

**Native Resolution,  
By CHRIS LAVIGNE LEGACY AUTHOR January 13, 20090  
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At first glance, Don Thornton's virtual world looks like many others. It's when you listen that you notice the big difference: All of the characters speak Cherokee, and if you want to succeed in this world, you have to learn to speak the language, too.

To create this unique program, Thornton combined his background in native language education with a technology developed to teach Arabic to American soldiers in Iraq. Called RezWorld, the game blends a Second Life-style presentation with advanced artificial intelligence, speech recognition and self-adapting instruction. By immersing Native Americans in their traditional languages and customs, Thornton hopes to teach them how to preserve parts of their culture in danger of dying out.

"My tribe, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, has some very good language programs," Thornton writes in an e-mail interview, noting a real-world immersion effort that has only produced around 65 speakers in five years. "In the same period, we have lost thousands of elderly fluent speakers. We need to produce conversational speakers more quickly, and videogames seem to be the most effective method." He says the technology behind RezWorld has proven able to advance learners in one week to a level that other programs require months to achieve.

"When you play RezWorld, you must begin speaking immediately to play," Thornton says. "Students of second languages feel a tremendous amount of anxiety when they mispronounce words. Often, they are scared to talk to fluent speakers for fear of appearing ignorant or being laughed at. In our game, the characters still tease you if you mispronounce a word, but it doesn't have the same impact to be laughed at by a videogame character than a respected elder in your community."

When I spoke with him, Thornton was in Australia at the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education spreading the word about his product and seeking a client to fund production of the first full version. While the pilot project for the game uses his own Cherokee language, Thornton's company Thornton Media, Inc. can adapt RezWorld for any other indigenous group, changing the in-game language and tailoring the environments and characters to suit a particular culture.

"We can actually be as customized as a tribe wants," Thornton says. "We can match the geographic terrain of individual tribes such as mountains, desert, forest, tundra. We can even put the faces of real tribal members on the characters."

He adds, "This is one of the rare times that the native cultures have a chance to take advantage of a new revolutionary technology before the mainstream."

While Thornton aims to use videogame technology to help preserve native languages, game writer and academic Beth Dillon believes more indigenous involvement in the creation of mainstream games will also help spread native culture, especially among children. Dillon,

who is of Anishinaabe, Irish and Métis descent, works with other technology-minded academics and artists through the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) network, a group dedicated to creating websites, online games and virtual worlds with aboriginal content and authorship. She says videogames remain an untapped field for native communities: “While there are numerous web-oriented projects and multimedia compilations like the curriculum from Wisdom of the Elders that includes content from their radio and other oral history recordings, few [communities] have the resources – individuals with skills and finances – to fully realize videogames, especially on a commercial-quality level.”

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One of AbTeC’s programs shows native children how to make games by teaching them modding and storytelling skills with assistance from both industry professionals and native elders. Called the Skins project and based at Montreal’s Concordia University, its participants learn 3-D art techniques and programming skills. Native elders share their wisdom at the same time, allowing the kids to uniquely blend modern technology and knowledge from the past.

“Traditional knowledge is vital to the well-being of our youth and their futures,” Dillon explains. “We learn from the ones before us. In the case of Skins, the importance is carefully considering traditional storytelling practices and how to transform that experience into a digital form for sharing with players or users.”

Dillon sees similarities between gaming and the native art of oral storytelling: “A storyteller and the listeners create the experience together, much like in videogames – the game designer sets up the environment and rules, but the player’s interactions really create the narrative. Both experiences rely on a participant’s sense of presence, immersion and emotion to be successful.”

Since September, a Quebec high school run by local Mohawks has been the site of the first Skins program. Participants started making creations in Second Life and plan to mod in the Unreal engine soon. Dillon says education is the key to getting more natives involved in the game industry, in which only 40 of 6,437 workers identify themselves as “Native American” (including seven Canadians and one Brazilian) according to a 2005 International Game Developers Association demographics report. “As with any barrier, our efforts start with youth,” Dillon says. “The more who feel empowered to go after that game-related job they want, the more presence we’ll have. For other generations, there needs to be a lot more education in the whole game development process ... it’s not just about having aboriginal involvement, but quality involvement.”

Convincing native leaders to embrace technological change is sometimes difficult, Thornton says. “There is built-in resistance to technologies in some native communities among the elders.” In marketing RezWorld and TMI’s other products, including a portable language tutor and translator called the iRez, Thornton says he works with his more than 100 clients face to face to make sure they’re comfortable with the technology involved.

