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Thunderbird Strike: Survivance in/of an Indie Indigenous Game

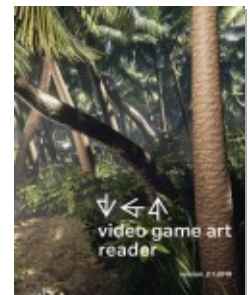
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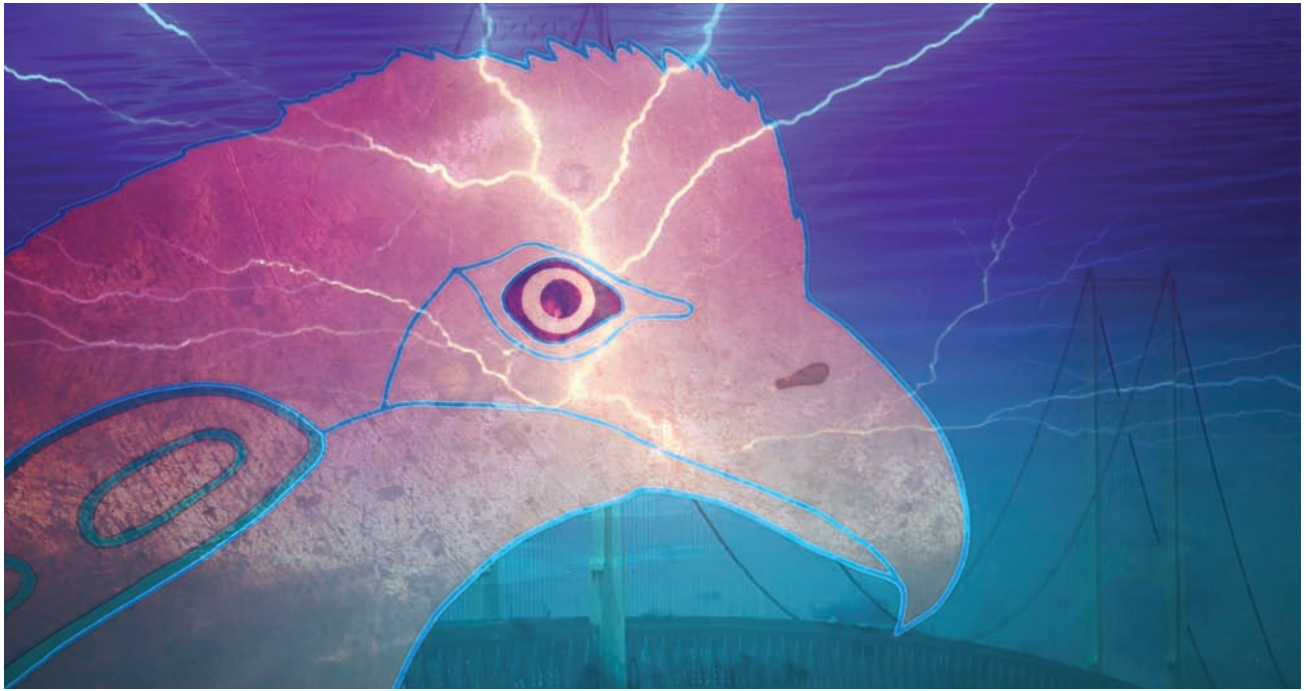


Figure 1. *Thunderbird Strike*, 2017. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.

Thunderbird Strike: Survivance in/of an Indie Indigenous Game

Elizabeth LaPensée

*Assistant Professor of Media & Information and Writing, Rhetoric & American Cultures,
Michigan State University*

Abstract

Thunderbird Strike, a 2D side-scroller developed by Elizabeth LaPensée, allows a player fly from the Tar Sands to the Great Lakes as a thunderbird protecting Turtle Island with searing lightning against the snake that threatens to swallow the lands and waters whole. The game encouraged players to learn about the indigenous culture, reflect on water protection and alternative energy sources, and gain

awareness of risks posed by oil pipeline construction for the conveyance of tar sands.

Thunderbird Strike was developed through residencies including O k'inādās Residency, The Banff Musicians in Residence Program, and Territ-Aur(i)al Imprints Exchange thanks to the 2016 Artist Fellowship grant from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council.

