



“OUR STORIES ABOUT EXTRACTION”: A BRIEF INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE

ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE AND JORDAN B. KINDER

Thunderbird Strike (2017) is a multiplatform, two-dimensional sidescrolling video game created by Anishinaabe, Métis, and settler-Irish media theorist and artist Elizabeth LaPensée in collaboration with Adrian Cheater and Aubrey Jane Scott (programming), NÀHGÀ a.k.a. Casey Koyczan (music and sound effects), and Kaitlin Rose Lenhard (cut scene editing). The video game sees players take control of a thunderbird, a traditional figure in Indigenous storytelling, to harness thunderous electrical energy that can be used to sabotage fossil fuel infrastructure and construction equipment as well as revive skeletal animals and reanimate dormant humans. It weaves together Anishinaabe stories and narratives with a game mechanic that gives points to players who participate in the destruction of fossil fuel infrastructures while also rejuvenating animals and humans affected by extractivism. *Thunderbird Strike* can be downloaded for PC/Mac OS, iPhone OS, or Android on its homepage: www.thunderbirdstrike.com.

In July 2019, Jordan B. Kinder and LaPensée had a brief conversation through email centred on the inspiration for *Thunderbird Strike*, its reception, and its possibilities as a pedagogical medium. It is included as the closing contribution to this special issue of *MediaTropes* in an effort to spark further discussions about the role that media, especially experiential media such as video games, can play in resisting the dominant, intersectional relations of petroculture and settler colonialism.

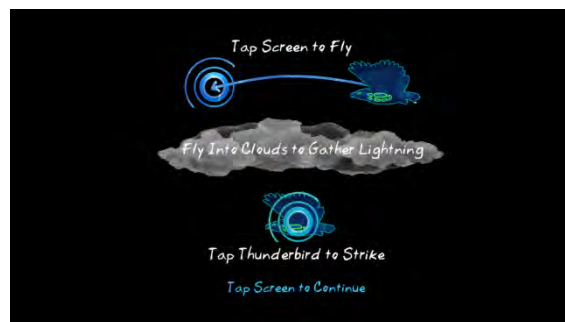
* * *

Jordan B. Kinder: *Thunderbird Strike* was released in 2017, a time when Indigenous-led resistance to fossil fuel infrastructure in North America was frequently making international headlines, particularly in relation to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in the United States. The game itself references

specific places—the Tar Sands, the Prairies, and the Great Lakes—as well as specific infrastructures, but I was hoping you could elaborate a bit more on what inspired you to focus on these specific places and how, as a result, your game is situated very much in this tradition of resistance, a tradition Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson understands as “radical resurgence.”¹ In other words, what events and contexts inspired you to create the game and where do you situate the game itself as a form of cultural production in relation to broader Indigenous-led movements against extractivism?



Opening Screen of *Thunderbird Strike*



Thunderbird Strike's Instructions Screen

Elizabeth LaPensée: I grew up with the worldview that we are already living in a post-apocalypse. When that's the perspective, it's not about “when will the world end?” but “what can we learn from before and what can we do now and for future generations?” My grandparents talk about how they miss being able

¹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

to put their hands in the water in the Straits of Mackinac and drink it, knowing it to be clean, while my mother grew up needing to avoid the water because of the impact of oil spills from the pipeline running under the bridge. This is only one story of many. NÀHGA a.k.a. Casey Koyczan—a Tlicho Dene musician and artist who created the music, sound effects, and voiceovers for *Thunderbird Strike*—experiences and sees issues from mining and toxins buried in the Northwest Territories. There are many similar experiences due to the impact of oil industry on lands and waters all the way from the Great Lakes to the Prairies to the Tar Sands. The seed for *Thunderbird Strike* was planted when I had just finished my dissertation and began looking for work. My hope was to be in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario to return to Baawaating where my mother is from and find a position at Algoma University in their game development program. Before pursuing a Ph.D., I ran game development workshops for Anishinaabe youth through what was at that time Algoma U, connected with their game incubator, and visited at the Anishinaabe institution Shingwauk Kinoomaage Gamig. I was so excited about the possibility of being in a place where Anishinaabemowin was spoken actively while being able to make and teach about games. However, by the time I graduated and reconnected, the game incubator had partnered with company sponsors to develop games that encouraged resource extraction. I asked myself then, “If a game told *our* stories about extraction instead, what would it look like?” The idea of sharing thunderbird stories through gameplay continued to stay with me and I went ahead and developed the game following insights and approval [from Elders and community members].



