PLAYING WITH THE WAR OF 1812: TEACHING HISTORY WITH GAMES AND 'PLAYFUL HISTORICAL THINKING'

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ABSTRACT

The complexities of the War of 1812 tend to get lost in the bicentennial commemorations. This paper explores the use of games and Robert MacDougall's concept of "playful historical thinking" as ways to let students and museum visitors discover the conflicting interpretations and uncertainties of the war. Specifically, this paper examines the alternate reality game (ARG) *Tecumseh Lies Here* which ran in the Fall of 2011.

RÉSUMÉ

Les complexités de la guerre de 1812 ont tendance à se perdre dans les commémorations du bicentenaire. Ce document explore l'utilisation des jeux et le concept de Robert MacDougall de « la pensée historique ludique » comme moyens pour laisser les étudiants et les visiteurs du musée découvrir les interprétations contradictoires et les incertitudes de la guerre. Plus précisément, cet article examine le jeu en réalité alternée (JRA) Tecumseh Lies Here, qui s'est déroulé en automne 2011.

This past summer communities across Ontario commemorated the War of 1812 and celebrated 200 years of peace between the United States and Canada. Towns and cities unveiled new parks and monuments, and somewhere every weekend a period military encampment sprung up and battle re-enactments took place. Visitors were provided with clear versions of the War of 1812 which bolstered the prevailing line in the commemorations that the conflict led to a unified and independent Canada.[1] The men in red are on our side; those in blue are the invading Americans. But the War of 1812 was rarely that simple.

The complexities of the war can be seen in the history of every community the conflict touched, a reality I encountered while working with the Eastern Ontario town of Gananoque in the lead-up to their bicentennial projects. Gananoque was a strategic supply depot along the St. Lawrence River and was raided by American forces in September 1812. The bicentennial committee came up with several interesting ideas, and in a series of private e-mails I was asked to find the identities of the militiamen who were wounded and captured during the raid so that their names could be placed on a cenotaph. It turned out that several of the captured militiamen on the list actually deserted and joined the Americans rather than fight for the British Empire. The area around Gananoque was notoriously pro-American and most settlers despised the ruling loyalist elite.[2] The local authorities spent much of the war hunting spies and traitors, and trying to prevent "desertions and vile elopements," sometimes of entire families. While the Americans made one violent attack on the community and departed, the garrisoned British soldiers stripped local farms and fields in a prolonged campaign of larceny.[3] Meanwhile, American merchants, eager for British gold, continued to trade with the north

shore of the St. Lawrence River. As Alan Taylor argues in his latest book, the War of 1812 was as much a civil war as a war between nations and empires and consisted of more shades of gray than red and blue.[4]

In addition to the uncertain loyalties of Gananoque's residents, the details of the American raid on the village were far from certain. The several surviving reports describe wildly different events. American newspapers reported the raid as a pitched battle between hundreds of redcoats and American soldiers while the memoirs of a young Canadian militiaman depict the attack as little more than an armed robbery, in which the "valiant Yankees" nabbed a few tick-ridden blankets and set a warehouse on fire. Between the fog of war and passage of years, we can be sure of very few details.[5] Tasked with creating an exhibit for the Arthur Child Heritage Museum of the Thousand Islands in Gananoque,[6] my colleague Devon Elliott and I came up with a simple yet effective way to exhibit the various accounts.[7] We made recordings of each primary source and stored them on a miniature computer connected to a speaker hidden inside an unadorned 1812 soldier's hat. In front of the hat sit two badges – one American and one British. Sensors can distinguish between the American and British badges, and when a badge is placed on the hat, the visitor hears anecdotes of that particular perspective of the raid. In total there are eight different versions of the raid, and the visitor is encouraged to come to his or her own conclusions about what really happened.

This is a simple incarnation of what Professor Robert MacDougall of the University of Western Ontario calls "playful historical thinking". By playful he does not mean cute or cartoonish, but rather play is meant as informal ways for museum visitors, students, or the public to work out the complexities of history for themselves without being spoon-fed pre-packaged verdicts. This manner of play can be fun, but it can also be anxious and difficult. In the words of Professor MacDougall, playful historical thinking is "a healthy, productive, and even responsible way for citizens of the twenty-first century to relate to the past. It recognizes limits on our ability to fully know other peoples and times, yet makes the effort to know them just the same. It wears its certainties lightly and takes pleasure in the…mystery, and strangeness of the past".[8] While people and governments might be looking for tales of nation building and the triumph of the "Spartan bands of Canadian Loyalist Volunteers"[9] over powerful invaders, teaching the complexities and ambiguities of the War of 1812 is vital for a proper understanding of the conflict.

