FLASHPOINTS 1 November 2018
Small but Mighty

The Reacting Consortium and WW Norton are pleased to announce the creation of a new series of short immersive historical role-playing games for college classrooms. Like Reacting to the Past games, Flashpoint games are centered on rich historical documents and are set in pivotal historical moments. Explicitly designed for use in survey courses, they can be completed in one week of class time. Flashpoints games include elements that will be familiar to Reacting veterans, but they are not just “small Reacting games.” As novels are to short stories, this is a different form. As such it has different strengths, weaknesses, and design constraints.

Backstory

This project grew out of discussions within the community regarding the desire for games that require less class time to play as well as games that can be used in larger classes. Over the years, many people have written and disseminated games that filled one or both of these niches. These designs, many of which have been hosted on the Microgames page of the RC website, vary greatly in terms of design.

The rich diversity of these games is inspiring, but it creates a steep learning curve for instructors who are interested in using them. There are few commonalities in terms of structure, materials, or pedagogical aims. In an effort to overcome this obstacle to wide-spread adoption, the Editorial Board struggled (for many years) to figure out what a “Reacting-style” short might be. We wanted to create some series standards, but we also wanted to honor the immense creativity of the authors who put their games forward.

To find a way forward, we boiled Reacting down to its essence: documents, roles, and compelling intellectual collisions. How short could a game become while retaining these key elements? At the same time, we worked with Norton to answer two compelling questions: what did they think they could actually sell, and how could the games be packaged in a way that would provide authors with meaningful compensation?

As a next step, in the fall of 2017, Mary Jane Treacy began adapting her *Paterson 1913* game to a two-session format that would work without extensive setup, but that would remain meaty enough to warrant being published as a book. In the spring of 2018, Justin Cahill at WW Norton organized the field testing of the prototype by instructors both inside and outside of the Reacting community. The game worked. All the instructors liked the basic structure and intent of the game.

Building upon this success, in the summer of 2018, a group of Reacting game developers worked together to clarify ideas about the design and intent of this new series. The notes below are the product of those fruitful conversations. We are now at the end of the beginning. We have a set of series standards and a prototype, but the concept of Flashpoints is sure to evolve. As it does so, I hope that many of you will participate in the project as both authors and play-testers. I also hope that you also end up using some of these games in your classes.

Flashpoints gamebook structure

We currently estimate that the gamebook should be 35,000-40,000 words in length. About half of this should be historical documents. The instructor’s materials should be 40,000-50,000 words, most of which will be role sheets.

**Section 1: Introduction & brief overview of the game.** This provides potential instructors and players with a quick overview.

**Section 2: Historical Background**

1. **Chronology.** The chronology should end where the game begins. Include 8-10 key events.
2. **Narrative.** Provide endnotes, if needed. Include plenty of subheads so instructors can break the narrative into chunks (e.g. One quarter for the setup; half before gameplay begins; one quarter before the second session).
3. **Counterfactuals.**

**Section 3: The Game**

1. **Major Issues** – *What are the major intellectual collisions?*
2. **The players** – *Describe the factions rather than individual roles*
3. **The action** – *Provide a very brief schedule of the game*
4. **Winning the game** -- *Players want to know how to win. Tell them how.*
5. **Your role** – *Explain how to use the documents and how to interact with other roles*
6. **Preparation for playing a role** – *Explain what players should do before the game begins*
7. **Assignments** – *Describe writing assignments, but make them optional; describe other assignments too.*
8. **Rules** – *The fewer, the better*
9. **Conclusion** – *Let players know how the game will end. A culminating vote? An outside threat made real?*

**Section 4: The game sessions.** In each case, be explicit about what players need to do in order to prepare for the session. Also explain any ways in which the game situation might change due to player decisions or outside interventions (e.g. the “game changers”).

1. **Overview**
2. **Before the game begins**
3. **Session 1**
4. **Session 2**
5. **Debriefing**

**Section 5. Roles and Factions.** Provide a fuller explanation of factions here. One line of description is sufficient for individual roles. Recognize that players will recognize factions, but will miss the details of individuals outside their own factions.

