

Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing Simulations: Reacting to the Past's "The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148"

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On June 24, 1148, "a general court was proclaimed at the city of Acre to consider the results of this great pilgrimage, the completion of such great labors, and also the enlargement of the realm." As the contemporary chronicler William of Tyre dutifully recorded, on the eve of the Second Crusade the expedition's leaders and "other noted men of high rank" gathered together and "entered into a careful consideration as to what plan was most expedient."¹ What happened next?

In my earliest teaching days over fifteen years ago, I would present the events of the Second Crusade by synthesizing quickly the Council of Acre's final deliberation, explaining how they decided to march against Damascus and showing the disastrous consequences of this choice. Why did they choose this destination? What motivated the crusaders to opt for such a course of action? What other options did they have at hand? And suppose they had decided to march against Ascalon instead? Rarely, if ever, did my brief summary of the Council of Acre and its aftermath provoke this sort of questioning in my undergraduate classroom. Then, at the suggestion of a colleague to whom I had expressed my frustrations at what I perceived as a lack of student curiosity and what appeared as their inability to grapple with the issues being raised and the broader historical thinking skills, I introduced in my courses a role-playing simulation pedagogy, *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP).

RTTP consists of a series of flexible yet elaborate games, set in a precise historical moment. Students, grouped in factions, dress the part of the event's protagonists and try to advance their group's goals. To win the game, they pursue their objectives through public speeches, class discussions and position papers informed by primary sources and classic texts. During the game, the professor becomes a gamemaster with a supervisory role who sits in the back of the classroom, while students take control of the class, presiding over class sessions, setting rules, and moderating debates.²

This article delves into a case study of integrating the active learning pedagogy *Reacting to the Past* into an upper-level history seminar, "History of the Crusades," offered at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), an institution situated within the heartland of the United States with a student body comprising over 15,000

1 William of Tyre, *A History of the Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. E. A. Babcock and A. C. Krey, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), XVI.29, p. 183.

2 "Reacting to the Past: Pedagogical Introduction," *Reacting to the Past*, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/node/2607>, last accessed: February 19, 2015, also hosted at [https://ou.edu/content/dam/honors/docs/RTTP%20Pedagogical%20Introduction%20\(Feb%202015\).pdf](https://ou.edu/content/dam/honors/docs/RTTP%20Pedagogical%20Introduction%20(Feb%202015).pdf). Last accessed: May 20, 2025; C. Edward Watson and Thomas Chase Hagood. "Reacting to the Past: An Introduction to Its Scholarly Foundation." In *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017.

Although in this essay the words simulation and game are used interchangeably, the latter better expresses one of the main elements on which RTTP is based: in Mark Carnes' words, "bad play." As he explains, "From Plato to Erikson, and from Rousseau to Csikszentmihalyi, the chief proponents of educational reform have indicted bad play – the lure of social competition, the longing to imagine what it's like to be someone else, and the subversive implications of both types of activities. More precisely, the leading philosophers and educators have insisted that bad play, while tolerable among children and teenagers, is wholly unsuited to the young adults – especially those destined for college." However, Carnes continues, "Reacting students become fully engaged because the elements of bad play – the pressure of social competition, the joyous liberation of taking on a new identity, the thrill of subverting customary social hierarchies and conventions – are so powerful." Mark C. Carnes, "From Plato to Erikson: How the war against "bad play" has impoverished higher education," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, November 21, 2014.

individuals spanning across ages, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. The seminar is categorized as upper-level elective and caters to a mixed classroom of undergraduates from various disciplines and History graduate students. This case study aims to explore, from the perspective of both the instructor and the students, learning outcomes and pedagogical results of teaching history with role-playing simulations.

First, I explain the essential elements and game mechanics of Helen Gaudette's "The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148," an RTTP simulation that brings to life a momentous turning point in the history of the crusades: the council held at Acre in 1148 on the eve of the Second Crusade to decide its leadership and its *raison d'être*. I then draw from firsthand experience using RTTP and from students' feedback to discuss the simulation's pedagogical benefits applied to a typical History of the Crusades upper-level course, also presenting suggestions for diverse assignments in a class including both undergraduate and graduate students. Then I conclude with an assessment of the pedagogical value of these simulations.

