Appropriation or Erasure? Imagining Indigenous Futures in Games

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Abstract

The depictions of the future in videogames are not neutral. In particular, the way Indigenous cultures and peoples are developed in these settings often reflects constraints of imagination reflective of settler colonial ideologies.

The most prominent depictions of Indigenous peoples and cultures in games, such as Red Dead Redemption II *and* Assassin's Creed III, *usually position us in the past. Portrayal of Indigenous people in the future is mostly achieved through self-representation in games of a smaller scale, such as the works of Anishinaabe game developer and academic Elizabeth LaPensée (2021). In the games examined here, Indigenous cultures are more present than Indigenous peoples. Comparing the depictions of Indigenous peoples in* Overwatch, inFAMOUS Second Son, *and* Horizon Zero Dawn, *I examine how the mentalities of settler colonialism impact the imagined futures depicted in these games.*

All three games take different approaches to portraying Indigenous peoples. Overwatch *touches on Māori, Australian Aboriginal, and Native Americans peoples in ways that can be considered appropriation or erasure, though they have improved from the depictions at release. In* inFAMOUS Second Son, *the player can make choices that lead to the eradication of a fictional Native American nation, the Akomish. The game's setting of Salmon Bay, Washington, has its own history of occupation by the Duwamish people that is subsequently erased (Thrush, 2017).* Horizon Zero Dawn *is set further into the future, using aspects of current cultures to give depth to future societies. However, they all demonstrate a reliance on stereotype and a separation of Indigenous cultures from Indigenous people. None of the depiction of Indigenous people or Indigeneity in these works are inherently bad. Within the narrative, to varying extents, there are justification or condemnation for events of Indigenous oppression. In some cases, the more problematic elements can be avoided depending on player input.*

While justified within the dystopian narrative of the games, each of these games displays

a continuation of the logic of "elimination of the native" (Wolfe, 2006). Elimination is achieved through redefinition as well as outright erasure. The complexity of Indigenous existence is subordinated to the use of Indigeneity as a tool to convey certain messages to a contemporary audience. Developing an understanding of these constraints and their effects are necessary to envision a more radical Indigenous future in games.

The depictions of imagined futures in videogames reflect settler colonial biases of the present. This article critically evaluates the extent to which Indigenous peoples and Indigenous cultures are represented in games. Many popular depictions of Indigenous peoples in videogames are focused on the past, such as *Red Dead Redemption II* (Rockstar, 2018) and *Assassins Creed III* (Ubisoft, 2012). Indigenous-focused games set in the future are primarily limited to smaller budget games mostly from Indigenous developers, such as *Umurangi Generation* (Origame Digital, 2020). A significant portion of these games also have a historical focus (Jae, 2019). I will analyse three mainstream games that centre Indigenous people or narratives: *inFAMOUS: Second Son* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2014), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). Only *inFAMOUS: Second Son* has a Native protagonist, whereas *Horizon Zero Dawn* has no Indigenous characters in the game, though it draws heavily on Indigenous cultures. *Overwatch* draws on Indigenous cultures more than it features Indigenous characters, though the quality of the representation varies across the roster.

Each game takes a separate approach: assimilating Indigenous peoples into a universal humanity, constructing a settler-created version of Indigenous peoples, or simply excluding us/them altogether. However, all three approaches can be traced back to similar colonial biases. I argue that a binding thread between these depictions is the logic of elimination (Wolfe, 2006). Wolfe differentiates between settler colonial manifestations of genocide and the logic of elimination. The logic of elimination refers to the peculiar, contradictory, and, at times, disingenuous views settler colonial nations have of themselves and of the Indigenous peoples whose lands they take, which justify their actions. Tuck and Yang (2012), drawing on Deloria (1999), outline a settler desire to appropriate Indigeneity, both as a way of establishing national identity and to ease settler uncertainty. This is expressed in the games analysed as the utilisation of Indigenous aesthetics, primarily from the First Peoples of America and Canada, due to the North American locations of the developers. Another manifestation of this desire peculiar to imagined futures is elimination, leaving the game's protagonists as the inheritors and protectors of the land. *Horizon* achieves this elimination in-universe, while *Overwatch* simply erases Australian Aboriginal peoples without an explanation.

Author Biography

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Terminology differs for Indigenous peoples from different continents. I use specific nation names when possible. When this is not possible, Native is used to refer to the First Peoples of the U.S. and Canada, Aboriginal for mainland Australian First Peoples,[1] and Māori for the First Peoples of New Zealand. Indigenous and First Peoples are used interchangeably to refer to the entire category of peoples. I am from the Dharug nation, and my country lies on what is also Western Sydney in New South Wales.

