

## **Where We're Going, We Don't Need Colonizers: The Rejection of Manifest Destiny and Construction of an Alternate World Using Indigenous Futurisms in Popular Media**

Courtney-Sophia W. Henry  
Wayne State University

Indigenous Futurisms is a term first used by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon in the early 2000s to describe a new way of imagining the worlds of science fiction. Science fiction has long been criticized for its lack of racial diversity and inclusion (Barrett, 2018). How can a genre that imagines a future of infinite possibilities be seemingly unable to imagine a future where people of colour exist – or at least have any relevance? Dillon developed the term to empower and encourage Native, First Nations, and other Indigenous authors and creators to speak back to the colonial tropes prevalent in the genre. Exploring the various ways in which Indigenous peoples are using their own technological traditions – their worldviews, their languages, their stories, and their kinship – serves as the guiding principles in imagining possible futures for Indigenous communities and their members. This is being done across a variety of mediums, including but not limited to video games and digital media, literary works, comics, and the visual arts. Much of the existing works within science fiction idolizes rugged individualism, the conquest of foreign worlds, and the taming of the final frontier. Indigenous Futurism calls us to reject these colonial ideas and instead re-imagine space, both outer and inner, from another perspective, one that makes room for stories that celebrate relationship and connection to community, coexistence, and sharing of land and technology, the honoring of caretakers and protectors (Keene, 2018).

Indigenous Futurism also advocates for the sovereign. Indigenous creators are tasked to define themselves and their world not just as speaking back to colonialism, but also as existing in their own right. Not to say that the past is ignored, but rather that it is folded into the present, which is folded into the future – a philosophical wormhole that renders the very definitions of time and space fluid in the imagination (Keene, 2018). Examples of artists working within the field of Indigenous futurism include Skawennati, a Mohawk multi-media artist best known for her project TimeTraveller™, a nine-episode machinima series that uses science fiction to examine First nations histories; Wendy Red Star, a Native American contemporary multimedia artist; and Elizabeth LaPensée, a game designer and professor of Native American Studies at Michigan State University.

This decade has seen how effective the Internet can be with effecting change in the real-world. In 2013, three female Black organizers – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called Black Lives Matter. According to the Black Lives Matter website they were "founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer." Black Lives Matter began with a social media hashtag and the movement grew nationally in 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. Most recently, Black Lives Matter has spearheaded demonstrations worldwide protesting police brutality and systematic racism that overwhelmingly affects the Black community. Additionally, the Me Too campaign gained widespread attention beginning in 2017. At that time it was revealed that film mogul Harvey Weinstein had for years

sexually harassed and assaulted women in the industry. Victims of sexual harassment or assault around the world – and of all races and ethnicities – began to come forward. On a smaller scale, the move to dismantle the colonial mindset using the tools of Indigenous Futurisms has also been aided by online discourse. In a post on the micro-blogging social media platform Twitter, Damien Lee (username @damienlee), an Assistant Professor in the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, proposed a simple linguistic shift in how we talk about the future, opting to move away from saying Canada or even “...in what is now Canada,” to, “...in what is currently Canada,” in order to “open possibilities for imagining futurities beyond the settler state.” This is an interesting proposal which has been adopted by many working within Indigenous Futurisms, myself included, however it remains to be seen if this will become wide-spread across disciplines.

The long-term exclusion of people of colour from science fiction offers up an interesting paradox, thus I believe is also important to consider Afrofuturism in conjunction with Indigenous Futurisms. Afrofuturism is an umbrella term for the Black presence in sci-fi, technology, magic, and fantasy, coined in 1994 by a culture critic named Mark Dery, although the idea has existed for much longer. Indigenous Futurisms as a framework was developed out of Afrofuturism; they are directly related and kin. Indigenous Futurisms is modeled after the concepts of Afrofuturism and works well because Indigenous peoples are subjected to processes of racialization like Black peoples and other peoples of color. The term Afrofuturism has become a cultural catchphrase of sorts, used to describe the world of tomorrow, today, in music, art, theater, politics and academics. The Afrofuturist Project is a grassroots community formed to celebrate, strengthen, and promote Afrofuturistic and sci-fi concepts and culture through creative events and creative writing. They describe Afrofuturism as: “Whether you call it mythology, ghost stories, cosmology, parable, folktale, sci-fi, religious tale, or fantasy, people of color have always contemplated their origins in the same breath that they anticipated the fate of humankind” (Guzmán, 2015.)