For the past few years, I and several other graduate students at Western, working under Professor MacDougall, have been exploring the use of playful historical thinking to bring the richness of the War of 1812 to life. We focused on developing and running a new kind of game which holds promise for teaching history in complex and rewarding ways. With funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Ontario Augmented Reality Network, our goal was to devise a game in which the players had to perform the tasks of practicing historians.[10] They had to collect their own evidence, formulate their own theses, and construct their own historical narratives. This took the form of an "Augmented Reality Game" or "ARG" for short. Unlike video games, in which play occurs within a simulated, digital realm, ARGs exist in both the online world and in public spaces like streets, museums, and schools. Most ARGs rely on a community of players who have to work together in order to solve difficult puzzles, normally too challenging for one person to accomplish on their own. Game designers distribute clues, missions, and story elements through websites, email, text messages, and even objects sent through the mail or hidden in public spaces. Game players then use wikis, Twitter, and blogs to analyze evidence, solve puzzles, and ultimately direct the narrative of the game.[11] The players must question their sources and assemble a narrative based on fragmentary and contradictory evidence.

For our game, entitled *Tecumseh Lies Here*, we chose the most abiding mystery of the War of 1812: the death and disappearance of the legendary Shawnee warrior Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames in October of 1813.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee Prophet, worked to unify the First Nations of the Old Northwest into a confederation to resist advancing American settlers. In 1812 this loose confederation formed an alliance with British forces in Upper Canada. In spite of early successes along the Detroit frontier, by late 1813 the British under General Proctor abandoned the Detroit River and were in full retreat, much to the horror and astonishment of Tecumseh and his followers. Tecumseh managed to convince Proctor to make a stand near the village of Moraviantown, which resulted in a decisive American victory at the Battle of the Thames. Tecumseh was killed, the British fled, and the dream of a Native confederacy was destroyed. Controversy erupted almost immediately following the battle as to what had happened to Tecumseh's remains. Some eye witnesses reported that Tecumseh was mutilated and carved into grisly trophies by the victors, others that he was spirited away by his warriors and buried in a secret tomb known only to a select few. The mystery of Tecumseh's death and burial has never been solved, but throughout the generations many people have sought his grave.[12]

The mystery of the whereabouts of Tecumseh's remains was only one layer of our story. We wanted the players to engage with the many ways in which the history of Tecumseh and the War of 1812 in general has been used and abused. Tecumseh's legacy and the circumstances surrounding his death remain sensitive issues considering the long history of white misrepresentation of First Peoples. Tecumseh has been embraced by Americans as the romantic epitome of the noble savage and the free spirit of the Native American. Canadians claim him as a martyr for the cause of independence from the United States. He is even one of the four principal Canadian heroes selected by the government.[13] We are aware that our game could seem to perpetuate the same macabre fixation with Tecumseh's grave that the game critiques, but we wanted *Tecumseh Lies Here* to be a subversive sort of commemoration which challenged these nationalist myths and outdated ideas.

Tecumseh Lies Here focussed on London, Ontario and the surrounding area and it took place in real time over the course of about two weeks. E-mails from mysterious and quirky characters started things off, and the players encountered an online video of man in a green Napoleonic-era uniform, trapped in a room, with no memory of who he was or why he was there, just snippets of a forced march, coloured leaves, and an impending sense of doom. Through a scattered set of clues, the players figured out that our trapped soldier was named Captain Smith, a re-enactor who, like so many people before him, was on a misguided quest for the lost grave of Tecumseh. Had he become so consumed with his search that he lost his grip on reality? Or had he uncovered some nefarious secret and was now paying the price? Players had to solve the mystery by following clues from Smith's research notes, much of which was in code. One of their first tasks was translating a note from Shawnee into English, which led our players to Western's Weldon library and a copy of Edward Eggleston's unflattering history of Tenskwatawa from 1890.[14] This started them on a hunt through the library and through the historiography of Tecumseh, from the earliest histories to modern scholarship, all disguised as a search for a missing person. In each book we hid clues, such as newspaper clippings or copies of letters from the War of 1812, which led to more puzzles and more information. Our intent was to guide them through the evolution of the myth of Tecumseh in American and Canadian national histories. Eventually the players, like historians beginning their research, had compiled a set of secondary sources and built a timeline of the circumstances and controversies surrounding the Battle of the Thames, all the while trying to figure out how to save the hapless Captain Smith. Meanwhile our characters tried to confuse the players by confronting them with erroneous facts, forged documents, and competing interpretations. The players had to learn how to decode several clues using encryption techniques that would have been familiar to Napoleonic officers – Vigniere squares, book ciphers, and even a primitive form of an enigma machine developed by Thomas Jefferson. Players could interact with the fictional characters in real time through twitter, e-mail, and even text messages and voice mail, creating an immersive experience which was, according to our student testers, often tense and accompanied by an eerie feeling that "this is not a game".

