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Profile Series

Profile of:

MARUHAEREMURI NIHONIHO

" I really had to walk between two worlds "

Maruhaeremuri Nihoniho, 45, probably never suspected that her childhood days playing arcade games like Space Invaders and later playing home video games like Tomb Raider would guide her to becoming an award-winning Indigenous video game designer today.

Nihoniho founded Metia Interactive, an award-winning game development studio based in Auckland, New Zealand. She is best known for her development of the commercial video game Cube for the PlayStation Portable gaming system.

Maruhaeremuri – who goes by the shorter “Maru” – is a Māori woman who was born and raised in Christchurch (or its Māori name Ōtautahi), New Zealand. She said her childhood was largely spent in between the urban Christchurch and a small rural village, two distinct lifestyles.

“I could experience life from multiple points of view,” she said, in a Skype interview. “Growing up in the country school, I grew up around people that looked like me. I would be sad when I would go to Christchurch here it was harder to find people who looked like me.”

At the time, the school she attended in the city did not emphasize the Māori culture as much as the country one did.

“I really had to walk between two worlds,” she said, emphasizing that she later found that to be an advantage in her life. “I could have grown

up elsewhere and not been exposed to my culture and had a different life.”

Nihoniho grew up in a household where the Māori culture was respected and had some fluent Māori speakers. She said the previous generation was not encouraged to embrace the Māori culture and the one before that, “the language was beaten out of you at school.”



The education system in New Zealand has changed much to the point where the Māori language is taught in some schools. “Children of today have opportunities to go to total immersion schools, she said, emphasizing how much things have changed.

In terms of becoming an entrepreneur, Nihoniho was certainly not raised that way. Neither of her parents were involved in business, but Nihoniho said they were creative and involved in local Māori community and Iwi (tribal) projects. Her mother was a teacher and her father was an aircraft engineer and a musician. She would always see him fixing things in the garage.

The creative element came when her mother encouraged her to make her own things, such as a doll to play with. She also encouraged her to make her own homemade cards for special occasions.



“At the time, I remember being grumpy over that. Making my own card seemed to be so embarrassing to me at the time. At the time, I did not appreciate it, but now I do.”

Nihoniho recalled being challenged during her schooling years. As a creative person, she preferred making things in a hands-on way more than simply learning it in a classroom. The classes she enjoyed the most, she recalled, were “hands-on” subjects such as science, metalwork, and woodworking.

She felt she learned more outside of the classroom than in it. After leaving school, she had no qualifications or specific work experience. Her first job was working in a second-hand shop. Her mother said that if she was going to leave school, she would need a job. After starting out as a waitress, she became manager after she obtained

enough experience. Although she had enjoyed great success in the hospitality industry, she felt that it was not her career aspiration.

“That would have been the easiest path to move into,” she recalled. “I knew it wasn’t what I wanted to do. There was something else out there and I would find it.”

She recalled that she was very passionate about video games as a child and remembered the “marathon binge” video game playing weekends with her family.

She decided she wanted a career change and developed the idea that she could combine her game playing enjoyment with her creative side. Her long experience in the hospitality industry had also given her people skills and experience in business.

While living in Auckland, New Zealand, she began to look for courses in everything she would need to know about video game development, such as coding and the basics in computer programming. She wanted to learn these quickly, but discovered everything she wanted to know in a diploma program in multimedia. The program provided an overview of 3-D modelling, editing, website design, and basic coding and scripting.

She also began to speak to existing game designers and ask for their advice. That advice led her to travel widely in pursuit of her dream. She travelled to conferences in places

such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well as to nearby Australia. She eventually developed a character-driven game idea involving a Māori warrior woman, but did not receive any luck in obtaining funding. There was plenty of interest expressed, she said, but she felt she needed a reputation in the gaming industry first before she would be taken seriously.

