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NATIVE

# NIGHT OF THE INDIGENOUS DEVS

The title 'NIGHT OF THE INDIGENOUS DEVS' is rendered in large, bold, block letters. Each letter is filled with a different image: 'N' shows a green field; 'I' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'G' shows a green field; 'H' shows a green field; 'T' shows a green field; 'O' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'F' shows a green field; 'T' shows a green field; 'H' shows a green field; 'E' shows a green field; 'I' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'N' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'D' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'I' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'G' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'E' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'N' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'O' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'U' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'S' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'D' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'E' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'V' shows a blue sky with clouds; 'S' shows a blue sky with clouds.

October 25, 2019

**EVENT PROCEEDINGS**

Edited by Meagan I. Byrne & Elizabeth LaPensée

# Night of the Indigenous Devs 2019 Proceedings



# NIGHT OF THE INDIGENOUS DEVS - 2019 PROCEEDING

MEAGAN I. BYRNE AND ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE

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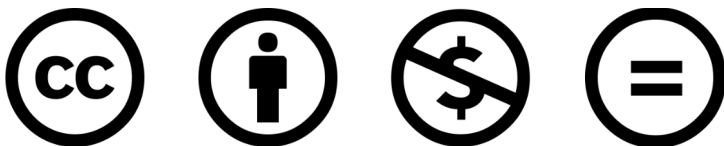
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# WHAT IS NIGHT OF THE INDIGENOUS DEVS?

KAITLYNN TOMASELLI | IMAGINENATIVE

This first edition of Night of the Indigenous Devs was an evening of six hand-picked games from the iNDigital Space at *imagineNATIVE* were brought into the comfort of a theatre. There the public were able to sit back and watch the games played live with real-time commentary from the artists who created them.

*Hold My Hand* by Nathan Powless-Lynes, *Wao Kanaka* by The Ka Lei Milika'a Collective, *Terra Nova* by SlipCycle, *Don't Wake The Night* by Brujería @ Werk, *When Rivers Were Trails* by the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, and *Full of Birds* by Ashlee Bird & Sarah Biscarra Dilley; these 6 Indigenous game creators and groups from all over the world were invited to come up on stage, one by one, and speak about their game. They talked about their process, which communities were involved, their successes, the failed attempts, and where they are at now with their games. The excitement was there with those artists, as they got the opportunity to share their projects and speak about their passion, to an audience who listened and became captivated in their stories.

Volunteers who were chosen at random from the audience, came up on stage to play these games for the first time live. There was laughing, conversations, and intense battles between players. The audience asked questions that sparked even more conversation. The engagement received from this event was remarkable!

The evening ended on a high note with a giveaway of an art piece donated by award-winning game designer, writer, and artist, Elizabeth LaPensée, merchandise from *East Side Games*, and a poster signed by all the artists and designed by *Achimostawinan Games'* founder, Meagan Byrne. At then end of the evening artists and the audience were given the opportunity to network amongst each other, talk, and even plan to meet afterwards for celebratory drinks.

This wasn't your traditional theatre viewing, **Night of the Indigenous Devs** is an event made to give Indigenous creatives a platform to highlight their talent within the interactive digital media sector, that can sometimes get overlooked because it is a smaller group of creatives that are making games. It is a chance to come out and have fun talking about Indigenous games in a relaxed, celebratory event. The audience gets an opportunity to really understand the creator's narratives and perspective as the artist gets the chance to share their story behind their game.

As games are increasingly getting recognition as a collaborative process, this event shows the audience how a combination of art practices all contribute to the creation of a game. The cultural aspect in Indigenous people coming together as a community to build towards a common goal is our way of life and has always been a valuable lesson.

**Night of the Indigenous Devs is an important event for Indigenous creatives and I can't wait until the next one!**



KAITLYNN TOMASELLI

**Kaitlynn Tomaselli is of Anishinaabe (Odawa and Potawatomi) and Italian descent from Mnidoo Mnising (Manitoulin Island). She is currently working at imagineNATIVE as the Digital + Interactive Coordinator. At imagineNATIVE, she helps facilitate the year-long programming and is currently working on an initiative that supports youth with video game development from start to stability.**

**She has taken part in many community-oriented programming around the City of Toronto, such as joining the youth council ENAGB Indigenous Youth Agency and the Native Child Youth Advisory.**



NAOMI JOHNSON

**Naomi Johnson is a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Bear clan from Six Nations. From 2013 - 2017, Naomi served as Artistic Director and then in 2018 as Co-Executive Director of the Woodland Cultural Centre, where she curated and programmed annual exhibitions and performance art events.**

**In June 2019 Naomi accepted the position of Associate Director for imagineNATIVE, having the unique and rewarding opportunity to be mentored by then outgoing Executive Director, Jason Ryle. In June 2020 she assumed the role of Executive Director of imagineNATIVE, taking on the leadership position for the organization. With a life devoted to the arts, she very much looks forward to continuing her work supporting Indigenous talent within the film and media arts industry.**

Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2020)



# A NIGHT OF THE INDIGENOUS

## DEVS' TO REMEMBER

NAOMI JOHNSON | IMAGINENATIVE

Last year was the 20th annual imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, and it was my first as a staff member. That year was a whirlwind of learning, growing, and truly enjoying what the Festival and the organization is. When I was first hired to train alongside Jason Ryle as Associate Director, I saw the year and my role not only as an opportunity to absorb what information and knowledge I could, but also a moment to get to know the staff and program delivery across departments.

When Meagan Byrne (who was the iN Digital + Interactive Lead at the time) asked staff if anyone would be willing to participate in her conception of 'Night of the Indigenous Devs' event, I wholeheartedly volunteered. A long-time video game enthusiast (a bit on pause since the birth of my son Charlie), I was very willing to offer up "expertise" for the event. Not knowing exactly what I had volunteered for, I assumed I was entering a tournament-style event, where I would surely crush my competition.

