American Indians, Video Games, and
the Structures of Dispossession

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INDIGENOMICON

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Preface

TIME PLAYS AND SLOW RUNS

Let's call the future heaven
and be done with a romance of the present.
The present was a mistake.
The possibility of anything else is a call to arms.
—Billy-Ray Belcourt, NDN *Coping Mechanisms*

The development of a book can chart years and shifts in the life of an author, the life of a community, the life of a world, or even the lives of multiverses. The spark of a thought starts small, and in the microcosm, it can be intense and encompassing. This book began as I finished the conclusion on zombies for *The Transit of Empire* in 2011, and it rapidly transformed, in part, as a response to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign firing Palestinian scholar Steven Salaita from my home program of American Indian Studies in August 2014. You will not find that moment addressed directly in the pages that follow, though I do engage it briefly in the introduction to set the stage—more than ten years ago now—and to historicize the horizontal vectors of social media that occurred in tandem with the rise of #GamerGate, a "civil" call for journalistic ethics that was really a misogynistic and racist backlash against queer, trans, women, and BIPOC gamers asking the industry to, simply, #DoBetter. In retrospect, 2014 augured the struggles to come, with personal loss sitting alongside global catastrophes as academic freedom morphed to civility and Black, Indigenous, and Palestinian voices were silenced, fired, suspended, or put on academic leave in the militarized violence across settler colonies reinforced by the unending twittering of social media. In the slow run of time since 2014, one iteration of

a vibrant American Indian Studies program at Illinois collapsed, and another was rebuilt in its place. In the instant since, a beloved aunt killed herself the day before Donald J. Trump won the national election in 2016.[1] In a two-year time gap, a global pandemic ground everything to a halt before the world started again, and in a knee-to-neck stoppage of air, George Floyd lost his life to police in Minneapolis as we learned to breathe still in the stench of five hundred years of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous conquest. Settler colonial studies was a critique of genocide until it was accused of being both genocidal and anti-Semitic after October 7, 2023, when Hamas broke down the prison-fenced border out of Gaza, killed Israeli settlers, and took hostages, and Israel began a devastatingly retaliatory and genocidal bombardment of Palestinians that has yet (as of this writing) to stop. In all those sinces, everything moves on and then stops completely as the competing pandemics of the coronavirus, the anti-Black violence of police and states, and the unrelenting settler death drive for land and elimination condition how it is we can or cannot breathe, live, and grieve in the structures white supremacy builds through the genocidal dispossession and occupation of Indigenous lands.[2] Despite Patrick Wolfe's axiom about structures not events, moments are eventful, and they draw out structures of response; what seemed so large in its microcosm of a moment is also only ever infinitesimal, absolutely insignificant, and irrelevant, except perhaps as a ground to start.

In this way, then, the focus in this book on video games seems woefully inadequate in the scales of losses and catastrophes that have continued coming, almost without pause and on repeat with Donald J. Trump's second turn at the presidency. Games continue to be dismissed in many quarters of academia as trifles, as downtime, as lacking any archive, with no serious heft or relevance to the weightier concerns of history, science, society, global politics, and the arts. But, in the time since, video games have also continued to be a microcosm into those very structures that inflict terror and its escape, destruction and rejuvenation, dispossession and the acquisition of power, fun and the deadly serious social media modes of self-production and self-monetization. Images from games such as *Arma 3* circulated as the verisimilitude disinformation of war in Ukraine and genocide in Palestine; *Spec Ops: The Line* rather than Vietnam is the reference point gamers have for the devastation of white phosphorus munitions deployed on civilians. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift from in-person to virtual living and working, games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became sites of refuge and connection, especially for many players who may not have found such games compelling prior. Although very different games in scales of violence and realism, both are scions of colonial capitalism centered on extraction, dispossession, accumulation, and

P.1 Author's avatar learns about settlement and burials from a bird. Gameplay still from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, March 20, 2020).

debt, with oblique or direct references to burial grounds and settlement, as the screen capture from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* attests (figure P.1). Both games also offered compelling social networking possibilities to stage isolation graduations, weddings, birthdays, office meetings, and classrooms. Even so, the platforms in which to play those games and many others became scarce as hardware inventories and the chips and cards required to run the software depleted and never quite recovered. Nintendo Switches were hard to find; PS5s near impossible to acquire as bot hoarding, supply chain failures, and crisis profiteering drove and collapsed the hardware economy, especially around major gift-giving holidays.

The fierce settler metaphors and vocabularies of product scarcity, manipulation of supply and demand, and price gouging embedded in the controversial reselling of PS5s by "scalpers" exemplifies why I am interested in what might be legible about contemporary settler colonial culture now, especially as it continues to produce knowledge of and ignorance about Indigenous peoples, past, present, and future. The throughline anti-Indigenous echoes of scalping hardware and access to systems resonate with the racist jubilation of "sca[lp]ed!" that critics used to commemorate Claudine Gay's removal from the presidency of Harvard, an institution whose 1650 charter's "whereas" stipulated, among other things, the education of "Indian youth."[3] Academic integrity and veritas are other words for civility and ethics in journalism that give cover for settler supremacy. Whereas, Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier writes, "means it

being the case that, or while on the contrary." For Long Soldier, whereas "sets the table," and in doing so, her poetry collection *Whereas* invites a reflection on conditions and priors, enacts a grammar of causation, and finally offers a meditation on the possibilities within "the grassesgrassesgrasses" of a Dakota speculative poetry of liberation drawn from the so-called Dakota Conflict and the mass hanging execution of the Dakota 38 ordered by President Abraham Lincoln on December 26, 1862.[4]

In another way, this book cannot offer anything spectacularly "new" to what we know about the present and its continued fierce attachment to settler colonial violence, geographies, and narratives of space and belonging. To point out that video games are settler colonial is obvious; that they hinge on structures of dispossession and the logics of elimination is a clichéd, predictable reading that already circulates across sites of online gamer engagement and social media. Students come to my courses on video games already ready to tell me that games are colonialist and racist, misogynistic and transphobic. Still, those same students play the games they critique, and more, they love them. As do I. So, while I do not claim to offer anything radically new or necessarily queer or decolonial in the pages that follow, beyond the fact that I myself am a queer nonbinary Chickasaw player of games, I hope I can at least demonstrate how a commitment to Indigenous feminist, Two-Spirit, and queer studies, grounded in Indigenous philosophies of land and relations and dedicated to abolition of police, prisons, capitalism, borders, and colonialism, might open the only world we have to alternative ways of living, relating, and imagining freedom. It is a matter of picking bones.

Acknowledgments

This book reflects more than a decade of my career and my writing life. So many of the investments in theoretical languages, institutional formations, and activist mobilizations have changed since I started the project, not to mention the innovations in video games, the possibilities for play, and the turn to the ontological. There is one thing that has remained consistent, and that is the substantial support I have been given by so many friends, family, and colleagues to bring this book into being. There are numerous people to thank for their guidance, encouragement, interest, engagement, and mentorship in this project, and yet I start by acknowledging the ground and relations that give me a place in the world—my Chickasaw ancestors whose homelands were in what is now Mississippi, those relatives who survived the founding of Oklahoma through a second taking, and the stretch between the two worlds before and after removal and allotment.

As critical as I am of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign throughout, this book would not exist without that institution, its choices, and the people who work or who have worked there. Although I cannot thank the upper administration for not definitively ending the racist mascot tradition and improving the campus climate for Indigenous students and scholars, I am indebted to colleagues, friends, and comrades who thought, struggled, theorized, laughed,

by Jeremy Braddock, was my second disciplinary home and my favorite weekly conversation on campus. Thank you, Andrew Campana, for inviting me to be a part of your vision for video game studies at Cornell, and for introducing me to Julia Chang, Roger Moseley, Walker White, and María Fernández. The addition of K. T. Wong and Reeana Esmail in our second year deepened the conversations, expanded our intellectual borders, and reminded us that archives themselves are activist. Thank you to faculty and students in American Indian and Indigenous Studies, especially Meredith Palmer, Jolene Rickard, Troy Richardson, Jeffrey Palmer, Waylon Wilson, Noah Mapes, and Jenine Hillaire. I am grateful for the chance to work with and learn from you. Finally, there are no words to express what it meant to be part of what Russell Rickford named the beloved community at Cornell, including but not limited to Momodou Taal, Sharif Ewais-Orozco, Derek Chang, Michel Chresfield, Paul Sawyer, Farah Bakaari, Begum Adalet, Tracy McNulty, Risa Lieberwitz, and the additional principled undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, librarians, and staff, many of whom I have already thanked.

In such a short span of time, the department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity at the University of Chicago has been a welcoming and generative home where I finished this book. I am so lucky to be thinking with and teaching alongside my colleagues including Cathy J. Cohen, Leora Auslander, Joyce Bell, Claudia Brittenham, Adrienne Brown, Eve L. Ewing, Adom Getachew, Adam Green, Ryan Jobson, Matthew Kruer, Uahikea Maile, Omar McRoberts, Reuben Jonathan Miller, Salikoko Mufwene, François Richard, C. Riley Snorton, Jacqueline Gaines, and Audre Smilke. The city of Chicago has a number of amazing colleagues working in game studies including Patrick Jagoda and Tara Fickle, and in Indigenous studies including Kelly Wisecup, Doug Kiel, Beatriz Oralia Reyes, Megan Baker, Maggie Reddon, and Sam Majhor along with the Center for Native Futures, a space Debra Yepa-Pappan and Monica Rickert Bolter have envisioned and curated to build community for artists, students, and the rest of us at-large Indigenous scholars living here.

At Duke University Press, Courtney Berger has been the absolute best, and I am beyond indebted to her for believing in me and in the project, for her friendship, for her patience with and support for my timeline and process, and for her leadership in and ethical commitments to making academic publishing accountable to Indigenous feminists. I am thrilled *Indigenomicon* is part of TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Jennifer Malkowski's PowerPlay series. I am also thankful to the anonymous readers who offered feedback, Gisela Fosado and Ken Wissoker at the press, and to Laura Jaramillo, Lisa Bintrim, and Livia Tenzer for all their help navigating image permissions, placements, and the finer grains of

Introduction

PLAYING STORIES

Rattling cages on the tracks and whispering at the pond. Perhaps the pond will whisper back.
—Mover 016, *Norco*, 2022

It would be really nice to hear a story.
—Ishmael Angaluuk Hope, *Never Alone* (*Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*), 2014

I have this sinking suspicion that the rise of Indigenous studies has something to do with the so-called crisis in the humanities. Do not get me wrong; I am not stating that because Indigenous studies now exists across many university campuses in North America—sometimes with faculty precariously housed in the cornerstone humanities departments, including English, History, and Anthropology—that there is any causal relationship with the "crisis" beyond synchronicity. The crisis culprits, we are told, are found in the lack of post-graduation jobs, a waning relevance for humanities conversations, a decline in student enrollments and majors, and a sense that technical training in science and engineering is more socially responsible as students incur lifetimes of debt just to attend a semester of classes. And yet, there is this wormy little ancestral Chickasaw sense I have that continues to insist that US academia would of course declare a crisis the minute we unruly Natives made any inroads into transforming how we might reframe history, story, place, and durative presence on this continent. I have started to think about American Indians as time travelers within the structures of US domination; already a bit out of joint, always out of time, and stuck in the past tenses of the long ago, we stretch away from the present into some murky early nineteenth-century landscape painting or

perhaps even into Edenic pre-contact forests of natural man. This sense of out-of-jointness is what I will discuss throughout this book as *Indigenomicon*, a portmanteau appropriated from the white settler supremacist author H. P. Lovecraft to name the structural ideas of Indigeneity that underwrite the genres of fantasy, horror, and science-fiction that video games then render playable as conquest and academia renders unintellectual as uncivil, undisciplined, and illegible. Dislocated from our actual presence in the contemporary United States as valuable participants in knowledge production, we remain markers of some savage horde threatening the very foundations of civilized society. In other words, we return as the mindless walking dead to capture and turn otherwise perfectly viable humanities departments into zombie programs feeding off the good works of STEM units. In fewer words, we are the crisis.

Not that anyone in academia would necessarily say that out loud with such stark causality. Instead, anti-Zionism is equated with antisemitism, critical race theory is deemed racist, diversity, equity, and inclusion are exclusionary, and settler colonial studies is somehow itself genocidal rather than a critique of elimination. Land grab and land back exist together in a recursive loop of propertied logics that shape settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Still, such thoughts have lingered and troubled me because I used to work at an institution that at one point was infamous for having destroyed an iteration of its American Indian Studies program by firing its one Palestinian faculty member for tweets. I will not rehearse again here the spectacle of what happened by delving into details that may or may not be familiar. Suffice it to say that at this point, more than a decade later, that institution has an all-new upper administration; new American Indian Studies faculty; a lasting budget crisis threatening at turns salaries, healthcare coverage, and hiring in ethnic and gender studies; a settlement in which the institution admitted no wrongdoing; an "unofficial" Indian mascot that still makes appearances here and there; and a censure that remained in effect until 2016 with a lingering boycott by scholars around the world, some of whom still refuse to engage in the public mission of the institution.

