



ARTS

Telling Indigenous Stories In Cyberspace

BY CHLOË LALONDE · NOVEMBER 7, 2017 · ⌚ 3 MINUTE READ



Artists Jason E. Lewis and Skawennati are co-directors of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC). Photo by Alex Hutchins

***Filling in the Blank Spaces* exhibits a multimedia, interactive, cross-cultural dialogue**

The Ohenton Karihwatehkwen are the words that come before all else. They call on everyone to give thanks to Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon and Father Sky. Grateful for the environment, all animals and all of creation, we acknowledge Creator, and we thank him for all he has done for us.

Skawennati and Jason E. Lewis' video piece titled *Thanksgiving Address* mimics the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen, giving thanks for contemporary technologies such as the computer and the internet. Located at the entrance of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, this piece also greets and thanks viewers for attending *Owerà:ke Non Aié:nahne: Filling in the Blank Spaces*.

According to the exhibition's description, *Filling in the Blank Spaces* is "an exhibition-forum on the research and creative work of the Aboriginal territories in cyberspace." It is an exhibition that demands viewer participation. The majority of the pieces presented require interaction.



Lewis and Skawennati's exhibition, *Filling in the Blank Spaces*, explores Indigenous identity through technology and art. Photo by Alex Hutchins

Five different video games are set up in the middle of the gallery's main space. They were created by the elders and youth of Aboriginal communities during *Skins Workshops*. In these workshops, video games are made to explore Indigenous stories, mythology and ways of life.

Lewis is a computation arts professor at Concordia as well as an artist and writer. Both he and Skawennati, a Concordia BFA design graduate, are co-directors of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC). AbTeC is a research network based at Concordia that strives to change the world by using digital media to tell stories of the past and imagine versions of the future. The initiative encourages Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to participate in the production and viewing of digital media and to create a dialogue between cultures.

The co-directors of AbTeC explained that their goal is to “facilitate the creation of a new generation of media producers while attempting to answer questions about how our stories are told and how these can be remediated via new media.” AbTeC also manages the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF), which often commissions works by Indigenous artists. Such works are projected onto the walls of the gallery and available as postcards.

The neighbouring room contains two virtual reality (VR) pieces, one by Scott Benesiinaabandan and another created during Skins Workshops. In these virtual realities, the viewer can explore a variety of futures and imaginary worlds.

Models of Skawennati’s avatar and Hunter, the main character of her series *TimeTraveller™*, on display at the gallery. Photo by Alex Hutchins

Another space documents the work done behind the scenes at AbTeC and IIF. Here, select pieces from both Lewis and Skawennati’s individual and collective bodies of work are on display. These documentations are from past projects and conferences, including work from when the couple met in Banff in the 90s. The room also includes material from The Future Imaginary symposium, an ongoing conference series that brings people together to imagine different futures.

Sketches and design plans for the VR projects are displayed beside two figurines: Skawennati’s avatar from the *Second Life* online virtual world, and Hunter, the main character in *TimeTraveller™*, a series of

nine 10-minute videos which play in an adjacent room. Each episode retells historical events from the Indigenous perspective, from the life of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha to the 1969 Occupation of Alcatraz and the 1990 Oka Crisis.

The video series is followed by the new media production *She Falls For Ages*. In [September](#), *The Concordian* visited *The Celestial Tree*, one of Skawennati's installations based off of this machinima. The "machinima" approach is entirely specific to the artist's body of work. Combining computer animation—similar to *Sims* graphics—and cinema, *She Falls For Ages* tells a futuristic, feminist interpretation of the Haudenosaunee creation story.

According to an article written by Lewis and Skawennati in *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, "since its beginning, cyberspace has been imagined as a free and open space, much like the New World was imagined by the Europeans."

In showcasing art that uses Euro-American technology, AbTeC and IIF hope to help Indigenous peoples reclaim their stolen identity. By expressing themselves in the creation of alternative realities, AbTeC encourages artists to create visuals of historical events, stories of the past and hopes for the future. *Filling in the Blank Spaces* exposes a dialogue which resonates from nation to nation, (re)learning and (re)discovering history in the process.

***Owerà:ke Non Aié:nahne: Filling in the Blank Spaces* will be open Tuesday through Saturday from 12 p.m. to 6 p.m. until Dec. 2 at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery in Concordia's LB building.**

Photos by Alex Hutchins

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