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TE REO MĀORI KA RERE: ‘TALKNOLOGY’ AND MĀORI LANGUAGE AS A LANGUAGE OF CHOICE

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Abstract

This opinion piece aims to grow awareness of a range of technological initiatives that are supporting Māori language regeneration. These initiatives have been chosen because they have communities of users. This piece could be useful to educators who want to learn about the options that are available in this area, or students of Māori language for similar reasons.

Keywords

Māori; talknology; minecraft; PlayStation; language regeneration

As a thinkpiece, my aim is to raise awareness across the sector about existing and upcoming ‘talknology’ initiatives that could support in language regeneration for Māori (indigenous peoples of New Zealand).

Language is a window to cultural beliefs and values (or tikanga), facilitating a specific perspective of the world. There is variation in the definition of languages and dialects, reflected in differing amounts of world languages as counted by various organisations. What is not at doubt is that a large number of languages are endangered or extinct. Also not at doubt is the range of strategies employed in language planning for minority languages internationally. Talknology is a pathway for a minority heritage language in becoming a language of choice. If speakers are choosing to speak a language, across multiple contexts, then the language will survive.

Te reo Māori, the Māori language (TRM), is indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand. From universal fluency prior to European contact, to 90 percent fluency in 1926 and less than 5 percent in 1975 (Biggs, in Waitangi Tribunal, 1986, p. 11), there was a growing concern that TRM would become extinct. The regeneration movement began with the first kōhanga reo (early childhood language nest) in 1982, focusing on TRM me ōna tikanga, Māori language and customs. Since then, initiatives have encompassed education, broadcasting and public sectors. By 2014, 23.7 percent of Māori reported a conversational fluency in TRM (Statistics NZ, 2014).

I will not explore digital initiatives for language acquisition. Comprehensive overviews of online Māori resources for teaching and learning have been written (Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014; Keegan, Keegan, & Laws, 2011). Keiha, Moorfield, Ka’ai, and Spooner (2013) have proposed a digital strategy for learning TRM. There are exciting initiatives involving:

- Māori groups, conferences and competitions: nzmis.maori.nz, teipukarea.maori.nz, maorilanguage.net, digitalmaori.com, 2015.nethui.nz, digmyidea.nz and maoritube.co.nz;
- Digital archiving of Māori taonga (treasures) (Hakiwai, 2012; Ngata, 2012; Te Reo o Taranaki, 2016; Whaanga, 2012);
- Teacher professional development (Jesson et al., 2016); and
- Ministry of Education (MoE) policies for infrastructure, practices and pedagogy with regard to technology in education (MOE, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Tiakiwai & Tiakiwai, 2010).

My focus is talknology initiatives supporting regeneration of TRM (Poutū, 2015). Revival linguists Zuckermann and Monaghan (2012) coined this term by joining Talk + Technology. Talk can be used to encompass game-play, conversations and story-telling. Talknology can be used to encompass console games, online chatting, newsgroups, photo and resource sharing through wikis, websites, and

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social media or online networking, DVDs, rich media, digital mass media, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games).

TRM language regeneration initiatives are found in several of these arenas: console games, social media, rich media, online games and networking. These initiatives focus on play or storytelling. Communities in Aotearoa have seen a need and come up with solutions to meet this need. These solutions provide a wider world where TRM is spoken and reasons for speaking TRM. Through youth using these tools and the development of other talknologies, Māori could become a language of choice in Aotearoa, in the media, social media, and while out and about. I believe that TRM can be regenerated through the use of talknology, to the extent that TRM is used in all arenas of life in Aotearoa.

The tools and the spaces to facilitate using talknology for the regeneration of TRM are being named in the following specific examples. The Microsoft operating system has a TRM interface. Google Translate includes Māori, there are Office LIPs (Language Interface Packs), and FaceBook is being translated into Māori. A Māori emoji keyboard, Emotiki, was launched in 2016. Skype helps kaumātua (elders) to have regular meaningful contact with their mokopuna (grandchildren) when geographically separated (Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014; O'Carroll, 2013). Words were created less than a week after the release of *PokémonGo* so players “can catch em’ all in te reo” (Kupenga, 2016, para.2).

