

# Indigenous Video Games in Libraries

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## Abstract

There is a recent movement known as Indigenous Futurisms that examines Indigenous perspectives within the context of technology. Related to this, video gaming continues to be one of the fastest growing forms of new media, yet diversity in the industry is still an issue. This is especially apparent with a lack of proper representation of Indigenous video game characters and Indigenous storylines. While this is starting to change with the recent rise of a handful of Indigenous owned gaming studios and creators, there are still challenges around accessibility for gameplay. Video games made by Indigenous creators and/or with Indigenous characters are for the most part non-existent in most public library collections. In discussions of decolonization in libraries, video games as a popular form of media are often overlooked and not viewed as valuable educational tools to encourage literacy and creativity. This paper suggests changes that can be made to ensure that video games that share Indigenous Knowledges and traditions or are developed by Indigenous creators are made accessible and are represented in library collections and spaces.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Video Games, Libraries, Representation, Education

Recent awareness of the “Indigenous Futurisms” movement, defined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon (as cited in Killick, 2021) as Indigenous perspectives in the context of technology, has increased, particularly related to video games. While video games are increasingly prevalent in popular culture, libraries are behind in ensuring that there is Indigenous inclusion in their video game collections. American scholar and video game designer Elizabeth LaPensée, who is of Anishinaabe

and Métis descent, has written extensively on video game studies and advocates for them as a tool for Indigenous sovereignty and cultural expression (Lohne, 2020).

However, little scholarship has been written about the study of Indigenous video games and their lack of inclusion in library collections, but libraries should include this discourse as part of their efforts towards decolonization.

This paper provides an overview of Indigenous video games and the academic scholars that are examining and writing about Indigenous representation and inclusion in the video gaming industry. It covers a history of Indigenous video games while outlining the problems of representation and then provides examples of more recent games that are addressing problematic representation. Finally, this paper suggests ways that Indigenous video games can be included in library collections and spaces by examining ways to access the considerable educational benefits and knowledge that can be learned from Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous cultures.

Before continuing, I would also like to situate myself and acknowledge that I'm a multiracial transgender settler living on the unceded, ancestral, and stolen homelands of the x̣ẉṃə̣θ̣ḳẉə̣ỵəm (Musqueam), Sḳẉx̣ẉụ́7̣mesh (Squamish), and seḷíḷwiṭuḷh (Tsleil-Waututh) Peoples and that I have taken time to reflect upon and acknowledge my own privileges. As noted, I am not an Indigenous academic, so this paper is meant to be a starting point for a larger discussion.

### **Indigenous Representation in Video Games**

Historical Indigenous representation in video games is problematic, resulting in Indigenous People have little control over settler narratives. Early video games that involved Indigenous Peoples were from the viewpoint of settler colonialism, and gameplay was focused on how many animals or natural resources could be extracted and used from the Land. For example, the 1970s video game *The Oregon Trail* exemplifies how Indigenous Peoples' claims to the Land are erased in favour of a settler-colonial lifestyle. The game's main objectives include gathering resources such as food, weapons, and raw materials and having access to transportation while preserving one's life as a settler. There is no narrative in the game that includes the proper and respectful inclusion of the traditional Indigenous Knowledges or Ways of Being towards resources or the Land (Miner, 2020). Instead, Ikenberg (2020) argues

that stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples as guides, traders, or hostile attackers of precious settler wagons and lives are pervasive. Indigenous Peoples are woefully misrepresented in this form of digital media, as in many others. Other video games involve the subgenre strategy of 4X, or Explore, Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate (Hafer, 2018). Games such *Europa Universalis* and *Civilization* have players gather materials and living things such as wildlife, plants, berries, wood, rocks, metals, and other resources that are then used, traded, or sold to sustain a character's health points. Indigenous Relationality and histories and how Indigenous Peoples inform respectful approaches to the Land, animals, cultural objects, spirits, the air, and whole ecosystems are not considered. Prioritizing Indigenous voices in video games could instead add nuance to traditional game mechanics through the sharing of sacred and cultural stories that demonstrate respect and relationality to the Land.



Figure 1. *When Rivers Were Trails* – (Source: Five Oaks Museum, 2021).