While much of Afrofuturism might sound highbrow, writer/musician Greg Tate, who currently teaches an Afrofuturism class at Brown University, is quick to point out that the discipline is just not regulated to the ivory towers and art-houses. “There is also a street element to Afrofuturism that should not be forgotten,” Tate states. “From RZA to Kool Keith to Grandmaster Flash shopping at Radio Shack, to drug dealers in the ’80s walking around with beepers, all of that is also a segment of Afrofuturism” (Gonzales, 2013).

Afrofuturism has recently soared to commercial success with the release and critical acclaim of Marvel Studio’s film *Black Panther*. It features an Afrofuturistic superhero in a world where Black people have the most advanced technology on Earth. The blockbuster movie broke several records, including highest-grossing film of 2018, third highest-grossing film in the United States, and 10th-highest-grossing film of all time. It is currently also the most Tweeted about movie of all time, according to Twitter movies.

Both Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurisms have the potential to be used as a tool of empowerment by their respective cultures (or indeed, in tandem) and push past limitations imposed by colonial powers. Herein lies the power (and importance) of reframing the narrative, and of the Indigenous Futurisms and Afrofuturism movements. Both signal twentieth century technoculture at the same time that it gestures toward a dark colonial past, constantly bubbling up in the present in nefarious modes of racism, as well as the imagination of possible futures (Guzmán, 2015). Janelle Monáe, who is regarded by many as the queen of contemporary Afrofuturism, cites the movement as the inspiration for her new narrative film, *Dirty Computer*:

*Emotion Picture*, a visual accompaniment to her latest album (which trended on YouTube). The 44-minute film, starring and produced by Monâe, tells the story of Jane 57821, a woman who's on the run from a totalitarian government that seeks to scrape her memories (Barrett, 2018). The film features minoritized groups who are under threat—including people of colour and LGBTQ individuals.

In an interview with BBC Radio 1, Monâe said, "Telling these stories through the lens of a young Black woman and speaking of a future where we're included, we're not the minority, but we're the heroines, we're the leaders, we're the heroes... I felt like I had a responsibility to [do] that."

The importance of these movements comes not just from the ability to connect people of Indigenous and African descent to their origins, but also to each other (Barrett, 2018). It may not be possible to rectify an entire history of exclusion, but the impact of these movements, born from attempts to answer important questions, is something that cannot be ignored. Anishinaabe scholar, artist, and game designer Elizabeth LaPensée asserts that the most important aspect and misunderstood parts of Indigenous Futurisms is that, "it's about past/present/future – the hyperpresent now. That we look seven generations before, and seven generations ahead." While Western science fiction tends to think solely of the future, Indigenous Futurisms, "reflects all space timelines and sees how they are all connected" (Keene, 2018). Historically, Indigenous peoples in pop culture, including but not limited to films, comics, and video games, have been reduced to a hodge-podge of stereotypes, rolled together into a basic, violent, "savage" character. When pretending to be Native American, performers often speak in "Hollywood Injun English," a simplified and corrupted form of English that perpetuates a sense of otherness. Grammatically, it draws on a range of nonstandard features similar to those found in "foreigner talk" and "baby talk," as well as a formalized, ornate variety of English; all these features are used to project or evoke certain characteristics historically associated with "the White Man's Indian." Such representations of Native American speech are based on authors' imagined realities, reflective of ideological assumptions, and not on everyday interaction (Meek, 2006).

Often, Indigenous beings are portrayed as villains, but sometimes, they are the victims. Perhaps the most famous example of this in a video game format is in *Custer's Revenge*, a 1982 game produced for the Atari 2600, where players play the role of U.S. cavalry leader Gen. George Custer, avoiding arrows in pursuit of a Native maiden. Custer wins by raping her, on screen. This is a brutal example, of course, but conquering Indigenous peoples and nations is also found in games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Civilization* (Sinclair, 2018). These two games give players the option to make Indigenous peoples the conquerors, too, which, while egalitarian in its way, is not necessarily better and still reduces Indigenous people to one-dimensional stereotypes and relics from the past.

Not all Indigenous representations in video games are created equal. Naithan Lagace, a Métis master's student who hails from The Pas, created Indigitalgames, a blogging archiving website that looks at the multitude of different forms of Indigenous representations within video games and examines the impact that they may have within Indigenous communities. "Not all representations wear headdresses and throw tomahawks," says Lagace. "Some of them – especially those invented by Indigenous creators – help build identity and relationships." Video games, Lagace says, reflect government and society's practices and policies about land, identity, and history.

