

New Media as a Platform for Indigenous Self-Representation and Socio-Political  
Activism: As Seen Through TimeTraveller™ and Skins

by

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## Abstract

This research considers how Indigenous people utilize new media as an effective tool for representing themselves and to address socio-political issues. Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space (AbTec) is an online networking project created by Indigenous artists Jason Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito. Two projects created through AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, a machinima production, and Skins, a video game workshop for Indigenous youth will be the focus of this research. Each project addresses different issues such as historical conflicts, representations of Indigenous people, online Indigenous territory, combining traditional practices with contemporary platforms, and integrating Indigenous people into the field of new media. AbTec, TimeTraveller™ and Skins are important because they serve as examples of successful new media projects. This MRP argues that new media presents a unique opportunity to challenge dominant ideologies, utilize self-representation to address socio-political issues, exert identity, and compliment culture.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participating artists Skawennati Fragnito and Jason Lewis for their support, guidance, and willing contributions. Their influence has helped structure this paper while providing invaluable insight into their work. I would further like to thank my committee, comprised of Dr. Julie Nagam and Dr. Caroline Langill. Dr. Nagam provided a guiding Indigenous perspective and helped establish a firm methodological framework upon which this research could be built. Dr. Caroline Langill assisted by recommending a surplus of reading material to establish the theoretical foundations of new media and how these concepts were applicable when utilized in an Indigenous framework. This project would not have come to completion without the endless support, direction, and patience of both Dr. Nagam and Dr. Langill.

## Dedication

To my Mom,

For inspiring me every day and for teaching me how important it is to persevere when things are most difficult. I admire your strength, I value your support, and I lavish in your unconditional love. Thank-you for always believing in me, for understanding the importance of following your dreams, and for teaching me that I can do and be whoever I want.

I would not be who I am today without you.

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## **Introduction:**

Indigenous writer Thomas King states, “The truth about stories, is that that’s all we really are.”<sup>1</sup> Stories communicate emotions that resonate long after the moment has dissipated. They connect the past and the present through the lessons they teach and seek to guide the future. New media art is just one way to tell a story. It neither replaces nor relinquishes the importance of Indigenous<sup>2</sup> oral tradition. Rather, it provides a complementary aspect to Indigenous cultures through accessing storytelling on a contemporary platform.

This Major Research Paper (MRP) examines the role of new media art within Indigenous self-representation and its possible links to socio-political based activism. It will engage with two Indigenous new media art projects, TimeTraveller™ and Skins, and their creators Skawennati Fragnito and Jason Lewis in conjunction with Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space (AbTeC). AbTeC is a research-networking project that originated at Concordia University, Montréal, Québec. Inspired by CyberPowWow,<sup>3</sup> an online Aboriginal art gallery that encouraged interaction amongst people, art, and texts, AbTeC is a collaboration of scholars, artists, and technologists who are creating space for Indigenous people within new media. According to the AbTeC website, the main goal of the project is to utilize new media

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper the term Indigenous will refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Status and non-status people in Canada. The term Indigenous, however, can be extended to include groups and individuals who are native to a specific region throughout countries across the world.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on CyberPowWow please see:  
<http://www.cyberpowwow.net/about.html>

technologies to complement Aboriginal cultures.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that projects such as AbTeC, TimeTraveller™ and Skins, effectively demonstrate how new media art can act as a contemporary platform for self-representation and socio-political activism by subverting the dominant ideologies projected upon Indigenous people.

TimeTraveller™ is a machinima<sup>5</sup> production filmed in Second Life, an online virtual world. The narrative is set in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century and features a young Mohawk<sup>6</sup> man named Hunter. In order to understand how this world came to be, he embarks on a ‘vision quest’ of sorts using the TimeTraveller™ glasses that allow him to travel back in time to historical conflicts involving First Nations.<sup>7</sup> TimeTraveller™ invites us on Hunter’s adventure as he explores significant events throughout Indigenous history such as an Aztec Panquetalitzli festival in pre-contact Tenochtitlan in 1490, the 1862 Minnesota Massacre, the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz, and the 1990 Oka Crisis.<sup>8</sup> Along the way, Hunter meets Karahkwenhawi, a young Mohawk woman, who provides him with a present day<sup>9</sup> perspective of Indigenous life, culture, and

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<sup>4</sup> “About,” Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space, Concordia University, accessed March 16, 2013, <http://www.abtec.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Machinima: The use of real time 3-D imaging used to create a cinematic production. This means that while the making of TimeTraveller™ falls under the category of new media, the final product is primarily film.

<sup>6</sup> Mohawk First Nations are members of the Haudenosaunee Nation (Iroquois Confederacy), comprised of six nations; the Seneca Nation, the Cayuga Nation, the Onondaga Nation, the Oneida Nation, the Tuscarora Nation, and the Mohawk Nation. The Haudenosaunee reside in Ontario, Québec, and New York State south of the St. Lawrence River.

<sup>7</sup> “Projects,” Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space, Concordia University, accessed March 16, 2013, <http://www.abtec.org/projects.html>.

In this case, the term ‘First Nations’ is being used in place of ‘Indigenous’ to describe the TimeTraveller™ project as the artists use it within the framework of AbTeC.

<sup>8</sup> Jason Lewis, “Time Travelers, Flying Heads, and Second Lives: Designing Communal Stories,” *Interactions* 19 (2012): 22.

<sup>9</sup> In this case, “present day” refers to our present, 2014, or relative to, rather than Hunters present which is 2121.



issues.<sup>10</sup> This narrative offers an Indigenous perspective to historical events; however, it also imagines Indigenous people in the future.

Skins is a workshop for Indigenous youth conducted by video game designers, Indigenous artists, and upper level undergraduate students from Concordia University in the Computing Arts program.<sup>11</sup> According to the AbTeC website, the curriculum begins with traditional storytelling and proceeds to teach participants how to communicate storytelling through virtual environments and video games.<sup>12</sup> Skins effectively demonstrates how Indigenous storytelling has evolved on a new media platform. According to the *Ots'i* website, a video game project created by participants in Skins 1.0,<sup>13</sup> Skins provides new opportunities for elders to share their knowledge with the next generation.<sup>14</sup> Lewis notes that at times, there can be difficulty in translating stories to a digital medium. Therefore, community partners are an essential component of the project, helping to ensure that cultural elements such as language and stories are represented in a way that accurately reflects the history and values of the community.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, "Time Travelers, Flying Heads, and Second Lives: Designing Communal Stories," 22.

<sup>11</sup> "Projects," Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space, Concordia University, accessed March 21, 2013, <http://www.abtec.org/projects.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Skins 1.0, was a collaboration between AbTec, Owisokon Lahache of the Kahnawake Survival School and Obx Labs.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," *Journal of Cultural Survival Quarterly* (2005): 29-31.

<sup>15</sup> "About," Otsi: Rise of the Kenien'keha:ka Legends, Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space/OxLabs, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://otsi.abtec.org/index.html>

Skins concluded its fourth workshop in the summer of 2013. The final three episodes of TimeTraveller™ were released at the *ImagineNATIVE Film Festival*<sup>16</sup>, on October 18, 2013 at the Ryerson Image Centre exhibition “Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.,” in Toronto, Ontario. Indigenous writer and media artist Steven Loft curated the exhibition. Both TimeTraveller™ and Skins hold similar underlying principals of Indigenous values and traditions. Additionally, they are both founded upon game culture and thus a significant body of research for this MRP will draw on working media and new media scholars such as Alexander Galloway and Ian Bogost. The divide between the two projects rests in the potential to address varying audiences. While TimeTraveller™ has been exhibited in gallery spaces and on an international stage, Skins remains more of a grass roots program, with focus on particular communities traditions and values. The aim of the Skins project is to generate an interactive platform of engagement created by Indigenous youth through consultation with their community and elders. Through the development of this skill set, Aboriginal youth increase their opportunities for being involved in professional video game design in the future.

While the two projects hold varying objectives, together, with AbTeC, they provide a comprehensive overview of important aspects of Indigenous new media art such as identity, articulate resistance, and digital sovereignty. For the purpose of this paper, identity considers the fluctuation of the social and political experience of an individual that is embedded within collective memory and in resistance to colonial

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<sup>16</sup> The *ImagineNATIVE Film Festival* is an international festival for Indigenous film and new media, held yearly in Toronto, Ontario.

ideologies.<sup>17</sup> This MRP discusses how identity can function Articulate Resistance – a term coined by Loft for the exhibition “Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.,” refers to an engagement in activism to counteract “the history of colonialism and continued racism”<sup>18</sup> of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Articulate resistance emphasizes re-writing and re-righting Indigenous past, present, and future. New media art provides opportunities for a greater sense of connectedness and reach that unites Indigenous peoples across the world in an effort to continue the process of decolonization. It also raises awareness of non-Indigenous people who can aid in the process of decolonization by understanding Indigenous perspectives. A thorough investigation of articulate resistance in relation to AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, and Skins will be discussed further in this paper.

Digital Sovereignty<sup>19</sup> refers to the ability to control representations online and in the virtual world. At this point, there remain formal and aesthetic barriers to overcome, such as the lack of Indigenous skin tones and clothing styles available. These program limitations have evolved since Fragnito first began the TimeTraveller™ project in Second Life.<sup>20</sup> However, the generally stereotypical

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<sup>17</sup> Bonita Lawrence, “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview,” *Hypatia* 18 (2003): 4.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Loft, “Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.,” Ryerson Image Centre, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.ryerson.ca/ric/exhibitions/GhostDance.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Digital Sovereignty draws on Michelle Reheja’s concepts of ‘Visual Sovereignty’ and the ‘Digital Reservation.’ See Michelle H. Raheja, “Reading Nanook’s Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*,” in *Native Americans on Film: Conversations, Teaching, and Theory*, ed. M. Elise Marubbio and Eric L. Buffalohead (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013): 58-88 and Michelle Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln: 2011), Kindle edition; 145 – 189.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth LaPensée and Jason Lewis, “Call it a Vision Quest: Machinima in a First Nations Context” in *Understanding Machinima: Essays on Filmmaking in Virtual Worlds*, ed. Jenna Ng (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 196.

depiction of Indigenous people in video games continues to remain a concern.<sup>21</sup> Projects such as AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, and Skins, are working hard to counteract these stereotypes by making Indigenous peoples creators rather than just consumers in the digital realm. These projects open doors for Indigenous peoples to be more readily involved in self-determining their own representations in the digital realm through an accessible interconnected network that takes place on a contemporary platform. Digital Sovereignty will be discussed in depth throughout this MRP. The core focus of these projects, *Indigenous self-representations through narratives on a new media art platform*, resonates with many other Indigenous new media art projects. As a result, this research is able to address general themes within Indigenous new media art and activism at greater lengths.

TimeTraveller™ and Skins were chosen as two Indigenous new media art projects that have, and continue to, effectively disseminate the message of the importance of self-representation on a large scale. New media provides an aspect of interconnectivity that allows individuals to network beyond their own community to tell a story. Increased ability to connect allows new media art projects to be available to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples locally and globally. This assists in providing non-Indigenous peoples with an alternative perspective that does not parallel that of the colonial narrative. Therein lies the potential to change the dominant ideology surrounding Indigenous culture. These projects demonstrate how new media art can act as an effective platform for self-representation and socio-

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<sup>21</sup> Beth Aileen Lameman, Jason E. Lewis, and Skawennati Fragnito, “Skins 1.0: A Curriculum for Designing Games with First Nations Youth” (paper presented at ACM Conference Proceedings; FuturePlay, Vancouver, British Columbia, May 6-7, 2010).

political activism through the effective use of new media in order to communicate Indigenous cultures, while participating in the process of self-determination. The implications of this research will reflect that new media is a pedagogical tool in contemporary definitions of identities. This paper will further reflect how TimeTraveller™ and Skins have inserted themselves within a larger project of art practice, new media and activism.

In *New Media an Introduction: Canadian Edition*, media and communication scholars Terry Flew and Richard Smith identify a desire to communicate beyond the physical that has existed since the 1700's when experimentation with radio signals and semaphores were used to transport messages long distances. In the 1800's, Inventor Samuel Morse, was credited with bringing the telegraph into popular use and thus the transmission of codes was titled Morse code – a system of dots and dashes to communicate a message.<sup>22</sup> Inevitably, technological advances led to the telephone, which became a widely adopted form of communication in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Film, radio broadcasting, television, and CD-ROMS all followed as popular media forms of communication and entertainment.

