Searching for Indigeneity in *The Oregon Trail*

JOHN R. LEGG

The Oregon Trail, first developed in 1971, focuses on the movement of white emigrants from Independence, Missouri, to the Willamette Valley of Oregon Territory during the late 1840s. Since its second-edition release on the Apple II in 1985, *The Oregon Trail* has been one of the most popular and nostalgically beloved historical games of all time. To so-called Wagonmasters like Don Rawitsch, a co-inventor of the game, *The Oregon Trail* offered a digital exploration of westward expansion, where white families endured the rough and ragged travels west, trying to survive and not die from dysentery.[1] But does a game set in 1848 belong in a conversation about video games representing the Civil War era?

There are two important reasons why *The Oregon Trail* belongs in this conversation. First, as a digital program, *The Oregon Trail* was the first game to use computer coding and computational technology as an educational tool in history classrooms. While this essay charts how the game transformed from a learning technology to a product of entertainment, *The Oregon Trail* built the conceptual and market justification for many of the games featured in this book.[2] Second, *The Oregon Trail* provides us a lens to understand how Civil War historians in recent decades have expanded the geographic and chronological scope of the Civil War era. The American West has been transformed from a region conceived as territory untouched by the Civil War into a primary theater of inquiry.[3]

Accordingly, the final two essays of this book relate to how Civil War

video games and the West collide. Generally, the West and the Civil War era, including Reconstruction, work well together because consumers have been primed to see these connections through the Western genre of literature, film, and other popular culture. It is easy for players to understand why these games emphasize westward movement for ex-Confederates (as seen in *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood*) and renegades as tropes of the West, which depicts this region as violent and full of lawlessness (as seen in *Red Dead Redemption 2*).[4]

If American cultural predispositions make an easy connection between the post–Civil War years and the West, what has made us unable to do the same with regard to *The Oregon Trail*? The westward migration depicted in *The Oregon Trail* fits into a category of land occupation that scholars have framed as settler colonialism. This idea "destroys to replace," as one scholar argued, and should be seen as "an ongoing process rather than something accomplished at a single moment."[5] The deepening structure of settler colonialism involves settlers permanently erasing and replacing Indigenous people from their homeland, controlling any ongoing Native presence in those spaces, and dictating the narrative of that history told after the removal of an Indigenous population. By this definition, *The Oregon Trail* remains central to understanding Indigenous dispossession and erasure during the Civil War era and throughout our contemporary lives.

The Oregon Trail broadly speaks to the growth of the United States in the nineteenth century and contributes to the fight over westward expansion that defines the Civil War era. On a more focused level, players of *The Oregon Trail* choose an imagined white, heteronormative family to move West. The only trials and tribulations the families experience along the way are challenges with accessing food and needed medical supplies, an occasional attack by bandits, or a botched river-crossing. The game takes place in the 1840s but speaks to the long history of the Oregon Trail, which operated between 1841 and 1869, ending with the introduction of the transcontinental railroad. The game needs a broader context that allows players to understand how the overland trail relates heavily to the Civil War era.

Scholars are now radically rethinking the deep entanglement of western and Civil War–era histories. Elliott West's *Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion* (2023) argues that "the Civil War and the birth of the West . . . should be given something like equal billing" as "neither can be understood without the other."[6] Americans have always

wanted more land, and during the nineteenth century, Americans obtained more territory than they had in centuries before. Much of the coming of the Civil War focuses on the western land grab, but as West alludes, this period drastically restructured the United States well before traditional timelines of Civil War expansion and postwar Reconstruction.[7]

The restructuring of the United States began decades before the first shots of the Civil War. Questions over slavery inspired the birth of the American West as a new space for American development.[8] The Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act forced Americans to reckon with expanding slavery well before the first shots were ever fired. Borderlands crises, like the Mexican-American War, also aided in westward growth. During the Civil War, especially in 1862, the federal government passed various acts that continued westward expansion. Secession and the removal of southern Democrats from Congress fueled Republicans to push their platform of free labor and to pass legislation that aided growth to and within western territories.[9] The Homestead Act, passed in 1862, provided white emigrants sixty acres of land for free, so long as they lived and transformed that space within five years. Such emigrants used overland avenues like the Oregon Trail to travel to these new spaces in the West, a movement that aided in the dispossession of Indigenous people, pushing Native communities far from their homelands. The Civil War offered the federal government more authority over Indigenous people, which provided landscapes for white emigrants to take, settle, and transform for themselves, forming a vibrant political economy around them.

The Oregon Trail depicts a world, both real and imagined, as a game of strategy, not as an opportunity to reflect on historical or contemporary morals or ethics. *The Oregon Trail* is not just harmless, nostalgic fun. Unconscious erasure of Native people's perspectives and cultures should be scrutinized and challenged alongside more deliberate efforts. Whether written on pages or typed in computer code, the stories we tell can drastically hold power over the people included in or excluded from those narratives, often resulting in a traumatic replication of violence or erasure.

This essay tells a story of Indigenous exclusion and erasure in *The Oregon Trail*, as well as the lack of necessary historical context regarding the mid-nineteenth century, which recognizes the deeper and persisting legacies of settler colonialism that lingers around us. It is our duty to push the boundaries of beloved stories, games, and cultures to recognize the con-

tinued terror inflicted on those who remained paved over by *The Oregon Trail*'s lasting legacy.