INTRODUCTION

Games—with their unique layering of design, code, art, writing, and audio—can be acts of survivance when developed from Indigenous perspectives for the purpose of Indigenous expression. An act of survivance is a form of self-determination. Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Robert Vizenor defines survivance as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.”¹ Survivance goes beyond survival—specifically, the survival of Indigenous peoples in the face of colonization, victimization, and attempted dominance by settlers—it is about nourishing Indigenous ways of knowing.

The two-dimensional mobile game *Thunderbird Strike* (2017) is one such act of survivance. It adapts Anishinaabe stories about thunderbirds into gameplay, and it unexpectedly became the inspiration for legal discussions regarding freedom of expression in games and games as art. The story of its design, development, and reception is one of survivance, meaning that it expresses an active Native presence, both in aesthetic and legal ways.²

Aesthetically, *Thunderbird Strike* uniquely brings Anishinaabe Woodlands-style art to stop-motion animations and side-scroller game design (fig. 1). The levels represent the lands and waters of Turtle Island (North America) in the midst of the continuation and expansion of pipelines that intrude on Indigenous territories. The gameplay reflects the hope that lands, waters, and all life on the island thrive, despite damage by oil operations.

The game’s very existence is also an act of survivance in legal terms, since oil lobbyists and an affiliated government official attempted to shut the game down with accusations that it encourages “eco-terrorism.”³ As the artist and designer, I along with the game endured a media smear campaign that involved Fox News, online harassment, and an audit on an arts fellowship I received.⁴ In the midst of proving that I honored the conditions of the fellowship, the game was also used to propose a new bill to control artistic expression.⁵

Despite this extreme reaction, people who actually played the game—in contrast to government representatives who admitted they had not played it—had positive interpretations.⁶ Players of *Thunderbird Strike* have described the game as humorous, and called it “cute” or even “adorable.”⁷ In three levels—made of around 80 unique backgrounds with hand-drawn sprites textured using modified photos of lands, waters, copper, birch bark, mining equipment, and oil—the player guides a thunderbird, a figure recognized by many nations. *Thunderbird Strike* uniquely comes from Anishinaabeg and Michif thunderbird stories. Jim LeBlanc, an Anishinaabe elder from Bay Mills Indian Community in Michigan, tells a version of the story in which the Crane Clan is foundational to the restoration of balance. All birds come from thunderbirds, who once walked among us. They return as the lands and waters are split and poisoned by hands that are always reaching, now removing layers of Aki (Earth) that are vital to wellbeing. As ongoing toxicity and environmental changes become more troubling, Crane Clan people lead by listening and bringing together communities around their shared concerns.

MOTIVATION

The world is imbalanced. I grew up with the worldview from my mother that we are already living in a post-apocalyptic world.⁸ For Anishinaabeg, the world as we knew it has already ended due to the onslaught of colonization. With that perspective, the question is not “when will the world end?” but “what can we learn from before and what can we do now and for future generations?” Tłchᑭ musician and artist NÀHGA, a.k.a. Casey Koyczan, created the music, sound effects, and voice-overs for *Thunderbird Strike*, and he experiences the impact from mining toxins buried in the Northwest Territories day to day. He was motivated to collaborate on the game because he also cares deeply about informing people of Indigenous perspectives on resource extraction.

Through *Thunderbird Strike*, I am doing my

best to pass on stories from my communities, animating the vital symbolism of thunderbirds in a new medium, as well as imagining an Indigenous-determined future. There are many versions of these stories from many nations. Since I am settler-Irish, Anishinaabeg from Sugar Island in Baawaating with relations from Bay Mills Indian Community as well as Métis, *Thunderbird Strike* reflects primarily Anishinaabeg and Michif voices.

“Thunderbird Woman,” brought into form by Anishinaabe artist Isaac Murdoch, makes an appearance in a game cutscene (fig. 2). I appreciate how Murdoch recognizes Thunderbird Woman as her own autonomous figure who is meant to be shared with as many people in as many ways as possible. His perspective as an artist parallels the way I approach games—I strive to make my work as accessible as possible, which means releasing it for free. Thunderbird Woman is iter-

Figure 2. *Thunderbird Strike*, “Thunderbird Woman,” adapted from Isaac Murdoch, 2016. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.





Figure 3. *Thunderbird Strike*, "No Pipelines on Indigenous Land," adapted from Dylan Miner, 2016. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.