I was immediately corrected that it was to be a cooperative effort with fellow staff member, the lovely Kaitlynn Tomaselli, our Digital + Interactive Coordinator. I had no say in whose game I was going to test in front of a live audience, but a huge part of me was thrilled to learn it would be a fellow member from my home community of Six Nations, Nathan Powless. His game, *Hold My Hand* is centered on your ability to communicate and cooperate with your partner. Kaitlynn and I spent quite a bit of time yelling at each other as we stumbled through the level. What surprised me most and what I truly believe is the genius of this game is the level of emotionality it draws out within only a short amount of time playing, emotional responses from both us as the players, and the crowd.

A surprising and potentially heartbreaking scene awaits those who can puzzle their way to the end. I won't spoil! The fun of "Night of the Indigenous Devs", was what most of us look for in a communal experience around interactive media. We cheer, we yell, we throw up our hands - and most of all we laugh and have a little bit of fun. Having the game developer front and center beside you while you discover their game, fielding questions from a live audience was something unique and wonderful. When I looked out into the crowd I saw diverse faces of all ages enjoying the gathering, smiles as they watched, questioned, and genuinely enjoyed themselves. When you are planning and working the Festival it is extremely rare you get to attend or partake in the events.

Our world as staff during Festival week is mostly spent running from venue to venue, moving through the crowds, hunting down people, and "putting out fires". It was a rare opportunity indeed to witness the successful Festival event and to be an active participant. Nia:wen Meagan for inviting me to be a part of it, and congratulations on an extremely successful first showing of imagineNATIVE's "Night of the Indigenous Devs."

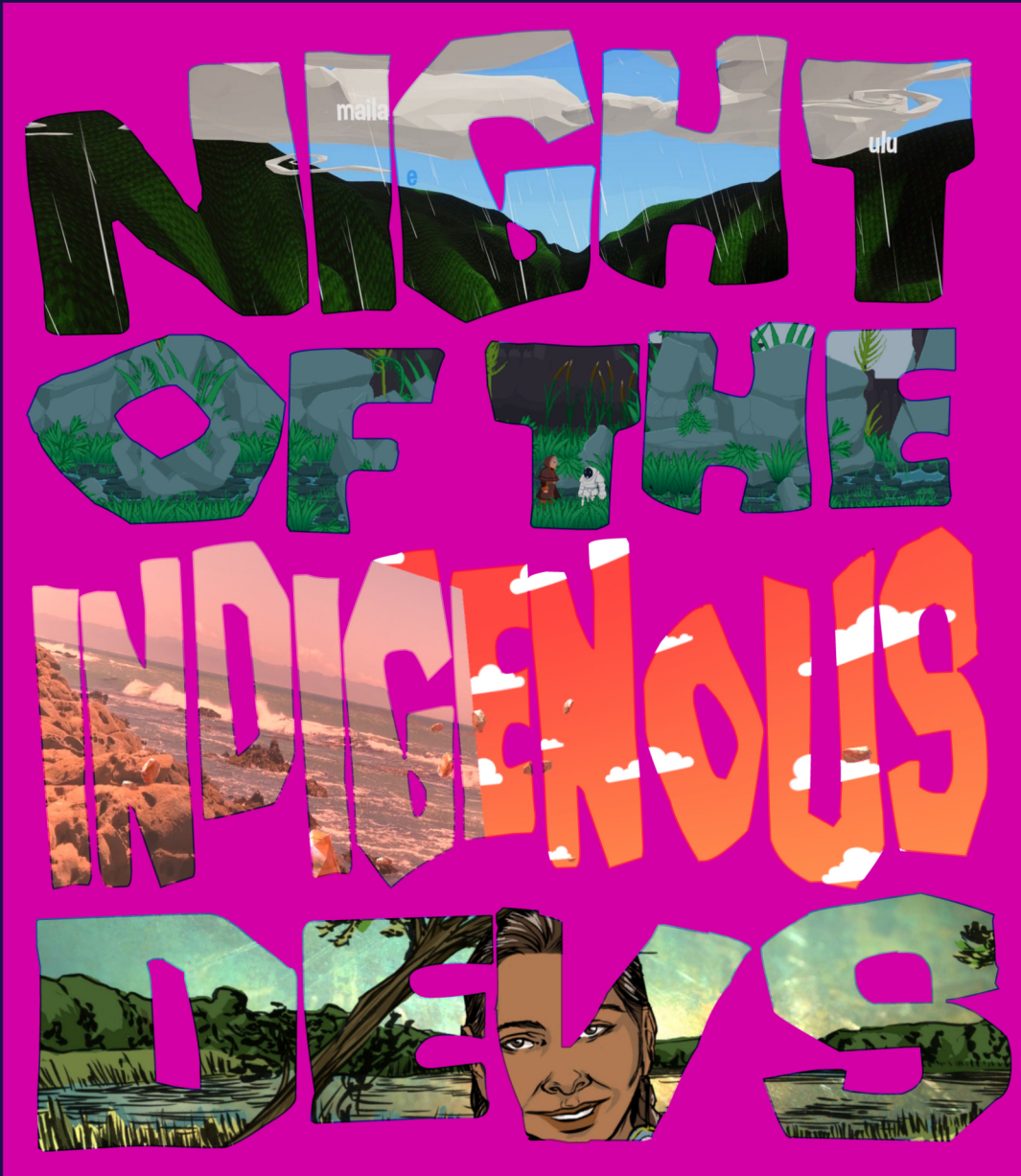
I look forward to more!

