Re-Worldings at MIT of Beaver Terrapolis Terristories

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Abstract

This paper weaves through the terristories of MIT's institutional and indigenous histories that inspired the creation of Stata Island – a social virtual world. Through spatial narratives, this work probes into the institutional symbols of MIT's Building 20 time capsule and Tim, the beaver mascot. In this virtual world, MIT's Stata Center building is rewilded into an interspecies cohabitation of beavers and humans, reclaiming 'nature's engineer' as a worlding agent. The land around Stata Center is reclaimed by the waters alluding to the marshlands and colonial history of the region and as well as the potential climate futures. In doing so, this work invokes the coexistence of pluriversal worlds that are forced to disappear at the very moment the one-world world is brought into reality. Furthermore, this work highlights the potential of harnessing game engines for worlding practices. Stata Island can be experienced at https://www.stataisland.com/.

Keywords

Virtual Worlds, Indigenous Histories, Institutional Memory, Worlding, Anthropocene, Terristories, Multispecies Storytelling, Decolonial Technologies, Pluriversality,

Introduction

Stories are encapsulated within lands and lands are encapsulated within stories. This symbiosis can be understood as terristories – ongoing relationships of land and stories, from the deep past to the foreseen future [7] and as a socio-spatial inquiry through stories [14]. Terristories are experienced in the rich tapestry of indigenous knowledge systems across the world. Terristories are also powerful as they not only chart geographic terrains and the encoded socio-cultural and ecological knowledge but also reconfigure notions of temporality, while encapsulating the psychic landscapes, ways of thinking, knowing and being. But such stories, and more over Single Stories [1], can also be dangerous and have been used to claim and colonize lands, by deeming them as terra nullius - stripped of their relationship to those who inhabited them and their deep-time sense of belonging while legitimizing their exploitation. The practice of terra nullius continues through extractivism, actively creating space for the tangible expansion of the one world and making absent the worlds that make those places [9]. Through the course of this paper, I will begin by establishing key concepts, and then go on to make the following four arguments. First, I elaborate upon terristories in the context of MIT through the virtual terrapolis world of Stata Island [29], as can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1: The social virtual terrapolis of Stata Island coinhabited by beavers and humans 2023.©Mrinalini Singha.

Using Stata Island I argue for a critical examination of indigenous and institutional histories. Second, I reintroduce the beaver – often associated with MIT as Tim the Mascot – as a worlding agent, speculating about the semipermeable membrane of beaver-human relationalities and the notion of becoming. Third, I highlight the potential of immersive technologies such as game engines for worlding and stress upon the urgency to not only create worlds through immersive technologies but also to word[1] immersive technologies through these worlds. Finally, I conclude by making a case against Baudrillard's notion of the disappearance of the real world.

Baudrillard states that the disappearance of the real world begins the very moment it is brought into reality [4]. I argue that it is the disappearance of worlds that begins at the very moment the one-world world is brought into reality. John Law defines the one-world world as a "contemporary colonial ontological occupation of territories" through the delegitimization of worlds into beliefs and the assertion of

[1] to word (verb): the deliberate use of words in any language to create and propagate a worldview.

