

Nitao

An immersive videogame set during the spring goose hunt in James Bay



In **Nitao**, players will become immersed in the world of the Cree goose hunt: the landscape, places, and traditional practices that the Cree of James Bay have done every spring since time immemorial. More than a game to accumulate points, **Nitao** players will be invited to participate in a colourful and engaging narrative world which is guided by teachings and ways of knowing that come from survival on the land.

A primary objective of the game is for Cree people, particularly youth, to acquire skills and learn traditional practices in a virtual world. Taking advantage of cutting edge immersive game technology, players will be invited to live alongside a Cree family in a contemporary spring hunting camp. They will learn and practice essential tasks such as building a shelter and setting rabbit snares, making a blind and predicting the arrival of the geese by the wind and weather. To move forward in the game, players will be required to demonstrate these skills and complete quests and tasks like collecting the best fire wood and placing decoys to attract the geese.

Perhaps more importantly, players will participate actively in the spring hunt as story world, a Cree way of being shaped by teachings, stories and legends that make up the Cree nation's history. Elders and fellow hunters in the family, as well as the characters of Cree legends will be woven throughout the game narrative, guiding players on notions of right and wrong, values of respect and sharing, and ethical codes of behavior. For players to advance, they will be required to pay attention to the advice of elders, and enact the values passed on through legends, stories and mythical beings. Players become part of the story, experiencing this Cree way of knowing and creating their own personal narrative as they navigate the landscape and contribute to a successful hunt.

The game will unfold over the lifetime of a hunter with the ultimate objective being to become goose boss, or Okimah. A player will first enter the hunting world as a child, working alongside an elder hunter, observing, listening and engaging in small tasks like collecting the necessary wood and supplies to make his or her first bow and arrow. Teachings at this stage may only be fully understood or acted upon in later years. Similarly, legends that begin as simple stories will become more complex and meaningful as a hunter grows up. Over a lifetime of spring seasons players will gain skills and competencies, acquiring knowledge and teachings and putting these into practice. In the context of this game, knowledge, rather than ammo or armour, is power.

Louis Bird's book, *Telling Our Stories*, underlines the importance of documenting Cree stories so that Cree people can "engage again - or for the first time - with meaningful aspects of their cultural traditions and histories." In addition, "the ways these stories will be performed and interpreted in the future, and retold to others, will be as imaginative, varied, and individual in their printed (*or electronic*) forms as they have always been for Aboriginal peoples." **Nitao** will use a form and technology that youth are familiar with to provide an imaginative way for players to engage with their cultural practices, traditions and history. Players will experience first hand the ways that Cree narratives from the past can be woven into our contemporary lives.

"**Nitao**" is a working title for this project and is the root of the Cree term that is roughly translated into English as "hunting, fishing, and trapping in the bush," and is found in a series of words related to hunting activities. At least five basic meanings are associated with this root term for hunting: to see something or to look at something; to go to get or to fetch something; to need something; to want something; and to grow or continue to grow.

Creators **Paul Rickard** and **Michelle Smith** are developing the game concept with game producer ODD1 and the National Film Board of Canada. Paul Rickard is a Cree filmmaker from Moose Factory. Michelle Smith is a Métis filmmaker and interactive media creator. Both have been involved in film and media production for 15 years.

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