

Reacting to the Past

Teaching Asian and World History through Role-Playing Games

By Yidi Wu

Teaching world history as a survey course is difficult for both faculty and students: the course requires a temporal and geographical scope that is often beyond individual faculty's expertise, and for a variety of reasons, most American students, unless they have a love of world history or possibly intend to major in history, have either low level of knowledge in history or, are historically illiterate.¹ Although most states require high school students to take some form of world or American history course for graduation, only a few states offer meaningful "end of course" state assessments on American history and virtually no states have "end of course" assessments in world history. In addition, at the undergraduate level, the task of teaching world history is often assigned to junior faculty who specialize in non-western context, and thus we as Asian specialists should invest more in world history pedagogies.

In this essay, I introduce role-playing games from the Reacting to the Past series as a powerful and effective pedagogy in teaching Asian and world history. By 2013, faculty adopted Reacting games at over 350 colleges and universities in the US and around the world.² I use one game, *Japan 1941: Between Pan-Asianism and the West* by John Moser, to illustrate the benefits of this pedagogy, and encourage more faculty to use and create role-playing games.

Reacting to the Past, as highlighted on its website, is "an active learning pedagogy of role-playing games designed for higher education."³ Students assume roles as faction members or independents faced with actual historical eras and problems. They achieve victory objectives listed in their role sheets through debates, collaboration, strategy, and luck. Students create their own scripts and determine the outcome through voting or dice. Each game comes with a collection of documents that students use to understand their characters and support their arguments. Each game has three parts: pre-game sessions, when instructors introduce historical contexts and guide students through primary sources, and students learn about their characters from the role sheets; game sessions, varying from one to six or more classes depending on game complexity, when students take the center stage while instructors, now gamemasters, step back to observe; and post-mortem discussion sessions, when students reveal all the secrets about their characters and learn about what historically occurred.

The Japan game starts in September 1940 as game session 1 and runs through November 1941 as game session 6. Students are mostly divided into three factions—Japanese army, navy, and imperial court—and the rest play "indeterminates," who are business executives, journalists, or foreign ambassadors unaffiliated with the factions. Each session includes several issues for debate, such as who should be the next foreign minister among two competing candidates; whether Japan should occupy northern and southern Indochina, withdraw from China, or invade the Soviet Union; what to prioritize in the material mobilization plan of 1941; and ultimately, whether Japan should attack Southeast Asia or the west.

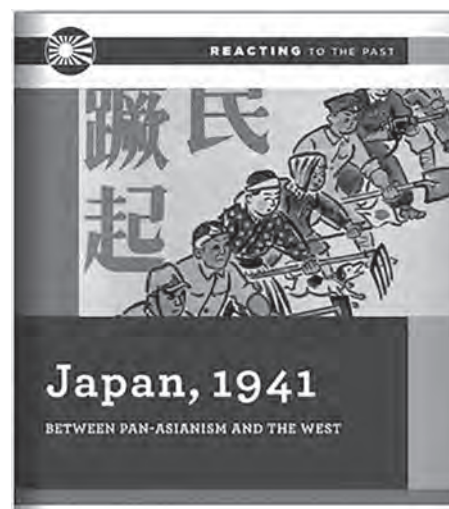
Role-playing games are a great way to help students understand historical contingency, the idea that anything could happen at a given historical moment. As a historian, I do not want to teach just what happened, but to present what could have happened. Textbooks often depict people as living in their own past and deemphasize the fact that individuals and groups make decisions when the future is unknown. Texts also ignore "what if" ques-

tions that can encourage deep reflection. Through games, however, students experience multiple competing paths, and what happens is contingent upon the number of votes or sometimes a die roll. In the Japan game, the power of decision-making lies in the cabinet, which includes members from various factions and indeterminates and is headed by the prime minister. The cabinet must reach a consensus for all decisions, otherwise those who dissent must resign. All decisions need approval from

the imperial court, which symbolizes the power of the emperor. Additional leadership comes from the supreme command, comprised of some army and navy faction members who can force war and navy ministers within the cabinet to resign. It teaches students Japan's wartime checks and balances.

These role-playing games are not reenactments, because students do not have to repeat exactly what happened in history, even though they are given role sheets based on historical characters. By deviating from history, students gain a sense of agency in changing history, as they successfully persuade others through a convincing speech, bribery, or a secret alliance. Some characters in the Japan game have hidden agendas, such as assassinating a rival (the consequence of which depends on the dice) or scheming to put a political enemy on trial. One character in particular, Ozaki Hotsumi (1901–1944), is a journalist in charge of investigating other players' involvement in secret opium trade in China, and an undercover Soviet spy. When students take advantage of their special power, they throw extra twists and unpredictability to the game. Contingency also makes the games more exciting for instructors to teach and observe, since different classes might arrive at completely different results with the same game. All my classes except one that played the Japan game decided against attacking Pearl Harbor. The one exception happened when a knowledgeable and persuasive student played Tōjō Hideki (1884–1948), general of the Imperial Japanese Army who served as the Prime Minister between 1941 and 1944. Some classes decided to attack the Soviet Union, while others occupied southern Indochina. The comparison and contrast between what happened in history and how students act things out in the games usually generates provocative post-game reflections. Students not only get to experience a version of history that they help create, but they also get to think about why their version follows or differs from history.

Besides historical contingency, another important concept exemplified by role-playing games is empathy, or the ability to understand and think in someone else's shoes. Students get to practice empathy by taking on characters and perspectives they might not have known before, or do not agree



Cover image for *Japan 1941: Between Pan-Asianism and the West* by John E. Moser.

with. A 2009 study shows that Reacting games make students more empathetic than regular classes.⁴ In practice, this is often easier said than done. In the Japan game, students soon realize that the Japanese government struggled with getting resources, especially oil, and did not always plan to attack the United States. Emotionally it is challenging for American students to argue for Japanese invasion of their own country, even though they are impersonating Japanese characters. But pedagogically, students get to see that attacking Pearl Harbor was not a popular decision even within the Japanese leadership.

