

Play as Preservation: Folklore and Mythology in *The Mooseman*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on and explores the intersection between game studies and folkloristics. Specifically, it considers *The Mooseman*, a game by Russian studio Morteshka, from the perspective of cultural preservation. It considers the way that the game represents the reconstructed Permian mythology, modeled after the metal castings in the Permian animal style, in its narrative, its audio-visuals, and its mechanics. It also considers the place of the game, as an artistic interpretation of an ongoing field of academic study, in the broader context of cultural preservation and heritage studies. To do this, it draws upon discourses in game studies, heritage studies, and folkloristics.

Keywords

The Mooseman, Folklore, Permian animal style, Heritage Studies, Cultural Preservation

INTRODUCTION

“Long-long time ago the world was created out of an egg-shell by a god named Yen... [sic]” (Morteshka n.d.). This is the opening line of the “About the Game” section of Morteshka’s website on *The Mooseman*. The line itself makes a promise to the reader: a promise of a game that tells a story of cosmic significance, pulled from myth. This is the premise of Morteshka’s 2017 game *The Mooseman*. As their website elaborates, the game tells an interpretation of the myths of the ancient people of Perm, the region of Russia in which the studio is based. When describing the game, both the website and the creator take care to reference its academic backing: the game is based on scholarly research and was made in consultation with the Perm Historical Museum (Morteshka n.d.; Properm.ru 2017). This promise of academic backing makes the game an interesting case study in cultural preservation. In this paper, I will analyze *The Mooseman* for its inclusion of ancient Permian myths, focusing on how the game presents them across three categories: its narrative, audio-visuals, and mechanics. Then, I will draw on discourses in folkloristics, heritage studies, and game studies to discuss the place of this game within the broader field of cultural preservation.¹

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THE KOMI²

The Morteshka website attributes the game's influences to the “finno-ugric tribes of Ural,” citing specifically “Komi-Permian, Komi-Zyrian and Saamic myth.”³ A special emphasis, however, is placed on the mythology of the Komi, a Finno-Ugric people indigenous to the northeastern portions of European Russia, including the Perm Krai (Paulson 1965). The Komi are a member of the Permian Branch of the Finno-Ugric language family, however they are known to have strong connections to the Ob-Ugric peoples (Uliashv 2019). The Komi christianized relatively early, converting to become Eastern Orthodox around the 14th century (Paulson 1965). This conversion brought with it significant societal changes for the Komi, leading not just to the adaptation of their intangible culture to Christian norms, but also to the adoption of agriculture, a shift in economic model that brought significant changes to the lifestyle of the Komi as a people and shaped the development of their culture in the following centuries (Limerov 2005). Because of their status as Christians, they were viewed by the Russians as good candidates to accept Russification (seen as a shorthand for civilization) and join the Russian nation during the 19th century (Jääts 2009). A part of this effort to Russify the Komi was the recognition of a distinctly Komi body of folklore – leading to research beginning in the 19th century (Jääts 2009; Lobanova & Kuznetsov 2019). During the 20th century, this focus on folklore saw an increase in funding and the development of new methods, leading to a surge in collection and interpretation of Komi folklore (Lobanova & Kuznetsov 2019). Today, Komi folklore has a special role in the interpretation of the bronze castings of the Perm animal style, a set of bronze castings from before Christianization that are thought to depict ancient Komi mythology, the reconstruction of which has involved comparative approaches between ethnic groups across Eurasia (Chesnokova 1995; Konakov & Black 1994; Limerov 2005).

ANALYZING *THE MOOSEMAN*

Narrative

The narrative of *The Mooseman* begins, I would argue, not with the beginning of the game but with the loading screen. In between the studio's logo and the notice that “headphones are recommended for optimal experience,” the game displays this message:

“This game is an artistic reconstruction of the myths that form the foundation of the artifacts of the Permian animal style.

The myths and lore of the Komi Permians, Komi Zyrians, Mansi, and Saami people were the main basis for the reconstruction.

The artifacts represented in the game are stored in the regional museums of Perm Krai” (Morteshka 2018).

This statement, presented to the player before they have even pressed start, frames the experience that follows, priming the audience to interpret the narrative of the game not only as a myth, but also as the product of an academically driven research project. This begins the division of the game's narrative into three sections: the direct narrative, which follows the story of the player character and is conveyed primarily through the moment to moment gameplay and secondarily through the “Myths”

encyclopedia accessible through the game's pause menu (Figure 1); the framing narrative, in which a storyteller is relaying the direct narrative to the player, which is told primarily through voiced lines of dialogue played during important scene transitions; and the meta-narrative, in which the player is made aware of the intent of the game to capture the mythology behind the Permian animal style castings, and is therefore positioned to interpret the game as the product of a research project and as a reflection of the world beyond the game.



