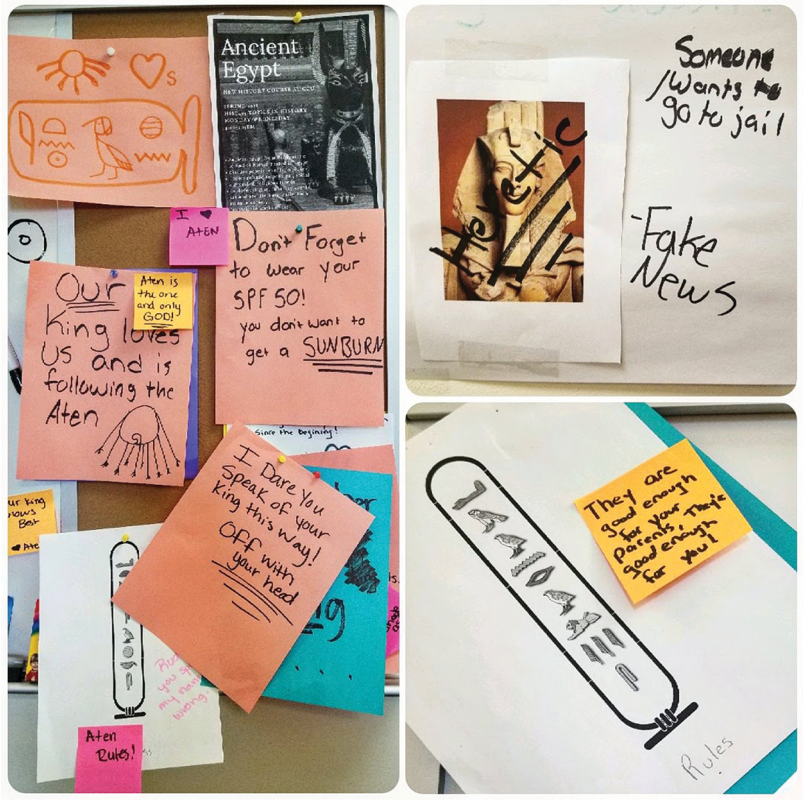
**Katie Stringer Clary**[1]

# *Reacting to the* (Public) *Past*™: Innovations in Public History Pedagogy

[1] Department of History, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC, USA, E-mail: mclary@coastal.edu

**DOI:** 10.1515/iph-2019-0005

"All I want to do is tell the story and history of these noble savages," Mr. Howard Price exclaims to the gasps and outrage of the assembled Cultural Patrimony Congress of 1988. "Noble savages!?" Native American activist Maria Pearson interjects; "These are our ancestors and people, not artifacts for your entertainment." So begins another debate at the meeting of the minds discussion of the United States' Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. It isn't 1988, though, but 2018 in a classroom in South Carolina. This congress is comprised of undergraduate students of public history, not influential lawmakers, activists, archaeologists, or museum professionals. The class is participating in a *Reacting to the Past* role-play simulation to engage with issues of patriation, ethics, and a variety of other public history issues. Through these innovative simulations, students learn the principles of public history and historical research in courses that are designed for the general education requirements and courses about public history for undergraduates. Through games, role-play, and reenactments students build empathy, analyze events and ideas from all sides, and more clearly understand the role stakeholders play in the creating and presentation of history for the public.




Graffiti in the gebeyah, or marketplace, outside Dr. Clary's office, displays the various views of characters in the game about Egypt's 18th dynasty. Some support the king and his religious reforms while others see Akhenaten as a heretic. Students recieved extra credit for their posts, and Paebel's distinctive post type had him arrested and charged with treason against the king. Photo by Katie Stringer Clary.

