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THOMAS JAMES REED
LUKWE'TIYÓ | ONEIDA FOR "HE IS A GOOD MAN"

Abstract

This commentary examines the state of Native representation in videogames from a Native perspective. Also, this commentary offers examples of Native Representation in Videogames from 1971 to 2025. Furthermore, I provide decolonizing and indigenizing examples of Natives in videogames. The paper also contains recommendations for further research and suggests good practices for videogame developers to facilitate design of positive Native representation as a decolonizing practice of indigeneity. This commentary closes with a call for positive representation, as seen in *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014), the first videogame made by an indigenous-owned videogame studio.

Keywords

Native representation in videogames; Native representation; videogames; Native American; American Indian; indigenous; decolonizing; indigeneity

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> One of the things I think a lot of people need to understand is, we aren't a museum piece. The Iñupiat people are a living people, and a living culture. … It's very important to me. It's who I am as a person. And we're very proud of who we are, and we want to continue that. (Upper One Games, 2014, A Living Culture, Never Alone [*Kisima Ingitchuna*] Insight Collection)

While researchers have already delved into Native, or Indigenous, representation in videogames (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011; Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain, 2008; Glaubke, Miller, Parker, & Espejo, 2001; Lagace, 2018; Leonard, 2006; Martínez Linares, 2018; Rushing & Stephens, 2011; Wardhana & Rizqiyanto, 2024; Wisniewski, 2018), a Native perspective is still a needed contribution to this field of research. The medium of videogames is an interactive, ever-growing storytelling device, that also features Native peoples or their cultures. While

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sometimes being detrimental and negative in their depiction of Native peoples, there are also instances of videogames being used as a decolonizing tool for Native peoples to tell their own story.

Whilst a third-person perspective is traditional for a commentary piece, it is pertinent to mention my own positionality as a Native person who is a member of the Oneida Nation, having grown up playing many of these videogames, with a PhD on the Indigenous Haudenosaunee game of lacrosse, and am an Assistant Professor in American Indian Studies at California State University of Long Beach. My Oneida name is Lukwe'tiyó, which translates in English to "He is a Good Man". I received this name at the age of nine from an elder female whose role within our Nation is to bestow names upon Tribal Members. I am Oneida, part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, I belong to the Turtle Clan, which is passed down matrilineally through generations. I am a third-generation survivor of Carlisle Indian Boarding School, and I descend from a long line of chieftains and clan mothers. I'm a Native gamer, educated, and passionate about seeing my peoples represented positively and on our own terms.

In many ways, I started researching this theme in 1995 when I was five years old and encountered Native characters on screen in a videogame for the first time—Nightwolf in *Mortal Kombat 3* (Midway, 1995) and T. Hawk in *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers* (Capcom, 1993). Native representation in videogames shaped the way I saw the world, as well as the way others saw me, so much so that my friends would call me Nighthawk growing up, a combination of Nightwolf and T. Hawk. Sometimes I felt like it was used as a compliment in sports, and other times used against me if others were perceiving me as upset. Native representation in videogames did not merely shape the way I was molding my own identity, it also shaped the way others saw me. As I have gotten older, and seen the power and importance of positive representation, I see games like *Never Alone* [*Kisima Ingitchuna*] (Upper One Games, 2014) as the model for other videogame developers to learn from in positive representation.

In my commentary, I will first examine Videogames from a Native perspective. Then, I will identify examples of Native Representation in Videogames before moving on to decolonizing and indigenizing examples. Finally, I offer recommendations for further research and suggest good practices for videogame developers.

Terms and scope

Before delving into Native representation in videogames, I will have to define the terms and scope of research. The focus of this commentary is primarily on indigenous peoples of North America, South America, Hawaii, and New Zealand. I take the term *decolonizing* from Linda Tuhwai Smith's (2019) *Decolonizing Methodologies*,

which includes techniques such as reclaiming, storytelling, representing, and discovering the beauty of our knowledge. Concepts such as Indigeneity are used to not only deconstruct colonial ways, but to reconstruct traditional indigenous ways of being.

Native representation in videogames from a Native perspective

Steve Newcomb (2017), Shawnee and Lenape scholar, says we can view history from the perspective of settlers arriving on the shores in their boats, or we can view history from the people who have already existed on those shores for millennia. In the same regard, it is important to interrogate whose point of view is being depicted in videogames. Is it Native people telling their own stories or is it others rendering their perception of Native people?

