When Rivers Were Trails

Elizabeth LaPensée & Team

Interactive Storytelling Art

"Very illuminating point and click adventure narrative about the displacement of Indigenous people in North America in nineteenth century. It explores an uncomfortable part of North American history."

ICIDS 2020 Jury

Placing stories, stories of place: writing *When Rivers Were Trails*

Abstract

In the 2D adventure game *When Rivers Were Trails*, stories reflecting place are situated on maps that keep track of the player's journey as an Anishinaabe person who is displaced due to the impact of land allotment in the 1890s. An Indigenous spin on *The Oregon Trail* meets *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, this game emphasizes Indigenous perspectives during interactive dialogue and decision making. While traveling from Minnesota to California, the player has the opportunity to come across over one hundred character scenarios and an assortment of random happenings written by around thirty Indigenous contributors. With the hope of providing insights for future games with similar aims, this brief descriptive overview delves into the writing of *When Rivers Were Trails*.

Keywords

indigenous, game writing, game development, interactive narrative, branching dialogue

texts of discomfort

Introduction

When Rivers Were Trails exemplifies what can happen when Indigenous people affirm self-determined representations in video games through writing. The game is situated within the United States, both on the development end as well as in the game story. Gameplay happens during the impact of land allotment in the 1890s when Indigenous people were forcibly displaced from their territories or allocated with small plots as their lands were given away for settlement or opened up for purchasing (LaPensée & Emmons, 2019).

With the hope of offering an Indigenous-centered alternative to *The Oregon Trail* video game series (Bigelow, 1997), *When Rivers Were Trails* is primarily intended for middle-school players as an intervention in classrooms. To that end, *When Rivers Were Trails* is a 2D adventure game that was created as a compendium to the *Lessons of Our Land* curriculum offered by the Indian Land Tenure Foundation (LaPensée & Emmons, 2019). It has since been played in a variety of settings and with a wide range of players thanks to exhibitions at museums such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum and festivals including the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival. It has also been included in university courses at public institutions and tribal colleges. Although the game was designed with middle-school youth in mind, the audience has unexpectedly turned out to be much broader and suggests a possible interest in future games with similar aims.

Along with guidance from co-creative director Nichlas Emmons, the team included around thirty Indigenous collaborators, such as lead artist Weshoyot Alvitre, game designer and writer Allen Turner, and rapper Supaman. While collaborating with the Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab at Michigan State University,

Indigenous writers determined their own representations and informed the art. Game writing largely focuses on the experiences of Indigenous people in the United States during the impact of land allotment in the 1890s, which divided up lands and displaced nations (Figure 1).

Players take on the role of an Anishinaabe person from Fond du Lac as they are forcibly run off their land in Minnesota. They come across text-based interactions by traveling node to node on historically-accurate maps. These maps emphasize the forced reservation lines

Makwa: "Miigwech (thanks), niiji (friend). The situation here is becoming increasingly dangerous. Our people are organizing to make sure the government knows we will fight to keep our lands. We need all of the help we can get."