Figure 1: The Myths Encyclopedia menu

The direct narrative follows one of the sons of the creator god Yen,⁴ who travels from the land of the living into the land of the dead to recover a fragment of the sun, before carrying it back up to the land of the living, and ultimately into heaven so it can enter the sky. The son, called a “Mooseman,” achieves this through the use of a combination of “the ability to see all that is hidden to the mortal eye” (Morteshka n.d.) and knowledge of the nature and mechanics of the world. As the player learns towards the end of the game, and as they might intuit earlier, this story is a solar myth, intended to explain the cycle of day and night on Earth.

The framing narrative follows the relaying of this solar myth by a storyteller. In this narrative, the player takes the role of the storyteller's audience. This is established in the game's opening cutscene, which begins with the words:⁵

“On the broad wings of a soaring bird, let me take you to a land of myth.

Let my words be seeds that grow in your heart.” (Morteshka 2018).

This is immediately obvious as being the opening formula for a story, and establishes from the beginning that the narrative that follows, the direct narrative, is a myth being told by the speaker. Additionally, the use of the second person “your” indicates that it is the player themselves being told this myth.

Finally, the meta narrative tells the story of the mythology and the game themselves. This is introduced in the initial loading screen of the game, but it is also reinforced through the descriptions of the collectible artifacts depicting real bronze casts in the Perm animal style (the ones “stored in the regional museums of Perm Krai” (Morteshka 2018)). These descriptions provide the player with some combination of a description of the cast's iconography, the location in which it was found, and information about either reconstructed Finno-Ugric myth or the Permian animal style that contextualizes their content. In addition, the screen that displays the description

also includes a citation, indicating which source the authors referenced for that particular collectible. The inclusion of this citation has two effects: first, it provides the game a level of credibility, suggesting to the player that the game extends beyond the play experience to become a “reliable” source of information (I will discuss whether this is actually the case more in depth later); second, it reminds the player of their own reality, taking them out of the game to appreciate and internalize the games narrative as something tethered to the real world.

These three narrative levels, all of which are actively invoked by the game itself, interface with and support each other to inform the player's experience with the game.

Audio-Visual

According to the Morteshka website, the “[v]isual style of the game is inspired by Permian bronze casts” (Morteshka n.d.). This manifests in a simplified style, with predominantly muted colors, simplified shapes, and visible brush marks. The protagonist themselves is a black silhouette, almost like the projection from a shadow puppet, without defining details (Figure 2). The animations of the game have a stutter that suggests a lower frame rate, further emphasizing the nature of the game as an artistic representation. This comes together to create a sense of distance between the player and the direct narrative of the game, emphasizing the game as being a *depiction* of a story, fundamentally about the story itself, rather than a personal narrative about the player character. This style – a simplified presentation that limits defining features and emphasizes the medium of the presentation itself – is frequently used in other media to indicate that the scene being shown is backstory: in games this can be seen in the intro sequence of *Resident Evil Village* (Capcom 2021); it also appears in film, such as the opening scene in *Sinners* (Coogler 2025). In these examples, the intention of the style is to indicate that a specific scene serves as the backstory for the broader narrative of the piece – in the case of *The Mooseman*, the style combines with the framing narrative to position the game itself as the backstory to the broader world.



Figure 2: The protagonist walks through an early stage.

While the main character is depicted with limited detail in a way that de-emphasizes their importance as an individual, the environment is depicted so as to elevate its importance. Multiple layers of parallaxed backdrop provide it a sense of depth –

additionally, small animations, such as the flight of birds as the player approaches, provide a sense of life to the setting itself. The game also makes use of several layers of foreground, which frequently pass in front of the camera so as to obscure the player's avatar (Figure 3). This separates the player from their avatar: these moments reaffirm that the player is not the character that they play as, but instead an outside observer, watching their character from afar. Further, when a tree passes in front of the camera, temporarily blocking the player's view of the character, the subsequent passing *beyond* the tree creates a sense of crossing a threshold. The crossing of thresholds, most importantly those at the boundaries between the Lower, Middle, and Upper worlds, is a major motif of the game, and the inclusion of the foreground brings this experience into the moment to moment gameplay.

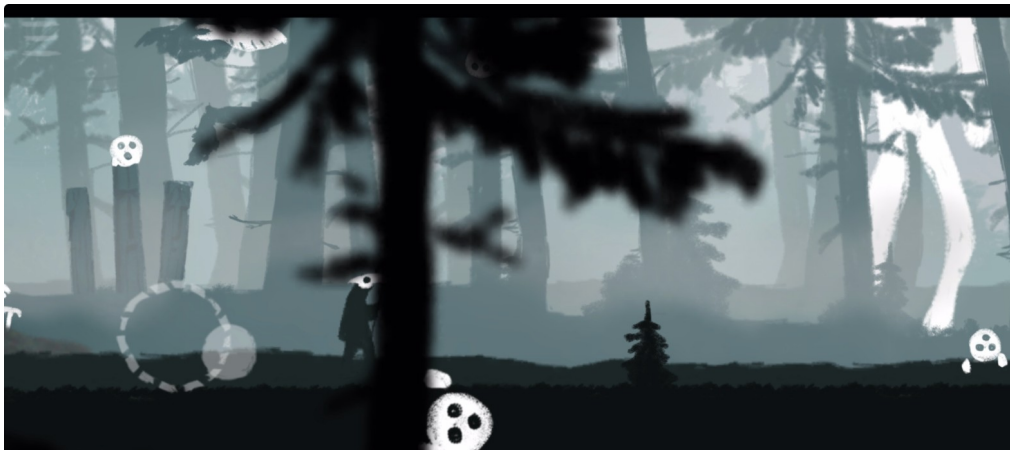


Figure 3: The protagonist, with the “mask” engaged, passes behind a tree.

