

Editor's Introduction to the Fall 2023 Special Section "History Fun and Games"

History is serious. Interpreting past events, deciding why things happened the way they did, is a serious scholarly endeavor with serious, real-life consequences for individuals, families, communities, nations, and the world. Teaching history is also an extremely serious endeavor, perhaps never more so than today. The stakes are sky high. When we live in an era of "alternative" facts, AI-generated texts and images, and bots spewing misinformation about life and death issues on social media seen by millions, our job—teaching students how to access reliable primary sources and make an evidence-based argument about the past—could not be more serious. So is this really a good time to dedicate a special section of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* to "history fun and games?"

It's precisely because the stakes are so high for history education right now that we need to take a close look at how history educators can utilize games, gamification, and play to help our students learn. Obviously, games are not the only way to learn how to do history. But the science of learning offers compelling evidence of how effective games can be for learning. Playing games checks a whole lot of boxes on the list of things that greatly increase anyone's ability to engage in authentic learning: evoking curiosity, encouraging autonomy, creating new connections, and strengthening sociality. Students in our social studies and history classes need to build critical thinking, information literacy, and primary source interpretation skills not just for academic success but also so they will be better equipped to navigate a world saturated with misrepresentations and deceptive discourse. Games, play, and fun can be an important part of the toolkit we bring into the classroom to take on this truly weighty responsibility as educators.

Gamification is by no means a new idea in education in general or even the field of history specifically. However, I believe it has new import in 2023, when educators and learners face some truly grim challenges. We are all still grappling with the fallout of the pandemic pivot semesters, including trauma and loss. Education at every level has become one of the most vicious battlegrounds in an excoriating culture war, even as profound, systemic inequities impinge on teaching and learning. Multiple polysynchronous modalities for teaching and learning are reshaping what even means to be in a classroom. Students, teachers, and college instructors are struggling in record numbers with anxiety, disconnection, disengagement, uncertainty, loneliness, and burnout. In short, all of us—teachers, faculty, and students of every age—need more opportunities to have fun and to engage in the social connectivity so necessary for effective teaching and learning. The authors of the articles and the subjects of the interviews in this special section of *THAJM* suggest a variety of ways to do exactly this.

In the first article, "A Fun and Different Course: How Gamification Transformed an Online U.S. History Survey," Chris Babits demonstrates how a "choose your own adventure" structure for an asynchronous history survey class fostered student competence, autonomy, and motivation—vital components of self-determination. Offering students options for accessing material and demonstrating their learning, accumulating points along the way, proved to be an effective course design and, perhaps most strikingly, students perceived it as an enjoyable, even liberatory way to learn. The ability to facilitate student engagement was an important factor for Christopher Barber as well when utilizing a role playing game in the classroom, as explored in "Reflecting on Reacting: Incorporating *Reacting to the Past* Games in the High School Classroom." Here Barber is discussing what is probably the most widely known game framework for history educators, *Reacting to the Past*.¹ After utilizing the RTTP game "Constitutional Convention," Barber concludes that "The game provides a deep dive into the historical context, events, and personalities of the Constitutional Convention, which is significantly more engaging than a

¹ The American Historical Association website summarizes *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP) as "complex games, set in the past, in which students are assigned roles informed by classic texts in the history of ideas. Class sessions are run entirely by students; instructors advise and guide students and grade their oral and written work." Examples of games include "The Trail of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England," and "The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 BC" (<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/reacting-to-the-past>). The RTTP main website explains that it "is an active learning pedagogy of role-playing games designed for higher education. In *Reacting to the Past* games, students are assigned character roles with specific goals and must communicate, collaborate, and compete effectively to advance their objectives. *Reacting* promotes engagement with big ideas, and improves intellectual and academic skills" (<https://reacting.barnard.edu>).

traditional lecture-based approach,” and that students can study and interact with “primary sources, historical characters, and issues ... in a way that is both personal and meaningful.” (page 83)

Maximizing students’ personal interest to make studying the past more meaningful is the teaching takeaway in “Phantasmagoria 101: Haunted History for Fun and Profit” by Garret D. Langlois and Nicola R. Astles. Langlois and Astles describe the founding and successful growth of a Texas Tech University student group on campus called “Raider Power of Paranormal” and their annual fundraising Haunted Tour of the campus. Contrary to the stereotypes about student interest in the paranormal (i.e. anti-intellectual, conspiracy theory-driven, etc.), these authors have discovered that creating a campus “ghost” tour motivated students to engage in rigorous research of the past and authentic learning about historical processes. Assessing authentic learning, and the impact of a games approach, is the subject of the next article, Patrick Ludolph’s “Measuring Critical Thinking in Reacting to the Past.” Ludolph poses questions about how to best measure the elusive skills we term “critical thinking,” and how RTTP (the role-playing game with which many history educators are most familiar) may help students build these skills. He concludes that RTTP “can be a potent intervention for developing creative thinking and effective communication” (page 91).