Figure 4. *Thunderbird Strike*, "Snake Boss," 2016. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.

ated in the game as an homage to her presence in art prints, posters, banners, community art, jewelry, and clothing. She also quite literally walks among us as a life-sized hand-held figure during gatherings regarding issues with pipelines, including the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at Standing Rock Indian Reservation, Line 3 which stretches across lands in Saskatchewan and Minnesota, and Line 5 in the Straits of Mackinac in Michigan, all of which put balance at risk.⁹

Notably, the only text in the game other than the title and instructions comes from Michif artist Dylan Miner's "No Pipelines on Indigenous Land" print, which has been used in screen printing gatherings for posters, banners, and shirts (fig. 3). He came to this representation through offering asemaa (tobacco), a teaching I also follow. I integrated his representation into *Thunderbird Strike*, which inspired the way the boss battle is depicted as a pipeline snake in the final level (fig. 4). Importantly, Michif artist Christi Belcourt cautions us to remember that snakes are not unilaterally representations of evil. There are snakes that help us, just as there is a snake that threatens to swallow the lands and waters whole. All life can be honored, and all greed must be recognized, reiterating the value of balance, which carries through *Thunderbird Strike's* mechanics.

GAMEPLAY

In *Thunderbird Strike*, the player takes on the responsibilities of the Crane Clan people by actively guiding the thunderbird player character from the Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada to the Straits of Mackinac in Michigan. The game scrolls in the opposite direction of conventional side-scrollers—moving from right to left, instead of left to right, in recognition of Anishinaabeg worldview, which looks at the Great Lakes to the South, and therefore envisions the journey from the Tar Sands to Line 5 as West to East (fig. 5).

The player can strike lightning to revive animals and activate people for Restoration points, and/or dissipate oil infrastructure for Destruction points. The meaning of the game is for the player to determine, since the gameplay weighs Restoration and Destruction the same for a total high score and does not actually require striking anything to reach the credits. The mechanics are based on balance, rather than the good vs. evil dynamic seen in most games. The design reflects what I hope for the lands, waters, and all connected life—balance.

In recognition of balance, in the first level players can choose to focus on the revival and survival of animals by striking lightning at the bones of caribou, buffalo, and wolves to reanimate them (fig. 6). Caribou reference the threat of extinction to animals in the Boreal Forest due

Figure 5. *Thunderbird Strike* Level Map, 2017. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.

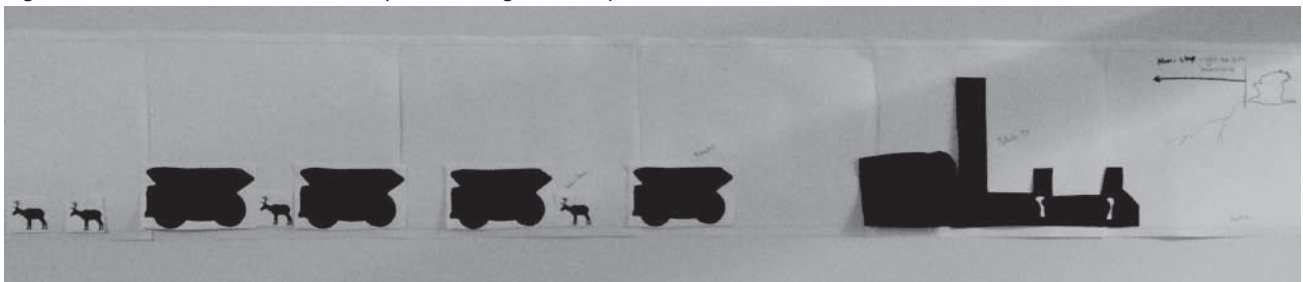




Figure 6. *Thunderbird Strike* Level 1, 2016. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.

to the toxicity of the Tar Sands operations in Alberta, while wolves represent the loss of animals due to fading natural food sources, and buffalo signify the ongoing impact of colonization on Indigenous ways of life that were disrupted by the greed of overhunting during the fur trade era.¹⁰ Players can also collide with caribou in the background, who become lightning and contribute neutral points towards the total high score.

Similarly, in the second level, players can activate people who stand among pipelines and equipment used to haul and place pipelines in the ground (fig. 7). The figures are made from the silhouettes of community members in Nkwejong (“Where the Rivers Meet” or “where one body of water flows into the next”) in Michigan,

an Anishinaabeg trading territory also known as Lansing, where I am now living. Their activation contributes to Restoration points, while gathering up protectors walking with “No Pipelines on Indigenous Land” posters in the background add to neutral points. Notably, there are many opportunities for balance in the gameplay.

