# How Indigenous Designers are Changing the Landscape of Video Games

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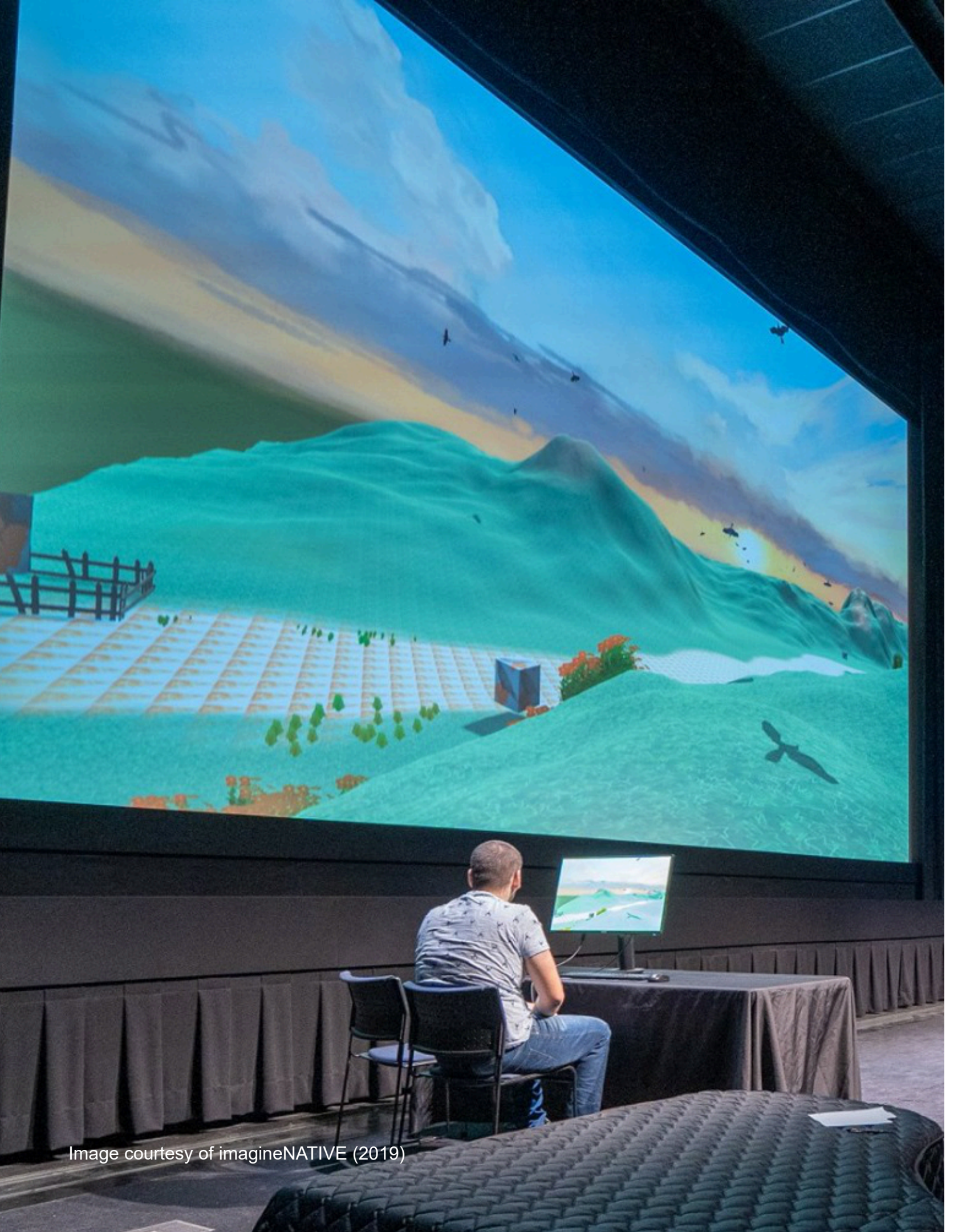
**When I entered my PhD program in Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis in the Fall of 2015, I knew I wanted to write about video games. More specifically, I wanted to write about Natives in video games.** I was simultaneously puzzled and infuriated by the fact that, in an industry that seemed to be making greater strides towards representational inclusivity of marginalized groups and making games that were not strictly about how many bad guys you could kill, the representation of Natives in games still seemed to be woefully behind the curve. There were games like the Bioware's *Mass Effec*t trilogy that had non-gendered psychic aliens that queered reproduction and living in the diaspora. There were games like Giant Sparrow's *The Unfinished Swan* where players took on the role of a young boy grieving his Mother's death by imagining himself into her paintings and remaking his world and sense of self by painting a story into the world around him. Yet, the new *Mortal Kombat X* game was about to come out and, although they had killed off Nightwolf in the previous installment of the series, the stereotyping and overt racism was back in the form of Kotal Kahn. Why, in a game where men with four arms, necromancers, and people with all kinds of cybernetic enhancements exist, did the only two Native characters still exclusively wear feathers and animal skin and either perform as the noble savage, communing with the spirits and sacrificing themselves for the "greater good" or, the bloodthirsty warrior, sacrificing humans to an unmerciful deity? It was then that I decided not only would I investigate why these stereotypes were so deeply rooted within the video game industry, but how we, as Native creators, could seek to make change by Indigenizing games.

