

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Creating a Playable Academic Edition of Mourning Dove's Cogewea or How Games can Decolonize

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Digital games have the tools and capacity to build interactive worlds that can both share knowledge and decolonize. Even though games have been accused of reinforcing white supremacist systems that tend to privilege profit over humanity, digital games by Indigenous and Indigenist artists and scholars provide evidence that games have the tools to facilitate decolonization. Along these lines, this paper is an exploration of how digital games can help to decolonize and reframe how Indigenous literature is read in the postsecondary classroom, specifically academic editions of Indigenous literatures.

**Keywords:** Decolonize; digital games; Indigenous literature; game development; Indigenous knowledge

## Introduction

I have been a gamer since the early eighties when I was introduced to *Zork*, a text-based game where players travel through an underground world solving puzzles. It is embarrassing to admit how often I died from lighting a match in a dark room with a gas leak, but learning through failure is one of the benefits of gaming. Video games, explains game developer Jane McGonigal (2011), give players skills that they take into the real world to solve actual problems. *Zork* taught me to read carefully and critically, think through problems logically, and persevere. Admittedly, there are games that should not have been developed in the first place, such as Ubisoft's shameful *Call of Juarez* series (in which, for example, players are asked to embody confederate soldiers and shoot fugitive slaves). Despite games that reinforce stereotypes and further white supremacy, such as Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption* series, digital games of all kinds are being used to alleviate the symptoms of Alzheimer's, teach about mental illness and addiction, and even work to decolonize.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous game developers, such as Métis scholar and developer Elizabeth LaPensée, have tapped into the potential of games to create actual change by revisioning the world through Indigenous perspectives. Along these lines, this paper is an exploration of how digital games can help to decolonize and reframe how Indigenous literatures are read in postsecondary classrooms, specifically academic editions of Indigenous literatures.

Because I cannot discuss all Indigenous literatures within the scope of this paper, nor should I as an uninvited settler-colonist visitor on Lkwungen land, this experiment in remediating Indigenous texts has been limited to those that are overtly cross-cultural. Mourning Dove's 1927 western *Cogewea* is the work that my team of research assistants and I have begun to remediate as a text-based game in order to explore how gaming paradigms can change and/or challenge ideologically-motivated reading habits. Mourning Dove's novel is cross-cultural, inviting Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers to reimagine the western as an inclusive space of Indigenous empowerment. I have often taught *Cogewea* in the classroom, and I owe a debt of gratitude to two Indigenous students, Kara Kennedy, an Anishinaabekwe with Haundenosaunee roots, and Sarah Werner, of French, Mi'kmaw, and German heritage (2010), who expressed dismay over how the novel is discussed in the introduction by Dexter Fisher (1981) and in the explanatory notes by *Cogewea's*

<sup>1</sup> See MIT's Gamelab to view their long list of serious games. Serious games are those designed specifically to solve problems and educate.

editor, Lucullus McWhorter (1927). I realized that their understanding of the novel via their Indigenous worldviews was much different than my own; as a result, I have spent the last eight years thinking through how to revise *Cogewea* so that Mourning Dove's Syilx Okanagan voice can be heard clearly.

One of the reasons *Cogewea* is such an important classroom text is the work that the novel performs to decolonize the modern western. Western American literary scholar Christine Bold (2012) describes the western formula as comprising the following components: the fictionalizing of historic events to benefit the ruling classes; the laconic white cowboy, who is an 'untutored natural gentleman'; white triumphalism; and the oppression of women, immigrants and people of colour (327). In addition, the western is a tool of colonization, representing Indigenous cultures as past, dying, savage, or irrelevant (Humphreys 2010; Lamont 2005). Mourning Dove counters this representation by reconfiguring the western to be a multi-racial, cross-cultural space of respect and community. *Cogewea* aligns with Maori educational theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) definition of decolonization: to demystify, re-center, and rewrite to re-right the place of Indigenous peoples in history, culture, and politics (28). However, while Mourning Dove's novel enacts Smith's definition of decolonization, the current edition includes editorial interventions that stifle and even silence the Syilx Okanagan knowledge that structures the novel. The postsecondary classroom is also a cross-cultural space, where a playable edition of this novel can help students and teachers to work toward the goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to decolonize education.

