

REMEMBER US: DESIGNING A VIDEO GAME THROUGH A PUBLIC HISTORY LENS

by

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Abstract

If you were to imagine what a public history-centred video game could look like, what would it be? What would make it *good* public history, what needs to be included for it to make a pedagogical argument? This major research project is an experiment in creating a game design document (GDD) for a public history game called *Remember Us*, a game centred around the experiences of immigrants and the working class in 1898 Ontario. This experiment takes the form of a GDD. A GDD is a roadmap for developers to follow when making games and is just as integral to the game as the narrative. This essay describes what a GDD is, the process of making one, and how its narrative and game mechanics intersect with historiography. This essay sets the scene for exploring the GDD. This essay also challenges readers to think differently about games and their potential for public history: Games have the power to not only bring something new to the discipline, but to give players and readers a memorable experience that challenges them to think in new, participatory ways outside the traditional forms of academic study.

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Introduction

When Muriel Rukeyser writes, “The world is made up of stories, not atoms,” she points to something important.¹ Stories combine history and context, they tell us the good and the bad about the world and ourselves, and they hold power that transcends time and space. Stories are engaging; each detail is important. And, perhaps most importantly, we all are capable of telling stories. With the digital age, more stories are available than ever before because today’s digital media provides us with new ways to express ourselves and interpret the world around us. One of the more popular means of digital storytelling is video games, a dynamic medium that joins narrative with analytical approaches to play, and they are an underutilized tool for teaching history.

Video games offer an endless array of possibilities: at their best, they are dynamic, engaging, immersive, and prompt our minds to think of problems, characters, times, and places in ways that are unique and subversive. Video games are powerful as teaching tools and as a means of creating impactful, individualized experiences.² A game provides the ability to combine visual, auditory, and hands-on forms of learning, something that books or listening to a university lecture rarely include. Scholar Lisa Gilbert found in her study on student engagement with history using a classroom setting and *Assassin’s Creed* that students felt a sense of “immediate access to history” that contrasted with what they had learned in class and a sense of “human connection to people in the past.”³ She also notes that there was evidence of a “willingness to allow games to rewrite their beliefs about history, and theorized

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, “The Speed of Darkness” from *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

² Kevin B. Kee, *Pastplay Teaching and Learning History with Technology* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2014).

³ Lisa Gilbert, “‘Assassin’s Creed reminds us that history is human experience’: Students’ senses of empathy while playing a narrative video game,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 47, 2 (2019), 108.

about the game's historical accuracy" but also missed "opportunities for critical engagement with this visceral sense of immersive experience."⁴ Playing games can provide poignant opportunities for learning and engaging with history, but the process of *creating* games can facilitate the critical engagement Gilbert argues is otherwise lacking. Historian William Urrichio and game scholar Ian Bogost both argue that the coding of the game is in itself a historiographic argument that manifests through the performance of the games' rules.⁵ For what is history but a story that we seek to understand and learn from, something that we retell and adapt again and again?

As historians Hayden White and Julia Nitz have argue in their work, storytelling is part of writing history and fiction: they share similar literary devices and functions.⁶ This MRE sets the context for and presents the results of an experiment that infused historical argument, narrativity, and game design to create *Remember Us*. *Remember Us* is a game that is as much a story told through the video game format as it is a historical argument about labour history, gender, and family in 1898 Toronto and northern Ontario. The game blends narrative storytelling with historical methodologies to create an experience where players 'learn by accident'. That is to say, the game will not be marketed as an educational tool in its final form, as was the case with games like *The Oregon Trail*,⁷ rather the historical methodologies underpinning the game's mechanics are the focus and are contained in its

⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

⁶ Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* Baltimore (Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), and Julia Nitz, "History, a Literary Artifact?: The Traveling Concept of Narrative in/on Historiographic Discourse," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 15, 1 (2013), 69-85.

⁷ An educational gaming series designed with students in mind back in the 1970s and still continues to be expanded on today: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Oregon_Trail_\(series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Oregon_Trail_(series))

narrative framework.⁸ Players adopt methodologies employed by public historians while playing through the perspective of the sixteen-year-old protagonist. The players become (informal) public historians as they are tasked with examining primary sources, such as letters, photographs, and other physical memorabilia, to further understand the plot, its central mystery, and historical context. The act of investigating and challenging what is presented at face value is rewarded through narrative and enhanced gameplay. By becoming investigators who utilize public history methodologies, however unconscious, players are encouraged to ‘learn by accident’, and it is further facilitated because of the game’s mechanics.

Remember Us ultimately makes an argument about the power of community and how popular media, when engaging with history, glances past the rich experiences of immigrants, women, and the working class in favour of more ‘glamorous’ narratives. History-based games often struggle to depict nuance, and games like *Assassin's Creed* dispense with nuance in favour of drama, violence, and (largely) facilitating male power fantasies.⁹ Like many indie games before it, *Remember Us* seeks to fill this existing gap, and other public historians can endeavour to do the same in designing a game that challenges the precedents set by other historical games, even if it is in the form of a class exercise or academic paper.¹⁰

In the last twenty years, popular culture has largely fixated on the AAA gaming giants such as EA, Ubisoft, and Rockstar Games—the creators of *Battlefield*, the *Assassin's Creed* series, and *Red Dead Redemption*, respectively—when it comes to understanding video

⁸ Elizabeth LaPensée, “When Rivers Were Trails: cultural expression in an Indigenous video game,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, 3 (2021), 281-295.

⁹ H. Bomberguy, “Power Fantasy, Male Objectification and Lady-Fanservice” (YouTube, August 20, 2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coNQAucXoNM>.

¹⁰ Shawn Graham. “Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games” in *Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning* (University of Michigan Press/Trinity College ePress edition, 2014): <http://epress.trincoll.edu/webwriting/chapter/graham>.

games. Even then, video games having a staying power in the public consciousness is a fairly recent phenomenon. One branch of gaming are so-called e-sports, worldwide tournament-style competitions built around strategy games, that offer millions in prize money.¹¹ Large game studios are subject to the financial pressures of stakeholders and the need to create a product that has mass-marketability. As a result, many of the most popular video games on the market in the last twenty years have game mechanics that are rooted in violence and combat.¹² In an E3 press event in 2017, 133 games were featured. 113 of those games included combat as an integral feature, meaning that 85 percent of the games centred around violence and combat-based game mechanics.¹³ The three popular game series listed above are hinged upon the popularity of glorified violence, despite the extensive historical research that went into constructing their narratives and world design. This is *not* the kind of game *Remember Us* is, both in narrative construction and how it is produced with historical methodologies. *Remember Us* forgoes violence-based mechanics for mechanics centred around relationship building between characters and historical engagement. Further, its historical settings are not used purely to provide a richly constructed backdrop to the story.

Much of popular culture points to the blockbuster games mentioned above and their spectacularly rendered history-based worlds¹⁴ and therefore distinguishing AAA and indie (independent) games is important. *Remember Us* is firmly situated in the latter. AAA studios have large development teams, extensive funding, and access to powerful game design

¹¹ E-Sports Earnings: <https://www.esportsearnings.com/tournaments>.

¹² Sami Yenigun, "Video Game Violence: Why Do We Like It, And What's It Doing To Us?" (NPR, February 11, 2013): <https://www.npr.org/2013/02/11/171698919/video-game-violence-why-do-we-like-it-and-whats-it-doing-to-us>

¹³ Pop Culture Detective, "The Unfulfilled Potential of Video Games" (YouTube, June 30, 2017): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Sq-EjKYp_Q&t=10s.

¹⁴ In AAA gaming studios, there is a large emphasis placed on developing graphics engines to produce life-like games. With each new console generation, these popular games look more and more like playable action movies.

engines and technology. Many of these AAA game studios have successfully created multi-million-dollar franchises—*Red Dead Redemption*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*, *Age of Empires*, and *Ghost of Tsushima* being among the most popular (and lucrative) historical video games. While these games are fun to play and involve a great deal of historical research to create their respective worlds and narrative conceit, they rarely subvert or challenge players to think critically about the history they are engaging with. Alternatively, indie games¹⁵ are largely free from the pressures that AAA companies are restricted by, and rather than needing to meet a standard of mass-marketability to create a profit, indie games have the freedom to engage users with unconventional stories and characters. There is greater creative freedom and the space to make bold storytelling choices that challenge players to think beyond “shoot ‘em ups” or the safe narrative conventions that are hallmarks of AAA games.

The concept of designing a game with something like *Red Dead Redemption* or *Assassin's Creed* as the benchmark is intimidating to any person who is aspiring to design their own games outside of the mainstream industry. This, however, is not the aim for this project, nor should it be for public historians. A public historian can design their own game as a way to teach history, and even if limited to the *process* of designing a game rather than the final product, there is much to be gained for the public historian and the future ‘players’. What inspired this project was the desire to create a bridge between casual gamers and the academic side of history, to encourage players to ‘learn by accident.’ What is possible for games to accomplish through narrative, setting, and design is constantly expanding and has

¹⁵ By “indie” I am referring to the larger section of games created by independent developers—that is, people outside of the AAA gaming industry, which is competitive and profit-driven. Unlike with AAA companies, they put their projects ahead of the possibility of creating profit. Instead, they prioritize creative freedom and develop games as passion projects. While less lucrative, they are often more subversive and unique than games available commercially.

the potential to reach broader and more diverse audiences. This project leans into that potential, challenging players to think of how we perceive and interact with Canadian history while picking up the tools of a historian along the way.

Of course, this is not the only public history project with these aims. *Remember Us*, especially with its emphasis on labour history in mining towns in northern Ontario, is situated within a larger context of public history projects that commemorate and explore the rich history therein. Barkerville Historic Town and Park, mining heritage tours for Kirkland Lake, and industrial heritage sites in mining towns of Cumberland County, Nova Scotia are a few of the already existing projects to which, as a public history project, *Remember Us* also contributes.¹⁶ Many existing Ontario public history projects aim to be ‘objective.’ There is little opportunity to establish an emotional or personal connection to the histories being presented. Museum exhibits, statues, and historic towns are, by the nature of exhibits, kept at a distance from the observer. A visitor to Barkerville Historic Town and Park might feel immersed in the re-created setting, but there is rarely an avenue through which the visitor can engage with the history with the same level of empathy and investment like they would with a story. *Remember Us* is unique to existing projects because it is built on establishing a connection with the player, gaining a level of investment that is rare to develop by reading a plaque or exhibit panel. It also re-creates historic settings and peoples, but the people and places feel alive rather than as long-gone bits of the past where we look back on them through the lens of the present. To my knowledge, no project like *Remember Us* exists. It goes beyond theory on the applicability of video games in the field of public history to

¹⁶ Robert Summerby-Murray, “Interpreting Personalized Industrial Heritage in the Mining Towns of Cumberland County, Nova Scotia: Landscape Examples from Springhill and River Hebert,” *Urban History Review* 35, 2 (2007), 50-59 and Pamela Stern and Peter V. Hall, “Historical limits: narrowing possibilities in ‘Ontario’s most historic town,’” *The Canadian Geographer* 54, 2 (2010), 209-227.

applying it in practice in order to create something that can be used by other public historians and the public whose stories I aim to tell.

Remember Us is a project in the form of a game design document (GDD) that outlines the mechanics, narratives, and pedagogy for a public history video game. Throughout the remainder of this essay, when I reference *Remember Us* specifically and its GDD, please see Appendix A.¹⁷ The GDD describes, using industry standard approaches, all the necessary metadata, historical content, and game mechanics that make the scaffolding needed to create a historical video game. Originally, I used a dynamic online platform to enable a cyclical design approach to the work; Appendix A preserves a static snapshot of that process. Appendix A is organized in the same manner that I will be discussing it for the ease of the reader, the details of which will be described in its own section. While there is no physical game yet to play, the GDD is the guide that allows readers to see the possibilities of what the game *could* be—what it aims to teach, how it will do so, what is included (and excluded), and the methodology behind player mechanics and the choices posed to both readers and future players. It is also the rulebook that guides the actual production of the game and helps the artists, programmers, writers, and producers realize the designer’s vision.¹⁸ In addition to the static version of *Remember Us*’s GDD in Appendix A, I am creating a supplementary website for the future that combines elements from this paper with the GDD to disseminate the

¹⁷ Please note that some sections were not included in the static version provided in the appendix. The pages on deadlines and goals I kept for my personal use, and the sections where I organized the secondary and primary sources into categories relevant to different aspects of the game were redundant being that they are provided here in the bibliography. All other meeting notes on the evolution of the project and information are otherwise included.

¹⁸ To specify, video game projects are led by a creative director. Like in a film, they act as the director of the project who has final say in all decisions. They will task artists and designers to achieve certain goals, such as how to represent a certain setting or character design, but artists and technicians are working towards a vision determined by the lead creative team. To put it another way, one of Michelangelo’s students can paint a robe blue rather than red, but it is Michelangelo who supervises and determines the finished product.

project to a wider audience, especially when it moves into the development stage.¹⁹ Herein, I now move to a discussion of gaming as public history, narrative design as a gaming mechanic, the evolution of *Remember Us* as a project, and the importance of empathy and its role in designing historical video games.

Now that I have described what the project is, it is important to describe what the game is about, as understanding the narrative conceit is important for understanding why I chose specific mechanics and features. After her mother goes missing, 16-year-old Esther leaves her home in Toronto to travel the isolated trails of 1898 Canada northward to the gold mining town of Leore, where her mother was last seen, to reunite her family, and encounters strange mysteries as she uses her wits to survive and return home. Esther is a 16-year-old girl from a poor, Jewish immigrant family. She works hard to support her family after her father loses an arm in an industrial accident and can no longer find work. Now the primary breadwinner, Esther's mother Sarah travels north to Leore, a rapidly growing gold rush town rife with promises of fortune. After six months, Esther stops receiving letters and money from her mother and, mysteriously, no one seems to remember Leore. After having lost two siblings to disease and her father slowly losing himself to alcohol, Esther is desperate to reunite what remains of her family. She works hard to build relationships with her neighbours in St. John's Ward, Toronto to earn the resources she needs to travel north in search of her mother, leaving her remaining family in a precarious position. If she is not well enough prepared or takes too long, Esther is at risk of losing everything. If she does nothing, she will be solely responsible for the well-being of her family and she will lose her mother forever. The player goes through this journey with Esther, preparing and using their wits to make the

¹⁹ The website is still under construction, but here is a link to the unfinished version: <https://sites.google.com/d/1KSGQNIUKgsMdvxRt7HBKF3KnEyP7kePd/p/1BWJkMYdNvOoOWVzqe6UTwKFHu8Go0-MY/edit>.

journey to Leore in search of her mother while balancing the needs of her remaining family. She must travel from Toronto to the dangerous and isolated trails of northern Ontario leading to Leore and every choice matters. Players must navigate the restrictions and dangers Esther will face while unravelling the mystery surrounding Leore and Esther's family.

