“Like oil and water”: extractive industry, water rights, and aesthetic activism in native american interactive digital narrative

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Abstract

Idiomatic English expressions such as “oil and water don't mix” or “like oil and water” – to describe a profound incompatibility – take on a specific political meaning in the context of water rights and Indigenous opposition to the extractive oil industry. Most recently, opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (the #NoDAPL movement, which started in 2016) highlights the threat to clean water supplies to the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation. Originally planned to run further north, near the city of Bismarck, North Dakota and thus avoiding the reservation, the pipeline route was changed because of the risk of toxic crude-oil leakage into the city's water supply. This redirection – and the transfer of risk from US to Sioux communities – has been termed “environmental racism” and an expression of “environmental colonialism” by activists, to which is added the charge of cultural genocide because construction of the pipeline desecrates tribal burial grounds and has destroyed other sites of sacred and archeological value. NoDAPL protesters emphasize that while the environmental threat posed by the [...]
“Like Oil and Water”
Extractive Industry, Water Rights, and Aesthetic Activism in Native American Interactive Digital Narrative
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Thanks to the organizers of this Research Day.

My topic is the incompatibility of oil and water; the extractive oil industry and the rights of Indigenous peoples to water – and to guardianship of clean water on their homelands and beyond.

My focus is the environmental video-game by Anishinaabe designer Elizabeth LaPensée, Thunderbird Strike (2017). This game has come to prominence in the context of Indigenous opposition to oil pipelines on reservation land (notably the “NoDAPL” protests of last year). LaPensée’s game is focused on Enbridge’s Line 5 which runs under the Mackinac Bridge at the point where Lakes Michigan and Huron meet, where an oil spill would poison both of these Great Lakes. A more immediate context is Enbridge’s current attempts to replace Line 3. Dating from the 1960s, it is corroded, leaking, and running at 50% capacity. Line 3 runs through two Anishinaabe reservations in Northern Minnesota: Leech Lake and Fond du Lac. Native communities oppose Enbridge’s proposal, which is simply to bury the old leaking pipeline and leave it in the ground while building a new pipeline along a completely new route. This proposal is currently making its way through the Minnesota Court system and the controversy has given LaPensée’s game a particular relevance.

I’ll start with the official video-game trailer (which is very short) so that you can know what I’m talking about!

→ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFACKHunuAU
Aesthetic Activism

Formal aesthetic strategies +
Socially reconstructive purpose

→ promotes awareness and discussion of social, economic and political issues (inc. environment)

→ with the aim of motivating direct action to change policies by: governments and corporations, and also individuals

Video-games characterized by “aesthetic activism” are also known as “social impact games”.

This genre has been especially attractive to Indigenous game designers such as Elizabeth LaPensée, who creates

→ Indigenously-determined video-games
Indigenously-determined video-games

... constitute a “path for passing on teachings, telling our stories, and expressing our ways of knowing. … [g]ames with our people represented in our own ways, with our place-names, with our stories, with manidoo … game engines that comprehend our ways of knowing”

(Elizabeth LaPensée 2014).

An Indigenously-determined game then preserves and disseminates Indigenous patrimony by performing stories and teachings in Indigenous game-worlds that are constructed according to mechanics informed by Indigenous epistemologies.

I have been asked numerous times whether these games invite non-Indigenous audiences to “play Indian” or vicariously “become” Indian – like Indian “hobbyists” – but this is a false question, based on a confusion between two distinct kinds of identification or empathy: affective versus cognitive empathy.
Affective versus Cognitive Empathy

Affective empathy = *feeling* the emotions of others

Cognitive empathy = “the attribution of mental states to self and others to explain and predict behavior” (R. J. R. Blair 2005)

Understanding, in order to predict and explain behavior, applies also to the behavior of game systems.
Cognitive Empathy and Video-Game Mechanics

The epistemological conditions for understanding the game =

The pre-determined, coded rules that govern the system

Games can be seen as “systems that build behavior via interaction”
where “game mechanics” =

all the rules that govern interactivity:
• How the player can interact with the game world (console, keyboard, touch-screen etc)
• Possibilities and constraints on potential player actions
• How the game begins
• How the game ends and
• Conditions for winning or losing

(Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek 2001)

Game mechanics not only control the “rules of the game” but more fundamentally the cognitive conditions for a player's interactivity with the video-game.
“Indigenously-determined” game mechanics

... conform to Indigenous epistemological principles, informed by Indigenous moral, ethical, spiritual values, and codes of behavior.
E.g. Anishinaabe Mino-Bimaadiziwin (living the good life): how to speak, think, perceive, act, and relate to Spirit based on custodial responsibility to, and reciprocity with, the total, inter-connected environment of Creation
The game is:

a free-to-download, 3rd-person shooter side-scroller for Windows PC, Android (Phone and Tablet), and iOS (iPhone and iPad). It is a “casual” game that can be played on a mobile device; so it is easy to learn and quick to play.

The development was funded by the Minnesota Clean Water Fund, which is dedicated to projects “to protect, enhance, and restore water quality in lakes, rivers, and streams and to protect groundwater from degradation.”

