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Reacting to the Past Games in Introductory World History Courses: How to Easily Revise Your Teaching for Transformative Learning and Have Fun in the Process

In recent years, many faculty seeking to improve their classroom experience have turned to Reacting to the Past games—and while it has significant benefits for student learning, it is not unusual to feel a bit hesitant about how to effectively incorporate Reacting into a traditional world history survey class. Reacting to the Past "is an active-learning pedagogy of complex role-playing games. Reacting promotes engagement with big ideas, and improves critical, practical, intellectual, and academic skills." Reacting to the Past does this through games set during a particular historical event: students are assigned roles from the period, and examine important source readings to advocate for their character's ideology or interest. Reacting games serve several additional pedagogical purposes. They make the classroom experience student-driven, encouraging students to take an active approach towards their education, increasing self-efficacy and academic performance. They encourage critical thinking and deep learning, leading students to challenge important assumptions they had held about history and historical events. They also cause students to increase their development of empathy, both for people in the past but also fellow students, as well as develop a better understanding and appreciation of faculty members both as "researchers and scholar[s]" but also "as teacher[s.]" In addition to the above, in World History Surveys, Reacting Games allow students to improve their skills in primary source analysis, and allow students to develop expertise beyond what is provided by the instructor in lectures.[1] In addition to these benefits, Reacting games also allow for students to use their learned empathy and critical thinking to learn how to effectively read primary sources against the grain, and to do so with other primary sources they encounter in class outside of the games.

However, it is not always clear for instructors how to incorporate this pedagogy into an existing class such as an introductory college-level world history survey class. This essay serves as a guide for navigating that process, while considering key pedagogical goals and outcomes, as well as providing some critique for creating games that can help move the world history survey away from socially dominant perspectives.

Perhaps the best way to introduce readers to Reacting to the Past is to describe my journey using it in the classroom. I was teaching traditional history surveys: lecture followed by discussions of related primary sources, with assessments in the form of written in-class exams. That kind of class could sometimes be a bit boring, students were not always engaged, and I knew there were better ways to teach, even if I was not sure what those ways were exactly. I began to read Ken Bain's *What the Best College Professors Do* and there was a very brief discussion of Reacting to the Past: assigning students roles in a historical event, allowing them to see and affect the unfolding of events from the perspective of a witness and participant. It sounded lively and engaging, the opposite of boring. I then followed that with Mark C. Carnes's *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* to explore more. I found the descriptions exciting but also scary; I would be giving up and changing things. I started small, with low-stakes changes, and the results have been great. It is really satisfying to have a student come up to you several years after teaching them to thank you for making a fun engaging class—but it is even more exciting to have a student come back after a several year absence and bring the knowledge that they learned from a game (explaining the ideology of Jacobinism) to their fellow students in a later class discussion (on the role of trans-Atlantic ideologies in United States early republic slave revolts and conspiracies.)[2]

Not fully sure how Reacting might work, or what issues it might present, I started off with a single game in one of my upper-level classes in United States legal history, and we ran *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*. It was a success; students enjoyed the game, and learned a lot not only about Anne Hutchinson, but about the intersections of law, religion, and society in 1600s Massachusetts. The experience of the game opened up opportunities to frame discussions about societal change and the law throughout the semester. When it came to the world history survey, I gradually introduced games, first trying *Athens Besieged* (a microgame) and then *First Encounters: Dutch and Kohekohe at the Cape of Good Hope* (also a shorter game), and then adding the *Game of Sages*, a two-day game. In the second half of the survey, I added a longer, multi-day game, *Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence*.[3]

Reacting was a success for me and I discovered that one of the most valuable things about Reacting to the Past games is their ability to allow students to think deeply and change their models of their understanding of history. Furthermore, this change is embedded in their memories. They will remember their game experiences twenty years from now. But that memory comes with some specific deep learning both relative to the game at hand, and also more broadly about pedagogy and leadership—we might think of

these as skills, but also learning how to engage and approach situations. For instance, the *Game of Sages* makes students not merely memorize the tenets of particular philosophies of governance during Warring States China, but causes them to think deeply about their comparisons with other schools of thought, and the practical applications of the philosophies. They come out of the game better equipped to recall more many years later, and they have rethought some assumptions about the history of China (often as an undistinguished mass of succeeding dynasties before the twentieth century.)[4]

World history is often focused on coverage. Even when we think critically about our implicit narrative, deep story, or big picture, we often revert back to coverage, especially outside our scholarly specialties. I have chosen games in part because of "coverage," but I wanted students to engage with issues of state and government formation, as well as the issue of colonialism. Coverage, in fact, is choosing a particular narrative or interpretation. When making the tough choices about what to include or exclude, consider your implicit narrative that you are trying to tell—is it valuable for students to learn? Why or why not?

