White Paper Report

Report ID: 104113

Application Number: HD5138911

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Reporting Period: 9/1/2011-2/28/2013

Report Due: 5/31/2013

Date Submitted: 5/24/2013

White Paper
Grant Number: HD-51389-11
Title: The American Guide Game
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Institution: Stone Soup Productions
Submitted: May 24, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Stone Soup Productions of Washington DC received a Level I Digital Humanities Start-up grant to develop the prototype for **The American Guide Game**, an immersive educational gaming experience centered on the Federal Writers' Project, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's least known, yet perhaps most enduring programs of his WPA initiative during the Great Depression. The Game is an outgrowth of Stone Soup's nearly eight year focus on the history, culture and significance of the Project, starting with the NEH-funded feature length documentary *Soul of a People: Writing America's Story* and its companion book, <u>Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America</u>. In 2010, the NEH Office of Public Programs awarded Stone Soup a research grant to refine the concept and develop plans for the *Soul of a Place Interactive Project* which will house **The American Guide Game** and leverage the richness of a web 2.0, HTML5 framework for engaging younger audiences. With the Level I grant received from Digital Humanities in 2011, Stone Soup began work on a prototype and continued forging meaningful partnerships both for the development and the eventual distribution of the game.

HUMANITIES BACKGROUND OF THE AMERICAN GUIDE GAME

The Depression of the 1930s was called at the time the most devastating American crisis since the Civil War. Millions of men and women were jobless. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA), an agency that provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of Americans to build roads and schools. For a smaller cadre of WPA workers, the tools they used were pen, paper, and the spirit of investigation. The WPA Federal Writers' Project (FWP) started with a mandate to produce travel guides for each state – this series was our first-ever national biography.

At its height, the Writers Project became the largest and most chaotic publishing effort in U.S. history. Its staff grew to involve some 6,600 employees and 12,000 volunteer readers and editors. Although many of the 20th century's most influential authors (such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Studs Terkel) started their careers on the Project, it was disparaged in its time as a charity for mediocre writers. The decades since have revealed the enduring value of its work for the study of early 20th century American culture and values. The Project's book and pamphlet series begun in 1934, the American Guides (one for each of the 48 contiguous states, as well as U.S. territories and selected cities), were all completed and published by the end of 1941, a remarkably short span of time for such a comprehensive panorama of Americana. The FWP also produced thousands of firsthand life-history interviews with everyday Americans, including ex-slaves. Although these interviews were also intended for publication, they instead languished in state and national archives for decades, after World War II cut short the publication effort.

The American Guide Game taps into this astonishing range of voices and patterns of life captured in the Writers' Project's social-ethnic studies, ex-slave narratives, and living lore projects to immerse players in a challenging simulation of the cultural landscape of the 1930s before the interstate and the Internet. By assuming the role of a WPA writer and editor, players will learn that, as the Federal Writers' Project unfolded, the staff struggled to reconcile two

visions of America: on the one hand, an idyllic and sometimes mythologizing version of America promoted by the tourist industry, and on the other, the iconoclastic and gritty Depression-era truth seeking picture of life their research uncovered. The game will reveal how this struggle played out, and how these out-of-work writers created a legacy for American culture by holding up a mirror to the entire country in the midst of one of its most challenging periods.

The American Guide Game play will focus on several humanities themes, including:

- **The relationship of regional cultures to national identity:** The Writers' Project's architects recognized that the country's regional cultures were fading with the advent of mass communication and modern travel, and responded by attempting to capture those vanishing cultures in the state and city guidebooks. **The American Guide Game** plays out in locales along the historic Lincoln Highway, the nation's first coast-to-coast highway. As players capture complex 1930s cultural streams, they also encounter everyday life in the midst of upheaval, change and economic development, which in turn influences future culture. For example, new roadside restaurants and businesses ushered in a novel, affordable form of tourism for Americans who were increasingly beginning to conduct their own tours of discovery along the back roads of America. Today, many programs designed to revive traditional cultures and languages and preserve historic landmarks have their roots in the cultural investigations of the Writers' Project.

- **The importance of individual life stories in American history:** By bringing to light some of the oral histories and interviews conducted through the Writers' Project, as well as linking to resources for accessing oral histories archived online, this project will promote an understanding of the importance of recording individual stories and how they aid in understanding history. Hearing the words of a former slave or a grocery store owner in a small town during the 1930s yields a level of insight and personal identification with historical topics, and will provide a thread of continuity linking the past to the present in a way that goes beyond what a textbook is able to deliver.