The shift from media to new media refers to advancement in communication and technology. New media, communication, and culture scholar P. David Marshall, in *New Media Cultures*, discusses the three categories of media/ new media and the developments that have taken place within those categories. Marshall suggests that printed media such as newspapers, magazines, and letters, are presented on a new

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<sup>22</sup> Terry Flew and Richard Smith, *New Media An Introduction: Canadian Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

media platform in the form of the Internet, The World Wide Web, e-mail, etc. Media images such as film, photography, and television migrate to DVDs, digital cinema, webcams, replay television, etc. Phonograph, telephone, and radio, once popular forms of sound media are often replaced with iPods, MP3's, and Internet radio.<sup>24</sup>

Media scholar, Charlie Gere suggests that new media encompasses a:

...vast range of applications and media forms that digital technology has made possible, including virtual reality, digital special effects, digital film, digital television, electronic music, computer games, multimedia, the Internet, the World Wide Web, digital telephony and Wireless Application Protocol (WAP), as well as the various cultural and artistic responses to the ubiquity of digital technology, such as Cyberpunk novels and films, Techno and post-pop music, the 'new typography', net.art and so on.<sup>25</sup>

Amongst the variety of media forms and platforms, new media theorist Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*, notes that there are five underlying characteristics that define new media: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. Numerical representation refers to the algorithmic codes that 'program' new media.<sup>26</sup> Modularity suggests new media consists of fragmented parts that can be independent or combined.<sup>27</sup> Automation refers to computer modification to create a media object using templates or simple algorithms.<sup>28</sup> Variability identifies that a new media object is not something fixed but can exist in potentially infinite versions. This suggests that the user appears to be engaging in what they believe are decisions, but are actually pre-determined, pre-

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<sup>24</sup> P. David Marshall, *New Media Cultures* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture: Expanded Second Edition* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

existing, or constructed by the database.<sup>29</sup> Transcoding means to translate code into another format through a process of reconceptualization.<sup>30</sup>

This shift from media to new media,<sup>31</sup> arguably occurred in the 1990's when the internet became publicly accessible. Gere writes that at this time "the Internet and the World Wide Web offered new possibilities for digital art."<sup>32</sup> New media art combines the artistic with the digital. Artistic Director of Northern Lights.mn., Steve Dietz suggests that new media art, though ever changing, can be identified by three qualities: interactivity, connectivity, and computability - in any combination.<sup>33</sup> These three defining behaviors align with art historical terminology: collaborative, distributed, and variable. Interactive and collaborative refer to the audience's engagement with the work, connected and distributed acknowledge the placement of the work and its accessibility, and computable and variable refer to the production of the work in materiality and form.<sup>34</sup> These characteristics present a unique opportunity for artists to create and present work that engages with its viewers on an increasingly accessible platform.

Around the same time, Indigenous art practice was likewise emerging out of the margins and moving towards a more mainstream practice. Curator Diana Nemiroff writes in "A Critical History of Exhibitions of First Nations Art" that

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<sup>29</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 36-38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>31</sup> Media continues to be a popular art form, aspect of communication, educational tool, and method of entertainment.

<sup>32</sup> Gere, *Digital Culture*, 107.

<sup>33</sup> Beryl Graham and Sara Cook, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 6. Although there is some debate surrounding this definition, these categories will continue to be used because as stated in an interview with Skawennati Fragnito, the artist noted in an interview that new media retains at least two of the three following characteristics: Interactivity, Connectivity, and Computability.

<sup>34</sup> Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 9.

beginning in the 1980's, as a result of Indigenous activism and a shift from modernism to postmodernism, Indigenous artists began to take on a more active role within institutions. This shift started in smaller galleries who were less invested in the mainstream and more open to local initiatives before moving towards larger, more heavily funded and influential institutions.<sup>35</sup> In "Towards an Aboriginal Art History," Indigenous academic and curator Gerald McMaster discussed how Indigenous artist Carl Beam's *The North American Iceberg* "was the first work of a contemporary aboriginal artist to be purchased by the National Gallery of Canada"<sup>36</sup> in 1986. McMaster explains that this was a major example of Indigenous art moving into a mainstream discourse.<sup>37</sup> According to the National Gallery of Canada website, the 1992 gallery collection of Inuit art received a permanent space within the institution.<sup>38</sup> Further, the website states that in the 2000's Indigenous art was chronologically integrated throughout Canadian galleries for the first time.<sup>39</sup>

Combining art and new media, Indigenous peoples saw an opportunity to represent themselves on a contemporary and accessible platform without restrictions such as place, space, or funding. Shirley Madill, Executive Director at the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery, believes that merging Indigenous art and new media will [allow us to] "create our own self-perception and free us from colonialist concepts too

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<sup>35</sup> Diana Nemiroff, "A Critical History of Exhibitions of First Nations Art," in *Global Visual and Material Culture 1800 to the Present* (Boston: Pearson Learning Solutions, 2013), 115.

<sup>36</sup> Gerald McMaster, "Towards an Aboriginal Art History," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (New York: Routledge, 1999), 93.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that McMaster makes clear that Beam's work should not be represented of the entire body of contemporary Indigenous art, but rather, only apart of it.

<sup>38</sup> "Our History: 1990's," The National Gallery of Canada, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.gallery.ca/en/about/1990s.php>

<sup>39</sup> "Our History: 2000's," The National Gallery of Canada, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.gallery.ca/en/about/2000s.php>



often internalized by Aboriginal people.”<sup>40</sup> Indigenous artist Dana Claxton writes that while seemingly contradictory, merging what is often presented as “static” Indigenous culture with contemporary new media<sup>41</sup> indicates that Indigenous peoples are moving into the future. This contradicts the perceived notion of Indigenous peoples only being present in the past by subverting the dominant narrative. It further reiterates Madill’s belief that this is one of the ways Indigenous peoples can free themselves from colonial concepts.

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<sup>40</sup> Shirley Madill, foreword to *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*, (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2005), ix-x.

<sup>41</sup> Dana Claxton, “Re:Wind” in *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*, (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, Banff, 2005), 15.

**Location:**

As a graduate student, I am invested in this research because I feel that the distribution of power present in Canadian society is often perceived incorrectly. Canada is considered a democratic, multi-cultural, peace keeping nation. However, investigation into the margins of Canadian society suggests that these perceptions are often problematic and cause the dominant culture to overlook the multiple narratives present amongst Canadian peoples. This is particularly true for Indigenous peoples and communities, who have experienced social and political oppression. Thus, it is important to recognize the discrepancies and injustices that have occurred, and continue to occur on this forefront. This can only be counteracted by Indigenous peoples taking over their own representations through the act of self-determination. As this process unfolds, Indigenous peoples begin to actively decolonize the fields of the digital, new media, and art. New media art offers further involvement within art and activism by encouraging participation, thus the individual becomes more than just a viewer and consumer, as we see in previous media forms such as cinema, photography, radio, and advertisements; but rather, actively engages with the work. My central argument is that this active engagement sparks connectivity between the participant, the work, and the culture and may enable a greater tolerance, understanding, and equality amongst varying groups. Further, it provides Indigenous peoples with the opportunity to self-represent on a number of platforms, generally without restrictions such as funding or physical space.

In 1991, Indigenous art historian Marcia Crosby wrote, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,”<sup>42</sup> and in 1992, historian Daniel Francis wrote, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Crosby and Francis were two of the first scholars who discussed how visual representations have shaped stereotypical views of Indigenous peoples.<sup>43</sup> Stereotypes that include Indigenous peoples wearing feathered headdresses, living in teepees, and carving totem poles, create a collective link that categorizes all Indigenous peoples as the same. This tendency to stereotype continues in contemporary new media. Stereotypes are reflected in misrepresentation and underrepresentation that allows for continued discrimination. Scholar, Elizabeth LaPensée, formerly Beth Aileen Lameman, outlines the Indigenous stereotypes that have existed in game culture since the 1980’s. She states that in real time strategy games, Indigenous peoples are often represented as generic units or historical figures. Misrepresentations include, having shamanistic abilities depicted wearing full regalia, war paint, and/or a feathered headdress. Other character misrepresentations include the “half breed hero,” “the princess,” and “the savage.” The popular Cowboy vs. Indian stereotype marks Indigenous peoples as targets. In *Custers Revenger* the player must rape an Indigenous woman until they win, otherwise, they risk being shot by an arrow.<sup>44</sup> These characterizations of Indigenous peoples are misrepresentations because they

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<sup>42</sup> Marcia Crosby, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian” in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John White and Peter O'Brian (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 43.

<sup>44</sup> Beth Aileen Lameman, “Native Representations in Video Games,” Vimeo, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/25991603>

portray Indigenous peoples through an imagined gaze of the dominant culture. These views do not reflect present cultural practices and values of Indigenous peoples and are offensive. Further, these racist representations can have damaging effects on Indigenous peoples because they suggest to the gaming community that these images and the behaviors associated with encountering them are acceptable.

Through this paper, I work through some of the issues that surround Indigenous representations in media and specifically new media art. These popular representations are extremely influential with respect to the dominant cultures' perception of marginal communities. Therefore, I highlight how Indigenous artists are dispelling these stereotypes through new media art practices. Artists are creating works that are acts of self-representation, which can lead to self-determination.<sup>45</sup> The goal of this research is to continue a scholarly dialogue that emphasizes the importance of Indigenous new media art within the process of decolonization.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The term 'self-determination' refers to the process of reinstitution and articulation of Indigenous goals and values generally in opposition to state authority. For more information please see, "Sovereignty" pp. 33- 50 by Taiaiake Alfred in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln & London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>46</sup> "De-colonization – the mechanics of escaping from direct state control and the legal and political struggle to gain recognition of Indigenous self-governing authority." Alfred, "Sovereignty," 41.

## Methodology

This MRP argues that successful new media art projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins can be utilized to challenge dominant ideologies. Ideally this would result in transformative relations. This research will employ a combination of Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies<sup>47</sup> to assist in guiding this project towards findings that are both sound and culturally mindful. The specific Indigenous methodologies used in this paper include: consulting with community experts, experiential learning, and accountability.<sup>48</sup> The research for this paper combines Indigenous methodologies developed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Margaret Kovach, Leslie Brown, and Susan Strega, among others. Aspects of Western methodology such as participants consenting to semi-structured interviews are also utilized for the purpose of this research. The primary research for this MRP encompasses qualitative interviews conducted with experts in the field of Indigenous new media and an analysis of AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, and Skins. A purposive technique of snowball sampling,<sup>49</sup> which indicates a small number of individuals who were selected because of specific characteristics,<sup>50</sup> has been used for this research. Skawennati Fragnito and Jason Lewis, two Indigenous new media artists, and project leaders of AbTeC,

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<sup>47</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People, Second Edition* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Kovach, "Emerging From the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies," in *Research as Resistance: Critical Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press/ Women's Press, 2005), 30.

<sup>49</sup> Snowball Sampling: A purposive technique of selecting specific individuals for interviews based on certain characteristics. These individuals will generally recommend other individuals or sources to be utilized or interviewed for a similar purpose and so on and so forth. In this case, Curator and artist Steven Loft was recommended, however, due to time constraints was never approached to participate in an interview.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 181.

TimeTraveller™, and Skins have agreed to participate. Interviewees were encouraged to share their personal and professional experiences as Indigenous new media artists.<sup>51</sup> Participants are welcome to contact the researcher outside of the interview regarding this research or otherwise.

This paper will emphasize the importance of the Indigenous voice and perspectives that are separate from the dominant narratives as well as my own voice, by incorporating qualitative interviews and accentuating the importance of storytelling.<sup>52</sup> Kovach states, research that emphasizes Indigenous methodology and integrate the community is critical to pushing forward self-determination and acts as a process of taking control through Indigenous epistemologies.<sup>53</sup> This research aims to do just that through interviewing the artists of the project, but also by including them in the process of writing. Fragnito and Lewis have been actively involved in everything from suggested readings, to readings of their work that have been previously published, to interviews, and review. Both Fragnito and Lewis have been invited to review and edit their contributions prior to the completion of this research. They have been encouraged to make any changes that they deem necessary. Both artists will receive a copy of this MRP upon completion. In doing this, participants have final approval over their contributions.<sup>54</sup> Their involvement has been an educational experience that has greatly assisted in the construction of this MRP.