Screenshot from Tar Sands Level

JBK: In some ways, then, *Thunderbird Strike* can be seen as a response to the use of gaming as a means to further normalize extractivism. Can you describe the kinds of games that were developed by the game incubator to encourage

extraction? Were they abstract or literal? In other words, what were the stories being offered through those games?



Screenshot from Tar Sands Level

EL: There was one game in particular that really wasn't about stories at all—it was a mining training game to educate people about extractive processes with the intention of priming them for mining related jobs. *Thunderbird Strike* instead offers gameplay from mainly Anishinaabeg perspectives.

JBK: *Thunderbird Strike* has generated some controversy and a lot of reporting focused on the characterization of the game as promoting “eco-terrorism,” specifically citing Minnesota Senator David Osmek’s remarks and the subsequent campaign to get the funding you received for the game investigated.² What has your experience been in the way that *Thunderbird Strike* has been characterized, and what is your view on that characterization? Did you expect backlash in this way? My own view is that it seems as though the dynamic of destruction gets overemphasized when the reality of the game mechanism is that sabotage serves as a means to halt expansion of fossil fuel infrastructures while undoing the historical damage of extractivism through the revival of people and animals. This latter dynamic seems to get less attention.

² Republicans, Minnesota Senate. “Sen. David Osmek: MN Taxpayers Should Not Be Funding Angry Birds for Eco-Terrorists.” Minnesota Senate Republicans (blog), October 26, 2017. <https://www.mnsenaterepublicans.com/sen-david-osmek-mn-taxpayers-not-funding-angry-birds-eco-terrorists/>.

EL: A spark was lit when an oil-supported news source covered the release of the game.³ It quickly ignited an oil lobbyist group [Energy Builders], which spurred itself into a press release calling for an end to the game,⁴ and which rallied a senator who yielded accusations that the game was training for eco-terrorists. The media fire spread just as wildly as it had started, ultimately leading to journalists covering various aspects of the game's development and reception, acting as fuel to the flames. Whether aimed at attacking, supporting, or claiming unbiased reporting, the mainstream press played a direct role in creating and continuing controversy around what was intended to be a community-released Indigenously-determined art game. When someone suggested that I "should have seen it coming," I had to laugh, because I really can't say that I expected to see a Senator on national news accusing me of fraud and promoting eco-terrorism. Even as prepared as I should have been given my prior experiences with media, I was still surprised at how venues neglected to focus on the art and mechanics of the game and only used certain screenshots and even cut around gameplay footage to erase the design. They certainly did not show that the player can earn "Restoration" points alongside "Destruction" points, which are equally weighted and result in the revival of animals and activation of people. Thankfully, game and technology media venues picked up the story and shared the truth of the game's origin and focus.

JBK: These points prompt me to think a bit more deeply about the question of circulation in relation to response and reception. Where has *Thunderbird Strike* been circulated (in the press, etc.) or exhibited and how, in your experience, have responses to the game been shaped by those circumstances, if at all?

EL: The response to *Thunderbird Strike* was heavily influenced by media sensationalism and countered, thankfully, when Indigenous game journalists and indie game journalists offered their take and deconstructed the attack that was occurring on both the game and me. Interestingly, the controversy around *Thunderbird Strike* was initiated by an oil lobbyist group [Energy Builders] at the same time the game was awarded Best Digital Media at ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, but neither were aware of one another.

³ Julianne Geiger, "New Video Game Targets Oil Infrastructure," *OilPrice.Com*, October 20, 2017, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Heres-Your-Chance-To-Blow-Up-An-Oil-Pipeline.html>.

⁴ Caleb Parke, "Eco-Terrorism? Anti-Pipeline Video Game under Fire for Putting Lives at Risk, Group Says," Fox News, October 26, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/eco-terrorism-anti-pipeline-video-game-under-fire-for-putting-lives-at-risk-group-says>.

