

Making History a Living Memory: The Power of Play and Role Immersion in Enhancing

Education

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Abstract:

Reacting to the Past, which employs role-immersion as a collegiate instructional tool, effectively combines active learning and play to create an engaging educational experience. This paper will examine how Reacting to the Past games alter the general disposition of a classroom, enacting a shift from quiet passivity to active and enthusiastic learning. Drawing from the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, this paper will consider the ways in which social interactions, assimilation, and accommodation compliment each other in order to enhance learning (Brame 1-2). An explanation as to why kindergarten teaches us so much – it emphasizes an experience driven by play – and how the same tactic is used by Reacting to the Past is also elucidated. Integrating external research alongside my own experience with Reacting to the Past and that of my peers and students from other universities and colleges, this paper will reveal the impact of role-immersion games on students and their applications in disciplines other than history.

A Juxtaposition: Dozing vs. Doing:

Silence permeates the classroom, broken only by the tapping of a nervous knee and the clacking of nails on phone screens. The computer at the front of the room grumbles groggily as it shudders awake, the professor fiddling with the keyboard as they pull up a slideshow and begin to speak passionately, pointing out specific words and graphics. A few students look on with equal interest, eyes bright and inquisitive.

One takes frantic notes, engaged, yes, but anxiety-ridden, and it is well-known that high loads of stress and subsequently high cortisol levels impair working memory (Oei et al.). Another listens with calm confidence – not overtly overwhelmed but also not taking notes, a practice which, in combination with reviewing those notes, produces the highest levels of recall,

while mere “mental” review produces the lowest (Fisher and Harris). A third thinks no one knows they’re playing video games under the desk. They’re wrong, but they’re not alone. Studies have shown that, ten to thirty minutes into a lecture, student attention tends to experience a drop. This drop “has been associated with the passive nature of the standard format” and “adversely affect[s] learning of the material” (Young et al.). The door creaks, and a student saunters into the room and slips into the nearest seat, their bag thumping to the ground as they settle in and proceed to stare blankly at the board as if they had been there the whole time. A concussive sneeze wakes a dozing student with a start and a faint “God bless you” is followed by “Thanks.”

Unperturbed, the professor talks on, pausing briefly – “Are there any questions? Comments? Concerns, perhaps?” – to no avail, for students only ask questions they deem “intelligent” or “impressive” and only respond when they are certain they know the answer.

This is the paradigm of education – quiet, organized, lecture-based ... predictable. Yet, when has reality ever been predictable? History teaches us no such thing. The students in this classroom are being stifled by an outdated education system – as Albert Einstein once said, “It is nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry” (DiCarlo).

Imagine a shout from the next room and a flurry of chatter, a heavy stomp and the thump of a fist hitting a desk – all in the vernal tone of young adults, for the professor is quietly observing from the sidelines. Then, imagine – I know, it’s difficult – a burst of laughter, the unexpected kind that tends to favor some of the most inopportune moments. These circumstances, it is likely, would be considered inopportune, as the laughter erupts at the

“assassination” of a boy who had taken on the role of President Francisco Madero during the turbulent 1912-1920 Mexican Revolution.

Perhaps the mirth was provoked by the look of shock on the boy’s face or the triumphant air of the assassin, the vehement outrage of the mastermind when she – as Feliz Diaz – wasn’t granted the presidency or the exaltation of the boy – playing General Victoriano Huerta – who was. It doesn’t really matter, though, does it? These students will remember they laughed that day, and they will remember why. They will remember that Madero was shot by foreign national Felix Sommerfeld in 1914, that Secretary of War and Madero’s right hand man Huerta quickly took over, and that the Mexican Revolution was a period of tension, brutality, bloodshed, and chaos in which commoners and political figures alike took part in immoral acts. Yet, most importantly, they will remember that learning can be fun, that it can bring a sense of joy and accomplishment like no other.

I was there, and the impression it made on me was profound.

