

# An Interview with Mark Carnes

Jessamyn Neuhaus

SUNY Plattsburgh

Teaching History 48(1)

DOI: 10.33043/TH.48.1.145-151

© 2023 Neuhaus.

Distributed with CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 License.

For the special section titled “History Fun and Games” in the fall 2023 issue *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, I’m delighted to include my recorded interview with Dr. Mark Carnes.

Mark C. Carnes, Professor of History, joined the Barnard faculty in 1982. His academic specialty is modern American history and pedagogy. His courses include “The United States, 1940-1975” and several courses featuring the Reacting to the Past pedagogy, which he pioneered in 1996. Professor Carnes served as General Co-Editor (with John Garraty) of the 24-volume *American National Biography* (Oxford University Press/American Council of Learned Societies). He is Executive Director Emeritus of the Reacting Consortium, which directs the Reacting to the Past pedagogical initiative, now used at over 500 colleges and universities. His most recent book is *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Welcome, Dr. Carnes, and thank you very much for being here.

Reacting to the past is easily the best known and widely used gamification of history education. But for those who may not be familiar with it, how would you summarize its structure--its learning goals, and implementation in the classroom?

**Mark Carnes:** First, thank you so much for having me. I’m always pleased to talk about Reacting. Reacting consists of complex games set in the past, where students take on roles informed by important texts. A Reacting game is comprised of three basic elements: 1) a game book, which sets out the historical context, lays out the rules of the game, [and] often includes primary sources that can inform and] help students develop their position; 2) role sheets, which outline each player’s objectives and guides them; and 3) an instructor’s manual, which provides guidance on how to teach the game. Students can get the game book from the University of North Carolina Press, either in hard copy or as an e-book. (<https://uncpress.org/series/reacting-to-the-past/>). Instructors download the role sheets and the instructors’ manuals from the Reacting Consortium website ([reactingconsortium.org](http://reactingconsortium.org)). There are now 32 published games; another 200 are in development.

Consider, for example, the game that is set in ancient Athens after its defeat in the Peloponnesian war (<https://uncpress.org/book/9781469670751/the-threshold-of-democracy/>). Most students are assigned to one of four factions: Radical democrats who seek to continue the direct democracy and eliminate its enemies; the moderate democratic faction seeks to preserve the democracy as Pericles conceived of it, which included restrictions on rights for immigrants; the Socratic faction seeks to create an educated elite of philosopher kings who would replace the democracy; and a faction of oligarchs seeks to restrict political activity to land-owning people. So this reflects basically the political alignments of ancient Athens. And then there are cluster of various other individual players who reflect historically complex elements.

There’s usually a setup week or two, when students are exposed to the materials. Also much of a “setup” period allows students to work in their factions to figure out how they’re going to make arguments and function as a team. The setup is followed by the game itself, as factions struggle to achieve their goals--meeting in the Athenian Assembly and in the Athenian law courts. So after the game play, in the final one or two sessions, there’s a briefing session where students discuss the game.

This is a sort of standard structure for a Reacting game: several setup sessions; then two or three weeks of game play, where students will be acting in their roles, trying to achieve their objectives; and finally a “debriefing” session to discuss the game and the ideas it generated. . That’s the structure of Reacting.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Another explanation of Reacting was provided, after this interview, by students at Newman University and Eastern Michigan University and elsewhere. See the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wwACK1uKqI>.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Thank you. That's very clear. So following up on that, what specific history skills and abilities does playing a Reacting game help students build?

**Mark Carnes:** Throughout the game, students make arguments in order to win over those players who have “indeterminate” roles. So students are always arguing from historical facts. A big issue in the Athens game, for example, is: Why, if democracy is so good, did Athens lose the Peloponnesian war to the antidemocratic state of Sparta? Those students playing Athenian oligarchs will argue that Athens needs to be much more like Sparta to prevail in the future. Radical democrats will counter that Athens lost the war because some oligarchs—“like those among you today”—conspired with Sparta to overthrow the democracy. So students must learn the facts of the Peloponnesian war, and understand the ideas of Pericles and Plato's Socrates. Often students conduct research to find additional facts to build their arguments, especially relating to causality. Why *did* Athens lose the war?

