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17 pages

My research focuses on making an artistic non-game that is designed to be displayed in a gallery environment. The work also investigates my experience of having multiple confused national identities and the existential crisis caused by several factors including the colonized history and present state of Sakha Yakut culture. The research is influenced and inspired by concepts of Indigenous Futurism, a cultural worldview that fights misconceptions of native people as inauthentic when they create artworks using digital technologies.

KEYWORDS: Sakha, Yakutia, videogames, digital art, Indigenous Futurism

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baruƷuƷuƷun ulaƷannuƷ maƷtanabuƷn!¹

S.C.

¹ I thank you all very much - translation from Sakha Yakut language

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

My name is Sargylana Cherepanova. I'm an interdisciplinary Sakha Yakut artist. In "Ethnic groups of North, East, and Central Asia : an encyclopedia" James Minahan defined us as Turkic ethnic group from Sakha Yakutia republic and that we're also considered to be one of the most largest ethnic groups from Russian Far East region.² I'm from Yakutsk, one of the coldest cities on Earth. It's located in East-Siberian part of Russia and during winter it can get to minus 60C (minus 76F). In winter we wear scarves over our faces all the time, because humidity in air freezes and becomes tiny pieces of sharp ice in the air that creates dense fog. The air is usually dry. I remember when I first arrived in United States, I was surprised how humid air can be.

In the future Yakutsk might stop being so cold and collapse because of the global warming that causes massive zombie fires. This phenomenon of zombie fires has even been researched in National Geographic article³. My current work is focused on decolonization of Yakut art and culture from the influence of imperialistic influence of Moscow. As it's stated in anonymous manifest to appeal to decolonize Russian Federation, Moscow's influence on ethnic regions of Russian federation is harmful to the world and to the ecology and people who inhabit these territories.⁴

On a personal level my work is about how I felt as an individual in isolation during COVID-19. And how I feel about my country and myself. It's challenging to do so being so far from home, but at the same time it is easier because of not having to listen to propaganda

² James Minahan, *Ethnic groups of North, East, and Central Asia : an encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 235

³ Alejandra Borunda, "Zombie' fires in the Arctic are linked to climate change", May 19, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/zombie-fires-in-the-arctic-are-linked-to-climate-change>

⁴ Anonymous, "Appeal to decolonize Russian Federation", March 20, 2022 <https://www.stop-the-war.world/en/decolonize-russia-en/>

materials everyday, and having more access to resources to the works of other artists from the US and the rest of the world who focus on similar problems.

Being far from home has also influenced me to define my identity. I have a confused sense of my identity. Being not Russian enough to be Russian, but being Russian enough to understand that I have the responsibility to at least try to stop the war with Ukraine. And at the same time being born as Yakut in Yakutia, on land that has been colonized by Russia itself. And all these parts of my birth identity collide with me being an international student in America. Together this fusion creates a confused identity that sometimes has a hard time understanding itself. It's hard to even think in just one language.

In addition to questioning my identity of being an international student from Yakutia in America has left me with a sense of facing a unique existential crisis. When I'm talking about the place where I'm from, sometimes it makes me feel like I'm talking about abstract things - some fantasy land that was made up, like Olonkho tales being told by Olonkhosuts during long winters.

I haven't met any other Yakut person in almost three years. Usually, when I first meet a person and tell them about where I'm from, about Yakutsk, *whwaq*⁵ or *is miine*⁶, I meet no recognition. This might be silly, but that sometimes this makes me feel like I'm just talking about things I dreamed, like I was sleeping all my life, that Yakutia doesn't exist and maybe I

⁵ Ysyakh – translation from Sakha Yakut language. Ysyakh is a summer solstice holiday, more known as a New Year for Sakha people

⁶ Sakha Yakut nation dish. A giblets soup

don't exist at all. When I meet people for the first time and min saqabwun dieteqpine sim biir kim de æjdææbæt⁷....

⁷ When I say I'm Sakha, nobody recognizes it - translation from Sakha Yakut language.

CHAPTER II: WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH

This research is about making an artistic videogame that is not a game in the usual sense. The end result exists in multiple variations. One of them is a presentation in a form of a video that was shot inside of a created game. The other variation is the game itself that can be run on a personal computer. The first variation, a 16 minutes long video is designed to be presented in a gallery environment already has some established rules. The other is designed to be experienced in the comfort of your own home while staring at the screen of a computer.

