Oldest Culture, Newest Medium: What Emerges from the Clash?

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ABSTRACT
Like most indigenous cultures, Aboriginal Australian culture almost never appears in games. This has changed in the past decade with an accelerating convergence between the world's oldest continuous culture and the world's newest medium. Results have ranged from the catastrophic in the case of *Survival Island 3* (2015), to the very positive case of the ongoing *Digital Songlines* project. This paper describes existing titles that have incorporated Aboriginal culture, and lays out the core challenges of using games to explore Aboriginal culture in particular, and indigenous cultures in general.

Keywords
Cultural heritage, Aboriginal culture, indigenous culture, virtual heritage, cultural heritage video games, procedural rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION
In 1965, the renowned Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner mused about how best to convey Aboriginal Australian culture in a museum. One of the most respected experts on Aboriginal culture, Stanner understood that a simple display of tangible items could never adequately convey a culture so deeply informed by the intangible. His proposal was thus visionary, both in terms of cultural heritage (CH) studies, where material culture has traditionally been the core consideration (Smith, 2006), and in technological terms. Stanner wanted to display "the whole record of Aboriginal life, ancient and recent, especially but not only its art, handicrafts and theatrical rituals" through a "genial conspiracy of audio-visual experts and sculptors, modelers, map and diorama makers, painters and the like" (Stanner, 1979, pp. 193-194). Positioned chronologically halfway between *Spacewar!* (1962) and *Pong* (1972), Stanner certainly did not have games in mind as a means through which his vision could be realized. Today, however, it is clear that games are an excellent medium to use for a holistic, virtual re-creation, re-enactment, and expression of culture where the intangible aspects of cultural heritage are not ignored or omitted for the sake of the tangible. In virtual re-creations, the intangible can indeed be a strong focus.

In light of the possibilities promised by the application of game technology to heritage, it is unsurprising the past decade has seen a substantial amount of research and practical projects carried out at the intersection of these two disciplines, and leading to the concept of virtual heritage (Champion, 2015). Aboriginal CH has not been left out of this convergence, and indeed features quite prominently on the map of Australian virtual

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heritage work. The encounter between the world's oldest continuous culture and the world's newest medium has been occasionally disappointing or indeed catastrophic with the release of titles like *Survival Island 3: Australia* (2015), and occasionally exciting in the case of the projects emerging from the *Digital Songlines* framework. Above all, this promising encounter is fraught with a creative tension that may impact positively both Aboriginal culture and the Australian video game industry in unexpected ways. This paper describes the games that have so far emerged from this encounter, and subsequently lays out the two core challenges involved in using games not only for Australian Aboriginal culture in particular, but also for similar indigenous cultures, present and past, in general.

EXISTING TITLES CONTAINING ABORIGINAL CULTURE

Cultural heritage may be found across four categories of games (Majewski, 2015). First and foremost of these in terms of the depth of available content are serious games, where entertainment is a secondary concern, with the main goal of the game being education, training, or even simply storage of facts. On the opposite end of the spectrum are ordinary commercial games, where the goal is only to entertain. Two other categories are hybrids oscillating between serious and commercial games. Thus, the third category are game modifications or mods, which are player-produced, and sometimes researcher-produced expansions to existing commercial titles (Champion, 2012), and which often do seek to provide deeper cultural information (Majewski, 2016). Finally, the fourth category are culture-centric games, which may either be serious games intentionally designed to imitate commercial games in order to enhance accessibility, or conversely they may be commercial games that utilize deeper cultural information as a selling point (Majewski, 2015). When Aboriginal CH is examined across these four categories, it becomes clear that while efforts in the serious game category are impressive, the overall results are somewhat disappointing.

Serious game projects exploring Aboriginal heritage have been among the most impressive virtual heritage projects developed of Australia. All of the projects so far have been associated with the broader *Digital Songlines* framework spearheaded by the Aboriginal researcher and developer, Brett Leavy. *Digital Songlines* was intended initially as a more effective method of storing cultural data without erasing contextual connections so often lost in ordinary databases (Leavy, 2014). The projects emerging from *Digital Songlines* have included *Digital Songlines – Irene's World* (2006), *Digital Songlines – Vincent's World* (2006) *Virtual Warrane* (2007), and *Virtual Warrane II: Sacred Tracks of the Gadigal* (2012), which depicted Sydney Harbour before settlement, and was at the heart of a well-received public exhibition ("WorldNewsAustralia", 2012). Two forthcoming project in this lineage are *Virtual Meanjin* and *Virtual Tarntanya*, which aim to depict pre-settlement Brisbane and Adelaide respectively; other similar projects are in development (Purtill, 2016). The *Digital Songlines* or more recently *Virtual Songlines* projects may be regarded as a series, with each subsequent title exhibiting incremental improvements over the earlier titles; this also means that all of them have a similar strengths and limitations.

