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Making Space: Reading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report in and Beyond the Classroom through Practice-Based Research

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

In a graduate-level Digital Storytelling course in the Department of Communication at the Université de Montréal, the first project I assign is called a “Collective Experimental Story.” The intention of this project is to introduce students to collaborative storytelling and to explore a platform that enables participatory forms of presentation and co-creation. I enter into this experimental process *with* students. In Fall 2021, I proposed that the project respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Reading Challenge. From 2008 to 2015, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission produced a report documenting the history and ongoing impacts of the country’s residential school system on First Nations. This report includes 94 Calls to Action, including a call for teachers at all levels to address these histories and their effects in the classroom. Students in my course were excited by this proposal. Over the first seven weeks of the course, we read the report, defined the objective and approach of our project, conducted research and development to identify a suitable platform, and divided tasks. We used Gather Town—an online meeting platform that boasts an old-school pixelated video game interface—to stage a live event. The goal was to share what we had learned and to open space for dialogue. Participants circulated as avatars in our simulated spaces. In this article, four of us who were involved in the project describe our practice-based research process.

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Introduction: Gathering

I (Natalie) teach a graduate-level Digital Storytelling course in the Department of Communication at the Université de Montréal. The first project that I assign in this course is called a "Collective Experimental Story." This assignment is an experiment for me too; in each of the three iterations of the course, I had no idea what to expect when I proposed it to students (Doonan 2002). The intention of this project is to introduce collaborative storytelling and to explore a platform that enables participatory forms of co-creation and presentation. I enter this experimental process *with* students, and we all explore new methods and subject matter together. In this article, I report on the project created by this class in the fall of 2021.

The approach to storytelling described in this case study modestly engages in the uncertain project of reconciliation between First Nations and settler populations in Canada. This is a monumental task that is by its very nature collective, precarious, and long-term. It is a place not of resolution but of questioning. While Indigenous scholars such as Taiaiake Alfred (2022), Glen Coulthard (2014), and Leanne Simpson (2011) have clearly expressed the problems and even impossibilities of "reconciliation," I use it in this article in a very circumscribed way in response to the Calls to Action contained in the report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which impel non-Indigenous Canadians and institutions to engage in reconciliation processes. Alfred criticizes the TRC Report for serving as a means of assuaging settler-colonial guilt and addressing First Nations people as victims, camouflaging the underlying sources of oppression, which are, as he says, "dispossession, destruction, and dependency; it is Colonialism in 3-D" (2022, 77). In this climate, Alfred assesses the TRC Report as an attempt "to bring Indigenous people into a situation in which they can access the benefits of capitalism and industrial society" (77–78). At the risk of naivety then, I will describe a first attempt to bring the TRC Report into the classroom to expose students to colonial-capitalist histories in this country and to the structures undergirding these ongoing processes of dispossession.[1]

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Employing anticolonial strategies in the classroom, as it is discussed below, implicates both content and methodology to work against institutional policies that have been long established in this country, summarized by Duncan Campbell Scott, superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs in 1920, as the assimilation of every "Indian" until there are none left.[2] In terms of content, my aim is to expose students to colonial histories and legacies in Canada, including such institutionalized policies of erasure and dispossession. In terms of methodology, I take direction from the work of Indigenous scholars, notably Shawn Wilson and Kathleen Absolon. Wilson has done extensive work studying the shared aspects of the ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and research methods employed by diverse Indigenous scholars in Australia and in Canada, noting in particular a shared focus on relationality (2008, 7). Absolon (2011) likewise draws comparisons between Indigenous approaches to research across the country, underlining the centrality of Indigenous worldviews and the positionality of the researcher; process rather than goal-oriented work; recognition of one's support systems (Elders, ancestors, community, etc.); holism (attention to Spirit, heart, mind, and body); and negotiation between academic and Indigenous theories, methods, and expectations. As a non-Indigenous person, my understanding of these methodologies is limited, since I have not been socialized in these contexts. Practice-based research (PBR), however, has many parallel alignments: horizontal teaching/learning; approaching the topic as a beginner rather than as an expert; attending to affect and the senses; and engaging in acts of making public as openings to conversation instead of treating these as outcomes, statements, or conclusions. This methodological approach resists the colonial-capitalist logic that reduces student value to tuition dollars, treats professors as service providers, and insists on the constant generation of products as evidence of worthiness.[3] In contrast to this consumer-cultural rationale, PBR is conducive to cultivating relations, a concern that is common with Indigenous methodologies (Simpson 2011; Wall Kimmerer [2013] 2016).

In the iteration of the course discussed here, I had proposed to students that we create something in response to the TRC Reading Challenge (http://trcreadingchallenge.com), which I had just learned about. This is an initiative launched by Jennifer Manuel, a former schoolteacher and archivist for the Ktunaxa Nation, that aims to recruit as many people as possible to read *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] 2015). People are invited to sign up online and to share their reading progress with others. From 2008 to 2015, the TRC produced a report documenting the history and ongoing impacts of Canada's residential school system on First Nations communities, as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Its executive summary report includes ninety-four Calls to Action. Among these are calls for teachers at all levels to address these histories and their effects in the classroom. Students in my course were excited by this proposal to join the TRC Reading Challenge. Over the first seven weeks of the course, we read the TRC Report; we defined the objectives and approach of our project; we conducted research and development to identify a suitable platform for sharing our responses to the TRC Report; and we divided our work.

In reporting on this experience, I do not claim any sort of expertise in anticolonial pedagogy.[4] I do very much wish to be part of decolonizing and reconciliation processes though. In my teaching, I always try to impart to students that making ideas public—through speaking, writing, performing, or any form of (re)presentation—means opening or engaging in conversation. I am following my own advice here and sharing research-creation in its embryonic phase. PBR, with its focus on process, can help to reframe the notions of (re)presentation, performance, and publication as outcomes,

understanding these instead as manifestations of thought-in-the-making. Importantly, this is a relational process.