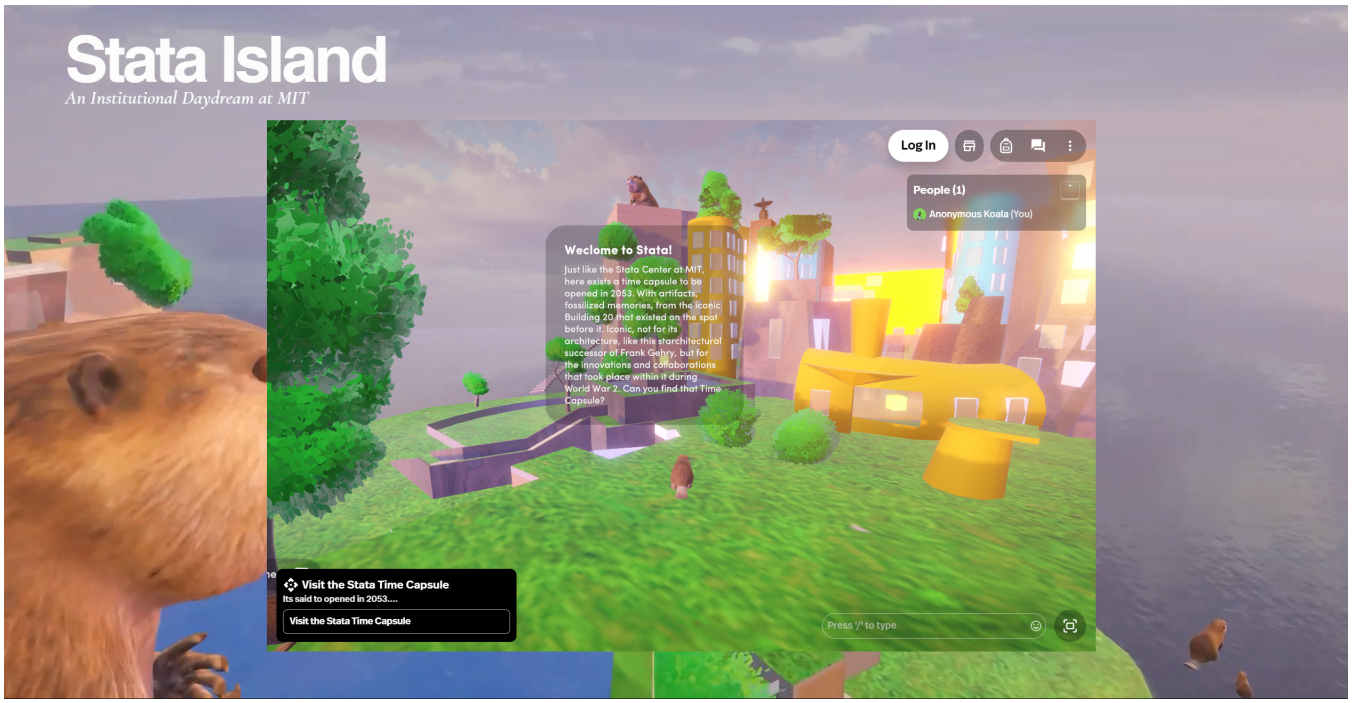

Figure 2: Website and Interface of Stata Island : An Institutional Daydream at MIT.©Mrinalini Singha.

the existence of a universal container-world reality [19]. He explains this through the absence of land ownership as a concept in Aboriginal Australian cosmology – as land isn't a space to be occupied, instead:

> ... it is a process of creation and recreation... The world, including people, but also what Europeans would think of as topographical features, plants, animals, ritual sites, and ancestral beings, are all necessary participants in a process of continuing creation. And if this doesn't happen then the world starts to hollow itself out. It stops existing.[19]

It disappears.

This process of creation and recreation exists in the everywhen – the Aboriginal Australian notion of temporality that suggests an eternal present outliving the association with anyone who happens to occupy a specific site in the present, a cohabiting of the past, present and future [21].

In this volatile time of climate crises and the Anthropocene, it is more pertinent than ever to reconnect with this process of creation and recreation, to reimagine, restore and restory [18] our relationship to lands, stories, peoples and worlds. In A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None, Kathryn Yusoff wrote:

> If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialism has been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence [37].

Amidst this systemically enforced delegitimization and disappearance of worlds, Lee Marcle asks - "where do you begin telling someone their world is not the only one?" [20] I believe that terristories and terrapolises, as modes of investigation, coupled with a pluriversal framing to facilitate worlding and wording practices can answer this pertinent question.

In A World of Many Worlds, Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena offer the pluriverse as an analytical tool that can be used for producing ethnographic compositions capable of conceiving ecologies of practice across heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds [9]. This can be interpreted as the inclusion of framing through lenses of diverse cosmologies and epistemologies as legitimate frameworks of knowledge in a web of relationality. In order to facilitate such a methodology and resultant experience, the spatialized narratives of real time 3-D immersive worlds have immense potential. At once both playful and powerful, these virtual worlds facilitate embodied explorations and invoke empathy for worlding more hopeful, pluriversal and resilient worlds.