While serious games typically provide CH content with great care for accuracy or authenticity, they do not necessarily provide this content in the most effective or interesting manner, and researchers have pointed towards commercial games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) as examples particularly worthy of imitation by CH practitioners (Granström, 2013). However, in the commercial arena, the only games allowing interaction with Aboriginal Australia have typically been grand strategy titles

where players lead nation-states across a particular period of history. Titles of this kind where some elements of Aboriginal presence could be identified included the *Civilization* (1991-2016), *Europa Universalis* (2001-2013), and *Victoria* (2003-2010) series. Although grand strategy games typically allow players a wide range of state actors to choose from, none of these titles provided an Aboriginal option, because Aboriginal Australian society did not have an equivalent of the state (Flood, 2006). Consequently, interactions with Aboriginal Australia in these games have occurred in vestigial form, barely relevant to the gameplay (Apperley, 2006), and absolutely irrelevant in terms of Aboriginal CH. It is clear that such an implementation of Aboriginal Australia is not an oversight or an intentional omission on the part of the developers, but simply a limitation embedded in the gameplay mechanics of the grand strategy genre. However, it is worth noting that more recent titles of this kind, especially *Europa Universalis IV* (2013), have made substantial attempts to incorporate alternative gameplay mechanics for indigenous states in North and Central America (Loban, 2016).

Outside of strategy titles, only one other commercial game has touched upon Aboriginal culture: the low-budget mobile game *Survival Island 3: Australia* (2015). The game's capacity to explore CH was already strongly circumscribed by its nature as a low-budget title with limited features. However, a much bigger problem was the title's marketing, which presented Aboriginals only as enemies to kill, stating that "You also have to fight with aboriginals [sic] – you invaded their home!" ("Billy D", 2016). Consequently, the game triggered an online petition, and within the space of less than one week, all online distributors chose to remove the game from their stores, effectively ending its commercial life (Johnston, 2016). Ironically, while it is no longer possible to verify the facts by playing the game in question, it appears as though *Survival Island 3* did not actually require the player to kill Aboriginals (Gooch, 2016), and the player was apparently able to interact with them in other ways. If this were true, *Survival Island 3* would be a unique case of a game removed from stores not due to its actual content, but solely because of its exceedingly maladroit marketing. Whatever the facts of the case, *Survival Island 3* illustrates the delicate political aspects of working with Aboriginal culture in games and maintaining constant dialogue to explain any potentially controversial aspect of any such game.

The next category to examine are player-produced game mods. Aboriginal Australia is virtually nonexistent in such productions, with the only noteworthy effort so far being the *Indigenous Peoples of Oceania* mod for *Europa Universalis IV* (Loban, 2016). In light of the gameplay challenges involved with simulating Aboriginal culture in a state-based game, it must be acknowledged that the *Indigenous Peoples* mod in some ways misrepresents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Nonetheless, Loban argues it is still worthwhile, as it provides cultural information about Australia's indigenous peoples, even if it does so in an ahistorical manner. Educators in the past have had similar misgivings about the depiction of Native American civilizations in the *Civilization* series, and have found that players are typically aware of the ahistorical nature of such depictions, but nonetheless benefit from their presence by being induced to ponder the game's limitations and the ways in which the given group could be depicted more authentically (Squire, 2011).

A final category are culture-centric games, which blend commercial and serious game characteristics. There is an established history of using commercial game forms with serious game content to either exploit CH as a marketable feature, or to explore CH in a more palatable manner. An example of the latter approach is *Never Alone* (2014), a

puzzle platform game produced by a Native American group from Alaska in collaboration with non-indigenous developers (Roberts, 2015). In the Australian context, the title *Songlines* (2012) falls into this category. Developed at the University of Southern California as an assessment piece (Vick, 2012), *Songlines* draws inspiration from Aboriginal creation stories to create a surreal fantasy game where the player "takes on the avatar of a primordial creator spirit who flies through a blank and formless landscape" (Vick, 2012, p. 1), and molds the world by adding waters, deserts, grasslands, and mountains. *Songlines* exemplifies a careful approach to Aboriginal heritage, where the non-Aboriginal creators, aware of the limitations of their university project, chose to maintain a certain distance from Aboriginal culture, "taking inspiration from these traditions without copying them too closely" (Vick, 2012, p. 40) in order to avoid the impression of unfairly co-opting Aboriginal culture.