The Reacting experience also gets to causality in a deeper way. I'm the author of an American history textbook, and it's 1,000 pages long. [*The American Nation: A History of the United States*] It deals with hundreds of topics in American history. But to make this complex narrative clear, I'm obliged to simplify everything, especially causation: “This led to this which led to this, and this, and so on.” If I were to add nuance, and explain that things might at any point have gone in a different direction, my narrative would confuse students. The text would balloon to 30,000 pages. So we historians—in our texts and lectures—make causation simple and crystal clear. We make everything look deterministic. But that is wrong.

A Reacting game not only restores the complexity of the past, but also its contingency. Students see how they or their peers “change” history. Perhaps a student makes a powerful speech, or a charismatic leader emerges who galvanizes a faction to power. Such persons change history [in the game], just as could have happened in history. We historians tend to neglect contingency—that the past might have unfolded in a different way—because we're so preoccupied with trying to chronicle what actually happened. Thus we neglect and even suppress the contingent elements in history. But we know that history could have unfolded in a different way. Reacting students learn this truth.

Let me add a related point. Students often regard history as boring because our books and lectures often suggest that individual human agency doesn't much matter. But Reacting shows otherwise. Students see it in their own games. Students see that they can and do make a difference, that individual actions can change the course of history. That's a very powerful lesson.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Almost like humanizing history.

**Mark Carnes:** I'm a textbook writer, and Reacting has completely changed my own philosophy. I used to think of myself as a social scientist, and social scientists seek to explore forces with universal import. We aspire to something as clean and powerful as Newton's laws, which are always true (until an Einstein comes along to complicate matters). Social scientists, too, seek to describe causal forces that drive history in particular directions, such as Marxism, or modernization theory, or innumerable other theories. We want to explain human behavior as something governed by such forces. But after seeing Reacting classes, I've learned that no social science theory can account for the complexity of human beings. I think that we social scientists have failed to adequately account for the vagaries of personality and individuality. And they are what make history so relentlessly fascinating—and also so difficult to fit into universalizing theoretical models.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** I'm interested in the history of Reacting. I know that the Reacting Consortium, Inc. recently became an American Historical Association affiliate. It's used at over 500 colleges and universities, so I think it's safe to say that it's a well-established and widely embraced pedagogical technique. But when you first created it in the late 1990s, did you encounter any resistance or skepticism from teachers and professors? What form did that take if so? And when did you see it start to change? If you did encounter resistance.

**Mark Carnes:** At the outset. Reacting generated enormous skepticism, especially from professors. It still does. That hasn't changed! Usually critics say something like this: "I'm a serious scholar. You can't reduce the pursuit of knowledge to fun and games. It is hard work, and that's what I teach my students. If students don't want to learn, they shouldn't be in college." Frankly, if I hadn't myself seen a Reacting class, that's what I would say, too!

But while skepticism of Reacting was strong and remains so, some things have changed. For one, more and more people are worried that nearly half of entering college students drop out. Now I teach a large history survey lecture course, and my students—from Barnard and Columbia—are highly motivated. My course is always oversubscribed. But on any given day, a third of my students are missing. Recently a senior auditor met with me after class. He had been sitting at the back of the classroom, and he noticed that a bunch of students were shopping or playing video games during the lecture. They were good students. I think I'm a good lecturer. The fact is that lectures are not an especially effective way to teach.

We've known this for a long time. Learning research has made this clear for four decades. Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard, in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, was baffled that professors, who exalt research and insist that we take nothing on faith, ignore research on learning and persist in lecturing, even though the learning research shows that lecturing isn't very effective.