**Naomi Johnson,**  
Executive Director  
**imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival**





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2019 Promotional Poster, Courtesy of imagineNATIVE, Designed by Meagan Byrne



# INDIGENOUS VIDEO GAMES AS IMMUTABLE SACRED SPACES

MEAGAN BYRNE

In 2018, during the imagineNATIVE Festival, VR artist Casey Koyczan and I had a conversation about digital space. This conversation started turning my mind to an idea about how we could regard video games. The conversation came at a time when there was public outrage over yet another Indigenous sacred site threatened or maliciously approached by outsiders. Standing Rock was on everyone's minds and I asked Casey if he felt that his VR spaces represented a kind of safe space where he could hold the sacred, since much of his work revolved around expressing a kind of transcendental Indigenous experience that was very personal to him. He was intrigued by this idea and asked me to clarify what I meant. Since it was only something I had just begun to think about I struggled to put it into words. "Well, since games and other application software generally cannot be permanently affected by an outsider. Would you then say that, maybe, video games make for a space where Indigenous people can recreate their own sacred spaces without fear of someone permanently damaging it?" It was an exciting idea to me. I was thinking of Indigenous-made video games specifically and that distinction shifted my paradigm regarding the immutability potential of digital space.

Save for games or applications that have multiplayer or server-based content, most video games we play are a copy of a source project. Understanding that, it stands to reason that even if someone were to destroy the world inside their copy, the original source and world remains untouched ready to be uploaded again. It was the ultimate safe space for an Indigenous person wrestling with concepts of identity or tradition. Here was a place no one could touch. However, in that same vein it also becomes a place without growth or change. It seems that these two aspects are at odds with each other. How can something be both removed from the cycle of life and a sacred space? And so, this small chat ultimately changed how I would approach my own work and the work of my Indigenous colleagues from that point on.

Before I continue I want to first set the groundwork for what is defined as a Sacred Space. In *A Conversation on the Efficacies of the Game Engine to Address Notions of Sacred Space* by Wyeld, Crogan and Leacy there is an excellent set of definitions:

1. "Sacred spaces are those spaces that defy the logic of scientific definition, of quantifiable space"
2. "Sacred spaces are controlled spaces. Access to and representation of these spaces and what they contain... is often subjected to rules and regulations"

(Wyeld et al)

Both of these definitions can be applied to the spaces created within game engines, but I want to add my own definition to the list:

3. The space is defined as Sacred by the one or the community who crafted or found it

This means that either the creator or the player can define a Sacred space within a game. However, this still does not yet give us a clear answer to the question: "How can something removed from the cycle of life be considered a sacred space?" This is a question that is specific to the realities of many North American Indigenous beliefs, however, for purposes of this paper I am specifically referring to the N hiyaw concept that everything has a life cycle and that nothing is immutable.

The question takes its roots in the Western belief that digital things are immortal or somehow possess a quality which renders them locked in time. However, this is a fallacy as all things technological and digital have a lifespan. Computers and hardware will rust and rot while digital information will degrade and become corrupted by time. Even in cases where digital information can last millenia it will still become something that can no longer be deciphered or read. To this end I believe we have a suitable answer to the question "How can something removed from the cycle of life be a sacred space?" Because in truth, it is not removed from the cycle of life. Rather, video games create a space that is able to be more tightly controlled than something that exists in the physical world and thus meets criteria two laid out above. Therefore, when I use the term 'immutable' I am specifically referring to digital space's ability to be immutable from human interference or mischief, not that digital space itself is immutable from the passage of time.

However, the argument could be made that vulnerability to human interference is also an aspect of a life cycle. To that position I argue that creating and holding these immutable digital spaces is no different from holding on to sacred items that should have been (re)buried or having a restoration done on family photos or portraits. That is to say, it is a means of coping and working through trauma. When working against over 250 years of colonization and assimilation there is no one "right" or "correct" way to heal from that level of systematic and generational trauma. And in so, I suggest that for some, creating these spaces is its own means of coping with trauma and in turn enacting survivance.

My first game *Wanisinowin|Lost* (2015) is a prime example of this, as it was both a means for me to work through generational trauma and to thrive as I did that work. The plot of *Wanisinowin|Lost* is simplistic: you are going to meet family you did not know about before. The player's mechanics are likewise simplistic: a side-scrolling platformer where players can go either left or right and jump over obstacles or listen to people talking. The story and the mechanics did not need to be complex because the issue I was exploring was not the complexities of navigating an Indigenous identity, but rather the frustration, confusion and fear I felt while trying to navigate those complexities. I was disinterested in gamifying my trauma, something I have seen done which I believe does a disservice to the players. While playing a game that deals with interwoven and delicate issues (youth homelessness for example) the player can come to believe that complex social issues are ones that can be overcome simply by playing perfectly. This was not what I wanted my players to experience. Further, it was not the aspect of my trauma I wanted to work through. Returning to culture or community cannot be achieved by making a game about it. Instead, I wanted to hash out and examine the emotional reactions I was having as I worked to gain a path back to my culture, and perhaps one day, my community.



Much like how Elizabeth LaPensée (2014) points out that her social impact game *Survivance* (www.survivance.org) “recognizes that players are the ones who create change rather than the game itself.” *Wanisinowin|Lost* was a deeply personal work where I focused on creating change within myself by personifying the aspects of my trauma-work that I struggled with into the game. I did this rather than try to have the game invoke a change in me.

In doing so I codified the experience in such a way that only myself and others who had had a similar experience would be able to access the deeper knowledge embedded in the piece. This is another way even public pieces can close off parts of their “sacredness” to outsiders. In Casey Koyczan’s work *Wenazii K’egoke ; See Visions* (2019), a non-interactive VR experience, viewers are invited to take a short journey to experience the myths, legends, and visions from the Northwest Territories. While there is nothing in the visuals or audio of Koyczan’s work that is restricted to outsiders, it is very much made for a Tłıchǫ First Nation (Koyczan’s nation) audience. It is an experience that is only truly understood by those who have lived enmeshed in those stories and legends. Koyczan does not explain or make accessible the stories and worlds he is showing. Much like sacred sites covered in ancient drawings, *Wenazii K’egoke ; See Visions* is open for everyone to look at, but only for a few to understand.

A similar approach can be seen in Ashlee Bird’s work *Full of Birds* (2019) which is a digital representation of yak tiṭu tiṭu yak tilhini artist, Sarah Biscarra Dilley’s work and the memories/thoughts that went into her conception of each piece. Players are invited to walk into Sarah’s works to visit a space made up of her thoughts and memories in the form of a video game environment. There is no doubt that this game space is a sacred space as it both plays with the concept of the gallery (a place for the public) and the concept of what goes through the mind of the artist as they create a work (something deeply private). *Full of Birds* stands in stark contrast to Bird’s previous work *One Small Step* (2018), which takes space that is already sacred (the Earth, the stars and even the Universe itself) and imagines a future where Capitalism and Colonialism has destroyed and profaned it. Bird states that *One Small Step* was her attempt to showcase “how unsacred a space video games have been to Indigenous people.”

Mohawk game designer Maize Longboat, who developed the sci fi co-op game *Terra Nova* (2019), states that it was the process of making *Terra Nova* that was the place of sacredness for him and in turn he created a space of sacredness in the actions that the player could take. In the game two players take on the role of Terra, an Indigenous-person analogue, and Nova, the colonizer analogue, in order to navigate a split-screen world that only becomes whole when the two work together.

Longboat both uses game design as medicine to wrestle with having family connections to both the colonized and the colonizer and allowed the players to use the results of that design to work their way through their own struggles with navigating both sides of that internal conflict. With the addition of a multiplayer, however, Longboat creates intimacy between two people as they work together and in that Maize allows his players to create their own sacred space. Longboat points out that “the interaction is meant to be very personal and private and in its own way sacred.” This is not so different from the interaction in Mohawk game designer Nathan Powless-Lynes’ *Hold My Hand* (2019) in which two players are invited to play on one controller, the closeness creating immediate intimacy and while the game itself is not enmeshed in the sacred, the relationship built between the two players is.





Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)





Hill Agency, Achimostawinan Games (2019)

However, sometimes it is not the place or the game-space itself which is sacred, but the fact that it makes room for ceremony. In short, it makes space for the sacred rather than being a sacred space. This may seem like a trivial point, but there is a key difference between the two. When a game space is considered sacred, it is the being in the space that is key. However, when a space makes room for the sacred, it is the actions of the participants that are key. The game *Wao Kanaka* (2019) by Ka Lei Milika'a Collective is an educational game designed to teach the Indigenous Hawaiian language and in that the game becomes a place of learning and in that is its own sacredness. It is a place that is equally open to any who are interested in learning the language but whose intended audience is very specific and close to the language already.

In the case of the Anishinaabe video game *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), Métis and Anishinaabe game designer Elizabeth LaPensée points out that, "ceremony is interwoven [into the game]. You can make offerings of tobacco to change the hunting minigame. You can participate in ceremonies if you are respectful. You are often given opportunities to gift elders and community members and receive knowledge in exchange. The animals are all in Woodlands style art because in those instances [when you're hunting] you're seeing them from an Anishinaabe worldview, like a lens for the sacred."

In *When Rivers Were Trails* (WRWT) the mechanics encourage an active engagement on the part of the players in the sacred. Here it is not the space itself which is sacred but the actions of the player throughout the game. In this game the sacred and ceremony that is required is unique in each situation the game presents the player. In these moments the space is sacred, but once the moment is over what was sacred has left with the people and does not stay in the space. Much like WRWT, *DON'T WAKE THE NIGHT* (DWTN) by Guaraní game company Brujeria@Werk takes this aspect of invoking the sacred and creates an experience for the player around that concept. In this game the characters call on a spirit (the player) in order to solve a problem. In doing this DWTN offers an interesting perspective where you are the spirit that is invoked and in so doing the creator makes clear the fallibility of the sacred within Guaraní culture. A concept that is near alien to those raised within the Abrahamic religions.

As Indigenous creators continue to take back control of their own narrative, we will see even more of these works that play and craft spaces that are sacred and designed for personal healing. It is clear that to Indigenous people the opportunity to have freedom from the fear of interference and control from outside forces gives video game creation a popular appeal. By allowing for the experience of feelings through mechanics, video games also offer a media where Indigenous people can protect and obfuscate their trauma from pain-tourists. This obfuscation also allows for an almost secret language to develop between the creator and their intended audience. Like *Wenazii K'egoke ; See Visions, Full of Birds*, and *Wanisinowin|Lost* these digital sacred spaces are available to the public, but are only fully accessible to their intended audience.

It is this obfuscation coupled with video games' immutable potential that renders video game space as the ideal locus of healing for traumatized peoples. Further, the digital is uniquely important to Indigenous people as a space that, having dealt with centuries of displacement, they can have full access and control over. It is a place that cannot be sullied by an outsider's hands and in that key quality is what makes game design so significant in the process of healing from the trauma of displacement.





MEAGAN BYRNE

***Meagan Byrne is an Âpihtawikosisân (Métis) digital media artist and game designer born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario. She has been creating digital interactive works since 2014. Her designs incorporate narrative, game mechanics, sound and traditional art and are deeply rooted in Indigenous Futurisms, language and Indigenous feminist theory. She sees her work as a constant struggle to navigate the complexities of Indigenous identity within a deeply colonized system. Meagan uses her work to explore questions of cultural belonging, the Indigenization of media and the future of Indigenous language and culture.***