There is also the matter of the spirits: when the player uses their mask feature, they can view spirits (called “Chud”⁶). These spirits are a stark white, and frequently move in looped, unnatural patterns. This gives the spirits a sense of otherworldliness, and creates the sensation that the world as seen through the spirits is more dynamic and less stable than the world through mortal eyes. Additionally, some spirits are shown clinging to elements of the foreground, demonstrating visually that they are everywhere, and that they surround the player (Figure 3).

Lastly, I would like to note the inclusion of the student choir of Perm Krai College of Arts and Culture as a part of the audio of the game. The choir is used to emphasize the spirituality of certain scenes, such as when the player watches the souls of the dead passing on the afterlife, when the sun rises as the player ascends from the underworld, and when the player succeeds in their mission and delivers the sun into heaven. They sing two songs: “Asya Kya,” a Komi-Zyrian folk song, and “Yen Dzodzogez,” a Komi-Permian folk song (Morteshka 2017). *The Mooseman* is a game that is very upfront about its grounding in the mythology of a specific place, and the community that lives there, extending from the inspiration to the decision to make the game playable in Komi-Permian (Morteshka 2017; Morteshka n.d.). The inclusion of local communities is an important part of cultural preservation (Logan et al. 2015), and the inclusion of the choir not only tethers the game to the region it represents, but also grounds it in the folk tradition it invokes. Further, the choice to use the local audio at such pivotal times suggests the importance of this decision – the game directly tethers spiritually meaningful scenes with the inclusion of the local community, elevating that inclusion to a spiritual level.

Mechanics

The last, but certainly not least, perspective with which I would like to analyze the game is from the perspective of its mechanics. While prior sections could be applicable to other forms of preservation, it is *The Mooseman's* nature as a ludic object that sets it apart from traditional approaches.

The first mechanic that the player is introduced to is walking – not only is it the first part of the controls introduced (and available before other mechanics and controls are unlocked), it also makes up the bulk of the game. The player spends most of their time walking, and even when other mechanics are used (usually to solve a puzzle), walking is still incorporated.⁷ This may seem like an obvious inclusion, but it bears mentioning for its connection to the Permian animal style. The style frequently includes a central figure surrounded by other zoomorphic figures in a sort of frame: often the central figure is the only one depicted as moving (Limerov 2005, 107-109). This, alongside other methods, has led some academics to conclude that the animal style castings represent specific moments from the mythological cycle of their creators – a premise on which *The Mooseman* is based (Morteshka n.d.). The central importance of the walking mechanic to gameplay, then, is a part of the broader endeavor of the game to depict its reconstructed mythology. This is further reinforced by the behavior of the camera, which briefly but noticeably continues to move after the player has stopped. This creates the sense that forward motion is the default and expected path forward for the player – de-emphasizing player agency in a way that reinforces that the story they are playing through, the solar myth, is not being forged by their actions but rather told through them by way of the framing narrative. This emphasis on the character and the story over the player is in contrast to many games' approach to the playable character, in which the boundary between the character and the player controlling them is often blurry (e.g. Ford 2025, 78-81). Instead, this approach is better described as a “restoration of behavior,” a term brought into games from theatre which describes the way a player, through play, concretizes a specific version of a *pre-determined* set of events laid out by the game (Fernandez-Vara 2009).

This de-emphasis on agency makes it especially jarring when, in order to collect certain artifacts, the player is required to move to the left (most of the game is spent moving to the right), often so as to move just outside of the starting bounds of the camera for the scene. This establishes that the collectibles are, at best, partially diegetic, as they frequently appear behind the player in the same corridor they walked in from. This plays into their role in the meta narrative: as the descriptions of these collectibles contain academic information and citations, they exist primarily as a real world informational text, rather than as in-game objects. While some collectibles present themselves directly to the player, many require the player to approach the game in unusual ways, testing different approaches and breaking the direct narrative of the game.⁸ This mechanically represents a deconstruction of the narrative as presented, encouraging players to embody through their play the research act of critically analyzing the myth for more information on their origins.

