

IIF Symposium Toronto - Elizabeth LaPenseÃ Âe

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00:17 Speaker 1: Aaniin. I'm currently living in Minnesota, but I was born and raised on the West Coast. And I am Anishinaabe and Métis and I will be talking about games as a pathway to indigenous futurisms. And when I talk about games, I'm actually just talking about the full range. Not just digital games and video games. But in my work, I'm really looking again, as I think is a theme in a lot of this work, past the present and the future, all simultaneously. And then when I talk about indigenous futurisms, I'm actually just taking that term from my mother, Grace Dylan, who is a scholar in indigenous science fiction. I was just raised in this. I was raised queueing up Dead Man alongside Smoke Signals, alongside Blade Runner. And she would take these film clips into her class and have conversations and test things out on me. And so I've seen those films and snippets very often.

01:20 S1: I've heard a lot of the nice music that comes in those films many, many, many times. And cued up tapes. So that was what I was raised in. Now, the work that I do is what comes to me. So I've never come into a community and said, "Hey! Let's make games! Games are the answer!" Because I don't think that's necessarily the case. I think that when we're talking about language and passing on teachings, it's very important we understand that games can be complimentary but are in no way meant to replace other forms of interaction.

01:57 S1: For example, most recently, I worked on a board game with the Northwest Indian College called the Gift of Food which was about passing on traditional teachings and values about the foods. In the game, each player has a basket and you gather foods as you go along. And it's all seasonal game play. There are things that are interesting to me about this. When you see games as systems of understanding, then you can portray our ways of knowing through the game play itself. And we've found that not just youth, but I prefer to work with inter-generational games. For example, this game, it's for all ages, essentially whoever can play it. Usually like 8 and up for this one. In that inter-generational game play, it's intrinsic. They're participating in the culture through action in every moment. And we can think also in games about how we're representing space, space time, how we're interacting with whose taking a turn when. All of these different aspects come into play.

03:13 S1: I'm also very inspired by the work of Allen Turner, who created what's basically the Dungeons and Dragons in an indigenous way. And that work came out of, he was sitting down... Does anyone know about Dungeons and Dragons or paper role play, like table top role playing, that kind of thing? I'm getting a few nods.

[background conversation]

[laughter]

03:40 Speaker 2: You should do just a quick tiny little definition of what it is.

03:43 S1: So for all of those who play... I actually have not really played table top games myself that much. But I can try to define them. Essentially, you have a character sheet. You create a

character. And primarily the form of game play is rolling dice and taking actions. And the dice determine if the action was successful or not. Primarily, it's narrative game play. You have someone who guides the story and the game play, and a whole complex narrative. Allen Turner was bringing that game into communities and he found that there were situations where communities would get uncomfortable. Because for example, the scenarios written into the book were very Western minded.

04:30 S1: There're things like, "Go into the tomb, raid and steal from the people who have passed on." That's not acceptable. It would make people uncomfortable. So he worked on creating an alternate system based on being Lakota himself. So I think that whether we're talking about video games with more vast use of technology or talking about paper games, we can understand each of these as systems; as systems that we're walking into and that we're walking out of.

05:05 S1: Now of course, there's a nod here to the origin work of Aboriginal Territories in Cyber Space, of running the skins game development work shops. And I feel that the curriculum that was developed for this, the process, the way that you've come together and look at traditional stories, interact with elders and story tellers along with themselves, their peers, and work on developing the game is representative of them as well as the community. I've always been very inspired by this work that has come out. And I hope that with the kinds of access that we have now, that this work will grow more and more and more. So what we're seeing is just an extreme amount of access compared to what we had before. John Romero is Yaqui and Cherokee.

06:00 S1: And he created Doom, which is basically a foundational game as far as game industry is concerned. It's only come out very recently that he is native and part of this is because there's more awareness about it, there's conversations about it happening and it has actually made some people in the game industry very uncomfortable. So when I say, "Hey, did you know that this foundational game which basically changed space, the understanding of how space is represented in games came from a Yaqui and Cherokee developer?" It can make other people very uncomfortable because my belief is that our ways of knowing can shift the technology and expand the technology; that we're not just stuck working within the constraints or rather that we can expand them out. And we've seen that with Never Alone. So Never Alone just recently came out. It's the first indigenous game for platform release. It's on consoles, very wide release on Xbox 360 and also available for PC and it was a collaboration between the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and E-line media.

07:14 S1: The thing that I personally find inspiring about this game are some aspects of the game play. So it's a platformer and in a platformer, your character walks along and you have encounters as you go along. Something that I found interesting about this game is that wind takes form in the game and sometimes the wind shifts to your benefit and sometimes it's not to your benefit. And so aspects like that that represent their thinking as a Cook Inlet Tribal Council as they came together and were discussing the game and how they wanted certain aspects portrayed can actually be built into the gameplay itself. And then you just have people making a lot of games right now. So Derek Baxter who works through a GOKey learning system primarily started off in languages apps that were very popular. He now does app workshops, and within five days communities are making apps of whatever they want. And in this case, I mean obviously there's a ninja in there [laughter] and there's some things that wouldn't necessarily be considered a part of their culture, but what's important that I'm seeing is that first and foremost this is about indigenous people having access to

the tools and skills to create and then from there, how they're using that is for each person to determine.