Themes of negative Native representation in videogames

Negative Native representation in videogames dehumanizes and exoticizes Native peoples. Negative Native representation in videogames tends to reinforce stereotypes in a reductive, oversimplified way, perpetuating the colonizing notions of the 'dumb savage', 'mystical warrior', or hypersexualized Native women. These depictions are rarely in a modern setting, can use a generic or fictional tribe, and are hardly ever portrayed by Native peoples themselves. Often, these are videogames made by non-Native peoples that use Native people to draw attention, fascination, and sometimes spectacle. Over the past decades many videogames have followed these patterns. In the following, I will briefly introduce the games *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), *Super Street Fighter 2: The New Challengers* (Capcom, 1993), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018) that constitute specifically obnoxious examples for these representational conventions.

Examples of Native representation in videogames

This commentary will briefly examine the state of Native representation in videogames over half a century, from 1971 to 2025. The era of the 1970's and 80's was a brutal time for harmful Native representation in videogames with Native characters and perspectives largely absent or grossly exoticizing. The most egregious, offensive, and harmful representation of Native peoples, whether videogames or other media, is *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982). The user plays as Custer who goes across the screen to rape a Native woman tied to a tree. This is literally the entire game, with a fixed pixelated screen, the background only slightly changing between levels, as the user has to control the character and move him across the screen to rape a Native woman with a feather in her hair. The next level continues with more of the

same. *Custer's Revenge* is hailed as one of the worst games of all time across different reviews (Cassidy, 2002; Plunkett, 2011). Surprisingly, when reading the reviews, I would expect people to deem the game horrible because of the sickening depiction and treatment of Native women, however, multiple comments are focused on the game being bad because it is redundant and repetitive. When the developer was pressed about this action of rape in the game, due to protests by Women's groups and Native groups and lawsuit by Atari for damaging the company's name and reputation, the developer Joel Miller's response was, "he's seducing her, but she's a willing participant" (Plunkett, 2011). A woman being tied to a tree and the game being called *Custer's Revenge* both imply it is clearly not a consensual act. For historical reference, General George Custer led the massacre of Wounded Knee and was killed in the Battle of Little Big Horn after being told repeatedly not to go into the Lakota territory because he was severely outnumbered. This victory by the Lakota at Little Big Horn is one of the few defeats in the United States' military history. The notion of *Custer's Revenge* is to get back at Native people for killing Custer, and in this instance through raping a pixelated Native woman tied to a tree. Despite the game being so notoriously obnoxious, it still draws attention in YouTube video reviews and articles (including this one), which unfortunately give attention to this horrific abomination of Native representation in videogames.

The 1990s brought fighting game characters. Think the aforementioned *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers* (Capcom, 1993) with T. Hawk from the fictional Thunderfoot Tribe. There were many other games, with many other characters. When I tell people I am researching Native representation in videogames, most non-Native millennials will tell me a Native fighting character they were brought up with playing. While there are many to choose from, I selected T. Hawk from *Street Fighter II: The New Challengers* as my example here because he was one of the first such characters I encountered on screen. He was reductive, simplistic, would sit cross-legged and put one right hand straight up in a greetings fashion after a win, or lean on a bended knee while swiping his thumb with his nose. T. Hawk was tough, stoic, angry, and did not take no nonsense from anyone. While coming from a fictional tribe of Thunderfoot and not pretending to perpetuate the real culture of any one tribe, T. Hawk was the first Native character I experienced in media who fought back for his land. In the final cut scene of the game, if you beat the game with T. Hawk, he adamantly tells M. Bison, "here is my homeland. Here is where I belong! … I'll reconstruct this place at all costs … No one shall disgrace my land and people again! I swear upon the honor and blood of our tribe!" While perpetuating the angry, simple savage, this was also a cornerstone for me as a five year old in being exposed to a simplistic notion of decolonizing and indigenizing which I did not yet have the academic vocabulary to articulate. The representation of T. Hawk was not perfect, but it still gave me a representation of another Native who wanted to do whatever he could to protect his homeland and culture.