I argue that our experiments with remediating *Cogewea* as a text-based game could be applied to many different types of texts where cultural appropriation, marginalization, and textual silencing are at issue. However, whether gaming is suitable to all texts is highly debatable. As LaPensée (2016) explains, when she develops a game she asks herself:

How could I follow storytelling protocol to honour stories that are only to be told when snow is on the ground if they were reimagined in games that can be accessed in any season? Is it even right to make an Indigenous character that non-Indigenous people can then embody? How do I truly represent Indigenous ways of knowing in gameplay when using game engines that aren't coded from an Indigenous worldview? (79)

Questions like this continue to trouble and inform our remediation of *Cogewea* from print novel to playable academic edition. LaPensée (2016) offers more insight for those working in Indigenous or Indigenist game development:

Games, which are made of varying levels of code, design, art, and audio, can provide spaces for expressing self-determination so long as, within the context of Indigenous art, they stand against colonial erasure...[and mark] the space of a returned and enduring presence. (180)

Taking this statement as our prime directive, we wanted to ensure that players learn to engage with *Cogewea* as a story that resists colonial erasure, empowers Indigenous identity, and grapples with colonization.

## Academic Editing and Publishing as Colonial Practice

The literary academic edition is inherently colonial. The conventional western norm of a single, authoritative manuscript produced by an academic editor (often a professor) does not reflect the overlapping, interconnected, textual, and oral nature of the Indigenous story. Western editing practices are grounded in certain epistemological premises and systems, which allow editors to make value judgments about texts. Editors, as a defined part of the book trade, are a fairly recent addition. In fact, even the publisher and printer as separate entities are a modern phenomenon. Up until the eighteenth century, the publisher, printer, and editor were one entity (Lane 1976, 30). This separation of the book trade into distinct industries with workers acquiring specialized roles and responsibilities was part and parcel of the Enlightenment, which valued scientific, objective thought above communal systems. This model of publishing and editing positions editors as 'shapers of culture' and publishers as 'gatekeepers of culture'; in other words, publishing practices are more exclusionary than inclusive (Lane 1976, 31). Historian Adrian Johns (2013) explains that the history of the book and its production is really about the how conceptions of (and even production of) modernity are based on the 'supremacy of print' and its conventions (394).

One of the conventions that Johns alludes to in his wide-ranging article on the history of the book and its relationship to scientific knowledge is the paratext. Academic editions comprise the original content by an author and the paratext, which often explains the content to an academic reader. We are taught to

privilege the editor's voice—we are told to look to the footnote or endnote to give us direction as readers, which means an edition's paratext can operate as a mechanism of social and state control. Before I am accused of spreading conspiracy theories, I am not saying that publishers and academics collude to enact nefarious plans, but they *are* part of the systemic violence that Indigenous peoples face daily. As Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice makes clear, 'many stories about Indigenous peoples are toxic' and further the mythology that Indigenous culture and knowledge are deficient (2). Most, if not all, books by and about Indigenous texts are structurally forced into a militaristic form of communication that does not suit Indigenous ways of writing, being, and understanding.