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<sup>51</sup> Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 118-119.

<sup>52</sup> Kovach, "Emerging From the Margins," 22.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>54</sup> Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 78-79.

The goal of the research within the MRP is to observe anti-oppressive theories that “offer an analysis of social reality and a vision of social justice.”<sup>55</sup> This paper recognizes the injustices that Indigenous peoples of the past and present have been subjected to and seeks to address the concept of ‘digital sovereignty’ that has the potential to contribute to the process of decolonization. This paper resists theorizations of a universal truth that excludes identities outside of the mainstream in order to achieve self-definition derived from a marginal experience.<sup>56</sup> Indigenous scholars of Indigenous studies and education, Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett write, “Images and representations of Aboriginal peoples that predominate in media, popular culture, and research studies portray us not as we are, but as non-Aboriginals think we are.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it is important for Indigenous peoples to be able to have a voice within the media, popular culture, and research. This paper, written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous person, acknowledges the biases that may be present as a result of internalizing the dominant culture over the course of one’s lifetime. However, I seek to reassess the canonical narrative of Indigenous/settler relations through engagement with Indigenous peoples and through education. Additionally, my primary academic advisor for this research, cultural theorist Dr. Julie Nagam, provides an invaluable Indigenous perspective and assertion of influence upon this writing.

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<sup>55</sup> Mehmoona Moose-Mitha, “Situating Anti-Oppressive Theories Within Critical and Difference Centered Perspectives” in *Research as Resistance: Critical Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press/ Women’s Press, 2005), 61.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>57</sup> Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett, “Putting Ourselves Forward: Location in Aboriginal Research” in *Research as Resistance: Critical Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press/ Women’s Press, 2005), 108.

This paper does not aim to speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples but rather to consider two successful new media art projects that have the potential to assist in achieving decolonization. Absolon and Willett write, “We will no longer be subjects of objective study; we are the subjects of our own knowledge creation.”<sup>58</sup> This paper emphasizes the importance of self-representation through new media art. Projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins are providing Indigenous peoples with an opportunity to represent themselves on a digital platform. This platform has the ability to disseminate representations and create communication networks both locally and globally. This research showcases how Indigenous new media artists are encouraging action based knowledge<sup>59</sup> as a way to connect communities, knowledge, and experiences that are separate from text.<sup>60</sup>

This MRP highlights the potential benefits of Indigenous new media art. Through dissemination of this paper at conferences and through publications, knowledge will be shared about Indigenous rights and the importance of involving Indigenous communities. It will also bring awareness to successful Indigenous new media art projects such as AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, and Skins – which emphasize how utilizing new media can make a difference in the real world. Some examples include creating a network, self-representation, disseminating appropriate Indigenous imagery, projecting Indigenous peoples into the future, and emphasizing the

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<sup>58</sup> Absolon and Willett, “Putting Ourselves Forward,” 113.

<sup>59</sup> Action based knowledge is a research tool that can be categorized as a part of self determination involving those directly affected by the issues at hand. For more information please see Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett, “Putting Ourselves Forward: Location in Aboriginal Research” 117; Fairn Herising, “Interrupting Positions: Critical Thresholds and Queer Pro/ Positions” in *Research as Resistance: Critical Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega, 154.

<sup>60</sup> Absolon and Willett, “Putting Ourselves Forward,” 118.



importance of training youth to have technological skills that can assist them in becoming community leaders, cutting edge artists, and technological agents.

## Who Controls The Narratives?

Historical representations of Indigenous peoples in art have often perpetuated stereotypes that have been embraced by the dominant ideology. North American artists George Catlin and Paul Kane portrayed Indigenous peoples in sketches and paintings as a way to “document” Indigenous culture starting in the 1800’s. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, Canadian artist Emily Carr became fascinated with Indigenous culture on Canada’s North West Coast. As Crosby notes, Carr came to the forefront some sixty years after Kane, yet the same issues remained present; their effort to record “authentic” Indigenous culture before it dies out places Indigenous peoples not only in the past, but perpetuates dangerous stereotypes.<sup>61</sup> Crosby writes, “The colonization of images in order to create a new Canadian mythology is parasitic, requiring that the first-order meanings within native communities be drained. This is not an inclusive act, but an act predicated on our exclusion, or ‘otherness’...”<sup>62</sup> Over 150 years later, Indigenous media art, and by extension, new media art continue to face similar issues.

Socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai uses the term ‘mediascapes’ to explain how media is characterized and disseminated. Appadurai writes:

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapescapes to viewers through out the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Crosby, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” 220.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>63</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works: Revised Edition*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Inc, 2006), 590.

What this suggests is that whomever controls the narratives that are being disseminated shapes the dominant ideology. Appadurai posits that representations propagated by the dominant culture can lead to imagined realities of the “Other.”<sup>64</sup> This is problematic because representations created by the dominant culture are often based on assumptions or stereotypes. This can only be avoided by allowing Indigenous peoples full and complete control over their own representations through the act of self-representation. Take for example, Indigenous representations in film; In *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film*, cultural studies scholar M. Elise Marubbio discusses how Indigenous peoples are generally portrayed in film as the noble/ignoble savage or a sexualized fetishization.<sup>65</sup> Cinema and film scholar, Daniel Bernardi reiterates this stating that in “U.S. cinema...people of colour are generally represented as either deviant threats to white rule, thereby requiring civilizing or brutal punishment, or fetishized objects of exotic beauty, icons for a racist scopophilia.”<sup>66</sup> Marubbio suggests that images perpetuated by the dominant culture, through media forms such as film reflect the social, political, and moral attitudes towards Indigenous peoples.<sup>67</sup> This in turn reinforces cultural narratives of nation building and national identity by excluding the racialized “Other” from the overall image of the nation and condoning stereotypes, racism, and acts of violence.<sup>68</sup> Appadurai agrees that ideoscapes, “which consists of a concatenation of

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<sup>64</sup> Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” 591.

<sup>65</sup> M. Elise Marubbio, *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>66</sup> Daniel Bernardi, *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (Chapel Hill: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>67</sup> Marubbio, *Killing the Indian Maiden*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Marubbio, *Killing the Indian Maiden*, 21.

ideas, terms, and images, including ‘freedom’, ‘welfare’, ‘rights’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘representation’ and the master-term ‘democracy’<sup>69</sup> have the potential to fetishize and alienate marginal cultures.<sup>70</sup> Thus, incorrect representations encourage alienation, propagate stereotypes and legitimize violence.

Similar issues of stereotypical behavior can be identified in new media art. For example, in “Skins 1.0: A Curriculum for Designing Games with First Nations Youth” by Lameman, Lewis, and Fragnito, reference is made to Lameman’s previous writings on misrepresentation of Indigenous culture, behavior, and language in video games. Her research has shown that “while North American Indigenous youth are known to be avid video game players, they rarely appear in commercial games, and when they do, they are misrepresented...”<sup>71</sup> Additionally, Lameman provides a video link on the AbTeC website that suggests that Indigenous characters are underrepresented in video games 90% of the time. According to the International Game Developers Association Diversity Survey from 2005<sup>72</sup> only 41 of 6,438 respondents identified as Native American.<sup>73</sup> While these statistics are discouraging, they do explain why there is a lack of Indigenous presence within video games. This illustrates how marginalization of Indigenous peoples in film and media is being mirrored within a new media environment. What this pattern suggests is not that it is

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<sup>69</sup> Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” 591.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>71</sup> Lameman, Lewis, and Fragnito, “Skins 1.0: A Curriculum for Designing Games with First Nations Youth.”

<sup>72</sup> The International Game Developers Association is currently working on a new diversity survey. Employees will have until April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 to participate. The results of the survey will be released in June of 2014.

<sup>73</sup> “Native Representations in Video Games.” First Nations/ Aboriginal people were not survey options though some respondents reported living in Canada. The majority of respondents were students without jobs in the industry. Further out of 41 respondents only 4 were female.

the medium that segregates a particular group of people, but rather, the dominant ideology that is largely in charge of the creation of visual imagery within culture. Stereotypes conform to societal beliefs of who marginalized people are and how they should look and behave. These are then disseminated on any number of media and new media platforms.

Workshops such as Skins are working to counteract these statistics by equipping Indigenous youth with the knowledge and ability to produce games that encompass aspects of their own cultural heritage.<sup>74</sup> While Skins remains largely an educational project, TimeTraveller™ is primarily an artistic narrative that works at counteracting Indigenous misrepresentations. The TimeTraveller™ protagonist, Hunter, uses his TimeTraveller™ glasses to easily navigate between the past, present, and future. This shift between time and space categorizes this machinima production within the science-fiction genre. In *'Indian' Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction: First Nations Voices Speak Out*, independent Indigenous scholar, writer, and filmmaker Sierra S. Adare, discusses stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples within TV science fiction, and how Indigenous peoples have reacted to those stereotypes. Adare identifies that, most commonly, Indigenous peoples would like to see Hollywood get rid of white supremacy, accurately present tribal diversity, and show Indigenous peoples as equals.<sup>75</sup> TimeTraveller™ addresses these concerns by presenting an Indigenous perspective to the science fiction genre.

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<sup>74</sup> "Native Representations in Video Games."

<sup>75</sup> Sierra S. Adare, *'Indian' Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction: First Nations' Voices Speak Out* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) 100.

In a previous interview Fragnito stated, “Timetraveller™ [in particular] and Skins encompass activism in that they are providing a whole other point of view and are using science fiction to do so. This gives the viewer distance from the present.”<sup>76</sup> When we consider science fiction, we find very few acknowledgements of Indigenous peoples in the future and when we do they are often represented stereotypically; TimeTraveller™ is an exceptional case where Indigenous peoples are controlling their own representations in the realm of science fiction. Lewis suggests that science fiction is a fantastic way of thinking through future paths because it challenges us to consider where we will be in one hundred years. Adare further supports Lewis’s view as she suggests that no other contemporary TV genre projects Indigenous peoples into the future of the dominant culture.<sup>77</sup> Lewis states, “If you are not present in the future imaginary of the dominant culture – you’re in trouble – that means that they don’t imagine you in the future...So we have to start proposing images of who we are and where we’ll be in the future.”<sup>78</sup> Lewis suggests that without a presence in the increasingly technologized world, it is easier to discount Indigenous peoples in the future, but also in the present. TimeTraveller™ invites the spectator to rethink historical events surrounding Indigenous peoples on their own terms and negotiate the viewer’s relationship to it.<sup>79</sup> In *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, Indigenous film and visual culture scholar Michelle Raheja writes:

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<sup>76</sup> Skawennati Fragnito, Interview with Amanda Roy (March 28, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Adare, ‘Indian’ Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, March 29, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> This draws on Michelle H. Raheja’s concepts of visual sovereignty and the spectator relationship in *Reservation Reelism*, 145 – 189.

In sharp relief against competing colonial discourses...it opens up multiple narratives for dialogue within and outside the community on a site that is less invested in the traffic in authenticity and fixed definition of indigeneity imposed by outsiders than in reconsidering the relationship between the visual image and the larger cultural and political contexts.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, TimeTraveller™ functions by counteracting the dominant transmission of “knowledge” by opening up an opportunity for conversation. The viewer is able to understand the narratives surrounding real conflicts that have occurred from an Indigenous viewpoint, in contrast to colonial modes of representation. This new perspective details how the past has come to shape the present, and how Indigenous peoples are imagining their future.

AbTeC is committed to ensuring that Indigenous peoples continue to be present in the dominant imaginary of the future through projects such as TimeTraveller™ and *Skins*. These projects place emphasis on the importance of self-representations of Indigenous communities within the field of new media art. Within media and new media, self-representation is imperative because popular media perpetuates stereotypes and archetypes of many cultural groups. This is particularly true for Indigenous peoples. Adare writes “In 1991, Linda P. Rouse and Jeffery R. Hanson conducted a study in ‘Indian’ stereotyping and status-based prejudices at universities in Texas, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. They found that ‘ninety-five percent of what students know about American Indians was acquired through media.’”<sup>81</sup> It can be assumed that this statistic has changed in recent years. However, it suggests that the realm of film, media, and digital culture has a significant impact on how the dominant culture internalizes visual culture and categorizes it as

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<sup>80</sup> Raheja, *Reservation Realism*, 145 – 189.

