

Roll For Perception: Games as a Site of Decolonization and Social Change

By

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B.A, University of Victoria, 2023

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Geography

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək'wəŋən (Songhees and X^wsepsəm/
Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the
Lək'wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the
land continues to this day.

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Abstract

Both tabletop and video games have immense potential to create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change. They can be a highly engaging form of learning that allow players to deeply understand and connect with the games message or story, especially with complex and difficult subjects such as decolonization. They can create space and community for marginalized peoples (i.e. BIPOC, LGBTQ2+) and enable them to express themselves and tell their stories. This study explores how games created by or in collaboration with Indigenous and other marginalized peoples can challenge colonial values and binaries. Grounded in cultivation theory, which examines the lasting effects of media, the study draws upon semi-structured interviews with members of a local gaming community, the Galleon Gaming Society, as well as online game reviews and statements to explore the game-player relationship and how players interact within and around the game space. Looking at the role games play in decolonization efforts will help unravel colonial structures within today's games and make gaming a more inclusive and enriching experience.

Keywords: Decolonization, Gaming, Qualitative, Indigenous Futurisms, Game Space, Cultivation Theory, Education, Social Change

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Acknowledgments

None of this work would be possible without the love and support from my family, friends, mentors, cats, and partner. To my best friend and mother, for always answering my calls and steering me in the right direction. To my father, for always rooting for me whether it was sports, singing, or academics. To Jamie, for listening to my rants and always believing in me even when he didn't know what I was talking about. Thank you to Reuben for stepping in and coaching me to the finish line and to CindyAnn and Teresa for your support and guidance. Thank you to the Galleon Gaming Society for telling me your stories and game recommendations. To my dear friend Katrina, thank you for introducing me to *Coyote and Crow* and for your support and bravery these past few years. Thank you to all my *Dungeons and Dragons* friends for our epic quests and allowing me to play my ridiculous characters. To all my friends for making me laugh and being a support system I couldn't have done without. Finally, I would like to thank my brother, Collin, for letting me watch him play *Halo* and *FIFA* when we were kids, showing me which *Pokémon* to use in battle, and constantly beating me at *Mario Kart*.

Dedication

“All great stories start with a single step... or a single roll of the dice.”

- *Dungeons & Dragons Essentials Kit*

“No matter how small, all creatures can affect the flow of history.”

- *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual*

“Wahoo!”

- *Mario*

Nomenclature

BIPOC - Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour

C&C - Coyote and Crow

D&D - Dungeons and Dragons

LGBTQ2+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit

NPC - Non-Player Character

PC - Player Character

RPG - Roleplay Game

TTRPG - Tabletop Roleplay Game

Positionality Statement

I would like to recognize that I am not an Indigenous person, and I am a white settler exploring these topics. However, as a queer, fem-presenting person, colonial structures and values such as the gender binary and the patriarchy negatively affect myself and my community as well, and the important work that Indigenous game developers do in countering settler colonialism within games benefits all those oppressed by those structures. This research is very important to me not just because I value unique and compelling games but because I strongly believe that when games tell meaningful stories they can change the gaming industry for the better.

1. Level 1: An Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Study

The gaming industry is currently one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors in the global economy. According to recent projections, revenue generated by this industry is expected to reach approximately \$522.46 billion USD in 2025, with an estimated annual growth rate of 7.01% (Statista, 2025). The video game sector alone – including mobile, console, and PC gaming – generated around \$282.30 billion USD globally in 2024. Moreover, the global gaming population is projected to reach an estimated 3.1 billion people by 2027, nearly 40% of the world's population (Statista, 2023).

Along with the rise of video games, tabletop gaming has also experienced a notable resurgence, particularly during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to increased isolation, more people searched for accessible forms of social connection, and, as a result, board games and TTRPGs (tabletop roleplay games) such as *Dungeons & Dragons* have grown in popularity, contributing to a tabletop market valued at approximately \$12 billion USD in 2023 (Coe, 2017; Lindner, 2023; Peiser, 2022). These statistics underscore the growing appeal of physical forms of play that foster in-person collaboration and connection, often complementing rather than competing with digital play.

Games have the capacity to go beyond play and become cultural products with the capacity to influence how billions of people interact with not only the game's story and message but each other and the world around them. As will be discussed in later chapters, games are key sites of place-making, offering new avenues for education, resistance, and positive social change. This

makes the examination of their content and design not only timely but necessary, especially considering ongoing global conversations surrounding representation and decolonization.

1.2 Background

Humans have long learned through play, and both digital and physical games offer unique opportunities to engage players in meaningful learning experiences. Unlike more traditional forms of learning, games invite players to interact with content in ways that make them “a part of the experience rather than a passive observer” (Aritzon, 2023; Brathwaite & Sharp, 2010, p. 315; Schrier & Gibson, 2010; Swain, 2010). Brenda Romero (formerly Brenda Brathwaite) has notably demonstrated this potential through her “Mechanic is the Message” game series, which places players at the center of complex scenarios, such as slavery, forced migration, and genocide (brenda.games, 2019). These games are not designed for entertainment in the conventional sense, but rather as opportunities for education and critical reflection. They exemplify how game mechanics can be intentionally aligned with educational goals, leveraging play as a medium for deep understanding.

Building on this logic, we can explore how games can be mobilized to support decolonization efforts by unraveling colonial structures both within game narratives and across the broader gaming industry. Games, whether consciously or not, can convey cultural messages through design elements. When these messages go unexamined, they risk reinforcing dominant, harmful ideologies such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism (Barnes, 2021; Euteneuer, 2018; Trammell, 2022). Many contemporary games continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes of historically marginalized groups (i.e. BIPOC and LGBTQ2S+) through tokenized characters, one-dimensional narratives, and gameplay that centers conquest, domination, or exploitation (Brooks et al., 2021; Bullock, 2022; Hines, 2022, 2023; Lancaster,

2022; Smith and Thakore, 2023; Trammell, 2020). These representations are not without consequence. The depictions within games can leave lasting impressions on players, shaping their worldviews and reproducing harmful social attitudes in subtle but pervasive ways.

One example that will be discussed further in Chapter 2 is the widely popular board game, *Catan*, in which players take on the role of settlers vying for control over an uninhabited island. While the game does not overtly reference colonial violence or Indigenous displacement, its core mechanics and themes mirror settler-colonial values. Games like *Catan* reveal how colonial structures and ideologies can be embedded in game design in seemingly innocuous ways (Lee, 2017; Peterson, 2017; Thompson, 2024; Tschapka and Kang, 2014; Veracini, 2013).

Given this context, it is crucial to examine how games can both reinforce and resist colonial narratives. By placing players in scenarios that challenge rather than replicate dominant power structures, games have the potential to foster empathy and understanding with communities and experiences that are often marginalized or misrepresented. Understanding this dynamic can inform the development of more diverse and inclusive game design practices.

1.3 Research Problem

While there is a growing body of scholarship that critiques how games can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce colonial values, few studies examine how player perceptions of game design affect their experiences in everyday life through an explicitly geographic lens (Borit et al., 2018; Carpenter, 2021; Euteneuer, 2018; Martin, 2016; Mukherjee, 2016; Sedelmeier and Baum, 2022). Additionally, there is little research that explores how developers might consciously design games that challenge colonial narratives and actively work toward decolonizing the gaming experience. As noted above, the number of people engaging with both video and tabletop games has grown exponentially in recent years, and, with it, so has the

amount of time individuals spend immersed in these “game spaces” (Nitsche, 2008; Wei et al., 2011). These environments have moved beyond simple entertainment and are becoming significant social and cultural spaces that influence player identity, relationships, and ways of thinking (Fernandez-Vara, 2011).

From a human geography perspective, game spaces deserve critical attention as emerging lived spaces that are both shaped by and shape the people who inhabit them (Kriss, 2016). These spaces can be viewed as meaningful places of interaction and powerful avenues for education and social messaging. As previously stated, their interactive and immersive qualities make them particularly well-suited for conveying complex content in engaging and impactful ways.

Understanding player experience through the lens of geography will allow us to understand the educational potential of games and help developers to create more meaningful and inclusive gaming experiences. To address this knowledge gap, we must investigate how players interpret the stories and messages presented through game design and how their experiences influence their thinking and understanding of the world. By centering player perception, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how games can become effective and impactful in creating opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change.

1.4 Purpose of Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding of the gaming industry by examining how games influence not only player experiences, but broader ways of thinking and engaging with the world. Games are not simply entertainment, they are cultural products that reflect, reproduce, and sometimes challenge dominant social structures of play (Ducheneaut et al., 2004, 2007). This project considers the idea that games are powerful media for storytelling and education and seeks to analyze the ways in which they can be mobilized to create spaces of

resistance against colonial structures. Framed by this context, the main research question guiding this study is: *How can games, both video and tabletop, create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change?* By exploring this question, the project aims to identify how developers use games to tell a certain story or message, the ways in which those stories manifest through game design, and how players receive that message or story through gameplay. This project focuses on Indigenous designed and collaborated games; however, it illustrates the ways in which games from marginalized perspectives overall can be impactful. Ultimately, this study contributes to interdisciplinary conversations in game studies, human geography, and decolonial studies while offering insights for developers to harness games for meaningful and positive social impact by fostering empathy and inclusion through immersive gameplay.

1.5 Research Goal and Objectives

In alignment with its overarching purpose, the main goal of this thesis is to understand how player experiences and real-world attitudes are influenced by the values, worldviews, and intentions embedded and expressed through game design choices. In relation to this goal, we can further refine and expand the geographic concept of “game space” as a meaningful site of spatial production, representation, and contestation as well as enrich our understanding of the gaming industry, with particular attention to the role games can play in fostering decolonization, resistance, and alternative forms of knowledge production.

To achieve this goal, the present study pursues the following objectives: (1) to explore prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and discourses within the gaming industry, focusing in particular on insights from both developers and players, (2) to compare and contrast player experiences and desires by analyzing data collected through semi-structured participant interviews and online player reviews, (3) to employ geographical theories of space and place alongside

phenomenological approaches to perception, embodiment, and lived experience as guiding frameworks for data collection and interpretation, and (4) to propose concrete ways that game developers might integrate these findings into their design processes in order to foster more inclusive, critically engaged, and socially transformative games. In the following section, I turn to a discussion of the significance of this study and its potential implications for both the scholarship and the gaming industry.

1.6 Game Space and Player Experience: Integrating Media Studies with Geography

Media geographies have emerged as an increasingly prominent subfield within contemporary human geography, reflecting the growing recognition of the ways in which media technologies and forms permeate the fabric of everyday life, spaces, and social relations (Hilander, 2016; Leszczynski and Elwood, 2014; Leszczynski, 2014; Zimmermann, 2007). As various forms of media continue to shape how individuals interact with, navigate, and conceptualize both physical and virtual environments, the intersection of media studies and human geography has become an essential site of interdisciplinary inquiry. This convergence addresses not only the diffusion of media across spatial scales, but also how media practices are embedded within different geographies (Luger, 2024; Salovaara-Moring and Maunula, 2011).

Much media geography focuses on the spatial dimensions of media production, circulation, and consumption. Scholars in this field draw from theoretical and methodological tools of both geography and media studies to interrogate how media artifacts and infrastructures interact with spatial practices, territorial boundaries, and place-making processes (Adams, 2017; Finn and Palis, 2015; Rosati, 2007). This includes examining how media construct representations of space, how they mediate spatial experiences, and how media landscapes themselves are shaped by economic and sociopolitical forces.

Media geographers explore the ways in which various spaces are transformed by and through media technologies. From the geolocate dimensions of mobile apps to the spatial narratives embedded in video games and films, this subdiscipline investigates how media both reflect and actively produce spatial meaning (Frizzera, 2015; Hjorth, 2011; Hjorth and Richardson, 2017; Leorke, 2014). As such, media geography serves as a critical lens through which to understand the relationship between space and media, offering insights into broader questions about power and identity in an increasingly mediated world. Current debates within media geography and their connection to this project are further explored in Chapter 2.

This thesis follows many media geographers' approaches, integrating methods and scholarship from both media studies and human geography. In the context of this thesis, both video and tabletop games are considered a modern form of media as well as spaces in which many people have a meaningful and reciprocal relationships (Ash and Gallacher, 2011). This study utilizes methods based in the theoretical framework cultivation theory, which examines the lasting effects of media on consumers (Gerbner, 1998; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Potter, 2014; Shrum, 2017). Originally applied to the popularity of television in the 1950s, cultivation theory has been widely employed in a contemporary context when exploring modern media such as social media, YouTube, etc. (Greenlee, n.d.; Morgan et al., 2014; Nevzat, 2018; Shrum, 2017). This thesis demonstrates how cultivation theory has continued relevance for contemporary media in the contexts of games and the gaming industry by focusing on video and tabletop games and the effects they have on players.

Cultivation theory was deliberately selected as the guiding theoretical framework for this project in preference to other more recent theories and methodological approaches within the fields of media and communication studies. This choice was driven by the analytical structure

that cultivation theory offers, one that closely aligns with the central aims and focuses of this thesis. This theoretical selection provides a robust and systematic means of interrogating the multi-layered relationships between media producers, media content, and audience reception. Cultivation theory's approach, which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2, examines the institution producing a piece of media, the nature and structure of the media content itself, and the interpretive and perceptual responses of the audience. This process offers a comprehensive lens through which to explore the varied effects and experiences of gaming media.

Cultivation theory examines how exposure to certain narratives, symbols, and ideologies embedded within media can shape an individual's worldview. Applying this framework to the analysis of games, both digital and tabletop, enables a nuanced examination across multiple stages. At the institutional level, we can interrogate the intentions and values of the game developers and studios and how they inform the stories and mechanics embedded in their games. The content level allows for a close textual and aesthetic analysis of the game itself, including elements such as character design, narrative structure, visual aesthetics, dialogue, and worldbuilding. The final stage of analysis focuses on the players themselves and their engagement with the game, their interpretations of its content, and any potential shifts in perception or attitude resulting from gameplay. By following this framework, cultivation theory offers a cohesive and rigorous structure for tracing the flow of meaning from creation to reception. In tandem with theories from human geography, its application to this study enables a thorough interrogation of how games function not only as entertainment but also as cultural texts with the capacity to influence social thought and individual perception within and around the game space.

Approaches from Indigenous and digital geographies also proved invaluable in building the framework for the current thesis. This study concurs with and adds to the observations within Indigenous geographies that explore how Indigenous artists and storytellers appropriate technologies and modern spaces, such as games, to further agendas surrounding decolonization and resurgence (Fricke, 2019; Rivera, 2023; Senier, 2021). Additionally, certain methods from digital geographies explore online spaces and communities, digital gaming geographies, and new technologies and techniques for conducting research, all pertinent to this thesis (Ash et al., 2018; Blackman, 2019; Carter & Ngyuen, 2022; Duggan, 2024; Fraser, 2023; Liu, 2024; Winders, 2021). This study contributes to the scholarship of both Indigenous and digital geographies, exploring both in the context of the gaming world.

Cultivation theory examines the relationship between media and consumer, and human geography focuses on the multifaceted relationships between people, space, and place. This thesis approaches games, virtual and physical, as both a form of immersive, highly influential, media and socially constructed, lived spaces that players actively inhabit and navigate. Integrating theoretical insights from both disciplines is critical for a nuanced understanding of how games influence players' spatial imaginaries and understandings of the world.

1.7 Significance of Study

1.7.1 The Role of Games in Place-Making

Both virtual and physical game spaces are becoming increasingly integrated into many people's everyday lives. These gaming environments are not merely sites of leisure but complex social arenas. Within such spaces, meaningful interactions between players, the game world, and in-game systems can foster moments of understanding and empathy (Mills et al., 2024; Woods,

2021). However, these same spaces can reproduce societal inequities, becoming sites of hostility, discrimination, and exclusion, especially toward players from marginalized and underrepresented communities (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, 2019). This study seeks to further interrogate the dynamic relationship between players and game space, examining how they shape not only individual experiences but also broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion within gaming cultures. By closely analyzing the player-game space relationship, we can better understand the socio-cultural implications embedded in games. Such insights are essential for informing more equitable and intentional design practices, empowering developers to cultivate spaces that promote respectful and responsible play. Moreover, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to expose and disrupt exclusionary structures and practices within the gaming world (Cote and Mejeur, 2018; 2022).

