

Basic Features of Reacting to the Past

Reacting to the Past is a series of historical role-playing games. Students are given elaborate game books which place them in moments of historical controversy and intellectual ferment. The class becomes a public body of some sort; students, in role, become particular persons from the period, often as members of a faction. Their purpose is to advance a policy agenda and achieve their victory objectives. To do so, they will undertake research and write speeches and position papers; and they will also give formal speeches, participate in informal debates and negotiations, and otherwise work to win the game. After a few preparatory lectures, the game begins and the players are in charge; the instructor serves as adviser or “gamemaster.” Outcomes sometimes differ from the actual history; a post-mortem session at the end of the game sets the record straight.

The following is an outline of what you will encounter in Reacting and what you will be expected to do. While these elements are typical of every Reacting game, it is important to remember that every game has its own special quirks.

1. Game Set-up

Your instructor will spend some time before the beginning of the game helping you to understand the historical background. During the set-up period, you will read several different kinds of material:

- The game book (from which you are reading now), which includes historical information, rules and elements of the game, and essential documents; and
- Your role, which describes the historical person you will play in the game.

You may also be required to read primary and secondary sources outside the game book (perhaps including one or more accompanying books), which provide additional information and arguments for use during the game. Often you will be expected to conduct research to bolster your papers and speeches.

Read all of this contextual material and all of these documents and sources before the game begins. And just as important, go back and reread these materials throughout the game. A second reading while *in role* will deepen your understanding and alter your perspective: ideas take on a different aspect when seen through the eyes of a partisan actor.

Players who have carefully read the materials and who know the rules of the game will invariably do better than those who rely on general impressions and uncertain recollections.

2. Game Play

Once the game begins, certain players preside over the class sessions. These presiding officers may be elected or appointed. Your instructor then becomes the gamemaster (GM) and takes a seat in the back of the room. While not in control, the GM may do any of the following:

- Pass notes to spur players to action;
- Announce the effects of actions taken inside the game on outside parties (e.g., neighboring countries) or the effects of outside events on game actions (e.g., a declaration of war); and

- Interrupt and redirect proceedings that have gone off track.

Presiding officers may act in a partisan fashion, speaking in support of particular interests, but they must observe basic standards of fairness. As a failsafe device, most Reacting games employ the “Podium Rule,” which allows a player who has not been recognized to approach the podium and wait for a chance to speak. Once at the podium, the player has the floor and must be heard.

In order to achieve your objectives, outlined in your role sheet, you must persuade others to support you. You must speak with others, because never will a role contain all that you need to know, and never will one faction have the strength to prevail without allies. Collaboration and coalition-building are at the heart of every game.

Most role descriptions contain secret information which you are expected to guard. Exercise caution when discussing your role with others. You may be a member of a faction, which gives you allies who are generally safe and reliable, but even they may not always be in total agreement with you.

In games where factions are tight-knit groups with fixed objectives, finding a persuadable ally can be difficult. Fortunately, every game includes roles that are undecided (or “indeterminate”) about certain issues. Everyone is predisposed on certain issues, but most players can be persuaded to support particular positions. Cultivating these players is in your interest. (By contrast, if you are assigned an “indeterminate” role, you will likely have considerable freedom to choose one or another side in the game; but often, too, indeterminates have special interests of their own.)

Cultivate friends and supporters. Before you speak at the podium, arrange to have at least one supporter second your proposal, come to your defense, or admonish those in the body not paying attention. Feel free to ask the presiding officer to assist you, but appeal to the GM only as a last resort.

Immerse yourself in the game. Regard it as a way to escape imaginatively from your usual “self”—and your customary perspective as a college student in the 21st century. At first, this may cause discomfort because you may be advocating ideas that are incompatible with your own beliefs. You may also need to take actions which you would find reprehensible in real life. Remember that a Reacting game is only a game and that you and the other players are merely playing roles. When they offer criticisms, they are not criticizing you as a person. Similarly, you must never criticize another *person* in the game. But you will likely be obliged to criticize their *persona*. (For example, never say, “Sally’s argument is ridiculous.” But feel free to say, “Governor Winthrop’s argument is ridiculous”—though you would do well to explain exactly why!) Always assume, when spoken to by a fellow player—whether in class or out of class—that that person is speaking to you in role.

Help to create this world by avoiding the colloquialisms and familiarities of today’s college life. Never should the presiding officer, for example, open a session with the salutation, “Hi guys.” Similarly, remember that it is inappropriate to trade on out-of-class relationships when asking for support within the game. (“Hey, you can’t vote against me. We’re both on the tennis team!”)

Reacting to the Past seeks to approximate of the complexity of the past. Because some people in history were not who they seemed to be, so, too, some roles in Reacting may include elements of conspiracy or deceit. (For example, Brutus did not announce to the Roman Senate his plans to assassinate Caesar.) If you are assigned such a role, you must make it clear to everyone that you are merely playing a role. If, however, you find yourself in a situation where you find your role and actions to be stressful or uncomfortable, tell the GM.

3. Game Requirements

Your instructor will explain the specific requirements for your class. In general, a Reacting game will require you to perform several distinct but interrelated activities:

- **Reading:** This standard academic work is carried on more purposefully in a Reacting course, since what you read is put to immediate use.
- **Research and Writing:** The exact writing requirements depend on your instructor, but in most cases you will be writing to persuade others. Most of your writing will take the form of policy statements, but you might also write autobiographies, clandestine messages, newspapers, or after-game reflections. In most cases papers are posted on the class website for examination by others. Basic rules: Do not use big fonts or large margins. Do not simply repeat your position as outlined in your role sheets: You must base your arguments on historical facts as well as ideas drawn from assigned texts--and from independent research. (Your instructor will outline the requirements for footnoting and attribution.) Be sure to consider the weaknesses in your argument and address them; if you do not your opponents will.
- **Public Speaking and Debate:** Most players are expected to deliver at least one formal speech from the podium (the length of the game and the size of the class will affect the number of speeches). Reading papers aloud is seldom effective. Some instructors may insist that students instead speak freely from notes. After a speech, a lively and even raucous debate will likely ensue. Often the debates will culminate in a vote. ..
- **Strategizing:** Communication among students is a pervasive feature of Reacting games. You should find yourself writing emails, texting, and attending meetings on a fairly regular basis. If you do not, you are being outmaneuvered by your opponents.

4. Skill Development

A recent Associated Press article on education and employment made the following observations:

“The world’s top employers are pickier than ever. And they want to see more than high marks and the right degree. They want graduates with so-called soft skills—those who can work well in teams, write and speak with clarity, adapt quickly to changes in technology and business conditions, and interact with colleagues from different countries and cultures. . . . And companies are going to ever-greater lengths to identify the students who have the right mix of skills, by observing them in role-playing exercises to see how they handle pressure and get along with others . . . and [by] organizing contests that reveal how students solve problems and handle deadline pressure.”

Reacting to the Past, probably better than most elements of the curriculum, provides the opportunity for developing these “soft skills.” This is because you will be practicing persuasive writing, public speaking, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. You will also need to adapt to changing circumstances and work under pressure.