

Playing History - Level Two Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant Proposal

Playing History Project Narrative

Enhancing History Education through Historical Games

With a computer and an Internet connection, history students can reenact Ernest Shackleton's hair-raising escape from Antarctica in 1916 using a sextant and a chart, explore the mysterious tomb of the first emperor of China, or set sail on an eighth-century Viking voyage. Each experience is available via free digital games, simulations, and interactives (from here on referred to as "games"), and each offers compelling and untapped potential for classroom instruction.²

Beyond the ability of online games to capture the imagination of students, educational researchers have confirmed three specific ways in which games can be used to help teachers facilitate historical thinking in classrooms: 1) by engaging students in the role of a historian; 2) by engaging students as historical actors; and 3) and by helping students develop historical models.

Research in educational psychology has proven games to be powerful tools for scaffolding students into the roles of professionals. During after school programs, students using games and simulations mirroring professional practices as diverse as journalism, bioethics, and urban planning developed a much more robust understanding of the decision process within the given professions than they would have in traditional classroom exercises.³ In games, such as the National Museum of American History's *You Be the Historian* and *Preserving the Star-Spangled Banner: You Solve the Mystery*, students are offered the ability to "do history," to be the historian.⁴ Through high quality games, students acquire sophisticated understanding of the manner in which evidence is analyzed and arguments are constructed from original sources.

The power of games to engage students in these kinds of roles has a second value in the history classroom. Part of learning to do history is acquiring an inside understanding of life in other periods. When games allow students to experience daily life in the Iron Age, and reenact virtual versions of Galileo's

² NOVA's *Escape from Antarctica* is available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/shackleton/navigate/escape.html>, the Discovery Channel's *Emperor's Tomb* is available at <http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/firstemperor/explore/explore.html> and the BBC's *Viking Quest* is available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/launch_gms_viking_quest.shtml.

³ William Shaffer, "Pedagogical praxis: The professions as models for post-industrial education," *Teachers College Record*, 106 (7), (2004) 1401-1421.

⁴ *You Be the Historian* is available at <http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/kids/springer/index.htm> and *Preserving the Star-Spangled Banner: You Solve the Mystery* is available at http://americanhistory.si.edu/ssb/8_mystery/fs8.html

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experiments, they offer those students a rich and immersive way to experience those roles and inhabit those worlds.⁵

The third way in which games have become proven assets to history classrooms is in their ability to spur the development of historical modeling. Foundational to understanding history is building models of action from events in the past. Kurt Squire's research on several historical games and simulations has demonstrated the power of games to facilitate historical modeling in K-12 classrooms. After middle school students played through historical simulations in the game *Civilization* in their history class, they were able to develop much more robust models of the intricate connections between the development of technologies, the role of geography, and the power of religion in world history than their peers who had not encountered the game.⁶

In short, games are now widely understood as valuable resources for enhancing classroom learning. But just as textbooks, documentaries, and lesson plans all vary in quality, so do games. It takes significant effort to evaluate those other varieties of educational media, just as it takes significant effort to determine the value and best use of a given game for the classroom. Consider the entertaining and engaging *Jamestown Online Adventure*. In this flash-based game, students set sail and set up their own Jamestown Colony. They decide where to build a fort and what crops to plant.⁷ While the game is fun and engaging, it has a fundamental flaw for teaching history. The challenge of the game is to do "better than the real colonists." Students leave remembering what they did to "win" but not the complex series of events and interactions that took place at Jamestown; or the highly problematic sources often used to reconstruct that history; or the multiple narratives told of Jamestown and John Smith (was he highly successful or a self-aggrandizing failure?) over the next 400 years. Currently teachers have to figure all this out on their own. There is no place for teachers and researchers to share this information. Without a central place for researchers, scholars, and educators to review and critique games, they are less likely to use them at all and much less likely to integrate them into classroom practice in a way that facilitates solid historical thinking and content.

Moreover even finding educational games on the web is haphazard and disorganized business. There is no systematic way to search across the content. There are currently thousands of free educational games

⁵ *Iron Age Life* is available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/interactive/games/> and *Galileo's Experiments* can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/galileo/experiments.html>

⁶ Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins, "Harnessing the power of games in education," *Insight* 3 (1) (2004) 5-33 and Kurt Squire, "Sid Meier's Civilization III", *Simulations and Gaming*, 35 (1) (2004), 135-140.