1.7.2 The Responsibility of Game Developers

To some extent, it is the responsibility of game developers to be aware of the messages their games may portray to those who play them. Certain games, intentionally or not, can reinforce certain assumptions or perpetuate harmful stereotypes through various design choices (Brooks et al., 2021; Bullock, 2022; Hines, 2022, 2023; Lancaster, 2022; Smith and Thakore, 2023; Trammell, 2020). As illustrated in the earlier discussion of the game, *Catan*, design decisions that appear neutral may carry underlying implications that echo colonial logics or erase diverse perspectives (Lee, 2017; Peterson, 2017; Thompson, 2024; Tschapka and Kang, 2014; Veracini, 2013). In a world where games have become so pervasive in everyday life and serve as cultural touchstones for many, it becomes crucial to interrogate the broader impacts of these design choices. This study explores how the structure and content of games shape not only the player's relationships within game space but also their interpretations of the real world.

Developers are not merely building entertainment; they are constructing spaces that influence social understandings and perceptions (Ash and Gallacher, 2011). As such, game studios should engage in sustained critical reflection on the potential consequences of their creative choices, recognizing that their work can contribute to larger conversations about identity, power, and representation.

1.7.3 Diversity and Inclusivity in the Gaming World

Examining the role that games can play in decolonization and education efforts provides a critical opportunity to expose and unravel colonial structures embedded in game narratives and design practices. In doing so, we can reimagine gaming as a space that is more inclusive and representative of diverse worldviews and lived experiences. Much of human geography is concerned with the dynamics between people and space and how they impact and inform each other (Pile, 2010). By treating game spaces as legitimate sites of spatial production, we can understand how they act as varied environments that simulate or challenge real world geographies and societal structures. This research aims to contribute meaningfully to the growing body of literature in game and media studies, digital geographies, and Indigenous geographies (Albright, 2024; Brooks et al., 2021; Salloum et al., 2023; Willett, 2017; Woods, 2021).

1.8 Outline of Thesis

This thesis develops over six chapters, each building upon the last to establish the theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and analytical insights of the study. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents a review of the existing literature on the gaming industry, decolonization, and geographic conceptions of space and place within the context of gaming. In particular, the chapter explores how Indigenous creators utilize contemporary media – such as

film, visual art, and games – to create opportunities for decolonization, cultural resurgence, and resistance, drawing from the fields of Indigenous Geographies and Indigenous Futurisms. It also introduces Cultivation theory, a well-established framework in media studies, and argues for its integration with theories from Digital and Indigenous Geographies to better understand the potential of games as instruments of education and social change.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approaches of the study. It describes the research design, study area, and participant selection, along with the methods used for data collection and analysis. The chapter also addresses potential limitations of the research and offers suggestions for how these limitations might be mitigated in future studies. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, organized according to the top five thematic codes that emerged from the data. These codes are illustrated through selected quotes from three sources: participant interviews, online player reviews, and public statements from developers and game descriptions. This chapter also provides a critical interpretation of the results structured around five main themes. This chapter analyzes the data in relation to the theoretical framework introduced earlier and demonstrates how games shape player perceptions and experiences. Through this analysis, the research question is answered, offering insights into how games can create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change.

Lastly, Chapter 5 summarizes the key findings of the study and offers recommendations for academics, players, and game developers. It identifies avenues for future research, proposing ways that scholars can expand upon this work and continue exploring the role of games in fostering inclusive and diverse experiences. The chapter, and thus the thesis, ends with conclusions about the project, the gaming industry and experience as a whole, and the ways in

which it needs to change. It serves as a call to action to developers and players alike to make the gaming world accessible to all.

2. A Player's Guide to the Gaming Literature

2.1 Placing Games Within Geography

At first blush, it may seem as though games have no place within geography, yet games are as much a lived space as a virtual reality. Much of human geography explores the relationship between people and space, and how relationships form as people become connected to a space. For many human geographers, and in this thesis as well, space is considered as simply a location in which people exist (Campbell, 2018). Space transforms into a place through “acts of naming as well as through the distinctive activities and imaginings” that occur within them (Hubbard, 2005, p. 42). Similarly, games, both virtual and tabletop, have become frequently lived and experienced places wherein relationships and connections form and complex interactions occur. Players often grow attached to games and the environments created in and around them, developing the same kind of significance to a person as a childhood home or favorite place. Understanding the objects, practices, and spatial dynamics within these game spaces will allow us to better understand how they can create opportunities for decolonization and education. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the current literature and understanding surrounding game studies, Indigenous futurisms, digital geographies, storytelling and decolonization through games, and the gaming industry overall. I also dive into the theoretical frameworks that influence this work as a means of situating my own theoretical approach within the broader literature. Through this chapter, I hope to create space to rethink and challenge our ideas of space and place and provide context for the reader to better understand the research.

For the purposes of this thesis, game space refers to any space in which people play or interact with a game, no matter the type of game (i.e. video games, board games, card games,

trpgs, etc.). This includes both the physical spaces in which the games are played as well as the virtual, imagined, and metaphysical spaces within the games themselves. Scholars such as Cheok et al. (2002), Fernández-Vara (2011), Flynn (2004), Fraser (2024), and Isasken et al. (2018) explore the concept of games as an inhabited space and challenge traditional ideas of the ways in which space is experienced and conceptualized, bringing together game space and geography.

2.1.1 Games as Third Space

The theory of third space, as described by Edward Soja (2009), is framed around the idea that spatiality is constituted through a multitude of definitions and perspectives, especially regarding those spaces where interaction occurs between home and work. In a postcolonial context, third space often describes spaces of cultural hybridity and resistance, especially relevant in decolonization efforts and examining the complex identities it produces. Homi K. Bhabha (1994), a key figure in postcolonial thought, stated that identity and culture form in an in-between space, i.e., third space. Other scholars concur with Bhabha's argument, describing how third spaces disrupt colonial binaries and give agency to those marginalized by colonial systems, creating spaces of resistance and decolonization (Ikas and Wagner, 2009; Kalscheuer, 2009; Kim, 2023; Wagner, 2009; Samkin, 2022; Schulze-Engler, 2009; Soja, 2009).

In the context of this project, games can be understood as third spaces as they often function as hybrid cultural environments wherein players negotiate identity and power. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's concept of third space as a site of cultural hybridity and resistance, games can challenge dominant narratives. Game developers often blend elements from different cultures, sometimes inappropriately, but also in ways that can foster cross-cultural expressions. For example, the *Horizon* games by Guerrilla Games depict a pantheon of gods from

mythologies of various cultures including Greek, Egyptian, and biblical characters. In both video and tabletop games, players often assume roles and identities different than their own. In this context, game space provides an opportunity to examine implicit biases and stereotypes that the player may hold and engage critically with systems of power embedded in narrative and game mechanics. Third spaces are also spaces of resistance and, in this way, games can subvert dominant historical narratives or challenge colonial ideologies embedded in popular culture, offering counter-stories or decolonial modes of play (Ducheneaut et al., 2004, 2007). A decolonial game might reframe colonization not as heroic conquest but as trauma and survival (e.g., *When Rivers Were Trails*). Even fan modifications or reinterpretations of mainstream games can resist colonial tropes, such as Elisabeth LaPensée's 2015 game, *Invaders*, which takes an Indigenous spin on the classic arcade game, *Space Invaders*.

In online and multiplayer games, the interactions between players often involve cross-cultural negotiation and collaborative worldbuilding that can foster solidarity, community, and discourse (Steinkuehler 2005, 2006). In global games like *Minecraft* or *Fortnite*, players can reimagine shared digital spaces, building monuments, crafting identities, or asserting cultural pride in ways not originally intended by game designers.

Game design itself can be a third space as developers can imbue the game with their own cultural identities in design elements that allow players to interact with storylines that create opportunities for resistance and reassert cultural sovereignty through play (Albright, 2024; Salloum et al., 2023, p. 307). Designers working with Indigenous protocols or land-based knowledge (such as in *Coyote & Crow* or *When Rivers Were Trails*) are not merely using games to represent culture but are reclaiming and reshaping how knowledge is produced and shared.

Games are third spaces because they are liminal zones of cultural encounter, where dominant and marginalized worldviews collide. They can serve as environments for negotiation and resistance, where colonial narratives may be replicated but also rewritten, and where players and designers alike engage in decolonization and understanding through play (Wolf, 2000).

2.1.2 Relationship Between Player and Game Space

An under-researched topic within game studies, and one with particular significance for this thesis, is the relationship between players and game space. Golding (2013) offers a foundational spatial analysis that repositions the player as central to the theoretical frameworks of video games, arguing that player agency and presence within virtual spaces demand closer scrutiny. This spatial lens reveals how game environments are not merely backdrops but active agents in shaping player experience. Kriss (2016) investigates player perception and experience from a psychological standpoint, particularly in the context of therapeutic applications. Her research examines how games can be designed and employed as clinical tools capable of influencing players' mental states, emotional regulation, and self-perception. This engagement with game space introduces the idea that player interaction is not only spatially situated but also deeply embodied and personal.

Further expanding the scope, Kosciesza (2023) turns attention to the lived experiences of transgender and non-binary players, examining how these players navigate and resist the cis-heteronormative structures that are often embedded in game design and community norms. Kosciesza highlights the ways in which marginalized players appropriate and reinterpret game spaces, using them as a place for self-expression and identity formation. Her work emphasizes

how spatiality in games is not neutral but encoded with normative assumptions that can either enable or constrain player agency depending on one's positionality.

Both video and tabletop gaming communities are known for creating exclusionary environments rooted in various gender and racial biases that can affect a player's relationship with the game space. Cote and Mejeur (2018; 2022) analyze these dynamics, focusing on how harmful stereotypes and systemic inequities within gaming communities create environments that alienate certain players. Their research reveals that some gaming cultures can function as a gatekeeping mechanism, reinforcing dominant norms while rendering others invisible or unwelcome. In response, scholars such as Cote (2017) have gone a step further, developing coping strategies and publishing resources to support communities that face harassment and discrimination in gaming spaces.

Together, these studies express the need to understand the socio-spatial dynamics of play. Game spaces, both digital and physical, are structured environments that shape how players engage with themselves and others. These interactions are heavily influenced by players' identities which in turn affect their experiences within gaming cultures. By examining how different players navigate these spaces, researchers can explore how games reproduce or resist broader societal norms and power structures. This understanding is not only essential for developing more inclusive games and communities but also for recognizing the potential of games and game space as a pathway towards decolonization and resistance.

2.2 Current State of the Gaming Industry

The gaming industry is booming and there is much literature surrounding the growth of the industry, player motivation, and, from a more critical lens, its pitfalls. Scholars such as Cohendet

et al. (2018), Predescu and Mocanu (2020), and Rykała (2020) have conducted extensive studies of gaming growth from an industry perspective, examining factors such as distribution, infrastructure, and future growth and development. Others, such as Wainwright and Ho (2024), examine how the industry has creatively changed and developed over time, focusing on how past tabletop role-play games inform and shape contemporary game design.

One of the most recent reasons for this growth is the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars, journalists, and game developers alike all took notice of the sharp increase in both sales and the number of players as the world shut down due to the global virus. Read (2022) explains how millions of players splurged on new games, both video and tabletop, and consoles, stating that the games helped with both boredom, isolation, and mental health. Peiser (2022, para 10) also argues that the pandemic drove many to purchase card and tabletop games, especially as “families who found themselves forced to spend time together looked for ways to connect through games and puzzles.” Even after the pandemic restrictions lifted, this trend continued and game sales rose as many found community and social interaction through games. Similarly, Şener et al. (2021) examine “the social and psychological effects of games on people during the pandemic period,” observing a dramatic and significant “increase in the number of active players and users daily” (p. 1).

2.2.1 Player Motivations

Another well-researched aspect of the gaming industry is player motivation, exploring questions such as: Why do people play games? or why do gamers play certain genres? Scholars such as Hamari and Keronen (2017), Klug and Tilo (2012), and Sagsetter (2022) examine the psychological reasons behind player motivation (i.e. leisure, entertainment, social interaction,

escapism, etc.). As tabletop games have increased in popularity, so has subsequent research (see Kosa and Spronck 2019 and Coe 2017 on the motivations to play tabletop games).

2.2.2 Criticisms of the Industry

Perhaps the most heavily researched aspect of the gaming industry is its pitfalls. One of the most criticized facets of the industry is how certain identities are appropriated, misrepresented, or underrepresented. Various scholars have explored the ways in which the gaming industry perpetuates harmful stereotypes of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) communities (Brooks et al., 2021; Bullock, 2022; Hines, 2022, 2023; Lancaster, 2022; Smith and Thakore, 2023; Trammell, 2020). Scholars continue to consider questions of representation and diversity as researchers investigate the ways in which the LGBTQ2+ community is portrayed through games, or the lack thereof (Bullock, 2022; King and Douai, 2014; Lancaster, 2022; Utsch et al., 2017).

Among the critiques of the gaming industry, there is a widespread call for increased diversity and representation and that proper consultation and accountability during the creation of these games is paramount, particularly with respect to ensuring that Indigenous cultures and communities are respected in the design of games. I now explore some of the other ways in which Indigenous communities bring their own traditions and cultures into modern spaces, such as with gaming.

2.3 Indigenous Geographies and Futurisms

For the purposes of this thesis, I narrow the scope of Indigenous Futurisms to two main definitions: 1) the ways in which Indigenous peoples intertwine tradition and culture with

contemporary experiences and how those experiences inform the future of the political and socio-economic climate of society and 2) a movement where art, pop culture, literature, film, and the like, intersect with the lives, cultures, and traditions of Indigenous peoples and communities.

The concept of Indigenous Futurisms serves as an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to appropriate “modern” spaces for their own cultures, traditions, and agendas. This, in turn, provides opportunities for decolonization, resurgence, and reconciliation for individuals and communities in both the present and the future. It involves imagining a future beyond the current settler state (Fricke, 2019).

Much of the settler literature surrounding Indigenous communities today tends to “deny Indigenous presence and futures, reproducing settler myths of Indigeneity by linking Indigenous legitimacy and authenticity in the past” (Mauer, 2021, p. 613). Indigenous Futurisms work to move past this narrative and demonstrate the ways in which Indigeneity exists in the present and will exist in the future. They work towards a future beyond and in spite of the settler state and “offer pathways to presents and futures built on different principles from the world of colonial and neo-colonial violence” (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 9).

2.3.1 Indigenous Futurisms as an Artistic Movement

Taken together, Indigenous Futurisms form a politically informed artistic movement. Indigenous artists convey topics and themes of decolonization, resurgence, resilience, and reconciliation through different media and storytelling. Storytelling is an integral part of all aspects of Indigenous life. Cultures and traditions are told through stories, new generations learn through stories, and Indigenous artists tell stories through their work and often these works

“offer a place away from colonialism, or sometimes a place in which colonialism never occurred” (Fricke, 2019, p. 110)

2.3.2 Indigenous Pop Culture, Art, and Science Fiction

In recent years, there has been a wave of contemporary North American Indigenous artists whose works center around common themes of Indigenous Futurisms and science fiction (Baudemann, 2016). The goal of this work is to “envision a future from an Indigenous perspective” and offer new ways of reading historical narratives, cultural beliefs, and aesthetics (Fricke, 2019, p. 108). One such artist is Ryan Singer, who integrates elements and themes of popular science fiction culture, namely Star Wars, with Diné cultures and traditions. One of his pieces entitled, “Sand People, Sand Painting” (Figure 2.1), depicts Tusken Raiders from the “Star Wars” movie franchise inside a Navajo hogan, taking part in a traditional healing ceremony (Baudemann, 2016).



Figure 2.1: Diné artist Ryan Singer’s “Sand People, Sand Painting” depicts characters from the “Star Wars” movies inside a Navajo hogan, taking part in a traditional healing ceremony. (Ryan Singer, 2019)

Singer is not alone in this marriage of tradition and science fiction; other Indigenous artists such as Daniel McCoy, Topaz Jones, Marla Allison, and Debra Yepa-Pappan all fuse traditional art with technology and contemporary media, often in the context of Indigenous science fiction.

Many elements of Indigenous pop culture, including film and media, integrate aspects of science fiction and futurity with Indigenous culture and traditions. For instance, a popular Indigenous website called A Tribe Called Geek (ATCG) explores current news and events of Indigenous peoples and art, literature, and pop culture (<https://atribecalledgeek.com/>). The Ojibwe and Choctaw founder of ATCG, Johnnie Jae, helped coin and popularize the term “Indiginerdity,” which applies to all things under the umbrella of Indigenous pop culture and nerdiness. Science fiction is also a popular trope within Indigenous-designed games, such as the ttrpg, *Coyote and Crow*, which combines aspects of spirituality, science, and technology throughout their worldbuilding (Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2: Artwork from the game Coyote and Crow (2021). (Coyote and Crow, n.d.)