Within my world history survey, I had several goals in mind for my students to learn. These goals were not necessarily inherently connected to Reacting games, though the games effectively incorporated them. Firstly, that the past was different from how we assume it was. Secondly, I wanted them to question some assumptions about western superiority and history as progress. Similarly, I wanted students to question the implicit western perspective. I also wanted them to develop some skills important to historical research: how to read sources, how to navigate the too little/too much problem of historical research, as well as how to make a historical interpretation.

More closely related to the games, there were several assumptions that I wanted to challenge students on: the process of learning, moving away from the banking model and towards an active understanding of learning; to center history on the lived experiences of people in the past, rather than a simple timeline of facts; that people in the past have debated, thought, and reacted to major social and political problems, and worked towards solutions to address those issues; and that those debates happened outside of a traditional western history context. Incidentally, these games were also good training for leadership, and allowed students to make connections and build friendships with other students.[5]

With the above in mind, I chose games that fit well with my teaching goals. The games both served the above goals, but also had specific functions within the course of the semester: smaller, shorter games to introduce students to the idea of learning through gaming, and shifting to longer games accompanied by larger and more complex writing assignments. Below are the games that I usually run in my survey, and the pedagogical purposes that they each serve.

First off is an icebreaker that I usually run on the first class day. *Making History* is a microgame that can be run within a single class session. This short game gets students to think critically about evaluating evidence, constructing narrative, and the concept of historiography. The game is also cooperative rather than competitive. Additionally, students are not given a role, but are asked to solve a mystery through initially cryptic evidence, and in the process construct a historical interpretation.[6]

Athens Besieged: In this game, students are citizens/inhabitants of Athens, deciding whether to negotiate a surrender to the coalition of armies besieging their city. As citizens die off from starvation, they are reincarnated as part of the besieging armies. Students learn about direct democracy and inclusion/exclusion within it, along with issues of ancient warfare and diplomacy. This is also a microgame, and I use it as a low-stakes introduction as students are often nervous about being in a class that uses active, engaged learning and a format for learning that is new to them. For this and all subsequent games, I have a debrief day after the game finishes.[7]

Game of Sages: This is a multi-day game set in the Warring States period of Chinese history. At the time of game setting, the state of Qin has become powerful enough to possibly conquer all the other states. Students are coming together from the other states to determine how to address the Qin threat and formulate a response. They are also expected to draw on philosophical and other writings from this period. In their speeches, they develop responses based on Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, and other schools of thought to address issues of governance, society, diplomacy, and warfare.[8]

First Encounters: This is also a one-day game, set during the early period of Dutch colonization of the Cape of Good Hope. Dutch and local Khoekhoe people must determine if they benefit more from warfare or continued trade. They must also negotiate a peace deal using go-betweens whom they do not entirely trust, but have to rely on because of the mutual language barrier. Students draw on Dutch and (white) South African sources to understand the problems, issues, and potential solutions, while gaining an understanding of how colonized people experienced and responded to imperialism.[9]

India: For the second half of the world history survey, instead of several smaller games, I run one much longer game—*Defining A Nation: India on the Eve of Independence*. In this game, leaders of different movements within British India negotiate the transfer of power and the shape of the newly independent nation(s) emerging from colonial rule. Students engage with core religious texts from Islam and Hinduism, and also experience some key events in twentieth century world history from the perspective of the Global South: decolonization and the challenges of post-colonialism, the rise of religiously-influenced nationalism, and the emergence of the Cold War.[10]

Running these games effectively for student learning and success means using additional tools and techniques. In these games, I have also used Slack, and have found

running certain games through Slack live chat to be effective (and preferable to some of the technical challenges of breakout rooms when teaching online.) I had one student simulate the language barrier by using Google translate to post in Dutch during some of the First Encounters negotiations.

I would also like to address the issue of scaffolding; to properly run a game, you need to explain how the game will work. You need to help students become more comfortable with public speaking, and also to give them proper guidance on their writing assignments, and to provide necessary historical context. If you are using a messaging tool like Slack, you will need to roll that out as well.[11]

Also for longer games, I decided that to give students time to research and draft their written assignments, one eighty-minute class day of my two per week is a game day, and the other a more traditional class day. The one exception is the debrief day, which I usually try to schedule immediately after the final game day.