In the field of Indigenous studies, the use of reflexivity and standpoint theory—using your own viewpoint as a form of interrogation—is an accepted aspect of academic analysis. As such, I incorporate my experiences as a Dharug person playing these games, and how my emotional reaction to them informs my argument. If parts of the game, such as the player character being repeatedly called "savage" in *Horizon*, make me uncomfortable, what this may indicate for other Indigenous players or the reasoning behind my discomfort are useful lines of inquiry. My purpose is not to suggest that the features I highlight should have been excluded, or that they imply racist intent on the developer's part; it is to point out the ways in which colonial thinking pervades every aspect of life, including fiction.

inFAMOUS: *Second Son*

inFAMOUS: Second Son (*Second Son*) is the third game in the inFAMOUS series. The game introduces a new protagonist: Delsin Rowe, an Akomish man who sets out to use his new-found elemental powers to save his tribe. Other Akomish characters include Reggie, his brother, and Betty, an Elder of the tribe. Departing from previous games in the series, *Second Son* is placed in the real world setting of Seattle, with developers drawing on their personal experiences living in the city (McWhertor, 2013). The game is set in 2016, the very near future at the time of release (Fleming, 2013).

Considerable effort is put into making the game's Seattle an accurate reflection of reality—with concessions to game engine limitations—including local flora, fauna, and businesses (McWhertor, 2013). The Akomish, however, are a creation of the developers. By name and location based on the Duwamish people of the Seattle area, this departure from realism constrains choices and reflects biases in the development of *Second Son*. In a development team that put so much emphasis on a Seattle that "feels totally real" (McWhertor, 2013), Duwamish people were considered interchangeable with a fictional counterpart. Considering the effort placed into including local species of birds, the break from realism in an aspect called the "genesis" (Dutton, 2014) of the game is particularly notable. According to game director Nate Fox, the creation of the Akomish was to avoid "invent[ing] or misinterpret[ing] anything that [they] didn't fully understand" (Gravning, 2014). This statement implies that Fox believes creating a fictionalised version of Native people is not inventing something they do not understand.

Second Son, rather than engaging with the complexity of Native experiences through their characters and setting, creates a simplified version of an existing people for their own purpos-

es. The Akomish are, in essence, a facsimile of a Native nation. They have been reduced to an essentialised form of Indigeneity designed for easy understanding. They have a longhouse, acting as a distinctive visual marker of Nativeness, and a heavily simplified form of tribal identity, framed around loyalty. Unlike the Duwamish, the Akomish have no history. There is no resistance against colonialism—in fact, there is no sense of colonialism at all. The Akomish are in the longhouse. Before that, they were not anywhere. They are a fabrication. They do not fight for federal recognition, like the Duwamish. There is no sense that the Akomish have an ongoing connection to land beyond one building. The Duwamish people have been "undefined" by taking the land from those with a land-based ontology. Seattle's Native history has been rewritten. In the context of the focus on realism in other aspects of Seattle, the treatment of Native peoples reflects a disregard based in a settler desire for dominion over land.

There is some merit to Sucker Punch Production's concerns about depicting an existing Native nation in the Duwamish. As with every people, there are varied perspectives, and likely there would be at least some criticism of the tribe's depiction. This depiction, given the construction of the Akomish critiqued in this section, would likely reflect settler colonial ideologies that informed the biases of the developers. The matter is not as simple as choosing the right path and the right characteristics to create a dynamic and progressive fictional Native. Racist settler colonial ideology is so deeply ingrained in the formulation and gathering of Western knowledge that no creative choice can be made in isolation of it (Smith, 2012, pp. 44–47).

The Akomish are also a depiction of Native cultures without the inclusion of Native peoples. The Native characters are voiced by white actors. This reflects a trend throughout the industry. It is common for white actors to voice non-white characters in videogames as well as animated television (Romano, 2020). Using white voice actors to inhabit characters of colour enforces an understanding of white people as a universal standard for humanity (Miletic, 2020). This implication is compounded using motion capture for the characters; not only white voices, but white behaviours and expressions are placed onto Native characters (McWhertor, 2013). The delineation between whiteness and Nativeness here refers not to an inherent quality of being, but a standpoint based on cultural beliefs and racialised upbringing (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 60). For Delsin, Reggie, and Betty, depicted as culturally involved members of their tribe, the recognition and inclusion of these differences would have allowed for a more nuanced and realistic depiction. *Second Son*'s depiction has been limited to relatively simple and surface-level indicators of Native identity. Native peoples' experiences are subordinated to the use of Native cultures as a tool to add uniqueness to the game's setting.

