



starts in Minnesota

Photos courtesy of Ben Hanson

Early versions of "The Oregon Trail" educational computer game used rudimentary graphics but fact-based information to engage young students. The game took players on a decision-making journey that had good and bad consequences.

The original creators of "The Oregon Trail" were Don Rawitsch, from left, Bill Heinemann and Paul Dillenberger.



New documentary by NL-S graduate tells the story of its origin

By Carolyn Lange
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For certain generations of school kids, learning about the western movement of early American settlers happened through a computer game called "The Oregon Trail."

Players put themselves in the role of settlers who were confronted with the challenges of not dying during their wagon train journey from Missouri to the Willamette Valley in Oregon.

Surprisingly, "The Oregon Trail" game, which is lauded as one of the most popular video games of all time, didn't originate in Oregon. Or Missouri.

It was created in 1971 in Minnesota by three college friends who didn't make a penny from the venture, even though tens of millions of copies of the game have been sold over the years.

"The Oregon Trail" should rank as high as Bob Dylan, Prince and the Coen Brothers in terms of media legends that came from Minnesota, said Ben Hanson, a 2005 New London-Spicer High School graduate who recently completed a documentary video on the origins of the game called, "Trailheads: The Oregon Trail's Origins."

Hanson started playing the game when he was about 5 years old, and he kept playing it with

friends through junior high.

"I loved it," said Hanson, who has spent much of his career involved in the video game industry. "I'd never played a game that was such an adventure."

Finding the heroes

About 10 years ago, while working for a community television station in Roseville, Hanson was looking for Minnesota stories to tell when he learned that the creators of his favorite childhood video game were from Minnesota.

Hanson found the men — Bill Heinemann, Paul Dillenberger and Don Rawitsch — and recorded video interviews with them in 2009-10.

A lot of people are familiar with the game but aren't aware it was started in Minnesota, said Hanson. "I wanted to tell that story."

He learned that the three had gone to Carleton College in Northfield and were all student teaching and living together in Minneapolis in 1971 when they were confronted with a need to create a fun activity for a junior high social studies class. They used new technology at the time and wrote an early computer program for a game they called "The Oregon Trail."

In the early 1970s computers didn't have screens, sound or visuals. The system involved

basically a "smart typewriter," said Hanson. Kids would type in an action and the computer would print out a response.

But the computer code the men created, combined with their creativity, elevated the dry

Evolution of the game

While Heinemann and Dillenberger continued teaching after college, Rawitsch began working for a new state organization called the Minnesota Educational Computing



educational games at that time into something that was fun and sought-after by students.

"They were ahead of their time," said Hanson. "They're some of the most important early game producers ... But they did not make any money off of Oregon Trail."

The game took players on a decision-making journey that had good and bad consequences.

Players had to decide how much money to spend on supplies and oxen before the journey began on the prairie and, in the final stretch, they had to decide which route to take — through the mountains where wagon wheels could break or over the river where wagons could sink.

Catastrophes awaited wrong turns and bad decisions and players received unfortunate news that they'd run out of food, or that they'd wasted bullets and buffalo by killing so many animals that the meat exceeded the wagon's weight limit.

The game didn't shy away from the reality of death and players were given heartbreaking game-stopping news that they had died of snakebite or dysentery before they could reach the land of milk and honey in the Willamette Valley.

Consortium that was created in 1973 to provide computer services to schools in the state. The Willmar School District was part of that network.

MECC also created software for educational games and Rawitsch updated "The Oregon Trail" code and, basically, gave it to MECC, which made it available to schools throughout the state.

The game got its start "because Minnesota was progressive in funding schools and using computers in schools early on," said Hanson. "Minnesota should take some pride in that."

The game was wildly popular with MECC, which was eventually sold to a tech company that later sold it for a reported \$133 million.

The three men never received any money for their work with the game, but have attained star-status among gamers who grew up playing "The Oregon Trail."

Hanson said the game, which has been updated as technology advanced, held up remarkably well for decades. But he said recent efforts to remake the game for different tech devices have not been successful.

He said the beloved game deserves a well-developed remake so a new generation of kids can play it.

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Ben Hanson, a 2005 graduate of New London-Spicer High School, recently completed a documentary on the educational game, "The Oregon Trail," which was developed in 1971 by three Minnesota college friends.

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OREGON TRAIL

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COVID-19 time

Hanson still had the raw video that told their story, but then he landed a job with Game Informer magazine, owned by GameStop, and the interviews were filed away.

“For 10 years it’s been gnawing at me,” he said.

Last year Hanson left Game Informer and started a crowd-sourced independent media outlet called MinnMax that creates podcasts, videos and interviews about the gaming community.

When COVID-19 hit, Hanson had plenty of alone time to edit the videos of Heinemann, Dillenberger and Rawitsch and he finished the documentary this fall about “The Oregon



Photos courtesy of Ben Hanson

Before modern computers, “The Oregon Trail” was first played by Minnesota school children in the early 1970s on what could be considered a glorified typewriter.

Trail” and its creators.

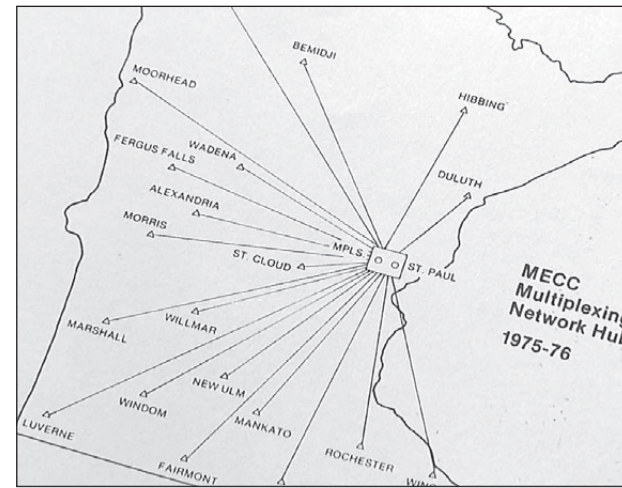
It’s available for free on YouTube.

With the motto of “games, friends and getting better” MinnMax also has

a commitment to raise money for organizations, especially those that help kids.

As part of the release of the documentary,

MinnMax is raising money for an immigrant-led non-profit organization called New Vision Foundation, that teaches



“The Oregon Trail” game was used widely in Minnesota schools through a shared computer network called the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium, which included Willmar. A documentary on the history of “The Oregon Trail,” and its Minnesota creators, was made recently by 2005 New London-Spicer graduate Ben Hanson.

underprivileged youth in Minnesota how to code computers.

“The documentary is about the importance of programming, teaching and selflessness, so it made sense to pay it forward and point people toward

supporting a great nonprofit like New Vision Foundation,” said Hanson.

Contributions to the fundraising campaign are open through the end of the week and can be made at givemn.org/oregontrail.

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