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Swedish Immigrant Trail Game Report

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The Swedish Immigrant Trail Game

Swenson Center Faculty Research Stipend Report

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SUMMARY

During the 2017-2018 academic year, I led a collaborative interdisciplinary project to develop a historical fiction video game focused on the Swedish immigration story.

Key collaborators in this project included:

1. **Lisa Huntsha** (archivist/librarian)
2. **Dr. Brian Leech** (history professor)
3. **Abigail Buchanan, Brooks Fiedler, and Katie Laschanzky** (student researchers and story-writers)
4. My entire *CSC 285: Software Development* class, with special thanks to the team whose version of the game was selected for deployment (Minh Ta, Jack Cannell, Max McComb, and Steve Jia).

1. MOTIVATION

With bristling debates over modern immigration in national and international politics, it seems more important than ever for us to look to history to understand the immigrant experience, both at a personal level (immigrants' lives and stories), and at a broader cultural and economic level to understand the impact they have had on our nation, and that our nation has had on them.

I felt that the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center could benefit from a new interactive exhibit that might have the potential to engage new audiences (beyond the Center's typical reach) with stories and images from the Swedish-American immigrant experience.

I believe that computer games can provide a unique way to experience aspects of the past in an interactive format, which can bring historical stories to life in some ways that books or movies cannot achieve.

I also saw this as an opportunity for my fall software development class to work on a useful project for a "real-world" client, while learning about Augustana's Swedish heritage.

Finally, I hoped this project would promote a digital humanities initiative on Augustana's campus, and encourage greater interdisciplinary study and interaction.



Figure 1: Opening screen for the adventure game: “You are a young Swedish immigrant to America in 1880. You have made the tough decision to leave your family and life in Sweden behind. Will you survive and prosper in America?”

2. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

To support these efforts, I was pleased to dedicate the whole term (Fall 2017) of my software development course (CSC 285) to the development of a web-based video game that falls into the broad genre of “interactive historical fiction”, and allows players to experience variations of stories of the historical experience of Swedish immigrants coming to America in the late 1800s (see Figures 1, 2, 3).

I was fortunate to find an enthusiastic collaborator in Dr. Leech, who oversaw a small group of students (Buchanan, Fiedler, Laschanzky) in an independent study project involving historical research and creative writing to create the storyline and assemble the photographic resources needed to create this game.

I am also grateful for the countless hours of support put forth by Lisa Huntsha, who supported the history students' research efforts within the Center's collections and worked patiently with the computer science students as they strove to develop software that would fulfill the project needs. She and her colleagues at the Swenson Center also put forth considerable effort into testing the game and providing feedback and making corrections/improvements.



Figure 2: Players can choose to play as one of two fictional characters: Lovisa Eriksdotter or Anders Bengtsson, with four major historically-plausible plot lines (farmer, minister, factory worker, and seamstress). A magnifying glass feature allows the player to more closely examine all photos of historical artifacts.

The students in my CSC 285 class were divided into teams of 4-5 students each, and worked on a term-long project to develop two pieces of software: a “game engine” (which would support the adventure-game format), and a “game builder” (which would allow for easier authoring of game content). While the bulk of the historical research was accomplished by the history students, Dr. Leech, and Lisa Huntsha, the computer science students were still exposed to a part of the research process, and were also forced to grapple with important intercultural issues in software development, such as supporting Unicode accent characters (å, ä, ö), which was not straightforward due to the specific technologies and tools that were involved.

After the course was over, one of the teams’ game engines was selected for additional development, and thanks to the continued efforts of faculty, staff, and select students, additional story-line content was developed and imported into the game engine.

The final phase of the project involved testing deployment options on the web, while also finding and fixing small bugs or unexpected technical issues. It took until Fall 2018 before the project was finally declared finished and ready for deployment. The game, now available¹ on the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center’s website, was also showcased at Augustana’s Fall Symposium Day on September 27, 2018, where more than 30 students attended the session and played it. Although this project took longer than anticipated to reach completion, overall I would rate it as a resounding success, and a testament to value of interdisciplinary collaborations that can (and should) occur at a liberal arts college.

¹<https://www.augustana.edu/swenson/swedishvideogame>

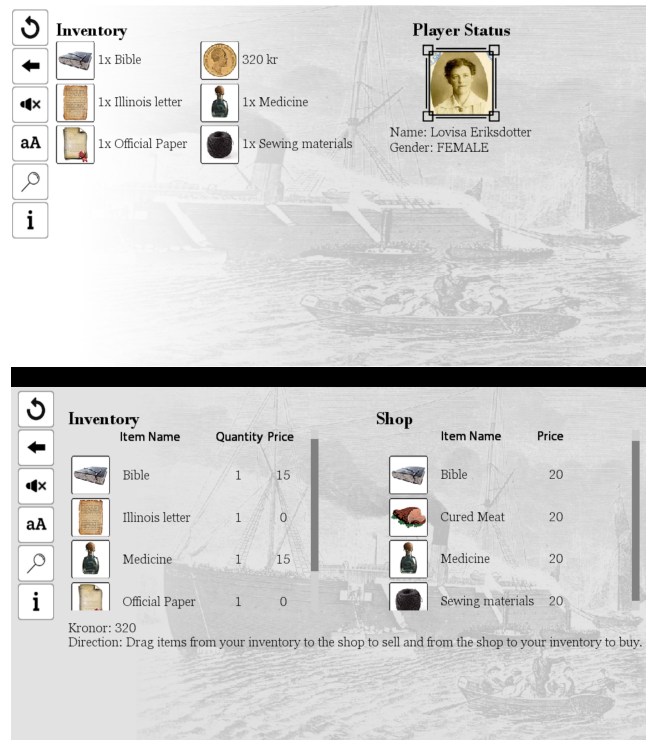


Figure 3: Players acquire and interact with various items during their historical journey.