Resist   Leave

Red Lake

and railroads of the time while de-emphasizing state names (Figure 2). As the player travels through Minnesota, the Dakotas, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California, they interact with people from many nations, including Blackfeet, Apsáalooke, Nimiipuu, and more, each with their own unique cultural representations. The journey changes from game to game as players come across land, waters, minerals, stars, animals, plants, Indigenous peoples, and adversaries such as Indian Agents through random happenings interspersed with linear character interactions. Players are challenged to balance their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing with foods and medicines while making choices. Some of these possible choices include contributing, trading, fishing, hunting, gifting, and honoring.
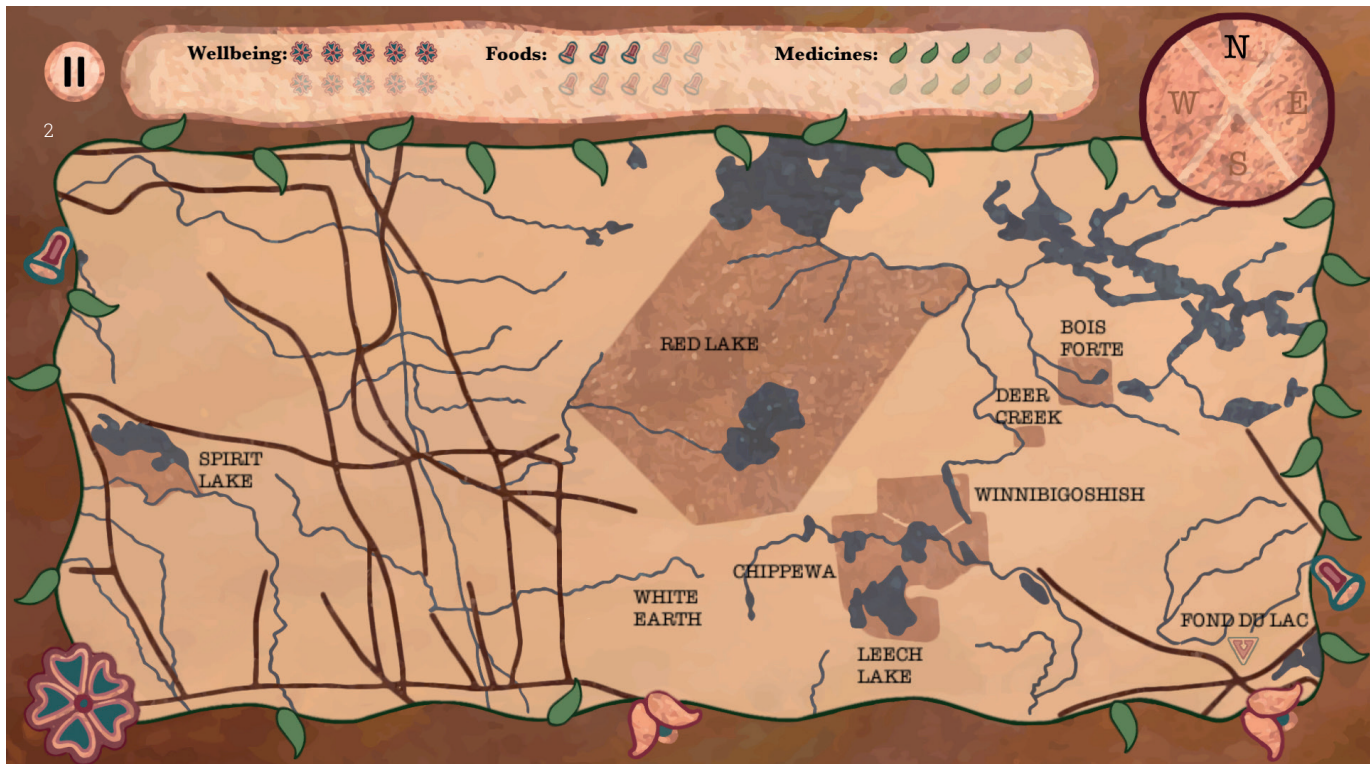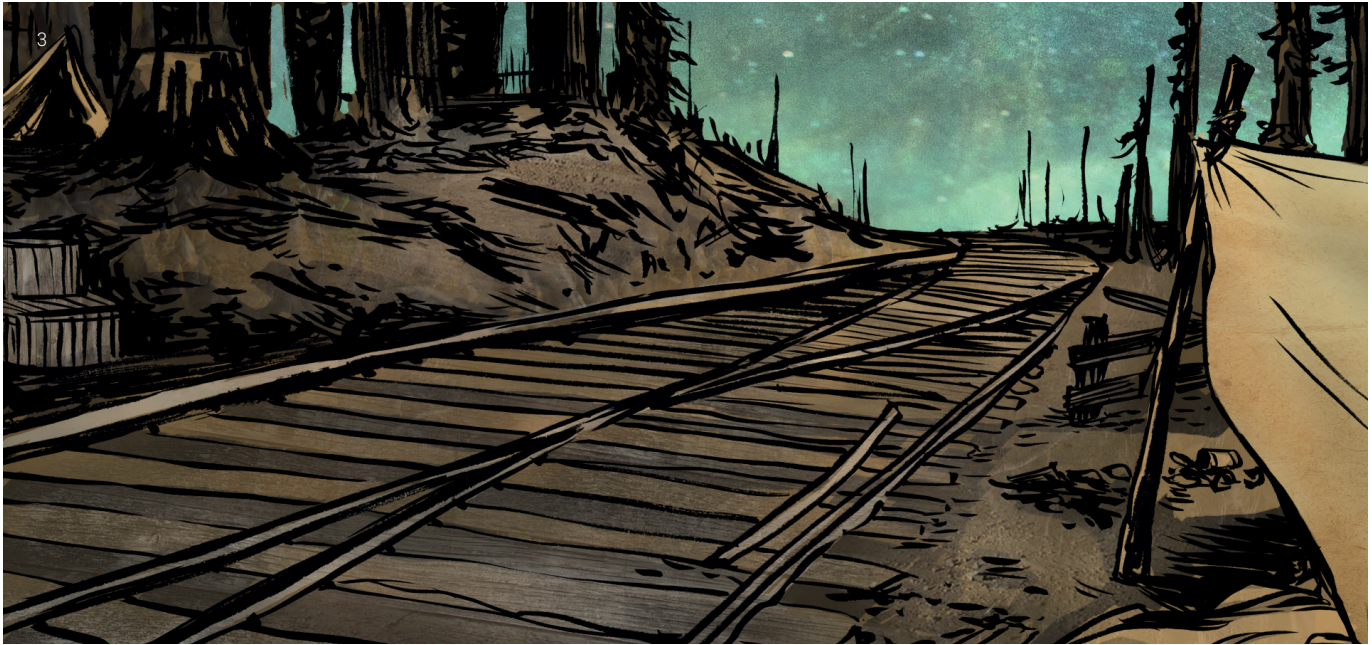
Process

