

# Reflecting on Reacting: Incorporating Reacting to the Past Games in the High School Classroom

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## Introduction

Philadelphia, 1787. Alexander Hamilton, delegate of New York, and Elbridge Gerry, delegate of Massachusetts, check their pistols one last time. Gerry had insulted Hamilton's honor during debates at the Constitutional Convention, arguing that the New Yorker's support for a strong executive was no more than an argument for installing a new king, betraying his true anti-republican sympathies. In the face of this public insult, Hamilton's only recourse was to challenge Gerry to a duel. The two men stare at each other for a moment. They raise their pistols, take aim at one another, and fire. The crowd cheers.

Of course, it is not 1787, it is not Philadelphia, and Hamilton and Gerry never faced off in a duel. Instead, it is 2022 at a public charter high school in Indiana and the dueling delegates are, in fact, students studying the Constitutional Convention in their government class. The students, spread out across two different classes, are participating in a Reacting to the Past simulation game, where they each take on the role of a real life delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

The Reacting to the Past (RTTP) games are a unique and innovative approach to teaching history that has been implemented in higher education institutions for over two decades. One in the RTTP series is the *Constitutional Convention* game, which immerses students in the historical scenario of the drafting of the United States Constitution. Here I reflect on my experiences utilizing the game with high schoolers and consider the potential for adapting the games to the secondary level. By examining the challenges and opportunities of implementing this game in a high school classroom, I will assess the feasibility and efficacy of using RTTP games to teach history and civics to high school students and how it might be adapted to align with high school standards, engage students, and promote history's habits of mind, civic literacy, and deep learning.<sup>1</sup>

## About Reacting

First introduced in the late 1990s by Barnard College History Professor Mark C. Carnes, Reacting to the Past (RTTP) is a series of role-playing simulation games designed to promote critical thinking, active learning, and in-depth historical knowledge among students. In RTTP games, students take on historical characters, read primary sources, and engage in persuasive and impromptu debate in order to accomplish objectives and win the game, all while learning along the way.<sup>2</sup> RTTP games cover a wide range of historical periods, from ancient Greece to 20th-century America, and offer students the opportunity to study and apply critical thinking skills, ethical reasoning, and historical context. It is a student centered pedagogical approach, as described by the Reacting Consortium:

Class sessions are run by students. Instructors advise students, and grade their oral and written work. Reacting roles and games do not have a fixed script or outcome. This is not re-enacting. In Reacting games, students are assigned character roles with specific goals and must communicate, collaborate, and compete effectively to advance their objectives.<sup>3</sup>

RTTP games are designed to encourage student engagement and interaction with the material and with peers. Students take on historical roles and engage in debate, negotiation, and decision-making that challenges their

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1 "History's Habits of Mind," National Council for History Education, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://ncheteach.org/Historys-Habits-of-Mind>. I will briefly discuss the concept of deep learning in the next section, but for an in-depth look at the concept as I use it here, see Jal Mehta and Sarah M. Fine, *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019).

2 "About Reacting," Reacting to the Past - Barnard College, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/about-reacting>.

3 "How Does Reacting Work?," The Reacting Consortium - What is Reacting?, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://reactingconsortium.org/WIR-basics>.

understanding of the historical period and their own beliefs. The use of historical sources and the opportunity for students to engage with primary documents provides a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the period being studied.

Through these methods, RTTP games promise to foster deeper learning. Deeper learning is certainly not a new concept in education; Mehta and Fine connect the current idea through Paulo Freire, Alfred North Whitehead, and Joseph Mayer Rice, arguing that “they share an emphasis on ‘deep’ versus ‘shallow’ education, that is, on education that asks students to think versus education that asks them to follow directions, and education that has purpose and meaning for students versus education that does not.”<sup>4</sup>

Taking this idea further, they submit that deeper learning occurs at the intersection of three distinct elements: mastery, identity, and creativity. Mastery involves the traditional focus of education: the content knowledge and disciplinary skills. Identity relates to intrinsic motivations and relevance. Creativity means being able to use one’s mastery to make something new, to apply the content knowledge and skills in new ways.<sup>5</sup> But how effective is the Reacting pedagogy for achieving deeper learning?