After walking, the second mechanic the game presents the player with is the ability to see spirits – an ability referred to in some fan-made paratexts as the “mask” (Threetimes 2020a). This serves as the basis for many of the game's puzzles: some objects are only present in the world when the mask is either on or off, and other objects behave differently when it is on. Of particular importance to the portrayal of

folk-belief is the lack of direct control the player has over the environment. While activating the mask might make some objects in the world move, for instance, the player themselves does not control them: instead, the player must learn their behaviors in order to manipulate them into moving when and where the player needs them to be.⁹ This is reflected in the encyclopedia entry on the Chud – “[t]here are spirits everywhere, and if you understand their behavior, you can control them” (Morteshak 2018, Chud). This establishes two things: first, the player's relationship to the spirits is not one of domination, but rather one of influence: nudging the spirits in a way that leverages their existing behaviors to your advantage. This is indicative of many folk-ritual practices, including those from Perm, which treat the ritual as a method of influencing or gaining favors with certain spirits (Paulson 1965).¹⁰ This is further mechanically reinforced by the speed of the moving objects, which travel slower than the player walks. This requires the player to intentionally match pace with the spirit: if they move at their normal speed, they will leave the spirit behind. The act of influencing the spirits, then, is not one that comes on the players terms, but rather requires patience and the acceptance of the terms of the spirits.

Besides demonstrating the relationship between the player and the spirits, the mechanic of spirits moving also establishes another significant theme of the game: that of the importance of knowledge.¹¹ This is laid out directly in the Myths encyclopedia: the player is described as among the “Ones Who Know” (Morteshka 2018, Sir-Yu River, amongst others) and, as mentioned, the mechanics of manipulating the spirit world are described as relying on the player character to “understand their behavior” (Morteshak 2018, Chud). This is perhaps established in no better way than in the importance placed on foreknowledge by the game. This importance is expressed in the game's difficulty, which depends on your understanding of the puzzles it presents. For example, towards the end of the game there is a scene in which the player, flying on the back of a bird, needs to navigate through a thunderstorm by dodging the oncoming thunder clouds. Because of how far to the right of the screen the player is during this scene, it is difficult to respond to the clouds appearing fast enough to evade them. In order to beat this section, therefore, the player needs to either be lucky or to have foreknowledge of the positions at which the clouds will spawn.¹²

Perhaps the best example of the importance placed on foreknowledge, however, is in the “simon-says” puzzles that are scattered throughout the game. These puzzles rely on the player approaching a series of glowing objects, noting which order they glow in, then going to each of the objects in that order and performing an action (either activating the mask or the light, depending on the iteration of the puzzle), then undoing that action before proceeding to the next object. These puzzles appear early in the game, with the glowing making clear to the player that there is some form of puzzle to be solved there, but there is no actual instruction given until near the end, when the completion of one is required in order to progress through the game. Only then does the game prompt the player on how to actually complete the puzzles (and even then the guidance is limited). In order to complete the game to 100%, then, the player is required to come into the game with knowledge of mechanics that will not be introduced until the end. This is a subversion of the notion that a puzzle should present the player with all the information they need to solve it (Fernandez-Vara 2023). It's noteworthy that, as a solar myth, the direct narrative depicted in The Mooseman is cyclical – every night a Mooseman must journey into the underworld and return with a piece of the sun. The initial appearance of the simon-says puzzle is actually slightly different than the final one, relying on a different input to complete.

This makes the first puzzle a mechanical innovation on the last, suggesting that it is actually developing on the players prior playthrough of the game, and thus of a prior cycle of the myth.

The “Myths” Encyclopedia

Arguably one of the most important mechanics of the game is the “Myths” encyclopedia. As the player progresses through the game, they come across totems – wooden poles with eyes carved into them. As they pass these totems, they “light” them (accomplished simply by passing them in the world), both unlocking the totem as a save point and also unlocking a new encyclopedia entry¹³ – giving them access to information that explains, elaborates on, and contextualizes the actions of the player. For example, the second entry in the encyclopedia, “Sir-Yu River,” is unlocked by the player immediately before they are faced with the challenge of crossing a river, and reads as follows:

“The Middle World is separated from the Lower by the great river Sri-Yu. It circles the Worlds and shrouds the World of the Dead from the World of the Living. The waters of the Sri-Yu are home to Vakul. He devours all who dare to trespass on his dominion. Only the Ones Who Know have the knowledge to find a bridge that leads from the one World to the other. There are other rivers that flow between the Worlds.” (Morteshka 2018, Sir-Yu River)

While the gameplay of this section itself consists simply of crossing an unnamed river using the mask mechanic, this entry provides context that explains that action’s significance in the narrative: the river is not just any river, but rather the border between the Middle and Lower worlds, and the player character must cross it in order to journey into the afterlife. This divide, between the elaborated story provided by reading the encyclopedia entries and the simplified story presented to the player through gameplay alone, continues throughout the entirety of the game. In order to fully understand the direct narrative, you need to consult and read the encyclopedia. This encourages the player to read and engage with the encyclopedia mechanic, and also mechanically represents the research that forms the meta-narrative, which relies on comparisons between the Permian animal style castings with other archaeological evidence, as well as recorded folklore from across Eurasia (Limerov 2005). This turns engaging with the direct narrative into a form of what Fernandez-Vara (2023) calls “exegetic play,” in which the processing of information becomes a component of the play experience. Further, the act of consulting the encyclopedia involves taking the non-diegetic action of opening the pause menu, then navigating to the encyclopedia to read further. This creates practical distance between the gameplay and the myths, allowing the game to represent cross referencing across types of sources without needing to exit the game application.