"The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148"

The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148 time-travels the students back to June 21, 1148, upon the arrival in the Holy Land of armies led by French and German monarchs in response to Pope Eugene III's call to arms.³ The victorious outcome of the First Crusade, with the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, had led to the establishment of Crusader States in the surrounding territories under Western control. However, half a century later, news of the fall of the County of Edessa, the first Crusader State to be founded, and the rising power of Muslim leader Zengi prompted the pope to issue the Bull *Quantum praedecessores* (1145), calling for a new crusade. In their journey to the Holy Land to join Western forces already stationed in Jerusalem, the French and the German contingents encountered several obstacles that significantly weakened their armies. When the troops finally arrived, their noble leaders gathered in Acre to discuss where to direct the crusade.

In the role-playing simulation, students dress the part of the council attendees – monarchs, barons, dukes, and religious authorities gathered on the eve of the Second Crusade in the assembly hall of the fortress of Acre, located in the northern area of the city and occupied by the Hospitallers. Each student is assigned a role, a nametag, and a role packet that briefly recounts the main biographical traits of the character and defines his or her goals, objectives, and suggested strategies to adopt during the council sessions. So, to cite an example, the role sheet of King Louis VII starts as follows:

*You are the French King Louis VII, leader of the French crusader armies. Along with Cardinal Guy of Florence, the papal legate accompanying you on your mission, and Count Thierry of Flanders, you constitute the French faction. You are known for being an exceptionally devout, well-learned, and quite handsome man.*⁴

The sheet next explains the rest of his biography, also suggesting primary and secondary sources to be consulted to get a better idea of the character and facilitate the student's immersion into the part. Then, it paints in broad strokes the behavior that this person is expected to assume in each debate in order to achieve their objectives. In the case, again, of King Louis VII,

*One of your most important goals during the crusade is to win glory and success on the battlefield against the infidels on behalf of the French people and all of Latin Christendom. You will, therefore, argue in favor of launching a crusade at this time in Debate 1.*⁵

Finally, the sheet concludes by listing the individual victory objectives, which, depending on role and faction, may include making sure that the crusade is declared or called off, defending it as a just war, being elected to lead the expedition, supporting or hindering the campaign of a particular candidate, or directing the armies against a

3 Helen A. Gaudette, "The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148. Student Manual" (Unpublished manuscript, February 2015), Word file, 8.

4 Helen A. Gaudette, "Instructor Manual - The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148." (unpublished manuscript, February 2015), Word file, 36.

5 Gaudette, "Instructor Manual - The Second Crusade," 38.

specific target.

The council participants are grouped into four main factions: the French, led by King Louis VII; the Germans, led by Conrad III; the Kingdom of Jerusalem, led by Queen Melisende, and a group labeled as the Eastern Allies, led by the Master of the Templars and including, among others, the Knight Templars and Hospitallers. As in most RTTP games, some players are assigned undecided or neutral roles. The factions must compete in trying to attract these neutrals to join their ranks, by persuading them of the likelihood of success of their proposed campaign and by luring them with private negotiations and even bribes – fiefs, benefices, trading privileges, relics, and so on.⁶

An additional game mechanism that is particularly creative and effective in heightening the competition, nurturing the quality of assigned papers and speeches while also teaching the students about medieval religiosity, is the relic element. At the end of each class, or session of the council, the best speeches and papers are awarded “relics” in the form of plastic bones, each bearing a different value, or victory points, expressing its spiritual power. The student who earns a relic can further increase its value by creating a reliquary to house it, and then use the sacred object to gain the preferences of the neutrals or exchange it for other privileges. In order to win the game, a faction needs to collect the highest number of victory points by the end of the third debate, through the achievement of their objectives, the possession of relics, and the support of the neutrals.⁷

For the purpose of the game, the single full day over which the assembly historically took place is divided into six to nine class sessions, subdivided into three main debates. To begin, the council discusses the idea of crusading and the justifications for holy war as applied to the specific context, and then votes by show of hands on whether the Second Crusade should proceed at this time. If the majority of the participants votes in favor, the debate moves to examine the target options: should the army move against Edessa, Ascalon, or Damascus? The risks, advantages, and disadvantages of each proposed campaign are presented and carefully weighed, and a new majority vote decides the direction of the expedition. Finally, in a campaign election-style debate the council selects the person best skilled to lead the crusade, discussing also whether a secular or religious authority should obtain such leadership.