The supporting website is organized into sections titled:

“About” (introduces the game),
“Reflect” (tells the traditional story of the Thunderbird people, of the devouring snake, the Alberta tar-sands, oil pipelines on/in the prairies, and the risk to the Great Lakes posed by Enbridge’s Line 5 under the Mackinac Bridge),
“Act” (gives details of non-violent forms of protest: sharing “the message of Thunder Woman” by creating posters or banners or shirts, speaking out against pipelines on Indigenous lands, joining one of the ceremonial Water Walks, or divesting from banks that fund pipelines), and
“Contact” (enables outreach to the designer).

The game is hypertextually connected to this educational website, linking the game to instruction about “real world” activism.

Visual Style →
LaPensée's visual style is based on sacred Anishinaabe pictographs.

According to Anishinaabe artist Zhaawano Giizhik:

"The style often emphasizes interconnecting "lines of power" and "lines of communication" radiating from the spines of the creatures portrayed, divided circles ("unity symbols"), and x-ray views of people, animals, plant life and supernatural beings. The X-ray anatomy, exposing the spiritual guts of animals and human beings, represent the source of Inner Power."

In this image, which opens the game, the "lines of power" connect Thunderbird's inner spiritual power, through the eye that shoots lightning, to the external world of Creation.

Note that in the game, only living beings have spiritual interiors or "Inner Power": the mechanical infrastructure of the oil industry (trucks, derricks, pipe), and also the devouring Snake that symbolizes Line 5, are soulless. The humans and other-than-human animals (bison, caribou, deer) that have been destroyed by the extractive oil industry acquire "Inner Power" only after they have been restored by the Thunderbird's lightning strikes.
Thunderbird Strike
Elizabeth LaPensée (2017)

Beginning: there is only one option – “play”
A screen of simple instructions appears:
“fly into clouds to gather lightning” and “tap thunderbird to strike”

LEVEL 1: cut scenes: environmental devastation of the Alberta tar sands, the living creatures that have been destroyed (especially the iconic bison). Thunderbird's inner power is white when charged, green when the lightning has been used up; at each point, the player must choose how to use the limited lightning and when to fly into the clouds to recharge: there is not enough charge both to destroy and restore all the targets presented.
As a side-scroller, the player's choice of movement is limited (fly up to charge; up or down to aim); the primary choice is the identification of the target to hit with the Thunderbird's lightning.
At the end of the level a score is given but there are no objective rewards (e.g. additional powers); movement to the next level is automatic.

LEVEL 2: cut scenes: industrial vehicles, forests, Thunder people, activists carrying signs “no pipelines on indigenous lands”. The targets now are sections of unlaid pipeline to destroy; and humans to restore to life. Where the reanimated animals in Level 1 assumed their living form and ran off-screen, the restored humans simply acquire their Inner spiritual Power. On this level, the player is assisted by occasional tornadoes that can destroy pipeline but cannot restore life.

LEVEL 3: cut scenes: the symbolic geography of the Great Snake with its tail in Alberta and its jaws open to devour the Great Lakes, the Mackinac Bridge, Thunderbird. There is a single opponent: the giant snake, which is clearly mechanical (it is articulated by riveted sections) that spews droplets of toxic oil. The primary aim is to protect the waters by neutralizing as much of this polluting oil as possible by placing the body of the Thunderbird in the path of the droplets.

Ending: Finally, the Snake either retreats or is destroyed and the Thunderbird flies offscreen. A high score is rewarded with a time bonus.
Outcome: There is no option to fail; every player “wins.” Indeed, to play is to win.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the game has been controversial →
Eco-Terrorist versus Eco-Warrior

“Gidakiiminaan is our connection and our relationship to the Land, and all of Creation. It is the experience of knowing and understanding the relationships that exist throughout Creation, and understanding your own role and responsibility in this relationship. This connection is the primary shaper of Anishinaabe identity, and it is this total relationship with Creation that informs our environmental ethic.”

Seven Generations Education Institute (2015)

“In our Anishinaabe tradition, one is a warrior by doing what must be done to protect the environment and society and advance their cause - even if it’s on a modest scale or in the smallest of ways.”

Zhaawano Giizhik (2016)

Minnesota State Senator David Osmek accused LaPensée of creating “an eco-terrorist version of Angry Birds” (2017). Osmek, an influential legislative supporter of the oil industry in general and Enbridge in particular, focuses on the destructive potential in the gameplay and ignores the restorative dimension. However, the player can choose NOT to destroy Line 5 in the symbolic form of the devouring Great Snake. But the toxic oil that the snake spews into the waters must be destroyed. This is work of protection and conservation in keeping with the Anishinaabe understanding of humans as custodians of the environment and keepers of an environmental legacy for the next seven generations.

Seven Generations Education Institute, an Anishinaabe education provider based in Ontario, explains the principle of Gidakiiminaan (quote in slide)

This environmental ethic powers the game mechanics of Thunderbird Strike, promoting cognitive empathy with the Anishinaabe principles of Mino-Bimaadiziwin (living the good life): specifically →

• to think,
• to perceive,
• to act, and
• to relate to Spirit

based on custodial responsibility to, and reciprocity with, the total, interconnected environment of Creation.

Controlling the Thunderbird avatar, the player mediates between the sacred lightning and its powers of destruction or restoration to perform the principle of Gidakiiminaan and, by extension, of Mino-Bimaadiziwin. → virtual eco-warrior or, more accurately, a virtual Water Protector
References