While this is expanded upon in Appendix A, it is important to note that specific details of the premise and plot will change as I consult with sensitivity readers and collaborate with people who have more specialized knowledge and experience to make Esther's journey believable. Her family dynamic and the precarious position they find themselves in will have nuances that I will inevitably miss. These considerations and potential shortcomings have been accounted for within the GDD. While I have a distinct vision in mind, there will likely be significant changes to the plot and characters to best fit the historical period and demographics being represented.

What is a Game Design Document? Gaming as Public History

A game design document (GDD) is exactly what it sounds like—a document that holds all of the information and data that guides the production of a game. While the digital rendering and software is what brings the ideas to life and facilitates play, the information that informs the design and *how* the players engage with the game is the vital base on which a project's foundation is built. It is the scaffolding for *doing* a game project, the gaming bible of design management. At their core, GDDs are large, highly descriptive, living documents utilized by studios to organize efforts between game development teams.²⁰ Before the rise of collaborative workspaces like Nuclino, Notion, Bloomfire, and Guru, GDDs were distributed as a single master document, making it difficult to change things as projects become refined

²⁰ Tim Ryan, "The Anatomy of a Design Document, Part 1: Documentation Guidelines for the Game Concept and Proposal" (Gamasutra, October 19, 1999), https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131791/the_anatomy_of_a_design_document_.php.

throughout the production process. They often include (but are not limited to) sections dedicated to project description, story, characters, goals, game mechanics, user skills, marketing strategies, genre, and marketing strategies.²¹ Much of a GDD focuses on the practical and is meant to guide designers as they make key design decisions. For example, a puzzle game like *Tetris* would not have combat game mechanics such as aiming, shooting, and lobbing grenades that an action game like *Call of Duty* would. Audience expectations match the genre of the game they play. Subverting player expectations to complement the game's themes and objectives is a rich area for designers to explore, and it is something *Remember Us* seeks to situate itself within. This is all to say, each decision must have an explanation, and the GDD is meant to house all of the information designers need to provide to stakeholders and creative teams.

A public historian's GDD must have different priorities and a focus that suits the aims of their project rather than the intricate, expansive work required for large-scale games that have the benefit of large teams and game design professionals who focus on technical expertise. The sections I created reflect both what is required for the game and also more explicit historiographical considerations. Thus, my sections include a general overview, game elements, art and other sources of inspiration (while time-consuming to create one's own, visuals are essential to communicating theme and mood in a game), story outline, background information (which is informed by historical research), meeting notes and project progress, historiographical considerations, academic sources, as well as separate sections dedicated to specific aspects of the historical research. This should by no means be a conclusive list; each GDD is going to have its own flavour specific to the designer and the public historian's goals

²¹ Leonardo Gonzalez, "How to Write a Game Design Document" (Gamasutra, July 26, 2016): https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/LeandroGonzalez/20160726/277928/How_to_Write_a_Game_Design_Document.php.

for the experience. Ultimately, what is important in the creation of a GDD is establishing a hierarchy of importance that has a logical flow for the team to follow and understand. The sections allow the development team to stay on track, assign tasks, monitor the project, and have separate sections dedicated to departments within the creative team (even if it consists of one person), such as writing, concept art, coding, digital rendering, asset development, historical research, and so on. A public historian who is interested in designing their own game has little to refer to outside of examples aimed at more ‘traditional’ game developers. As one of the few GDD's crafted by a public historian, *Remember Us* will serve as a model for public historians.

To the public historian, the creation of a GDD can appear to be a daunting task, but in many ways, it possesses similarities to designing exhibit proposals. Numerous guides exist online to help new developers in designing their own games and having the documentation set to industry standards²², but access to GDDs built with public history in mind are almost non-existent. Creating a GDD streamlines ideas, provides clear goals, and defines one’s own limits. This is not so different from writing a paper or gathering information for a more ‘traditional’ academic project. In particular, a public history GDD should focus on audience and game mechanics rather than marketing and financial projections.²³ A GDD

²²See for example, Tim Ryan’s “The Anatomy of a Design Document, Part 1” (https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131791/the_anatomy_of_a_design_document.php), GameDesigning’s “How to Build Your First Game Design Document” (<https://www.gamedesigning.org/learn/game-design-document/>), and Nuclino’s “How to Write a Game Design Document (GDD)” (<https://www.nuclino.com/articles/write-game-design-document>).

²³ This is not to say a public historian should not charge money for their game or they should be inherently not-for-profit, but for even small game development studios, there are entire departments dedicated to marketing and audience-testing. Game studios of every size do not invest time, money and resources into games that they do not think people will (pay to) play. Many indie game developers make their games free (or very inexpensive) for the sake of creating without the aim of making a living from the game alone. These are considerations that the public historian should consider if they are taking their game to the development stage with the intention of eventually releasing it to the broader public.

communicates one's central thesis and presents the unique opportunity for them to be immersive and interactive.

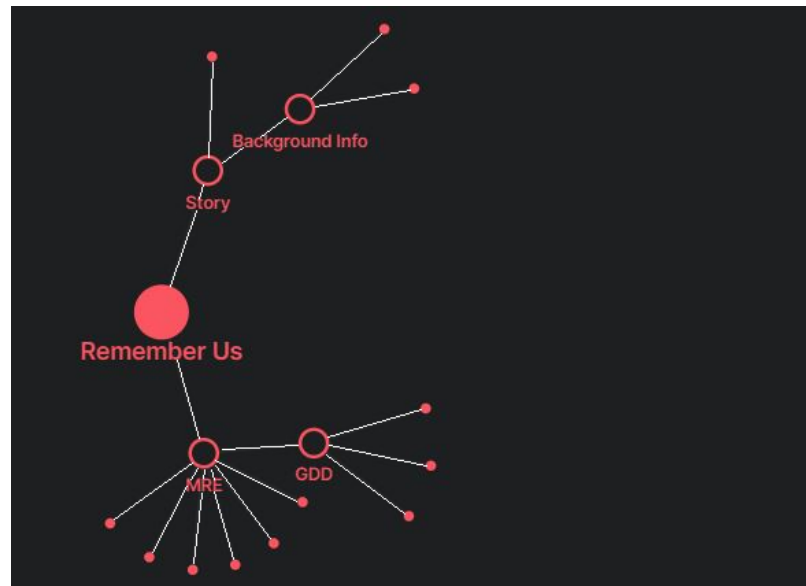


Figure 1: Screenshot of the *Remember Us* workspace in Nuclino. Provided by Jenna Emslie.

Nuclino offers a collaborative workspace needed for the creation and maintenance of a GDD through the design and implementation stages. Nuclino allows a designer to effectively split the document into separate sections, embed images and links, and organize project ideas. Figure 1 is a visual taken from the Nuclino interface that shows branching sections of the design document. Each branch has its own sub-branch with related ideas and tasks, and they all stem from the main concept of the game. Some may find this approach helpful, but ultimately, it is less about the chosen program and more about its capabilities to meet the designer's needs. I chose Nuclino because of its engaging user interface and because it allowed me to divide the project into separate (but interlinked) sections where I could embed files, images, and videos with ease. Nuclino is also, according to its website and several blogs I perused, used by smaller gaming studios for their project management and sharing workspaces with multiple projects. While there were many other platform options, Nuclino seemed the most intuitive and immediately useful for the project. After choosing a

platform, I decided which template to use to establish my own layout by consulting web resources, such as Gamasutra²⁴, and found that the template provided by Tricks Gaming Studio was the most specific and helpful for my needs.²⁵ Numerous support groups for creating games also exist on platforms such as Reddit for indie developers to consult when designing a game on their own and act as an online support community.²⁶ Please refer to Appendix A for the content of the GDD, which I will be describing below, as it is divided into sections with clear headings to differentiate between topics.

Game Design and Feedback Loops

Games are inherently defined by rules. When playing, users should be asking themselves, *what can I do, what can I see?* The design of these rules, and the agency for players to determine a game's limits for themselves, is what determines player investment.²⁷ While hundreds of pages worth of content in AAA studios are dedicated to outlining and describing these rules, I will focus on the few that are included in the Game Overview section of Appendix A. The Game Overview is the hub of general information, and its purpose is to give the reader, as the name suggests, an overview of the entirety of the game. The elevator pitch, audience, story synopsis, gameplay, and game elements are introduced in this section. In a larger GDD, each of these topics would have its own dedicated section that would be assigned to a creative team, but for the purposes of this project, they are limited to a few paragraphs with photos to aid understanding. For the ease of the reader, I have added

²⁴ Gamasutra is an industry blog that frequently discusses the craft and business of designing games: <https://www.gamasutra.com/>.

²⁵ Gamasutra: <https://www.gamasutra.com/>, Trick Gaming Studio: <http://www.trickgs.com/>

²⁶ r/gamedev - game development, programming, design, writing, math, art, jams, postmortems, marketing: <https://www.reddit.com/r/gamedev/>.

²⁷ Jon Ingold, one of the founders of Inkle Studios (Heaven's Vault, 80 Days), has delved extensively into this topic in various talks published on YouTube. You can find a particularly insightful discussion published by GDC, "Heaven's Vault: Creating a Dynamic Detective Story" (November 6, 2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o02uJ-ktCuk&list=PLWB2kg6Hs9xh4FAJ-hfFLU2wIdo7vsAKm&index=214&t=836s>.

additional details that explain what would usually be included and point to where more information (when applicable) exists in the GDD.

Core mechanics, of which the reader will find two examples in Appendix A, are the framework needed to achieve the gameplay design goals.²⁸ These are determined by what the designer wants the player to experience, and what they want players to take away from playing the game. In a game like *Battlefield V*, one of the core mechanics is aiming and firing weapons from a first-person perspective, taking cover, and following mission objectives, while in games like *Heaven's Vault*, a game that incorporates archaeology practices in the story and gameplay, the core mechanic is deciphering and decoding a lost language to understand the backstory and guide the player's exploration. Core mechanics are what builds the overall structure of a feedback loop—essentially, what motivates a player to continue playing.

Michael Sellers, in his text, *Advanced Game Design*, uses the example of *Monopoly* to explain what feedback loops are, and how they can make or break player engagement. Reinforcing loops reward winners by creating “rich get richer” situations; in *Monopoly*, having more money means that the player can buy more properties, which leads to gaining more money, and the gap widens between winning and losing players.²⁹ As Sellers describes,

For those winning, as the gap widens, they have to attend less and less carefully to the game to keep winning. For the losers, they have fewer options that will enable them to win. For both, gameplay collapses to the point where the player has fewer decisions to

²⁸ “What are gaming mechanics?” TIQ Software: <https://www.tiqsoftware.com/playbook/gamification/game-mechanics/>. This page also includes helpful definitions of other aspects of game design, such as levelling, gamification, user engagement, level design, and scaling.

²⁹ A separate discussion could be had on how *Monopoly* was intentionally designed this way, to sow discord amongst friends and demonstrate the perils of unchecked capitalism. See Naomi Russo's article “Propagandopoly: Monopoly as an Ideological Tool” in *Work that Works* no. 9: <https://workthatwork.com/9/propagandopoly-monopoly-as-an-ideological-tool> for further discourse.

make (fewer choices that will affect the state of the game significantly), the game ceases to be psychologically engaging, and thus it is no longer fun.³⁰

Creating balanced loops decreases potential dissonance for players and allows for a level playfield to make a game both fair and engaging. Sellers outlines four principle loops: the game model's loop (of which the below example pertains); the player's mental loop, the interactive loop; and the designer's loop. For *Remember Us*, I focused on creating the game's model loop and an interactive loop for dialogue with NPCs (non-player characters), but many figurative, interacting gears are required for creating a functional game, and more loops and mechanics will be designed and implemented in further stages of *Remember Us*'s development.

The game's model loop refers to the game's internal model of the world, and it is dynamic by necessity. It is what creates the game's world as experienced by the player, and it is what molds the space for gameplay.³¹ Player choice is intimately tied with this loop, as it determines the available paths for players to explore and what meaningful decisions are available to them. When there are no meaningful decisions for the players to make, this ultimately nullifies gameplay—it eliminates engagement and fun, an integral function to any game. As Sellers explains, the game's model is represented by engines, economies, and ecologies, which can be expanded into progression, combat, inventory, skill, quest, and other systems.³² Delving further into the technicalities of game loops is not necessarily required for the public historian when designing their own game, but it is important for them to consider when deciding how they want players to engage with their game worlds. Jeremiah McCall, a historian who specializes in analysing video games, argues that 'good' historical games

³⁰ Michael Sellers, *Advanced Game Design* (Addison-Wesley Professional, 2017), 221.

³¹ Ibid, 225.

³² Ibid, 225.

create authentic historical conversations that are “generated by the game mechanics.”³³ Game mechanics and one’s historical argument are married to one another by necessity, and this must be reflected in the designing stage of a historical video game. This, again, points to the value of the process of designing a game, thinking like a developer to approach public history with an immersive perspective, and creating a valuable contribution to other, more ‘academic’ projects.

Remember Us’s game model was designed with the player’s mental loop in mind. It is meant to closely align with the player’s understanding of the game’s internal model as they experience the game. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of this loop.

