Gaming Extractivism: Indigenous Resurgence, Unjust Infrastructures, and the Politics of Play in Elizabeth LaPensée’s Thunderbird Strike

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ABSTRACT

Background: Indigenous-led struggles against fossil fuel infrastructure in North America have become increasingly visible. These struggles occur on the ground as well as through cultural production that performs cultural resistance.

Analysis: This article examines Anishinaabe, Métis, and settler-Irish media theorist and artist Elizabeth LaPensée’s video game Thunderbird Strike as a form of Indigenous cultural resistance to extractivism.

Conclusion and implications: Thunderbird Strike expresses the necessity of halting the expansion of extractivism by inviting players to participate in the sabotage of unjust infrastructure. In asking players to enact the very forms of generative resistance that the game articulates at a narratological level, Thunderbird Strike reveals the possibilities for video games to prefigure the transition to a decolonial, post-extractive future.

Keywords: extractivism; infrastructure; sabotage; settler colonialism; video games

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte: Les luttes menées par les groupes autochtones contre l'infrastructure des combustibles fossiles en Amérique du Nord deviennent de plus en plus visibles. Ces conflits se produisent sur les plans du territoire et de la « résistance culturelle ».

Analyse: Cet article interroge Thunderbird Strike (2017), un jeu vidéo d’Elizabeth LaPensée—anishinaabe, métisse, irlandaise-canadienne—en tant que type de résistance autochtone culturelle aux pratiques extractivistes.

Conclusion et implications: L'auteur démontre que Thunderbird Strike incite l'arrêt de l'extractivisme en invitant ses participants à saboter « l'infrastructure injuste ». En demandant aux participants de promulguer les formes de résistance générative que le jeu articule au niveau de la narratologie-même, Thunderbird Strike dévoile le potentiel des jeux vidéos de préfigurer la transition à un futur décolonial et post-extractif.

Mots clés: l’extractivisme; infrastructure; sabotage; colonialisme; jeux vidéos
Extraction is a cornerstone of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism.
—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, pp. 201)

Extractivism is a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking .... It is the reduction of life into objects for the use of others, giving them no integrity or value of their own.
—Naomi Klein (2014, pp. 169)

**Introduction**

The past decade has marked a relative boiling point for pipeline politics across North America that has, among other things, drawn attention to the settler colonial inertia of extractivist fossil fuel infrastructure development. In the United States, on the heels of the highly publicized 2016–2017 demonstrations at Standing Rock in North Dakota to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, President Donald Trump revived the Keystone XL pipeline expansion through executive order (Smith & Kassam, 2017). In Canada, instrumental decisions were made regarding pipeline projects with perpetually uncertain futures, such as the conditional approval of Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain Expansion Project in 2016 (National Energy Board, 2016), which was followed by the federal government purchasing the project for $4.5 billion in 2018. And construction surrounding TC Energy’s natural gas pipeline project in Northern British Columbia, Coastal GasLink, has continued to encroach on unceded Wet’suwet’en territory. These episodes are only a handful of the most prominent events that have occurred over the past several years on what political anthropologist Kregg Hetherington (2019) calls “the frontlines of the Anthropocene” (p. 8), as less publicized projects move forward and smaller-scale resistance persists. Yet, these historical pressure points arguably stand out in terms of how they have amplified in the public imaginary the intersections of fossil fuel infrastructure development and continued settler colonialism.

In this context of heightened collective attention toward fossil fuel infrastructures and the broader extractivist energy regime they comprise, Anishinaabe, Métis, and settler-Irish media theorist and practitioner Elizabeth LaPensée (2017c) released a multiplatform video game called *Thunderbird Strike*. The game was funded in part by a grant from the Minnesota-based Arrowhead Regional Arts Council. Upon the game’s release, pipeline advocacy group Energy Builders (2017) issued a statement against it that quoted its president accusing the game of “encourage[ing] eco-terrorism” and called for Michigan State University, which housed the lab the game was developed in, “to pull the plug immediately on this taxpayer-funded political campaign” (para. 5). This press release spurred a larger media event that saw Minnesota State Senator David Osmek decry the game as “an eco-terrorist version of Angry Birds” (Minnesota Senate Republican Caucus, 2017, para. 2). In the wake of this media event, the Minnesota House of
Representatives approved a bill that, among other conditions, “would prohibit funding projects that promote domestic terrorism or criminal activities” (Turtinen, 2018, para. 3). A two-dimensional side-scroller with vivid stop-motion animations propelled by a narrative that weaves together elements of traditional Anishinaabe stories, the game invites players to embody a thunderbird flying over the Alberta tar sands eastward to the Great Lakes. Flying over these landscapes, players harness electric energy from thunderous clouds to sabotage fossil fuel infrastructure and revive or (re-) activate victims of extractivism, including animals and people, along the way. Taken together, the destruction of unjust fossil fuel infrastructures and equipment alongside the restoration of the victims of extractivism serves as a world-building, future-casting mechanism. This dyadic mechanism offers a vision for a post-extractive infrastructural future that emerges out of the ruins of settler colonial fossil fuel society—ruins that players participate in creating within Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c).

