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The Revolution and Me

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I entered my study of the Revolutionary era – and by extension, the historical profession – by serendipity. However, my study of the French Revolution as an undergraduate and my current pedagogical practices, especially designing and using *Reacting to the Past (Reacting)*, intersect in important ways.

I was a chemistry major at Trinity University when I signed up to take a course on the French Revolution. The course fulfilled a distribution requirement and I thought it might be a fun change from my other classes. I enjoyed chemistry; I wasn't looking for a new major. I had chosen chemistry because I was good at it, because I thought that I could get a job doing it, and because I liked that it helped explain how the world worked.

Instead of being “fun,” this class taught me that history also asked important questions about how the world worked. Gary Kates, who taught the course, had chosen Simon Schama's *Citizens* as one of the central textbooks. Schama's provocatively revisionist retelling of the Revolution was paired with a wide variety of primary sources and critical historiographical articles. I was fascinated by the ways in which the discipline allowed the marshalling of all kinds of data and how opposing viewpoints could be held next to one another. I remember saying to my parents that, while I could imagine myself as a chemist for ten or fifteen years, I could imagine myself as an historian for a lifetime.

Within a week, I was in Gary's office, telling him that I wanted to be a history major and go to graduate school in history. He didn't laugh at me, but only said, “Maybe you should give it a few weeks.” I didn't change my mind. The next semester, I studied abroad in Paris and spent time in the Archives Nationales, working on what became the beginning of an Honors Thesis in History. I did indeed pursue a Ph.D., remaining in French history.

Historical Study, Complexity, and Chaos

What is the point of my stroll down memory lane? It is directly related to my pedagogical observations about the French Revolution, which run along two paths. First, like the majority of students in universities today, I did not enter college to pursue a humanities degree; I didn't even see it as a possibility. Second, my experience leads me to believe that a classroom that is constructed with an eye toward provocation and the voicing of multiple perspectives can encourage students to see historical study as central to understanding how the world works, as well as a place where they will find their own voices.

Like today's students, I was deeply cost-conscious for college; I went to the undergraduate institution that gave me the best scholarship package. Until my French Revolution class, I hadn't ever thought that my college training might relate to a profession in which questions about the past could have power and explanatory force. Similarly, students – and their parents – worry that a history major is not a worthwhile investment, especially in non-elite universities.¹ As Mark Carnes notes in *Minds on Fire*, student complaints about career prospects are hardly new; there was really no Golden Age of Higher Education.² Even if we tell students that history offers them an opportunity to understand and explain the world, a way to use their voice, that may not appeal, if it does not come with a clear relationship to future employment.

However, more and more, students seem to be frustrated by undefined courses of study.³ Today, even outside the humanities, college-bound young adults expect different types of direction than colleges used to provide, including a clearer path of requirements and a sense that all the pieces fit together into a coherent plan that will result in the achievement of specific goals.⁴ Some faculty – I am one of them – also note that their students, both more anxious and more afraid of being wrong, increasingly avoid open-ended questions that leave too much room for interpretation.

Perhaps students are not only cautious and risk-averse in a financial sense, but also in a different, more social, sense. The scope of historical inquiry is almost unbounded. It is steeped in ambiguity and relies on an interplay between change and continuity. These characteristics drew me to the profession. What if the chaos and complexity are off-putting to students who are increasingly used to starting with measurable certainty, with facts and figures and comfortable, quantitative answers? If that is the case, the problems that history faces seem even bigger.

It may not be that our students fear for their future employment prospects so much as historical study itself seems unattractive – too messy, too complicated, too chaotic, with altogether too many opportunities for wrong answers. This is especially true for students who do not believe that they can add their own voice to the mix. For example, there are nearly as many explanations for the cause(s) of the French Revolution as there are French Revolutionary historians. The desacralization of the monarchy, the rise of a capitalist bourgeoisie, or the demands of a growing public sphere are only some of the possibilities for this one question. How can a first-generation student, in an introductory course, ever possibly hope to get it “right”?

