

NEW MEDIA REVIEW

In/consequential Relationships: Refusing Colonial Ethics of Engagement in Yuxweluptun's Inherent Rights, Vision Rights

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Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories

Curated by Karen Duffek and Tania Willard

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ON THE CLOSING DAY OF the Museum of Anthropology's *Unceded Territories* exhibit of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's art, crowds formed queues long enough to snake through the halls and to pack the exhibit space for the final artist's talk. Given this incredible turnout and the attention that his paintings and #RenameBC project received, I was surprised to see one of the most unique pieces in the exhibit garner little engagement from visitors and media alike. In the centre of the exhibit, Yuxweluptun's 1992 virtual reality machine, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights (IRVR)*, remained unoccupied for most of my two visits to the museum. Compared to newer and sleeker virtual reality (VR) headsets, its PC-based and wired construction is dated. But in a time of unprecedentedly expansive and immersive VR experiences, *IRVR* has continued relevance. Positioned between paintings challenging Western scientific claims to intellectual authority on the one hand, and the perseverance of Indigenous ontologies on the other, this work raises powerful critiques for visitors to unceded territories – exhibit and geography both.

Taking up one of the first critical engagements with *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* – Loretta Todd's "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace" – this review considers the ways that *IRVR* not only enables users' abilities to "portray themselves" but, in turn, refuses to allow settler subjects to proceed uninterrupted in executing colonial ontologies.¹ With a view-

¹ Loretta Todd, "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace," in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser and Douglas Macleod (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 192.



Figure 1. Installation shot of *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun shown at the Museum of Anthropology, UBC. Photo by Kyla Baile

finder, headphones, and joystick, *IRVR*'s virtual environment is designed to react to the user's navigational decisions in challenging ways, refusing settler desires for consequence-free relationships to space that characterize museums and cyberspace alike.

Virtual reality is an old technology and an even older concept. And in the more than twenty-five years since *IRVR*'s creation, VR technology has become more refined and accessible. But the colonial frameworks that inspired the technology continue to dominate our embodied and virtual realities. Last year saw the release of perhaps the most expansive open world game of all time, *No Man's Sky*, which uses procedural generation to provide more than 18 *quintillion* planets for players to "discover," rendering infinity "yours for the taking."² While the game trades in pixels rather than physical plots, its premise echoes the *terra nullius* narratives that were used to foster settlement by feeding a growing sense of white entitlement to Indigenous lands in what is now known as North America. The game offers users limitless "unoccupied" space in which to engage

² Hello Games, "About," *No Man's Sky*, 13 June 2014, <http://www.no-mans-sky.com/about/>.

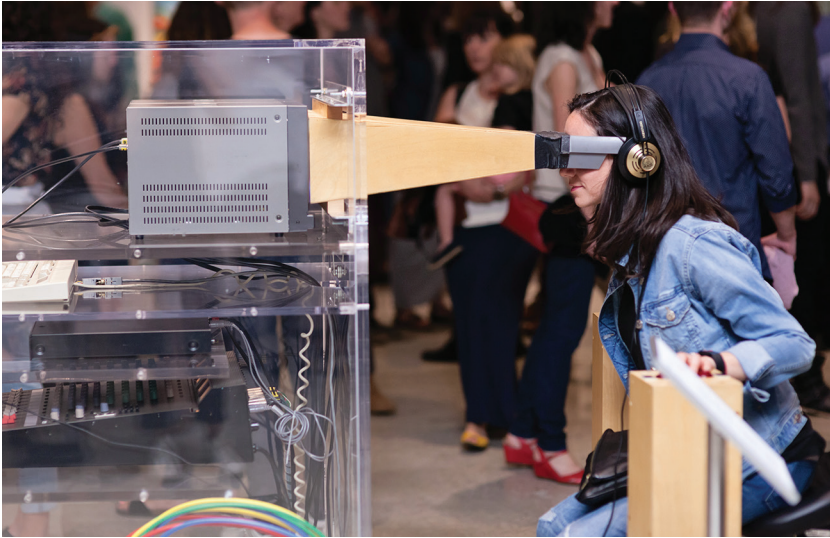


Figure 2. Detail of *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* from the opening night of the exhibition *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun – Unceded Territories* at the Museum of Anthropology, UBC. Photo by Jayme Dunn.

according to the same terms as were used to solidify settlement: assuming authority over the world's inhabitants through naming, performing entitlement to the world's resources through extraction, and prioritizing one's own wealth by attacking those who interfere with these projects.³ The ongoing normalization of these behaviours highlights the continued importance of projects like *IRVR*, which design Indigenous ontologies into cyberspace.

