

What's In A Name?

MOVING BEYOND “MANIFEST DESTINY”

A few years ago, I attended a conference focused on how to reduce the implicit bias many Canadian health care practitioners have against Indigenous people. The presenter, a physician from the Squamish Nation, started her keynote speech with something that an elder had told her; something that has stuck with me ever since:

“In order to say goodbye to a problem, you must first say hello.”

What she was implying was that we couldn't solve the problem of the poor treatment Indigenous people tended to receive from health care practitioners until we acknowledged that this was a problem. More importantly, we were forced to come to terms with the fact that the problem started and ended with us - the health care community at large.

When Jay and I were first working on what has now become *Corps of Discovery*, we didn't have a world to set it in. We had this really interesting mechanism focused on exploration and deductive logic - two things we both adore. With Jay's imprint, Off The Page Games, having success with other comic book-based titles (*MIND MGMT* and *Harrow County*), we went looking for a suitable comic to expand into a full boardgaming experience. We wanted a rich world with compelling characters and a storyline that was focused on exploration and survival.

We found that in *Manifest Destiny*.

Written by Chris Dingess with art by Matthew Roberts and colours by Owen Gieni, the critically acclaimed and provocatively titled *Manifest Destiny* tells the story of the Corps of Discovery, the famed Lewis and Clark expedition in an alternate timeline. Similar to the actual expedition, Sacagawea, a young Lemhi Shoshone woman, guides the Corps of Discovery as they trek across the country. Unlike their historical counterparts, the comic versions of Lewis and Clark have been tasked by then-President Thomas Jefferson with destroying all of the monsters terrorising the land. Without giving away too many spoilers, the story actively subverts many of the tenets held by those who believed in “manifest destiny”. In short, we thought it was a great fit for our next project.

When Jay announced that the next offering from Off The Page Games would be titled *Manifest Destiny*, most were intrigued and asked questions about the game's mechanisms. Some people were fans of the comic and were happy to see it make the transition to the tabletop. A few, however, reached out privately to me knowing my history with social causes and my views on colonialism. They questioned if I knew what the term “manifest destiny” actually meant and how harmful it might be to Indigenous people. They expressed concern regarding how the game would be presented and received; whether it would condone racist tropes and behaviours or if it would further marginalise Indigenous people who wanted to join in the joys of tabletop gaming.

I initially responded by sending them a link to a letter Chris Dingess wrote addressing similar concerns with the comic book ([see An Open Letter from the Writer of MANIFEST DESTINY - Skybound Entertainment](#)). I told them that while the comic was a rousing adventure on the surface, its overall message was actually a poke in the eye to “manifest destiny” – it turns the whole concept on its ear, portraying the colonists as not only fallible and misguided in their efforts, but as downright horrible in many instances. The colonists are decidedly not the heroes of this story. They are not of the superior race though they may think they are.

Without the benefit of reading all 48 issues of the comic, though, how could anyone be expected to know that? It was unfair of us to assume that people would know something as esoteric as an indie comic series. Still, the game had to share the same title as the comic book, didn't it? Jay had obtained the licence in hopes that fans of the comic would gravitate towards the game. Wouldn't people give us the benefit of the doubt and understand the artistic intent behind the title? Those who reached out to me personally were charitable, but the greater gaming public owed me no such leeway. Thus, the title needed to change, but we couldn't move past the problematic term “manifest destiny” until we acknowledged that it was, in fact, a problem.

John L. O'Sullivan, the editor of the New York-based *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, first used "manifest destiny" in his 1845 editorials where he advocated for the annexation of Texas and the Oregon Country to the United States of America. He implied that it was the God-given right of American colonists to settle the entire continent, even if it meant removing or eradicating the Indigenous people who had been stewards of the land since time immemorial. Manifest destiny was later used to justify further annexation, including that of New Mexico, Hawaii, and Alaska.

Canadians were not immune to this belief, either. During the 19th century, the rail expanded westward, carrying colonists across the prairies and into the northern regions. This has resulted in untold losses for many Indigenous communities. Land, culture, history, language, and countless lives were lost. Those who believed in manifest destiny also thought that the European colonists were superior to the Indigenous people, justifying the systematic deconstruction of Indigenous cultures via the Indian Act, reservations, and residential schooling in Canada. The intergenerational trauma and systemic oppression that affects Indigenous communities to this day are directly linked to actions taken under the auspices of manifest destiny.

So, when people saw the title *Manifest Destiny* on a game box, they were right to voice their concern. Anyone who wasn't familiar with the comic book would most likely jump to the wrong conclusion and we couldn't fault them for that. There was no way for us to inform them otherwise, especially at first glance. Even just seeing the term in an unexpected place would be like a gut punch to anyone from an affected community. Using *Manifest Destiny* as the game's title would only serve to alienate the very people we want to join the tabletop gaming community.

Jay and I never intended to harm anyone and neither did the creative team behind the comic. The risk of anyone seeing the title and feeling like they weren't welcome in the tabletop gaming community, however, was enough for us to push for a positive change – one where we would still honour the original work while avoiding the harmful terminology. Regardless of our intent, when there is a risk of harm, changes should be made. After we had discussed alternate titles with the writer and several consultants from Indigenous communities, Jay approached the licensor with Chris' blessing. Jay presented our findings to Skybound, arguing the case for a name change despite the potential loss of brand recognition. Initial misgivings aside, we reached an agreement that we are all satisfied with.

We are proud to present *Corps of Discovery* to the tabletop gaming community. We know that by moving beyond *Manifest Destiny*, we are reducing the harm experienced by people who have been negatively affected by colonisation across North America. Games, as a form of art, can and should be used to ask controversial questions but not at the risk of further traumatising or marginalising the very people we're trying to uplift.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare wrote, "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Were he still alive, I would argue with the Bard that names do matter, but it would still serve us well to remember that the original, objectionable name was not what makes the game compelling – the game is compelling in and of itself, no matter what it is called.

Written on January 10, 2024 by Sen-Foong Lim, a treaty person,
from the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee,
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