Worlding was first introduced by Heidegger in *Origins of a Work of Art* [16] and was soon subverted by Gayatri Spivak [35] to critique the assumption made by colonizers about an uninscribed earth, similar to the notion of *terra nullius* and a condition that made it possible for the worlding of a one-world-world that otherized non-western peoples.

The term worlding has since been further utilized in fields from ontological design to the SF (Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far) of Donna

Haraway. *In Staying With Trouble* Haraway describes worlding time, not as container time but as *"entangled times of past/present/yet to come,"* akin to the notion of the everywhen. Furthermore, she calls forth a space for multispecies worlding called *Terrapolis* (terra – soil, and polis – political community) [13]. In the *terrapolis*, all species are seen as citizens of their milieu motivating speculative experiments for alternative political imaginaries in the Anthropocene.

Exploring these notions of terrapolis, wordings and terristories I was prompted to design Stata Island [29], as a virtual terrapolis that embodies the notion of worlding time and the everywhen as it condenses time – the indigenous and institutional past, alternative present, and climate futures of the land upon which MIT stands. I built *Stata Island* through the use of game engines adding to the discourse of utilizing real time digital technology for worlding. Note that *worlding* differs from the more common notion of *worldbuilding*, as it activates the world into a perpetual state of becoming, as a verb acting upon itself.

Having explored the nuances of these terms, the rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section II explores the terristories of the indigenous and institutional histories and climate futures of MIT as well as the terrapolis envisioned through *Stata Island*. Section III explores beavers as a worlding agent, semi-permeable beaver-human membranes and the becomings in between. Section IV examines the wording and worlding of worlds through immersive technologies.

II. Terristories of MIT & the Stata Island Terrapolis

Two hundred years ago, the region where MIT stands along what is now called the river Charles was tidal marshlands [12] and during high tide, East Cambridge would become an island [8]. This drastic "reclamation" of the shoreline can be seen in Figure 3.

In *Inventing the Charles River*, Karl Haglund writes:

> ... Cambridge was separated from Boston by more than two miles of open water—three times the present distance— and by thousands of acres of salt marshes and open, unsettled lands extending in all directions from the river's meandering shores. In the nineteenth century the shallow basin, its nine-mile length edged with mud flats and broad salt marshes, was dammed for mills and filled for commercial and residential ventures. At low tide the bays of the lower Charles became vast expanses of noisome, sewage-laden mudflats [12].

Before the invasion of European settlers starting in 1620 and the establishment of Boston city in 1630 [10], this region was where the indigenous Wampanoag people foraged in the summer months [32].Beginning in 1675, the European colonists waged a war against the Indigenous peoples that came to be known as King Philip's War, encroaching on their land and pushing the people inland [32]. Like many universities in the United States, MIT too has benefited from the land grabs of indigenous territories under the Morrill Act of 1862 [25]. Today, the institute acknowledges and