Indigenous people and people of colour have continually critiqued, traced, and theorized these normative inheritances. And, as norms, they rely on the maintenance of specific conditions to enable their existence. As Cree/Métis director Loretta Todd explains, Western culture's appetite for everything and everywhere is enabled to grow by building worlds in which settlers are "[free] from consequence": asserting dominance over lands and their inhabitants – virtual or material – is only conceivable if you are not party to relationships that will hold you to account for doing so.⁴ In *No Man's Sky*, for example, police *might* pursue you for killing other human or non-human animals, but not for imposing other irreversible changes on the landscape, including blasting holes through rock faces.⁵ In other

³ Ibid.

⁴ Todd, "Aboriginal Narratives," 186.

⁵ "No Man's Sky: 18 Minute Gameplay Demo - IGN First," IGN, YouTube video, 9:30, 6 July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLcjvIQJnso>.

words, the game entitles players to make resources of landscapes without hesitation or heed to any pre-existing relationships and legal systems.

Indeed, contrary to narratives about cyberspace as more “free” than our embodied realities, we design and enter VR with the same ethical and ontological frameworks that we use to navigate our material reality more broadly. This often produces expansive virtual worlds that are just as – if not more – violent, alienating, and oppressive than our embodied realities. In these spaces, colonizing subjects can conjure digital landscapes with 18 quintillion planets, while sustainable, nuanced, and just terms of engagement therewith seem unimaginable. With such limitless entitlement to space, then, is Yuxweluptun’s *IRVR* not just another space that settler audiences can explore through a colonial lens?

Like other VR environments, *IRVR* presents the opportunity for users to enter a space and undertake actions to which they may not otherwise have access. *IRVR* opens beneath a moonlit sky, with the user down the path from a longhouse, smoke rising from its top. In first-person perspective, users can then navigate up to, in, and around the virtual longhouse, in which singing and drumming are audible. For many Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, this may represent a first engagement with longhouse ceremony, a first virtual engagement, or a first engagement outside of one’s own customs and relations. In a museum space, where fragments of Indigenous cultures have been objectified, generalized, and “shared” outside of their political and geographical relationships, these interactions risk complicity in colonial consumption, objectification, and exploitation. And given the maintenance of colonial norms in mainstream VR design, *IRVR* users enter the longhouse scene at the intersection of two powerful sites of colonial power.

But Indigenous critiques do more than simply respond to and document colonialism in museums and cyberspace; as in the embodied realm, Indigenous communities and artists build worlds founded in Indigenous ontologies that imagine colonial terms of engagement out of existence, refusing to maintain the conditions for the normalization of colonial behaviour. If colonial exploitation requires separation from relationships of consequence by objectifying the environment into presumed unresponsiveness, then Todd’s description of an Indigenous world of relations as “a world of subjects to subjects” provides a foundation for these refusals. Such worlds are those in which “freedom from consequences” becomes unimaginable because the environment cannot be objectified by those assumed superior.⁶

This relational ontology is embedded in *IRVR*’s design. As described above, *IRVR* normally offers users a joystick to navigate a virtual longhouse

⁶ Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives,” 182.

in which fire pits are active and ovoid beings are dancing, drumming, and vocalizing. During my visits, the installation was out of order; instead of navigating towards, around, or within the longhouse themselves, users could watch a recording of someone else's navigation choices through the viewfinder. In this recording, the user walks up and into the longhouse and moves around inside, approaching the fires and ovoid beings as they appear and dissipate. These animations make clear that the user is not the only agential actor in the space; instead of navigating an "unresponsive" environment as an observer, as in an art exhibit, the user's movements trigger reactions from other occupants. At one point during the recording, an ovoid figure vocalizes and moves towards the user before disappearing from view, perhaps having moved through them. It was overwhelming to witness and immediately prompted questions: What happened? Who was the figure? Was I (the user) hurt? Enhanced? Physically unaffected? If I had been in control of the navigation, would I have stepped so close?