¹ “Why Are Fewer People Majoring in History? | Smart News | Smithsonian,” accessed February 12, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/why-people-major-history-180970913/>.

² Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

³ “Yale History’s Major Comeback | Perspectives on History | AHA,” accessed February 12, 2019, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2017/yale-historys-major-comeback>.

⁴ Kathleen A. J. Mohr, “Understanding Generation Z Students to Promote a Contemporary Learning Environment,” *Utah State University*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.15142/t3m05t>.

Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791

Reacting to the Past offers a possible solution with its engaging and supportive introduction to historical study. *Reacting* has nearly twenty years of pedagogical research to back its approach, which uses primary sources in an active-learning – student-run and student-centered – environment. *Reacting* “games,” set into moments of conflict, incorporate polarization, anger, and even mob rule, not for their own sake, but for the purpose of helping students confront historical conflict and decision-making processes. Students approach each game from the perspective of an assigned role, which is itself informed by primary source materials and designed to draw students into debates about the past and engagement with big ideas.

Once the instructor explains the background of the game, a majority of class time is driven and directed by students, working in their factions— speaking, plotting, writing, conferring, and negotiating with their fellow students. Students speak and run the classroom, but not in their own voices. Instead, each takes on the voice of a real person from the past. Because students preside over the class, far more of the instructor’s time than in a traditional class is spent coaching students through the process of argumentation, of helping them to understand the motivations of their characters, the game’s factions, and the era. This structure offers students an incentive to read and interpret primary documents. It also provides students with enough direction and support to make clearly reasoned arguments from the perspective of the past, to see even chaos and complexity as comprehensible. The design of *Reacting* games also improves students’ skills in speaking, writing, and analyzing texts, all core skills that are highly valued by historians and employers alike.

The French Revolution game is an excellent case in point. If we want students to see the appeal of complexity, of change over time, of causation, even of chaos, there is no better historical moment than the French Revolution. As many of us who teach the French Revolution have experienced, our students already think that they “know” what happened: for starters, Louis was a despot and Robespierre was a murderer, even as they feel overwhelmed by other details. *Reacting* helps students to deepen their understanding, to read carefully and think critically about their assumptions.

Preparation for the “game” begins with a traditional, if quick, opening. For *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France*, faculty lead the classroom in a setup phase that lasts approximately four class sessions. If one is following the schedule outlined in the game book, students first read excerpts from Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. The professor facilitates discussion on the *ancien regime* and the Enlightenment, including Rousseau’s exploration of contested questions about privilege, freedom, and civilization. For the next class session, students read a narrative of the early years of the Revolution, along with primary sources such as Sieyès’ “What is the Third Estate,?” the Declaration of the King Upon the Estates-General, and the August Decrees. This second class leads students to a discussion of other questions of representation and legislation, including how protests against privilege resulted in specific revolutionary legislative developments. Class Three places Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* into direct contact with one another. It also asks the students to think about Burke and Rousseau in the context of the Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Now, students ask questions about

how people can achieve the benefits of living in society and also gain freedom, how they can create entirely new societies – or whether or not one should – and what rights should be legislated and how.

At the end of the setup classes, students are given individual role sheets. Many of the roles also belong to a game faction, a group of students who share some goals and victory objectives, criteria by which one can judge at the end whether or not they have “won” or “lost.” People in the same faction therefore have a pre-arranged alliance in the context of the game. For *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution*, the factions are: Conservatives (nobles and clerics), Feuillants (moderates, in 1791), Jacobins (radicals), and the Crowd (vocal revolutionaries who lack legislative standing). Even when students belong to the same faction, their roles will have differentiation that is specific to the historical individual the student represents. The roles, which range from approximately 5 to 25 pages, offer a detailed overview of each character’s motives and victory objectives; the French Revolution instructor’s guide calls them a “life preserver in a stormy sea.” In reading a role sheet, the student learns if, how, and why their faction cares about a particular issue – slavery, or the King’s Veto, for example – and who in the faction should plan to give a speech before the National Assembly on which topic. A portion of the document provides a road-map for the next seven sessions. Other sections help students understand who their allies are, what their faction’s intellectual vision is, and what practical matters might prevent or distract their character from accomplishing their goals. The role sheet may even include secret information about that character, which no one else in the game should know.

