

Material Connections in Skawennati's Digital Worlds

Digital media provide the latest in a long line of storytelling tools that Indigenous peoples have taken up and adapted to their own cultural frameworks.¹ In the early days of cyberspace, some Indigenous critics, including Loretta Todd, worried that the nature of computer spaces, built on binary code in response to “a fear of the body, aversion to nature, [and] a desire for salvation [from] the earthly plane,” could be “anchored to re-enactments of western cultural consciousness” (155, 162). Todd questions whether Indigenous “narratives, histories, languages and knowledge” can “find meaning in cyberspace” and asks, “what ideology will have agency . . . ?” (153, 154). In other words, is the ideology of online space shaped by the software, or by the creator and audience? Conversely, Steven Loft repositions cyberspace outside a Western framework by arguing that digital technology “is a part of the makeup to the universe, a tool of survival and self-determination” (“Aboriginal Media Art” 93). More recently, Loft has argued for an Indigenous understanding of new media focusing on the land: “For Indigenous people the ‘media landscape’ becomes just that: a landscape, replete with life and spirit, inclusive of beings, thought, prophecy, and the underlying connectedness of all things—a space that mirrors, memorializes, and points to the structure of Indigenous thought” (“Introduction” xvi). Both readings focus on the relationship between cyberspace and material reality.² Where Todd worries about the possible dislocation of the two realms, Loft focuses on the connections made possible by cyberspace and those between that landscape and the material world. This paper will examine the relationship between digital and physical worlds

in the context of *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* and *TimeTraveller*^{TM3} by Mohawk artist Skawennati Tricia Fragnito,⁴ whose work imagines ways in which humans' interactions with and within cyberspace can change social systems in the physical world.

The most obvious and widely studied way in which new media technology supports change in the material world is through democratizing dissemination, so that Indigenous people can more easily control the images that circulate about them. Skawennati, who has been creating digital worlds since the mid-1990s, believes that cyberspace "offers Aboriginal communities an unprecedented opportunity to assert control over how we represent ourselves" (Lewis and Fragnito 29). She helped found *CyberPowWow*, an online gallery, and then, with Jason Edward Lewis, *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* (AbTeC). AbTeC's "main objective is to identify and implement methods by which Aboriginal people can use new media technologies to complement our cultures" and find home territory in the digital world (AbTeC n. pag.). To this end, AbTeC has acquired space—AbTeC Island—in the online virtual world Second Life, thus making a literal land claim in digital reality. *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* and *TimeTraveller*TM overtly reclaim Indigenous history and posit a future where Indigenous nations have self-determination; the political thrust of these pieces is supported by the nature of the media in which they are produced. Skawennati draws attention to the digital forms of both works with allusions to Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. By rewriting this canonical science fiction text, and reclaiming its Aleut antagonist Raven, Skawennati critiques and provides an alternative to mainstream representations of Indigenous people as romanticized and as savage representations of the past. More importantly, by reframing Stephenson's concept of the Metaverse—a digital world which, as David Gaertner notes, has "its own geopolitics" and "social terrain" (n. pag.)—Skawennati Indigenizes understandings of the supposedly "new world" of cyberspace.

The term "new world," with its obvious echoes of the invasion of the Americas, and the conception of cyberspace as a digital landscape raise questions of land claims, and how people live with the territories they occupy. The words *cyberspace* and virtual *reality* suggest an alternative universe, an idea that is intensified in both Second Life, which people can use as an alternative to their physical lives, and the cyberpunk genre, in which human consciousness inhabits cyberspace in ways on the cusp of becoming possible with current technology. E. L. McCallum argues that

