

Terra Nullius, Terra Incognita

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We're all immigrants in cyberspace. This is one of the most interesting implications of "Unnatural Resources", the theme of the latest incarnation of the online gallery CyberPowWow¹ set to go live in May 2004. "Unnatural Resources" takes an old conversation about Natives, non-Natives and the use of natural resources and casts it into a new realm, the conglomeration of interconnected virtual constructs we call cyberspace.

"Unnatural Resources" poses the following question: if we consider cyberspace to be another frontier undergoing colonization, and if we're concerned with how that colonization plays out, might we not do well to reflect on the historical course of colonization on this continent? Pre-contact Natives were more complex than the profoundly eco-conscious warriors imagined by the ecological left, and the European colonizers were more complex than the greedy capitalists populating the same dream/nightmare, but "Unnatural Resources" seeks to use these descriptions as a way of identifying the extreme positions of an argument that contrasts the husbanding of natural resources for the common good and the exploitation of them for personal gain. When the husbanding side loses out to exploitation side of the debate, we get poisoned fish stocks, mad cows and global warming.

Transposing this argument into cyberspace poses several challenges. Cyberspace has no native population that might contest the notion that it is terra nullius and thus subject to control by the first immigrants who might claim it. The resources in cyberspace are not timber, game and gold; they are processing power, bandwidth, networks and data, which, in dutiful accordance with Moore's Law, increase at a dizzying rate. The stakes are not those of survival, but of prosperity. And we're not just colonizing the place, we're making it up as we go.

Media integrated artist Archer Pechawis, in "Not So Much A Land Claim", an essay from CPW2K, writes:

"We have signed a new treaty, and it is good. We have the right to hunt, fish, dance and make art at www.CyberPowWow.net, .org and .com for as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow."²

His statement exemplifies the freedom to define the territory as we see fit, a freedom that stands in stark contrast to the obstacles encountered by our ancestors as they sought some way to get along with the European colonizers.

Yet, while such freedom may have increased, people and their desires remain constant. Some of them wish to control the resources in cyberspace; some want to spread them around. We have censors looking to block access to sites they find objectionable, corporations looking to stop the trading of what they consider to be their intellectual property, and hackers shutting down whatever target of opportunity presents itself. We see governments that spent public capital to ensure that every nook and cranny of the continent received power and phone lines balking at the idea of ensuring comprehensive connectivity to the new world. We suffer spammers clogging up the whole damn thing and degrading everybody's experience. The sides of the debate retain a familiar character.

Building on CyberPowWow 2K's examination of "...that place where Native meets non-Native"³, CPW04 uses the eco-warrior and rapacious capitalist archetypes as a means of engaging artists and audience in the debate. Should cyberspace evolve towards a creative commons similar to that proposed by Lawrence Lessig?⁴ Does such a communal sharing structure have a prayer of flourishing in an increasingly commerce-oriented and government-controlled network? Or, from

the other side, if many of the resources of cyberspace are unnaturally expandable, won't there eventually be enough for everybody? If so, shouldn't exploitative self-interest be used as the driver for ensuring that expansion continues?

CPW04 invites artists to respond to these questions from both historical and contemporary standpoints. As the first residents of Turtle Island, Native peoples tend to possess a sense of responsibility to the land that has only relatively recently become part of the majority culture's discourse. Most First Nations still maintain the land under their control with an eye towards the seventh generation, though some do not. The non-Native peoples came to this land looking for resources to exploit, yet now they experiment with ecological sustainability in many ways, from local recycling efforts to international accords on air pollution. The eco-warrior and rapacious capitalist don't substitute for the much more complex reality, but they do clarify the issues and provide a basis for argument.

"Unnatural Resources" continues CyberPowWow's seven-year tradition of sparking discussion about how Native culture interfaces with network technology and the dominant culture that spawns it. The first three incarnations established a clear Native point of participation in the ongoing development of the net, raising issues of access, representation and the oftentimes contentious relationship between our tradition and our present-day reality. With each successive exhibit, primary curator Skawennati Tricia Fragnito has expanded focus from Natives talking about Native issues to Natives and non-Natives discussing points of mutual contact to, with "Unnatural Resources", issues vital to the virtual community at large regardless heritage.

With this next installment, CyberPowWow trajectory becomes strongly parallel with the one plotted by Jolene Rickard in "No Treaties Needed", an essay in CyberPowWow 2:

[t]he reservation represents the most static notion of how to understand Native experience...Native peoples are moving from reservation 'territories' to urban and rural environments...⁵

CyberPowWow 04 continues that expansion of Indian Territory beyond the reservation. By involving itself with fundamental questions about the nature and direction of cyberspace as a whole, the exhibition places itself – and Natives – into direct exchange with the wider virtual world. By reflecting on the past and seeking to understand how that history shares similar dynamics with the new New World, the exhibition helps ensure that there are no reservations in cyberspace.

¹ www.cyberpowwow.net/librry.html

² www.cyberpowwow.net/archerweb/

³ www.cyberpowwow.net/STFwork.html

⁴ www.creativecommons.org

⁵ www.nation2nation.org/jolenework.html