The solution to the issue of scaffolding is some form of integration. A standalone scaffolding can bore students and make them impatient. *Argentina 1985*, which I have used in an upper-level class, avoids these issues by integrating lectures into the game; students learn about Argentina's history while role-playing as high school students in an Argentinian classroom, under the watchful eye of a student prefect who is on the lookout for violations of the dress code and unruly student behavior. I run *Athens Besieged* over two days: a first day of setting up, getting everyone onto Slack, and starting to play the game, and a second continuing game day, followed by a debrief day.[12]

I also have given students several ways to reflect critically about their experiences. I followed the completion of each game with a debrief day; each student stepped out of their character, back into their student selves, and had a chance to discuss their experiences in the game, and think about what they learned. Furthermore, I usually ask my students at the end of the semester what the most important thing was that they learned in class. Students often cited the experience of the game and their roles. My response here is general and anecdotal, but there is a considerable body of research to back up the ways that Reacting games stimulate deep learning, and get students to challenge assumptions.[13]

Many students find the experience of the games to be exciting and engaging: they are often surprised to discover that learning can be fun. They especially appreciate an online class that is more lively and engaging, and found that immersing themselves into a society in greater depth allowed them to think deeply about issues such as decolonization or the relationship between state and religion. It is also an excellent way to have a strong discussion with students about what they came in knowing and not knowing. I found that experience to be particularly noteworthy in a game of *Art in Paris* in a western civilization survey; very few of them had had any sort of introduction to approaching and studying art. However, I have encountered students who have rejected the active learning model and state a preference for the banking model—they also

sometimes rejected the deep dive into an area that they may not see as relevant to their personal incoming narrative of world history.[14]

Despite these issues, Reacting games are quite effective at getting students to think about history as a lived experience—they are inhabiting peoples' lives in the past. I also emphasize to students that they are going beyond play and LARPing (live action role playing) into something that makes them realize that these are people, not just characters. Grounding the student experience in real, historical persons helps students to make that connection. Similarly, in the debrief, connecting characters historically to what happened after the game ended helps to ground the experience to real historical events.[15]

One way that Reacting to the Past games work effectively to build student learning is through developing the skill of reading against the grain. Instructors do not always provide practical guidance on this skill, sometimes emphasizing other skills and concepts in class. Reading against the grain also has prerequisites; students cannot read against the grain if they are not reading the source in the first place. I have often found myself working on making sure that students have been engaging more generally with sources, let alone reading against the grain. Furthermore, the skill of reading against the grain is something that we are trained to do with sources as historians, and so we often do not think about how to teach others to do it. This is especially the case with a survey class, where we are often assigning the same primary sources every year (a few get swapped out, but most of them stay). There is also the problem in a World History survey that the common structure is an information-heavy lecture followed by a reading of primary sources. Very rarely do we discuss historiography in the depth that we might in an upper-level undergraduate class, to say nothing of a graduate class. However, after they have played a Reacting game, most students are more engaged and thinking about the ideas, and are more comfortable engaging with historical primary sources. The *First Encounters* game is especially useful in building the reading against the grain skill, because students with indigenous roles have to use colonizer-authored documents to understand their own perspectives. Thus, to research their talking points for the game, they have to read documents against the grain. In so doing, they also learn to empathize, not only with the authors, but with the perspectives of others that can be discerned when reading sources carefully and critically. I will also say that when I make this written assignment, I grade on whether or not students quote from the texts with relevant material. I have made this assignment fairly low-stakes, leaving their own motivations to do well in the game as the driver of the quality of their arguments. I have found this teaching strategy to be successful, and a good way to address the use of artificial intelligence large language models (LLMs) in student assignments.

The benefits of reading against the grain come through elsewhere in the class as well. Post-game, using students' former roles can be useful for getting students to look at a source from a different perspective; "How would your character have reacted to

this?" or, less directly, "This source represents one side of a key historical event, how might people from other sides have seen it?" Francis Xavier's account of attempting missionizing in Japan is a good example, where we can see Japanese responses and challenges to his theology and cosmology. I have found this technique especially useful in United States history surveys to interpret documents from enslaved peoples' perspectives. I usually run the *Bacon's Rebellion* game, and have found it helps engage students with abolitionist writings as well as discussions of African-American choices and actions during Reconstruction. Here the importance of Reacting in developing empathy is helpful. It allows students to go beyond thinking about historical responses to these issues and events as facts to be remembered, and instead allows them to place themselves in the perspectives of not only the author of a primary source, but other people affected by and responding to the event as well.[16]