Let us take academic explanatory notes as examples of this colonial toxicity. Anthony Grafton's (1997) extensive and entertaining study of the footnote describes the content of a text as meant to persuade and notes to prove (15). That is, notes are meant to direct the reader to other sources, bolstering the writer's argument. But Grafton also states that notes are much more complex and militaristic. They create a second story for the reader to follow, often revealing 'weak points' in an argument or, as in literary works, '[they try] to fix the text's message unequivocally for posterity' (33). Betsy Hilbert (1989) describes notes as fulfilling a number of purposes, including 'castigating, elucidating, crowing, and praising' (400). The note gives the editor the opportunity to say one more word, explains Hilbert, but what's missing from both Hilbert and Grafton's accounts is a sense that the reader is included, regarded, or considered. Indeed, the history of the note (foot or end) illustrates the fundamental problem with academic editions: they are not for the reader but for the editor to solidify their career, talk back to other scholarly arguments, and generally be solipsistic. Hans Gabler (2010) argues that the strengthening of the scholarly editor's agency has weakened reader-directed interpretation. For example, in the need for scholarly production to increase in the academy, scholarly editions have moved from being compilations to intellectual endeavours, on par with academic monographs. An edited scholarly edition is an intellectual accomplishment of mediation and interpretation, but where is the reader? Who is doing the interpreting? What if an editor is not versed in Indigenous storytelling protocols and practices?

Editing as a western cultural, economic, and epistemological practice is grounded in systemic discrimination and colonization. Anishinaabek editor, publisher, and writer Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (2016) shares the perspective of Métis writer and Canada Research Chair Warren Cariou, who explains:

There is a long and unfortunate history of Aboriginal stories being appropriated, expurgated, and distorted in colonial culture, and these abuses have often occurred under the guise of 'editing.' It is very important for editors to be aware of that history and work very hard to ensure that their editing practices do not (consciously or unconsciously) continue to create such distortions. (31)

Both Damm and Cariou's concerns were proven true by the fairly recent (2017) resignation of *Write* magazine's editor, Hal Niedzviecki, whose story should act as a clear example that western editing and publishing is a colonial practice.

Niedzviecki edited the manuscripts of several Indigenous authors as part of a special issue of *Write*; in his introduction, he argued that there is no such thing as cultural appropriation: it is a writer's prerogative to represent and articulate the voice of any culture or people. Subsequently, a number of prominent journalists, including Jonathan McKay, former editor of *The Walrus*, and Steve Ladurantaye, formerly managing editor of CBC's *The National*, publicly denounced Niedzviecki's firing, attacking those who opposed Niedzviecki's point of view, which included many of the authors whose work he edited.<sup>2</sup> This shameful incident sheds a great deal of light on how systemic racism and colonialism continue to operate in subtle (and not so subtle) ways to control and even erase Indigenous writing.

The Niedzviecki scandal is not an isolated case. Indigenous authors are often framed and, in turn, silenced by colonial discourse. Note how anthropologist Jay Miller describes Mourning Dove as an author in his introduction to her autobiography:

[Mourning Dove] led two lives—a public one as Mourning Dove and a private one as a woman struggling to make ends meet. Her public life as a writer is all the more astounding because her formal education was scant, her command of Standard English was faulty, and her companions sometimes unsupportive. (xi)

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ctvnews.ca/entertainment/managing-editor-of-cbc-s-the-national-reassigned-after-cultural-appropriation-tweet-1.3418170>.

The University of Nebraska Press (UNP) offers the following description of Mourning Dove in their online promotional blurb for *Cogewea*:

One of the first known novels by a Native American woman, *Cogewea* (1927) is the story of a half-blood girl caught between the worlds of Anglo ranchers and full-blood reservation Indians; between the craven and false-hearted easterner Alfred Densmore and James LaGrinder, a half-blood cowboy and the best rider on the Flathead; between book learning and the folk wisdom of her full-blood grandmother. The book combines authentic Indian lore with the circumstance and dialogue of a popular romance; in its language, it shows a self-taught writer attempting to come to terms with the rift between formal written style and the comfortable rhythms and slang of familiar speech.