Indigenous filmmakers actively use their films to explore worlds beyond the settler colonial state and reimagine cultural representations on the silver screen (Crow, 2019; Dillon and

Marques, 2021; Henry 2022; Keene, 2018; Lempert 2014; Medak-Saltzman 2017; Nilges, 2023; Recollet, 2016; Topash-Caldwell, 2020). Much of this exploration occurs within the genre of science fiction, as it allows Indigenous filmmakers and viewers “to imagine new possibilities and solutions for a history . . . marred with fear, violence, institutional discrimination, and deep-seated ambivalence” (Lempert, 2014, p. 165; Medak-Saltzman, 2017). It is an opportunity to create the groundwork for a world in which Indigenous peoples are not only included but at the forefront. Many scholars focused on Indigenous science fiction in film believe that those watching them can see pathways towards an Indigenous future and that “representations of people of color in spaces and places where they are not expected to be – whether that is in film or the science lab – have material effects on the possibilities that young people envision for themselves” (James, 2016; Medak-Saltzman, 2017; Topash-Caldwell, 2020, p. 82).

Pop culture is an invaluable facet wherein Indigenous artists, filmmakers, game developers, etc., can “posit a future where... Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating allow us to re-imagine, re-create, and exist while also looking to the past and the present simultaneously” (Keene, 2018, para 7). Additionally, the representation within Indigenous films can help create a world in which Indigenous peoples are no longer frozen in the past or diminished to tired tropes, harmful stereotypes, and gross misrepresentations. As Jeanette C. Armstrong (Okanagan) explains, “the purpose is to tell a better story than the one being told about us” (James, 2016, p. 155). I now explore how this storytelling can occur through the medium of games.

2.3.3 Technology and Gaming

Finally, and most pertinent to this thesis, I explore how artists portray Indigenous Futurisms through technology and gaming. Instances of Indigenous appropriations of technology

and the internet are increasingly apparent, leading to a virtual territory wherein Indigenous peoples can speak and be heard as well as reconnect to their lands and each other (Rivera, 2023; Senier, 2021). An example of one of these technologies is a site called Cyberpowwow, which not only had virtual galleries and chat rooms, but people using the site were able to organize live gatherings (Senier, 2021). These virtual spaces are known as Native Digital Hubs and are increasingly helpful for Indigenous peoples “in diaspora to gather, exchange knowledge, and take that knowledge home again” (Senier, 2021, p. 416). These digital spaces present unique opportunities for education, resurgence, and language revitalization through Indigenous digital projects and the use of digital tools (websites, social media, virtual reality, video games, apps etc.) (Rivera 2023; Senier, 2021; Wallis and Ross, 2021). When Indigenous communities capitalize on new technologies, they can “reimagine traditional storytelling in new media forms” and “challenge mainstream stereotypes of Indigenous cultures, invigorate new means of visual sovereignty and revitalize and strengthen their own communities through Indigenous-centred storytelling” (Wallis and Ross, 2021, p. 316; also, see McGurk and Caquard, 2020).

In Brenda Brathwaite’s work, “The Mechanic is the Message: A Postmortem in Progress,” she argues that games have the capability to capture and express “difficult experiences” and that “due to their interactivity, games are capable of a higher form of communication, one which actively engages the participant and makes them a part of the experience rather than a passive observer” (Brathwaite and Sharp, 2010, p. 315). Using her logic, Indigenous game developers can create games in which the content they present – such as the impacts of colonization, traditions and culture, and Indigenous futurisms – is more deeply understood by those who play them.

Historically, the gaming industry has been exclusionary towards minority groups (i.e. BIPOC, LGBTQ2+) and especially the women in those groups (Clapper, 2021; Hines, 2022, 2023; Lancaster 2022). This has translated into toxic and harmful game spaces wherein minority gamers feel unwelcome and unsafe. As Lancaster (2022) argues, “racial and ethnic stereotypes portrayed in video games... contribute to further bias and negative attitudes toward non-white people in real-world experiences,” and these biases within games and the gaming industry are “partially a reflection of those creating video games” (para 3). Indigenous game developers can transform this narrative by creating games with BIPOC representation “designed by and for people in marginalizing contexts and are meant to create safe environments that affirms players’ identities and belonging as acts of playful resistance” (Brooks et al., 2021, para 11; Madsen, 2017; Tanaka, 2022; Wilson, 2021). By centering BIPOC experiences within games, gaming and the video game industry can become a site for “resistance, activism, and mobilization among marginalized users” (Brooks et al., 2021, para 1).

An example of this type of game is *When Rivers Were Trails*, a 2D point-and-click game developed by Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabeg) in collaboration with the Indian Land Tenure Foundation and Michigan State University’s Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab, which included contributions from over 30 Indigenous writers, artists, and musicians (Figure 2.3). In the game, one plays as an Anishinaabeg person in the 1890s, displaced from their traditional territory in Minnesota and heading west to California due to the impact of allotment acts on Indigenous communities. The player faces Indian Agents, meets people from different nations, and hunts, fishes, and canoes along the way as they balance their wellbeing. Throughout the game, one learns about what occurred during this time and the impacts it had on the nations in North America. The player also spends time learning about traditional plant foods and medicine,

cultural practices, and language as they continue to play. This game serves as an example of how games and technology can incorporate Indigenous knowledge and be used as an educational resource to help players learn about the past and inform the future.



Figure 2.3: Image still from the game *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019). (Indiecade, 2019)

As an artistic movement, Indigenous Futurisms show the ways in which Indigenous futures are imagined through creative, artistic, and diverse media. These media represent “the creative arm of the Indigenous futurist movement, which joins the more overtly political arm of the movement evident in the protest, legal, and advocacy work, all of which are vital to seeing our way toward, fighting for, and calling forth better futures” (Medak-Saltzman, 2017, p. 144)

Indigenous futurisms are, of course, about the future, so it becomes imperative to consider where Indigenous Geographies is headed. Indigenous futurisms moving forward will be centered around making space for Indigenous voices and perspectives in all areas (i.e. academia and research, art, film, pop culture etc.) (Chattopadhyay, 2021; Fight, 2019; Fricke, 2019; Latulippe and Klenk, 2020; Rose-Redwood, 2019, 2021). Indigenous scholars, knowledge

holders, and artists should be at the forefront of this movement and further create opportunities for resurgence, revitalization, reconciliation, and decolonization (Budhwa and McCreary, 2013; Mitchell, 2020; Simpson, 2014).

2.4 Cultivation Theory as it Applies to the Gaming World

This thesis utilizes a framework based in cultivation theory, commonly used within communication and media studies to examine the long-term effects of media on the viewer (Gerbner, 1998; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Potter, 2014; Shrum, 2017). Cultivation theory was first developed in the late 1960s along with the meteoric rise of television, which had quickly become the dominant form of media consumption in North America (Mosharafa, 2015; Potter, 1993; Romer et al., 2014). It is called cultivation theory because it posits that long-term exposure to media, particularly television, “cultivates” or shapes viewers’ perceptions of reality. Essentially, the theory suggests that the more time someone spends interacting with a form of media, the more their views of the world will align with the messages and portrayals they see on the screen. The theory was originally developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues from the Annenberg School of Communication (ASC) at the University of Pennsylvania. As it was originally intended, cultivation theory proposes that the content portrayed through television is “heavily laden with violence that provided a distorted view of the world,” often including victimized portrayals of women, the elderly, and racial minorities with white males as enforcers (Romer et al., 2014, p. 115). Gerbner argues that consuming large amounts of this type of content cultivates a “fearful attitude to the world” that has “gradual but serious long-term

negative consequences for its viewers' outlook and beliefs as well as for the larger culture” (Romer et al., 2014, p. 115).

After its conception, cultivation theory became very popular, especially within media and communication studies, being one the most heavily cited communication theories (Brathwaite and Sharp, 2010; Bryant and Miron, 2004). The theory consists of three main stages of analysis: institution, message system, and cultivation. As summarized by Potter (1993), institution analysis examines the values and intentions of the organization putting forth the message or content, such as the television studios. Message system analysis focuses on the actual message or story being told and the patterns or themes portrayed. Cultivation analysis explores how that message was received by the consumer and the way in which it affects their perceptions of the real world.

While Cultivation theory was initially applied to television, the framework has several modern applications that researchers have utilized. The most prevalent of these applications is to social media. Similar to television's explosion in the 1950s-1960s, social media use has risen in the past few decades, and many researchers have applied cultivation theory in the same way Gerbner did to examine its long-lasting effects (Morgan et al., 2014; Nevzat, 2018; Shrum, 2017). One unique example of a recent application of the theory is Jennifer Greenlee's study of a popular tabletop roleplay game (trpg) YouTube show called Critical Role. Greenlee examines how the show has “changed the TTRPG community, impacted its audience, and created a huge, devoted, and lasting fanbase” through the framework/lens of cultivation theory (Greenlee, n.d., p. 10).

2.4.1 Games as Media

Cultivation theory can be applied in the context of this project as games have been recognized as a new and integral form of media in recent decades that can have real world effects on their players. Scholars recognized this trend in the 2000-2010s when online and console gaming began to rise in popularity. Cover (2004) began exploring the idea of digital games as interactive media through this new relationship between author (game developer) and audience (player). Other researchers contributed to this growing body of literature by examining the various ways that cultural production can occur through digital spaces and games (Burwell, 2017; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Fromme and Unger, 2012; Graham, 2018). Hjorth's (2011) book, *Games and Gaming: An Introduction to New Media*, examines how games and gaming cultures and spaces create new avenues for understanding new media more broadly. Several scholars took a more critical lens such as Strasburger and Donnerstein (2014) who examine the possible effects of violent videos games for child development, a popular and highly debated topic surrounding video games. Scholars have continued to explore games as a form of media as new games and ways of playing have emerge. Jenkins and Mayoss (2024), for example, factor in how current consumers have shorter attention spans and game companies are attempting to satisfy them with games streamed from the cloud and how that affects game quality and subsequent gameplay.

2.4.2 Player Perceptions

Player perception is a key focus of this thesis. Several scholars are concerned with the ways in which certain games can influence player behaviour and thinking. For instance, Holl and Melzer (2020) examine player perception and experience as well as how the moral and ethical

dilemmas they face in games can influence real world decision-making. A growing body of scholarship has examined player perceptions and experiences as well as their real world consequences through the lens of media/game studies (Klimmt et al., 2009; McGloin et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2023; Sommerseth, 2007; Sotamaa, 2007). Through the theoretical framework of cultivation theory, we can examine the values and intentions of game developers, the patterns and themes present in the games themselves, and the ways in which players receive the messages portrayed and how it may change their lived experiences.

2.5 Digital Geographies

An emergent sub-discipline within geography, digital geographies has broadened not only new objects, practices, and spatial dynamics for exploration, but “we have also begun to articulate new ways to study these elements and to incorporate them into our research tools” (Winders, 2021, p. 293). For the purposes of this thesis, I examine concepts and practices surrounding digital spaces and new technologies beneficial to the research process. I also engage with contemporary debates within media geographies as it relates to digital geographies within the context of this project.

2.5.1 Digital Spaces and Online Communities

With how prevalent technology, social media, and online platforms are in everyday life, many scholars have highlighted the importance of investigating digital spaces and landscapes with the same vigor as tangible ones (Ash et al., 2018; Carter & Ngyuen, 2022; Duggan, 2024; Liu, 2024; Winders, 202). Relationships and social interactions occur within these digital spaces through the online communities that grow from different platforms. Several scholars explore how digital

platforms and online spaces contribute to community-building, knowledge-sharing, and a sense of belonging (Erickson, 2010; Hwang et al., 2015; Skinner, 2007). We see this especially when examining online gaming spaces and communities, as previously discussed when identified as a digital third space and the relationships and interactions that occur within them (Willett, 2017; Woods, 2021).

While several gamers have built positive relationships with themselves and others through gaming, many issues persist which is blatantly evident when examining digital spaces and online communities. While many have found connection and community, certain online spaces have become a petri dish for what Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir (2019) describe as ‘Networks of Hate’ as alt-right individuals with misogynistic, racist, and homophobic ideals find each other and create kinship through prejudice.

2.5.2 New Technologies

The rise of digital geographies has led to an increase in tools and resources available that is changing the way research is conducted. For the purposes of this project, I focus on these technologies as a new means for knowledge production and data management as well as digital and fictional worldbuilding within the games themselves. Winders (2021), for example, notes how platforms such as Twitter (now known as X) and Instagram have become new data sources and how new technologies and programs such as Facetime and Zoom allow for participation and interviewing at great distances. Rose (2016) focuses on how new technologies can lead to greater creation and dissemination of knowledge and cultural objects. Additionally, Bikaki et al. (2024) discuss how collaborative and open-source platforms can contribute to greater knowledge production across a wide range of sources and participants, leading to an accelerated

understanding of complex social and cultural phenomena. Access to such a larger scale of data and information can lead to privacy, ethics, and confidentiality concerns. Winders (2021) expresses the importance of securing data and being hyper-aware of any privacy issues that may arise when using new technologies throughout the research process.

2.5.3 Digital Gaming Geographies

From a theoretical perspective, digital geographies provide new ways to critically examine game space and the interactions and relationships that occur in and around them. Fraser (2023), for example, explores the increase of participants in real-time interactive digital space, such as online multiplayer games, in recent years. This work considers the implications of these digital geographies for the discipline as a whole and the “significance of virtual world-making for geographical theorizations of digital space and place” (Fraser, 2023, p. 347). Similarly, Blackman (2019) examines the dynamic relationships between players and digital worlds through virtual reality (VR) and video games. Through increased availability of technologies like VR, Blackman critically discusses how experiences within computer-generated worlds can be performative and how becoming a part of these digital worlds can feel “unsystematic and unfinished” (2019, p. 133).

Orlando Woods’ (2021) research focuses on how feminist digital geographies can extend into online gaming and enrich the discourse by highlighting how game spaces are fluid and influenced by context. They explore how gendered identities are both reshaped by and actively shape the blurred boundaries between ‘online’ and ‘offline,’ as well as between ‘gaming’ and ‘non-gaming’ environments. Mills et al. (2024) examine the social, economic, and spatial relationships between families and online gaming spaces that include paid-for currency such as

Robux in the online gaming platform, *Roblox*. Their research considers how these kinds of digital games can recreate gambling-style systems and chance-based mechanisms, and how they inform and are, in turn, informed by family geographies.

More broadly, Ash and Gallacher (2011) discuss how video games have become cultural artifacts and therefore an integral part of human and cultural geographies. Their work was among the first to critically examine the ways in which scholars have traced out the socio-economic dynamics of the geographies in and around video games. Through their approach, they argue that examining videogaming as a “(techno)cultural practice” can greatly contribute to the scholarship of cultural geographies surrounding video games (Ash and Gallacher, 2011, p. 351).

Additionally, Wearing’s (2016) research focuses on young gamers’ experiences in the virtual world of gaming through the lens of leisure cultures. They explore how an increasing amount of youth are spending their leisure time in some form of digital space and how new technologies give them a sense of security and belonging in the safety of their homes “while maintaining a flow of online friendships and communication with others” (Wearing, 2016, p. 138). Wearing zeros in on this new form of leisure, examining the relationship between young gamers and the digital worlds they inhabit.

Finally, Morawski and Wolff-Seidel (2024) published an entire textbook exploring the intersections of geography and gaming. In it, they argue that video games can serve as an effective medium for geographical research, highlighting the ways that digital worlds and landscapes shape our spatial experiences and perceptions. Their study offers a broad exploration of current debates in video game research with an emphasis on geography and geographic education. By examining gaming through various geographical lenses, they invite scholars to consider the spatial dimensions of games and their educational potential.

2.5.4 Media Geographies and Gaming

As discussed in the previous chapter and throughout this thesis, this project views games as interactive pieces of media pervasive in many people's everyday lives. For this reason, it is important to consider current debates and questions surrounding media geographies, specifically in relation to gaming. With the rise of games, many media geographers began to examine the role games play as a new form of media and the spaces created within and around them. Several scholars have focused on games through a cultural and ethnographic lens, exploring how games are cultural artifacts and media as well as how they have become engrained in many people's everyday lives (Ash and Gallacher, 2011; Flynn, 2010). Focusing on mobile media and how common mobile phones are in the contemporary world, many researchers have focused on the use of mobile games and how they create new opportunities and methods of spatialization and place-making (Frizzera, 2015; Hjorth 2011; Leorke, 2014). An interesting example of this is Hjorth and Richardson's (2017) examination of the location-based mobile game, *Pokémon GO*. The main aspect of the game is that players need to walk around their neighbourhoods, cities, etc., to find and catch different Pokémon. Hjorth and Richardson use this game to observe the ways in which location-based mobile games not only utilise digital mapping technologies but how they create hybrid experiences of space and place and influence a player's experience and sense of place. These scholarly contributions underscore the importance of viewing games not merely as entertainment, but as new media with dynamic spatial and cultural practices that reshape how individuals experience, navigate, and produce meaning within both digital and physical environments.

