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Ginger L. Smoak
University of Utah

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***Reacting to the Past* and Subversive play:
Pushing Boundaries in Pedagogy**

Ginger L. Smoak

University of Utah

*This piece examines the *Reacting to the Past* role-playing pedagogy in light of subversive play. Subversive play can allow the students an opportunity to explore ideas and roles outside of their social norms and realities. Designed to produce an emotional reaction, it increases the tension between the “rules” of society and the classroom and those of the game. *Reacting to the Past* asks students to inhabit a role and speak, write, and influence through critical analysis of primary documents and persuasive speeches. Through *Immersive Dynamics*, this gamified pedagogy allows players to discover new perspectives by seeing an event through another’s eyes. By examining my experience teaching three historical *Reacting to the Past* games, this paper illustrates the educational and social benefits of this pedagogy and of subversive play.*

I sat in the corner of the classroom, watching the action on the edge of my seat. Would the Council of Acre accept the validity of a letter purportedly sent by Nur ad-Din to his agent, and would they vote to attack Damascus? Joe¹ was playing Muhammad al-Sultan, emir of Shayzar of Damascus, an actual historical figure but one who would not have attended the War Council at Acre in 1148. A member of the Eastern Allies faction, he had been invited to the War Council by Queen Melisande of Jerusalem as a trusted ally. One of Joe’s secret objectives was to betray his faction and compromise Damascus by becoming a spy for Nur ad-Din, the leader of Edessa.² Joe had to convince everyone at the Council that he was protecting Damas-

1 Names have been changed. This piece was presented as part of a panel titled “Pedagogical Innovations in Teaching the Renaissance and Reformation” at the 49th annual Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association conference, held at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction, Colorado in June of 2017.

2 The city of Edessa fell to the Muslims in 1144.

cus's interests, all the while trying to get it to target that city in their next Crusade. Despite the unlikelihood that they would be duped, a quick glance between Joe and myself expressed disbelief: they were buying it. The vote: Damascus.

Reacting to the Past, a role-playing pedagogy created by Mark C. Carnes, helps students recognize the contingency of history and the importance of individual actions, motives, and discourse, that history's path is not determined.³ Students playing a particular "game" learn to read and utilize primary sources effectively and, most importantly here, to argue persuasively within a given role in order to influence other characters and convince those characters of their own positions. Each *Reacting to the Past* game divides players into groups called factions. The remainder of the students are Indeterminates, those who may be convinced, cajoled, and bribed to vote with one faction or another, leading to a victory. The members of the factions, therefore, must make cogent arguments in speeches to sway the Indeterminates, who often do not realize the power they hold. Working together in these groups, students have both individual and collective objectives to meet by learning about history, reading, writing, and speaking and finally by colluding and manipulating; in short, through subversion.

Reacting to the Past role-playing games allow students to enter the world of subversive play "spent in the borderlands between the normative systems and the edges."⁴ Subversive play can allow the players, in this case the students, to explore ideas and roles outside of their social norms and realities. Designed to produce an emotional reaction and to prompt them to "consider an issue, thought or concept in a new and creative way," it increases the tension between the "rules" of society and the classroom and those of the game.⁵ For a

3 Mark C. Carnes developed *Reacting to the Past* at Barnard College in 2005 to offer students a new way to learn about history, philosophy, religion, art, and science.

4 Cox, "Digital Ephemera," <https://videlais.com/2011/08/26/subversive-play/>

5 Cox, "Digital Ephemera," <https://videlais.com/2011/08/26/subversive-play/>

group of students on the verge of adulthood, especially those who have been taught to follow society's rules, subversion is not only beneficial, but also vital for them to develop their own identities.

By definition, subversive play worlds exist "outside the boundaries of everyday life," limited in time and place/space.⁶ College classrooms, however, are regulated and supervised by faculty and other college authorities, so how subversive can a game be in this case? Carnes suggests that "subversive play worlds do not destroy hierarchy, authority, and order; they depend on it."⁷ There would in fact be nothing to subvert without clearly identifiable authority in the form of rules, systems of belief, class hierarchy, and social convention. Students understand that *Reacting to the Past* games have been created by scholars, are overseen by instructors, and are underpinned by scholarship, yet they "transform the class into their own subversive play world, and when they do, the walls of authority seem to dissolve."⁸ When this happens, they can and do challenge the notion that historical action is outside of themselves, a long-ago series of predetermined events that affect them little, if at all.