The above biographies cast Mourning Dove as an anomaly. Her career as a writer is 'astounding,' because she was not fully educated in the settler colonist school system. UNP engages a discourse of authenticity and even the language of western individualism by noting that she was a 'self-taught' writer. Contrast these representations with Syilx Okanagan scholar, activist, author and Canada Research Chair Jeanette Armstrong's overview of Mourning Dove as a writer and storyteller:

Mourning Dove's knowledge of the use of captik<sup>w</sup> [oral stories, but this is a poor translation] is more than evident in the novel *Cogewea: The Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range*, in terms of its success to show the Indian viewpoint...Drawing masterfully on captik<sup>w</sup>, in the novel, Dove allows access to a layering of the levels of meaning revealing the tensions and impacts of colonization on the Syilx Okanagan people and on their land during that time of deep cultural transition. (195)

The contrast between Armstrong's description of Mourning Dove and the colonial framing of her as a long-suffering, undereducated Indian author is striking. This collision between worldviews is asymmetrical in that Miller's mass-published book (still in circulation) and UNP's online, promotional excerpt have more reach than Armstrong's dissertation. A playable edition of *Cogewea* provides a vital intervention into the problematic understanding of Mourning Dove that has largely been put into circulation by an outdated (yet popular) edition, and counters western editing practices that can and have misrepresented Indigenous identity and knowledge.

Because *Cogewea* has been reproduced by editors not versed in Indigenous editing practices, Mourning Dove's narrative is stifled. A playable edition of *Cogewea* will illuminate the continuity and connectedness in the novel, both of which are integral to Indigenous philosophy, and, therefore, communities. The chapters (or stories) that populate the game need to be formatted, designed, and edited in such a way that they connect back to Mourning Dove's Syilx Okanagan community and also a mass readership. By connecting this text with Mourning Dove's community, this novel can be realigned within Indigenous taxonomies and taken out of western forms of academic and mass textual consumption. *Cogewea* needs to be shared as a gift, which means readers have a responsibility to the text ('The Project,' n.d.). This responsibility can be learned through both a print and an interactive digital edition that follow Indigenous editing practices and protocols. The philosophies of continuity and connectedness that are integral to Indigenous editing practices are also necessary to Indigenous cyberspace as well.

## Indigenous Cyberspace and Decolonizing the Text

Cree Métis literary scholar Deanna Reder and literary scholar Linda Morra (2016) make clear that 'it is still not uncommon for students, from first year to graduate school, and even for university faculty and staff' to have limited knowledge of Indigenous histories, literatures, and social contexts (439). The digital humanities (DH) field has the tools and the capacity to build interactive worlds that can both share knowledge and decolonize. Even though DH has been accused of reinforcing neoliberal systems that privilege profit over humanity, DH projects by, for example, settler scholar David Gaertner and LaPensée provide evidence that DH can re-story and rewrite to re-right (Findlay 2000, 309). Indigenous and indigenist cyberspace can open up new ways of communicating the language of the land and the presence of Indigenous peoples,' explains Gaertner (2016), '[opening] up productive and challenging spaces to further investigate key principles in Critical Indigenous Studies and provide students with interactive ways to engage with Indigenous knowledges and methodologies' (494). Academic editing would seem to be particularly resistant to such approaches, defining the editor as 'preparing a text for publication' or 'acting as a liaison between author and publisher' (Greetham 1994, 348). This entrenched relationship between editor, text, and publisher, which

tends to exclude community and even readers, needs to be redefined to better serve Indigenous authors, editors, texts, and communities. As a way to rethink the role of the academic editor and the production of the academic edition, a central question we asked prior to remediating *Cogewea* was how a scholarly edition might become an interactive structure, inviting the reader to participate.

Further, in the case of *Cogewea* and other texts by authors whose cultures have been oppressed and knowledge systems devalued, how can the paratext empower, rather than overlay western norms and values? How do we create a space in which the cultural integrity of the text is maintained? Perhaps print texts have become too conventionally embedded within western publishing paradigms. Can a non-expert reader of Indigenous texts move beyond their habits to view print texts within culturally-specific norms? In other words, if Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* is published with foot or endnotes, an introduction, and so forth, can her novel be interpreted as anything other than a formal academic edition, bearing all of the (colonial) expectations readers bring to such a genre?