The use of Native art and design can vary in the extent to which it reflects colonial ideologies, from being quite superficial or tying into the complexities of Native histories and cultures. For example, two features of *Second Son* are the ability to paint predefined graffiti art around Seattle and to unlock different designs for the back of Delsin's vest. These could be used to highlight Native and particularly Duwamish art styles. Indigenous political art has a long history, and having the character tap into that history, using images similar to Figure 1,

would give a sense of greater depth of Native identity (Kaufmann, 1993). Delsin as a character already uses his art skills for political purposes, defacing police billboards and mocking the military-style occupation of the city. Using a fictional nation would weaken these connections. Art practices for a fictitious Native nation would need to be appropriated from existing peoples, changing their meaning by removing them from the history and culture they belong to. Alternatively, the designs could have been created by mostly white settler developers, reflecting an essentialised outside view of what Native cultures are. This continues the history of settlers creating false understandings of Indigenous peoples that would then overshadow the peoples themselves (Nakata, 2007, pp. 2–10).

Figure 1: A sign reading "Chief Seattle is watching" with an image of Chief Seattle's face, used in demonstration against an oil rig, on the side of Duwamish longhouse (Tran, 2020).

The inclusion of Native design may ring hollow if used in isolation. Thus, the inclusion of Native peoples in the development of the game becomes incredibly important. Native people included should be from the character's nation, though this may not be possible. There may be difficulties in finding people from specific nations, due to small populations, or people simply being too busy or uninterested. Developers would need to be prepared for Indigenous peoples to refuse, and be prepared to put in the effort to establish trust. There is a historically fraught relationship between Indigenous peoples and researchers that needs to be worked against to avoid recreating an oppressive power dynamic (Smith, 2012). This context is similar enough to games developers seeking information that the same dynamics are relevant here. Having

long-term lived experience of the complexity and diversity of Native life is a perspective that is noticeably absent from the games discussed in this article. Inclusion of those who have these perspectives would help add depth to the often surface-level inclusion of Indigenous peoples.

As already noted, the developers considered having a Native character the "genesis" of the game. Despite this, they do not seem to have engaged with the complexity of Native experience or taken advantage of the narrative opportunities a Native perspective could provide. This contradiction is encompassed by Wolfe's framework. According to him, settler colonial nations use Indigeneity as a way to express difference from the mother country (Wolfe, 2006, p. 389). The Native connection to land is particularly desired as a form of establishing identity (Deloria, 1999, pp. 4–5). In this case, the developers have used the Duwamish people through the Akomish to add a sense of "Seattleness," appropriating Indigeneity in order to add a deeper connection to the setting. The fictionalisation of the Akomish reveals the lie to this appropriation, as their fabricated relationship to land has no place in the real Seattle *Second Son* aims to emulate. The shallowness of the depiction also reflects its narrative role as a tool to add depth.

Another aspect of the game that has strong resonances with the logic of elimination is the evil, or "infamous," ending. One of the key appeals of the series is the ability to choose different moral paths throughout the story, accessing different quests, abilities, and storylines. The "infamous" path leads to the death of the entire Akomish tribe, save for Delsin. He can either kill them directly or let them die slowly from attacks perpetrated against the tribe earlier in the game by the military force occupying Seattle. In the good ending, Delsin saves the tribe. The developers expect most players would play both endings (Dutton, 2014). The series itself is titled for the ability to choose a moral path of either hero or infamous. I explore two facets of this ending. Firstly, how the ending itself reflects the logic of elimination. Secondly, how the ending implies a lack of consideration of Indigenous people that make up part of the game's audience.

The "infamous" ending of the game arguably constitutes an act of elimination. While Delsin may live on, the Akomish nation is dissolved. Delsin is effectively assimilated into the settler colonial U.S., having no remaining ties to his people or his culture. The lack of ties also reflects the shallow representation of Native cultures, as Delsin's loyalty to the tribe, removed as a character trait in this endgame, is portrayed as the extent of his cultural connection during the game. By making these choices, the player has effectively "killed the Indian in him" (Pratt, 1892 in Wolfe, 2006). This ending is not a necessary gameplay choice. Delsin could have killed Betty, the only remaining named member of the Akomish at this point in the story, and it would be a similar "evil" action without resorting to elimination. While the action of killing off a Native nation may have made sense in-story, giving gamers the ability to wipe out a Native people ties very strongly into the logic of settler colonialism, through enabling the player's ability to participate in elimination.