Sovereign development

The game development process for *When Rivers Were Trails* invokes sovereignty, meaning the right of Indigenous nations to be self-governed. Carol Nadjiwon, who is an Anishinaabe elder from Batchewana First Nation, describes sovereignty as the ability to assert and hold power during decision making (personal communication, January 1, 2017). In the context of game development, sovereignty can refer to ensuring that Indigenous creatives are in lead roles (LaPensee, 2020; Laiti, 2021). With sovereignty in mind, the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians provided support for the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, which made it possible to form an equitable partnership with Michigan State University's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab that was focused on training and building capacity for Indigenous collaborators. The Indian Land Tenure Foundation also involved their Board of Directors in making final decisions regarding design and content throughout the process.

In addition, experienced game writers Toiya Kristen Finley and Cat Wendt were also given space to determine their own representations, both in their own scenarios and from other writers. For example, Blackfeet writer Sterling HolyWhiteMountain wrote a stark scenario without characters and based on Blackfeet stories that reveals the harshness of what happened to Chinese people who labored on railroads in Montana (Figure 3). The presence of this scenario was validated by Wendt, who had decision making power for content related to Chinese representations. Self-determination in *When Rivers Were Trails* was thus extended to all writers as a matter of equity and advocacy.
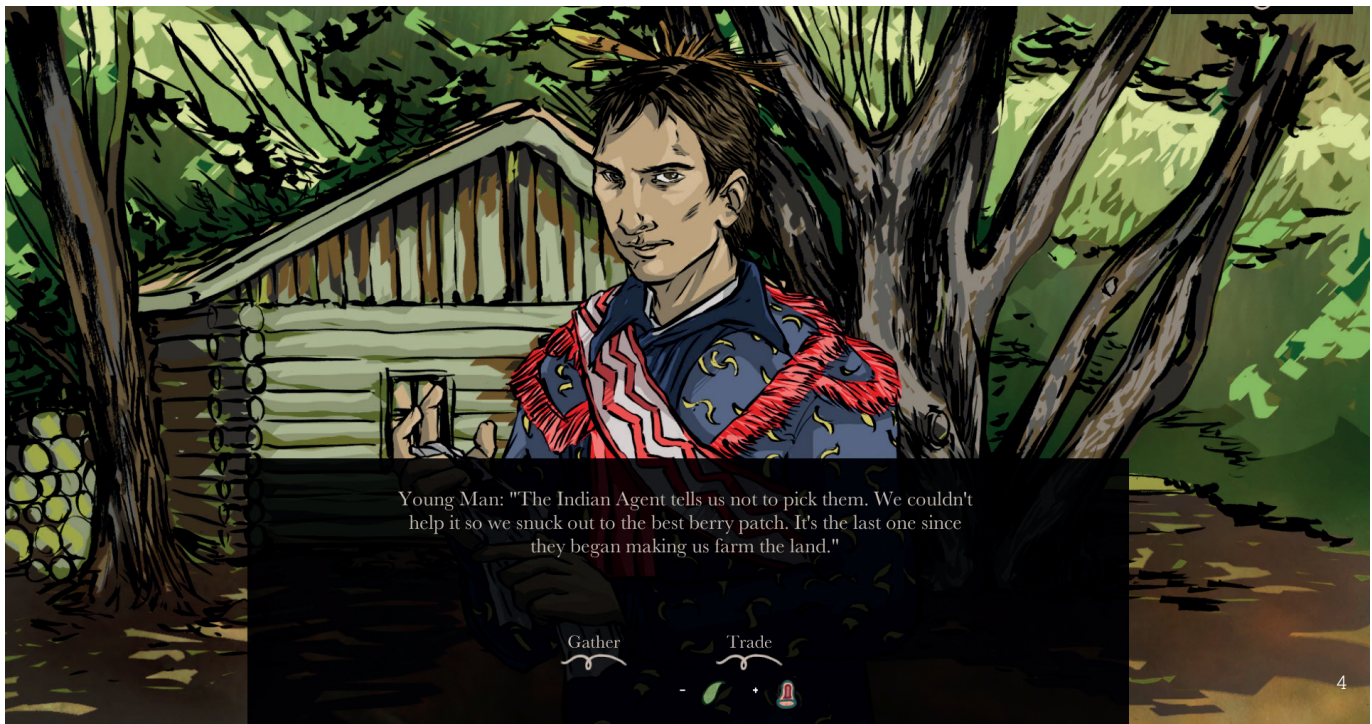
Building capacity