The Indigitalgames website highlights the problematic and repetitive ways Indigenous peoples are represented – but one thing Lagace has noticed is increased complexity in the gaming industry. Games such as *Assassin's Creed III* repeat stereotypes but incorporate Indigenous languages and ceremonies that gamers can interact with positively. Others, such as *Until Dawn*, use political struggles Indigenous peoples are involved in (such as the environment) as storylines (Sinclair, 2018).

"Indigenous-made games with Indigenous themes are not yet widely mass-market products," says LaPensée, "but they are gaining attention – and players – as access to technology, including mobile devices, expands."

According to Indigenous epistemologies, technology is similar to a shapeshifter, as Stephen Loft writes: the "shapeshifter (not unlike the Trickster himself) [is] neither inherently benign nor malevolent, but always acting and active, changing transformative, giving effect to and affecting the world." This is important given how technology is often viewed in binaries (Guzmán, 2015). In pop culture representations, technology is often depicted as the harbinger of a dystopian future, while also heralding visionary prospects for better living. The creators of Indigenous Futurisms embrace technology in all its instantiations, from the galactic machinations presented in the compilation to game design, Indigenous speculative fiction writing, artistic production, and the potential for space travel, whether imaginative or cosmological. Significantly, the understanding that technology is essential to contemporary Indigenous constructions of selfhood contrasts longstanding notions of Native peoples as artifacts of a bygone past (Guzmán, 2015).

While inaccuracies and misrepresentations continue to be the norm, Indigenous peoples are growing increasingly involved in the gaming industry, whether it be working on games or inventing them (Sinclair, 2016). By focusing on the specificity of Indigenous cultures and communities and using input from the cultures from which they sample, games such as *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* by Upper One Games demystify Indigenous cultures, refuse stereotypes, and forge healthy relationships while also creating interesting, complex environments that are entertaining and exciting for players to interact with. In the game, which was created with more than 40 Iñupiat elders and storytellers in Alaska, players take on the role of a young Iñupiat girl and an arctic fox trying to solve the problem of an eternal blizzard (Sinclair, 2016).

"Done right," says game theorist LaPensée, "video games have the potential to be self-determining spaces, where Indigenous peoples can express themselves on their own terms" (Sinclair, 2016).

An award-winning video game designer, LaPensée creates games that help players understand Indigenous identities, learn cultural and political expressions, and gain Indigenous perspectives of history. For example, in her app *Honour Water*, released in 2016, players acquire the roots of traditional songs, and in her 2017 computer game *Thunderbird Strike*, gamers experience how to resist pipelines and revitalize a devastated landscape. Both of these issues are extremely relevant to the contemporary North American Indigenous experience, where issues like the developments of the Keystone Access Pipeline and Dakota Access Pipeline continue to threaten tribal water safety and land rights. Tribes and environmental organizations oppose both projects, citing concerns that oil spills would contaminate surrounding waters. Protests against the Dakota Access pipeline drew international attention as thousands of demonstrators established semi-permanent camps starting in the summer of 2016 near where the pipeline would cross under the Missouri River just upstream from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation

(McKenna, 2016). Protesters have been shot with rubber bullets, tasered, and blasted with water cannons in freezing temperatures. They have been threatened, surveilled, and arrested, all while trying to protect the land they have lived on for centuries. In spite of this aggression, the water protectors maintained a peaceful presence throughout the struggle to stop the pipeline, which would snake through Native American lands and disturb sacred Sioux Nation burial sites.

More than six years after the dramatic protests near the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation began, activism against oil pipelines is as politically contentious as ever. In her game *Thunderbird Strike*, LaPensée transforms players into a thunderbird flying across Canada and through the Great Lakes. In dozens of Indigenous traditions throughout North America, thunderbirds are considered sacred beings that can bring renewal or destruction; in the game, players restore fallen caribou and buffalo to life and strike construction and oil equipment with divine lightning (Starkey, 2017). The goal of the game was "to examine the modern through the lens of our stories," LaPensée said.

For her efforts, LaPensée was lambasted by Republican Minnesota State Senator and gubernatorial candidate David Osmek, who described it as "an eco-terrorist version of *Angry Birds*" (Sen. David Osmek, 2017). Toby Mack, the president of the energy and oil-lobbying group Energy Builder, went further, calling it a "taxpayer-funded political campaign... designed to encourage eco-terrorism or other bad behavior." LaPensée received a \$3,290 state arts grant through Minnesota's Legacy fund, which was created to "protect, enhance, and restore lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater" and "preserve arts and cultural heritage." Minnesota State Representative Bob Gunther was also perturbed by the game, which won the award for Best Digital Work at the ImagineNATIVE Festival, calling her grant "an abuse" of the program. He plans to introduce legislation to increase oversight of how grants are distributed in the future (Starkey, 2017).