In response to *The Oregon Trail*, Elizabeth LaPensée's 2019 game *When Rivers Were Trails* presents a revisionist historical narrative that places Indigenous characters, communities, and shared knowledges and cultural practices in proper relation to the Land (Miner, 2020). The game centres Indigenous Knowledges and Indigenous Ways of Being while modifying gameplay narratives to that of generosity, respect, relationality, responsibility, reverence, and reciprocity versus traditional narratives of violence, exploitation, control, greed, and ownership of the Land or materials. In the game, characters survive using traditional Indigenous methods of gathering and hunting food and utilizing transport, all while avoiding Indian Agents (LaPensée, 2021). LaPensée's games are categorized as being serious games in that they prioritize both fine art and game design together with strong a call for action around social justice (Ząbecki, 2019). Furthermore, Miner (2020) notes that *When Rivers Were Trails* has a different approach than that of most traditional video games, as in this game "the interrelation between player and game state has shifted. The game makes room for generosity and a relational perspective on community" (p. 312). This is done by centering the game around an almost entirely Indigenous cast of characters that use traditional cultural practices and respectful ways of moving through natural environments using a gameplay mechanics strategy for accumulating or using resources.

A problem with Indigenous representation portrayed by video game characters in *Europa Universalis* and *Civilization* is that these types of games offer up the illusion that Indigenous Nations have broken away from being Othered, while at the same time still relying on the mechanics and assumptions of settler colonial gameplay. Spivak (as cited in Jensen, 2011) defines it as, "the other is always the other as in *inferior*, not as in *fascinating*" (p. 65). It means that those that are at the centre of power (such as gaming producers) have the ability through the social construction of a virtual world to designate Indigenous gaming characters as Others within a video game. This allows for Indigenous sovereignty only through a lens of Eurocentric notions of power, achievement, and participation of the conquering of "empty" worlds (Carpenter, 2021). The use of this terminology imposes the settler colonial view that any Land devoid of "modern development" is a flaw. Games produced with Indigenous creators can provide a far richer experience than a world that is seen solely from a settler colonial

perspective. If we apply what Justice (2018) mentions in relation to Indigenous texts being responsive and not reactive to their usage in video game storylines, then Indigenous writers are concerned primarily with developing and articulating relationships to the Land, human community, wildlife, histories, and futures. All of these encompass meaningful connections and offer insights around the fundamental rights of Indigenous people.

Video games which feature Indigenous characters can offer problematic worldviews, especially if they are steeped in settler colonial assumptions and/or are not created with Indigenous consultation or collaboration. Although previous versions of *The Oregon Trail* video game series have included issues of historical inaccuracies and stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples, Anna King (2021) notes that there are concerted efforts to redesign this series while working with tribal ancestors. The more recently developed games examined below were created in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, either through discussion and sharing of Indigenous Knowledges or with Indigenous game studios and creators directly.

Miner (2020) details some notable differences between *When Rivers Were Trails* and other video games that feature Indigenous Peoples or Indigenous Lands. First, *When Rivers Were Trails* consists of almost entirely all Indigenous characters, uses traditional cultural practices and beliefs, and the Indigenous communities in the game were created in collaboration with over thirty Indigenous contributors. Second, the relationship between the player and the mechanics of the game have shifted: “the game makes room for generosity and a relational perspective on community (Miner, 2020, p. 312). Third, it disrupts the stereotypical creative narrative of a game like *The Oregon Trail* in that it uses artwork made by Indigenous artists that conveys the player character’s Anishinaabe worldview (LaPensée, 2021). The design of the game is unique in that it reflects the lived Indigenous experience of the artists, which will aid in bringing about a greater awareness of and interest for Indigenous video games to the public. The game shares teachings of Indigenous Knowledges and Ways of Being that are by written by Indigenous game creators to control the narrative of video gameplay through a lens focused on placemaking. In *When Rivers Were Trails*, when characters move

about in the space instead of following linear directions along the map, they move along trails or follow rivers. This alternative form of placemaking critically emphasizes the difference between a settler colonial cartographic gaze and a defiant Indigenous one that goes against a Euro-western form of cartography that omits Indigenous Peoples, their communities, and their Land (Miner, 2020 p. 326).



Figure 2. *Never Alone* – (Source: Steam, 2021).

Newer games, such as *Never Alone* and *When Rivers Were Trails*, are being used as tools of cultural expression and Indigenous sovereignty by their Indigenous creators and collaborators. *Never Alone* is a video game made by the first Indigenous-owned gaming company in the United States, was developed with Indigenous Storyteller Robert Nasruck Cleveland, and is based on *Kunuksaayuka*, a traditional Iñupiat tale (Lohne, 2020). Lohne (2020) also mentions that the game was envisioned by the publisher and the community as being accessible to the community and playable in an intergenerational manner. In this way video stories that are being relayed by Elders in the game pass along Indigenous Knowledges and Indigenous Ways of Being to the community through youth culture using video games as a form of education.

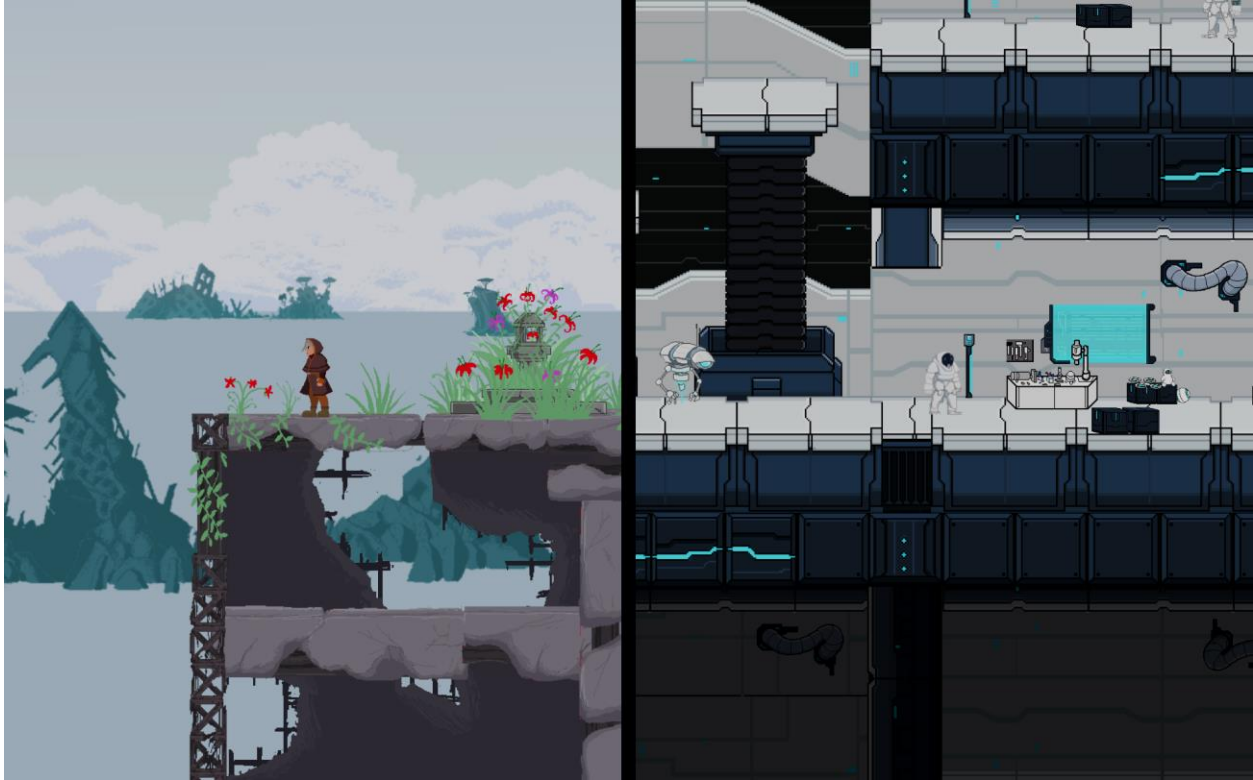


Figure 3. *Terra Nova* – (Source: Maize Longboat, 2019b).

Maize Longboat's *Terra Nova* is a two-player video game set on future Earth that portrays an imagined world where Indigenous Peoples and settler peoples make contact with each other thousands of years in the future. Each are living in their own independent communities but eventually end up involved in an experience of "first contact" that allows players to dictate what will happen through a historical reframing of the planet. Longboat's game was created as an Indigenous-led project with Mehrdad Dehdashti, Mi'kmaw artist Ray Caplin, and sound designer Beatrix Moersch with references to Indigenous Knowledges and Ways of Being woven throughout (Muzyka, 2019). The two-player cooperative science fiction platform game has a unique narrative in that in the first contact between settler and Indigenous players, both are seen to have equal positionality, and as a result each is asked to consider what it means to be the Other. From there, they play together and make decisions around alliances, the possibility of war, and whether each will remain in their own worlds as they act as liaisons between their communities (Longboat, 2019a). In considering Indigenous representation in video games, if, as Younging (2018) states, Indigenous literatures

frame the experiences of Indigenous histories, colonization, and the present, then Indigenous video games must be representative of the same.