In addition to the division between the direct narrative as told through gameplay and the direct narrative as told through the encyclopedia, the “Sir-Yu River” entry also demonstrates another common trend in the Myths entries: it shows that information is frequently provided out of order. In this case, the entry refers to “Vakul,” a powerful pike fish that appears as a boss later in the game. This trend is more noticeable in the entry “Kudym-Osh,” which tells the story of a dead tribal leader of the same name. The totem that provides this story, however, is located immediately *beyond* the room in which the spirit of Kudym-Osh himself appears. In order to exit his room and

reach the totem, the player needs to first solve a puzzle in which they press buttons in the correct order of his life events, based not on the encyclopedia entry but on the cave paintings on the rooms walls.¹⁴ The information being out of order both forces the player to learn it in stages – first seeing the cave paintings depicting events surrounding a bear, then seeing a spirit standing over a coffin, then speaking to the spirit,¹⁵ before finally being able to read his story in more detail. In addition, on a broader level, this lack of order prompts the player to conceptualise the myths and the game as an interconnected whole, since the encyclopedia entries could refer to any point in the game. This once again invokes the research of the meta narrative, as it encourages the player to think critically about how different sources of information connect, and how they might fit together to form a cohesive whole.

Another important aspect of the Myths encyclopedia is the way that it provides information that is not directly relevant to the gameplay itself. For example, the entry for “Wolf” refers to the place of the wolf in the cosmological history of the game world, and the circumstances of their creation. Wolves, however, only appear as physical targets to shoot with a bow over the course of a flashback scene. Their role in the game itself does not involve the history of their creation, and having that knowledge does not directly add to the narrative evoked by the gameplay. While this information is not especially relevant to the direct narrative of the game, it is relevant to the meta narrative, as it reaffirms for the player that the game is a source of knowledge even outside of the gameplay itself.

Finally, it is important to note that there are several myths in the game that directly contradict each other. “Creation of Man,” for instance, refers to Yen as having “filled the Middle world with spirits, animals, and men” (Morteshka 2018, Creation of Man) – this is in direct contradiction with the later entry “Genesis,” which tells a version of the creation of the world in which the Chud (spirits) are born out of the shell from which Yen was born (Morteshka 2018, Genesis). This contradiction is reflective of the nature of the mythological canon, suggesting that the Myths are genuine rather than invented. Additionally, it prompts the player to meaningfully weigh the differences when deciding their understanding of the mythology.

Paratext as Mechanic

While the Myths encyclopedia encourages the player to think along the lines of cross-referencing and research, this is further reinforced by the tendency of the game to direct players towards paratextual materials. This is most obvious in the inclusions of overt citations, found both in the descriptions of the collectible artefacts and the game’s end credits. These then direct the player towards external sources on the mythology of the game. This is not the only instance of this direction, however. I have already discussed the lack of proper explanation for some of the puzzles, some of which even go so far as to provide the player with contradictory signals on their success.¹⁶ This then encourages (though does not *force*) players to consult external paratextual materials, such as guides or walkthroughs, in order to progress through the game. Combined with the Myths encyclopedia,¹⁷ this serves to make the experience of playing *The Mooseman* itself something of a research project, as the player is encouraged to jump between sources to properly understand the game.

DISCUSSION

Use of Specific Mythological Motifs in *The Mooseman*

Over the course of its runtime, *The Mooseman* incorporates many mythological and faux-mythological motifs, of varying degrees of adherence to its underlying source material. One example of motifs that adhere to its sources in a way that keeps to their original forms is in the story of Kudym-Osh, whose spirit the player meets shortly after arriving in the land of the dead. Kudym-Osh is a figure from Komi-Permian folklore: like in the game, he is the son of a one-eyed spiritual figure¹⁸ and a bear, and like in the game, the woman he marries is at first depicted as “ugly”¹⁹ before being revealed at the wedding to be beautiful (Limerov 2005; Uliashev 2019). Additionally, the main character's status as a demi-god is reflective of the view in Komi myth that all the world, including gods, spirits, and wildlife, are connected through familial kinship ties (Limerov 2005).