<sup>81</sup> Adare, ‘Indian’ Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction, 6.

“knowledge” that is then projected out into the world. In *Mining the Media Archive: Essays on Art, Technology, and Cultural Resistance*, cultural historian Dot Tuer cautions against seeing new media as a separate, idealized world when the cyber world and the real world are indivisible.<sup>82</sup> That is to say, on the other side of a computer or video game is a person who may internalize the representations that they are presented with. This can result in damaging responses upon those who are being stereotyped. This includes Indigenous peoples being subjected to stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and violence. Several TimeTraveller™ episodes such as Episode 2, which discusses the ‘Minnesota Massacre’<sup>83</sup> and Episode 3, which discusses the Oka Crisis,<sup>84</sup> depict historical events that illustrate how stereotypes, racism, and discrimination have been damaging in the past. AbTec, TimeTraveller™ and Skins function by presenting a counter-narrative to existing stereotypes. These projects recognize differences among Indigenous peoples while also identifying common goals such as the right to self-determination.

In *Jeff Thomas: A Study of Indian-ness*, Indigenous curator, critic and art historian Richard William Hill discusses how Indigenous agency insists upon self-representation that must occur from within the very discourse that oppresses Indigenous identity.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the term self-representation references the ability of an

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<sup>82</sup> Dot Tuer, *Mining the Media Archive: Essays on Art, Technology, and Cultural Resistance* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2005), 5.

<sup>83</sup> A misunderstanding surrounding land claims that resulted in armed conflict between the Dakota Sioux that ended in the mass execution of 38 Dakota men in 1862.

<sup>84</sup> In 1990, Mohawk communities in Oka, Quebec protested the government wanting to bulldoze their land to create a golf course. Even though almost everyone was arrested, the project did not go forward and it was considered a victory.

<sup>85</sup> Jeff Thomas and Richard William Hill, *Jeff Thomas: A Study of Indian-ness* (Toronto: ABC Art Books Canada, 2004), 19. Note that Hill is discussing this idea of representation in specific reference to Jeff Thomas’s work; however, this concept of self-representation can



individual to give meaning to one's language and culture. Self-representation would then ideally result in positive transformative perceptions of Indigenous peoples by the dominant culture. New media art is one way for Indigenous peoples to create images that are self-representations, which are both affordable and accessible. In comparison to media platforms that are generally more structured, require a specific skill set, technology, funding, and physical space in order to proceed,<sup>86</sup> new media art allows for a platform where virtually anyone with access<sup>87</sup> to a computable platform can participate. New media offers ample opportunities for participation. Jason E. Lewis classifies new media as a *terra nullius*, land belonging to no one. In "Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito," Lewis writes, "We're all immigrants in cyberspace."<sup>88</sup> Thus, Indigenous peoples retain equal opportunities to gain place and space in cyber space through the ability to self-represent without restrictions such as physical space or monetary means.

In "Merging New Media with Old Traditions," Indigenous communication scholar Yvonne Poitras Pratt writes, "Aboriginal people are increasingly asserting their online cultural boundaries and taking back control of their stories and traditions. This movement resonates with those who wish to break free of oppressive realities and claim a future of their own."<sup>89</sup> AbTeC's goal is to re-right and re-write these

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likewise be applicable to a larger body of Indigenous visual representation.

<sup>86</sup> For more information please see Michael Robert Evans, "Video as a Socio-Political Endeavor" in *Isuma Inuit Video Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Please note that there are issues of accessibility, often in the case of remote Indigenous communities. For more information please see Valerie Alia, *The New Media Nation: Indigenous Peoples and Global Communication* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>88</sup> Jason E. Lewis, "Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito," *Backlash* 21 (2005), accessed November 24, 2013, [http://www.abtec.org/docs/terra\\_nullius\\_terra\\_incognito.pdf](http://www.abtec.org/docs/terra_nullius_terra_incognito.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> Yvonne Poitras Pratt, "Merging New Media with Old Traditions," *Native Studies Review* 19 (2010): 9.

stereotypical definitions through self-determining Indigenous new media art projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins. Self-determination is a multifaceted process that involves Indigenous peoples re-gaining self-governance. In “Tribal Cultural Self-Determination and the Makah Whaling Culture,” Indigenous lawyer Robert J. Miller defines self-determination as:

‘The right of a distinct and identifiable group of people or a separate political state to set the standards and more of what constitutes its traditional culture and how it will honor and practice that culture.’ ... cultural self-determination is intimately tied to tribal sovereignty and the rights of self-determination...this is so because native groups will decide for themselves what cultural practices to preserve, and they will use their political power and sovereign status to fight for those rights.<sup>90</sup>

Indigenous political science scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred reaffirms in “Sovereignty,” that Indigenous self-determination is founded as a rejection of Euro Canadian goals of assimilation to promote Indigenous rights and culture. Alfred argues that Indigenous peoples in Canada have fought harder than anywhere else for the right to self-determine.<sup>91</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the act of self-determination refers to equality amongst cultures to assert their rights, freedoms, and identity. This includes the ability to control and disseminate images and narratives associated with Indigenous identity and culture. Loft further considers the importance of self-determination within new media art:

Indigenous digital artists around the world are deeply engaged with, and provide important contributions to interdisciplinary and cross-community dialogues about cultural self-determination. Their works explore and bear witness to the contemporary relevance of the histories of Indigenous oral

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<sup>90</sup> Robert J. Miller, “Tribal Cultural Self-Determination and the Makah Whaling Culture,” in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln & London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>91</sup> Alfred, “Sovereignty,” 40.

cultures and profound connections to their widely varying lands. They also reveal the creative drive that is at the heart of Indigenous survival.<sup>92</sup>

Art projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins seek to inspire and empower Indigenous peoples to create their own realities. This can lead to acts of self-determination that renegotiate the unequal balance of power currently present in Canadian society through the process of decolonization. As stated by Miller and Alfred, self-determination will allow Indigenous peoples to regain control of their identity, spirituality, culture, and land.

Disregarding marginal perspectives ensures that groups outside of the dominant culture remain on the edges of society. Poitras Pratt identifies that “while appropriation of the Native voice can be traced back to those who may not have in mind the marginalized group’s best interests, there is increasing recognition that Aboriginal people are asserting greater control in today’s online environment.”<sup>93</sup> TimeTraveller™ and Skins subvert the dominant cultural ideology in both content and medium. These projects address historical events and traditional values, while projecting Indigenous peoples into the future. TimeTraveller™ and Skins are not only re-writing and re-righting Indigenous history by presenting a new perspective that empowers rather than degrades Indigenous peoples and communities, but they are doing so from a contemporary platform. Poitras Pratt suggests that Indigenous peoples are often categorized as modern or traditional but not both.<sup>94</sup> These established binary categories constrain contemporary Indigenous peoples by failing to

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<sup>92</sup> Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes: Globalizing Networked Aboriginal Art,” in *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* (Banff: The Walter Phillips Gallery Edition, 2005): 191.

<sup>93</sup> Poitras Pratt, “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” 8.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

consider a rhizomatic approach to the contemporary. Utilizing new media to create art and promote education is another examples of how Indigenous peoples are actively adapting to the contemporary uses of an increasingly technological world. Rather than remaining static, as is often stereotyped, Indigenous peoples are utilizing new media as a platform for self-representation and socio-political activism by connecting Indigenous peoples locally and globally, disseminating Indigenous stories, and educating the next generation.

To have the dominant culture project images of Indigenous peoples that are at best degrading and at worst, a death sentence, can lead to feelings of resentment and a desire to regain control. In order to bring Indigenous concepts of identity to the forefront, the dominant culture must relinquish their control and allow Indigenous peoples the ability to self-determine, as per their rights and freedoms. Through self-representation Indigenous artists are able to address social and political issues that rest within identity, articulate resistance, and digital sovereignty. These aspects of new media art effectively contribute to the process of self-determination and decolonization.

## Identity

Canada can be perceived as a multicultural nation that promotes equality and opportunities without discrimination. This idealized view of our peacekeeping nation overlooks the discrimination, racism, and violence that has occurred and continues to occur in Canada. In *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, sociologist Sherene H. Razack explores how “spaces are organized to sustain unequal social relations.”<sup>95</sup> Razack discusses how the origins of North America are built on a romanticized national story that denies conquest and colonization, replacing it with peaceful settlement. Europeans are represented as the bearers of civilization while Indigenous peoples were perceived as dead or assimilated.<sup>96</sup> Indigenous scholar of Indigenous studies, Bonita Lawrence writes, “...the reality is that Native people in Canada and the United States for over a century now have been classified by race and subjected to colonization processes that reduced diverse nations to common experiences of subjugation.”<sup>97</sup> Within a colonial framework, Indigenous peoples have often been considered lesser than Europeans, largely due to their holistic culture and oral traditions. Hill identifies that the civilized (settler) versus savage (Indigenous peoples) dichotomy projected upon Indigenous peoples has resulted in devastating consequences.<sup>98</sup> Forced assimilation policies were enacted through cruelties such as residential schools, the last one only closing in 1996, which aimed to “civilize”

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<sup>95</sup> Sherene H. Razack, “Introduction: When Place Becomes Race,” in *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, ed. Sherene H. Razack (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Lawrence, “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States,” 5.

<sup>98</sup> Richard William Hill, “After Authenticity: A Post-Mortem on the Racialized Indian Body,” in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash Milby (New York: Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 99.

Indigenous peoples through Christian religion and Western educational objectives. According to the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1, PART TWO, Chapter 10 – Residential Schools, the residential school system aimed to assimilate Indigenous children and control their future by removing them from their homes and re-socializing them in an attempt to conform to Euro Canadian standards of society.<sup>99</sup> Students were abused verbally, physically, and sexually during their time in residential schools. Although Prime Minister Steven Harper issued a public apology in 2008<sup>100</sup>, the damage caused to the children, and the families they were forcibly removed from, requires much healing that may never be achieved within a survivor’s lifetime. This recent example is just one of the many ways that the dominant culture attempted to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Euro Canadian society.

Assimilation aims to force individuals and groups into behaving like the dominant culture.<sup>101</sup> Miller writes, “This federal policy was designed to bring Indians into the American melting pot by destroying their tribal governments and tribal ways of life and assimilating them into mainstream society.”<sup>102</sup> Miller goes on to explain how attempts to civilize Indigenous peoples through forced religion, education, and

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<sup>99</sup> “Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1, PART TWO, Chapter 10 – Residential Schools,” The Government of Canada Web Archive, December 12, 2007, The Government of Canada, accessed March 21, 2014, [http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071211055641/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg28\\_e.html](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071211055641/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg28_e.html).

<sup>100</sup> Steven Harper, “Statement of Apology,” June 11, 2008 Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, The Government of Canada, accessed March 21, 2014 <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649>.

<sup>101</sup> See Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 87 – 88.

<sup>102</sup> Robert J. Miller, “Tribal Cultural Self-Determination and the Makah Whaling Culture,” 133.

government, stripped Indigenous peoples of their rights as the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) attempted to take all control away from Indigenous peoples. The result of assimilation is forced oppression, a loss of cultural values, language, traditions and identity. In Canada, it is projected that everyone is entitled to an identity associated with the multiplicity of cultures that coexist here, however, this perception is deceiving. Art historian James Clifford writes, "...Globalization, at a cultural level at least, permits and even encourages ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual differences – so long as they do not fundamentally threaten the dominant political-economic order."<sup>103</sup> Thus, everyone is entitled to an identity that is associated with the dominant culture. Stepping outside of the dominant culture places groups and individuals on the margins of society, because they are considered to be a threat to national identity.