⁷ Available at <http://www.historyglobe.com/jamestown>

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available online in individual content silos. Broadcasting entities like PBS, BBC, and the History Channel, and subsidiary programs like NOVA, each develop a variety of games associated with their programming, but these are often buried in the very complex sitemaps of their large websites. Similarly, independent educational game developers such as Persuasive Games, Funbrain.com, and PrimaryGames.com provide access only to their own offerings. These individual repositories limit the ability of teachers looking for game content related to a specific topic. For history teachers faced with ever increasing burdens on their time it takes far too long to research each of these sites individually. Further, without any means for user feedback, the widely varying quality of these games ensures that web searches return a random mismatch of high and low quality games divorced from their potential classroom use. (An abbreviated selection of this diverse selection is available in Appendix A.)

There exists no central directory for this content. While many websites are built around games and game reviews, none of them focus on the use of games for classroom education. A commercial site, Super Smart Games, offers synopses of games for parents, and to a lesser extent teachers, but it does not offer reviews by academics, peer reviews, or the ability to search across the content in ways that would be meaningful to classroom teachers.⁸ Likewise there are excellent directories for educational websites in general, (including our own *History Matters* and *National History Education Clearinghouse*) but there are no directories of this nature for history games.

History and duration of the project

During the 2005 and 2006 meetings of the Games Learning and Society Conference, a consensus arose around the lack of infrastructure for games and learning initiatives. Conference sessions from educational games developers and researchers underscored the fact that while many great games are being developed, without a clearinghouse for information about these games they would remain on the periphery of educational practice.

Learning of these results, which confirmed our own experiences over several years of working directly with teachers through our other educational websites especially five separate *Teaching American History* grants and through conversations with Andrew Hoffman from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's American

⁸ <http://www.supersmartgames.com>

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History and Civics Initiative and Kurt Squire of the Games Learning and Society Group, we began to sketch the scope of this directory. Hoffman stressed that this central directory could better develop strategies for teaching with these kinds of games, and Squire insisted that the space be collaborative, to best allow existing online learning communities to engage with this effort. Other members of our advisory board have all contributed in similar ways, and this proposal reflects their wisdom and contributions.

CHNM's track record at developing resources to facilitate K-12 education makes it an ideal institution to develop and maintain this directory for historical games. CHNM's critically acclaimed *History Matters*, *Women in World History*, *World History Matters* web directories and currently underdevelopment *Making the History of 1989*, *Childhood and Youth*, and *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* (all NEH funded projects) as well as *The Object of History* (a partnership between the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and CHNM funded by IMLS) all offer evidence of our experience and commitment to creating freely available tools for teachers. (See *Appendix B* for background on CHNM and *Appendix C* for final performance reports on previous NEH history education projects.) Furthermore, CHNM's position as the home of the Department of Education's *National History Education Clearinghouse* and unique role as a developer of the open source content publishing system *Omeka* demonstrate its unique qualifications for developing this collaborative directory.

The start-up grant will support the work of a project director, a web developer, and a project manager for a year. In the first three months, the developer will focus on building the technological infrastructure and launching the website, while the project manager will build the initial directory of games and reviews. Over the next nine months, the team will work to refine this infrastructure. After the initial three months of development, a set of expert historians and teachers identified by project staff will begin reviewing twenty-five of the best games, commenting in depth on their historical accuracy classroom utility. We will seek out early adopters, teachers who are likely to experiment with new technologies and try the games in their classrooms, and as the site grows, we will conduct outreach to pre-service and classroom teachers to raise awareness of *Playing History*. By the end of the year, an active community of teachers will contribute reviews, reflections on using the games in the classroom, and related material as well as adding to the list of relevant

⁹ *History Matters* can be found at historymatters.gmu.edu, *Women in World History* is located at chnm.gmu.edu/wwh, *World History Matters* can be found at worldhistorymatters.org, a draft of *Making the History of 1989* is available at chnm.gmu.edu/1989, *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* can be found at gulaghistory.org and *Object of History* can be found at objectofhistory.org

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games. The community will be stable, providing the core for continued grant funding and support in conjunction with other CHNM k-12 projects.

Project Description and Methods

Playing History's central feature is history teacher-oriented metadata. By enabling teachers to search for games by time periods and historical keywords, this resource will make it simple for teachers to integrate high quality games and simulations into their daily classroom routines.

The project can be accomplished with modest funds because it leverages several institutional capacities already in place at the Center for History and New Media (CHNM). First, *Playing History* takes advantage of the power of *Omeka*, an open-source content publishing system designed for the digital humanities and developed by CHNM. Using this platform, the site will immediately offer advanced searching and tagging features crucial to the communal nature of the directory. The built-in "theme system" will allow the team to develop a look and style for the site quickly and cost-effectively. This platform will bypass a majority of the upfront development costs and will contribute to the growing body of open-source digital humanities project. (For more information on the *Omeka* platform and examples of how it is already in use for history education projects consult *Appendix D*.)

The level two start-up grant will provide support to the project director, Kelly Schrum, a web programmer, Dave Lester, and a project manager, Trevor Owens. Schrum brings 10 years of experience in digital education projects into her position as the principle investigator. She will provide overall guidance, supervise advisory board discussions, manage interaction with teachers, and insure that *Playing History* integrates with CHNM's already rich digital history education projects. At the start of the project Lester will build a set of three plugins to extend the *Omeka* platform to incorporate a series of community features. An Amazon-style rating plugin will allow users to provide quick feedback on the value of a given game and a comment plugin will allow users to add written feedback and lesson plan ideas to games on the site. Because Lester is a lead programmer on *Omeka*, and thus familiar with the plugin architecture of *Omeka* this will be a relatively easy task. (This added functionality will also benefit other humanities institutions using the *Omeka* platform for their projects.) To see basic mock-ups of initial plans for the interface consult *Appendix E*. While Lester works on the site's structure and infrastructure, Owens will work to seed the database with

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information about an initial set of games, aggregating links to 200 freely available games to establish a working set of content to attract early adopters. The resulting collaborative web directory will be directly useful to teachers, allowing them to quickly find games to use in their classrooms and providing a space for sharing reviews and lesson plans with colleagues. By connecting teachers, researchers, and developers, the final result will be higher quality resources that ultimately facilitate student learning. (To see these features in action, consult the use case in *Appendix D*.)

An important component of high quality educational games is their ability to incorporate rigorous academic content and solid pedagogical strategies. To ensure that these criteria are met and reflected within the site as a whole, supervised by Schrum an expert group of historians and teachers will review twenty-five of the best games. The reviews by historians will evaluate the historical accuracy, overall quality, and use of historical thinking skills and place the games content in historical context. Each 400-700 word review will also suggest links to three secondary and primary sources that could be used to either reinforce or complicate the games argument. The expert teacher reviews will each discuss overall quality, appropriateness for various age levels and student audiences, and ability to engage students. Each 400-700 word teacher review will also suggest strategies for using the game to further educational goals in practice, for helping students to confront the games as historical arguments, and for helping students to examine those arguments in relation to important modes of historical thinking and important issues in the history of the specific topic. In addition to offering valuable information about the quality and uses of a given game, these expert reviews will set the tone for user contributions.

Final Product and Dissemination

Once the site has enough content to offer useful search results and sample reviews, Schrum and Owens will focus their efforts on getting teachers involved in using and contributing to the directory. Here the project will leverage several existing CHNM projects that regularly involve teachers. CHNM's suite of teacher web resources—*History Matters*, *World History Matters*, *Object of History*, and *Historical Thinking Matters*—all have established user communities of teachers interested in the role digital media can play in the history classroom. Beyond these projects, CHNM's new position as the home for the Department of Education sponsored *National History Education Clearinghouse* makes us uniquely positioned to involve a large national audience of

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history teachers in the *Playing History* project.¹⁰ Outside of these existing capacities, Owens brings his proven skills as the outreach coordinator for CHNM's *Zotero* project. Through Owens' work, the *Zotero* project increased its user base ten fold, from 50,000 users to over 500,000, last year. Owens will work to bring together the existing CHNM teacher communities with "early adopter" teachers through existing teacher social networking sites like *NextGen Teachers* and *TeachAde*.¹¹ In these online social networks, teachers are already publishing their own lesson plans and reviews and *Playing History* will offer them an additional outlet to discuss teaching history with new media.