Although writers including Finley, Wendt, and Allen Turner had familiarity with the process of *When Rivers Were Trails* from many years of working in the game industry, the majority of Indigenous writers had little or no previous game writing experience. Since capacity building was an intentional outcome of the game, Indigenous writers with experience ranging from game design to audio recording for games to journalism to poetry to nonfiction and fiction short stories to fiction novels as well as artists and community workers were guided in game writing. They were provided the game design document, writing templates, a set of possible game mechanics, as well as creative freedom to suggest new mechanics. Text-related mechanics included interaction options for players to choose, such as listening, trading, gifting, helping, resisting, running, and more. Wri-

ters could generate any mechanics embedded in the text, as long as they could be integrated with the user interface in relation to wellbeing, foods, and medicines, or activating the minigames including hunting, fishing, and canoeing. Thus, the gameplay in *When Rivers Were Trails* is reciprocal with the writing.

Among a wide range of character scenarios, Korii Northrup, a Fond du Lac artist who interweaves her art with community work, was inspired to bring issues with Indian Agents and displacement to the forefront. In one of her character scenarios, a young Anishinaabe man is denied access to a berry patch as a method to force Indigenous people to focus on farming (Figure 4). Although she had no previous game writing experience, she worked with and adapted the mechanics to meet the needs of her ideas.

Young Man: "The Indian Agent tells us not to pick them. We couldn't help it so we snuck out to the best berry patch. It's the last one since they began making us farm the land."

Gather   Trade

4

In other scenarios, she wrote Oneida characters who travel as far as California during the game as a way to recognize Oneida relations. Her scenarios revolve around what she describes as warnings about the promises and realities of assimilation. The individual contributions of each writer combine into a robust game with a myriad of perspectives and experiences (LaPensée, 2021).

Aesthetic

As another act of capacity building, Alvitre was given a lead artist role. Although it was her first time working on a game, her experience as a comic illustrator and writer deeply influenced aesthetic decisions in *When Rivers Were Trails*. In the role of Co-Director, Elizabeth LaPensée provided templates and instructions for Alvitre to extend her previous work experience towards a 2D game. While working on characters and environment art, Alvitre delved deeply into personal research as well as sources provided by writers, such as family photos.

To fuse the scenario art with the user interface art by LaPensée, Alvitre utilized textures of materials provided by LaPensée, including copper. The result is a mix of aesthetics which complement one another. The game ebbs and flows between colorful splashes of art by Alvitre and stylized user interface elements. The sense of life in the scenes is further extended through animations of animals and fish during the hunting and fishing minigames. These animations were provided by Amber Ottarson, who worked on the game in the Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab team. All work was routed to Alvitre to ensure that the varying aesthetics across the game could be related and at times united, such as when Alvitre's environmental background art, LaPensée's user interface art, and Ottarson's animations merge in the hunting minigame.