### **Education with Video Games**

One of the many strategic goals of libraries is to have initiatives around how the library and its resources and materials can be used for learning and education, particularly around bridging the digital divide and supporting that with the creative use of technology. Video games are important educational tools and are a significant component of mainstream popular culture, so there should be proper representation of Indigenous People in this form of media as it focuses on storytelling, history, and player agency. Video games differ from other types of consumable media in that they are also interactive, utilize strategy, and involve gameplay mechanics which are important tools for digital education. Carpenter (2021) notes that input and action are required to make choices, while strategic skills are a requirement for players to progress in the game. This highlights one of the most important aspects of Indigenous video games: due to the interaction required, video game players take on agency rather than passivity in this type of learning environment.

A great example of how video games can be educational is with the use of Traditional language skills and the ways of moving throughout Indigenous landscapes that are learned in LaPensée's *When Rivers Were Trails*. This is exemplified as one progresses through the game and encounters different challenges and interactions with other characters. At one point, Ojibwe words such as "Aniin" (greetings) or "niiiji" (friend) are shown with their English colloquial meanings. Not only is there the use of various Indigenous languages throughout the game, but there is also the use of Indigenous Knowledges and Indigenous Ways of Being dispersed throughout as well. Players monitor not only their physical health, but also their emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Much of this is done through choices of language or actions used with other characters, the use of traditional foods and medicines, or by playing mini-games that are embedded within some of the scenarios, such as fishing, hunting, and canoeing (LaPensée, 2021). The game's close relationship to Article 10 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2008) around the forcible removal of Indigenous Peoples from their Lands serves as another immediate teaching point.



Throughout the game, players encounter non-player characters that explain the impact that the *General Allotment Act* process has had on the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples.

Another way that Indigenous game creators are making space for learning is with the video game workshop that Skawennati Fragnito (Mohawk), the co-director of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), runs for Indigenous youth. In the workshops they begin by learning about the history and importance of Indigenous storytelling and how video games can be used as a tool for another form of storytelling. He teaches workshop participants that within the framework of making games there is room for Indigenous Peoples to share their language and Traditional Knowledges by controlling the narrative and advocating for self-representation (Roetman, 2016). Other educational institutions, such as libraries, also need to ensure that digital skills are given just as much space and priority in their programming. Batchelor et al. (2021) notes that “ninth graders, seniors, and college students found that playing video games enhanced their connections to print-based texts they were reading in their classes” (p. 94). Other technical, creative, and project management skills can be applied to the development of Indigenous video games using tools such as storytelling, digital development and design, decision making, coding skills, and programming. LaPensée (as cited in Roetman, 2016) explains that her approach as an Indigenous person to video game design differs than most linear gameplay in that her use of narrative uses “non-linear storytelling, including those traditional tales elders told for days or months at a time and often revisited for teaching purposes” (p. 47). Libraries should also be able to provide informational resources with opportunities for Indigenous Peoples that want to become involved in the video gaming industry.

Many educational facilities are calling for the use of interactive fiction in emerging literacies, such as the use of gaming technology in the classroom to help build multimedia skills for writing and comprehension or critical thinking skills involving decision making or complex puzzle solving (Batchelor et al., 2021). One example of an Indigenous patron using libraries to learn coding is John Romero (Yaqui/Cherokee), one of the creators of the popular video game *Doom* (Roetman, 2016). He was able to

release an update to his game in 2016 because of library-provided resources and access to game-making tools. Many different types of software and gaming tools are open source and freely available to prospective game designers. Libraries are well-placed to provide access to video gaming resources and education to prospective Indigenous game designers and creators.

### **Indigenous Video Games in Libraries**

Most public libraries have had video game collections for close to fifteen years, but Indigenous video games are often missing from these collections. Calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015) around equity, education, language, and culture highlight the fact that libraries need to ensure that they remedy the lack of inclusion and accessibility of Indigenous video games in library collections.

One of the main challenges around accessibility to Indigenous video games is that many of the games that indie gaming studios produce are only available for digital download, rather than a physical format. There are other barriers around general awareness too, because Indigenous video games are often only reviewed in depth by other Indigenous Peoples. Marketing budget constraints also make it difficult to get published in mainstream gaming magazines or on websites. However, there are many Indigenous games that can be downloaded to personal digital devices such as phones, tablets, and laptops but an overall greater awareness that these games exist is lacking. To increase awareness and become more inclusive of Indigenous video games, there are several considerations for libraries:

1. **Accessibility**—Computer and/or console stations (with headphones) can be set up with Indigenous video games already downloaded on them. The public can then play in time slots that can be reserved, similar to computer stations. Some stations may make use of gaming platforms such as Steam which makes it easy for library staff to download games.
2. **Community Funding and Partnerships**—Other options include reaching out to larger software and gaming companies to have them become partners in funding accessible gaming spaces and to do outreach to Indigenous communities about

Indigenous representation and creation in video games. Gaming companies can also put on a career exploration class or recruitment session for interested Indigenous Peoples.