The latter classroom is the educator’s dream. The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence as to why this reverie can become reality by substituting traditional lectures with the pedagogy of Reacting to the Past – a collection of highly immersive role-playing games that combine student-led sessions; extensive collaboration and competition; in-class debates, discussions, and speeches; and intensive reading, research, and preparation. I intend to examine the following question: why are Reacting to the Past games so successful in reviving a love of learning in students? Through reflections upon my own experience in a Reacting-to-the-Past-based modern world history class, the observations of Mark Carnes in his novel *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*, and the accounts of other college students from Sacred Heart University, Barnard, Columbia, and Dordt College, I will

argue that these games enhance education by placing an unprecedented emphasis on active learning through play.

What is Reacting to the Past?

Reacting to the Past is, in the words of Barnard College, “an active learning pedagogy of role-playing games designed for higher education” (“Role-Playing Games for Engaged Learning”). Developed, according to Carnes, by scholars from a pool of colleges and universities, Reacting to the Past games are, at their core, an elevated version of make-believe (“Debate at Dawn” 4), of playing pretend. Except, the characters one plays were once alive, once walking, talking, and fighting hard for what they believed in. Some won the battle, some the war. Some lived. Some died, whether by disease or by the bullet or by some other manifestation of the Grim Reaper, of the Angel of Death. Reacting roles range from courageous warriors to hungry reporters, from corrupt politicians to progressive reformists, from well-educated fools to wise commoners.

An Investment:

College is a balancing act, a battle of picking and choosing priorities, and if you don’t enjoy the subject, why bother taking the time to remember it? Students tend to retain – by no fault of the professor – only the tricks and trade secrets of how to pass a class. What they don’t retain is the knowledge itself or the more important lessons in hard work, perseverance, communication, patience, understanding, and tolerance of our differences.

Having played two role-playing games in Professor David Luesink’s Modern World History from 1200 course (HI-110-HN) at Sacred Heart University, I can attest to the undeniable

impact Reacting to the Past has on students, myself included, as well as the skepticism with which it is first met – from this, I must admit, I was not immune.

When I read “role-playing game” (Luesink 3) on Professor Luesink’s syllabus in September of 2023, I was, to say the least, displeased. The rest of the syllabus I felt I could comfortably handle: “Define and assess the significance of the major developments, events, ideas, and people of World History since the rise of the Mongol Empire,” no problem. “Analyze and discuss historical primary source documents,” sounds good. “Write short essays analyzing major themes, events, and ideas” (2), time consuming perhaps but perfectly manageable. “In-game speeches, [...] debate, and negotiations” (3) ... No, I would have rather not, and to add an element of performance into the mix! My first thought was, if I am being perfectly honest, something along the lines of, *I’m an English major, not an actor*. I read about history; I don’t, and have never sought to, impersonate it.

I remember the day Professor Luesink handed out our packets, chipper as he explained the various roles and general expectations of what he called the “1349 Norwich Plague Game.” A number of students were not, I dare say, quite so enthused as they rifled through the pages, some with a look like murder in their eyes, others – like me – with a gleam of panic, as I am not one to speak up in class. I shy away from faculty for whom “Participation Matters” on Rate My Professor, I dread presentations, and I pray for a cancellation when debates or discussions roll around. Clearly, I wasn’t exactly thrilled by the prospect of a role-playing game.

Interest in the game was somewhat slow to take hold; as Carnes elucidates, “The students [he] interviewed explained that Reacting games didn’t catch fire until the second or third week, when their new identities and ideas, superheated by competitive pressures, penetrated their minds. That is when they ‘lost themselves’ in the experience” (“Debate at Dawn” 10). In a

similar fashion, I quickly discovered after a few sessions that this was unlike any project I had ever undertaken. In fact, it was less of a project and more of a shift in my way of thinking. Having been assigned the fictionalized Sister Edith Wilton, I found myself drawn further into the life of a nun, of a woman, in the Middle Ages. I was intrigued by her adventures, emboldened by her courage, and inspired by her faith. In writing and speaking the words “I am Sister Edith Wilton, head nun of Carrow Abbey. Do not, men of the Council, disregard my voice on the premise that I am the only woman in this room,” Edith became more than a character to me, more than a role – she came to life, and, in the classroom, I *became* her. I gave speeches with a passion I didn’t know I had, voted on issues as if her values were my own, and strove to serve the people of Norwich as best I could.