To prepare debates speeches and discussions, the students are encouraged to explore several Christian and Muslim primary sources, including the chronicles of the First and Second Crusades by William of Tyre, Fulcher of Chartres, Odo of Deuill, Otto of Freising, Ibn al-Athir, Ibn al-Qalanisi, and Usamah ibn Munqidh. Other selections consider the idea of jihad, holy war and just war, including excerpts from the Qur’an, the Bible, and Augustine’s *City of God*, along with several key documents from the Investiture Controversy. While the students’ speeches, dialogues, and discussions in class do not follow a predetermined script, they are profoundly informed by and substantiated in the primary sources – there is even a penalty prescribed for mentioning ideas, things, or facts that occurred after 1148.

Why play a game in a History of the Crusades course?

Students’ reactions to the announcement that part of the course is going to be devoted to “playing a game” vary. The medieval enthusiasts and fantasy role-players anticipate the first debate with growing expectations, often starting to read the game book and inquiring about rules and strategies well before the actual beginning of the simulation. Others are intrigued by the novelty of the pedagogy and curious to find out more about it. On the other hand, some students are intimidated by learning that they are required to come prepared and engage actively in each session, delivering speeches in front of their peers and constantly raising questions or making observations rather than simply listening to lectures and taking notes.⁸ For some, especially those who have

6 Gaudette, “The Second Crusade,” 25-31.

7 Gaudette, “The Second Crusade,” 32.

8 As Andrews et al. observe, surveying the findings on student resistance to active learning in the extant literature, “Students may be resistant to new instructional methods because student-centred activities may require more effort, may require students to attempt a task they do not feel efficacious at or see value in, or may be outside of students’ assumptions about teaching and learning.” Madison E. Andrews, Matthew Graham, Michael Prince, Maura Borrego, Cynthia J. Finelli & Jenefer Husman. “Student resistance

learned how to navigate the system and find themselves at ease in the traditional lecture-review-test schema, role-immersion games can be perceived as a destabilizing step out of their comfort zone, requiring the mastery of skills that go beyond good comprehension of the text, attentive notetaking, and retention of key information.⁹

Other students, perhaps the high-achievers accustomed to poring over assigned readings, may be reticent about engaging in something sounding to them more like a playful and childish activity than an upper-level course assignment.¹⁰ “When I was first told that we were going to be taking part in a role-playing simulation on the War Council of Acre for an entire month, I was very skeptical about whether this would be a learning experience for me. ‘Could we really learn that much by playing a game?’ wondered Matthew, a senior double-major with a stellar GPA. And yet, he continued, “To my surprise, this was one of the best learning experiences I have undertaken throughout my undergraduate education.”¹¹

Why does the RTTP pedagogy make this possible? A first answer, at a basic level, is fairly intuitive: while history is commonly perceived as boring, role-playing simulations make it fun, to the point that students routinely arrive even thirty minutes early to class, and at the end remain lingering around to exhaust seemingly endless questions. As one of them told the class at the end of the semester, “When hearing my alarm on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, I was ready to roll out of bed and excited to come to school because that was game day.”¹²

to active learning: do instructors (mostly) get it wrong?,” *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education*, 25:2, 2020, 142-154, DOI: 10.1080/22054952.2020.1861771 On student self-report learning perception in active classrooms, see Louis Deslauriers, Logan S. McCarty, Kelly Miller, Kristina Callaghan, and Greg Kestin. “Measuring Actual Learning versus Feeling of Learning in Response to Being Actively Engaged in the Classroom.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 (39): 19251–19257 (2019). doi:10.1073/pnas.1821936116.

