

# A SCIFI VIDEO GAME

## ABOUT FIRST CONTACT

MAIZE LONGBOAT

Stories about first contact have always captivated my imagination. From historical texts to sci-fi films, the idea of Indigenous and Settler peoples meeting for the first time seems to produce captivating narratives that deal with mystery, (mis)communication, and transformation. Presents and futures are determined by moments of first contact and this is clearly apparent for the context of Turtle Island. Take Tiohtiá:ke (Montréal) for example, the territory where I currently live. The island and its surrounding waterways are shared territory between Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Algonquin, and other Nations and have been significant areas of intercultural contact for thousands of years. The presence of Jacques Cartier to the area in 1535 sparked massive cultural and ecological changes in this territory. According to Cartier's record, the people at Hochelaga celebrated the explorer's arrival by bringing him and his crew food and provisions. An apparently positive, albeit seemingly inconsequential instance of worlds colliding. However, the people that reside on Tiohtiá:ke today, whether Indigenous or not, experience the results of that initial first contact event and the subsequent ongoing colonization by Settler individuals, institutions, and governments. Creating *Terra Nova* was a way to imagine a first contact scenario that conveyed the complexities associated when Indigenous and Settler worlds collide. From story to art, game mechanics to sound, the game encourages players to think critically and differently about communication and Indigenous agency as it relates to colonization.

### Story

*Terra Nova* is science fiction set on Earth in the far distant future. The planet is almost unrecognizable from what it looks like today and could easily be mistaken as alien if not for its distinctly shaped continents. Land masses are smaller than they are now, however, as a series of environmental disasters caused the world to flood. The unpredictable and hostile environment inspired a group of people to abandon the planet and travel through space on a giant starship to settle somewhere better. This ship was equipped with everything they would need to live millennia amongst the stars, as long as they could extract materials from planets during their journey. Not everyone wanted to leave Earth, however. The people that stayed on Earth were forced to confront the systems of their way of life that were causing their home harm. They were able to adapt to the erratic environment and eventually built a new relationship with the lands and waters of the Earth centred around values of sustainability and care.

Both groups of people, those from Earth and those from the stars, eventually forgot about one another and formed distinct societies reflective of their respective environments. The Earthborn people live high atop the overgrown, ruined city-structures built ages ago to escape the unpredictable tidal cycles of future Earth. In their starship, Starborn humans live in cramped quarters and have highly regimented daily schedules oriented towards material and labour production in support of the colony.

The narrative of *Terra Nova* is experienced through the eyes of the game's two player-characters: Terra, an Earthborn Elder, and Nova, a youthful Starborn inventor. These characters are controlled by two players playing simultaneously.

Terra's story begins when a mysterious star falls from the sky into a particularly treacherous area of flooded land known as the Lowlands. As Land Leader, Terra sets off to investigate the unidentified object by making her way down into the Lowlands before coming to a clearing.

Nova, meanwhile, is on his way to begin his first day of Settlement Training, the standardized education program that all Starborn youth must complete, when the Starborn starship crashlands on a mysterious planet. Separated from the rest of the starship, he is determined to find his people. Nova eventually comes to the same clearing as Terra and the two of them experience the first moment of contact between Earthborn and Starborn. Although they are distinct peoples, both are human and can speak the same language. After their initial shock wears off, they each introduce themselves and determine that they are both looking for the crashed starship. The two agree to help one another and begin a harrowing climb up an ancient structure to see if they can spot the wreckage. After helping one another up through the structure, both Terra and Nova gaze out toward the Starborn starship, half-buried and smoking on the horizon. It is at this moment that they realize that their worlds have been changed forever and that it is up to them to act as liaisons between their communities. The narrative concludes on the unspoken questions of what is to come as a result of first contact. Will the Starborn successfully settle in a world that they no longer know anything about? Will the Earthborn let them live in their territory? Will the communities make alliances or war? Might the Starborn be forced to leave again? The narrative of *Terra Nova* suggests that all of these outcomes are possible.

## Game Mechanics

*Terra Nova* is a cooperative 2D platformer that requires two players to guide both Terra and Nova through the game by moving and jumping. These basic platforming mechanics allow Terra and Nova to explore the game's horizontal and vertical environment, jump over gaps between platforms, and navigate hazardous objects throughout. Interactive dialogues can be triggered by pressing the action button when Terra and Nova are close to a non-player character (NPC) or a key object, which in turn opens a textbox that displays what that character or object says or does. There are often multiple dialogue response options to the text from which players can choose in order to continue the conversation. This level of interactivity to scripted conversations is intended to allow the players to define what kind of responses Terra and Nova have in any given scenario. Some dialogue responses even trigger in-game events that make new paths forward accessible.

*Terra Nova* is designed around facilitating two character narratives that two players experience simultaneously. Each player controls either Terra or Nova from a split perspective as they move left and right, up and down through their respective levels. Having the game played in split-screen is intended to keep the worlds of Terra and Nova separated from one another to signify the clear divide between Earthborn and Starborn experiences. Game environments displayed during split-screen play can vary wildly to the point where players may feel like they are playing a completely different game. When Terra and Nova both enter the clearing in the Lowlands and move close enough to one another, the divider in the centre of the display disappears. Without a divider, the game instantly transforms into a fullscreen experience that both characters share. This is the moment, Terra and Nova's first contact, when gameplay becomes fully cooperative. Players now share the same screen space and must communicate with one another by coordinating their movements to navigate the platform puzzles that follow.