Misinformation circulated and suddenly I was being attacked by a senator on FOX News.⁵ The story exploded from there. VICE Motherboard joined in to clarify, while several media sources got on record both the oil lobbyist and the senator admitting that they had never even played the game.⁶ Eventually the media firestorm faded, but not until I had to change my number and re-evaluate how I approach cybersecurity. Occasional articles pop up still attempting to defame me, as *Thunderbird Strike* continues to be used as an example. For instance, a bill has been proposed in Minnesota to fine any artist who uses arts funding with taxpayer dollars to represent “civil disobedience or domestic terrorism” (which of course they [the Minnesota House of Representatives] get to define).⁷

JBK: The articles that comprise the special issue are especially attentive to media form, addressing how oil is a medium in itself and one that is mediated in various ways. You’ve written that “done right, games have the potential to be self-determined spaces, where Indigenous people (meaning First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Native American, Maori, Aboriginal and similar communities) can express themselves on their own terms.”⁸ What do you think video games offer as a medium that other media might not? And what sorts of design choices did you make in *Thunderbird Strike* in terms of narrative, art, and game mechanics that activate this potential of self-determination?

EL: Games can offer dynamic self-expression by merging design, code, art, and sound. For example, language can be integrated in voiceovers as well as inspire mechanics, such as in the singing game *Honour Water*.⁹ In this game and others that I have worked on, the core mechanic is balance. *Thunderbird Strike* is a

⁵ Caleb Parke, “Eco-Terrorism? Anti-Pipeline Video Game under Fire for Putting Lives at Risk, Group Says,” *Fox News*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/eco-terrorism-anti-pipeline-video-game-under-fire-for-putting-lives-at-risk-group-says>.

⁶ Jacob Dubé, “Oil Lobbyists: Thunderbird Strike Video Game ‘Promotes Ecoterrorism,’” *Vice*, October 27, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xwawq3/oil-lobbyists-thunderbird-strike-videogame-promotes-ecoterrorism.

⁷ Melissa Turtinen, “Bill Approved to Prevent Legacy-Funded Art Projects from Promoting Domestic Terrorism, Criminal Activity - Session Daily - Minnesota House of Representatives,” Minnesota House of Representatives, March 19, 2018, <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/SessionDaily/Story/13126>.

⁸ Elizabeth LaPensée, “Video Games Encourage Indigenous Cultural Expression,” *The Conversation*, accessed December 28, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/video-games-encourage-indigenous-cultural-expression-74138/>.

⁹ Elizabeth LaPensée, *Honour Water*, 2016, <http://www.honourwater.com/>.

sidescrolling stop-motion animation game in which all the art was hand drawn and the textures come from photos I have taken of the lands and waters damaged by oil infrastructure as well as the equipment and structures themselves. The first two levels have approximately thirty-eight unique background images per level, expressing the impact of the oil industry on Indigenous lands and waters. The game moves opposite to the expected convention in sidescroller games—moving from right to left instead of left to right, which reflects the Anishinaabeg worldview that looks at the Great Lakes to the South, and sees the journey from the Tar Sands to Line 5 as West to East. Indigenous ways of knowing can inform everything from the development process (meaning how a game is made), to gameplay, to assets such as art and sound, all with the aim of self-determination.

JBK: I taught *Thunderbird Strike* in a first-year undergraduate research course on media, energy, and environment at the University of Alberta in winter 2019. I was prepared for students to feel uncomfortable taking the position of a saboteur, especially at an institution so heavily shaped by oil and natural gas, and for that unease to be the larger focus of our discussion. I was surprised to see that this wasn't the case. We instead had a genuine conversation about the relationship between settler colonialism and the development of fossil fuel infrastructures, as well as the complicated politics of sabotage. I think this is in large part due to the ways that the game weaves together traditional Indigenous stories as a premise for articulating the narrative of resistance at the game's core, as well as the paratextual information on the game's website that contextualizes these stories and provides space for reflection and action.¹⁰ Building on the last question, then, to what degree do you view video games as pedagogical media that open up space for addressing complex and often difficult conversations, such as those surrounding the damaging legacies of settler colonialism and extractivism?