most cyberpunk texts “rehearse old geographic interpretations of space” that replicate the social structures of colonial adventure narratives (350). In a worst-case scenario, cyberspace could be seen as akin to the substitute land “given” to many of the First Nations in treaty negotiation processes. Viewed this way, virtual reality and cyberspace become dangerous territories, ones that might allow other territories to be lost. On the other hand, acknowledging the ongoing connections between the virtual and the physical, “the idea that data in cyberspace, like narrative itself, is a mapping or reconstruction of elements of the real,” can give those connections purpose (McCallum 364). If they are conceived of as interconnected with physical space, as supplemental realities rather than substitute ones, virtual reality and cyberspace provide the possibility of new territory on which to stake a claim, and to complement the ongoing land claims happening in the physical world. One prominent and recent example of the community-building possibilities of cyberspace is the Idle No More movement, in which Indigenous people organized and communicated their message online. But Idle No More began in response to numerous problems in the material conditions of Indigenous people and included activism in the physical realm—round dances, hunger strikes, and blockades. Such a movement could not have mobilized as quickly without an already existing network of Indigenous thinkers and activists online. Skawennati helped in the establishment of this network in her work with *CyberPowWow*, which was created as a space for Indigenous artists to publish and Indigenous people to “interact . . . in real time” (*CyberPowWow*), and was supplemented with events in physical galleries across Canada. In both cases, the cyber world and material world supported each other and allowed for the formation of communities across physical distance.

Skawennati's art uses the speculative trope of time travel as a metaphor for the way cyberspace can collapse physical distance and imagine new ways of being in the world. *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* consists of a virtual paper doll named Katsitsahawi Capozzo who travels in time over a millennium, from immediately prior to contact to five hundred years in the future. Each stop in the timeline provides a brief historical context and an outfit in which to dress the Katsitsahawi doll. Skawennati creates a positive version of Indigenous futures at odds with the image of “the vanishing Indian” common in both historical narratives and mainstream science fiction texts. *Imagining Indians* is situated roughly at the quincennial of Columbus's landing; it looks back to the past five hundred years of

colonization, and forward to five hundred years of future opportunity and growth. Lewis notes that one of the goals of AbTeC is “to consciously imagine ourselves in and into the far future,” in part by “engaging deeply with the technologies that are giving form to the future” (58-59). By having Katsitsahawi living in the text’s present, but also being able to occupy positions in the past and future, Skawennati shows how all identity is not only a static snapshot of who a person is now, but is also an amalgamation of where she has come from, and where she is going. Katsitsahawi’s timeline emphasizes “the role that art can play in the creation and documentation of history” (Claxton 38). When the timeline switches from past to future, Skawennati shifts her focus from historical figures to science fiction ones, without distinguishing between the two. She emphasizes the fictional nature of past history by evoking Pocahontas, a woman whose identity has been overwritten by colonial narratives. Her future history provides an alternative to mainstream science fiction, which, on the rare occasions that it allows for future Indigenous peoples, presents them in ways that reflect past and present stereotypes.⁵ By eliding fiction with history, Skawennati suggests to the interactive viewer that there is something inherently similar about the act of imagination that allows one to put oneself in the shoes (and other clothing) of both Pocahontas and Y.T. from *Snow Crash*; but in both cases, she rejects a colonial perspective.

Skawennati emphasizes the positivity of her version of Indigenous futurism, and the importance of Indigenous control over such representation, by having Katsitsahawi explore both Chakotay from *Star Trek: Voyager* and Stephenson’s Raven. Raven and Chakotay represent two different sides of the stereotypes of the science fiction “Indian,” living in the future, but as stereotypes from the past. Chakotay, who collaborates with colonizing forces by becoming second-in-command of a Federation vessel and who carries a high-tech medicine pouch to enable instant vision quests, conforms to many of the positive stereotypes of the “good Indian.” Raven, an Aleut, is one of the main villains of Neal Stephenson’s novel. He is identified as “the baddest motherfucker in the world” and is so dangerous that he has had “POOR IMPULSE CONTROL” tattooed on his forehead as a warning to others and as a punishment for crimes (Chapter 36, 15).⁶ Raven’s stereotypical character might, as Lisa Swanstrom argues, be created in part to “undermine such stereotypes,” as readers’ sympathies shift when they learn his backstory (61, 63). His past alcoholism and present violence stem from his anger at American colonial practices. He says that his people have been “fucked

over . . . worse than any other people in history,” and lists the injustices they have faced, including Russian occupation, smallpox, slavery in the sealing industry, and nuclear testing on their land (Chapter 47, 50). His destructive behaviour could, therefore, be read as justified, as activism rather than terrorism, and as a rare example of an Indigenous person having advanced technology and agency in a science fiction future.