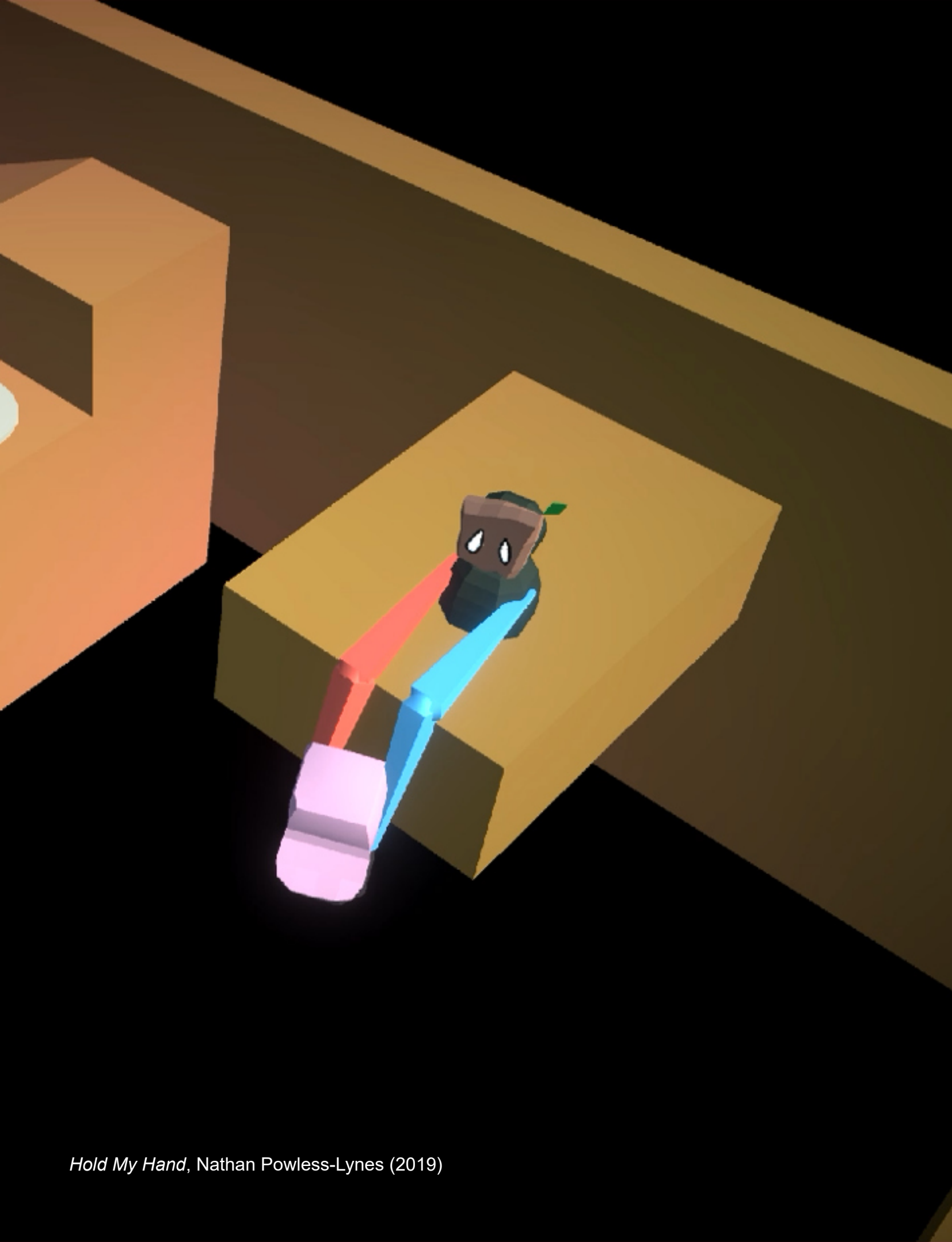
# HOLD MY HAND

NATHAN POWLESS-LYNES

*Hold My Hand* is a cooperative puzzle game about two people holding hands and overcoming obstacles together. Embark on a journey of companionship, attachment, and letting go.

This is a game about holding hands to solve puzzles. Every puzzle requires cooperation and a bit of physical contact. So get close, learn to depend on each other, and work together to the very end. The game is meant to be played with two people sharing a controller, as if holding hands.

Download: <https://nathanpowlesslynes.itch.io/hold-my-hand>



*Hold My Hand*, Nathan Powless-Lynes (2019)



NATHAN POWLESS-LYNES

***Nathan Powless-Lynes*** is an award-winning game designer from southern Ontario. He prides himself on creating unique, different-yet-pleasant games. He is a recent graduate from Sheridan College's Bachelor of Game Design program. In the past few years, he has presented his games and spoken at events including Level Up, EGLX, imagineNATIVE, and Different Games.

**Nathan** is currently employed at Ubisoft Toronto as a Level Designer.





Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)