While it is true that such events are happening with alarming frequency at too many institutions throughout North America in what might be understood as a profoundly regressive anti-intellectualism that sees tenure as too much job security for radically politicized faculty, my former employer might at least be acknowledged as having helped to set a precedent for how academic administrations, in concert with state representatives, federal agencies, and trustees, can coalesce a defense of their actions around moral panics, charges of antisemitism, and a neoliberal lip service to "free speech" that protect the hegemony of

US colonial racial capitalism. One of the things we heard in the midst of this administrative neoliberal top-down revolution designed to destroy academic freedom and faculty governance was that civility was first and foremost the standard by which faculty research, teaching, service, and conduct was to be judged and valued. The other thing we heard was that there was a strong divide across the campus between the STEM departments, who supported civility, true equity and neutrality, and the administration, and the humanities units, often comprised of queer and/or scholars of color, who refused such standards and were deemed uncivil, guilty of bullying the institution because they disagreed with it. It was a moment that mirrored 2014's rise of #GamerGate, a white masculine supremacist, misogynistic, and transphobic social media movement purportedly about restoring ethics in video game journalism, and its similar regressive push by those in power to seize the "civilized" high ground by enacting the incivility of rape threats, doxing, swatting, and getting people fired as the new standard of engagement on social media.

In academe, framed as a problem of "two cultures" that now divide the standards and norms of faculty governance, university advancement, and the metrics of achievement, campuses in the United States are often split almost down the middle with hard and natural sciences and engineering on one side and the softer disciplines of anthropology, literature, history, and philosophy on the other. At my former institution, that cultural divide is also spatial. To the north of campus are the STEM departments, housed in state-of-the-art buildings with supercomputers and applications to support their mining, collection, and processing of Big Data; to the south, the humanities and social sciences trudge through the crumbling innards of buildings encased by the facades of neoclassical architecture to provide the culture and data to be processed. The old canard, "those who can do, those who can't teach," often informs how the north side of campus sees the south, and like American Indians, the humanities have become something a little retrograde, stultified and rarefied, uncivil and unruly, political and politicized, and finally out of time.

With lines drawn, there have been some efforts in many humanities programs across North America to try to find ways to speak across the divide, to translate the critical theory of humanities disciplines to the quantitative, algorithmic documentation of scientific fact, and to develop structures for more collaborative interactions. It is a matter of sending out interdisciplinary emissaries, and because I am Chickasaw, because I come from a nation whose governmental structures valued what we called the *fani mingo* institution, a form of diplomacy in which someone was adopted out to learn the values of strangers and then

bring back knowledge, I have tried to shape my current research and teaching to venture into the heart of supercomputing and technology studies. It has been a steep learning curve, a lesson in allotment and misapprehension, and perhaps, ultimately, a problem of perspective.

My first sense of the challenge came during initial interview conversations for a faculty fellowship at one of the STEM centers on campus in spring 2015 when an astrophysicist, deeply invested and genuinely interested in learning about the humanities, asked me if there was any place for grand questions in the work we do on our side of campus. She then explained that for astrophysics, and in her own research, an example of a grand question might center on trying to figure out what happens when two black holes collide. Blue Waters, the powerful National Science Foundation–supported supercomputer housed at Illinois, was at that moment in the midst of crunching 20,000 hours worth of data and simulations to build an algorithmic model of what such a collision might entail.[1] The answer requires massive mathematical equations to calculate the gravitational effects the pair would have on each other as they are pulled closer and closer together, and it is a problem that pushes to the heart of Einstein's theory of general relativity. While the outcome of such a collision is ultimately just one super black hole and massive waves of gravitational distortion blasting through the universe, creating a small "blip" of a sound, some have speculated that there might be a possibility to chart a path through the spiral of space-time disturbances created as the gravitational fields of the two holes interact before final impact—a path that would enable time travel to the past.

Of course, when she explained all this, she did so in much more precise—and dizzying—technical language, and when she was done, she reiterated her inquiry about grand questions in the humanities. I paused, a bit intimidated by the enormity of not just one, but two black holes, and then said that, for the discipline of American Indian studies and in my own work at least, a grand question might involve trying to understand what just decolonization would look like in North America, where the colonization and genocide of American Indians were enabled through slavery, indentureship, and the onset of colonial racial capitalism that has brought the world to our lands. How do we disentangle those pasts and those arrivals, and spatialize land loss alongside the loss of bodies, languages, families, and cultures as a way to transform our present and future? It is the one question that underlies every project I undertake, it is a question into which I think Southeastern American Indians, who were both enslaved and enslavers, particularly have insights, it is a question that informs even the name of the supercomputer as "Blue Waters," and it is a question whose answer affects everyone. She listened

and when I was done remarked that grand questions might not be that useful for the humanities after all.

Within the scope of literary history, digital modes of writing and storytelling, including hypertext, code, or even video games, are, relatively speaking, recent, though they have also now been with us for more than forty years. Within that same scope, American Indian and Indigenous studies has a much, much longer intellectual trajectory, and yet, the field is presumed by many to be just as recent, as if it is determined by the latest and most significant interventions to conversations within and beyond Western academia in the past forty years. Still, twenty years ago, when I was writing the dissertation that would eventually be revised into *The Transit of Empire*, it was almost impossible to suggest that Indigenous peoples were and are colonized by the settler nations that formed themselves through the seizure and occupation of unceded Indigenous traditional lands and territories. There is something profoundly provocative to me about the synchronicity of arrival within academia that Indigenous studies and video game studies share, perhaps because the two fields represent antipodal points on the presumed timeline of technological progress. Within the colonizing timelines of civilizational advancement, Indigeneity is always assumed to stretch back to the beginnings of time, to harken to a dustbin of prehistory, to signal the origins of human life before technology, and to serve as a container for some authentic, long-lost, pre-modern cultural existence that, if recovered and reasserted by white inheritors, might somehow save and then change the world. Meanwhile, video games represent the dissolution of culture as well as the apotheosis of modern achievement and technological advancement.

With the rise of settler colonial studies in conjunction with Indigenous studies, the processes through which seizure and occupation function and stabilize have generated sustained and multifaceted structuralist accounts of dispossession sited through culture, law, governance, capitalism, race, and discourse. *The Transit of Empire* was part of that wave of scholarship, and in it, I theorized Indianness as a discourse through which the United States enacts its empire globally. My method in that book was the enjambment of disparate fields and theories, my archive a mix of literary, legal, and political texts and contexts that served to elucidate exactly how US imperialism née colonialism depended upon the prior presence of and orientation to American Indians. This book deploys a slightly more granular and grinding method of *disambiguation* to think through the lasting repercussions of anti-Blackness, colonialism, imperialism, dispossession, and genocide. Broken into roots, the literal meaning of *disambiguation* is to render

something not ambiguous. Perhaps most ubiquitously, the word often appears as a category of Wikipedia pages that serve to resolve "the conflicts that occur when articles about two or more different topics could have the same 'natural' page title."[2] For instance, Wikipedia's resolution of conflict for pages that could "naturally" share names for "Chickasaw" directs users by linking browsers to our language; to our nation; to towns, cities, and counties in the United States; to the Sikorsy H-19 helicopter used by the United States in the Korean War; to a US Navy ship; and even to a council of the Boy Scouts of America in Memphis, Tennessee, with no further disentanglement of settler colonialism, imperialism, militarism, occupation, or appropriation.[3] Rather than using disambiguation as conflict resolution that flattens all meanings into equitable validity within settler historiographies, I am interested in it for this book as a methodology for close reading across archives to hold that multiple genealogies and meanings for critical key words in Indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, technology studies, the Black radical tradition, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, Marxist theory, and queer of color critique exist simultaneously and contradictorily. Many words carry resonances across fields that may or may not be in actual conversation and can give the sense that they share meaning when they, in fact, do not. Moreover, the flattened resolutions may instead replicate the cultural productions and ideological frameworks that anti-Blackness and Indigenous dispossession enable.

My archive to do this work, however, is presentist and fleeting, if not seemingly trivial, and my starting points will not be satisfyingly novel. Video games, after all, are notoriously dismissed by most who do not play them as mindless, violent, mass-produced, planned obsolescence products that cater to toxic masculinity, meritocracy, and white supremacy all while further entrenching global racial capitalism and settler militarism.[4] They are even understood that way—and sometimes celebrated for it—by those who play them. To be clear, such assessments are often exactly right, and one does not have to play video games to have an opinion on what they enact. Video games are platform dependent, their development epitomizes supply chain production that draws on a global network of studios, they predominately cater to men, they glorify first-person acts of violence, and in North America, they have been operationalized on Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan as a conduit for the larger social media retrenchment of regressive white settler supremacy that targets Black players, Indigenous players, and players of color as well as feminist, queer, and trans critics of games. But because video games are all that and so much more as cultural, political, ideological, and technological objects derived through software, code, and programming, they offer an ideal occasion for interrogating how truth,

knowledge, memory, narrative, and distraction serve the anti-Black, misogynistic, and xenophobic settler societies that continue to occupy Indigenous lands and provide the base and frame in which games are designed, circulated, and played.

I am fortunate to be writing this book now, following a number of critical engagements that have helped establish video game studies as a legible and credible discipline all its own. Scholarly works by Lisa Nakamura, Tara McPherson, Adrienne Shaw, Jack Halberstam, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Ruha Benjamin, Tara Fickle, B. Patrick Jagoda, Soraya Murray, Kishonna Gray, Andrew Campana, Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, Ian Bogost, Jesper Juul, TreaAndrea Russworm, Christoper B. Patterson, Bo Ruberg, Edmond Y. Chang, Michelle Brown, Whit Pow, and Nick Dyer-Witheford, to name just a few, have already provided the critical frameworks through which to think about Blackness, Indigeneity, race, gender, sexuality, disability, capitalism, militarism, territoriality, technology, game design, and play together in vexed and hopeful ways toward transforming the structures of power that determine how and why technology and the games it enables circulate as playable objects. *Indigenomicon* adds to these ongoing field conversations by returning to the foundations of narrative, conquest, dispossession, and accumulation that have, perhaps almost too obviously, provided games their structuring allegories of spatial and territorial play. As Alexander R. Galloway asserts, "Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed: they exist when enacted."[5] Galloway's definition helped inaugurate what is referred to as *proceduralism* in video game studies, which centers video games as coded algorithms, as allegories of control, and as machinic objects, and the definition points to a fundamental conundrum of agency within neoliberalism and colonial racial capitalism.[6] Games exist when enacted, with the player and the machine vying for authorial agency in the story that unfolds. That games have agency to manifest worlds within the context of ongoing settler colonialism where Indigenous peoples are presumed to be either absent or only that which is enacted upon exemplifies the continued hegemonic ignorance about settler colonialism that settler colonialism produces as its own recursive cultural inheritance to ensure its perpetuity.

Though video games may be the occasion for my critical analyses throughout the pages that follow, it is my hope that this book will offer deeper theoretical contributions to a range of disciplinary concerns that bring Indigenous studies as well as queer of color critique, feminist studies, critical ethnic studies, settler colonial studies, and critiques of racial capitalism into conversation with object-oriented ontology, software studies, critical technology studies, and video game studies. There are a number of key analytics and words that I will use,

but the distilled intervention this project makes will center on two intertwined concepts: relationality and ground. There are multiple genealogies for relation and relationality that might be activated within a critical study of technology and video games. From the MySQL relational databases that build tables to manage and organize large amounts of data to Édouard Glissant's Caribbean poetics, *relationality* has become a key word, especially within Indigenous feminisms, queer Indigenous studies, and queer of color critique, as well as in the intersections of Black and Indigenous studies. For me, the concept of relationality derives from Indigenous philosophies of relationship with land, with water, and with the agentive human and nonhuman forms of life that surround us. Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dine) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) have suggested that these place-based reciprocities serve as "grounded normativities" that represent the alternative governance values of Indigenous communities opposed to settler states. "Grounded normativity," they write, "houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place."[7] Video games often mechanize repetition as intimacy within a particular place in a game for players to extend replayability or longevity, a phenomenon referred to as "grinding" and often critiqued as a capitalistic, Protestant work-ethic, neoliberal investment in self-managed progression through acquisition of territory, side quests, resources, skill points, and so on, all for the sake of leveling up. To *grind* is extractive capitalism writ large; there is also the potential for *the grind* to be the site where extractive capitalism is made most bare, where it gets stuck in the exploitative register of alienated labor and the means of production. Disambiguated, *grind* is itself a structure and a mode of relationality in perpetuity; it is a disruption to flow, and a halting pause to the forces of settlement and normativity when they confront difference and otherness. In that pause of confrontation with difference, the grinding is a sign of possibility or destruction; it can signal the illegibility of alternatives pushing back/against, be they queer, erotic, or just tired from the daily grind. Understood in this way, grinding becomes symptomatic of how Indigeneity confronts neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism, which depend upon proprietary understandings of property, sovereignty, recognition, and governance, requiring a grind against to hold Indigenous philosophies of resurgence, reciprocity, kinship, and accountability. Drawing inspiration from Coulthard and Simpson's work, I also grind on their theory of "grounded normativity" throughout this book to reframe their use of normative beyond political and governance studies' deployment of the term and instead highlight *grounded relationality* as an Indigenous queer and feminist intervention.