Stephenson's cyberpunk classic does imagine Indigenous people surviving into the future, but in a way that links them with the ideology of “the vanishing Indian.” In the future of *Imagining Indians*, Indigenous peoples are doing decidedly better than in *Snow Crash*, in which Raven is an outcast whose ultimate defeat benefits the larger society of the novel. Raven logs on to the Metaverse from public terminals that render him indistinct, comparable to “a person who has his face stuck in a xerox machine” and unlike the beautifully rendered avatars that give status in Stephenson's virtual reality (5). Stephenson's simile of the photocopy emphasizes not only the limitations of cyber worlds for those without material resources to access them, but also the almost unrecognizable rendering of Indigenous people in many media representations. As Gaertner notes, “Raven is afforded none of the clarity of his protagonist counterpart inasmuch as his translation into cyberspace reflects the ‘censorship’ of Indigenous histories within the repressive ideology of the settler state” (n. pag.). In *Imagining Indians*, Katsitsahawi's outfit evokes Y.T., the white female protagonist of Stephenson's story, marking the only point in the timeline that Katsitsahawi does not take on the dress of an Indigenous person. By having Katsitsahawi dress as Y.T., Skawennati distances her from the negative aspects of Raven, but allows her to paint him in a more positive light. Like Y.T. in *Snow Crash*, Katsitsahawi can see positive aspects in this apparently negative character, and aligns with him because of their shared Indigenous heritage: “I have to state here that I generally deplore violence, but a one-man army [. . .] has its uses. I'm just glad to know that he's on our side” (*Imagining*, “2121 Journal”). She thus redeems an Indigenous science fiction villain, emphasizing both the context of his attitude and actions, and the activism that is inherent in his violence.

The differences between the texts also reflect the different ways in which Western and Indigenous worldviews position individual people in a larger social framework. Katherine Hayles notes, “Stephenson clearly sees the arrival of the posthuman world as a disaster” (263); Skawennati's future world is, by contrast, a utopia that features human connection and balance. Katsitsahawi operates as an avatar for all who interact with the digital art

of *Imagining Indians*. Like her, anyone can use cyber worlds to try on the “clothing” of different subject positions, and, when online, to see how others react to that subject position. Ideally, the piece can enact and promote not only the resurgence of Indigenous nations by the twenty-fifth century, but also understanding between cultural groups as they try on different clothes. At the same time, the low-tech conceit of the paper doll reminds the viewer that such subject positions are always provisional. If they are put on like clothing, they can be as easily shed. As well, the limited number of clothes available echoes the limitations of avatars in online video games such as *World of Warcraft* (Langer 87). Virtual identities can help to promote understanding and imagine other ways of being, but unless those identities, understandings, and imaginings translate into the physical world, then the subversive potential of that play is lost.

*TimeTraveller*TM illustrates the shifting subjectivity of cyberspace immersions by dramatizing the experience of a protagonist finding a new life and identity online, but does so within a platform that has been criticized for divorcing people from physical reality. The machinima series⁷ is shot on location in Second Life, the online virtual world popular in the early twenty-first century. The series has dual Mohawk protagonists: Hunter provides a perspective from a future world in which distinctions between the virtual and the material are beginning to blur; and Karahkwenhawi, like Katsitsahawi in *Imagining Indians*, operates as a stand-in for the early-twenty-first-century viewer, whose interaction with virtual reality primarily takes the form of an online social media presence. *Snow Crash* is again an obvious intertext. Raven makes a cameo appearance in Episode 08, and Hunter, at the beginning of the series, has much in common with Stephenson’s character. Like Raven, Hunter uses his traditional skills for a mercenary purpose; his ability to “paddle a canoe faster than most speedboats” (Episode 01)⁸ echoes Raven kayaking across the Pacific faster than a steamship. These direct allusions draw attention to the links between Stephenson’s Metaverse, the Second Life platform in which the series is filmed, and the *TimeTraveller*TM glasses that are at the centre of the plot. According to Lewis, “Fragnito [Skawennati] believes the metaverse—the post-Gibsonian virtual space imagined by Neal Stephenson in his novel *Snow Crash*—is a fast-approaching reality. She uses Second Life for making her machinima in large part because she sees the massively multiplayer online virtual environment as embodying an early version of Stephenson’s metaverse” (70). In *TimeTraveller*TM, the technology depicted in the text is

closely linked to the technological medium of the text. Hunter compares the TimeTraveller™ glasses to “going into a full-on, 3D chat room” (Episode 01), and Karahkwenhawi describes them as “more addictive than Bejeweled,” which, while meant to praise entertainment value of the tool, also points to the ways in which current humans can waste time with online video games—both as complex as Second Life and as simple as Bejeweled—that take them out of their material lives (Episode 09). Hunter and Karahkwenhawi's immersions into different times are an extension of the viewer's interactions with the Internet, and, I argue, point to the possibilities and limitations of contemporary virtual realities.