- **Two visions of America:** In the state and city guides, the Writers' Project presented a portrait of America that some called propaganda, and others believed truly reflected the country's cultural richness. This contemporary debate about the accuracy of the guides and other Project works serves as a jumping-off point for discussion of conflicting interpretations of American values and identity, and competing views about what is considered American and un-American. The game actively confronts players with narrow definitions of American culture that Project writers themselves encountered on the road. For example, players will experience the voices of members of a revitalized Ku Klux Klan that in addition to being anti-Black, was also anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic at the time when the guide books were being compiled. They will encounter anti-Immigrant sentiment and will experience Jim Crow segregation by struggling to find a hotel room or through finding their interview or exchange abruptly terminated when assuming a black FWP writer's identity. Because the game requires players to adapt their language and tactics to the demands of each locale, the choices players make unlock immediate experiential consequences that powerfully underscore learning points rich in significance

for the humanities: from the challenges of a particular geographic, economic, social and historical situation, to the sophisticated understanding of complex relationships that are both environmental and social.

THE GAME

The American Guide Game innovates by using realistic roles grounded in well researched history conducting authentic tasks within a scalable technological framework. In **The American Guide Game**, players travel back to the 1930s, role-playing as field writers and editors working on the American Guide Series. The game's interface incorporates high resolution, primary sources meticulously researched in archives around the country, including the National Archives and the Library of Congress, resulting in an immersive game-based learning experience that is designed from the bottom-up to engage players in historical thinking. The game requires players to unlock clues in each locale through a series of mini-games, interviews with local residents and other activities that that must be deciphered and interpreted in order for the player to advance.

Players can switch between playing different roles as FWP Writers and Editors. Similar to the popular game *Assassin's Creed*, this design gives players a sense of choice, exposes players to a range of different historical experiences, encourages replayability, and supports innovative pedagogical approaches. For example, teachers might use these different roles to promote jigsawing, a technique in which after playing different roles, students come together at the end of the lesson to create a shared artifact, drawing on their various different perspectives.

Our project team, which includes the *Soul of a People* documentary's production company Spark Media and educational gaming developer Learning Games Network (LGN), decided that **The American Guide Game** should focus on locales along the historic Lincoln Highway. The first highway that stretched across the continental United States, from New York to San Francisco, the Lincoln Highway provides the perfect travel route for players today to encounter everyday life in the 1930s. And with over 700 cities or towns built alongside the Lincoln, this approach seemed to be an ideal, and infinitely expandable, way to showcase the diverse traditions and cultural mores across America. The original plan for the prototype was to have a basic playable build-out for three locations on the Highway: 1) Bedford, Pennsylvania; 2) Omaha, Nebraska; and 3) Chicago, Illinois.

On the advice of the Office of Digital Humanities, we opted to scale back on the number of cities in favor of doing a more detailed and focused prototype for one location. We chose Bedford, Pennsylvania, an example of small town America full of local lore and fascinating history. The selection of Bedford also emphasized one of the reasons why the American Guidebooks were so vital – they sought out every road and hamlet across the country, not just the big cities or the "important" cities. The Guides would include every town in America, no matter how small, because every town belonged to this nation and had its own story. With Bedford, we could highlight the importance of the historic Lincoln Highway, explain the phenomenon of quirky rest stops that sprouted all across the country in the 1930s (like Bedford's Coffee Pot), and introduce players to the Bedford Springs Resort, at one time an alluring and desirable vacation spot for U.S. Presidents.

The great majority of digital assets and information contained in **The American Guide Game** has been gleaned from research and archival assets collected during production for the *Soul of a People* documentary film, from which targeted scenes will also be selected and incorporated into the gameplay. Stone Soup corralled these resources, identified applicable content, exhaustively researched additional time-period location information, and developed in-game dialogue to inform branched interviews, coupling content with original art direction, game mechanics, and supplemental content development.

The targeted audience for **The American Guide Game** is youth in grades nine through twelve. We aim to inspire youth to explore, experience and express American history through gaming, social and new media. We are convinced the future of education in America is going to be through virtual classroom activities, which will surely utilize games to pass along lessons in all study areas, from math to history to sciences. We have already taken the first steps to be part of the movement in that direction with our partnership with Florida Learning Virtual Schools (FLVS), which has agreed to participate in testing throughout the various prototype stages, assist in creating support curricula material, and leverage their partnerships across the country to increase distribution. We have also received letters of support from the Urban School of San Francisco, the Penn Manor School District, the National Council for History Education, and the American Library Association. Our development partner LGN also has an extensive educational network that they intend to leverage once the final game is released.