That notion of grounded relationality hinges, importantly and simultaneously, on the meaning of *ground*, a word that represents both the literal spaces—waters, lands, air, stars, and ice—that form the intimate and embodied relationships Indigenous people have with traditional lands—and the space that settler colonialism strips from Indigenous communities in the production of its own territoriality and the ordering of the land as the structuring rationale of state power, sovereignty, and belonging. *Ground* is also the past tense of grind and implies in its meaning the full stop and wearing confrontation between Indigenous sovereignty and what Manu Karuka identifies as settler "counter-sovereignty," in which "colonial sovereignty is always necessarily a reactive claim."[8] The word *ground*, when traced through Caribbean and Black thought, conjures Katherine McKittrick's demonic geography drawn from Sylvia Wynter's invocation of "the grounds" "as the absented presence of black womanhood" in the violence of the auction block, as well as Walter Rodney's *Groundings with My Brothers*, which Carole Boyce Davies describes as a "rooted exchange of knowledge between the academy and the community (without privileging the scholarly intellectual over the organic or community intellectual)."[9] The word connotes connection and well-being, solidity, solidarity, and rightness of thought and behavior.

When *ground* serves as a synonym for *land*, it becomes the stake for disambiguating settler colonial studies from critical Indigenous studies. Patrick Wolfe perhaps symptomatically observes, "Land is life—or, at least, land is necessary for life. Thus contests for land can be—indeed, often are—contests for life."[10] The grammatical shift he performs in the em dash clarification, in the first two sentences of "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," effectively removes life from land as a living entity in its own right to make land necessary for all other life, without thinking about the life of the land all its own. That shift represents the difference that Indigenous relationality tries to make legible in English and at the site of settler colonial theory's misapprehension of Indigenous assertions of grounded normativity and sovereignty. "The production of space referring to landscapes that arise out of social practices and geographic forms of organization along the lines of gender, race, and class," Tonawanda Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman argues, "are structured to maintain a sense of stable colonial histories and power."[11] For Indigenous peoples, land—and water, and sky, and stars for that matter—is life, full stop.

Within critical technology, software, and video game studies, there have been scholarly works thinking about the physical space of the software lab and the infrastructure of the broadband networks that enable online access, the visual politics of spatial representations in video games, and the ground on which games can be and are played.[12] And in Indigenous studies, Indigenous feminists,

including Sarah Hunt, Meredith Alberta Palmer, Jen Rose Smith, Shari Huhndorf, Shannon Speed, Audra Simpson, and Dian Million, among others, have theorized the relationship between settler occupation of space and violence against Indigenous women's bodies. In this growing body of work, Goeman foundationally advances what she terms a "settler grammar of place" to theorize "the repetitive practices of everyday life that give settler place meaning and structure" to "normative modes of settler colonialism."[13] This book builds on such discussions to consider how technology produces a (dis)embodied sense of ground through the digital spatial realms of narrative play in video games. Linking ground to discourse as well as code, software, platform, and machine, *Indigenomicon* disambiguates and then re-entangles meanings across disciplines in order to reveal something of the structuring logics that animate technology designed within the context of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands. That an NSF-funded petascale supercomputer at the flagship land grab University of Illinois was named "Blue Waters" is perhaps not a grand question nor even a grand problem, and yet it does still inhere the structural and cultural logics of settler colonialism when read beyond the hale sailing allusions implied in its name and placed within the context of United Nations doctrinal definitions of colonialism for the purposes of decolonization.[14] The "salt water thesis" requires there to be "blue water" between the colonizing country and the colonized in order for the colonized to be eligible for decolonization. According to Kanaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, the United Nations defined colonialism through a separation of water "in attempt to avoid questions from having to deal with the Native American question in relation to self-determination after Belgium challenged the United States in response to being pressured about its African colonies."[15] To name a supercomputer "Blue Waters" in landlocked Illinois, a state defined by the removal of every single original Indigenous nation that existed within its current borders, signals dominance by flouting the legal machinations through which settler colonialism both structures itself and hides. Therefore, thinking about technology spatially within the context of ongoing settler colonialism is vitally necessary to transforming how we disrupt the presumed ideology-freeness of code, machine, platform, supercomputer, and game.

As scholars in the so-called digital humanities continue to seek out strategies and deploy machinic methods for responding to the new media and literatures produced by computers and for computers, inquiries about reading strategies, accessibility, and aesthetics become more and more obsessed with finding the computational tools with which to interact with both new and old forms of

literature. Whether reading distantly to gain a sense of network aggregation, circulation, and scale, or mining textually for pattern recognition, word frequency, and visualization, digital humanities turns to computation and Big Data in the hopes of making literary studies relevant in the current ascension of STEM, machine learning, and generative artificial intelligence (AI). Although it is tempting to start with a critique that many of the textual practices that digital humanities deploy find their origins in settler colonial structures of salvage anthropology, bureaucratic management, resource extraction, and accumulation, it is perhaps necessary to take a step back from what is a rather basic observation and pause to define what exactly is meant when we discuss digital and other forms of new media writing, literature, and stories. Digital literature is currently understood as literature primarily written to be read through a computer interface and existing in codes and clouds, on browsers and platforms, or through hypermedia networks and interfaces. Video games, as the one particular subset of digital media that I am going to be examining here, present particular parameters and challenges to the genre classification of "literature" writ large. As Astrid Ensslin points out in her book *Literary Gaming*, video games are texts "that we can read in the sense of close-read and close-play for the artistic verbal and ludological forms and contents." She continues, "Clearly, the vast majority of them do not use literary language (spoken or written) in the sense of verbal art."[16] Existing somewhere between movies and choose-your-own-adventure interactive novels, video games are digital modes of play first and foremost that require both humans and machines in order to advance either narratively or, better, "levelly."

In the initial attempts to build something that might at this point be loosely disciplined as video game studies, scholars tackling these new digital interfaces locked themselves into a knock-down, drag-out fight to determine whether games were first and foremost stories, or whether they were, literally, games that one played. That "debate" from the early game studies years, now infamously shorthanded as narratology versus ludology, drew in such scholars as Janet Murray, Henry Jenkins, Jesper Juul, Espen Aarseth, Nick Monfort, Ian Bogost, and Alexander R. Galloway to argue over whether cultural studies, anthropology, literary studies, cinema studies, sound studies, play studies, or computer science had the best and most proprietary skills to interpret video games. Narratologists such as Murray and Jenkins drew on literary and cultural studies methods to emphasize the storied aspect of games that derived from classic hero quests and even Shakespeare to provide play with grander thematics beyond placing a few rapidly falling jigsaw puzzle pieces in a row to clear them. Ludologists countered that the gameplay itself hindered any actual storytelling these formats might undertake because story was separated into paratextual elements that

included game manuals, spell descriptions, in-game worldbuilding, and even CGI cutscenes, where story was revealed, but not actually or ever played. Keywords such as *procedural*, *flow*, *ergodic*, *algorithmic*, and *operations* proliferated, and these scholars insisted that because video games were code first and foremost, it was through code that they would best be understood and studied.[17] But perhaps it was game designer Jonathan Blow (*Braid, The Witness*) who best summed up the ludologist perplex when he weighed in to declare that "videogames are pretty terrible for telling stories." Adding that focusing on anything that might be called a narrative in games ultimately takes away from an analysis of what the game's mechanics might actually teach us, Blow observes, "Any system communicates something to the player, whether you as the author of the game intended to communicate that thing or not. The gameplay does this regardless—it's not necessarily just the story or the visual assets."[18] According to Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski, in their own accounting of the disciplining debates of video game studies, narratology versus ludology "looms largest," but the perennial and subsequent debates that have followed fall to similar sides—though the scholars mentioned above might shift allegiances—and include what Jagoda and Malkowski identify as "*proceduralism* and *anti-proceduralism*," as well as computational versus representational analyses that rehearse in echo that initial binary conflation between narrative and mechanics, culture and design, politics and play. Jagoda and Malkowski emphasize that, although the binary debates might oscillate over time and appear to recycle familiar ground, "more than many other fields . . . game studies encourages ongoing discussions between theorists and designers, formalists and historians, and empiricists and artists who approach games from different perspectives."[19] Video games, then, are already interdisciplinary products reflecting the cultural and political norms in which they are created, and they hold myriad possibilities for critical engagement that, as Jagoda and Malkowski suggest, "attends to the political dimensions of ludic forms, as well as the ways that games reproduce, animate, and challenge patterns within broader cultures."[20]

For the purposes of this book, I am particularly interested in how the schisms in video game studies often return us to the formalism and structuralism of mid-twentieth century theory as some of the leading scholars encourage those who want to study games to prioritize procedures, systems, codes, algorithmic processes, rules, objects, and mechanics as the means of communicating something at the level of embodied play over the visual, narrative, or representational assets that provide content. The focus on form and structure is also an attempt to keep the primacy of "the medium is the message," to evoke Marshall McLuhan's words, to remember that video games are, first and foremost, games

that are meant to be played for fun and joy.[21] And while it is true that narrative is to be found everywhere and in everything, Jesper Juul for one has argued that the temporality and immediacy of controller input make it difficult to "find a distance between story time, narrative time, and reading/viewing time" while actually playing through a game level.[22] Video games either synchronize the temporality of the narrative to the urgency of the happening right now on the screen or they create distance between the story and play by disrupting the flow of the gameplay to insert narrative cutscenes and videoclips as events that the player cannot control to advance character development and plot. "It is impossible to influence something that has already happened," Juul observes, "this means that *you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time*."[23] You cannot, in other words, match the temporality of the play to the temporality of the story. Either one or both must be sacrificed in order for a game to be playable.

The formal elements of a video game's design, its rules, constraints, and procedural operations, are the structures that initiate the conditions of play, construct the spatial parameters of what can be played, and provide challenge by introducing opportunities for both failure and mastery. How you play, how long you play, and whether you actually ever complete a game comes down to a finely tuned balance of the rules and constraints the game imposes to keep you engaged. As per Jonathan Blow's point, those formal elements have value in and of themselves; they communicate something, and they are, importantly, often separate from any narrative or story that may be driving the occasion of the game. Designers have, at times, bemoaned their inability to find ways to fully provide players with the opportunity to play the story elements as immersively as all involved might want—the distance between expected and desired mechanics that make a game playable and flatten the temporality of the story to the now on the screen are often at odds with the literary elements. And so far, games that have tried to achieve literary or perhaps just the cinematic status, including *The Last of Us*, *Uncharted*, or *Death Stranding*, get routinely critiqued by gamers for being nothing more than playable blockbuster Hollywood movies. Though film critic Roger Ebert has been roundly mocked time and again by gamers for his elitist dismissal of games, there are good reasons why he boldly declared that "video games can never be art."[24]

Lingering just a few beats more in these debates about code, temporality, narrative, structure, and event offers the possibility for Indigenous critical theory, settler colonial studies, and video game studies to enter into uneasy conversation grounded initially on an associative disambiguation on my part of what structures might mean across disciplines. Importantly, as a theoretical school of thought, structuralism derives from the work of theorists in linguistics,

psychology, literary studies, and anthropology who studied systems of meaning within language and culture to draw larger insights into how both function. *Sign*, *signifier*, *signified*, and *langue* are just some of the key words deployed by structuralists and their poststructuralist colleagues. Importantly, one of the founding figures in the development of structuralism was anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who built his understanding of human behavior on the study of Indigenous kinship, clans, ceremonies, and languages, presuming that what he thought were binary oppositions in the structural formations of Indigenous languages, stories, and governance served as "the savage mind" refraction of modern society.[25] In what has become the ubiquitous slogan of settler colonial studies, or rather, Patrick Wolfe's oft-cited contention that "settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event," the elimination of the Native is a process that endures beyond the eventfulness of any single occasion as conquest itself provides the logistical architecture through which settler societies erect themselves into and onto space.[26] In defining settler colonialism as an invasion that inaugurates structures, Wolfe never fully defines what the structured components of settler colonialism are, though he affirms that "all of them come back to the issue of land."[27] Instead, he invites us to return to structural analysis of binaries in considering not just the mechanical architectures and infrastructures of settlement and land seizure, but also the larger logical, cultural, racial, legal, and juridical structures that codify elimination, territoriality, possession, and dispossession.[28] In another move anticipated by any number of scholars in the fields of Indigenous and settler colonial studies, focusing on the procedural systems, codes, and jurisdiction of sovereignty, property, and governance has taken on a rather formal adherence to processes and operations that, as with code and technology studies, also returns us to structural analyses and to the Indigenous trace that remains, regardless of whether it is ever acknowledged. Structures are endemic and durative; they are found in laws, rules, code, software, and genres; and they persist as a fetish of sovereignty and power at the thresholds of demarcation between civilized and savage, human and animal, life and death. In other words, structures have become everything as histories of colonialism and racism, genocide and slavery continue to produce white supremacy as the only possible nativism on lands seized from Indigenous peoples. Any system, as Blow said, communicates something.

