

## INDIGITALGAMES AND THE REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES BEYOND TOMAHAWKS AND HEADDRESSES

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Digital identity has become an influential aspect of Indigenous representations in the 21st century. With the rise in popularity of social media, blogging sites and other social platforms, identity can become skewed or assimilated in digital media. The Indigitalgames.com project wants to show the complexities and various factors that contribute to representations seen in video games throughout the decades. Initially, the plan was simple, examine images similar to those seen in other media forms like Hollywood Western movies, or Western comics. As I began to investigate more diverse genres of games, there were multiple types of representations involving Indigenous people that didn't follow the Noble Savage characteristics. Not all representations wore headdresses and threw tomahawks. This discovery allowed me to examine other images seen in video games and compare the tropes and stereotypes. As technology continues to develop and expand concepts of space, people use said space to inform, to connect with others over long distances and to explore ideas and values that otherwise would not be accessible in the physical area. By using technology like blogs, social media outlets, and cellular devices, local space becomes intertwined with technology, often, used as a starting point for discussions and relationships. This paper will discuss the complexities that digital media has on Indigenous identity and by using Indigitalgames.com to show video games like *Until Dawn* and *Assassins Creed 3*'s complex tropes of Indigenous cultures can be used to counteract negative representations of Indigenous people through digital content aimed at educating multiple generations of peoples on video game stereotypes.

Digital media can reshape the way people perceive cultures, and communities as generations of younger people continue exploring this media through technology. Digital technology is an interest for many Indigenous communities who wish to pursue etiquette ways of including their cultures into newer forms of technology. Perceptions surrounding space and the importance of physical space come into question as more Indigenous peoples rely on digital space for connecting with their communities. As younger generations of Indigenous peoples continue to move away from their traditional homelands, the higher the reliance on digital media to stay connected with family back home becomes. Messaging, however, can consistently change within digital spaces as there becomes more input from people sharing similar backgrounds, experiences, and relationships. For many communities, this becomes a concern when representations within digital media become intertwined traditional roles and other information associations. As Joshua describes in his book; *No Sense of Place*:

*The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*; “The change in the information characteristics of traditional groups lead to two complementary phenomena: the decreasing importance of traditional group ties and the increasing importance of other types of association” (Meyrowitz, 131). Connectivity through digital media for Indigenous communities raises concerns as many feel digital space assimilates communities and traditions. It is up to re-establishing the importance of roles and responsibilities within communities through digital media to rebalance what potential disconnections may arise while incorporating digital space into physical spaces.

Roles and responsibilities can continue to resemble parts in natural communities if input and relationships continue to be reflected similarly within digital spaces. Reconnecting physically disconnected people to communities through digital space is essential, as technology can quickly bring individuals back into their respective communities. It is important to note, that because physical presence declines within Indigenous communities with every generation, roles of elders and youth can still preserve the importance of relationships through contributions in digital space. Knowledge can again be passed down, and relations can always be upheld using technology. As Joshua explains; “Electronic media affect social roles because they bypass the communication networks that once made particular places unique. More and more, people are living in a national (or international) information system rather than a local town or city” (Meyowrityz, 146). Reconstructing relationships within Indigenous communities by using digital media allows families to reconnect that are separated by physical space. However, concerns arise as aspects of identity become harder to simulate within digital media outlets that involve larger, multi-ethnic groups, which incorporate more substantial inputs from people that undermined or underestimate essential aspects of a particular culture.

Relationships within the digital realm have considerably more identity issues when relating to physical ones. Part of the problem, as Joshua describes is that; “The integration of social spheres does not simply give people new places to play their old roles; it changes the roles that are played. As place and information access become disconnected, place-behaviors and activities begin to fade” (Meyrowitz, 148). Within physical connections, roles of elders or community leaders become tied to community presence. These social spheres reinforce the importance of continuing roles and responsibilities, tying people back into their culture. Digital media plays a significant role in rebuilding mentioned relationships, as more and more Indigenous youth travel away from their home communities pursuing a career or personal interests. Using social media sites, blogs or even digital phone channels like Skype or Discord, youth can now reconnect and often teach older generations to harness these technology gifts as tools for reinforcing positive relationships. What digital sites achieve is significant, as on the one hand they can strengthen roles and responsibilities of older people in the community, but can change how to address challenges from being physically distant from their community. As technology continues to develop and expand concepts of space, people use this space as an opportunity to inform and to connect with others over vast distances.