Horizon Zero Dawn (Guerrilla Games, 2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (Guerrilla Games, 2022) feature fictional tribes in the distant future. When I play *Horizon Zero*

Dawn, it feels like developers have extracted like a vulture our Native culture out of fascination, while erasing Native people's resiliency and existence. It does not feel great. These games feel weird to play as a Native person. The game features many Native cultural references, while Native people have been erased from existence in this imagined post-apocalyptic landscape. While the created world attempts to be post-racial in this futuristic setting, it erases the possibility of Native tribes' and peoples' existence. While Native people are erased from the game, there are Native references of culture ever present in the game. A medicine wheel is a traditional circle symbol, used across Tribes of North America, and is sometimes of black, red, white, and yellow, or sometimes blue instead of black. This can stand for many things, including the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, as well as all colors of people being connected as human beings. In the game, there are medicine wheels on loading screens or in certain architecture. Bow and arrow, traditional Native hunting tools, are used, as are certain housing units which have indigenous-inspired designs. Or there are animal hides being tanned in a traditional fashion. So, in this imagined future, Native culture has survived, however it would seem Native peoples and Tribes were not able to survive. This notion perpetuates a notion of colonization, erasure, and negates Native peoples' resiliency.

In the United States today, there are 574 federally recognized Tribes, over 100 state-recognized Tribes, and over 100 Tribes who are seeking recognition in 2025. Each has its own distinct customs, languages, histories, practices, and stories, so generic Native American culture in games can cause confusion to audiences regarding what is fiction and nonfiction. During quarantine in 2020, many Native women from different Tribal Nations and organizations would tell us, 'we have lived through pandemics and ends of the world, and we will survive through this'.

I share the example of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018) because whenever I tell people I am researching Natives in videogames, this is often the first question people will ask me my thoughts on. I feel like people are asking to see what kind of a Native person I am, whether in their eyes if I am a 'cool' Native who does not get easily offended, or an easily offended and 'angry' Native person to avoid. I would view it as being a person who accommodates their own oppression, or a human being who advocates for more equitable and just representation of our Native people.

Well, how you play determines how Arthur Morgan perceives and treats Native people in Chapter 6 of the game. If you play as 'good', then Arthur views the Native peoples as noble and just in their struggle as he supports them. If you play as 'bad', then Arthur views Natives as resources to be exploited for his own personal benefit. Here is my point of contention: the game takes 40+ hours to play and it is remarkably difficult to play as a 'good' or benevolent Arthur. After carefully playing the game for a span of over two years, with every decision and choice being made intentionally to make sure I got a good ending, my character was still neutral between bad and good. The game mechanics may even allow you to accidentally bump into someone on

your coach and wagon, an involuntary act that can accidentally kill someone. If a bystander witnesses this and reports you to the sherriff, you will be hunted until you die. Consequently, it is in the interest of the survival of your character to kill any bystanders before they can run away and tell anyone about what you did. This vicious cycle can make it very difficult to play as a good character, and my belief is that a majority of people who play this game will never experience the good ending of Arthur's benevolence towards Native peoples and will instead likely get the bad ending where Arthur views Native peoples as subhumans to exploit. A point of appreciation I have for the game is that the late Oneida Actor Graham Greene plays Rains Fall of the fictional Wapiti Tribe. Western games in general tend to glorify westward expansion, as opposed to viewing it as an invasion, colonization, and genocide.

Themes of decolonization and indigeneity in Native representation in videogames

Videogames which decolonize and indigenize Native peoples tend to humanize Native characters. Often, these characters are portrayed by Native peoples, in voice acting, facial, and motion capture. When done with the most respect, Native characters in games are designed and created by Native peoples, or in consultation with Tribal Nations or Indigenous groups. Examples of decolonization and indigeneity are Native people telling their own stories through the interactive medium of videogames. These are done with respect and reverence in their stories, with Native language, culture, and customs infused throughout the game. These instances educate about Native culture and history while also being an enjoyable and fun experience for the player. Decolonizing and indigenizing examples can be done in a modern setting, not just fixated in the past or in an imagined future. During the course of recent decades, certain videogames have implemented these patterns. In the upcoming section, I will introduce the games *Never Alone* [*Kisima Ingitchuna*] (Upper One Games, 2014), *Raven and the Light* (Basedow, 2015), *Mulaka* (Lienzo, 2018), and *Aztech Forgotten Gods* (Lienzo, 2021) which exemplify decolonized and indigenized representational conventions.