Evidence suggests that there are demonstrable benefits to using RTTP in the classroom. In a two year study, researchers found that “Reacting participants exhibited positive social effects (making friends, working in groups, joining class discussions) and made gains in academic self-efficacy, which has been related to academic performance and adjustment, including student commitment to remain in school.”<sup>6</sup> In their study of 272 undergraduate students, Bledsoe and Richardson found student “self-efficacy improved over the course of the game; they reported an improvement in learning outcomes; and they were more engaged than students in the comparison group” and that “the differences between the Reacting participants as a whole and the comparison group were significant,” concluding: “Above all, Reacting is an experience that students value, especially in terms of perceived learning, enjoyment, and engagement.”<sup>7</sup>

Students play RTTP games over several class sessions, so each session builds upon the previous one. At the beginning of the game, students are given a brief overview of their role, the historical period, and their objectives. Throughout the game, students engage in a variety of activities, including reading primary sources, writing position papers, and participating in debates and negotiations. In each session they must settle one or more important issues. Students determine the outcome of the game; they are free to change history during Reacting games, sometimes dramatically so.<sup>8</sup>

One of the strengths of RTTP games is the flexibility they offer instructors. The games can be adapted to different levels of difficulty, different class sizes, and different time frames. Instructors can choose to focus on specific themes or historical periods, or they can integrate RTTP games into a larger course curriculum. Additionally, RTTP games offer a unique opportunity for interdisciplinary learning, as they can be used to teach not only history, but also political science and philosophy.<sup>9</sup> This compatibility with multiple disciplines is one of

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4 Mehta and Fine, *In Search of Deeper Learning*, 11.

5 Mehta and Fine, *In Search of Deeper Learning*, 15–16.

6 Carolyn A. Schult et al., “Strengthening Students’ Self-Efficacy Through Reacting to the Past,” in *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, ed. C. Edward Watson and Thomas Chase Hagood (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), quoted in Robert S Bledsoe and Deborah S Richardson, “Impact of Reacting to the Past and Effect of Role on Student Attributes and Academic Outcomes,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 33, no. 3 (2022): 361.

7 Bledsoe and Richardson, “Impact of Reacting to the Past and Effect of Role on Student Attributes and Academic Outcomes,” 369, 371.

8 For an example of students turning the Cuban Missile Crisis into open acts of war, see Christian Garner, “Reacting to the Past Pedagogy in the Classroom” (West Point, NY, United States Military Academy, 2018), 1.

9 The interdisciplinary use of Reacting games likely extends much further. One could easily imagine incorporating it into a speech or debate class. The subjects of some games may allow for opportunities in the science classroom as well. See, for example, Amy Curry, “1349: The Plague,” The Reacting Consortium, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://reactingconsortium.org/games/1349Plague>; For a look at incorporating Reacting games into the philosophy classroom, see Kathryn E. Joyce et al., “Teaching Philosophy through a Role-Immersion Game: Reacting to the Past,”

the most crucial aspects for the purposes of this paper as I applied the system to the secondary level.

## About The Course

The course in question was United States Government. There were two sections of the class, with each meeting on a block schedule of one 45-minute and two 90-minute periods per week. This one semester class is generally taken by students during their senior year of high school and is a graduation requirement, meaning all students, regardless of academic background or skills, must complete the course. Often some students will take the class during their junior year instead.<sup>10</sup> Because the school is a public charter, the class sizes are smaller than in the standard public high school. Student absences were at times frequent and, particularly in the smaller class period, it was not uncommon for the number of students present to be fewer than a dozen.