⁹ Richard Felder, a pioneer of active learning, explains student resistance to active learning in these terms: “Learner-centered teaching methods like active and cooperative and problem-based learning make students take more responsibility for their learning than traditional teacher-centered methods do, and the students are not necessarily thrilled about it.” Richard M. Felder, “Hang in There: Dealing with Student Resistance to Learner-Centered Teaching.” *Chem. Engr. Education*, 45 (2), 131-132 (Spring 2011). See also David C. Owens, Troy D. Sadler, Angela T. Barlow, *et al.* “Student Motivation from and Resistance to Active Learning Rooted in Essential Science Practices.” *Res Sci Educ* 50, 253–277 (2020); Sneha Tharayil, Maura Borrego, Michael Prince, *et al.* “Strategies to mitigate student resistance to active learning.” *IJ STEM Ed* 5, 7 (2018); Shannon B. Seidel, and Kimberly D Tanner. “What If Students revolt?—Considering Student Resistance: Origins, Options, and Opportunities for Investigation.” *CBE Life Sciences Education* 12, no. 4 (2013): 586–595.

Instructors’ concerns about some student resistance may represent a barrier to the implementation of new teaching strategies like this, out of fear that “their use of active learning might lower their course evaluations, especially among instructors whose tenure, promotion and merit ratings depend heavily on such measures.” Madison E. Andrews, Matthew Graham, Michael Prince, Maura Borrego, Cynthia J. Finelli & Jenefer Husman “Student resistance to active learning: do instructors (mostly) get it wrong?,” *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education*, 25:2, 142-154 (2020), 150.

¹⁰ Analogous student perceptions of instruction have been observed by Keri Watson and Patsy D. Moskal after incorporating the RTTP game “Modernism vs. Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-89” in an upper-level art history course at the University of Central Florida. Although the class response to the implementation of active learning was overwhelmingly positive, “there were students who never warmed to the game. One student wrote, “I guess you can call me a traditional student, but I feel I learn Art History best from lecture and a slide show displaying the artist, title, and date,” while another said, “The game itself and games of this nature are not in line with how I, personally, learn best. I learn best under a lecture scenario.” Keri Watson, and Patsy D. Moskal, “Scaling a Reacting Game for Use at a Large Public University.” *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past: Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices*, edited by C. Edward Watson, and Thomas Chase Hagood. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 105.

¹¹ Matthew Kennedy, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past’s ‘The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148’” (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014).

¹² The comment that anthropologist and historian Matthew Wilhelm Kapell reports from a student evaluation on the implementation of historical videogames in his course pedagogy sums it best: “I used to think ‘history’ was boring, but I now see that it is just that most history teachers are boring.” Kapell further explains, “the ludic capacity [...] allows for an in-depth understanding not just of facts, dates, people, or events, but also of the complex discourse of contingency, conditions, and circumstances, which underpins a genuine understanding of history.” Andrew B.R. Elliott, and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell. “Introduction: To Build a Past That Will ‘Stand the Test of Time’—Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives.” In *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of*

Most important, students soon become so engrossed in the game that, without even realizing it, they begin to spend hours seeking out additional sources for their speeches and papers.¹³ Andrea, a student completing a double degree, certainly familiar with intense study and hard work, admitted, “I can safely say that I have never done as much independent research as I did in preparing for this class. And I think that’s an important by-product of a game like this—the drive on the part of the student to learn and research independently, which will serve to help later in his/her career.”¹⁴ To mention just one example, Craig, dressing the part of Master Robert, leader of the Knights Templar, for the Council of Acre “researched not only his biography and background, but also the history of the Knights Templar, Christian teachings about peace and war, the view of jihad in the Qur’an, chivalry, Muslim customs, medieval military strategy, and the geography of the Holy Land.” Surely most of these topics would have been touched upon also in a traditional lecture setting, and yet, he reflects, “Their in-depth study allowed me to understand better the mindset of these people, the context in which they lived and therefore the reasons behind those events.”¹⁵

Such personal investment in one’s assigned individual historical persona couples, necessarily, with a spirit of competitiveness and eagerness to win and beat the other factions. As a student recalls, “We dove into the primary and secondary sources to find treaties our opponents had signed that would negate their stance or to retrieve anything that could call their faith and credibility into question. We had no idea that amidst the mudslinging we were immersing ourselves in knowledge.”¹⁶ If the initial drive for many students is to prepare well enough to avoid embarrassment in front of the class, explains *Teaching Naked Blog’s* author José Antonio Bowen after observing RTTP role-playing in action, soon the mechanism taking place in the classroom is analogous to micro-rewards in videogames: “the potential to “win” provides motivation, [...] then you immediately feel the joy of success and eventually mastery.” After defending his faction’s position, “the (partisan) audience roared. This was a good feeling and reinforced the idea that –when I read carefully and prepare, there is a reward.”¹⁷