This article engages with Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) to examine the role that video games and, in turn, cultural production more generally can play in resisting extractivism while working toward the realization of a more equitable, sustainable energy future by producing alternative infrastructural imaginaries. Existing critical commentary on Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) tends to approach its resistance to settler colonialism and expression of ecological activism in terms of how it embodies and communicates Indigenous worldviews in form and content (Madsen, 2018a, 2018b). As a point of complementary departure, this article focuses more closely on how Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) foregrounds struggles over infrastructure as determinant sites through which Indigenous sovereignty is expressed and conditions for a more equitable energy future are realized. Infrastructures are not passive or neutral objects that serve exclusively technological ends; they are media that shape social and ecological relations and determine possible futures. A growing body of scholarship within the field of infrastructure studies theorizes about these social and cultural dimensions of infrastructure, including the ways in which infrastructures mediate and reproduce dominant power relations (see Anand, Gupta, & Appel, 2018; Barney, 2017; Cowen, 2017, 2018; Durham Peters, 2015; Easterling, 2014; Jones, 2013; Star, 1999). As Deborah Cowen (2018) argues in relation to Canada’s infrastructural past and present, for instance, the building of infrastructure was a circuitous means to undermine Indigenous sovereignty: “Historically and in the present the construction [of] railroads and pipelines relied upon the settler states’ claims to jurisdiction, but that jurisdiction is also materialized through infrastructure” (p. 15). At the centre of energy infrastructure development in settler colonial nations are questions of land and territory that are rooted in a broader project of settler colonialism enacted through infrastructural development in a sort of self-propelling, self-fulfilling mode of settler-state legitimation.
These spatial-jurisdictional infrastructural politics that continue to undermine Indigenous sovereignty are a (if not the) focal point of *Thunderbird Strike*’s (LaPensée, 2017c) intervention. Indeed, *Thunderbird Strike*’s (LaPensée, 2017c) mechanics lay bare the necessity of disrupting business as usual to halt the expansion of what human ecologist Andreas Malm (2016) and others call the fossil economy in order to (re-) build a world otherwise. In situating LaPensée’s (2017c) *Thunderbird Strike* within a broader tradition of Indigenous resurgence and drawing on insights from the fields of infrastructure studies and the energy humanities, this article shows that *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c) is a form of cultural resistance to the bounded processes of settler colonialism and extractivism (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Willow, 2016) that offers visions of alternative infrastructural futures rooted in assertions of Indigenous sovereignty. First, a brief analysis of *Thunderbird Strike*’s (LaPensée, 2017c) formal mechanics and narratological trajectory, which relies on Liam Mitchell’s (2018) “ludopolitics” and Alexander Galloway’s (2006) notion of “gamic action,” preliminarily maps out how LaPensée leverages video games as interactive media for critical and generative ends. These mechanisms of restoration and destruction are then used as guiding signifiers to elaborate on *Thunderbird Strike*’s (LaPensée, 2017c) expression of Indigenous resurgence and cultural resistance, and on its proposition of an expanded notion of sabotage as a necessary mode of action to move beyond extractivism. Throughout the article, *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c) is not only treated as representative of conceptual frameworks surrounding Indigenous resurgence and the politics of sabotage but also as an active contribution to these frameworks.

**Beyond consciousness-raising: The ludopolitics of *Thunderbird Strike***

Through a series of close readings of the mechanics, design, and narrative content of popular video games, ranging from mainstream titles to independent ones, Liam Mitchell (2018) proposes the notion of the “ludopolitical” to theorize about what video games uniquely offer as interactive media. “As an index of our assumptions about what the world is,” Mitchell (2018) writes, “videogames also suggest what the world should be. They express the desire to see it changed” (p. 1). Contained within Mitchell’s (2018) framing is an explicit recognition of the dual function of video games, both as a kind of diagnosis of the present as well as a prefigurative signal toward alternative futures. That is, they express a desire for a world otherwise. At the centre of these desires, according to Mitchell (2018), is control and, it follows, power—forms of control and power that are provided to the player through gameplay mechanics and interface relations. Following Mitchell (2018), this article looks to control as a keyword to orient *Thunderbird Strike*’s (LaPensée, 2017c) interventions against the machinations of settler colonialism and the fossil economy.
The foundational mechanics of *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c) are based on a process of harnessing electrical energy from thunderous clouds that can then be deployed by players for two purposes: actions that garner points in the respective categories of “destruction” and “restoration.” First, electrical energy can be deployed for the destruction of industrial equipment, such as loaders, and infrastructure, such as the game’s final “boss”: an animistic pipeline in the form of a serpent whose weak points players target and attack to defeat (see Figure 1). Conversely, the thunderous energy can also be used to reanimate skeletal animals or revitalize human figures by transforming dormant figures into vibrant ones (see Figures 2 & 3). In other words, the energy can be deployed to revive and rejuvenate the victims of extractivism. Both of these processes converge to form the core mechanics of *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c) and gesture to the game’s larger vision of diagnosing or critiquing the deleterious effects of the fossil economy while simultaneously highlighting the necessity for action to move beyond such an economy. In ascribing scores of equal weight to both actions (see Figure 4), the game’s structuring dyad suggests that the destruction of some elements of our current infrastructural regime is necessary for human and more-than-human beings to flourish.
A distinguishing feature of video games as a medium is their capacity for integrating participation as a primary mode of engagement. As media theorist Henry Jenkins (2006) canonically notes, however, participation has become a broader signifier of the contemporary mediascape. These participatory characteristics are seen as definitive aspects of new media and the media ecosystem they are a part of. In this conjuncture, media theorist Alexander Galloway (2006) proposes the notion of “gamic action” to name the unique aspects of video games as a medium—going beyond the expanded notion of participation or interaction that Jenkins (2006) relies on to theorize the contemporary media moment. Comparing video games to other media through the vector of action, Galloway (2006) explains: “indeed, one takes a photograph, one acts in a film. But these actions transpire before or during the fabrication of the work, a work that ultimately assumes the form of a physical object (the print)” (p. 2). “With video games,” Galloway (2006) continues, “the work itself is material action. One plays a game. And the software runs” (p. 2).