The curriculum for the class was designed to synthesize several elements: the Indiana State Academic Standards for US Government<sup>11</sup>, the NCSS College, Career, and Civic life (C3) Framework<sup>12</sup>, The Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy<sup>13</sup>, and the concept of deeper learning<sup>14</sup>. This synthesis resulted in three learning objectives that students must meet in order to pass the course. These objectives were Civic Concepts and Skills<sup>15</sup>, Civic Creativity, and Civic Inquiry. The first tasks students with mastering content, concepts, and skills, the second with using that mastery to create new ideas, products, or understandings, and the third fosters natural student inquiry in driving their own learning.

To meet these ends, the course was divided into four primary units, each built around a central compelling question: 1. Nature of Politics and Government (*What is the point of having government?*) 2. Foundations of American Government (*Why does our government work the way it does?*) 3. Principles and Institutions of American Government (*Who has the power?*) and 4. International Affairs (*What is our role on the world stage?*) In addition, the course culminates in a project that tasks students with identifying a social or political topic of interest to them, identifying a problem, researching the issue, and proposing a solution in the form of policy proposals to be made to elected officials, school leaders, and peers. Students determine the topic, as well as the final product.

The second unit focuses on the Founding Era of the United States, connecting the political philosophies studied in the first unit to the study of the branches and functions of government in unit three.<sup>16</sup> To answer the unit's compelling question (*Why does our government work the way it does?*) students needed to understand the connections between the Articles of Confederation, the debate around how to correct them that culminated in the Constitution, and the continued debate around ratification that led to the Bill of Rights. Because of this, study of the actual Constitutional Convention was bookended by two lessons. The first lesson, occurring just before the game, focused on the Articles of Confederation and their shortcomings. The second, which immediately followed

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Teaching Philosophy 41, no. 2 (2018): 175–98, <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201851487>.

10 This is particularly true of students who intend to graduate early and as such some students may not have completed the same courses previously, proving a further challenge for the teacher trying to differentiate instruction; indeed, during one of the classes discussed here, the youngest student was actually a sophomore.

11 “Indiana Academic Standards: United States Government” (Indiana Department of Education, January 16, 2020), <https://www.in.gov/doe/files/United-States-Government-Standards-2020.pdf>.

12 *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, NCSS Bulletin 113 (Silver Spring, Maryland: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

13 “Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy” (Educating for American Democracy, March 2021).

14 Mehta and Fine, *In Search of Deeper Learning*.

15 The first of my course learning objectives may seem broad but is based upon Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework, specifically the concepts of civic and political institutions, participation and deliberation, and processes, rules, and laws. See *The C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, 31–34.

16 For a selection of well-developed curricular materials and lesson plans on this topic, see “Foundations of Government | ICivics,” iCivics, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.icivics.org/curriculum/foundations-government>.

the game, was focused on the ratification of the Constitution and the debates surrounding it.

Briefly, the first lesson began with a short introductory lecture on the Articles followed by student analysis of Alexander Hamilton's *Federalist* No. 22.<sup>17</sup> I modified the paper and adapted it for this lesson, selecting six different excerpts, each focusing on a single problem, simplified to include vocabulary, and presented in large font with analysis questions.<sup>18</sup> Students were responsible for analyzing only one excerpt before sharing their analysis in a class discussion over the weaknesses of the Articles. The lesson concluded with Shays' Rebellion, a case study that allowed students to see that contemporary thoughts about the Articles of Confederation were divided and complex.<sup>19</sup>

The second lesson picked up following students studying the Constitutional Convention. Centered around the ratification of the Constitution, students took an active role in the debates by playing the iCivics game *Race to Ratify*.<sup>20</sup> They selected one side of the debate, either Federalist or Anti-Federalist, and attempted to influence the ratification by learning various arguments and composing pamphlets with the arguments that supported their chosen side. The lesson concluded with a debriefing in which students learned how the debate ended in reality. In the following class, students synthesized their learning from the unit to answer the compelling question.

In the initial plan for the course, the class quickly covered the Constitutional Convention with a brief lecture or video. Under this original scheme, the focus of the students' learning was on both the events leading up to the Constitutional Convention, such as Shays' Rebellion, but also the debates over ratification that followed. The limitations of this approach became obvious fairly quickly. Studying the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation certainly helps students understand why some Americans wanted a stronger central government and studying the ratification debates helps them understand the arguments for and against the Constitution, but neither actually explains how the Constitution as we know it came to be. To help the students better answer the unit compelling question, I decided to shift the primary focus of the unit to the Convention itself.