Studying history through role-immersion games proves to be more than fun: the experience may offer students

History, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 1–30, 14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781628928259.ch-001>. Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

13 Similarly, in a national survey designed to gauge students’ and instructors’ perceptions of the impacts of RTTP on learning and teaching, an overwhelming majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that in RTTP courses they “read assigned material with greater attention to detail” (83.2%) and “read and researched beyond the material assigned” (71.7%). Thomas Chase Hagood, Naomi J. Norman, Hyeri Park, and Brittany M. Williams. *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, 170. Such profound involvement can be defined as “meaningful engagement,” that is, “internalized learning relevant to the discipline” extending “far beyond student interest, to include deep understanding of course material and practice of discipline.” In a recent study, Marie Gasper-Hulvat et al. observed it to be a typical learning outcome resulting from student participation in Reacting to the Past role-playing simulation, analogous to the results elicited in students engaged in other active learning exercises. Marie Gasper-Hulvat, David M. Dees, and Anthony V. Sheffler, “Eliciting Meaningful Engagement in an Art History Survey Course: Reacting to the Past and Active Learning.” *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, 113-126.

14 Andrea Schemehorn, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past’s ‘The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148’” (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014). Prof. Amy Curry echoes this comment, observing that, after taking her RTTP classes, students are strongly motivated to go research historical periods, events and characters on their own, even about things not covered in class, “especially after internalizing the kind of deep engagement with historical figures, ideas, and problems that RTTP games often promote.” Amy Curry, “Using Role Playing to Keep Students Engaged.” Norton Learning Blog: Dispatches from Norton’s Teaching and Learning Community. December 18, 2020. <https://reactingconsortium.org/books-essays-articles> Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

15 Craig W. Horobik, “Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course” (final paper HIST 4910-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

16 Shane Cavlovic, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past’s ‘The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148’” (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014).

17 José Bowen, “Reacting to the Past Will Revive your Teaching.” *Teaching Naked Blog*, July 15, 2016. <https://teachingnaked.com/reacting-to-the-past-with-revive-your-teaching/> Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

learning outcomes rarely gained in a traditional lecture setting.¹⁸ Players are required to immerse themselves into their historical persona, their mindset and their decision-making process, allowing them to commune with the people of the past. The historical empathy that results in the process plays a central role in understanding the events of history, because it allows the historian, or the history student, through inferential thinking, to make sense of “the “why” of history: why did an individual or group of people, given a set of circumstances, act in a certain way?”¹⁹

“By filling the roles of our characters, we took on their beliefs and motives,” explained Matthew, who during the Council of Acre simulation dressed the part of Frankish King Louis VII. “With every argument, we were forced to understand how to use our primary sources to back up our assertions; every speech was enriched by quotes to support our position. Is it justified to kill people as a Christian? Should we attack Damascus or Edessa? How about Aleppo? How exactly can we attack these cities? All these questions needed to be answered, justified, and then argued about with your peers. With each game session, we learned more and more about the interrogatives that these medieval people asked themselves and struggled with.”²⁰

One of the greatest obstacles to the study of historical periods like the Middle Ages is the perceived remoteness and even irrelevance to the topic: a Nebraskan college student may think they have nothing to share with twelfth-century French crusaders. Yet, without a profound comprehension of the people behind the narrated facts, without partaking, somehow, in the experience from which sources and documents stemmed, even an accurate analysis of the texts may lead to gross misinterpretations. The reader may be tempted to fill with their own twenty-first-century conceptions and beliefs those gaps left by his lack of familiarity with the mindset and mentality of the time. Conversely, the personal engagement and closeness to the crusaders’ persona that the students develop through the role-playing simulations is what allows them to gain a more in-depth understanding, a greater clarity of textual analysis, and a more objective grasp of the historical events and their sources. “Ponder the experience of an atheist who plans to study astronomy and finds him/herself thrust into the Catholic Church during the trial of Galileo,” suggests writer Daniella Greenbaum, assessing the merits of the RTTP pedagogy. “It’s exceptionally easy to look back at eras of history that are unlike our own and thrust upon them a 21st-century label. But it is far more rewarding to attempt to inhabit the mindset of an earlier generation, exploring without value judgments why they believed what they believed.”²¹