I have highlighted the benefits of Reacting, but also want to be clear that it is not a panacea. There are tradeoffs, and while the games benefit many students, students are often uncomfortable with active, engaged learning; some find it thrilling, most enjoy it, but some reject this form of learning. Scaffolding is helpful in alleviating those concerns, but some students also get frustrated with delays in starting the game. Anecdotally, I have seen this more with the India game, which as a multi-day game is more difficult for students who struggle with active learning. Overall, however, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks—deep learning, not just for already enthusiastic students, but for many students coming in with less engagement and motivation.[17]

Although Reacting pedagogy provides many benefits, there is still room for critique. Many of the games that would fit in with a world history survey deal with states, formal politics, warfare, and violence. Since, in patriarchal societies, these were often part of men's historical domain, male roles predominate. This seems to be especially the case in many shorter games. Of course, in many times in pre-modern eras, primary sources from women or that reveal women's reactions and perspectives, especially those of non-elite women, are difficult to find. However, these limitations can also be a tool for starting a discussion with students about the limitations of the archive.

There is also the question of addressing gender and sexuality with more modern games. The traditional roles in the India game are exclusively male. It is one thing to include female roles, but what would this game look like with a Hijra role? Similarly, *Argentina 1985* is set in a high school. As Argentina shifted away from dictatorship, there were changes in LGBTQ life; what would it be like to be an LGBTQ student or teacher experiencing those changes? I have paired this game in an upper-level history class with a screening of *La Historia Oficial/The Official Story*—a choice recommended in the instructor's manual—which has some incidental, casual homophobia targeting a seemingly neurodivergent student. (Also, incidentally, in a classroom that includes active learning and subversive play.)[18]

More broadly speaking, while there are a variety of games that can fit into a world history survey, there is a shortage of games that center the experiences of non-western women. It would be a great benefit for teaching to have a game where women in the Global South confront issues of colonialism in an early modern or enlightenment context. Such possibilities include a game where women confront these issues during, say, the Bourbon Reforms in Latin America. For a pre-modern game, something using the Buddhist Psalms of the Sisters as a jumping off point for religious debate and the problems, issues, and concerns of women.[19]

More games continue to be in development, and I encourage authors to consider the above critiques in developing their games. Games can also be further enriched by the creation of additional roles, which can bring new perspectives and issues into a particular game. Additionally, since this article has also been written as somewhat of a how-to guide, I also encourage additional writing on the process of changing and revising classes to incorporate Reacting games, especially the world history and similar survey classes.

I have written this essay to be helpful and practical by including my perspective and experiences. Too often, literature on scholarship of teaching, especially more informal literature, emphasizes what works effectively, but has less focus on how to practically change existing teaching to move towards those goals. I have focused on small changes building up to a significant change in teaching methods over time. The more we meet each other where we are at, the more we can put effective change in our teaching into practice.

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Notes

[1] "The Reacting Consortium - What is Reacting?" Reacting Consortium, accessed August 4, 2024, https://reactingconsortium.org/WIR-basics ; Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014); Patrick Rudolph, "Measuring Critical Thinking in Reacting to the Past," *Teaching History* Vol. 48, No. 1 (2023) 91-105; Robert S. Bledsoe and Deborah S. Richardson, "Impact of Reacting to the Past and Effect of Role on Student Attributes and Academic Outcomes," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* Vol. 33, No. 3 (2022), 361-373; Thomas Chase Hagood, C. Edward Watson, and Brittany M. Williams, "Reacting to the Past: An Introduction to Its Scholarly Foundation," in *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past: Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices*, Ed. C. Edward Watson & Thomas Chase Hagood, (Cham, Switzerland : Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-16 ; Thomas Chase Hagood, Naomi J. Norman, Hyeri Park, and Brittany M. Williams, "Playing with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: How Does Reacting to the Past Empower Students and Faculty?," in *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, 159-192; Carolyn L. Schult, April Lidinsky, Lisa Fetheringill Zwicker, and Elizabeth E. Dunn, "Strengthening Students' Self-Efficacy Through Reacting to the Past," in *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, 75-89; Yidi Wu, "Reacting to the Past: Teaching Asian and World History through Role-Playing Games," *Education About Asia*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 2022) 67-68.

[2] Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004); Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role*; Popiel, Jennifer J., Mark C. Carnes, and Gary Kates. *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*. Second edition. Reacting to the Past. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015; Douglas R. Egerton, "Gabriel's Conspiracy and the Election of 1800," *Journal of Southern History* 56 (1999), 191-214.