Indeterminates, students who are not aligned with any particular faction, also receive their role sheets. Some of them are National Assembly representatives who can vote and might eventually be persuaded to join other factions; others are female or too young or too poor for the franchise. Indeterminates’ goals may be to gain enough status to vote or to change the laws to gain more political influence, though some may only wish to profit from the Revolution or change their social standing. Though Indeterminates have less group identity than members of factions, they have roles that remind them of their importance in other ways. Indeterminates are the keys to deciding which faction ultimately prevails; they evaluate the rhetorical and persuasive force of student writing and they can freely shape policy. The role sheets therefore attune students to the fact that whether they are in a faction or an Indeterminate, no student can prevail without allies; they must find coalitions and collaborators.

The last preliminary session involves the students meeting in their factions (or, in the case of indeterminates, talking with the instructor and possible allies), to discuss events in Paris and abroad. They spend the class session planning for the first Assembly meeting, choosing who will be President, deciding what to publicize and discuss in their faction’s first newspaper (which will be “printed” three times during the course of the game). The instructor moves where needed, helping to answer questions and also making it clear that students are indeed about to be in control of the classroom!

After this final preparatory meeting, the students are thrown into Paris in June of 1791, just as Louis has returned from an abortive trip (or was it a kidnapping?) to the Austrian border. For the next six class sessions, the professor disappears – or, more accurately, moves to the back of the class, where she sits as the Gamemaster (GM). (Officially, the Gamemaster observes, though she

also plays other roles as necessary: foreign and potentially invading powers, the Pope, or even fate in the form of the rolling of dice.) The class, now the French National Assembly, is led by a student who has been elected to the role of President. The elected President sets the agenda for the day, and any member of the National Assembly who wishes to address his fellow legislators is free to do so. Planned debates – encouraged by the specifics of the role sheets – are over the role of the Church and the nationalization of Church lands; the monarchy, feudalism, and privilege; passive and active citizenship; participation in armed defense; freedom of speech; slavery; and popular violence. In any of these debates, the class may be transported away from the Assembly and to the streets of Paris by a particularly persuasive member of the Crowd, who demands to speak directly to the people.

Primary sources remain central to the forward progress of the game. The assigned documents are related to the legislative schedule envisioned by the game designers, though creative students will do outside research to find more support for their positions. Strong students understand that their character's own ideas and vision of the world are important, but they must also persuade others to see their perspective as something that goes beyond the merely individual. To do that, they need to assemble evidence: convincing facts, propagandistic images, and philosophical support.

The evidence – quotations, ideas, statistics, images – is marshaled by the students for use in speeches and newspaper articles, as each student seeks to achieve the faction's victory objectives as well as the individual character's. Evidence is then deployed in different ways, depending on the audience that needs persuasion. Legislative debates attempt to influence fellow members of the National Assembly; newspapers address the people of France, private letters concentrate on spies, diplomats, heads of state, and foreign audiences. Artistic and philosophical salons allow for broader discussion of the social and cultural implications of ideas.

In class debates, ideally, each legislator waits for a turn at the podium, where he then offers a prepared speech on a pre-determined agenda item, in an attempt to persuade other legislators to see the wisdom of proposed legislation. Others can ask for permission to speak as well. In practice, as members of the Crowd begin to make their opinions known over the speeches, and the Assembly gets louder and louder, order often falls by the wayside. The President sometimes gets ousted for someone more radical, legislators might expand the franchise, and by extension, the number of people who can legitimately address the Assembly grows. A newspaper's popularity carries prestige and even votes in the National Assembly; unpopular policies can spark hostility that inspires delegates to flee the country. After all, if the people of Paris get too unhappy, they can not only vilify and harass, but to also riot and kill. The threat inherent in this radicalization often results in an expansion of voting rights as well as a leftward tilt to the Assembly.