The progression in Hunter's use of the technology—from light “edutainment” to a tool to make connections across time and emphasize cultural continuity—teaches the viewer about the use of cyberspace, including the *TimeTraveller™* series itself. Hunter's dual life in his physical world and the world of the TimeTraveller™ glasses links him not to Raven, but to Hiro Protagonist, the biracial protagonist of *Snow Crash*. Hiro, as a programmer, has a mansion in the Metaverse, but in physical reality lives in a shared storage locker—a metaphor for what E. L. McCallum argues is the characteristic homelessness of the cyberpunk hero (355) and that Swanstrom reads as a sign of the objectification of human beings (59). Similarly, Hunter lives in a sparse storage locker in a bank of cubicles. However, there is a marked difference in the heroes' interactions with digital and physical reality in the two texts. Where the physical world does not hold the answers for Hiro, whose heroism comes from writing code for the Metaverse, Hunter uses TimeTraveller™ as a tool to help him live in his physical reality. Hunter wants to figure out who he is by better understanding where he comes from: “I figure a little visiting with my ancestors, a little recon with my role models, could do me some good right now, give me a new perspective. Go ahead, call it a vision quest” (Episode 01). Like the tricorder in Chakotay's medicine bundle, the TimeTraveller™ glasses provide a technological version of a spiritual journey. Hunter's technological immersions provide similar lessons to the visions traditionally achieved through fasting.

Importantly, Hunter's use of technology does not replace traditional methods of learning, which are ongoing in his time. Although Mohawk culture is notably absent in Hunter's life at the start of the series, this absence reflects Hunter's own position rather than the death of the culture. When reflecting on her journey through time with Hunter, Karahkwenhawi emphasizes the “incredible advancements” of Indigenous people in the

future and confronts Hunter: “I thought you said there weren’t any Indians around these days. We’re stronger than ever” (Episode 09). When Hunter clarifies that he “wanted to learn more about [his] heritage,” she asks why he chose virtual reality over human experience in the physical world. He explains his discomfort with just showing up and saying, “I’m a Mohawk. Teach me,” which is why he chose “edu-tainment” to make his journey to knowledge (Episode 09). The success of Hunter’s quest validates similar journeys by Indigenous people who are disconnected from their communities and cultures for a variety of reasons. As the technology improves, more and more cultural lessons, language programs, and community liaison can happen online, allowing Indigenous people to connect, learn, and organize in both the digital and the physical worlds.

The series again argues that advances in technology can lead directly to improvements in the representation of Indigenous people. In the first episode, Hunter uses future technology, from the viewer’s perspective, to observe a group of colonial soldiers at Fort Calgary in 1875 who are using technology from the viewer’s past: “Mr. Nester Vance’s Great Panorama of the West Illustrative of the Indian Massacre in Minnesota in 1862” (Episode 01). Although Hunter complains about the *in situ* narration, hand crank, and backlit paintings, he is caught up in the narrative. He thus sees how who tells stories and through what medium affects the ways that history is understood, and how that history can affect the world; in this case by stirring up soldiers on the frontier so that they see Indigenous people as dangerous and bloodthirsty. The representation of the Dakota in the panorama is two dimensional not only in form, but also in substance. The limitations of the technology mirror and reinforce the bias of the content. The second episode questions the representation of history in the “Great Panorama”: the medium shifts from backlit paintings on a hand crank to 3D experiential technology, and the perspective shifts from that of the settlers to that of the Dakota people. While the basic fact that Indigenous people killed a settler family, including an unarmed teenaged girl, is unchanged, the situation is far more complex than it was portrayed in the panorama. The Dakota people are starving, and the federal treaty payment is long overdue. Because they are hungry, they decide to ask a Christian farmer to share food, but he reacts violently to their polite request. The perspective and the medium alter Hunter’s—and, by extension, the viewer’s—understanding of the story.

