

INDIGENOUS VIDEO GAMES AS IMMUTABLE SACRED SPACES

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In 2018, during the imagineNATIVE Festival, VR artist Casey Koyczan and I had a conversation about digital space. This conversation started turning my mind to an idea about how we could regard video games. The conversation came at a time when there was public outrage over yet another Indigenous sacred site threatened or maliciously approached by outsiders. Standing Rock was on everyone's minds and I asked Casey if he felt that his VR spaces represented a kind of safe space where he could hold the sacred, since much of his work revolved around expressing a kind of transcendental Indigenous experience that was very personal to him. He was intrigued by this idea and asked me to clarify what I meant. Since it was only something I had just begun to think about I struggled to put it into words. "Well, since games and other application software generally cannot be permanently affected by an outsider. Would you then say that, maybe, video games make for a space where Indigenous people can recreate their own sacred spaces without fear of someone permanently damaging it?" It was an exciting idea to me. I was thinking of Indigenous-made video games specifically and that distinction shifted my paradigm regarding the immutability potential of digital space.

Save for games or applications that have multiplayer or server-based content, most video games we play are a copy of a source project. Understanding that, it stands to reason that even if someone were to destroy the world inside their copy, the original source and world remains untouched ready to be uploaded again. It was the ultimate safe space for an Indigenous person wrestling with concepts of identity or tradition. Here was a place no one could touch. However, in that same vein it also becomes a place without growth or change. It seems that these two aspects are at odds with each other. How can something be both removed from the cycle of life and a sacred space? And so, this small chat ultimately changed how I would approach my own work and the work of my Indigenous colleagues from that point on.

Before I continue I want to first set the groundwork for what is defined as a Sacred Space. In *A Conversation on the Efficacies of the Game Engine to Address Notions of Sacred Space* by Wyeld, Crogan and Leacy there is an excellent set of definitions:

1. "Sacred spaces are those spaces that defy the logic of scientific definition, of quantifiable space"
2. "Sacred spaces are controlled spaces. Access to and representation of these spaces and what they contain... is often subjected to rules and regulations"

(Wyeld et al)

Both of these definitions can be applied to the spaces created within game engines, but I want to add my own definition to the list:

3. The space is defined as Sacred by the one or the community who crafted or found it

This means that either the creator or the player can define a Sacred space within a game. However, this still does not yet give us a clear answer to the question: “How can something removed from the cycle of life be considered a sacred space?” This is a question that is specific to the realities of many North American Indigenous beliefs, however, for purposes of this paper I am specifically referring to the N hiyaw concept that everything has a life cycle and that nothing is immutable.

The question takes its roots in the Western belief that digital things are immortal or somehow possess a quality which renders them locked in time. However, this is a fallacy as all things technological and digital have a lifespan. Computers and hardware will rust and rot while digital information will degrade and become corrupted by time. Even in cases where digital information can last millenia it will still become something that can no longer be deciphered or read. To this end I believe we have a suitable answer to the question “How can something removed from the cycle of life be a sacred space?” Because in truth, it is not removed from the cycle of life. Rather, video games create a space that is able to be more tightly controlled than something that exists in the physical world and thus meets criteria two laid out above. Therefore, when I use the term ‘immutable’ I am specifically referring to digital space’s ability to be immutable from human interference or mischief, not that digital space itself is immutable from the passage of time.

However, the argument could be made that vulnerability to human interference is also an aspect of a life cycle. To that position I argue that creating and holding these immutable digital spaces is no different from holding on to sacred items that should have been (re)buried or having a restoration done on family photos or portraits. That is to say, it is a means of coping and working through trauma. When working against over 250 years of colonization and assimilation there is no one “right” or “correct” way to heal from that level of systematic and generational trauma. And in so, I suggest that for some, creating these spaces is its own means of coping with trauma and in turn enacting survivance.

My first game *Wanisinowin|Lost* (2015) is a prime example of this, as it was both a means for me to work through generational trauma and to thrive as I did that work. The plot of *Wanisinowin|Lost* is simplistic: you are going to meet family you did not know about before. The player’s mechanics are likewise simplistic: a side-scrolling platformer where players can go either left or right and jump over obstacles or listen to people talking. The story and the mechanics did not need to be complex because the issue I was exploring was not the complexities of navigating an Indigenous identity, but rather the frustration, confusion and fear I felt while trying to navigate those complexities. I was disinterested in gamifying my trauma, something I have seen done which I believe does a disservice to the players. While playing a game that deals with interwoven and delicate issues (youth homelessness for example) the player can come to believe that complex social issues are ones that can be overcome simply by playing perfectly. This was not what I wanted my players to experience. Further, it was not the aspect of my trauma I wanted to work through. Returning to culture or community cannot be achieved by making a game about it. Instead, I wanted to hash out and examine the emotional reactions I was having as I worked to gain a path back to my culture, and perhaps one day, my community.

Much like how Elizabeth LaPensée (2014) points out that her social impact game *Survivance* (www.survivance.org) “recognizes that players are the ones who create change rather than the game itself.” *Wanisinowin|Lost* was a deeply personal work where I focused on creating change within myself by personifying the aspects of my trauma-work that I struggled with into the game. I did this rather than try to have the game invoke a change in me.

In doing so I codified the experience in such a way that only myself and others who had had a similar experience would be able to access the deeper knowledge embedded in the piece. This is another way even public pieces can close off parts of their “sacredness” to outsiders. In Casey Koyczan’s work *Wenazii K'egoke ; See Visions* (2019), a non-interactive VR experience, viewers are invited to take a short journey to experience the myths, legends, and visions from the Northwest Territories. While there is nothing in the visuals or audio of Koyczan’s work that is restricted to outsiders, it is very much made for a Tłıchǫ First Nation (Koyczan’s nation) audience. It is an experience that is only truly understood by those who have lived enmeshed in those stories and legends. Koyczan does not explain or make accessible the stories and worlds he is showing. Much like sacred sites covered in ancient drawings, *Wenazii K'egoke ; See Visions* is open for everyone to look at, but only for a few to understand.