EL: Thank you for sharing the game! Ideally, games offer safe spaces to play and will facilitate interactions with perspectives. This experiential quality of games is a springboard for further discussions. As game designer Brenda Romero articulates, the mechanic is the message.¹¹ In *Thunderbird Strike*, the

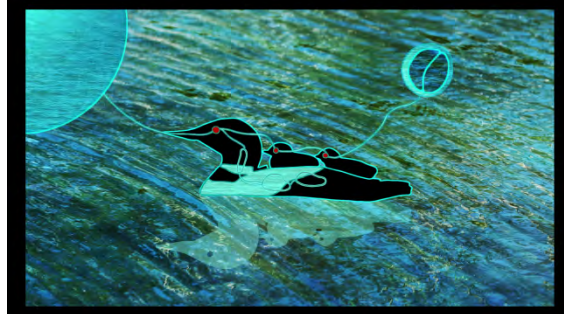
¹⁰ "Reflect — Thunderbird Strike," accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.thunderbirdstrike.com/stories/>; "Act — Thunderbird Strike," accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.thunderbirdstrike.com/action>.

¹¹ See Brenda Romero's "analog game series," *The Mechanic is the Message*: Brenda Romero, "Work," accessed February 1, 2020, <http://brenda.games/work-1>.

core mechanic emphasizes balance and the design reflects the inevitability that thunderbird stories convey. The thunderbird continues to fly with ongoing scrolling environments, regardless of the player's input. And, in fact, the snake boss in the final level will eventually deconstruct on its own and darken the water with oil if the player chooses only to watch and not fight. The levels in the game exist not in relation to us, the players, but rather in relation to the truth of stories.



Screenshot from closing cut scene



Screenshot from closing cut scene

Works Cited

- “Act — Thunderbird Strike,” accessed February 1, 2020.
<https://www.thunderbirdstrike.com/action>.
- Dubé, Jacob. “Oil Lobbyists: Thunderbird Strike Video Game ‘Promotes Ecoterrorism.’” *Vice*, October 27, 2017.
https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xwawq3/oil-lobbyists-thunderbird-strike-videogame-promotes-ecoterrorism.
- Energy Builders. “Michigan State Univ. Prof Uses School’s Taxpayer-Funded Lab to Create & Launch Video Game to Blow Up Pipelines and Block Energy Infrastructure.” Energy Builders press release, October 25, 2017.
<http://energybuilders.org/michigan-state-univ-prof-uses-schools-taxpayer-funded-lab-create-launch-video-game-blow-pipelines-block-energy-infrastructure/>.
- Geiger, Julianne. “New Video Game Targets Oil Infrastructure.” *OilPrice.Com*, October 20, 2017. <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Heres-Your-Chance-To-Blow-Up-An-Oil-Pipeline.html>.
- LaPensée, Elizabeth. *Honour Water*. 2016. <http://www.honourwater.com/>.
- . “Video Games Encourage Indigenous Cultural Expression.” *The Conversation*. Accessed December 28, 2019.
<http://theconversation.com/video-games-encourage-indigenous-cultural-expression-74138>.
- Parke, Caleb. “Eco-Terrorism? Anti-Pipeline Video Game under Fire for Putting Lives at Risk, Group Says.” *Fox News*, October 26, 2017.
<https://www.foxnews.com/us/eco-terrorism-anti-pipeline-video-game-under-fire-for-putting-lives-at-risk-group-says>.
- “Reflect — Thunderbird Strike,” accessed February 1, 2020,
<https://www.thunderbirdstrike.com/stories/>.
- Republicans, Minnesota Senate. “Sen. David Osmek: MN Taxpayers Should Not Be Funding Angry Birds for Eco-Terrorists.” Minnesota Senate Republicans (blog), October 26, 2017.
<https://www.mnsenaterepublicans.com/sen-david-osmek-mn-taxpayers-not-funding-angry-birds-eco-terrorists/>.

Romero, Brenda. "Work." Accessed February 1, 2020.

<http://brenda.games/work-1>.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Turtinen, Melissa. "Bill Approved to Prevent Legacy-Funded Art Projects from Promoting Domestic Terrorism, Criminal Activity - Session Daily - Minnesota House of Representatives." Minnesota House of Representatives, March 19, 2018, <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/SessionDaily/Story/13126>.