3. Cultural Teachings—An Indigenous Elder from the community can be brought in as a cultural teacher to do a teaching around the Traditional Knowledges shared in Indigenous video games. Concepts around Indigenous Knowledges, Indigenous Ways of Being, and Indigenous Relationality could be taught by sharing screen shots of a game in a presentation using any of LaPensée’s video games, for example. These sessions can be done as intergenerational sessions with Indigenous Peoples only and/or as sessions for the general public.
4. Cooperative Gaming—One example that is mentioned in Batchelor et al. (2021) is that of a schoolteacher that connected her computer to a projector and used interactive live play sessions of a game along with the participation of her students. The students mentioned things they noticed about the storyline or had questions about and then they all played through the game in a group effort. Options could include purchasing one game for the library that is played as a group or several copies where students can work in small groups. With some types of Indigenous interactive fiction games, there is the ability to do a live walk through, where one can pause or rewind the story and have certain points for discussion where decisions around movements and actions are decided upon by the majority.
5. Programming—Library programming and events can also reflect the diversity of Indigenous video gaming by highlighting newer forms of media. Libraries can put together Indigenous gaming nights where Indigenous creators and industry professionals are invited to talk about Indigenous representation and creation in video games with Indigenous Youth.

6. **Gaming Workshops**—Specific gaming workshops can be hosted by libraries where educational and software tools can be made accessible for Indigenous Peoples to get started in the creation of video games. These workshops can also outline opportunities for education through the development of digital game creation, storyboarding, coding, art, and design skills around storytelling.
  
7. **Space**—Libraries can support Indigenous creators by giving them both physical and online space with access to tools to help promote their work. Two Cree video game streamers created content about playing video games and added rez humour and moose calls into the mix to create their own online space, an example of what can be accomplished around Indigenous-created content in libraries (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). This type of creative production could be implemented in many of the digital creator spaces that are available in public libraries.
  
8. **Awareness**—Library staff can share information at conferences or workshops about the existence of Indigenous video games and why they should be included in library collections. They can stress how this is an essential and often overlooked part of the collection and is an important part of decolonizing libraries. Staff can also make sure that learning and sharing information about Indigenous video games becomes part of their continual learning around Indigenous representation in library spaces.

As Easterling mentions in Yousefi (2017), part of the librarian hacker's repertoire in libraries is making small corrective measures to library collections or to assist in the creation of alternative spaces. Using the small actions highlighted in this paper around ensuring that there are Indigenous video games in libraries can lead to progressive and innovative changes in equity towards the efforts of decolonization. As part of ensuring that systemic changes occur in library systems, library professionals need to recognize that Indigenous video games should be made accessible in library collections and spaces.

The lack of Indigenous representation in video games and video game collections is harmful and perpetuates the notion that Indigenous culture is not worth preserving. Having video games with Indigenous characters developed by Indigenous creators can be an educational tool that leads to better relations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers. If Indigenous video games are missing from archive and library collections, it leads to a bigger problematic question around settler colonial institutions informed by Panuncial (2019): whose history gets archived and preserved and whose history is not being represented at all?

## Conclusion

The discourse around Indigenous video games is relatively new. As Longboat (2019b) mentions, Indigenous Peoples are bringing attention to the ecosystem of international video game development and contributing in many ways around how Indigenous video games are now being played, viewed, critiqued, and researched. I conceptualize video games as being another world immersed inside the real world that can offer the potential for a safer space for learning. For Indigenous video games this would necessitate that gameplay around Indigenous representation is controlled by Indigenous creators who are shaping culture in new and imaginative ways. We can all acquire new knowledge about the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples from Indigenous video games that are developed and created through an Indigenous lens.

This paper outlines the importance of bringing about a greater awareness of Indigenous video games by suggesting resources and ways that libraries can bring more merit and recognition to the important work of Indigenous video game creators and developers. LaPensée (as cited in Carpenter, 2021) notes “true self-determination in games must happen from the code up” (p. 48). Libraries can help lead the way by being supportive educational spaces that ensure that there are more stories and examples of Indigenous video games in the digital world led by Indigenous creators.

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