A similar approach can be seen in Ashlee Bird’s work *Full of Birds* (2019) which is a digital representation of yak titvu titvu yak tilhini artist, Sarah Biscarra Dilley’s work and the memories/ thoughts that went into her conception of each piece. Players are invited to walk into Sarah’s works to visit a space made up of her thoughts and memories in the form of a video game environment. There is no doubt that this game space is a sacred space as it both plays with the concept of the gallery (a place for the public) and the concept of what goes through the mind of the artist as they create a work (something deeply private). *Full of Birds* stands in stark contrast to Bird’s previous work *One Small Step* (2018), which takes space that is already sacred (the Earth, the stars and even the Universe itself) and imagines a future where Capitalism and Colonialism has destroyed and profaned it. Bird states that *One Small Step* was her attempt to showcase “how unsacred a space video games have been to Indigenous people.”

Mohawk game designer Maize Longboat, who developed the sci fi co-op game *Terra Nova* (2019), states that it was the process of making *Terra Nova* that was the place of sacredness for him and in turn he created a space of sacredness in the actions that the player could take. In the game two players take on the role of Terra, an Indigenous-person analogue, and Nova, the colonizer analogue, in order to navigate a split-screen world that only becomes whole when the two work together.

Longboat both uses game design as medicine to wrestle with having family connections to both the colonized and the colonizer and allowed the players to use the results of that design to work their way through their own struggles with navigating both sides of that internal conflict. With the addition of a multiplayer, however, Longboat creates intimacy between two people as they work together and in that Maize allows his players to create their own sacred space. Longboat points out that “the interaction is meant to be very personal and private and in its own way sacred.” This is not so different from the interaction in Mohawk game designer Nathan Powless-Lynes’ *Hold My Hand* (2019) in which two players are invited to play on one controller, the closeness creating immediate intimacy and while the game itself is not enmeshed in the sacred, the relationship built between the two players is.



Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)



Hill Agency, Achimostawinan Games (2019)

However, sometimes it is not the place or the game-space itself which is sacred, but the fact that it makes room for ceremony. In short, it makes space for the sacred rather than being a sacred space. This may seem like a trivial point, but there is a key difference between the two. When a game space is considered sacred, it is the being in the space that is key. However, when a space makes room for the sacred, it is the actions of the participants that are key. The game *Wao Kanaka* (2019) by Ka Lei Milika'a Collective is an educational game designed to teach the Indigenous Hawaiian language and in that the game becomes a place of learning and in that is its own sacredness. It is a place that is equally open to any who are interested in learning the language but whose intended audience is very specific and close to the language already.

In the case of the Anishinaabe video game *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), Métis and Anishinaabe game designer Elizabeth LaPensée points out that, "ceremony is interwoven [into the game]. You can make offerings of tobacco to change the hunting minigame. You can participate in ceremonies if you are respectful. You are often given opportunities to gift elders and community members and receive knowledge in exchange. The animals are all in Woodlands style art because in those instances [when you're hunting] you're seeing them from an Anishinaabe worldview, like a lens for the sacred."

In *When Rivers Were Trails* (WRWT) the mechanics encourage an active engagement on the part of the players in the sacred. Here it is not the space itself which is sacred but the actions of the player throughout the game. In this game the sacred and ceremony that is required is unique in each situation the game presents the player. In these moments the space is sacred, but once the moment is over what was sacred has left with the people and does not stay in the space. Much like WRWT, *DON'T WAKE THE NIGHT* (DWTN) by Guaraní game company Brujeria@Werk takes this aspect of invoking the sacred and creates an experience for the player around that concept. In this game the characters call on a spirit (the player) in order to solve a problem. In doing this DWTN offers an interesting perspective where you are the spirit that is invoked and in so doing the creator makes clear the fallibility of the sacred within Guaraní culture. A concept that is near alien to those raised within the Abrahamic religions.

As Indigenous creators continue to take back control of their own narrative, we will see even more of these works that play and craft spaces that are sacred and designed for personal healing. It is clear that to Indigenous people the opportunity to have freedom from the fear of interference and control from outside forces gives video game creation a popular appeal. By allowing for the experience of feelings through mechanics, video games also offer a media where Indigenous people can protect and obfuscate their trauma from pain-tourists. This obfuscation also allows for an almost secret language to develop between the creator and their intended audience. Like *Wenazii K'egoke ; See Visions, Full of Birds*, and *Wanisinowin|Lost* these digital sacred spaces are available to the public, but are only fully accessible to their intended audience.

It is this obfuscation coupled with video games' immutable potential that renders video game space as the ideal locus of healing for traumatized peoples. Further, the digital is uniquely important to Indigenous people as a space that, having dealt with centuries of displacement, they can have full access and control over. It is a place that cannot be sullied by an outsider's hands and in that key quality is what makes game design so significant in the process of healing from the trauma of displacement.



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Meagan Byrne is an Âpihtawikosisân (Métis) digital media artist and game designer born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario. She has been creating digital interactive works since 2014. Her designs incorporate narrative, game mechanics, sound and traditional art and are deeply rooted in Indigenous Futurisms, language and Indigenous feminist theory. She sees her work as a constant struggle to navigate the complexities of Indigenous identity within a deeply colonized system. Meagan uses her work to explore questions of cultural belonging, the Indigenization of media and the future of Indigenous language and culture.