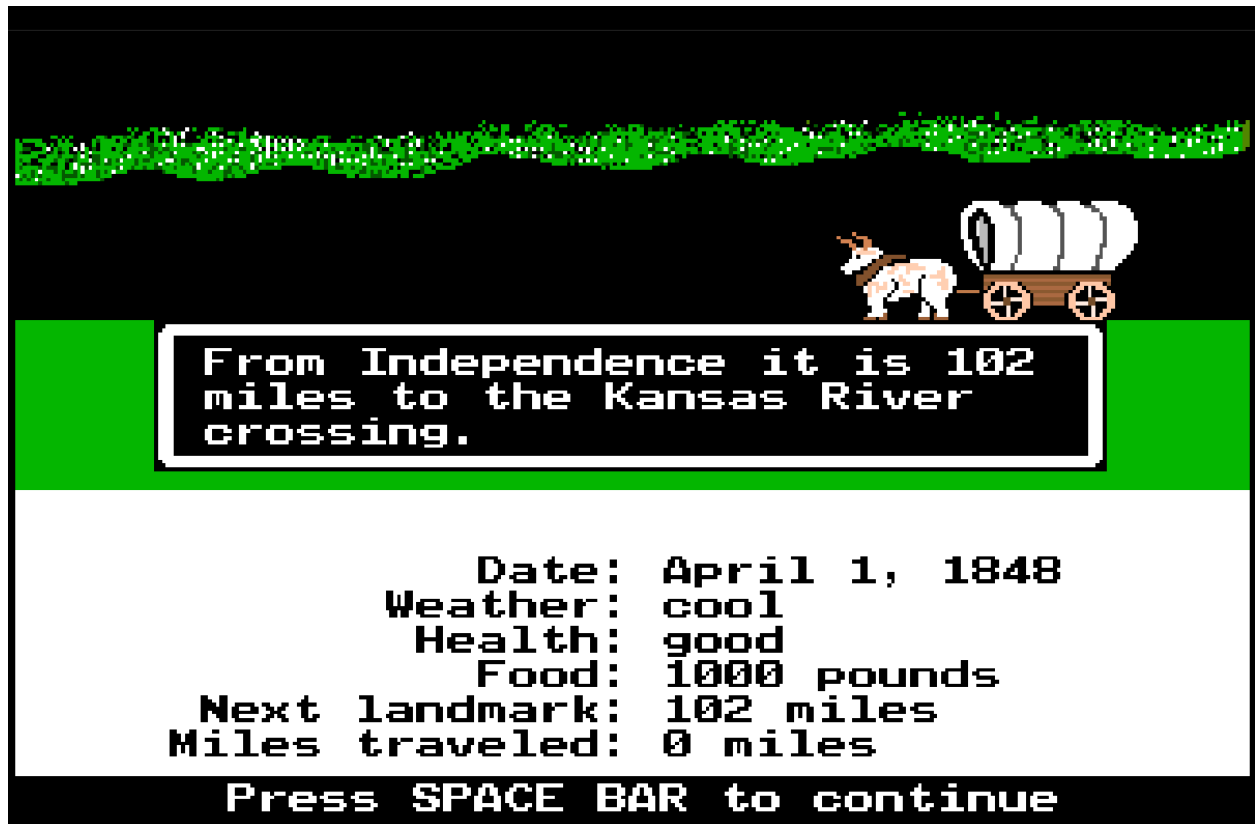


Scenarios and Redesigns

Getting Help on the Trail

The year is 1988, and 9 year old Sharon is playing the Oregon Trail as an activity for her history class. As there aren't many computers available, students are working in groups with one person working the keyboard. As Sharon has never used a computer before, she soon becomes overwhelmed trying to play the game. She types in "one" to try to begin to travel the trail, but nothing is typed out in the game. Is the keyboard broken? Her classmates tell her to type in "1" so she does, and begins the game. Once the group has made their choices and begins on the trail, the music begins to emit very loudly from the computer. How does she turn it off? No one knows. The lack of readily available instructions and feedback for inputs leads to confusion, and Sharon is embarrassed for not knowing the answers. Although many of her classmates seem to be having fun, Sharon remembers little of the historical elements of the game and isn't able to really engage with it. The experience makes her view computers as mysterious, frustrating objects to be avoided.

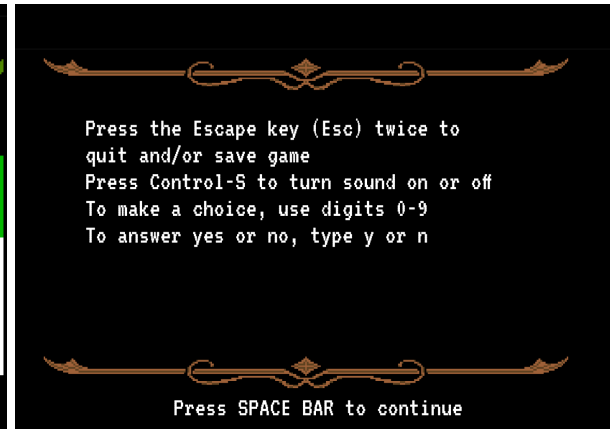
The year is 2024, and Katie has decided to engage in some nostalgia and play her favorite computer game she remembers from elementary school, Oregon Trail. She starts up an emulator and begins playing, but becomes interrupted. How does she save the game? There's no exit buttons on screen like she's experienced in current interfaces, and seemingly no instructions for how to save the game once you're playing it. She can't remember what she used to do when she was younger – she was never able to save games anyways on the shared public school computers they used to rotate using. Maybe the game just expects you to finish in one session? It was a nice walk down memory lane, but she abandons the game in the middle and never returns – her memories will have to be enough.



The original screen for The Oregon Trail when playing the game.

In this version of The Oregon Trail, a couple instructions are only available from the startup screen and not from within the game itself. Even these instructions are hidden under the "Learn about the trail" in the main menu. Instructions for which key presses register in the game under which circumstances are not available at all, leaving the potential for confusion when playing the game.

A simple redesign would be adding a key that allows players to access a help screen from within the game. Using the "?" key would make sense for a help screen and it is a character that is not already being used in the game. A short instruction for accessing a help screen could go right beneath "Press SPACE BAR to continue" and be a prominent, consistent instruction. When players press "?," it would take them to a text screen listing instructions for actions in the game (outside of hunting, which has its own instructional screen). To return to the previous screen, players would be instructed to press the spacebar.



Left: A redesigned example of an in-game screen, with a help menu now available under "Press SPACE BAR to continue." Right: A help menu designed in the style of the game.