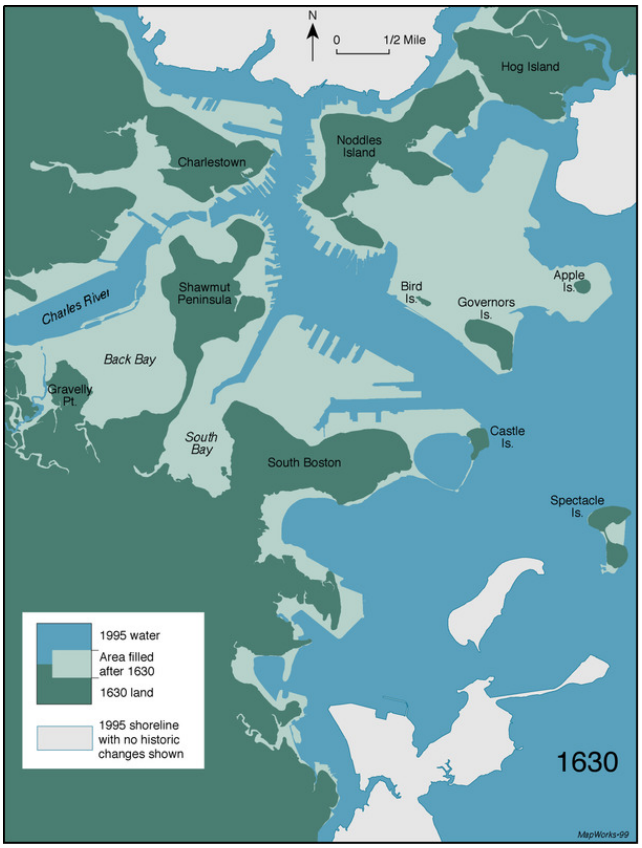

Figure 3: Boston shoreline 1630. ©The Muriel G. and Norman B. Leventhal Family Foundation.

condones this history while trying to create a safe space for and conversations with indigenous students, such as through the MIT Indigenous Language Initiative, The Indigenous History of MIT course, the MIT Native American Student Association [25] and the recent Immersive Indigenous Incubator [27].

There are various ways remembrances are sustained at MIT. One such tradition is that of commemorating events with time capsules. Although none have been known to be made for remembering the indigenous histories of MIT, there are about eight time capsules currently known to be on campus land [24]. One such time capsule exists in plain sight in a frequented public space in Building 32, commonly known as the Stata Center (Figure 4).

Should you walk into Stata, across the bustling cafeteria and towards the elevators, you might notice it - a peculiar artifact nestled in a corner. Looming about 15 feet in height is a wooden crate with a satellite dish on top of it: "BLDG. 20," it reads, "Time Capsule Do not Open Until 2053" (Figure 5).

Building 20 was the predecessor that stood in the spot of Stata Center from 1943 to 1998 [11], The latter is famous for its iconic albeit not always functional architecture made by Frank Gehry; the former for the inventions that were made inside its make-shift structure during World War 2.

Dubbed the Magic Incubator, it is where the radar, that

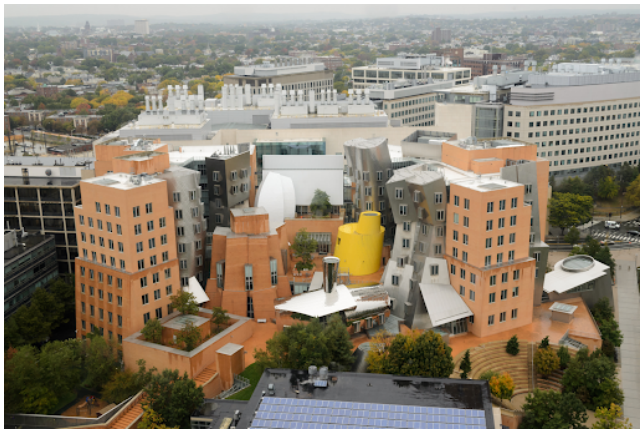

Figure 4: Ray and Maria Stata Center, as seen from the Green Building. Photograph by King of Hearts. *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0.

helped the Allies win the war, was invented [11]. The endearment felt for Building 20 can be felt in an article published in MIT News in 1998:

> Items suggested for inclusion in the time capsule include a piece of Building 20 floorboard, a RadLab reunion book, a photo of the construction site in 1998, a list of major donors to the new complex, a coaster from the March 27th celebration, a poster of MIT's "Greatest Hacks," a sample of news media (year-end issues of Time and Newsweek), photos of famous MIT alumni/ae, a video of "Good Will Hunting," and *instructions on how to deal, in 2053, with the 1998 electronic media contained in the box* [26](emphasis added).