The game took players beyond their computers to track down clues at local historical sites such as the Museum of Ontario Archaeology, an 1812-era cemetery, Fanshawe Pioneer Village and sites in and around London rumoured to be the possible resting places of the Shawnee warrior.[15] For the finale the players had to use a reverse GPS box, created once again by Devon Elliott, which contained the last clues. It could only be unlocked after the players had visited specific locations, including the alleged place where Tecumseh was killed, just outside the village of Thamesville.

The response from our test players was very positive.[16] The collaborative, collective nature of the game produced some surprising and unexpected results. Puzzles that relied on obscure references to very minor events in the War of 1812 were solved with amazing speed. Our players arrived at far different conclusions and went down surprisingly different avenues than we expected. Their own discoveries had us re-writing the game and adapting our own ideas to the narrative they produced. In the end the players were able to free Smith, thwart the bad guys, and explore the various interpretations of the Battle of the Thames, the contributions of the First Peoples, and wider legacies of the War of 1812. They not only confronted the ambiguities and mysteries of the war, but how the conflict has been used and abused ever since. Our team at Western is currently working on another version of *Tecumseh Lies Here* to coincide with the bicentennial of the Battle of the Thames in October 2013.

Teaching the uncertainties of history may be the trickiest thing for public educators to accomplish. Confusion, anxiety, and disillusionment are all possible outcomes for our students and museum visitors. But teaching them to question the accepted narratives is vital for forming critically thinking citizens. By allowing our students the freedom to think playfully and question the history they are taught – be that through counterfactuals, games, or engaging with the primary sources – they are able to achieve their own insights and discoveries. While large and complex games like *Tecumseh Lies Here* are likely not feasible for every institution, playful historical

thinking can be employed in a variety of ways not just to liven up the classroom or museum, but to introduce new ways of thinking about the past. From small examples like the talking shako in Gananoque to the expansive world of ARGs, playful historical thinking has shown its potential to engage audiences and deliver rewarding and resonating experiences with history.

NOTES

[1] The Canadian government lists the lasting contributions of the War of 1812: http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1305743100762/1305743162190.

[2] Glen Lockwood, *The Rear of Leeds and Lansdowne: The Making of Community on the Gananoque River Frontier, 1796-1996* (Carleton Place, ON: Motion Creative Printing, 1996): 96-97.

[3] Letter from Joel Stone to Nathaniel Coffin, 13 March 1814. Letter from Nathaniel Coffin to Joel Stone, 19 November, 1814. Queen's University Archives, Joel Stone Papers.

[4] Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels & Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[5] *The Pittsfield Sun* (Pittsfield, Massachusetts) Oct. 8 1812. Memoirs of Hiel Sliter, taken from Glen Lockwood, *The Rear of Leeds and Lansdowne…*96-97, and Thaddeus Leavitt, *The History of Leeds and Grenville* (Belleville, ON: Mika Silk Screening, 1972 [1879]): 39.

[6] http://www.1000islandsheritagemuseum.com.

[7] http://devonelliott.net.

[8] http://www.robmacdougall.org/blog/2010/03/playful-historical-thinking/ The quotation is from Robert MacDougall and Timothy Compeau, "Tecumseh Lies Here: Goals and Challenges for a Pervasive History Game in Progress," in Kevin Kee, ed., *Pastplay: Playing with Technology and History* (Forthcoming).

[9] Egerton Ryerson, *The Loyalists of America and their Times, From 1620-1816*, Vol. 2 (Montreal: Dawson Bros., 1880): 379.

[10] http://www.oarn.net/.

[11] For more background on the history and uses of ARGs see: Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not A Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming* (Macungie, PA: New Fiction Publishing, 2005); Jane McGonigal, "This Might Be a Game: Ubiquitous Play and Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century" (Ph.D. diss, University of California at Berkeley, 2006); Markus Montola et al, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009).

[12] For the most comprehensive examination of the mystery surrounding the death of Tecumseh see: Guy St. Denis, *Tecumseh's Bones* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2005). For a history of Tecumseh's career and historical significance see: R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984) and John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998).

[13] http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1339440491192/1339441158221.

[14] Edward Eggleston, *The Shawnee Prophet: or, the Story of Tecumseh; including sketches of Indian Chiefs, Famous in the Frontier Wars* (London: Lock & Co., 1890).

[15] The Museum of Ontario Archaeology: http://www.uwo.ca/museum/ and the Fanshawe Pioneer Village http://www.fanshawepioneervillage.ca/ both enthusiastically helped during the running of our game.

[16] See the blog post by one of our players, Adriana Ayers, at: http://activehistory.ca/2012/05/tecumseh-lies-here/.