A playable edition can, perhaps, address these questions. Such an edition must incorporate Indigenous editing practices as well as digital gaming paradigms to create an interactive text that actively engages the reader.<sup>3</sup> To give credit where credit is due, our inspiration for this project comes directly from Sonja Sapach, Jon Saklofske, and the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Modelling and Prototyping Team's 'Gaming the Edition' text model, which challenges the private practice of scholarly editing. Through this project, the Team asks questions about how to create a rigorous open access model that is somewhat akin to the Wikipedia model of editing, but, once a reader edits the text, they 'level up' and continue on their reading and editing journey.

While the digital game edition of *Cogewea* will not engage open access editing in this form, gaming an edition can create spaces of learning, participation, and interconnectivity previously restricted in print text editions that only those with exclusive knowledge could access and understand the form and content of. To put it another way, when Johns (2016) writes about the 'supremacy' of print and western print cultural praxis, he is (perhaps unwittingly) pointing out that the fetishizing of print devalues other ways and means of sharing knowledge. Digital paradigms offer a means to realize active, energized textual engagement between reader and text, overlapping and blending Indigenous orature, community, and kinetic vitality in a digital textual space.

My team and I have chosen to use Twine as our platform. The director of Diversity and Inclusion for Riot Games, Soha Kareem (2015), describes Twine as a tool for reimagining and redefining modes of storytelling; it can help to give voice to lesser-heard voices. The digital scholarly edition of *Cogewea* follows a tradition of interactive fiction to engage the user, not simply through reading, but by teaching the user *how* to read in order to proceed (Montfort 2005, 3). This aspect of interactive fiction is crucial to our remediation of *Cogewea*. As mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for postsecondary students, staff, and teachers to lack knowledge of Indigenous histories and knowledge. Interactive fiction, therefore, offers users, or 'interactors,' new ways to engage with the text. Nick Montfort (2005) explains that interactive fiction teaches 'by offering a new way of seeing' (4). Our goal is to use interactive fiction to create an Indigenist way to read a scholarly edition of an Indigenous text. I would like to share the principles that guide our game development, which flow from the concept of Indigenous cyberspace.

Indigenous cyberspace existed before cyberspace was thought of as a technology. If cyberspace is where constellations of data interact, are networked, and shared, then cyberspace is inherently Indigenous (Loft 2014). What Steven Loft (2014) means by this definition is that 2.0 and even 3.0 technologies are ways of thinking and being that Indigenous peoples have always understood. Loft explains that Indigenous peoples 'have always mapped our environments. From the routes that crisscross the vast expanses of Turtle Island, to our stories, rituals, and ceremonies, to our various sign technologies [such as wampum], these conceptual maps have provided a direct link between past, present, and future' (178). The section of Loft's (2014) essay that speaks clearly to this project is the concept of a 'networked Indigenous exceptionalism' that incorporates a 'multiplicity of voices and philosophies as well as artistic practices into an expanded and expanding information structure' (178). My team and I see *Cogewea* as constrained by its print environment. The Twine platform provides the tools to imagine *Cogewea* as a social knowledge space that centers Mourning Dove's Syilx Okanagan knowledge and understanding.

Positioning *Cogewea* in Indigenous cyberspace unlocks the novel from its binding in western traditions of writing, editing, and publishing.<sup>4</sup> In Indigenized cyberspace, the cosmologies that shape the novel can be expressed in an integrated and interconnected way. Indigenous cosmology, explains Loft (2014),

<sup>3</sup> See Younging, Greg. 2018. *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*. Edmonton: Brush Education.

<sup>4</sup> The beta version of the game version of *Cogewea* can be accessed as a pinned Tweet on my Twitter profile @smhumphreys.



incorporates and integrates 'Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, histories, traditions, ritual, ceremony, spiritual practices, and stories in ways of thought, of being, and artistic and intellectual practice' (182). Indigenized cyberspace facilitates expressing Indigenous cosmology.