**Katie Stringer Clary** is the corresponding author.

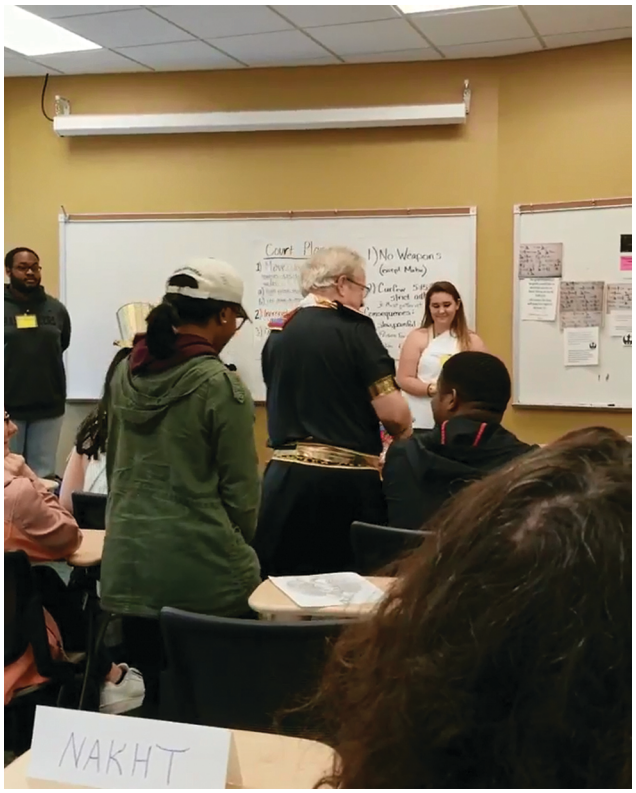
## What is *Reacting to the Past*?

*Reacting to the Past* (RTTP) is often insufficiently described as a type of Model United Nations or *playing a game*. The reality is that *RTTP* is much more than just a game or a simulation. *RTTP* strives to allow students and teachers the opportunity to engage in active, hands-on learning using many of the same principles of research, analysis, and critical thinking common to the wider discipline of history in an innovative and interactive way. The *RTTP* website explains that it "consists of elaborately designed role-playing games set in pivotal historic moments of clashing ideas and interests."[1] Students are assigned distinctive roles and *victory objectives* that they pursue in alliance with some students and in competition with others. Students *win* through successfully persuading their classmates using historic arguments, ideas, research, and texts. *RTTP* began in history classes, but the pedagogy has spread across disciplines to encompass multiple fields of study including science, math, sociology, philosophy, and more recently – public history. *RTTP* games represent an advantageous opportunity for public history educators because the instruction style places students and audiences *inside history* and allows them to grapple with the complex politics of cultural heritage. Popular games include those that center on the French Revolution, the development of democracy in Athens, and a cholera epidemic.[2]

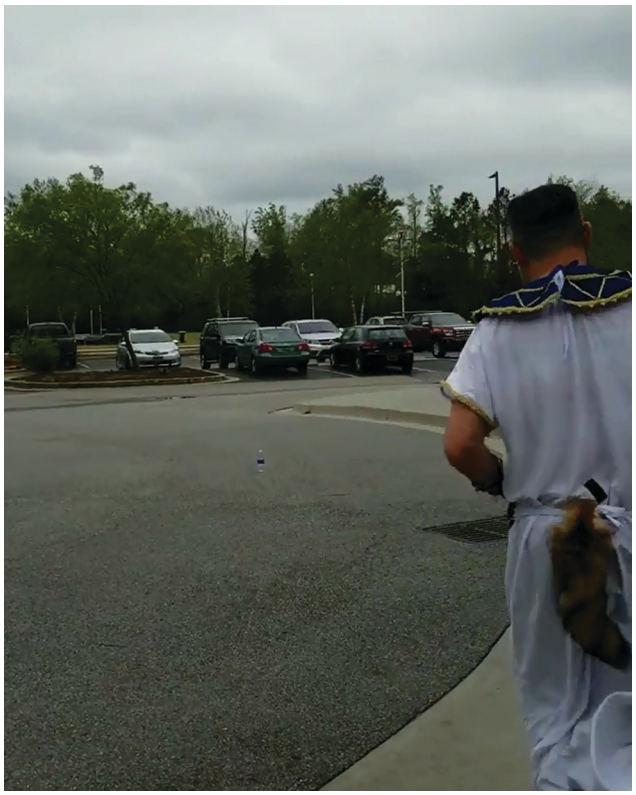
The pedagogy of *RTTP* flips the classrooms so students run the sessions with little interference from the instructors. The goal of *RTTP*, according to the consortium documents on their Barnard College website, is "to draw students into the past, promote engagement with big ideas, and improve intellectual and academic skills."[3] This gives students a lot of agency in the classroom, but also a significant amount of responsibility. Students must do the readings and come to class prepared, or they risk letting down their *team* or *losing* the game. While this does seem to put a lot of pressure on students, most rise to the occasion and students who have appeared reserved and quiet in class are often the most enthusiastic participants.[4]


Students display their offerings to the Aten, aka Dr. Katie Clary, on their first day of the game. Photo courtesy of Katie Stringer Clary.