Additionally, to explore ideas and values that otherwise would not be accessible in the physical area. As Eric explains;

“local space is defined by a users ability to locate information flows.. local information acquisition, once regulated to the sidewalk conversation, church meetings, town halls, is now potentially extended to the internet or mobile phone... In each case, they are privy to local

information without setting foot in the physical space to which information is accessed, in a networked society..." (26).

Video games differentiate from other popular forms of media like comic books and television shows or movies, that loosely identify Indigenous characters only through visual and auditorial cues, whereas video games combine these formats to enhance representations.

Video games present information to a multitude of different generations that play them. For comparison, books have confidently separate age groups according to the complexities of the material, whereas digital media like video games allow the more adult-oriented content to be accessed more readily for younger generations. Eric describes this as; "A child's age was once a prime determinant of what he or she knew. Very different types of children were exposed to similar information because they were in the same age group. Now, children of every age are presented with "all-age" social information through electronic media" (Meyerowitz, 151). An "all-ages" information system dissolves the restrictive order placed on written information, as the specific or adult-focused content is more available or accessible on the platform. Information in digital media consistently shifts and changes depending on who or what factors contribute within them. Multiple aspects of Indigenous imagery portray the complexities facing identity, culture and traditional values when describing what makes an Indigenous person Indigenous. Using examples like *Until Dawn*, *Assassins Creed 3* as well as others, provides examples of non-Indigenous video game companies reconstructing Indigenous cultures in their games. *Indigitalgames* examines some of the portrayals that famous video game developers use to devalue Indigenous people. Some examples that are used by non-Indigenous video game developers are mystical, or Wendigo depictions that are used to reconstruct essential traditions surrounding spiritual lessons. As well as hyper-violent warrior imagery, that deconstructs vital roles warrior teachings have on Indigenous men. Both examples show that adverse impacts are displaying beyond what the game visually presents to the player.

#### *Mystical and Wendigos in Until Dawn*

A dominant contributing trope continuing to restrict representations of Indigenous cultures, communities, and traditions is through mystical and Wendigo tropes. These tropes share similar relationships with the "savage" or "noble savage" tropes as their representations other and limit mystical or traditional ties of Indigenous communities to their past. In video game media, mystical or Wendigos are used as historical lore within the game as a justification for the demonic nature that the game takes place within. Mystical representations include tropes like spiritual creatures such as the Wendigo in *Until Dawn* are the antagonists that the player must conquer to fight their way out of a remote cottage in the northern Alberta winter. Shape-shifters are a part of many First Nations cultures and have become popular plot devices in recent popular literature- especially the subgenre of horror/science fiction. In *Shape-shifting: Images of Native Americans in Recent Popular Fiction*, Macdonald, Macdonald and Sheridan (2000) describe shape-shifting as;

"a human being changing into another living creature- for example. The shamanistic idea of the Lakota Sioux warriors shape-shifting into buffalo or wolves to enhance hunting skills and to honor the animal hunted... In general, it carries the idea of metamorphosis, of transformation from one form to another, or to some degree, becoming the other, sharing point of view and lifeway" (Adare, xvii; MacDonald et al., xiv-xv).

One example that uses the Wendigo or mystical tropes as the backbone to their storylines is *Until Dawn*. This game reinforces a character that “others” or disassociates essential teachings involving traditions, vital lessons or cultures that many Indigenous cultures would use to reiterate fundamental cultural ties that are passed down through younger generations.

*Until Dawn* is a 3rd person horror adventure game set in an isolated cabin in the northern mountains of Alberta, Canada. In the game, you take control of 9 friends who return to the family cabin one year after a tragic event. Throughout the game, the player controls multiple characters between chapters, often exploring both new and familiar surroundings previously examined. The main story revolves around the teenagers, as shortly after reaching the cabin, something or someone begins to hunt them down. Every interaction, dialogue choice and button press or button miss press impacts the character’s path through their portion of the story.

The “butterfly effect” as the game describes it early on, is the primary mechanism that revolves around the player’s choices and weaves them into pieces of the story. Every decision the player makes shifts the story into another direction. For example, if the player decides one character should be killed or accidentally fails a chase scene, where button combination completions are required to see a character safely cross a dangerous section of the level, the player will lose a piece of the story that only that player can acquire. Ultimately, player choice having such a substantial impact on the story is an essential mechanic that keeps the player emotionally invested in ensuring every character contributes to their portion of the game.

The story involving the playable characters is not the only story told, however, as the player explores the mountain environment, they will find side story tidbits revolving around the previous residents living up on the mountain. The game describes the mountain as having a checkered history. The game details that in 1893, “the Cree” were the original inhabitants amongst the mountain. Upon colonial expansion, Tin and Radium were discovered in the region causing a massive mining boom. After a lack of maintenance, a devastating structural collapse in the mine caused 30 miners to be trapped in the intricate tunnels of the pit. After numerous days of surviving on only a small stream of water, 12 miners resorting to cannibalism. The miners were found and rescued and placed into the recently built Blackwood Asylum, where the miners would slowly turn into cannibalistic creatures. In the early 1990’s, property near the Asylum was purchased by the American movie mogul Bob Washington and a vacation home was soon constructed. This vacation home is the location surrounding the player’s main story.

*Until Dawn* uses mystical or Wendigo representations throughout the main story of the game. Firstly, the Indigenous group that the story revolves around is the Cree. The Wendigo depicted in the game are based on legends that describe a creature or monster who transforms from a human into a cannibalistic monster. The story states that anyone who ate human flesh would run the risk of being possessed by the Wendigo around the Blackwood Mountain. During a playthrough, if the player finds the “Strangers Journal,” it describes that the Cree believed that the Blackwood Mountain was sacred land. It also details that prophecies were foretold of butterflies guiding ones to wither good or bad fortune. As mining began to disrupt the holy grounds, the Wendigo was released. The attachment that once solidly connected the Cree nation to the Blackwood Mountain region would dissipate by the destructive measures of mining in the area.

Over consuming resources are also described as another symptom of transforming a person into a Wendigo. Basil Johnson argues in; *The Manitou: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*, that overconsumption of an individual rather than supporting his/her family can also contribute to the Wendigo becoming stronger.

“There is nothing more harmful in humankind’s inclination to rest, play, celebrate, feast, and pursue hobbies. The trouble is that some people don’t know when to stop and appear not to care, because nature, or Kitchi-Manitou, has endowed them with slightly more than is good for them: appetites, passions, and desires that dilute their talents, common sense, and judgment. It doesn’t take much. A fraction too much or too little of anger, envy, or lust is enough to create an imbalance in a person’s character to impair his or her judgment and weaken his or her resolution” (Johnston 223-224).

Johnston describes the rapid western colonial expansion, similarly to the development mentioned in the game, as a crucial contributor to the survival of the Wendigo entity. As Johnson indicates that the ends of business deal with power, wealth, and profit. Anything that diminishes the return, ensuring not to violate the rights of others or; “to ensure the land remains fertile and productive for future generations...”(Johnston, 237). When exploring the miner’s side story clues, the player would find out the history of the miners themselves and 1952 mine collapse. The game also makes mention in a Journal clue found as a secondary source of information about the slow transition into Wendigo’s as some would resort to cannibalism. It is important to note that the game designers did not use resource extracting as another symptom that would lead the miners to turn into Wendigo’s, only the idea of resorting to cannibalism set the transformation into play.

Until Dawn plays with an iconic 1980’s horror movie trope setting to tell a story of isolation, desperation, and revenge. The mystery surrounding the Wendigo is solely upon the fear surrounding nonhuman actions like cannibalism rather than a multitude of factors that could change a character into a Wendigo like greed, or cannibalism as Johnston describes earlier. The depiction of wendigoes as a “mythical” or nonhuman like entity that completely dissociates the creature from a human. The game uses Wendigoes as creatures that only transform through nonhuman actions (cannibalism) and not that of massive resource extraction. Another example that takes on a different form of negative stereotyping is through the Warrior representation used in Assassins Creed 3.

#### *Warrior and “Hyper Violence”*

The player portrays the warrior representation in the game Assassin’s Creed 3. In Assassin’s Creed 3, the player controls the character named Desmond Miles, who uses a futuristic device called the Animus to travel back in time to fight an organization trying to run the world called Templars. During this setting, Desmond will use the Animus to live out one of his Native America relatives during the American Revolutionary War period. Connor, Ratonhnhaké who is a half-English, half-Mohawk man whose father is a part of the Templars. The player may play an active role in warriorhood in Assassin’s Creed 3, but some factors continue to reinforce unhealthy aspects involving Indigenous men and violence within Assassins Creed 3. In Assassin’s Creed 3, Ratonhnhaké must build up an army in which helps him continue his search throughout the Americas for his father, Haythem Kenway. Kenway, early on within the game finds, kills and burns down Ratonhnhaké community. The player experiences the harsh realities of interactions between early colonial settlers and Indigenous

communities. Showing Ratonhnhaké as a small child losing his community gives the player the understanding of his struggles throughout the game, forcing the player to explore and interact with the environment and continue to grow with Ratonhnhaké. The destruction of the community by his father paints Ratonhnhaké as an underdog being forced to overcome such obstacles to survive. This event occurs while, Ratonhnhaké is still a young child, attempting to get the player to sympathize with Ratonhnhaké as after seeing his community destroyed, he must kill everyone involved. What *Assassins Creed 3* illustrates is a very violent event of “warrior” mentality where Ratonhnhaké must then partake in violently assassinating everyone held responsible for his communities extinction.

Hyper “warrior” mentality is a destructive accomplice in many Indigenous communities surrounding the men. However, one example of warriorhood that is described by Thomas Ka’auwai Kaulukui Jr in the book; *Indigenous Men and Masculinities* as warriorhood coming from the deity Ku, which represents the god of war. In the interview, Ty.P. Kawika Tengen writes: “In actuality, Ku is a deity of male generative force and productivity, and including statecraft, governance, farming, fishing, and healing; even more broadly, Ku is seen as the masculine component of society that compliments Hina, the Feminine” (Tengen, 229). Kaulukukui explains that Ku mainly represents responsibility. The responsibility of one’s self regarding ethics, morality, having good values, being in substantial physical strength. All factors contribute to responsibilities surrounding “protection, building, and carrying the heavy physical loads and all of those things which are necessary for a male role in society” (Kaulukui, 230- 231). Roles and responsibility then sprout out from self to family, then to the community and finally to nations. Throughout the interview, there are conversations about Kaulukui’s time serving in the military and the experiences he sees in other Indigenous men dealing with their Kus. In the interview Kaulukukui discusses that one of the most important things in which Indigenous warriors need to do when dealing with this built up Ku is to rather than fighting with that aspect of life, there needs to be recognition that Ku is a part of who Indigenous men are. Secondly, Kaulukukui mentions that recognition of the community needs is vital for what is acceptable conduct within a civilized society, separating that from the violent actions appropriate in war. Lastly, Kaulukukui mentions that then the men would need to:

“deal with the experience itself and try to translate the experience of battle into something that is positive, has made you stronger so that you can move forward to carry your community responsibilities in the peacetime effort... take those things in which can be seen as a negative experience and look at the positive aspects of it that make you stronger and better to live a better life to carry your kuleana here” (Kaulukukui, 232).

Ultimately suggesting, that the warriorhood mentality is something that is inside every Indigenous male and that for that kuleana to remain positive, violent actions that only hurt oneself or the people around them must be dealt with accordingly.

Throughout *Assassins Creed 3*, the family values that Kaulukukui mention in his interview with Kawika Tengen are absent in Ratonhnhaké as he ventures through his story. The character deals with his “warriorhood” by lashing out, assaulting and killing the people responsible, continuing to address the pain of loss through violence. The character never looks at his actions as destructive within the community he makes. Often, Ratonhnhaké divides his new community and the “real” world, even more, apart from as the player progresses through the game. The community that Ratonhnhaké creates is that in which all have similar desires. That desire is to kill every Templar (who are British

colonizers) and to obtain an abundant amount of wealth. This community is not family or that of even nationhood; it forms the image of the colonizers.

*Concluding thoughts:*

With video games like *Until Dawn* and *Assassins Creed 3* incorporating harmful tropes and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as the games main narratives, the importance of Indigenous identity dissolves. The lack of identity leaves younger Indigenous peoples lacking traditional teachings, or the desire to seek out that knowledge as they feel mainstream media has portrayed their cultures as harmful or destructive. However, by providing analyzed information surrounding multiple types of tropes and stereotypes, numerous generations of Indigenous peoples can seek out educational opportunities that constructively display harmful tropes. Having blog type entries like *Until Dawn* and *Assassins Creed 3* shown as examples, the project can enhance the significance of essential roles involving spirituality, the importance of warriorhood, as well as other factors that greatly hinder positive aspects of Indigenous cultures, communities, and traditions for generations of Indigenous peoples. The continuation of blog entries that present both positive and negative tropes continue to expand concepts of Indigenous identity, as well as address concerns about cultures expanding into digital media. Roles, responsibilities, and communities can draw upon video games that detail specific examples that either incorporate examples of positive cases or as shown with the examples given in this essay, dissolve essential aspects of Indigenous culture. As each game adds another example of the complex nature surrounding Indigenous representations in video games, *Indigitalgames.com* wants to present these issues in a suitable way that can be consumed by multiple generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that further the conversations surrounding positive digital media relationships of cultures, traditions, and communities.

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