But declining enrollments now threaten the survival of many colleges. Administrators especially worry about the viability of their institution when half of its students—its customers—drop out. And history survey courses are among the most lethal in that respect. And so administrators are among the most vocal proponents of active learning. Faculty who embrace Reacting often find that administrators are their biggest supporters.

More people [are using RTTP] because it is spread by word of mouth, for the most part from faculty, who find it to be an exhilarating way of teaching. Yes, sometimes lecturing can be satisfying. Sometimes you give a good performance and you know it: You make a point effectively. Students laugh at the jokes. Everyone seems to be awake. But always there's tension, and the experience is usually draining. But a Reacting class is exciting because of what students do, and sometimes what they do is spine-tinglingly wonderful. That's why so many Reacting instructors have become zealots. That's why Reacting has spread to so many people and institutions.

Okay, now, I've given you a long lecture on the inadequacy of the lecture as a pedagogical mode [Laughter]. [So to summarize]: what has happened is that more people have heard about Reacting, and the Reacting community is larger and larger.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Building on what you have just been talking about, I have a question about something I know everyone reading this journal is going to be concerned about. One of the most pressing problems I've heard college instructors [identify] in the past year or so is how to encourage student attendance and active participation and engagement. I have a hunch, but can you tell us more about how Reacting facilitates student engagement?

**Mark Carnes:** Over 2,600 instructors and administrators belong to the Reacting Facebook Faculty Lounge, a restricted access website. These online discussions provide lots of feedback. And quite often instructors report that they have had perfect attendance for the entire semester in their Reacting classes. I've seen that too! While nearly a third of my students are missing from my large lecture classes at Columbia, I'm surprised if I have more than three or four absences for the semester in my Reacting classes. So the question is, why do students come so regularly

Partly, in Reacting, no one knows exactly what's going to happen. It's student-run. That's an important fact. Although every game is carefully scaffolded, to make sure certain issues are raised and debated, students can and do take the game in unexpected directions. Moreover, you never know who is going to rise to the challenge of a difficult debate, or how a crucial vote will go, and so each class has inherent drama.

Another part of the engagement comes from the factions, the teams. So if a team is working well, it will make sure that everyone shows up –to vote or to provide support. Even the slackers.

And a Reacting class is fun. Often, it can be loud. There will be laughter, and there will be shouting. If a Reacting

class is adjacent to a regular class, sometimes there will be complaints, too! But it'll be interesting and fun. And even students who don't like Reacting—who dislike speaking in public, for example—they will nevertheless show up. Chiefly because they're curious to see what will happen. If you're looking to engage your students, Reacting is a radical solution. I doubt you can find anything more engaging.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** It's so interesting how many student engagement tools [Reacting] hits on. I hear: student accountability to each other, empowering students as learners, and also that element of curiosity because it's not clear how it's going to shake out.

**Mark Carnes:** The curiosity draws them in, but another aspect of the engagement is competition. And yet another is “make believe.” It's fun to “become” someone other than yourself. It's scary at first, especially because students are asked to play the part of someone very different from themselves. But then, by the second week, most students figure out what they stand for and come to understand the world they've been asked to inhabit. It can be exhilarating--just living that fantasy. So, yes, Reacting ticks off a whole bunch of motivational boxes.

Some students, once they're in the game, hate to see it come to an end. They've figured out this other world and where “they” belong in it. They can argue reflexively without thinking where “they” stand: “I support this position. I believe this.” Students can and do make “their” arguments in an impassioned way, because they've inhabited that world, and they understand it. But of course, once they understand that world, then they've learned what they need to learn—and so it's time to move on. Ideally, to another Reacting game.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** We know history educators are facing new challenges every day and some issues have become significantly more difficult since the late 1990s. In what specific ways can a Reacting game help teachers and college instructors meet the demands of teaching historical thinking of “alternative facts” and decreasing digital literacy?