The nature of the infamous ending alienates the potential Indigenous audience. To use myself as an example, as a Dharug person I was extremely uncomfortable when I learned

about this ending, and do not feel able to play the infamous route in this game. Other Indigenous people I have spoken to have had similar sentiments. The audience for this ending is supposed to be shocked by Delsin's actions, but not to the extent that it would make the game unplayable. Sucker Punch Productions do not seem to have failed in this effort. There appears to have been positive reception by some players, with comments on a video of the ending saying they consider it the better and more interesting of the two endings, with one controversial commenter even suggesting that his actions were "a mercy killing" (Bubbly Jubbly, 2021). Providing the circumstances for players to consider killing an entire Native tribe in-game positively contributes, albeit only slightly, to the normalisation of the elimination of Indigenous peoples in reality. For those who are opposed to elimination in any sense, including fictional, the infamous route is profoundly unappealing. People whose ancestors experienced, and who are still experiencing, the ramifications of settler colonialism cannot find escapism in a narrative that repeats their destruction.

Ultimate dominion over the fate of the Akomish people lies in the hands of the player. Given the historical outcomes of this sort of control, I believe this power should not be provided for the purposes of play.

Horizon Zero Dawn

Horizon Zero Dawn (*Horizon*) is a 2017 action game developed by Guerrilla Games. It is set 1000 years in the future, when human society has redeveloped centuries after an initially unexplained apocalypse. The story follows Aloy, a young woman searching for answers to her mysterious origin. The new human societies are based around four tribes, three of which—the Nora, Carja, and Oseram—play major roles in the main story. These tribes, while drawing inspiration from existing cultures, are supposed to provide a setting "completely different" from our world (Travis, 2017).

Due to the large time gap between the apocalypse and the story of the game, *Horizon* is described as a post-post-apocalyptic story (Travis, 2017). Rather than dealing with the immediate aftermath of catastrophic collapse, the game navigates the world that has grown in its wake. *Horizon* is also a postcolonial game; not in the sense that it has surpassed or deconstructed the structures of colonialism, but that these structures have reached their conclusion. Every human society has collapsed and all current cultures, not just Indigenous ones, no longer exist. Everyone who belonged to this world is long dead, and humanity has little knowledge of those who came before. There are no Indigenous peoples or cultures left on the planet. To put it another way, everyone has become Indigenous. A redefinition of humanity has eliminated Indigenous peoples while purporting to represent them. This is enabled by the ambiguity of Indigenous as a term. As a label to describe peoples who have undergone a specific experience of settler colonialism, Indigenous has been eliminated (MacDonald, 2016). As a term used to describe peoples who are belonging or being original to a land, Indigeneity has been appropriated. The "postcolonial" setting of *Horizon*'s future continues through the portrayal of the human tribes.

The people of *Horizon* have a range of skin tones and ethnic features distributed almost randomly across the human population. In creating a new population consisting of an amalgamation of current cultures, *Horizon* has effectively assimilated a range of cultures suppressed by white supremacy into a universal humanity. The tribes are each an amalgamation of cultures, with some original characteristics created by the developers. In this sense, Indigenous cultures are simply one among many inspirations. The entire future human population is framed as pseudo-Indigenous. For as long as this iteration of humanity has existed, they have lived on these lands. In-universe, the inclusion of Indigenous cultures decontextualised and absent of Indigenous people is neutral. The people who make up the Nora, Carja, and Oseram have displaced no one to occupy their lands. They have moved into a literal terra nullius. Terra nullius, Latin for "no one's land," refers to the justification of settler colonialism that Indigenous peoples did not classify as using the land in a meaningful way, and therefore the land was open for occupation by Europeans (Ritter, 1996). This was retrospectively applied in some settler-colonial nations as a legal doctrine (Ritter, 1996, p. 6). The discrepancy between these beliefs and the genocidal reality causes ambiguity and anxiety in national identity (Deloria, 1999). Making true a legal fiction that settler colonists use to validate occupation realises a settler fantasy in which this anxiety does not exist. The appropriation of Indigeneity is another way in which this anxiety is settled. By becoming Indigenous, settlers become the legitimate inheritors of the land. *Horizon* also uses this strategy. The tribes of humanity are in fact the legitimate and explicit inheritors of the land, handed over to them by humanity from before the apocalypse.

The trend of assimilating Native cultures and heritages into a universal humanity can also be observed in the Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft) series. The protagonist for the contemporary segments of the first few games, Desmond Miles, has a wide variety of ancestries, including Italian, Persian, and Mohawk. However, he appears as an ethnically ambiguous white man. He is an everyman, a point of entry to the game's diverse setting for the audience, and, while he has Mohawk ancestry, he is not Mohawk. The concentration of diverse human experiences through the vessel of a white player character is visible in both these games. Aloy, the player character in *Horizon*, uses a white actress for her design and motion-capture (Travis, 2017). While race does not have the same meaning in the game, players read characters based on their existing racial frameworks. Elimination is achieved through assimilation of Indigenous peoples and the establishment of a racially neutral but often white-centred version of humanity.