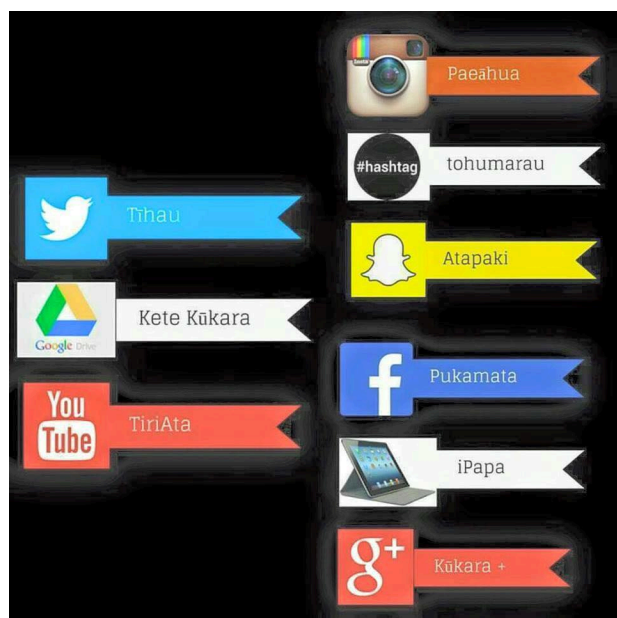


Figure 1: Ella Cartwright’s post to the FB group: He tamariki kōrero Māori.

The first initiative I want to draw attention to is *Mahimaina*, or *Minecraft*. The game which was originally developed by Markus Persson, and then by Mojang, was acquired by Microsoft in 2014. It is available on all major platforms. The game had been purchased over 106 million times, by June 2016. It is a sandbox style game, where players of all ages have a hollow virtual world in which they build things. Each Minecraft map is unique, with different biomes (game regions), caves and creatures. There are three modes of play:

- Creative, with access to infinite resources, no death or injury and no limits when travelling.
- Survival, where players gather resources and can lose health. Respawning, after death, happens in a safe place.
- Hardcore mode, like survival mode, but players only have one life.

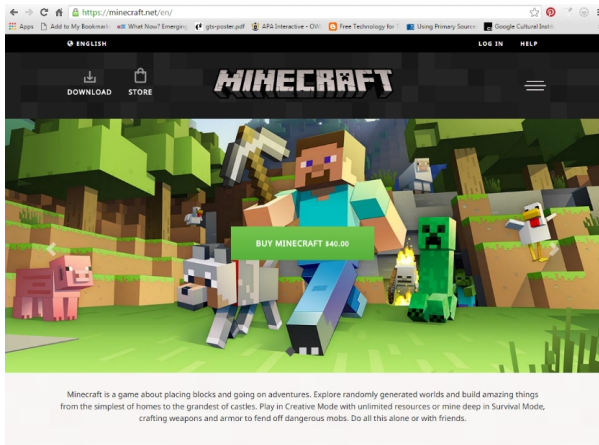


Figure 2: The official Minecraft site.

Minecraft was transformed into a Māori world by two families. The Paitai whānau, in Wellington, and the Rokx-Taratu whānau, from Tokomaru Bay on the East Coast, changed the language, resources and environment for PC and Mac platforms. Texture packs were developed using SPAX, while other community members edited existing texture packs in Photoshop, before sharing them. There is a strong social media presence, and a site at mahimaina.co.nz.

The take-up of *Mahimaina* was dramatic. On 11 March, 2016, posts were made to a Facebook community, *He tamariki Kōrero Māori*, to gauge interest. At that stage, two children were playing *Mahimaina* on a private server, so they could hold to a whānau commitment of speaking only Māori. The name *Mahimaina* was coined because of community input, and the group of children grew rapidly. There are plans to extend the world to console and mobile devices.

Te Karere (New Zealand Māori television news programme) ran a news story on 24 March, sharing kura kaupapa (primary school with Māori customs and language as the foundation of all teaching and learning) and immersion TRM classes interest in classroom applications for *Mahimaina*. This initiative utilises popular aspects of digital Māori youths' worlds to strengthen love for TRM. Media interest has enhanced the potential for educational expansion, as well as facilitating further growth of *Mahimaina*.

A second initiative is an upcoming PlayStation and PC platform game, *The Guardian* (theguardiangame.com), aimed at children over 12 years of age. The main character, Maia, is a female Māori warrior. Although English is this game's language, the world is a Māori world, which means this title is setting a precedent for the Māori world in console gaming. Maru Nihoniho, of Te Whānau ā Apanui, Ngāti Porou, and Ngāi Tahu (Māori tribal groups) is the games developer. The next logical step will be the development of TRM or bilingual console games.

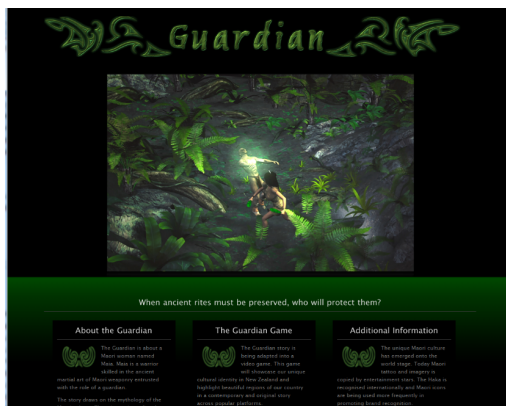


Figure 3: *The Guardian*, upcoming PlayStation title.