Identity assumes that everyone, equally, retains the supposed 'cultural rights' to practice their beliefs and exert their personhood. Lawrence writes:

Contemporary Native identity therefore exists in an uneasy balance between concepts of generic 'Indianness' as a racial identity and of specific 'tribal' identity as indigenous nationhood. In general, Native resistance to colonization rejects notions of "pan-Indian" identities that can, at best, only aspire for equality within a settler state framework.<sup>104</sup>

Stripping someone of their identity, their personhood, in an attempt to "reintegrate" entire groups into the dominant culture is an act of dehumanization. As a result, cultural identities are often exploited. Clifford writes that there is a "growing

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<sup>103</sup> James Clifford, "Taking Identity Politics Seriously: 'The Contradictory, Stony Ground...,'" in *Without Guarantees: Essays in Honour of Stuart Hall*, ed. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie, (London: Verso, 2000), 100.

<sup>104</sup> Lawrence, "Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States," 3.

tendency to objectify, commodify, and perform identities.”<sup>105</sup> Art Historian, Deborah Root discusses this further in *Cannibal Culture: Conquest, Appropriation and Cultural Difference*, suggesting that the Canadian Government appropriates Indigenous cultures, particularly in the arts and crafts sector, in order to profit economically. The perception of Indigenous peoples as an exotic race, promotes tourism and “authentic” experiences of Indigenous culture.<sup>106</sup> Appropriating Indigenous culture to contribute to a national identity is ironic considering that marginal communities are viewed as a threat to the dominant ideology. This double standard is utilized to control the representation of Indigenous communities and thus limit their influence.

Despite continued objectification, commodification, and exploitation, Indigenous peoples have and continue to retain their identities. One of the ways Indigenous peoples do this is through art. Loft writes, “Art functions as remembering, the creation and articulation of cultural memory.”<sup>107</sup> Loft notes that for Indigenous peoples, memory is history; it is also the present and the future.<sup>108</sup> Thus, it can be supposed that Indigenous identity is built upon the notion of collective memory. As art functions within that respect, it can then be directly connected to identity and self-determination. Cultural memory and collective memory share similar characteristics, however cultural memory is specific to a particular group of people who share the

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<sup>105</sup> Clifford, “Taking Identity Politics Seriously,” 101.

<sup>106</sup> Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Conquest, Appropriation and Cultural Difference* (Colorado: West View Press, 1996).

<sup>107</sup> Steven Loft, “Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum: A Coyote Perspective” in *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture* (Banff: The Walter Phillips Gallery Edition, 2005), 88.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.



same ethnicity. Collective memory refers to philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwach and art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg's notion of a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society that continues through generations.<sup>109</sup> Egyptologist Jan Assman and independent scholar John Czaplicka suggest that a shared identity is produced through oral history, conscious unity and specificity of knowledge.<sup>110</sup>

Through the reproduction of identity and the importance placed on the connection of the past, present, and future, Indigenous peoples have a firm understanding of who they are. Assman and Czaplicka state, "In cultural formation, a collective experience crystalizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia."<sup>111</sup> This suggests that through the act of cultural and collective memory, traditions, values, and practices can transcend time and space. However, building Indigenous identity upon the past, does not exclude elements of the contemporary or of the future. TimeTraveller™ is an example of how Indigenous identity founded upon the past can assist in imaging the future while taking place on a contemporary platform. Hunter seeks to understand his heritage by going back in time using the technologically advanced TimeTraveller™ glasses. Hunter's recombinant identity lends itself to the past, present and future (his present being our future but also his future). As illustrated by Hunter in TimeTraveller™, identity is an aspect of personhood that is in continual flux, its meaning changes from person to person as it develops over the course of ones lifetime. In the case of

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<sup>109</sup> Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995):126.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 129.

Indigenous peoples, this development extends beyond their own lifetime, to their predecessors and their future generations.<sup>112</sup>

Indigenous peoples have continually adapted to the changes in North American society. The advancements in technology and widely used new media is just one of the ways that Indigenous peoples continue to prove their adaptability. Loft suggests, “Technology has an immediacy that lends itself to the confluence of memory and subjectivity.”<sup>113</sup> Within new media, there is an increasingly growing number of individuals and groups, self-representing online.<sup>114</sup> This establishment of identity is seen extensively through online communication technology, particularly social media. Social media is being used to disseminate a digital identity through applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and many others. Each serves a specific function from providing status updates to finding employment, however, all underlie sharing information about oneself with others. In *Alternative and Activist New Media: Digital Media and Society Series*, information studies scholar Leah A. Lievrouw suggests that opinions expressed within new social movements<sup>115</sup> reflect self-definition and personal identity offline.<sup>116</sup> Lievrouw describes three defining features characteristic of new social movements: participation, collective identity, and symbolic production. Lievrouw continues that

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<sup>112</sup> The belief of seven generations constitutes considering the implications of a decision on seven generations after the Indigenous peoples of the present.

<sup>113</sup> Loft, “Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum,” 94.

<sup>114</sup> An example of this is Idle No More, which utilized new media through online presence and social media to communicate an activist movement that calls for sovereignty, protection of land and water through peaceful revolution. See: <http://www.idlenomore.ca/>

<sup>115</sup> New Social Movements: A collective group of educated individuals coming together on a new media platform to address social and political issues.

<sup>116</sup> Leah A. Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media: Digital Media and Society Series* (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 53.

these new social movements are created through new systems of meaning i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Websites, etc. that society is beginning to recognize as a legitimate means of cultural production.<sup>117</sup> In the case of AbTeC, TimeTraveller™ and Skins, the participating artists and students are creating and legitimizing new media art as a form of cultural production, but also as a movement for change. Indigenous groups advocating for self-representation and self-determination, in an effort to maintain their independence from the institutional state, through the sharing of collective experiences, values, and emphasizing the importance of identity, are a part of the social movement that Lievrouw describes.

In *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtual Human*, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, discusses the sense of virtual personhood as an opportunity for individuals to be their most true self. However, there is a broadly shared cultural assumption that virtual selfhood and actual selfhood hold differing characteristics.<sup>118</sup> Although the perception of fulfilling identity on a simulacrum of the world appears disconnected, there are several characteristics that allow individuals to construct identity within the virtual world. Virtual worlds like Second Life encourage participants to take on a more active role. Boellstorff suggests that in the virtual world individuals are more assertive with their self-identity – their image, the way they are presented, may change, but their personality largely remains the same. The outlet for it, however, allows for a more comfortable setting for interaction. As a result, Boellstorff asserts that, “Their online lives could make their

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<sup>117</sup> Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media*, 49-50.

<sup>118</sup> Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtual Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 119.

actual world self more ‘real,’ in that it could become closer to what they understood to be their true selfhood, encumbered by social constraints or the particularities of physical embodiment.”<sup>119</sup> For Indigenous groups, who have both an individual and collective identity, the virtual world serves as an opportunity for them to self-represent without restrictions such as space, place, or financial constraint.

This process of shaping identity through the virtual world extends to new media art as well. Indigenous art is innately political, built upon a collective cultural memory that functions within social structures of identity. Thus, Indigenous new media art is taking up positive identities in order to effectively mobilize resources that will project an appropriate representation of Indigenous culture to the dominant ideology. AbTeC, TimeTraveller™ and Skins are active examples of how artists are using new media as a platform to bring forth issues around self-determination. In “Charting Indigenous Stories of Place: An Alternate Cartography Through the Visual Narrative of Jeff Thomas,” Indigenous cultural theorist Julie Nagam writes, “Historical images of Aboriginal people have kept us in a frame that renders us still and voiceless; this tradition of visual representation has had considerable long-term effects.”<sup>120</sup> TimeTraveller™ discusses a shared past, present, and future, from the perspective of an Indigenous person. This context allows the dominant culture insight into a different historical perspective. TimeTraveller™ is particularly effective in this sense because it has been presented at film festivals such as ImagineNATIVE and in

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<sup>119</sup> Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, 121.

<sup>120</sup> Julie Nagam, “Indigenous Stories of Place: An Alternate Cartography Through The Visual Narrative of Jeff Thomas,” in *Diverse Spaces: Identity, Heritage and Community in Canadian Public Culture*, ed. Susan L. T. Ashley (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 190.

gallery spaces. Thus, the project is capable of reaching wide audiences varying across race, gender, and class.<sup>121</sup> The project emphasizes the importance of Indigenous peoples controlling their own representations in order to exert their identity and maintain cultural connections through a Six Nations or Haudenosaunee perspective.

TimeTraveller™ utilizes Second Life to illustrate real life historical events from an Indigenous perspective, but to also imagine the future. Lawrence emphasizes that Indigenous survival demands the challenging of the erasure of Indigenous identity and traditions. She goes on to suggest that in order to establish a sovereign future, intervention into the colonial framework needs to occur.<sup>122</sup> TimeTraveller™ functions by projecting Indigenous peoples into a future world where they experience sovereignty and self-determination. Thus, the notion of identity, both individual and collective, as well as the continued presence of Indigenous peoples is reaffirmed. The fact that TimeTraveller™ is being presented to such a large audience allows an opportunity for these concepts to permeate the dominant ideology. In *How To Do Things With Video Games*, scholar, author, and game designer Ian Bogost suggests that while video games are often under criticism for aspects of social realism that can encourage violent and discriminatory behavior, there is also potential for games to embrace respect and create reverence.<sup>123</sup> In this sense, TimeTraveller™ is using the game world to create images of Indigenous peoples through the act of self-

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<sup>121</sup> It could be argued that although the presentation of TimeTraveller™ is reaching a larger audience than it would remaining solely online, that the demographic it is reaching remains within the scope of the artistic community (upper middle class, Caucasian) – however, perhaps this is exactly the demographic that should be targeted in order to achieve change.

<sup>122</sup> Lawrence, “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States,” 23.

<sup>123</sup> Ian Bogost, *How To Do Things With Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 24.

representation. This then allows potential for the dominant ideology surrounding Indigenous peoples to shift into a more positive light.

Skins also has the ability to subtly subverts preconceived notions of Indigenous culture and replace them with something positive by bringing Indigenous culture and production into the mainstream. Skins brings Indigenous storytelling into the popular culture of video games. The player navigates a game world that emphasizes Indigenous culture through its narrative as well as its production. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, media, culture, and communication scholar Alexander R. Galloway writes, “Play is a symbolic action for larger issues in culture. It is the expression of structure...It is an aesthetic, enacted vehicle for ‘a powerful rendering of life’”<sup>124</sup> What this suggests is that in an effort to ‘recreate life’ on a virtual platform, game designers hold the ability to influence consumers subconsciously through game design and objectives. Galloway draws attention to game designer and academic researcher Gonzalo Frasca’s essay “Video Games of the Oppressed” which examines how games address social and political issues. TimeTraveller™ and Skins fall into this category and can be connected to social realism by way of topic matter.<sup>125</sup> Galloway provides the example of the game, *Under Ash*, to illustrate this through intervention in the gaming market:

The game designers describe Under Ash as acting in opposition to what they call “American style” power and violence. Realizing that Palestinian Youth will most likely want to play shooter games one way or another, the designers of Under Ash aim to intervene in the gaming market with a homegrown alternative allowing those youths to play from their own perspective as Palestinians, not as surrogate Americans. Under Ash players, then, have a

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<sup>124</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 75-76.

personal investment in the struggle happening each day around them. This is something rarely seen in the consumer gaming market.<sup>126</sup>

The Skins workshop does exactly this through the creation of Indigenous video games. Skins assists Indigenous youth in determining their identities and stories and how they can incorporate their culture into the mainstream. At the same time, these students are developing skills that will assist them in becoming producers of their own representations rather than just consumers.

Both TimeTraveller™ and Skins emphasize a shared sense of past, present, and future that resonates with Indigenous goals of articulate resistance and decolonization. Identity is a fundamental aspect of personhood. It defines who we are, as an individual and as part of a collective. In mobilizing current technologies, Indigenous peoples are stepping outside of the representation projected upon them by the dominant culture, both literally and figuratively. Projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins focus on highlighting Indigenous identity on a contemporary platform, while retaining cultural and collective memory. Redefining how Indigenous identity is perceived by the dominant culture is an innately political process that requires action within all facets of Canadian culture. By re-righting Indigenous past and present, new media art can assist viewers in understanding Indigenous perspectives on an engaging new platform that, in the case of Skins, allows active participation. Ideally, in the future, this will result in Indigenous peoples being able to represent themselves on any number of platforms without restriction, discrimination, or consequence. In order to achieve this, a process of articulate resistance is required.