**Mark Carnes:** I think different Reacting instructors would answer this in different ways. In my view, Reacting teaches students that facts can be manipulated. Students need to refer to texts and facts to make arguments that likely are far-removed from their own, real lives. To act like a Puritan theologian during the trial of Anne Hutchinson, or a Confucian scholar during a succession dispute in Ming China, or a member of the Kentucky legislature in 1861—these are difficult challenges! Students must gobble up lots of facts, and then arrange them to support their objectives, their victory goals. They see how to use facts to make a persuasive argument, so that teaches them something important right there.

Students also learn that everything is much more complicated than any simple argument can make it. Every debate has multiple perspectives. Human affairs are complicated! And the past is always filled with infinite roles, each of which is complex and demanding.

Students, I think, learn the complexity of history, and how simplistic talking points that pass for discourse in contemporary life just don't suffice. The real world is complicated, and facts and texts can be easily manipulated.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** I'm going to follow up by addressing another hot button issue that educators are facing and discussing. Recently there's been a lot of concern among educators at all levels about artificial intelligence, the Chat GPT tool in particular, and its potential impact on student writing and learning. How could Reacting possibly mitigate plagiarism in the history classroom and facilitate authentic student learning and demonstration of their learning?

**Mark Carnes:** I think we've all been stunned by the power of artificial intelligence and text generators. And it's obviously going to improve rapidly. I had initially thought that Reacting was relatively insulated from the AI threat. I had assumed that AI would not be able to generate useful speeches for most Reacting roles, because students often are playing minor figures known only to scholars. But AI will improve, surely. The Reacting community is chewing on this, and there's probably been scores of posts on how we cope with this during the

past month.

One solution that occurs to me is for instructors to require that students make reference, in every speech and essay, to something that has specifically occurred in their class. I don't see how AI's trolling of the internet could build up the class-specific context for a student speech, but maybe I'm wrong. This is something that the consortium as a whole is struggling with. This is going to be an ongoing challenge but because the Reacting pedagogy is so unique, it's going to be harder for ChatGPT to break than most of our other classes. It's a much more serious problem in regular classes.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Well, it seems like too, as you're describing, students become invested and engaged with the material, their motivations turning to any kind of [plagiarism are lessened].

**Mark Carnes:** Yes, except that they *are* college students. They're supposed to give a speech on immigrant rights in ancient Athens. But they haven't done anything and it's due tomorrow. . . We've all been there.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Reacting is history based and this is a teaching history journal. But I know that it also appeals to instructors across disciplines. In what ways have you seen it adapted for use in non-history classrooms?

**Mark Carnes:** The Reacting community has expanded over the past two decades, and hundreds and hundreds of professors have joined the enterprise. The faculty discussion group has over 2,600 members. And one of the first things that occurs to Reacting instructors is that **their** subject or specialization would be perfect for a game. And so different instructors design new games—and in nearly all disciplines. Instructors in art history have created games in art history; and scientists have created games in the history of science, Darwin and Galileo, that led to history of science games. Then games in nursing—such as a game on the origins of cholera in 19th-century London. The Black Death game became popular during the Covid pandemic, as many instructors thought it would provide an ideal foundation in epidemiology. Also games in philosophy and political science. Political scientists in many ways were the easiest recruit to Reacting because they studied simulations as a graduate mode of pedagogy. Probably half the Reacting instructors are historians. Then I would say 20% are political scientists, and then 30% are humanists of various stripes, English professors, philosophy, professors, religion, professors. And we have a strong religion department component over the past 5 years. It's spread rapidly in foreign languages and English composition classes. Those would be our biggest growth spurts in recent years: foreign language and English composition.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** You've already addressed this somewhat but this special section is titled "History Fun and Games"—what makes Reacting to the Past Fun? Why is fun important to teaching and learning history?