Another substantial benefit of the RTTP pedagogy is that it brings history alive: in a sense, it adds a third dimension to it. Sometimes undergraduate history instructors, pressured to cover complex and lengthy periods in only a few lessons, may end up summarizing, simplifying and overly flattening the past – and this is especially

18 Stroessner and colleagues, utilizing quasi-experimental procedures to assess the consequences of students’ participation in RTTP, found that the pedagogy produced “elevated self-esteem, greater empathy with the needs and feelings of others, greater agreement with the belief that human characteristics are amenable to change across time and contexts, and improved rhetorical ability,” while no such change was observed in the traditional classroom control group. As Carnes highlights, “Psychologists have found this belief in the malleability of the self to be one of the strongest psychological elements conducive to educational growth (see Dweck 2000).” Steven J. Stroessner, Laurie Susser 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 (2009): 612; Mark C. Carnes, “Foreword.” *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, x.

19 Stuart J. Foster and Elizabeth Anne Yeager. “The Role of Empathy in the Development of Historical Understanding.” *The International Journal of Social Education* 13, no. 1 (1998). For a survey of both past and recent scholarship about empathy in history education, see Kaya Yilmaz, “Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools.” *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (2007): 331–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036827>.

20 Kennedy, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing.”

21 Daniella J. Greenbaum, “How to think about the past.” *Commentary*, June 23, 2016. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/american-society/college-campus-thinking-past/> Last accessed: August 13, 2023. By providing “the benefit of a sort of ‘double consciousness’ in which the player’s identity is relaxed while the role is enacted,” role-playing fosters empathy and intercultural awareness. Sarah Lynne Bowman. “Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review.” In *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, 124-5; Greenbaum, “How to Think About the Past.”

true in survey courses. Through role-immersion games, instead, history is seen “at a micro level – from the view of a certain person who has his or her own agenda. And this is actually how it truly unfolds. Now, when you have thirty people with their own agendas, this is where the true magic happens.”²²

Two results of using RTTP role-playing simulations in the history classroom are especially noteworthy. First, rather than an artificial oversimplification of history (good guys vs. bad guys), students are offered the possibility of empathically understanding multiple points of view. “Frequently,” scholar O.L. Davis Jr. explains, “empathy springs from considerations of more than one, even several different, points of view or perspectives.” And, anticipating a possible objection, he asserts, “It is robust, tough, and insightful even as it is imaginative, and it is always based upon available evidence.”²³

In the RTTP classroom, analyzing and presenting the positions of all the parts in play allows the students to realize how, more often than not, there are plenty of excellent reasons and motivating factors on both sides and how sometimes similar values or goals may nonetheless lead to different interpretations of the same text or event. This awareness, in turn, forces students to engage the primary sources on a much deeper level: documents and chronicles need to be mined to explore intentions, detect bias, or understand how an adjective may change the crowd perception of an argument, while at the same time seeking to anticipate counterpoints, objections, and rebuttals. “The game made us look at history differently, not just as dates, people, and places, but opening our minds to look at all sides of the issues to get a better understanding, trying to find evidence to back our position and counter the other factions,” observed the student who at the Council of Acre was assigned the part of the papal legate, Cardinal Guy of Florence.²⁴

Second, students who are asked to decide whether the target of the Second Crusade should be Damascus, Edessa, or Ascalon cease to perceive history as ineluctable fate: things, the game teaches, may have gone in a drastically different direction. Human freedom and agency always play a part in the unfolding of events, and even if, as the dice rolls used in the role-playing simulation show, unexpected circumstances and fortuitous happenstances can dramatically reverse an expected outcome, man is the true protagonist of history.²⁵ The King Louis VII character in the council expounded, “By actively participating in the game, I gained the understanding that events did not ‘just happen’: many other options could have been chosen. This understanding of history is often lost in the onslaught of ‘this event happened then, this is why it happened, and this is how it happened,’ whereas through this role-immersion game, it was ‘any of these events could happen, but I want this one to occur because I am the King of France and this will benefit me the most.’”²⁶

What *actually* happened, however, is only momentarily moved to the background. An entire “postmortem” session is always scheduled at the end of each RTTP role-playing simulations, once the final debate’s deliberations are finalized. During the postmortem, students are invited to come out of character to discuss their roles, achievements, and shortcomings. In this key session, the narrative of how events truly occurred is re-established.