I considered several approaches to achieve this. One possibility was to provide students with a selection of primary sources and an analysis guide, following a similar outline to the Stanford Reading Like a Historian lessons.<sup>21</sup> A second consideration was to make use of the iCivics lesson on the topic.<sup>22</sup> A third option was to turn the Convention into a simulation game. There are many versions of this activity. Many of the ones I found took the approach of changing the setting of the game from the Convention itself to the school; in this design, rather than debating the makeup of the United States Constitution, students are instead debating reforms to the school's student council.<sup>23</sup> While this is intended to make the subject more relevant to the students and their lives, my concern was that it would make the subject of study too far removed from the compelling question (Why does

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17 Although written after the Constitutional Convention, it was selected because it highlights many of the criticisms of the Articles from the faction later known as the Federalists. For the full text, see Alexander Hamilton, "The Federalist Papers : No. 22," The Avalon Project : The Federalist Papers, accessed January 28, 2023, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed22.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed22.asp).

18 For a discussion on modifying primary sources for secondary students, see Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, "Tampering With History," *Social Education* 73, no. 5 (2009): 212–16.

19 This portion of the lesson was adapted from one of the many excellent lesson plans found in the Reading Like a Historian curriculum. See "Shays' Rebellion," Stanford History Education Group, accessed January 28, 2023, <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/shays-rebellion>.

20 "Race to Ratify - Constitution Ratification Game," accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.icivics.org/games/race-to-ratify>.

21 For a detailed explanation of this curriculum, see "History Lessons," Stanford History Education Group, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons>.

22 "Major Clash? Compromise! | Constitutional Convention Lesson Plan," iCivics, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://www.icivics.org/teachers/lesson-plans/major-clash-compromise>.

23 For a detailed lesson plan designed for college preparatory government students, see Jessee Hankins, "We the People: A Simulation for Young Voters" (Bowling Green State University, May 15, 2015), <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/174>; This lesson was adapted for the middle school classroom; see Kevin Roughton, "Digital Constitutional Convention," Teach with Magic, September 15, 2020, <https://www.mrroughton.com/blog/digital-constitutional-convention>.

our government work the way it does?). Ultimately, in the interest of supporting the course learning objectives and promoting deeper learning, I decided the best course of action was to adapt and modify John Patrick Coby's *The Constitutional Convention of 1787* Reacting game to the secondary level.

## Modifying The Game

Adapting and modifying *The Constitutional Convention of 1787* game for the high school classroom presents several challenges. The game is designed for a college-level audience and requires a certain level of prior historical knowledge, critical thinking, and reading and writing skills to play the game as originally written. Indeed, within the game book (intended to be purchased by the students, in contrast to the online instructor materials) Coby includes a detailed section on the historical background of the Constitutional Convention and a selection of core texts for students to read, analyze, and use to support their arguments in class.<sup>24</sup>

The challenge, of course, comes from the fact that these sections of the game book are highly detailed and written for a more advanced audience than high schoolers. The historical background section of the book consists of twenty-six pages. Within these pages, we find detailed information, not only on America under the Articles of Confederation (including topics such as the Continental Congress, Northwest Ordinance, State Constitutions, and the Annapolis Convention) but also an explanation of republican theory at the time of the founding (detailing country and court republicanism and the agent and trustee theories of representation).<sup>25</sup> The “Core Texts” section runs over eighty pages and includes excerpts from works such as Aristotle's *Politics*, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, John Adams' *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.<sup>26</sup> The level of detail and complexity in these texts is far more advanced than that typically studied in the secondary classroom. To fit the needs of my classes, I removed these readings, instead reviewing with students our previous study of the philosophical foundations of American government and the limits of the Articles of Confederation.