Developing work for publication, particularly in academia, often entails eliminating any trace of emotion. And yet there are emotions. There is fear. Risky topics are avoided. The third person is adopted. Immediate personal reactions are edited out, or more probably never get articulated. For me, PBR honours a slowing down that allows for acknowledgment of these feelings. In her book *The Minor Gesture*, Erin Manning writes about the relational field that is conventionally obliterated in the act of writing. Here, I am thinking about the classroom as a relational field. Given that this is a Digital Storytelling course, its relational field extends to the Internet, and to the creative platform that we used. This article too belongs to this "co-composition with a world in the making. A worlding," to borrow Manning's words (2016, 132). This idea resonates with Michael Taussig's notion that the field is the site where self and other meet (2011). This site of encounter is destabilizing, unsettling and unsettled. What is the role of the educator within such a field? I propose that it is one of facilitation, which is a "reciprocity in a field of experience" (Manning 2016, 142). According to Manning, the facilitator helps to carry the feeling, to move an event toward its satisfaction. Clearly then, the educator is not the only facilitator. I was not the instigator (or provoker) of the project described below, having responded to invitations circulating online. Evidently, the TRC Report itself is an important facilitator in this story. Likewise, each student participant facilitated the movement of feeling toward certain moments of achievement, and beyond. The tools we used have also helped to co-compose the field.

An important question that emerges in the midst of all this is, How do we carry stories, especially when they do not belong to us? In what follows, there are multiple references to the efforts that we made to design "safe" and "comfortable" spaces for discussion. This should not be misunderstood as an attempt to soften the blow of the stories that we tried to communicate. Our concern with the aesthetics of the virtual meeting spaces we used had to do with our desire to make the event accessible and to make it feel nonthreatening. On the one hand, we were conscious that digital tools are often intimidating. We wanted to use a platform that could be navigated with a minimal degree of digital literacy. On the other hand, we worried about the discussions being triggering for some people. We wanted to preempt, as much as possible, any form of aggression within the space. Creating a warm and inviting interface was one strategy for achieving these goals.

The very design of the project is meant to expose colonial structures in the classroom. I have tried to remain responsive to emergent, unfolding events. This contrasts with planning a project in advance, with a series of lectures or activities leading toward predefined objectives. This PBR methodology is, it seems to me, anticolonial in its denial of mastery. What Manning characterizes as the "neurotypical" assumptions of volition, agency, and (especially) individuality are dismantled in the collective, experimental project. As non-Indigenous scholars, the collaborators in this project cannot take an authoritative role in this work. While recognizing the significant limitations of our impact, I see it as part of much larger processes that will be developed in future iterations of the course, and across the ongoing works of the authors. "With Indigenous resurgence at the centre of anti-colonialism," writes Elizabeth Carlson, "the roles of white settler academics are at the periphery, making space, and pushing back against colonial institutions, structures, practices, mentalities, and land theft. . . . [E]ven though participation in anti-colonial practice on the part of white settlers [is] a limited possibility, it remains a moral and ethical responsibility" (2016, 5). Doing this work within the short time constraints of a course project is only one of the major restrictions of this endeavour.

Certainly, we have not been able to achieve any form of redress, but we are pushing back. This kind of work in academia does inevitably meet resistance and is thus a provocation.

Collective Decisions

Together we decided to plan a public event, and to do our best to create a space conducive to discussing the content of the TRC Report with a wider group of participants. One master's student suggested that we use Gather Town—an online meeting platform that boasts an old-school pixelated video game interface and that can host a variety of audiovisual materials. Any number of participants can circulate within the spaces designed by the host(s), under the guise of customizable avatars. Students embraced the process of researching and testing the capacities of Gather Town, and we decided that it offered the functionalities that we were looking for.

The class of fifteen was divided into groups of two and three, with each taking responsibility for one section of the TRC Report. We fixed October 26, 2021, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. for a public presentation, during which we planned to share what we had learned from our reading, in an open conversational format, and with the support of audiovisual media. Each group designed a room inside our shared space. I was responsible for writing an introductory address, which I presented around a virtual campfire that I had added to the common space for this purpose. I also created a short video that I placed in this common area. The video focuses on some of the visual and audible evidence of Kanien'kehá:ka dispossession in the neighbourhood where our campus is located. These contributions were to set the tone for the journeys that students created in their separate rooms, which were located adjacent to this common space.

Video example: https://vimeo.com/636578741.

In the following sections of this article, four of us will guide readers of *Performance Matters* through our PBR process. Our own positionalities in this project were discussed at length in preparation for the public event in Gather Town. We read the TRC Report from a variety of perspectives: as non-Indigenous citizens, residents, and visitors to Canada, and as scholars in the Francophone Canadian university system. We were careful to avoid presenting ourselves as educators, there to teach others about the violence of colonization processes in this country. Instead, we wanted to invite an open public to listen with us. Our goal was to share our learnings about the histories and ongoing effects of residential schools, and our personal reflections on what it means to hold these stories. We took up the question raised in the Report: on the path toward reconciliation, "where do we go from here?" In preparation for this, we spoke a lot about cultural appropriation and our own varied positions vis-à-vis the TRC Report. One student took the initiative to find and share articles about cultural appropriation with the class.

It was important to us to present stories in multiple formats, including videos and photos. Students assembled documents, testaments, and artwork to help foster dialogue among visitors to the space. The affordances of the platform encourage different kinds of interaction and exchange. For instance, it is possible to place virtual objects, such as rocks, chairs, and screens in the environment. Avatars can interact with these by pressing "x" when they approach them. This can mean, for example, that a video or audio file will start playing, or that an image will open onscreen. When two or more avatars come close together, a live video chat opens. These chats can happen around the audiovisual media, so that people can discuss a video or other file while watching it onscreen

together. During our live event, students guided visitors through the spaces they had designed, explaining their thematic organization of the rooms and discussing media during and after visitors' engagements with the work. Mariana Villarreal Herrera and Pauline Dubois, for instance, introduced a video that is accessed by approaching a virtual clock and clicking "x." In the yellow pop-up seen in the screen capture, they explain that it is a story told by a father who managed to resist sending his young daughter to a residential school (Radio Canada 2016).

Mariana and Pauline guide visitors through the room they created in the online meeting platform Gather Town for *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*. Screenshot, 2021.