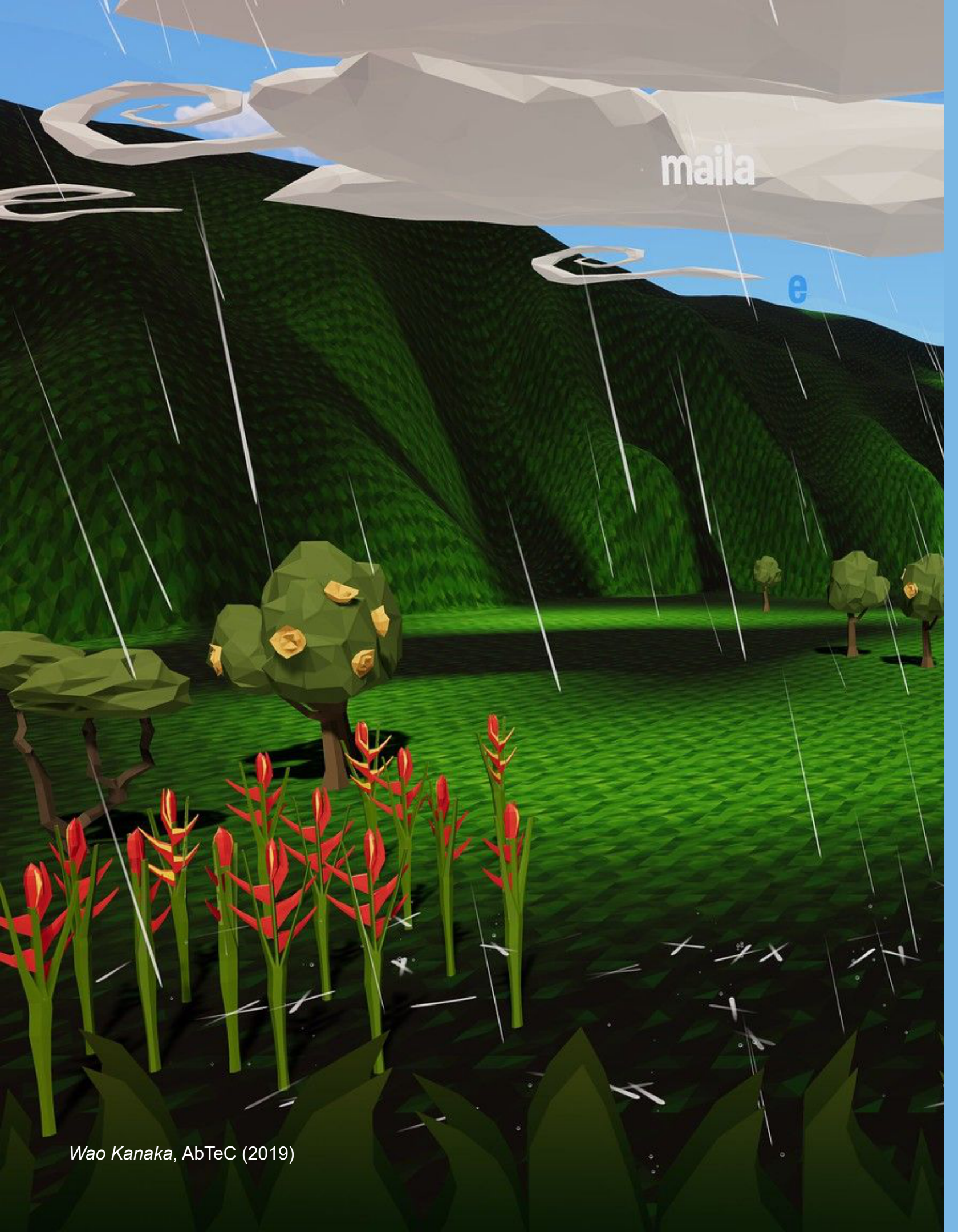
# WAO KANAKA

THE KA LEI MILIKA‘A  
COLLECTIVE

Tūtū (grandmother) tells you a story: Humanity is forgetting our responsibility to uphold aloha ‘āina, the love for the land. If continued on this path, the story will not end well, Tūtū warns, but you have the power to change the future. Seek and use the knowledge entrusted to you to irrigate the lo‘i kalo (taro fields), fish sustainably at the loko i‘a (fish pond), and learn the ‘oli (chants) which influence our love for the land. As you do this, a new dream for the future is revealed to you. *Wao Kanaka* is a Hawaiian-language, first-person exploration and puzzle game set in a universe filled with Kānaka Maoli (Hawaiian) characters and traditions.

Download: <http://skins.abtec.org/skins6.0/documentation/>





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#### THE KA LEI MILIKA'A COLLECTIVE

***Ka Lei Milika'a* is a collective formed by the participants of the Skins 6.0: He Au Hou 2 Workshop, a three-week intensive videogame workshop in Honolulu during which the group conceptualized and developed *Wao Kanaka*, an educational point-and-click game. Majority Native Hawaiian, Ka Lei Milika'a is made up of 17 young adults from a variety of disciplines and professional areas, some with little to no digital production skills or background in making video games.**





Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)



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# DESIGNING

# TERRA NOVA



# A SCIFI VIDEO GAME

## ABOUT FIRST CONTACT

MAIZE LONGBOAT

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

### Story

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

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

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

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

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

## Game Mechanics

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

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



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

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

## Art

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

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

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

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



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

## Sound

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

## Conclusion

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

# TERRA NOVA

SLIPCYCLE

Set on Earth in the far distant future, this 2-player cooperative platformer explores what first contact between Indigenous and Settler peoples might look like thousands of years from now. Two worlds collide after a mysterious spacecraft crashlands in Earthborn territory. Follow Terra, an Elder Earthborn landkeeper, and Nova, a youthful Starborn inventor as they explore their respective environments and interact with the people of their communities.

Download: <http://terravagame.com/>





## SLIPCYLE PRODUCTIONS

***SlipCycle Productions* is the collective work of Indigenous creatives Maize Longboat (Creative Director, Producer) and Ray Caplin (Artist, Animator).**



Image courtesy of Brujería @Werk (2019)

# DON'T WAKE THE NIGHT

BRUJERÍA @ WERK

You have been summoned by a community of witches, and must act as their impartial judge but for what purpose? Mystery unfolds around you as you explore a world and a story about community and accountability.

Download: <https://brujeriaatwerk.itch.io/>



## BRUJERÍA @ WERK

***Brujería @ Werk* is owned and operated by SANTO, an artist, speaker, and gamemaker. They currently reside in Toronto, Canada, where they create art based around expressions of brujeria and ancestral traditions.**

**SANTO is also a co-director at Dames Making Games, a non-for-profit arts organizations dedicated to supporting non-binary and women creators in making, playing, and changing games.**





Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)



# WHEN RIVERS

# WERE TRAILS

INDIAN LAND TENURE FOUNDATION &  
GAMES FOR ENTERTAINMENT AND  
LEARNING LAB

Winner of the Adaptation Award at IndieCade 2019, *When Rivers Were Trails* is a point-and-click adventure game about the impact of colonization on Indigenous communities in the 1890's. Arguably, it's a mashup of *Oregon Trail* and *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* where you are an Anishinaabe in the 1890's who has been displaced from your traditional territory in Minnesota. You are forced to head west to California due to the splitting of land and movement of nations caused by allotment acts. Along the way, you face Indian Agents, meet people from different nations, and hunt, fish, and canoe as you balance your well-being.

The game takes strides in self-determined representations by including over thirty Indigenous contributors. *When Rivers Were Trails* exemplifies sovereignty both in gameplay and development process.