The non-game investigates what makes a game a game and if a videogame can exist without a strictly defined gameplay elements. A lot of traditional games are usually seen from a Western point of view. It has to cater to a player and has to have a set of rules. I've made a videogame that is simultaneously an art-object, a non-game, and also an attempt to decolonize the space of videogames and the world that creates it. It is an attempt to look at videogames presented as a form of art from the perspective of a Sakha Yakut person.

The central element of this non-game is how I'm trying to examine my own existential crisis as a Yakut person. When I cannot find traces of my culture in the Western world, I create my own worlds based on my experiences and memories.

CHAPTER III: INFLUENCES

When I make my work I think about narrative. I wonder, is it possible to completely avoid narrative in video games? In considering how storytelling could operate in this game I find some inspiration in Yakut Olonkho epic tales and contemporary videogames.

During long winters Olonkhosuts could tell these tales for a few days or even weeks. It has become a cultural code of self-identification for Yakut (Sakha) people. This phenomenon of when Sakha people started to identify themselves with Olonkho is described in *Storytelling in Siberia : The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World* by Robin P. Harris. Harris notes that there was a cultural oppression of Olonkho in USSR. As a result, many Olonkhosuts died out. And only when UNESCO recognized Olonkho as a cultural masterpiece that should be guarded, began the new era of revitalization of Olonkho and Sakha Yakut identity.⁸

Olonkho and other shorter tales describe a mythology and the whole construction of a universe. But Olonkho is also improvisational art, and so one story can go on for a long time - changing its shape, becoming something else. But even though I realize how important this is for my culture, I also find Olonkho problematic. Being traditional art it appears a little bit too outdated and sexist for me - one of the patterns that I see is the treatment of women as inferior or evil if they're not fertile. As Anna Danilova noted in the paper *The Image of a Woman-Knight-Hero in Yakut Olonkho* women abaaahy (Sakha monsters, antagonists of Olonkho) are visually described as infertile with narrow hips and sharp breasts.⁹ This probably

⁸ Robin P. Harris, *Storytelling in Siberia : The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 135-138

⁹ Anna Danilova, *The Image of a Woman-Knight-Hero in Yakut Olonkho* (Yakutsk, Russia: Institute of Humanitarian Research of Academy of Sciences of Republic Sakha Yakutia Olonkho Center, 2008)
<https://cheloveknauka.com/obraz-zhenschiny-bogatyrki-v-yakutskom-olonho>

also has something to do with the theme of fertility cult everywhere in Sakha Yakut culture, even in Ysyakh. Of course this is probably connected to the attempt to revitalize our culture and our people, but it still makes me feel uncomfortable.

Technically as a game developer I feel a certain responsibility to not even unintentionally recreate patterns from the real-world oppressive systems when I'm creating simple rules and invisible walls for the games. I'm making a game where you as a player don't have to do anything at all. I don't really know where I'm going with this, I'm still exploring and researching. I just think that it's important to be aware of what is going in the world, especially when you make videogames. Entirely excluding politics and social issues from videogames is impossible.

My main influence is a movement that exists in Western art which is called Indigenous Futurism. According to Skawennati, this movement is about including indigenous people in the science fiction vision of the future, so indigenous people can see themselves in the future. That we're not dead. We're alive. It is about fighting the stereotype of seeing indigenous people as less authentic if they work with technology.

Skawennati is a Mohawk artist that tells a story from a perspective of her digital avatar. And she is also a co-founder of the projects like Initiative for Indigenous Futures and Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace.

Skawennati's work *She Falls For Ages* is a video work which can be described as a machinima. Meaning that it's a video shot inside of a game. In this example this work was made

using environments of a game Second Life. Skawennati retells a tale of worldbuilding from her culture in sci-fi setting. By doing this she combines two elements. The past and the future.¹⁰

One of the things that Skawennati made in digital space was her avatar. I thought it was interesting. Sometimes it seems to me that the character creation process is the most interesting part of the game. And I could also see this as a process that is needed to inhabit a digital space. As a person whose land has been colonized by Russian Federation 389 years ago, I feel a special connection to it.

Lindsey Nixon noted in the work *Visual Cultures of Indigenous Futurism* that academic discourse may tend to infantilize artists from this movement. And it might center only on certain concepts that are allowed, making this unintentional lip service.¹¹ I also agree with this. I read it that in a way giving attention only to the future component of this cultural movement can indeed be seen as a lip service, by allowing other problems to be silenced, such as the difficulty to access needed COVID supplies in indigenous communities not just in America but everywhere in the world. I feel like Indigenous futurism can and maybe should have teeth. So, it wouldn't be a safe convenient movement that can be used by institutions or even governments.

I don't have an answer for that. But I still like the concept of Indigenous Futurisms and Afrofuturism as well. I think I was working in this similar direction even before I discovered about these movements. When I started making a structure for video game I'm working on

¹⁰ Skawennati "She Falls For Ages", April 11, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/212761877>

¹¹ Lindsay Nixon, "Visual Cultures of Indigenous Futurism" *Otherwise worlds : against settler colonialism and anti-Blackness* edited by Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro and Andrea Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 332-342

right now, I found an inspiration in Yakut mythology with the idea that there are layers in the world, and the belief from Yakut shamanism that everything has a spirit and is alive.

The other narrative-related inspiration was a game “The Beginner’s Guide” by Davey Wreden. This was the first game where I cried. It was at the moment when the author directly interacted with the player and talked about his personal experiences. I felt like it was something similar to the communication that already happened and is still happening between the person who created the game and the person playing it. And all of this is going on at different points in time. I set a similar goal in my game - to bring in something personal and to create an unusual interaction with the player.

CHAPTER IV: WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

I'm interested in researching what elements make a videogame an art project that can be displayed in a gallery environment. I see parallels between creating rules for a bunch of locations floating in airless space and how rules are created in our real world. I wanted to be aware of these parallels, so that I wouldn't accidentally recreate real-life oppressive structures from our world. I want my project to be personal, so that when people look at it, they could easily tell it was made by someone and not a company. I incorporate my cultural Yakut (Sakha) upbringings in this project because I want to decolonize a video game space and the real world beyond this virtual reality, and because it's important for me as a Yakut person to see myself in the future and not just in archives of history museums.

This research is also important for me because I think that that social and political components of the work (especially in a video game format) shouldn't be easily separated or erased. This research is a statement for me that I disagree with imperialistic colonial policies of Moscow and I can't and don't want to avoid these manifestations in my work.

My goal is to make a non-game that is personal and that is challenging the definition of the videogame and the art.

I also hope to bring diversity in the world of videogames that is currently dominated by white male developers.

CHAPTER V: WHAT IS GOING ON IN THIS RESEARCH

sulustar kœestybetter translates as *stars aren't visible*(or *I can't see stars*). It's written in the Novgorodov alphabet that was created by a Yakut linguist Semyon Novgorodov and was briefly used in from 1920 to 1921. Unlike the modern Yakut alphabet, it's not based on Cyrillic script¹².

The non-game begins in a room that represents a typical bedroom that associates with the experience of having to go through COVID while staying at home. There's a dragonfly on the wall that is supposed to be character that guides you through the game. I feel a special connection, a kinship with the dragonfly.

Soon the game cuts to the more fantastical version of this location. This location has been made in Virtual Reality. What is interesting about working in VR is that it has a unique sense of perspective. In the first semester, I remember reading a piece about scopic modes. There was an example about cameras in cinematographic media, where the angle of the camera limits our understanding of what is going on. I thought about how this idea might apply to VR. There's no camera limitation in VR, since you're the camera. You can look at everything under any possible angle. You can go everywhere and if there are several events happening, you can witness them all. There's more perspectival freedom.

But still, it's not just a camera. It's everything else in the game that matters too. The game, app, or digital experience has a system with rules. Since the beginning of studying in the MFA program and taking courses that are not offered in Russia because of current ideological clashes, I realized that as a game developer I have a responsibility to not recreate real-life

¹² V.M. Ionov, Semyon Novgorodov, *saqalu: suruk bicik* (Yakutsk: Oblast Typography 1917)

existing systems that harm oppressed groups and everyone else too. And as a gamer myself I would like to see more games that are created with a similar understanding.

In this second room there multiple plants in pots, to which I refer as Non-Playable Characters(NPC). Generally, I tried to create a feeling that everything is alive and has a spirit according to the Yakut shamanic worldview, but the reason for giving the plants text voices is different. I felt like they were alive in another way. I think they represent trapped pieces of my Yakut culture. Once they were free, but now they're constrained to these containers and they need to be nourished with care. Their future is unknown and honestly, I don't know if *min tulum* will still exist in the future.