Developing *The Oregon Trail*, 1971–1985

On December 3, 1971, students at Jordan Junior High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, arrived at their history class to find Don Rawitsch standing at the lectern. Rawitsch, a senior at Colgate College finishing his bachelor's degree in history with an emphasis on education, was asked by his supervising teacher to lead a history class on westward expansion during the nineteenth century. In the weeks leading up to the class, Rawitsch had attempted to develop a new method of teaching the history of westward expansion in the United States. He settled on a board game designed to help students leave the comfort of their textbooks and visualize the scale of the Oregon Trail firsthand.[10]

Closer to the lecture, Rawitsch's roommates, Bill Heineman and Paul Dillenberger—student teachers at a neighboring junior high school who understood Beginners' All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code (BASIC) techniques and 1970s computer technology—convinced him to transform his board game into a computer program. Two weeks before Rawitsch's lecture, the trio finished the game they called *Oregon*, and their students would soon come to enjoy the computer program in the classroom.[11]

Rawitsch, Dillenberger, and Heineman developed the game for teletype computer technology, a device fixed with a typewriter keyboard connected to a large spool of white or yellow printer paper. The teletype connected to a much larger mainframe computer system that resided in the offices of the Minneapolis Public School system. Connecting via telephone wires and modems, students played *Oregon* through text-based calls and responses with the teletype machine.[12] As users entered code into the teletype, the device printed out responses for users to interpret. In playing *Oregon*, the teletype printer asked questions central to gameplay, like "Do you want to eat (1) poorly, (2) moderately, or (3) well?" Students typed their responses into the machine and it "chugged through a few basic formulas and spat out the next prompt along with a status update."[13] The early version of *The Oregon Trail* did not include images or sounds, only the text that the program offered and students responded to. Those who played responded

favorably to the computer game, as they used strategy to try to survive their family's move west from Missouri to Oregon.[14]

By the end of Rawitsch's student teaching that semester, he had removed *Oregon* from the Minneapolis Public Schools mainframe system. It was his project, and since he was no longer a student teacher at the junior high school, he wanted to preserve it for the future. By 1974, Rawitsch landed a new job with the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC), and *Oregon* found a new home to redevelop and build it into a more robust program.

MECC innovated educational programming and computer development primarily for the state of Minnesota, but its reach blossomed throughout the country for most of the 1970s and 1980s. The organization championed new methods for introducing computer technology within educational frameworks, not only because of the central role Minnesota played in computer development, as Joy Rankin argues, but also because of the state's devotion to educational practices.[15] Wayne Studer, a former employee of MECC, described in an interview that "all the instructional designers had to be educators. We were all former teachers . . . That background in classroom education was important."[16]

After a year of repurposing the game into MECC's system, the organization released Rawitsch's new and improved *The Oregon Trail* for hundreds of schools connected to MECC's mainframe hub in Minnesota. Many changes had been made, especially as Rawitsch and his team added visual features to move the game away from the text-based foundations developed in 1971.[17] MECC served an important role in the spread of *The Oregon Trail*. Before 1974, only 14 percent of Minnesotan students, mainly in the Twin Cities region, had easy access to MECC programming. By 1975, that number had grown to 46 percent of Minnesota students utilizing MECC's services. The exponential growth of MECC usage demonstrates its success in spreading new computational opportunities for students not just around the Twin Cities but also around the entire state of Minnesota. Of the programs offered by MECC, *The Oregon Trail* remained a popular program for students and teachers.[18]

The popularity of *The Oregon Trail* grew in the 1970s. The game made a splash in the classroom as teachers and students alike rushed to after-school clubs or to empty teletype computer stations to play the program. Slowly, the game transformed from a one-class educational tool to a pro-

gram beloved by all, with the emphasis not on enhancing U.S. history curriculum but on surviving the trail.[19] By the late-1970s, Rawitsch and his MECC team tracked nearly 5,000 gameplays throughout Minnesota. Those numbers grew exponentially as it moved from the locale of Minnesota to a larger national audience. During the mid-1980s, MECC realized that *The Oregon Trail* needed to be redeveloped with more visually stimulating gameplay. New organizational strategies overhauled *The Oregon Trail,* transforming it from an educational tool to a game of leisure for players to experience in their own homes.

Working at MECC, R. Philip Bouchard took the original 1971 concept of *The Oregon Trail* and created a new adaptation of his own to be more inclusive of forgotten topics.[20] Unlike the 1971 iteration that worked on teletype machines connected to a larger time-share mainframe computer, the 1985 version welcomed in a new age of computing technology; the game would be played on the Apple II computer, and later the IBM PC, Macintosh, and other computer systems.[21] Bouchard published his own book on this history, *You Have Died of Dysentery,* in which he describes his interpretation of his new iteration played on new systems. He believed the 1985 game transformed from an educational tool to something children could enjoy, for fun, on their home computer consuls.[22] Despite his vision, *The Oregon Trail* remained an educational tool that allowed students to experience the history of the American West in new ways.

Rather than players experiencing the American West through the text printed on the teletype, the 1985 iteration visualized the landscape on which white settlers moved on the Oregon Trail, first in black-and-white and then redeveloped in color. The goal of the reimagined game was to be "highly entertaining to its target audience," as stated in development plans. "In order to appeal to the 5th grade audience, arcade/action activities will be intermixed with the adventure/strategy activities."[23] At this moment, viewers experienced the game in new ways. The 1985 version reimagined the central purpose of *The Oregon Trail,* though the educational foundations imagined by Don Rawitsch in 1971 remained an important vision in Bouchard's redevelopment.[24]

In both the 1971 and the 1985 programs, "historical accuracy" remained an essential aspect of gameplay and player experience. Rawitsch's goal of accuracy worked well with his plans to teach students the history of westward migration in the nineteenth century.[25] Rawitsch and Bouchard used

their training as history students (both academically and out of sheer enjoyment of the subject), and eventually teachers, to guide them in projecting a historical vision within *The Oregon Trail.* They used archival research, primarily aging published collections of Oregon Trail letters, to develop the gameplay narrative. Their version of historical accuracy, in reality, is a narrow technical accuracy—of wagons, geography, weaponry, rates of consumption of food, ways to mend ailments—instead of broader, conceptual authenticity. When thinking of the time period in which game players traversed the overland trail, this "historical accuracy" failed as it did not address any of the important political debates occurring in the 1840s.