The Digital Natives Academy teaches hardware and coding basics, graphic design, animation, photography and web development to primary through to secondary school students. These workshops are conducted completely in te reo Māori and represent a blended technological initiative. This third initiative, at digitalnatives.org.nz was established by Potaua Biasiny-Tule, of Ngāti Pikiao, Tūhoe, and Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, and Nikolasa from America. This husband and wife team asked what skills they wanted their children to have. One of the essential skills they decided on, was coding as a new literacy. Their aim is to provide Māori youth with the tools they need to think creatively, work collaboratively, and reason systematically within Te Ao Māori, the Māori World.

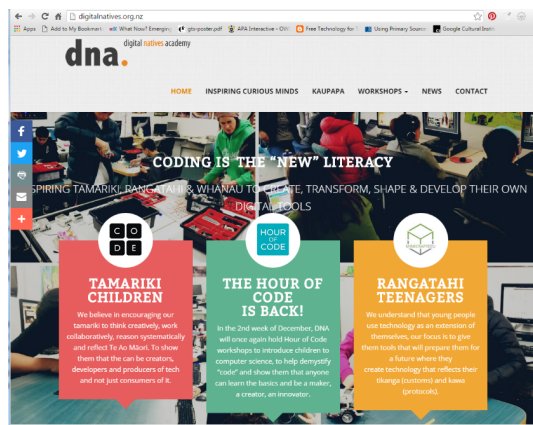


Figure 4: DNA (Digital Natives Academy).

Facebook is used extensively to promote face-to-face meetings and the sharing of ideas. *Māori 4 Grown Ups* is organising a Māori 4 Taiohi (Youth) four day school holiday programme for secondary school students. The arts, dance, jiu-jitsu, waka ama (dragonboating), traditional Māori sports, like Ki-ō-rahi and Mau rākau, and hangarau (technology), including TRM coding are some of the options, facilitating the idea that TRM is not just something learnt at school. It is a relevant and integral part of things that teenagers enjoy doing.

The first interactive bilingual e-Learning app (iOS and Android) was released in 2013. Kaitiaki HD (at maumahara.co.nz) was developed by Gisborne scientist Dr Ian Ruru, supported by Te Puni Kokiri and in collaboration with igameandlearn.com. The app focuses on kaitiakitanga (conservation and guardianship), in terms of Tangaroa and ocean life. It set a precedent in Aotearoa as the first educational gaming platform allowing its primary and intermediate school users to gain qualifications as they progress through the game.

Appstar Creative developed the freeware, *Niwa Taniwha*, for iOS 5.0 and above. You are Niwa, a taniwha (magical being) born in Hawaiki. Your mission is to cut down a tree, build a canoe and cross the great ocean to Aotearoa. Similarly to *The Guardian*, this game is helping set a precedent of gaming from a Māori perspective. Culture and traditions are the 'hoa haere' (travelling companions) for language.

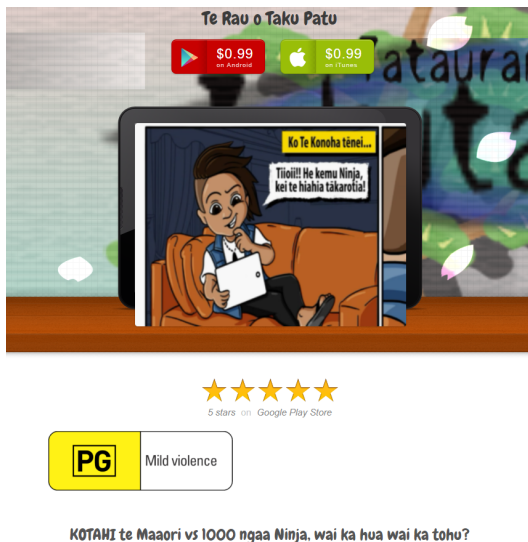


Figure 5: One of the action games available from Koroa.

There are a series of apps, some free and some costing 99c, available on Android and iOS that were released in Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori 2017 (Māori Language Week), by koroa.co.nz. This is a small family business, based in Hamilton, where the aim is normalisation of TRM.

Graham Oliver has developed a series of literacy inspired ‘pangakupu’, or crossword puzzles, available at pangakupu.maori.nz. Meanwhile, Kiwa Digital designed *Ngā Atua*, a series of interactive graphic novellas based around Māori cosmological origin stories. This Auckland-based company extended their thinking by developing a learning programme called Kiwa SLAM, that empowers students to digitally tell their own stories in their own language. The stories are then shared via the iTunes shop.

Talknological tools such as these are fundamental in the regeneration of TRM. Through these tools and the development of others, levels of TRM fluency will continue to rise. Because of these tools, we will arrive at a place where TRM becomes a language of choice. It is relevant. It is used in talknological arenas our youth are interested in. Talknology can be used as a real and useful means of conveying the language.

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