By that time, however, she had maxed out of her personal savings, as well as that of her husband's. All the costs of travel to various gaming conferences to promote her work began to catch up with her. She also felt the constant travel was becoming a challenge in becoming a video game entrepreneur.

"In these years of travelling, I became lonely. I was going to places where I did not know anybody. I am more of a quiet person. I am more of a listener and thinker and not so outspoken."

She said her biggest challenge was finding her own internal motivation to keep going. At the time, nobody was taking her seriously and she was running out of money. She said encouragement from her family and friends made a big difference. Besides finding her own self-motivation, she had to develop a sense of resilience, especially after hearing so many rejections.

She then changed her gaming direction and began to work on a pitch that was more realistic and more cost-effective than her original

idea. Her new idea was the complete opposite to her other design and focused on solving puzzles, rather than a character-driven adventure game.

She began prototypes for the game Cube. Eventually, she pitched the idea to a publisher and it became her first game playable on the PlayStation Portable gaming device.

She said she had to take her time and become a strategic thinker and plan her next move. After getting commercial success with Cube, she felt more secure in her future and had to stay motivated. After signing her first contract, she felt relief.

"After Cube, I had a reputation to my credit on the international gaming market," she said.

With that security, she felt she could focus on the games for the entertainment market. She also developed a passion for finding a platform to tell Māori stories. After her success with Cube, she was contacted by the University of Auckland to develop software to help teenage – especially young Māori – to deal with depression. She developed a software that was basically a computerized cognitive behaviour therapy (known in psychology as CBT) for young people.

The program – called Sparx – allowed her to teach others in the way she preferred. The teaching component is interactive, immersive and very different from a classroom setting.

She is now working on a new game called Takaro which is “Play” in Māori that is designed to teach computer coding concepts to young people.

“I am able to develop game playing with a message where you learn by doing.”

To help aspiring Māori entrepreneurs and business leaders, Nihoniho recommended that governments and communities help by understanding that the Māori have their own way of doing things.

“They’ve got to understand that the programs they have designed are not working for us. They are putting a square peg into a round hole.”

She said governments and organizations need to stop making programs for Māori and start getting our input

into the design of such programs. “We know what will work better for us. ”

Nihoniho said that things have gotten better in New Zealand as there are now business-oriented programs for Māori and many Māori businesses have been up and running for years now.

Over the last few years, she has received accolades from various organizations for her work. She became a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her pioneering work in the gaming industry and mental health services. In May 2018, Nihoniho received the Māori Entrepreneurial Leader Award from the University of Auckland in recognition of her “learning through play” gaming component.



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Joseph Quesnel is a research fellow for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy who mainly focuses on Aboriginal matters and property rights. Presently based in eastern Nova Scotia, he is from north-eastern Ontario and has Métis ancestry from Quebec.

He graduated from McGill University in 2001, where he majored in political science and history. He specialized in Canadian and U.S. politics, with an emphasis on constitutional law. He also has a Master of Journalism degree from Carleton University, where he specialized in political reporting. His master's research project focused on reformist Indigenous thinkers in Canada.

He is currently studying theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax.

In the past while as a policy analyst, he was the lead researcher on the Frontier Centre's flagship Aboriginal Governance Index, which is measured perceptions of quality of governance and services on Prairie First Nations.

For over two years, he covered House standing committees as well as Senate committees. Quesnel's career in journalism includes several stints at community newspapers in Northern Ontario, including in Sudbury and Espanola. He also completed a radio broadcasting internship at CFRA 580 AM, a talk radio station in Ottawa, and the well-known Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC).

He is a past editor of C2C Journal, an online Canadian publication devoted to political commentary. He wrote a weekly column for the Winnipeg Sun and contributes to The Taxpayer, the flagship publication of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Quesnel's policy commentaries have appeared all over Canada, including the Globe and Mail, the National Post, the Financial Post, the Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, the Montreal Gazette, the Calgary Herald, Winnipeg Free Press, among many other major papers. Over the years, he has been featured as a guest commentator on many radio and television news programs.