Returning to the line of questioning that inspired Mitchell’s (2018) account of the ludopolitical, how do fantasy and control factor in Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c)? Mitchell (2018) claims that video games offer a fantasy of control that modulates the pleasure of players in a number of affective registers: “Designers craft power fantasies to satisfy players’ desires for control, but they also
make games that leave players feeling impotent, guilty, or confused—in a good way” (p. 2). This argument, which seeks to capture the broad range of affects that video games offer, does not quite suit Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c), a game propelled by an impetus to collapse avatars of real-world structures that prop up a dominant settler colonial fossil fuel energy regime. Rather than offer a fantasy, Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) instead casts players as virtual land and water protectors (Madsen, 2018a), as a material possibility for action in Galloway’s (2006) sense. While there are no doubt a number of theorists that could be drawn upon here from the burgeoning field of video game studies, both Mitchell’s (2018) and Galloway’s (2006) treatments of control and action precisely illuminate the fundamental characteristics and mechanics of Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) that this article hones in on. The closing animated scene of the game is telling here in terms of control and action: pump jacks fade into windmills (see Figures 5 & 6), providing a speculative conclusion to the player’s actions taken throughout the game and showing how actions of destruction and restoration produce conditions for transition.

In Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c), players can choose how to play without punishment, save for a zero score across the categories. In other words, unlike many conventional side-scrolling shooters, there are no “lives” as such, and a lack of action produces a particular outcome anticipated by LaPensée. One can move through the game world of Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) without doing anything beyond pressing start as the thunderbird continues to move from level to level, from right to left, until the final level, which will eventually come to a close with the pipeline-serpent self-destructing if players fail to act. Through this choice, players arguably participate in the maintenance of the fossil economy or
the continuation of business as usual. Though LaPensée tells us that “[y]ou always win” (Hearne & LaPensée, 2017, p. 32), this is not entirely accurate: inaction arguably reproduces settler colonial extractivist relations by leaving the serpent-pipeline to harm the environment beyond mitigation. Although the animistic pipeline eventually self-destructs, players are awarded zero in this particular level’s metric of scoring: a “time bonus.” The lesson on offer here is that without proactive action, this socially, economically, and ecologically deleterious business-as-usual scenario will carry on until inevitable ecological devastation is complete.

The paratextual elements hosted on the official website of Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) offer deeper insight into the lessons of the game—expressing how it indexes the world as it is, to use Mitchell’s (2018) parlance, and foregrounding what it should be. In these registers, the website serves as a pedagogical hub of resources for reflection and, tellingly, the prima facie mode through which video games function: action. Under the heading “Reflect,” LaPensée (2017b) elaborates on the social, ecological, political, and historical context of Thunderbird Strike through the subheadings “Thunderbirds,” “Toxins,” “Tar Sands,” “Prairies,” “Great Lakes,” and, finally, “Call to Action.” Here LaPensée (2017b) narrates the original stories that inspired the game’s narrative and its characters, including the thunderbird and the serpent, while offering pedagogical prompts to visitors for further reflection. Under “Act,” LaPensée (2017a) links to spaces where visitors can learn more about pipelines through the Honor the Earth campaign homepage, speak up against pipelines through the circulation of Métis artist and scholar Dylan Miner’s “No Pipelines on Indigenous Land” poster (see Figure 7), join ceremonial water walks led by Anishinaabe grandmothers, and participate in divestment campaigning alongside Mazaska Talks (Money Talks), an Indigenous-led international umbrella organization campaigning for banks across the globe to halt the funding of fossil fuel development.

Both of these paratextual spaces offer a vision of the activist ecosystem in which Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) exists, which erodes the boundary between the game world and the material one. In its larger media context, Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) persistently signals that the struggle against the fossil economy occurs in the imperative mood. This imperative delineation is conditioned by a recognition of the interrelationship between settler colonialism
and extractivism, as materialized through the continued inertia of fossil fuel infrastructure development. Using the mechanics of restoration and destruction as conceptual anchors, this article will elaborate on how these relations work together in terms of *Thunderbird Strike*’s (LaPensée, 2017c) expressions of Indigenous resurgence and cultural resistance on the one hand and its employment of sabotage toward “unjust infrastructure” as a mode of self-defence and self-determination on the other. Together, these two registers offer a vision for a future based on alternative infrastructural imaginaries that are simultaneously decolonial and post-extractive.

**Refusing extractivism through restoration, or, *Thunderbird Strike* as radical resurgence**

By inviting players to participate in virtual actions of place-based resistance, *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c) is part of a broader tradition of Indigenous resurgence that thinkers such as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) have recently theorized. A fundamental lesson from many Indigenous voices today is that the expressions of resistance that have made headlines over the past several years are not recent developments. Instead, such expressions are part of a longer tradition of perpetual resistance toward the colonial relations of settler states and embody a broader practice of refusal toward the machinations of settler colonialism on the one hand and an assertion of sovereignty on the other (Coulthard, 2014; Estes, 2019; A. Simpson, 2014; L.B. Simpson, 2017). Yet, given the ebbs and flows of coverage conducive to the conventional mediascape that, as Rob Nixon (2011) famously put it, attends more generously to spectacular events than the durational forms of “slow violence” (pp. 2–3) that define much persistent structural, social, and environmental violence, how Indigenous resistance to settler colonial actions and apparatuses enters the broader popular imaginary through media is selective. At the same time, Indigenous-led movements—including Idle No More (ongoing since 2012) and the #NoDAPL demonstrations at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline (2016–2017)—have highlighted how a material on-the-ground struggle is waged in parallel with a kind of media struggle.

In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) outlines a growing movement of Indigenous resurgence with shared tenets and motivations, a movement she situates under the banner of the Radical Resurgence Project. For Simpson,

> The Radical Resurgence Project simultaneously names an expansive dispossession as our primary relationship with the state, it names colonialism as the meta-system of domination, and it categorically refuses both. It refuses neoliberalism’s move to separate cultural resurgence from political resurgence and co-opt it. (p. 54)
Through this formulation, Simpson (2017) draws attention to the fundamental interconnectedness or, indeed, intersectionality of settler colonialism’s deleterious effects and consequences on Indigenous peoples as she explicitly rejects the ways in which Indigenous politics often sets up “a hierarchy of issues” that prioritizes perceived political issues such as land claims over “issues regarding children, families, sexual and gender violence, and bodies” (p. 53). Movements such as Idle No More, which was initiated by Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon, and Sheelah McLean in the winter of 2012 and continues today in a number of manifestations, foregrounded intersectional issues resulting from settler colonialism and challenged Bill C-45: Jobs and Growth Act (Parliament of Canada, 2012). The bill was over 450 pages and contained changes to a number of Acts that would negatively affect long-standing treaty rights across a number of categories. Gathering under the declaration that enough is enough, Idle No More arguably acted from the recognition of “colonialism as a form of structured dispossession” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 7), and that the effects of dispossession in this way alienates Indigenous peoples from the lands they have always had a deep relationship with.

Through engagement with other contemporary Indigenous thinkers, Simpson (2017) articulates a politics of refusal and resistance tied to a long tradition of resistance, which the title of her book aptly gestures to. The resistance and refusal embodied in her theorization of recent and ongoing Indigenous resurgence is part of what Mohawk theorist Audra Simpson (2014) more broadly identifies as a politics of refusal. This refusal, she argues, conditions Mohawk identity as a people who have resisted settler colonialism and asserted sovereignty primarily through mechanisms of refusal: refusal to adopt American or Canadian citizenship as “border peoples,” refusal to base Mohawk identity through a politics of recognition with the settler state, and so on. By refusing the settler state’s impositions of identity in this way, Simpson (2014) argues that refusal operates as a way of asserting sovereignty. “Refusal,” she writes, “comes with the requirement of having one’s political sovereignty acknowledged and upheld” (p. 11).

Putting Simpson’s (2014) approach to refusal as an Indigenous mode of existence in relation to and against the settler state and Glen Coulthard’s (2014) elaboration of “grounded normativity” (p. 13) as a practice of place-based politics into conversation with each other, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) synthesizes their views to further detail the aims and methods of the Radical Resurgence Project. Refusal and grounded normativity here serve as methods through which to resist settler colonialism, a process that extractivism underwrites while simultaneously affirming sovereignty. In this way, refusal is generative. And while it is important to underscore that Coulthard (2014), Audra Simpson (2014), and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) are writing from different perspectives—Dene, Mohawk, and Mississauga Nishnaabeg, respectively—it is also important to draw parallels with these worldviews as peoples resisting the same settler colo-
nial apparatuses. Indeed, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s (2017) synthesis shows as much through strategies of resistance that, at their foundation, assert sovereignty and participate in Indigenous internationalism premised on solidarity among Indigenous nations.

Following Simpson’s (2017) provocations, then, we can ask how a video game puts forward a politics of grounded normativity and, indeed, if it can at all. Commenting on the instrumental role of social media in recent Indigenous movements such as Idle No More, Simpson (2017) provocatively and reservedly suggests that “grounded normativity does not structurally exist in the cyber world, because it is predicated on deep, spiritual, emotional, reciprocal, real-world relationships between living beings” (p. 221). “Dispossessed from our Indigenous material worlds, our thought systems and our practices, are we losing the ability to be makers and to solve problems?” (p. 221) she questions. Simpson’s (2017) critique here is aimed at a particular kind of tendency of network society (Castells 2009) to reproduce already existing uneven social and economic relations—what Jodi Dean (2009) calls “communicative capitalism” (p. 2). Dean’s (2009) notion underscores the tendency for communicative technologies and systems produced under capitalist conditions to reproduce those conditions in their operation by subsuming resistance to them. Simpson (2017) similarly shows how these tendencies can potentially undermine real-world Indigenous organizing by capturing efforts and syphoning them through larger capitalist and colonial sets of relations.