I have used *RTTP* in all undergraduate classes I teach as the resident public historian in a *traditional* history department. All of my classes, from the general education core requirement history survey, to upper division history classes, to the public history focused undergraduate courses, have benefited from the games. When I used *RTTP* in my Pre-Modern World: Public History general education courses, I saw students engage with and understand unfamiliar concepts. One student commented after a short game, somewhat disheartened, that history is not just names and dates and facts but so much more complicated than that. Classes that utilize *RTTP* pedagogy are enjoyable, but more importantly, students engaged with materials and the history in ways that I had not seen in my classrooms before. Students became invested in their roles, did outside research, prepared and defended arguments related to intricate and ancient practices. They also built empathy for people who lived through the reforms, changes, and even deaths of Ancient Egypt's 18th Dynasty in the fourteenth century BCE.




**Video 1:** Paebel, ambassador from Megiddo, is accused and sentenced in a trial for treason against the King, Akhenaten. The sentence was carried out by a medjay and Ay.
Video by Katie Stringer Clary.



**Video 2:** Akhenaten, aka Prof. Charles Clary, performing the running part of the traditional Sed festival to prove his fitness as king.
Video by Katie Stringer Clary.

There are many benefits to using *RTTP*; students learn the skills of engagement, public speaking, critical thinking, outside research, and more. There are challenges with this pedagogy, as well. A potential issue for im-

plementation of *RTTP* is working with students who have difficulties with public speaking or engaging with material in the classroom. Faculty are encouraged to work with students and be understanding of their concerns. One solution is to use online discussion platforms, such as Slack,[5] for students to gain interaction points.

## Gamification of public history and cultural heritage

As I became invested in *RTTP*, I saw many opportunities for public history and cultural heritage topics with which students could engage. Currently there are a handful of games related to these topics either in development or available as mini games that take place over one to three class meetings. One such game, *Bomb the Church,* pits students on either side of a fictional small-town council debate on whether or not to bomb a church that contains their local cultural heritage and artifacts. The decision is for students to decide if the material culture and architectural history are more important than the lives of the local militia who would be sent in to save the site and artifacts. The game does not take place in any particular town, and is intentionally vague so students or instructors can fill in the blanks with their own town or region. There is also a game in development about the creation of the Vietnam Memorial, another about the Elgin Marbles repatriation controversy, and a short game about the 9/11 Memorial in New York City and a nearby mosque. Ranging from one-hour games about historical analysis to multi-day immersions, *RTTP* offers a unique technique for engaging audiences that is of great interest to public historians in museums, historic sites and organizations, and public programmers, as well as traditional teachers.

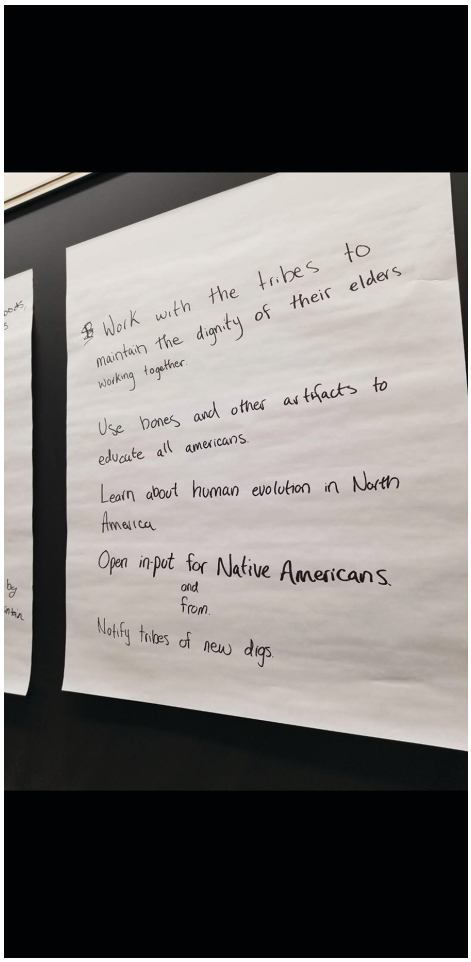
*Reacting to the Past* embodies many of the principles of historical thinking as well as the public history discipline and methodology. At its core, *RTTP* – like public history – is all about understanding and analyzing historical documents and events and the complex communities that experienced and continue to experience the impacts. Through this understanding of the past, participants build a connection to history that may encourage them to become more involved, do further research, or better understand the current situation preempted by historical events.