Humanity lacking racialisation is justified in-universe. A thousand years before the events of the game, all life on earth was wiped out, then reborn with only fragmented knowledge of the civilisations that came before. In this context, the exclusion of Indigenous cultures would be tantamount to erasure. What makes their inclusion different to the use of Viking or Roman cultures as inspiration is the ongoing oppression of Indigenous cultures in contemporary Western society. While the tribes in the game have no history of colonialism or oppression to enable appropriation, this is not so of the people who play the game. The tribes that use clothing and designs based on Native American cultures have no Native people to hold power over. Out of

game, the cultures that were repressed and people that were and are punished for practicing them are used as fodder for the worldbuilding of a profitable game. The difference in power historically, and the contemporary continuations and ramifications of this, are inescapable. There is no way to write *Horizon*'s tribes to sidestep the existing cultural context of the game itself. The developers were essentially placed into a double bind, where there is no option they could take that did not reflect some history of Indigenous erasure. The situation says less about *Horizon* itself than it does about the pervasiveness and myriad systems of colonialism.

While Indigenous peoples themselves have been eliminated in the world of *Horizon*, it is worthwhile exploring how Indigenous cultures are featured in the worldbuilding. The construction of the various tribes in the present of *Horizon* also reflect colonial representations of Indigenous people. Out of the four main tribes, the Nora is heavily based on Native American cultures. Some of these characteristics include aspects of their appearance, such as the use of beads and feathers, terminology like "brave" for warrior, and a land-based spirituality. The Nora are also denigrated by and less technologically advanced than the two other tribes encountered in the main game, the Oseram and the Carja. Throughout the course of *Horizon*, it is common to hear the Nora player character, Aloy, referred to as "savage." The Carja even refer to the Nora lands as the "Savage East." Journalists and fans writing about the game, as well, use the term primitive for the whole setting, but also specifically for the Nora (Jecks 2017). These terms are racially charged, based on stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and the idea of European societies as benchmarks for civilisation (Büken, 2002, p. 46; Smith, 2012, pp. 30–33). Frankly, as an Indigenous person it was alienating to realise just how many times Aloy and the other Nora are called savage and disparaged by other characters in the game. The use of these terms, to Indigenous players, may be a reminder of the racism they face in settler colonial societies and not simply a language choice to add depth to the game. Non-Indigenous players are given a way to embody this appropriated Indigeneity by playing this game. It is significant that Aloy comes from the heavily Indigenous-coded Nora tribe. Aloy acts as an entry point to Indigeneity for non-Indigenous players.

While the Nora are not Indigenous, the developers use stereotypical understandings of Indigenous peoples as a shortcut to portraying them. The framing of the Nora as "savages" in relation to the other tribes, and inferior in relation to Aloy, allows players to project their existing cultural biases onto the characters. Guerrilla plays on stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as less technological and less advanced, by having the Nora explicitly reject technology and practice a lower level of innovation in clothing, building, and weaponry (Davies, 2017). Their culture as well, is said to be less advanced than the Carja, the "only highly civilized culture" in *The Art of Horizon Zero Dawn* (Davies, 2017, p. 47). This is not just biased information received from characters in-game, but the beliefs Guerrilla holds about the world that they have created.

The focus on development and linear progress for categorising *Horizon*'s tribes reflects colonial constructions of history that have been refuted by Indigenous academics (Smith, 2012, p. 31). Linear history produces hierarchies of civilisation, indicated in the treatment of the

Nora, Carja, and Oseram as ranked by levels of development. It also conflates technological prowess with the complexity of social structures. For example, while Aboriginal Australian cultures did not have equivalents to European technologies such as guns, we possess some of the most complex kinship structures (McConvell, 2018). Yet, the Carja are considered to be the most advanced technologically and socially (Davies, 2017, p. 47). This conceptualisation of hierarchical civilisation underpins the worldbuilding and the interactions between different tribes throughout the game. The use of "savage" and "primitive" fit within this understanding. The justifications for the displacement and replacement of Indigenous peoples through the logic of elimination is supported by this framework.

