital media poet, artist, and software designer. He founded Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media, where he directs research/creation projects on computation as a creative and cultural material. He co-directs the Initiative for Indigenous Futures, the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace research network, and the Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Video Game Design. He is a Trudeau Fellow, and University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary as well as Professor of Computation Arts at Concordia University, Montreal.

Lewis' creative work has been featured at Ars Electronica, Mobilefest, Urban Screens, ISEA, SIGGRAPH, and FILE, among other venues, and has been recognized with the inaugural Robert Coover Award for Best Work of Electronic Literature, a Prix Ars Electronica Honorable Mention, several imagineNATIVE Best New Media awards and five solo exhibitions. He's the author or co-author of chapters in collected editions covering mobile media, video game design, machinima and experimental pedagogy with Indigenous communities, as well as numerous journal articles and conference papers.

Born and raised in northern California, he is Cherokee, Hawaiian and Samoan.

Jason Lewis, artiste, professeur à l'Université Concordia et chercheur actif dans le Réseau international Hexagram est directeur du groupe de recherche d'*Obx Labs*, qu'il a d'ailleurs fondé et dont le travail consiste à réaliser des projets en arts numériques avec différentes communautés autochtones. Il est également co-directeur d'*AbTeC*, *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*.

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