One of the main benefits I've seen using *RTTP* in the public history and general history education classrooms is its ability to engage students who may not be history majors or minors, or even have had much of an interest in the subject at all. The games help students to build empathy for and understanding of the decision-making process of people who lived 30 or 5000 years ago. These are core principles of public history, and using *RTTP* helps instill these values and ideals in public history students in an academic setting. By embodying the character of someone who was there, students are better prepared to understand the person's decision-making processes, the way events play out in real time, and how historians understand and analyze the sources (or lack of sources) those people left behind.

Other public history values of engaging stakeholders, building community, and the importance of compromise are played out in the classroom in low-stakes simulations of probable situations students will encounter in the field. In these games, students must make their point clearly and succinctly while also playing the politics game and creating alliances with like-minded students. Some games include not only two factions, or sides, but also *indeterminate* roles, filled by participants who can be swayed to one side or the other if students are savvy to include and engage with these community members and stakeholders.

## Development of a public history *RTTP* simulation

*Reacting to the Past* is almost always a hit in my general education history and public history courses. However, for my upper-division and more advanced Public History and Museum courses I wanted more in-depth analysis of a case study. I decided to create my own game about the development of the United States legislation, the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA) of 1990. The game began as a one-day simulation based on the *Bomb the Church* model, but it has grown to encompass at least two to three class sessions, and I plan to eventually expand this game into a full, official, published game.

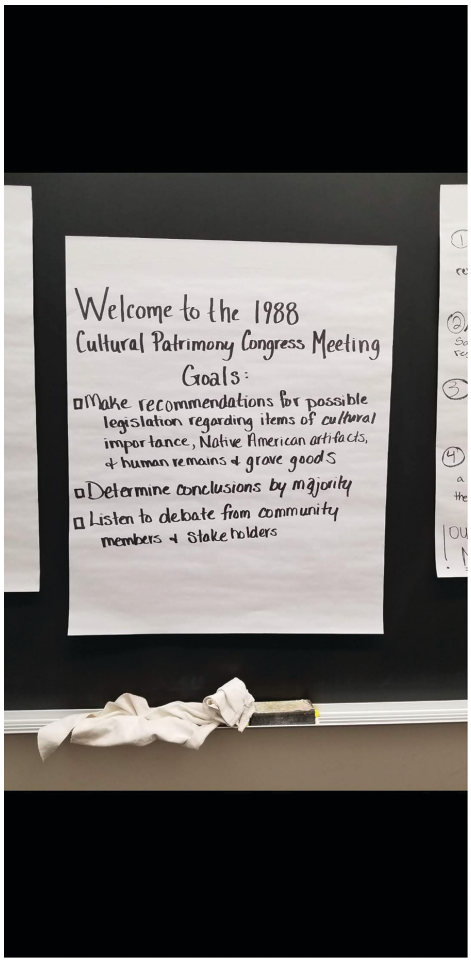



One proposal for a solution to appease all sides in the debate on what should happen to Native American artifacts and remains in museums. Photo by Katie Stringer Clary.

In this game, tentatively titled, *The Eve of NAGPRA: Cultural Patrimony Congress of 1988*, students take on the roles of archaeologists, museum workers, professors, graduate students, Native American activists or, in some cases, complex characters who embody many of those roles. In fall 2018 my research fellow, undergraduate student Victoria Peck, and I began to expand and prepare for play-testing the game in Introduction to Public History.[6] The description students get explains:

> The year is 1988. Representatives from museums, tribes, universities, and other interested groups have gathered in Washington, D.C. to debate issues of cultural patrimony and the potential repatriation (or not) of objects, artifacts, and even human remains. Tensions are high and emotions run rampant as archaeologists, scientists, and anthropologists fear losing research subjects, museum workers are alarmed at the idea of empty exhibit cases and collection storage spaces, and families grieve the loss and display of their ancestors in public spaces.[7]

In 1990, the United States passed NAGPRA which provided certain protections to artifacts, human remains, and items of cultural patrimony for federally recognized Native American tribes.[8] The setting of the game is pre-NAGPRA legislation, at a fictional meeting of all of the major stakeholders in the fight for the protection of Native American landscapes, artifacts, and human remains. Essentially, the main goal for students is to create a proposal by majority agreement to decide what rights Native Americans, museums, archaeologists, and others have to uncover, display, and study artifacts, grave goods, and human remains.




The agenda for the Cultural Patrimony Congress 1988. Photo by Katie Stringer Clary.