Historical context is vital to understanding the unfolding of actions in the past, and *Reacting to the Past* games, unlike historical simulations and reenactments involving a simulacrum of a historical event, afford the understanding that a person in a given situation may vary their actions in a different setting. In *The Idea of History*, R.G. Collingwood argued that historical figures are knowable only through their words, as we read and "rethink" their thoughts.⁹ Just as a place like Disneyland, for example, is "hyper realistic," that is present simultaneously as "absolutely realistic and absolutely fantastic," *Reacting to the Past* role-playing is both built upon the underlying historical framework *and* make believe: both archival

6 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 64.

7 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 64.

8 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 65.

9 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 297.

research *and* Dungeons and Dragons.¹⁰ Fast and intense, this pedagogy does not always allow full understanding of historical content, an insurmountable issue for many professors that leaves them opposed to Role Playing Games. Critics accuse *Reacting to the Past* of misrepresenting the historical past, saying that they “constitute an offense against the values of the historical profession.”¹¹ However, as Carnes has said: “History is a smorgasbord of plausible ‘what-ifs’ . . . describing ‘what happened’ and why ignores the contingency of the past.”¹² History is messy, a valuable lesson in itself.

“Gamification” refers to “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” to make systems or processes “more fun and engaging.”¹³ Usually used in software engineering and educational processes like the use of clickers or apps, gamification can also be used in other education platforms, such as Role-Playing Games (RPGs). Gamification Effectiveness Theory posits that the framework relies on four main drivers of effectiveness: Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Game Mechanics, and Immersive Dynamics.¹⁴ The more than forty *Reacting to the Past* games currently in use explore, history, science, art history, human rights, and political science through gamification using all of these drivers, but especially Immersive Dynamics, which enable a player’s immersion into the gamified system or activity. In these games, students embody roles, sometimes of actual historical figures and other times composites. Using primary and secondary source documents provided by the instructor as well as their own outside research, they role-play as their character through a given set of circumstances. This methodology of teaching history emphasizing active learning and

10 Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality*, 43.

11 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 249.

12 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 257. See also Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives*, American Historical Association, Jan. 2007.

13 Amir and Ralph, “Proposing a Theory of Gamification Effectiveness,” 626-627.

14 Amir and Ralph, “Proposing a Theory of Gamification Effectiveness,” 627.

engagement is a form of “flipped classroom,” in which students get most of their historical content outside of class and then spend the class period “speaking, plotting, writing, conferring, and negotiating with their fellow students.”¹⁵ The majority of the class meetings are mostly or entirely student driven, with the instructor silently enconced in a corner of the room, largely forgotten.

I taught my first *Reacting to the Past* course in the Honors College at the University of Utah in 2017 as a semester-long *Intellectual Traditions* course dedicated to the pedagogy. We played three medieval historical games: *Constantine and the Council of Nicaea: Defining Orthodoxy and Heresy in Christianity, 325 C.E.*, *The Second Crusade: the War Council of Acre, 1148*, and *Il Duomo di Santa Maria del Fiori, 1418*. Each of the games begins with 1-2 weeks of lecture on historical background, engaging with primary sources individually and with other students, and “set up” of the game’s situation and rules. Games always begin with a liminal event in order to establish a sense of impending change and uncertainty, allowing students to change the historical narrative in a way that allows them to see that history is not predetermined or “set in stone.” This aspect in particular drew me to this pedagogy, as I have recognized student’s tendency to see history as stagnant and part of a larger “plan.” In *Reacting to the Past* games, most students recognize that their role sheets and the historical background in their Game Manuals provide them with the bare minimum of information needed to be successful in the game. They know that they must do additional research, and read and re-read the historical documents for clues as to how their characters might act, regardless of how they did act in history. They discover what else was happening at that time and place, and then make decisions based on that contextual information. Some roles are so brief that students are required to flesh them out by naming their personas and developing biographical details, and this immersion into character can get into their heads. One student surveyed said: “I had to double check my thoughts-are they my thoughts or

15 Olwell and Stevens, “I Had to Double Check My Thoughts,” 568.

my character's thoughts?"¹⁶ If teaching historical thinking is one of our primary goals as educators, this seems a promising start.