The matter of assignments and assessment presented a challenge as well. As laid out in the game, students are expected to write papers and give speeches. The papers assigned vary depending on which delegate the student is playing and which issues are up for debate that day. The game also includes quizzes for the core text readings. The intent here is to allow the instructor to grade quizzes and papers as they would in a traditional class.

This was incompatible with my class for two key reasons: first, the entire purpose of a deep-dive into the Convention was to prepare students to better engage with the unit compelling question, which served as the assessment. Second, I do not grade in my classroom; individual assignments are not given individual scores.<sup>27</sup> Instead, assessment is based on whether or not students meet the course learning objectives. Fortunately, this challenge was easy to remedy. As the game does not require grades or essays to function properly as a learning experience, I was able to simply remove these aspects entirely.

An additional challenge relates to class size. The game is intended for up to thirty-two players, with the minimum class size in the book being twelve. This will not be a problem for many classrooms, but for one of my classes, I only had a dozen students. If even a single one was absent for one class then we would not have enough players for the game.

To alleviate this concern, I took on a role as well in both classes. In the standard game, one player takes the role of George Washington as President of the Convention and is responsible for facilitating the debates between delegates and determines the order of player speeches. Because I was not assigning speeches to the students, the

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24 John Patrick Coby, *The Constitutional Convention of 1787: Constructing the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), pts. 2, 5.

25 Coby, *The Constitutional Convention of 1787*, 15–43.

26 Coby, *The Constitutional Convention of 1787*, 67–150.

27 For more information on this concept, often called “ungrading,” see Susan Debra Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

role of George Washington became largely a formality; I was able to play the role while still assisting students as a teacher during our game sessions. As an added bonus, I purchased a powdered wig to wear, signifying the start of gameplay.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the game is complex. It is difficult for students to learn all of the rules quickly. Each student is assigned a delegate to play and a faction to be part of (these factions are the Nationalists, Moderate Nationalists, Moderate Confederationists, and Confederationists, which roughly correspond to the later Federalist and Anti-Federalist factions). Broadly speaking, the student's faction determines their position on the issues. RTTP games are complex, however, and the delegates are not always loyal to their faction. The game includes scenarios for duels, rivalries between specific delegates, and faction defections on top of the already complex matter of debating the Constitution. In terms of determining the winner of the game, players receive points based on how well their faction achieves their goals as well as on their own individual delegate objectives, which are different for each player.

Playing the *Constitutional Convention* game was a relatively late addition to the course curriculum so the class had limited time to prepare to play. To simplify the game for our purposes, I modified the delegate role sheets into smaller reference cards.<sup>29</sup> On these cards I included only the most pertinent game information: special rules such as rivalries or faction defections and individual delegate objectives. With these changes in place, the students and I were ready to embark on our first session of the Constitutional Convention.

## Our Constitutional Conventions

To introduce the students to the gameplay, we conducted a “session zero” in which students met with their factions and held a vote that elected me, in my role as George Washington, as President of the Convention. With that complete, the first order of business was to elect the Convention Secretary (in the context of the game, this person helped me keep vote tallies). Any student could run for the post. In my first class, the Secretary was Gouverneur Morris (delegate of Pennsylvania) while the second class elected Charles Pinckney (not to be confused with C.C. Pinckney, both delegates from South Carolina). This was, of course, patently ahistorical; the real life secretary was William Jackson.

The main issues of the first session centered around the House of Representatives. First we debated the character of representation in the lower house: agent (or “delegate”) vs. trustee (or “elite”) representation. This first issue did not result in a vote. Instead, it was to set the stage for later debates to come. Student debate was enthusiastic.

The second issue of the session is where the debate picked up because it was the first with a vote: what will be the size of the House? The issue was twofold: students had to decide on how many representatives there would be for the first Congress and decide what the rough proportion of representatives to inhabitants should be. After much debate, the first class finally compromised with a starting size of 105 representatives and a later ratio of 1 per 30,000 people. The second class also landed at 1 per 30,000 but the “Nationalist” faction managed to keep the starting size at 65 representatives. At this point, the first class had already differed from the historical Convention.