2.6 Decolonization and Gaming

This thesis centers around decolonization within the gaming industry. Several scholars, such as Trammell (2022), Barnes (2021) and Euteneuer (2018), examine the ways in which the gaming industry currently upholds colonial narratives and values. These scholars also stress the importance of decolonizing the industry and the benefits of that process, such as increased diversity, social justice and inclusion, and helping to unravel the colonial structures that dominate society.

2.6.1 *What is a colonial game?*

While it may not be obvious, many of the games available today uphold settler colonial values. Numerous scholars explore how current games perpetuate coloniality, such as Euteneuer (2018) with *Clash of Clans*, Carpenter (2021) with *Civilization*, Martin (2016) with *Resident Evil 7*, Sedelmeier and Baum (2022) with *Santa Maria*, Mukherjee (2016) with *East India Company*, and Borit et al. (2018) with *Struggle of Empires*. While these are great examples of colonial games, I would like to draw attention to one that may be more universally known, *Catan*. Previously known as *Settlers of Catan*, it is a game rooted in colonialism, with the main game mechanics being resource extraction, exploitation, development, and expansion. The Dutch version of *Catan* was originally called *Kolonisten van Catan*, which literally translates to *Colonists of Catan*. The game perpetuates the idea of “terra nullius,” or “nobody’s land,” which has been a “legal concept used as justification that lands were empty and therefore open for colonization, conquering and resources extraction” (Mack and Na’puti, 2019, p. 360). Several scholars have already explored the ways in which *Catan* reproduces the conditions of settler

colonialism through gameplay (Lee, 2017; Peterson, 2017; Thompson, 2024; Tschapka and Kang, 2014; Veracini, 2013).

For those who may not know, *Catan* is a strategic board game where players collect and trade resources (brick, wood, wheat, ore, and sheep) to build roads, settlements, and cities on a modular hexagonal board. Players earn points by expanding their territory, acquiring development cards, or achieving specific goals like having the longest road or the largest army. If a player rolls a seven or plays a Knight card, the robber mechanic is activated where the player can block a specific resource from producing, steal an opponent's card, and force any player with more than seven resource cards to discard half. The game ends when a player reaches 10 victory points. The company that produced *Catan*, Mayfair Games, has created several expansion packs and spin-off games, all with similar themes such as:

- **Seafarers:** An expansion that introduces ships and new island scenarios. Players can build ships (like roads on water) to explore and settle new islands.
- **Traders & Barbarians:** A modular expansion that adds several new scenarios and gameplay variants to *Catan*. It includes trade caravans, barbarian invasions, fishing, and new event cards.
- **Explorers & Pirates:** An expansion that emphasizes exploration and seafaring. Players build ships to discover new lands, establish settlements and ports, and complete various challenges.
- **Settlers of America:** A historical spin-off of *Catan* set during the westward expansion of the United States. Players build settlements, railroads, and trains to transport goods across the country. Instead of standard resource gathering, resources deplete over time, forcing players to expand westward.

- **Starfarers:** A stand-alone sci-fi version of *Catan* set in space. Players explore the galaxy, establish colonies on planets, trade resources, and interact with alien civilizations for advantages.

While many of the expansions and spin-offs for *Catan* have similar colonial mechanics, Mayfair Games has created certain expansions/mechanics that shift that Eurocentric/extractive lens. For example, *Rise of the Inkas* is a stand-alone version of *Catan* that introduces civilization decline and renewal. Players progress through three eras, where their settlements will eventually decline, allowing others to build over them. This rule forces players to adapt and relocate rather than just expand. The game also features new terrain and sustainable resources such as fisheries and jungle resources. Additionally, *Oil Springs* is a mini-expansion that introduces oil as a new resource in *Catan*. Oil can be traded or used to build cities, boosting production and progress. However, excessive oil use leads to pollution and climate disasters, which can flood hexes and make them unproductive. Players must balance economic growth with environmental risks, adding an element of sustainability and ethical decision-making to the game.

2.6.2 *What is a decolonial game?*

By understanding what makes a game colonial, we can then ask the question: what is a decolonial game? In the context of this thesis, a decolonial game is one in which the game's development, design, and narrative processes challenge and oppose the colonial systems present in many contemporary games. Several scholars have brought to light the ways in which certain games subvert colonial narratives such as Helland (2024) with *Never Alone (Kisima Innitchuna)*, Silva et al. (2022) with *Living Colors: A Game about AfroIdentity*, Ensslin (2024) with *Skábma-Snowfall*, and Bettocchi et al. (2020) with the *Incorporeal Platform*. A good example of a

decolonial game is *Coyote and Crow* (C&C), which is a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) set in an alternate future where colonization never occurred. Players take on the roles of Indigenous-inspired characters in the world of Makasing, a land shaped by advanced science and technology, spiritual power, and deep cultural traditions. It is a world of science and spirituality where the future of technology and legends of the past collide. The game emphasizes collaborative storytelling, focusing on exploration, diplomacy, and conflict resolution rather than traditional combat mechanics. Included at the beginning of the guidebook for the game are letters to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous players. Indigenous players are encouraged to bring aspects of their own communities and cultures into the game and their characters and to use C&C to explore their Indigeneity. Non-Indigenous players are told to leave behind all their previous knowledge and preconceived notions of Indigenous peoples as the world they are entering is unlike the one they know so well. Designed by Indigenous creators for Indigenous players, *Coyote and Crow* is inherently decolonial and offers a non-Eurocentric approach to ttrpgs, centering Indigenous perspectives and storytelling.

2.6.3 Storytelling, Education, and Social Change Through Games

A widely studied facet of the gaming industry is how developers can tell stories through games and what, if anything, players learn from it, as seen in the works of Green (2018) and Glassner (2001). Through a decolonial lens, many scholars explore how games can transmit cultural knowledge whether in the form of stories, art, language, and music (Chan, 2021; Guntarik, 2023; Laiti et al., 2021; López and Cruz, 2021; Madima, 2024; Nidjam, 2023; Yusa et al., 2021; Zambrano, 2023).

Scholars who research the gaming industry are also interested in how players learn and the educational potential of games (Brathwaite and Sharp, 2010; Koo and Seider, 2010; Nardo and Gaydos, 2021; Schrier, 2016; Swain, 2010). Such works are not only concerned with how games operate as educational resources but also how games can teach ethics, values, and morals.

Many of the scholars within this field, some previously mentioned, are concerned with how games and the gaming industry can enact positive social change. For example, queer scholars like Gobble (2021), Kemp (2023), and Abustan (2022) explore the ways in which games cultivate positive communities and allow gamers to explore their sexual and gender identities in a safe space through gaming. Similarly, Goodall (2021) explores how tabletop role-playing games promote social participation, inclusion, and community-building.

Understanding the literature provides crucial context and background for this project. The intersections of digital geographies, Indigenous futurisms, and cultivation theory allow us to understand game space and the interactions that occur within them as well as how game design can affect player experience. In the next chapter, I outline the specific methodologies used in this study to answer the question: How can games create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change?

3. Choose Your Character: Selecting the Right Methods

Building from my review of the literature and theory, the qualitative methods used in this thesis were chosen to examine the decolonization and educational potential of games.

Methodological processes taken from cultivation theory (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Potter, 2014; Shrum, 2017) along with recommendations from Hay and Cope (2021) allow for an in-depth exploration of the various ways in which games are produced and consumed, including game developers' intentions, the games themselves, and player experience. Approaches from Indigenous futurisms (Chattopadhyay, 2021; Fricke 2019; Lempert, 2014) and digital geographies (Ash et al., 2018 Carter & Ngyuen, 2022; Duggan, 2024; Liu, 2024; Winders, 2021) were used alongside cultivation theory for an analysis of the results. The following methods help to answer the question: How can games create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change by allowing us to examine player experience and values as well as the teachings they take away from playing certain games.

In this chapter, I document the sites of data collection, the participants in the research study, participant response collection methods, and methods of interpretation as well as the limitations of the study. Permission to conduct research on human subjects was received from the University of Victoria Research Ethics Board as well as the community organization through which I found my primary participants. As defined in the positionality statement at the beginning of this thesis, I am a white, settler researcher exploring topics of Indigenous agency, culture, and futurisms. In agreement with Catungal and Dowling (2021), understanding the various power dynamics within research, especially when matters of cultural sensitivity are involved, is crucial. As a non-Indigenous settler exploring topics of Indigeneity and Indigenous stories and cultures, I

have strived to be aware of my positionality throughout the research process, with the intention of not simply observing and recording but validating and uplifting the work of Indigenous communities and game designers. In this chapter, I introduce the study area, data collection, and participant recruitment methods for this project. I then explore the theoretical frameworks and methods of analysis used for organizing the collected data. I end the chapter by explaining possible limitations of the project and why they occurred.

3.1 Study Area

The study area for this project is two-fold: the traditional territories of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and X̱w̱sepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples, colloquially known as Victoria, British Columbia, and in online or virtual spaces. The Galleon Gaming Society was chosen because the group presents itself as an inclusive and welcoming space for all. Additionally, the group presented a good starting point for recruitment through the snowball method, which will be discussed later. In-person participant interviews occurred at the University of Victoria in the Critical Geographies Research Collaboratory as the security and privacy of that room was assured. Remote options for the interview were also provided to give participants maximum flexibility and accessibility, either through email or Google Forms. The second “location” for this study consisted of online and virtual spaces as this is where secondary data (i.e. game reviews, game descriptions, developer information, etc.) were collected. There are several reputable websites and forums dedicated to reviews for both video and tabletop games, and many game developers and studios have their own websites with detailed descriptions of both the games and their mission statement or values. Digital spaces such as review sites and forums enabled me to gain data and player statements from around the world, which greatly increases my dataset.

3.2 Data

The populations of interest for this study are gamers, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous video and tabletop games, as well as game developers, studios, and companies. As this research is largely concerned with player perception, it is vital to interview gamers who have experience playing a wide variety of games. Understanding the intentions and values of the developers creating the games that players interact is equally important in considering how game and gamer interact. The samples from these populations consist of semi-structured interviews with members of the Galleon Gaming Society as well as online statements from both gamers and developers from game reviews, gaming forums, company websites, etc.

3.2.1 Primary Data Collection

3.2.1.1 Participant Recruitment

Gamers are friends with other gamers and for this reason I followed Stratford and Bradshaw's (2021) suggestions of snowball sampling, starting first with members from the Galleon Gaming Society and then encouraging them to inform other gamers of the study. Initial participants were recruited from the Galleon Gaming Society through their Discord with a Google Form sign-up sheet and then continued recruitment occurred through the snowball method by allowing participants to pass along the sign-up form to those they think would be interested. Discord is a popular social media platform widely used amongst gamers to text and call. Using this app ensured not only communication with members of the society but that they were familiar and comfortable with using Discord. After participants signed up, each was given a letter of information for consent to sign so they understood the purpose of the study and how

their data would be used (Catungal and Dougal, 2021). All participants were kept anonymous in the presentation of this project and all data files secured to protect privacy and confidentiality.

3.2.1.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews with members from the Galleon Gaming Society focused heavily on gamer experience and perception of game in general. A total of 15 participants were interviewed over the span of four months with scheduling occurring over email and planned at the convenience of the participant. Participants were provided allergy friendly food and offered reimbursement for travel (i.e. gas, parking, bus fare, etc.). Following suggestions from Dunn (2021), each participant was asked 10 guiding questions about their experiences with games, both virtual and tabletop (Figure 3.1). The interviews were loosely structured to provide opportunities for tangents and make the participants more comfortable. The questions were structured to build and maintain rapport, beginning with the participants' initial experiences with gaming (childhood, friends, family, etc.) before moving onto more in-depth and complex questions (Dunn, 2021). I did ask if participants had played any Indigenous-designed or collaborated games, and while some did, most did not. To include an element of collaboration, I asked participants their thoughts on what they would like to see done with this research and their data (i.e. open access resource, games archive/library, etc.). To ensure rapport did not dissipate at the close of the interview, I kept contact with participants, ensuring them that they would be kept up to date with the research and how it is presented to the public. In-person interviews lasted between one to two hours and were recorded using the Voice Memos app with participants' explicit and verbal consent. I then used the dictation feature in Microsoft Word to initially transcribe the recordings, editing and reviewing where necessary.

Roll for Perception Questionnaire

1. What first got you into games?
2. Do you play primarily video games or tabletop games? Both?
3. Why do you play games? (i.e. fun, relaxation, making friends, learning etc.)
4. Have you played a game (either video or tabletop) from the perspective of someone of a different identity than your own? (i.e. Indigenous designed or collaborated games)
5. Have you ever played an Indigenous designed or collaborated game, that you know of? (e.g. Never Alone, Coyote and Crow, etc.)
6. What was your experience with this? Did you learn something new?
7. Do you think playing games from the perspective of someone else can teach the player empathy and compassion for that identity?
8. In what ways do you think the gaming industry can be improved?
9. What would you like to see done with this research?
10. What is your favourite game?

Figure 3.1: List of the 10 questions used in participant interviews.

3.2.2 Secondary Data Collection

The secondary data collection consisted of online statements and reviews from various online sources. As Winders (2021) states, digital geographies have become necessary to understanding relationships and interactions in the contemporary world, and this is never truer than when it comes to games. Using the new technologies and techniques discussed in the previous chapter, I was able to gather data on player experience from around the world. With these online

statements, I looked for players’ experiences and perceptions of specific games as well as the values held by game developers and companies. Online statements were collected from popular game review sites and gaming forums (i.e. Steam Reviews, Metacritic, BoardGameGeek, etc.) as well as directly from developer/studio websites. Many of these same developer/studio websites had descriptions of the Indigenous-designed or collaborated games. Table 3.1 shows the games chosen for this study and the number of reviews written for them from different online sources. The selected games were chosen as they are all the most popular Indigenous-designed or collaborated games found and had the most online reviews/statements associated with them. All online data collected are public access and dynamic/incomplete as gamers are constantly posting new reviews or revisions to old reviews. All usernames of private individuals/commenters are omitted to ensure no privacy or confidentiality issues.

Game	Developers	Metacritic	Steam Reviews	Google Play	Apple App Store	Goodreads	BoardGame Geek	DriveThru RPG	RPG.net	RPGG	Shut Up and Sit Down	Gaming the Past	Kickstarter
Never Alone (2014)	Upper One Games & E-Line Media	21											
Hill Agency: PURITY/DECAY (2022)	Achimotoawinan Games	2	4										
When Rivers Were Trails (2019)	Elizabeth LaPensée			1								2	
Thunderbird Strike (2017)	Elizabeth LaPensée				3								
On the Path of the Elders (2009)	Mushkegowuk Cree and Carleton University					1							
Spirits of Spring (2014)	Minority Media and Larva GS	3											
Burn the Fort (2024)	Klee Benally						2						
Ehdrigohr (2013)	Allen Turner and Council of Fools							4	1				
Dog Eat Dog (2013)	Liwanag Press					2		2		1	3		
Potlatch Card Game (2018)	NDN Players						3						5

Table 3.1: Table depicting online review statements for specific Indigenous designed or collaborated games and where they were sourced from.

3.2.2.1 Game Reviews and Gaming Forums

As previously stated, I collected player reviews from various game review sites and gaming forums about Indigenous-designed and/or collaborated video and tabletop games. When collecting these statements, I looked for reviews specifically about Indigenous-designed or collaborated games whereas the participant interviews were about player experience in general. This is because with interviewees I wanted to explore in-depth player experience overall as there was no guarantee they had played an Indigenous-designed game, whereas the online statements were in specific reference to Indigenous-designed or collaborated games.

3.2.2.2 Developer/Studio Websites and Game Descriptions

In addition to gamer reviews, I examined statements from the game developers and studios about both the values of the company/developer as well as their intentions behind creating the game. This included mission statements detailing the values, goals, and purpose of the company as well as their reason for creating the games they do. These sites also included descriptions of each game, which often showed or described creator intentions (Table 3.2, Appendix A). In Chapter 4, I further explore and analyze the reviews and statements found. While both the primary and secondary forms of data were essential for this project, the online reviews and developer statements were more central to answering the research question with the interviews becoming more supplementary in providing insights into gaming experiences more broadly.