For this episode, Hunter turns his TimeTraveller™ to “Intelligent Agent mode,” which allows him to interact with the people around him and to, in

his words, “choose a side, so that you know all the stuff your team knows” (Episode 02). While his diction emphasizes that he sees the experience as akin to an online game—an entertainment without real consequences—he gets caught up in the action and attempts to kill the white farmer; however, the scene resets, and a historical Dakota hunter makes the kill. Even though Hunter’s shot has no effect on history, it does emphasize how perspective influences beliefs. Like the soldiers in the first episode, Hunter is riled up by the experience of injustice. Intelligent Agent mode, like the assumption of an avatar in online spaces such as Second Life, allows people to temporarily occupy an alternative subject position. The advanced technology of TimeTraveller™, and the impossibility of altering history within the program, make it appear more accurate than the panorama, which has an obvious colonial bias. Hunter’s TimeTraveller™ glasses do show this historical moment through the eyes of the Dakota, but because the technology has access to a multitude of perspectives, it can mediate between them, and, in theory, recreate something closer to “the truth.” That the truth it depicts aligns with Indigenous and anti-colonial understandings of history privileges those understandings, and in turn suggests that this is the real history. The contrast between the facts of the initial conflict as Hunter experiences them and the outcome in which thirty-seven Dakota are hung for treason suggests that the problem is not so much historical indeterminacy as it is that the truth of history was deliberately obscured by the settlers.

In order for cyberspaces to be effective places in which to enact personal and cultural change, they have to be seen, at least provisionally, as real worlds with real consequences. In *Snow Crash*, Raven’s activism against America is not limited to the nuclear weapon on his motorcycle. He helps to distribute the drug “snow crash,” which is both a computer virus that hacks and destroys machines, thus destabilizing the Metaverse, and a central nervous system virus that attacks physical bodies in the material world. The link between the two worlds through this virus emphasizes the interrelationship between identity on the two planes. While the visit to late-nineteenth-century Dakota territory increases Hunter’s knowledge of colonial relations in the past, he is still in the early stages of returning to the cultural knowledge and traditions of his own Mohawk ancestry. He exits the program, or at least the Intelligent Agent mode, immediately following the massacre, noting that one of the advantages of TimeTraveller™ is that one does not have to remain in the program “when things get heavy” (Episode 02). He is not yet personally involved in the history of his people. This

changes with the third episode, in which Hunter is transported into one of the most iconic images of the conflict between the Mohawk community of Kanehsatà:ke and the town of Oka: the close-up of Private Patrick Cloutier face to face with Brad “Freddy Krueger” Larocque, an Anishinaabe man, whose position Hunter occupies. By having Hunter displace a historical person, Skawennati places him at the centre of the action and makes him a part of the blockade in a way that he was not in the previous narratives. Hunter’s virtual occupation of Kanehsatà:ke reenacts the literal occupation of the space in 1990, linking online and physical community activism.

Unlike in the previous episodes, which each present a single journey to the past, Hunter visits Kanehsatà:ke many times over several weeks. Along with the historical protestors, Hunter learns about the geography of his home territory; his language; the history of his people, including the forming of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the place of the Warrior Society; and the politics and treaty rights that informed the protest. This representation of learning in a simulated environment is an extension of the use of contemporary online resources for teaching culture and language. Hunter’s education thus gives him a sense of place and purpose in his life, which he can take out of the past and into his present. He sees what can be accomplished when people work together, and the effectiveness of protest. At the end of the episode, the *Blade Runner* movie poster that used to adorn his wall is replaced with a Mohawk Warrior flag, showing that he is at heart no longer a hired gun, fighting other people’s battles, and that there is more to being a warrior than killing. E. L. McCallum argues that in most cyberpunk, “the colonization of cyberspace by real-space metaphors not only effectively relies on the geopolitical organization of our world but also marks a failure of those texts to question the individualist conventions of narrative point of view” (367). But where Stephenson’s Metaverse is mapped according to urban spaces of streets and neighbourhoods, Skawennati’s digital world moves from an emphasis on Hunter’s journey to a focus on the communities with which he interacts. Unlike Raven, whose individual activism focuses on revenge and destruction, the Indigenous activism portrayed in and promoted by *TimeTraveller™* focuses on growth and connection. Learning about Indigenous history and culture through Internet resources can inspire and coordinate positive Indigenous activism, which stresses that, even in a digital world, occupying the landscape ethically is paramount.