Cooperation between players is required to complete the game. There are certain puzzles that come after the first contact scene that must be solved by Terra or Nova together. As an Earthborn Elder, Terra has extensive knowledge of her people's territory and can lead the duo's quest of locating the crashed Starborn starship. She also has immunity to a species of flora called Brightshade, a future species of curled red vine that is toxic to the touch of those who did not eat it as children. Terra can pass through Brightshade with ease, whereas Nova must avoid touching it at all costs. Some areas are only accessible by Terra because of groups of Brightshade that might block Nova from entering.

Nova also has unique abilities. Using his Multitool, a device of his own engineering, Nova can clear away debris that is blocking his path. When Nova gets close to the debris and activates a text-based interaction he is able to use his Multitool to clear the way for both he and Terra to continue onward. Without the two players' deliberate cooperation, Terra and Nova cannot progress through the platforming puzzles that require both of their unique skill sets to complete.

## Art

When considering how Earthborn and Starborn characters and environments were going to be visually represented, I did not want the art of Terra Nova to depict stereotypical Indigenous iconography. The game's visual design actively pushes back against the assumption that Indigenous characters in media must don feathers and buckskin to truly be Indigenous.

Setting the narrative in the future further enabled me to create a story with unique characters and environments that could reference events and peoples of a colonial past while also inspiring discussions about what a future Earth might look like. From harrowingly tall cement structures from a long past era now covered in green overgrowth, to sterile corridors with advanced technologies embedded in their walls, the art direction of *Terra Nova* conveys an imagined future world where new stories emerge. The game's artist, Mi'kmaq illustrator and animator Ray Caplin, and I started by developing concept art that depicted a flooded Earth and a crash-landed alien starship that set the aesthetic look and feel of the game's environment. The environment design was done before designing the Earthborn and Starborn characters because I felt that it was important for the visual identifiers of the two cultures to be informed by their respective homes.

Livable land is scarce on a flooded Earth and a vast diversity of plants cover most of the stable surfaces that remain. Nature has taken over, and thus the Earthborn villages are built upon the tops of the ancient structures high above the tides. Their villages are constructed from natural materials and are constantly having to be repaired or rebuilt after storms. The Starborn starship, on the other hand, has served as the home of the Starborn for millennia. It has been immaculately maintained to be as clean and sterile as possible to ensure its longevity. Starborn living quarters are cramped, but adequate. Elevators quickly ferry their riders to all corners of the starship. The sheer size of the vehicle is massive and even features its own skyscraper city.

From both narrative and visual perspectives, Terra is designed to be an embodiment of Earthborn relationality to the land that sustains her people. Like their environment, Earthborn are rugged, resilient, and adaptable. They are devoted to the networks of relationships they exist within. Terra, their Elder Land Leader, is garbed in clothing designed to support her mobility and athleticism needed to move across the land. The fabrics and leathers used to make her hood, shawl, leggings, and boots are all sourced sustainably from natural materials.

Nova is different from Terra in several ways, but maybe none more so than his appearance. Life in space requires humans to protect themselves from a number of hazards like radiation and extreme temperatures (even within the starship), so Nova must spend nearly all of his time wearing a high-tech spacesuit. His helmet even has an outward digital display that has the ability to represent his facial expressions. At first glance he may even appear to be something other than human. Nova looks similar to other Starborn while wearing their suits, but being a child he is notably smaller in stature. Not only are Starborn spacesuits necessary for them to survive out in space, but their smooth white finish also represents the social value they place on uniformity. The Starborn have embedded their technology within their human experience and have become almost entirely disconnected from any kind of relationship with their home planet.

## Sound

When players first load into the game they are greeted by soft, ambient tones that characterize the uniqueness of both Earthborn and Starborn scenes. The Earthborn village environment is filled with sounds of people bustling to and fro, animals, and wind blowing high above the ground. In contrast, the Starborn starship environment has beeps and boops of the vessel's various robots and space instruments as they communicate. In addition to ambient sounds, *Terra Nova* also features sound effects that enhance player immersion in the game's world. In the starship, elevators make noises and airlock doors hiss when opening or closing. Interactive dialogues also provide feedback for players as they navigate between choices. Terra and Nova even have a set of unique vocalization sounds that play when they confirm interactions with the NPCs and objects in the world. Having vocalizations for Terra and Nova without having them speak their dialogues was a way to help players connect with the characters and their personalities. It also helped to manage the game's scope and kept the narrative dialogue fluid during the iteration process.

## Conclusion

All aspects of *Terra Nova's* design are meant to support players in experiencing first contact. I have considered the careful intentionality behind much of the design process to highlight the ways in which multiple creative disciplines were required to create it. Having the game's narrative follow two different characters informs the design of its mechanics as a cooperative experience. The 2D platforming mechanics inform the visual style of the game to be approachable to audiences of all ages and sci-fi visuals, in turn, inform the futuristic sound design. Layering and weaving these aspects of *Terra Nova* within one another works to convey the experiences of first contact from both Indigenous and Settler perspectives in a way that is intentional. This game closely examines first contact as a process, as a relationship, as something difficult, beautiful, and complicated. As a result, first contact between Terra and Nova becomes something more than an "us-versus-them" scenario. It was always my hope that the game's content and player experience communicated this clearly, and that the process of its development also serves as a source of inspiration for other Indigenous artists to make their own games.