

Claire Darmstadter

Everybody I am joined today by Eleanor Falck, junior at UW-Stout studying Game Design and Development Art and creator of Growing Up Ojibwe — The Game. Thanks for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

So first, it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your background as relates to the Ojibwe culture and language and if you were or continue to be a learner of any other languages, whether it's like a high school course or anything like that.

Eleanore Falck

Yes, so I grew up near the Bad River Reservation. My hometown is Ashland, Wisconsin. And my family is Oneida. So I know a few Oneida words. But I also know a few Ojibwe words just like growing up in the area and kind of learning a little bit about both Ojibwe and Oneida culture. And so I have not spent time to specifically sit down and learn any Ojibwe or Oneida language, it's kind of something that I have just picked up a little bit of here and there, not very much. But in high school, I did spend, I think two years studying Japanese online.

Claire Darmstadter

So do you feel like not having that very strong or necessarily fluent linguistic base makes it difficult to connect to the culture or it's something where perhaps, there's some other areas of Wisconsin, that's called post-vernacular language. So they don't necessarily speak the language fluently, but they're still able to engage with the culture through a couple key words or a couple prayers or songs. Do you feel like speaking the language is really heavily emphasized in the community or not so much?

Eleanore Falck

I think speaking the language is important. And I think that, like, people should continue to learn it. But I also don't feel that I am missing out a ton on culture and stuff. I think like spending time with other Native Americans, there are specific slang terms, like from the area that we'll use that make me feel like part of the community. And I think there's words that a lot of people know, at least like from the area that I'm from, I think there's like, a handful of words that a lot of people know and will use, instead of using their English words. So like saying manoomin, instead of saying wild rice, or things like that. So I think that you can still be like involved in the community, without knowing a ton of language.

Claire Darmstadter

And can you talk a little bit more about your experience with Japanese because that's pretty unique. So what made you want to take that language? And what was that experience? You said it was online, so I'd imagine it wasn't like a typical class?

Eleanore Falck

Yeah so my experience learning Japanese, I was inspired by, like, a lot of modern Japanese art and games and artists growing up in middle school, and like, I've since branched out, but I thought, like learning a language would be cool. And it was also I saw as like part of

requirements for like, getting into a college potentially. So I wanted to have a language class under my belt. And I actually, unfortunately, did not have the best experience learning language online, because there wasn't anyone to talk to. And like I couldn't call anyone or communicate with other classmates. So I kind of felt like I didn't get the most out of taking the class online, at least in that way at that time. Because I didn't get to practice speaking a lot. But it was still a good experience to just learn about a different culture and another language. And I would be interested in continuing that language or another language at some point.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah you had that online school thing before we kind of figured out what was going on there in that space. I think we still are trying to figure it out. But I can imagine how difficult that would have been even a few years ago. So let's talk all about the game now. So can you kind of walk us through how you came up with the idea and what went into developing it from both a technical side, but also just like coming up with the content? And is there a bunch of vocabulary embedded throughout or what does it all kind of look like?

Eleanore Falck

Yes. So when I first started out as an intern at the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, in the PIO office, the Public Information Office, my supervisor Dylan Jennings wanted me to create something educational for the younger generation to like, bring them in and get them ready to like learn more about like things like tribal sovereignty, and treaty rights, and traditional harvesting and traditional ecological knowledge and also like, some Ojibwe language, and so that was really the basis for things. So as a game major it was like, this would be super awesome if I could make a video game because I know that a lot of kids are really interested in technology. And so I thought it would be a good way to attract them, and then also keep them engaged. So that's where that started. And then developing the game, I developed the game using a game engine called GDevelop, which is like a pretty beginner friendly game engine since at the time, I had just completed my freshman year. And then I created all of the art and animations I'm in Photoshop, and imported them. And so as for the Ojibwe language that is included in the game. Throughout the game, you meet like spirit helpers and knowledge holders, who are usually — there's like, plants and animals that are spirit helpers and knowledge holders. So there's like a tree and then a bear that you meet in the first level. And then you can talk to them. And they will teach you the things that you learn in the game. It all comes from these characters. And so all of the spirit helpers and knowledge holders have like their names written in Ojibwe. So you like me to bear and it says *Makwa* at the top, and then the text of what the bear is saying underneath is there. And then there's also like, throughout the game, you'll do things like harvest maple sap, go spearfishing, and go wild ricing. And so when these activities are like being explained to you by other characters in the game, there will be words that are used in both Ojibwe and English. So again, for example, like in the wild ricing level, they'll talk about, we're gonna harvest manoomin. But then also refer to it as wild rice so players can learn.