When I began my research, I quickly realized that I could not speak about the decolonization of the video game industry and the power of Indigenous made games with any level of authority if I myself was not actively involved in a creative practice. Yes, I had been a lifelong video game enthusiast, but if I wasn't getting my hands dirty, putting in the work, learning the ins and outs of design, what business did I have discussing why and how Indigenous creators could change game design? So, I started small. With the help of a one-day modding workshop, I began to undertake simple projects, like ROM hacking the original *Super Mario Bros*. game for the Nintendo Entertainment System to see if I could Indigenize the imagery of an extent game. I successfully swapped out the English for Abenaki, my heritage language, and changed a lot of the pixel art to reflect animals, plants, and people significant to our culture. While this straightforward, representational mode of Indigenizing the game was an important step in the right direction, for me, the most significant change to the game lay underneath the surface. As I had changed the character of Mario to the Abenaki figure of Gluskabe, I wanted to change the Goombas to something more meaningful as well, so I altered their art to that of wolf prints. I did not want the protagonist of this game to be mindlessly killing minions, but instead, to be tracking. Therefore, I felt that I needed to change the sprite animation for the former Goombas as well. No longer did I want them to be squished beneath the feet of the player character, but rather, to simply cartwheel off of the screen in a cute way. With one simple alteration in code, this game went from the mindless murder of faceless minions, to a peaceful narrative about tracking and making room for those seemingly blocking our path.  This small, yet significant change, became my cornerstone for game design.

*Full of Birds*, Ashlee Bird (2019)



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What had become apparent to me through hacking *Super Mario Bros*. and making this one minor adjustment in code is that representation in games and, more specifically, what makes a game Indigenous, is not always something that is explicitly visible. Ultimately, games operate via two types of language: visual/representational language, and mechanical/coded language. Visual/representational language is precisely what it sounds like: avatar and game space design, imagery, as well as things like the narratives, character descriptions etc. that are presented via text or dialogue and convey a direct message to the player. Mechanical/coded language happens underneath the surface and involves things like level design, control schemes, and ultimately anything that dictates how a player interacts within the digital space. As Anna Anthropy states in her 2012 book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*, games are incredibly limited in not only their representational language, but their mechanical languages as well, "Most games are copies of existing successful games. They play like other games, resemble their contemporaries in shape and structure, have the same buttons that interact with the world in the same way…If there's a vast pool of experiences that contemporary videogames are failing to tap, then there's just as large a pool of aesthetic and design possibilities that are being ignored," (Anthropy, 5). Anthropy calls out for a more diverse array of games, especially from a design perspective, and applying an Indigenous lens to game design is the way in which I want to contribute to this field. While there is certainly a necessity within game design for Indigenous creators to develop overt, positive, visual representation, there is also great power and possibility in game design that alters not just what we see, but how we play. These types of design choices that happen below the surface and curate the experience of play are, I believe, some of the most influential types of gamic language and allow us, as Indigenous creators, to generate Indigenized worlds and epistemologies within our digital spaces of play. Therefore, I have made it my mission to incorporate these Indigenized modes of play into my own game design.

The ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Festival, specifically the iNDigital Space, has provided a platform for myself and many other Indigenous creatives to share our Indigenous games with the world. The first game that I presented at the 2018 iNDigital space at the ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Festival embodied Indigeneity through gameplay that specifically critiques colonial practices and the concept that "exploration" does not implicitly impact the environments it takes place in. *One Small Step* is a space walking simulator that is more focused on the mechanical language of games, and how these can subvert the visual language that is being presented to the player. This game presents itself as a traditional, open-world game, providing the player with an expansive universe to explore, but the mechanics and the code, unbeknownst to the player, suggest otherwise. As the player ventures, they quickly discover that, unlike traditional sand-box, open-world games, there is nothing in this digital world for the player to collect, nothing to fight or kill, and exploration, ultimately, is not free or unaccounted for. As you play, the game begins to close itself off to you, as you have had an impact on the spaces that you have been in. The world becomes smaller and smaller, and soon, is nothing like what you originally encountered. Finally, once you have explored all of the planets, the game completely closes itself off to you, reading "Colonization Complete" before quitting itself. While this game does present an Indigenous worldview and a critique of colonialism, this game has a clear gamic framework that has a specified beginning and end and an overarching narrative that becomes apparent to the player by the game's conclusion. I was ultimately left feeling as though I did not push my design choices far enough, and therefore, reached out to my colleague, Sarah Biscarra Dilley, to collaborate on a project.

This past year, at the 2019 ImagineNATIVE Festival, I exhibited the game *Full of Birds*. This work is an interactive Indigenous art gallery featuring the works of Sarah Biscarra Dilley. This piece seeks

to complicate the traditional understandings of a gallery, as well as provoke thoughtful engagement about the spaces from which Indigenous art stems and the spaces in which it is displayed. This work is a 3-dimensional digital gallery that utilizes the original works of yak tiṯu tiṯu yak tiłhini artist, Sarah Biscarra Dilley. This game encourages the user to explore what it means to be "in" a space, and how we, as Indigenous women artists, choose to maintain and recreate, or bend and reshape, spaces and places through our creation. With this work, we hoped to complicate understandings of both the gallery and games, and ask the player to explore how these spaces do and don't overlap. Additionally, this work dissects the way in which we interact within both of these spaces, and challenges the ways in which they create, commodify, and stagnant Indigenous peoples within space and time. However, as this game was much less structured in its design but was, to me, much more of an Indigenized space, consequently, its presentation at Night of the Indigenous Devs, was equally terrifying and illuminating.

When the lights went down in the TIFF Lightbox on Night of the Indigenous Devs, I was really hoping I was going to go first. I had seen the other creators' games in the iNDigital Space and they were all so polished, so expansive, so impressive. My game, I felt, was much less of a "game" in the traditional sense than theirs and I was deeply worried how it was going to be played on the big screen and received by the audience. I was worried that the Q&A section would be silent because people didn't "get it". However, I was dead last. Meagan Byrne introduced my game, saying she had specifically saved it for last as she thought it was something unique. The panic became tenfold. However, once I sat down on stage and began to speak about our game, it all fell into place. As an audience member played our game on the screen, I spoke about the game, including reading from a statement co-written by myself and my co-creator, Sarah Biscarra Dilley, whose artwork the game is built by and for. As I concluded our statement and opened the room for questions, I was pleasantly surprised to see a number of hands in the audience go up. There were excellent questions about the process of creating the game, working in a team, and what my larger practice looked like, but the most interesting question for me as a creator came from a woman who asked why I felt it was important to present or label my project as a game and what makes it an Indigenous game. Ultimately, my answer once again speaks to the concept of Indigenizing games. The understandings of Indigeneity and what makes a game Indigenous are multi-faceted and nuanced concepts to be sure, and ultimately ones that each Indigenous game designer and player will most likely have their own unique views upon. For me, a concept of Indigeneity, and how I use it within my game design, can be best encapsulated by Maile Arvin's essay "Analytics of Indigeneity" in the collection *Native Studies Keywords*. Arvin states:

> In short, an analytics of indigeneity should enable both a critique of how indigenous peoples are always seen as vanishing as well as opening up the boundaries of indigenous identity, culture, politics, and futures to new, productive possibilities. Viewing indigeneity as an analytic rather than only an identity allows us to deeply engage the various power relations that continue to write indigenous peoples as always vanishing. Arvin, 126

Arvin's understanding of Indigeneity not only takes to task its weaponization by the dominate other, as the moniker of a vanishing, historicized people, but also examines the possibilities of Indigeneity as an expanding identity that works against these pre-established boundaries and associations that have been used against us. This concept of Indigeneity allows for a reformation of "identity, culture, politics, and futures," by Indigenous people, for Indigenous peoples, and in ways that are not "sanctioned" by settler notions of Indigenous identity that are marked by a union with a colonial past and/or future (126).

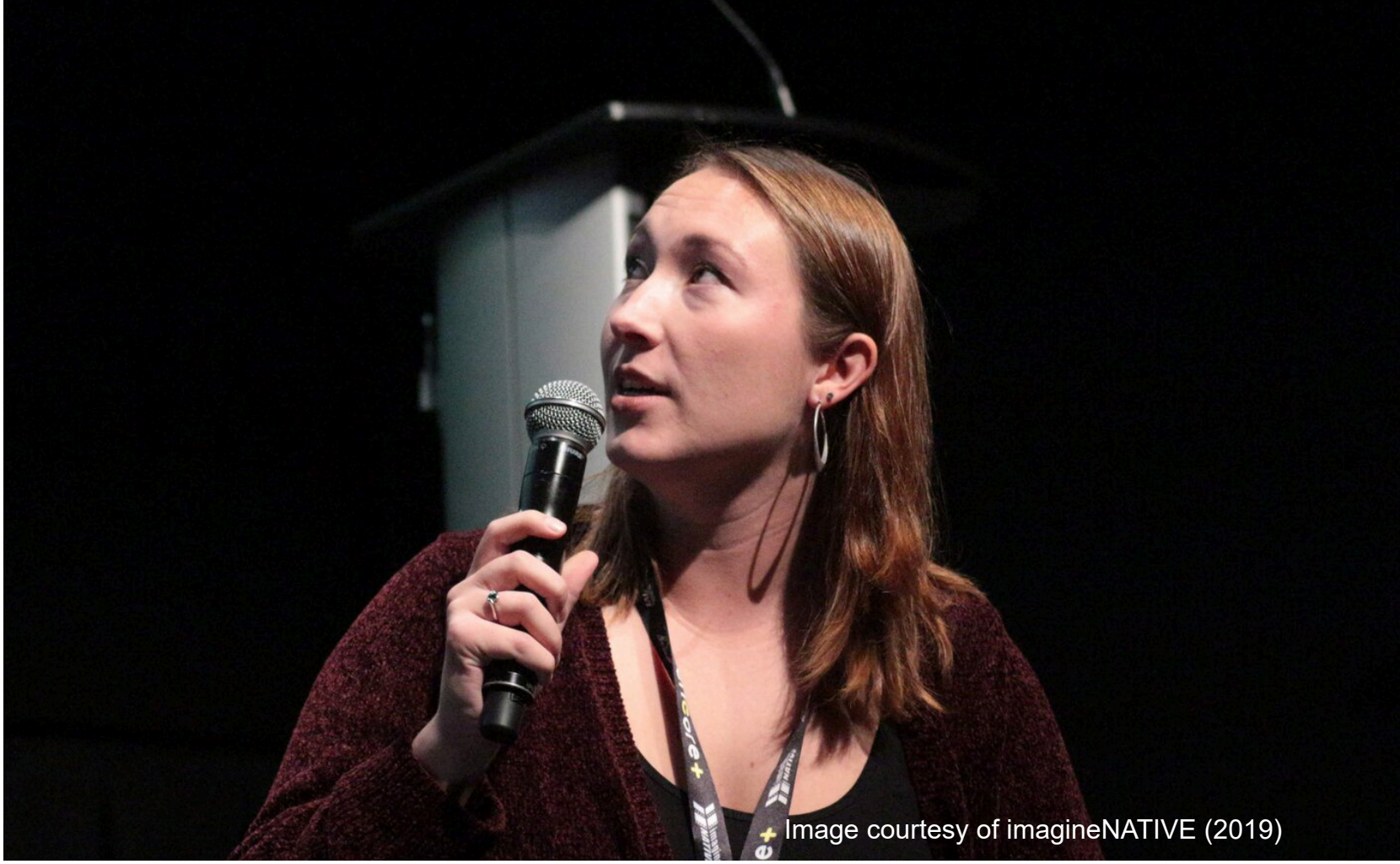


Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)

This lens, that allows for our own definitions of our identities, our own shaping of our pasts and futures, is the one which I have begun to apply to my game design, specifically in the mechanical/ coded language of my games, and which I feel *Full of Birds* fully captures. I made this game, and labeled it as such, not to signify my game as a classic “game” but to change the narrative of what a game is. I stated that I was sick of people telling me what a “real” game is, just like Indigenous people are sick of the colonial powers