Some interesting indie-style culture-centric developments have also occurred with the Aboriginal community in the mining town of Roeburne, Western Australia. As part of the Yijala Yala Project, Aboriginal youths developed the platform game *Love Punks* (2011) depicting their community. Beyond games, they also developed the interactive apps *NEOMAD* and *Warlu Song* (Matheson, 2015). Finally, it must be noted that, through the incorporation of commercial gameplay features such as quests, Brett Leavy's *Virtual Songlines* projects are certainly moving in some ways away from serious games towards the culture centric-commercial category. *Virtual Meanjin*'s user interface also relies on elements typically found in commercial games, such as a mini-map with markers.

ABORIGINAL CULTURE IN GAMES: THE CORE CHALLENGES

The absence of Aboriginal culture in games is remarkable when contrasted with the popularity of Aboriginal themes in cinema and their significance in the Australian souvenir industry. Partially, this absence may be attributed simply to the broader collapse of the Australian games industry (Apperley & Golding, 2015). However, there are two main is challenges involved in dealing with Aboriginal culture in games which must be considered.

The first challenge is the need for collaboration. It must be stressed that all around the world, frustrations accumulated from past conflicts have left indigenous communities ill disposed towards heritage scholars (Zimmerman, 2007). It is thus crucial for heritage work to be conducted in strict cooperation and with acknowledgement of indigenous ownership and control (Creamer, 2004; Zimmerman, 2005). In the absence of collaboration, even when a project does not actively seek out controversy as *Survival Island 3* appeared to do with its marketing, it is still possible to cause unintended controversies. An example of such a situation may be seen in the case of the phone company Telstra's virtual re-creation of Uluru in *Second Life* (2003). This natural landmark is an Aboriginal sacred site, where tourists are discouraged from climbing and taking photographs of Uluru's north-eastern face. These restrictions were not considered in Telstra's virtual version, sparking protests from the site's custodians (Haines, 2007; Wyeld, Crogan and Leavy, 2007).

Such situations are liable to contribute to a lack of trust. Nonetheless, Aboriginal communities are open to collaboration, and excited by the possibilities of game technology. There is also an awareness of the relative success of *Never Alone* (2014), which not only conveyed cultural content, but also generated an income for the community group responsible for its inception. The open attitude towards games is best exemplified by the official statement issued by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council in

reaction to the situation around *Survival Island 3*. In this statement, the chairman of the Council did not condemn the medium, but instead chose to extol the positive potential of video games, while also urging developers to collaborate with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal game developers (Johnston, 2016).

The other challenge lies in the fact that indigenous cultures are hard to reconcile with conventional gameplay. Even *Never Alone*, created specifically to transmit cultural content, ultimately relegated the bulk of this content to bonus videos detached from the game's narrative. *Never Alone*'s game mechanics were not in any way tailored towards the Iñupiaq culture it was trying to depict. In so doing, the game failed to make use of possibly the greatest advantage video games have over other media in conveying CH, namely procedural rhetoric, the idea of conveying a message not only through words and explanations but above all through rules, actions and reactions (Bogost, 2007). In other cases, such as the *Indigenous Peoples of Oceania* mod, the built-in procedural rhetoric of the game already works against the implementation of indigenous content by building its rules around the social framework of the state, absent in many indigenous cultures.

Similarly, it is easy to imagine a new *Assassin's Creed* (2007-2015) game set in colonial Australia, where the player might even be an Aboriginal character. But he or she would also be an assassin, whose behavior in all likelihood would not be distinct from earlier games in the series. The game would inevitably gravitate towards a combat-heavy and materialistic gameplay, while de-emphasizing the type of gameplay that might emerge from a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle.