This emphasis on the cyber world casts a potential critique on the kinds of cyber worlds generated by Indigenous-designed video games such as Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c). Simpson’s (2017) critique is leveraged against social media more generally as a connective yet, ultimately, alienating media infrastructure, rather than a critique of digital cultural production more generally. However, a latent scepticism of the virtual undergirding her argument hedges the possibility of the virtual or digital meaningfully impacting the material world. She describes this reliance on digital technologies for movement building in terms of alienation more fully:

I wonder if this creates further alienation from oneself, from Indigenous thought and practices, and from the Indigenous material world. I wonder if this is a digital dispossession from ourselves because it further removes us from grounded normativity. The [i]nternet is the ultimate Cartesian expression of mind and mind only. There are no bodies on the Internet. There is no land. (p. 221)

In other words, Simpson (2017) sees the contradictions at play in the mobilization of capitalist media technologies and infrastructures and, more broadly, the virtual as in some ways determining and delimiting the possibilities for their role in emancipatory, decolonial projects.
LaPensée, however, is keenly aware of these contradictions, which her game both embodies and is situated within, particularly in relation to extractivism at both the conceptual and material levels, as well as in terms of the limitations of media and cultural production alone to effectively make change. In a 2017 interview with Joanna Hearne, LaPensée describes making *Thunderbird Strike*, showing concern “that people will probably call it an activist game” (Hearne & LaPensée, 2017, p. 33). In anchoring the conversation to the ways that the game functions as a form of activism, LaPensée reveals a kind of hesitation in framing it as “direct action” (Hearne & LaPensée, 2017, p. 33). Hearne challenges this hesitation by emphasizing that games such as *Thunderbird Strike* “support consciousness raising, when you learn to destroy something and then you learn to be gentle with something” (Hearne & LaPensée, 2017, p. 33). Here, LaPensée meditates on the relationship between dynamics and how they are bound to the broader material contexts in which they are produced and circulated, pointing out that although *Thunderbird Strike* takes aim at the settler colonial enterprise of extractivism, its own existence in such a media ecosystem is also entirely ironic because of the mining that’s happening for the materials that are used to make the iPhone that we’re playing the game on. I mean, at some point, unless there is such a shift that people really are genuinely looking at other ways of making technology, there will always be some way in which there is harm being done. (Hearne & LaPensée, 2017, p. 33)

She concludes her line of thought by suggesting that work can still be done using these technologies “with hope for a better future and laying pathways for changes, because the ways that iPhones are made are deplorable. Eventually there has to be a transition to other ways” (Hearne & LaPensée, 2017, p. 33).

These observations provide important insights about the form and content of *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c). LaPensée’s attention to the extractivist materiality of mobile communicative technologies in her interview with Hearne (Hearne & Lapensée, 2017) recognizes that *Thunderbird Strike* has an uncomfortable relationship to the media through which it is experienced. LaPensée implicitly builds on recent developments in media studies that ask us to attune our critical senses to the material conditions under which media are produced as part of our methodological and critical practices (e.g., Cubbitt, 2017). She articulates this problematic not simply as a constraint but as a site of potentially productive tension. This uneasy relationship recognizes how this material-spatial and political-economic reality negotiates the layers of mediation that the game as media exists within, shapes, and influences. Indeed, it is precisely within this space of discomfort and alienation between the cultural and political aims of *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017c) and the material-ecological realities under which it was created...
and is circulated that the possibility for intervention through alternative infrastructural imaginaries is revealed.

_Thunderbird Strike_ (LaPensée, 2017c) is ultimately part of a growing body of Indigenous video games that “portray Indigenous storytelling, teachings and ways of knowing for their own people and the wider world” (LaPensée, 2017d, para. 5). LaPensée (2017d) points out in a survey of contemporary Indigenous video games that mainstream video games often “misrepresent or appropriate from Indigenous communities by falling back on stereotypes or including cultural content without involving Indigenous people in the development process” (para. 1). These kinds of tensions underwrite the context in which _Thunderbird Strike_ (LaPensée, 2017c) was produced, as it emerged from a question LaPensée asked herself: “If a game told our stories about extraction instead, what would it look like?” (Kinder & LaPensée, 2019, p. 201). Her more recent game, _When Rivers Were Trails_ (LaPensée, 2019), directly challenges how these settler colonial relations are reproduced in video games by playing with the form of _The Oregon Trail_, a popular 1970s educational game that mythologizes settler history, in a way that foregrounds sovereignty in its production process and in its content. In an article that explores the interventions of _When Rivers Were Trails_, LaPensée (2020) cites examples, including _Never Alone_ (Kisima Ingitchuna) (E-Line Media, 2014) and _Terra Nova_ (Longboat, 2019), as evidence of the growing number of “[v]ideo games with self-determined representations” (p. 4). Video games, she argues, “offer opportunities for self-determined expressions conveying Indigenous heritage in dynamic ways” (LaPensée, 2020, p. 1). They also resist dominant settler imaginaries through the production of worlds that complicate Simpson’s (2017) skepticism of the virtual. In other words, video games can serve as a medium to do restorative work at multiple levels—from political economy that collaboratively centres Indigenous artists, writers, and designers to modes of play that make these expressions of self-determination available to a larger Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience in engaging ways.