3.3 Methods for Analysis

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis and Coding

After collection, I analyzed all data through thematic analysis and open coding through qualitative data software (NVivo), looking for common themes, perceptions, statements, sentiments, etc. Using computer analysis software enabled efficient data reduction, organization, and analysis in a manageable format. Using Cope's (2021) recommendations of concept mapping, I then further organized the codes into six main themes found consistently throughout the data. Using these codes and themes, I then analyze my findings through several the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2.

3.3.2 Organization Through Theoretical Frameworks

Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of cultivation theory, Indigenous futurisms, and digital geographies, as discussed in the previous chapter, I organized the data through the three stages of analysis as each pertains to the gaming world exploring the questions:

Institution Analysis: What are the values and intentions of the game developers/companies?

Message System Analysis: What is the message/story being told through the game?

Cultivation Analysis: How do players perceive the message and how does it affect their thinking, behavior, and real-world attitudes/behaviour?

3.3.3 Institution Analysis

Institution analysis examines the values and intentions behind the institutions, in this case game developers, putting forth a message. Looking at the intentions of the developers and studios can provide us with insight into the reasoning for creating the game in the first place. To find this information, I went directly to developer or company websites, looking for mission statements or similar messages about their values. Understanding the reasoning behind a game's development can help us understand what kind of message or story the developer is trying to tell. As discussed in length in Chapter 4, many of the developers created these Indigenous-designed and/or collaborated games with the purpose of education, decolonization, and visualizing imagined Indigenous futures and the potential for agency, sovereignty, and cultural continuity in game space.

3.3.4 Message System Analysis

After examining the institution's intentions, I then move on to message system analysis. Usually, message system analysis explores the message itself to "identify meanings that (a) could be attributed to institutional practices of mass production of messages, and (b) were found to be disseminated widely across the entire media landscape" (Potter, 2014, p. 1018). In this instance, message system analysis will be used to look at the games themselves. Certain game mechanics, rules, and functions can affect the ways in which a player experiences the game, often with the intention of eliciting certain responses or ways of thinking. By examining game descriptions and playthroughs, we can see the kinds of thinking, ideas, and environments that Indigenous games create. It is through this stage of analysis that concepts from digital geographies become useful

as we explore the digital landscape of video games and the process, interactions, and relationships that occur within them (Ash et al., 2016).

3.3.5 Cultivation Analysis

The final stage is cultivation analysis, which examines the ways in which a game’s stories, symbols, gameplay, etc., contribute to the cultivation of assumptions about life and the world. Since the games focused on in this case all revolve around Indigenous communities and stories, the assumptions they cultivate are those of decolonization and education. For this project, cultivation analysis focuses on player experience and the ideas, values, and thoughts they take away from certain games. The interviews focused on the player’s general experiences, regardless of the type of game they played whereas the online gamer reviews were all specifically pulled from Indigenous-designed or collaborated games. As in institution analysis, Indigenous futurisms are imagined, and in some cases brought to reality, through this stage as we see how these games ultimately influence and change the player. Chapter 4 extensively explores and analyzes the

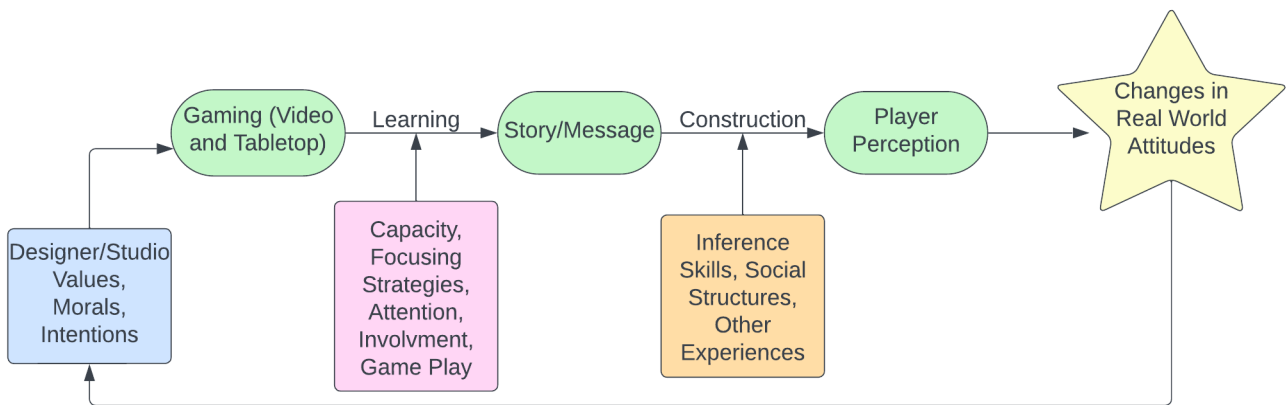


Figure 3.2: A visualization of how the processes of game development can affect player perception and understanding.

3.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations that I would like to address, the first being the fact that there are very few contemporary Indigenous games in the video or tabletop format, and the ones that do exist are not well known. As a result, a very small number of interview participants had ever played or even heard of an Indigenous game. In future studies, it would be helpful to include another method of data collection such as having a focus group play an Indigenous game together and interview the participants throughout the process. There is a lack of funding and resources given to diverse stories from larger game companies, and while it may seem like there is a lack of interest in BIPOC-centered games, this often comes from a lack of awareness of the possibility of those games.

Finding detailed reviews of Indigenous games proved difficult and led me to unique sources such as Goodreads and Kickstarter. On sites like Metacritic, there were many reviews, but few written comments. When examining online statements, I was observant of any negative comments that would suggest these games are not effective at education or decolonization. However, all of the negative reviews I found were about the actual gameplay and mechanics of the game (i.e. bugs, glitches, lagging, etc.) and not about the actual content or story of the game itself. Additionally, as mentioned before, this online data is forever incomplete as people are writing new reviews and comments or revising old ones, yet the information currently on these sites prove invaluable and not readily accessible anywhere else.

Considering the scope of this project, documenting visible, societal change resulting from playing transformative games is very difficult. This thesis serves to illustrate the beginning of a larger process by first introducing gamers, the interview participants, to Indigenous games and

then documenting people's experiences after playing the game, the online reviews. Through this process, the goal of introducing players to Indigenous games is to expose them to topics of decolonization and Indigeneity, hopefully setting them on a path towards playing these games, educating themselves, and changing real-world attitudes and biases.

The final limitation I would like to bring attention to is that many gaming communities, both virtual and in-person, are cisgendered, heterosexual, white, male-dominated spaces. These communities are often unsafe or uninviting spaces for marginalized identities, leading to a rather undiversified sample pool. While there was some variety in the identities of those I interviewed, most were from this dominant group. With this in mind, it can be inferred that many of the online statements and reviews collected were likely from that same community; however, there is no way to know this due to the anonymous nature of the profiles. This could possibly skew the themes present within the online statements, so it was important to keep potential player demographics in mind. However, when games depict characters or stories of certain communities, especially marginalized ones, the players who seek them out are often allies to or a part of that same community (Richard and Gray, 2018).

Considering the methods, practices, and limitations mentioned above, the next chapter presents the findings of this study. I have organized Chapter 4 using the five themes derived from thematic analysis and coding. In this chapter, I consider player experience and how the various games, both video and tabletop, they have played throughout their lives have affected their thinking and attitudes about the world around them. I also explore developers' intentions and how game design can tell a certain story or convey certain emotions. I conclude Chapter 4 with an analysis of the overall sentiments of players as well as steps that game developers can take in decolonizing their designs and the gaming experience. As shown in the flow chart in

Figure 3.5, the methodologies and research processes of this study are intended to understand how the games that developers create can change or alter players perceptions and understandings of the world.

4. Boss Fight: Confronting the Key Findings

The findings of this research indicate that games, in varied formats, hold significant potential as avenues for decolonization, education, and social change. Through their interactive, narrative, and affective capacities, games offer unique opportunities to challenge dominant historical narratives, foreground marginalized perspectives, and engage players in critical reflection on colonial legacies and contemporary social issues. This chapter first presents the results derived from semi-structured participant interviews, in combination with data gathered from online game reviews and public statements made by game developers. This project employed the use of qualitative analysis software, NVivo, to identify and organize the various patterns, themes, and codes in the data (Figure 4.1). The results are presented based on data type and the common sentiments and patterns throughout. Together, these sources provide a multifaceted understanding of how games are perceived, interpreted, and experienced.

Code	Description	Files	References
Accessibility	Accessibility of games and game information	4	8
Decolonization	Decolonization present in games, companies, communities etc.	8	32
Discrimination	Discrimination of certain communities or individuals from game design and game communities	7	10
Diversity	Diversity in stories told through games, in game designers, and in player communities	14	49
Education	Games as an education tool	11	55
Empathy	Games as a tool to teach empathy	7	23
Exposure	Games exposing player to new thoughts, ideas, cultures etc.	7	22
Family	Family experiences with games i.e. game nights	7	11
Friendships	Games as a way to make and maintain friendships	7	7
Immersion	Games immersing players in a story, culture, identity etc.	8	22
Perspective	Players gaining new perspectives through games	15	39
Quality	The quality of a game affecting the player experience	4	5
Self-Care	Games as a form of self-care	6	8
Social Fabric	Games contributing to a person's social fabric	9	13
Storytelling	Games as a storytelling tool	11	30
Variety	Player desire for a variety of games	6	19

Table 4.1: NVivo codebook depicting the codes used, descriptions of the codes, the number of files the codes are present in, and the number of times the code is referenced.

The second part of the chapter analyzes the ways in which these findings support the argument that games can be used not only as pedagogical resources but also as platforms for activism and resistance. The results and the identified codes and patterns are then organized into five core themes derived from recurring patterns and conceptual groupings present in the data (Table 4.2). These themes serve as the organizational framework for the analysis presented in this chapter and help to illustrate the ways in which games can shape players' worldviews, cultivate empathy, and promote critical engagement with systems of power and oppression.

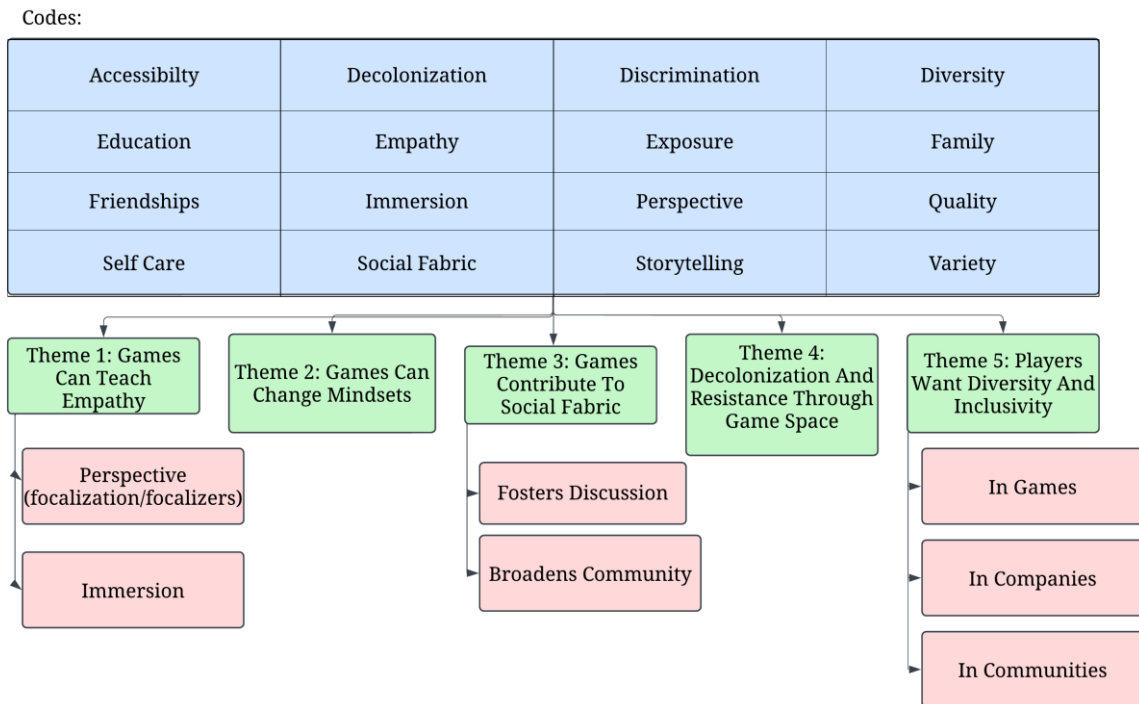


Table 4.2: Concept mapping and visualization of organization of codes into themes and subthemes.

As illustrated in Table 4.1, these patterns and themes emerged through an in-depth process of thematic analysis, coding, and interpretation. Each theme reflects distinct, yet interconnected, aspects of how games can contribute to processes of social awareness and decolonial engagement. By organizing the data in this manner, I offer a cohesive and theoretically informed

discussion that underscores the potential of games within various educational and socio-political contexts.

As mentioned in previous chapters, this thesis is grounded in cultivation theory's theoretical framework and methodologies. In keeping with this framework, I explore the sentiments and patterns present in the three main foci of analysis: the game developers and studios, the games themselves, and the player's experiences and perceptions. Through analyzing and discussing these results, I work to achieve this study's goal of understanding how player experiences and real-world attitudes are influenced by the values, worldviews, and intentions embedded and expressed through game design choices.

4.1 Developer Intentions and Game Design

To answer the question of a game's potential to create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change, we must examine the values and intentions of the developers and studios designing, producing, and releasing the games. The various design choices made for games are often a result of the developer's personal understanding of the world, and those choices, intentionally or otherwise, can convey a certain message or bias through the game (Boone, 2022; Neely, 2017). For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on developers and studios that created Indigenous-designed or collaborated games as they often include elements of decolonization, education, and social change within their design (Table 3.1).

For example, NDN Players, creators of the card game, *Potlatch*, describe themselves as academics who wanted to imbue their own indigeneity within the processes of game-making and education as a response to and critique of the problematic nature of many games available today (NDN Players, 2020). The developers describe *Potlatch*, which is the name for a community

feast and celebration for many Indigenous communities, as a “strategic, educational card game based on Indigenous philosophies” specifically designed to “meet K-12 educational standards for teaching about native history, economics, culture, and government” (NDN Players, 2020; Pender and Gross, 2025). This intention manifests in the gameplay mechanics as they are based on “sharing resources to meet other players’ needs for food, materials, technology, and knowledge” (NDN Players, 2020).

Similarly, E-line Media, creators of *Never Alone* in partnership with Upper One Games, describe themselves as “passionate about harnessing the power of games to help players understand and shape the world” (E-Line Media, 2025). Klee Benally, maker of *Burn the Fort*, summed up well the educational potential of games when he said “[g]ames can be powerful storytelling and teaching tools. Indigenous Peoples have played games rooted in ceremony since time immemorial” (Klee Benally, n.d.). Even when developers did not intend their games to be used for educational purposes, their games have similar potential in educating others about the cultures and communities portrayed through design choices, aesthetics, and narrative structures.

Additionally, many of the developers examined in this thesis strive for diversity and inclusion within their games and the development process. Upper One Games, for example, is the first ever Indigenous-owned video game company in the United States and their game *Never Alone* won several awards for both its narrative and positive social impact (E-Line Media, 2025). Another Indigenous-owned and operated video game company, Achimostawinan Games, claims they are “dedicated to developing Indigenous games for an Indigenous audience (and the world) while also helping Indigenous artists and communities develop interactive and digital content” (Achimostawinan Games, n.d.).

An important element of game design is immersion and perspective, ensuring that the player becomes engrossed with the worldbuilding and the characters and stories therein, and several developers and studios have placed this at the forefront of their design process. Considering *Never Alone*, Upper One Games and E-Line Media stated that the aesthetic designs of the game were “inspired by traditional Alaska Native art... and honed through collaboration with Alaska Native elders and artists. This ensures that the look and feel of the game stay faithful to the traditional styles and provide a unique and inspirational visual presentation for *Never Alone*” (E-Line Media, 2025). Through this design, the developers claim that “*Never Alone* brings the atmospheric and compelling world of Iñupiaq stories alive” (E-Line Media, 2025).

Many of the developers mentioned in this thesis made design choices and included game mechanics that create opportunities for players to engage with and participate in decolonial thought, learning about alternate ways of knowing and being through gameplay. In certain games, players are forced to interact with and understand colonial structures and the ways in which they oppress marginalized communities. For many developers, these choices are deliberate and intentional. Klee Benally, for instance, believes that “nearly every game available on the shelf today is rooted in colonialism and resource exploitation” (Klee Benally, n.d.). He created the board game, *Burn the Fort*, as a response, stating, “I wanted to offer an alternative and challenge those narratives... For some people this will be just another tabletop game, for others, and this is my intention, it can be one small way to engage and build cultures of resistance and liberation” (Klee Benally, n.d.). Similarly, Liwanag Press describes their role play game (rpg), *Dog Eat Dog*, as a “game of colonialism and its consequences” (Liam Liwanag Burke, 2013).

For many, games are another medium for storytelling, and for many of these developers and communities it is a way to bring their cultures, histories, and traditions into the modern world and to a wider audience. Achimostawinan Games, for example, includes in their company's vision and mission statement that they aim to "tell stories that want to be shared in a way that is neither exploitative nor harmful" (Achimostawinan Games, n.d.). In fact, the company's namesake stems from the Cree word, Achimostawinan, which means "tell us a story" (Achimostawinan Games, n.d.). When working on *Never Alone*, E-Line Media and Upper One Games describe how they worked in close collaboration with "Alaska Native storytellers and elders to create a game which delves deeply into the traditional lore of the Iñupiat people to present an experience like no other" (E-Line Media, 2025).

4.2 Player Sentiments, Interpretations, and Understandings

Understanding the common sentiments and interpretation that players have of the games they interact with is another crucial step in answering this project's main research question. As described in Chapter 3, player experiences and perceptions were examined in the form of participant interviews and online reviews. The interview participants were asked questions about their general gaming experiences as well as their encounters with Indigenous-designed or collaborated games and games where they play as an identity different from themselves. The online review statements are direct responses to those games listed in Figure 3.1. For the purposes of this thesis, interview participants and their responses will be denoted with the moniker Gamer 1, Gamer 2, etc., and online review statements will be denoted as Reviewer 1, Reviewer 2, etc.

When asked about the educational aspect of games, the respondents tended to agree that games can teach not only new content and perspectives but also provide functional and cognitive benefits. These responses highlight how many gamers see education potential within video and tabletop games and how they can positively contribute to the gamer's personal development. Gamer 1, for example, shared their experiences playing games with difficult content surrounding colonialism and how "through those controversies and people being educated about the past... there's been such a shift in settler culture, because people don't know about it otherwise because they're not taught about it." Additionally, Gamer 7 expressed how they believe in the educational potential of games and how they would like is "see higher education embrace more styles of teaching and learning. Just because it's fun doesn't mean it doesn't work!" The video game, *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, in particular, had many positive online reviews in regard to the game's educational potential. Reviewer 19 described the game as a "history lesson, because for a people of storytellers, to tell their stories and experiences in this way, is something really phenomenal." Many of the online reviews expressed how through this game they were able to learn more about a different culture. Review 12, for instance, wrote that *Never Alone's* "charm, coupled with the opportunity to explore a culture you might not know much about, makes it utterly captivating." Similarly, Reviewer 15 stated that the game's "atmospheric setting, the loveable heroes and a slew of documentary-videos, that give insight into the lively culture, not only entertain but teach you a lot of interesting things. I would really like to get more games like this."

Most interview participants agreed that diversity is needed within the gaming industry and the communities surrounding it and that the player experience would benefit from greater diversity overall. For instance, Gamer 5 stated, "in a time where more people from different

backgrounds are entering the gaming industry, I would like to see their stories crafted into games.” When talking about *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* and the cultures and communities surrounding the game, Gamer 4 maintained that:

we need fewer white dudes saying this is theirs. It’s not yours. It’s for all of us. It’s for anybody who wants to play and that’s just that. And if you and your other white dudes want to go off and play the game your way, that’s fine because it’s designed that anybody who wants to play it can play it and you go off and play your way. You don’t have to play with us, that’s fine. But it is for us too and we will go and have fun without you.

Similar to the interview participants, many of the online reviewers expressed appreciation and excitement towards the diversity and representation present within Indigenous-designed or collaborated games. Reviewer 26 commented that the video game, *Hill Agency: PURITY/DECAY*, was a “stylistically gorgeous game and a refreshing futuristic representation of Indigenous people” (Metacritic). Similarly, Reviewer 17 wrote that “*Never Alone* shows that different cultures have wonderful stories to tell” (Metacritic). Reviewer 41 praised the creator of the rpg, *Ehdrigohr*, for developing an alternative to the “endless fantasy worlds modeled on mediaeval Europe” where “‘tribal’ peoples of any kind are exoticized or treated as inferior” (DriveThruRPG).

Respondents also expressed their opinions towards the role that games have in giving players opportunities to explore new perspectives, identities, and ways of life and how, in doing so, the player can gain a greater appreciation, sense of empathy, and understanding for that identity. For example, Gamer 2 observed that “feeling something for a character is a step towards, I think, real empathy.” Similarly, Gamer 10 expressed how “playing games from the perspective of someone different from you could be an opportunity to think about different interactions with and reactions to situations around you...and how that might affect someone whose experience of the world is different from yours.” Gamer 4 claimed that diverse “games

that support and validate... disability identities [are] better not just for the games, but for the people who are experiencing them and for the people around them to help find that compassion and understanding.” Gamer 6 claimed that when games intentionally and respectfully “reflect real ethnicities/identities and histories within our world,” they can “create more empathy.”

In the online reviews and forums, many players described how some of the games’ design elements and game mechanics helped further immersion within the storyline and portray the perspectives of the characters and communities whose identities are represented within the game. Reviewer 20 expressed how they “enjoyed playing *Never Alone* and being immersed in Alaska Natives’ folklore” (Metacritic). Reviewer 52 described *Dog Eat Dog* as “a devastating bit of game design that puts you in the heads of the colonisers and the colonised... It’d be uncomfortable to play, certainly, but not everything worthwhile is pleasant.” When reviewing the point and click video game, *When Rivers Were Trails*, Reviewer 29 commented, “the game offers a different, less-often seen perspective on the suffering, resistance, and adaptation of Indigenous people in response to the US policies of forcibly seizing indigenous land and forcing Indigenous peoples to relocate and re-start in places far from their homes” (Goodreads).

Due to the design elements of these games, many of the statements from both interview participants and online reviewers contained themes of decolonization or sentiments opposed to colonial values and the ways in which games can play an important role in unraveling those structures and oppressive systems. Gamer 1, for example, expressed how they believe that increased access to Indigenous video and tabletop games would help contribute to efforts for “truth and reconciliation, ... supporting Indigenous art, supporting Indigenous culture, and... supporting traditional or ancestral forms of art.” Gamer 1 also noted that these kinds of games “encourage people to engage with Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous points of view, think

about Indigenous futurity and alternate futures and Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty.”

Similarly, Gamer 13 expressed how they “remain hopeful that following the lead of Indigenous designers and game facilitators will allow settlers to learn about colonialism and indigeneity in the uniquely embodied, communal modes afforded by gaming.”

As previously stated, all the online statements were taken from reviews and forums about specifically Indigenous-designed or collaborated games. Many of the game developers included decolonial themes within the games, which will be discussed in detail later, but here we can see that these themes translated into gameplay and were well-received by the players who reviewed the games. Reviewer 45 commented that the rpg, *Dog Eat Dog*, is “one of those rare games we come across that do not necessarily have ‘fun’ as the end goal... It is thoughtful and intelligent and just a little uncomfortable” (Shut Up and Sit Down). In another statement for *Dog Eat Dog*, Reviewer 48 commends the developers, writing:

[t]his is honestly one of the most masterfully designed games I’ve ever read, it is overflowing with genius mechanics which create the oppressive culture of colonialism. Asking not whether the colonising force can be repelled through force, but rather can the natives thread the needle between assimilation and rebellion in a way that the coloniser will “grant them independence” which they themselves robbed from the island (DriveThruRPG).

In another rpg, *Ehdrigohr*, Reviewer 41 loved how the worldbuilding was “inspired by various Indigenous societies from our own world rather than by the usual Eurocentric fantasy tropes” (DriveThruRPG). Reviewer 23, who had been waiting for the release of *Hill Agency: PURITY/DECAY* for years, wrote a glowing review, claiming “Achimostawinan Games has hit it out of the park and into the post-colonial future, truly” (Steam Reviews).

Games serve as a powerful medium for storytelling, and many of the interview participants and online reviewers expressed the importance of storytelling within game design and the ways in

which it immerses the player. Gamer 7, for example, discussed games as “interactive media” and how games with “storytelling elements” positively contribute to the gaming experience. Gamer 4 recounted their experiences running tabletop roleplay games (ttrpgs) and how through collaborative storytelling they get to watch “people play through their characters and go through story arcs and watching how those characters change.” They also expressed how they “love seeing people interact with the world and become invested in it and getting a chance to explore themselves through their characters and learn about themselves and how they see the world as opposed to their characters.” Similarly, Gamer 7 explained how the storytelling in ttrpgs allows them to foster “connections with friends... enjoying the present and enjoying those things while still being yourself.” Gamer 11 stated how they enjoyed diverse stories told through games and how in the current gaming industry “you don’t see a lot of diverse stories” and how they “would like to see more Indigenous storytelling.”

The online reviews had similar sentiments to the interview participants, with many of the comments expressing appreciation and enjoyment of the unique and diverse stories told through the Indigenous-designed and collaborated games. For example, Reviewer 25 enjoyed the “interesting Indigenous futuristic story lines made by actual Indigenous peoples” of *Hill Agency: PURITY/DECAY*, specifically the “language integration into the dialogue and the Indigenous humour and cadence” (Steam Reviews). *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* had a large number of comments all praising the game’s narrative elements and storyline, with Reviewer 11 stating that the game is an “expressive medium to get us in touch with a civilization that has been dealing with nature’s hardships for centuries” and through the game’s design “you will learn a valuable lesson or two from its simple yet effective storytelling” (Metacritic). Reviewer 19 perfectly sums up the impact of a game like *Never Alone*, writing:

sometimes the small stories are the important ones. And ‘*Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*’ is a fantastic small story that tells a big story of a people, a culture that is unknown to us in so many ways. This platform game is a fantastic visual experience, with a very interesting and unique visual, but in addition to being a phenomenal gaming experience this game is much more than that, it is a history lesson, because for a people of storytellers, to tell their stories and experiences in this way, is something really phenomenal (Metacritic).

These findings demonstrate the recurring patterns, sentiments, and interpretations present within the data. Based on these results, five interconnected themes were developed to offer a comprehensive analysis of how both virtual and physical games can create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change. These themes not only reflect the patterns observed in the data but also integrate the theoretical frameworks that underpin this project.

4.3 Theme 1: Games Can Teach Empathy

The first theme to emerge from this study is the idea that games can teach empathy through perspective and immersion. When I say perspective, I am referring to the use of focalization and certain focalizers within games. Focalization occurs when specific narrative choices, called focalizers, are made to steer the observer towards a certain way of thinking or perceiving the story (Creanga, 2007; Kubicek, 2009). In this case, these are specific game design choices that further immerse the player within the story of the game and the perspective of the Player Characters (PCs) and Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Examples include character design, environmental design, dialogue choices, music design, etc. Certain aspects of game design further immerse the player within that world. For instance, the game, *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, uses specific design elements pertinent to the Inupiaq community to help the player connect to that culture and better understand certain aspects of the game. The game uses

scrimshaw, Figure 5.1, a traditional bone carving method used by the Iñupiat to record stories to help immerse the player in the culture and history of the community.



Figure 5.1: Image still of a scrimshaw style carving from the game, *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* (2014). (*Novel Alliances*, 2016)

In the game, *When Rivers Were Trails*, you play as a displaced Anishinaabeg person dealing with the Allotment Acts in the nineteenth century. You make decisions as an Indigenous person trying to navigate your way through challenges, facing Indian Agents, and meeting people from different nations as well as hunting, fishing, and canoeing along the way as you balance your wellbeing. The game utilizes traditional languages, plants, and other knowledge to enhance the immersive and educational elements within the game (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2: Image still of an NPC interaction from *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019). (*Indian Land Tenure*, 2019)

Based on the data presented, we can speculate that unique and diverse games and the design choices made by their developers not only immerse the player within the game but have the potential to teach them empathy and compassion for those represented in their games. The online reviews and forums are filled with statements from players illustrating their experiences with the games and how they have gained greater empathy and appreciation for the identities within the game. In the reviews of the game, *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, one player writes how the game “comes away as respectful of its inspiration and educational” (Reviewer 16, Metacritic) while another appreciates how the game showcases how “the connection between individuals and communities and how the ties that bind them together, can overcome the most seemingly impossible tasks” (Reviewer 6; Metacritic). The game also implements documentary-style video clips directly from the Iñupiaq community and its members from which the main story of the game is derived. Through these design and storytelling elements, players have connected with the characters and story, with one player appreciating “the extraordinary empathy that the relationship between the two protagonists creates” (Reviewer 5, Metacritic) and another describing how the game will “teach you few things and also will touch your soul” (Reviewer 13, Metacritic).

Several other Indigenous-designed and collaborated games illicit similar feelings within players. For example, the videogame, *Spirits of Spring*, is described by one player as “an allegory of healing” that “takes on the difficult task of cleaning an open wound, and trusts that each player will be able to trace the edges on their own” (Reviewer 37, Metacritic). The tabletop roleplay game (ttrpg), *Ehdrigohr*, is set in worlds alternate to the typical Eurocentric *Dungeons and Dragons*-style game, and many players appreciated how the author of the game included

“overall themes of struggle with mental illness (particularly depression), hope, and community,” (Reviewer 42, DriveThruRPG) as it created a deeper, more emotional experience.

Interview participants expressed similar sentiments as those above. For example, Gamer 2 described how a certain kind of video game “forces people to...take a look at what you know” and how the experiences within a game and the choices a player makes “are a way of teaching empathy.” Gamer 2 also expressed how “there’s a lot of games that really force you in so deeply into a specific role that you feel you should feel something for the characters...and feeling something for a character is a step towards, I think, real empathy.” Similarly, Gamer 12 stated, “I think games can force somebody to use a different perspective if they’re serious about actually role-playing the character.” Gamer 9 summed up this theme in their statement, “there’s no better teacher than walking in someone else’s shoes.”

Based on these experiences and testimonials, we can see that in some cases these developers and the stories they tell through their games are successful in helping players gain a greater understanding of and empathy towards the communities and cultures within them. In the next theme, I explore how this understanding and empathy can challenge player biases and mindsets.

4.4 Theme 2: Games Can Change Mindsets

The second theme derived from the data is the idea that, in some circumstances, games have the ability to change players’ mindsets through exposure and education. Several game companies and developers make this a part of their mission such as the creators of *Never Alone*, E-Line Media, which described itself as “a video game developer and publisher passionate about harnessing the power of games to help players understand and shape the world” (E-Line Media, 2025). Similarly, one of the core values of Achimostawinan Games is “to tell stories that want to

be shared in a way that is neither exploitative nor harmful” (Achimostawinan Games, n.d.). The creator of *Ehdrigohr*, Allen Turner, firmly “believes in the power of play and story as fundamental, powerful medicines which shape our sense of self, relationships, and our connection to the cosmos” (Council of Fools, 2015). As a final example, the creator of the *Potlatch Card Game*, NDN Players Games, observed that incorporating their “indigeneity and social equity skills” into the gaming world creates opportunities to increase a “scholarly Indigenous presence within popular culture” (NDN Players, 2020). By using their Indigenous and academic knowledge, they can model “Indigenous philosophies and understandings within gaming” (NDN Players, 2020).

Based on the data sample, a number of interview participants and game reviewers suggested that the games helped change their mindset related to complex topics such as diversity, inclusion, and colonization. In one online review of the point-and-click video game, *When Rivers Were Trails*, a teacher described their experience playing the game in their classroom, stating that:

[b]ecause this game offers a perspective on US Expansion/Colonialism not often as accessible, even just playing the game individually or as a class...then discussing the experiences and perspectives of the player character and non-player characters in the game will help teachers increase the diverse perspectives they include when exploring US expansion/imperialism westward (Reviewer 28).

Interview participants’ experiences aligned with those of the online gaming community. Gamer 7 described how the storytelling and interactivity of certain games can build a “whole other level of understanding and knowledge.” Gamer 2 discussed how a game depicting the lives of those suffering in war-torn countries “really challenges those assumption about what our lives look like here and what it looks like there...because we are so far removed.” Gamer 3 stated that often when running ttrpgs, they try to subliminally incorporate impactful ways of playing the game that challenge stereotypes and cultural biases, describing it as “taking something the players

already know and flipping their perspective.” Another participant, Gamer 4, also runs games and tries to provide opportunities for players to grow and reassess their “understandings and change their views and have all kinds of amazing experiences.”

