The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere: Balancing Accuracy, Fun, and Tone in Educational Games

Keywords

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Designing a historical game for education presents a set of seemingly incompatible priorities. Ideally, such a game will be reasonably faithful to the historical record, effective as a tool for teaching that record, appropriate in tone for a broad public audience, and most importantly, engaging enough to attract players. But how can a game maintain a fun, inviting tone while still accurately representing often difficult and painful historical realities? In this presentation, Dr. James Coltrain, lead developer at Historiated Games, will introduce an early version of *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,* an upcoming all-ages virtual reality game about the American folk hero's mission to alert the countryside of the advance of British troops and inspired by a painting of the event by *American Gothic* painter Grant Wood.[1] Faced with a set of competing demands, our team found their solution to the question of tone in the art of Wood and the other artists of the Regionalist movement, and their canny mix of unflinching historical detail, myth, and whimsy.

Our game is the most recent in a long tradition of works reimaging the story of Revere's ride, often to inspire contemporary public action. Wood's painting of Revere's ride was part of a broader goal in his art to endear his audience to the American past, promoting a gentle, inclusive patriotism that would inspire them to resist the looming threat of 20th century fascism.[2] He had been himself inspired by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1860 poem "Paul Revere's Ride," also written to rouse Americans, then for the defense of the Union and the abolition of slavery on the eve of the American Civil War.[3] Wood and Longfellow's creations both rely on mythmaking and a liberty with historical truth that would be difficult to extend to a historical game meant to faithfully educate. How could our title incorporate the whimsy and wonder of these depictions while giving players an honest accounting of Revere and the origins of the American Revolution?

Our solution was to harmonize these competing values through the conceit of inviting players to a night at the theater. Instead of purporting to depict Revere's journey directly, the game instead presents itself as a Depression-era WPA theater production of a play about Revere, similar to public art Wood himself worked on.[4] While players see a historically faithful timeline of Revere's events unfold in front of them as they play in front of rolling landscapes inspired by Wood, if look behind themselves in the VR environment, they'll see that the scene actually sits on a stage in a 1930's Art Deco theater. Fourth wall breaking events sometimes occur, as virtual stagehands run by wrangling set pieces and shuffling the "actors" in the scene. This solution provides one

level of abstraction from the actual history depicted, which can account for small anachronisms, diffuse tension in depicting intense scenes, and represent Wood's 20th century in addition to Revere's 18th.

This decision also complemented the mechanical challenges of the game. A virtual reality title, *The Midnight Ride* is a third person game where players take roughly the same viewpoint as Wood's painting, controlling a mouse sized Revere as he explores scenes that sit at about lap level. For roughly a third of the game, players steer Revere on horseback in gameplay reminiscent of the endless runner genre popular on mobile devices. A design challenges was to give players the fast pace of an endless runner without making them motion sick in VR. Here the theater conceit provides the solution. Rather than feeling like they are virtually flying next to Revere at breakneck speed, he and his horse run on what is essentially a treadmill of moving terrain that streams in from behind one stage curtain and disappears behind another, with the fixed stage and sky anchoring the player, and reducing motion sickness considerably.

A story told by Wood's biographer recounts that as a young child he once interrupted a stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, shouting "You stop that!" when he was unable to bear the title character's whipping at the hands of the villainous Simon Legree. This anecdote provides one of the most memorable fourth wall breaks in our game, which during a scene accurately depicting Revere's capture and assault by British soldiers, including one threatening to "blow his brains" out, the virtual figure of a child from the game's fictional audience runs on stage and breaks the tension, shouting the same as the young Grant Wood to protect poor Revere.[5] In the game the virtual actors break character and chuckle, laughs reverberate from the audience, and an apologetic virtual mother escorts the child back to their seat. This scene exemplifies how our approach allowed us to at different turns emphasize honesty, artistry, and accessibility in digital historical storytelling.

Figure 1: Grant Wood's 1931 painting, The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.

Figure 2: A scene in the video game *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* mimicking Wood's original painting captured from inside a Meta Quest virtual reality headset. Video link here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsFZWkgAcXE

ENDNOTES

[1] Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, Oil on Beaver Board, 78 × 65.3 cm (30 3/4 × 25 3/4 in.), 1930; *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, 1931, Oil on Masonite, 30 × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm), 1931.

[2] Wanda M. Corn, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and Whitney Museum of American Art, *Grant Wood, the Regionalist Vision*, 1st edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 120-123

[3] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Paul Revere's Ride," *The Atlantic*, January 1, 1861; David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 336-38.

[4] Barbara Haskell, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables* (Yale University Press, 2018), 49.

[5] Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 131.

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