Experientially offering alternative infrastructural imaginaries is the primary mode through which _Thunderbird Strike_ (LaPensée, 2017c) expresses cultural resistance to settler imaginaries and foregrounds self-determination. Cultural resistance refers to resistance that mobilizes cultural production for activist ends that operate alongside material resistance. Although cultural and material resistance are not separate, separating them in this way establishes a conceptual space to reflect on the role of media and cultural production in mediating political possibility beyond mere echoes of on-the-ground movement—they are part of these movements. Others have framed the interventions that _Thunderbird Strike_ (LaPensée, 2017c) makes at the level of culture as “aesthetic activism” (Madsen, 2018b). For Deborah Lea Madsen (2018b), _Thunderbird Strike_ furthers the mission of water protection by compelling players to perform the Anishinaabe principle of
Gidakiiminaan. She quotes the Seven Generations Education Institute definition of Gidakiiminaan as “the experience of knowing and understanding the relationships that exist throughout Creation, and understanding your own role and responsibility in this relationship” (p. 11).

Madsen’s (2018b) view of Thunderbird Strike as aesthetic activism describes the ways in which players are oriented toward a particular form of action founded on Anishinaabe principles and worldviews. Though Madsen (2018b) does not engage this lineage, the concept of aesthetic activism used in these ways is tied to Dean Rader’s (2011) employment of the concept, linking to a longer political aesthetic tradition of Indigenous art, literature, and film. This is a productive starting point to address the ways infrastructure is presented as the site on which such activism is concentrated, but it must be explored with LaPensée’s hesitance in framing the game as activism in mind. However, despite this hesitance, the ludopolitical dimensions of possibility propelled by gamic action are further articulated in terms of how people appear in the game as a kind of avatar or stand-in for players themselves in activist contexts. They appear both as already activated, carrying signs as if marching in a demonstration—which players can draw energy from—or they appear as dormant beings that require restoration to become activated. If an equitable energy transition away from fossil fuels and extractivist energy regimes more generally requires both material forms of resistance as well as cultural ones (Kinder, 2016), then Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) contributes to this future through aesthetic means. What Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) offers players is a virtual experience in sparking a transition from a position that centres Indigenous voices and expresses the incompatibility of extractivist infrastructures and just energy futures.

Unjust infrastructures and an expanded notion of sabotage, or, destroying extractivism

Building on recent scholarship that examines the cultural and material tendencies of infrastructure along with an engagement of perspectives on sabotage in the era of fossil fuels, this section more closely maps the infrastructural terrain upon which Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) intervenes. Offering an account of the relationship between infrastructure, settler colonialism, and the politics of sabotage, Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) is situated in the contemporary moment under what Jeff Diamanti and Mark Simpson (2017) describe as “the shadow of fossil capital” (p. 3), a shadow cast over the totality of social and ecological relations in the geologic epoch we inhabit, which some call the Anthropocene. In providing an exposition of the tension between just and unjust infrastructures and the forms of sabotage from below and from above that emerge from the shadows of fossil capital, this section develops an approach to the modes of resistance that Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) invites its players to participate in through gamic action.
If we follow insights in the energy humanities that understand energy and infrastructure as a social relation (Huber, 2013; Malm, 2016), possibilities for working toward a more just energy future through infrastructure are brought into view. These possibilities emerge from the recognition that certain energy sources and infrastructures have inherent or immanent material properties and historical-cultural tendencies that, together, form their possibilities or, as design theorist Keller Easterling (2014) identifies in *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, their “dispositions” (p. 21). In his article “Building More Just Energy Infrastructure: Lessons from the Past,” energy historian Christopher F. Jones (2013) makes a case for focusing on the cultural politics of infrastructure in the approaching energy transition as a social transition—that is, a focus on infrastructural disposition. “If we are to understand the social dimensions of energy transitions,” Jones (2013) writes, “we must understand the social dimensions of energy infrastructures” (p. 158). Understanding infrastructures in these ways reveals that the material tendencies of particular transport infrastructures have fuelled and continue to fuel inequality. Citing coal canals, oil pipelines, and electricity transmission vis-à-vis the grid, Jones (2013) underscores how infrastructural networks of energy transmission in America—particularly those tied to an ever-intensifying fossil fuel energy regime—deepened the economic divide between rural and urban residents and simultaneously inflicted immense damage to ecosystems. As Jones (2013) argues, these infrastructures “were not simply mechanisms for moving power; they were weapons used in highly competitive industries to squelch and increase financial power of particular parties” (p. 160, emphasis added). These infrastructures resulted in the concentration of wealth generated by an uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of the fossil economy, with peoples and environments on the peripheries of the sites of production bearing a heavier burden.