While Aloy is subject to the same prejudices as the rest of the Nora, the narrative largely constructs her as an exception to the Nora's cultural limitations. Put crudely, Aloy is not like other Nora, a common essentialist narrative that suggest that intelligence and success are the domain of white people (Whop, 2011). This narrative is used by non-Nora characters, with the explicit meaning that Aloy is too clever and competent to be a member of that tribe, implying that Nora are by nature unintelligent and incompetent. These stereotypes are also applied to real life Indigenous peoples, which is another example of using existing cultural frameworks to develop the fictional world (Smith, 2012, p. 26). Comments in the art book reinforce this reading, stating that Aloy's "sharp insight and rational mind" cause conflict between her and the other Nora (Davies, 2017, p. 19). Aloy also does not act according to Nora tradition. Being raised as an outcast of the tribe, she has little respect for their goddess, the All-Mother, she does not adhere to their prohibition on technology, and she does not share the tribe's belief in the Sacred Land. She is also made exempt from the Nora restrictions around travel, although this is necessary for gameplay reasons. Most importantly, Aloy considers herself to be not "of the Nora" but "despite the Nora." This is logical within the narrative, given that her status as an "outcast" meant Aloy was not able to speak to anyone besides her guardian or enter the village before the age of eighteen. Regardless of the reason, players are faced with Aloy's negative perspective of the Nora throughout the game, tying into existing cultural narratives about exceptionalism. The implications of these narrative choices that reflect colonial biases are not examples of poor writing, but of how ingrained colonial thought is in contemporary society.

Aloy's rejection of the Nora culture is also vital to the survival of the Nora people, and indeed the world. The Nora's lack of technology, particularly in weaponry, in comparison to the other tribes leads to them facing extinction at the hand of the Shadow Carja cult. Aloy's disregard for these practices is what enables her to save them. Creating a Native-coded character who rejects her culture is reminiscent of racial exceptionalism. It is Aloy's assimilation into Carja and Osera use of technology and understanding of land that makes her the hero. This again justifies elimination, positioning the Indigenous-coded tribe as the most primitive and making assimilation or emulation of more advanced cultures necessary for life on Earth to continue.

In the previous paragraphs I have examined Aloy as an Indigenous, or Indigenous-coded, character. However, Guerrilla Games rejects this framing, with director Mathis De Jong

claiming that Aloy's "Native American 'look' is purely coincidental" (Leandre, 2015). Despite their intentions, Aloy, as a member of the Indigenous-inspired tribe the Nora, is herself specifically Native American-coded. Aloy's beginning outfit is in the style of the Nora, and her standard outfit included in promotional material is called the Nora brave outfit. She becomes a "brave," a term taken deliberately due to its association with the warriors of Native peoples (Diver, 2017). Using this word is another example of drawing on players' existing cultural associations to add depth to the worldbuilding.

The relationship between *Horizon Zero Dawn* and the logic of elimination is ambiguous, as elimination in this universe occurs to all life on Earth. It is difficult any point about the appropriation of Native cultures or the colonial implications of the game's setting without running up against the constraints of the setting. Much of what is discussed is most likely unintentional, and, as mentioned above, somewhat unavoidable.

Overwatch

Overwatch is a 2016 multiplayer first person shooter game set in a future where robots called Omnics live in an uneasy peace with humans after an Omnic-human war. It has a large and diverse roster of characters. Aboriginal Australians have been eliminated from the universe of *Overwatch* through simple erasure. Māori and Pacific Northwest Native peoples are present, though representation of people is subordinated to the use of cultural aesthetics. Imagery is used more to provide an interesting visual for character cosmetics than to reflect the identities of the characters.

Overwatch's possibilities for Australia's future are surprisingly limited when it comes to the portrayal of Aboriginal Australians. There are two characters from Australia: Junkrat, an "explosives-obsessed freak" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2021a), and Roadhog, a "ruthless killer" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2021b) who serves as Junkrat's bodyguard in lore. Due to the nature of *Overwatch*'s gameplay, the lore for the game is disseminated through short films, comics, and online biographies. Through this, players learn that the centre of Australia was "gifted" by the Australian government to the Omnics, but conflict between them and a newly created Australian Liberation Front resulted in the land becoming an irradiated wasteland (Blizzard Entertainment, 2021b). This narrative strongly reflects the colonial biases that shape contemporary views of Australia as a nation, as explored below.

Indigenous understandings of Australia differ from the version portrayed in *Overwatch* in several key ways. Firstly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain that sovereignty was never ceded over Australia and that the land continues to belong to those who have lived with it since time immemorial (Gilbert, 1973, p. 17). Under this framework, the Australian government gives away stolen land. It is the complete absence of Aboriginal peoples that elides this fact in the game. This absence indicates the influence of terra nullius on the construction of settler colonial states. While in Australia the legal concept was officially