Bouchard, however, had to fight with his superiors at MECC to remain historically accurate while developing a new arcade-style *The Oregon Trail* experience.[26] These later iterations compromised Bouchard's expressed hope for the foundational 1971 and 1985 games, that they could work as an educational tool that "immerse[d] the player in a historically accurate simulation of the Oregon Trail experience." "Simply by playing the game," Bouchard explained, "the players would be exposed to a great ordeal of history and geography—and would not only pick up a lot of information, but would also gain a strong gut feeling for what it was like to travel on the Oregon Trail."[27]

In developing *The Oregon Trail,* Rawitsch and Bouchard looked at the evidence produced by white travelers on the trail and trusted that these reflections offered a reliable and definitive account of the trail in the nineteenth century. These sources assembled a narrative based on events scribbled in journals, which left significant gaps in a broader understanding of the histories and cultures involved and did not leave what Western academics consider factual evidence preserved in archives and published in books years after the fact. This focus, for instance, unfortunately continued to push Indigenous people to the margins. Raymond Fogelson calls for a greater appreciation of nonevents, cultural traditions, and sources that recenter Indigenous lifeways and customs to broaden the breadth of scholarly investigation into the past.[28] The *Oregon Trail* developers, then, failed to recognize the holistic vision of the American past, or even to acknowledge that our understanding of the past was constrained and biased altogether.

This failure stemmed from the general lack of understanding of archives as problematic institutions. The "archival turn," which started in the 1970s but did not fully gather steam until the 1990s, pushed scholars to think

critically about archives as institutions of power and knowledge.[29] Scholars did not fully embrace new understandings of the archive until after the developers published *The Oregon Trail,* meaning that most of the primary source research conducted for the game happened during a window of time before even specialists understood the problems with archival collection and curation.

Debates over Inclusivity and Historical Accuracy

Historical accuracy, as they conceived it, loomed large in both Rawitsch's and Bouchard's versions of *The Oregon Trail.* As an educational tool, Rawitsch wanted the game to help students visualize the movement of white settlers into the American West. By using firsthand nineteenth-century accounts by settlers on the trail, researched in the library archives at the University of Minnesota, Rawitsch demonstrated how white settlers and pioneers imagined the trail as they traversed it, and the natural encounters they experienced while moving west.[30]

As a form of settler colonialism, the use of these primary sources signifies how archives are institutions of power created by the settler state to justify its existence and dominance. As a land-grant institution, the University of Minnesota is a creation of the Civil War–era Republican Party and the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which used the same justifications and had the same implications as the Homestead Act. Due to this, the developers could not include Indigenous perspectives because the settler state had too narrowly defined what material and voices were "historical" and worth preserving. Ultimately, it was Civil War–era legislation that strengthened the settler institutions that erased Indigenous presence and memory from the land.

Like many expansion narratives at this time, the game depicted the meeting of two worlds: white civilization from the East meeting the "wilderness" of the West.[31] By relying on a biased white story line and settler perspective over all else, the computer game allowed for a visual form of domination that recognized the American West as an empty space ripe for the taking.[32] In this iteration, Native Americans blended in with the western wilderness, where white settler encounters with them were few and

far between. The 1971 version of *The Oregon Trail* offered only a handful of encounters between the player and Native Americans. When the virtual families ran out of food supplies, infrequent visits by Native people provided food to help the travelers survive one more day. In other instances, players intermittently encountered Native Americans who wanted to barter goods or help them move across wide rivers.

The 1971 version failed to recognize the history of Native America, as it boiled down Native Americans to providers for white settlers, violent obstacles to white "progress," or people succumbing to colonialism. Due to this, Bouchard recognized that the 1985 redevelopment of *The Oregon Trail* needed to better incorporate Indigenous people into the computer game. Both Rawitsch and Bouchard attempted to reject negative stereotypes used against Native Americans.[33] In order to do this, they relied heavily on archival research to learn about the situations that white emigrants experienced.

Working before the archival turn, these developers believed that this was enough, but this research method was not inclusive of Indigenous perspectives from the period being studied. We can therefore say that their work was a product of the flaws in the colonial archive altogether. However, we must be aware that social and popular culture movements in the early 1970s should have directed the developers to more inclusive ways of centering Indigenous perspectives, as was seen in the rise of social history, civil rights and Vietnam War protest, Vine Deloria Jr.'s writings, Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), the critically acclaimed Dustin Hoffman film *Little Big Man* (1970), as well as the demands made by the American Indian Movement. All of this happened nationally before or during the development of *The Oregon Trail.*[34]

While Rawitsch's version used "hostile riders" to describe the infrequent attacks against the settler's wagon, Bouchard understood this as a "veiled reference to Native Americans" and he needed to historicize these moments. In his own research, Bouchard noted the infrequency of attacks on white settlers. During 1848—the year players experienced their trek on *The Oregon Trail*—only two attacks against white settlers were recorded in the sources he investigated. Bouchard's research suggested that he needed to deal with the fear of attacks by Indigenous communities, which many nineteenth-century diarists frequently penned about. In his version of the game, Native Americans played a much more significant role in the visualization of *The Oregon Trail.* Rather than using blanket names like Native

American or American Indian, Bouchard implemented specific community names when white settlers encountered them—such as the Sioux, the Cayuse, the Blackfoot, or the Shoshone.[35]

The realignment of *The Oregon Trail* followed similar contemporaneous trends in historical scholarship, often labeled New Western History. Led by some of the major contributors to the history of the American West, this field represented a greater appreciation for race, class, gender, and the environment in the American West.[36] They refuted the history of the frontier presented by Frederick Jackson Turner, who argued that American democratic spirit could be found on the edges of society, that it "turned Europeans into Americans" and "explain[s] American development."[37] A new socioeconomic emphasis on the peoples who inhabited spaces of encounter with settlers, pioneers, conquistadors, and fur trappers reframed the importance of the American West and its relationship to the development of the United States.

While reinventing the visual nature of the game, Bouchard also developed a set of rules to incorporate and recognize Native Americans in the game. Some of these rules included making most interactions with their communities nonviolent encounters; if conflict ever arose—due to settlers not paying a toll when crossing Native lands, for example—it was the player's fault for mishandling the situation. In Bouchard's plans, Native people could not be seen to be at fault for violent encounters. The game also did not simulate armed engagements between white settlers and Native Americans; the only firing of weapons would be in segments devoted to hunting.[38] In most cases, Native American interaction rested on trading or bartering with white settlers.

However, Bouchard's concerns over the treatment of Native Americans in his game ultimately changed when MECC released the 1985 version. Final edits and reorganization of the game removed many of the aspects described, especially those related to the contentious issues of Native Americans requesting tolls when white settlers crossed over their lands. MECC's final decision to not incorporate these changes, according to Bouchard, happened "due to limited disk space on the floppy, limited RAM, and limited resolution on the [computer] screen."[39]

Despite Bouchard's efforts to redesign a more inclusive *Oregon Trail* in 1985, the final product further depicted Native Americans as nonessential characters in the program's narrative. The game placed Native people,

seen either in the background or as people serving white settlers, in only a handful of places: at landmarks, river crossings, or when the white family ran out of food. The three significant "meeting points" allowed players to grasp a small piece of Native culture through vignettes, brief stories told by the Indigenous locals. This was an important feature as Bouchard wanted to "provide some meaningful information about Native Americans," which "ought to make it a much better product for the school market."[40]

Both versions of the game relied heavily on archival written accounts, correspondences, letters, and diary entries that informed the developers about the white settler experience in traversing the Oregon Trail. While these primary documents offered first-person reflection on the Oregon Trail, the sole use of such sources challenges a truly authentic experience.[41] The misperception of being historically accurate through grounding in inherently biased archives resulted in an erroneous and one-sided research methodology that emphasized written and artistic reflections by white travelers.

Initially, Bouchard's game intended to use the Washington Territory's Whitman Mission as a place to depict encounters between Native American, specifically Cayuse, men and Christian missionaries. In Bouchard's vision of the new game, players could decide to stop for rest at the Whitman Mission near the end of their travels. If they stopped, their family might come under direct assault by Cayuse attackers. Bouchard referred to the infamous Whitman massacre of November 29, 1847, when Cayuse men attacked the Christian mission and killed two white missionaries and eleven others to resist the spread of disease and the encroachment of white settlement.[42]

When players arrived at the Whitman Mission, Bouchard wanted them to experience the site in two different ways, in two different years. If the player arrived at the mission before November 29, 1847, they might experience a normal trading post, whereas a player arriving after November 29, 1847, and up to 1853, would find that "only a burnt-out shell . . . will remain [and players could not] buy or trade supplies." If a player arrived at the mission on the day of the massacre, November 29, 1847, "then your entire party will be killed." Bouchard believed that the addition of the Whitman massacre would blend in with the broader inclusion of Native Americans, "and that portrayal would have had a good balance."[43] While Bouchard ultimately removed the Whitman Mission story by staging the game in

1848, its removal either suggests caution about the propagation of "hostile" Native American stereotypes or was an incidental casualty of shifting the player focus on the 1848 boom in movement along the Oregon Trail.[44]

MECC's expectations for production and sales of the redeveloped game superseded Bouchard's acknowledgment of the importance of historical accuracy in *The Oregon Trail.* In his own words, Bouchard sought to "do a better job at representing Native Americans."[45] While he attempted to include Native people in several new contexts—the showing of community names, adding visualizations that depicted them in spaces otherwise seen as Indian-free, and removing "hostile" stereotypes—two practical factors greatly limited what he could actually do: the need to fulfill his mandated goal of creating a successful "edutainment" game for leisure-time use in homes, and the RAM and disk space constraints that resulted from designing the product for the Apple II and distributing it on 5.25-inch floppy disk.[46] Bouchard described the primary intent of the new game: "I had to keep in mind that the #1 goal of the publisher was to create a product that would be popular with kids playing the game at home." He continued, "In other words, the publisher never asked me to create an educational product—just an entertaining one."[47] Despite MECC's ambitions to develop an at-home game with entertainment and leisure value, a product "that would never be sold to schools," Bouchard "intentionally created a design that could be sold in either the home or school markets." Because of his efforts to design *The Oregon Trail* with versatility, MECC followed his lead and released the game for both markets.[48]

The Future of Trail Gaming

Following Bouchard's 1985 version of *The Oregon Trail,* new iterations of the game flooded storefronts and computer classrooms. After this point and into the twenty-first century, children began playing the game at home for leisure, just as Bouchard had envisioned.[49] Even at home, however, students misunderstood the realities of the game they played.

In researching this piece, I interviewed historian Melissa DeVelvis, an active player of *The Oregon Trail* as a child. In the early 2000s, Melissa and her sisters reimagined their living room as part of *The Oregon Trail* landscape. Their grisly burnt-orange couch morphed into a covered Conestoga

wagon that protected them from the elements and moved them west. The sisters even cooked an inedible "frontier soup" made from grass and dandelions pulled from their front yard to concoct their first-person experience in moving on the Oregon Trail. When I asked about interactions with Indigenous people, Melissa said that while she understands the issues with the game now, as someone who holds a PhD in history, as a child she had believed that "most Native American communities were placed on reservations by the 1840s." At that point in her life, Melissa was under the impression that most Indigenous spaces had become "empty land," and she reflected that "it was our Manifest Destiny. Being from Georgia, we knew about the Trail of Tears [but we] did not have the mental ability to extrapolate that to the video game."[50] The ramifications were clear: the game, as described by the scholar Emily Grosvenor, "empathized with pioneers and their struggles, not to get the full picture of the actual history of settler–Native interactions."[51]

The foundations of *The Oregon Trail* constructed a digital reality that blurred the lines of historical accuracy. The legacy of the game morphed into a nostalgic force eager to remember the original gameplay, commended not for its effectiveness in depicting the past but for its ability to teach children how to play games and how to use computers.[52] By the turn of the twenty-first century, *The Oregon Trail* had a cult following, formed to celebrate their childhood computer program. Dubbed generational "Xennials," describing people who grew up in both an analog and a digital life, their recollection of *The Oregon Trail* moved backwards from what the original developers imagined. These players solely wanted to remember the sickly and treacherous experiences that white pioneers faced on their trek west, not the inclusion of Indigenous people. Recent efforts to commemorate this nostalgia in card games, cell phone applications, and even live-action performances of *The Oregon Trail* were all a result of this nostalgic enterprise. Fans of the game wore T-shirts with the proverbial message "You Have Died of Dysentery" to show their devotion to dying on the trail.[53] Most forms of the game emphasized the traditional story line of moving west without dying. Something needed to be done to challenge the incomplete history that people experience in *The Oregon Trail.* There needed to be a game that emphasized Indigenous presence in the United States during the nineteenth century.

Dr. Elizabeth LaPensée at Michigan State University offered a corrective

to this misperception of Indigenous people in computerized gameplay. In 2017, LaPensée collaborated with MSU's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab, the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, and the Indian Land Tenure Foundation to launch *When Rivers Were Trails*. This new "social impact game," a program with the "aim to create social awareness around a specific issue, educate players, change the attitudes and/or behaviors of players, and/or promote social engagement," centers the Indigenous experience of an Anishinaabe person fleeing west from Minnesota to California during the post-Reconstruction period of allotment.[54] Developed with *The Oregon Trail* in mind, *When Rivers Were Trails* follows a map-based exploration through the American West that emphasizes many different Indigenous communities and cultures. The emphasis of the game offers players the opportunity not only to experience Native culture but also to learn the deep-rooted history of allotment in United States history. LaPensée and Nicholas Emmons recognized the issues produced in most versions of the *Oregon Trail*, arguing that the "games . . . reinforce colonial perspectives and false narratives regarding Indigenous peoples through visual representations, design, and the actions the players take in order to win by reaching the West."[55]

When Rivers Were Trails offers deeper insights into how Native Americans experienced the world around them during the period when the federal government separated reservation land into parcels to be bought and sold. In the game itself, rather than players participating in the marketplace and capitalism, players barter with local Indigenous nations. Instead of meeting at military fortifications depicting authority, they interact with tribal elders and experience important cultural events. Instead of creating jokes on the face of a tombstone, players understand what Indigenous well-being meant to Native people. Broadly, it transforms the *Oregon Trail* story to show how Native people engaged with the landscape, other Indigenous communities, and the structures of colonialism.[56]

When Rivers Were Trails recasts the objectives of *The Oregon Trail* in traveling west. The goal of MSU's game is not to have players survive the rugged, empty wilderness between Missouri and Oregon. Rather, players of *When Rivers Were Trails* receive a newfound perspective on Indigenous life in spaces otherwise understood as empty, antimodern, or ripe for "civilizing." They also experience, as LaPensée and others describe it, a game influenced by the history, perspectives, and knowledge of and by Indigenous

people. The centrality of Indigenous people, either within the game or as collaborators in the development process, allows for a richer educational opportunity in playing and teaching the game. Indigenous scholars such as Margaret Huettl and T. J. Tallie follow this lead and show how present versions of *The Oregon Trail* better represent Indigenous characters after collaborative meetings with Native communities.[57] Even though the earlier versions *The Oregon Trail* morphed from an educational program to a leisure game, now supported by the weight of nostalgia, since 2017, *When Rivers Were Trails* has pulled players back into the reality in which these games were initially intended to be used.[58]

The legacy of *The Oregon Trail* demonstrates how the creators developed a game that would not become a static artifact but rather a product that evolved overtime. Don Rawitsch's 1971 game redeveloped the ways in which students experienced overland trails in the American West. Through technological advancement, and R. Philip Bouchard's redevelopment of *The Oregon Trail* in 1985, visualizations replaced text-based programming, which gave a new meaning to students imagining their place in the past. Both developers of *The Oregon Trail* used historical accuracy to develop a rich experience for students traveling on the Oregon Trail. Nevertheless, this accuracy emphasized white experiences at the cost of recognizing Native American presence in spaces paved over by Oregon Trail travelers. Both Rawitsch and Bouchard understood the complications of encounters between white and Native groups, ultimately choosing to avoid using problematic stereotypes that could have warranted criticism. Yet the absences formed in the foundational version only further deepened a settler-colonial understanding of what the American West represented in the nineteenth century.

