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FINAL THOUGHTS

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I heard my children and their friend gasp. "That's so sad!" They were playing *Hold My Hand*. "I don't want to go without you!" They were all thoroughly traumatized, but in a good way, because they were deep in the throws of feeling for one another. "This is just wrong!" They questioned whether they made a mistake, and played again, only to find the same ending again in a two-player game where only one player can make it to the very end.

Thanks to Night of the Indigenous Devs, I got to hear the developer Nathan Powless-Lynes talk about his game. Don't worry; he assured everyone that he is well and that his design choices weren't about underlying trust issues. He was hoping to make a game with an impactful ending amidst art that otherwise appears generally cute and non-specific. The theater was filled with gasps and laughter as two players randomly selected from the audience attempted to make their way through the levels, always having to hold onto one another, not always quite pulling that off, often leading to many deaths of falling into voids of nothingness. *Hold My Hand* expands the definition of what it is to be an "Indigenous game," as it is Indigenous because the developer is Indigenous rather than having an overtly Indigenous aesthetic. The gameplay invites us to reflect on working together (for better or worse) and experience empathy, as we must ultimately leave our partner behind in order to complete the game and only one of us can win (if that can be considered winning at all).

Approaching a two-player game from another angle, *Terra Nova* with design by Maize Longboat and art by Ray Caplin begins with each player in their own split screen. As you traverse a future Earth experiencing a climate crisis post-apocalypse, you eventually meet. Not only does the interaction act as a metaphor for First Contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers through the story, but also through design by changing from a split screen co-op to shared screen. The breathtaking pixel art and poignant narrative led to awe in the audience during Night of the Indigenous Devs. For anyone unaware, they came to understand how this was Longboat's first festival distributed game and Caplin's first experience with expressing himself through pixel art. Their work is a true indication that it is not only a matter of possibility but one of added value for Indigenous people to aim for core roles in game development. Alongside their dynamics as a self-determined team, *Terra Nova* also exemplifies that Indigenous games can carry with them deep meaning and purpose while also having commercial appeal.

Echoing the climate issue themes in *Terra Nova*, *Wao Kanaka* by The Ka Lei Milika'a Collective seeks to address these concerns now with hope for preventing such a future. The game beautifully interweaves gameplay with language immersion thanks in part to Daniel Kauwila Mahi, who grew up attending 'ōlelo Hawai'i at Ke Kula Kaiapuni 'o Ānuenuē, a Hawaiian Language Immersion School. Although the gameplay drew contemplative reactions during the mini-game where the player needs to choose the correct phrases in a song to help rain droplets fall, there was much laughter during a seemingly undefeatable puzzle mini-game that concerned the importance of the flow of a river. Through fast-paced gameplay with win conditions that harken to the wellbeing of their community, *Wao Kanaka* speaks to Indigenous self-expression in games through language and representations of land.

Don't Wake The Night, with design, art, and writing by Santo Aveiro through Brujería @ Werk, similarly immerses the player in their language and reflections of land. You move through the space in relation to listening to conversations with the goal of better understanding your role in the community. During meditative gameplay that asks the player to slow down and read/listen, we gained insights about the meaning of Santo's unique art style and cultural references carefully placed throughout gameplay. Their interpretation of community and land relates to their upbringing, with delicate references to everything from protocol to plants. With gameplay that leads up to the goal of self-realization rather than a scoreboard, *Don't Wake The Night* brings into question expectations of what makes a game a game and gives us a welcome alternative.

In parallel with challenging the definition of games, *Full of Birds* invites the player to experience a series of artworks by walking through a gallery space and quite literally into the works themselves. Through Ashlee Bird's reflection during Night of the Indigenous Devs, the

audience was illuminated to how *Full of Birds* is a game in that it is a voluntary experience that allows exploration in a safe space. Traversable tapestries of environments created from art by Sarah Biscarra Dilley invite us to slow down, listen, and be with the land. Bird's intention was to push back at the expectations of galleries and games, by merging both in a self-led experience relating space and land.

Movement across land is also vital in *When Rivers Were Trails*, which I provided design, interface art, and writing for, alongside an incredibly robust team. Since the game includes both linear and randomized gameplay, I honestly wasn't sure how selecting someone from the audience who had never played before would go. And then, it happened. While I was talking about what excites me most about the game, which is the development process and it contributed to genuine capacity for collaborators like the artist Weshoyot Alvitre, the *Duck Hunt* homage version of the hunting mini-game popped up. With only one instance of that version possible per game, it was just too perfect! *When Rivers Were Trails* is an Indigenous response to *Oregon Trail*, a game I grew up playing in keyboarding class, asking why the Native characters existed only in relation to settlers. The gameplay is also inspired by *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (which I contributed writing to), because I wondered what a primarily Indigenous lens on Westward expansion in such a game would look like. It's a culmination of everything I have hoped for in a game, with a balance of being for awareness, for play's sake, and a good bit of nostalgia.

Above all else, I am immensely grateful to Meagan Byrne for the opportunity to speak while *When Rivers Were Trails* was being played and to listen to Indigenous game developers with varying worldviews and ways of making games while seeing their games in action. Before this event, I had only been invited to talk during live gameplay for games I haven't made, expected to perform as a commentator and provide the "Native perspective" for an audience. Night of the Indigenous Devs flipped the stage, shifting us from being under the settler gaze to being uplifted and seen for our work. It was a moment to be reflected on with hope that it will always be remembered for rectifying Indigenous self-determination in games.



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