For the Fall 2018 semester, most students seemed to really enjoy this activity. Results from a survey distributed to my class provided fascinating insight from the student perspective. When students were asked, "What did you learn from this game and process?", they responded with a variety of viewpoints including: "How difficult it is to compromise with so many different stakeholders," "I learned the art of debate and the difficulty in making an agreement between two intrenched sides of an issue," and "The diversity of characters made for an interesting mix, meaning that many people were put outside of their comfort zone and made to look at alternative opinions."[9] These are important core values of public history, and through this game students met a variety of student learning outcomes laid out in the catalog and syllabus for an introduction to public history course.

## Future of *RTTP* and public history

I look forward to testing the NAGPRA game in future classes, including Great Debates in Public History, a new general education class that meets core requirements. For this class I plan to use all of the public history and cultural heritage games, as well as structured debate on current case studies in preservation, museums, repatriation, and ethics. As we continue to playtest the game and survey participants, Peck and I will adapt and expand the game using that feedback.

There are also endless opportunities for other games to be created using public history case studies and principles. Any watershed moment in history, any legislation or paradigm shift that involved discussions or formal meetings, or any major event could become a *RTTP* game. A short list of potential options includes historic preservation and real estate development, Confederate monuments in the United States, the repatriation of collections from Colonial era acquisitions, or the museum ethics of displaying artifacts like the Enola Gay, which was the aircraft responsible for dropping the first nuclear bomb on Japan during World War II.

There are many benefits to using *Reacting to the Past*; however, instructors also may face some challenges with this pedagogy. Some games include problematic historical figures; for example, the Frederick Douglass game includes John C. Calhoun, a major political figure from South Carolina and one of the most prominent

defenders of slavery. The "Reacting Faculty Lounge," a Facebook group for instructors of *RTTP*, routinely hosts discussions on how to cast this role in a diverse classroom and how to reign in over-enthusiastic students playing controversial roles. Some games set in the more recent past, such as the NAGPRA game, include figures who may still be alive. Another potential pitfall of *RTTP* is the depiction of people from a variety of ethnic or cultural groups or people with disabilities. Instructors must remind students at the beginning of the game about cultural appropriation and respectful portrayal of their characters. The NAGPRA game includes this statement in the pre-game handouts, "Dressing up and getting into character is encouraged for the game, but it is important to remember the line between proper representation and being culturally insensitive ... . For those who are representing real people it is possible to find images of how they dressed to use as inspiration for your own attire."[10]

Another potential issue for implementation of *Reacting to the Past* is working with students who have difficulties with public speaking or engaging with material in the classroom. Faculty are encouraged to work with students and be understanding of their concerns. One solution is to use online discussion platforms, such as Slack, for students to gain interaction credit points. Instructors should also work with their office of disability or student services to create and administer solutions for students with disabilities.

I am a firm believer in the empathy and understanding *RTTP* can bring to the university classroom, college students, and eventually to public communities. Though to some *playing a game* seems like a fun or even silly way to learn, the pedagogy has proven effective in building skills and comprehension of historical events and people. The adaptability of games and the seemingly endless topics for development around the world make this a rich opportunity for the classroom and communities. Though it has not yet been fully realized, I am confident that *Reacting to the Past* and public history are natural partners in bringing cultural heritage and public history to our international and connected global communities.

## Notes

1 "Reacting to the Past." *Reacting to the Past*, Barnard College, 2018, reacting.barnard.edu/. Accessed January 6, 2018.
2 "Reacting to the Past Publications." *Reacting to the Past*. Norton Publishers, 2019, http://books.wwnorton.com/books/book-template.aspx?ser=Reacting±to±the±Past&currentpage=1&lastpage=4.
3 "Reacting to the Past," reacting.barnard.edu/.
4 More information available in: Carnes, Mark C. *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. Harvard University Press, 2014.
5 www.slack.com – Slack is an integrative website that allows students to message each other as a full class, in groups or factions, or directly, without sharing personal information.
6 Nicolas W. Proctor has provided a publication about how to write, create, and adapt games in: *Reacting to the Past Game Designer's Handbook*, 3rd edition, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.
7 Clary and Peck, *The Eve of NAGPRA*, 2018.
8 National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, "National NAGPRA," https://www.nps.gov/nagpra/, Accessed February 13, 2019.
9 Anonymous NAGPRA student digital survey results, recorded 11/30/2018-12/15/2018.
10 Katie Stringer Clary and Victoria Peck, *The Eve of NAGPRA: Cultural Patrimony Congress of 1988*, Game in-progress, 2018.