Relatively absent in Jones’ (2013) thorough discussion of the social dimensions of energy infrastructure is a long history of structural inequity that these infrastructures propel—that is, a structural inequity experienced through the impacts of resource extraction, production, and circulation in North America tied to persistent legacies of settler colonialism. Certainly, Jones’ (2013) aim is not to comprehensively map the social and ecological impacts of energy infrastructure in American history, which would necessitate an engagement with these legacies. Instead, he provides an account of their material tendencies and the political and economic contexts through which these infrastructures emerged in order to underscore the determining role that energy transportation infrastructures play in locking in past energy transitions. But in outlining the ways in which rural and urban communities unevenly experience the costs and benefits of the extraction and transportation of coal, for instance, he shows a keen awareness of the disparate spatial politics and consequences of infrastructural development. Cowen’s (2018) assertion, recounted in the opening pages of this article, regarding the ways
in which infrastructure jurisdictionally functions in settler colonial states precisely pins down what is arguably overlooked in Jones’s (2013) account. Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) asks its players to disrupt such infrastructural inequity with their sights set on a more equitable future. And the mode through which this disruption occurs in Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) is sabotage. It is tempting to view this sabotage as a kind of metaphor that sidesteps the literal definition of sabotage, that is, “to ruin, destroy, or disable deliberately and maliciously (frequently by indirect means)” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). The material reality of the unevenly distributed social and ecological costs and benefits of the fossil economy, however, demands drastic action, and Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) asks its players to experientially meditate on the necessity of sabotage in the age of fossil capital. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have provocatively declared that “Decolonization is not metaphor” with an eye to “re-min[ing] readers what is unsettling about decolonization” (p. 1). Following this move to unsettle, Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) lays bare the reality that halting the fossil economy is not achievable through metaphor. As Indigenous land and water protectors across North America and, indeed, across the planet continue to emphasize in their resistance to settler colonial projects, for communities on the front lines, the stakes of carrying on with business as usual are life and death. Achille Mbembe’s (2003) notion of “necropolitics,” which describes the “subjugation of life to the power of death” (p. 39) that occurs primarily at the hands of states and institutions, clarifies the stakes here. In the context of extractivism and infrastructure, these stakes of life and death are produced through what T.J. Demos (2018) calls the necropolitics of extraction and Michael Truscello (2020) sees as embodied in hyper-industrial infrastructural dispositions.

Despite Jones’ (2013) blind spot in his tracing of the spatial politics of certain energy transportation infrastructures and their necropolitical undercurrents, the question of justice that animates his account deserves attention. His discussion of how particular energy infrastructures, such as fossil fuel infrastructure, tend to deepen existing material and cultural inequalities is motivated by a desire to diagnose the past and present with an eye cast to a more socially and ecologically just future. Jones (2013) views such futures as emerging from a set of regulations, legislations, and principles oriented toward criteria that fulfill a kind of distributive justice. To expand on Jones’ (2013) impulses beyond these criteria, “unjust energy infrastructures” are a conceptual way of attending to the persistence of infrastructural injustice. Notions of justice underwrite much of the defining critical vocabularies of numerous contemporary movements that demand a more equitable future from intersectional axes, including those related to environment (see Schlosberg, 2013; Walker, 2009), energy (see Guruswamy, 2010; Pellegrini-Masini, Pirni, & Maran, 2019; Sovacool, Burke, Baker, Kotikalapudi, & Wlokas, 2017), and climate (see Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). In these contexts, justice mobilizes not only a lim-
ited juridical process mediated and enacted through the state but a broader critical intellectual tradition of the concept that invokes equity more generally.

According to Jones (2013), just energy infrastructures are those that can adequately reconcile the inequalities that are often produced through the fissure between sites of production and consumption. To bring this reconciliation into being in future energy systems, Jones (2013) suggests that while corporations are entitled to profits, “we should use regulatory structures like rate caps and common carrier status to ensure that these technologies do not encourage consolidation and control” (p. 161). In this formulation, any form of energy infrastructure—whether oil pipelines, megadams, or wind farms—can hypothetically become more just through a series of policies, decisions, and mechanisms that fit certain criteria of justice.

But if unjust energy infrastructures cannot become just either through intervention or distribution mechanisms outside of capitalism’s base impulses, and they continue to deepen social and ecological inequity at local and global scales despite progressive regulatory mechanisms within the context of a profit-driven market economy, what is to be done? In Carbon Democracy, economic historian Timothy Mitchell (2011) has compellingly argued that the oil pipeline emerged as a transportation infrastructure in part as a way of further automating the fossil economy, in turn weakening the autonomy that coal workers once held and expressed through actions such as blockading railways. In other words, in Britain’s era of coal, workers mobilized the material tendencies of coal’s distribution to shut down its flow and halt the operations of business as usual as a means to achieve more democratic political and economic arrangements.

Sabotage proves to be more than a concentrated disruption of the dominant order; sometimes, it is a characteristic of the dominant order. Tapping into the semantic ambivalence of the notion of sabotage—a notion that tends in the popular imaginary to be associated with fringe acts of violence to property motivated by perceived extremism—Mitchell (2011) identifies the ways in which the capitalist classes that comprise the oil industry participated in their own form of sabotage through their control of the flows of oil to maximize profit. Mitchell (2011) follows Émile Pouget, whose translated 1909 pamphlet Le Sabotage helped to popularize the word “sabotage” in English, by recounting Pouget’s conclusion “that the capitalist class were perhaps the real saboteurs” (p. 39). Sabotage represents a mode of struggle across infrastructural terrains, leveraged from above and below as a way to achieve desired outcomes. This expanded concept of sabotage, as Darin Barney (2019) argues, offers lessons in sparking an energy transition. Relying on Paolo Virno’s account of the possibilities of political action today, Barney (2019) ultimately suggests that sabotage may be a necessary mode of engagement through which to break out of the confines of petroculture, a term that describes the deep interrelationship between modernity and the production and consumption of oil (Wilson, Carlson, & Szeman, 2017).
Sabotage enters the picture here, then, as a tactic that not only names destructive processes associated with violence but also as a mode of struggle adequate to break the impasse fortified by the fossil economy and its extractivist settler colonial inertia. Barney (2019) describes infrastructural sabotage as a form of mediation: “If infrastructure is the medium of sabotage then sabotage itself is a practice of mediation” (p. 221). In this way, the struggles over energy and infrastructural futures that form a key site of intervention for Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) can be understood through this wager of sabotage against sabotage. Engaging a similar critical tradition as Mitchell (2011) and Barney (2019), Diamanti and Simpson (2017) offer five theses that further shed light on questions of energy transition and responsibility in the age of impasse. Their second thesis is instructive here as it demonstrates how capitalist implementations of energetic dispositions across its history are a kind of “serially sabotaging force” (p. 6), while their third outlines the ways in which “sabotage from below” functions as “the material practice of counter-disposition” (p. 7). Counter-disposition here describes orientations and relations that disrupt dominant modes of infrastructural and energetic disposition—those modes that are at once extractivist, capitalist, and settler colonial.

