NEW MEDIA REVIEW

Screen Sovereignty: Indigenous Matriarch 4 Articulating the Future of Indigenous VR

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Indigenous matriarchs are changing the culture of the technology industry through virtual reality (VR). Indigenous Matriarch 4 (IM4) is the first Indigenous virtual reality media lab and is situated on the West Coast. Currently, it offers introductory and intermediate workshops on VR and 360 video for Indigenous creators and community members. Loretta Todd is the creative director of IM4; she is joined by media matriarchs Cease Wyss, Doreen Manuel, Amethyst First Rider, and Tracey Kim Bonneau.[1] I am so grateful to have participated in IM4's series of VR workshops in February. It was the first time I learned about digital technology from Indigenous women; as a nehiyaw visual artist, I was so excited. IM4 has created an encouraging community around Indigenous VR, and it is that community that I am passionate about. The community IM4 has established is the reason I will be a VR programmer and developer. Most of my education in digital arts has been self-taught or from sources created by white men. It has been a struggle to establish myself as a capable and talented technician and digital artist over the past six years. My access to knowledge has been impeded by various barriers maintained by cis white men who predominantly occupy the digital media field and digital technology industries. This is why IM4 was so unbelievably important to me and critical to the expanding VR industry. The Indigenous women at IM4 are facilitating the tools and technology of VR for self-determined representations in media (i.e., screen sovereignty) for Indigenous people.

The experience of being in a VR headset is unique: the illusion of looking over the edge of a building feels very real. Console video games add a layer of interactivity that is combined with the experience of authorial intrusion in literature and the intimacy of radio and television. This experience is limited by reality because it is always framed within the

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[1] https://www.ecuad.ca/calendar/im4-indigenous-vr-speakers-series.

IM4 Lab
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Loretta Todd presenting during the youth virtual reality workshop at the Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association. Colin Van Loon (*left*), youth participants, and myself (*right*). Photo by Debbie Krull, 5 March 2019.

screen. VR, however, dissolves that wall entirely. Being immersed in 360 sound and video creates an environmental presence. And, until recently, I did not like or trust VR. There have been many opportunities for me to try VR, but I was unwilling to put a headset on. I knew VR could do damage. My concern was how easily the hardware could facilitate detaching from life and reality. I was worried about a surge of violent immersive content. I saw VR as an exaggeration of the proliferating destructive narratives in both video games and online. I am not certain this is avoidable, but I do think the culture of VR and digital media can be changed. I know it will be changed if Indigenous people continue to direct the culture of VR.

My interest in VR began after Nyla Inukshuk visited my Indigenous New Media class. Her stories really affected me. I had never met an Indigenous woman in the technology industry. I also had never met an Indigenous woman who knew code or programming. But it wasn't just her knowledge that inspired me, it was her ethics. Nyla expressed the idea that VR is currently interesting as an evolving and new technology because nobody is an expert. One of her projects that engaged youth with VR has particularly influenced me. She said the most powerful experience was learning alongside the youth while co-creating in VR. This was far different than the condescending and elitist technology industry I had witnessed. For the first time in years, I was excited about technology. Shortly after, I attended the IM4 workshops.

I am grateful to have attended IM4's intermediate VR workshop series and the Indigenous youth VR/360 workshop. IM4's workshops provided technical training for both introductory and advanced levels; the majority of participants were women of a wide age range who had various technical skill backgrounds. Our collective interests included developing VR for health and wellness, sports, video games, Indigenous language conservation and revitalization, and storytelling through VR cinema and 360 movies. The IM4 workshops I attended facilitated the basics of VR production through hands-on experience and basic coding for Unity, a popular game engine and animation program. When IM4 media matriarch Moni Garr taught me how to manipulate code in Unity I knew I was hooked. We each had access to the Oculus Go – a portable VR headset – and an Oculus Rift, which is the headset that I love. The Oculus Rift is different from the Go in processing capacity, which basically means it can do more. I specifically love the program Tilt Brush in the Rift: it is a tangible 3D painting experience (or perhaps, more accurately, MS Paint in VR). What I think is special about Tilt Brush is that the creations can be imported into Unity and then animated. With guidance from IM4, this is a low barrier of access for someone to create their own video game or VR experience. IM4 offers the learning environment and supportive community for Indigenous people to engage in this technology. It is mobilizing Indigenous people to affirm screen sovereignty in a powerful and immersive way.

I would like to examine screen sovereignty within the context of Michelle Raheja's visual sovereignty in film media. Raheja complicates the understanding of sovereignty by recognizing that the modality of sovereignty will manifest in specific ways for individual Nations. She writes: "Under visual sovereignty, filmmakers can deploy individual and community assertions of what sovereignty and self-representation mean and, through new media technologies, frame more imaginative renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms, such as the presentation of the spiritual and dream world, than are often possible in official political contexts."[2] With this in mind, screen sovereignty is related to visual sovereignty; but there is a distinction as the experience of VR is far different from that of traditional film. Raheja's definition translates to Indigenous VR as a channel for screen sovereignty. Indigenous VR creators can and are worlding in a way that is situated in their particular culture and that is evident in both process and content. The immersive format of VR deepens storytelling capacity – it is what I consider to be the most influential potential of VR. The capabilities of the technology allow creators to conceptualize and manipulate time and space, and reflect their individual Indigenous philosophies and epistemes. Tlicho Dene IM4 presenter and artist Casey Koyczan said to me: "Indigenous VR gives us a voice that we didn't have before. It enables us to express our creativity in a way that brings spirituality, history, and culture to life; to walk around in it and be immersed in order to better learn with tangibility."[3] Indigenous VR is an intersection of art, technology, and tradition that conceives a presence and immersion that other digital media cannot.