that be telling us who we are, inside and outside of games. Why did we call this a game? Because, just like Arvin’s understanding of formulating Indigeneity and what we want it to mean to us and for us, I want to redefine what games are and how we interact within their spaces, and *Full of Birds* encapsulates just that.

The interactive environment of *Full of Birds* is like an immersive snapshot of conversations between Indigenous people, from different sides of the continent, Sarah Biscarra Dilley being yak tityu tityu Chumash, and myself being Abenaki, sharing an experience of living away from home while remaining intimately tied to it. This game, and the worlds created within it, became a manifestation of our relationships to our homelands, our cultures, the artwork being interpreted, and to each other.

As a visual artist, the collage works Biscarra Dilley makes tend to work between deeply placed materials and dis/placed figures, mirroring the experience of being from a landless community from the area of unratified Treaty of June 3, 1871 (also known as Treaty “D”). Due to generations of enclosure, beginning with the California Mission System, land theft through the use of eminent domain, and continuing in our unrecognized present, she did not grow up in her homeland and learned about it through stories, made visible in imagination and the occasional photograph until reestablishing connections in adulthood. I, although growing up in my home territories, grew up in a space and culture that was filtered through centuries of institutionalization, medical sterilization, and historical erasure, resulting in a community gone underground, fighting against colonial narratives that

