

Studio 4  
Game Innovation

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# Whispers of the American West

## VIDEO GAME

### GAME DESCRIPTION

This is a video game about the western art collection on display at the Phoenix Art Museum. This game began as a collaboration with the education department at the museum in 2018. The expressed need was to educate the public about the often unspoken history surrounding each piece in the collection.

#### PREMISE

Art collections are a joyful celebration of humanity

#### PURPOSE

Eduentertainment multi-player online game that joyfully educates the public as to the diverse voices and contributions that formed the collection of the Phoenix Art Museum. This is a new interpretive layer for visitors; a digital layer of meaning that reveals multiple narratives and hidden meanings to works of art on view at Phoenix Art Museum.

#### THEME

Inclusion and Cultural Awareness

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### LEVEL 13: DESERT RAIN GOD

About the art: 54 x 72 in. (137.2 x 182.9 cm)  
Museum purchase with funds provided by Betty Van Denburgh in honor of Western Art Associates.

What the docents are currently teaching about the piece.

In 19th century, women were not part of the great enthusiasm for landscape painting, but in the twentieth and twenty-first century women reclaimed it. The artist worked outside, en plein air, directly in contact with the landscape of Northern New Mexico and had a bold, expressive style: using palette knives and masonry trowels.

Results, or what the docents can add to their lesson about this painting.

The historical and current trauma of the indigenous lives lost due to the uranium mines and the unfinished business of decontamination of the land is all ours. As we work toward a decolonized world, this piece is not just a tribute to the beauty of the land, but is also an opportunity for a renewed discussion about reversing the damage to the land of the Diné. It is important to continue the work of honoring the Treaty of 1868 to ensure the thriving of the Diné - and all indigenous people - in contemporary society.

### FUTURE WORK:

This NCUIRE project was a preparation for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant application that will be submitted in June 2021.

**PROJECT START (JAN 20)**  
We reviewed the grand requirements, set up the project in GitHub and began building the hub level. We researched and brainstormed what the game title and mechanics could be used:  
 Magic in the landscape (appearing mountain experience near Diné Community College, Devine);  
  
Hidden pathways that are revealed via exploration. Certain landscape features offer unique perspective that specifically reveal these pathways. (Griffin)

**CULTURAL RESEARCH (JAN 25)**  
We focused on Desert Rain God by Louisa McElwain. She was fascinated by the way light changes when a storm comes in the American Southwest.  
 The location of the painting appears to be in New Mexico, approximately somewhere in the Navajo Nation. As Louisa McElwain studied the landscape and the light to create this painting, she was unaware of the political, social, and cultural significance of this land. This narrative surrounding the painting is an example of historical amnesia. (Devine, Griffin)

**PUZZLE RESEARCH (FEB 3)**  
We researched the puzzles in Zelda and their creator Eiji Aonuma. (Devine, Griffin)  
 We looked at puzzle boxes and imagined that the game would be centered on a puzzle narrative (Devine).  
  
The painting asset was created for the hub level. (Griffin)

**DECOLONIZATION (FEB 5)**  
In approaching the design of this level of the game, we decided to answer the call of Nikki Sanchez, a Pipil/Maya and Irish/Scottish academic, Indigenous media maker and environmental educator to face this historical amnesia.  
 We aimed to learn:  
1) What treaties are important and why?  
2) What system of oppression is still alive today because of that broken treaty?  
3) What action can be taken today? (Devine)  
  
Additionally, work began on the environment for the level. (Griffin)

**TREATY OF 1868 (FEB 15)**  
In the location that the painting was created, the Naal Tsoos Sanf (The Old Paper): The Navajo Treaty of 1868 is the treaty is still in effect today. It has not yet been fully honored.  
 Article IX, section 6 of the Treaty states:  
"They will not in future oppose the construction of railroads, wagon roads, mail stations, or other works of utility or necessity which may be ordered or permitted by the laws of the United States; but should such roads or other works be constructed on the lands of their reservation, the government, will pay the tribe whatever amount of damage may be assessed by three disinterested commissioners to be appointed by the President for that purpose, one of said commissioners to be a chief or head man of the tribe." (Devine)

**ABANDONED URANIUM MINES (FEB 22)**  
The work of Navajo storyteller Sunny Dooley and nuclear nonproliferation expert and founder of Bombshelltoe, Lovely Umayam, influence this project.  
 "Ways of Knowing" is a creative attempt to bridge policy and humanity in examining the United States' nuclear weapons production legacy ... [and] serves as a reminder that nuclear weapons are not just made of secrecy, science, and steel; their power is in part derived from a naturally occurring element extracted from the Earth at the expense of Indigenous lives." (Devine)  
  
Mine game environment built. (Griffin)

**JOYFUL ART AND GAMES (MAR 17)**  
We revisited the idea that the game must be fun and joyful. We discussed: "Bugsnax," "Superliminal," "Monument Valley," and "The Witness." We also looked at artists Shigeo Fukuda and Kumi Yamashita. Ultimately this led to the design of the main mechanic in the game. (Griffin, Devine)

**SHADOW ILLUSION MECHANIC (MAR 22)**  
The main mechanic in the game will be a shadow illusion. Actual symbolic imagery will need to be researched but this an example of what is imagined as to how this mechanic can work: Change the position of the sun to control the appearance and disappearance of the illusion. (Griffin, Devine)