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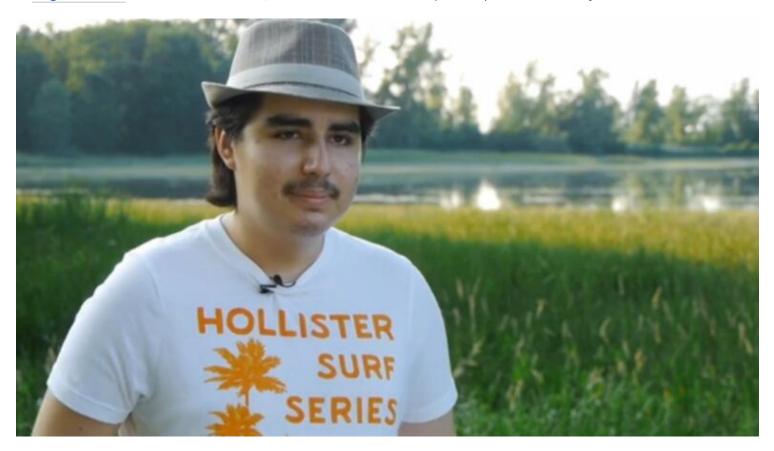
Indigenous

Aboriginal communities in cyberspace

Montreal-based tech group helps indigenous youth define their own identity through gaming

Angela Sterritt · CBC News · Posted: Jan 04, 2014 8:10 AM EST | Last Updated: February 11, 2014

Tehoniehtathe Delisle is the creator of a computer game called Skahiòn:hati: Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends. (Clark Ferguson)

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Tehoniehtathe Delisle's thumbs flew furiously as he took on his rivals.

The 21-year-old Kanien'kehá:ka youth was deeply immersed in a computer game called *Skahiòn:hati: Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends* — a digital adventure that tells the story of a man who must fight a Stone Giant, Tree People and the Flying Head on his path to becoming a warrior.

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Delisle isn't just good at the game. He helped invent it. He gained the skills to bring legends to life as a producer, writer, and junior research assistant of a video-game design workshop at Concordia University called Skins, which he first attended five years ago.

The Skins program is an initiative of Montreal-based Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC)—a research network that aims to expand an indigenous presence online.

"Skins came to Survival, the high school I went to, and asked if we wanted to make video games," Delisle explained. "The goal was to make a video game that showcased our culture and got it out there."

The workshop series is aimed at giving youth gaming design skills — but it's also busting stereotypes.

The curriculum begins with the basics of traditional storytelling, then teaches participants how to tell a story through virtual environments and video games. Students learn skills for video-game production such as game design, art direction, 3D modelling and animation, sound and computer programming.

Tehoniehtathe Delisle said creating the games gave him the opportunity to see his people represented in an accurate way. (Clark Ferguson)

To date, Skins has produced four different games over four workshops from 2008 to 2013, first hosted by Kahnawake Survival School (KSS) and then later by Concordia University. During the three-week intensive workshop, participants worked as a team, taking on game-industry roles to turn one of their stories into a playable video game.

Delisle said creating the games gave him the opportunity to see his people represented in an accurate way.

"The latest game is called *Lenién:te and the Peacemaker's Wampum" and the Peacemaker's Wampum*," he said. "It's about a female archeologist, who comes back to her town. She has to relearn her culture to get back to her community, and save them from people who are trying to steal the peacemaker's wampum."

> **❝ This kind of project is really to help the rest of the world understand us, so these games are extremely important ❞**
>
> *- Owisokon Lahache, Skins cultural adviser and teacher*

That story came from a student's imagination and research. But Owisokon Lahache, a teacher, talented artist and highly regarded knowledge keeper, also provides stories to the youth. She has been a cultural adviser and teacher in the Skins workshops from Day 1.

"This kind of project is really to help the rest of the world understand us," Lahache explained, "so these games are extremely important."

Culture and identity through gaming

The idea of carving paths to culture, home and identity through gaming came from Kanien'keha:ka artist Skawennati Fragnito.