This insistence that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event has prompted Elizabeth Povinelli to interrogate the ethical and temporal implications of that which never raises to the surface of event, that which only exists as ongoing suffering that can neither be spectacular nor even redeemed. In *Economies of Abandonment*, she terms these moments of the nothing spectacular

"*quasi-events*," through which the suffering of the other endures.[29] As the opera-
tive temporality of the social projects of late liberalism, *quasi-events* orient them-
selves through prior presences that provide both the occasion and the rationale
through which sovereignty, authority, and power are founded and demarcated.
This governance of the prior, as she calls it, is not so much a structure as it is
a temporality of eventualization—"the relay between mechanisms of coercion
and contents of knowledge likely to induce behaviors and discourses, affective
attachments and analytic tendencies"—that stretches the ongoing suffering
initiated by conquest and genocide of the Indigenous other beyond the logical
outcomes of either death or liberation.[30] Within settler colonial studies, in other
words, the temporal duration of structures supplants eventfulness to ensure
that the eventualization of ongoing Indigenous dispossession continues into the
futures settlers imagine for themselves.

In her work on programming languages, digital cultures, and new media,
Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues that software, the internet, and social media
have interceded in the durative temporalities of US sovereignty to link struc-
tures back into the production and proliferation of events as either crisis or
catastrophe. Software, code, and technology are neither apolitical nor transpar-
ent tools; rather, they emerged as iterations of neoliberal forms of government,
commercialization, and commodification that served to make "code *logos*: code
as source, code as conflated with, and substituting for, action."[31] Meanwhile, the
technology we use, whether in the form of Apple, Microsoft, Google, Sony, Nin-
tendo, ChatGPT, or Steam platforms, are all designed for user interface but not
necessarily user agency. "Tellingly," Chun observes, "trusted computer systems
are systems secure from user interventions and understanding. Moreover, soft-
ware codes not only save the future by restricting user action, they also do so by
drawing on saved data and analysis. They are, after all, programmed." Software's
temporality has transposed the durative eventualization of structural violence
back into the spectacle of eventfulness by compressing time into real time as
the only actionable time. But rather than managing crises as eruptive events by
producing safety through control, software and code, networks and social media,
have all converged in the present to produce crises as their raison d'etre. Within
this barrage of crises, we have come to assume that code is analogous with action,
and that action is analogous to agency. But, as Chun carefully explains, "what
we experience is arguably not a real decision but rather one already decided in a
perhaps unforeseen manner: increasingly our decisions are like actions in a video
game. They are immediately felt, affective, and based on our actions, and yet at
the same time programmed."[32] Perhaps one of the reasons, then, that so many
video game scholars and designers insist that games cannot tell stories is because

the critical distance necessary between the immediacy of action on the screen and the agency of the user has flattened to produce the settler as sovereign self. If that is the case, then story may ultimately disrupt the illusion of action and reveal the structures of settler colonialism that the code has built. In his rejoinder to Ian Bogost's declaration in the *Atlantic* in 2017 that games can never tell stories, Austin Walker affirms that "storytelling can paper-over strange design decisions and 'hook' players who might otherwise be skeptical. . . . In this way, storytelling in games also solves problems for players."[33] Story is, after all and as I have been hinting, the event of the game and not its structure.

THE RELATIONALITY OF GROUND

Before proceeding further, I should pause here to issue a caution about what the desire to fill representational gaps within video game studies—an impulse Lisa Nakamura terms "gaming's cruel optimism" and Soraya Murray critiques as the "vicissitudes of representation"—produces within the structures of Indigenous dispossession that *Indigenomicon* charts, especially as it connects to issues of relationality.[34] Darryl Leroux uses the term "shifting" to discuss self-Indigenization, how non-Indigenous people within US and Canadian settler societies have taken up Indigenous identities—sometimes entirely and knowingly fabricated, others built on family stories passed down orally, and still more through a settler guilt drive to validate the violence white women face through claiming Indigenous women's trauma without community recognition or actual ancestors—to build careers in academia, arts, and industry.[35] As the collective of editors who convened a recent issue for the *Journal of Games Criticism* on "Surviving Whiteness in Games" argue, "pervasive Whiteness is one of the ways games make themselves known as colonial projects," and "the White default in game design has documented how games function as 'racial pedagogical zones' and thus continue the project of coloniality of play."[36] I agree that structural whiteness is one way games are colonial projects; however, settler colonialism is more than white supremacy, and the extraction of Indigenous identities and ancestries, and the subsequent subversion of Indigenous knowledges that results, underpins the playing Indian into becoming Indian that affords the non-Natives who participate in the shift from white to Indian their antirelational power within systems of domination.

Although I wish I could write more extensively about prominent and sometimes award-winning game designers who self-identify as Indigenous broadly (for example, Métis or Anishinaabe), have varying claims over time (naming one community and later shifting to another, unrelated one), or claim connection

to contested tribes in Vermont, for instance, I cannot.[37] Given the still ongoing damage that figures such as Andrea Smith, Elizabeth Hoover, Maylei Blackwell, "Qwo-Li" Driskill, Circe Sturm, and Buffy Sainte-Marie have done to Indigenous feminisms, Indigenous queer and Two-Spirit studies, Indigenous food studies, and Indigenous performance, not to mention the damage to Cherokee, Mohawk, Mississippi Choctaw, and Cree communities, '60s scoop survivors, and adoptees, I want to be as mindful as possible to not continue circulating, and in doing so producing, credibility for people who are not, in fact, Indigenous.[38] "The issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls speaks to the value attached to their lives," Audra Simpson warns. "Were it not for the efforts of Indigenous women themselves, it is reasonable to speculate this issue would have remained hidden from public view. And in this reality, having White women speak as if they are Indian continues the act of disappearing them."[39] This pervasive and concealed whiteness is a condition of not just video games, but even the very scholarship and journal issues attempting to confront it. I will return to some of these questions throughout my book as I reflect on the im/possibilities of Indigenous dystopic futurities and how structures of dispossession in video games hinge on the literal death and absence of Indigenous peoples.

With that caution in place, it is important to highlight how Indigenous game designers and Indigenous studies scholars have been weighing in on debates about game narratives to say that such anxieties about the separation of story and play have no place in Indigenous worlds. By using Indigenously designed games, they set out to show how traditional culture and storytelling traditions are, in fact, best suited for digital formats and gameplay mechanics. Indigenous studies scholars point not only to the cultural value placed on games in traditional spaces, but also to the fact that gaming and narrative chance, as work by White Earth Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor amply demonstrates, go hand in hand. Tuscarora game designer Waylon Wilson argues, "Video games can take our people to places normally unreachable so that we may continue to engage with traditional teachings located in these sites."[40] Similarly, Maize Longboat (Kanien'kehá:ka from Six Nations of the Grand River) uses his game *Terra Nova* to explore possibilities for "insert[ing] our voices within the larger videogame industry by utilizing the tools available to us to produce Indigenous-determined narratives while also deconstructing misguided ones."[41] In championing the digital as a prime site for decolonial intervention, Oglala Lakota scholar Craig Howe suggests that HyperCard, hypermedia, and hypertext are perhaps best suited for presenting Indigenous oral histories. In an argument that reflects Janet Murray's contention that oral bardic storytelling contains similar procedural elements of object-oriented programming languages, Howe contends that digital formats

enabled by hypertext are finally able to represent the associative, mnemonic, event-centered, and nonlinear aspects of Indigenous oral histories and storytelling traditions.[42] Those oral traditions depend on what Howe identifies as social, spatial, experiential, and spiritual dimensions that serve to locate both the teller and the listener within particular geopolitical, cultural, communal, and cosmic relationalities.[43] Indigenous tribal histories, Howe explains, are "more likely to be recited in relationship to specific landscapes, waterscapes, and skyscapes. This perspective is," he continues, "event-centered: here something happened and a particular person or being was present."[44] While Indigenous writers were able to adapt and transform written language and print media to capture some of those elements, digital technologies, with their incorporation of multimedia components into a cohesive, immersive, and now virtual reality experience, offer better toolsets to elucidate the mnemonic, embodied, temporal, and spatial functions of Indigenous stories.

So, despite the fetishization of the Indigenous other as either technophobic Luddite on the one hand or salvage ethnographic resource to be saved by digital technological advances on the other, the Indigenous turn to digital media and video game design as ways to not only preserve but transform Indigenous languages and stories into playable archives for the next generation of Indigenous children, then, makes perfect sense. And it is that sense of building resources for the future that compelled one Alaska Native community to partner with non-Native designers to build and produce a commercial video game that would be engineered and marketed for the current generation of game systems, including the Mac and pc, the ps4, Xbox One, and Android and iOS. *Never Alone* (*Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*) is a 2014 video game produced through a collaboration among the Iñupiat, Upper One Games (an Indigenously run game studio launched by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council in Anchorage), and E-Line Media. Although the partnership behind *Never Alone* is an Indigenous-led collaboration, according to Dennis Scimeca, "in practice, Upper One Games actually subcontracts development to E-Line Media, which established a development studio in Seattle specifically for the task. And for E-Line, level one of the partnership started on the ground in Alaska, getting a crash course on the native culture."[45] That crash course involved drawing upon Iñupiaq language, culture, aesthetics, and philosophy to transform the traditional story of Kunuuksaayuka into a video game that encourages gamers to reflect not just on how Indigeneity, race, gender, and settler colonialism inform what and why we choose to play, but on how survival depends upon cooperation rather than competition, relationality rather than individualism, and respect for—rather than undistinguished destruction of—all life. The game's design choices seek to tell the story of a young girl named Nuna

I.1 Nuna and Fox being chased by a polar bear. Gameplay still from *Never Alone* (*Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*) (Upper One Games, November 18, 2014).

and her friend Fox (see figure I.1) as they brave a harsh arctic landscape to escape a polar bear hunting for fish; outrun Manslayer as he destroys the villages in his path; outwit Little People to recover a sacred drum; traverse icebergs and ocean floors; and finally stop an unending snow storm caused by Blizzard Man as he tries to shovel his way through whole glaciers and mountains. Along the way, the game provides players with access to spirits, resources, owls, and cultural insights to help those players, Iñupiat and non-, learn about Iñupiaq cultural values and traditions.