[3] Michael P. Winship and Mark C. Carnes, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Mark C. Carnes and Naomi Norman. *Athens Besieged: Debating Surrender*, unpublished manuscript, last modified September 29, 2017; Sandrine Catriss and Andrew Goss. T*he Game of Sages: War and Diplomacy in China, 233 BCE*, unpublished manuscript, last modified January 4, 2021; "The Reacting Consortium - The Game of Sages," Reacting Consortium, accessed August 4, 2024, https://reactingconsortium.org/games/sages223bce; Paul Otto. *First Encounters: The Khoekhoe and the Dutch at the Cape of Good Hope, 1672*, unpublished manuscript, last modified December 3, 2020; Ainslee T. Embree and Mark C. Carnes, *Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016); " 'People Can Get FIRED UP': Slack in the Classroom with Reacting to the Past in a Live, Video-Linked Classroom," in *Association for Regional Campuses of Ohio (AURCO) Journal*, 2020.

[4] Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 27-29; Ken Bain, *What the Best College Students Do* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); Hermida, Julian. *Facilitating Deep Learning: Pathways to Success for University and College Teachers*. Oakville, ON: Apple Academic Press Inc, 2015.

[5] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970); Md. Mahbubul Alam, "Banking Model of Education in Teacher-Centered Class: A Critical Assessment" *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* Vol.3, No.15, 2013

[6] "The Reacting Consortium - Making History: The Breakup Game," Reacting Consortium, accessed August 4, 2024, https://reactingconsortium.org/games/makinghistory .

[7] "The Reacting Consortium - Athens Besieged," Reacting Consortium, accessed August 4, 2024, https://reactingconsortium.org/games/athensbesieged.

[8] Catriss and Goss, *Game of Sages*.

[9] Otto, *First Encounters*.

[10] Embree and Carnes, *Defining a Nation*.

[11] I have discussed the use of Slack in an earlier journal article: John O'Keefe, " 'People Can Get FIRED UP': Slack in the Classroom with Reacting to the Past in a Live, Video-Linked Classroom," *Association for Regional Campuses of Ohio (AURCO) Journal*, Vol. 26 (2020)

[12] "The Reacting Consortium - Argentina 1985," Reacting Consortium, accessed August 5, 2024, https://reactingconsortium.org/games/argentina1985.

[13] Thanks to my colleague from my previous institution, Meredith Oda, at the University of Nevada-Reno for introducing me to this reflective prompt for students.

[14] Gretchen Kreahling McKay, Nicolas W. Proctor, and Michael Andrew Marlais. *Modernism versus Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

[15] Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 246-270; Popiel, Carnes, and Kates, *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*; Catriss and Goss, *Game of Sages*; one thing I struggle with here is the place of violence. A student playing François Buzot in the French Revolution game was very disturbed to learn that her historical character had committed suicide. In the Game of Sages, the particularly gory death of legalist Si Yi also poses some problems as well.

[16] Francis Xavier, "Letter from Japan, to the Society of Jesus at Goa, 1551," https://origin-rh.web.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1551xavier3.asp. Last accessed June 14, 2024

[17] Verdis Robinson, *Bacon's Rebellion, 1676-1677: Race, Class, and Frontier Conflict in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2024); Mark D. Higbee, "How Reacting to the Past Games 'Made Me Want to Come to Class and Learn': An Assessment of the Reacting Pedagogy at EMU, 2007-2008, *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at EMU*, Vol. 2 No. 4, October 23, 2009; Carnes, *Minds on Fire*; Bledsoe and Richardson, "Impact of Reacting to the Past and Effect of Role on Student Attributes and Academic Outcomes";; Rudolph, "Measuring Critical Thinking in Reacting to the Past"; Hagood et. al., "Playing with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: How Does Reacting to the Past Empower Students and Faculty?"; Schult et. al., "Strengthening Students' Self-Efficacy Through Reacting to the Past,"

[18] Patrícia Marcos and Jessica Hinchy, "Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900," January 5, 2024, in New Books Network, podcast, audio, 1:03, https://newbooksnetwork.com/jessica-hinchy-governing-gender-and-sexuality-in-colonial-india-the-hijra-c-1850-1900-cambridge-up-2019 ; Luís Puenzo, dir. *La Historia Oficial* (The Official Story.) 1985; Port Washington, N.Y. : Koch Lorber Films, 2004. DVD. Mary Jane Treacy, *Argentina 1985: Making Memory*, unpublished manuscript, last modified August 2021.

[19] Hallisey, Charles, ed. *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015.