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[2] Michelle H. Raheja, "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and 'Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner),'" *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (Dec. 2007), 1163. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068484?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

During the youth workshop, Todd explained how VR is an emerging technology and how, for the first time, Indigenous people will be at the forefront of advancing media and developing technology. She addressed how traditional film has a set of rules, expectations, and methods to capture a scene. These established grammars of film, such as the rule of thirds, do not apply to VR or 360 films. While there are films that break rules, the current state of VR allows for the invention of new grammars to be established from the beginning. After hearing Todd, it became evident to me that Indigenous VR is crucial as a medium that can enable Indigenous youth to see themselves in the future – to see themselves as vital, valued, thriving – and as a mechanism with which to carve their futures. I experienced this in an episode from Sacred Teachings Series by T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss; the viewer is immersed in the 360 perspective of a frog. The frog was held by Tsawaysia Spukwus-Alice Guss, S*kwxwú7mesh and Kwakwaka'wakw cultural mentor*, who was having a conversation about it with Wyss and Meagan Innes. There is no longer an old boys' club when Indigenous women are transforming the methodologies of filmmaking. IM4 media matriarch Wyss, says, "The past, present, and future ancestors have always co-existed in the same timeframes. Therefore, futurisms and Indigenous developers are aligned with our people and always have been."

IM4's Indigenous youth workshops encourage self-governance by empowering youth to shape their future and the future of VR technologies. More immediately, trained Indigenous youth will occupy and shape the VR industry, changing how we use, see, and create with technology. But the media matriarchs are forward thinking. In seven years, Indigenous youth will be the leaders in VR; they will establish screen sovereignty related to their specific Nations, create distinct sets of Indigenous VR grammars, and engineer hardware and software that reflect their Indigenous laws.

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[3] Casey Koyczan is also NÀHGĄ. His work can be found at https://nahgamusic.com.

IM4 is changing Indigenous representation by galvanizing Indigenous community around VR technologies. IM4 workshops are screen sovereignty in action. It is the Indigenous VR creators who are pivotal for asserting and redefining Indigeneity. Whiteness has defined Indigeneity in opposition to itself, as in, Indigeneity has been constructed as what whiteness is not.[4] Indigenous VR pushes against that. Media have perpetuated the misrepresentation of Indigenous people as a historical and dormant culture in many different ways. Consider, for example, the ongoing legacy of non-Indigenous people in red face. In the 1910 version of *Pocahontas*, Pocahontas was played by a white woman.[5] Taylor Sheridan's 2017 *Wind River* casted Chinese actor Kelsey Chow as the Indigenous female lead.[6] While there is a lot that can be interpreted from this, I would rather respond by drawing attention to Donald Sutherland's Métis film. In 1985, Sutherland thought about making a film on Louis Riel; however, he realized he was not the right person: "That person has to be someone with a Métis heart. That is a very distinct and specific thing."[7] Sutherland understood the importance of visual sovereignty. In the context of VR, screen sovereignty is achieved when Indigenous people, with their Indigenous hearts, are representing their stories and cultures.

IM4 facilitates agency and autonomy for Indigenous storytelling in VR; this pushes against the legacy of misrepresenting Indigenous people in racist, damaging, and inaccurate narratives. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes that Indigenous literature is medicine because stories establish individual and collective narratives as an extension of orality; this validates Indigenous experiences, re-establishes fragmented kinships, and corrects colonial narratives.[8] I think Indigenous VR has the same potential as literature, if not more.

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[4] This is what Elizabeth Furniss defines as the frontier myth in her book *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999).

[5] Anna Rosemond, *Pocahontas*, film produced by Thanhouser Company, Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company, 1910.

[6] Kevin Noble Maillard, "What's So Hard about Casting Indian Actors in Indian Roles?" *New York Times*, 1 August 2017.

[7] CBC Archives, "Donald Sutherland says Louis Riel's story isn't his to tell," CBC/Radio-Canada, 17 July 2018. https://www.cbc.ca/archives/donald-sutherland-says-louis-riel-s-story-isn-t-his-to-tell-1.4748569.

I understand Episkenew in the context of establishing screen sovereignty; Indigenous VR artists will create the medicines for their respective communities. I see this in the VR cinematic piece *Biidaaban* by Lisa Jackson.[9] It was my first viewing of an Indigenous VR experience. Her piece establishes relationality and reciprocity with the land in a post-apocalyptic future that is not bleak. *Biidaaban* functions as an assertion of Indigenous women's screen sovereignty. Her piece goes against the narrative of "man versus nature," where nature is the enemy to be conquered. *Biidaaban* contributes to imagining an Indigenous future; Jackson manipulates temporal space in a way that is rooted in tradition, language, land, and culture. I cannot wait to see more VR works from Indigenous women. It is the media matriarchs at IM4 who are providing a medium to conceptualize Indigenous futurisms, to imagine technology built from Indigenous epistemes, to think generationally in digital media, and to represent individual and collective narratives. The media matriarchs are bringing together Indigenous creators to self-govern through self-determined representations of community and culture in VR. IM4 is nourishing our hearts to tell our stories.

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[8] Jo-Ann Episkenew, "Myth, Policy, and Health," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 211–12.

[9] http://lisajackson.ca/Biidaaban-First-Light-VR.