Another interview participant described their experiences with how different forms of media have impacted their life, stating, “movies, TV, and games...are a great way to expose you to the fact that other people who don’t look like you are just the exact same. They have their own motivations, their own ways of being, and they have their own stories that are probably super interesting” (Gamer 2). A number of interview participants and online reviewers suggested that the games created by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) developers had the potential to change their mindsets and ways of thinking about the world. I will now move on to Theme 3, which explores how games contribute to a player’s social fabric.

4.5 Theme 3: Games Contribute to Social Fabric

An unexpected but relevant theme that arose when analyzing the results is that, for many players, games have contributed significantly to their social lives and personal relationships. Through gaming, many people have broadened their communities, befriending people from different backgrounds they may not have otherwise met. Additionally, when these groups come together, the games they play often foster discussions about complex topics such as racism, misogyny, and colonialism. This is especially true with games in the tabletop format like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Coyote and Crow*, or *Ehdrigohr*, as it creates space for players to interact face-to-face and engage in collaborative storytelling, world-building, and problem-solving. For example, Gamer 13 described how “tabletop games engage more of their desires for socializing, discussing the world, learning, and building community.” Similarly, Gamer 10

explained how they really enjoyed tabletop games and “the social aspect of telling complex and interesting stories with my friends using game mechanics and character interactions.” Gamer 7 described how playing games created community and a safe space to express themselves and how ttrpgs have become an integral part of their life. For them, “those connections with friends and also...the storytelling...and...living different scenarios...and being in the present” were some of the reasons they fell in love with gaming and found it such a powerful way to connect with others and themselves.

Another participant, Gamer 1, described how they participated in games of Indigenous created ttrpgs, *Ehdrigohr* and *Coyote and Crow*, with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous players at the table. In those experiences, Gamer 1 stated that there was some awkwardness among the players, especially with the settler players role-playing as Indigenous characters, which is a part of the game design in *Coyote and Crow*. Despite this discomfort, through role-playing, world-building, and engagement, the players were able to work through those feelings and connect with one another through discussion and problem-solving.

This theme was derived mostly from participant interviews; however, some of the online reviews expressed similar thoughts and feelings on the importance of community and connection. For example, one commenter stated that the game “*Never Alone* attempts to portray the message that the connection between individuals and communities and how the ties that bind them together, can overcome the most seemingly impossible tasks” (Reviewer 9, Metacritic). Another *Never Alone* reviewer expressed how that game contained “strong themes about friendship, courage and respect that you can play with your kids” (Reviewer 20, Metacritic). Finally, one online reviewer expressed that the game, *Spirits of Spring*, “teaches kids about bullying and friendship. The message is loud and clear” (Reviewer 36, Metacritic).

These comments and statements illustrate how games can create opportunities for community, discussion, and connection, and this is often the intent of the developers. For example, the creators of the *Potlatch Card Game*, NDN Players, state that an integral aspect of their company is that they are all “active participants in our communities, public scholars and social equity workers” (NDN Players, 2020). *On the Path of the Elders*, a Mushkegowuk and Anishinaabe peoples and Treaty No. 9. Cree culture and history education game impresses upon players that “there is strength in numbers, align yourself with like-minded people, be respectful, not arrogant or rude” (*On the Path of the Elders*, 2025). As mentioned above, the creator of *Ehdrigohr*, Allen Turner, expresses the importance of play and storytelling in shaping our communities, relationships, and connections to others, ourselves, and the world around us. Now that we have discussed how games create community and connection, we will now push that further and explore how games use this space for decolonization and resistance.

4.6 Theme 4: Decolonization and Resistance Through Game Space

The fourth theme to arise is that game space serves as a platform through which players can actively practice decolonization and create spaces of resistance to the dominant colonial society. The games that have been discussed in this study are decolonial as the worlds within them challenge colonial narratives and histories through Indigenous futurisms such as with *Coyote and Crow* and *Hill Agency: Purity/Decay*, or through education like *When Rivers Were Trails* and *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*. The spaces created through these games provide opportunities for players to have open and honest discussions about complex issues like decolonization and settler guilt. For example, the developers of *Never Alone* describe themselves as a company that seeks positive social impacts and produces games that “explore meaningful

themes, and provide gateways to new perspectives and interests” (E-Line Media, 2025). With Achimostawinan Games, the creators of *Hill Agency*, their mission statement explains how they intend to “be a globally established video company known for unique stories and gameplay that reflects an Indigenous perspective” (Achimostawinan Games, n.d.). As previously explained, NDN Players are game developers’ intent on incorporating Indigeneity into not only their company but all aspects of the gaming world and pop culture.

For some games, the educational component enables players to engage with complex topics like colonization and oppression as well as learn about alternate ways of being and knowledge systems. The point-and-click adventure game, *When Rivers Were Trails*, teaches players about “the impact of colonization on Indigenous communities in the 1890’s” (LaPensée, 2024). By the same creator, Elizabeth LaPensée, the game, *Thunderbird Strike*, takes a unique approach in educating players about the Alberta Tar Sands. The gamer plays as thunderbird protecting Turtle Island against the “snake that threatens to swallow the lands and waters whole” (LaPensée, 2024). In this game, the ‘snake’ is representative of the excavator equipment used in the tar sands.

Tabletop games also provide ample opportunity to interact with various forms of decolonization and resistance. The ttrpg, *Coyote and Crow*, is set in an alternate timeline in which colonization never happened, and you play as characters exploring this Indigenous world. Another ttrpg, *Ehdrigohr*, is described as a “non-traditional fantasy world” taking inspiration from Indigenous cultures rather than typical Euro-Medieval fantasy settings. *Dog Eat Dog* is a role-play game about “colonialism and its consequences” in which the players participate in the story of a community on a small Pacific Island in conflict with a foreign occupation. Finally, in

the board game, *Burn the Fort*, players must work together to defend their lands from colonizers who have invaded.

Based on online reviews and participant interviews, we can see how many players engage in discussion surrounding decolonization and resistance through game space. One commentor for *Hill Agency: Purity/Decay* expressed how “*Hill Agency* is a stylistically gorgeous game and a refreshing futuristic representation of Indigenous people” (Reviewer 26, Metacritic). For *Ehdrigohr*, players were excited to see fantasy worlds not “modeled on mediaeval Europe, and ‘tribal’ peoples of any kind exoticized or treated as inferior” (Reviewer 41, DriveThruRPG). Players of *Dog Eat Dog* were impressed with how the game recreates the “oppressive culture of colonialism” (Reviewer 48, DriveThruRPG) and succinctly teaches players how colonialism works. The design of these games can expose players to these complex social issues and encourage them to rethink their own biases and prejudices through gameplay.

Interview participants recounted their own experiences with decolonization and resistance in various game spaces. Gamer 1 described how playing Indigenous ttrpgs opened space for discussions of the repercussions of privilege and colonialism between Indigenous and non-Indigenous players. They stated that these kinds of games “encourage people to engage with Indigenous perspectives...and think about Indigenous futurity and alternate futures of Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty.” Gamer 1 also described how, for the Indigenous players in the group, role-playing in a decolonial world gave them a sense of catharsis, being able to explore settings in which their cultures and knowledge were at the forefront and in which they do not have to “deal with all the sh*t they deal with every day. They can explore and express...in security and joy.” Similarly, Gamer 7 described how, in their experience, “games are a way to act out imagined futures.”

We can see how Indigenous developers can create spaces of resistance and decolonization through their games and how players have entered those spaces and created opportunities to explore alternate ways of knowing and being. I will now move on to the final theme of this study in which I illustrate the desires of players for increased diversity and inclusivity within the gaming world.

4.7 Theme 5: Players Want Diversity and Inclusivity

This final theme synthesizes the overall findings of the study and the preceding themes, revealing that players consistently express a desire for greater diversity and inclusivity across three key areas: games themselves, the companies that produce them, and the communities that form around them. We can see evidence of this across game review sites and forums as well as testimonials from participant interviews. I also explore the current climate among game developers and studios who are interesting in producing the games players are looking for.

4.7.1 Diversity and Inclusivity in Games

In the gaming industry, dozens of new games come out every year, and while many people desire those games, there remains a lack of diversity and representation within the storylines, PCs, NPCs, etc., of the games currently available. Many players have noticed this deficit and expressed a desire for more diverse and unique games on the market. One player of *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, after commenting on their appreciation of the game design, stated that they “would really like to get more games like this.” One of the interview participants, Gamer 3, lamented how companies tend to opt for “big, almost blockbuster-type games...and so all these kind of smaller stories that are meaningful and should be told aren’t getting told.” Similarly, Gamer 2 explained how “there’s so many other experiences out there,” but those experiences are

ignored by most game companies and studios. In many of these cases, companies choose to create what many players think are just different variations of the same game. Gamer 11, for example, stated how they “love sequels and franchises...but at the same time you don’t see a lot of like diverse stories.” Gamer 5 expressed how they would like to see more diverse stories told through video and tabletop games complaining, “you know how many times I have vicariously lived through D-Day? There’s so much more to the world than the same events over and over again.”

In addition to simply having a more diverse range of games and stories, players want companies to take accountability throughout the development process and consider respectful representation and consultation when creating their games. Players, such as Gamer 8, believe that developers should not only create “more diverse games and characters,” but also explain why this diversity is important. Gamer 5 similarly remarked, “I am tired of shallow representation, as I think it’s dishonest to everyone. Like enough to say you are diverse but not enough to say you are portraying the culture well.” An interesting point Gamer 4 made is that in many games things like disabilities and diverse peoples are erased or “fixed.” They observed that many developers feel the need to do this to make gameplay run smoothly or to not upset any players; however, they believed that these kinds of differences do not need to be ignored but “acknowledged and treated with respect.”

These comments show how many players want more stories told from the perspective of other cultures in a respectful way that does not “sacrifice the representation of people with superficiality” and includes proper consultation with an authority of that culture (Gamer 5). I now move onto how players want more diversity and inclusivity within the actual game

companies and developers, with a call to “diversify the creators and the creations of both video and board games within Western Society today” (Gamer 6).

4.7.2 Diversity and Inclusivity in Companies

The players included in this study expressed a desire for increased diversity and representation within games, but they want that inclusion conducted in a respectful and considerate manner. One of the best ways to achieve this is to increase the diversity of those involved in the creation and production of the games themselves. The gaming industry is dominated primarily by white men and, as a result, diverse games are often not the first ones chosen to be developed or when they are the representation of certain communities often contain disrespectful stereotypes (Cameron, 2019; Leonard, 2003; Naidoo et al., 2020; Nakamura, 2019).

We can see this with games such as *Saints Row*, a game about running a crime syndicate in which the character creator page automatically spawns a black man, perpetuating the negative and harmful stereotypes that black men are aggressive and contribute to criminal activity. Many players have noticed these kinds of transgressions, and many blame the companies themselves. Gamer 7, for example, stated succinctly that diversity in companies is “actually not that hard and having, like, different people at the table and being a part of it that aren’t just all white, CIS men.” Additionally, Gamer 7 explained how having “different types of people at the table and really amazing storytellers” could create more unique and compelling games that tell meaningful stories. Similarly, Gamer 4 expressed how “we need more diverse representation within game development,” and Gamer 12 stated that larger gaming companies need to create “more space for different ideas and different people’s perspective of what would make a good game.”

While the gaming industry is dominated by companies who do not prioritize diverse stories, there are companies and developers who do. Many of them have already been mentioned such as E-line Media, Upper One Games, NDN Players, and Achimostawinan Games, who believe in “crafting original Indigenous stories for an original Indigenous audience” (Achimostawinan Games, n.d.). In Chapter 5, I explain more about how players can support these smaller developers and companies to uplift diverse voices as well as send a message to larger game companies.

4.7.3 Diversity and Inclusivity in Communities

As explained in Chapter 2, many communities surrounding both video and tabletop games are hateful and exclusionary to diverse peoples (i.e. BIPOC, LGBTQ2+, women, etc.). Several interview participants recounted their own experiences and knowledge of this hatred and the ways in which it needs to change. Gamer 11, for example, explained how video games create spaces that “male gamers tend to dominate and it tends to be less safe.” Gamer 9 believed that the game companies need to be the ones to “address the discriminatory behaviors that are rampant in game development (i.e. sexism, racism, transphobia, etc.).” Similarly, Gamer 2 complained about the gaming communities and their “rampant, visceral hatred of others and the way they gatekeep experiences and letting people in.” However, Gamer 2 also explained how the games company, Workshop, banned any use of hate speech or symbols and any users who engaged in such activity were not welcome in their community and would be removed from the company’s digital spaces. This kind of change, though rare for many companies, sends a powerful message to the gaming community, letting players know that hatred and discrimination of any kind is not okay. If more companies followed Workshop’s lead, they could have an

immense influence on their players and not only create safe spaces to play but encourage new gamers to join in.

4.7 Conclusion

The gaming industry is just that, an industry, and often companies are going to develop games that will earn them the most money, attraction, and fame. However, based on the comments, reviews, and interviews considered in this study, we can see that players can learn about other cultures and identities through games, and often desire more of those diverse, unique and compelling stories within games. Some of the themes and conclusions drawn from the results may apply more to physical games rather than virtual ones and visa versa . For example, physical, tabletop games may be more conducive to fostering moments of discussion and building community while video games can more easily provide moments of introspection and self-reflection. However, both formats of games have the ability to create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change. There are developers and smaller companies willing to tell those stories in respectful and impactful ways. The gaming world is only growing, and gamers have the power to speak out and lobby larger corporations to enact changes that will make gaming more diverse, inclusive, and positive. In the final chapter of this study, I sum up my key findings and provide recommendations for pathways forward not only within scholarship but the gaming industry as a whole.

5. Game Over or Continue? Conclusions and Next Steps

This chapter synthesizes the key findings from this thesis and situates them within an academic and practical context. In it, I revisit the project's main research questions, goals, and objective, addressing them in the context of the main results. I demonstrate how this research contributes to scholarship while also considering the study's broader implications. I provide reflections on the methodologies employed in addition to recommendations for the wider gaming world. I close with a discussion of directions for future research and final reflections.

The insights gleaned from the online statements and interview participants in this study confirm previous scholars' arguments that the gaming industry needs a major shift towards more inclusive, diverse, and respectful practices (Brooks et al., 2021; Bullock, 2022; Hines, 2022, 2023; Lancaster, 2022; Smith and Thakore, 2023; Trammell, 2020). By focusing on player experiences and desires, it is possible for games to provide opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change when done responsibly and with consultation. If developers are going to create games that represent real world cultures and communities, they have an ethical responsibility to consult with members of those community to ensure accurate and respectful representation. The sentiments portrayed through both online reviews and participant interviews demonstrate the desire and need for greater diversity and inclusion in all aspects of the gaming world. With greater recognition and support, both large and small game developers have a role to play in creating pathways towards the production of diverse, compelling, and quality games. In keeping with its overall theme and purpose, it seems appropriate to end this study by restating a quote from a reviewer of *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, "sometimes the small stories are the important ones."

5.1 Recap of Research Question, Goal, and Objectives

My research was guided by the overarching question: how can games create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change? To answer this question, I had one overarching goal for this study, to better understand how player experiences and real-world attitudes are influenced by the values, worldviews, and intentions embedded and expressed through game design choices. The following objectives allowed me to achieve this goal: (1) to explore prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and discourses within the gaming industry, focusing in particular on insights from both developers and players, (2) to compare and contrast player experiences and desires by analyzing data collected through semi-structured participant interviews and online player reviews, (3) to employ geographical theories of space and place alongside phenomenological approaches to perception, embodiment, and lived experience as guiding frameworks for data collection and interpretation, and (4) to propose concrete ways that game developers might integrate these findings into their design processes in order to foster more inclusive, critically engaged, and socially transformative games.

As stated in Chapter 1, the gaming industry is quickly growing and its reach into everyday life is becoming increasingly pervasive and evident. Understanding the relationship between players and the gaming world will allow us to better understand the ways in which people are affected by the games that they play and to what extent the developers and their design choices are responsible.

5.2 Synthesis of Key Findings

As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the findings from this study were organized into five main themes which encapsulate the main arguments and insights of this thesis. I now synthesize these

key arguments in the context of these themes. The first theme argued that games can teach empathy through their immersive qualities and providing gameplay from diverse perspectives. Online reviewers of Indigenous games like *Never Alone* and *Ehdrigohr* illustrate how impactful the presence of Indigenous culture, art, and storytelling is in the games. Certain game design choices can immerse the player within the game's narrative and place them in the shoes of the Player Character (PC). Through this, players can gain greater empathy for the communities represented within games, as shown in the online reviews and participant interviews.

