PLAYING FOR THE FUTURE: A PICTURE BOOK APP FOR CULTURAL RECLAMATION AND RECONCILIATION

A Picture Book App for Cultural Reclamation and Reconciliation

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Abstract

This presentation emerges from a collaborative research project that is developing a series of picture book apps to support the grassroots cultural resurgence of the Rocky Cree people of northern Manitoba, Canada. Drawing on Anishinaabe digital game scholar Elizabeth LaPensée's claim that Indigenous games can serve as acts of survivance, "merging survival with endurance in a way that recognizes Indigenous peoples as thriving rather than merely surviving" (2017), the team seeks to decolonize technological tools and tropes and to explore the ways in which the gamification of education can support the goals of decolonization and reconciliation. The presentation recounts the challenges of developing game elements that honour the specificity of Rocky Cree worldviews and utilize what La Pensée calls culturally appropriate mechanics, including "slowing down, listening, making choices, revisiting paths, and interpreting the journey," focusing specifically on two games: Packing the Canoes and Gathering a Bundle.

This paper discusses a collaborative research project being undertaken by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to develop a series of picture book apps to support the grassroots cultural resurgence of the Asiniskow Ithiniwak (Rocky Cree) of northern Manitoba, Canada. Drawing on Anishinaabe digital game scholar Elizabeth LaPensée's claim that Indigenous digital games can serve as acts of survivance, "merging survival with endurance in a way that recognizes Indigenous peoples as thriving rather than merely surviving" (2017), collaborators seek to decolonize technological tools and tropes and to explore the ways in which the gamification of education can support the goals of decolonization and reconciliation.

In 1993, two men from South Indian Lake in northern Manitoba found the eroding burial site of a woman who was named Kayasochi Kikawenow, or Our Mother From Long Ago, by elders of the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN). Archaeologists from The Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg determined that the young woman had lived some 350 years ago and was buried about 1660 CE. This is the protocontact period in Manitoba history: Kikawenow would have heard about but never encountered non-Aboriginal people appearing in the land. OPCN elders understood the revelation of the burial site as a gift from the ancestors to support the reclamation of their culture, one that was "to be used by our youth to learn about the old ways and gain respect for the past" (Brownlee & Syms, 1999). When young people know and respect their past, they said, they can

imagine and create a successful future. The research results were published by the Museum, but the accessibility of the teachings to young people remained a concern for community member, educator, storyteller, and knowledge keeper William Dumas. In 2008, at his invitation, a research team based at the Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures (CRYTC) at the University of Winnipeg, worked with him to develop a historical picture book for young people that sought to re-animate the life and times of Our Mother From Long Ago. Entitled *Pīsim Finds Her Miskanow*, the book tells the story of thirteen-year-old Pīsim, the fictional name Dumas chose for Kikawenow, as her family prepares for and then undertakes the journey to the Spring Gathering of her extended kinship group. At the edges of the story are blocks of supplementary information in the form of regional maps, Cree vocabulary, descriptions of material objects, transcriptions of songs and stories, and accounts of cultural traditions. In 2014, the Canadian Archaeological Association honoured Dumas and illustrator Leonard Paul with a Public Communications Award "in recognition of their outstanding contributions to Canadian archaeology."

The team is now working to transmediate the picture book into an app. (Over the seven years of the project, there will be a total of six picture books and six picture book apps developed.) The app will retain the aesthetic look and feel of the story and illustrations of the narrative strand of the picture book, while the supplementary informational texts (known to the project team as "story notes") will become pop-up modals. At several points in the app, readers/players will be invited to explore aspects of Rocky Cree language and culture through games. The paper presented at Meaningful Play 2018 discusses the project team's challenges and processes in developing game elements for the *Pīsim* app that honour the specificity of Rocky Cree worldviews and utilize what La Pensée calls culturally appropriate mechanics, including "slowing down, listening, making choices, revisiting paths, and interpreting the journey" (2017). The paper focuses specifically on two games: Packing the Canoes and Gathering a Bundle.

The Packing the Canoes game is a simple drag-and-drop game, where players are asked to decide which of a variety of items from their home camp should be taken with the family group on the five-day paddle to the site of the Spring Gathering. This game is inserted at a moment in the story that is focused on the plot event of setting out, and is a way of slowing down readers as they consider the journey ahead and make choices with regard to that journey. There is very little attention paid either in the text or illustration of the picture book to the details of the camp furnishings. An initial challenge, then, was to figure out these details. This involved a visit to one of our partner communities in northern Manitoba for a sharing circle—a widely used Rocky Cree research method (Sitchon, 2013)—with a group of land-based knowledge keepers, in this case, men who continue to travel across the lakes of their region to hunt and fish. What we learned was that the question of what is left behind is at least as important as the question of what is taken. In pursuing explanations for some of the choices that seemed obvious to the land users, we recognized that the game was much more meaningful than merely teaching facts about Rocky Cree adaptation to their places. Rather, these practices were an expression of a fundamentally different set of values from those that inform contemporary consumer culture.

The Gathering a Bundle game is a collections/item inventory game, but one that removes the elements of competition and accumulation (such as players scoring different levels of achievement or winning badges), and allows players rather to assemble story notes that are particularly meaningful

or interesting to them and to save this collection of knowledge to their own bundles. In Cree culture, the bundle is a collection of objects that hold the memories and knowledges of an individual or group; in the app, the bundle will serve as a way for players to revisit their paths through the story and to interpret their journeys. This game was developed as an alternative to a proposal by our app development company to build a Find Your Miskanow (or Life Path) game that would reference the main theme of the book as expressed in its title. When we took the Find Your Miskanow game to our community partners, the knowledge keepers were first perplexed and then alarmed at the wrongheadedness of the assumptions embedded in the proposed game. By mediating between the app developers, who are accustomed to working within Western game tropes, and Indigenous knowledge keepers, who are grounded in the Rocky Cree worldview, we are striving to resist a reinforcement of dominant cultural behaviours while ensuring that the games retain clarity and usability for the user experience and interface.

Natalia Kucirkova (2016) has postulated that effective collaborative research, practice, and design for apps require that "a clear epistemology" be shared by all stakeholders. This is not the circumstance in which the Six Seasons collaboration is operating. The project was formulated in the aftermath of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) (2015) and is funded by a national granting council in Canada that is committed to sponsoring projects that will advance reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Such reconciliation, the final report of the TRC concludes, must be "based on mutual recognition, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future." The research team understands these to be our overarching objectives. It is increasingly clear to us, however, that "recognition" and "respect" are iterative processes within the long journey toward reconciliation rather than preconditions to be achieved before setting out.

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