Clearly, the game struck a nerve, and sparked a continuing conversation regarding Indigenous land rights and water protection. LaPensée, who received death threats after the eco-terrorism claims, says the lawmakers are completely off-base. *Thunderbird Strike*, which is available to play on Windows, iOS and Android, addresses the destruction that oil pipelines cause the environment and the threat they represent to drinkable water reserves, which is an issue crucial to hundreds of Minnesota communities. The company behind Enbridge GXL Pipe System, a network of oil pipelines that runs from Canada to the Atlantic Ocean, has proposed a new \$2 billion line through the Minnesota region. The move sparked outcry from Native tribes, environmental activists, and citizen groups, who are concerned about the Pipe System's long history of leaks throughout Canada and America and its proposed path through Native lands and ecologically significant areas. Line 5 of the system, which runs through parts of Michigan and is a focus of *Thunderbird Strike*, has already leaked more than 30 times (Starkey, 2017).

Games like *Thunderbird Strike* use a popular form of media to give a voice to marginalized communities and imagine a different world in which Indigenous traditions are honored rather than subverted. That, LaPensée says, is the crux of why *Thunderbird Strike* is important and why it deserved the grant's funding: "There are many different stories and traditions surrounding the thunderbird, but my community taught that it was the protector of the land, and that it would come to defeat a great snake that swallows the land and the waters. If you just look at the Enbridge network, its jaws stretch around the Great Lakes, as if consuming sacred waters" (Starkey, 2017). According to LaPensée, the game *Thunderbird Strike*, which also features art by Indigenous creators, is part of a long history of Native artists who have used their work to explore the effects of colonization on their way of life: "This isn't just my story. This is

generational and about honoring those who came before." Despite the attempts to portray the game and its criticism of the pipeline as "terrorism," LaPensée says it represents something even more crucial in face of the dangers posed by the pipeline: "This is an outpouring of our cultural values" (Starkey, 2017).

Being able to face issues of stereotyping and racism head-on, whether in music, movies, video games, or other forms of media, is important for minoritized youth. Representation matters, and as the commercial success of *Black Panther* revealed, there is a desire for stories like these to be told more broadly (Barrett, 2018). The release of shows like *Lovecraft Country*, and, although not of the science fiction genre, the success of the film *The Fast Runner* also suggests there is interest in these kinds of stories. The racism of H.P. Lovecraft, an influential writer of pulp fiction and weird tales, is well-known; indeed, it's a point the characters in *Lovecraft Country* explicitly discuss; the mere fact that the series' heroes are all Black is in itself a riposte to the early 20th century author, spitting in his otherwise admired eye (Lloyd, 2020). Indigenous authors and creators continue to speak back to the colonialism tropes so prevalent in science fiction by reimagining space exploration from a non-colonial perspective and reclaiming their place in an imagined future in space, on earth, and everywhere in between. However, Indigenous Futurisms does so much more than reply to colonization. It challenges, upends, and eliminates colonial tropes and constructs and enforces Indigenous perspectives – it's about doing something for, by, and centered on Indigenous peoples. Indigenous Futurisms recognize space-time as simultaneously past, present, and future, and therefore is as much about the future as it is about the present. It means telling alternate histories, dreaming about liquid technology, imagining a future where unceded territories are taken back, and beyond (Roanhorse et al., 2017). Unlike mainstream science fiction where futurism is typically violent and values the advancement of technology over both nature and human beings, Indigenous sci-fi is the polar opposite. The goal of Indigenous Futurisms is to imagine worlds where the advancement of technology does not disrupt or destroy ecosystems or the balance of power between humans and nature. Alternate realities are a huge part of Indigenous sci-fi because even if they are not writers or artists, most Indigenous people have imagined how differently the world would be without certain events like colonization (Roanhorse et al., 2017).

Whether transported through the pages of a comic book, the glowing glass of an iPad gaming app, or the silver screen while staring at *Logan's Run*, ideas of the future continue to enthrall and captivate youth and adults alike (Gonzales, 2013). Science fiction becomes not only a way to escape the drabness of the present but also a critical creative space to challenge potential outcomes of important issues in the present. The emergence of this imaginary has always been intertextual, a crosscut of science fiction writing, graffiti, performance, television, and music (Guzmán, 2015). As the Indigenous Futurisms movement continues to flourish, the future is now.

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