Colonial Strata

Taking an anticolonial approach to Digital Storytelling in this course presents a unique set of challenges. In addition to the colonial university system, we must also contend with the colonial architecture of the Internet. By this I am referring to its material infrastructure, which extends far beyond the campus, cutting through Indigenous lands and violating laws governing respectful relations with land, water, air, and other species. Computer networks and core routers provide data routes hosted by commercial, academic, and private network centres that traverse countries, continents, and oceans. Furthermore, our traffic across this network is regulated by international agreements between governments and telecommunications organizations. These forms of regulation conflict with treaty relations, which depend on reciprocity with the land. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners report having heard repeatedly that "reconciliation will never occur

unless we are reconciled with the earth" (TRC 2015, 18). They quote Elder Crowshoe, who says that "Mi'kmaw and other Indigenous laws stress that humans must journey through life in conversation and negotiation with all creation" (18). The ideological structure of the Internet has fallen prey to precepts of acquisition, conquest, competition, insatiable consumption, limitless growth, and concentrated wealth. In using the Internet, we acknowledge our complicity in maintaining this structure, while also benefiting from some of its democratic affordances, as intended by its original architects.[5]

Gather Town provided an interface that allowed us to meet with people who would not otherwise have been able to travel to our event. Meeting online does not mean, though, that we have somehow overcome physical divides. Gather Town is headquartered in Silicon Valley, a place that owes its name to the first ingredient used in manufacturing computer chips: sand. This is another reminder of the material foundations of the Internet and of its natural composition. It is composed of land, sand, earth, minerals, blood. The mission of Gather Town is to remove constraints in access to educational opportunities, in choosing places of work, and in being close to family and friends by building the so-called Metaverse, described as "a virtual layer over the physical world" (Gather Presence, Inc., n.d.). This is a symbolic and utopian illusion that fails to acknowledge its trespass, in which we, as settlers, guests, occupants, and recent arrivals, participate.

Our group is located in Tiohtià:ke, a traditional place of meeting and exchange for the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation. This is a founding nation of the Haudenosaunee/People of the Longhouse (Iroquois) Confederacy, which is also comprised of the Seneca, Tuscarora, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oneida Nations. The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples have long ties to what is now called the Island of Montreal. Many scholars agree that despite the diverse and divergent understandings of what constitutes "decolonization," at the centre of these processes are "Indigenous sovereignty over land and sea, as well as over ideas and epistemologies" (Sium, Desai, and Ritskes, 2012, II). We acknowledge that our academic pursuits, even as they strive toward anticolonizing, occupy and extract from these lands. In attempting to make space, we are also taking space.

Stumbling Blocks

The accessibility of the space for students is another question. A common barrier to student engagement with online storytelling platforms is the entry fee. This is an issue that we discussed in class. One of our selection criteria was the relative accessibility of Gather Town. The fee structure allows for the creation of online meeting spaces that are open to anyone, with a limit of twenty-five users. For larger meetings, in 2021, Gather charged US$3/user/day. For longer projects with more users, the rate was US$7/user/month, starting at US$175/month for twenty-five users. This offered us the best compromise we could find for hosting a public event online, considering our goals for sharing multimedia and holding multiple simultaneous live discussions within the same space. It meant investing US$8 each though. After a thorough discussion, we decided to limit the number of participants to fifty so as to constrain the cost. In the end, we had more than enough space to accommodate everyone, but we worried that some might be left out as a result of limiting participant numbers to keep the event affordable. This issue of financial accessibility is an important consideration in PBR within the classroom. Aside from this event, the only thing I asked my students to pay for during the semester was a Can$10 downloadable story/game. For many students, even modest fees are significant though and affect their choices to participate or not in activities and events.

This financial hurdle was not the only challenge we faced in using the platform. Two days before our event, one student accidentally wiped out everything that the class had created in the space. All of the carefully curated rooms disappeared, their contents gone. The student contacted everyone in a panic at midnight. Thankfully, after troubleshooting for several hours in liaison with Gather's tech support, most of the space was restored, but needless to say, anxieties were running high in those final hours. This is a pitfall of collaborative work in a platform where everyone in the group is "finding their feet," so to speak. It is a risk that we take in accepting to discover together. In this approach to PBR, the experimental process is valued above the security of the tried and true.[6]

Case Study: PBR Process in the Collective Experimental Story

A few weeks before our event, we circulated an open invitation to the public through our various personal and professional networks. A poster for the event and a signup form were created by master's student Luana Oliveira. On the morning of October 26, we welcomed about fifteen participants into this space, gathering the group around the virtual campfire for approximately twenty minutes before letting each person follow their own itinerary through the seven rooms. In each room, people were welcomed individually by students. The following is an account of this experience.

Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif poster. Designed by student Luana Oliveira, 2021.

Welcoming Address (Natalie Doonan)[7]

I come to this text as a Canadian citizen. I come to this text as a person of mostly French and Irish descent. As such, I am a beneficiary of the colonial-capitalist foundations established by some of my ancestors. These systems have enabled my pursuit of higher education. I am privileged to hold the position of assistant professor at the Université de Montréal, a school that has secured the fourth highest research revenue in Canada according to the latest ranking (Research Infosource 2022). As such, I believe it is my responsibility to address the TRC Calls to Action in the classroom. PBR is essential to this because exposing the learning process and its uncertainties are anticolonial acts.

Approaching (ongoing) colonial histories through PBR has the effect of turning the magnifying glass back on oneself.

In my work, I do a lot of reading. The pace of reading this document is different from what I'm used to. It demands a different rhythm. I had to stop to make way for tears. I had the luxury of choosing the time and the space for these tears—the luxury to keep them private. The survivors of Canada's residential school system, meanwhile, have been called upon, and have had the great courage, to share their suffering onstage, in very public and highly mediatized events. In June 2015 I attended a short segment of the TRC closing event, presented in the nation's capital—Ottawa, Ontario. Survivors spoke their traumatic stories in a bright building of smooth surfaces (Reconciliation Canada, n.d.). At the event, which was open to a public who could come and go freely through the overflow spaces, we were at once enclosed and on display, surrounded by walls of glass. The sense of visibility was magnified by the intense media presence everywhere in the downtown core covering the events. This memory came flooding back to me as I became overwhelmed by what I read on my computer screen. I moved from desk to the comfort of my cozy couch, trading desktop for tablet, my experience safely confined. My point here is that I don't carry the burden of exposing my experience to public scrutiny. But perhaps doing so is part of the reconciliation process?