The second theme explored how games can change players' mindsets and ways of thinking about the world around them, including any preconceived notions or prejudices they may have. Diverse games can expose players to communities, cultures, and ways of knowing that they may have never interacted with before. In this way, they become a tool or resource for not only introducing different cultures to a player but allowing them to learn about and better understand them. Interview participants, especially, demonstrated how diverse games can "build a whole other level of understanding and knowledge" (Gamer 7).

The third theme focused on how games can contribute to a player's social life. Several statements from gamers explained how playing games was a way to stay connected to friends and family. Others expressed how through games they met individuals from diverse backgrounds that they may not have met otherwise. Several interview participants stated that playing games with people with different identities than their own fostered critical discussions of complex issues such as colonization. Gamer 1, for example, played Indigenous tabletop role play games with Indigenous players and through that they were able to work through uncomfortable feelings and have important discussion through roleplay and worldbuilding.

Game space as an avenue for decolonization and resistance was the topic for the fourth theme. The results from both the online reviews and the participant interviews demonstrated how diverse games, both virtual and physical, can create spaces through which players can challenge and resist dominant narratives of oppressive colonial structures. Games like *Dog Eat Dog* recreate those structures through gameplay, allowing players to understand the effects of colonization and Indigenous erasure.

The final theme explores how players want diversity and inclusivity in three main areas of the gaming world: games, companies, and communities. Player statements illustrate how many developers are producing games with repetitive storylines and many gamers considered in this study believe that having more diverse perspectives in development will create more unique and compelling games. Additionally, several gamers relayed experiences of harassment or exclusion with the communities surrounding certain games, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds. To an extent, these communities are derived from the cultures and messages portrayed through games, such as with the hostility of *Call of Duty* chatrooms, a game centered around violence and war. Diversifying games, companies, and communities can make the gaming world more inclusive and accepting while also encouraging more people to explore gaming and create connections and stories that reflect a broader range of experiences, identities, and perspectives.

Together, these themes and their main arguments form a narrative that demonstrates the transformative potential of games. The first theme lays the foundation by showing how games can foster empathy through immersive storytelling and representation. This emotional engagement leads into the second theme, where empathy becomes a pathway for challenging preconceived notions and shifting players' worldviews. As players become more open-minded

and aware, the third theme shows how games also function as social tools, bringing people together across lines of difference and encouraging meaningful, sometimes difficult conversations. This social engagement connects to the fourth theme, where game space becomes a site for resistance and decolonization. The final theme ties these ideas together by emphasizing the need for structural change within the gaming industry and its communities. Ultimately, these key findings build toward a vision of a more inclusive and diverse gaming world.

5.3 Contributions and Implications

By considering the research findings presented in this study, the gaming industry can become a greater avenue through which to tell meaningful and engaging stories. Understanding player perception can allow us to further understand how games affect our perception of the world and how we absorb content. Additionally, examining the role that games play in decolonization efforts will help unravel colonial structures within today's games and make gaming more inclusive. As discussed in Chapter 2, different forms of media (i.e. games, TV shows, movies, etc.) are creating new spaces in which people have highly involved relationships with different aspects of media. This thesis has focused on game space and the influential relationships between players and the game environment. Cultivation theory and other approaches commonly used in communications and media studies could prove useful in geography when examining the relationship between people and more virtual spaces like game space. Methods from cultivation theory illustrate how design choices can affect a player's game experience and the messages they take away from it. Combining this framework with approaches from Indigenous and digital geographies allowed me to further explore games as lived spaces for players and their communities. As discussed in Chapter 1, integrating methodologies from both media studies and

human geography created a robust framework to examine games as both influential media and embodied spaces.

This thesis also worked to further develop the concept of game space and the relationship between games and their players. The results demonstrate how games of all types can create spaces of opportunity for connection, community, and discussion. In some cases, game spaces can provide a safe and controlled environment in which players can explore complex topics and problem solve through gameplay. Game space also creates possibilities for decolonisation and resistance as players interact with game design elements that more explicitly bring forward elements of colonization and oppressive structures, such as with the roleplay game *Dog Eat Dog*. Through game space, players can learn more about themselves and the world around them, re-evaluating their ways of thinking and re-imagining what the world and its future could be.

Ultimately, this thesis serves to illustrate the role that games can play in educating players about the importance of decolonization and creating positive, real-world change through broadening and diversifying community as well as creating spaces for discussion and problem solving. The results show that this kind of impact is not only possible but currently happening with several Indigenous-designed or collaborated games. Many who play these games can come away with a greater understanding of the communities represented, and their stories can foster empathy that alters the players' ways of thinking, as demonstrated by the statements from online reviews and participant interviews. If more developers create more mechanically sound games with the intention of educating the player, the gaming world and all its facets has the potential to become a more diverse, inclusive, and enriched place.

5.4 Methodological Reflections

As noted in Chapter 3, a significant limitation of this study was the lack of modern video and tabletop games that were either created by Indigenous designers or developed through meaningful collaboration with Indigenous communities. This scarcity posed considerable challenges throughout the research process. Specifically, several interview participants reported having limited or no prior exposure to games developed by Indigenous creators, which, in turn, restricted the depth of their responses regarding these types of games. Moreover, locating substantial online comments or reviews of such games required extensive and often time-consuming efforts, as these works tend to be underrepresented in mainstream gaming discourse and platforms.

Additionally, the broader demographic landscape of the gaming industry remains dominated by cisgender, heterosexual, white men. This demographic imbalance influenced the composition of the participant pool, limiting the range of perspectives included in the study. As a result, the participant sample did not reflect the level of diversity initially sought, potentially narrowing or skewing the results and we can infer that this lack of representation likely extends into online review spaces. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that the data collected may disproportionately reflect the attitudes of this dominant group, thus introducing a potential bias in the overall interpretation of the results.

Despite these constraints, the methodological design of the study exhibited several strengths, particularly in its innovative use of digital tools and platforms for participant recruitment and data collection. Using popular social media and messaging platforms among gamers like Discord allowed for easy communication with the local gaming community, Galleon Gaming Society,

and thus easier recruitment for participant interviews. Additionally, incorporating global platforms such as Metacritic and Steam Reviews as data sources allowed the project to capture a broader range of gamer perspectives from around the world. These methodological choices not only enriched the dataset but also demonstrated adaptability in navigating the limitations previously mentioned.

5.5 Recommendations

This thesis has focuses heavily on player experiences since that is what determines not only the success of a game and its developers but also the kinds of games likely to be made in the future. Through both the online game reviews and participant interviews, players expressed their appreciation and admiration for Indigenous-designed and collaborated games, enjoying stories alternate to those that have been previously available. As stated earlier, the only issue any of these reviewers had with the games was the actual game play and mechanics (i.e. bugs and glitches). It is therefore my recommendation that either larger corporations with higher budgets incorporate diverse stories and perspectives into their repertoire, or more support and funding be given to smaller game designers who are willing to make those unique and diverse games. This can be done through a variety of ways, the main two being crowdfunding and player influence. Crowdfunding is one of the most popular ways in which smaller game developers can receive direct player support to create their games. This method not only gives developers an incentive to create their games but shows them exactly how many people desire their game. Additionally, players who support a developer or game through crowdfunding typically receive the game when finished along with other rewards and gifts. Crowdfunding is an opportunity for players to have a hand in supporting the games they want to play and encourage those developers to create more.

Convincing larger companies to focus on smaller stories is more difficult, yet players and their communities do have significant influence on the gaming industry and market. Players can abstain from purchasing sequels or games that reiterate the same storyline repeatedly. Players can also directly contact companies, creating online campaigns informing them of what storylines and perspectives they would like to see included in the games produced. Change is not simple or easy, but through community and collaboration, the gaming industry can become a more diverse and inclusive space.

I also strongly recommended that educators and academic institutions consider incorporating games from diverse perspectives, particularly tabletop games such as *Burn the Fort*, into their curriculum when addressing themes related to colonization and its impacts. These games, by virtue of their interactive and participatory nature, offer unique pedagogical value in fostering critical engagement and reflective thinking. They allow students to encounter complex historical narratives and power dynamics in a simulated, yet emotionally resonant, environment that encourages active learning.

This approach aligns with Brenda Romero's (2010) influential work, which highlights the educational power of games to convey complex and often emotional material in a manner that is both immersive and accessible. Through game-based learning, students are invited to inhabit roles, make decisions, and witness consequences in ways that can deepen their understanding and elicit empathy. Such experiences can be particularly impactful in teaching difficult concepts like colonialism, as they shift learners from passive to active participants.

Furthermore, integrating these games into educational settings contributes to a more inclusive and decolonial pedagogical framework by elevating Indigenous narratives and perspectives that

are often marginalized in conventional teaching materials. By engaging with games developed by or in collaboration with Indigenous communities, students are offered a more nuanced and culturally grounded understanding of historical and contemporary issues. This experiential form of learning not only complements textual and lecture-based instruction but also supports the development of critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and historical consciousness among learners.

When done intentionally and respectfully, diverse representation within games is powerful and can create positive change in all aspects of the gaming world. To achieve this goal, companies need to not only consider alternative stories and ways of thinking but bring new perspectives and developers to the table. These kinds of changes can enrich player experience by exposing them to a wide variety of stories, cultures, and ways of being. The testimonies from players in this thesis illustrate that it is possible for gamers to gain a greater understanding and empathy for certain communities when they play games from the perspective of that culture or identity. Through gaming, players can learn more about the world around them and even shift their mindsets and any preconceived notions or prejudices they may have held prior.

5.6 Directions for Future Research

Future research surrounding the gaming industry can continue to explore player experiences and desires, as gamers are the one ultimately affected by the decisions made by the developers. Focusing on player perceptions can open a wealth of possibilities in studying the relationship between players and game space. For example, scholars could explore how games like *Spiritfarer* create space to work through grief. As stated in Chapter 2, some players, especially those in the LGBTQ2+ community, use games like *Sims* to express themselves and explore their

identities in a safe space. Considering games as legitimate sites of social and spatial construction can lead to new questions for future research in both media studies and geography.

An alternative approach to this study would be to host focus groups that play Indigenous-designed or collaborate games and document the participants experiences and discussions before, during, and after gameplay. With this method, researchers could more directly document players' perceptions of the game content and design choices and how it affects them. Focus groups would be useful when exploring questions of game space, because it would enable scholars to observe and record the interactions within game space in real time. The gaming industry is growing quickly and has become an integral part of many people's lives. Understanding both the positive and negative aspects of the player-game relationship within game space is paramount and should be the focus of future researchers interested in the intersections of media and geography.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, documenting societal change resulting from playing Indigenous designed or collaborated games is difficult considering the scope of this project, and this thesis is representative of only one part of a larger process. In future research, a larger scale project could document the effects of playing transformative games over a longer period to document the full process and how a player's attitudes and biases may change throughout the project. This could be done with either focus groups or individual participants and either video or tabletop games.

In the context of this study, the anonymity of interview participants was carefully maintained, and individual identity markers, such as race, gender, and sexuality, were intentionally excluded from both the dataset and subsequent analysis. This decision was made in an attempt to center the players' gaming experiences and perspectives without preemptively framing them through specific identity lenses. However, as mentioned in the project's

limitations, the gaming world has historically been dominated by cis-white players and while keeping participants' identities anonymous is beneficial in certain respects, it also represents a limitation in terms of the depth of socio-cultural insight that could be derived. Identity factors can shape how individuals interact with games, both in terms of content and community, and influence their interpretations, emotional responses, and senses of inclusion or exclusion within gaming spaces. Future research would benefit from adopting a framework that incorporates participant identity as a meaningful analytical lens. By exploring how a gamer's identity can interact with gaming practices, scholars could generate a more comprehensive understanding of how diverse individuals experience games differently. Such an approach would also contribute to ongoing efforts within game studies to amplify underrepresented voices and to interrogate the norms and power structures within gaming cultures. Including these perspectives would not only enrich academic discourse but also support the development of a more inclusive and diverse gaming world.

5.7 Final Reflections and Closing

The examples presented in this thesis only touch upon the various ways in which games can create opportunities for decolonization, education, and social change. Examining the relationship between players and game space is critical for understanding how games influence gamers' understandings and perceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them. The results of this thesis can help both developers and players make conscientious and responsible decisions when creating games, choosing which games to support and play, and how to conduct themselves in gaming communities. At its core, gaming is meant to be fun. It can create opportunities to build connections, learn about the world, and learn about yourself. Currently,

however, this is only true for certain gamers. Gaming communities can be exclusionary, and many companies have prioritized profit, creating similar games without exploring new stories or perspectives. Through these practices, developers have alienated whole demographics from their games. The findings and recommendations presented in this thesis are building blocks for game companies to change this narrative. In the right hands, games aren't just play, they're powerful instruments for education, decolonization, and social change, shaping not just how we spend time, but how we understand the world and each other.

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Appendix A

Game Name	Game Description	Game Visuals
Never Alone (2014)	An atmospheric puzzle platformer developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska Native people, drawn from a traditional story that has been shared across the generations.	 <p style="text-align: center;">(E-Line Media, 2014)</p>
Hill Agency: PURITY/DECAY (2022)	Hill Agency: PURITY/DECAY is an Indigenous cyber noir detective game where you play as a private investigator solving everything from petty crimes to global conspiracies all while exploring the various different worlds that make up North America of the future.	 <p style="text-align: center;">(Achimostawinan Games, 2022)</p>
When Rivers Were Trails (2019)	When Rivers Were Trails is a 2D point-and-click adventure game in which you play as a displaced Anishinaabeg person dealing with the impacts of the Allotment Acts in the 1890s. Displaced from their traditional territory in Minnesota they head west to California due to the impact of allotment acts on Indigenous communities, facing Indian Agents, meeting people from different nations, and hunting, fishing, and canoeing along the way as they balance their wellbeing.	 <p style="text-align: center;">(Indiecade, n.d.)</p>

<p>Thunderbird Strike (2017)</p>	<p>In the 2D sidescroller Thunderbird Strike, you play as a thunderbird flying from the Tar Sands to the Great Lakes to protect Turtle Island from the snake that wants to eat the land and water. It serves as an allegory for the Alberta Tar Sands and the extraction that occurs there.</p>	 <p>(Elizabeth LaPensee, 2017)</p>
<p>On the Path of the Elders (2009)</p>	<p>On the Path of the Elders is an interactive educational game inspired by Cree culture and history and created in collaboration with Indigenous communities.</p>	 <p>(Ānako Indigenous Research Institute, 2014)</p>
<p>Spirits of Spring (2014)</p>	<p>Spirits of Spring is an IOS game that tells the story of Chiwatin and his best friends, Rabbit and Bear. Chiwatin is a young Indigenous boy who maintains the balance between spring and winter by controlling magical Spirits.</p>	 <p>(Shaun Musgrave, 2014)</p>
<p>Burn the Fort (2024)</p>	<p>In Burn the Fort, each player takes the role of a historic warrior fighting to stop colonial invasion of their lands. Players take turns gathering & playing cards, trading, battling wagons, and gathering resources to burn the fort.</p>	 <p>(Indigenous Action, n.d.)</p>


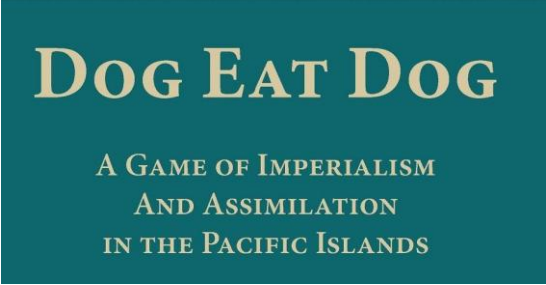

<p>Ehdrigohr (2013)</p>	<p>In Ehdrigohr, you roleplay a character struggling to survive in a recovering world. It is a fantasy game of high heroics, powerful magic, and survival horror.</p>	 <p>(Allen Turner, 2013)</p>
<p>Dog Eat Dog (2013)</p>	<p>Dog Eat Dog is a game of colonialism and its consequences. As a group, you work together to describe the conquest of one of the hundreds of small islands in the Pacific Ocean, defining the customs of the natives and the mores of the outsiders arriving to claim it.</p>	 <p>(Liwana Press, n.d.)</p>
<p>Potlatch Card Game (2018)</p>	<p>Potlatch, the game, is a strategic, educational card game based on Indigenous philosophies. It is designed to meet K-12 educational standards for teaching about native history, economics, culture, and government.</p>	 <p>(Lisa Bontje, n.d.)</p>

Table 3.2: Table containing game descriptions and visuals.