While Rawitsch and Bouchard did not actively choose to practice settler-colonial erasure, their games replicated the realities of settler colonialism and its manifestation in our historical archives. That structure represents not only a method of the past but also something that is evolving and emerging through the present and into the future. The lingering settler archive and historical publishing apparatus (supported by the land-grant university) continues to force the decontextualization of the deeply intertwined oppression of Black and Indigenous people by the American settler state. The writing-out of Native Americans surfaced when players routinely encountered them as guides or as providers eager to help the white family

move across their lands. Rawitsch's and Bouchard's unconscious bias, an unintended interpretation of both the American West and the Civil War era as designed in their games, uncritically replicated the artistic styles and depictions seen in historical sources from the nineteenth century. Whether in historical primary sources or in *The Oregon Trail* visual or text experience, it should be noted that Americans have routinely relied on the conscious and unconscious effort to rid the American landscape of Native Americans.[59]

The lasting effects of settler colonialism troubles the memory of the American West and the recognition of Native American survival into the twentieth century and beyond. Coll Thrush argued that "we are all inside" the deepening structure of settler colonialism. "If you think you're outside of the story," he proclaimed, "you're so inside it that you can't even see it."[60] Americans play *The Oregon Trail* to remember a childhood game, not to learn about the history of the American West. The absence of recognition of the history of the Oregon Trail as a violent, life-altering experience for Native Americans demonstrates the failure of *The Oregon Trail* as a historical representation of the past. It is important to engage with materials that recenter American history through the centrality of Native American experiences. These communities should not be seen as antimodern people who faded into the unknown when white settlers encountered them or eradicated them from their traditional homelands. Playing games like *When Rivers Were Trails*; engaging with Native-produced sources, games, programs, histories, artworks, and other ethnohistoric source material; and accessing more public-facing historical material—as seen in the Zinn Education Project—will enable us to be more aware of the power of settler colonialism and the Indigenous responses to that structure.[61]

The Oregon Trail recasts the traditional understanding of the Civil War binary of North versus South, white versus Black, as something more diverse. It shows that the Civil War arose from intense debates over the viability of slavery and the spatial geographies over which the institution of slavery and accompanying power and authority spread West.[62] The emphasis on the Civil War era may not be apparent to players, yet recent games like *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood* or *Red Dead Redemption 2* reckoned with these crucial questions, mirroring the slow evolution of Civil War historiography to center the West in its narrative.[63]

One such narrative revolves around the concept of "Greater Reconstruction," developed by Elliott West, which expands the era of Reconstruction to between 1848 and 1877, ending not with the end of traditional Reconstruction but with the end of the "last Indian War" with the Nez Perce.[64] West recently argued that Reconstruction scholars embrace too much focus on the post–Civil War years and should pay more attention to earlier periods too.[65] Like this critique, *The Oregon Trail* allows us to reconsider Civil War chronologies and topics in the West that go beyond the western postwar focus of *Call of Juarez* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*. I agree with West when he contends that "while we call the mid-nineteenth century the Civil War era, acquiring the West had at least much to do with remaking America as the conflict between the North and South."[66]

The significance of *The Oregon Trail* lies in what is missing from the game: context. Such context, when coupled with the dimensions of "historical accuracy," can provide players with a greater understanding of nineteenth-century America's expansion into the West.[67] It is what *The Oregon Trail* leaves out—namely, the questions arising over slavery in the West, the United States' harsh treatment of Native people throughout North America, and the lack of land dispossession policies that made overland trails possible—that sets the tone for future Western themes in video games. These recent developments show a more responsible mode of historical interpretation and serve as a reminder about how to respond to settler-colonial structures, as these new developments came from listening to and centering the lives and cultures of Indigenous people. Now is the time to take these defining programs and blaze a new trail, enabling us to understand the power of history and the importance of inclusion in our telling of it.

NOTES

1. Don Rawitsch, "I Am Don Rawitsch, a Co-Inventor of the Original *Oregon Trail* Computer Game," *Reddit*, February 1, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/4300qf/i_am_don_rawitsch_a_coinventor_of_the_original/; Robert Whitaker, "He Created *The Oregon Trail* and He Didn't Make a Penny," *Slate*, November 17, 2021, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/11/oregon-trail-game-history-inventor-don-rawitsch.html; Rawitsch, "Classic Game Postmortem: 'Oregon Trail,'" presentation at Game Developers Conference, Moscone Center, San Francisco, February 27–March 3, 2017, *GDC Vault*, https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1024251/Classic-Game-Postmortem-Oregon-Trail.

2. Matt Jancer, "How You Wound Up Playing 'The Oregon Trail' in Computer

Class," *Smithsonian Magazine,* July 22, 2016, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-you-wound-playing-em-oregon-trailem-computer-class-180959851.

3. See Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill, eds., *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 1–4; Megan Kate Nelson, *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

4. John Wills and Esther Wright, eds., *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), 27.

5. Jean M. O'Brien, "Tracing Settler Colonialism's Eliminatory Logic in *Traces of History*," *American Indian Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (June 2017): 249; J. Kēhualani Kauanui, "'A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1, https://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-settler-colonialism-enduring-indigeneity-kauanui.

6. This work builds off his previous "Greater Reconstruction" scholarship. See Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race," *Western Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2003): 6–26; West, *Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), xx; West, "Reconstruction in the West," *Muster* (blog), *Journal of the Civil War Era,* https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/forum-the-future-of-reconstruction-studies/reconstruction-in-the-west/#_ednref1.

7. West, *Continental Reckoning,* 454–455.

8. Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xx; Megan Kate Nelson, *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native People in the Fight for the West* (New York: Scribner, 2020), xix.

9. West, *Continental Reckoning,* 141.

10. Timothy Compeau and Robert MacDougall, "*Tecumseh Returns:* A History Game in Alternate Reality, Augmented Reality, and Reality," in *Seeing the Past with Computers: Experiments with Augmented Reality and Computer Vision for History,* ed. Kevin Kee and Timothy Compeau (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 194.

11. Don Rawitsch, interview by author, February 11, 2021; John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 42.

12. Hannu Salmi offers an insightful history of computerization and describes the purpose and influence that mainframe computer systems offered in this new digital age. See Salmi, *What Is Digital History?* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021), 2.

13. Ezra Klein, "Type 'BANG,'" *Washington Post,* June 21, 2011; Katharine Slater, "Who Gets to Die of Dysentery? Ideology, Geography, and *The Oregon Trail,*" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 375.

14. Rawitsch interview; R. Phillip Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery: The Creation of The Oregon Trail—The Iconic Educational Game of the 1980s* (Self-published, 2016), 43–46.

15. Jessica Lussenhop, "*Oregon Trail:* How Three Minnesotans Forged Its Path," *City Pages,* January 19, 2011; Joy Rankin, "From the Mainframes to the Masses: A Participatory Computing Movement in Minnesota Education," *Information & Culture* 50, no. 2 (2015): 198–199.

16. John E. Haugo, "Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium," April 1973, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED087434.pdf; Joe Juba, "A Pioneer Story: How MECC Blazed New Trails," *Game Informer,* April 7, 2017, https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2017/04/07/a-pioneer-story-how-mecc-blazed-new-trails.aspx.

17. Minhua Ma, Andreas Oikonomou, and Lakhmi C. Jain, eds., *Serious Games and Edutainment Applications* (New York: Springer, 2011), 32.

18. Rankin, "From the Mainframes to the Masses," 211–212; Kevin Kee, Eric Poitras, and Timothy Compeau, "History All around Us: Toward Best Practices for Augmented Reality for History," in *Seeing the Past with Computers: Experiments with Augmented Reality and Computer Vision for History,* ed. Kevin Kee and Timothy Compeau (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 208.

19. Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery,* 46.

20. R. Philip Bouchard, "I Designed *The Oregon Trail:* You Have Died of Dysentery," *Format,* July 24, 2017, https://www.format.com/magazine/features/design/you-have-died-of-dysentery-oregon-trail-design.

21. The "Oregon Trail Generation," as described by Anna Garvey, places Americans living in a period between the analog and the digital life. Also considered "Xennials," those living in this generation grew up learning, playing, and experiencing life through analog means—textbooks and board games—but developed into adults during the rise of digital technology, which transformed the world in which they lived. Garvey, "The Oregon Trail Generation: Life before and after Mainstream Tech," *Social Media Week,* April 21, 2015, https://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2015/04/oregon-trail-generation.

22. Recent work on augmented reality demonstrates the significance of a participatory experience of playing a history-based game, where decisions both increase the entertainment value of the game and signify the importance of history in general. See Kee, Poitras, and Compeau, "History All Around Us," 210.

23. Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery,* 99.

24. Bouchard, "I Designed the Oregon Trail."

25. The game was created in a context when U.S. education was in transformation and flux. Americans debated the role of diversity and race in U.S. history. For much of the twentieth century, Americans waged battles in the so-called history wars that questioned the content that students learned in their history and social studies classrooms. See Ronald W. Evans, "The Social Studies Wars, Now and Then," *Social Education* 70, no. 5 (2006): 317–321; James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Indianapolis: Wiley & Sons, 2020);

Frances Fitzgerald, *American History Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Little, Brown, 1979); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Hazel Witman Hertzberg, *Social Studies Reform, 1880–1980* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1980).

26. Other games have also experienced this tension between benefactors and development ambitions. In *Assassin's Creed III*, for example, developers understood the geographic importance of Philadelphia to Revolutionary America. However, they decided to leave the city out of game play as eighteenth-century Philadelphia did not offer much entertainment value. See Shubhankar Parijat, "Ubisoft Was about to Include Philadelphia in *Assassin's Creed* but Didn't Because It Would Have Been 'Boring,'" *Gaming Bolt*, November 15, 2012, https://gamingbolt.com/ubisoft-was-about-to-include-philadelphia-in-assassins-creed-but-didnt-because-it-would-have-been-boring.

27. Rawitsch interview; Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 100; Kee, Poitras, and Compeau, "History All around Us," 213.

28. Raymond D. Fogelson, "The Ethnohistory of Events and Nonevents," *Ethnohistory* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 133–147.

29. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

30. Don Rawitsch, email correspondence with author, February 11, 2021.

31. Sarah Keyes, "'Like a Roaring Lion': The Overland Trail as a Sonic Conquest," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (June 2009): 21; Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 233.

32. James Joseph Buss, *Winning the West with Words: Language and Conquest in the Lower Great Lakes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 5.

33. Rawitsch interview.

34. For more information on the twentieth century and myths surrounding the frontier and indigeneity, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

35. Rawitsch interview; Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 101, 165–166.

36. See Patrick Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

37. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 20; Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 4; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 31–32.

38. Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 165–166.

39. Bouchard, email correspondence with author, August 30, 2021.

40. Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 100–101.

41. For more information on the sources consulted by Don Rawitsch, see Rawitsch, "Oregon Trail," *Creative Computing Magazine* (May 1978): 133; Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home About: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019), 8.