After several events in these first locations, the player gets transported to another location that was recreated from the memory of a very real place, my hometown of Yakutsk. What the player sees there is a playground surrounded by tall buildings. These buildings represent a typical residential architecture style in Russia that is called "hrushevka". Architecture can be designed as an instrument of oppression. This is what hrushevka buildings symbolize here. The player is trapped and the only way to temporarily make those buildings disappear is to interact with the playground construction. After these interactions the buildings slowly disappear underground, but it's just temporary. After some time the player find themselves trapped again in the cube textured with rendered surroundings. When I created this particular chain of events, I wanted it to be a metaphor for the fact that when you ignore a problem, it doesn't mean that it will go away. I wanted to talk about how there's very little difference between practicing self-care when you're trying to save your mind in an impossible situation and blissfully ignoring the problem.

The other thing I was thinking about while creating this playground is how a memory can transform and twist when you're trying to remember it. It's not something still and permanent. Visually I was also inspired by aesthetics of point-cloud data. This is why there are so many particles in the air. It was supposed to create a feeling that everything can disappear or morph any second.

The sun in the sky is an important part of a whole composition. In Sakha Yakutia Republic we have a celebration that is called uhuaq (Ysyakh). It's informally called Sakha Yakut New Year. It's celebrated during summer solstice. During uhuaq we gather outside of the city, perform or watch various dancing and singing activities. And we stay there during night and meet the rising sun as a culmination of the entire celebration. It is believed that when you meet the sun, you absorb the energy for the rest of the year. I try to include this feeling in most of the scenes I created in this project. And it's the most evident in the next transition to the final scene which has no narration at all.



Figure 1. The last scene with no narration

When creating it, I tried to make it feel alive. Perhaps it is the most “indigenous futurist” scene here. After finishing exploring this fictional land, a player can activate an invisible construction that resembles a diamond mine. It expresses my feelings about the fact that the Russian government uses our lands and resources for their gain. And how the concept of “indigenous futurism” can both be a hope and a trap. Yes, having a vision of the future is very important. Especially for the people whose future has been taken away. But how can future exist without present and past. I feel like I can dream about the future of Sakha Yakutia republic every day, create works about it. But in real life we and our resources are still used by government to wage wars. It’s convenient for a government to have harmless dreamers who are so deep in their dreams they don’t call the government out.

CHAPTER VI: HOW THIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

Because I'm a visual artist, most of the development happened in the 3D modelling software application Blender and the game engine software platform Unity and some parts of it were also developed in the VR software application Gravity Sketch.

The music was composed with understanding that absence of the sound is also a part of the composition. The main goal was to make it fit the non-game pacing.

The conceptual part was developed through researching what it means to be Yakut in modern world, the existential crisis of Indigenous people, the "indigenous futurism" concept and how to make a game that is designed to be displayed in a gallery environment. I made a lot of journaling, sometimes waking up in the middle of the night to write down the idea that I just dreamed.

When I make the 3d objects I open the Blender program and start a rough build. At first, my environment is not functional. A player is a capsule, a tree is a cuboid. As I work, things become clearer. They become characters, allegories, feelings, spirits. A space made from a corridor, a house, an island, the sky. What is a sky? A sky is a cube. A cube made with blue textures. A white ball is drawn in my sky. The painted clouds froze over me. My sky is a cube. It stands still, but it is endless. It's unreachable.

I used allegories with cubes as an environment device and the transition device a lot. Because the cube is the most elemental object. It's usually the first object to be created. And I find it poetic.

Then I create an island in the middle of the void. It is abandoned, there is nothing on it that can breathe. Is the island the heart? It seems like a still heart in the middle of emptiness.

The void is a space that exist beyond all the invisible walls and locations in the game. Technically void in my game an unlimited empty space in which the map of the game exists. If the player falls off the map they will fall forever. Until they shut down the game. I thought it'd be interesting to activate this space as well. Or rather the absence of it.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

My research demonstrates that even though I'm Sakha Yakut, I don't have to make my work only about Olonkho epic tales. My culture doesn't have to stay locked away in the archives of history museums. My culture can evolve and change forms. I can tell my own story and transcend it in artistic non-game, and that it will matter too.

But also, in order to create or resurrect the future that has been taken away I shouldn't forget about both past and present. My work as a Sakha Yakut person can be easily used by institutions and governments because of its appeal to the hope of having future and this is why my work needs to have teeth.

Even though I don't agree with sexism in Olonkho, I still appreciate Olonkho's role in revitalization of Sakha Yakut culture and I can use this storytelling as inspiration.

And even though it feels like Sakha Yakutia is not real sometimes due to the fact that we have been erased by colonization by Russia, my Republic of Sakha Yakutia is very real and so is war.

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