More frequently, however, the game takes significant liberties with the presentation of its myths. This is most apparent in the two dominant mythological narratives of the game: that of the creation of the world, and that of the solar myth that serves as the actual gameplay. Perhaps the most notable change to the creation myth is its limitation to a singular demiurge: in Komi folklore, the world is created not just by Yen but also by Omöl, Yen's sibling and the source of the world's evil (Limerov 2019). While there remains significant overlap in the stories – the laying of eggs by a duck, the hatching of the demiurge(s), and the eventual creation of the three worlds out of the body of the mother and the shells of her eggs – the lack of a second god foundationally changes its character. Further, in the original myths Yen is depicted as a bird, in contrast to the game's choice to portray him as a moose (Chesnokova 1995; Limerov 2019; Morteshka 2018, Genesis). Vladimir Beletsky, the game's designer, described this change as a way of making the myth “pre-Christian” – a reference to the traditional association of Yen with God and Omöl with Satan (Limerov 2019; properm.ru 2017). This new version of Yen is reminiscent in several ways of the Saami myth of the reindeer Meandash, which Beletsky has cited as a source of inspiration for the game's mythology (dtf.ru 2017). Meandash, for instance, is often shown as having selected a wife from among three daughters, and then eventually fleeing his marriage in response to a bad smell (Ernits 1999; 2000; Morteshka 2018, Daughter of Man; Morteshka 2018, Separation).²⁰ Meandash is also, notably, a masculine figure – while Yen is depicted as male in *The Mooseman* (as he is in Komi folklore, where he is a bird), deer are conventionally seen as feminine in Komi myth (Limerov 2005).

The solar myth that makes up the gameplay has been changed as well. The game makes reference to a cosmic hunt, in which a moose carrying the sun is hunted down by the sky god,²¹ eventually causing night. A version of this myth exists, in various forms, across Eurasia (Limerov 2005).²² The game makes changes, however, in the way that it uses the death of the solar elk to justify its own, separate solar myth, that of the recovery of the sun by the mooseman.

The Mooseman as Preservation

This then invokes another consideration: that of whether or not *The Mooseman* can be seen as a form of cultural preservation. The designer of the game has made it clear that goal of the game is not to provide a strictly accurate depiction of the myths, which he acknowledges are unknowable, but instead to provide an artistic interpretation of

what they might be as inspired by academic research (Morteshka 2018; Morteshka n.d.; properm.ru 2017). Despite this, they also provide sources for the player to read, should they want to learn more, and as mentioned earlier they mechanically encourage players to do so. In this regard, it can be seen as what Bailey (2024) calls a “devious archive” – an interactive exploration of a more speculative mode of history.

This situates *The Mooseman* at a point of debate found in the fields of folkloristics and heritage studies: that of “authenticity” (Dundes 1985; Hafstein 2012; Handler & Linnekin 1984; Logan et al. 2015). This parallels a similar point of friction in game studies, especially in regards to history games, about the nature of authenticity and accuracy (Lozano 2020; McCall 2022). The core conflict in both cases is between representation and invention. It might be accurate to refer to *The Mooseman* as “fakelore,” a somewhat derogatory description coined to describe media that presents invented material as an academic representation of “real” folklore (Dundes 1985). This is a complicated topic, however. Not only is the history of academic collections of folklore littered with instances of this practice —the Brothers Grimm, for example, frequently heralded as among the founders of folklore as a discipline, are known to have doctored their field notes prior to publication, as did V. Charnoluski, one of the scholars cited by *The Mooseman* (Bacchilega 2012; Dundes 1985; Ernits 2000) – but the very notion of a “legitimate” representation is itself up for debate. Handler and Linnekin (1984), for instance, argued that the concept of a “tradition” can only be seen as a lens through which we view modern practice and material. Hafstein (2012) made a similar argument about “heritage,” suggesting it is simply a framework for organizing the use of present resources.

Copplestone (2017) identifies how “success” for the use of games in preservation is contingent on assumptions about what it actually means, which are often different between stakeholders. *The Mooseman* uses a mix of sourced and invented material in its presentation of its mythology. In some cases, this style of “selective authenticity” (Koski 2017) or “selective realism” (Ford 2025, 107-109) can prove problematic, as it can lead to players inferring that the game can be viewed as an authoritative source on *all* of the material that it depicts. Left unchecked, this perception of authoritativeness can lead to the recreation and reinforcement of harmful discourse and stereotypes (Levy 2026). Copplestone (2017) notes that this potential for misleading players was an active concern among some cultural heritage practitioners. This is not absolute, however. As Vandewalle (2023) points out, all games about mythology necessarily collapse their source material into a single “version,” a fact which doesn’t negate their potential for educational use.²³ As Koski (2017) establishes in his analysis of *Valkyria Chronicles*, fictionalized representations of topics subject to cultural narratives can still engage with the player’s understanding of, and relationship to, those topics.²⁴ To adapt this to mythology specifically, even a fictionalized (or “artistically reconstructed”) version of a mythology can engage with the mythos’ “semantic centers,” or the core ideas that serve as frames of reference for the mythology’s use in differing contexts (see Ford 2025, 41-42; Schjødt 2013). This demonstrates, at minimum, the possibility of validity in *The Mooseman*’s approach, if also risk. While the risks should not be dismissed, the game’s decision to present its status as an “artistic reconstruction” front and center at the start of every play session mitigates the concern that players will interpret it too literally. Additionally, the presentation of citations ensures that curious players can find academic resources to pursue further reading.²⁵