Aboriginal people did engage in conflicts, not only with European colonists but also with other Aboriginal groups (Flood, 2006). The militant Aboriginal resistance that occurred particularly in South-East Queensland in the 1840-1870 timeframe (Kerkhove, 2016) is well worth commemorating in a video game, and almost ideally suited as a mod for a tactical role-playing game like the *Mount & Blade* (2005-2011) series. Again, however, for all the tangible benefits such a mod would bring in terms of bringing to light a forgotten part of Australian history, the emphasis on warfare would make the depiction of the hunter-gatherer traditions difficult at best.

An open-world role-playing game (RPG) such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) may perhaps be more suited for Aboriginal culture, as it already features many of the outdoor activities such as hunting that Aboriginal people partook on a daily basis. But at the core of *Skyrim* is the dungeon. Many Aboriginal stories contain activities comparable to an RPG-like dungeon crawl (Berndt, 1981), but usually just one. The gameplay of *Skyrim* would not hold up if the game were reduced only to the activities justifiable from an Aboriginal perspective; the removal of inappropriate features must be accompanied by the implementation of new and appropriate features. This can also be seen in the way *Skyrim* tells the story of its world to the player. There are just over 300 books for the player to read in *Skyrim*, and their uniquely subjective approach makes them remarkable world-building devices (DiPietro, 2014). Such devices did not exist in Aboriginal Australia. By contrast, there are five songs to be heard in all of *Skyrim*, and it is through song that the bulk of Aboriginal stories were told (Berndt, 1981; Flood, 2006).

The need for a radical re-examination of gameplay is perhaps best illustrated by the recently-released open-world action game *Far Cry: Primal* (2016). As a game set in the prehistoric Europe of 10,000 BC, *Primal* certainly demonstrates that a hunter-gatherer culture is theoretically within reach for game developers; many of the game's scenes

convey fascinating, if conjectural and sometimes outright fantastical, aspects of Mesolithic Europe. The game even went as far as to include a fictional language conceived by an expert linguist on the basis of the reconstructions of a speculative Proto-Indo-European language (Te, 2016). However, its gameplay does not differ substantially from the earlier *Far Cry* (2004-2016) games that took place in modern settings. Particularly noticeable are the user interface elements such as a mini-map, all of which substantially detract from the experience in terms of conveying what living in the Mesolithic era felt like. Consequently, the radically different cultural setting did not filter into any meaningful gameplay differences; particularly lamentable was the erasure of the most important material concerns of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle through the proliferation of easy-to-find resources and instant item-crafting mechanics (Weidman, 2016). A game like *Far Cry: Primal* set in Aboriginal Australia would certainly be noteworthy and worthwhile. However, many of the devices typical for mainstream video games that are present in *Primal* – some of which have also seeped into *Virtual Meanjin* – will not permit as deep an exploration of the world's oldest continuous culture as it certainly deserves.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous Australian-themed games are currently rare, in spite of the fact that such titles could potentially be highly successful on the strength of their cultural content. However, it is clear that titles exploring Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures will not achieve their fullest potential as long as they rely on the mechanics standard in present-day games. A novel approach to gameplay is needed so that cultural content emerges not only through narrative, but also through the procedural rhetoric of the game mechanics. For such innovation, independent game developers are probably far better suited than most large commercial studios. In the Australian games industry of today, which has been practically denuded of large studios, this is a situation of intriguing opportunities both for the Indigenous community and for Australian games developers. Any such projects will be challenging; however, developers, researchers, and modders who do set out on this path will find a supportive and enthusiastic Indigenous community to work with.

This paper begun with W. E. H. Stanner. The anthropologist concluded his discussion about the need for a sophisticated re-telling of Aboriginal culture through modern means with a strong call to action: "I think that in fifty or a hundred years' time Australians of the day will wonder why on earth we could not see beyond our noses. I hope they will not have cause to say: 'there they were, the eighth European generation, blind to the unrepeatable miracle that they could still touch hands with, talk to, and learn about the eight hundredth generation of forerunners. They had everything. Except imagination.'" (Stanner, 1979, p. 197). Since those words were first written in 1965, fifty years have already passed.

BIO

Jakub Majewski is currently pursuing PhD research at Bond University, focusing on the intersection between RPGs and cultural heritage. As an adjunct Teaching Fellow at Bond, he has taught interactive experience design, game culture, and the game industry. Jakub also has a decade of experience in games development in various capacities from level designer to producer and creative director. His professional portfolio includes forty games in multiple genres for multiple platforms.

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