According to Dave Gaertner, "*Never Alone* is a thrilling example of the dynamic, fluid, and living presence of Indigenous storytelling in contemporary spaces and its ability to shift and adapt within new contexts and mediums without sacrificing meaning or faithfulness to the past."[46] For Métis scholar Warren Cariou, the game's kinesthetic elements represent the centrality of relational ethics for Indigenous peoples. A game like *Never Alone*, he argues, "embodies the kind of generosity that is encapsulated in the Indigenous ethic of hospitality by welcoming players into the territory and the culture."[47] Finally, Katherine Meloche suggests that *Never Alone* exemplifies "the fluidity of Inuit sovereignty as it transforms storytelling and gaming protocols into digital forms."[48] It is a game, in other words, that has received strong praise from non-Native industry critics as well as from Indigenous studies scholars as it promises to, in the words of *Wired*'s glowing review, "serve both as cultural ambassador and invite us to contemplate persuasive worldviews other than our own."[49]

At the baseline of design, the game itself renders its world starkly and charmingly, as players begin by being introduced to what is to come with a screen that informs them that "the Iñupiat are an Alaska Native people who have thrived for thousands of years in one of the most formidable environments on Earth." As that screen fades to black and harsh winds begin to wail, a man speaking Iñupiaq explains, "I will tell you a very old story." With slightly murky and obscured letterboxing to perhaps simulate the experience of wearing Inuit goggles used to prevent snowblindness, players are presented with a side-scrolling puzzle platformer that in subtle and profound ways disrupts the genre that became popular with Nintendo's 1985 classic *Super Mario Bros.*, a video game that innovated the industry and inaugurated the side-scrolling platformer as we now know and play it. Taking character models and some of its plot from *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo transformed Jumpman into Mario and sent him and his brother Luigi on an epic quest through Mushroom Kingdom to rescue Princess Toadstool from the clutches of Bowser, an evil war-turtle sorcerer who likes to capture princesses and torture Mario and Luigi. Armed with his fist to smash open power-up bricks and his Goomba-squishing jump landings, Mario navigates precarious levels with gravity-defying leaps across gaps and piranha plants living in pipes throughout the Mushroom Kingdom. As he progresses, he collects gold coins and occasional special powers to help him gain extra lives, temporary invulnerability, or massive growth spurts that allow him to clear each of the stages that mark his journey. It is a well-loved and iconic game that has now been roundly critiqued for the simplistic "bro-plot" about brothers forever rescuing the imperiled princess. It is also a game about competitive colonial conquest in the pursuit of power, wealth, and territoriality.[50]

Never Alone, while retaining many of the same gameplay mechanics introduced by Nintendo's *Mario*, including running, jumping, and gaining powerups and collectables, deviates in profound and significant ways. Rather than only encountering enemies along the way who need to be overcome, the players are introduced to spirit helpers who offer resources and reveal platforms so that Nuna and Fox can safely and successfully navigate Siḷa—the Iñupiaq word for the weather, the air, and the land they inhabit, experience, and breathe—together. And while *Super Mario Bros.* offered cooperative play when a second player joined as Luigi, *Never Alone* is best when two players work together to synchronize their efforts, to coordinate jumps, and to time their movements to make sure they both successfully navigate through the game environments and solve puzzles. In fact, the game entwines the gameplay fate of Nuna and Fox to such a degree that if one of them dies, the other does as well before the game reloads the last successful checkpoint save. Finally, rather than collecting coins

or special hidden stars, players in *Never Alone* watch and listen for owls to appear in hard to reach spots, and if they successfully navigate to them and cause them to fly off, players unlock "Cultural Insights" that offer real-time videos of the Iñupiat elders, scholars, and community members who worked on the game as they share further cultural background on some of the gameplay and environmental elements.

The beauty of the game is in fact found in its gentle and quiet renderings of the Iñupiaq language, the environments, and the Iñupiaq storytelling traditions that help world the game and provide context for the game's playable aesthetic. For instance, the opening narrative sequence juxtaposes the voice of a traditional storyteller with artwork inspired by Iñupiaq scrimshaw etchings and engravings that, according to the late Amy Fredeen, then chief financial officer for E-Line Media and executive vice president and CFO of Cook Inlet Tribal Council, "is this really beautiful method of art that's done either on baleen or ivory and traditionally it was done to tell stories."[51] Functioning as mnemonics toward timelines and events within a story, scrimshaw carvings help record histories and can be read by storytellers to ensure key aspects of the story are remembered through multiple retellings. The monochromatic black and ivory story panels the game uses at the beginning evoke those ancient technologies for Iñupiat gamers as they introduce Native and non-Native players to a young girl who loves to hunt and possesses a great number of skills. Her village has been beset by blizzard after blizzard, to the point that she and her people are all at the brink of starvation. Rather than wait to die in her village with her community, she sets out on her own in the hopes of finding the source of the unrelenting whiteout winds and snow and then stopping it. She does not get far before she is almost attacked by a polar bear, and that is where players take over playing the story. In a game that pointedly avoids violence and killing, and emphasizes collaboration and caring by reminding players that land is never empty space, but filled with allies and helpers who come in surprising forms, the thrilling suspense of the game's hardest challenges still derive from an imperiled young girl being chased by bears and monstrous men through stark and unforgiving terrains.

How the game integrates Iñupiaq language, philosophy, and cultural values is both innovative at the level of game design and significant in the history of video gaming, which has all too often deployed deeply sexist and racist caricatures of American Indians, from *Custer's Revenge* to *Turok the Dinosaur Hunter*, *Prey* to *inFAMOUS Second Son*. *Custer's Revenge*, a game notorious for gamifying the rape of Indigenous women, is, according to Adrienne Shaw, "part of the game industry's long-standing tradition of commercializing women's bodies for a heterosexual, male gaze. It is a celebration of colonial violence and sexual violence, genocide

and misogyny."[52] In *Never Alone*, centering the game on a young girl—rather than remaining consistent with the expected male gendering of the child in most versions of the traditional story—as one of the two avatars that players interact with as they navigate precarious conditions in the hopes of rescuing Nuna's people from the never-ending blizzard was an intentional and significant choice for the elders and designers who developed the epistemological game for both young and old players.

Returning to Craig Howe's delineation of the four dimensions that, for him, comprise Indigenous oral histories, one could argue further that *Never Alone* constructs a gameplay experience evocative of the social, spatial, experiential, and spiritual elements that underline the protocols for telling stories. To draw this out explicitly, the emphasis on cooperative play reflects the social ethics of relationality, kinship, and community that shared cultural knowledge and stories nurture and maintain; the environmental mechanics of wind, snow, ice, and water all serve to ground the game in Iñupiaq philosophies of land and link the story to the physical elements of the environment; and the embodied components of just playing the game to advance the story reflect the experiential aspects of affective communication and storytelling call-and-response performance. Finally, the game incorporates Iñupiaq spiritual knowledges to underscore the story's significance for Iñupiat gamers particularly, though the game tries to share parts of such philosophies by working to teach non-Iñupiat players about the culture and its values. The recurring insistence that Nuna is not alone in a harsh and cold world is one of the game's core lessons, and players are educated in the significance of the Iñupiaq concept of Siḷa, the entirety of creation existing in connected relation, as Nuna and the players learn to trust the located relationalities that make water and land, spirits and animals, human and non-, all life. Fox, without giving away too many spoilers, is a character in their own right, and their role in the story provides additional insights into Iñupiaq understandings of kinship, life, death, and rebirth.

Moreover, if Indigenous oral traditions are event-centered rather than temporally and chronologically situated, as Howe contends, then the aspects of gaming that have so often been critiqued for preventing games from ever being able to tell stories effectively end up serving Indigenous aesthetic needs as a disruption to settlement's structures. Indeed, the events of Nuna's adventures as well as the key turning points are all told in-game through unplayable cinematic cutscenes (signaled by the narrowed letterboxing of the onscreen image) that punctuate a never-ending series of crises while simultaneously providing the player with moments of safety or a pause to catch one's breath. Additionally, by extending the voice of the storyteller along with the subtitle translations

beyond the cinematics and into the playable parts of the game, the game helps to integrate story with play in ways that other games like *Bastion* and *The Stanley Parable* have tried to do, to varying degrees of success and intent. The emphasis on telling the story in Iñupiaq language and tying its progression to the players successfully navigating the game's environment to trigger the next part of the story reflect an Iñupiaq aesthetic that serves to transform the game beyond something one plays and offers insights into the consequences of environmental destruction for the sake of profit and power.

For Donna Haraway, the game and its sympoietic collaborative emphases represent what she calls the "world games" derived from Indigenous peoples' stories and practices. "These games both remember and create worlds in dangerous times; they are worlding practices. Indigenous peoples around the earth have a particular angle on the discourses of coming extinctions and exterminations of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene," she states.[53] In a close reading of the game that parallels Indigenous scholars' enthusiastic discussion of storytelling as a fulfillment of the promise of video games, Haraway also admits to being thwarted by many of the ludological aspects of the game, a thwarting that she takes as a caution to not "once again raid situated Indigenous stories as resources for the woes of colonizing projects and peoples, entities that seem permanently undead."[54] Admitting to her failures, she confesses, "continuing to die early and often in *Never Alone*, I have not forgotten that spirit helpers favor their kin. Animism cannot be donned like a magic cape by visitors. Making kin in the ongoing Chtulucene will be more difficult than that, and even the unwilling heirs of colonizers are poorly qualified to set conditions for recognition of kinship . . . Staying with the trouble, yearning toward resurgence, requires inheriting hard histories, for everybody, but not equally and not in the same ways."[55] *Never Alone* does many things as a game focused on a traditional Iñupiaq story told by storytellers in the language, but what it does not do is name the repercussions of settler colonialism nor mention resurgence beyond continuance.

Haraway's conflation of the animism, Indigenous relationalities, worldbuilding, and storytelling that inform the game with the gameplay mechanics in many ways plunges us back into some of the old terrain that the narratology/ludology debates charted. Scholars in Indigenous studies who have written about the game have all, almost unanimously, agreed that to focus on the gameplay mechanics or failures of the game misses the point. And many mainstream gamers have admitted to loving the multicultural aspects of the game, the neoliberal feels that make them know that downloading and playing the game will make them better people. But many of them have also expressed frustration that the game's mechanics are often at odds with what should otherwise

be an enjoyable experience of play. As one negative review from *Game Informer* points out, "Brief documentary segments full of interviews and historical insight tie the action and the legends together. This is the best and most rewarding part of *Never Alone*; you see a short film explaining the myths surrounding the aurora borealis, and that information better equips you to appreciate the next level where you see those myths brought to life. Here's the problem: When you aren't watching movies, you're playing an unremarkable platformer."[56] Rather than dismissing such concerns about gameplay mechanics as misplaced or reading them as a sign of refusal of the settler player as Haraway does, staying in this trouble returns us to Jonathan Blow's assertion that "any system communicates something to the player whether you as the author of the game intended to communicate that thing or not."

Clint Hocking, a former director at LucasArts and Ubisoft, coined the phrase "ludonarrative dissonance" on his blog in 2007 as a way to describe the disconnect that often happens for players when the gameplay and the narrative in a video game are at odds.[57] There are hundreds of examples, from *BioShock* to *Grand Theft Auto*, where the story does one thing and the gameplay encourages something entirely else. For instance, many of the narrative CGI moments providing contextual stories for first-person shooters often decry gun violence and killing, in between the wanton and gleeful explosions and barrage of bullets that the player has just unleashed on a horde of enemies. When the critically acclaimed and highly anticipated *No Man's Sky* released in 2016, it was immediately panned for its ludonarrative dissonance in the gap between a narrative that promised the endless exploration of Columbusing the universe and gameplay that instead reproduced a terra nullius void in which, according to one review, "playing *No Man's Sky*, there is a sense of something hollow and black sitting in the heart of all this freedom. It is, in a sense, the shadow to the psychology of openness that the game posits as its central ethic."[58] For a 2D platformer like *Super Mario Bros.*, the gameplay and the narrative match, but as Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins argue, that is because it is a story best understood as a new world travelogue. "Nintendo's Princess Toadstool and Mario Brothers is a cognate version" of John Smith, Pocahontas, and John Rolfe, they argue, because all are stories about exploration and colonization to such a degree that "the movement in space that the rescue plot seems to motivate is itself the point, the topic, and the goal and that this shift in emphasis from narrativity to geography produces features that make Nintendo® and New World narratives in some ways strikingly similar to each other and different from many other kinds of texts."[59]

If *Never Alone* is indeed a game that has similarities to *Super Mario Bros.* in design and genre, then I wonder whether and if, alongside the Iñupiaq storytelling,

language use, and cultural knowledges, there is not some bit of ludonarrative dissonance at play in the mechanics themselves that derive from settler colonial structures and mechanics of dominance, territorial control, and conquest, where the system and coded elements of the game design communicate something counter to the designers' intention. The structural nature of games requires some form of initiation that serves to introduce players to the game world by offering, among other things, tutorials, on-screen directions, and inset maps. In the process, games reproduce terra incognita as a way to introduce challenge and mystery, and gamify exploration as part of the play itself. In other words, as one traverses levels and stages, lands and worlds, more and more of the game's spatial architecture is revealed and mapped for the player to mark degrees of completion and provide other signs of mastery to allow rapid movement through space once it has been discovered.

For all of the game's emphasis on helping players learn cultural insights into Iñupiaq worldings and relationalities with the cosmos, represented in *Never Alone* with reference to Siḷa—the land, moon, snow, wind, aurora borealis, and ice in kinship relation—non-Native players must still initialize themselves to the space as strangers as they face the forward motion of the platformer with no sense of embodied belonging, no sense of spatial knowledge to remember what is ahead, and no lived connection to the grounded relationalities the game hopes to evoke and impart. It is, in other words, a coded ludic mechanic that interpellates the settler. Iñupiat players, however, are also presented with Siḷa, a space they know intimately because it is the place they live, breathe, and weather, as a *terra nullius incognita* that they have to navigate as newcomers. Settler colonialism, for Indigenously designed games, itself becomes a ludonarrative dissonance as the system becomes the mechanic and structures overwhelm events. Video games may offer innovative ways to link story and play, but until games can embody at the level of play the kinds of grounded relationalities that the stories teach, they will remain ambivalent tools of Indigenous decolonization.