**Mark Carnes:** When I decided I needed to write a book about Reacting, *Minds on Fire*, I thought I had all these wonderful stories and anecdotes; these extraordinary experiences that I'd experienced with students, and then all the stories Reacting faculty had recounted, and I wanted to share them.

I figured I could group these stories into different categories. And then I would just tie these stories to the literature on the philosophy of education, invoking all of the philosophers who had said playing is the best way to learn. That would be the intellectual [framework] that would give heft to the stories.

But when I looked carefully at Plato and Rousseau, and Dewey and Erickson, and other titans in the philosophy of education, I found that while they all endorsed play as the best way to learn, they defined play in ways that were not much fun! Rousseau thought that the ideal experience for young persons was scoutcraft: He told Emile, his putative student: "We don't want your mind to be encumbered with book learning or anything like that. That will stick the ideas of other people into your head, and diminish your own sense of self. So you must not read books, and you should just stay away from other people, because they will corrupt your own pure self. So we'll keep you out in the woods and you'll learn scoutcraft." Well, I was a Boy Scout and I quickly learned that too

much scoutcraft becomes the army, okay? After you've tied your tenth knot, or whatever, it's not that much fun! John Dewey, similarly, always advocated play, but he was concerned with helping educate the immigrant masses, bringing them into schools, and then getting them into industrial jobs. So he generally conceived of play as pre-work. There is a point where he met with parents at a high school and said, "You know, we can make education more fun. You can give boys shovels and girls brooms. Even washing dishes can be fun!" And the parents just looked at him. Our philosophers of education have said, yes, we need play, but they have defined play in ways that aren't fun.

I learned that there are several elements that make things fun. One is "make-believe." And what does Plato's Socrates say about make believe? It is the one thing that he wants to keep out of his ideal republic, because it's false. It deprives people of their sense of self. It inflates their imaginations, by encouraging them to identify with gods and mythic heroes. And once their imaginations have been inflamed, they won't perform their proper (boring) tasks in society. Rousseau's favorite author is Plato and so Rousseau says the one thing he doesn't want [anyone doing is] make-believe, because once he imagines he's someone other than himself, his sense of self is corrupted. So Rousseau wouldn't give [students] any books, especially novels and things that will take excite his imagination. Dewey says he doesn't want his play to turn into fooling because it becomes abstract or silly. It's not going to help people find jobs in the industrial workplace. So we've got this philosophy that play should be preparation for work. [It] leaches out the make-believe elements, the imaginative elements that can be wild and dangerous and subversive.

That, to me, is what fun is: fundamentally subversive. It subverts the natural order of things, or it subverts the social order. It exalts the imagination. It takes people to places that can even be dangerous. Educators sometimes view this with alarm: "No, no, no, you're fooling around! You're going in these dangerous, unpredictable directions." That opposition to fun—to subversion—has been embedded in the philosophical bedrock of Western Civilization. And it surfaces, often unknowingly, in our graduate schools of education. And so we have this weird discourse, which says that we must promote active learning that's playful; but then, teachers who dutifully follow in the footsteps of Dewey and Company end up creating really dead play forms that aren't fun. And so young teachers, bent on playful innovation, give up on play—and revert to lecturing.

What we've learned with Reacting is you've got to empower students, give them control of the class but then create a structure that is filled with knowledge. Put the course content into the furniture and decorations, and then push students into that structure and encourage them to explore it, especially within their peer group. In the process, they will engage in all types of imaginative subversion. And they'll have fun.

That's what Reacting is, these games that have taken years to develop. They've been tested and refined, in 50 or 60 iterations in classes. These games are hard to develop but it's where higher education should be going, creating intellectual structures and then nudging students into them. The instructor functions as cheerleader: "Go in there! You can do it! Here are some tools to help you. Here are some critical sources. Here's how to write and speak more effectively. Here's how you can lead a team better, or be a better teammate."