Such instructions poignantly capture how time capsules simultaneously assert the existence of the past and assume the possibility of, even prepare for, a future. One in which someone still exists to uncover their distant past, a collective present through the selections of the encapsulators. A relic such as this, albeit touching, makes one question absence. *What are the histories unwritten, unrecorded about the land upon which this time capsule stands? How might they engage with the potential futures and create alternate realities? How might we interact with them?*

These lines of inquiry brought me, and perhaps may bring you – the reader – to world Stata Island, or a worlding akin to it. Stata Island[29] was built as a part of a course conducted by Gediminas Urbonas in Spring 2023. [2] Here, time is collapsed and interwoven stories encapsulated on an island allude to the past and potential future terristories of the landscape. The Building 20 time capsule has its digital twin replicated in various places across Stata Island (see Figure 6 and Figure 7, alluding to the need for a multiplicity of perspectives capsuled within.

The land is once again reclaimed by the waters into an island-like body that climate futures might result in

[2] 4.368 / 4.369 Studio Seminar in Art the Public Sphere: Hybridity and Monstrosity

Figure 5: Building 20 Time Capsule at the first floor of the Stata Center Building at MIT©Mrinalini Singha.

(Figure 6). Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas propose the swamp as a tool to address the vital urgency of human cohabitation with other forms of life, placing the swamp at the crossroads of disciplines and practices [36]. While this terrapolis of Stata Island is not a swamp (yet), the virtual Stata building is rewilded with ecological growths protruding from its surfaces, and water reservoirs and a dam allude to the beaver inhabitants of the island. Here, the beaver-human membrane is porous and as an explorer, you too can become a beaver avatar (Figure 7).

This world has spatialized narratives like visiting the virtual reconstruction of the time capsule or talking to the Giant Beaver in the Sky (Figure 8). These narratives take the form of quests, an assemblage of varying realities - pasts and futures, science and cosmologies, that can be engaged with to experience the rich compost of stories that make this land

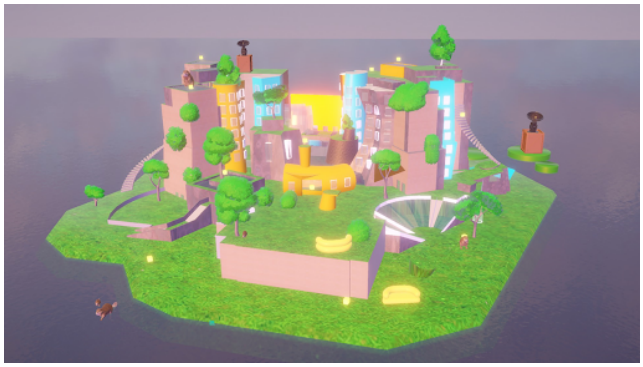

Figure 6: The rewilded Stata Island that exists in the everywhen, both in the past and the climate futures of the land. ©Mrinalini Singha.

what it is.

III. Semi-Permiable Beaver-Human Membranes and Becomings

The beaver is a curious animal that has made appearances across Turtle Island from the myths of Giant Beavers on the east coast, to cultural heritage and monuments of Indigenous Peoples of the Pacific Northwest in the form of totem poles. Tales of the Giant Beaver are speculated to have originated because of an encounter of deep time and cosmology – indigenous people coming across the fossils of Castoroides, an extinct genus of enormous, bear-sized beavers that lived in North America during the Pleistocene [33]. Their descendant, the North American beaver, is a keystone species – an organism that supports its entire biological community [31] and is popularly known as nature's engineer [5].

Due to its remarkable engineering and mechanical skill and its habits of industry, MIT has had Tim the beaver as a mascot for over a hundred years [28].

Putting aside the problematics of mascots as disneyfied simulacra [3], we might spend a while longer with the beaver. Leanne B. Simpson problematizes the title of "natures engineer" as a colonial analogy. For her people, the Mississauga Nishnaabeg, the beaver or Amik (plural Amikwag) appears in their ancestral teachings as a representation of Nibwaakaawin or the practice of wisdom [34].

> Amikwag built dams. Dams that create deep pools and channels that don't freeze, creating winter worlds for their fish relatives. Deep pools and channels that drought-proof the landscape. Dams that make wetlands full of moose, deer and elk food, cooling stations, places to hide calves, and muck to keep the flies away.....And who is the first one back after a fire to start the regeneration? Amikwag. Amik is a worldbuilder. Amik is the one that brings the water. Amik is the one that works continuously with water and land and animal and plant nations and consent and diplomacy to create worlds, to create shared worlds. [34]

Figure 7: Visiting the virtual twin of the time capsule at Stata for a quest as a beaver avatar on The Stata Island ©Mrinalini Singha.

