

HE AU HOU: (RE)CODING HAWAIIAN SURVIVANCE THROUGH GAMING

(Re)coding Hawaiian Survivance through Gaming

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Abstract

For three weeks in the Summer of 2017 a group of primarily Indigenous students from diverse backgrounds and levels of experience came together to create a video game based on Hawaiian mo'olelo or storytelling. The Skins 5.0 workshop resulted from the collaboration of multiple organizations including The Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF), Kanaeokana, and Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace. These groups contributed funding, curriculum, educators and enthusiasm to provide the physical and mental space necessary for the creation of the design team name Nā 'Ane Mahiki. In time since the release of *He Au Hou*, the designers have had time to reflect on the final product, the impact it has on players and the impact it has had on the designers.

This paper is an exploration of the intersections of video game building, meaningful learning, and Hawaiian culture. It also takes up the challenges and rewards of organizing and running an inclusive trans-Indigenous workshops involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and instructors from Turtle Island and Oceania. Further, this co-authored research investigates identity building, cultural development, programming and game creation from Hawaiian cultural and ontological perspectives, as well as the creation of connections to cultural heritage through developing a video game based in Hawaiian ways of knowing.

Each of the co-authors took on a different role during the workshop, this paper is a reflection of our pilina (connections, ties) to each other, this place, and the larger web of connections into which the game is woven. To reflect these different strands, each of the authors presents a section relating to their 'ikena (view, seeing, knowing/knowledge), each of which is briefly summarized below.

Kaona or multiple meanings are learned from intimate relationships with 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian Language). Within *He Au Hou*, the design elements play with kaona and use methods of ulana (weaving; calm; prophecy of a foreteller) to connect the player with traditional stories from Hawai'i. Ulana is one of the most important game mechanics within the game and it is through ulana the player and the designers experiment with Hawaiian ontological practices. This begins to question what it means to be a pā'ani wikiō Hawai'i (Hawaiian Video Game). Taking elements and cues from the vast archive of Hawaiian Language materials, through chant, song, dance, and many other publications and records, the player and the designer both start to understand how deeply they know their language as the images and experiences of the game telegraph many meanings. Every step taken in the game

has a meaning, so every significant interaction whether player with their avatar or virtual interactions within Hawaiian reality creates a ripple effect in our environments.

This section performs a refusal – turning away from alien phenomenology, object-oriented ontologies, and new materialism currents. It turns towards an Indigenous multisensory method of (re)coding to trace how the students, instructors, designers, community members, and cultural experts came together to nurture a new emergence of Kanaka Maoli ways of playing and sharing stories with a diverse audience and engage kaona as security protocols. In conclusion and contrast, the complications of the materials and extraction involved with digital gaming in tension with the learning and (re)coding that occurs are noted.

To the player, games are a participatory experience that can result in valuable learning. Games can act as vessels to communicate cultural values by providing social context for cultural learning (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The designers of *He Au Hou* deliberately worked to create an experience that would immerse players and share cultural values. Players have the chance to empathically connect to the experience (Schell, 2008) by becoming the avatar of a voyager in the game and gathering cultural knowledge to add to the formation of their own identities. In this way, players are not only passive learners of a culture, but also become active creators.

Rather than close with connections to cultural heritage or individual experiences, this collective work returns to our pilina to frame the workshop and resulting game as ways of opening to, as one of the organizers noted, “getting us back to the right timescale” (Kuwada, 2015). Programming languages and software programs are embedded with and co-constitutive of settler-colonial structures and ‘discrete’ ways of coding the world through Western cultural frameworks (Harrell, McPherson). This workshop – and the network of connections and (re)connections made that extend beyond it – challenge those technical-cultural systems by providing (re)generative paths towards inclusive Indigenous Futurities (Tuck, Gaztambide-Fernández) and planting seeds of ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i within the code itself to cultivate future emergences of intellectual sovereignty and what Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua terms Hawaiian survivance.

Sources

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