42. Eliza Spalding Warren letter to Clarence Leroy Andrews regarding the Whitman massacre, January 19, 1894, PNW00227, Pacific Northwest Historical Documents, University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/pioneerlife/id/3284; Cameron Addis, "The Whitman Massacre: Religion and Manifest Destiny on the Columbia Plateau, 1809–1858," *Journal of the Early American Republic* 25, no. 2 (2005): 222; Chelsea K. Vaughn, "Killing Narcissa: Race, Gender, and Violence in Recreations of the Whitman Incident," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 389; Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 206.

43. Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 169, 206–207.

44. Daniel R. Maher, *Mythic Frontiers: Remembering, Forgetting, and Profiting with Cultural Heritage Tourism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 9.

45. Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 102.

46. Bouchard, email correspondence, September 5, 2021.

47. Bouchard, email correspondence, August 30, 2021.

48. Ibid.; R. Philip Bouchard, "Including Humans in the Design," *The Oregon Trail*, http://www.philipbouchard.com/oregon-trail/including-humans.html. After Bouchard finished his revamped *Oregon Trail* project, he moved on to a similar computer program called *Lewis and Clark Stayed Home*, which visualized a much earlier movement west with greater emphasis on Native American encounter. For more information on this game, see Bouchard, "A Different Journey to Oregon," *The Oregon Trail*, http://www.philipbouchard.com/oregon-trail/different-journey.html; Bouchard, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, 526–527.

49. R. Philip Bouchard, "How I Managed to Design the Most Successful Educational Computer Game of All Time," *Medium*, June 29, 2017, https://medium.com/the-philipendium/how-i-managed-to-design-the-most-successful-educational-computer-game-of-all-time-4626ea09e184.

50. Melissa DeVelvis, Twitter interview by author, August 28, 2020.

51. Emily Grosvenor, email correspondence with author, October 7, 2020.

52. Steve Pepple, "Why Did All Children of a Certain Age Play *Oregon Trail*?," *Medium*, November 20, 2016, https://medium.com/s/story/why-did-all-children-of-a-certain-age-play-oregon-trail-6a53e27e83d8.

53. John R. Legg, "Ride or Die: The 'Oregon Trail Live' Q&A," National Council on Public History, *History@Work*, November 19, 2020, https://ncph.org/history-at-work/the-oregon-trail-live-qa.

54. Elizabeth LaPensée, "*When Rivers Were Trails:* Cultural Expression in an Indigenous Video Game," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 3 (2021):

281–283; Nicholas Emmons and Elizabeth LaPensée, "'I See My Ancestors': Exploring Tribal College Student Experiences Playing *When Rivers Were Trails*," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17, no. 2 (June 2021): 1–2.

55. LaPensée, "*When Rivers Were Trails*," 282; Elizabeth LaPensée and Nicholas Emmons, "Indigenizing Education with the Game 'When Rivers Were Trails,'" *Amerikastudien* 64, no. 1 (2019): 76.

56. C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa, "'Friends' and Fistfights: Federal Indian Policy Debates and Late Nineteenth-Century State Development," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 4 (2015): 513; Elizabeth LaPensée, "*When Rivers Were Trails*," 1.

57. Anna King, "A New Spin on a Classic Video Game Gives Native Americans Better Representation," NPR, *All Things Considered*, May 12, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/05/12/996007048/no-bows-and-arrows-and-no-broken-english-on-the-updated-oregon-trail; T. J. Tallie, "On Nostalgia and Colonialism on the New *Oregon Trail*," *Hyperallergic*, May 16, 2021, https://hyperallergic.com/645727/on-nostalgia-and-colonialism-on-the-new-oregon-trail; Livia Gershon, "New 'Oregon Trail' Game Revisits Westward Expansion from Native Perspective," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 17, 2021, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/new-oregon-trail-game-features-playable-native-american-characters-180977744; Mark Wilson, "'The Oregon Trail' Is Back—and a Little Less Racist," *Fast Company*, June 14, 2021, https://www.fastcompany.com/90645359/the-oregon-trail-is-back-and-a-little-less-racist.

58. Beth A. Dillon, "Signifying the West: Colonialist Design in *Age of Empires III*: The WarChiefs," *Eludamos* 2, no. 1 (2008), 143–144.

59. Tallie, "On Nostalgia and Colonialism"; Slater, "Who Gets to Die of Dysentery?," 374; T. J. Tallie, "Failing to Ford the River: 'Oregon Trail,' Same-Sex Marriage Rhetoric, and the Intersections of anti-Blackness and Settler Colonialism," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, June 4, 2014, https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/04/failing-to-ford-the-river-oregon-trail-same-sex-marriage-rhetoric-and-the-intersections-of-anti-blackness-and-settler-colonialism.

60. Vaun Raymond, "Coll Thrush at Beyond the Frame Symposium" (November 17, 2018), YouTube, April 5, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IneyCsROeI8.

61. The Zinn Education Project seeks to bring, to students of any age, the histories most often ignored in the standard historical textbooks used in history classrooms. With the goal of "emphasiz[ing] the role of working people, women, people of color, and organized social movements in shaping history," this resource recenters the voices written out of the American past as central to its history. For more information, see zinnedproject.org.

62. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 4–5, 10; Michael E. Woods, *Bleeding Kansas: Slavery, Sectionalism, and Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 22, 72.

63. Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 82.

64. Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 6–26.

65. This statement was given by Elliott West from the audience at a Greater Reconstruction panel during the 2022 Western History Association meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

66. West, "Reconstructing Race," 25.

67. In his famed *Battle Cry of Freedom*, James M. McPherson begins his story of the Civil War with the West and the Mexican-American War. Since this moment, historians have grappled over the meaning of the American West in the Civil War narrative. See McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–4; Nelson, *Three Cornered-War*, xiii–xvi, 252; Arenson and Graybill, *Civil War Wests*, 1–2; Virginia Scharff, ed., *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 2.