

December 22, 2008 - 1:45 PM

Citizenship becomes a trivial pursuit



Helvetiq is practical as well as playful
(smugmug.com)

Republic was the name of the Swiss confederation under Napoleon's rule at the beginning of the 19th century) is of special interest to immigrants it has appeal for anyone with an interest in the country.

"At the start it was really all connected to my naturalisation process, but we quickly realised that this game could interest all Swiss," Barkat told swissinfo.

"While I was preparing for my naturalisation, I asked people around me questions and they usually did not know the answers or they had forgotten them."

Barkat came to Switzerland to study at the Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne and realised there was a gap in the market for such a game after he was unable to find an instruction manual to help him learn more about "Swissness".

Helvetiq emerged with the help of two engineering friends, Yves Barbey and Nils Rinaldi. It is illustrated by a graphic designer from Lausanne and manufactured by the Vaud-based GameWorks.

Federer's earnings

The game runs through 212 questions such as "What does it mean when sirens sound on a Wednesday at 1pm?" - alluding to the national alarm test day that happens across Switzerland.

Players advance by answering questions on politics, society, culture and sports. A second strategic goal of the game is to climb up the ladder of the political system by using the tools of direct democracy.

To compile the questions, they referred to history books, the online encyclopedia Wikipedia and a pool of friends.

Barkat said the range of subjects covered during his own naturalisation interview with the local police almost floored him.

As well as a question on the dangers of avalanches, Barkat was asked if he thought it was normal for Roger Federer to earn as much money as he does.

"To this day I still do not know why I was asked this question. I was a little taken aback," he said.

An Algerian immigrant has invented a game to ease people through Switzerland's naturalisation process by testing their knowledge of the country.

Hadi Barkat came up with the idea for Helvetiq with two Swiss friends after applying to become a citizen a couple of years ago.

The first 3,500 copies in French have sold out since the game's release in November and another 5,000 are in production. A German version is coming out in 2009, and English, Italian and Romansh editions are also planned.

Barkat says although Helvetiq (the Helvetic Republic was the name of the Swiss confederation under Napoleon's rule at the beginning of the 19th century) is of special interest to immigrants it has appeal for anyone with an interest in the country.



Hadi Barkat (sp)

"At the time, during a naturalisation hearing, it can make you a little anxious. I got out of it by talking about his talent, and all the jobs he helps maintain."

Helping memorise

Pleased to have been part of the 45,000 people who received Swiss citizenship in 2007, Barkat sees Helvetiq as a good teaching tool in preparing for naturalisation and especially for those who must undergo a hearing as part of the process.

Hearings are not required for everyone, as they vary on the requirements of the particular canton or municipality. It is a typically Swiss situation, which the game designers have since been able to respond to – by offering municipalities the chance to customise the game to their area. Vevey, for example, has already placed an order.

Teachers, immigration-related institutions, the Red Cross and the Roman Catholic aid organisation Caritas have also expressed an interest in Helvetiq.

Barkat says the recurring issues in the game allow for people to memorise the answers.

"It is not necessarily easy for everyone to remember dates such as when the battle of Marignan took place," said Barkat.

"Rather than having to isolate themselves as they would during an exam, we wanted to make preparing for naturalisation more fun."

By the way, when did that battle take place?

swissinfo, Carole Wälti

TAKE THE TEST

1. What did the Jura separatist organisation, the Belier Group, engrave on the Unspunnen stone?
2. Which 19th century Russian author was ruined at the Saxon casino in canton Valais?
3. What body of the Swiss army was created in 1941?
4. How much did a cup of coffee cost in Switzerland in 1950?
5. What did Georges de Mestral invent by imitating nature?
6. Which Hollywood creature did Swiss artist Hans-Ruedi Giger design?
7. Which artistic movement was founded in the early 20th century in Zurich?
8. Which alliance was formed in canton Bern in 1353?
9. The Post Office issued a stamp with a special scent in 2001 – what was the smell?
10. What is special about the Lauberhorn downhill ski race?

ANSWERS

1. Twelve stars, symbolising the European Union
2. Dostoyevsky
3. The Swiss Navy
4. SFr1
5. Velcro
6. Alien
7. Dadaism
8. The confederation of eight cantons
9. Chocolate
10. It is the longest race on the World Cup circuit

KEY FACTS

Helvetiq contains a quiz and a political game.

There are 156 cards and 212-game questions.

The first edition was released on November 11, 2008 and sold out in a month.

5,000 copies have been ordered for the second edition.

Price: SFr69.90 plus shipping.

LINKS

- Helvetiq (<http://www.helvetiq.ch/index.php>)
 - Naturalisation - Swiss government (<http://www.bfm.admin.ch/bfm/en/home/themen/buergerrecht.html>)
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