08:47 S1: So with that in mind while we're talking about virtual reality, and I have mad respect for all the work that's happening in there right now. Personally in my own work that's just not accessible to me. Up until fairly recently, I've been living in a place where I'm on the other side of the digital divide. I can't even download a lot of these games that people are buying. I can't get online to play games. I can kind of load up, from Jarrett over there, part of RPM.fm. I can kinda load on SoundCloud, but I have to watch the amount of time 'cause it eats up the space and I'm like, "I just want the download." So I'm always grateful when there's a download. So that's the kind of environment that I've been living in and I know that I'm not alone in that. I know there are many other people who live in that situation as far as internet access goes, given that we are part of indigenous communities. So with that in mind, I have been focusing on mobile games, because I feel that these are some of the most accessfull ways to reach many different people and I'm just playing at this point and trying to reach people with just little tweaks of messages and again, the meaning is in the meaning you make, you can go play that game just downstairs.

10:11 S1: So this is a little bit of it. In this game, there are a couple of things that I was looking to do that would differ from the original Space Invaders. So this is based off of an arcade game and also inspired by art, by Steven Paul Judd and there are a couple of things I wanted to do in this game. I wanted to... Within the constraints of a mobile game. One of the aspects was that, it has always bothered me how lives are represented by numbers in games. Like, "Oh it's just, we're quantifying our life by these replaceable numbers." When that is not actually the case. When you lose a life in this game, you're losing another community member on the screen. Those are actually a part of the original art from Steven Paul Judd, and those are individuals they're not you, they're other community members reinforcing the connectedness between the characters, so just for example. And again, this work doesn't always have to get to the level of Never Alone. One of the cautions that I have that I'll talk about here is the amount of funding that's going into this. So from what I know, Never Alone cost two million dollars to develop.

11:35 S1: They made enough back to cover the cost, but they're not making enough to actually benefit the community and originally... So it's difficult, I think, to say that games are the answer for making back money or looking in industry models. So I'm looking more at games as art or games as forms of expression. Games for learning, different aspects of this so that we're looking at it more from that perspective, 'cause I'm not sure that games as a way to make money is necessarily viable. And I can say, from at least Never Alone, that that was not what happened. And the story that's being told is not actually telling you that, so this is kind of off-record in this group, but now on camera, so... [laughter] But I just want to be honest with everyone. You know we get this a lot, where we walk in we're like, "Games are the answer." Or, "VR is the answer." And constantly creating is the answer.

12:39 S1: So, with Blood Quantum coming out from Renee Nejo, she's dealing with, in the mechanics themselves, her own personal struggle with representations of Blood Quantum. And in the game there are these little droplets, gray droplets and blue droplets. And the gray droplets come and they steal your blue droplets and they will become gray over time. And if they reach a certain gradation of grayness, they will not come back. You can go and try to retrieve them, but they will

stay at a certain point. It's not really a fun game to play. [laughter] It's actually really sad. But in this case she says, "Well, you know that's the experience that I'm creating." And so that to me is what I'm most excited about, is games that are actually getting into forms of expression for everyone.

13:40 S1: And then you also have just... I'm very excited about... The depth of interaction that is possible with games. So there's a singing game out right now and there's going to be an Anishinaabemowin add-on soon. And what you do in the game is you are listening to songs and you're singing back, and your point score is based off of... Well, it's not like a point, it's kind of more a visual representation, it's like "Oh, you hit that phrase. You hit that phrase. You hit that phrase." And people are learning the language from the other game that they have been playing and bringing around.

14:20 S1: People are learning language, because they're doing it, actively in the moment, as opposed to this web space we get locked into with language-learning, where you're just... You see an image of an animal and you're supposed to click the word that aligns with the animal and then that's how... It puts it in a test mode, which I think is Western way of thinking and is not really getting people directly involved in the language. It's more like trying to test that you prove, that you know a phrase. That, to me, is not speaking the language; that's just memorization.

15:00 S1: So with games like this, there can be a lot more depth and I'm hoping to see more of this singing, actively moving, other aspects like this. And I think that we can be inspired by the depth of VR in that regard. So, what is it from VR that I would want to see in games? It'd be the motion and the sense of depth that's happening, and I think that that can be done in other spaces too. So, with that in mind there are also some really beautiful games coming out now from indigenous communities, and they are all ones that will be out for making profit. And I'm excited to see these because they are expressing the culture, getting access to a wide range of audiences. And they're just... It's really beautiful to see indigenous-made games alongside other independent games in these circles. This is fairly new.

16:02 S1: This last year we had the first-ever Natives in Game Dev gathering, where we brought together... Jason Edward Louis was a part of that. We brought together a community of game developers from all over to have discussions about this and what kind of work we want to see next. This is Treachery in Beatdown City, which is not just with native representations, it has a wide range of representations in it. And I think that is also a beautiful aspect, that... And there are aspects in here that relate to the way that the music was done. They're very... It's just more intricate, I think, and related to the developers and their experiences working from within game industry and being, in a way... Their voices are already acts of activism or acts of survivance because a lot of us are still working within the constraints of being in industry and working contracts or working on games we don't necessarily want to be a part of, but that we need to be.

17:08 S1: So, then from there, the experience that we're gaining we can expand out into our own works. There's a lot more independent work coming out. This work is coming out from an Algonquin developer, Julia Detar, and this is going to be out at the Indie Games Festival, at that kind of level, so similar to Never Alone in terms of access and representation. It is not overtly indigenous; there are no representations of indigenous people in the game, but the theme is very environmental. And so I think that that kind of work is very interesting, where it's not necessarily

about indigenous representations, and having regalia, or even having humans at all, but rather are representing land, sky, stars, water, plants and so on. Animals... So, having said all of this, what I'm working on right now is a mobile game that touches on that note too, with environmentalism you could say.

18:22 S1: So the next game I'm working on is a mobile game called Thunderbird Strike and it's a simple bomber game where you are a thunder bird flying and you're zapping lightning down at mining company buildings and equipment and for the more you destroy, the higher your score. My hope is to release this game for free, again because the kind of work that I'm doing is about the messages and I wanted to reach as many people as possible. So I'm looking at alternate models of getting this work out there. I found that being more in the area of art is more supportive in understanding what I'm doing with the kind of games that I'm working on. But, having said that, again games can be used for language, health. They're being used in many different ways, with caution, because I have seen games that are being used in very negative ways. So, for example, Algonquin University has a lab there where they do incubation projects and I asked them if they had any Aboriginal games that they were working on. And yes, they did, so I was very excited. I was like "Great, I'm so excited to see this work. What is it going to be?"

19:40 S1: Well, the game was all built to convince you to go work for the mining companies that were stripping their land of their resources, right? That's what a lot of this funding is being put into. Because what games do by immersing you so immensely in that space, is that you're taking action in these games, right? So for all of this there's some caution I have. I want to see more work where we're singing, where we're moving, where we're actually going out onto the land as we're playing the game and maybe interacting with plants in a safer way, so that we're learning about plants and being able to feel like there's some reward for looking at plants, or being around plants, and you're getting that feedback system through the game, but that you're not actually picking the plants, because that's what's happening right now. In a lot of effort to revive knowledge, there are also ways in which non-indigenous communities are going way overboard and going into community spaces and actually just taking and taking and taking and taking. And it's all under this disguise of, "We respect the land, we want to learn about the land." It's just further colonization, you're just continuing to take and not offer respect and not tend to the plants that are in that place.

21:04 S1: So an alternative might be, well here is this app that you can look at and this game you can interact with and so you can learn this knowledge and you can learn how, through it, to respect the land while not actually taking from the land. So on that note I'll open up to questions because again, this is still a very wide open area. There's a lot of really incredible work. This is the first time at Imaginative where we've ever had specifically a game exhibit where it's been a whole arrangement of games. This is a first time ever, so I'm very happy to see that and very honoured to be a part of this. And I know that a lot of that, where we are today, is in large part because of Aboriginal territories in cyberspace and because of their ongoing commitment to running youth workshops and their collaborations with Imaginative overtime, so thank you too for that. Questions?

22:04 Speaker 3: Cheryl?

22:06 Speaker 4: More like a comment or maybe something to put in your bonnet and think about.

There's the new fund at Canada Counsel for International Travel which is meant to sort of be a RD opportunity, but it's meant to go internationally, to go to a lab somewhere and do some international Travel. And when you're talking about what funding is being used for, the type of projects, I think it would be interesting for this group, for your project, Jason and Skawennati and Steven to sort of really using it as a bit of a lobby to talk about what is it when the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe decide that they're going to do a project together? That's an international project. That's a project between nations, and it would be great to be able to use what you're doing as a way to lobby for that as well. Because I think that would be a great way to lever funds to do interesting projects where we don't have to go to Holland or to someplace else.

23:06 S1: I'll add to that real quick. It's related. I'm jumping. I'm a Anishinaabe and Metis I can't help myself, it's just built in. So with that, so international connections, I think also what I want to see are residencies or workshops where it brings people together from all different areas, but also all different areas of our work because a beautiful thing about games is, you can have music, audio. Just recently Trevino Brings Plenty created music for Invaders and that was something he learned how to do as someone who works in some beats and things like that. But there are a lot of other amazing indigenous musicians who can and should have their music in games. I think there'd be a really brilliant depth to that kind of work happening. The same thing of designers, artists, even photographers, documentarians.

23:58 S1: I think that there are so many incredible people out there right now with strong foundations of work, that I'd like to see kinda us at this level coming together. And I've dedicated well over 10 years now to youth workshops, so I feel like at this point I really wanna see this level of people come together and talk about our work, and our previous work, and see what we can create. Because we could and should be making right now, like this year, and getting our work into the Game Developer's Conference, into the Indie Games Festival, into these wider game spaces. To get our voices out there, I think, is very important. So that's something that I would like to see.

24:50 S3: Brilliant, yeah.