This mode of teaching is absolutely exhilarating, and it's why Reacting is spreading. It's because people have found joy in teaching. We imagined we would find that in graduate school, but then we began teaching in traditional pedagogical modes that aren't very effective. Worse, we find traditional teaching to be wearying; it grinds you down. Of course, sometimes you'll have a Reacting class that's as boring as a traditional class, but more often, with Reacting, you will have magical classes that are far better than you could have ever imagined.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** I love the idea of fun being subversive and empowering for students and encouraging student learning, but also empowering and energizing for educators. It's been such a tough few years for all educators. Fun is maybe just as, or even more important for us, for the instructors.

**Mark Carnes:** Absolutely. And people say, you know, how did you do it? They sort of look at the Reacting Consortium, Inc. edifice—the dozens of published games, the hundreds more in development, the extensive

editorial board, the entire membership organization. . . How, they ask, did it ever come about? The point is, I had a glimmer of an idea and then others joined the initiative, bringing with it their ideas and energy. Soon, there was this infusion of hundreds of people for whom Reacting became a big part of their lives, their professional lives, and they they've created this great structure. I wrongly get lots of credit for it, which is a real hoot, because, you know, I'm just having fun.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** That's right! My last question is what is your most important piece of advice for someone who might be interested in using Reacting to the Past for the first time?

**Mark Carnes:** The best way to learn about Reacting is to come to a workshop, come to a conference. When you come to a conference you'll sign up to play one or two games. About a month before the conference, you will receive your gamebooks and role sheets. And during a day or two, you'll play a compressed version of a game. We always have our major workshop in New York in June, but we also have lots of other conferences during the year. Find out more at <https://reactingconsortium.org/>.

One of the special features of our conferences, too, are veteran Reacting students who function like guides, or mentors, to different factions. The students, having spent a dramatic month of their lives playing the games, know them inside and out. And instructors, who probably didn't begin reading the gamebook until they got on the plane to come to the conference, are very needy. They didn't realize the game was so demanding. And so, during the initial faction meetings, the student "preceptors" provide guidance and encouragement, while the instructors soak up the students' advice. This glorious inversion astonishes faculty, who begin to realize how powerful the Reacting experience is for students.

So one of our standard sessions at the at the workshop is a session where the new instructors to Reacting ask questions of a panel of students. At one of these sessions a few years ago, a professor asked what advice the students would give to new Reacting instructors. And a student named Jessica Howells, from Eastern Michigan University, replied: "You've got to surrender control of the class to the students. You've got to let it be their class. You need to step back and not intrude too much. In one class, where I was serving as a student mentor, I was trying to encourage a shy student to speak. Finally, an issue emerged in a debate that she had written a paper on, and she went up to the podium to speak. And then the instructor intervened, to make exactly the point the student was going to say. So the student just sat down."

Perhaps this is the hardest part about Reacting. We instructors are used to showing off, to controlling things. It's hard to sit in the background and let the game unfold. Yes, you can shape things by meeting with factions beforehand, by grading papers quickly with useful feedback, by jotting notes and sending encouragement.<sup>2</sup> By cheerleading when students encounter a difficult challenging. By consoling when they lose a pivotal vote. Teaching in this way is glorious, but it does not entail dominating the classroom. But there is a greater joy in seeing students do wonderful things.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Oh, that sounds so great. I've often said that if I could just give one piece of advice to instructors it would be try to talk less.

**Mark Carnes:** It is one of the main lessons I've learned from Reacting is that I teach better by shutting up.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** You made this sound so, so fun.

**Mark Carnes:** So I hope you—and your readers!—will apply for funds to come to a Reacting conference, especially the big Summer Institute. You will have a ball, and it will forever change how you think about teaching.

---

<sup>2</sup> During the Pandemic, many Reacting faculty began to use Slack and Discord to encourage students within factions to interact and share materials. Afterwards, many of us continued to use Slack and Discord to provide instant (private) advice or encouragement. Before, we would pass a note.