overturned in the Mabo decision of 1992, a psychological terra nullius continues to influence Australian society (Behrendt, 2003, p. 3). The role of resistance to government intervention in *Overwatch* is instead played by one of the groups Roadhog and Junkrat are affiliated with, the Australian Liberation Front (Blizzard Entertainment, 2006b). The Australian Liberation Front, consisting of those who were displaced by this imposition, are said to be "survivalists, solar farmers, and people who just wanted to be left alone" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2021b). Absent from this list is any mention of the Aboriginal population that, as of 2006, made up one quarter of the Outback population (Taylor, 2006, p. 48). None of the named characters associated with Australia are confirmed or coded to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and, as with *Second Son*, none of the voice actors are Indigenous. While Junkrat has concept art that depicts him with darker skin, white body paint, and stereotypically Aboriginal features, none of these make it into the final design or any of the character cosmetics (Burns, 2017, p. 38). Rather than a facsimile, we are almost entirely absent, save for the use of a didgeridoo in one of the background tracks.
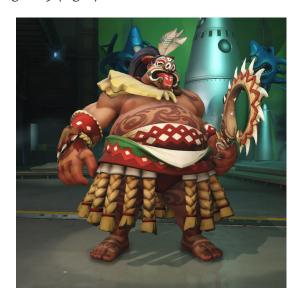
This exclusion perpetuates the logic of elimination outlined by Patrick Wolfe (2006). Australia has a long history of violence against Indigenous peoples, including forced relocation, forced assimilation, and wholesale slaughter (Behrendt, 2003; Gilbert, 1973). The only aspect of our cultures that are included in *Overwatch* provide a unique flair to differentiate the Australian map's soundtrack from the other locations. The settler presence in Australia relies on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The elimination of Indigenous peoples was considered to be an inevitable consequence, whether by explicitly aimed action or the supposedly natural decline of a "primitive" race (Nethery, 2009, pp. 73–74; Tatz, 2001, p. 16). By constructing a vision of Australia's future where Indigenous people are entirely absent, *Overwatch* has inadvertently completed this process. In fact, it was those who fought against their land being seized by the Australian government that caused the destruction of the land itself (Blizzard Entertainment, 2021b). Those who remain even after this destruction are explicitly said to live in a world "built from the ashes" (Junkertown New Escort Map). There is a parallel to the experiences of the Australian Liberation Front and Aboriginal Australians, but, in the game, resistance is positioned as more harmful to the land than government imposition, suggesting that their current circumstances are self-inflicted. These are both stances that have been taken about Aboriginal Australians as well, as part of the logic for commandeering the land and the justification for the oppression of peoples (Wolfe, 2006).

After the nuclear destruction, the Australian Liberation Front morphs into a faction called the "Junkers." Their members in the game, including the characters Junkrat and Roadhog, function as pseudo-Indigenous inhabitants of Australia. With the effective erasure of the First Peoples, the injustices the Australian government commits in giving already-occupied land is against the Junkers. It is the Junkers who resist against the occupying force of the Omnics. This dynamic reflects the settler-colonial desire to appropriate Indigeneity (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 8). Through the playable characters, players are able to position themselves as victims of colonialism demonstrated through government intervention. There is no settler

anxiety in occupying the land, as *Overwatch*'s Junkers are the one that have been wronged.

Roadhog, one of the Australian characters, is heavily implied to be Māori. His legal name is Mako, the Māori term for shark, though he pronounces it incorrectly. He also has several character skins themed around Māori and Islander culture, named Toa and Islander respectively (Burns, 2017, p. 211). The developers have taken great care in some aspects of the design, involving a Māori tattoo artist in the development of the Toa design. However, they appear to have reinforced the racialisation of Indigeneity in darkening Roadhog's skin colour for the similar "Islander" cosmetic (see Figures 2 and 3). This practice is widely considered to be racist, similar to the way white voice actors for characters of colour are racially insensitive (Perez, 2014). The criteria for belonging to an Indigenous community, including Māori communities, is about cultural connection and heritage (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010). If Roadhog is a Māori man, there is no need for him to darken his skin to belong, and this cosmetic simply enforces colonial ideas of racial categorisation. Accuracy and cultural sensitivity is subordinated to the use of Māori aesthetics as unique cosmetics.

Figure 2 (left): Screenshot of *Overwatch* character Roadhog's "Toa" skin.
Figure 3 (right): Screenshot of *Overwatch* character Roadhog's "Islander" skin.

There is one Native character included in *Overwatch*'s line-up. Pharah, an Egyptian playable character, was confirmed to have a Native father from the Pacific Northwest coast in late 2017 (Burns, 2017, p. 208). However, this followed a backlash against the alternate skins Raindancer and Thunderbird, which were released a year earlier in 2016 (Grayson, 2016). Responding at the time, director Jeff Kaplan implied that Pharah was non-Indigenous, saying "when she's in that skin, should it just be another character?" (Grayson, 2016). The retconning of her identity suggests that being Native is not a significant part of her character and was mainly chosen to justify the aesthetic of the existing skins. This is compounded by

the fact that Pharah has no connection to any specific nation but the "Pacific Northwest," treating the nations of the area as interchangeable (Rossi, 2017). Despite the later improvement in representation, these character skins are clear examples of aestheticising Native cultures over representing Native peoples.

Figure 4 (left): Pharah's Thunderbird skin (Burns, 2017, p. 208).
Figure 5 (right): Pharah's default skin (Burns, 2017, p. 65).

At release, the developers had seemed to follow the simplest form of racist representation for Indigenous peoples: that of absence (Langton, 1993). This was not mitigated by the inclusion of Native and Māori aesthetics in cosmetics to add visual uniqueness. That Roadhog is Māori-coded and Pharah was retconned to be "part-Native" has changed the nature of the representation, but not overturned the valuation of Indigenous aesthetics over Indigenous peoples. The unequal treatment continues through the lack of confirmation of Roadhog's Māori identity and lack of *iwi*, and Pharah's lacking a confirmed nation, though it is said to exist (Rossi, 2017).

Discussion and Conclusion

Across the three games, only one Indigenous consultant and no Indigenous developers were confirmed to be involved. Indigenous experiences are consistently filtered through a lens of whiteness, removing the opportunity for Indigenous people to define their own identities and

experiences. This is not entirely due to an absence of Indigenous developers. *Urumangi Generation*, mentioned in the introduction, is a Māori game. Discussed further on are other Indigenous-created and supported games. While settler colonial ideologies are a powerful constraint on gaming possibilities as demonstrated by this article, they are not insurmountable.

All these games also focus on Indigeneity as primarily marked by visual difference. *Overwatch* in particular, with its focus on game cosmetics, portrays Native and Māori characters almost exclusively through costume. Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are extraordinarily complex. A range of different possibilities could have been raised by the inclusion of diversity of Indigenous experiences.

How could Delsin in *Second Son* have grappled with the police occupation of a city that has already been stolen from his people? Could they have included places in the city with a Native history and not just those familiar to the developers? Could a specific tribal identity be delineated culturally and not just by name?

How could the Nora tribe in *Horizon*, including Aloy, be shaped by a land-based epistemology? How do the Nora actively manage their land, for example through cultural burnings? Could Indigenous people have been more heavily included in the past characters Aloy discovers?

In *Overwatch*, how could Pharah's Native heritage be included in her story and the way she acts? Could Roadhog express himself as Māori man? Could he use *te reo* (Māori language)?

Exploring the depth of Indigenous experiences, rather than relying on stereotype, and expressing culture through people, rather than through signifiers, raises opportunities even within the structures of these existing games.

Wolfe's logic of elimination, as a way of framing settler colonial ideology, can be traced through each game. *Second Son* can end with the very literal elimination of the Akomish tribe, itself an appropriation of Native culture and the real-life Duwamish people. *Horizon* has a more ambiguous elimination as all of humanity and all cultures, not just Indigenous ones, are destroyed before the game begins. Despite this, Native cultures are appropriated to flesh out the construction of *Horizon*'s tribes, particularly the Nora. The use of existing colonial ideas of Indigenous people and hierarchy of civilisation allows players' cultural frameworks to be applied to the Nora. *Overwatch* disposes of Indigenous peoples that are not useful for adding a unique aesthetic to the game, like Aboriginal Australians. Māori and Pacific Northwest Native cultures are represented, but any complexity of identity or culture is subordinated to aesthetics for character cosmetics. The appropriation of Indigenous cultures in these games is a form of elimination through the assimilation of Indigeneity into a universal humanity.

There are Indigenous developers and game developers working with Indigenous people to explore beyond settler colonial ideology and stereotypes. Relatively popular games like *Never*

Alone (Kisima Iŋitchuŋa) (Upper One Games, 2014) and *When Rivers Were Trails* (Indian Land Tenure Foundation and Michigan State University's GEL Lab, 2019), incorporate cultures and histories previously ignored by gaming, while allowing Indigenous perspectives to shape the games. The recent movement of imagining Indigenous futures, called Indigenous futurism, operates across various forms of fiction (Dillon, 2012). However, precarious indie developers are poorly positioned to create change in the industry as a whole, and more well-funded studios need to be held accountable (Srauy, 2019). Currently, many Indigenous futures in videogames reflect colonial biases and desire. With analysis and effort, the possibilities and complexities of Indigenous futures can be manifested through Indigenous-controlled narratives.

Endnotes

1. There are two main subgroups of Indigenous Australian peoples. These are Aboriginal Australians, from the mainland, and Torres Strait Islanders, from the islands between Papua New Guinea and Australia. As *Overwatch*'s Australian sections take place in central Australia, only Aboriginal Australians are discussed here.

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