There is also the question of commercial pressures on preservation projects. *The Mooseman* is, in addition to being a work of art and an effort of cultural preservation, a product that can be bought on multiple platforms. This is not as uncommon as it might seem – plenty of “heritage preservation,” including on the governmental level, is driven by the view of heritage as a resource that can be exploited for profit (Hafstein 2012; Logan et al. 2015). This goes hand in hand with the state of folklore as a whole: the development and transmission of folklore have become increasingly professionalized, and the use of a “folkloric” aesthetic has been increasingly leveraged to market products for sale (Bacchilega 2012; Noyes 2012). This does not universally mean that the product is destructive, however. Much has been said about the game *Never Alone*, which incorporated indigenous Alaskan community members into its design process, and how it subverted the tendency of games to prioritize white colonial narratives (de Vasconcelos Neto & Alves 2020; Massanari 2015; *Never Alone* n.d.).²⁶

Games can serve as a powerful preserver and transmitter of folklore (Levy 2026). This is reflected in the movement by many modern stewards of heritage towards digital forms, including interactive exhibitions (Logan et al. 2015). Games that draw on cultural heritage have the opportunity to bring their cultures to people who might otherwise not have ever interacted with them, and in doing so encourage them to engage with it. Bailey (2024) observed this in the development of fan-made paratexts that explore and explain the historical context of the game *Black Book*, another game developed by Morteshka. This usage of games to preserve and convey culture is both high risk and higher reward: if developed carelessly, a game can perpetuate and reinforce harmful stereotypes (Levy 2026). If used towards positive ends, however, games can serve as a unique form of cultural preservation, both democratizing and decolonizing heritage.

CONCLUSION

The Mooseman is a game that presents a version of Permian mythology through the lens of artistic interpretation. It uses its various components to portray a supposed pre-Christian Finno-Ugric solar myth, and uses its mechanics to encourage the player to critically engage with this material not just as a body of knowledge, but as a process of information gathering (that is to say, research). While the game is informed by academic research and formal preservation institutions -- notably the Perm Historical Museum -- it takes artistic liberties that make it distinct from scholarship. It frontloads this distinction, however, and provides ample opportunities for the player to engage directly with the scholarship that informed it. In particular, the inclusion of a bibliography makes moving from the game to scholarly sources much easier for any players that may want to. The game’s existence provides a new pathway for more people to discover and learn about Finno-Ugric mythology, in ways that leverage its ludic form. In this sense, it succeeds as an effort of preservation.

Ultimately, the question of games and cultural preservation is not *whether* games can be considered a part of preservation: they already are. Instead, the focus of research should be on how they behave, how they can be used, and what their strengths and limitations might be. Cultural preservation is a multi-faceted endeavour, and the role of games therein can only be understood by seeing them as one part of a broader ecosystem. Cultural preservation is, and will continue to be, a combination of art and scholarship, conducted by a mix of professionals, individuals, and institutions. Research on games in preservation is an ongoing topic of study – future research must

grapple, of course, with the nature of games as ludic objects, but must also consider their relationship to other methods. By engaging in topics at the intersection of game studies, folkloristics, and heritage studies, we can better understand the role that games can and do play in the development and perpetuation of culture, and use that to create a more equitable approach to preservation.

ENDNOTES

1. A note on translation: the term “лось,” in Russian, is translated by *The Mooseman* as “Moose.” In British English, this same word (which refers to the *Alces* genus) is translated as “elk,” a word that in America refers to a different animal (*Cervus Canadensis*). Because several of my sources are published in Europe, and use the British translation, for the sake of this paper I have opted to use the two interchangeably, referring to the *Alces* in both cases. It is also worth noting that, while “лось” refers to the *Alces* genus specifically, there is also work that has been done connecting the folk-belief of ancient Eurasia to the deer family more generally (Limerov 2005, 128; Mikhailova 2006; Konakov & Black 1994).

2. A note on terms: *The Mooseman* makes reference to two of the branches of the Komi people: the Komi-Permians and the Komi-Zyrians. Both of these terms appear elsewhere in the literature surrounding them: the Komi are members of the “permian” language family, a branch of the Finno-Ugric language family (Paulson 1965). Additionally, prior to the 20th century the term “Zyrian” was used to refer to all Komi (Jääts 2009).

3. The intro sequence for the game also references the “Mansi,” an Ob-Ugric people.

4. I use the romanization “Yen” in this paper as that is the version used in *The Mooseman*. The most frequent spelling I have seen has been “Jen,” and I have also seen “En” used.

5. The audio of the cut-scene is in Komi – this is the text translation that appears on screen.

6. Outside of the game, “Chud” refers both to a historical group of Baltic Finns, and also to a mythologized pagan people (Jääts 2009; Limerov 2005).

7. It’s worth mentioning that the PC version (Morteshka 2017) includes the option to auto walk, which limits, but does not remove, the need for the player to directly control their avatar. This reinforces the divide between the player and their avatar, but since it is not included in the mobile version (Morteshka 2018), I avoid analysis of it in the body of the paper.

8. Alternatively, they could consult paratextual sources such as guides or walkthroughs – a process that I will consider in more depth later.