The most difficult game we played was also the first: *Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, 325*. Students had to learn both the rules and structures of *Reacting to the Past*, as well as the many facets of early Christian doctrine, determine what ideas fourth-century Christians considered most important and why, and strive to understand the episcopal authority of metropolitan bishops, and women's roles in the late Roman social and religious hierarchy. This proved relatively challenging, especially since, as in traditional medieval history classes, students are not particularly knowledgeable or comfortable with learning about religion, particularly one not their own. The game is especially designed to create a Creed and the bulk of the class sessions tackled that issue, students wrangling over excruciatingly detailed word choice, each faction and Indeterminate player adding their own perspectives. The ensuing debate was often heated, as religious debates have historically been, allowing students to understand history on an emotional, as well as an intellectual level. Students recognized that corporate Christianity did not emerge as a monolithic doctrine out of a vacuum, but rather that it took centuries of this kind of discussion and disputation, local and ecumenical Church councils, letters and treatises, to come to the agreed upon Creed. Using multiple versions of scripture, as well as the Gnostic Gospels, canons, and letters, students wrote three historical papers on an idea, such as the nature of the trinity, for which their role advocated, and then used those papers to inform the speeches they gave in class. When they finished the game, the student playing Bishop Ossius of Cordoba, who presided over the Council, wrote the final Creed upon which they had agreed on a scroll she had bought at a stationary store and the bishops signed it.¹⁷ Not all bishops agreed to sign and one, Acesius the Novatianist, walked out of the Council, forfeiting all of his victory points and losing the game. Students who signed the Creed received points (if it made sense in their roles).

16 Olwell and Stevens, "I Had to Double Check My Thoughts," 568.

17 I hung the scroll in the classroom as we left that day and it was stolen, perhaps a testament to its beauty and "coolness" quotient.

The students who achieved the greatest number of their objectives won the game. The winner received five extra credit points in the class, not enough to change their grades, but providing enough extra incentive to give convincing speeches. Likewise, losing a game did not affect their grades, further removing a barrier to subversion.

As the game progressed, so did their willingness to play outside the rules. Shyness and self-consciousness evaporated, as did the fear of saying something incorrect and the overall fear of failing. Rather, it helped to bolster their inventiveness and creativity, both essential qualities of a good historian and thinker. Because this class is only one option to fulfill their Core Honors requirement, students self-select, and are therefore naturally more willing to “buy in”. Over time they cared less about their grades, and instead thrived on the competition and collaboration. Students became fully immersed in the game in exciting ways, by wearing costumes, bringing props, posting messages (physically and electronically), and getting wholly into character during debates. They made and brought relics to class, created banners, and produced documents they had researched, such as contracts and commissions. By requesting that they include me on all email correspondence and by reading the electronic discussion board where they posted information, speeches, and rebuttals, I was able to peer into this subversive realm outside of class as well, where a large part of the game play occurs. It allowed me to better assess the amount and type of work in which each student was engaging. Students held meetings on evenings and weekends and spoke to each other outside of class about the game often. I even observed them referring to each other by their character names in other classes and contexts, further indicative of the tight-knit and inclusive community that *Reacting to the Past* fosters.

From the perspective of Social Capital theory, the classroom community created in *Reacting to the Past* games constructs a network that provides students with societal value, while also “facilitating the circulation of resources, particularly new information and ideas, contributing to their academic performance.”¹⁸ I switched up the

18 Webb and Engar, “Exploring Classroom Community,” 13.

factions in subsequent games so that former adversaries were now allies and vice versa. They were therefore able to continue to expand that network throughout the semester. In several studies done about *Reacting to the Past* students stated that by playing a game they developed skills in oral argument, critical thinking, strategizing, writing, and teamwork and that the experience helped with overcoming anxiety. They enjoyed the approach and felt that it contributed positively to their learning.¹⁹ Students also reported higher self-esteem, an increase in empathy, and enhanced verbal and rhetorical skills.²⁰

In the second game, *The Second Crusade and the War Council of Acre, 1148*, the focus shifted to twelfth-century politics in Europe and the Middle East. Besides the Indeterminates, students group into several factions: French, German, Jerusalem and Eastern Allies, which included the military monastic orders and diplomats from Damascus. They engaged in three debates: how can we justify this Crusade, which city will we target, and who will lead it? Presided over by Patriarch Fulcher of Chartres, each student read and utilized sources written by St. Augustine on Just War theory, Otto of Freising's *Histories*, Usamah Ibn Minqidh's autobiography, Pope Eugenius III's *Quantam praedecessores*, and other works to effectively argue for their interests and sway the Indeterminates to vote with their factions. They also collected "relics" of varying point values given for effective speeches, keeping them in their homemade reliquaries. Finally, the student playing Fulcher was responsible for creating the True Cross, to be respected above all else.