The virtual world of Stata Island – where one can choose to become a beaver – emphasizes on the beavers as life-giving, generative and affirmative worldbuilders governed by this deep relationality and interconnectedness. This game avatar induced porousness of the human-beaver membrane speaks to the need for sympoiesis and the ongoing state of becoming. Sym-poiesis, for Haraway, is about making-with, rather than auto-poiesis, or self-making [13]. Sympoiesis counters the anthropocentric worldview of single authorship, for even we are sympoietically becoming and unbecoming through the generation and regeneration of cells and of all the multi-scalar processes that take place to make us human in this more-than-human world. Such ongoing states of becoming are quintessential to indigenous cultures and even embedded in languages. As Robin Wall Kimmerer notes in Braiding Sweetgrass [18], in Potawatomi, an Indigenous American Language, everything is in a state of becoming, water becomes a river, it becomes a sea. There are more verbs than nouns, as opposed to English, a more object oriented language which has seventy percent nouns and thirty percent verbs.

> A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb wiikwegamaa—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live.... To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive [18].

Figure 8: Talking to the Giant Beaver in the Sky for a quest as a human avatar. ©Mrinalini Singha.

Figure 9: Left: The initial representation of MIT's Tim the Beaver February 1914. ©MIT Courtesy MIT Historical Collection. Right: The current Disneyfied Mascot. Maia Weinstock License (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Should the real world disappear, as Baudrillard states, the very moment it is brought into reality by the act of being named, *what of languages such as this, that name not nouns, but rather continuous becomings? What of wording a world in which everything is not statically named, but is in a state of becoming? Might the real world still disappear?*

IV. Wording Worlding Technologies

As seen above, words and languages structure and frame entire worldviews, entire worlds. Different languages ontologically establish common ground differently, through their conceptualization of space, time, gender and reality. For the Guugu Ymithirr, an aboriginal tribe in north Queensland, Australia this can be observed in their approach to spatial information. In their language, rather than calculating location relative to inherent asymmetries in local reference objects, or from the viewpoint of observers themselves characterized by such asymmetries (such as Left and Right) the Guugu Ymithirr system refers instead to cardinal directions, fixed by the position of the sun. Here you would not go to the left of someone but rather west of someone [15]. One can only speculate the impact this would have on their relationship to the land, the self and to their terristories.

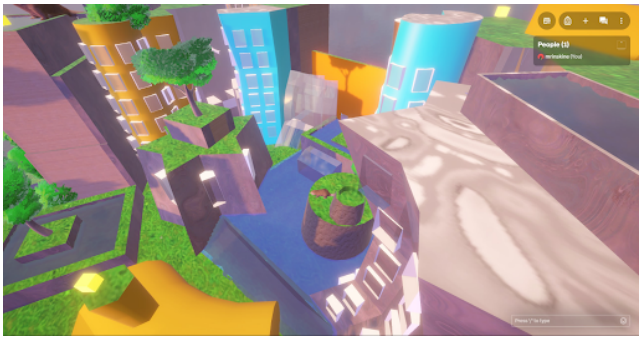

Figure 10: Rewilding process of Stata Center, with ecological growths as well as water bodies forming pools and a dam within the architectural complex. ©Mrinalini Singha.

The construct of time has been worded differently, especially in the context of cultures that emphasize the circularity of time. This can be seen in the commonly used Hindi/Urdu word kal, which denotes both yesterday and tomorrow. This is a quintessential example of the everywhen being worded into a worldview. This is further illustrated through yuga, a cosmological concept in Hinduism. A term that is often translated as an age or epoch, yuga is distinct from these notions as yuga is an inherently cyclical measure of time. On a vast scale from the deep time to the deep future, four yugas cycle through a constant flow of creation and destruction.

