

IM Boilerplate

“How to Teach with 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.

1. Game Set-up

Before the game begins, instructors must help students to understand the historical background. During the set-up period, students will read several different kinds of material:

- The game book, which includes historical information, rules and elements of the game, and essential documents; and
- Their roles, which describes the historical figures they will play in the game.

You may also assign primary and secondary sources outside the game book (perhaps including one or more accompanying books). Some texts are recommended in the annotated bibliography that appears in the gamebook. Others may be suggested in the schedule section of this IM. If you want players to use these readings, they need to be tied in to the functioning of the game. Figure out how they tie into the game by relating them to specific roles and particular assignments.

Characterize the set-up sessions as a brief introductory overview. Remind players that they should go back and reread these materials throughout the game. A second reading while *in role* will deepen their understanding. Remind players that 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.

This IM provides prompts for leading discussions during these set-up sessions.

2. From Instructor to Gamemaster

Once the game begins, you become a Gamemaster (GM). During regular game sessions, this means you will often take a seat in the back of the room. While no longer in control, you 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.

Much more of your work will occur outside of the classroom. Guide players by responding to their oral presentations and written work. Probably the best way you can help students is to provide nearly immediate feedback of both. Quick feedback is important because the game issues often shift rapidly.

In addition, it is quite likely that students (individually or in groups) will seek your counsel. Sometimes these consultations will involve confusion with the situation or game mechanics. Other times, they will involve students who are seeking some sort of in-game advantage. Thus, the more familiar you are with the game the better.

3. Student-Centered Classroom

Once the game begins, certain players preside over the class sessions. These presiding officers may be elected or appointed. The schedule section of this IM explains how this process works. Make sure that you have taken the necessary steps to select the first presiding officer before the game begins.

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.

Encourage students to avoid the colloquialisms and familiarities of today’s college life. Never should the presiding officer, for example, open a session with the salutation, “Hi guys.”

4. Role Playing

Role sheets are extremely important to players. Given their unfamiliarity with role-playing and the chaotic and unpredictable nature of many of the class sessions, they will cling to them like life preservers in a stormy sea. Encourage them to keep their role sheets close and stress their confidential nature. Role sheets contain secrets!

It is unlikely that you will be able to master the contents of all the role sheets in this game – particularly the first time you use it. Consequently, encourage students to bring their role sheets along if they want to consult with you. Similarly, if you are corresponding with a student, pull their role sheet up on a screen so that you can consult it with ease.

Roles are often clumped into factions. This gives these players allies. In many games, one faction represents utopian theorists who seek to accommodate mankind to their intellectual visions; another faction represents social “realists” who seek to adapt these ideas to fit the obdurate shapes of human nature.

Remind faction members that in order to achieve their objectives, they will need the support of other students. They will never have the strength to prevail without allies. Consequently, collaboration and coalition-building are at the heart of every game. Along these lines, discourage

them from resorting to violence in order to achieve their objectives. (Unless that is part of the learning objectives of this particular game). Remind these faction members that every game includes roles that are undecided (or “indeterminate”) about certain issues. Similarly, encourage indeterminate roles by reminding them that they are the true kingmakers. Without their support, no faction can hope to prevail.

5. Liminality

Most games begin with some sort of “liminal moment.” For example, *Threshold of Democracy* begins every session of the Athenian assembly with a pig sacrifice. These are odd rituals that are not unlike the cry of “play ball” at the beginning of a baseball game. They signal that the classroom has become a different place in which the students will be interacting in strange, unusual, and delightful ways. As the game continues, students may find that their liminality deepens.

6. Student discomfort

This sense of being immersed in a role may be particularly challenging to students charged with promoting worldviews that are antithetical to their own beliefs. If this causes discomfort, remind them that they are merely playing roles. Also remind them to direct their criticisms at one another’s roles rather than one another as persons. (For example, you may need to intervene if someone repeatedly says, “Sally’s argument is ridiculous.” But encourage them to say, “Governor Winthrop’s argument is ridiculous”). Similarly, remind students 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!”)

Remind students to always assume, when spoken to by a fellow player—whether in class or out of class—that that person is speaking in role. Some roles may include elements of conspiracy or deceit. Such roles will cause some students stress, so you should encourage students to talk with you if they become uncomfortable with their roles. In the vast majority of cases, you will be able to talk them through their discomfort. To encourage these students make it clear that everyone is merely playing a role.

7. Victory

The challenges of achieving their victory objectives highly motivate many students even if the impact on their grades is insignificant.

8. Assignments

In general, RTTP games require several distinct but interrelated activities:

- **Reading:** This standard academic work is carried on more purposefully in a Reacting course, since what students read is put to immediate use.
- **Research and Writing:** The exact writing requirements depend on you, but in most cases students will be writing to persuade others (particularly the indeterminates).

- **Public Speaking and Debate:** Expect most of your students to deliver at least one formal speech from the podium.
- **Strategizing:** Communication among students is a pervasive feature of Reacting games. Encourage them to continue the game outside of class. You may want facilitate this by organizing their initial faction meetings – perhaps during a regular class meeting.

Some game-specific variations on these requirements are described in the Assignments section of the gamebook, but for the most part, the particular structure of these assignments is up to you. Tailor the game to fit your learning objectives by consulting the suggestions in the Assignments section of this IM.

If you ask players to upload their written work, please make sure that you keep it behind password protection so that other, less scrupulous players do not borrow from them in the future. Ideally, delete all electronic copies of assignments at the end of the game.

9. Schedule

Similarly, this IM includes a number of sample schedules. They should help you to fit the game to a variety of formats as well as learning objectives.

10. Ahistorical outcomes

Every game includes the potential for ahistorical outcomes. These fall within a “plausibility corridor” of possible counterfactual outcomes that have been designed by the author. If it is important for you to retain historical verisimilitude you may want to keep this corridor narrow. You can do this by nudging players to take certain actions or through *deus ex machina* interventions. In either case, it is usually best to do this outside of regular game sessions. Otherwise, students begin to feel as if they are your puppets.

Alternatively, if your learning objectives feature leadership, writing, and speaking you may want to release these controls. As you balance between encouraging students and staying true to the history, you may find yourself in a dilemma. For example, if a weak student who rarely speaks makes a presentation that is riddled with historical errors, should you immediately correct those errors publicly, which will ensure that the class learns the correct history, or should you wait, let the mistakes go uncorrected, and build the student’s confidence? Alternatively, what if an irrepressible student manages to cobble together an implausible coalition? Should you jump into the fray by forcefully reminding each faction of its purposes, or do you let it play out? This requires subtle judgment on complicated matters of content, student psychology, and pedagogy. That is to say, you must be a good teacher.

11. Debriefing

Every game ends with at least one session dedicated to debriefing. Comparing the historical record with student experiences is often an excellent pedagogical exercise, which helps students to

understand historical causation and contingency. If nothing else, it provides you with an opportunity to set the record straight.

In addition, this session allows students to exit the game. They put aside their game names, reveal their secrets, and disclose any skullduggery. Encourage them to tell all – it is important for them to put the conflicts between their roles behind them.

12. Modifications

Once you are familiar with the workings of the game, feel free to modify the game as you see fit (to go off on your own, in readings, written assignments, etc.). It's your game now.