



ARCTIC ADVENTURE

Beautiful illustrations and animations enhance exploration of the great white north

Back in 1999 the United States Mint launched the 50 State Quarters Program. It lasted 10 years and introduced limited-edition quarters with unique designs for each state. The coins were released in the order the states ratified the Constitution or joined the union.

The program caused considerable buzz among not only coin collectors, but the general public as well. I remember my young daughter eagerly awaiting the release of the newest quarters so she could put them in her cardboard coin display card. The program moved coin collecting from the fringes of society into everyday conversation for a while.

Canadian coin collecting

Last year the Royal Canadian Mint tried to generate the same type of excitement with the release of a series of quarters commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Canadian Arctic Expedition. The effort was aimed squarely at children with the launch of HeartOfTheArctic.ca, an animated, interactive website. The site is a virtual adventure that teaches kids about the arctic's flora, fauna, people and history while they search for hidden goals, coins and games.

I don't know if the Canadian Mint was as successful with their arctic quarter program as the U.S. mint was with the 50 states, but Heart of the Arctic was nominated by the Webby Awards for best use of animation on a website in 2013. So even if your kids have no interest in coin collecting, Canadian or otherwise, the site is well worth a visit.

Moving pictures

The website is beautifully illustrated and presented as a single, very wide, side-scrolling, parallaxing page. Parallaxing is the technique of having the background, middle ground and foreground areas of the image move at different speeds to give the illusion of depth in a two-dimensional image. Since the background moves slower than the foreground, it appears as if things in the foreground are closer to you. It's the same sensation you get when riding in a car. The guardrails zip by quickly while the treeline in the distance goes by more slowly, the mountains farther away pass even more slowly, and the moon, which is very distant, seems to keep pace with the car as if it's not going by at all.

The end result is impressive. As you navigate back and forth across the Arctic landscape you encounter indigenous dwellings, explorers' tents, artifacts, rock and ice formations and various wildlife. The style of the illustrations and the col-

or palette, combined with the sense of depth and movement create an enjoyable user experience.

The storyline of the game is that the Arctic is out of balance and you are an explorer who must find numerous objects to restore the natural order. The objects may be native artifacts, animals, artifacts left by past explorers or a variety of other items. When you find an object a brief description is revealed, as well as related photos and videos.

Some of the finds lead you to interactive games, such as reassembling a woolly mammoth skeleton or saving a ship from sinking into the icy waters. You can also unlock the four commemorative coins and learn about the events that inspired each one.

Ice cold eye candy

Heart of the Arctic is a visual treat with some real educational value. I had some issues with slow response times (from the site, not me) when I was playing some of the games and even navigating through the page. That's probably inevitable when you have a single page with so much rich content. I wasn't able to find the last item, so I didn't save the Arctic and earn the honors and accolades that were sure to follow. But I did have fun playing and I thoroughly enjoyed the visuals.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with your favorite websites and apps.



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites