

### **CURRICULUM THEMES**

Social Issues, Taking Action, Diverse Perspectives, New Art Forms/Media, Technology, Digital Media, Indigenous

Grade: 8-12, University Students

### **CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS**

CH8.2: Students will analyze the work of contemporary Indigenous artist Dallas Flett-Wapash (Ininew/Saulteau). They will learn about how his digital artwork addresses social issues such as the inclusion of Indigenous artists in new mediums, and the social inequities that can exist on reserves because of colonialism and racism.

CH9.3: Students will investigate the diversity of artistic ideas, styles, and media in contemporary arts expressions by learning about Dallas Flett-Wapash's digital art practice. Dallas is Ininew (Cree) and Saulteaux (from the Keeseekoose First Nation, Saskatchewan), and explores digital art through the lens of an Indigenous

CH10.1: Students will learn how artist Dallas Flett-Wapash (Ininew/Saulteau) draws attention to his personal and cultural values and beliefs through video game design. He also challenges the mainstream ideas often presented in video games.

CR20.1: Students will research artworks by Dallas Flett-Wapash inspired by Nintendo Entertainment System games, but incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing. He combines Indigenous knowledge and technology by using video games as a medium. through the lens of an Indigenous cultural context.

CH30.1: Students will research an Indigenous artist whose work challenges societal norms. Afterwards, they will create an artwork that explores how video games can reinforce or challenge commonly held values and beliefs. They will be creating an image that imagines an improved version of their favourite video game- one that better represents their own personal values.

## **DALLAS FLETT WAPASH**

Dallas Flett-Wapash is digital artist who works with video games and other interactive technologies. He is Ininew (Cree) and Saulteaux (specifically from the Keeseekoose First Nation, Saskatchewan). Dallas currently lives in Fox Lake Cree Nation, in northern Manitoba. His practice is an ongoing digital reconstruction of his cultural identity. Dallas examines and shares his experiences, beliefs, culture, language, and lifestyle using video game aesthetics. His work also challenges the current practices of video game design, and uses game engines and design tools in unusual ways.

Dallas is also an educator who works to make digital mediums accessible to all artists. He has taught digital arts workshops for many arts and educational organizations, including the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

His recent accomplishments include being part of two co-exhibitions with Taylor McArthur: *!in:Site*; for the Art Gallery of Manitoba, and Azimuth Nitehi for the Video Pool Media Arts Centre. Dallas participated in the MacKenzie Art Gallery's first Digital Artist in Residency program. He has done lots of work with the Unity engine, including researching augmented reality techniques through a Canada Council for the Arts grant, creating a four-part online series on learning Unity for Create2Learn, and assisting the National Film Board with Unity.

### **CONTENT ADVISORY**

The resources related to Landscapes of Digital Art are intended for an older audience than some of our Studio Sundays/Teacher Resources. We recommend using this resource with ages 14+/Grade 8 and up.

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Dallas Flett-Wapash created the seven games in *IndigiNES* as part of the online exhibition *lin:Site*; for the Art Gallery of Southern Manitoba. Dallas's games were originally meant to be experienced in a setting that would bring visitors back in time to the experience of gaming in the early 1990's. However, in response to Covid-19, this exhibition was moved entirely online.

The seven games in *IndigiNES* reference different Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) games. For example, the game "Awas Dogs" looks like and is played very similarly to *Pac Man*, "Kevin's 24/7" takes inspiration from *Castlevania*, and "Rena" makes cooking feel like a Pokémon battle. While these games were created with the modern game engine Unity, Dallas limited himself to the NES's colour palette. He used Aseprite to design graphics with large, visible pixels. The games are played with an NES controller, rather than a mouse and keyboard.

Despite these references, the stories these games tell are entirely Dallas's. They are rooted in his experience as an Indigenous person who grew up on reserves in Canada. For example, "Awas Dogs" relates to his personal experiences being chased by dogs while walking to the grocery store with his mother. It speaks to the costs of living on reserves, and to the \$5 yearly treaty payment that hasn't changed with inflation. It also speaks to Indigenous worldviews; notice the turtle-shaped playing field referencing Turtle Island (an Indigenous name for North America). Throughout the games and menu screens, Dallas uses Cree words and syllabics. He also uses the vernacular of the Swampy Cree reserve he grew up on (a vernacular is a language style specific to a place or group of people). Deadleh!

These works of art let people with similar lived experiences to Dallas feel represented in video games. They re-imagine a past with Indigenous artists included in mainstream video game design. At the same time, they allow people who have never lived on a reserve to learn about Dallas's experiences. These games highlight both the unique positive experiences of reserve life, as well as the hardships that come from the social inequality many Indigenous communities face. These games could be described as retro-futurism, as they use an art style from the past combined with modern technology, and examine how early digital artworks (like NES games) felt modern or futuristic at the time of their creation. This style hints at how social inequality has also kept many Indigenous communities living in conditions that feel like they belong in the past. It also makes us think about what digital art will look like in the future if Indigenous artists are better represented.

Click here to watch the games from *IndigiNES* in action, and hear Dallas speak about his works:

<https://youtu.be/o3qk3GQ8ddQ>

Or watch his talk on another one of his creations, *Crappy Home Designer*. It's inspired by *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and looks critically about the capitalist values present in many games.



## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Why do you think representation for all groups and cultures in new forms of media is important?

Indigenous Futurism is an artistic movement that looks at how Indigenous culture intersects with technology, and imagines what Indigenous futures could be like. It is often closely related to the genres of science fiction and speculative fiction. The term was created by Anishinaabe author and professor Grace Dillon, and is inspired by the term Afrofuturism. Artworks that are part of Indigenous Futurism often imagine a past where European colonization of Indigenous lands did not take place, and how Indigenous culture might be more woven into modern and future mainstream cultures in this scenario. How does *IndigiNES* fit into this genre?

# ACTIVITY

Inspired by Dallas Flett-Wapash's re-imagining of Nintendo games, examine one of your own favourite games, and create a re-designed "screen shot" that better fits your current viewpoint and experiences.

## WHAT YOU NEED

- Writing tools and paper, or word processor
- Optional: [worksheet](#)
- Drawing materials of your choice, or digital art platform of your choice.

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Even works of art that we love can be thought about critically. Pick your favourite video game on any platform. Ask yourself some of the following questions, and write down your answers:

What worldview does this game represent? (A worldview is how someone understands the world based on their past experiences and cultural background.)

How do I see that worldview represented in this game?

Who are the "good guys" in this game?

Who are the "villains" in this game?

Who is not represented in this game?

What does this game show to be important?

What does this game show to be unimportant?

2. Think about your own worldview. What has shaped your beliefs and values? What experiences have you been through?

3. Think about how you could change your favourite game to better represent your own worldview. Write down some of the changes you would like to make. Some examples could include:

Updating the characters.

Changing the art style or colour palette.

Changing the language or vernacular the game uses.

Changing the goals of the game.

4. Draw an imagined "screen shot" from your redesigned favourite game, as if you paused the game while playing and took a picture of it. You could do this on paper with any medium you like, or you could create this screen shot digitally.

Some free software suggestions include:

[Pixilart](#), if you want a retro 8-bit look.

[Inkscape](#), a free alternative to Adobe Illustrator.

[Krita](#), a digital painting program.