CHALLENGES

To create an interactive learning experience on the Writers' Project presented a keen creative challenge to Stone Soup Productions. With a scope as wide as the nation itself, what do the producers focus on? How does one create an immersive experience on the WPA, of the Communist hysteria during the Depression, of the soon-to-be famous writers on the Project, and of the American Guides themselves? How do you introduce the role of minorities and women into the game, and deal with such difficult realities as segregation? How do we create a sense of "the soul" of a specific location during a given time period, and establish continuity that will bring modern day relevance to players. The other challenge dealt with the sheer enormity of the characters who – although fictional creations – are all meticulously researched and grounded in historic fact. We are planning for every character, including the Project writers and editors, as well as all of our interview subjects to have distinct and authentic personalities and speech patterns. Branching dialogue will be written that will create different experiences based on a player's character and background and style of questioning. This, plus the addition of wrong answers and deadends in the investigations, will encourage replayability and hone the player's interviewing and reasoning skills.

Each of these elements is important, yet how does one craft a cohesive experience without becoming wildly unfocused or confusing gamers? With the grants from the NEH, we struck what we felt was a workable balance. The solution was a vast amount of research and careful organization that categorized the vast number of location backgrounds, characters (both playable and non-playable), archival assets, early dialogue tree drafts, and humanities themes to be

presented in each locale. This organizational matrix distilled and categorized all the disparate elements, creating a guide for the designers and archival researchers to move forward with the actual game development.

From the technical standpoint, we faced a difficult decision early in the development period. Though the majority of educational gaming is currently coded in Adobe Flash, which is not supported in IOS systems such as iPhones and iPads. There is a legitimate concern in the industry that sometime in the near future, Flash will no longer be supported in any system, and even Adobe has discussed phasing out the platform. We are strongly committed to exploring a game adaptation for mobile devices and also to developing a game that will have a long (and ideally a continuously expanding) lifespan. Therefore, we made the decision that Flash, though perhaps easier in the short term, would not be the ideal platform for **The American Guide Game** and instead focus on leveraging HTML 5 for the game development.

We are also thinking ahead to potential distribution challenges. Currently, there is only an English language version planned for this game. Our project team recognizes this as a potential issue, as Spanish is the fastest growing language in the United States. In addition, the market of Spanish-speaking students and adults would benefit from this game and its lessons and insights about American democracy, ideals, institutions, and social and political practices. While there are no immediate plans to produce alternate language versions, there have been discussions to create one in future expansions.

PLANS FOR FINAL PRODUCT AND DISSEMINATION

The American Guide Game will ultimately be web-hosted and constitute at least 13 locations throughout the United States, each with its own cast of characters, unique items, mini-games and multimedia content, and will be accessible to schools, individuals, and learning establishments with existing Internet infrastructure. The game is intended for use in schools as a humanities learning tool and curriculum supplement, as well as by libraries and interested individuals that may seek to enrich their understanding of 1930s America and the themes of **The American Guide Game**. A mobile version is also being explored. We continue to build on an established network of testing partners and interested organizations as we develop toward our final product. By engaging testing partners early and building project buy-in amongst interested organizations, the project team has begun securing the institutional clout necessary to assure widespread game dissemination. Testing partners will represent our most interested parties once the product is completed, and become advocates within their respective communities.

Plans are to disseminate **The American Guide Game** Interactive Experience through a projects section on LGN and Stone Soup Production's s respective websites and the website of Games Learning Society, a partner of LGN. **The American Guide Game** project section will deploy screenshots, game play videos, related media articles and internally produced articles discussing the design and development of the project. The Project will leverage LGN's visibility at academic, industry, and education conferences to showcase **The American Guide Game**, most notably through LGN's Games + Learning + Society Conference, which attracts 500 of the leaders in games and learning every year. In addition, project team members regularly attend, are

present at, and sponsor leading conferences in the games and learning field, including Games for Change, Meaningful Play, The Game Developers Conference, and the ISTE Conference, as well as relevant film festival and producer gatherings. Where appropriate, LGN will present this project in other relevant conference panels and forums, using its design and developmental framework as a tool for discussing the challenges and triumphs of creating interactive games for impact in the humanities. We will leverage these and additional programs and partners not only for dissemination, but also for ongoing play testing and piloting.