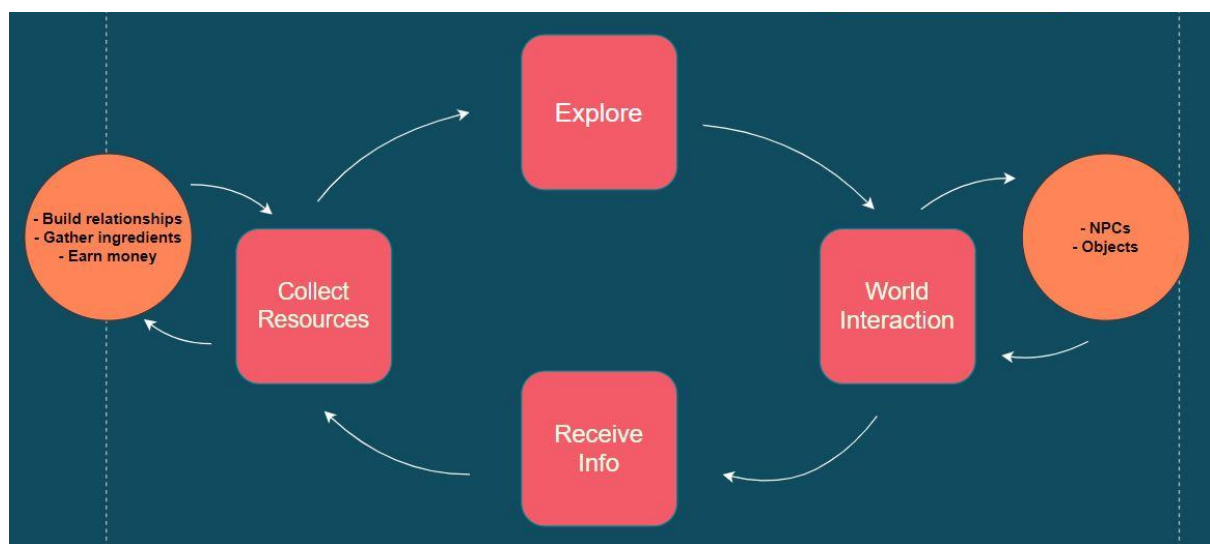


Figure 2: Game’s Model Loop. Created by Jenna Emslie.

As reflected in Figure 2, *Remember Us* emphasizes exploration and player choice; how much they put into the game and story will be reflected in what they take away from the experience. One of the goals for *Remember Us* is to create an immersive experience that allows players to become active agents in a historical setting, giving them the agency to make narrative and

³³ Jeremiah McCall, “Video Games as Participatory Public History,” in David Dean, ed., *A Companion to Public History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 416.

game choices that affect the game's ending. Exploration, world interaction, receiving information, and collecting resources are the four largest parts of *Remember Us*'s game's model loop. Exploration is the main incentive for player motivation. The game design, both in its coding and artistic style, is what will draw the player in and prompt them to explore, and the story will be what figuratively 'traps' the player and pushes them to finish the game.³⁴

Through narrative prompts, world interaction represents the player's 'call to action'—it is what offers them a goal and challenge to complete. How compelling these interactions are is directly underpinned by the narrative framework. 'Fetch quests', which refers to challenges where a player must find something (usually trivial, or a "macguffin") and return it to the quest-giver for a reward, is a common staple throughout many game genres, especially RPGs (role-playing games) and MMOs (massively multiplayer online games). They are such a staple, in fact, that it is newsworthy in video game journalism when a AAA game does *not* include them, such as the case with Ubisoft's new title in their historically inspired series, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.³⁵ However, they are often repetitive, boring, and make a chore out of completing challenges, which directly goes against the goal of encouraging player engagement.³⁶

These examples are important to consider when designing one's own game: What purpose do the objectives have in the overall story? How will it facilitate learning and critical engagement? Fetch quests are merely one example amidst a large variety of objective types,

³⁴ Jon Ingold, "Heaven's Vault: Creating a Dynamic Detective Story."

³⁵ Semir Omerovic, "Assassin's Creed: Valhalla dumps menial fetch quests in favour of memorable characters" (*altchar*, May 27, 2020): <https://www.altchar.com/game-news/assassins-creed-valhalla-dumps-menial-fetch-quests-in-favour-of-memorable-characters-an6rs0w56O5L>.

³⁶ To find an example of player discourse on the topic, see u/Entria's Reddit post on /r/gamedesign, "Are fetch quests fun?": https://www.reddit.com/r/gamedesign/comments/jdwdmu/are_fetch_quests_fun/.

but the process of creating them with purpose and a strong connection to your game's thesis again parallels the considerations required in exhibit design and serve the same purpose. The third element of the game's design loop is receiving information, which facilitates the player receiving feedback from the game. By receiving information, players are enabled to collect 'rewards'—that is, resources such as money, stronger relationships with NPCs that allow for helpful bonuses later in the story, and the ability to obtain rare ingredients that give otherwise unobtainable advantages. The game's elements are a reflection of the model loop, and they should be self-reinforcing. If this design process is done in a compelling way, it incentivizes the player to begin the loop anew, continuing the game's model loop until the game's completion.

Games are defined by their rules, but they are also visual and interactive representations of an immersive story, and, by necessity, this demands that the designer take into consideration what assets need developing, what the narrative framework will be, who the audience is, and what visual and auditory style suit the game best. In the remainder of the Game Overview section of Appendix A, there are parts dedicated to audience, story, characters, and assets.³⁷ Included in these areas are brief descriptions of what would typically be present in a more fleshed-out project, and while it is not necessary to include a great amount of detail for the public historian embarking on creating their own GDD, they are beneficial aspects to consider. The process of thinking through each step of a GDD prompts new, interconnecting thoughts and ideas, and the evolution of a project is worth just as much as the finished product, whatever form that may take.

³⁷ 'Asset' is shorthand for characters, objects, levels, environments, maps, and sound effects that need to be developed and implemented in the game. For more information, this site has a good list of gaming terminology: "Game Development Terms," Unity: <https://unity.com/how-to/beginner/game-development-terms>.

While I elaborate on *Remember Us*'s intended audience in the Game Overview section of Appendix A, I believe it is important to expand on determining one's audience when developing games. For the last forty years, games have largely been marketed to white young men and boys.³⁸ This is reflected in the available genres, many of which favour violence and combat mechanics, and AAA studio's marketing strategies: while not 'traditionally' masculine, AAA marketing departments nevertheless saw gaming as a hobby reserved for young men, and games often had hyper-masculine characters based around archetypes to facilitate male power-fantasies and the narratives were largely heteronormative.³⁹ In the last fifteen years, AAA game studios have started to (slowly) expand who they market their games to, and began to acknowledge that almost fifty-percent of their audience were actually women and girls.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the AAA gaming industry has been even slower to think of and include representation of the LGBTQ2+ community⁴¹ and racialized groups in both its games and marketing strategies.⁴² This is yet another area where indie games are ahead of the gaming curve; while there is gatekeeping within gaming

³⁸ Tracy Lien, "No Girls Allowed" (*Polygon*, December 2, 2013):

<https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed>.

³⁹ If one is unfamiliar with Gamergate, a misogynistic and racist backlash against feminist critique of gaming, and its ties with the surge of far-right extremist groups online, please read Aja Romano's "What we still haven't learned from Gamergate" (*Vox*, January 20, 2020): <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws>.

⁴⁰ "Women and the Future of Gaming" (*A Transperfect World*, November 25, 2020): <https://www.transperfect.com/blog/women-and-future-gaming>.

⁴¹ Pauline de Leon, "Why Video Games Need More LGBTQ Representation" (*Hyperbae*, August 3, 2020): <https://hypebae.com/2020/8/lgbtq-representation-in-video-games-gaming-diversity-inclusivity-ea-the-sims-bioware-dragon-age-veronica-nikatine-ripley-interview>.

Noteably, BioWare has been one of the few AAA studios to consistently include queer characters, especially as romance options in their popular *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* RPG series, and even in their LucasArts licensed *Star Wars: The Old Republic* MMO series, since their establishment in 1995. However, this representation is limited to the fantasy genre, and is not prevalent in history-based games. When it is included by AAA studios, it is the exception, not the rule.

⁴² Damon Packwood, "The era of white male games for white male gamers is ending" (*Quartz*, October 31, 2018): <https://qz.com/1433085/the-era-of-white-male-games-for-white-male-gamers-is-ending/>.

communities that has made it difficult for anyone who is not a straight, white man to widely distribute their games and gain recognition for their efforts⁴³, the indie gaming scene has given players what AAA game studios often neglect: stories featuring people of colour; unapologetically queer narratives; subversive, cerebral and existential horror that does not rely on “hack ’n slash” mechanics; meta narratives constructed around gaming tropes while breaking the fourth wall; challenging colonialism and capitalism; friendship and intimate relationships; and political commentary and critique.⁴⁴

Gaming is a diverse medium with diverse players, and games offer a unique opportunity for public historians to engage with potentially alienated audiences who otherwise may not be able to access public history-driven exhibits and projects. Especially if the game is inexpensive or free, public historians have new and relatively unexplored avenues through which they can create historical discourse and critical engagement through games. Having a ballpark audience is important; it is not feasible to make a game that is appealing to everyone—whether due to the narrative conceit, genre, or gaming mechanics—and how the public historian chooses to interact with their audience is entirely dependent on who the game is aimed towards: Is your game meant for children, teens, adults? Who is meant to be playing the game and why? What should they be taking away from the experience? For *Remember Us*, ultimately, it is aimed towards teenagers who have an interest in Canadian history; its narrative is constructed around reckoning with Canada’s colonial history, especially in regard to the exploitation of the poor and working class, women, and immigrants. The narrative is

⁴³ Chloe Spencer, “Queer indie games deserve more recognition” (*techradar*, January 20, 2021): <https://www.techradar.com/news/queer-indie-games-deserve-more-recognition>.

⁴⁴ *Treachery in Beatdown City* by Nuchallenge and Harukan Works, *A Summer’s End: Hong Kong in 1986* by Oracle and Bone, *ANATOMY* by Kitty Horrorshow, *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* by Draw Me a Pixel, *Crappy Home Simulator* by Dallas with a D, *Buddy Simulator 1984* by Not a Sailor Studios, and *Papers, Please* by Lucas Pope are a few examples among many that speak to these broad categories.

grounded in a coming-of-age story through the main character Esther and her relationships to her family, community, and the world around her. This is not an uncommon theme in media aimed at teens but *Remember Us* uniquely aims to provide players with the tools to critically examine history and the colonial narratives that have been dominant in Canada's construction. Specifically, of its founding and evolution as a nation that accepts immigrants and champions the working class.

However, for the purposes of this MRE, the beta version of *Remember Us* (its pre-development stage) will be packaged as a unit that can be incorporated into first and second year post-secondary history classes. They would act as a testing group for the first prototype (which would be built on an altered version of the GDD found in Appendix A), and while they learn how to engage with video games critically and examine how game mechanics can be a vehicle for historical arguments, I would be able to get feedback about the mechanics, story, and historical argument, and determine how successful the project is in tying the historical complexities and nuances together. After building on that feedback, the project can adjust and evolve accordingly and then development would move forward. By choosing university students (who would be approximately nineteen or twenty years old), they are in an environment that would focus specifically on the interactions between the story, the game choices, mechanics (and what they say about the narrative itself), and historical representations. They are better equipped to read into the nuance of the game and suggest meaningful changes and offer valuable insight into how the game functions and how it can improve.

Game Elements: Mechanics

Game elements refer to everything included in a game: characters, locations, objects, and mechanics. While feedback loops encompass *how* a player can interact with the game

world and *why* they should continue to do so, game elements describe *what* they can interact with and the game's limitations.

Game design is inherently defined by rules, and game mechanics are a way to summarize these rules; they define what a player can do, how they can do it, and how that leads to a compelling experience for players.⁴⁵ As Miguel Sicart argues, game mechanics are “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state.”⁴⁶ Mechanics guide player behaviour, and they are tied to the game's genre and story. Anything included in the design of a game is a mechanic, and as gaming scholar Richard Rouse asserts, they make up the “guts” of a GDD.⁴⁷ How the characters walk, how they interact with objects, what they are allowed to hold on to, who they can speak with, where they can go, what potential obstacles the player will encounter are all broad examples of what a game developer must consider. Describing all of these functions would, as Rouse stated, require a good deal of space in one's GDD. For the purposes of my project, I outlined a handful of the main mechanics that are the most pertinent to highlighting the game's design loop and facilitating the player's connection to the protagonist, Esther, in the Game Elements section of Appendix A. The mechanics I have included are a journal to chronicle Esther's inner world, something that is challenging to communicate when the player takes on the role of the protagonist rather than partaking in the story as a third party, as well as a codex, narration, object interaction, inventory, and a recipe function are the most prominent mechanics. In Appendix A, the reader will find many screenshots taken from other games, such as *The Last of Us Part 2*, *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, *Gone Home*, *The Long Dark*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath*

⁴⁵ Miguel Sicart, “Defining Game Mechanics,” *Game Studies* 8, 2 (2008), <http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Richard Rouse, *Game Design: Theory and Practice* (Jones and Bartlett Learning, second edition, 2005), 310, as cited in Miguel Sicart's “Defining Game Mechanics.”

of the Wild to serve as visual examples in addition to further descriptions on how each mechanic would function in the game.

The Role of Empathy in Historical Games

Stories are important, and they speak to intrinsic parts of ourselves. They are present in the ways we talk about ourselves and others, and how we frame the world; they are not limited to fiction and fantasy. To quote Muriel Rukeyser again, “The world is made up of stories, not atoms.” The coding, feedback loops, game mechanics, and technical considerations are the vehicle for what makes a good game so compelling: its story, how it makes us feel when we play, the weight of the consequences we bear with the protagonist as we make choices alongside them, and a kind of immersion that cannot be found through movies and novels.⁴⁸ Games make us complicit in its world—while the choices are pre-scripted and every outcome accounted for, the player, by enacting the choices, takes on a unique role: they are an observer and a participant simultaneously. Gaming journalist Carolyn Petit explains that games create a “dreamspace” for players to occupy, where they are present in the game, taking on the character’s actions as their own, all the while remaining separate. She argues that it does not negate the experience of being present within a game’s narrative—instead, it is one of the driving factors that can make a game so impactful—and I agree. Games are powerful mediums not only for historical arguments, but for connecting to parts of the human experience that are often absent in academic discussions of history.