The last two articles are case studies of original gamification approaches created and implemented by the authors, again with the goal of engaging students in fun and meaningful ways that help them develop historical thinking skills. In “Murder Most Foul: A Centuries-Spanning True Story of Teaching, Vengeance, and Several Ducks, to Which is Appended an Original Role-Playing Game of the Highest Historical Accuracy,” Justine Meberg describes a very successful lesson she designed for her West Point freshman in an introductory history class, “Army of the Republic: Leading Citizen Soldiers.” Students studied and role played scenarios deriving from letters written in 1841 by “five cadets nursing offenses to their honor wrote to Secretary of War John Spencer to protest the Superintendent’s alleged abuse of his authority in investigating the disappearance of several ducks” (page 106). As Merberg argues, “This very silly case produced big questions. We talked about what honor meant to the letter writers. We considered how their conception of it compared to ours. We asked how our responses to the documents revealed our views of officership today” (page 108).

In the last article, “Making History (with Timelines): Playing Games and Constructing Historical Narratives in History Survey Courses,” Caitlin Monroe outlines an effective class activity, in game form, that both reinforced students’ overall understanding of the chronology of events being covered in the class while also encouraging students to think critically about what “counts” as history: “students had to practice historical thinking skills and think about those questions about constructing historical narratives” (page 125). Importantly, the timeline game described by Monroe strengthened classroom community and sociality.

Similarly, the student reflections in the subsection of “History and Fun and Games” titled “Student Voices” suggest that a gamification approach to historical content increased their understanding of past events while helping them build new connections and to feel highly engaged in the classroom environment. Peculiar Joseph’s “Is Including Games in College Class Beneficial?” answers in the affirmative, explaining that in playing the French Revolution RTTP game for her political science class, “we had to utilize our critical thinking and problem-solving skills to play the game” (page 134). Joseph also offers a word of caution when it comes to RTTP: working as a team is not easy to do, and students’ different levels of willingness to actively engage and contribute can be a significant challenge. The second student reflection, “All African People’s Conference Game Reflection” by Ava Moore and Kamryn Reed, emphasizes the variety of academic and professional skills that RTTP can help students develop, especially public speaking skills. Moore and Reed persuasively conclude that “it’s vital that history teachers around the world incorporate games into their classrooms to help students fully engage with the concepts and events that they are learning” (page 138).

That’s an argument enthusiastically endorsed by Mark Carnes, creator of *Reacting to the Past* and the subject of one of the two interviews I conducted for this special edition. In our conversation, Carnes explains the logistics of running a *RTTP* game and enumerates some of the ways that this roleplaying enlivens, deepens, and can ultimately transform history learning and teaching. He notes that *RTTP* also empowers students studying history

in a meaningful way: “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” (page 146).

My second interview is with Tori Mondelli, historian and coauthor with Joe Bisz of *The Educator’s Guide to Designing Games and Creative Active-Learning Exercises: The Allure of Play*. Mondelli delves into the different types of gamification that educators can implement and offers some specific advice to readers of *Teaching History*: “For those wanting to teach students or help students learn about historical events, my favorite mechanic is the roleplay and simulation. Because it helps the students kind of immerse themselves, and there are different ways you can structure it. It will typically motivate students to do reading ahead of time, so that they can be very good at their role” (page 140). In her interview, Mondelli summarizes a key learning from the scholarship and research on teaching and learning, and a point at the heart of this special section of *Teaching History*: students crave experiences that aren’t so prescriptive, linear, and purely logical all the time” and with a gamification approach “you can open up imaginative spaces that students don’t often get to traverse in traditional academic settings” (page 141).

I hope readers will find the ideas explored here inspirational and thought-provoking. I hope this special section of the Fall 2023 edition of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* will encourage you to consider new ways to offer your students a chance to experience history fun and games.

Neuhaus, Jessamyn. 2023. "Editor's Introduction to the Fall 2023 Special Section 'History Fun and Games'".
Teaching History: A Journal of Methods 48 (1):61-63.
<https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.48.1.61-63>.