IMPACT

Poignantly, media attention sparked by an oil lobbyist (and later a senator in Minnesota) chose only to depict lightning striking at oil infrastructure and completely overlooked the overarching gameplay. Initially, the oil lobbyist called for the complete deletion of *Thunderbird Strike* with accusations that the gameplay trains



Figure 7. *Thunderbird Strike* Level 2, 2016. Image courtesy of Elizabeth LaPensée.

“eco-terrorists,” a serious allegation referring to criminal violence against people or property for environmentalist ends.¹¹ The press release also publicized misinformation that the game was developed at the Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab at Michigan State University, even though it was created independently and only involved my own equipment. The intention of drawing such a connection was to threaten my position at Michigan State University as well as shut down the game. I was barraged by media and oil infrastructure supporters looking for legal implications behind the motivation of developing *Thunderbird Strike*, about which I was very clear: I am Anishinaabekwe, an artist and a mother raising my children with hope for the

next generations.

When a social media outcry declared the attack as a threat to freedom of speech in games, a Minnesota senator was alerted by the oil lobbyist, because *Thunderbird Strike* was funded by an artist fellowship from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council. A series of meetings with government officials ensued, along with an audit of the artist fellowship. The Arts Council was in support of my work and pointed out that I completed the work as detailed in the proposal. With letters of support as well as paperwork, I showed that I substantially completed the game before moving from Minnesota to Michigan for a position at Michigan State University (residency in Minnesota was a proviso of the fellowship)

and proved how the game related to Minnesota, since Line 3 is included, and the textures came from Anishinaabeg lands and waters in and around Fond du Lac reservation. I had delayed the release of the game so that it would premiere at the imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival in October 2017, just as I said I would in the fellowship application. In fact, *Thunderbird Strike* went on to be awarded Best Digital Media Work, an unanticipated and quite meaningful honor.

Despite being in the process of proving myself, the accusations by oil lobbyists and the senator were aired on national news, includ-

ing claims that *Thunderbird Strike* incites and even trains eco-terrorists.¹² In the midst of all of this, I was hit with threatening emails, attempts to break into my online accounts, and strange phone calls from hidden numbers at odd hours. Thankfully, I had support from colleagues aware of cybersecurity strategies and took steps to ensure my safety. Survivance is a stance that moves us beyond victimhood into denouncing the dominance of a colonial system responsible for the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples.¹³ Since then, contributors to this system continue to attempt measures to control free-

Figure 8. Elizabeth LaPensée, *Nokomis Tends the Lands with Waters in Hand*, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.



dom of expression in art, specifically referencing *Thunderbird Strike* as the catalyst. The latest attempt is a proposed bill that would implement a civil penalty for any artist who receives government-generated grant funding if their work is deemed to encourage “domestic terrorism.”¹⁴ The artist could be charged a fine of up to ten times the amount of their award. A bill such as this could silence artists whose works relate to similar themes as *Thunderbird Strike*. However, such a bill could also encourage work to be supported through independent means, which in turn could further emphasize sovereignty in game development, leading to more self-determined games.

FUTURE WORK

Despite the pushback and struggles, I continue to act from a position of sovereignty, as exemplified by Anishinaabe elder Carol Nadjiwon at Batchewana First Nation in Baawaating. She frames reservation operating structures as sovereign, meaning self-determined in power, both in terms of leadership and more recently and more literally, in regards to energy power. Her community diversifies its energy sources with both wind turbines and solar panels, as well as participates in testing water cleaning devices that use sound technology. This hope for the present and the future is reflected in *Thunderbird Strike* and compendium art (fig. 7) that will continue on with hope for generating discussion around the wellbeing of lands, waters, and all connected life. To this end, next steps for *Thunderbird Strike* include festival circulation as well as gallery exhibitions of the game, paired with art that depicts alternative energy sources and draws attention to Indigenous perspectives

on pipelines. Regardless of attempts to silence *Thunderbird Strike*, the game continues on, with hope for the future. ➔

Bio

Elizabeth LaPensée, Ph.D. is an award-winning designer, writer, artist, and researcher who creates and studies Indigenous-led media such as games and comics. She is Anishinaabe from Baawaating with relations at Bay Mills Indian Community and Métis named for Elizabeth Morris. She is Assistant Professor of Media & Information and Writing, Rhetoric & American Cultures at Michigan State University and a 2018 Guggenheim Foundation Fellow.

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