Such an expanded understanding of sabotage suggests reframing it as a necessary mode of resistance to unjust infrastructures and in the generation of alternative infrastructural relations. This is how Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) asks its players to practice counter-disposition through destruction and restoration: first, through sabotage as self-defence rather than “eco-terrorism”—the defence of present and future generations (human and non-human) against the necropolitical tendencies of the fossil fuel energy regime—and then as a way of generating and maintaining forms of living otherwise, of living beyond extractivism. Importantly, such infrastructural sabotage stems from a longer tradition of expressions of Indigenous sovereignty in Canada that target so-called “critical infrastructure,” particularly through blockades, in order to disrupt the circulation of capital (Pasternak & Dafnos, 2017). In February 2020, for example, railway blockades were erected across Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory and elsewhere in Canada. This blocking of passenger and cargo rail was in solidarity with the Wet’suwet’en, whose permanent encampment on their traditional territory was raided by the RCMP. The RCMP were enforcing a B.C. Supreme Court injunction related to the Coastal GasLink natural gas pipeline project, which crosses unceded Wet’suwet’en territory (Snyder, 2020). So, while this article has so far primarily relied on non-Indigenous perspectives to articulate the notion of unjust infrastructures and the politics of sabotage, there is a deep historical relationship between sabotage and the modes of Indigenous resurgence that coalesce to inform the ludopolitical dimensions of Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c).

The conceptual framing of unjust energy infrastructures situated in relation to this expanded notion of sabotage provides a vocabulary for describing how
Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) games extractivism. As a specific kind of media whose communicative affordances include world building through participation and action—that is, its ludopolitical possibilities expressed through “gamic action”—video games provide an avenue through which to speculate on the role that cultural production can play in curating and activating broader sensibilities. Through these dynamics, LaPensée’s (2017c) Thunderbird Strike articulates a specific kind of resistance grounded in an understanding of the intersections of the fossil economy’s drive to expand and the settler colonial dynamics that underpin this drive. Fossil fuel infrastructures and the extractive energy regime they comprise are incontrovertibly unjust. If sabotage is an effective strategy through which to move beyond fossil fuel society, then to what degree is sabotage necessary for the maintenance of good relations in the face of the “serial sabotage” that underwrites the twin forces of the fossil economy and settler colonialism? Visions of a smooth transition that rely on the building of new fossil fuel infrastructures—including claims from the Government of Canada (2019) that “every dollar the federal government earns from [the Trans Mountain Expansion pipeline] will be invested in Canada’s clean energy transition” (para. 1)—are premised on the maintenance and reproduction of settler colonial extractivism. Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) shows us that there is nothing smooth about the fossil economy, and that its disruption is necessary to build to a socially and ecologically just future.

Conclusion: Indigenous world building and our infrastructural future

LaPensée’s oeuvre of transmedia works, which includes animation such as Returning (LaPensée, 2015), comics such as Copper Heart (LaPensée, 2015), visual art (LaPensée, 2016), and video games, are commonly viewed as part of the emergent tradition of Indigenous Futurisms. Indigenous Futurisms is a genre of cultural production by Indigenous artists and writers that mobilizes speculative and science fiction modes of future-casting to think through the possibilities of Indigenous futures against colonial narratives whose futures depend on the extinction of Indigenous peoples (Dillon, 2012, 2016). In this way, Indigenous Futurisms challenge the animating fantasy of a future without Indigenous peoples at the core of settler colonialism by envisioning an Indigenous future, a future made certain through the long histories of resistance that thinkers such as Simpson (2017) and Nick Estes (2019) detail. Some of LaPensée’s works sit more comfortably in this genre than others, particularly the work that is set in speculative futures. Yet, despite its setting in the petrocultural present, Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) contains traces of these speculative undercurrents.

What, then, does Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) offer in terms of visions for the future? The continued encroachment of fossil fuel infrastructure on Indigenous lands for over a century is part of a broader legacy of colonial violence.
From the construction of open-pit strip mines to the ever-increasing tailings ponds storing the toxic by-products of extractive processes, refashioning landscapes and ecosystems in these ways to suit the fossil economy means continually reproducing relations of dispossession. These are precisely the types of relations that fossil fuel infrastructures mediate: extractivist relations based on non-reciprocity (Klein, 2014) that form a through-line between colonialism, settler colonialism, and capitalism (Simpson, 2017). Intervening in the production and reproduction of these relations through gamic action, Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017c) offers a post-extractive rejoinder to our possible infrastructural futures. She asks her players to consider the relationship between settler colonialism and infrastructural development and to act on it, offering an alternative infrastructural imaginary that is relational rather than technological or instrumental, that is grounded in a refusal of the necropolitical forces of the fossil economy.

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Websites
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