In relaying this personal encounter with the TRC Report, I am acutely aware of white fragility. I considered not sharing it at all for fear that this may be interpreted as a way of reorienting the attention back to me, a white middle-class Canadian of mixed European descent. I do not share this account because I wish any sympathy. Rather, exposing my affective response to these testimonies is an act of resistance to hiding behind the third person, as so many of us are taught to do in academia. The convention of adopting the royal We remains common practice, even in the humanities and social sciences. It bears underlining that like all writing, mine is situated within a particular embodied experience and orientation toward the topic at hand. Reading is an intersubjective sensory experience. My discomfort in reading this text is not only individual but also social and political. As Michalinos Zembylas points out, my "discomforting feelings" belong to the "wider structures and practices of race, racism and whiteness that trigger such feelings in the first place" (2018, 87). Recognizing this point is part of decolonizing the classroom. Further, acknowledging my lack of objectivity means that I must take responsibility for my reading, and for what I make public, following from that engagement.

The report of the TRC asks Canadians to learn about the histories of the residential school system and its ongoing effects. Further, it asks the difficult question: What happens now that we, as readers, know this history? As non-Indigenous beneficiaries of this system, and of broader colonial-capitalist systems, what responsibilities does each of us in this class hold toward reconciliation? These are questions that must first be answered individually, since each participant in the course relates in distinct ways to these histories. Moreover, within Québec, many Francophones find themselves identified with the ambiguous historical positions of both colonizer and colonized. Because of this, the topic of reconciliation is particularly fraught in this province. The openness of this group to working with the TRC Report may be due in part to the fact that a small minority of the students are Canadian (Québecois[e]), while the rest are international. In other courses, I have met with resistance from a small minority of students who feel that focusing on Indigenous oppression detracts from the histories of injustice faced by Francophones in Québec in relation to the Anglophone elite, of which I am presumably a representative.

What does reconciliation mean to each of us?

While I have not personally committed acts of theft, child abduction, rape, abuse, renaming, and shaming, I do continue to benefit from the effects of these institutionalized policies. In speaking the languages of colonization—English, French, Spanish—and not the languages of my hosts, I do participate in ongoing cultural imperialism. My ways of being and knowing—my ontological and epistemological groundings—are undeniably Western, shaped by the Catholic Church and by Canadian school systems.

I read this text as a mother.

What does it mean to read this text, to be aware of the histories it reveals? What does one do with the stories of more than 150,000 children who were ripped from their families to attend schools that were sometimes thousands of kilometres from their home communities? Some children were taken without notice and never got a chance to say goodbye to their parents, their siblings, their dogs. Some boarded airplanes filled with wailing children even younger than school age, begging parents not to leave them. Some never saw their families again. Many returned home as adults who spoke English or French and no longer had the words to communicate with parents and grandparents.

As a mother, what do I do with these stories?

Stories are repeatedly identified throughout the report as vehicles for reconciliation. "Learning how to live together in a good way happens through sharing stories and practising reconciliation in our everyday lives" (TRC 2015, 18).

I am reading the TRC Report in the context of a Digital Storytelling course. In the course, we have identified common characteristics of digital storytelling. For instance, its emphasis on social interactions, participation, and distributed authorship. We have been interested in its multisensorial, multimodal, and embodied attributes, and in the possibilities that it offers for performative, or action-based approaches. According to Janet Murray, "multisequential" stories are those that allow for navigation through multiple sequences, as opposed to a unisequential storyline, which has a coherent beginning, middle, and end, progressing toward a predefined outcome (1997, 63). Digital storytelling offers opportunities for the social implication of publics and for collective social practice. A multisequential story resists the colonial impulse toward teleological exegesis. We have decided to use this platform as a strategy for sharing multiple stories from a variety of perspectives. People can participate in live exchanges across geographic distances and through multimedia. These forms of storytelling offer alternative modes of literacy, both digital and embodied. Reading and writing being the common modes of address in the university, making work public through multisequential storytelling is a strategy for inviting a greater diversity of participants into the conversation. This PBR approach values the creation of open spaces that may or may not lead to peer-reviewed outcomes (i.e., what is valued by the institution). In an effort to make everyone at ease, we decided not to record the event.

By opening this space, we make ourselves vulnerable. This is not the same thing as opening ourselves to critique, something we do every time that we make something public. Making ourselves vulnerable means exposing our weaknesses and sharing our personal stories. Sharing our feelings and speaking from a place of uncertainty are both strategies that in my mind belong to PBR, because they are gestures of whipping open the curtain. Here I am picturing the meek Wizard of Oz, hidden

backstage of his impressive, God-like talking head projection. PBR rips open that curtain to reveal our trembling selves. It involves taking the risk of approaching making and publishing as opportunities for thinking together. For this to work, it is not possible to maintain our place of unwavering authority and expertise. During the event and in this publication too, we count on the sensitivity and generosity of those who join us. We have done our best to create a welcoming space.

The student reflections that follow are revelatory of the varying engagements that took place. The struggles of students being introduced to these histories for the very first time lay bare on the page. The difficulties of negotiating with deeply bred colonial impulses come through the writing, as they did in the classroom. These are not polished analyses, but reflections of thought in the act. There are evident problems, such as framing residential school survivors as victims, and dismissing their lands and identities as lost. In the three experiences related below, students evoke, as I did above, the privilege to dip into the story, to "witness" and move on. The learning process is fraught, but it is also communal and ongoing. The point here is that in honouring process—the practice, the performance—of ideas being worked out, space opens up for discussion.

A Story that Doesn't Belong to Me (Mariana Villarreal)

The process of building a space in Gather Town brought a strong sense of gamification for me. There are many features to build the space and there is a clear resemblance to games like *The Sims* or *Animal Crossing*. Choosing colours, building scenery, placing objects, choosing actions, and decorating, became the focus of each team, and at one point, since the space is open and everyone can look at what anyone is doing, I felt teams were collaborating yet at the same time competing to create the most visually appealing rooms. I sensed the Instagram logic take over, where achieving an aesthetically pleasing visual is often "the story" and more important than the rest of the content. We didn't discuss this as a group, but my personal conclusion is that we wouldn't have provided that much attention to the decoration/visuals had we used a different platform.

The way Gather Town enables collaboration not only shaped the way our work was presented but also the relationships between the team members since some of them, as with any team dynamic, became the leaders of the group and executed the collective decisions in terms of choices for the virtual space in the early stages. As they became more proficient in using the platform, their place as leaders became more evident and the circle was reinforced.

Focusing on the content of our story, as a student, it was important for me to read and understand this text. This is because I felt I represent—at least in this classroom—what I think is the stereotypical foreigner who reads the news about Canada but does not really go further to understand its history, or the lessons that come from it. Being asked to participate in a collaborative storytelling process about the findings of the TRC was a technical and ethical challenge where many interrogations came into play. The following question helped me to reflect on what I could do: How could I tell a story that doesn't belong to me?

Recognizing that reading the report in its entirety was only a small act in terms of learning the whole context of the findings, I decided first to explicitly recognize my ignorance. I produced a short audio commentary in which I shared my position as a foreign student who recognizes that what she thought was superficial knowledge was instead deep unawareness of history. The platform allowed me to express this very personal aspect of the exercise in an intimate setting, since conversations are

contained within rooms. I presented an audio file set against a black screen. Importantly to me, this didn't detract any of the focus from the stories in the gallery.

Audio example: Mariana Villarreal's contribution to *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*. Gather Town, 2021. https://youtu.be/dKBlkzRyydo.

As a second step, I was inspired by the title of Natasha Kanapé Fontaine's book *Do Not Enter My Soul with Your Shoes*. She tells us that this phrase refers to the inability of non-Indigenous people to truly understand the history of First Nations. We can try to learn, we can try to educate ourselves, but we can't really know sincerely what happened. I connected with this thought and decided to include it as the video content that first greeted our visitors in the gallery. Gather Town's spatial layout features allowed me to plan the content of the gallery in a nonlinear way, meaning visitors could design their own path and walk from object to object (a tree, a fountain, a circle of flowers and boulders, among other things), depending on what grabbed their attention. The features did help me, however, to point arrows to floating notes that explained what each object would present and the main historical facts about the video, audio file, website, or photograph that came up after clicking on the object. Prefacing each piece of content was a very important aspect for me, not only to provide additional historical context but to frame the voices of the survivors within a space of respect.

I was able to embark on the discovery of a very complex and sad history that is also rich in learnings and examples of resilience. My own country, Mexico, has a very sad history of colonization and oppression, and this process has helped me to understand it from a distance and in a different light. It is not easy to think about decolonization. It overwhelms me. It is an enormous thought, touching all the aspects of my individual life and the life of my country. My language, my body, the way the society I am part of relates to the environment, the land, the way we eat and value food, the way we process resources, the way we think about health and healing, the way we look at culture and cultural objects. It is a sea of thinking and possibilities that I recognize I can barely see.

While this is not the first project that sparks that internal dialogue and deconstruction in me, it is the first one that allows me to think about it from a unique perspective. Canada and Mexico share a lot of things that I had never considered. Both countries experience the difficulties of trying to heal from the oppression suffered by Indigenous peoples in the past, while the present continues to limit and challenge their lives.

The geopolitical challenges that my country faces in its relationships with the rest of the continent and Canada aren't small or easy, and stem from the same difficulties. The extraction of natural resources and the power dynamics surrounding Mexican temporary workers coming to Canada to develop agricultural land are two issues that came to my mind after reading the TRC Report. Drawing new parallels and digging deep in my ability to question them is part of what I consider the learning process that this project sparked in me.

Working through a PBR approach allowed me, as a student, to discover new strategies of knowledge production and transference. The shifting forms this project had from the beginning (group discussions about which platform to choose, aesthetic considerations, etc.) made evident that I needed to understand clearly the knowledge I was producing and trying to share and my objectives in doing so. This made me unavoidably gain a deeper connection to the material and to the

emotions that it created in me. After all, the most valuable element for me in terms of learning, the thing that I will keep with me, is the ability to ask myself questions about decolonization of all the contexts I inhabit. Whether those spaces are familiar or foreign to me, the process of questioning will be there.

Learning Together (Sara Bouvelle)

Gather Town provided an excellent way to get together despite the pandemic. Its simple and user-friendly design made it easy for the participants who could quickly get used to the game-like interface. In this way, we were able to integrate a playfulness that alleviated the heavy nature of the topics we discussed, thus creating a safer space in which we could all interact.

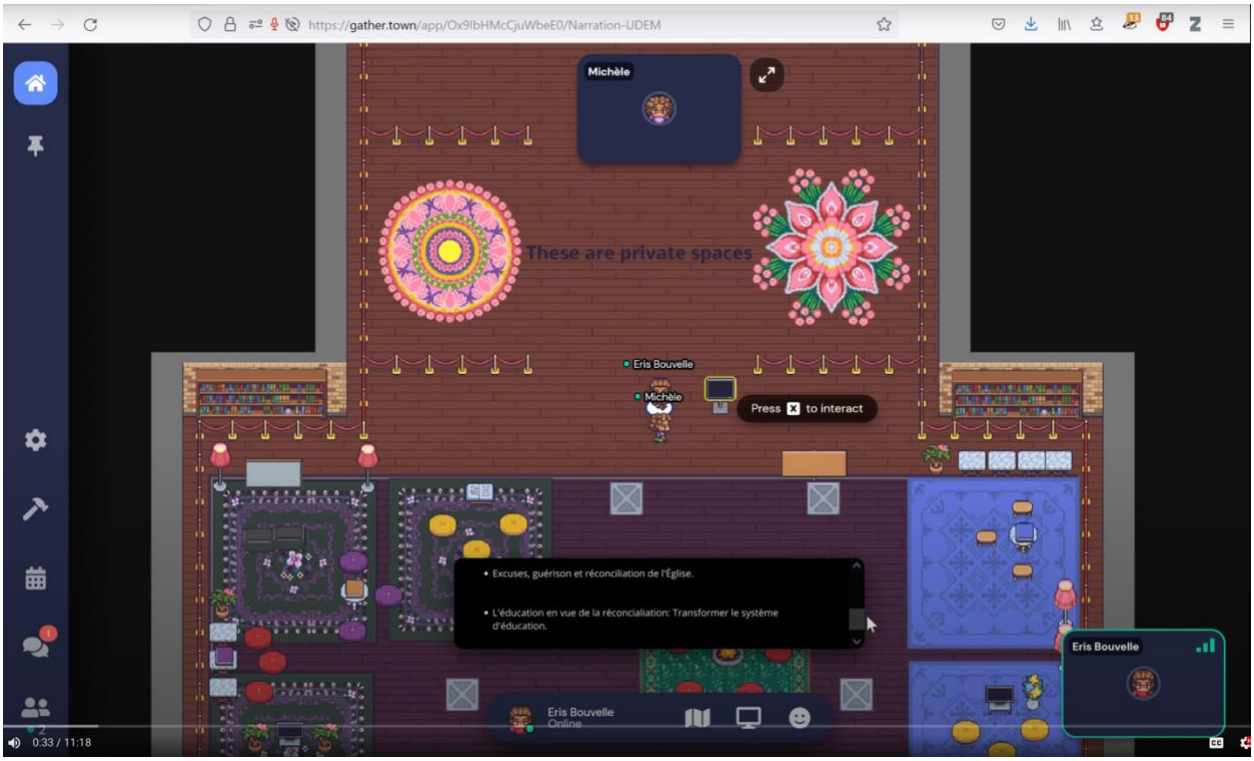
Though creating the rooms was a long process, it was rewarding to put together our own exhibit. Michèle Barcena-Sougavinski and I spent a long time thinking about how to welcome participants during the event, how they would move through our room, what they would see, and how much autonomy we wanted to give them. With these things in mind, we created an exhibit with various media so that visitors could quickly understand the context behind the parts of the TRC Report that we had read. At the centre of the room, we built a space for discussion. It was important for us that, no matter how much they knew about the TRC and the content of the report coming in, we give visitors the tools to make them feel comfortable discussing it with us. Gather Town has a homeliness to it that helped us achieve that goal by personalizing our space with the many options available on the platform.