Claire Darmstadter

And so especially as a result of COVID, teachers, and students are very familiar with technology. So what's kind of a way that they can integrate into their classrooms? It's something where all the students would play together, they'd play separately, have you introduced it to classes at all before?

Eleanore Falck

Yeah, so I am aware that there are some classrooms that are using the game, I've heard a little bit about that happening, which is really great. And I'm actually working with Ashland Middle School to set up a talk, where I show them the game and talk about it, and then they can play it. I think, ideally, in a classroom setting, because I was thinking about developing for a classroom setting when making this game. I think that everyone could play individually, so that they can like go through things at their own pace, and explore as they want. Because with game-based learning, I think it is important that you have agency in what you're doing. And it's not just being fed to you. I think that's one of the main points of game-based learning is that you're able to do what you want at your own pace, and so that you're like, comfortable, and it's just easier for you to learn things that way. So I think it should be an individual thing for students. But then also throughout the game, you earn points by engaging with characters in the game, and doing the activities in the game. And so then these points are displayed, like on the level menu screen, so educators can go and look at this screen and see how much students have been engaging with the game. And so that was a way that I designed this game for it to be used in a classroom setting, so that people can kind of see how interested students are. And it's also just like, the point system is just kind of fun, because I think everyone likes getting points in games. It's encouraging to see like, Oh, I haven't done everything in this level yet, so I should go back and do this a little bit so I can get all the points kind of thing.

Claire Darmstadter

And you mentioned you're introducing it at a middle school. So is there a general age range, it's meant for kind of a minimum age or having a certain level of reading that makes it accessible? Or who should be able to play with it?

Eleanore Falck

Yeah, so I designed this game to be for middle schoolers, but I do really think that anyone can play it as long as you can read, probably at like the later elementary school level, or even like mid-elementary school level. I think with help, you'll be able to understand what is in the game, and I have heard that there are some like younger elementary schoolers who really do enjoy playing this game, which I think is kind of funny, but that's really great. I'm really happy about that. And so I think like with help and guidance, really anyone should be able to play the game and enjoy it and learn something from it.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. Well, I will leave a couple links if people want to download it or check it out, because I think that's an awesome resource. So even though you're not a language major at Stout, and you're not necessarily super involved with that, would you say that Stout as a university community, or Ashland where actually grew up? Are both pretty hospitable to people

who speak more than one language or a non-English language? Or what's kind of the vibe that you get from being in these communities?

Eleanore Falck

I think that I might just not be involved with like, enough people who do speak multiple languages to really speak on that. And I think maybe that is part of the problem is that either there is not a lot of like, multilingual people in the area. Or, if there are, it's not something that they like, show as much. I guess, I don't see people being like, upset or aggressive, or two people who speak multiple languages. But I also haven't seen a lot of stuff that's like encouraging you — I don't know what that would entail exactly. But I do know that like in schools, in Ashland, I believe they do. Like right now, I think they were working on an Ojibwe culture unit, which is really cool. And I'm not really too sure what is involved in that. But I do think that they are including some Ojibwe language in that unit. So I think that people around here are generally accepting and think it's neat if you speak multiple languages.

Claire Darmstadter

And so the last question I usually ask everybody is why it's a superpower to speak more than language or be multilingual. So you can choose to either answer that question or if you're not necessarily as connected to the language, can you just give us one word or phrase or cultural practice or a tradition that is meaningful or significant to you?

Eleanore Falck

Oh, well, I think I could do both maybe. I don't know. I think it's really cool to be able to speak multiple languages. My mom speaks Spanish, as well as English. And you can just like talk to way more people and connect to way more people. And that's amazing. That's super useful. Like in the work world, but also just like, on a personal level, you can understand way more people's experience. So that's amazing. And so for, like one cultural thing. I talked about this recently, I did another interview, but this weekend, well two weeks ago, I went home to visit my dad and we went maple syruping. And we're like hanging out outside boiling sap. And that's just a really great time for me, I get to go home from like, the busy environment at school and spend time outdoors with my family. And that means a lot to me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, well, thank you so much for all you had to share with us. I will leave like I said a link to the game because I think everybody should check it out. It looks super cool. I'm excited to dive in and play a little bit myself. So have a great rest of your semester, and thank you so much for giving me a couple of minutes of your time today.

Eleanore Falck

Thank you!