The second session focused on the Senate. The two issues up for debate were the method of election and the manner of representation for the upper house. Historically, this was election by the state legislatures<sup>30</sup> and equal representation for each state. The first class was the closest to the historical Constitution as the various factions compromised. In their Constitution the state legislatures still had the power to elect the Senate, but to also limit state power, the state governors would in turn be elected by Congress! The second class limited state power differently. They agreed to have the lower house elect the upper house, with the compromise being that the states selected the nominees for election. Both classes agreed on equal representation in the Senate to offset the

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28 George Washington did not actually wear a powdered wig. By this time the wig had gone out of style and gentlemen would instead powder their hair.

29 These role sheets, available for instructors on the Reacting Consortium website, are sometimes several pages long, including detailed biographies, individual delegate objectives, and special rules such as faction defections.

30 This was changed to direct popular election of the Senate with the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913.

proportional representation in the House.

Our third session focused on the presidency, with three key issues: length of term, eligibility for re-election, and method of election. The real convention settled on 4 years, unlimited re-eligibility, and the electoral college.<sup>31</sup> The first class saw the nationalist factions sweep the session, because several key members of the opposition (the “confederalists”) were absent that day. They approved a six year term, unlimited re-eligibility, and direct election by the people. The second class again differed, as the confederalists put up a stronger fight. They settled for a five year term and re-eligibility for reelection, but put in a two-term limit from the start. Their president is elected by the Congress; still no electoral colleges!

The last session of the game was the most difficult because it focused on slavery. This can be a hard topic, particularly in a simulation game, as Coby acknowledges in the Instructor Manual of the game: “The Constitutional Convention provides what possibly is the most anodyne, matter-of-fact encounter with slavery allowed by American history. But that encounter could still be distressing to some, especially in mixed-race classes.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this served as a concern in my class; about one-half of the students were Black. To mitigate these concerns, I spoke frankly with the students about the nature of the debate and emphasized the guidance Coby provides:

Slavery was defended at the historical convention on grounds of economic necessity only. The “positive good” school of thought had not yet made an appearance in the South, at least not in any significant way. Thus southerners in the game convention can—and should—stick to economic arguments, for by doing so they remain faithful to the record, while avoiding racial remarks that might make themselves and others uncomfortable.<sup>33</sup>

I made a point of emphasizing this with students at the start of simulation and again at the start of the fourth session. Students were given the opportunity to step out of the classroom or speak to me privately if they became uncomfortable with the session, though none did so. I remained attentive of the debates throughout the classroom, though students did not require redirection or correction on this particular issue. All-in-all, the students conducted the debates of this final session with a professional demeanor.

The two big issues were importation and how enslaved peoples count for representation and direct taxation. Historically importation was protected for twenty years and representation saw the Three-fifths Compromise. The first class was nearly derailed by the issue of importation. They compromised with protection for seven years and total ban after fifteen. Representation and direct taxation were fixed at one-half, an overall win for the northern states. The second class instead was stuck on the other issue. They agreed to immediately ban importation, highlighting one weakness of the RTTP approach: some students opted not to follow their delegate roles. Southern states had an advantage with representation, though, winning full representation but only a rate of two-thirds for taxes.

The final vote of the game was to determine whether or not to adopt the Constitution they had two weeks debating. Both classes ultimately did so, with the first class having a stronger central government and the second having stronger states.

As an additional note, each class also saw delegates duel. In both cases, Alexander Hamilton and Elbridge Gerry clashed over the presidency debates, with Gerry insulting Hamilton’s honor and accusing him of being a not-so-secret monarchist. They faced off in the hallway with Nerf guns following (approximated) dueling rules. In the first class, Hamilton won the duel and Gerry won in the next. Neither delegate was killed; in terms of game mechanics, the loser lost their vote on the next issue and could not debate for the rest of the session.

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31 Presidential re-eligibility was limited to two terms with the Twenty-second Amendment in 1951.