The collaborative process that led us to the event, however, might have been the most interesting part for me. It helped me get to know my classmates better, and reading the TRC Report all together didn't feel intimidating, even though the text is dense and difficult. We took the time to find the best ways for us to connect with the text and to honour it properly. Various options were discussed, but the one that made everyone enthusiastic was the possibility of holding an event where we would invite people to join us to discuss the report together. Collaboration was the key word for the event as well: none of us being of First Nations descent, we wanted to open a respectful space where we could all learn together without being patronizing.

The event was important to me personally. I don't know much about First Nations histories, and I have sometimes found it difficult to approach the topic without proper guidance, so what we did together was a good opportunity for me to fill this gap in my education. I was appalled to learn the extent of the mistreatment that First Nations have endured in the twentieth century, a period that was glossed over during my school years. Being part of this project allowed me to channel my thoughts and feelings into action. As a new citizen, it confronted me with what it really means to be Canadian, and how privileged I am to have been able to live in this country, ignorant of these issues. It's easy to forget on what grounds Canadian society was built. Reading the TRC Report was eye opening, to say the least. I am grateful we've had the chance to create something meaningful for visitors, but mostly for us, in a truly collective learning experience.

This was a rare opportunity to take part in a collaborative process within a university context. In both undergraduate and graduate studies, learning is often solitary. Never once in my experience has my class come together to create something like this. Natalie made it clear, early on, that she values unorthodox ways of producing academic work, and this event is a perfect example of how those

values reflected on everyone's perception of their engagement with the material. Natalie encouraged us to consider how the shape of conventional academic work reflects on larger issues like elitism, ableism, and racism. This gave me a broader perspective on what academia is, and the many forms it can take, which I think was especially meaningful in the context of Indigenous history, which is so often overlooked for its originality in contrast to dominant Western practices and traditions. Going forward, I will use this lesson as a reminder to challenge what academia should look like, whom it should benefit, and whom it serves.



Gather Town room created by Sara Bouvelle and Michèle Barcena-Sougavinski for *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*. 2021.

Opening Our Eyes and Experiences (Gaëlle Issa)

The sections of the TRC Report that my team and I had to address covered The Legacy and the Calls to Action: the impacts of residential schools on the victims and their families; the violence against First Nations children that continues to this day; the differences in government funding to communities; the limited access to education for First Nations people; and the lack of justice regarding the residential school abuses. Our group's main objective was to reflect on these themes in a way that avoided misinterpretation, through three distinct artistic media: literature, music, and visual arts.

Our team was composed of three incredibly dedicated people. We had very diverse backgrounds which made our project more interesting. Two of us were international students who recently moved to Montréal, one from France, and the second from Lebanon; the third one was a Canadian resident of Haitian descent. As non-Indigenous people, we were seeking to depict and carefully convey the messages of these sections of the TRC Report without any cultural appropriation. The intention of our project was therefore necessarily based on personal interpretations. Charlène Auré

shared with us a rather intimate poem that she had thoughtfully written. Gabriel Démosthène then used the poem as lyrics around which he composed and recorded a song. I in turn used his melody as inspiration for a series of illustrations that I created using the iPad drawing application Procreate. My illustrations were based on photos of First Nations women and children, which I found in online publications such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the British Broadcasting Corporation, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. My source photos came from articles covering the events, discriminations, and abuses that happened in residential schools and in non-governmental organizations dedicated to fighting violations of children's rights.

Our collaboration and teamwork were extremely fruitful, and our cooperation was both fascinating and unique. We each performed our parts independently while relying on the TRC Report in creating our content. Toward the end of the process, we gradually unveiled our works, to receive each other's instructive feedback. The results were honestly quite striking. Following the revelation of the song and my three illustrations inspired by my teammate's poem, I edited a video that brought together our three compositions. The result felt like an astonishing music video of the final song: illustrations scrolling along with the lyrics of the poem.

La vérité pour guérir. Video by Charlène Auré, Gabriel Démosthène, and Gaëlle Issa. 2021.

The final stage of our work took place in Gather Town. Our main concern was to create a warm and welcoming environment—a safe space where people can share their feelings, ideas, and get involved in our extremely personal interpretation. The platform fulfilled this desire for us. We created a simple, peaceful space, divided into a variety of small colourful areas with plants and poufs, in which one could reflect alone or meet with others. Arrows were also used to indicate a path to access all the visuals such as a couple of documentary images, and other visuals illustrated by my teammate.

Video still from *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif,* Gather Town. Original artwork by Gaëlle Issa, lyrics by Charlène Auré. Full video with original music by Gabriel Démosthène.

Visitors circulated through our room to discover and understand our section of the TRC Report. Each person interpreted our video in their own way while capturing the core idea of the project. We took the time to talk with visitors with our video onscreen. It was a truly meaningful and moving experience. It helped me to grow immensely on a personal level. One visitor to the event shared a particularly poignant personal reflection with us: "As an Indigenous person, it helps my healing process to know that there are non-Indigenous people taking the time and showing their vulnerability in talking about this. I feel that education is a huge part of healing. I appreciate your time and work. *Je suis honoré d'être présent aujourd'hui. Nia:wen* (thank you)."

Although I am an international student, and specifically Middle Eastern, this assignment opened my eyes and allowed me to better understand the history of the territory. The feeling of contributing to the process of reconciliation was extremely satisfying and rewarding. As I moved to Québec, part of the integration process was to introduce me to the history of Canada in order to understand the territory I was going to settle in. Reading the TRC Report pulled me into a much more personal experience. Nothing compares to the satisfaction of contributing to a cause. It is an honour to witness the emotions of generations who lost their territory and identity by enduring terribly violent acts. It has been rewarding to share what I have witnessed.

Challenges

I am grateful for the spirit of generosity with which students embraced this difficult work. To my understanding, PBR values failures, missteps, or shortcomings as cherished openings for evaluating why something worked or didn't work. Many points of divergence among us are hinted at in the student reflections above. The notion of "giving autonomy" to participants for instance, undercuts the idea of a relational field in which volition, intentionality and agency are distributed (Manning 2016). This is a multi-authored project, as reflected in this article too. Moments of dissensus offer an accurate glimpse into our PBR process. While certain deep-seated colonial impulses are evident, the sense of hope and desire for change is the predominant message conveyed through this writing. The injunction of the TRC Report to read and share its stories is a complex challenge. It risks playing into the fixation in academic research noted by Tuck and Yang on "eliciting pain stories from communities that are not White, not wealthy, and not straight." They write, "Academe's demonstrated fascination with telling and retelling narratives of pain is troubling, both for its voyeurism and for its consumptive implacability" (2014, 227). The intention expressed by Sara to create a space that could "alleviate the heavy nature of the topics we discussed" was a strategy to avoid framing our public encounter as sensationalizing. Other students, too, selected media to share that showcased accomplishments, rather than stories of pain. The story of the father who avoided sending his daughter to residential school, presented by Mariana and Pauline, is one example.

The issue of appropriation has been raised a few times throughout the article. From my perspective, it was one of our biggest challenges. One problem that arose was in relation to the graphic elements that are available in Gather Town, which include for example, tipis. These led to stereotyping in some cases, despite the many conversations that we had had as a group about what constitutes cultural appropriation and how to avoid it. In their writing above, some of the students address their own struggles with this issue. While I expected that students would create their own media, it didn't occur to me to stipulate this in the project requirements. Mariana and Pauline were among the majority though, who pulled excerpts from videos, audio, writing and images that they had found online to create an exhibition in their room. As evidenced in Mariana's writing, this was part of a

self-reflexive process in which they wrestled with how to communicate their processes of engagement with the report, while avoiding telling stories that do not belong to them. In her careful curation, Mariana was intent on presenting media in which First Nations people present their own stories, in their own words. The danger here lies in inadvertently mining Indigenous content to populate our tour. These are thorny issues that are productively brought to the surface through practice.

On the other hand, Gaëlle's group did decide to produce their own media. In her writing we can observe a glimpse of the challenges the trio faced around how to work with visual representation. The song lyrics express a sense of injustice vis-à-vis barriers to education faced by First Nations, while proclaiming a commitment to allyship. Here it is evident that Call 63.iii, "Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect" is being addressed. While the group decided to create a series of original drawings to avoid taking work that doesn't belong to them, we can still see issues of appropriation being negotiated. For instance, the image of the white dove in the still from the video Gaëlle's group produced, presumably representing peace, hovers above a landscape depicting residential school buildings. While it seemed logical to include an image of a residential school, since these are a central subject of the TRC Report, we discussed the issue as a group and decided that it would be best to avoid such depictions, since the buildings themselves are triggering for many survivors. Tensions between the desire to create spaces that are conducive to discussion of charged topics in a forthright manner, while avoiding imagery that is triggering, surface in the reflections above. The media shared by each group clearly offered many opportunities for dialogue, which was the main purpose of our event.

Publishing as Conversation

Engaging with these fraught histories in the classroom inevitably opens onto challenging negotiations. Despite this peril though, students committed to the effort. Why did this work? I think in part it is because it was the first project presented and discussed in the course. It gave students an immediate sense of the epistemological orientation of the course. Those who are averse to anticolonial approaches, or to the notion of situated knowledges, may have fled before getting in any deeper. One person did drop out early on, and another one just after we had completed the project. The former cited a different reason, and the latter never informed me of their intention to drop the course, so I don't know what her reasons were.

The way that I present this collaborative, experimental project emphatically underlines that I will not be the decision maker. Although I do try to present some ideas of topic and platform to launch our brainstorming, I strongly encourage students to contribute other ideas too. I suppose that if students were interested in the course and my approach, but not the topic of the project, they would have made other suggestions. The classroom felt quite open and there were ongoing debates, in which conflicting voices seemed free to express themselves. Of course, there are inevitably limits to this as it is impossible to work outside of power dynamics that are present in any classroom, but we did have lively exchanges throughout the semester.

Working against Colonial-Capitalism in the Classroom through PBR

Designing anticolonial pedagogy is not simple or straightforward. As a first step, it might mean recognizing the ways in which we, as scholars, are colonized. Being colonized likely implies that we

benefit from and also perpetuate colonial practices. This is not an easy admission. Blindness toward our own complicity is not usually deliberate. It takes effort to learn and unlearn the privileges that so many of us take for granted. Canadian school systems—Anglophone and Francophone—are founded on colonial order. "The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary," writes Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* ([1999] 2021, 1). Instead of trafficking knowledge extracted from Indigenous communities, PBR can help creative researchers to turn attention inward and toward the transformative work required to subvert the systems that have benefited certain people at the expense of others. Turning the gaze inward means both engaging in self-reflexivity and also addressing the systemic and structural sources of oppression.