Interactive Storytelling Art
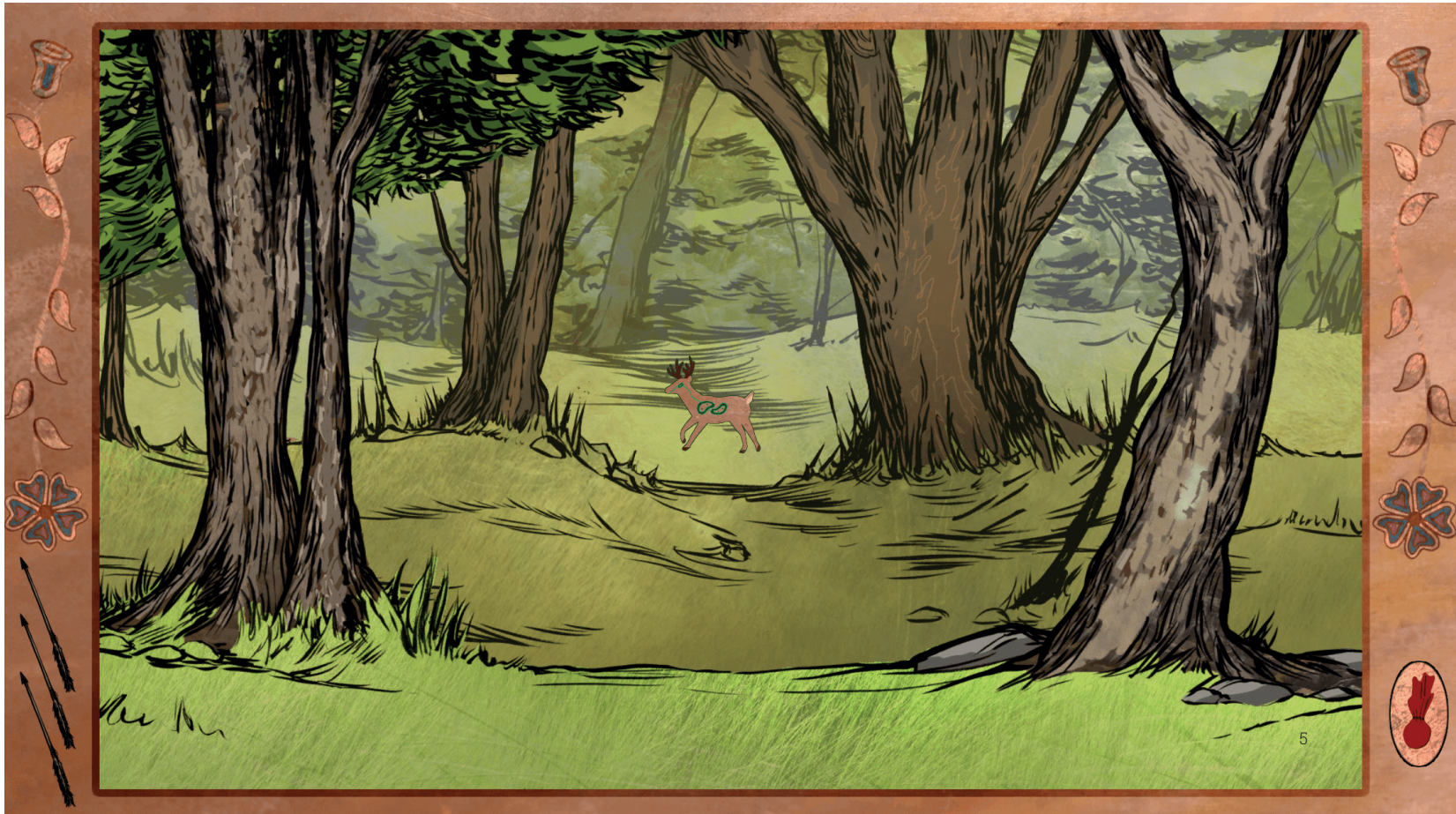
Technical systems

Capacity building not only occurred internally with writers, but also for the team through external support during development. To provide context, *When Rivers Were Trails* utilized the Unity game engine, which is known for being accessible (Haas, 2014), alongside Ink, which is recognized for enabling narrative systems (Howard & Donley, 2019). However, ties between these two tools are not built in. The connection between the writing in *When Rivers Were Trails* and direct impact on gameplay was made possible thanks to Johnnemann Nordhagen, who shared code from the narrative game *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (2018). His generosity and interest in empowering the development team allowed for communication between choices the player makes during text interactions and the system represented in the user interface. Specifically, decisions made by the player during character interactions and random happenings result in gains and/or losses to wellbeing, foods, and medicines. If the player loses all of their wellbeing, then they die and revert to the last save. Thus, this shared code was instrumental to the depth of *When Rivers Were Trails* and largely responsible for the game's ability to blur the lines between education and entertainment (Khan, 2019).