What if students cannot identify with their roles, especially when it comes to controversial characters who supported slavery and racism, denied women's rights, misused power, and suppressed the masses? As much as the games allow students to practice empathy, we as instructors should make it clear that empathy does not mean sympathy. As Steven Volk explains, empathy is "rather the capacity to understand actions and choices made from another's perspective."⁵ That understanding is not the same as agreement or endorsement.

One of the most important skills for research is primary source analysis, and role-playing games can help students practice this skill. Primary sources are the backbone of each game because students not only need to read them, but also incorporate them in their speeches and papers. Primary sources for the Japan game range from legal documents, such as the 1889 Imperial Constitution, a 1913 magazine article "the White Peril," foreign policy statements, including the 1934 Amai Declaration and the US response to it, and diplomatic agreements, such as the draft of the Tripartite Pact. It is worth spending time analyzing some of the documents before launching the game, and helping students find quotations relevant to their characters. Each character's role sheet also describes primary and secondary sources that students should use to conduct research and understand their positions.

Public speaking is another critical skill, less emphasized in regular history classes but best practiced in role-playing games. Each player needs to speak on behalf of their characters and defend their positions on the spot. They also need to listen carefully to other speeches, and digest information before making decisions.⁶ Many students express fear and anxiety over public speaking, and Reacting games seem daunting at first. At the end of the semester, however, many students write in their reflection papers, which I assign after each game, that they feel more comfortable with public speaking, and recognize their improvement in this life skill. Sometimes a previously shy and quiet student might surprise the class with a powerful speech, and students find themselves enjoying arguing and giving commands, in ways that do not match their personalities.

What differentiates role-playing games from lectures or discussions is that students have a lot more control over how the class develops. They can be faction members working on common objectives, or indeterminates who are either undecided voters or working on their own agenda. Each game has some leadership positions, and these players act as hosts or moderators in each session (such as the Prime Minister in the Japan Reacting game). Instructors serve as gamemasters: we assign characters to students along with their role sheets, know all secrets of each character; send out newsletters of historical events periodically throughout the game so students are aware of what is happening in real time; observe as students engage in speech and debate, and occasionally write notes to students reminding them of their tasks. A lot of teaching and communication happen outside the class, as students often need guidance understanding their roles or finding primary sources to support their arguments.

The Reacting games enable nonspecialists to incorporate role-playing in their teaching because students must take more responsibility in researching and presenting content. It is likely that some students will know more about

their characters than the instructor after the game. This pedagogy makes it easier and less burdensome for faculty to teach unfamiliar topics, since they do not need to lecture on the material. When it comes to student advising, each character's role sheet that comes along with the game provides a roadmap for both students and instructors.

Role-playing games also contribute to peer interaction and community building. Students in Reacting games are grouped into factions, and each faction shares similar victory objectives. Students in the same faction can help each other with speaking and writing and work together to defend their position against other factions during class debates. Students who are indeterminates in the game also need to reach out to others to achieve their goals, and most of the time, as undecided voters, they are sought after by faction members to strike deals or make alliances. A 2016 study shows that Reacting games increase acquaintance and friendship ties between students, while eliminating student isolation.⁷ Students have shared with me that they made friends through the games that they would not have met otherwise. Many students would meet outside of class to collaborate and strategize for the game. Many Reacting faculty use online platforms, such as Slack or Discord, to facilitate virtual communication in addition to class exchange.

As more faculty adopt Reacting games in their teaching, the repertoire of games has been expanding, especially those focusing on non-Western contexts. Besides the Japan game, other Asia-related games include *China in 1587*, *Korea in 1894*, *India in 1945*, and *North Korea in the 1990s*.⁸ The role-playing pedagogy has transformed my classes to be more engaging and entertaining, as well as highly educational and memorable. ♦

NOTES

1. In 2018, the then-Princeton University Woodrow Wilson National Fellowships Foundation Center took the history and civic examination immigrants must pass to become American citizens and administered questions from the test pool to 1,000 randomly selected Americans. Survey data indicated that American adults are ignorant of the most basic information about history, including wars and other armed conflicts. In the Princeton study, 60 percent of US adults surveyed were ignorant of which countries the US fought in World War II. Furthermore, respondents under forty-five years old were over three times less likely to know these rudimentary facts when compared with respondents sixty-five years old or higher.
2. Mark Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 36.
3. Reacting to the Past, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>.
4. Steven Stroessner, Laurie Beckerman, and Alexis Whittaker, "All the World's a Stage? Consequences of a Role-Playing Pedagogy on Psychological Factors and Writing and Rhetorical Skill in College Undergraduates," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101, no. 3, 611.
5. Steven Volk, "Empathy and Engagement: Using Avatars to Bring Students into History," *Peer Review* 14, no. 3 (2012): 8.
6. Lily Lamboy, a former *Reacting* student, created a series of speaking exercise videos, including eye contact, posture, gestures, pacing, fluency, volume, and tone, for students to practice before games start. Speaking Skills Videos, *Reacting Consortium Library*, <https://reactingconsortium.org/instructor-resources/Public-Speaking> (available for registered members).
7. Jeff Webb and Anna Engar, "Exploring Classroom Community: A Social Network Study of Reacting to the Past," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (2016): 1, <https://tinyurl.com/uhf6w2ak/>.
8. For a list of published games, as well as games under review, see <https://reacting.barnard.edu/games>.

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