Decolonizing and indigenizing examples of Natives in videogames

The most powerful examples of indigeneity and decolonization are Native peoples telling their own stories through videogames. *Never Alone* [*Kisima Ingitchuna*] (2014), made by the first Native-owned videogame studio, Upper One Games, tells a traditional story narrated by Iñupiat elders with cultural insights about the Iñupiat as in-game achievements. The user plays this side-scrolling puzzle-platformer, switching between, or playing co-op, as a nine-year-old Iñupiat girl or her pet arctic fox. While the story of the game is set in the past, the cultural insights in the forms of videos which are unlocked take place in the present, with Iñupiat cultural leaders educating the viewer on Iñupiat ways of being. This is one of my favorite games of all time. It is aesthetically gorgeous and shows the possibility of what videogames are capable of

when used as a storytelling tool by Native people. The game plays like a meditation or prayer. One of my favorite things to do is to play this game while my little white pet Maltese dog sits on my lap and watches.

An additional example of indigeneity and decolonization of Natives in videogames, is *Raven and the Light* (Basedow, 2015), a horror PC game about Indian Residential Schools, where the real-life motto was "kill the Indian to save the man". I am a third-generation survivor of an Indian Boarding School. My great-grandfather Anderson William Cornelius ran away twice and eventually escaped from Carlisle Indian Boarding School, and my great-great Uncle Joshua was killed while trying to escape. This PC game gave me the chills, triggered some intergenerational PTSD, and still I had to see more. I needed to complete the game. The horror aspect was genuinely appreciated as someone who lives with the horrors of these inherited memories.

I hope as many people as possible play *Raven and the Light*, and witness how institutions like religion where used to say things like, "Jesus loves you", while the sexual assault of boys and girls by school officials at the over 450 Indian Boarding Schools and over 150 Indian Residential Schools in Canada was widespread and rampant (Desjardins, Hudgins, & Cuevas, 2024; PBS NewsHour, 2024). If a school official, often a church official, impregnated a young Native women by rape, the baby would be burnt alive in furnaces (NoiseCat & Kassie, 2024). My great-grandpa talks about hearing the babies' screams and seeing their bones in the furnaces. The National Geographic documentary, *Sugarcane*, by Julian Brave NoiseCat and Emily Kassie in 2024, talks about such events (NoiseCat & Kassie, 2024). The film is about a man who was found as a baby in a furnace in an empty ice cream container. He later had a son and abandoned him. Then, the son, Julian Brave NoiseCat, made the documentary to tell the truth about this painful part of Canadian and United States history of infanticide and genocide at the Indian Boarding and Residential Schools. Go play *Raven and the Light*, but brace yourself, especially after knowing the history. Or perhaps the game will make you want to go learn about the history on your own—I hope it does.

The game *Mulaka* (Lienzo, 2018) is about a shaman who fights off creatures from Sierra Tarrahumar culture. It features Sukurúama, a shaman protagonist. Throughout the game, especially in loading screens, whenever you meet a new creature, or in dialogue with non-playable characters, the game exposes users to facts about Sierra Tarahumara culture. The game is a prime example of the educational value and potentials of videogames. Funds from game sales support the Sierra Tarahumara in modern day Mexico. I think this is a great model for other videogame studios and developers to follow. In collaborating with Tribes to tell their own stories and have these as sources of economic development for self-determination.

My final example, *Aztech Forgotten Gods* (Lienzo, 2021), explores indigenous futurism. Indigenous futurism (Nelson, 2020) can be compared to and draws inspiration from Afrofuturism (Dery, 1994), with a widely known example being the depiction of

Wakanda by Ryan Coogler in the film *Black Panther*. Indigenous futurism seamlessly blends the past and the future while continuing the traditional values of a people. A graphic novel example of an anthology of Indigenous Futurism from different Tribal Nations is in *Moonshoot Volume 3* (Nelson, 2020). In *Aztech Forgotten Gods,* the user plays as the protagonist of an uncolonized Aztech people, also known as Mexica, who now have flying vehicles amidst their technologically updated temples. While I think that Native people should be shown in the present to remind people we are still here, I appreciate the possibility and positivity of Indigenous futurism, and *Aztech Forgotten Gods* brings Mexica culture, the plot, dialogue, and gameplay.