Another example that depicts the embedding of worlds in words, is that of maya. Maya is the Sanskrit word for illusion, and for non-dualists, it is the powerful force that creates the cosmic illusion that the phenomenal world is real, the cosmic force that presents the infinite brahman (the supreme being) as the finite phenomenal world [6]. In Indian philosophy, the perceived 'real world' is already unreality. When the Western notion of reality is instead worded as the unreality that precedes the real, as opposed to Baudrillard's simulacra that replaces the real – what then of the disappearance of the real world?

Carl Mika (et al) distinguish between 'wording the world' and "worlding the world" as two onto-metaphysical orientations [22].

> We write about this speculatively from a paradoxical space where we acknowledge that "wording" this reality (i.e. naming and writing about it as we are doing here) cannot do the job of "worlding" it. We draw on our experiences inhabiting Indigenous and racialized bodies navigating the interfaces of juxtaposed complex contexts within and outside of academia in different countries and contexts [22].

Thus, worlding a world can be seen as an embodied experience through which that particular world comes into being while dissolving the boundaries of the subject and the object. You are made by worlds, as much as worlds are made by and with you sympoietically.

Such embodied experiences, in which one experiences the world through the perspective of another, can be made

possible through the use of immersive technologies such as game engines. These game engines have unfortunately been extensively used to create combative and competitive experiences that consciously and subconsciously reinforce a worldview of colonization and conquest. However, they have the potential to do a lot more.

It is now easier than ever to create game worlds using game engines such as Unity and Unreal. This democratization has led to the proliferation of indie game developers and experimental filmmakers creating alternative games and immersive experiences that elicit empathy and compassion. Voices of indigenous filmmakers and game designers are powerfully coming to the forefront with VR cinematic experiences such as This is Not a Ceremony (2022), by Niitsitapi writer and director Ahnahktsipiitaa [2] and Bidaaban (2018) by Canadian and Anishinaabe filmmaker Lisa Jackson [17]. Exploring the stories of two Indigenous men wounded by the colonial tradition of systemic racism, This is Not a Ceremony goes beyond the veil of traditional media, transporting the audience into another realm, where past, present and future are one; where colonial rules and assumptions are forgotten; and where we can finally get to the truth of the matter [30]. Bidaaban takes its audience through a time-jump into a radically different future– in a Toronto that has been reclaimed by nature. The VR experience emphasizes on the power of langues to embody different sets of relations to land, time and each other [23]

It is crucial for us to not only tell stories and make worlds through these technologies but also to articulate, understand and word these worlding technologies and their mechanics through concepts and cosmologies of pluriversal cultures. Communities of practice are being built around this confluence of technologies and worlding as seen through initiatives at MIT such as the ISO Immersive Indigenous Incubator [27] and the Worlding Initiative – a collaboration between the MIT Open Documentary Lab and Unity Technologies [23].

For the author, it was important that the place-based exploration of Stata Island was done in a manner that could be socially experienced by the extended communities of MIT (Figure 11). Stata Island is shared using the platform – Spatial powered by Unity which allows for players to co-inhabit the world – as humans and beavers – in real time while also being able to communicate via text, audio and action. Going forward, the author is planning to exhibit the virtual world of Stata Island at the Stata Center itself, through an interactive installation that passersby can interact with and experience. It is hoped that this material can be taken forward to build an alternative time capsule that acknowledges the indigenous histories of MIT as well as the diversity of the worlds its community comes from.

V. Conclusion

In the course of this work, we have traversed many lands- from the terristories of MIT to the virtual terrapolis of Stata Island, across continents, languages and through pluriversal worldings. We have wrestled with Baudrillard and established that it is in fact the disappearance of worlds that begins as soon as the one-world world is brought into reality. We have explored worldings in immersive technologies and the wording of immersive technologies through worlds. We have become beaver and become human and perhaps daydreamed of dams more akin to that of Amik, the beaver worldbuilder. We have metaphysically opened time capsules and are putting together this paper as another, setting sail into cycles of the everywhen for, as put by Haraway –

Figure 11: MIT community engaging with Stata Island accessed via phones. ©Gearoid Dolan.

> "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. [13]"

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