Writing

Writing took many forms in *When Rivers Were Trails*. As a way to balance variety with continuity, some writers wrote specific aspects of the game. Elaine Gomez, E. M. Knowles, and LaPensée wrote several text-only random happenings to add variety to the journey. "Random happenings" are pulled at random from a pool of numerous possibilities when the player reaches a node linked to the random happenings pool. The differences in writing styles are balanced out with writers who consistently provided certain content. For instance, Sheena Louise Roetman used her foundation in journalism to write all of the loading scene transitions, which establish the history of the lands and peoples from map to map. Tashia Hart contributed Anishinaabe-specific descriptions for the attributes and uses of all medicinal plants and plant foods to highlight Anishinaabe perspectives in the

player character's worldview. Stories with very particular themes were provided by repeat writers. Specifically, all Bigfoot stories were written by Ronnie Dean Harris and all Anishinaabe star stories were shared by Annette S. Lee in collaboration with Anishinaabe elders Carl Gawboy and William Wilson. These throughlines were interwoven with over one hundred character scenarios, each with their own unique writing.

Interactive scenarios

Interactive scenarios focusing on characters and lands were provided by twenty one Indigenous writers all working simultaneously and independently: Li Boyd, Trevino Brings Plenty, Tyrone Cawston, Richard Crowsong, Eve Cuevas, Samuel Jaxin Enemy-Hunter, Lee Francis IV, Renee Holt, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Adrian Jawort, Kris Knigge, E. M. Knowles, David Gene Lewis, Korii Northrup, Nokomis Paiz, Carl Petersen, Travis McKay Roberts, Sara Siestre-

em, Joel Southall, Jo Tallchief, and Allen Turner. The writing styles change relative to a particular writer's interests and prior experiences. For example, Petersen filled his writing with heavy action, informed by his work as a game designer. Writers' sovereignty over their writing style was paramount to the game. Notably, HolyWhiteMountain's were some of the longest scenarios in terms of the sheer amount of text. Initially, the student team at the Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab leaned towards the conventions of commercial games where styles are consistent across content and suggested editing down the text. However, HolyWhiteMountain determined that his writing was representative and the co-creative directors ensured that Indigenous sovereignty was upheld by keeping the original writing.

A list of possible mechanics was provided to writers, but they were opened up to options generated in relation to their stories. The-

se evoked mechanics such as talking, listening, helping, and gifting, among more. Although these mechanics were largely limited to text interactions, the option to fish emerged from scenarios repeatedly. In one scenario written by Kris Knigge, the player is required to follow the text path of giving a grandfather a gift, which in turn unlocks the ability to go fishing with him. Knigge, among other writers, thus inspired a fishing minigame and reinforced how writing influenced the game's design.

Alongside representations in the fishing and hunting minigames, animals have their own series of interactive scenarios. To create a thread of continuity, all animal scenarios were written by Turner, whose intention was to portray animals as intelligent beings capable of communication without anthropomorphizing them (Figure 6). The art style also shifts from character and environment art by lead artist Alvitre to Woodlands style art by LaPensée as a

way to convey an Anishinaabe lens of these animals during interactions. The player may come across scenarios in which they can relate to animals as a caretaker, a participant during scuffles as animals interact amongst one another, or as an interferer who damages their relationships with animals. Whether seen as family, a friend, enemy, guest, stranger, or outsider, the player is often given opportunities to earn or maintain better relations, but they can also misstep and potentially lose wellbeing or even honor.

You go over to the cliff to investigate what the foxes are so interested in. You see a kit fox that is stuck a few feet down on the cliff face. You think you could reach it if you tried, but it'd be dangerous.

Help   Leave

6

Honor system

Throughout the game, the player's choices during text interactions are connected to a hidden honor system. The fact that this system is hidden is purposeful in order to prevent players making choices relative to being aware of honor. Instead of "playing the system," players should ideally make choices based on their own decisions, which translates to gaining or losing honor. For example, in a scenario written by HolyWhiteMountain that takes place at a train station several hours east of the Blackfeet Agency, an elderly man teases the player. If the player responds angrily, they unknowingly lose honor, among other more overt ramifications (Figure 8).

