

imagineNATIVE

Company Showcase

- **Type of company:** Indigenous interactive media festival
- **Established:** 2000
- **Location(s):** Toronto, ON
- **Company Size:** 10-20 Employees
- **Website:** <http://www.imagenative.org/>

imagineNATIVE, an Indigenous-focused film, digital and interactive media festival, started in 2000 in order to give a platform for screen-based works made by Indigenous artists. The focus is not necessarily put on programming, but rather on artists. Thus, the work imagineNATIVE presents is sometimes not obviously Indigenous in theme or story, though it is created by Indigenous directors, producers and screenwriters. In doing so, imagineNATIVE makes sure these voices are heard beyond mainstream forms of media, which generally do not offer these perspectives.

Company Origins

Over the last two decades, imagineNATIVE has grown considerably to become a leading international organization in the screen-based media industry. It has deeply contributed to the shift in perception and changed the landscape of this industry by giving more opportunities for Indigenous work to be seen. imagineNATIVE's presentation is not limited to the annual 5-day festival held in October, but consists also in year-round initiatives (touring, presentations of work), workshops and special projects.

From the early days, digital media has been a component of the festival, even if imagineNATIVE did not always have the time or capacity to nurture that side of its presentation. Over the last few years, however, with the proliferation of more accessible technologies in the digital and interactive areas (e.g. VR/AR hardware, smartphones, game development and computer animation software), imagineNATIVE was finally able to support the development and the presentation of this kind of works.

Indigenous perspective in VR

2167 was a key VR project initiated by imagineNATIVE. In collaboration with TIFF, Pinnguaq and the Initiative for Indigenous Future, imagineNATIVE commissioned four Indigenous filmmakers and artists to share their vision of Canada 150 years in the future through four VR experiences. Jason Ryle, Artistic and Managing Director at imagineNATIVE, and a science-fiction and alternate reality enthusiast, had the idea of 2167 in contemplating what the festival would do for the sesquicentennial. According to its mission, imagineNATIVE chose to

propose something other than a celebration of the past 150 years. At first, this project was intended to be a short film series. Jason tried the Google Cardboard in 2014 and had a revelation: VR was the right medium for 2167.

Three of the four VR short films premiered at TIFF Bell Lightbox in June 2017 and all works premiered during the 18th edition of imagineNATIVE festival. It was also presented at the Berlinale European Film market. 2167 has been successful both because it presents very different content (a collection of VR dystopian experiences), and because it represents original, forward-looking, and conceptual Indigenous content. 2167 is now part of the touring presentations that imagineNATIVE offers year-round across Canada.

With the growing interest and potential of VR, it was also important for imagineNATIVE to ensure Indigenous perspectives are present. This need was further heightened by the realization that that VR is particularly conducive with non-linear, non-western forms of storytelling. Indigenous storytelling often relies on unconventional structures, loops and fragments. The art of storytelling in virtual reality offers a point of view and a unique sense of place, space and environment that can be compared to Indigenous oral storytelling practices.

Digital or interactive?

After years of success in the film industry, the organization would like to achieve the same positive shift in perception in digital and interactive media, which is why VR is becoming more prevalent at imagineNATIVE. Indeed, the recent addition of Meagan Byrne as Digital and Interactive Coordinator starts a new stage in the way imagineNATIVE conceives digital works made by Indigenous artists.

This shift started by realizing that there are two types of VR works: interactive experiences (the user has the control) and 360-degree films (no action required). imagineNATIVE then built two different strategies for developing and presenting each type of content. Because imagineNATIVE serves primarily filmmakers, VR is mostly used for film, although an increasing number of interactive projects are also supported by imagineNATIVE. Of course, VR remains an experimental field, which has not reached mass adoption in the marketplace meaning that nobody can say with certainty that it is here to stay or how it is going to evolve.

Ethics of VR

Developing and presenting Indigenous content raises a whole range of questions, especially when these considerations meet the ethics of virtual reality. As a leader in the screen-based industry, imagineNATIVE is developing a framework called On Screen Protocols and Pathways (based on an existing Australian initiative), to guide both Indigenous and non-Indigenous content creators, producers and distributors in the process of using Indigenous stories on screen. While this framework is focused on TV and film, the principals and protocols can be applied to digital and interactive content until a specific framework is developed. The intention of the framework is to be a tool that enacts generational change on the screen and one that ensures that negative stereotypes are no longer perpetuated. It will also help to make sure that adequate permissions have been granted for the use of stories or sacred places and that ceremonies are not misappropriated. In this context, the sense of immediacy and intimacy that VR can offer makes it especially important to find ethical solutions. imagineNATIVE commits to encourage conversation within the sector to promote healthy cross-cultural projects.

The road ahead is paved with many other considerations that the VR sector will have to address with the help of imagineNATIVE: access and education, attribution and copyright or archiving and preservation of digital media.

Looking ahead

Jason and Meagan are confident in the future of the Canadian screen-based industry and role of Indigenous creation within that industry. With the increasing awareness of historical and contemporary Indigenous issues, the audience has become more prone to access these stories that were marginalized or ignored for too long. VR is a great tool to share these stories and meditative experiences and to build bridges between cultures. This interest is reflected in the recent creation of Canada's Indigenous Screen Office, intended to cover all screen-based content, including digital media.

After two decades of presenting Indigenous-made screen-based work, imagineNATIVE's archive presents new opportunities to further explore and contextualise Indigenous cinematic history. We can now look at Cree cinema specifically or explore aspects of Anishinaabe cinema in ways we could not in the last century.