In the final stages of the project, Owens and Lester will work to evaluate the project on two different levels, offering summative information on building web communities for history teachers, and formative research on new directions for history games. Lester will gather a wide set of quantitative data on the site's use. The quantity of games, numbers of users, amount of user activity, and quantity and quality of user-contributed content will speak to the success of the projects' attempts to build community, while information on the most popular games and the most frequent failed searches will offer valuable information on the needs of history teachers for future game development. Owens will gather feedback from the most frequent users to assess their needs for future development. He will also arrange a focus group of Northern Virginia history teachers to do usability and feasibility testing for these kinds of web communities. Through these qualitative and quantitative evaluations, the team will write a white paper outlining the successes and trials of developing this kind of web community for history teachers and formative information on new directions for development of the resource and development of historical games in general. Owens will then present the project's findings at regional education technology and humanities education conferences. Throughout the project Owens and Lester will maintain a blog detailing their progress and efforts keeping the growing community up-to-date on recent developments and offering an ongoing log of the project's development for other developers and community builders interested in starting similar projects.

CHNM is committed to nurturing *Playing History* as part of its diverse offering of K-12 resources and part of its broader mission to combine cutting edge digital media with the latest and best historical scholarship to promote an inclusive and democratic understanding of the past as well as a broad historical literacy. We have

¹⁰ See *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>; *World History Matters*, <http://worldhistorymatters.org/>; *Object of History*, www.objectofhistory.org; *Historical Thinking Matters*, <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org>; and *National History Education Clearinghouse*, <http://teachinghistory.org>.

¹¹ <http://nextgen.ning.com/> and <http://www.teachade.com>

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already devoted considerable attention to developing free digital resources for historians and history teachers and we have sustained what we have developed for almost fifteen years. CHNM's stability stems from several sources. With the help of an NEH Challenge Grant, CHNM has raised a \$2 million endowment, which provides for CHNM's long term viability as a unit of the George Mason University Department of History and Art History. Mason also has a strong institutional commitment to CHNM, which has a \$1.5 million annual budget and a staff of more than forty. The History Department has made "new media" a central focus of its new PhD program, which insures a steady stream of students (at least eight of whom work as Graduate Research Assistants at CHNM) interested in sustaining existing projects and creating new ones. CHNM has also recently received an Academic Excellence Equipment Award from Sun Microsystems. Housed in Mason's secure data facility, this state-of-the-art configuration will help meet CHNM's server technology needs for several years to come. Significantly, other major digital history projects—such as the award-winning *DoHistory*—are now hosted by CHNM. Their creators sought out a permanent home and chose CHNM because of our reputation for creating and sustaining quality digital history projects. This substantial endowment, demonstrated fund-raising success, strong institutional support, and solid technology allows CHNM to guarantee that *Playing History* will be a permanent resource for permanent resource for teachers, developers, and researchers.

The open architecture and standards behind *Playing History* will enable future development, and we envision the community as a living and sustainable project for the future. *Playing History* will rely on the rapidly growing and well-funded *Omeka* project as a content publishing system, guaranteeing longevity and sustainability.

Beyond maintaining and supporting the initial project, we will pursue funding for several projects to enhance the collaborative directory through additional funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Open Education Resource project and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning initiatives. With funding from these foundations we plan to expand the directory, integrate a tool for searching games by state standards, and develop expert guides and tutorials to demonstrate best practices for using games in the history classroom.

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Project Work Plan:

October 1 - December 31

- Meet with teachers and historians to agree on approach to reviewing games
- Design theme for the site
- Develop Omeka rating plugin
- Develop comment Omeka plugin
- Aggregate information on 85 games for the initial launch
- Add first 5 expert reviews and model lesson plans
- Launch web site

January 1 - March 31

- Promote the site through early adopter teacher web communities
- Notify the 30,000 teachers and historians on CHNM's contact lists
- Refine website
- Add information on an additional 85 games to the directory
- Add 7 expert reviews and model lesson plans

April 1 - June 31

- Extend promotion to users of the National History Education Clearinghouse
- Add information on an additional 85 games to the directory
- Add 8 expert reviews and model lesson plans
- Arrange focus group with Fairfax County teachers
- Gather information about site usage

July 1 - September 29

- Run focus group with Fairfax County teachers
- Add information on an additional 45 games to the directory
- Add 8 expert reviews and model lesson plans
- Finish gathering information on site usage
- Write white paper

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Project Staff

See Appendix G for staff CVs

Dr. Kelly Schrum: Principle Investigator and Project Director – As the director of education projects at the CHNM, Schrum brings 10 years of experience creating digital history education projects and working with teachers. Her guidance and direction will be invaluable to the projects success.