Throughout many possibilities for gains and losses, the player's level of honor informs differences in the text displayed during loading scenes in-between maps. These historically accurate stories written by Sheena Louise Roetman either reflect the version of history that appeals to players who contributed resistance along their journey or, alternatively, those who compromised during allotment and land loss. As the journey progresses, certain choices in text interactions only become visible with a high level of honor. This design invites replayability, without making the underlying system an obvious feature that might otherwise influence a player's choices.
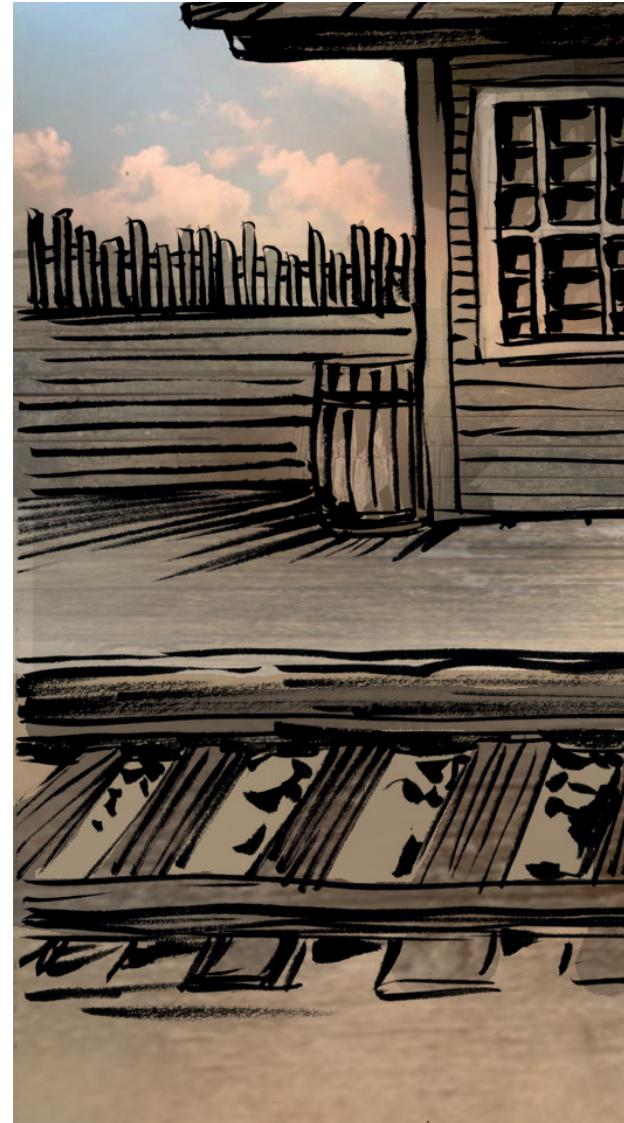
Collectable stories

Interactive scenarios and random happenings often include the potential to earn a collectible story. These stories are gathered by following certain paths, typically involving mechanics including talking, listening, asking, or gifting. Although they are categorized as traditional, historical, family, or personal stories, these categories are not intended to separate them or frame them as earned rewards. Instead, they are collected universally in a Stories menu that can be accessed at any point by pausing gameplay, opening the menu, and revisiting the text by their keyword (Figure 8).

Collectable stories frequently convey additional knowledge intended to further inform the player about the impact of land allotment on Indigenous people and their sovereignty as well as better understand cultural practices and teachings. It is not necessarily possible to collect every single story in the game during a single playthrough since the text interactions in scenarios often branch into different directions. This choice defies standard game design where collectables serve as a form of completion. Instead, interwoven stories invite players to replay the game to figure out what they missed and where.

Stories

Sawyer	Oneida	Indian Market
Hunting Party	Jingle Dress	White Earth
Relocation	Broken Treaty	Red Lake

◁ **Return**

1

◁ ▷

Challenges

While *When Rivers Were Trails* is a complex example of self-determined Indigenous representations in game writing, certainly the game development process was not without its challenges and the game content admittedly has limitations. These are most clearly reflected in the amount of time the team had to develop, iterate, and launch the game, as well as parameters on content that were necessary to be able to deploy the game in middle-school classrooms.

Development timeline

As an act of sovereignty, the Indian Land Tenure Foundation along with the co-creative directors wanted to establish that the Foundation and Indigenous contributors would retain intellectual property rights to the game and all related content as well as the ability to determine the game's distribution and use. This stance meant that writing and finalizing the contract between the Indian Land Tenure Foundation and Michigan State University took just as long as the team was then able to be given to actually develop, playtest, iterate, and polish the game. The development cycle was less than one year, beginning in the summer when students working for the Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab were available, and then continued through the university school year until the following spring. This put unfair pressure on students, who were also working for classes and internships. It also led to tight deadlines for content creation and revisions for lead artist Alvitre. Nonetheless, she created several unique environment art backgrounds and characters in direct relation to her own research as well as content provided by writers, ranging from their scenario text to family and community photos (Figure 9). For future work, it is highly advisable to look closely at any restrictions around when funds need to be spent by and, if possible, build in extensive time for contracts and other paperwork. Otherwise, it may be necessary to scale back a game's content and design relative to the timeline.