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<sup>126</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 83.

## **Articulate Resistance**

Identity is not an inherent right, as much of the dominant culture believes. This belief is only held when an individual or collective identity aligns with that of the dominant culture. Lawrence states, “Because identities are embedded in systems of power based on race, class, and gender, identity is a highly political issue, with ramifications for how contemporary and historical collective experience is understood.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, as a result of the present limitations imposed on Indigenous identity and self-determination, activism is required in order to acquire these rights. As previously stated, articulate resistance is a term coined by Loft for “Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.” It refers to an engagement with activism to counteract “the history of colonialism and continued racism”<sup>128</sup> of Indigenous peoples in Canada. TimeTraveller™, as presented within the exhibition, exemplifies an example of Indigenous new media activist art.

On the Ryerson Image Centre website, Loft quotes Indigenous theorist Jolene Rickard, who writes, “The work of Indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization and identity politics [...] Sovereignty is the border that shifts Indigenous experience from victimized stance to a strategic one.”<sup>129</sup> Articulate resistance does not need to be bold or overbearing, though it can be. Articulate resistance opposes colonial modes of appropriation, discrimination, and violence by speaking or acting on behalf of oneself to correct misconceptions projected by the

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<sup>127</sup> Lawrence, “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States,” 3.

<sup>128</sup> Loft, “Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.”

<sup>129</sup> Jolene Rickard, “Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand,” *Aperture* 139 (1995): 51.



dominant ideology and to achieve self-determination, decolonization, and sovereignty. Projects such as AbTeC seek to inspire and empower Indigenous peoples to share their stories and create their own realities through the act of self-representation. Fragnito states:

What never changed was me wanting to see social and political change – making art is my way to be an activist – to me they are so the same – but the art way is slower – it’s subtler, it’s a way of presenting the facts from another point of view, I’m almost describing TimeTraveller™. It’s presenting perspectives. It’s planting seeds. What I believe what I’m doing is presenting alternative possibilities for our future. In TimeTraveller™, I’m truly showing it. It’s an alternative world that we could be in if we changed our thinking.<sup>130</sup>

The act of self-representation is an essential component of articulate resistance in that it strives for the ability to present alternative modes of being and advocate on behalf of them. Nagam’s examination of Jeff Thomas’s work can further be connected to TimeTraveller’s relation with self-representation. Nagam argues that images such as Thomas’s,<sup>131</sup> or in this case, TimeTraveller™, function by provoking the viewer to engage with particular contestations in Indigenous history and to question how these representations have come to shape their own ideas of Indigenous peoples.<sup>132</sup> TimeTraveller™ demonstrates that there are multiple ways of knowing and understanding the complex relationships within the different histories of the colonial narrative.<sup>133</sup> This dialogue is created by calling attention to biases and seeks to reposition Indigenous place within historical narratives.<sup>134</sup> Presenting these perspectives through an accessible digital medium and through art encourages

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<sup>130</sup> Skawennati Fragnito, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 13, 2013.

<sup>131</sup> This particular work of Jeff Thomas is a series of photographs that place an Indigenous figurine into the Toronto, Ontario landscape.

<sup>132</sup> Nagam, “Indigenous Stories of Place,” 192.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

openness to alternative narratives not through force, but through the ability to understand another perspective.

Lewis emphasizes, however, that it is not just about talking about change, but rather, going out and *making* the change:

In the 9 years it's [AbTeC] been formally in existence, we [Fragnito and Lewis] have both done concrete projects that are not just talk. We need a full spectrum. We need to have this conceptual, political and cultural conversation but make sure we are affecting the world; with students, with art work, things we can touch and feel and see. We need to train other people, both materially, but also conceptually, why this is important. How can we think about these things? How are these technologies going to change our culture going forward? From my approach it's problematic to only talk about these things, you need to get your hands dirty to understand what's going on.<sup>135</sup>

The Skins workshop is a culmination of both Fragnito and Lewis's desire to use education as a tool to empower Indigenous youth. Skins falls into the category of what Bogost would call, *serious games*. These are games that are used outside of entertainment to promote education. The serious game component allows for individuals to experience taking on a new role within a particular set of rules or restriction. Bogost writes that these simulations create new opportunities for learning.<sup>136</sup> In Skins, both the players and the creators are engaging in participatory action, which allows them to explore Indigenous traditions, stories, and themes. This can help the Indigenous youth navigate their own cultural heritage, but also gives the player insight into what it means to be Indigenous, from a first person game perspective. Lewis notes that going forward AbTeC will continue to encourage Indigenous peoples to engage with technology; assisting them in learning how to

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<sup>135</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16, 2013.

<sup>136</sup> Bogost, *How To Do Things With Video Games*, 5.

successfully manipulate technology for their own objectives.<sup>137</sup>

In creating concrete projects, Fragnito and Lewis have effectively mobilized their resources in order to become agents of change. New media art is a new platform for bringing the past to life, imagining the future, and changing the present, which are the cornerstones to Indigenous epistemologies and ontology as stated by Loft earlier. Clifford writes, “To imagine a coherent future, people selectively mobilize past resources. Articulations of tradition, never simply backward-looking, are thus generative components of peoplehood, ways of belonging to some discrete social time and place in an interconnected world.”<sup>138</sup> Indigenous peoples are utilizing new media to do just as Clifford suggests; through mobilization of past and present resources, Indigenous peoples are becoming active in online and new media environments. Lievrouw refers to this action as *resource mobilization theory (RTM)*. RTM suggests that a collective acts in accordance with material and cultural resources, in order to articulate resistance, identify themselves, and employ tactics to achieve their goals.<sup>139</sup> In reference to Indigenous peoples this suggests that they are no longer bystanders in this contemporary realm, but rather, they become producers, through projects such as AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, and Skins. Lewis emphasizes that this is important because as the digital becomes prevalent Indigenous peoples need to ensure that they continue to remain relevant. Lewis states, “Over time, the digital is becoming the everything. It’s not that we need to make sure we’re part of this conversation, we need to make sure we’re part of *the* [emphasis added]

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<sup>137</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16, 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Clifford, “Taking Identity Politics Seriously,” 97.

<sup>139</sup> Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media*, 152.

conversation.”<sup>140</sup> AbTeC and particularly projects such as Skins are ways to ensure that the next generation of Indigenous peoples are getting involved in the production of Indigenous representations. Engaging in new media not only features Indigenous peoples in the present, but also projects them into the future.

New Media artists acknowledge the placement of Indigenous peoples in society, but are utilizing their art projects to extend beyond the local. This network connects Indigenous peoples while continuing to acknowledge their past and present through the narratives that are being disseminated. Clifford states, “Human beings become agents, capable of effective action, only when they are actively sustained ‘in place’ through social and historical connections and disconnections.”<sup>141</sup> Indigenous peoples are utilizing new media art to bring their past and present experiences onto a contemporary platform that connects them not only to other communities, but also to the world. This allows for the distribution of Indigenous images and representations by Indigenous peoples and aims to counteract the racism and oppression aimed at Indigenous peoples through stereotypical images presented by the dominant culture. AbTeC participants and project creators are some of the agents required to make changes. Lewis states that there is potential for a much larger conversation to take place. AbTeC aims to engage in and expand that conversation.<sup>142</sup> Both Fragnito and Lewis agree that the potential to network on a large scale is one of the unique benefits that new media offers.<sup>143</sup> The fact that Indigenous peoples are engaging on a

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<sup>140</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>141</sup> Clifford, “Taking Identity Politics Seriously,” 96.

<sup>142</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>143</sup> Jason Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito, interviews with Amanda Roy, Dec 13<sup>th</sup> 2013 and Dec 16<sup>th</sup> 2013, respectively.

contemporary platform shows their versatility, their ability to adapt, and that they want to connect with the community through artistic means.

Another important component of articulate resistance is the act of storytelling that functions as a central component of TimeTraveller™ and Skins. In “Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance,” by cultural theorists Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes, they state, “Stories in Indigenous epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing, and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form.”<sup>144</sup> Sium and Ritskes go on to write that stories produce a creative space for dynamic resistance that reclaims epistemic ground to subvert colonialism.<sup>145</sup> Storytelling thus acts as a political and social signifier of defying the dominant ideology. Further, Storytelling provides agency to the teller that resists the colonial narrative. It suggests that colonizers have failed in their attempt to erase Indigenous peoples from their own land.<sup>146</sup> Storytelling thus, validates Indigenous cultural survival by proclaiming their existence and emphasizing their beliefs.

In “StoryTelling,” Indigenous scholar Qwul’sih’yah’maht Robina Anne Thomas discusses how storytelling can act as a form of resistance by respecting and honoring people while simultaneously documenting their reality.<sup>147</sup> Indigenous new media art has the capacity to act as a way to share stories and form resistance. This is

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<sup>144</sup> Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes, “Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2 (2013): II.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., III.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., IIII.

<sup>147</sup> Qwul’sih’yah’maht Robina Anne Thomas, “Honouring the Oral Traditions of my Ancestors Through Storytelling,” in *Research as Resistance: Critical Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press/ Women’s Press, 2005), 244.

particularly illustrated through TimeTraveller™, when an alternate perspective on historical events forces questions about the dominant narrative. In *Skins*, Indigenous youth are encouraged to share their stories through a digital medium so that they can become producers of their own representations in video games.

According to the Ots'i website, a video game project created by participants in *Skins 1.0*, *Skins* provides new opportunities for elders to share their knowledge with the next generation. In "Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space," Lewis and Fragnito stated that *Skins* participants were divided into small teams who would interview elders regarding tribal history. These interviews were then utilized to build a virtual, navigable space to represent and illustrate stories.<sup>148</sup> Through this engagement, *Skins* effectively demonstrates how Indigenous storytelling has evolved on a new media platform. Lameman, Lewis, and Fragnito further suggested that there has been an increase in game developers, artists, and activists interested in approaching video games and virtual worlds with educational, artistic, and activist goals in mind; examples of these include *Games for Change* and the *Serious Games Initiative*.<sup>149</sup>

The proclamation of Indigenous survival in any form threatens national identity because it disrupts the intended order of the dominant culture. Sium and Ritseke write, "In the colonial order of things Indigenous stories are always threatening."<sup>150</sup> This is particularly true on a new media platform due to its potential accessibility and global reach. Colonial order is concerned that this mobilization of

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<sup>148</sup> Lewis and Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," 29-31.

<sup>149</sup> Lameman, Lewis, and Fragnito, "Skins 1.0: A Curriculum for Designing Games with First Nations Youth."

<sup>150</sup> Sium and Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power," III.

resources could lead Indigenous peoples to come together in their assertion of rights through decolonization towards sovereignty and self-determination. Poitras Pratt suggests, “Some argue that new media use has allowed Aboriginal groups to reject assimilative tactics and project a sense of pan-Indianism that has evoked feelings of national solidarity.”<sup>151</sup> This feeling of solidarity that has the potential to span globally is the result of network connectedness, one of the unique opportunities that new media communication technologies provide. Raheja discusses how new media and film can imagine a new world, while being a meeting space through a network of communities to create and exchange information.<sup>152</sup> In an online environment, this act of storytelling functions as a unique opportunity to present traditional knowledge on a contemporary platform.<sup>153</sup> Poitras Pratt writes, “Aboriginal people are increasingly asserting their online cultural boundaries and taking back control of their stories and traditions. This movement resonates with those who wish to break free of oppressive realities and claim a future of their own.”<sup>154</sup> This exertion of agency raises awareness and emphasizes a greater sense of connectedness. Poitras Pratt suggests that these three aspects, agency, awareness, and connectedness, are important to

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<sup>151</sup> Poitras Pratt, “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” 20.

<sup>152</sup> Raheja, *Reservation Realism*, 145 – 189.

<sup>153</sup> In *Dancing on Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011) Leanne Simpson agrees that storytelling is an important route to decolonization. However, she believes storytelling is most effective when presented orally. Simpson suggests that when storytelling is mediated through print, film, video, or in this case, new media it loses much of its ‘transformative power’ to be a social change agent, p. 34. Simpson believes this to be the case due to a lack of engagement. I would argue that while new media does not necessarily allow physical interaction it does encourage participation and interaction on a digital platform. As a result, it could be argued that new media is more effective than previous mediums that have presented storytelling. This would be particularly true for contemporary youth who consistently reside in online environments.