Performance artist, new media artist, filmmaker, writer, curator and educator Archer Pechawis of Cree and European ancestry states that grafting Indigenous protocols onto existing methodologies will not do; rather, Indigenism as the central protocol is the goal. But the question becomes, particularly for a settler scholar: What does it mean to create an Indigenist media ecology or to ensure that Indigenism is the central protocol?

Where Loft is optimistic about cyberspace possibilities, Métis Cree film director and activist Loretta Todd, in her groundbreaking mid-nineties article, wonders if western capitalism will co-opt cyberspace—we, of course, see this happening with the attacks on net neutrality and lack of access to a speedy and reliable connection for rural and northern communities, where a great many Indigenous people live. Actually, my recent experience creating a page on Wikipedia about *Cogewea* proves Todd's point. I came under continual fire while trying to write the page, and some of the comments by Wikipedia editors showed a lack of respect for other forms of knowledge, despite Wikipedia's claim to disseminate all knowledges. When Wikipedia says that they represent 'the world,' they largely mean one world, one worldview.

But Todd also notes that cyberspace offers a way to express the connection between mind and body, between the material and immaterial, and interconnectedness as opposed to Cartesian ideas of duality and separation. Todd directly asks, 'can native worldviews—native life—find a place in cyberspace' (183)? She muses:

Although native worldviews cannot be easily typified, it is fair to recognize that they embody the desire for harmony, balance, and unity. Within this worldview, the individual is endowed with freedom to express and experience singular emotions and thoughts, which are then shared with the community through narrative, ceremony, and ritual... [h]ow do these concepts fit into cyberspace when cyberspace has been created within societies that view creation and the universe so differently—one that creates hierarchies of being that reinforce separation and alienation with one that seeks harmony and balance with the self and the universe? (183)

Her answer to this quandary offers another path for us to follow as we remediate *Cogewea*. First, it is not about making cyberspace more inhabitable for white folk; rather, finding a way to indigenize cyberspace is about ensuring it does not become yet another colonial space, hungry for consuming all and caring nothing for what it appropriates and consumes. As we worked to build a playable edition, I gathered the principles for creating Indigenous cyberspace and the projects that inhabit such spaces. They are as follows, from the work quoted above by Loft, Todd, and Gaertner, as well as from scholarship by Métis social scientist Mike Patterson (2010):

- Actions have consequences—not everything and anything can be uploaded and shared. There are limits to knowledge. Cyberspace is not limitless and utopic. Those who use this space must be responsible to the communities they represent; therefore, Indigenous philosophies must be central to cyberspace that claims to be Indigenized.
- Indigenous ontology and epistemology expressed ideals of cyberspace before cyberspace was thought of as a technology (e.g., interconnectedness; storing data via sign systems; updating and collating; multi-layered, multimedia communication systems).
- Cyberspace can return the oral, interactive elements of storytelling to story. The user is as important as the story.
- Indigenized cyberspace makes connections; it is a social space where knowledge is shared and is virtual but not disconnected from material reality. It is a space where the user is not immersed but connected. There is no loss of body and soul but a reinvigoration through shared humanity.

By contrast, western cyberspace values escape—for example, by promoting one's success or attacking others to bolster an ideological position. These ways of behaving online are antithetical to Indigenous cyberspace. As well, traditions of western narrative are transported into cyberspace and game stories, in which heroes conquer and assert their will over others. Our hope is that we have created an Indigenized cyberspace where the user is given the responsibility of the story—like a gift rather than an object to be taken. The traditions and knowledge that inform *Cogewea* are central rather than obfuscated through the editor's voice and the paratext. The above four principles have helped myself and researchers associated with the project to ensure that our interactors, or players, 'privilege Indigenous and local place-based knowledge... [and] value

such knowledge as a sophisticated system rather than viewing it as a parochial limitation' (Yunkaporta and McGinty 2009, 58). In other words, we hope that this playable edition will teach players to value, revalue, and celebrate Indigenous histories and knowledge while also shedding light on *Cogewea* as more than a fraught text with an imposing white editor, and as a powerful example of a cross-cultural text that rewrites to re-right.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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