

Between Pleasure and Harm: Transcreating a Serious Game on Older Adult Mistreatment with Indigenous Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how play can support, rather than undermine, engagement with the serious topic of older adult mistreatment through the Indigenous adaptations of *La valise de Lise*. Originally designed as a slow, collaborative escape-room style game, *La valise de Lise* asks players to piece together the story of an older woman experiencing mistreatment within her family. When adapting the game for Cree and Inuit communities, it became clear that standard translation practices could not account for culturally specific understandings of kinship, harm, and care. The project therefore relied on collaborative transcreation, reworking story arcs, objects, puzzles, and tone while maintaining the game's core interpretive structure. These adaptations, *Jane's Journey* and *Mary's Message*, show how play can create enough emotional distance to approach difficult material, provided it is carefully calibrated. Transcreation emerges as an ethical method that supports culturally grounded conversations about mistreatment.

Keywords

Critical gerontology, serious games, Indigenous game adaptation, older adult mistreatment, play and cultural context, cultural adaptation, community-engaged research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Serious games often rely on familiar dynamics of play. Curiosity, collaborative problem solving, and the pleasure of working through a clue can draw people into topics that they might otherwise avoid. When the subject is older adult mistreatment, however, play becomes charged in a particular way. It can create an opening, but it can also feel at odds with the gravity of the issue. This paper examines how that tension is negotiated in *La valise de Lise*, which led to the co-development of adaptations of the game with two Indigenous communities: the James Bay Cree and Nunavik Inuit. We argue that the concept of transcreation offers an ethically attuned and culturally grounded approach for the co-creation of serious games across contexts.

In the original Québec French version of *La valise de Lise*, players open a locked suitcase and piece together the fragments of a fictional older woman's life. As players solve the puzzles, examine objects, decipher documents, and work together to interpret clues, they gradually recognize a situation of mistreatment within a family setting that is subtle and relational. The game, which is inspired by the escape room genre, asks players to pay attention and recognize the ambiguity often present in situations of mistreatment. In Haraway's terms, it encourages them to "stay with the trouble" (2016) rather than reach for quick resolutions. In line with Flanagan's (2009) work on critical play, the game relies on the capacity of play to unsettle assumptions and open pathways for reflection within a structured but exploratory environment.

When the Cree and Inuit communities invited our team to adapt the game, a first, obvious step to initiating the adaptation was considering translation (from the original French to English, Cree, or Inuktitut) and localization (setting the game in "the North"). However, these two processes would not have been adequate for this work. Both translation and localization would have left the underlying text stable across cultural contexts, merely converting the language of play and leading to superficial changes in game elements (Bernal-Merino 2015; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). While accounting for these aspects is crucial, older adult mistreatment is not experienced or interpreted in identical ways across communities and cultures. The clues that signal harm, the nuances of family relationships, and the words available to describe dynamics all carry different meanings—not to mention the context of colonial domination and histories of local resistances. Mere translation into Cree or Inuktitut, for example, still risks transporting external understandings of mistreatment from the South into a Northern context where they do not fit, may flatten local concepts of kinship, care, and obligation, and may reproduce past histories of colonial violence and trauma.

Further, play, storytelling, and collaborative problem-solving already hold deep cultural significance in Cree and Inuit social life, often shaping how learning unfolds and how knowledge is transmitted across generations. Work by Cruikshank (1998) on storytelling as situated knowledge and by Igloliorte (2017) on Inuit narrative and visual practices underscores the importance of understanding play not simply as "mechanics" but as culturally meaningful modes of engagement.

For this reason, the adaptation work has entailed slow, in-depth collaborations with local community members, as well as a demand that we situate ourselves as

members of white settler culture. Transcreation is a concept that offers an understanding of the need for an expansive and creative re-authoring of content in this context. The goal of transcreation as a process is not to preserve the source text but to retain the intended emotional and narrative force (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2006; Pedersen 2014). Transcreation assumes that a one-to-one equivalence across cultures is rarely possible and acknowledges that narrative, tone, pacing, meaning, and affect need to be redefined. In the case of *La valise de Lise*, this has meant rethinking story arcs, using locally meaningful objects and symbols, working with local artists, rethinking puzzles, and reframing the relational dynamics at the core of the story. The core experience remains the same insofar as players still discover mistreatment through careful collective inquiry, yet the expression of that experience shifts in ways that are culturally appropriate and take into account the specific history of colonialism and decolonization being undertaken by these two Indigenous communities. The titles of the new games, *Jane's Journey* and *Mary's Message*, reflect this re-authoring process and the collaborative shaping of each game's narrative identity.

These changes bring forward a question: How can the playful qualities of the game support thoughtful engagement with a topic shaped by histories of pain, vulnerability, and silence? The Cree and Inuit adaptations do not reject playfulness and pleasure. Instead, they treat them as tools to be handled with intention. Enjoyment does not erase seriousness; rather, it can create enough distance for participants to move toward a discussion of difficult material at a manageable pace.

In this presentation, we argue that transcreation, as a guiding concept, serves three important functions. First, it preserves the procedural intention of the game rather than its literal storyline. Following Bogost's work on procedural rhetoric (2007), what matters is the structure of inquiry and interpretation that the game invites. Second, it enables ethical resonance with the targeted community of players. By reworking both narrative and material cues, transcreation ensures that the experience remains meaningful without imposing external moral expectations. Third, it helps manage the tension between the ludic and the serious. Playful elements are not removed, but they are used to support attentiveness, emotional pacing, and a willingness to stay in conversation. Together, these functions illustrate how transcreation contributes to broader discussions in game studies about the cultural portability of serious games and the ethical challenges of designing for diverse communities.

The Cree and Inuit adaptations of *La valise de Lise* suggest that transcreation is not a simple task of co-production. It entails an ethical commitment to designing serious games that can be adapted across cultural contexts without losing their complexity or sensitivity. Transcreation keeps the door open for curiosity, discomfort, discovery, and care, and allows players to stay with the trouble long enough to consider mistreatment in ways that acknowledge existing colonial histories and broader dynamics of power, while reflecting the specificity of cultural contexts and familial relationships.

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