"For the first time, with this new medium— with the internet, with computation — we are able to get in on the ground floor of a new technology and represent ourselves," said Fragnito in a telephone interview.

"We wanted to see more native people being not just the consumers of, but the producers of the [cyber] space," Fragnito said. "We wanted to have youth doing what they like to do — playing video games, for one."

Owisokon Lahache, a teacher, talented artist and highly regarded knowledge keeper has been a cultural advisor in the Skins workshops from day one. (Clark Ferguson)

Owisokon Lahache incorporated the Skins workshop into her classroom as part of a once-a-week extracurricular program at the Kahnawake Survival School. In her class, she would talk about traditional stories. Then AbTeC staff would launch into the tech component. About 10 to 15 students took part, working to create their own game. For some, this also included participating in AbTeC's intensive weekend courses, also held at KSS.
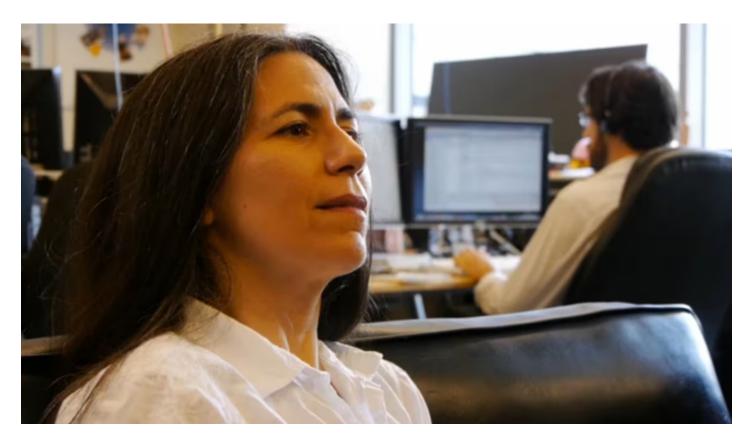
Fragnito said the workshop encourages youth to not just be consumers of cyberspace, but producers of it. She said it's empowering to draw links between old stories and new mediums.

"It gives rise to valuable skills in technology, all centred around the gaming industry," she said.

Skins has the potential to reach hundreds of youth — some who play and some who make the game.

The challenges

Through the youth participants and workshops, AbTeC has also realized what works, and what doesn't. Accessibility was one challenge they experienced. For example, some kids had the internet at home and others did not. Some didn't even have computers. This made getting in contact with the participants and assigning them homework difficult. Thankfully, this changed over time as technology became more readily available.

The idea of carving paths to culture, home and identity through gaming came from Kanien'keha:ka artist Skawennati Fragnito. (Clark Ferguson)

Fragnito also said they found participants were only mildly interested in programming, and as the most time-consuming aspect of working in a game engine, they had to find more user-friendly technology.

But Fragnito said the biggest challenge of Skins has been teaching youth all they need to know in just a few weeks. They've tried many different formats: a weekly class with intensive weekends; A 14-day-straight intensive; two separated one-week intensives with a couple of

months of biweekly afternoons of instruction; and the last one, a three-week intensive with weekends off.

Delisle said he couldn't really play the first game on his home computer because it wasn't powerful enough. He said it would download, but play very slowly, and hence the character's movement was very choppy.

He feels now, although the game doesn't look as realistic in the 2D version, scaling it down makes it more accessible for their target participants — indigenous youth.

The future for Delisle

Delisle has contributed to four games.

As a screenwriter, creative director and producer, he's considered a leader among his peers. He is working to bust stereotypes and paint or program a real picture of what Mohawks look, sound and act like. And he's doing so through one of the most popular and widely accessible mediums on the planet.

According to Delisle, creating and being a part of this game has led him one step closer to his dream. He's now returning to college in hopes of becoming a filmmaker.

This story was produced in partnership with Journalists for Human Rights. It is part of a JHR series, called Leading Together, that profiles innovative experiments in Aboriginal youth empowerment.

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