Download: <https://indianlandtenure.itch.io/when-rivers-were-trails>



*When Rivers Were Trails,*  
the Indian Land Tenure Foundation (2019)



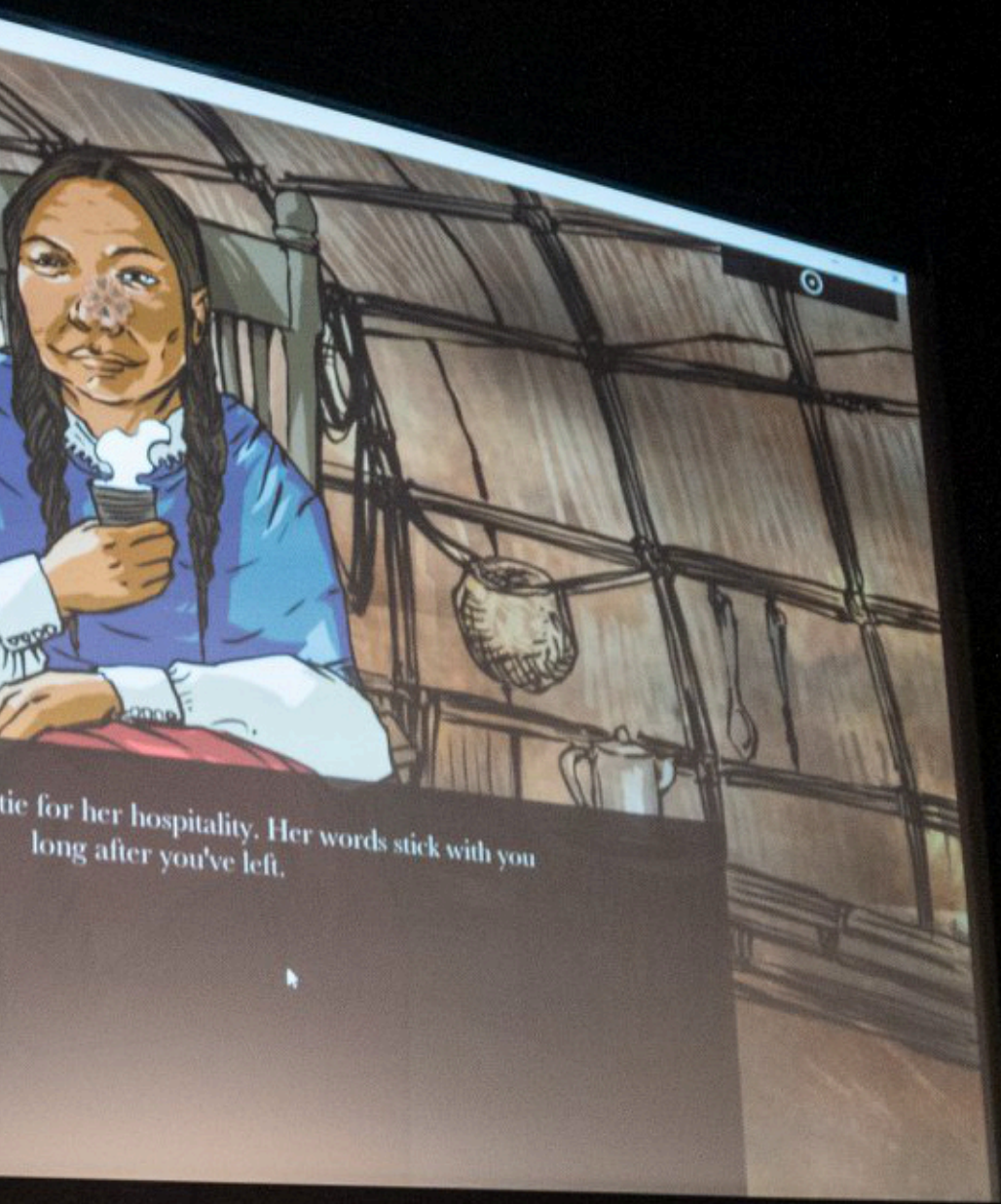


## THE TEAM

Creative directing by Nichlas Emmons, creative directing, design, and user interface art by Elizabeth LaPensée, art by Weshoyot Alvitre, and music by Supaman and Michael Charette. Indigenous writers include Weshoyot Alvitre, Li Boyd, Trevino Brings Plenty, Tyrone Cawston, Richard Crowsong, Eve Cuevas, Samuel Jaxin Enemy-Hunter, Lee Francis IV, Carl Gawboy, Elaine Gomez, Ronnie Dean Harris, Tashia Hart, Renee Holt, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Adrian Jawort, Kris Knigge, E. M. Knowles, Elizabeth LaPensée, Annette S. Lee, David Gene Lewis, Korii Northrup, Nokomis Paiz, Carl Petersen, Manny Redbear, Travis McKay Roberts, Sheena Louise Roetman, Sara Siestreem, Joel Southall, Jo Tallchief, Allen Turner, and William Wilson, alongside guest writers Toiya K. Finley and Cat Wendt.

This project was made possible by a collaboration between the Indian Land Tenure Foundation and Michigan State University's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab thanks to support from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians.





...tic for her hospitality. Her words stick with you  
long after you've left.



**NOT**

**PLAYING**



**AROUND**



# HOW INDIGENOUS DESIGNERS ARE CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE OF VIDEO GAMES

ASHLEE BIRD

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 Effect* 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)







Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)



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 titvu titvu yak tilhini 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 Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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).



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).



Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)

# FULL OF BIRDS

ASHLEE BIRD & SARAH BISCARRA DILLEY

Walk through a 3-dimensional digital gallery that utilizes the original works of yak tityu tityu yak tihini artist, Sarah Biscarra Dilley. 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.

**Download:** <https://abird.itch.io/imaginative-gallery-submission>







ASHLEE BIRD & SARAH BISCARRA DILLEY

***Ashlee Bird*** is a PhD Candidate in Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis. Her work focuses on the history of representation of Native Americans in video games, as well as the decolonization of the video game industry. Ashlee’s creative practice centers an Indigenous lens within video games and contemplating what “representation” entails.