These questions could only arise in a context of unfamiliarity with the particular space and occupants, and with the appropriate protocol for relating to them. Without these relational familiarities, I could not discern the actual effects of the user's actions. More significantly, had I been navigating, I would not have been able to determine an appropriate distance to keep (or not) from the figures, nor to determine whether it was appropriate to enter the longhouse in the first place. Questions like these are not prompted in (virtual) realities built through and for colonial ontologies of domination; they assume that you were always supposed to be there. But Yuxweluptun, Indigenous activists, and Indigenous ontologies more broadly demand deeper ethical reflection from all subjects: Are you actually supposed to be here? If, regardless, you are here, how will you conduct yourself?

Such questions form what Todd calls Yuxweluptun's invitation "into the mystery of the everyday."⁷ She argues that by not providing an avatar for the user, *IRVR* rejects the bodiless escapism offered by other VR projects: instead of assuming a separate identity, "you are challenged to 'portray yourself.'" While I agree that the absence of an avatar brings users into the space as themselves, it is what that design decision sets *IRVR* up to do – particularly in a museum – that is so powerful. Bringing users into the longhouse without enhancement makes explicit that they can only rely on themselves, and the behavioural ethics they already hold in the world, to guide them. But instead of indulging settler entitlement to space, *IRVR* designs the rewards for such behaviour out of existence. If users seek to control the space, they are given no opportunity; if they do

⁷ Ibid., 192.

not wish to enter the longhouse, they do not have to. And for those who do choose to enter the longhouse, *IRVR*'s reactive animations make explicit that users are in subject-to-subject relations with its other inhabitants.

Understanding *IRVR* as inviting users into different ways of relating to “the mystery of the everyday” offers a powerful way of framing subjectivity on unceded territories more broadly. In the exhibit, *IRVR* was installed facing another longhouse depiction, Yuxweluptun's 2016 floor-to-ceiling *Spirit Dancer Dances around the Fire*, and in front of *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1990). In the latter, a tower of lab coat-clad figures and paper clips attempt to patch over a hole in the sky with an insufficiently sized strip of blue, depicting the insufficiency of colonial tools for addressing colonialism's consequences. And if we take seriously that, as *IRVR* and Todd suggest, the desire for control over knowledge is a colonial tool, as settlers we have to ask ourselves what the limits and consequences of our engagement with the former – a depiction of Indigenous ceremony – might be. This lays a foundation for asking wider, more difficult questions about how we will avoid replicating the patchwork approach to justice of *Red Man Watching* – questions that can only be answered in relationship to others and by rejecting the individualized Platonic quest to know and control all.⁸ Indeed, answering these questions requires turning to the legal orders already present on the lands in which we live. As Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel writes: “It's a good thing Indigenous peoples are still here, because our legal orders address all of those questions. So why aren't you asking us?”⁹

By not designing for domination and exploitation, *IRVR* refuses to be the “somewhere else to go” for settlers seeking to escape the consequences of colonial ethics.¹⁰ Instead, in normalizing subject-to-subject relations, *IRVR* asserts that consequences are always present – even if less explicit than ovoid figures passing through you. Engaging in either virtual or material reality as if they are not is a dangerous assertion of one's separation from and superiority over these consequences, but it does not remove them from existence. And until the conditions for settler colonialism are designed out of our material realities, *Inherent Rights*, *Vision Rights* will continue to be an important intervention into (virtual) reality. Those interested in learning more about Yuxweluptun's interventions should look at the award-winning exhibit catalogue, *Unceded Territories*, edited by Secwepemc artist Tania Willard and curator Karen Duffek.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁹ Chelsea Vowel, “Beyond Territorial Acknowledgements,” *âpihtawikosisân*, blog, 23 September 2016, <http://apihtawikosisan.com/2016/09/beyond-territorial-acknowledgments/>.

¹⁰ Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives,” 182.

¹¹ Karen Duffek and Tania Willard, eds., *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories* (Vancouver: Figure 1, 2016).