

This First Nations Artist Recreates Tense Moments in Native History in Second Life

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By [Zak Kotzer](#)

October 24, 2013, 1:42pm

Soon after it debuted a decade ago, Second Life was optimistically hailed as the great new form of online interaction. It was a digital space far more complicated and eclectic than the social networks we eventually settled on. Though it's not without good reason most people stopped logging on.

As with so many technical initiatives, the sprawling 3D community quickly became the island(s) of misfit users, most infamously known for raver anthropomorphism and incredibly inappropriate uses of [Shrek](#). But that's not to say Second Life isn't capable of being productive.

When native new media artist [Skawennati](#) discovered Second Life, and machinima (in-game filmmaking), she decided it would be perfect for *TimeTraveller™*. A nine-part sci-fi piece, *TimeTraveller™* is about a future Mohawk hunter using VR glasses to step into key, and oft overlooked chapters in native history. Not as family friendly as most edutainment, *TimeTraveller™* blends virtual reality with harsh reality, recreating the Minnesota Massacre and Oka Crisis in an environment otherwise used for heavy petting between different Sonic the Hedgehog characters.

I spoke with Skawennati about *TimeTraveller™*, creating a virtual space for natives and how Bert and Ernie messed up their shoot.

VICE: How did TimeTraveller™ come about?

Skawennati: I envisioned this story, in part, for another show. A story about this native man who lived in the future, with technology that allowed him to view other moments in history. I was really thinking a lot about Raven from [Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk novel] *Snow Crash*, what a cool character he was, a cool Mohawk hunter. Kind of a good guy, kind of a bad good guy.

That explains the reoccurring Blade Runner posters.

Yeah, they're in two places. I wanted to make that connection. Even though I hadn't heard of machinima at that time, I knew I wanted it to look like a video game. I wanted it to be a

story told in that way. I was just sitting on the story until someone showed me Second Life, told me you could even make movies with it.

How was that first experience with Second Life?

I loved it! Do you remember The Palace? It reminded me of The Palace but better. I felt like I already knew it, because even the 3D thing was new, I really understood why you would go into a virtual space and talk to people. I'm very chatty in the virtual world. I don't mind talking to avatars. Ideally, building seemed very exciting to me, though ultimately I didn't do too much of that. I had a crew. They did most of the building.

You said that part of your reason for making *TimeTraveller™* was that you felt there was a lack of native presence in cyberspace. Could you elaborate what that means?

It's true that every grand council has a website, but I feel that there are not enough [native] people creating things. I want there to be spaces that feel like they're for native people and I want them to be participating in the conversation of how cyberspace is developing. There's space, social media, and visceral environments that are still growing but have yet to see their heyday. I want to make sure we're in there, and a lot of native people certainly use the internet, but they aren't making the internet.

Why do you think that is?

I have lots of ideas. I think that we still have the highest dropout rate in the country. Even though we have a lot of inroads to go to university, a lot of people don't go, and when they do computer science is not their first choice.

So there's a larger problem?

The larger problem is a mindset. I think that there's not enough feeling of ownership. That we too can make this, blow this up and fill this. I want native people to feel like they can be producers and not just consumers.

And that's especially interesting in light of Second Life, where you can create anything you want.

Exactly.

Your story even seems a little bit based on Second Life, technology that lets you visit in a virtual, reconstructed time and place. Was Second Life a direct influence?

No, actually. Surprisingly. I definitely feel like I'm exploiting that connection, but the story was the story. If anything I felt it was too similar to Star Trek's holodeck. Second Life, it has what I call modularity, you can move from place to place, time to time, event to event. He

had a jet pack in my first draft, and when I found out you could fly in the game it just seemed perfect. It was a very good fit.



Did you have to cooperate with other Second Life users for *TimeTraveller™*?

Ha-ha, well. The real answer is 'no.' Early on, when we were filming that Fort Calgary scene with the Northwest Mounted Police, there were five of us operating avatars and these two other avatars, Bert and Ernie, come into the room. I tried to explain things. I'm typing, they're on voice chat. We didn't have voice chat yet. I told them, "I'm so happy you're interested in being here, but, could you like, move? We're shooting." They didn't notice I was typing to them. I remember them standing around, saying, "Duuude, what is this?" "I don't know duuude." I decided, okay, we can't have visitors to our set.

That's adorable that there are two dudes wandering around Second Life as Bert and Ernie.

It was too cute. It really was. A lot of people ask me how collaborative this is with other Second Life users, but it isn't at all. I think they find that disappointing for people who understand the potential of Second Life. I have participated in other people's machinmas, and that was amazing. I think I'm too much of a control freak to let strangers participate.

You've been filming this for six years now, how have you found Second Life changing over time?

It's changed a lot. First of all, the parts I loved about it, the social aspects, have dried up. You go out into the world and not find anyone interested in chatting. We've certainly seen improvements in graphic quality, which you can see in the newer episodes. But we were

very disappointed when we heard that boob jiggle was added as Second Life's newest, greatest, latest feature, but their mouths still can't sync properly. But hey, now we have boob jiggle.

Second Life panders towards a different audience.

Exactly. Early on we got an island. We could afford it because they gave universities half-price on islands, and I was associated with Concordia. Three years ago, they stopped the discount. It clearly meant they weren't interested in connecting with universities anymore, even though there were so many interesting things happening.

Would you use Second Life in future projects?

No. It's really difficult to be dependent on any kind of technology. I often wondered if Second Life was even going to make it to the end of my project, if they would still be running. If you asked me that question three years ago, I would have said absolutely. I was even promoting Second Life! I wanted lots of people to use it. Most people don't even understand what they are looking at. Now that I've seen where Second Life has gone, I'm afraid I'll also have to duck out.

Did you hope natives would have a prominent space there?

Well, I had a whole island planned out. If I could continue, if I could get people to come over to Second Life, what I imagined was a cool circle; some nature, some new. One part would be a grassy area, with the Tree of Peace growing there. A space where elders could tell stories, but also a screen, you can do screenings in Second Life, avatars giving talks or just streaming them. I imagined a red cube gallery. Like the Red Cube in New York, a humungous, modern looking cube in the middle that you could walk in to. There'd be contemporary native art in there, made for Second Life, with Second Life, or imported, scanned, digitized and put up on the wall.

That would have been cool.

Watch the first 6 episodes [here](#)