RezWorld is based on the Tactical Iraqi training system developed by Alelo Inc., an American company that sells programs to the U.S. military under its wholly-owned subsidiary, Tactical Language Training LLC. Alelo's technology uses speech recognition to let players communicate with NPCs and to monitor and correct players' pronunciation. Plus, Alelo's A.I. programming creates what the company calls "Cultural Puppets" – NPCs that behave according to cultural norms and customs. So, for example, if you don't properly greet a character in RezWorld, he or she will respond to you differently than if you are polite and follow proper protocol.

"Each character has its own personality," Thornton explains, "and reacts to not only the language you speak, but also your gestures and your manners. You must approach them a certain way, the same way you must approach a [real-life] elder of a particular tribe or First Nation."

Like other Alelo products, RezWorld also comes with a "Skill Builder" component, which trains users with interactive audio and video recordings of fluent speakers before they enter the virtual environment. Following Tactical Iraqi's success, Alelo has also created versions that teach Pashto, French and Dari, as well as one for businesspeople called Mission to Iraq.

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While the technology is advanced, RezWorld relies on a simple principle for its success: fun. The Cherokee version features a landscape Thornton says players find humorously familiar. The player's avatar is a Cherokee man with long pigtailed (a female avatar will be available in the full game) who drives a car that's constantly breaking down. While visiting locations like a casino and a tribal hall and attending a pow-wow, players meet characters ranging from other residents to a talking coyote and Bigfoot. "The most common reaction in a demo is laughter," Thornton says. "The game contains many references to Indian culture and native movies that Indians recognize immediately. The 'rez car,' the 'rez dog,' the 'Philbert' character – all of these are cultural references, inside jokes."

The reaction makes Thornton very happy, he says, as preserving native languages has become his life's mission. He tells a story of how a non-native professor visited his grandmother regularly for three years while working on a Cherokee-English dictionary. Though promised a copy of the finished product, Thornton's grandmother never received one, nor was her work acknowledged in the book. Learning of how the professor had exploited his grandmother inspired Thornton to work towards ensuring natives have control over the destiny of their languages and culture.

"It was life changing," he says. "My grandmother hasn't had an easy life, but she never really talks about disappointments. This was one of the rare times I've seen her mad at someone. When I tell this story at a native community, the reaction is exactly the same each time: people nodding their heads in the audience because this type of thing is so common."

Videogames haven't portrayed Native Americans with much depth or respect for their culture. Dillon says Nightwolf from Mortal Kombat 3 was the lone native character she

remembers from childhood. She's given talks at conferences and written papers about the representation of natives in videogames and says many games just recycle tired stereotypes involving magic or savagery. Games like the WarChiefs expansion for Age of Empires III reflect Eurocentric values with their emphasis on resource gathering and territorial conquest, she contends, and don't take into account that native characters would have different motivations. "What we need are characters with individuality to identify with and be proud of, with game mechanics that are capable of reflecting aboriginal thinking."

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For Dillon the main issue is representation: "If our stories or histories are going to be used, they should be imagined and shared by us, so that people can experience them to the fullest." After meeting Pocketwatch Games founder Andy Schatz at the Independent Games Festival, Dillon was hired to help write the company's Venture Arctic game, which incorporates Inuit and Haida content. Dillon, whose favorite games include the Oddworld series, Portal, BioShock and Psychonauts, has also created native-inspired mods for Neverwinter Nights and written for a game based on Mayan culture.

Two comic books authored by Dillon won a contest at online publisher Zeros2Heroes sponsored by Canada's Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. One is an aboriginal take on Alice's Adventures in Wonderland featuring a gamer girl as its protagonist and the other, called "How the West Was Lost," fuses aboriginal myth with steampunk. Dillon says she hopes to create more such cultural mixtures in her writing and game design, delving more into her love for steampunk (she wears a bowler hat and long suede coats in real life) and genres like cyberpunk. "As long as the storytelling comes from aboriginal people, it will be to the heart," she says. "As native people, we are naturally hybrid."

While Dillon's work in videogames and comics brings traditional stories into the future, Thornton's RezWorld uses game technology to keep the past alive. Both of them want to ensure that natives – and native kids especially – have a chance to experience the richness of their cultures. As digital technology develops into a more important part of those cultures, videogames are becoming a new resource for Native Americans in their efforts to preserve and protect their unique customs, stories and identities, and to share them with the rest of the world.

Chris LaVigne wrote this article from his home, located on the traditional territory of Cowichan Tribes of Vancouver Island. He also writes for Snackbar Games and Maisonneuve.