Other forms of contingency change the progress of the game, too. In Game Sessions 2, 4, and 6, the Gamemaster distributes the Gamemaster News Service, a paper intended to help students more clearly fix themselves in a global historical moment. This sheet also moves the students forward in time and raises the stakes of the game with notices of economic crisis, war, cultural conflict, and technological change. War with Austria threatens the borders and slave rebellion looms. Thus, even as students have role sheets that emphasize legislative results, such as “pass

the Civil Constitution of the Clergy,” or “keep slavery legal” they quickly find that domestic events such as famine and civil war cannot be kept separate from the Assembly’s agenda. In fact, ignoring international politics for the sake of accomplishing one’s short-term goals will quickly result in unmanageable crisis. The game speeds up in ways not entirely dissimilar to the Revolutionary experience of time and place.⁵ Everything seems fraught with potential. Students fear that there is too much to grasp and that it’s beyond their control.

As students begin to realize that they cannot possibly achieve all their goals in such a short amount of time, and that they can’t control as much as they had hoped, they often attempt to expand their reach by working harder. They research opposing factions’ agendas in “real history” and look at legislative debates for clues to what should inspire them. Students come early to class, spend hours in the library and plan meals around the availability of their faction members. They plot and plan, not only in person, but also using technology like GroupMe and Slack to communicate with one another in a semi-private manner. As GM, I’ve gotten any number of late night/early morning emails asking if Danton “can” do something or “how” Louis might be able to escape. Turning that question back on the students inspires even more creativity. One of my recent favorites was a letter to the GM, written in code and slipped under my office door, with a promised “bribe” of cookies to follow successful delivery to the target. (The students also explained why they thought that the diplomat they had targeted would be positively inclined toward them and careful enough to carry off some espionage. They pled for generosity in my own interpretation of the situation.) While the letter was not intercepted, the troops that they had requested were not sufficient to defeat the armed insurrection in Paris, and they still “lost” the game.

Outcomes or, “What happens if the Jacobins lose?”

Of course, I’d argue – along with most of the students who have played – that whether the outcome of the game was a “win,” each student who takes a *Reacting to the Past* class wins in the end. I’d say this is true even in the moments when the game comes out wrong. Sometimes, for example, the Austrian invasion of Paris succeeds and the Conservatives restore Louis XVI to the throne, wiping out the Jacobins, moving the Restoration back from 1814 to the early 1790s. However, even when something counterfactual happens, students in *Reacting* classes do not think this is the “real” history. Instead, they understand that they are learning a lesson about cause and effect, as well as historical contingency: things did not have to occur the way that they did, though they did have to happen according to logical rationales. For example, an Austrian win at Valmy would have had serious consequences for the success of the Revolution. Similarly, the choices that were made by the Restoration government in 1814 and 1815 might have some lessons for the decisions that a “winning” Conservative faction makes.

Outside the realm of immediate historical fact and relevant context, students also often read more purposefully in a *Reacting* course. Because they understand the motivations of their characters as problems to be solved, they need to marshal evidence to support their causes. The texts that are central to the “game” are therefore directly relevant. As one instructor using these games noted,

⁵ Lynn Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 671–78, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-2009-015>.

“Since the theories of these writers [eg, Burke and Rousseau] are relevant to winning the games themselves, students...learn that success in political conflicts is as dependent on ideological justification and persuasion as force.”⁶ If “winning” means being able to understand and deploy the terms of your faction, then students are more likely to engage the texts that help them understand their ideology and explain it persuasively to others.