In order to do so, I, entirely of my own free will, read and annotated approximately fifty pages worth of text over the course of a week, including Gentile da Foligno’s *Short Casebook*, Gui de Chauliac’s *Great Surgery*, King Pedro IV of Aragon’s *Response to Jewish Pogrom of Tárrega*, and plague-related ordinances from various regions. In reminiscing about a French Revolution inspired game, Dordt College graduate Nate Gibson explained:

We read more in the weeks of the game than we had at any time before in the class. We plowed through the game manual, our history texts, Rousseau, you name it. We spent hours writing articles. I spent several all- nighters editing my faction’s newspapers, and the other editors did too. It had become more than a class to us by that point. (Carnes, “Debate at Dawn” 3)

Like Gibson and his classmates, I gathered data and quotes, carefully planned my speeches, built cogent arguments with supporting reasons and evidence ... I – alongside many of my peers – went beyond the required simply because I was genuinely interested in the subject, in my character, in the person I became when I was Edith Wilton instead of Kathryn Haig. As a student from “Reacting to the Past: The Student Perspective (2012)” said, the game “[...] makes you want to work outside of class and just invest as much time as possible in it” (2:17-2:24).

Employing Reacting to the Past games in a college setting encourages the development of time management skills, a willingness to go above and beyond, and a passion for a subject that may otherwise have been of little consequence to the student in question. As a result, Reacting to the Past serves as an investment in the future through the education of the young.

“I demand ...”: Active vs. Passive Learning:

“As the leader of the Zapatistas, I demand the Mexican government provide welfare! The people are starving,” a girl, playing the role of Emiliano Zapata, called from the back of the room. We all turned to stare at her. I was shocked – not by the fact that someone had spoken without raising their hand but because someone had spoken at all ... and with such fervor, such genuine determination. Yet, what shocked me far more was what followed:

Out of the bewildered silence came, “Where would we get that kind of money?” The speaker – a girl acting as business-minded Felicistas Juana Catarina Romero – continued, “I’m certainly not going to pay for it.”

“There’s plenty in the treasury. Distribute it to the poor,” Zapata insisted, hands on the table, halfway out of her chair.

“Yes, the government must take fiscal responsibility,” another Felicistas, Francisco Bulnes, agreed, earning a scowl from Romero.

“What if we hire the Zapatistas? They could work as soldiers, and we could pay them a salary. It would be a win-win,” the girl in the role of Pancho Villa said.

Nervously looking up from his sheaf of banking records, the boy playing Secretary of Hacienda Ernesto Madero Farías inquired softly but firmly, “And where will the money to pay the troops come from?”

The debate went on, growing and evolving – even becoming heated – until a compromise was reached. Regardless of what that compromise was, a great feat had been accomplished that day: Reacting to the Past had driven us, as students, to speak instinctively, to actively engage with the material, with each other, and with history on the fly, in an impromptu discussion we could in no way have prepared for. The elegant arguments and flowery diction went out the window, and we became engrossed in a natural dialogue, posing questions, presenting logical arguments, and making emotional appeals in an effort to further our own – or rather our character’s – goals (Carnes, “Overcoming the Silence” 124-129). It was, I thought, a miracle – No, a fluke ... perhaps produced by a little too much coffee on everyone’s part.

I now know better, for this was no fluke but rather the consistently observed result of active learning.

What is active learning? According to CFT Assistant Director Cynthia J. Brame, active learning is an educational approach that “focus[es] more on developing students’ skills than on transmitting information and require[s] that students do something – read, discuss, write – that requires higher-order thinking.” Active learning “also tend[s] to place some emphasis on students’ explorations of their own attitudes and values” (1). Reacting to the Past embraces this

approach wholeheartedly and in such a way that one Sacred Heart University student said “it kept [them] engaged and eager for class.” Another held that they “learned a lot about [them]self,” and a third explained that “playing the game [...] was [...] helpful to [their] learning. [They] found it to be more interactive than just listening to a lecture.”