THE GROUNDS FOR RELATIONALITY

Never Alone is a game that ultimately prioritizes kinship and relationalities over ground. I want to turn now to consider how a video game might make ground the contest through which relationalities are obscured. Martinique writer Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* is now often cited and engaged with as the primary text of the relational turn, and his theory of Relation draws on the complexities of Caribbean history, creolization, and the necessity of opacity to resist the singularity of representation in favor of understanding deeper connections between

and among. But, in writing *Faulkner, Mississippi*, Glissant offers an intriguingly specific addendum to his theory of Relation when he observes that William Faulkner's Southern Gothic attempts to hold blood and race through his half Black, half Chickasaw character, Sam Fathers, who represents "the stunning and impossible connection, which in poetics we call the Relation, between all these people—Whites, Blacks, and Indians—caught in the system's trap, and also the sustained honor, courage, and will, whatever their race or condition, of those who oppose the system, for whatever reason."[60] That Relation for Glissant is, in other words, incapsulated by the "stunning and impossible connection" of racialization and Indigeneity within the systems of slavery, colonization, genocide, and capitalism—and their resistances—that produced the South and the Caribbean in the body of a single Black Indigenous (Chickasaw) figure, and Glissant invites us to use that figure's opacity to ponder possibilities against removal, displacement, and alienation. It is in his exegesis of Faulkner that Glissant offers us at least one way to break the hegemonic separation of the North American continent from the Caribbean and hold the two together. "We already know that, in many respects," he writes, "Louisiana is close to the Caribbean and especially to the Antilles: the plantation system, the thrilling presence of Creole languages, a linguistic background of French, and most blatantly in all of these slave societies, the insistent suffering and the Negro runaways."[61] After a break in the page, and in a stretch of narrative time, Glissant adds, "Later, I would remark that whites from Louisiana generally refuse to admit any such connections."[62] It is, as of yet, unclear to me what Indigenous studies scholars might say of the relational enjambment between the South and the Caribbean.

It is even less clear how Indigenous studies scholars hold Blackness and Indigeneity together, though Chad Benito Infante might provide a start by pointing to the metaphoric and metaphysical work Blackness and Indianness do in poetic relation to each other in settler mythologies of white mastery, as coupled, paired, and "imagined alike in their difference" where "they share a punctuated rhythm of complimentary and harmonic sounds in the overemphasis on death in their shared histories."[63] We often ground racialization and colonization as intersecting but different historical, legal, and cultural processes through the metaphors of "land" and "ocean," according to Infante.[64] In this framework, Infante continues, "the Black body seems to possess a fluidity of being and movement whereas the Indian seems to possess the ground on which being and culture can stand. Both are false perceptions of European recognition. Both are made to perceive the other's sign of subjection as a sign of veneration."[65] Within this fallacy, however, and as Afropessimists have suggested, Indigenous studies has yet to deal

with the matter of what race actually is and what racialization actually does in the after of slavery. Lenape scholar Joanne Barker tells us, "The erasure of the sovereign is the racialization of the 'Indian,'" and the two processes through which the state erases the sovereign to produce that racialization of the "Indian" are in the form of what she identifies in *Red Scare* as the Murderable Indian and the Kinless Indian.[66] The first is already foreclosed to the dying or already dead past, a well-known stop in the geographies of history that have led to our present. The second is the fraud, the Cherokee or Métis "Indian" who "is claimed by non-Indigenous, predominantly white, individuals and groups who benefit from and within the social and material conditions. It allows them to pretend an identity and history that transcends accountability to the ongoing conditions of genocide and dispossession. It serves to discredit and disparage Indigeneity even as it claims Indigeneity as its own."[67] The binary division between Blackness and Indianness—ocean and land, race and sovereignty—generates a plethora of paired metaphors that Infante says serve to hold Blackness and Indigeneity in relation, creating in their apposite opposition the vectors of displacement, where competition for land via labor serves as fulfilment of both citizenship and humanity while simultaneously vacating the land of any possible Indigenous presence or labor outside of whiteness.[68] For Shona N. Jackson, the processes through which land and Indigeneity are stripped of presence or labor are also the processes through which Blackness is rendered to a belonging only to Black skin or flesh, and is, in Jackson's words, the "un-housing" of Blackness. This un-housing is the loss of sovereignty, the loss of ontology, the loss of a prior time of belonging for Blackness and it causes non-whites, in Jackson's words, "to move around in a world and cultures that are antagonistic to our very flesh. This antagonism to our flesh is our new housing." "Land itself," she continues, "sutures the gap between labor as alienation and labor as becoming and belonging (disalienation)" for Black people.[69] White settlers, it should be mentioned, never experience any alienation from the lands they arrive to take.

Columbusing provides us metaphors of empire that can never be just metaphoric, but are rote within the structures of territoriality, dominance, and exploration that shape most of our outlets for play. The breakout video game *Norco*, which made the top of lists for best game of 2022, resists Columbusing in favor of painstakingly bearing witness to the apocalyptic environmental disasters the petrochemical industry has unleashed on beloved lands shaped by histories of violence.[70] The game asks players to linger in the quotidian grind of gig economies and crumbling infrastructure, as well as the slow death of cancer.[71] It is a game that is, on its surface, radically different from *Never Alone* as it centers the stories of a grieving family; flooding, hurricanes, and climate disasters in

southern Louisiana; and the real-life consequences of petrochemical neighbors. Some critics have claimed it is not much of a game at all. It is instead a point-and-click Southern Gothic adventure where the story is the event as it takes the player through the fenceline communities along the Mississippi River inspired by the real-world Diamond subdivision in the unincorporated town of Norco, Louisiana (named for the New Orleans Refinery Company that dominates its landscape), about 40 miles upriver from the city of New Orleans. Developed by Geography of Robots, published by Raw Fury, and created by a designer known as Yuts, or sometimes Yutsi, *Norco* is set in an alternate and dystopic near past during the winter of 2017–18, and follows a young woman named Kay as she returns home to Norco and "Dimes" after journeying west into the war-torn and burning lands of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her mother, Catherine, has died of cancer by the time Kay returns, but Catherine is also a playable character that the game follows in flashback to establish a larger story of incel cults, agnostic and divine birth rights, rocket ships, alien scouts, vengeful alligators, secrets at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain, and the quotidian documentation of the environmental havoc that the refineries have wreaked on the people, communities, birds, animals, lands, and waters that live in the region. Art from the game is sparingly stark even as it often features the stacked levels of energy extraction and transport, with one screen, for instance, centering on Dimes's gas station that sits below power lines, both loomed over by the cranes of the oil refinery (see figure I.2).

Despite being mostly point-and-click and drawn from prior games such as MacVenture's *Déjà Vu* (1985) that I played in black and white on a Macintosh computer in high school, the game takes about ten hours to complete, and involves side quests, puzzles, mindmaps, and memory dumps that are too involved to detail here. What interests me more than what the game play entails is how the game itself functions as an archive—with a website bibliography and resources page, a purchasable soundtrack and artbook, and a lore app that details the historical, cultural, and political contexts for the game. Steve Lerner's book *Diamond* is recommended reading, as is Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's *Petrochemical America*, and the website also references the 2019 documentary *Mossville: When Great Trees Fall* as providing context for understanding "the phenomenon of the 'extown'—i.e., industry moves in, and residents relocate for a variety of reasons (negative externalities, buyouts, etc.)."[72] Threaded through the resources as subtext for the game is a sense of land as justice and land as source of belonging, of health, of family, of worth. The *Mossville* documentary directly inspires the *Norco* game, as one of the game's main characters, Duck, is based on Stacey Ryan, the Black homeowner at the center of *Mossville* who

I.2　A gas station in the town of Dimes, surrounded by forms of energy extraction and transport. Game art from Norco (Geography of Robots, March 24, 2022).

tries—against all odds and in the face of eventual, inevitable failure—to keep his trailer home and plot of land despite the Sasol corporation's expansion of its chemical waste territory. Sasol, which stands for South African Synthetic Oil Limited, is a coal, oil, and petrochemical refinery developed in the 1950s to use Nazi Germany-derived chemical processes to provide energy to Apartheid South Africa as it faced energy shortages from international boycotts and sanctions. Residents living in Sasolburg, South Africa, are interviewed in the film and describe with exacting detail the colonial racial capitalistic practices of seizing Indigenous Basuto lands, fencing them, and making them uninhabitable. It is a process of entanglement among environmental racism, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism that Traci Brynne Voyles theorizes as wastelanding: "the assumption that nonwhite lands are valueless, or valuable only for what can be mined from beneath them, and the subsequent devastation of those very environs by polluting industries."[73] In the film, without comment, the camera chooses to linger on a billboard advertisement in Sasolburg that features a stereotypical image of an American Indian in a headdress on one side and a hamburger with fries on the other, with the tagline between them: "Sasol Burgers eat Spur Burgers," as if the Indian is the universal sign of land dispossession (figure I.3).[74] Back in Mossville, Louisiana, a town founded by a freed slave in 1790, Stacey Ryan's home is a fort surrounded by Sasol workers, agents, and security guards, as they transform the public road to his house into Sasol private company land access. The film simultaneously frames Ryan as the dispossessed

I.3   Billboard advertisement from Sasolburg, South Africa. Screen still from the documentary "Mossville: When Great Trees Fall" (*Reel South*, season 5, episode 10; PBS, 2020; Alexander Glustrom, dir.).

diasporic Black man facing apartheid in Jim Crow southern Louisiana and as the Native Black man who desires a home he can keep and land he can work for disalienation and access to freedom, humanity, dignity, and citizenship. Nowhere does it mention any of the Indigenous peoples still in relation to the lands that have become Southern Louisiana.

On the website reference page for *Norco*, the developer tell us that Mossville followed a "similar pattern to Diamond," the community the game fictionalizes, or perhaps familiarizes, as "Dimes."[75] As Steve Lerner describes it in his book, which is also cited at the website, "Diamond is not a place where most people would choose to live." He continues, "There are catalytic cracking towers, stacks topped by flares burning off excess gas, huge oil and gasoline storage tanks, giant processing units where oil and its derivatives are turned into a wide variety of useful chemicals, and a Rube Goldberg maze of oversized pipes."[76] According to Lerner, Diamond was also the site of the "largest slave rebellion in U.S. history," and the plantation from which the subdivision gets its name was itself a renaming of Trepagnier plantation, where, on January 8, 1811, those who were enslaved there, inspired by Haiti, revolted and attempted to advance on New Orleans. They were unsuccessful in rallying others to their cause, and US militia eventually tried and executed sixteen leaders of the rebellion, mounting their

heads on sticks along River Road.[77] *Norco* references this history when Kay and her party encounter a mangled robot named Mover dangling from one of the refinery cranes mid-game. In a burst of words that might be poetry, Mover says, "You will find in the water not only flames but whole hurricanes. There will be patterns of light that form the shape of the old bayous where those who killed for freedom still hide. . . . Rattling cages on the tracks and whispering at the pond. Perhaps the pond will whisper back."[78] In his case study on Diamond, Lerner lingers on this violent history of the region; he also acknowledges what he refers to as the "exterminated" Natchez (who were not exterminated but who instead took shelter within the Chickasaw as refugees) and the maroons and Choctaws who raided plantations along the river, although again only in passing.[79] These brief references to Indigenous peoples around *Norco* as archive can only be gestural, because the temporal and spatial focus of the origins for Diamond's present-day crisis is chattel slavery and the post-Civil War reconstruction that concentrated descendants of freed slaves in the impoverished parishes of the region, then restructured them into the fenceline communities of "cancer alley" between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Land ownership as reparation precedes buyouts and relocations as the site of reparative justice in a colonial recursion of territorial acquisition that never undoes the founding logics of settlement.

