

CINCINNATI FOURTEEN



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Making Revolutionary Choices

We needed good news. Months of meetings and in-person events had been canceled, Anderson House was closed, the professional staff was working hard to adapt to virtual everything, and there was no end in sight. In education, teachers were struggling with many of the same issues. The terms *remote learning* and *distance education* were not new to the lexicon but had taken on a distinctly new importance as teachers sought ways to effectively engage their students. To meet that need, President General William Pless Lunger announced the release of *Revolutionary Choices*, the American Revolution Institute's new digital strategy game, on June 20, 2020.

Revolutionary Choices is an electronic game that challenges players to win the independence of the United States while making many of the same difficult decisions that our revolutionary forefathers faced as they fought to secure our liberty. After years of development, testing, and revision, students, teachers, or anyone else with a computer and an interest in American history can now play—and thousands of them already have.

Announcing the release of the game in the wake of vandalism and destruction of historical monuments, and the introduction of false and misleading materials about the American Revolution in many schools, the president general underscored the urgent need to actively combat historical illiteracy. “I don’t need to tell you how important it is to reach young Americans with the story of our Revolution in ways that will catch their

imagination and encourage their interest, understanding, and appreciation of the difficulties the revolutionaries faced.”

The concept of using a video game to introduce young people to the American Revolution was first suggested by Dr. James O. Pringle of the Pennsylvania Society. In the winter of 2011, Jim and his wife Jane joined a lecture group in Maine to help ward off the winter blues. One of the meetings involved a discussion of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s effort to educate U.S. school children in the fourth through sixth grades about our judicial system. A recent study had shown that only one adult in ten could name the chief justice of the Supreme Court or understand the U.S. court system.

The discussion was led by a federal judge, Kermit V. Lipez. Joining him was Barbara Anderson, an old friend of the Pringles and a retired



superintendent of Portland, Maine, public schools. The judge and the educator explained Justice O’Connor’s effort to fill the void in civic education through her “Our Courts” program. The program’s title had been changed in 2010 to

“iCivics,” and its mission was to develop educational online games and lesson plans to promote civics education. At the close of the presentation Jim asked Judge Lipez how much historical content was included in the games. He was dismayed to learn that history was not emphasized. Jim saw value in the concept of using an educational game to teach the history of the American Revolution. He contacted iCivics to discuss the possibility of forming a partnership to include an historical component to their games. Unfortunately, iCivics was cutting its in-house game building group.

Undeterred, Jim contacted Ben Sawyer, the award-winning co-founder of Digitalmill, Inc., a game consulting firm based in Portland, Maine. He was an innovator in the realm of *serious games* (not an oxymoron, as will be seen) who had become a nationally recognized leader within the games community for pioneering new ways to expand the use of games beyond entertainment and into education. “I did not understand much of his game vocabulary,” says Jim, “but the prospect of creating a Revolutionary War based game was indeed real.” Sawyer received the idea enthusiastically—there was no other game like the one Jim Pringle was proposing.

Ben enlisted the help of Nick Fortugno, a game designer and chief creative officer at Playmatics, LLC, a company that focuses on “discovery through play”—that is, merging story and interactive digital experiences to engage children in play while simultaneously providing learning opportunities. Playmatics’s lead designer Patrick Mooney would be critical to the project, as was the work of others at the company.

The original cost estimate to produce the game was \$150,000—certainly an expensive undertaking. The initial development of *Revolutionary Choices* was funded by a \$100,000

grant from the State Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania in 2014. As the project moved forward, other early supporters included the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, the William Penn Foundation, the Kennedy Douglass Trust, and a number of individual members of our One Society of Friends.

The Society’s education committee chairman, Cliff Lewis, recognized that the game’s development was a logical step; young people like technology and games, so why not combine something they naturally enjoy into a process that enables them to better understand American history. Cliff made *Revolutionary Choices* a priority agenda item at his committee meetings, and his interest and involvement was vital in moving the project from conception to development and testing.

Of course, the game developers at Playmatics are not historians, and despite their best efforts to achieve historical accuracy, over the several years of development they heavily relied on the





Society's professional staff to provide and review the historical content of the game. The amount of staff hours devoted to bringing *Revolutionary Choices* to completion is incalculable. In addition to facilitating student testing, our education team has developed a teacher guide and companion materials based on the game and its themes.

Extensive field-testing preceded the game's launch, all of which was coordinated by the American Revolution Institute's education director, Stacia Smith, with the capable assistance

of Evan Phifer. The largest trial consisted of a week of use by eighth-grade students at Alice Deal Middle School in Washington, D.C. during February 2019. Testing was also performed in smaller numbers at George Washington University, Landon School in Bethesda, Maryland, and Neptune High School in Neptune, New Jersey.

Revolutionary Choices is a unique way to introduce students to the challenges of the American Revolution. As a part of the expanding



American Revolution Institute menu of educational products, *Revolutionary Choices* seeks to nurture understanding and appreciation of the constructive achievements of the Revolution. The game underscores the complexity of the Revolution, the wide range of issues involved, and the enormous difficulties the Revolutionary generation overcame to achieve independence and establish a unified republic.

In the combined roles of commander-in-chief, president of the Continental Congress, and a state governor, the player is presented with a series of complicated problems rooted in the history of the war. For example, as commander-in-chief do you seize supplies from local farms, pay for confiscated supplies with promissory notes, or forgo the supplies and continue to press Congress and the state governments to support

the army? Your choices have consequences, not just for winning and losing in war, but for the liberty and unity of the country you're fighting to create.

While trying to defeat the British on the battlefield, the player faces historical dilemmas, weighs options, makes choices, and copes with consequences. Military success may bring the player closer to independence, but national unity and liberty must not be sacrificed on the altar of victory. If played with thoughtfulness and daring, players can win the war and create a free and unified nation. Bad decisions, however, may hopelessly divide the citizenry, compromise freedom, or lose the war.

“There is no simple path in *Revolutionary Choices*,” explains Executive Director Jack D. Warren, “and that is an essential part of the lesson the game was created to teach. The Revolution involved difficult decisions. In *Revolutionary Choices*, success is measured by military victory, but also by establishing effective governments and upholding the rights and freedoms of the people. Seize the food without paying, and you trample on rights—your military effectiveness may increase temporarily, but your score for upholding rights and freedoms declines.” If you trample on the rights of the people in a particular region, you risk losing their support for the war. Jack explains that success in the game demands the players manage a delicate balancing act. Arm the enslaved? Advantages and disadvantages. Respect pacifists who oppose armed conflict with Great Britain? Invade Canada? All real choices, with real consequences. Defeat is always at hand, but so is the possibility of victory.

“The Revolutionary War was a near-run thing,” Jack says. “Defeat was always a possibility, and the way the war was conducted had an enormous impact on the kind of nation that emerged.



Revolutionary Choices underscores this lesson. The outcome of the war was contingent on the decisions made by historical actors—for whom the player is a surrogate. The outcome was not ordained by impersonal forces. People and their real-world choices are what make history.”

The mission of the American Revolution Institute of the Society of the Cincinnati is to ensure that Americans understand and appreciate the Revolution—and *Revolutionary Choices* will help achieve that goal. Teachers who have tested the game in their classrooms are eager to use it this school year and are thrilled that it is now available. It is sure to appeal to hundreds of teachers and thousands of students.

Anyone can play *Revolutionary Choices* online at www.RevChoicesGame.org. By the time you read this, *Revolutionary Choices* should also be available as a free download via the Apple Store. The classroom guide, which includes a decision-making guide, a timeline, and introductory information about the people and places featured in the game can be found in the Classroom section of the American Revolution Institute website, www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org.