Engaging the sources in this way deepens student research and writing as well. In *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France*, the rise and fall of factions depends on their ability to persuade others of the truth (and usefulness) of their position. Equally importantly, this persuasion takes place during an existential crisis for France. Jacobins know that if they cannot carry public opinion and legislative debates, France will be destroyed by factionalism, not only the onslaught of counterrevolution from the provinces but a welcomed invasion from enemies. Conservatives seek to preserve France from destruction, too. While each has a different definition of “France’s true nature,” both are zealously committed to seeing their vision come true in game play.

Students, committed to promoting their character’s view, do more than read and write; they also speak in defense of their view. Nearly every student must offer at least one formal speech from the podium; those who do not may speak in the streets, lead an art salon, or demand women’s rights in some form. The game, therefore, demands that students make real efforts to read carefully, write well, speak and argue persuasively. These skills, conducted in groups and embedded in communication between students, means that they also gain experience working with others. As one study of *Reacting* methodology confirms, students who learn in an RTTP classroom “are becoming more engaged in classroom discussions, more willing to work in teams, and are demonstrating improvement skills in rhetorical presentation, critical thinking, and analysis. They also develop higher levels of empathy and a greater understanding of contingency in human history and thus the role of individual action and engagement.”⁷ These are important historical skills, but also skills that employers value and that our students need.⁸

Students also learn that things were not always the way that they are today and that change often occurs alongside conflict over values and ideals. The historical thinking that enables these conclusions is a complex skill for teachers to help students to achieve. Most students, even those at the end of their college career, find it difficult to reconstruct or engage different cultures and

⁶ Tracy Lightcap, “Creating Political Order: Maintaining Student Engagement through Reacting to the Past,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 1 (January 2009): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096509090167>.

⁷ Teagle White Paper Russell Olwell, “‘I Had to Double Check My Thoughts’: How the Reacting to the Past Methodology Impacts First-Year College Student Engagement, Retention, and Historical Thinking,” *The History Teacher* 48, no. 3 (May 2015): 562, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440296002600509>.

⁸ Anant Agarwal, “Data Reveals Why The ‘Soft’ In ‘Soft Skills’ Is A Major Misnomer,” *Forbes*, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anantagarwal/2018/10/02/data-reveals-why-the-soft-in-soft-skills-is-a-major-misnomer/>; “Stop Calling Them Soft Skills; They’re Essential Skills,” Trevor Muir, accessed March 26, 2019, <http://www.trevormuir.com/new-blog-avenue/soft-skills>.

thought systems, taking them on their own terms.⁹ However, taking part in the negotiation and renegotiation of ideas helps students engage in a concrete way the problems surrounding the creation of political order, including the difficulty of establishing political institutions in a moment of collapsing public confidence.¹⁰ Their own frustrations and sense of chaos and lack of control allow them to see how historical decisions were neither fated nor driven by single-minded actors. Instead, the Revolution, as with history writ large, was complicated, with a host of demands and desires coalescing into the final game journée of riots, war, and terror.

This is exactly what our students do not enter college knowing that they need: more complexity and more shades of grey, and more...mess. *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France* eschews simplistic explanations of the Revolution. The game offers students a directed introduction to reading historical sources, thinking historically, and making arguments about the past. It also teaches them that chaos and complexity do not, in and of themselves, pose impossible barriers to understanding the past. The student who plays Danton or Cazalès may not decide that she wants to be a history major, but hopefully, she will leave the game with a deeper sense that historical study, especially in moments of conflict, offers fruitful opportunities for conversation, dialogue, and understanding the world as it was and as it now is. In short, she too will know that historical study explains how the world works.

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⁹ Olwell, “‘I Had to Double Check My Thoughts’: How the Reacting to the Past Methodology Impacts First-Year College Student Engagement, Retention, and Historical Thinking,” 568.

¹⁰ Lightcap, “Creating Political Order,” 175–76.