Just as Hunter is transformed by his interaction with the technology, that interaction transforms the technology itself. New media artist Archer

Pechawis starts thinking about Internet technology as a tool to transmit knowledge, but then asks the more fundamental question: “*What happens when we approach the visioning, creation, and application of modern technology from an entirely Indigenous world view?*” (38, emphasis original). *TimeTraveller™* provides one possible answer. When Karahkwenhawi's mother asks Hunter to take care of her daughter if she is arrested, he does so. He knows intellectually that he cannot change history, but he still makes sure she is safe. That *TimeTraveller™* lets Hunter take care of Karahkwenhawi marks the beginning of a fundamental shift in the parameters of the technology. Episode 04 begins in 2011 with Karahkwenhawi, now an adult, working on an art history project. As she takes notes, Hunter appears, dissolves, and leaves behind the *TimeTraveller™* glasses, which Karahkwenhawi then uses for her own time travel. Hunter later notes: “That's one serious glitch in the system . . . You shouldn't be able to have technology from your future, for one thing, and you sure as hell shouldn't be able to remember me” (Episode 06). Up until Karahkwenhawi takes possession of the glasses, they provide a recreation of the past, a reconstruction similar to that found in history books, albeit in a medium that gives the illusion of verisimilitude. When she comes into contact with the glasses, they transcend their technology. Katherine Hayles argues that *Snow Crash* “is driven by a single overpowering metaphor: humans are computers,” which allows a computer virus to infect humans' basic programming (259). *TimeTraveller™* travels in the opposite direction, suggesting that human interaction can overwrite computer programming, and perhaps, by implication, that technologies are people.

During the video montage that makes up Episode 08, there is an even more drastic shift. Although Karahkwenhawi and Hunter have visited immersions together before, this time they visit each other, so that one is in their own physical reality and the other in a virtual reality, thus upsetting the binary between real- and cyberspace. Even more remarkable is the ability for the time travel to transcend the technology that allowed it in the first place. Whenever people wearing the glasses in an immersion remove them or switch them off, they disappear from that time and return to their own, which is how Hunter leaves Karahkwenhawi. But when Hunter removes the glasses from Karahkwenhawi's face, as she visits him in his storage locker, she remains with him in her future, and her body dissolves in her present. The cyber has become the real. Karahkwenhawi explains the glasses' new abilities as “magic” (Episode 06). Karahkwenhawi's interpretation could be

read as a form of primitivism, of mistaking advanced technology for magic due to a lack of understanding, but that would be a misreading. Jackson 2Bears argues that Indigenous peoples “often understand technology, as something alive and filled with spirit, something with which we are interconnected in what [Leroy] Little Bear called a ‘circle of relations,’ and something that is a part of a universe of ‘active entities with which people engage” (14). Similarly, Pechawis claims that “as my traditional spiritual grounding and technological fluency deepen, the space between these two disciplines diminishes. More and more they become dialects of the same mother tongue” (42). The magic is cemented by the Aztec human sacrifice that Hunter undergoes. Although Hunter reassures his partner that he is in no danger, Karahkwenhawi worries that whatever glitch is making the glasses affect their material world threatens to make Hunter’s death real too. Hunter’s biorhythms, monitored by his TimeTraveller™ glasses, flatline at the end of the episode, and the screen wipes to a red “SYSTEM FAILURE” warning, leaving viewers uncertain as to his fate (Episode 07). That Hunter returns for the final two episodes of the series does not entirely negate his death. The system failure has allowed a system reboot—whether in the TimeTraveller™ glasses or Hunter himself is not entirely clear—but it is a reboot with a critical difference. The human connection between Hunter and Karahkwenhawi has moved them beyond the limitations and boundaries usually set by the technology, just as it is possible for human exchanges online to have real effects in material reality.