Markku Eskelinen, a scholar of interactive drama and cybertext fiction, argued that “stories are just uninteresting ornaments of gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis

⁴⁸ If the reader would like to read more on the subject, they can consult Anastasia Salter and Stuart Moulthrop’s *Twining: Critical and Creative Approaches to Hypertext Narratives*, (Amherst, Massachusetts: Amherst College Press, 2021).

on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy.”⁴⁹ Eskelinen would go on to be soundly disproved with the rise of narrative-based games that have garnered critical acclaim and a popularity,⁵⁰ so much so that one of the most successful narrative-based games of all time, *The Last of Us*, now has one of the most expensive television adaptations in the making by HBO.⁵¹ Games have become a vital form of storytelling, and participants have more agency than ever before to participate and actively contribute to a story’s meaning and narrative. *Remember Us* contributes to this growing genre of games, giving a great amount of weight to its narrative and providing the designer and player the agency to engage in ascribing meaning to it.

Ascribing and creating meaning in *Remember Us* was a vital part of the process of designing the game. As I was developing the concept for *Remember Us*, researching the history of gold mining towns in Canada and immigrant communities, and refining the narrative, the characters I created came alive in my mind. They existed in my own dreamscape, but the more I researched, the further I delved into the history of Canada in the 1890s, the more real they felt. Esther especially seemed to take on a life of her own. For months, my mind was occupied by imagining various scenarios Esther would find herself in, what her journey would look like, how she interacted with and cared for her family. I did not know how to feel about this at first; I was not writing a novel, I was designing a game for players to learn the historian’s tools of analyzing the past and engage with neglected histories.

⁴⁹ Markku Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation,” *Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1, 1 (July 2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

⁵⁰ AB Endacott, “The Rise of Narrative-Based Videogames,” *The Nerd Daily*, September 11, 2018, <https://thenerddaily.com/the-rise-of-narrative-based-videogames/>.

⁵¹ Paul Tassi, “‘The Last of Us’ Series May Cost HBO More Than ‘Game of Thrones,’” *Forbes* (July 18, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2021/07/18/the-last-of-us-series-may-cost-hbo-more-than-game-of-thrones/?sh=499995885e9e>.

But a large part of public history is, arguably, subverting many ‘established’ conventions within the discipline of studying history. Why should it be any different for me to feel such an intense connection to the characters and community they are situated within, and the history-rich story I have created? The distance that academia insists should be present between the scholar and their subjects of research disappeared for me; it did not have a place in the game I was making, and that does not make it any less of a historical argument about the past, and it is worth the same critical engagement as any academic paper. Emotion and empathy are just as vital as the historical research in narrative-based, history games. The historical setting established the parameters of what Esther could and could not do, what means were available to her and her family, what challenges they might face, and how it would shape them, but none of that means much without the emotional connection to make it feel real for those engaging with the story. We cannot relive history, but games provide a unique opportunity for us to learn from and connect with it in ways that are not possible through ‘objective’ texts and detached regurgitations of the past.

Conclusion

We rely on narrativity and narratives to understand ourselves and the world we live in, and how we choose to tell stories can be just as important as its contents. Historians use books and exhibits to tell stories about the past, and by limiting ‘authentic’ historical discussions to these mediums, we miss vital opportunities for broad audiences from various backgrounds to participate in defining meaning in history and their places in it. Public history seeks to undermine the authority held by historians when it comes to interpreting the past. While it is still failing to include alienated peoples and challenge the western tenets of academic authority and the insular nature of studying history, it also presents unique opportunities to grow beyond what was considered traditional academia. Video games are a natural extension of the growth of public history and should be treated as such rather than

classifying games as ‘just’ a form of entertainment, a pastime or hobby. Games can be a teaching tool for history if one changes their mental framework—how many more GDDs and games might be created by public historians if they were taught to treat it like an exhibit proposal? What would the market of history-based games look like if there were public historians actively contributing to it and not limiting themselves to objective study of terminology or user interaction? Video games are a tool of endless potential uses: When allowed to be at their best, they prompt our minds to think of problems, characters, times, and places in ways that are unique and challenge preconceptions and teach the critical thinking skills that historians endeavour to do for their students.

Remember Us, while still maintaining its roots in creating an enjoyable, compelling, and immersive experience for players that is a staple for video games, seeks to treat its medium and story seriously. It is a game that critically engages predominant historical narratives about Canada’s past and invites players to empathize with and grow to care for its characters, almost all of whom come from backgrounds that are otherwise under-represented in historical study and popular media. As Lisa Gilbert noted, students who played *Assassin’s Creed* felt a sense of an “immediate access to history” and established a human connection to people of the past.⁵² The ability to include the critical engagement that is otherwise lacking through the process of designing games is an area of work and study that is under-utilized by public historians. Whether I find a development team to help me complete *Remember Us* is uncertain. However, this does not really matter. The project, as it exists now, still provides something important. It might prompt other public historians to try something new, to engage with history and narrative in ways where they are not the analyser, but a participant in meaning making and designing games others will benefit from, whether through play or

⁵² Gilbert, “‘*Assassin’s Creed* reminds us that history is human experience,’” 108.

building upon the initial idea. My experimental project, and the historical argument at the heart of it, has endeavoured to present an opportunity for other public historians to do the same.

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Appendix A: Game Design Document

(Please note that the following is a static version of a dynamic document housed within Nuclino. The large bolded, centred fonts indicate a new section that had its own page on Nuclino, with the bolded left-aligned headings indicating the subjects within the section. The organization of this appendix follows the flow as it is presented in the original workspace. The only omitted sections pertain to organizing articles that are listed in the bibliography and logistical matters such as meeting deadlines and breaking up tasks.)

Game Overview



Art by [Bailie Rosenlund](#).

Name of the game: *Remember Us*

- Dev: @Jenna Emslie
- Design: TBD
- QA: TBD

Overview

Elevator Pitch

After her mother goes missing, 16-year-old Esther leaves her home in Toronto to travel the isolated trails of 1898 Canada northward to the gold mining town of Leore, where her mother was last seen, to reunite her family, encountering strange mysteries as she uses her wits to survive and return home.

Audience

While the ambition for this game is to be a widely available product through game host services such as Steam and the PlayStation Store, for the purposes of this Major Research Project, the scope of the audience will be limited to first and second-year university students. It would be my hope that a university class (or two) could act as a test group for the first prototype of the game to get feedback about the game mechanics, story, and the historical complexities and nuance that is meant to tie the latter two

together. After building on that feedback, then the development would move forward and adjust accordingly.

By choosing university students (approximately 19 or 20 years old), I would have an audience who are in an environment that would focus specifically on the interactions between the story, the game choices and mechanics (and what they say about the narrative itself), and historical representations. They are better equipped to read into the nuance of the game and suggest meaningful changes and offer valuable insight into how the game functions and how it can improve.

Story

A one-paragraph synopsis of the story.

Esther is a 16-year-old girl from a poor, Jewish immigrant family. She works hard to support her family after her father loses an arm in an industrial accident and can no longer find work. Now the primary breadwinner, Esther's mother Sarah travels north to Leore, a rapidly growing gold rush town rife with promises of fortune. After six months, Esther stops receiving letters and money from her mother and, mysteriously, no one seems to remember Leore. After having lost two siblings to disease and her father slowly losing himself to alcohol, Esther is desperate to reunite what remains of her family. She works hard to build relationships with her neighbours in St. John's Ward, Toronto to earn the resources she needs to travel north in search of her mother, leaving her remaining family in a precarious position. If she is not well enough prepared or takes too long, Esther is at risk of losing everything. If she does nothing, she will be solely responsible for the well-being of her family and she will lose her mother forever.

The player goes through this journey with Esther, preparing and using their wits to make the journey to Leore in search of her mother while balancing the needs of her father and remaining siblings. She must travel from Toronto to the dangerous and isolated trails of northern Ontario leading to Leore. Every choice matters, and the players must navigate the restrictions and dangers Esther will face while unravelling the mystery surrounding Leore and Esther's family.

Gameplay

Describe how the game is played. It should be specific and describe each feature in a structured way, but for the purposes of this project, it is limited in its scope.

The game will be a third person adventure that emphasizes exploration and world interaction. There will be no violence-based mechanics. Esther can potentially find herself in precarious, and even dangerous, situations, but the players must rely on their wits to get Esther out of any trouble she finds herself in. Esther will narrate during cutscenes and when she is writing in her journal, allowing the players to build a connection with her character and to explore more of her interior world—something that is challenging to accomplish in a video game since many game protagonists are an avatar for the player to project themselves into the story. The player should feel like they are making these decisions with Esther, identify with her, and know that they are ultimately controlling the trajectory of her life, but they are not *her*. The choices available to her and the players are informed by who she is; she is not a blank slate.

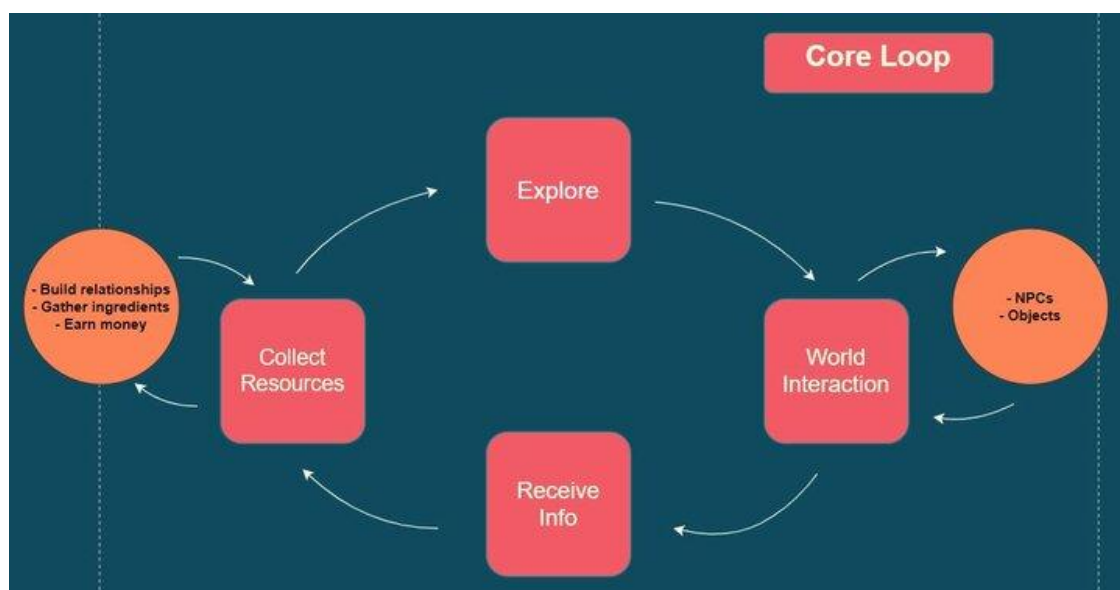
There will be puzzles that require players to explore the environment for clues and carefully pay attention to information given by NPCs (non-playable characters). Esther will get hungry and tired on her journey, and players will need to balance the time constraints of making it to Leore before winter comes and ensuring that Esther does not get sick or is otherwise unable to perform tasks that are essential to understanding the story.

- For example, if players have neglected to learn recipes and forage for food items to make meals or don't take time for Esther to rest, she will not be able to perform certain tasks in the future. The player might encounter a rough trail that will lead to her destination much faster, but it will be physically demanding to use it. If she is weak and malnourished, the players must take the long way to their destination, further compounding the time constraints and builds the sense of urgency.

Every decision will matter in the game. If the players did not take the time to build relationships with Esther's neighbours and provide an adequate exchange of payment, Esther's younger siblings will be left to their own devices as their father is incapable of providing steady income or attentive parenting. Depending on how much the player did or did not do, Esther's siblings can get sick and suffer serious consequences, or they might come to the attention of a moral reformist group that actively seeks out children to take from the 'slums' of St. John's Ward, thus being lost to Esther and her family. Dialogue choices and player decisions are irreversible, and the player has to reckon with the consequences, both narratively and through the game mechanics, of their choices.

More will be added to this section as the project moves further in the development process.

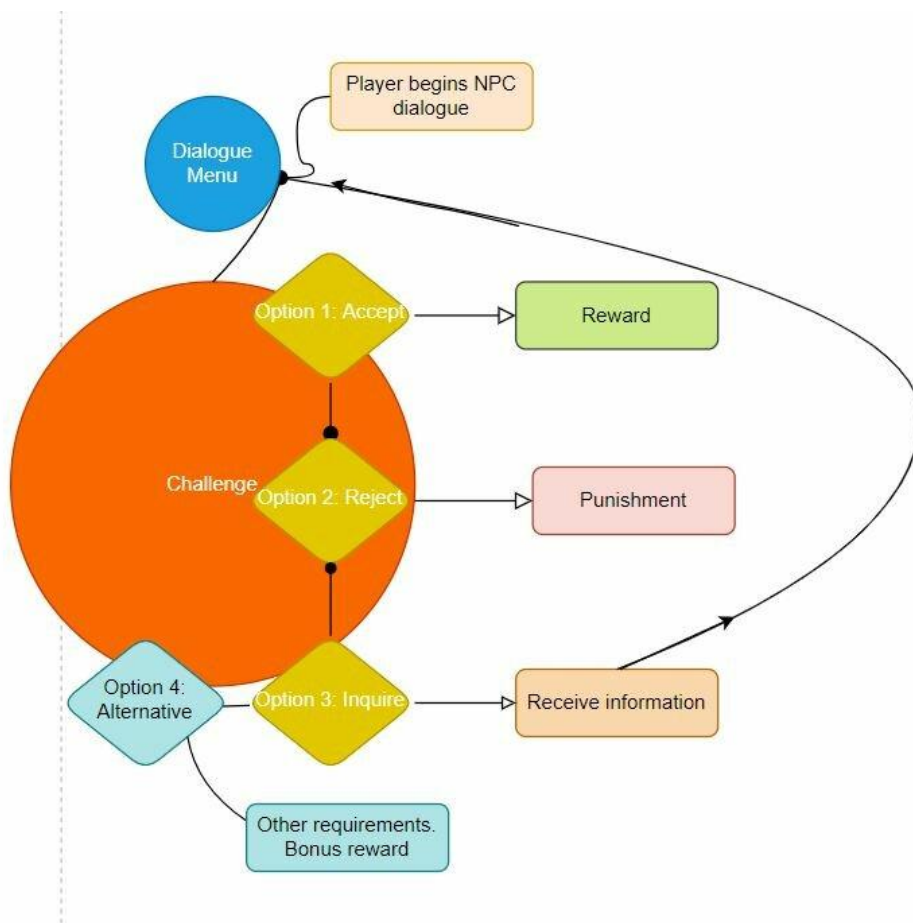
Core Game Mechanic #1 (Game's Model Loop)



- **Details:** This is the core loop of the game, what motivates the player to keep playing. The loop encompasses exploration, world interaction, receiving information, and collecting resources.