Content limitations

Since *When Rivers Were Trails* is primarily geared towards middle-school students and inclusion in classrooms, there were understandable although limiting restrictions on the content. Among instances where this concern came up, Sara Siestreem's initial scenario pitch had to be adjusted. Instead of an intense physical punishment for the player if they treat a Hanis Coos woman known as Winqas Huu'mis (Spider Woman) and her land wrongly, they must react to poison oak, which potentially reduces their wellbeing depending on their choices (Figure 9). Although Siestreem handled this change skillfully, discussions about these limitations are open and ongoing. So far, conversations across the team about the potential for an uncensored version of the game haven't led to anything actionable because of the implications of such a direction.

Within the context of this game being po-sitioned as a "text of discomfort," as framed by the International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling 2020 exhibition, *When Rivers Were Trails* portrays Indigenous experiences in the 1890s, but within the range of what can be portrayed in middle-school classrooms and what writers wanted to express. As Siestreem reiterates, the 1890s were especially violent and disruptive times of colonization and genocide for Indigenous people in what is now known as the United States of America. *When Rivers Were Trails* manages to approach these harsh realities through relatable interactions thanks to the many Indigenous writers as well as moments of humor while playing on *The Oregon Trail.*

Although the possibility of removing the limitations around content and choosing instead to display the fullest extent of violence during the 1890s has been considered, Indigenous collaborators involved in the discussion determined that it would lead to an entirely different game

and one that they would not be comfortable with writing. Thus, the content within *When Rivers Were Trails* can provide a model for future games with similar aims to act as interventions, with the understanding that self-determination is core.

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Acknowledgements

When Rivers Were Trails was developed in collaboration with the Indian Land Tenure Foundation and Michigan State University's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab thanks to support from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians.

The game features creative directing by Nichlas Emmons; creative directing, design, and user interface art by Elizabeth LaPensée; art by Weshoyot Alvitre; and music by Supaman and Michael Charette. The writers are Weshoyot Alvitre, Li Boyd, Trevino Brings Plenty, Tyrone Cawston, Richard Crowsong, Eve Cuevas, Samuel Jaxin Enemy-Hunter, Lee Francis IV, Carl Gawboy, Elaine Gomez, Ronnie Dean Harris, Tashia Hart, Renee Holt, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Adrian Jawort, Kris Knigge, E. M. Knowles, Elizabeth LaPensée, Annette S. Lee, David Gene Lewis, Korii Northrup, Nokomis Paiz, Carl Petersen, Manny Redbear, Travis McKay Roberts, Sheena Louise Roetman, Sara Siestreem, Joel Southall, Jo Tallchief, Allen Turner, William Wilson, Toiya K. Finley, and Cat Wendt. The team from the Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab was Alex Hogan, William Johnston, Nathan Kellman, Ellie Locatis, Declan McClintock, Amber Ottarson, Kieran Peasley, Rebecca Roman, and Harrison Sanders.

Game development involved over thirty Indigenous contributors with creative directing by Nichlas Emmons, creative directing and design by Elizabeth LaPensée, art by Weshoyot Alvitre, and music by Supaman and Michael Charette. Indigenous writers include Weshoyot Alvitre, Li Boyd, Trevino Brings Plenty, Tyrone Cawston, Richard Crowsong, Eve Cuevas, Samuel Jaxin Enemy-Hunter, Lee Francis IV, Carl Gawboy, Elaine Gomez, Ronnie Dean Harris, Tashia Hart, Renee Holt, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Adrian Jawort, Kris Knigge, E. M. Knowles, Elizabeth LaPensée, Annette S. Lee, David Gene Lewis, Korii Northrup, Nokomis Paiz, Carl Petersen, Manny Redbear, Travis McKay Roberts, Sheena Louise Roetman, Sara Siestreem, Joel Southall, Jo Tallchief, Allen Turner, and William Wilson, alongside guest writers Toiya K. Finley and Cat Wendt.

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Images

1. Scenario Written by Nokomis Paiz, Art by Weshoyot Alvitre;
2. Map Interface, Art by Elizabeth LaPensée;
3. Scenario Written by Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Art by Weshoyot Alvitre;
4. Scenario Written by Korii Northrup, Art by Weshoyot Alvitre;
5. Hunting Minigame, Art by Weshoyot Alvitre and Elizabeth LaPensée, Animations by Amber Ottarson;
6. Scenario Written by Allen Turner, Art by Elizabeth LaPensée;
7. Scenario Written by Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Art by Weshoyot Alvitre;
8. Collectable Stories Menu, Art by Elizabeth LaPensée;
9. Scenario Written by Weshoyot Alvitre, Art by Weshoyot Alvitre.

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