***Sarah Biscarra Dilley*** is a multidisciplinary artist and emerging scholar. Her interdisciplinary process explores the spaces between the worlds, grief & joy, and body & land. Being raised in Chumash, Chicax, and queer family traditions - and between urban and rural environments - directly informs her understandings of embodiment and place as spatial, temporal and grounded in relationship.

Images courtesy of Ashlee Bird and Sarah Biscarra Dilley (2019),  
Opposite image: *Full of Birds*, Ashlee Bird (2019)





Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE (2019)

# FINAL THOUGHTS

ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE

**I heard my children and their friend gasp. "That's so sad!" They were playing *Hold My Hand*. "I don't want to go without you!" They were all thoroughly traumatized, but in a good way, because they were deep in the throws of feeling for one another. "This is just wrong!" They questioned whether they made a mistake, and played again, only to find the same ending again in a two-player game where only one player can make it to the very end.**

Thanks to Night of the Indigenous Devs, I got to hear the developer Nathan Powless-Lynes talk about his game. Don't worry; he assured everyone that he is well and that his design choices weren't about underlying trust issues. He was hoping to make a game with an impactful ending amidst art that otherwise appears generally cute and non-specific. The theater was filled with gasps and laughter as two players randomly selected from the audience attempted to make their way through the levels, always having to hold onto one another, not always quite pulling that off, often leading to many deaths of falling into voids of nothingness. *Hold My Hand* expands the definition of what it is to be an "Indigenous game," as it is Indigenous because the developer is Indigenous rather than having an overtly Indigenous aesthetic. The gameplay invites us to reflect on working together (for better or worse) and experience empathy, as we must ultimately leave our partner behind in order to complete the game and only one of us can win (if that can be considered winning at all).

Approaching a two-player game from another angle, *Terra Nova* with design by Maize Longboat and art by Ray Caplin begins with each player in their own split screen. As you traverse a future Earth experiencing a climate crisis post-apocalypse, you eventually meet. Not only does the interaction act as a metaphor for First Contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers through the story, but also through design by changing from a split screen co-op to shared screen. The breathtaking pixel art and poignant narrative led to awe in the audience during Night of the Indigenous Devs. For anyone unaware, they came to understand how this was Longboat's first festival distributed game and Caplin's first experience with expressing himself through pixel art. Their work is a true indication that it is not only a matter of possibility but one of added value for Indigenous people to aim for core roles in game development. Alongside their dynamics as a self-determined team, *Terra Nova* also exemplifies that Indigenous games can carry with them deep meaning and purpose while also having commercial appeal.

Echoing the climate issue themes in *Terra Nova*, *Wao Kanaka* by The Ka Lei Milika'a Collective seeks to address these concerns now with hope for preventing such a future. The game beautifully interweaves gameplay with language immersion thanks in part to Daniel Kauwila Mahi, who grew up attending 'ōlelo Hawai'i at Ke Kula Kaiapuni 'o Ānuenuē, a Hawaiian Language Immersion School. Although the gameplay drew contemplative reactions during the mini-game where the player needs to choose the correct phrases in a song to help rain droplets fall, there was much laughter during a seemingly undefeatable puzzle mini-game that concerned the importance of the flow of a river. Through fast-paced gameplay with win conditions that harken to the wellbeing of their community, *Wao Kanaka* speaks to Indigenous self-expression in games through language and representations of land.

*Don't Wake The Night*, with design, art, and writing by Santo Aveiro through Brujería @ Werk, similarly immerses the player in their language and reflections of land. You move through the space in relation to listening to conversations with the goal of better understanding your role in the community. During meditative gameplay that asks the player to slow down and read/listen, we gained insights about the meaning of Santo's unique art style and cultural references carefully placed throughout gameplay. Their interpretation of community and land relates to their upbringing, with delicate references to everything from protocol to plants. With gameplay that leads up to the goal of self-realization rather than a scoreboard, *Don't Wake The Night* brings into question expectations of what makes a game a game and gives us a welcome alternative.

In parallel with challenging the definition of games, *Full of Birds* invites the player to experience a series of artworks by walking through a gallery space and quite literally into the works themselves. Through Ashlee Bird's reflection during Night of the Indigenous Devs, the

audience was illuminated to how *Full of Birds* is a game in that it is a voluntary experience that allows exploration in a safe space. Traversable tapestries of environments created from art by Sarah Biscarra Dilley invite us to slow down, listen, and be with the land. Bird's intention was to push back at the expectations of galleries and games, by merging both in a self-led experience relating space and land.

Movement across land is also vital in *When Rivers Were Trails*, which I provided design, interface art, and writing for, alongside an incredibly robust team. Since the game includes both linear and randomized gameplay, I honestly wasn't sure how selecting someone from the audience who had never played before would go. And then, it happened. While I was talking about what excites me most about the game, which is the development process and it contributed to genuine capacity for collaborators like the artist Weshoyot Alvitre, the *Duck Hunt* homage version of the hunting mini-game popped up. With only one instance of that version possible per game, it was just too perfect! *When Rivers Were Trails* is an Indigenous response to *Oregon Trail*, a game I grew up playing in keyboarding class, asking why the Native characters existed only in relation to settlers. The gameplay is also inspired by *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (which I contributed writing to), because I wondered what a primarily Indigenous lens on Westward expansion in such a game would look like. It's a culmination of everything I have hoped for in a game, with a balance of being for awareness, for play's sake, and a good bit of nostalgia.

Above all else, I am immensely grateful to Meagan Byrne for the opportunity to speak while *When Rivers Were Trails* was being played and to listen to Indigenous game developers with varying worldviews and ways of making games while seeing their games in action. Before this event, I had only been invited to talk during live gameplay for games I haven't made, expected to perform as a commentator and provide the "Native perspective" for an audience. Night of the Indigenous Devs flipped the stage, shifting us from being under the settler gaze to being uplifted and seen for our work. It was a moment to be reflected on with hope that it will always be remembered for rectifying Indigenous self-determination in games.





ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE

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