Trevor Owens: Project Manager - Owens' two years work researching and planning the future educational games in the Games Learning and Society group at the University of Wisconsin and experience as the technology outreach coordinator for the Zotero project at the CHNM qualify him to manage and promote this project.

Dave Lester: Web Developer - As one of the lead developers on the *Omeka* project at CHNM, and the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship's American Studies Crossroads Project he is uniquely qualified to develop online humanities web communities and repositories, and is intimately familiar with the *Omeka* platform.

Review Panel

See Appendix H for Review Panel CVs

Christopher Hamner. Professor Hamner specializes in the social dimensions of U.S. military history. Before joining the History faculty at George Mason University in 2005 he was a fellow at Harvard University's John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and the U.S. Army's Center for Military History. In addition to his teaching duties, he is Editor-in-Chief of the *Papers of the War Department 1783-1800*, an innovative digital documentary editing project run through George Mason University's Center for History and New Media. Since 2007 he has served as Lead Historian with the Loudoun County (Virginia) Teaching American History project.

Allyson Poska: is a Professor of History at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia. She is the author of three books, *Regulating the People: The Catholic Reformation in Seventeenth-Century Spain*, *Women and Gender in the Western Past*, and *Women and Authority in Early Modern Spain: The Peasants of Galicia* winner of the 2007 Roland H. Bainton Prize. She is coeditor of a monograph series with Ashgate Press

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entitled, “Women and Gender in the Early Modern World.” She has been the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, and the American Council of Learned Societies. Currently a member of the executive council of the Sixteenth Century Society, she has also served on the executive board of the Society for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies and as a member of AHA’s Fagg Prize Committee. She is working on a study of the translation of gender norms during the Spanish immigration to Buenos Aires at the end of the colonial period.

Eleanor Greene: Currently a history education consultant, Eleanor Greene was recently a Teaching American History Project Director with seven Virginia school districts and George Mason University, helping teachers improve their content mastery and develop more effective strategies. For 22 years Ms. Greene successfully taught secondary social studies in Washington, DC, Northern Virginia, and Massachusetts. She has collaboratively designed curricula in history, law related education, and conflict management education.

Nathan Richardson: Is a middle school teacher in Fairfax Virginia. Nathan has nine years of experience as a middle school teacher and sees the quality education of early adolescents as a key to their discovery and development of newly-emerging intellectual interests. He brings a unique perspective to the teaching profession having spent his early career helping families with children experiencing emotional and behavioral problems. He has demonstrated a strong commitment to history education through his participation in a Teaching American History grant program and by continuing to collaborate with historians and history educators at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. Mr. Richardson has demonstrated an acute eye and ear for the possibilities that the new media bring to this age group as they strive to think critically about themselves and their world.

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Advisory Board

(See Appendix I for advisory board CVs)

Margaret Chmiel - *Director of Digital Media, JASON Project, National Geographic Society*

Dan Cohen, Ph.D. - *Director, Center for History and New Media*

Andrew Hoffman - *Director, American History and Civics Initiative, WGBH*

Matthew Kirschenbaum, Ph.D. - *Associate Director, Maryland Institute for Technology in
the Humanities*

Dan Norton, - *Director, Game model and interface designer, Filament Games*

Alice Robison, - *Postdoctoral fellow, MIT Comparative Media Studies Program and Literacy
Curriculum Advisor, The Game School*

Kurt Squire Ph.D - *Associate Professor, Educational Technology, University of Wisconsin and
Director, Games Learning and Society Group*

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1. Shaffer, William. Pedagogical praxis: The professions as models for post-industrial education. *Teachers College Record*, 106(7), (2004) 1401-1421.
2. Squire, Kurt. & Jenkins, Henry. Harnessing the power of games in education. *Insight* (3)1. (2004) 5-33.
3. Squire, Kurt. Sid Meier's Civilization III. *Simulations and Gaming*, 35(1) (2004) 135-140.