The most obvious effect of the cyberdeath on Hunter’s material reality is that his sacrifice immersion wins him a trillion dollars from the TimeTraveller™ corporation, and he and Karahkwenhawi subsequently move to a penthouse apartment at the top of AbTeC towers. This wish-fulfillment fantasy world is the flip side of the apparent dystopia that Hunter occupies at the beginning of the series. The world is still “an over-mediated, hyper-consumerist North America” where there is not “enough room for everybody” (Episode 01); the only real change is that Hunter no longer has “to be content with being a ruthless, efficient coldblooded killer,” and can instead enjoy the luxuries afforded by that capitalist consumer culture (Episode 01). The advancement of Indigenous people across North America is similarly measured according to material success. In Episode 04, Karahkwenhawi travels to a pow wow set in July 23, 2112 in Winnipeg, which showcases the vibrancy of Indigenous life and culture in the future. The pow wow fills an Olympic Stadium, and features expensive prizes and dancers

who are treated like rock stars. But just as machinima allows artists to repurpose commercial technology for their own ends, so too can Indigenous people have financial success without being assimilated into Western capitalism. Just as Hiro Protagonist learns “how to balance successfully the need to be his own hacking boss against the practicalities of the commercial world that he inhabits” (Swanstrom 76) in *Snow Crash*, so Hunter and Karahkwenhawi balance their material success with their continuing and strengthening Mohawk identities. Their penthouse apartment is at the top of AbTeC Towers, emphasizing the ongoing strength of their people. Although they are now rich and famous, the focus of Hunter and Karahkwenhawi is not on money, but on art: Hunter’s web series reaches viewers across time, and Karahkwenhawi curates Indigenous art from her own time. Their support of Indigenous arts suggests that they have not been co-opted into Western understandings of the world with their material good fortune, but have used their riches—physical and emotional—to enrich others.

The ambiguous materialism of the ending parallels the metaphorical connections between TimeTraveller™ and the contemporary Internet, which itself can be used to supplement or to supplant material reality. Hunter compares his recording of immersions in TimeTraveller™ to machinima, “where you can save the action in your video games to make movies” (Episode 07). Machinima is, of course, the medium of *TimeTraveller™*, and Hunter explaining it as he is recording the immersion for a contest, while Skawennati is recording the scene in Second Life, reminds the viewer of the connection between the plot of the story and its medium. The series itself is presented on its framing webpage as if it were the actual recordings of the immersions that Hunter produced during his travels, used by the corporation as both entertainment and advertisement for the technology. The limitations of the medium draw attention to the limitations of digital platforms of all kinds, but at the same time suggest ways of transcending those media. Second Life’s reliance on set body forms and somewhat stilted movements, for example, might at first interfere with the reader’s participation in the immersion. But, as Lewis argues, the “low-res textures and low-polygon count characters and objects also create a sense of future-retro, a visual feel that serves as subtextual commentary on the relationship between actual and imagined futures” (70). The distinctions between Hunter’s seamless immersive experience in TimeTraveller™, the makers’ more complex and difficult filming of the series within Second Life, and contemporary viewers’ more passive viewing of the series all draw attention

to the different ways of experiencing cyberspace. In each case, where the separation between the material and the digital can create a distancing effect, emotional connections can close the gap in the uncanny valley, allowing the digital to become the real.