<sup>154</sup> Poitras Pratt, “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” 9

decolonization.<sup>155</sup> It is through agency that participation is encouraged and articulate resistance is fostered. Thus, storytellers are embracing technology to ensure that their traditions and practices remain relevant.<sup>156</sup> Lewis notes, however, that storytelling is not unique to Indigenous peoples and is just one of the ways that new media can be used.<sup>157</sup> In this sense, storytelling on a new media platform is reflective of another way Indigenous peoples are mobilizing contemporary resources to promote their culture.

Articulate resistance suggests that Indigenous peoples are becoming active agents in the redefinition of themselves, their culture, and their future. Indigenous new media art becomes an agent in the formation of social and political change by addressing issues of cultural knowledge, identity, and representation. Articulate resistance as demonstrated through new media and new media art offers an example of how Indigenous peoples are actively mobilizing their resources to effect change. New media is particularly effective in this sense, as a result of its networking abilities, which allows groups and individuals to connect across large distances. This network has the potential to unite Indigenous peoples across the world in their efforts to achieve decolonization. Storytelling is another aspect of articulate resistance that aims at decolonization by subverting the dominant ideology. Storytelling through new media, as in the case of *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup> and *Skins*, offers the advantage of reaching large audiences and including youth in the dialogue being created. Thus, this

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<sup>155</sup> Poitras Pratt, "Merging New Media with Old Traditions," 4

<sup>156</sup> Candice Hopkins, "Interventions in Digital Territories: Narrative in Native New Media," in *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture* (Banff: The Walter Phillips Gallery Edition, 2005), 130.

<sup>157</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16, 2013.



dissemination of culture and identity on a new media platform moves Indigenous peoples towards digital sovereignty through an interconnected platform.

## Digital Sovereignty

Digital Sovereignty refers to the capacity to have independent authority online and in the virtual world. Digital Sovereignty draws on Raheja's concepts of 'Visual Sovereignty' and the 'Digital Reservation.' Raheja argues visual sovereignty is "to confront the spectator with the often absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans while also flagging their involvement, and to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype."<sup>158</sup> Further, the digital reservation suggests, "that film and other forms of new media operate as a space of the virtual reservation...a space where Native American filmmakers put the long, vexed history of Indigenous representations into dialogue with epistemic Indigenous knowledge."<sup>159</sup> Raheja would suggest the process of healing that is occurring on the virtual reservation is unfolding before a national audience,<sup>160</sup> making it even more important. Thus, Raheja's work lays the foundation for understanding how new media acts as an emancipatory medium for Indigenous peoples to express their culture, identity, and become active agents in creating change. *AbTec*, *TimeTraveller™* and *Skins* operate within these conceptions of visual sovereignty and the digital reservation by creating space for Indigenous peoples within online and new media environments. These projects speak to digital sovereignty in that they are asserting Indigenous rights to be present within the digital discourse, express their identity and culture without restriction, and invite

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<sup>158</sup> Raheja, "Reading Nanook's Smile," 59.

<sup>159</sup> Raheja, *Reservation Realism*, 145 – 189.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

the public to be a spectator while reaching out to network with other Indigenous peoples locally, nationally, and internationally.

Indigenous artists are increasingly finding space within the virtual world – creating an online place to call their own. It is this act of articulate resistance that digital sovereignty is founded upon. New Media, although seemingly ubiquitous, continues to remain outside of the artistic cannon. Galloway writes that video games, and by extension new media, continues to reside in lowbrow cultural production that is not on par with high art.<sup>161</sup> This suggests that new media art is not high art in the same sense that Indigenous peoples are continually placed on the margins of society. Digital sovereignty refutes this claim, bringing Indigenous new media art to the forefront of artistic and cultural production. Digital sovereignty actively claims that Indigenous peoples have the right to create art that encompasses their culture *and* is relevant to the dominant ideology. Raheja explains how the visual, including new media, is a compelling and contemporary site for exploring sovereignty through the creative act of self-representation. She further suggests that this act has the potential to subvert stereotypes and strengthen communities that have suffered from genocide and colonialism.<sup>162</sup> Thus, digital sovereignty strives for truth and reconciliation through a contemporary platform.

Sovereignty, Indigenous law and politics theorist Joanne Barker writes, is a term that prominently emerged following World War II. It has since come to signify Indigenous efforts to reverse the process of colonization. Surrounding a multiplicity of social and legal rights to political, economic, and cultural self-determination,

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<sup>161</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 85.

<sup>162</sup> Raheja, “Reading Nanook’s Smile,” 60.

sovereignty marks how the process of decolonization is articulated.<sup>163</sup> Raheja emphasizes, “Sovereignty indicates a powerful way to mobilize social and political action through situation, sometimes temporary, solidarity with the understanding that this solidarity is predicated on consensus that recognizes individual dissent.”<sup>164</sup> Barker agrees that sovereignty encompasses activists who articulate a need for social change, and artists who represented their histories, cultures, and identities in opposition to colonial forces of race, culture, and nationalism. Further, sovereignty entitles Indigenous peoples to the rights of self-determination, territorial integrity, and cultural independence.<sup>165</sup> Sovereignty is thus an important part of human rights. Unfortunately, despite the universal understanding of Canada as a sovereign nation for all, Indigenous peoples continue to be restricted in ways that can only begin to be described within this paper. The focus of self-determination and sovereignty within the scope of this paper addresses the issues that surround Indigenous representation. Self-representation is one way to correct stereotypical representation of Indigenous peoples while simultaneously allowing them to govern their own identity.

As previously argued, one way that Indigenous groups can rearticulate their rights is by challenging the stereotypical representations presented by the dominant culture through new media art. Poitras Pratt acknowledges that new media is a powerful communication medium that allows Indigenous peoples to effectively counteract cultural misrepresentations that have oppressed and disempowered

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<sup>163</sup> Joanne Barker, “For Whom Sovereignty Matters,” in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln & London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>164</sup> Raheja, “Reading Nanook’s Smile,” 64.

<sup>165</sup> Joanne Barker, “For Whom Sovereignty Matters,” 18.

them.<sup>166</sup> These stereotypes include aspects of Indigenous identity: how Indigenous peoples dress, behave, and what they believe. It also includes how Indigenous peoples are represented as “savage,” and “static.” These stereotypes have resulted in a certain perception of Indigenous peoples by the dominant culture, but fail to consider the social and political underpinnings of what can be classified as a cultural genocide. This event is generally overlooked in Canada because the dominant culture has dehumanized Indigenous peoples. Characteristics projected onto Indigenous cultures are almost always negative and the dominant culture internalizes them because of a lack of knowledge. This results in the disregard of human rights and a denial of sovereignty on Indigenous land. Mockery, oppression, forced assimilation, and stealing of land are legitimized in the Canadian subconscious when dealing with Indigenous populations. This is because the dominant culture is generally only exposed to colonial perspectives, dismissing Indigenous cultural knowledge as irrelevant, when in fact it is an important facet of understanding Indigenous peoples. Projects defined and created by Indigenous peoples such as AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, and Skins emphasize the importance of bringing Indigenous narratives forward.

New media functions as a way for anyone with access to a computable platform to engage in an interconnected discussion. Galloway writes:

It is part of larger shift in social life, characterized by a movement away from central bureaucracies and central hierarchies toward a broadband network of autonomous social actions...Computers have a knack for accentuating social injustice, for widening the gap between the rich and the poor (as the economists have well documented). Thus the claims I make here about the relationship between video games and the contemporary political situation refer specifically to the social imaginary of the wired world and how the various structures of

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<sup>166</sup> Poitras Pratt, “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” 18.

organization and regulation within it are repurposed into the formal grammar of the medium.<sup>167</sup>

For Indigenous new media artists, technology defies colonial modes of representation and allows for what Indigenous artist Lorretta Todd refers to as ‘reimagining indigenous airspace’ or as artist and scholar Armin Medosch states ‘working with technology is not an end to itself but a way of asserting and exercising basic freedoms.’<sup>168</sup> Engaging in Internet use may not appear to be a political statement, but in a way, it emphasizes the similarities Indigenous peoples share with the rest of Canada.<sup>169</sup> To suggest otherwise, is to continue the process of dehumanization that has been imposed upon Indigenous peoples throughout history.

Loft writes, “Cyberspace has been occupied, transformed, appropriated, and reinvented by Native people in ways similar to how we have approached real space. Like video, digital technologies have always become a medium for speaking and telling our stories.”<sup>170</sup> It is this relationship between real space and virtual space that Indigenous peoples have established that in turn validates it. Galloway states, “Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as

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<sup>167</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 88.

<sup>168</sup> Loft, “Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum,” 94.

<sup>169</sup> According to the Canadian Internet Registration Authority, as of 2014, 87% of Canadian households are online: <http://www.cira.ca/factbook/2014/the-canadian-internet.html>. Further, the Government of Canada has announced plans for Canada’s Digital Future guided by five principles: Connecting Canadians, Protecting Canadians, Economic Opportunities, Digital Government, and Canadian Content. Digital Canada 150 hopes that by 2017 over 98% of Canadians will have online access. For more information, please see the Digital Canada 150 strategy here: [https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/028.nsf/vwapj/DC150-EN.pdf/\\$FILE/DC150-EN.pdf](https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/028.nsf/vwapj/DC150-EN.pdf/$FILE/DC150-EN.pdf). When analyzing this information it is important to consider that both sources are from a cultural position of power. This current initiative, has the potential to include Indigenous peoples further in the Canadian online discourse.

<sup>170</sup> Loft, “Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum,” 95.

a static computer...Video games are actions.”<sup>171</sup> The same is true for all new media, without a connection to the “real world” all new media would essentially be rendered useless. People are required in order for new media to operate, exist, improve and generate meaning. New media is both the medium, the method, and in the case of TimeTraveller™, the message. Fragnito states, “TimeTraveller™, wanted to use a medium that was futuristic to show people in the future. I wanted the medium to be part of the message. I call it futuristic because I think we’re going to talk that way [using technologies] more and more.”<sup>172</sup> In many cases of Indigenous new media art, the message is clear; the development of an artistic discipline based on electronic technologies allows for articulation of creative and cultural space that forgoes the territorialized domains of cultural and artistic cannons.<sup>173</sup> This projection of Indigenous peoples in the future opposes the colonial narrative of a ‘dying race’ that institutions have emphasized throughout history.<sup>174</sup>

Indigenous peoples are continually adapting to changes in contemporary society and AbTeC is just one example of that. Lewis explains, “You [the dominant culture] can’t use incompetence as a way to disclude us.”<sup>175</sup> While many Indigenous peoples choose to solely transmit their stories, traditions, and values traditionally, Indigenous new media artists are opening up a dialogue to discuss how contemporary

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<sup>171</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 2.

<sup>172</sup> Skawennati Fragnito, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 13, 2013.

<sup>173</sup> Loft, “Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum,” 95.

<sup>174</sup> For more information on the institution portrayals of Indigenous peoples, please see Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011).

<sup>175</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16, 2013.

methods can not only coexist, but also complement traditional knowledge rather than work against it. Raheja further supports this stating:

The virtual reservation does not stand in opposition to or as substitute for the material world, but creates a dialogue with it. It helps us see things in the material world in a different dimensionality, this enhances our understanding of online and virtual as well as off-line and off-screen communities.<sup>176</sup>

AbTec, TimeTraveller™, and Skins support an offline sense of culture, identity, and aim for change just as they would not be possible without their offline counterparts. The relationship that exists between the online and offline world offers the potential for a greater connectedness that can assist in mobilizing Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across the globe.

