

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Gaming the Guerrilla Girls

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It was my first full-time teaching gig: a one-semester sabbatical replacement, two hours from home. I commuted once a week, spent three nights at an Airbnb whose kind host was the only redeeming feature in the whole scenario, and packed 235 students into three non-stop days. One of my courses, chosen by the department's previous candidate who dropped them for a better position, was a senior-level lecture which I felt entirely unprepared to teach and about whose existence I maintained serious moral misgivings: *Women Artists*. Many women artists, I suspected, sought nothing more than recognition as *artists*, without the gendered qualifier. I spent most of that summer before my "semester from hell" enthralled in course preparation. I devoured every teaching-related article that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published. One of them (Berrett 2012) set me on fire: a profile of *Reacting to the Past (RTTP)*, a historical role-playing pedagogy that purportedly buoyed student engagement to astronomical heights.

Although mostly rooted in the discipline of history, I learned that an art historian, Gretchen Krehling McKay, had written a game based in the nineteenth-century Parisian art world. If this could happen in art history, I knew that the solution to my *Women Artists* problem lay in this pedagogy. It would not be enough to investigate women artists from an objective perspective and to express sympathy for a distant historical problem. In order to grasp the complexities of art world misogyny, my students would have to feel it, internally.

This is how my RTTP game, *Guerrilla Girls in our Midst: 1984-1987*, was born. My students would learn about historical Women Artists by *being* one. What better scenario to place them in than at the conception of the Guerrilla Girls, the activist group who laid the foundations for the very existence of their course? I naively speculated that it couldn't be all that hard to write a role-playing game set in New York City in the 1980s. My presently neglected dissertation, after all, interrogated the works of a (male) Russian Avant-Garde painter. Adopting a completely new-to-me pedagogy and writing an entire curriculum well outside my subspecialty was a completely reasonable expectation for my first semester teaching a four-course load. (Insert retrospective head scratching here.)

Reacting to the Past is a remarkably effective pedagogical tool for engaging students in historical primary sources. Structured intellectual debate revolves around core questions that still resonate with our world today. According to Mark Carnes (2014), Reacting students learn historical content more deeply, acquire greater leadership and communication skills, develop stronger classroom communities and self-knowledge, and enthusiastically do more work than for non-Reacting coursework. Historically grounded roles defined by multi-page role sheets guide play starting from a specific historical moment, with all the motivations and sources available to participants in that moment. As the students play the game out, what happened in history need not necessarily occur in the classroom. Students must remain faithful to their roles, employing the game manual's documents within defined game mechanics, but they are free to attempt to change history. In my case, the core question that inspired the game design was: What if the Guerrilla Girls had been successful beyond their wildest dreams – or, alternatively, had never reached lift-off?

My first play-test of *Guerrilla Girls* was remarkably not a complete disaster. Students who had spent the entire semester handing in plagiarized work, ignoring the textbook, and, in their most vulnerable moments of in-class discussion, revealing that they did not recall basics of their lower-division art history courses, showed up and played their roles with insight. For perhaps the first time in their art history education, they *engaged* in a sustained and thoughtful manner. Well, at least enough of them did.

The following semester, returning to a different university as an adjunct, I played a revised version of the game concurrently in two sections of a second-year contemporary art course. My insistence that students take an active role in every class led to outright rebellion from many of the majors. They were used to lecture-based courses, where they took notes to study for in-class exams. My course could not have been further from their comfort zone. I only learned the full scope of their outrage when one of the tenured professors in the department cornered me in my office to regale me about my insufficiencies as an instructor. That night, I wrote a manifesto. It began, “I will not be belittled or infantilized,” fuming over her use of language and nonverbal cues that I knew she would never have used towards a male or older colleague. I doubled down, declaring, “I will not sacrifice collaborative modes of intellectual inquiry because they fit uncomfortably into patriarchal, hierarchical systems of judgment, evaluation, and institutionalization of education. I will make my life and my job infinitely harder by manipulating power structures that diminish important voices.” I dug in my heels with the overwhelming sense that, with this much resistance (as well as quiet but passionate support from several deeply engaged students, one of whom, to my luck, was good friends with the dean), surely I was on to something very important not only for my own career but also the development of the academy.

I next ran *Guerrilla Girls* a year later, in my second semester of a new tenure track position, and flares rose again. In hindsight, I understand how an ill-conceived modification to the mechanics of the game elicited significantly more confusion than Reacting generally leaves students with on their initial encounter. In stark contrast to my experience as an adjunct, however, my closest colleagues rallied around me, working triage to ensure this didn't create irreparable damage to my tenure case. I was not extremely concerned; Reacting teaches students and professors alike that the best learning opportunities occur out of the ashes of spectacular failures. The support of my department provided space to think critically about the failure, allowing me to refine my innovative teaching practices rather than forcing me to retreat to the purportedly tried and true lecture-exam format.

After that semester, I set the game aside for three full years to let it simmer, replacing it with a newly emerged opportunity to conduct a service learning project related to the same content. I took my game to the Reacting Game Development Conference, where a team of highly experienced Reactors picked it apart. Their feedback had the potential to transform the game, and my university's Teaching Council subsequently supported its complete revision with a summer teaching development grant. In the past year, I have play tested the revised materials in my own classroom and at the Reacting Annual Institute, both times to resounding success, including more constructive criticism for revisions.

Throughout my entire experience, the most helpful support came from the Reacting community. At conferences and in the Facebook Reacting Faculty Lounge, colleagues discuss game-related issues and relate inspiring stories of the transformative effects of these games. Their critical feedback and unwavering support made me feel for one of the first times in my academic career that I had found a scholarly community. This was a group where I could thrive

on my terms, which, the more I researched my game, I discovered revolved around a feminist ethic of collaboration and mutual support.

My students remained a constant motivation driving the development of the game. Despite the unhappy, noisy detractors, I also saw quiet, thoughtful players enjoying themselves, conducting what felt like, maybe for the first time ever, meaningful research. I observed students who had been disengaged from art historical content over the entire semester, if not most of their college careers, dip their toes in the water for the first time. I saw how students for whom the conventional methods of lecture-note-exam created agonizing anxiety realize that perhaps educational experience need not be perpetually traumatic. If the game had flopped, if the students had clearly learned significantly less than they would have with other learning modalities, I would never have persevered. The long-term learning, the critical thinking, and the emotional knowledge that my students demonstrated made the sometimes seemingly insurmountable challenges worthwhile.

References

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