With a basis in Jean Piaget’s constructivist learning theory and Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of development, the form of active learning used by *Reacting to the Past* places students in a long-term, experiential situation driven by teamwork and “peer-peer interaction” (Brame 2). In the process, students learn by “connecting new ideas and experiences to existing knowledge and experiences to form new or enhanced understanding” – first assimilating new information derived from primary and secondary sources and from playing the game to an existing framework, then accommodating to any contradictory information revealed during the post-game debrief, as it is common for games to stray from the historical account of an event (1). While it may seem counterintuitive to allow students to deviate from the true narrative of history, *Reacting to the Past* games are *not* and were never designed to be reenactments. Rather, they were meant to help students understand the values of a different time period and the conflicting perspectives of its various inhabitants by forcing them to make decisions using those values and from one of those perspectives. As one Sacred Heart University student reflected, “I really enjoyed the game because it really forced you to become submerged in the historical background in order to know how to move forward with speeches, votes, and proposals.”

By compelling students to read primary and secondary sources, write and present speeches, engage in spontaneous debates and discussions, and physically reconstruct real events, *Reacting to the Past* synthesizes different forms of active learning in order to provide an

immersive experience that sparks interest in students, awakening in them an otherwise unlikely enthusiasm for class time and for acquiring knowledge.

The Role of Play ... College as Kindergarten:

When do we learn the most? In kindergarten, of course – you wouldn't be able to count to ten or write your name or read this essay, for that matter, if you hadn't retained your ABCs and 123s. The real question is why ... Why do we learn best, and internalize that learning more effectively, in kindergarten? A Brown University study points to a combination of lower childhood GABA levels and “a rapid boost” of those levels in conjunction with subsequent learning sessions: “[...] before learning begins, the overall amount of GABA in children is [...] smaller than adults [...]. However, the researchers found that children exhibited a rapid boost in GABA concentration in the *second* round of learning, while the concentration of GABA in adults did not change” (“Why Do Children Learn More Quickly Than Adults? New Study Offers Clues”). Essentially, childhood allows, however briefly, for greater neurological elasticity, greater absorbency, less inhibition. Yet, this explanation merely provides the biological how and why rather than a tangible goal to aim for and is relatively useless in helping teachers determine how best to engage their students. Further, it may suggest to some that since the ease of learning decreases with age, the ability of young adults and adults to learn ceases altogether, which is simply untrue. Consequently, we must look at the characteristics of kindergarten itself, and, without disregarding the influence of GABA, I am of the opinion that we can boil these down to one essential factor: play.

Fittingly, Carnes describes *Reacting to the Past* games as rooted in the competitive and, at times, aggressive absurdity of play: “Reacting classes are configured as games. Games are play.

People enjoy playing” (“Debate at Dawn” 4). In my own experience playing Sister Edith Wilton in Professor Luesink’s Plague Game, I, along with my fellow students, embraced the freedom we were given – and were, frankly, quite unaccustomed to – in order to take control of our education in an unarguably fun way: We bickered endlessly. We rolled dice to determine who lived and who died, leaving our fates up to chance and often tossing a die or two wildly off course in the process. Our Bishop staged a coup against the leaders of the council, with whom he, while in character, shared a mutual – highly entertaining – animosity. We engaged in candid, modernized discussions and live demonstrations, putting our own personal spin on a severely morbid topic. Our pride and joy, I’d say, was the decision to roll our “dead” away in a chair, shuttling them with exaggerated solemnity to the back of the room. The fun certainly didn’t stop there, for, during our Mexico in Revolution Game, we schemed and plotted and made allies only to stab them in the back with sinister smiles of satisfaction.