- **How it works:** One of the core mechanics of the game is exploration. The players are motivated to do so through world interaction, which includes NPCs and objects such as letters, photographs, and small items like matchbooks, candles, and hundreds of others. By interacting with the world, players receive information that's relevant to the plot and advances Esther's quest, which allows them to uncover more about the world around them and the characters. Once players have the information to proceed to the next part of the story, they need to have the necessary funds, resources, and established relationships with other characters in order to explore new areas. This cycle repeats throughout the game, spurring players to continue until its conclusion.

Core Game Mechanic #2



- **Details:** This feedback loop is for player dialogue with NPCs (non-playable characters). Players will need to engage with NPCs to gain information, complete missions, and obtain items. The "challenge" is the build up and the request for the player's help, which leads to the options of accepting or rejecting the request.
- **How it works:** Depending on the player's interactions with the NPCs, there are up to three different outcomes. Option 1 is the most straight-forward: the player can accept the request and provide what the NPC is asking for and conclude the mission.

Example:

NPC: Did you see my coin purse? It's blue with red flowers. I've been looking everywhere, and my mother will be cross if I don't bring it home!

Esther: I can find it for you. (The conversation ends when Esther returns the coin purse and she is rewarded with a portion of what's inside.)

- Option 2 allows the player to refuse what the NPC is asking (whether because they don't want to give the NPC what they're asking for or because they don't have anything to offer), ending the conversation until the player prompts the dialogue option again where they're presented with options 1-3. It's referred to as a "punishment" option rather than "reward" because the player gains nothing additional from the NPC like they would if they completed the request.

Example:

NPC: Did you see my coin purse? It's blue with red flowers. I've been looking everywhere, and my mother will be cross if I don't bring it home!

Esther: No, I haven't. Sorry.

NPC: Let me know if you find it, please. It's important. (Dialogue ends.)

- Option 3 allows the player to ask for more information. This could lead to clues as to where to look for an item, give more context about the NPC's backstory, provide information about a location, and allow players to weigh the costs and benefits of doing what the NPC requests. After completing this option, it prompts the player to choose between option 1 & 2 again.

Example:

NPC: Did you see my coin purse? It's blue with red flowers. I've been looking everywhere, and my mother will be cross if I don't bring it home!

Esther: How did you lose it?

NPC: I was going down the street and bumped into a gentleman who seemed harried. He apologized and it wasn't until I had walked away that I realized it was missing. Wait... you don't think he might have taken it, do you?

(The player will once again be prompted to either accept or reject the quest.)

- Option 4 is conditional and only present with select NPCs and missions. For example, if an NPC asks Esther to find out what happened to their friend because they haven't seen them in a while, the player can investigate and find the friend and ask why they haven't been around. The friend could say that they had been in a fight and they were avoiding them, and if they asked, to tell them that they were sick. The player will then have the option to lie or tell the truth, which would lead to additional character interactions that the player can witness, which would be (in this example) either a fight or reconciliation.

Game elements

Describe your game world, including all the characters, location, object, and other elements in it.

Characters

The central characters. This is not a conclusive list, and more information is located under [Background Info](#).

- Esther Zimmerman (protagonist).
 - She's 16 and works at a textile mill at the start of the story. Hardworking and clever, she likes to use her brain to solve problems and while stern with her younger siblings, cares deeply about her family. They are her motivation, and it is her love of her family that drives her to make the journey to Leore alone in search of her mother.
- Sarah Zimmerman (Esther's mother)
 - Esther gets her cleverness from Sarah. Before she left for Leore, she would come up with unique ways to make money and provide for her family. She is diligent, attentive, but has a quick temper that often leads to frequent scolding when her children are being too rowdy. She moved to Canada as a young woman with her husband, Levi, and thought their lives would be very different from what they turned out to be; it didn't follow the promise of opportunity that she had imagined.
 - When she begins to hear rumours of prospectors and entrepreneurs heading north and northwest to gold mining towns and walking away rich (and of the broader freedoms for women to do the same), she decides to head north to Leore in northern Ontario with a few other women with similar goals.
- Ruth Zimmerman (the youngest sister)
 - She's 11 at the start of the story. Precocious and preoccupied with appearing to be grown up, she often gets herself in trouble because she takes on more than she can handle and doesn't often think about long-term consequences. She tries to be the 'lady of the house' and mother her youngest brother, Elijah, but needs more of a parental figure in her life instead. She very much looks up to Esther.
- Elijah Zimmerman (the youngest brother)
 - He's six and the youngest in the family. Similarly to Ruth, he wants to help the family and be more grown-up, but he is often distracted by games and what others are doing around him. He doesn't like school, but Esther encourages him to work hard. He has lots of energy and tends to wander off unexpectedly. He is very well-loved by the family's neighbours.
- Levi Zimmerman (Esther's father)
 - After losing his right arm in a factory accident, Levi was unable to find gainful employment afterwards, and slowly turned to drinking to manage

his physical pain and growing depression. He's not an abusive father; he tries his best with what he has, but the main methods he knew of how to provide for his family were taken from him.

- He holds onto a good deal of bitterness, but he doesn't lash out at his family. He's still neglectful because of the nature of alcoholism and untreated depression, but he isn't a bad man. Because he cannot provide for his family, he feels a great deal of shame that Esther is the one looking after him and his children.

Locations

More information can be found under the [Settings](#) section.

- St. John's Ward, Toronto, ON. Travel is limited to the neighbourhood and select locations (such as the mill where Esther works, downtown Toronto, the train station when she leaves for Leore) are only available for specific beats of the story (which will be decided later in development).
- The specific locations Esther travels through on her way north will be decided later in development, but her time will be limited on the trails and subject to other conditions, such as her food storage, inventory management, money, and the time of year (it can either be late summer going into fall or on the cusp of winter, depending on the player's choices in Toronto).
- Leore is the final new location, a fictional mining town based on Kirkland Lake. It is abandoned and run-down, but it looks like people left very suddenly. There are letters, photographs, and personal items left behind that allow Esther to piece together who the people of Leore were and what they were like.

Levels / missions

- The story will be divided into two parts with three chapters within them.
- Specific missions will be determined further into development when the project enters the writing stage.

Assets

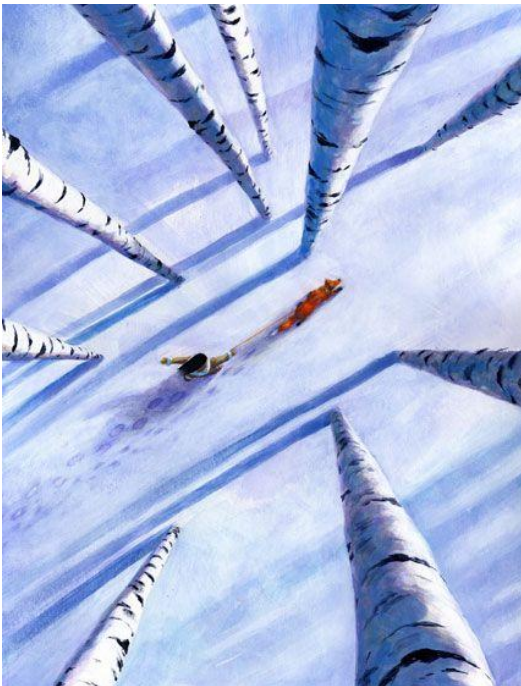
Here is where all of the assets needed as well as brief descriptions would be included. The game is not in this stage yet, but it is an important aspect to keep in mind if the concept moves into the development stage.

Art

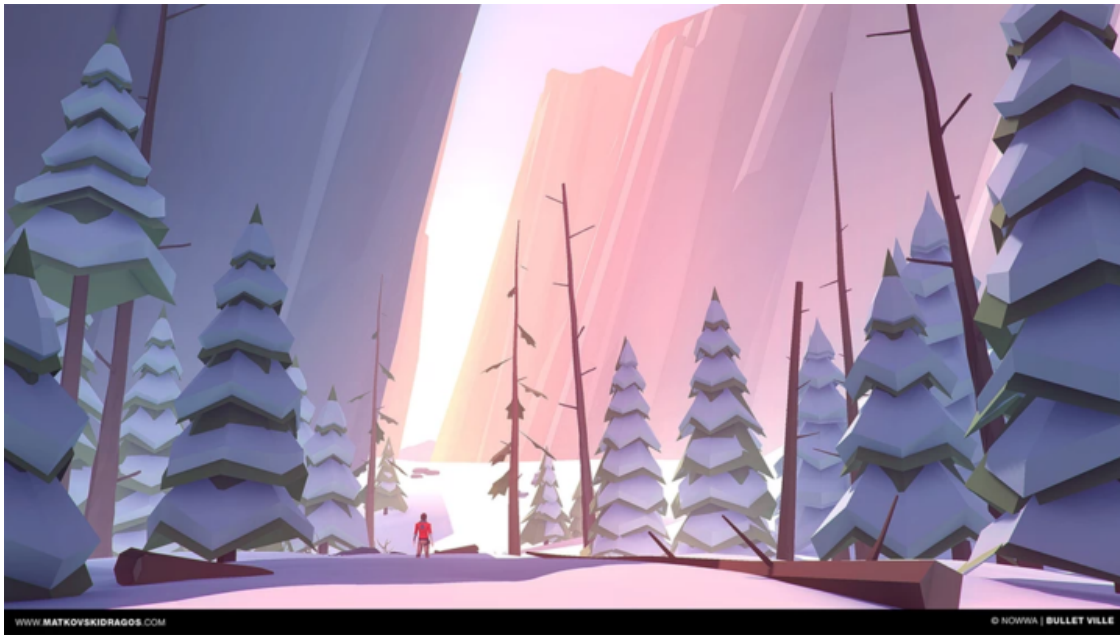
The game does not have its own concept art yet, but these are styles and aesthetics that evoke the mood of *Remember Us*, mostly pertaining to the settings in northern Ontario and the winter landscape. Sources are linked below the photos with descriptions of why I chose them for inspiration.



From *Klaus*, dir. Sergio Pablos.



"Following the Fox" by AdamHunterPeck.



Bullet Ville (NOWWA), art by [matkovskidrags](http://matkovskidrags.com).



Art by [Yun Ling](#).

Sound

This will eventually include details for both the soundtrack and sound design. The game has not reached this stage, but this will eventually include the OST (original soundtrack), sound effects, and sound design to facilitate ambiance.

Historical Background and Influences

Gold Rushes in California, Alaska, and the Yukon were quickly flooded with prospectors looking to make their fortunes after gold was discovered, and along the gold veins, towns were established to accommodate the new influx of people and to make fortunes of their own. However, most of the larger stakes would be claimed and mined and the wealth that flooded the areas would ebb, and many towns were abandoned completely. Kirkland Lake is one of the few mining towns that had a large enough gold repository that it has supported entire communities for over a century. It also became a site with rich labour history—the lives of minors, the shopkeepers who followed to establish businesses, and the women who journeyed north to work in brothels and enjoy freedoms they were not afforded as working girls in factories in more populated urban areas are the historical influences that will shape the narrative of the game. It is within this rich historical period that *Remember Us* is situated.

While a complete historical analysis and in-depth research to create a report isn't the aim of this stage of the project, areas that *will* be thoroughly researched and incorporated into the game within the context of Canada in the 1890s includes (but is not limited to): criminality, sex work, moral reform, queer history, indigenous history, mobility (means of travel and the agency required to do so), seances and spirituality, the history of alcohol, labour history, gender, neighbourhood compositions and relationships in large cities, and, of course, gold rushes (both their beginnings and endings).

Historiographical Issues and Considerations

This is where considerations and issues need to be listed.

Sensitivity Readers

If Esther is going to have a Jewish background and the story will include Indigenous characters, then sensitivity readers are a necessity. Although the intention of the game is to tell stories from Canadian history from the perspective of historical voices that have been suppressed, ignored, or unexplored, it is *not* the intention to perpetuate stereotypes or misrepresent vulnerable and minority groups for the purposes of the narrative. Therefore, sensitivity readers or having people from diverse religious, racial, and gender backgrounds would be something I would prioritize if the project goes forward into the development stage.

Many games do not utilize this level of care in the nuance of representation in their stories and mechanics. By having the game mechanics explicitly avoid combat and violence, it is a direct call to fulfil a previously under-represented medium in the genre: games that tell compelling stories without relying on violence and the presumption of the white experience to do so.

[Here is an article](#) about what sensitivity readers are and why they're important.

Sex Work

The nature of sex work and sex workers is often misunderstood. I am differentiating sex work, where women are in control of their own bodies and do this form of labour willingly, from sex trafficking and exploitative sex practices. Violence and abuse are disproportionately used against sex workers, especially if they are transgender or people of colour. Because of the laws against sex work, the ones selling the services are punished while the people buying said services rarely face the brunt of the consequences.

There is a common and pervasive devaluing of sex workers. They are reduced to 'just' being prostitutes, their lives are undervalued, and they are often abused and not protected by the legal system.

The purpose of this game is, in part, to challenge these assumptions and biases. Esther's mother Sarah is a sex worker. However, I want there to be a distinct absence of punishment against Sarah for being a sex worker. She will not be subjected to abuse; she will not die tragically. To have these elements in her story would be to communicate that women who engage in sex work can only have one outcome - violence. This curtails any productive and insightful commentary and analysis on the lives of sex workers, their relationships with their families, and their autonomy.

[Here is an article](#) that talks about the differences between sexual exploitation and sex work.

LGBTQT* Characters

This is not a solidified story choice yet, but something that I want to further explore in the story. The central conflict is that Esther is searching for her mother after she stops answering family letters and Leore falls out of the public consciousness after the residents also go silent. The (possible) conclusion of the story is that Esther puts together the clues as to where her mother is and finds her with another woman.

