

# Tino Rangatiratanga in Games: Three Tales of Māori Game Development

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## INTRODUCTION

The videogame industry has long been decried as a cultural appropriator and rampant reproducer of colonial tropes. When depicted, the Indigenous image, and correspondingly the Māori image, have become synonymous with either that of a “servant” or “barbaric warrior” (Mahuta 2012, 127). In retaliation, sovereignty and self-determined representation are commonly evoked as a demand. These words imply that Māori should take the metaphorical reins to self-represent and that non-Māori should aid that goal. However, while useful as an appeal, they are abstractions; unactionable on their own. To take “the next step beyond protest” (Mahuta 2012, 130), we must first investigate the questions these terms raise. How are sovereign games made in a Māori context and what does it mean to make them?

Set within the intersection of Games and Indigenous studies, *Tino Rangatiratanga<sup>1</sup> in Games: Three Tales of Māori Game Development* combines qualitative interviews and textual analysis to illuminate the emerging, culturally nurturing, efforts of three Māori game developers. This paper examines the production processes and design of the games, *Guardian Maia* (Metia Interactive, 2018; Metia Interactive, 2022), *Toroa: Skycall* (Atawhai Interactive, 2023), and *Umurangi Generation* (Origame Digital, 2020), under a decolonial lens. To uphold Indigenous knowledge and to centre human subjectivity, Kaupapa Māori<sup>2</sup> and story-work methodologies are incorporated into this research. Kaupapa Māori research represents Maori researchers' endeavours to “retrieve space” in academia (Smith 2021, 239). Graham Smith (1990, cited in Smith, 2021, 241) defines it as research that is “connected to Māori philosophy and principles” and which reasserts the “validity” and “importance” of Māori culture and knowledge. Story-work methodologies, more specifically Jenny Lee-Morgan’s (2019) pūrākau<sup>3</sup> methodology, is used to similarly draw upon indigenous oral storytelling traditions. Being a narrative-based approach, pūrākau as a methodology centres human emotion and experience to “engage people of the ‘real world’” (Lee 2005, 9). I meld conventional analysis methods like thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and the pūrākau methodology to present my findings and interview discussions.

Self-determined representation, or representation that includes the Indigenous community, is not always as simple as consulting one Indigenous person. When depicting Māori stories, this is particularly true. Even Māori game developers might require extensive consultation to make their game ethically from a cultural standpoint. Unlike many Western conceptions, Indigenous knowledges are “relational” (Brayboy

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et al. 2012, 436). This means that knowledge is thought of as cumulative and not owned by the individual. When considering Loban's (2024) notion that cultural representations are, in actuality, representations of knowledge, game developers are therefore responsible for how these representations affect the entire community. From this angle, inaccurate depictions could not only reinforce harmful stereotypes but also misinform rangatahi<sup>4</sup> attempting to reconnect to their culture. This paper explores how Māori game developers are navigating creating games that are "culturally safe" while also juggling the recurrent demands of everyday game development.

The game developers presented in this paper walk paths uncharted. Without predecessors to depict "correct" procedures for representing our culture in a space beyond tūpuna<sup>5</sup> imaginings, they must carve their own. Their stories can neither offer clear-cut methods to success nor completely replicable approaches to ethical and meaningful representation. However, by analysing their experiences, achievements and missteps, this research will explore the genesis of Māori-made games and how they might exemplify "a concept of play that points to the future" (Trammell 2022, 245).

## ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Tino Rangatiratanga loosely translates to Māori self-determination or sovereignty.

<sup>2</sup> Kaupapa Māori, as a term, is defined as Māori approaches, topics, practices, or principles.

<sup>3</sup> Pūrākau is a Te Reo Māori word for oral storytelling traditions or narrative.

<sup>4</sup> The word rangatahi refers to the younger generation, or Māori youths.

<sup>5</sup> Tūpuna is a Te Reo Māori word for ancestors or grandparents.

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## **BIO**

Anika Clancy is an independent researcher focusing on decolonial and post-colonial game studies. They have recently undertaken a Bachelor of Media and Communication (Honours) degree at RMIT University, where they investigated three Māori game developers' approaches to "sovereign" game development. Passionate about Indigenous storytelling and the emergence of Māori-made games, Anika hopes to highlight and encourage further efforts for autonomous cultural expression in games through research.

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