In the *Reacting to the Past* pedagogy, while students run the game, the Gamemaster/instructor still has the ability to intervene, some-

19 Albright, "Harnessing Student's Competitive Spirit," 374.

20 Reacting to the Past/Reacting Consortium, Barnard College, <http://Reacting.Barnard.edu>. In a 2013 survey of RTTP Faculty 96% found it to be "Very Effective" or "Effective" in producing student learning of content and skills in Critical Thinking, 99% in Teamwork, 95% in Problem Solving, and 98% in Oral Communication. Furthermore, 98% found it to be Very Effective or Effective in Providing Academic Challenges, 96% in Connecting Knowledge with Choices and Actions, and 91% for Developing Students' Ability to Apply Learning to Complex Problems. But only 88% did so in Knowledge of Content, and the lack of time to go into depth on content is a major obstacle for some instructors.

times literally as a god. Students cannot use anachronistic information, so the Gamemaster must point out when they are using evidence from a document that did not yet exist or referring to an event that had not yet occurred. Gamemasters need not be experts in the period, but of course must provide accurate historical context in the introductory “set up.” Students can and do challenge the rules of the game and the Gamemaster must decide if they have made a plausible case. At the end of each game the Gamemaster holds a Postmortem, a session that explains the ways in which the game diverged from history. It also allows students to debrief and tell secrets, explain actions in the game and mend fences, all over snacks and a party atmosphere. This session is vital to set things “straight” and diffuse tensions. In the *Second Crusade* game, for example, some students became too involved in the tension, becoming so immersed in the game that they began to take other’s actions too personally. One student in particular became extremely involved in the game, sending me daily emails about historical context and strategy and she took the betrayal of her character by another to heart. Perhaps because of the intense nature of her role, or because some people are especially susceptible to Immersive Dynamics, she could not separate actions in the game from actions “in real life,” perhaps a drawback to this kind of pedagogy for some. The Postmortem ameliorated some of her feelings of betrayal but I’m not entirely convinced that she ever forgave her former friend.

Whereas the first two games focused on the complicated religious and political motives and events reflecting medieval ideas, the third game grapples with the paradigm shift surrounding Renaissance Humanism and its innovations. In *Il Duomo di Santa Maria del Fiori, 1418* players compete to design the dome of the Florentine cathedral. Factions are led by Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and della Querca, each jockeying for a chance to design and construct one of the pre-eminent domed cathedrals of the Italian Renaissance. Here my engineering students could shine, as the factions were not only required to design, but also to build and present a “proof of concept”

model to the Indeterminates. These models had to illustrate the factions' detailed plans and answer questions about everything from supply lines to how the designs reflected Humanist values. One especially thorny problem they had to solve, for example, was how to transport the workers a distance of 70 feet up to and down from the worksite. They also researched cranes, levers, and other construction innovations used in this competition, examining schematics and videos illustrating Renaissance engineering and techniques, as well as images of classical domes. Using historical documents written by contemporary engineers such as Vitruvius and Vergarius, and Renaissance writers like Brunni and Dati students had to decide on the best building ideas and practices, all the while harmonizing those concepts with Humanism. The game opened with a liminal event, a procession through the streets of Florence (around our building) on the Feast of San Giovanni, the patron saint of the city. They marched with *palios* and banners they created, reflecting the trade guilds to which they belonged, and carried candles, parading to the sound of characters playing musical instruments. In the course of the game, students came to understand that Renaissance Italian society consisted of multiple intersecting roles: familial, guild, neighborhood, religious, political, and economic. Just as each one of them occupies multiple roles in their lives (student, child, parent, employee, etc.), so too did the characters they were embodying. In this game, as in history, Brunelleschi's design won the competition and he received the commission.

Students grapple with ideas differently because they are trying out strategies, historical factors and human motives in a very tangible way. Players immerse themselves in history in a novel process, one that differs from lecture-based classes in its use of space, objects, and time. Students learn leadership skills, networking and teamwork, logic and argumentation, ethics, and public speaking and, perhaps most importantly, empathy. Anthropologist Victor Turner's "anti-structural function" of liminality argues that by subverting cultural and historical rules with persuasive social inversions, a new identity

and social reality is forged.²¹ This new identity can help students understand new class, race, and gender perspectives, as well as human nature. By playing historical characters of a different gender, for example, they might perceive the issues differently, and perhaps carry that new understanding to other areas of their lives. They learn to see things differently because they are able to “reskin” themselves and try on other historical personas.

Reskinning refers to taking on a new role, pushing the boundaries of society and the world, and engaging in subversive play, allowing the player to change the “narrative of the game world as it exists for them, rewriting”; itself a subversive act.²² By engaging the concepts behind subversive play, including exploration of boundaries and encouraging rebellion, *Reacting to the Past* pedagogy is particularly effective at allowing students to develop empathy, network and build connections, and understand both history and culture through liminal inversions of gender, class, age, race, time, and space. By subverting students’ norms, educators can help them better engage intimately with history in a simulacrum of a simulacrum of the past.

Ginger L. Smoak is Associate Professor Lecturer in the Honors College at the University of Utah, and currently serves as President of the RMMRA.

21 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 44. See, for example, Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. 1969.

22 “Digital Ephemera”

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