Racism

Race, racism, and ethnocentrism are important (and complicated) dynamics to include, but I believe that they are essential. I am a white woman, and while I can do my best to research the experiences of immigrants and people of colour, there will be many nuances that I will miss. One of the goals of the project is to reckon with Canada's colonial legacy and what that looked like in practice, and this will need to be done with care and with consultations with groups who were most affected by it. (This includes indigenous peoples, especially those whose land Leore will be situated, Jewish Canadians, and learning from and researching the experiences of immigrants who lived in St. John's Ward.)

Religion

I grew up with conservative, evangelical parents. Despite all my best intentions and research, this will colour my interpretations and representations of the characters and story. This religious background (among other factors such as me being a white, cisgender woman) is important to consider, and it again emphasizes the importance of having a diverse group of people working on this project if it goes further in production.

Functional Bias - Photographs and Accounts of Marginalization

Many of the photographs taken of St. John's Ward included elsewhere in this GDD come from the City of Toronto archives and were rarely done with the intention of capturing moments of time in various communities for posterity. Often, they were taken to aid the narrative that St. John's Ward, a neighbourhood filled with the poor and working class, immigrants, and people of colour, was a dirty slum. This is corroborated by the eventual mass-eviction of tenants and the demolition of the neighbourhood to further expand Toronto's downtown core and gentrified ventures.

Photographs are an important point of reference, especially since they are essential to create authentic feeling environments for the game. But these photographs are not to be taken at face value, and while physical objects and people can be rendered in a convincing manner, the photographs (and the photographer's potential intentions) should not dictate how the environments and people are treated by the narrative. I.e., while a photograph might show houses falling apart, poverty, and children without parents does not mean that St. John's Ward was a 'dirty' place filled with 'dirty' people.

Nuance and Avoiding Historical Revisionism

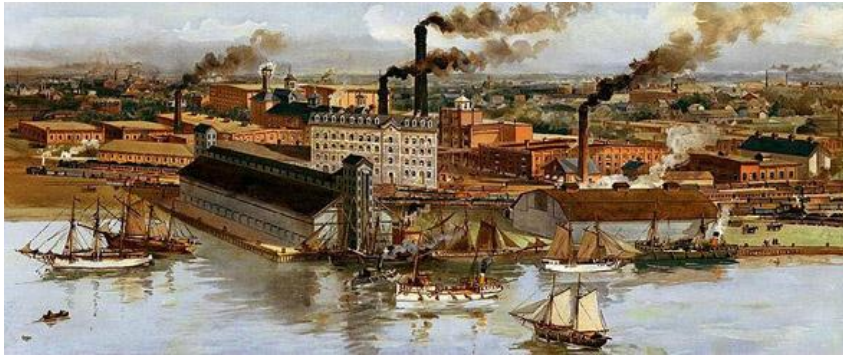
If a player is not engaged in the story and its characters, they're not going to play it. While history heavily informs the narrative, environment, and seeks to subvert and undermine colonialist myths about Canada in the 1890s, the game shouldn't cross the line into historical revisionism. This is where thorough research will be especially important. The historical circumstances at the time will inform how the game world reacts to Esther and what choices she has. Esther journeying alone to Leore will not be seen as a "you go, girl" moment for her friends and neighbours—it's dangerous and incredibly risky, and there is a lot she needs to consider to reduce the risk and be successful. A great deal of time and attention will need to be dedicated to this part of the game's development before creating solid plot outlines and storyboards.

Story

Background Info

Settings

Toronto, The Ward



Positioned between Yonge Street, University Avenue, College Street, and Queen's Street, St. John's Ward, shortened to "The Ward", was considered a slum in the heart of Toronto. Filled with immigrant families (Irish, Black, Italian, Chinese and Eastern European Jews), it was looked down on by the middle class and wasn't seen as a safe or acceptable area. Its history hasn't been explored as in-depth in comparison to other Toronto neighbourhoods, and much of it was destroyed after WWII to make way for businesses and city hall. Closer to the 1920s, overcrowding led to families building houses in their backyards to create more space. It was one of the most densely populated areas in Canada at the time. ([Source](#))



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 2206

City of Toronto Archives.



City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0311_00094

City of Toronto Archives. A family outside their home in The Ward.



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 596

City of Toronto Archives. An overview shot of The Ward, circa 1910.



City of Toronto Archives. A small street in The Ward, circa 1880.



City of Toronto Archives. The Ward was considered dangerous because of accrued prejudice and was a "rough and tumble place" where lower-class workers were left and separated from the rest of the city. ([Source](#))



A "slum of squalor", many in modern-day Toronto have forgotten about The Ward, and the unpleasant history (and the larger problems that contributed to the poverty and continue to do so) are largely unacknowledged. ([Source](#))

"In the rear of a store located at 142 Agnes Street were found living quarters consisting of three rooms, one of which was used as a storeroom for all kinds of rubbish. The bedroom contained four beds, used by a father, mother and two children. The third room was a kitchen, which a daughter of about eleven used as a sleeping room. Under the bedroom was a cellar full of dirt, wood and rubbish. The cellar was inspected because a very decided dampness and strong odor was noticed when inspecting the bedroom. It was found that two tin or lead pipes which connected the sink of the kitchen with a tile drain were overflowing." - Michael Kluckner quoting a City Health Department inspection report (about the property pictured above) from November 26, 1913. ([Source](#))



City of Toronto Archives. Rent was between \$10 - \$12 and there was such a high demand that landlords largely didn't fix any of the properties.

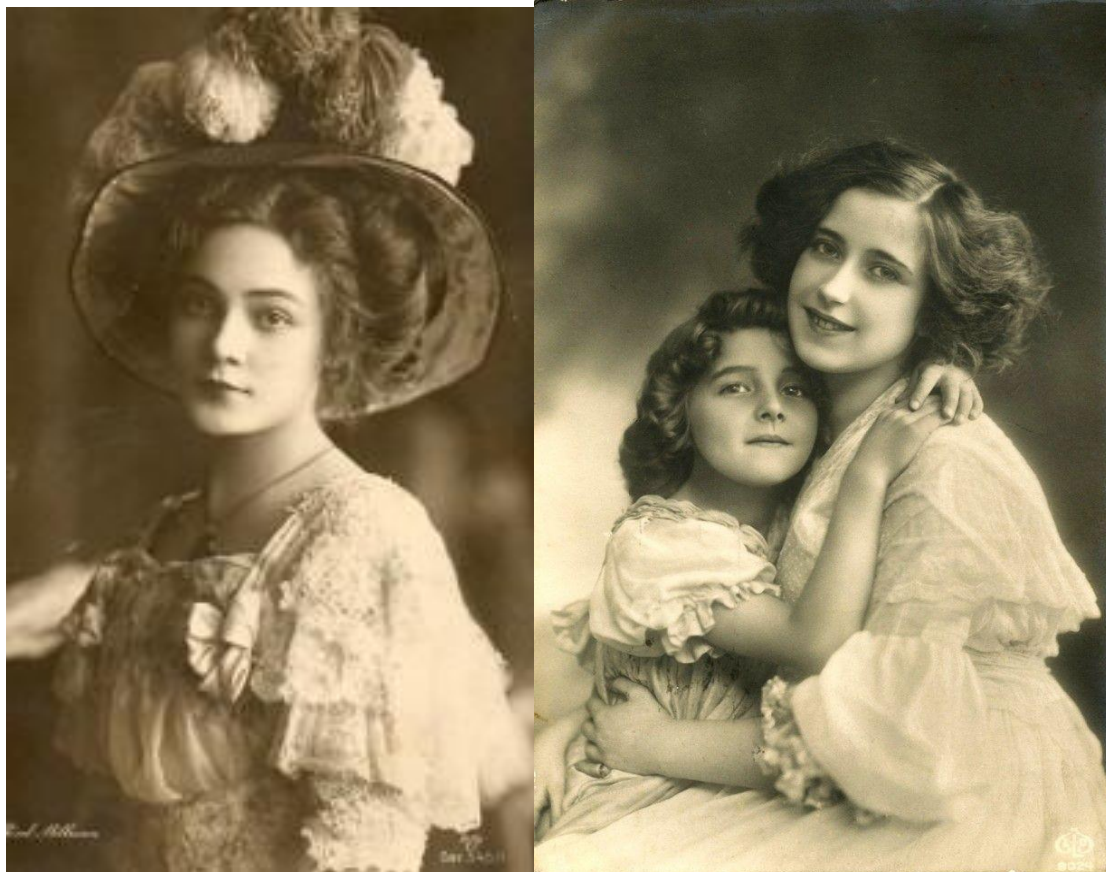
"Throughout its history, the Ward was a gateway neighbourhood for the most beaten down and penniless immigrants seeking refuge from the 1848 European rebellions, the Irish potato famine, and oppressive regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe. With little public assistance available to immigrants upon their arrival, the Ward became a staging ground for nascent immigrant communities to establish themselves before escaping to colonize other parts of the booming city. The Ward was a demographic chameleon."

([Source](#))

- I think considering the demographic and the names I've loosely chosen for Esther and her family, it would sense for her to be Jewish. This will require lots of research about conflicts with the Christian moral reformists and anti-Semitism. If I go down that route, careful effort would need to be made not to Christianize her experiences and worldviews and respectfully depict what their life would've been like without falling into stereotypes.

People

Upper-to-Middle Class



Working Class



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 8029

Children living in The Ward, circa 1911.

Characters

Esther Zimmerman

She's our protagonist—16 years old, tall for her age, and she has dark hair and eyes. Her primary source of income is working at a textile mill until she takes a risk and quits to go to Leore. Hardworking and clever, she likes to use her brain to solve problems. Despite being able to think of clever solutions, she still has quite a bit of naivete; she wants to believe the best of people. This is what makes it more difficult for her to fully piece together what life was like for people living in northern communities and mining towns, where utility and practicality were prioritized, and the same societal structures and rules didn't impact people the same way as it did back in the city and more 'traditional' settlements. She loves reading and, in many respects, thinks of her plan as something heroic and daring—she wants to go on a potentially dangerous journey by herself for the noble purpose of reuniting her family—but the world she lives in does not work this way, and a great deal of her arc will be coming to terms with this and finding her own meaning in both her sense of self and her family.

Esther is the maternal figure for her siblings and manages most of the household affairs such as budgeting, shopping, and paying their bills. While she is essentially the 'woman of the house,' she rejects this position, holding onto the hope that her mother will be back any day and her family will once again resemble the one she remembers. In her mother's absence, she uses the money she makes to pay for food and contribute to the rent for their small house and is largely responsible for taking care of her two remaining siblings. And while she's stern with her younger siblings, she cares deeply about her family. They are her motivation, and it is her love of her family that drives her to make the journey to Leore alone in search of her mother.



Dina from *The Last of Us Part II*, Naughty Dog, acting inspiration for Esther.

Ruth Zimmerman

She's 11 at the start of the story. Precocious and preoccupied with appearing to be grown up (and failing), she often gets herself in trouble because she takes on more than she can handle and doesn't often think about long-term consequences. She tries to be the 'lady of the house' and mother her youngest brother, Elijah, but needs more of a parental figure in her life instead. She doesn't have the same optimism about her mother that Esther does. Rather than worry about why she went silent, Ruth interprets the absence as a form of abandonment and doesn't see the point in going to find her. She very much looks up to Esther and worries that Esther will leave them, too. This is a major point of reckoning between the two sisters that complicates Esther's choices (and by extension, the player's).



Illustrations by [Coils of Light](#) and [JNPZ](#). I like the attitude conveyed in the art; she's more playful and doesn't have the same sense of responsibility as Esther even though she tries her best to emulate Esther and what she remembers of her mother.

Elijah Zimmerman

He's six and the youngest in the family. Like Ruth, he wants to help the family and be more grown-up, but he is often distracted by games and what others are doing around him. He doesn't like school, but Esther encourages him to work hard. He has lots of energy and tends to wander off unexpectedly. He is very well-loved by the family's neighbours.

Sarah Zimmerman

Sarah is the matriarch of the Zimmerman family. She gives the appearance of being more carefree and not to take much seriously, preferring to hide her worries and doubts from her family and internalize them instead. Fiercely intelligent and unwilling to ask for help, Esther gets her cleverness (and stubbornness) from Sarah. Before she left for Leore, she would come up with unique ways to make money and provide for her family. She is diligent, attentive, but has a quick temper that often leads to frequent scolding when her children are being too rowdy. She moved to Canada as a young woman with

her husband, Levi, and thought their lives would be very different from what they turned out to be; it didn't follow the promise of opportunity that she had imagined.

When she begins to hear rumours of prospectors and entrepreneurs heading north to gold mining towns and walking away rich (and of the broader freedoms for women to do the same), she decides to head north to Leore in northern Ontario with a few other women with similar goals—to make a lot of money quickly and return home, escaping the hard and low-paying labour of working in factories.

Levi Zimmerman

After losing his right arm in a factory accident, Levi was unable to find gainful employment afterwards, and slowly turned to drinking to manage his physical pain and growing depression. He's not an abusive father (in the sense that popular ideas conceive around alcoholism); he tries his best with what he has, but the main methods he knew of how to provide for his family were taken from him.

He holds onto a good deal of bitterness, but he doesn't lash out at his family. He's still neglectful because of the nature of alcoholism and untreated depression, but he isn't a bad man. Because he cannot provide for his family (and lost two of them as a direct result of living in poverty), he feels a great deal of shame that Esther is the one looking after him and his children. He loves Sarah very much—he describes her as the love of his life in letters that Esther can find—but he believes that Sarah doesn't want to come home. Like Ruth, he thinks she's abandoned them. It contributes to his bitterness, but he ultimately blames himself, and it adds to his increased mental and emotional separation from his children.

Outline

Chapter 1

- Introduced to Esther and her family. The game opens on Esther working at a textile factory. Includes a mini game about operating the machinery; gives an insight about labour history (working conditions, equipment, etc).
- Her younger sister (TBN) comes to collect Esther at the end of the workday - the youngest sibling has wandered off and Esther needs to find him.
- Esther tells her sister to go home in case their brother comes back, and she goes looking through the Ward searching. Allows for introducing neighbours and people outside the neighbourhood, setting, atmosphere, game mechanics around object interaction and journal entries.
- She finds her brother with a family that will be positioned at the far end of the area in the Ward players can explore. Concept of what the community is like and trading favours is introduced.
- When Esther returns home, her sister is making dinner; her father is passed out on the bed. There should be mementos showing that he used to do factory work,

maybe have a photo on the mantle when her younger brother (one close in age) was alive and her father hadn't lost his leg in an accident.