32 John Patrick Coby, *The Constitutional Convention of 1787: Instructor’s Guide* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 21.

33 Coby, *Instructor’s Guide*, 24.

## Reflections

Using the RTTP game to teach the Constitutional Convention reveals both the benefits and challenges of using this approach in the secondary classroom. The game is a demanding and immersive experience that requires a significant investment of time and resources. As Ian Bennington mentions upon reflection of his own use of the games: “Do not think that RTTP classes teach themselves or that they are somehow less work than a traditional class.”<sup>34</sup> However, the learning outcomes of the game at the college-level suggest that this investment is worth it.

The RTTP pedagogy is deliberately designed to incorporate many factors that have been shown through research to positively influence student achievement. Professor John Hattie provides a breakdown of these influences in his “Visible Learning MetaX” database, which contains and synthesizes information from hundreds of meta-analyses and list the effect size of each influence. RTTP involves collaborative learning (effect size of 0.39), competitive elements (effect size of 0.24), enjoyment (effect size of 0.56), motivation (effect size of 0.38), and self-efficacy (effect size of 0.65).<sup>35</sup> These benefits seemed to occur in my classroom as well, particularly in terms of student enjoyment and motivation. What needs to be studied further is the direct impact of this pedagogy on secondary students.

The game provides a deep dive into the historical context, events, and personalities of the Constitutional Convention, which is significantly more engaging than a traditional lecture-based approach. Though limited in my test case due to time constraints, with slight modification to the curriculum students would be able to engage with some of the same primary sources, historical characters, and issues as in the standard game in a way that is both personal and meaningful. The primary sources used in the RTTP games, however, must be modified or adapted for high school students to ensure that they are accessible and engaging. This may involve simplifying the language of the primary sources, highlighting key concepts, or providing additional background information.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most promising, the use of RTTP games offers significant interdisciplinary possibilities. The games can be used to explore historical, political, and social issues, as well as to develop skills across a variety of disciplines. The potential for exploration at the intersections between history and other disciplines, such as literature, science, and economics, is worthy of further study. One could easily imagine an interdisciplinary course that incorporates English, Speech, Biology, and History, particularly with other games such as Amy Curry’s *1349: The Plague*.<sup>37</sup> In this hypothetical course, students would study the history of medieval Norwich, England, write persuasive arguments with their English teacher, deliver those arguments as speeches, and follow the game with a biological study of plagues and germs.

My experience with Coby’s *Constitutional Convention* game was very promising. This unique student-centered pedagogy is worthy of further investigation, particularly within secondary classrooms. In a stroke of fortunate timing, faculty at Grand Valley State University recently were awarded a grant for the purposes of bringing RTTP to more secondary classrooms.<sup>38</sup> The Reacting Consortium website also has a page dedicated to hosting tips and resources for high school teachers interested in incorporating Reacting games into the curriculum.<sup>39</sup> These resources are generally still in the development stage but this growth of interest is a promising step towards strong inquiry-driven, student-centered classrooms.

34 Ian Bennington, “Teaching With Reacting To The Past—Bringing Role-Immersion Play Into The College Classroom,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 4 (October 2015): 589, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000523>.

35 John Hattie, “Visible Learning Metax,” Visible Learning Metax, August 2021, <https://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/>.

36 Wineburg and Martin, “Tampering With History.”

37 Curry, “1349: The Plague.”

38 “RTTP In High Schools: New Grant Will Help High School Instructors Incorporate Reacting,” The Reacting Consortium, January 30, 2023, [https://reactingconsortium.org/News/13078421?fbclid=IwAR1CxWdVzRL5iQ0c2xs3w9Q4GxG0DHSkAG0d3p9EQpaGDL\\_YT9gUts3kWc](https://reactingconsortium.org/News/13078421?fbclid=IwAR1CxWdVzRL5iQ0c2xs3w9Q4GxG0DHSkAG0d3p9EQpaGDL_YT9gUts3kWc).

39 “Reacting in High Schools,” The Reacting Consortium, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://reactingconsortium.org/HighSchools>.