Cynthia J. Alexander, scholar of Indigenous identity politics, social justice and specialist in virtual learning environments and gaming technology, believes that Indigenous peoples can utilize new media as a form of empowerment. Given that the new multi-sensory media requires high-end technology, Indigenous peoples have the opportunity to surpass earlier technological systems. This would allow them to not only have to have access to technological systems and be trained as users, but also become designers of those systems.<sup>177</sup> AbTeC emphasizes that Indigenous peoples need to become active agents in creating space for themselves online and in digital communities. Thus, the creation of Skins, an Indigenous workshop for youth to develop skills in the realm of video game design, was a direct response to increasing youth engagement in the field of new media. Maskegon-Iskwew writes, “An essential component of Indigenous digital arts development is a commitment to the progress of

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<sup>176</sup> Raheja, *Reservation Realism*, 145 – 189.

<sup>177</sup> Cynthia J. Alexander, “Wiring the Nation! Including First Nations? Aboriginal Canadians and Federal E-Government Initiatives,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 35 (2001): 277–296.



Indigenous youth in digital art practice as emerging artists and for the education value of their participation in arts and cultural production... Indigenous youth must be supported in becoming artists and cultural producers ...”<sup>178</sup> Assisting Indigenous youth to acquire the skills required to become producers rather than just consumers, will assist in changing new media production for future generations.

Living in an increasingly digital world, Indigenous peoples (and all people) must continue to adapt to the changes in technology. Communication technology such as new media has the potential to subvert dominant ideologies and start revolutions.<sup>179</sup> Since the government does not closely regulate the Internet,<sup>180</sup> digital sovereignty is a possibility that is close at hand. Loft suggests, “For some this is the first time since contact and submergence within dominant, preexisting European cultural practices that their voices and images are being heard, seen, respected, and celebrated outside of their own communities.”<sup>181</sup> Digital Sovereignty emphasizes the development of technological skills associated with new media and new media art. This skill set empowers Indigenous peoples and encourages them to actively engage in the production of new media. Lewis explains,

The main thing...is reversing the colonial trajectory of people coming here and bringing all sorts of technologies including representational technologies. AbTeC is getting our hands on means of representation and using them internally and externally, in the sense of creating our own representations in use

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<sup>178</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” 193.

<sup>179</sup> Idle No More, consists of a movement that has relied heavily on social media to disseminate information and gain support.

<sup>180</sup> According to Harald E.L. Prins, “Digital Revolution: Indigenous Peoples in Cyberia” in *William H. Haviland, Cultural Anthropology Wadsworth, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.* (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 2000), 306; the internet allows instant gathering and sharing of information with a potentially global reach that remains outside of the filtering mechanisms of mainstream mean. As a result, it remains difficult for governments, corporate print and broadcast media to be gatekeepers of information.

<sup>181</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” 192.

of the greater culture. It is very much a decolonization strategy.<sup>182</sup>

There are some potential benefits of new media that may include dissemination of information, working to change stereotypical colonial views, signing petitions, interacting with communities, developing skills (design, typing, coding, etc.), networking, increasing job opportunities, participating in workshops, and bringing new media onto other platforms such as gallery spaces. Poitras Pratt suggests that new media networks meet community needs such as political participation, improved means of communication, cultural revitalization and reclaiming of control and power on both a local and global scale.<sup>183</sup>

Maskegon-Iskwew writes, “Networked art practice is becoming a crucial framework for the emerging recognition and empowerment of Indigenous cultures around the globe.”<sup>184</sup> It is this act of empowerment, achieved through articulate resistance that can establish digital sovereignty. Digital Sovereignty would generate knowledge sharing, emphasize Indigenous past, present, and future objectives, and achieve results that would have effects in the real world. Digital sovereignty would further require Indigenous peoples controlling their own representations in all new media forms. In order to include representations of Indigenous peoples in and outside of their cultural context, approval would have to be requested from the specific clan. Another aspect of digital sovereignty is to identify individuals online who are posing as Indigenous peoples and remove them online.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16, 2013.

<sup>183</sup> Poitras Pratt, “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” 12.

<sup>184</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” 192.

<sup>185</sup> Poitras Pratt identifies an example of how a group of concerned Indigenous peoples were able to remove an individual posing online as a Native person. This individual, ‘Blue Snake’,

By this definition digital sovereignty is an achievable goal. One could argue that this is something AbTeC has already achieved by the creation of AbTeC Island in Second Life, illustrating Indigenous perspectives of past events and goals for the future through TimeTraveller™, integrating youth into new media production, disseminating these projects on a large scale (TimeTraveller™ in galleries and Skins by travelling to different communities), situating AbTeC lab within a university, and its creation by two leading artists in the field of Indigenous new media. However, in order for digital sovereignty to have any relevance, it needs to happen on an increasingly larger scale. According to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, there is a dearth of Indigenous content online. They estimate that more than half of the Indigenous communities in Canada do not have a community home page. As a result, Indigenous peoples are losing a valuable opportunity to represent their culture online. Indigenous youth, however, are engaging in new media technologies and thus are looking to contemporary platforms to express their culture.<sup>186</sup>

Focusing on youth will assist the new generation of Indigenous peoples in learning how to utilize new media as a resource for empowerment. Maskegon-Iskwew suggests there is a growing body of research that indicates arts education for youth will contribute to the development of innovation, leadership, community engagement, critical thinking, self-discipline, self-motivation, learning, team work and self-esteem.<sup>187</sup> Further, these skills are essential for developing a future vision

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was appropriating an Indigenous voice to dispense misleading advice on Indigenous cultures. See page 8 of “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” for more information.

<sup>186</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” 203.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 193.

and to encourage Indigenous youth to become leaders in their communities.<sup>188</sup> Poitras Pratt emphasizes that technology is allowing Indigenous peoples to regain control over their history and future for the first time.<sup>189</sup> This claim is a big one considering Indigenous peoples have been resisting colonization since its inception. New Media provides a unique opportunity for self-representation on an accessible platform that connects people and communities across the world.

Digital sovereignty is an attainable goal if Indigenous peoples work together to collectively decolonize the digital nation. New media, and new media art, create a network that allows for communication to mobilize local and global resources and move people into a decolonial state. Advancements in technology within the last twenty years allow for a greater number of Indigenous communities to connect as active agents who oppose colonial modes of oppression. Projects such as AbTec, TimeTraveller™, and Skins, are three exceptional examples of how Indigenous peoples are utilizing new media as a platform for self-representation and socio-political activism. These projects reject stereotypical representations imposed on Indigenous peoples and aim to correct them in the future. By encouraging youth to access new media technologies, the next generation of Indigenous leaders will have the skills required to empower a digital nation.

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<sup>188</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” 193.

<sup>189</sup> Poitras Pratt, “Merging New Media with Old Traditions,” 18.

## **Conclusion**

Through the act of self-representation Indigenous artists are transforming digital space into a place for cultural development and survival. This transformative act is legitimizing Indigenous cultures both on and offline. Indigenous communities are able to express their identity online without restrictions. This concept of identity is established upon a collective cultural memory that Indigenous peoples build the foundation of their futures upon. The act of speaking out against the dominant cultural ideologies projected upon Indigenous peoples to correct misrepresentations is referred to as articulate resistance. Through the process of articulate resistance, Indigenous peoples regain agency in determining who they are as people by insistence upon equal rights. Thus, new media technologies act as an agent for social and political change. As a result, there is potential for Indigenous peoples to enter into a sovereign state online, as well as in society. In order for this to be effective, it must occur on a much larger scale. New media offers greater potential for a global network that can mobilize resources to come together through a process of decolonization.

AbTeC is one example of a successful new media project that emphasizes self-representation and empowerment through the digital world. Projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins seek to subvert the dominant ideology by re-righting and re-writing historical definitions of Indigenous peoples and projecting them into a different kind of future. The involvement of youth is a key component in the success of the projects; Indigenous youth are being encouraged to utilize new media technologies as a form of empowerment. As the world moves increasingly towards

the digital, Indigenous peoples need to be equipped with the skills and resources required for them to thrive in a technological age.

While there are many potential benefits for Indigenous peoples utilizing new media including networked connectivity, skill development, and self-representation, there are also some potential drawbacks that should be acknowledged. The largest two are accessibility and what it means to utilize new media. New media requires a computable platform in order for the user to interact, participate, or create. Thus, it is important to recognize that there can be limitations to accessibility, particularly for more remote communities. In *New Media Nation: Indigenous Peoples and Global Communication*, scholar, journalist, poet, and photographer Valerie Alia argues that radio continues to remain the most prominent form of communication technology for Inuit communities in the North.<sup>190</sup> However, accessibility to a computable platform is not as limited as purported. When Fragnito was asked about accessibility as a form of restriction, she explained that there are restrictions in the form of accessibility for all mediums of art. When considering more traditional medias such as radio, photography, and film, participation often requires equipment, physical space, and funding.<sup>191</sup> New Media allows for a more engaging platform that foregoes issues of physicality and monetary requirements.

The second issue is what it means to use new media. In “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyber Space,” Todd cautions that cyberspace can pose implicit challenges for non-western cultures because its goal is to continue a technological

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<sup>190</sup> Valerie Alia, *The New Media Nation: Indigenous Peoples and Global Communication* (Berghahn Books, New York: 2010).

<sup>191</sup> Skawennati Fragnito, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 13, 2013.

aim of expansion, control, and domination. Thus, she encourages Indigenous peoples to make cyberspace their own through a process of transformation that emphasizes Indigenous epistemology.<sup>192</sup> It could be argued that Indigenous peoples utilizing new media are conforming to the dominant ideology. In other words, Indigenous peoples who use new media have been more effectively assimilated than those who do not. This would suggest that Indigenous new media artists have fallen into the “trap” of colonial ideologies and are conforming to the exact thing they are fighting against. Lewis acknowledges that while new media, and by extension new media art, does function on a platform created by the colonizers, there is no benefit to sealing Indigenous communities off from the dominant culture. Rather, he suggests that Indigenous communities can continue to be strong and self-determined while engaging in elements of the dominant culture.<sup>193</sup> Thus AbTeC is taking online space and making it a place for Indigenous peoples to create, share, and disseminate information.

These potential drawbacks are far outweighed by the positive outcomes that have resulted from Indigenous new media art. Representations of Indigenous peoples are being corrected on a large scale: TimeTraveller™ has been screened at film festivals, in gallery spaces, and online (YouTube, Second Life, AbTeC, ObxLabs). This not only provides an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to represent themselves to the dominant culture but it allows the dominant culture to view a perspective outside of the colonial narrative. This creates potential for education surrounding past

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<sup>192</sup> Loretta Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace,” in *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture* (Banff: The Walter Phillips Gallery Edition, 2005), 153-163.

<sup>193</sup> Jason Lewis, interview with Amanda Roy, Dec 16, 2013.

and present Indigenous issues. Furthermore, Indigenous youth are becoming actively involved in the creation of their representations through the Skins workshop. The Indigenous narratives that underlay each video game (there have been four created over the course of Skins) suggest that Indigenous youth growing up on the reserve have a unique perspective on life that they can share with the world. It also reinforces the fact that Indigenous peoples can become involved in aspects of contemporary society such as new media, while continuing to remain true to their cultures. Workshops such as Skins empower youth to become leaders within their communities, but also on a larger scale.

One of the greatest benefits that new media provides is the potential to reach large audiences. Mobilizing computable resources allows Indigenous peoples to focus on both the local and global efforts of a decolonizing movement. This can be intimidating for the dominant culture because it provides Indigenous peoples across the world an opportunity to network with one another while engaging in the process of articulate resistance. Articulate resistance aims to achieve digital sovereignty – for Indigenous peoples to self-represent across the virtual world without restrictions. This process can be accomplished in any number of ways. For AbTec, the process is achieved through combining Indigenous narratives and art on a contemporary platform. Indigenous new media art, as seen through TimeTraveller™ and Skins, functions as an activist project that is an effective route towards decolonization. By presenting these art projects on a contemporary platform, Jason Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito subvert the dominant ideology and engage in the process of self-



representation by re-writing and re-righting Indigenous narratives of the past, present, and future.

Forthcoming, this research could be expanded to address Indigenous new media art on an increasingly larger scale. This would examine Indigenous new media art more generally, to see how other artists are addressing issues of articulate resistance and digital sovereignty. It would also be beneficial to return to AbTeC to see the impact that projects such as TimeTraveller™ and Skins have had on artists, students, and collaborators. If given the opportunity, it would be valuable to interview more artists, such as Steve Loft, to gain greater understanding of the growing artistic field of Indigenous new media.

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