Hunter and Karahkwenhawi's interchange also connects TimeTraveller™ to contemporary social media. Hunter suggests that he can visit Karahkwenhawi in her own time, using the data that TimeTraveller™ collected from her Facebook page. Karahkwenhawi's question—"Wouldn't that just be a virtual me?"—could be directed either at the recreation of her life as a TimeTraveller™ immersion, or at the source material for that immersion (Episode 07). The online lives that people construct for themselves through blogs, tweets, and status updates are often heavily mediated, and—like all autobiography—are more a new creation than they are an undistorted reflection of the entirety of a life. Karahkwenhawi is not her Facebook page, but the page provides access to a part of her, and whatever glitch in the system has allowed the two protagonists to connect across time also allows them to move beyond the mediation of virtual reality. Lewis argues that "[t]he explosive growth of social media in the Facebook era means that many of us—youth, aunties, and elders alike—are enmeshed in a virtual network of personal relationships that interpenetrate our material world relationships like a pixellated shadow" (62). *TimeTraveller™* extrapolates from this current reality and suggests ways in which this "pixellated shadow" can obtain depth and nuance, and meld with the physical reality that casts the shadow. Lewis, marking a middle ground between the cautiousness of Loretta Todd and the spiritual and cultural optimism of Steven Loft and Jackson 2Bears, argues that a desire to maintain Indigenous traditions must take into consideration "that the Western world view is busy constructing structures and systems," which will shape the future not only of that culture, but also of Indigenous cultures, and that it is therefore necessary for Indigenous people to have a say in the creation and structuring of those systems (61-63). The cyber nature of Skawennati's texts marks out territory in cyberspace, suggesting that virtual reality is another important area for Indigenous people to stake a claim. Just as the relationship between Hunter and Karahkwenhawi transcends time and technology, allowing for realistic human contact within virtual space, so the series itself escapes what Loretta Todd critiques as the "mechanical and separate" universe of virtual reality (163). Candice Hopkins argues that "Skawennati's project . . . challenges Baudrillard's warnings of an increasingly virtual life, a place where 'the inert matter of the social is not produced by lack of

exchanges . . . but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges” (69). The focus here is on relationship and reciprocity, Indigenizing both the digital and the future.

By focusing the series on *one* cyber relationship with larger political and social implications, Skawennati asks her viewers to consider the implications of each of their online exchanges. While there is no direct evidence that watching *TimeTraveller*TM has inspired any specific social movements, the larger project of AbTeC, with its training of new generations of Indigenous creators in new technologies, is helping to bring the positive world it imagines into being (Laurence n. pag.). The virtual world is not a separate matrix, but rather an extension of the physical world; its main use comes from its connections back to that world. Hunter and Karahkwenhawi's relationship reminds us that the connections we make online are not with computer programs, but with other people, who have real lives in the physical world. Increased access to internet technology is allowing social and political connection, organization, and engagement across large geographic distances—almost as remarkable as Hunter and Karahkwenhawi's relationship across time. Steven Loft argues that “technology-based art . . . exists in a real-time logic that separates it from its process and situates itself in the present consciousness of the viewer” (“Aboriginal Media Art” 94). Watching machinima or viewing digital dolls online might not have the obvious political and social impact of organizing a protest march or an occupation of colonized space, but the participatory nature of Skawennati's art, and the ways in which it draws attention to the political potential of its own medium, can inspire viewers to make connections and effect change in the material world. She Indigenizes the digital worlds in which she makes her art, using them to make connections never dreamed of by the characters in *Snow Crash*.

NOTES

- 1 Discussions of Indigenous storytellers adapting and Indigenizing digital media began in the 1980s, and draw on earlier and ongoing discussion of Indigenous storytellers adapting and Indigenizing the written word, European languages, visual media, and other storytelling forms. Although this essay focuses on digital art and machinima as storytelling, it draws on discussions of form by Indigenous literary nationalist theorists from Simon Ortiz on, and discussions of Indigenous digital art beginning with the work of Buffy Sainte-Marie and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun since the 1990s.
- 2 This distinction is, of course, not a fixed dichotomy; digital texts have their own materiality, from the hardware and software on which they are created and consumed

(such as the fictional TimeTraveller™ glasses), to the ways in which those texts interact with the world that is more generally understood as the physical one. I, like Skawennati, distinguish between these two worlds to show their interconnection.

- 3 I use the italicized *TimeTraveller*™ to refer to the machinima series, and the unitalicized roman TimeTraveller™ to refer to the technology (the glasses and company) within the series.
- 4 Skawennati publishes under both her full name and her first name. For consistency, I will refer to her as “Skawennati,” which is how she has most recently published. I will, however, indicate the name under which texts were published, and will not change her name in direct quotation.
- 5 For more detailed discussions of the representations of Indigenous people in science fiction, see Seirra S. Adare’s *“Indian” Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction* (U of Texas P, 2005) or listen to Molly Swain and Chelsea Vowel’s *Métis in Space* podcast.
- 6 References to the ebook version of this novel are to chapter number.
- 7 Machinima is a medium in which movies are shot within video games, manipulating the computer graphics and animation of an established platform to tell new stories.
- 8 Since *TimeTraveller*™ is a series, I use episode numbers in lieu of page numbers.

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