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A land-based digital design rhetoric

+ Analysis of website [The Ways](#)

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A few years ago, my mom, a member of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community among other things, shared with me a link to the website

The Ways: Stories on Culture and Language from Native Communities Around the Central Great Lakes.

This website features videos and interactive maps that explore Native culture and language, primarily of the Anishinaabe peoples in the central and upper Great Lakes region.

Upon first glance, I was hooked. I spent hours exploring videos and reading essays, all the while feeling a sense of comfort. Wandering through the site felt like wandering my family's land on Lake Superior on a crisp autumn day. It's as though I could feel the sandy ground beneath my feet and the smell of jack pines and moss in the air. My experience with The Ways was a felt sense of belonging to a land, of being of a people—it was a melding of content and form that felt like home.

Scholars in rhetoric and composition, explore the ways that interfaces, design elements, and typography are rhetorical.

Design is content, design is embodied, design is sensory, and it is always intimately connected to the cultures within which we find ourselves living, breathing, and making meaning.

For students who have grown up in a technologically-saturated and an image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them.

While I encountered The Ways through a suggestion from my mother, and while I experienced it as a space of digital storytelling that works to sustain and share Anishinaabe culture in the Great Lakes, the site was actually created as a very specific educational resource:

The Ways is an ongoing series of stories from Native communities around the central Great Lakes. This online educational resources for 6–12 grade students features videos, interactive maps, and digital media exploring contemporary Native culture and language.

The Ways supports educators in meeting the requirements of Wisconsin Act 31, seeking to expand and challenge current understanding of Native identity and communities.
(<http://theways.org/about>)

It's not surprising that the ways I feel and breathe this content would be very different were the video stories housed on YouTube instead of on this beautifully designed website.

The website covers different topics, ranging from dancing on the pow-wow trail to language preservation initiatives to traditional food gathering practices.

If you click on a story, you are brought to a page that includes two parts.

Above the fold is a video (see Figure 19.3),
below the fold (Figure 19.4)
is an essay that is part video transcript, part additional information.

There is also a sidebar that includes links to sharing the story on social media,
a map that indicates where the speaker is from,
a section that offers questions for learning,
below which is another section that offers resources for further learning (Figure 19.5).

Finally, the bottom of the page (Figure 19.6) includes credits and also reveals the bottom of the slightly transparent background image that sits behind the below-the-fold content. This background image changes with each story and is related to the story itself.

For example, the Manoomin story has a faint background image of a wild rice field.

Each story on the site is arranged in the same way.

The above-the-fold content includes a very large still image from the video itself contrasted sharply against a black background.

The Ways logo and navigation system sits atop the page itself, and is a rustic simple font that appears white on black, however at times has rollover functionality that turns the typeface a deep-sea blue.

There are small embellishments throughout the site, usually next to the log or the navigation system. These small symbols (Figures 19.7 and 19.8) are reminiscent of the petroglyphs found throughout the Great Lakes region.

The logo is almost always white on black, except for the front page (Figure 19.8) where the background is a patterned wood grain.

The videos themselves are beautifully crafted, and I can't extract their effect from my embodied reaction to this website. However, what strikes me most about this site is the impact the videos, along with the essays and maps and additional content, have on me. It is an impact that I do not feel when I encounter these videos on YouTube.

The standardized platform of YouTube does not even remotely give me the sense of home and place that The Ways does. I do not feel embraced, and I do not necessarily feel like staying and exploring.

The contrast between the design of The Ways and the design of YouTube is stark, and my experiences with each site give me a very different sense of engagement with the space

.
Land is not a metaphor, it is a living thing that our rhetoric, digital or otherwise, exists on, with, and through. Our active participation with the land, that is our movement through the biosphere, is always already part of the semiosphere. We are all bodies living on a land base. As we continue to revise and revisit our rhetorical theories for producing and analyzing texts in digital spaces, it is important to think through how the seemingly landless place of cyberspace is always already part of the land.

We bring our bodies and our lands with us online. We all bring our unique experiences and understandings and relations of and with land to all of our communication acts. Our theories of digital design should work to pay attention to these relations.