9. As an example of the moving objects, there are many rocks which, when the mask is on, will be revealed to be “reptiles” (Morteshka 2018, Reptiles), and then move towards the player if they are within range. The player can pass through them when the mask is on, but climb over the rock when it is not. Puzzles that use these rocks involve both leading the rock to a place where it provides a ramp up a ledge, as well

as hiding by standing inside the rock when the mask is turned off, thus making other creatures walk over the now solid rock.

10. For an example of this, consider the ritual sacrifice to ward off excessive winds, described by Paulson (1965, 165): “In some places the forest spirit was offered sacrifices twice a year, in the spring and the fall. In the spring a gray sheep and a goose were slain, and at the same time prayers were said asking that there not be too strong a wind in the summer”. Notably, rather than phrasing the ritual as a demand or other form of compulsion, the ritual consists of asking the forest spirit to behave in a certain way, in the hopes that it cooperates of its own accord: the agency is preserved by the forest spirit itself.

11. In addition to this theme’s appearance in the direct narrative, it also appears in the meta narrative, as the importance of knowledge is implicit in the drive to collect and derive it. It is also implicit in the framing narrative, as attending the presentation of a myth that describes and explains the world implicitly attaches value to that explanative story. This is another example of the three levels of narrative reinforcing each other.

12. Either by dying and retrying the scene, having played the game before, or consulting a guide.

As another, anecdotal example, on my first playthrough, my battle with Cheran (one of the game’s bosses) took me several tries, as I brute forced the button combination required to finish his puzzle and beat him. On my second playthrough, however, I understood that the wall paintings in the background represented the order I needed to press the buttons, and beat him on the first try and without much difficulty.

13. The game frames this unlocking as “deciphering” - all of the entries are visible from the start, but the text is written in the old-permic script.

14. Admittedly, I brute forced this combination on my first playthrough, and left with little understanding of Kudym-Osh’s story.

15. This is one of only a few occurrences of dialogue within the direct narrative itself.

16. For example, one puzzle requires the player to guide a series of rabbits to a giant bird, so that the bird eats them and flies away, in order to clear it from your path. While the rabbits will run away from you if you move towards them, they will not go far enough to be eaten by the bird unless you activate both your mask and your light before approaching them (Threetimes 2020b). During my playthrough, I intuited the need to push the rabbits, but thought my conclusion was wrong when the rabbits refused to go all the way to the bird. This then pushed me to consult a guide in order to proceed.

17. A less direct example of this is the game’s use of achievements to inform the player of what is happening in the game. For instance, when you escape the underworld while playing on an iPhone, you will receive the achievement “Middle World: You now walk among the living.” Because this achievement appears at the top of the screen when it is unlocked, it allows the player to see the context of their current gameplay actions from an external source while staying within the game, allowing the game itself to stay silent.

18. The game refers to her as a “priestess,” while Uliashev (2019) refers to her as a “shaman.”

19. In the folklore, her “ugly” form is connected to that of an elk – this is connected to the portrayal of elk as feminine in Komi mythology (Limerov 2005). This portrayal was likely made more complicated in *The Mooseman* by the decision to change Yen from a water fowl to a moose – since Yen is a masculine god, and the player is explicitly his son, the player's exposure to the iconography of the moose is predominantly masculine.

20. It's important to note that depictions of Meandash vary, and these properties are reflected in some, but not all variants. For more, see Ernits (1999; 2000).

21. The theonym “Yen” implies that he is a sky god (Limerov 2019). In other versions of the myth, it is a bear, not the sky god, doing the hunting (Limerov 2005; Uliashev 2019).

22. A version of the myth in which the hunted elk carries the sun (like in *The Mooseman*) is known in the mythology of people in Siberia – however the inclusion of elk carrying the sun in Perm animal style castings, as well as evidence for a pre-Ural version of the myth of the cosmic hunt in some form, indicate that the myth likely existed in Perm as well (Limerov 2005).

23. In this context, *The Mooseman's* decision to include conflicting portrayals of its mythology in its encyclopedia actually further mitigates the risk of players over-interpreting the games' authoritativeness, as the game's material demonstrates that such contradictions are possible.

24. While Koski's analysis focuses on history, the underlying approach (that of the invocations of popular discourses by fictionalized representations of their subjects) is shared with cultural heritage. Additionally, the boundary between history and cultural heritage (and, for that matter, between history and mythology) is thin at best. For more on this, see Coppleson (2017), Vandewalle (2023), and any number of chapters from the 2024 volume *Central and Eastern European Histories and Heritages in Video Games*, especially those by Bailey; Makai; Maravić et al., and Pýcha & Váňa.

25. It's important to note that the inclusion of academic sources does not on its own ensure that the game is not at risk of recreating harmful discourses (see Said 1978/1994), nor does the designer's appreciation for the culture being depicted (Macfie 2002). For more on this as it relates to games, see Levy (2026).

26. On the topic of game development as a market, it's worth noting that some scholars have observed an increased interest in games centering Eastern European/Russian myth (Makai 2025; Maravić et al. 2025). If this trend continues it might imply that more games of this nature will be developed in the near future.

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