22 Cavlovic, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing.”

23 Davis Jr., O.L. “In Pursuit of Historical Empathy.” In *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, edited by O. L. Davis Jr., Elizabeth A. Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, 1-12. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2001), 3.

24 Thomas Qualters, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past’s ‘The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148’” (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014).

25 On the relevance of emphasizing human agency in the history classroom, see Harry J. Brown, *Video Games and Education* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 118. Brown observes that historically inspired digital games like *The Oregon Trail* teach the “lesson of contingency” by allowing players to make individual choices and experience their effects on the historical outcomes. See also Vinicius Carvalho, “History and Human Agency in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*,” *Gamevironments of the Past* 5 (2016): 109-10, on the notion of agency related to human behavior and individual action in society. Brown’s and Carvalho’s insights on videogames reflect what can be observed in role-immersion pedagogies like RTTP, where structured but open-ended simulations centered on decision-making and counterfactuals reinforce in students the idea that human beings are not passive recipients of historical forces but active participants who shape events

26 Kennedy, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing.”

The instructor ceases to be a gamemaster and takes up once again the professorial role, to correct alternative scenarios or counterfactuals that the game designer may have included in the simulation for the sake of the debate: no, the armies of the Second Crusade did not besiege Ascalon, and Izz Abd al-Hasan Ali, brother of the diplomat Usamah ibn Munqidh, would never have been invited to attend the Council of Acre as representative of the Damascenes.²⁷

Finally, what is perhaps the most critical and long-lasting learning outcome students may gain through exposure to role-playing simulations in the history classroom is an original and in-depth exposure to historical methodology.²⁸ The Second Crusade game in my class ran for a period of five weeks, which meant that other parts of the syllabus had to be shortened or sacrificed. “With the game taking a quarter of the course time and as a returning student paying my educational expenses out-of-pocket with an interest in maximizing my investment, I must admit that my initial thought was that the loss of traditional lecture time was steep even for the excellent educational benefits the game provided,” reflected a student after taking part in the simulation. Yet, he continued, “A trip to Barnes and Noble with my daughter changed that. While she was looking for the latest 39 Clues books on which to spend her monthly \$25 gift certificate, I tried to chase down some books on the Knights Templar for a future research project.”²⁹

Enthralled by the preparation of a costume to wear during the game sessions for the character assigned to him, the Master of the Knights Templar, this student emailed me a few days before the opening debate with quite an odd question. He was considering arriving to campus on his horse carrying his standard, and he wanted to know whether his character’s family coat of arms would have been displayed on the flag, together with the Templar emblems. Unable to find an easy solution to this query, after the end of the semester he embarked on an independent study project to analyze the military orders iconography in contemporary illuminations and frescoes, in the hope of resolving the mystery of his character’s banner. And so, in the middle of this quest, he continued, “What I found were five books specifically on the Second Crusade, seven more on crusades in general, and an equal number on the First Crusade. I found nothing useful on military orders. It was at that point that it dawned on me. To paraphrase a quote from *Good Will Hunting*, nothing Dr. Saltamacchia might have lectured about the Second Crusade during that five-week period could not be obtained with a checkout card from the local public library. What we lost was information that could be found in books, magazines, online, and on TV. What we gained was a grasp on how to go about reading and deciphering that information. We were taught how to gather our own evidence to support a point, we discovered how to detect bias in a source, look past it, and still make use of the document. In short, we learned how to be historians.”³⁰

That semester, I had divided the History of the Crusades course into three parts of five weeks each: a first part conducted in a traditional lecture format, covering the idea of crusading and jihad up to the events of the First Crusade and the establishment of the Crusader States; a second part, entirely devoted to *The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148* game; and a final third part in which I planned to return to lecture-mode to present the later campaigns, from the Third Crusade on. Yet, once the second part of course ended, my class was entirely

27 Gaudette, “Instructor Manual - The Second Crusade,” 86. On the crucial pedagogical value of postmortem debriefing sessions in role-playing games, see Bowman, “Role-playing Games,” 127.