- Introduce more game mechanics of looking at recipes and making food based on collected ingredients.
- Demonstrate the role Esther has in the family: she is the caretaker, the main provider. Things are difficult in her mother's absence. She reads over the last letter she received from her mom 5 months ago. Her sister expresses the same worry she feels but Esther puts on a facade of confidence.
- Family ages:
 - Levi (father): 38/40
 - Sarah (mother): 36, missing
 - Esther (sister/daughter): 16
 - Emmet (son/brother): 14, deceased
 - Ruth (sister/daughter): 11
 - Miriam (sister/daughter): 7, deceased
 - Elijah (brother/son): 6

Inciting incident: what starts Esther's journey?

- Esther is on her way to work and buys a newspaper. On the second or third page is a story about Leore; it's sensationalized, but it alludes to a string of bad luck and it being abandoned. There's no other word about it. There's no new news from her mom, so Esther checks in with the mail depot (to see if they've had incoming letters at all), and goes to listen to gossip from other travellers, her mother's friends (who's her community? Around the Temple/Synagogue (Holy Blossom Temple), communal spaces, old workplaces, Jewish bath houses).
 - She would try to re-trace her mother's steps and relationships to get a hint of what happened to her mother and Leore.
- She knows she cannot rely on the RCMP; she's both poor and the daughter of immigrants, they wouldn't care and she doesn't want to bring undue attention to her family's situation. Thinking her mother might be dead, she knows someone needs to go to Leore to look for her.

Chapter 2

- Centres around Esther preparing for the journey.
- Needs to get supplies, support from her neighbours (to look after her family), money (for the trip and to repay those who agree to help), and travel arrangements.
 - This would necessitate several minigames to engage the player.

- Each job/task the player agrees to results in a specific reward/needed resource. The more jobs they complete, the more they gain. But to balance this and keep players from "grinding", there should be a counter consequence so that they don't spend all their time just on that.
 - The more time Esther is away from home, the more likely it is for her siblings to get into trouble or lost, her dad to use their money to drink or have his workmates spend a lot of time in their home, which means that they're consuming the food they have. This would make players have to think about the Zimmerman family as a whole in addition to the end goal Esther wants to pursue - and it also gives urgency to her journey: it needs to be successful and not take longer than necessary; otherwise, there will be real consequences to her family because Esther didn't think things through.
 - What would those consequences look like?
 - Her brother might get sick and be taken away by one of the many church groups monitoring the conditions of children in poor neighbourhoods, the family could become homeless, someone could take a dangerous job and die. All are possibilities depending on the state they were left in when Esther started her journey.
 - This will need to be a careful balance: players should feel the overwhelming responsibility that Esther carries without the tasks being impossible to manage or the mechanics being buggy. It should establish stakes and player investment without making them feel that the tasks are repetitive.

Chapter 3

- The journey to Leore
- Transportation will be important here.
 - How will Esther get to Leore?
 - The player can have multiple ways to get there and they have to decide which is the most cost and time-efficient. Each choice should have a pro and con, something heavy enough that the player has to seriously weigh their choice.
 - If they choose to go by boat, then they are at the mercy of the weather. There could be a bad storm that keeps them from going far upriver, there could be other disasters, leaks, or repairs needed. The scheduling can also be very unreliable.

Although this is the fastest method, it should also be the most volatile and unsafe.

- If she goes by train, then it should be more on time but it doesn't go as far north, she'd need a secondary mode of transport to take her the rest of the way. But there aren't any docks where she can board when she reaches the end of the line.
 - If she goes by cart, then this is the slowest option but the cheapest because it would be reliant on favours and relationships with neighbours created beforehand. There is the risk of being very delayed or other roadblocks, but it's the safest method. They'd take her further than the train, but still not all the way to Leore.
 - Walking is the slowest method and the last resort. Esther will have to do some walking toward the end of the journey to make it to Leore and players will need to account for that when preparing for the journey.
- This is where choice and preparation should become critical. If the player is underprepared, they'll be stranded with very few options, failing Esther's mother and her family. Being over-prepared can be incredibly helpful, but what would Esther do if she lost some of her supplies? She'd need to rely on the practical skills she could have picked up from friends and neighbours in the first two chapters of the game.
- There should be four endings for this section:
 - 1. Esther uses her wits and knowledge to continue on to Leore
 - 2. Esther is under-prepared and just has enough to go back home empty-handed and worse off than when the player meets her. The family is doomed to continued poverty and down another family member.
 - 3. The player gives up, stranding Esther where she is and stunting the game's progress, causing a "game over". Permadeath/permanent consequences will be highlighted here.
 - 4. Esther dies from exposure, sickness, or by accident - all of which also result in a "game over" for the player.

Chapter 4

- This chapter can only happen if players were savvy and successful in planning for the journey. There will be different states of well-being that the player will need to monitor and attempt to remedy if needed. (Is she sickly? Has she lost weight? How are her supplies, is she able to sleep inside or is she outside? What's the weather like?)

- This chapter will need more character interactions, and they'll need to vary depending on what the player has said, what mode of transportation they've used, and what state Esther is in. There should be conflict introduced.

So, what should that conflict look like?

- This might be best decided with a layout of potential outcomes.

Chapter 5

- Arriving in Leore and finding it abandoned.
 - Focus on exploration and discovery.

Chapter 6 (Epilogue)

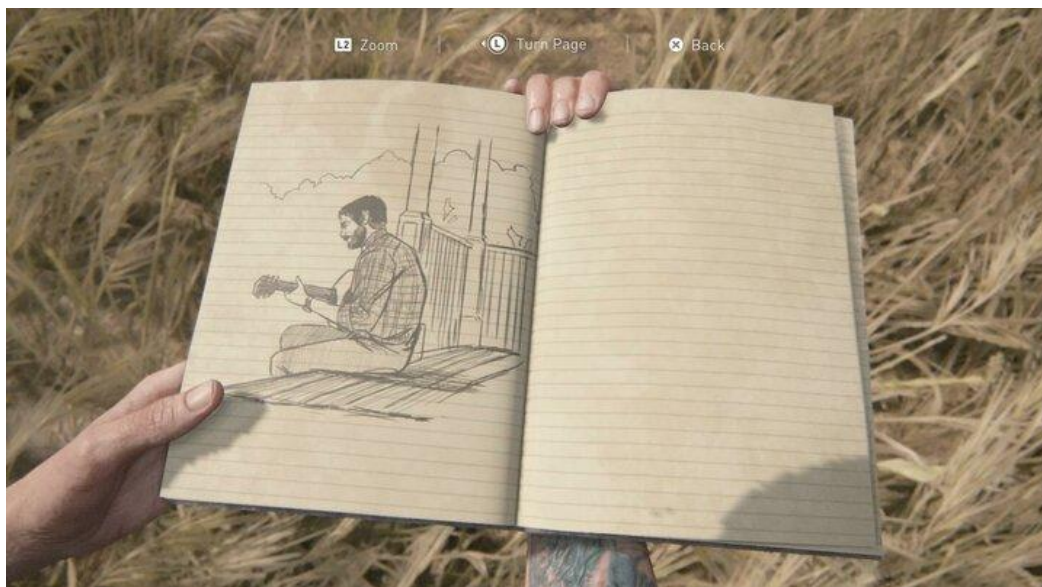
- Finding Sarah, Esther's decision, and the fate of the Zimmerman family.

Game Mechanics

Please find a definition for game mechanics [here](#).

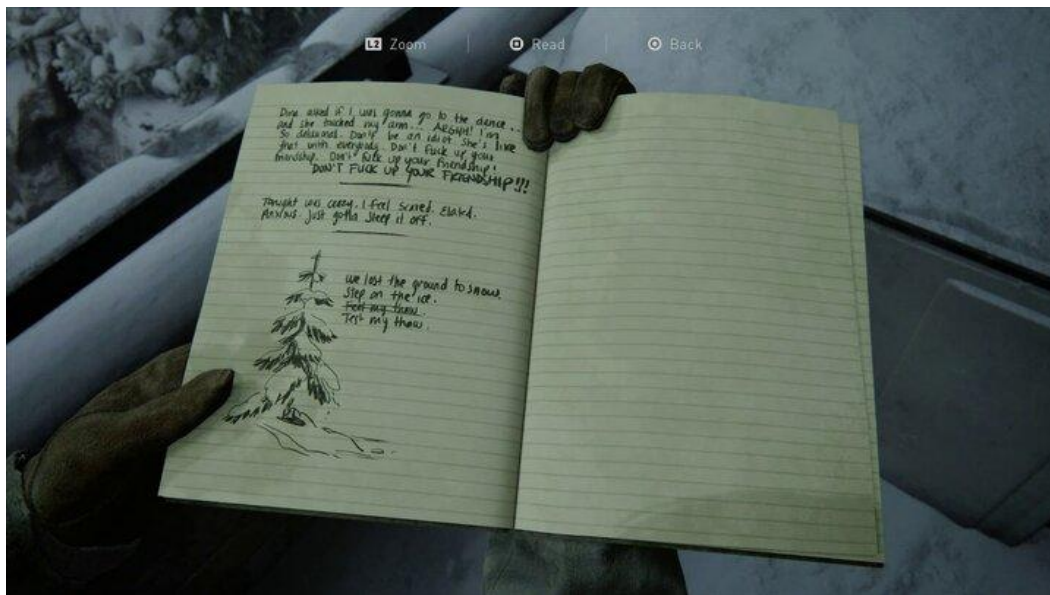
Journal

Esther will have a journal that she uses to track her thoughts, experiences with her neighbours, people she meets during her journeys, her objectives, and what she learns about her mother. She also tries her hand at sketches, including things she finds in the wild and that strikes her eye. This will be tied with the codex mechanic, which will allow players to review information they've received from the story, re-read letters, and examine photographs. This is similar to journal mechanics found in many games, with prominent examples such as *The Last of Us Part II* and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*.



The journal mechanic allows players to refresh themselves on their journey with Esther, and it highlights important personality markers that might otherwise be obscured. What parts of the environment Esther will be drawn to will be directly linked to her

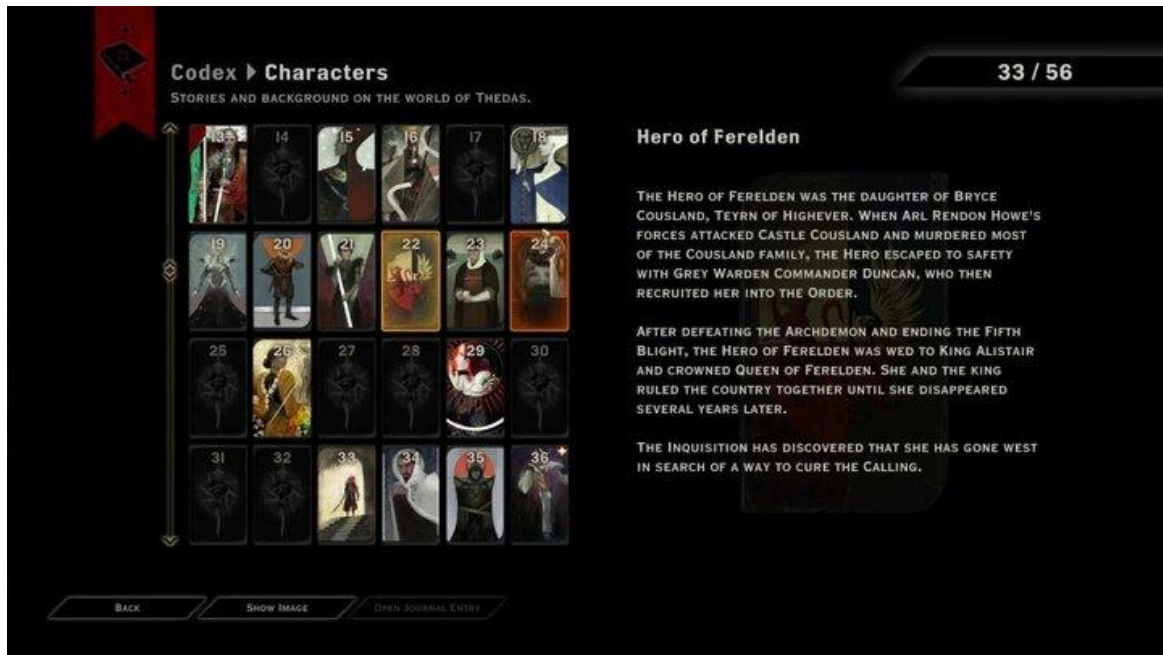
interests as a character, and it's up to players to pick up on these environmental cues to get the most out of the game.



Images taken from *The Last of Us Part II* | Naughty Dog

Codex

The journal acts as a codex. Esther likes to draw, and her journal is one of the few outlets where she can share her worries and fears. As her journey progresses and players interact more with the world and characters, Esther will draw small portraits of the people she encounters, write down her thoughts about them, and any important plot/mission related information that the player can consult later. This would also be a helpful tool to include more historical information in the game. When the player visits important Canadian landmarks or encounters specific groups (such as moral reformers, the mounted police, etc), players can find more information about them in the codex. This would allow players to gain additional historical insight to the world they're digitally occupying. It would also serve an important practical function; players can review their current objectives in case they get off-track or need reminders on what to do and where to go.



Many games offer variations of codices, with *Assassin's Creed* being the most prominent series to make use of tying historical information to specific sites the player can visit.



Codex interface in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* | BioWare. Database interface in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* | Ubisoft.



Images from *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* | Naughty Dog.

Similarly to the example above, players would combine multiple means of markers to commemorate Esther's journey to resemble a journal a real person might have kept. It's a useful way of imbuing more of her personality into the game and making it into a tangible mechanic players can engage with.