Reacting to the Past gave us the chance to play again, and who’s to say playing isn’t a serious endeavor? Play ignites our creativity, our curiosity, our willingness to, as Stephen E. DiCarlo says in “Too Much Content, Not Enough Thinking, and Too Little FUN!”, “run home, study, and contemplate – to really learn.” Play takes the sense of obligation out of education. It restores us to a mindset in which we enjoy learning for learning’s sake, in which learning isn’t just something to endure for the grade and then forget. Play and, consequently, Reacting to the Past games bring us back to kindergarten.

Conclusion:

Overall, through their unique prioritization of active learning and play, Reacting to the Past games serve as powerful educational tools at the collegiate level. They are assets, means by

which professors can convince students that working hard – doing the readings, completing the assignments, preparing for and participating in class – is worthwhile but that the content isn't as important as the skills developed in learning it (“Reacting to the Past: The Student Perspective (2012)” 2:04 - 2:26; Carnes, “Debate at Dawn” 3). Using active learning, *Reacting to the Past* harnesses the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky by means of both the cognitive processes of assimilation and accommodation and social interactions among allies and between enemies. The effect of this fusion of strategies is to help students make connections between new information and past understandings and experiences (Brame 1-2). Further, *Reacting to the Past* takes advantage of the competitive drive of games to encourage a love of learning, excite interest in subjects once thought dull, teach time management skills, foster creativity and curiosity, and boost retention, effectively using active learning and play to elevate the classroom experience (Carnes, “Debate at Dawn” 4).

Despite appearances, the applications of *Reacting to the Past* are certainly not limited to the realm of history. Such games can be implemented in courses of any subject – from art to law, philosophy to religious studies, literature to economics, the political and social sciences to STEM and the natural sciences, with games including “Modernism Vs. Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-1889,” “Russian Literary Journals, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy in St. Petersburg, 1877,” “Paterson, 1913: A Labor Strike in the Progressive Era,” “The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 BCE,” “Food Fight: Challenging the USDA Food Pyramid, 1991,” “Constantine and the Council of Nicaea: Defining Orthodoxy and Heresy in Christianity, 325 C.E.,” and “Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace, and the Dawn of Computing” (“Reacting Games”). Conducted by Scott Freeman and colleagues, a 2014 meta-analysis examining the effect of constructivist-style teaching in comparison to “exposition-centered course designs” with regards to STEM courses

found “that students in traditional lectures were 1.5 times more likely to fail than students in courses with active learning” and “that on average, student performance on exams, concept inventories, or other assessments increased by about half a standard deviation when some active learning was included in course design” (Brame 2). Reacting to the Past, evidently, can be applied to any discipline and can be used to promote interdisciplinary study, enhance understanding, and improve educational outcomes by basing information within the context of a historical event.

In my own experience with Professor Luesink’s “1349 Norwich Plague Game” and “Mexico in Revolution, 1912-1920,” Reacting to the Past games are highly effective and undeniably memorable – pleasurable yet in no way less arduous. In fact, Reacting to the Past demanded more, and my peers and I were driven to comply, working harder because we were invested in the game’s outcome, determined to accomplish our character’s goals. I read sources, wrote speeches, presented and defended my arguments, solicited for votes, formed alliances, sought to undermine enemies, and took copious notes ... not because I had to in order to pass but because I wanted to in order to win. I befriended students who, within the context of the game, were meant to be my enemies alongside those who acted as allies, and, in the process, a community formed, further enhancing the learning experience. Upon reflection, several key takeaways have solidified:

- 1) My ability – and that of students in general – to recall information thrives with spontaneity and experiential learning;

- 2) Reacting to the Past teaches more than just content, accentuating the importance of skill-based learning in the form of teamwork, public speaking and communication, source analysis, writing, and more; and
- 3) Reacting to the Past has the potential to reinvigorate the education system and the motivation of college students by ensuring that learning is fun and engaging.

Ultimately, Reacting to the Past radically alters the educator's approach to teaching in that the professor takes a backseat, allowing the students to drive. Although some swerving and crashes and perhaps a few tickets for aggressive driving or running a stop sign are inevitable, Reacting to the Past ensures that students take an active role in furthering their education by encouraging play-based methods of learning.

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