**Section 6: Core Texts.** Include marginal glosses and headnotes.

**Section 7: Glossary**

**Section 8. Sources**

**Section 9. Acknowledgments.** Thank those who should be thanked—particularly your play-testers.

Adapting existing games to Flashpoints

Over the past several years, our community has been enriched by a wide variety of short games. Many of these reside in the online game library. Others are listed on the BLORG. If you are the author of one of these games and are interested in adapting it to the Flashpoints format, please inform me.

If you are not interested in adapting your game, there is the possibility that your free game will undercut the sales of Flashpoints games. Consequently, you should recognize that at some point in the future, the Reacting Consortium may need to delist your game.

For similar reasons, “Conference games,” which are chopped down versions of full size Reacting to the Past games, which are available for download, will be managed by Jenn Worth who will distribute them to bona fide faculty development events, but not to faculty who want to try them in their classrooms.

The REB has asked the organizers of the 2019 GDC 2019 to include programming for modifying these games to the Flashpoint format

Conceptual advice

**Consider the sales pitch.** Norton sales staff conceive of these as a new, innovative, and powerful way to bring primary documents to life. They will describe them as an alternative to document readers. In essence, they see these are document readers framed by active pedagogy.

**Let the textbook be your friend!** Examine several to get a sense of what is usually covered in the chapters related to your topic. Each game’s short debriefing should help the class to return to the survey.

**Parachute in to a messy moment.** These games are a good way to bring a particular topic to life. These are, in essence, greatly expanded “call out boxes.” It is a deep dive to illuminate messy moments and contingency, but in a more tidily constrained way than full-length games.

**Keep the survey syllabus in mind.** Make writing assignments pre- and post-game and make them optional.

**Give players clear direction on their role sheets.** Players do not have time to get used to the game. They need to be able to hit the ground running. Mary Jane’s Paterson game does this under three headings on every role sheet: *read, find,* and *present*. The information these contains guides players to the texts that are pertinent to their roles, asks them to locate something within those texts, and then requires them to present that idea to everyone else.

**35 roles.** Norton is not planning to market these to mega-sections, rather they are targeting survey courses with discussion sections, which might be led by TAs.

Significant differences between Flashpoints and RTTP

**In terms of readings:** Each player presents ideas from a core reading; players are not required to read all the documents (but they may be encouraged to do so in order to gain in-game advantage).Simplicity is a virtue when it comes to the documents.

**In terms of writing:** Writing assignments are all optional, and all assignments are fully self-contained in the GB – no outside research is required.

**In the IM:** More instructor aids:

* A “Grab and Go” sheet to aid novice instructors
* A check sheet to monitor required player actions
* Quizzes
* Description of the narrative arc of the game
* Session by session breakdown of what needs to happen when
* Perhaps a speech template or rubric
* Powerpoint slides for the setup and debriefing
* Placards, nametags, and other useful paraphernalia

**In terms of roles:** Roles need to include redundancy mechanisms to ensure that key player-initiated events occur. Similarly, since introducing ideas in many of the documents is the responsibility of players (since players will not ordinarily read *all* the documents), multiple roles need to be tasked with introducing these ideas, or variations upon them.

To avoid “failure to lift off” during the first game session, roles must include clear easy *compulsion* to act right away.Since instructors will use Flashpoint games in multiple sections on many campuses, avoid role with big secret agendas (e.g. Lithicles in the Athens game).

Avoid creating roles that lack buddies, especially if they have objectives that are at odds with other players or are tangential to the major issues (e.g. Herodion in the Athens game). Even if roles are not identical, try to provide each role with at least one person they can reach out to without fear during the first session. This will allow peers to resolve confusion and will minimize the temptation to become a wallflower.

Role immersion, which for many people is one of the most powerful elements of Reacting to the Past, may be present in some Flashpoints games, but it will certainly not be possible to ask players to inhabit roles to the same degree.

Thanks

Special thanks to Mary Jane Treacy for venturing forth with *Paterson 1913* and to Justin Cahill for figuring out WW Norton’s marketing plan. Thanks also to the participants in the 2018 “Short Games Incubator,” Jae Basiliere, Jeff Fortney, Kelly McFall, Kyle Lincoln, Amy Brown Curry, Mary Beth Looney, Paul Wright, Mark Carnes, Judy Walden, and Rebecca Livingstone. And finally, thanks to everyone in the community who has written and shared a short game -- especially David Henderson and rest of the NSF crew who did pioneering work with short games in the natural sciences.

Please note that this document has been revised in small but significant ways since its initial posting.