Narration

The game *What Remains of Edith Finch* presents intriguing opportunities to further tie narrative mechanics with gaming. As you play *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the protagonist, Edith, is narrating her experiences to the player, and her speech is written out in the negative space of the environment. It gives the player the impression that they're exploring the inside of a storybook, that they've been transplanted into someone's personal history. They're *experiencing* the memories Edith describes as if they are there themselves, even as she is looking at the environment in the present. This type of narrative mechanic joins more literary approaches to narration with gaming and could provide subversive avenues for *Remember Us* to take.

For example: What if the players could hear Esther's voice reflecting on the journey that makes up the main plot of the game? What would her insights provide, how would that engage the player? It could be a sort of meta-narrative about storytelling and history, how we tell our histories to others and ourselves. While this requires further experimentation in the writing process, it's a game mechanic with a lot of potential.

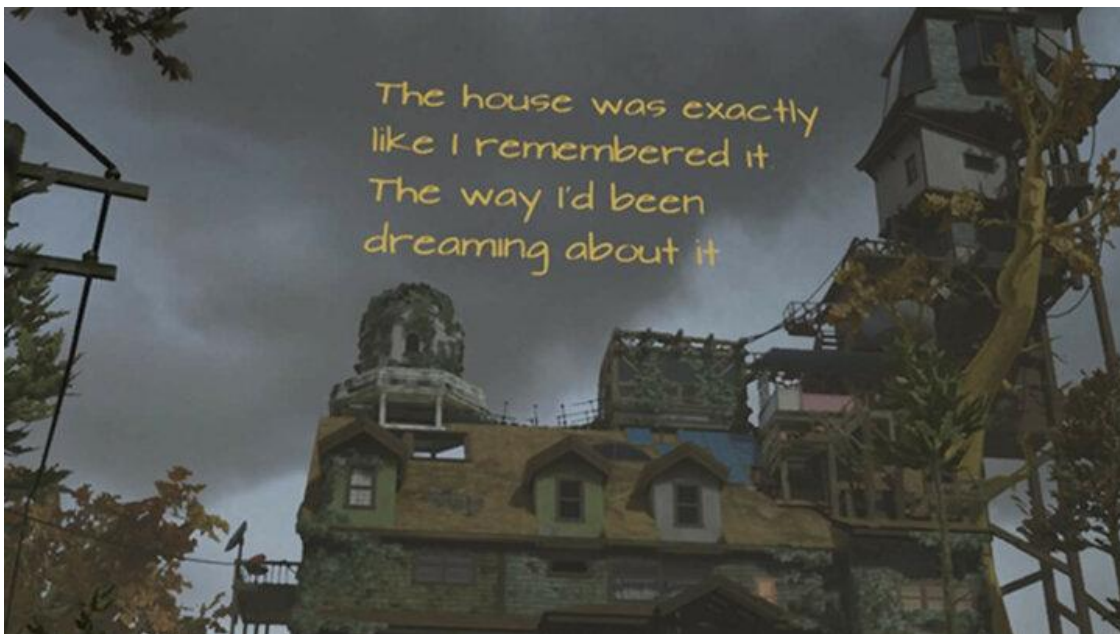


Image from *What Remains of Edith Finch* | Giant Sparrow.

Object Interaction

While Esther is exploring, she'll come across letters, newspapers and photos, flowers and plants that she can collect and categorize in her journal/codex. This will be a good way to increase her knowledge (and by extension, the player's knowledge) on local plants—what's edible, what can be used for medicinal purposes, which to avoid, etc.

She will be able to pick things up and look at them, flip items around so she can examine all sides and find physical markers that can tell her about the history of the object and who interacted with it (and how). For example, this can manifest with writing on the back of photos (the year, who's in them, maybe a small personal note), writing in the margins of newspapers (comments on events, a way to point out something personally significant), and it could be a way for her to discover clues as well relating to her mother and Leore.

Maps

Players would be encouraged to explore the environment to find specific spots to sketch and garner commentary from Esther, similarly to Nathan Drake's journal function in *Uncharted 4* and to Ellie's in *The Last of Us Part II*

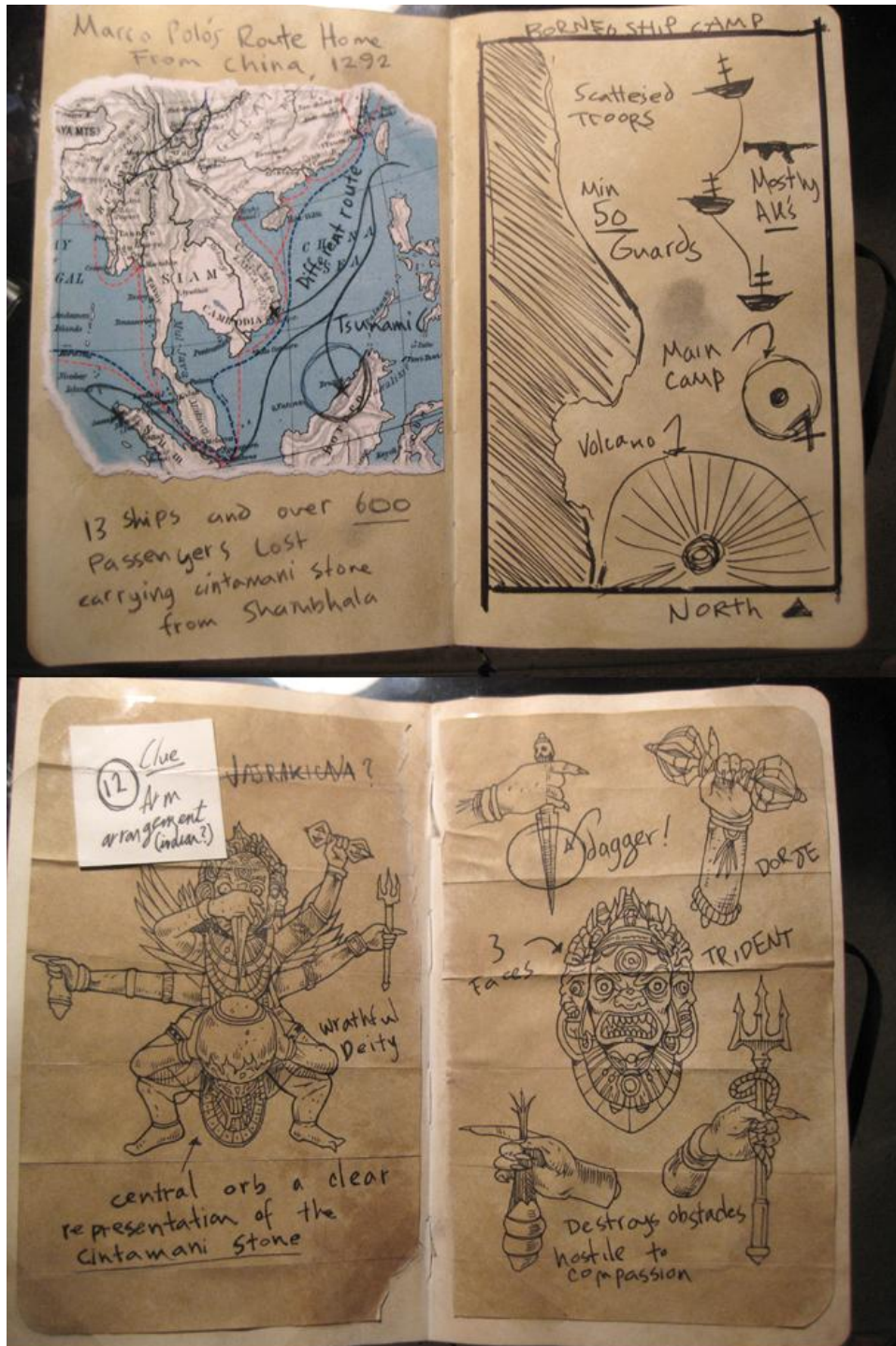
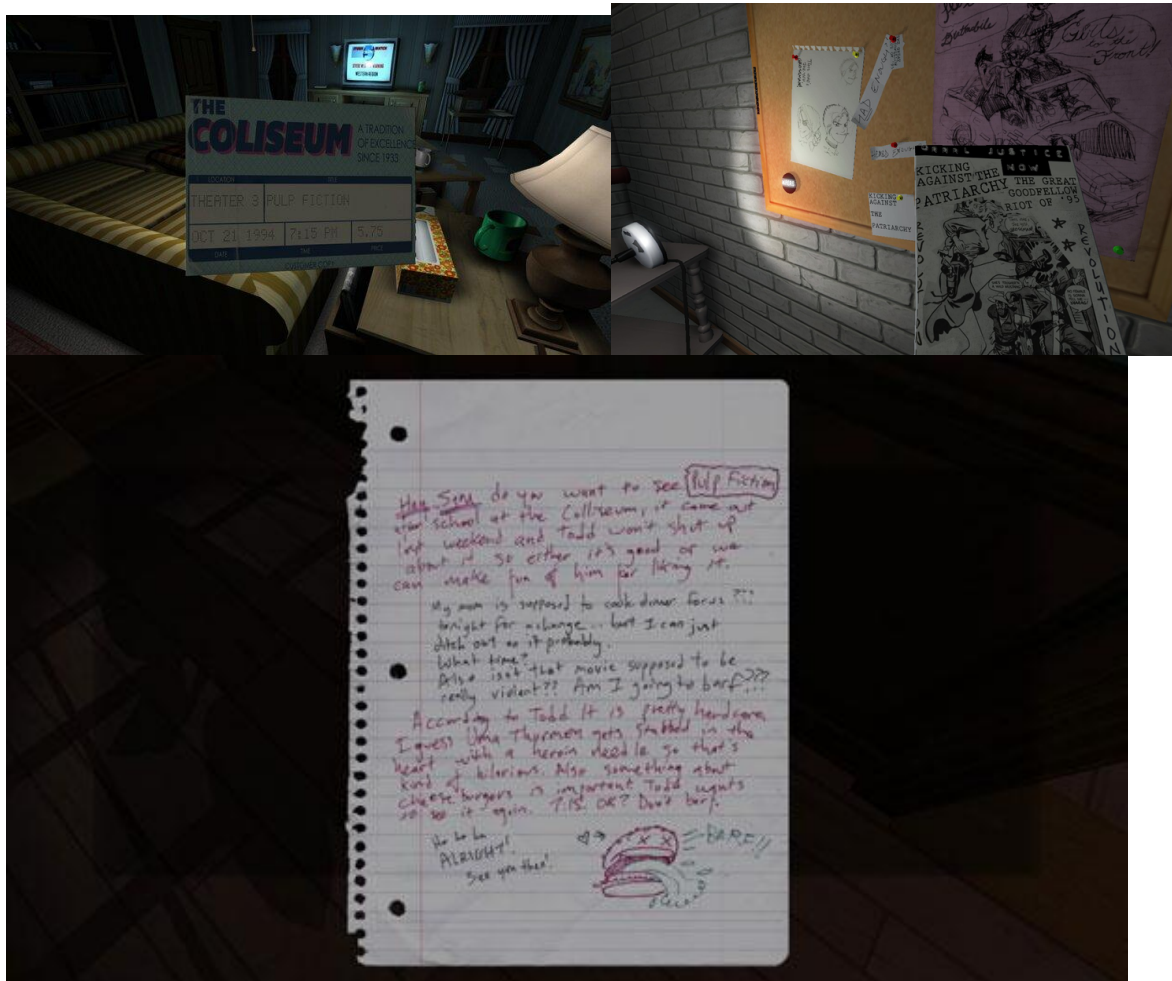


Image from *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* | Naughty Dog.

Collecting Letters

This is tied to the journal and codex function, and it encompasses the ability for players to keep sources of information to reflect on later. Letters and photos can be re-read and examined later, and this is also a useful worldbuilding tool; it can give the player context to Esther's relationship with her mother, since players will not meet her until the end of the game. It also demonstrates what people thought were important to talk about and include in letters and personal collections of memorabilia and photos (obituaries, news stories, photos, etc). This will be informed by historical research and teach players about prevalent values and relationship dynamics between friends and family.



Images from *Gone Home* | Fullbright Company.

Inventory & Inventory Management

A large part of the first half of the game revolves around Esther preparing for her journey to Leore. The roads north will be rough, she won't have access to trains to take her the entire way and having more than she can carry is just not feasible. This will make players manage Esther's inventory. Depending on her stats and how much players look after her character, she can carry more than her starting base for inventory weight.

The Long Dark has an interesting take on this. It's a survival game based in Canada where the winters never end. Players forage for items, and different articles of clothing

have varying quality and resistance to the elements. Players also have a limited amount of inventory slots, making it imperative to choose what they bring wisely and to maintain what they do have, something that is learned by completing favours and building relationships with Esther’s neighbours and community members before her journey begins.



Having an inventory management system prevents players from taking their items for granted and encourages thoughtful choices when engaging with others and choosing how to approach Esther’s journey.



Images from *The Long Dark* | Hinterland Studio.

Recipes

Players will be able to build their own recipe book by collecting recipes from various NPCs in Toronto and on the trail to Leore, and by searching through its abandoned buildings. This has a practical function—when Esther eats, she gains health bonuses. She can go around bigger obstacles, sustain more environmental injuries and health damage from weather before getting sick. And it also has a historiographical purpose—it incorporates Esther’s (Jewish) family history, the history of her neighbours and their

cultures, and it gives the player an idea of what kinds of meals would be available for working class and immigrant families, as well as how travellers would keep themselves fed while on the road. This also encourages players to think about what supplies they need and understand what considerations people in the 1890s would've kept in mind.



Image from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* | Nintendo.

Breath of the Wild incorporates this mechanic well. By finding particular ingredients, cooking the meal, and building on their techniques as chefs, players gain bonuses and health that will help them beat bosses and particular monsters. While there is no fighting mechanics in *Remember Us*, it will serve a similar function in that making meals encourages players to further interact with the game world and invest in Esther's wellbeing.

Art - Inspiration, Concepts, and Photographs



Concept art from *Dishonored* | Bethesda Studios

I like the sense of closeness that this has, the cramped quarters and tight spaces. Of course, this is different from what Toronto (especially St John's Ward) was actually like because the buildings in these images are built higher, but they share the Victorian style that Canadian cities tried to emulate. And I just like the style and feel this has.



Toronto Archives, Yonge Street



Assassin's Creed: Syndicate, Ubisoft



Toronto Archives, Jewish-owned bakery on Kensington Street.