Recommendations for further research

For further research on the state of Native representation in videogames, it is recommended for people of specific Tribal Nations to review games where their tribe is being depicted. This would be helpful in assessing the accuracy of representation of Native cultures and histories. In addition, it would facilitate awareness for what it feels like to have a person's Tribal Nation depicted in correct or incorrect, positive or negative manners.

There are many more titles that were not included in the scope of this commentary which are worthy of exploration. This endeavor I will have to leave to other researchers and critics. Lastly, this commentary risks being outdated by the time it is read. New videogames are being developed daily, and the medium is a creative landscape that is ever changing. It deserves our constant, vigilant attention.

Suggested good practices for Native representation in videogames

For videogame developers curious about how to positively represent Native peoples in videogames in a decolonized, indigenized way, the following are good practices that can be emulated. Cultural insights in *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014) come from having Tribal members share their culture in unlockable videos as achievements, and this should be implemented widely. Having a loading screen with cultural learning like in *Mulaka* (Lienzo, 2018) is a way to share cultural wisdom, worldviews, and the beauty of Native ways of being. Culturally infused storytelling like in *Aztech Forgotten Gods* (Lienzo, 2021) is something other game developers can implement in telling more Native stories. Language is a key part of culture, and having an Indigenous language with translated subtitles, like in *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014) and in parts of *Assassin's Creed 3* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), do a form of poetic justice to a Native audience's ears, and are healing for others. Through such games players and others can learn about Native peoples and experience that we as Native people are still here. In addition, having more instances of a humanized

protagonist who lives in the modern era like in *Infamous Second Son* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2014) is a sight that is profoundly liberating and healing to see.

Eleanor Bailey Cornelius, my grandmother and an elder in the Oneida Nation, grew up at some point in Seattle, Washington, and was profoundly positively impacted when she heard of a videogame that showed Native people in a city where she had lived, in a modern era. Having Native people crystallized and frozen in the past, or situated in a fictional future, tends to perpetuate a narrative of Native people not existing in the present. There were 9.7 million Native people in the United States of America at the 2020 Census (U.S. Census Bureau. (2023), 1.8 million First Nations people in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023), approximately 50 million Indigenous peoples in Latin America—including Central and South America (de Dios, 2020)—and nearly one million Maori people in New Zealand (Raine, 2024). They and all other Inidigenous and Native peoples deserve representations that reflect their cultures, histories, and identities as they themselves see them.

Closing takeaways

A student of mine, Audrey Spencer, taught me that "beyond entertainment or engagement, [videogames] can be used as tools, so representation of underrepresented groups, like Native people, should be handled with care" (Audrey Spencer, personal communication, 4 December 2025). Arlie Neskah, a Diné elder, taught me that human beings have the power to close our eyes and imagine a world like this one, only better. Our responsibility as human beings is to lead people to such imagined places (Arlie Neskahi, Diné Elder, personal communication, 22 February 2016).

If every game handles Native representation with care like the first Native-owned videogame studio, Upper One Games, then this world would be a better place. Each Tribal Nation is unique and has their own cultural beliefs, and a key commonality is the notion of seven generations. Seven generations means that in everything we do, we do not just do it for this generation but do it for a better world for seven generations to come. We as human beings are storytelling animals. We as Native peoples are referred to as the Eagle People (Craig Stone, Ojibwe Elder and Professor Emeritus at CSULB in American Indian Studies, personal communication, 10 December 2025), with visions and stories to share. Videogames are a medium for us as Native people to tell our stories, in our own languages, as human beings. Native representation in videogames impacts not only Native peoples, but all human beings. In the words of Dr. Donald Warne, a member of the Lakota Nation whose Lakota name is Pejuta Wicasa, which means Medicine Man:

> Let us remember, we all drink from the same stream of consciousness. We are all connected by that same stream of consciousness. We are all related. What we do to each other, we do to ourselves. Act kindly toward

> my people, for indeed my people are your people (TEDx Talks, 2014, 00:18:40).

Yaw^ko, thank you in Oneida, for engaging in this commentary with me. As we say in Oneida, let's put our minds together, so be it in our minds.

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