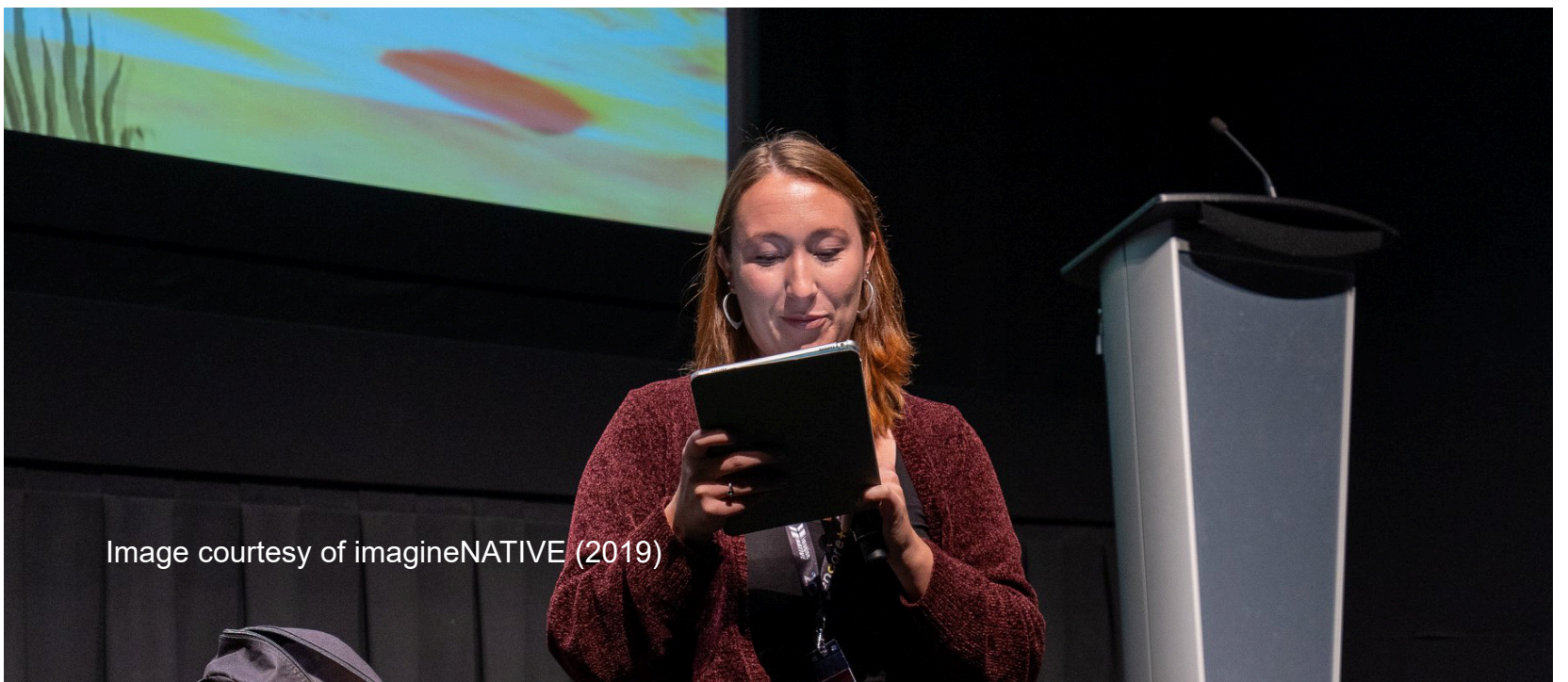
sought to erase us from our land and our land from us. The game builds upon this method of understanding context and place, each shifted through the description and imagination of another.

The process of working together was easy but required an exercise in translation between medium and practice. Sarah states that she felt I was particularly accommodating of the sometimes haphazard materials uploaded by a primarily analog collaborator, while she excelled at conveying the way she works with materials, the message she was working from and working towards, and the relationship of a practicing Indigenous artist to the space of the gallery, all to someone placed firmly outside any formal artistic realm.

When I asked Sarah, with whom I charged the naming of the piece, why she chose the title *Full of Birds*, she responded “I guess I think of birds as messengers, intermediaries of sorts. Back home, they remain plentiful in ways that bigger animals may not be—succeeding even in places that have been very changed through ranching, vineyards, oil. When I think of the movement often depicted in my 2-d work, I think of the slow explosions of birds when I drive to our creeks—two steps ahead of me, traveling every which way, but coming back together in their families. Maybe we need to take our cues from them. We’re full of stories, like birds,” (Sarah Biscarra Dilley, 2019).

Through this game, we have put forth some of those stories. What Biscarra Dilley said struck her the most while playing through the finished version of our game was how much was translated through our conversations, even down to the movement of hillsides or mountains and the stories in each 2-d work shared. Naturally, there was a shift in how these places were conceptualized. Working from Sarah’s dialogue with me and the images she sent me, I would fill in all of the gaps with imagery and spaces, landscapes and languages familiar to me; the thunder of crow’s wings drumming through a gully, the way my grandfather’s garden shed existed in organized chaos, the armor of green hills surrounding home, the music I listened to with my dad, thawing our hands against the tireless heater of our old truck after a late November hunt. But nonetheless, the core elements of Sarah’s images and inspirations were there. The stories persist, because we persist.

As peoples from opposite coasts but both impacted by some of the earliest waves of colonial imposition, our homelands, as our relatives long before us knew them, only exist through imagination, through facets of memory. But they continue in each of us and they live in our story, in our creation, in the ways we have always made the world. (Bird, Biscarra Dilley, 2019).



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