Shona N. Jackson finds the Native in Hegel's dialectic, and in doing so, answers the pernicious question of what it means that these discourses of history, ground, and place repeatedly (fiendishly) acknowledge Indigenous presence as staging area in the archive of white and Black racializations only to either absent or defer that presence from having any meaning at all. "In Hegel's differing modes of subordination of Blacks and Natives," Jackson argues, "the later are presumed vanished, the former are conceived of as a blank slate brought in because the [later] perished. The idealist dialectic thus makes Native disappearance essential for conceiving the Black subject in terms of its value for white subjectivity and for the new native Black self." She continues, "The dialectic in which Indigenous peoples are made to work for Black being, the tension that maintains the Native Other as the necessary limit within the production of Blackness in modernity is simultaneously the desire for Hegelian recognition in the achievement of Native status as a future orientation for Black identity." Finally, she concludes, "the endless discursivity of [Native] absence is the precise moment in which they are brought into the dialectic and made to work for Black being. This is not the master slave dialectic but its iteration as a settler Native one in which they work for, again, these new world indigeneities by serving as the limit of Black humanity."[80] Jackson's reading of Hegel's deferred settler Native dialectic as one that works to produce new world Indigeneities for those who

arrive from elsewhere is brilliant and transformative, especially in how it posits the necessity of the labor the Native does against Marxist misreadings of Hegel. It helps reframe the ground of attachment to land as freedom, even as it raises the question: who or what labors for Native being? When humanity, subjectivity, land ownership, and citizenship hinge on Indigenous disappearance into the dialectic and the inability of Indigenous peoples to labor in any form, my question might be a trick if the answer is also a recursion that Natives themselves labor for their own being. Visibility and recognition are traps, and it is unclear what there is to even repair as the claim to Indigeneity hinged on the vacated site of the Indian-as-ground itself becomes the site of redress, healing, and wholeness within settler colonial societies. This relationality of Blackness and Indigeneity, as Glissant, Infante, and Jackson suggest, is embodied and unhoused in what is and seems from here to only ever be a Southern Gothic horror.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

Indigenomicon grinds on these registers of relationality and ground in the unhoused horrors that settler colonialism has created for those of us who are not white, though differently located, within the brutal histories of genocide, slavery, and dispossession. This book is composed as a compendium of relational essays that sit with, rather than build a definitive argument about, the ludonarrative dissonances of video games to consider how games serve settler colonialism as ongoing recursive and discursive structures of territorial dispossession and acquisition counterposed to Indigenous modes of governance, livability, and relationality. In doing so, this book has two primary goals. The first is to add to ongoing conversations about race, gender, embodiment, and spatiality within video game studies by bringing Indigenous critical perspectives to the field to theorize how video games, as procedural new worlds that epitomize modernity as a smooth curve of technological progress, depend upon and elucidate how dispossession is structured and enacted within settler colonial imperialism. The second is to deeply theorize what *ground* and *relationality*, as key words within Indigenous studies, might mean as critical methodologies derived from Indigenous feminisms and Indigenous queer and Two-Spirit speculations about Indigenous dystopic nows and futures in conversation with Afropessimism, Black feminism, and queer of color critique.

One of the many harms Indigenous identity theft has had in academia, and especially in video game studies and queer studies, is that those who engage in it land rush how we can theorize Indigenous futurisms in conversation with other radical traditions that imagine utopias or other possible worlds beyond

this one.[81] Trademarking and prospecting the term "Indigenous futurisms" as a proprietary intellectual idea epitomizes dispossession; what is lost is the chance to think otherwise about what futurities, grounded in Indigenous intellectual traditions, might mean in the afterlives of slavery and genocide, labor and land dispossessions, and the constant speculation to turn appropriable representation into profit that forecloses refusal as an ethical stance. Kara Keeling, in outlining possibilities for radical imagination to work toward both queer times and Black futures, details how Black existence "carries within in it alternative organizations of time in which the future, if there is such a thing, has not been promised; it has had to be created by reaching through and beyond what exists."[82] What difference does it make to queer of color critique that Indigenous futures offer dystopic visions of what is to come rooted in the insistence that our lands and the relationalities they instantiate are the basis for this world as the only one we have?

Soraya Murray, building off Fuller and Jenkins, W. T. J. Mitchell, Espen Aarseth, and Michael Logan, among others, has importantly theorized how the digital spaces and landscapes of video games are deeply ideological; moving through space as an expression of time is the essential and defining feature of video games as new media.[83] "As 'practiced' forms of place," Murray writes, "the spaces of games in which players move often tend toward a predatory vison of landscape, in the sense that the space is observed from a privileged position, and often assessed in an ongoing, activated manner for its use-value or exploitability for success within the rule-based system of play."[84] Placing these arguments about the constructed, ideological, and predatory function of video game landscapes as a ground on which to begin a conversation with Indigenous studies helps to elucidate through disambiguation the distance between Indigenous critique and settler colonial studies. The chapters that follow, therefore, hold ongoing cultural, political, and narrative debates around video games, play, and technology in tension with critical Indigenous studies to further explicate how code, platform, and algorithm are deeply enmeshed with the settler colonial structures that dispossess Indigenous lives, knowledges, and lands.

The title for my book takes its inspiration from H. P. Lovecraft's dream book, *Necronomicon*, and Lovecraft particularly is credited with inaugurating survival horror conventions in video games. Within the tropes of horror, and figured as both uncivil and illiberal, Indigenous peoples are often temporalized as part of a long lost and undead past that continues to unsettle the speculative ground of settler horror and science fiction. Never quite arrived, and never fully eliminated, Indigeneity disrupts settlement, disturbs absence, and haunts imagination through uncanny returns. Drawing on texts including Mark Z. Danielewski's

novel *House of Leaves*, along with two video games, *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Until Dawn*, my first chapter will consider how the uncivil, the unhoused, the savage, and the zombie inflect how settlers project horror into the past and present of their occupation, and how Indigenous artists imagine decolonial possibilities within apocalyptic collapse.

Chapter 2 builds on the ludic tropes of horror discussed in the first chapter and extends them to the generic crossroads between science fiction and the western. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall determined in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) that American Indian nations "occupy a territory to which we assert a title independent of their will, which must take effect in point of possession when their right of possession ceases. Meanwhile, they are in a state of pupilage."[85] Placed within a timeless present of imperative dispossession, American Indians are caught within the conflicting temporalities of the colonizing US nation-state that anticipates our cessation into assimilation on the one hand and leaves open the ambivalent possibility that we will someday graduate out of tutelage on the other. Foreclosed and deferred as disabled, childish, ignorant, and unschooled, American Indian nations trouble US progressive narratives of settler colonialism and empire that grapple with dystopic futurity. Reading *Doctor Who* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* in conversation with Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, this second chapter will consider how the colonization of American Indian nations depends upon what Manu Karuka and colleagues theorize as colonial unknowing, a mode of knowledge production that is unable to attach meaning, significance, or temporality to the everyday signs and structures that underwrite settler colonialism within contemporary US society.[86]

My third chapter begins with a close-reading of Māori game designer Naphtali Faulkner's vision of what he terms "the shitty future" in *Umurangi Generation* (2020) in conversation with Mvskoke poet Joy Harjo. With world-ending apocalypse as the only possible outcome to an alien invasion in the wake of a catastrophic climate collapse, the indie game *Umurangi Generation* upends first-person conventions by rethinking how games might (re)produce space through relation. Meanwhile, Irrational Games's 2013 *BioShock Infinite*, a major studio-backed blockbuster (hereafter AAA) release, likewise imagines world-endings that offer Indigenous genocide as the only inevitable given to settler modernity. Reading these texts together, this chapter considers how sovereignty-as-code enacts violence in the spaces between beast and human, savage and civilized at the edges of promised new worlds evoked as the wild. With the rise of object-oriented ontology within video game studies and the ontological turn, questions about the structures of settler colonial governance persist in the spaces between

representation and play. Engaging recent conversations in queer theory, racial capitalism, and critical Indigenous studies about the wild, this chapter offers insights on the nature of video games and the discourses of land as a grounded relation that continue to shape how we imagine alternative trajectories for decolonial resistance.

Examining how Indigenous peoples continue to be rendered absent even in those very structures that depend upon and evoke our very presence—law, code, race, sexuality, and sovereignty—my fourth chapter will offer an intervention to current conversations in video game studies to argue that colonialism reembodies and reencodes digital difference in the desired production of realistic representation. Video games have been studied as a "paradigmatic media of empire," and they have been located within the transnational circuits of militarism as well as within the securitization of information control and capital supply chains.[87] Beginning with a disambiguation of *Indigenous* as well as the rise of mana to signify magic in most games, this chapter scales from global to local to supranational gaming to finally close read how Ubisoft's AAA games *Assassin's Creed III* and *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* enact and enable playing as Black and Indigenous as a means to sidestep the repercussions of the ground of slavery and genocide in the creation of the United States and at the auction block. What might it mean to play fugitive while serving the financializations and logisticalities of settler militarism to secure the hoped for liberation within the ongoing networks of settler colonialism, Indigenous dispossession, and the production of the Indian and the pirate? *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* is the first and only installation in the wildly successful franchise that lets players assume the role of a female Black Creole assassin named Aveline de Grandpré. Fighting through the streets of New Orleans at the end of the French and Indian Wars, moving in and out of plantations to successfully complete missions, and flirting with French and Spanish soldiers for gifts, Aveline is located within a long line of assassins that originates in Syria and extends through time to include pirates, fugitive slaves, Indians, shinobi, and Vikings. Conceived as a spin-off of *Assassin's Creed III*, *Liberation* served as the handheld accompaniment to the PS3 release of *AC III*, which centers the franchise's only playable American Indian character, Ratonhnhaké:ton, as he helps ensure the success of the American Revolution through his actions in Mohawk homelands. While situated within early colonial military history, the game hails contemporary settler militarism in a recursive loop that projects settlement through time and through the inevitability of Indigenous dispossession.

"Prepare to die," ads for the video game series *Dark Souls* warn, and indeed the series is known for its punishing, hard-core gameplay that promises gamers

failure over and over again. Notorious and celebrated for its difficulty, the game series created by FromSoftware, Inc., presents players with an alienated world of violence that demands exploration tied to conquest to control space, advance past demonic creatures, and achieve dominance over terrain. Along the way, players collect the souls of defeated enemies—the game's mechanic that instantiates what Shona N. Jackson theorizes as Indigenous Conversion—and use them to acquire the skills, weapons, and tools necessary to not only survive but beat the game.[88] Chapter 5 considers the rise of what I term *late colonialism* alongside neoliberal and technocratic consolidations of self, narrative, and expression within social, digital, and video game conventions. Reading closely FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* video games, as well as Team Cherry's *Hollow Knight*, through work by Wilson Harris, Layli Long Soldier, Édouard Glissant, and Bartolemé de Las Casas, this chapter also disambiguates Relation to discuss how anti-Blackness, land dispossession, and the ontological turn to objects within technology and software studies are part of settler colonial proceduralisms. How do race and Indigeneity function as recursion within the databases, code, and play structuring video games? How might ground and groundlessness disrupt the normative structures of settler colonialism? And finally, what could relationality offer as resistance to such technological structures of dispossession?

Caught within the both/and of late colonial collapse and the fantasies of revolutionary upheaval as restoration of some prior grandeur, American futurities often reproduce themselves through nineteenth-century signs of Indianness within the ongoing context of colonial domination. Meanwhile, analyses of coloniality too often equate white supremacy and racialization with settler colonialism, losing in the analogy the grounded particularities of Indigenous sovereignty, land, and presence in calls for decolonization that often mean everyone except Indigenous peoples. As Goeman cautions, "settler colonialism becomes the analytic, and Indigenous futurities are not part of the practice."[89] *Indigenomicon* concludes by considering more closely how Indigenous futurities, as practice, often disrupt and challenge the procedural recursivity of territorial acquisition as the mechanic for advancement within settler structures of dispossession by reveling in dystopic collapse. In theorizing "the image of the law of the Indigenous," the book grinds on questions of ground and relationality, how they serve as both authority and legitimation within settler structures of play and imagination, and how they function differently in Indigenous philosophies as accountability and reciprocity. Close reading HBO's *Westworld* alongside work by Elissa Washuta, Joshua Whitehead, and Tanya Tagaq, my conclusion ruminates on the challenge Afropessimism has posed to Indigenous studies in tension

with Indigenous "shitty futures" to consider impossible and queer Indigenous pessimisms as a horizon of the negation of Indigenous negation.

In their current form as globally circulated, technologically built products of procedures, algorithms, code, and mechanics, video games routinely reenact and re-inscribe structures of Indigenous dispossession as the condition of their play. As such, they provide crucial insights into how those structures function and persist within the realms of imagination that are intended to offer escape from the grinds of the everyday. Throughout the pages to come, I offer possible ways to study video games and their settler colonial structures of dispossession without, hopefully, losing Indigenous philosophies of grounded relationalities that provide alternatives for being and belonging on and to the lands and waters that live with us. In doing so, I hope that readers will find in this book the possibilities that queer Indigenous feminisms might offer: the joy of critique, the beauty of relation, and the possibility of play on grounds that are not magic circles of recursion but instead spiraled pathways to stars beyond the constellations that settlement, genocide, and slavery have only ever offered as tawdry shadows of true freedom, belonging, and connection. I ground us here to begin in the hopes we survive the future to come.