In this "Collective Experimental Story," I am attempting to transform the classroom into a space of shared vulnerability, in which we can collectively reckon with the responsibilities that come with access to this space. The work that students created for this project humbled me. The time, effort, and care that they invested in this collaboration were exceptional and deeply moving. PBR in the classroom can be scary because it implies not knowing in advance where it might lead. It requires a certain letting go of control. In my experience so far, this trust has been rewarded tenfold. I am grateful to the students who have also embraced this challenge, joining me on this journey toward assuming our own parts in anticolonial practice.

In her exquisite work *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer invites non-Indigenous people to become naturalized to place. By this she means acting as though our lives, and our children's futures, depended on the thriving of the place where we live. She urges us (non-Indigenous people) to put both feet on the ground, instead of "acting like immigrants" with one foot still on the boat (2016). This is a metaphor for the colonial habits that persist long after the first immigrants arrived to what we call North America. As I write, more than a year after this event in Gather Town took place, I continue to wonder about the meaning and impact of having invited a class of mostly international students to participate in a collective, experimental storytelling project around the TRC Report. The Report is aimed toward Canadians. However, many of the Calls ask for the respect of treaty relations. If every person were to do this, relations with other-than-human beings would be respected too. Treaties extend beyond humans to other species of animal and plant, as Leanne Simpson explains in her description of relations between fish clans and fish nations (2011, 109). Becoming naturalized to place, and respecting treaty relations where we live, whether temporarily or long-term, entails developing reciprocal relations. According to Wall Kimmerer, reciprocity produces mutual thriving. In these texts, non-Indigenous people are all being called to tread lightly, to be grateful, to act with humility and respect, and to share the gifts that are bestowed on us (2016). All of this is relevant within the classroom, and within this project.

"Respecting and honouring treaty relationships" appears repeatedly in the Calls to Action (10.vii is particularly relevant to the classroom). Call 86 asks "Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples." Knowing these histories and their legacies helps to reduce racism, because many of the assumptions on which racist attitudes are based are dismantled by learning about the realities of colonialism. This is relevant not only to citizens and permanent residents since colonialism has international repercussions. Many of the students in my class hail from France and from former French colonies. All students in Canadian institutions are addressed in the Calls to Action. Further, Call 93 asks "the federal government, in collaboration with the national Aboriginal organizations, to revise the information kit for newcomers to Canada and its citizenship test to reflect a more inclusive history of the diverse

Aboriginal peoples of Canada, including information about the Treaties and the history of residential schools." Uncovering these histories is not enough in itself, but it is integral to the reconciliation process.

While we each occupy a particular place in these processes, the journey is not solitary. It is a communal endeavour on many fronts. I first learned of the TRC Reading Challenge through the Canadian Association for Theatre Research in the summer of 2021 when I received an invitation to participate through its listserv. Several other members of this association led reading groups of their own in their classrooms. The Toronto-based company Théâtre Passe Muraille joined the Challenge, organizing weekly readings of the TRC Report, followed by monthly meetings to discuss the report's Calls to Action, with the objective of developing responses to the calls.

The fact that these groups have all coalesced in pandemic conditions has implicated virtual environments within the purview of spaces targeted for decolonization. Théâtre Passe Muraille held its meetings on the online meeting platform Zoom. Recently I have noticed increasing attention toward acknowledging the many lands on which we gather when we make use of such platforms. Collectively, we are seeking ways to transform these spaces, which do not "separate [our] geography from our destiny" (Gather, n.d.) but only try to help us forget that we are rooted somewhere. In PBR we engage in and with those places, embracing the unpredictable transformations that will no doubt unfold from reciprocal relations with place.

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Notes

1. See Wolfe (2006) for his widely cited definition of settler colonialism. He explains: "Settler colonialism is an inclusive, land-centered project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan centre to the frontier encampment, with a view to elimination of Indigenous societies" (393). Lorenzo Veracini (2013) shows that the focus on relationships between settlement and invasion have produced a need for instituting "reconciliation" processes and public apologies.

2. For a definition of anticolonial methodologies and practices, see Carlson (2016). Note that in the absence of First Nations participation in this project and the fact that it falls short of working toward concrete restorative justice, I am calling my approach "anticolonial" instead of "decolonial." Implicit in this is a critique of neoliberal logic, which Tuck and Guishard call "the most recent iteration of settler-colonialism" (2013, 16).

3. Many scholars have made explicit the alignments between colonialism and capitalism. See, for example, Coulthard (2014), Gómez-Barris (2017), and Sousa Santos (2018).

4. The terminology around what constitutes "anticolonial," "decolonial," and "decolonizing" research and pedagogy is contested. Elizabeth Carlson (2016) unpacks many of the distinguishing features. Tuck and Guishard (2013) define "Decolonial Participatory Action Research." Sium, Desai, and Ritskes (2012) discuss

the theory/action divide that poses potentially fatal problems for doing decolonial work within colonial academic structures in which "decolonizing the mind" threatens to occlude the real, physical effects of colonization on people. Further, Zembylas underscores the danger of attending to emotions as individual responses to the violence of colonization, without a more substantial attention to the underlying social, political sources of "white discomfort" that emerge from "broader affective, material and discursive assemblages of race, racism and whiteness" (2018, 86).

5. For a short story on the discrepancies between the original visions for the Internet and how these have been co-opted, see Brooker (2018).

6. Gather Town launched in May 2020. Although we were unsure of the lasting appeal that meeting and conferencing tools like this would retain beyond pandemic times, our intention was to leave our exhibition up online, making it accessible for as long as possible. I have since decided to password protect the space though. While we had hoped that readers of *Performance Matters* would be able to visit this space during or after consulting this article, in the end I worried about exposing students to critique at a stage when it is important for them to explore freely without repercussions. I did not want some of the critiques that I make in this article to be attributable to specific individuals. This is an example of ethical issues that can arise in PBR projects and publications. Varying degrees of security exist at different career stages, which is an important consideration when working, and especially publishing, with students.

7. This section is a modified version of the Welcoming Address that I delivered during the event. I have adapted it for publication to avoid repeating points that are discussed elsewhere in the article and to provide clarification for readers.

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