Notes

PREFACE

1. Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, writes "Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant" (3).
2. I use "settler death drive" here as theorized by Audra Simpson in "The State Is a Man."
3. For more on the use of scalping to discuss Claudine Gay's resignation as president of Harvard over plagiarism charges, see Confessore, "How a Proxy Fight"; Harvard Charter of 1650.
4. Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 79, 101.

INTRODUCTION. PLAYING STORIES

1. Clavin, "When Black Holes Collide."
2. Wikipedia, "Category: Disambiguation pages."
3. Wikipedia, "Chicksasaw (disambiguation)."
4. For settler militarism, see Nebolon, *Settler Militarism*, 6 as well as Jodi Kim's discussion of militarist settler imperialism in *Settler Garrison*, 16–23.
5. Galloway, *Gaming*, 2.
6. Galloway, "Playing the Code."
7. Coulthard and Simpson, "Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity," 254.
8. Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 2.
9. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxv; Davies, "Introduction: Re-grounding," xi.
10. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 387.
11. Goeman, *Mark My Words*, 30; see also, Dietrich, "Introduction," 19–26.
12. For example, see Hu, *Prehistory of the Cloud*, as well as Duarte, *Network Sovereignty*; Murray, *On Video Games*; and many discussions of "the magic circle" in game design and criticism.
13. Goeman, "Disrupting a Settler-Colonial Grammar," 236.
14. Petascale here refers to the massive computation power of the supercomputer. According to the National Center for Supercomputing Applications website, Blue Waters was capable of "processing more than 13 quadrillion calculations per second" and had more than 1.5 petabytes of memory. See https://www.ncsa.illinois.edu/research/project-highlights /blue-waters/ for more.

15. Kauanui, "Decolonial Self-Determination."

16. Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, 4.

17. These words have now become part of video game studies, but for foundational texts see, for instance, Galloway, *Gaming*; Bogost, *Unit Operations*; Csikzentmihayli, *Flow*; and Aarseth, *Cybertext*.

18. Blow, quoted in "Digital Bards," 51.

19. Jagoda and Malkowski, "Introduction" 4, 6.

20. Jagoda and Malkowski, "Introduction," 6.

21. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

22. Juul, "Games Telling Stories."

23. Juul, "Games Telling Stories.

24. Ebert, "Videogames Can Never Be Art."

25. See, for example, Lévi-Strauss's discussion in "The Logic of Totemic Classifications," in *The Savage Mind*, 35–74.

26. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 388.

27. Wolfe, *Traces of History*, 34.

28. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 388.

29. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 4.

30. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 15.

31. Chun, "Crisis, Crisis, Crisis," 92.

32. Chun, "Crisis, Crisis, Crisis," 99.

33. Walker, "Stories in Games Aren't Problems."

34. Nakamura, "Afterword," 246; Murray, "Vicissitudes of Representation," 5–9.

35. Leroux, *Distorted Descent*, 1. Leroux credits anthropologist Circe Sturm's scholarship as part of the inspiration for his use of "shifting" to describe how settlers assert Indian identity in his book (19–20). In February 2025, Sturm's claims to be Mississippi Choctaw descendent were publicly contested. Sturm has posted a letter from Tribal Alliance Against Frauds (TAAF) and her response on her faculty website at the University of Texas at Austin: https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/anthropology/faculty/sturmcd.

36. Harrer et al., "Surviving Whiteness in Games."

37. This book is not about identity fraud in video game studies. Documenting, verifying, and addressing self-representation as Indigenous requires time, space, knowledge, and effort, and it means sometimes not getting to cite or engage work marketed or presented as Indigenous. It is an issue that deeply affects Indigenous feminisms and Indigenous queer, trans, and Two-Spirit conversations as well as video game studies. For instance, genealogies done on Elizabeth LaPensée and her mother, Grace Dillon, suggest they have no Anishinaabe or Métis ancestry (these two identity markers are quite broad and require the identification of communities within them both). For details, see the thread on Grace Dillon at *New Age Frauds* at http://www.newagefraud.org/smf/index.php?topic=5593.0. Grace Dillon is credited with coining the term "Indigenous futurisms" in conversation with Afrofuturism. Elizabeth LaPensée is extensively cited in the field of video game studies, and her games include *Thunderbird Strike* (2017) and *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), among others. Ashlee Bird has identified as Western Abenaki originally from Champlain Valley without specifying one of the four Vermont state-recognized

tribes in doing so. Moreover, those four state-recognized tribes' claims to Abenaki identity are rejected by the Odanak and Wolinak Abenaki First Nations in Canada as identity fraud. For more information about the issues involved in the legitimacy of "Western Abenaki" in Vermont, see the Unsettling Vermont website at https://unsettlingvermont .com, as well as Vermont Public Radio's *Brave Little State* podcast series "Recognized" (Reed, Crane, and Poux). Finally, game designer Meagan Byrne has identified as Swampy Cree/Newfoundlander, as well as Métis of Ontario. For instance, see Byrne's bio on the "About Us" page for Indigenous Routes, last updated October 14, 2012 at http://www .indigenousroutes.ca/about-us. Most recently, she identified as either Métis of Ontario or Métis Nation of Ontario, a federally recognized tribe in Canada challenged by many First Nations. See Forester, "Manitoba Métis Leaders Warn MPS" as well National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition (NIMAC)'s Instagram post featuring an artist profile for Byrne on May 15, 2023 at https://www.instagram.com/indigenous_media_art/p/CsP4r9uxfC6/?img _index=1. Indigenous identity is vexed and involves colonial structures of political, racial, and cultural recognition that are anti-Black and anti-Indigenous, and therefore mistakes can be made about who is or is not Indigenous. Hopefully, as more people understand how to parse claims to Indigeneity, there will be an accounting for how and why certain scholars, designers, singer-songwriters, artists, and writers circulate and get awards while others do not. I have, to the best of my ability, tried to cite and engage Indigenous game designers and scholars in this book.

38. On Andrea Smith, see Viren, "Native Scholar Who Wasn't." On Elizabeth Hoover, see her "Letter of Apology and Accountability." On Buffy Sainte-Marie, see Leo, Woloshyn, and Guerriioro, "Who is the Real Buffy Sainte-Marie." On "Qwo-Li" Driskill, see Jaquiss, "Students, Faculty and a Watchdog." On Sturm, see note 35 above.

39. Simpson, "Indigenous Identity Theft Must Stop."

40. Wilson, "*Čá··hu*—Is Anyone There?"

41. Longboat, "*Terra Nova*," 13.

42. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 234–41; Howe, "Keep Your Thoughts Above the Trees," 168–69.

43. Howe, "Keep Your Thoughts Above the Trees," 164–67.

44. Howe, "Keep Your Thoughts Above the Trees," 162.

45. Scimeca, "Why *Never Alone* Is So Much More Than a Video Game."

46. Gaertner, "How Should I Play These?"

47. Cariou, "Performance, (Kin)aesthetic Memory, and Oral Traditions in *Never Alone*."

48. Meloche, "Sovereign Games."

49. Peckham, "*Never Alone* Is a Harrowing Journey."

50. In this book, I will use terms in reference to video games that are hopefully known to those who play games. For nonplayers: *side-scrollers* refer to 2D, side-view games that follow the player's avatar as they run left or right across the screen to the next; *platformers* are games that often involve jumping to platforms to collect objects and navigate a level. Words like *soulslike*, *roguelike*, and *metroidvania* refer to the kind of gameplay a game offers by citing formative games such as *Demon's Souls*, *Rogue* (a 1980s permadeath dungeon crawler), and *Metroid Prime*/*Castlevania* (two games that require item powerups to reach areas inaccessible earlier in the map/level), which inspired others. I will also use game title–specific

terms throughout. For instance, *Super Mario Bros.*, in this paragraph, is a generic source in the industry, in that the game has become a cultural force in which piranha pipe plants and angry brown mushroom enemies named Goomba serve as touchstones for generations of players and designers alike. Finally, against any logic of acronym and/or grading system, *AAA*, or *Triple-A*, refers to blockbuster games designed by major game studios such as Sony, Nintendo, and Ubisoft rather than smaller independent titles that are referred to as "indies."

51. Freeden interview in "Scrimshaw," one of the twenty-four Cultural Insights unlocked in *Never Alone*.

52. Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 21.

53. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 86.

54. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 87.

55. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 89.

56. Juba, "*Never Alone*: Left Out in the Cold."

57. Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock."

58. Underwood, "Terra Nullius."

59. Fuller and Jenkins, "Nintendo® and New World Travel Writing," 57, 58.

60. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 73.

61. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 29

62. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 29.

63. Infante, "Colonial Metaphor," 65.

64. Infante, "Colonial Metaphor," 74.

65. Infante, "Colonial Metaphor," 75.

66. Barker, "For Whom Sovereignty Matters," 17.

67. Barker, *Red Scare*, 131.

68. Infante, "Colonial Metaphor," 78.

69. Jackson, "Are We Settlers or Are We Natives?"

70. *Norco* made games-of-the-year lists for *Polygon* and *The New Yorker*, among others. See Mahardy and Polygon Staff, "The 50 Best Video Games of 2022" and Parkin, "The Best Video Games of 2022."

71. *Slow death* here is a reference to Berlant's theorizations of it in *Cruel Optimism* and in "Slow Death."

72. Norcogame.com, "Norco Game Resources."

73. Voyles, *Wastelanding*, 10.

74. Glustrom, dir., "Mossville."

75. Norcogame.com, "Norco Game Resources."

76. Lerner, *Diamond*, 9.

77. Lerner, *Diamond*, 15–16.

78. Geography of Robots, *Norco*.

79. Lerner, *Diamond*, 13.

80. Jackson, "Are We Settlers or Are We Natives?"

81. There are perhaps many reasons that extend from Joanne Barker's observations in *Red Scare* that Indigenous identity theft serves the rationality of the settler state to absolve itself of history and make any claim to Indigeneity itself fraudulent as it "slips between its absolution and the state's rationale for oppression" (71). Video games depend on

visual art, graphics, sound, and music, and though they are not named explicitly, they are potentially included under Section 309.22 of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (P.L. 101–644) that protects American Indian artists and prevents fraud in the marketing and selling of Indian produced arts or crafts as "computer generated art, graphic art, video art work, glasswork, and art forms to be developed in the future." Such protection would, however, depend on whether video games count as art, which is still debated, even though the US Supreme Court acknowledged they hold protected speech rights as a form of media in *Brown et al. v. Entertainment Merchants Assn.*, 564 U.S. 786 (2011). Academia is another site with no or limited oversight and no prohibition against self-indigenization claims or family stories of Indian identity that are not shared by the Indigenous communities and nations claimed.

82. Keeling, *Queer Times*, 35–36.

83. Murray, *On Video Games*, 152–68.

84. Murray, *On Video Games*, 180.

85. *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831).

86. Karuka, et al., "On Colonial Unknowing."

87. Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xv; see also Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.,* and Crogan, *Gameplay Mode* for additional theorization of games within the US military industrial complex.

88. For Jackson, Conversion is "the religious-ontological function of the Columbian-era discoveries. As a religious imperative, Conversion fulfills an extractive or devaluing economic function, making Indigenous lands valuable *over* Indigenous bodies, while Indigenous actions are devalued as spiritual *labours*" (*Beyond Constraint*, xv).

89. Goeman, "Land Introduction," 35.

CHAPTER 1. WHAT REMAINS

1. Lovecraft, "History of the *Necronomicon* (An Outline)," 813.

2. Butts, *H. P. Lovecraft*, 10; Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

3. Lovecraft, "Horror at Red Hook"; Lovecraft, "Shadow of Innsmouth," 601, 602, 603.

4. Lovecraft and Bishop, "Mound"; Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

5. Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 5–6.

6. Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 278–79.

7. In his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play," Derrida discusses Claude Levi-Strauss's influence on structural anthropology through readings of Levi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, *The Savage Mind*, *The Raw and the Cooked*, as well as *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. Ferdinand de Saussure's influential discussion of signifier and signified can be found in *Course in General Linguistics*. Mauss's *The Gift*, for instance, "studies" Tlingit and Haida in Alaska, and Tsimshian and Kwakiutl in British Columbia, as well as Pacific Peoples to theorize the power and economy of gift exchange. He also discusses "mana" as part of the analysis of "gift," as "not only magical power of the person but also his honour" (36). His structuralist account of "mana" is one of a number of influences on how video games normalize "mana" as the ubiquitous blue bar of expendable power in any game with a magic system. I discuss "mana" further in chapter 4.

8. Goeman, *Settler Aesthetics*, 4.