28 Research shows that gamification transforms the social studies classroom from a passive space where the instructor transmits dates, kings, and battles into a fun, student-centered environment where inquiry-based engagement fosters critical historical thinking. Sergio Tirado-Olivares, Ramón Cózar-Gutiérrez, Rebeca García-Olivares, José Antonio González-Calero. “Active learning in history teaching in higher education: The effect of inquiry-based learning and a student response system-based formative assessment in teacher training.” *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 2021, 37(5), 61-63. Differently from the rote memorization of traditional historical lectures, gamification enhances cognitive skills related to problem-solving and “allow[s] students to learn to think like historians by replicating professional historical practices.” Elliott and Kapell, “To Build a Past That Will ‘Stand the Test of Time,’” 15, Bowman. “Role-playing Games,” 112-131, 122, with the bibliography referred there.

29 Horobik, “Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course.”

30 Horobik, “Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course.”

transformed. During the last five weeks of the semester, my lectures were constantly interrupted by several raised hands – poignant questions, provocative comments, and thoughtful considerations. In the words of one of the students: “The game changed the dynamics of the class. When the semester first started, like in most courses, people were pretty quiet: three, maybe four students per lesson (often, the same students over and over) would make a contribution or ask a question. Post-game, the three or four students who previously held all the discussion time had to fight just to get their views out. The entire class participated in the lecture, to the point that Dr. Saltamacchia would have to end debates for the sake of keeping the lecture moving.”³¹ I ended up deciding to keep my lecturing to a minimum, transforming the class time into a thought-provoking lab where the students were asked to analyze in-depth historiography and primary sources and discuss them, finding fallacies, highlighting persuasive arguments, and counteracting weaker points.

In short, “it did not just teach us about the crusades,” as another student pointed out. “Through the papers we had to write during the game, the simulation trained us in how to form a persuasive argument. Through the delivery of our speeches in the council, it gave us public speaking experience, while interpersonal skills and team building were reinforced by the work in factions.”³² Groupwork at state schools like the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where most students have part-time jobs to pay their tuition, is often daunting, exacerbated by the fact that everyone finds it difficult to agree on a time to meet outside the classroom. In this instance, instead, the unexpected happened: “The game forged bonds and friendships that hold to this day. Since I was a member of the German faction, we met one night at the Crescent Moon, which is a German Alehouse in Omaha, to discuss the strategy for the debate of the next day: the order of our speeches, what we would speak about and how to win over the intermediates. After that, the Crescent Moon became a staple for us classmates.”³³

Using RTTP in Mixed Undergraduate and Graduate Classrooms

A peculiar challenge to the implementation of RTTP role-playing simulations arises when utilized in mixed undergraduate and graduate classrooms, those upper-level courses offered at institutions like mine with a section reserved for Master’s students: how should the graduate students be engaged in the games? As experienced in my own dual-level class, several different options are possible. First off, they can all be involved in the simulations as regular players. However, given their higher educational level they may resist the idea of “playing” with undergraduates. An additional potential problem is that vocal graduate students may end up dominating the debates and intimidating the younger students with their oratorical skills. Assigning leadership roles to graduates may foster analogous concerns. One of the foundations of RTTP pedagogy, namely the student-center classroom, might be lost, since the graduate students might be perceived as teaching assistants in charge of the game, with a resulting minor empowerment of the undergraduates. One way to turn this perception into something positive might be to transform graduate students into preceptors, omniscient and impartial counselors to whom the various players can turn for help, suggestions, and indications.³⁴ Given the sophistication of the RTTP role-playing simulations, however, this option can probably be successful only if the designated preceptor has direct experience as a “veteran” player in the game in question or at least in similar ones.

The solution I adopted instead in my dual-level History of the Crusades class, after weighing the potential issues of the three options described above, was to assign the graduate students a substitutive game-designing project: the drafting of the handbook for a newly created game revolving around a crusade of their choice. The students were provided with a copy of Helen Gaudette’s student gamebook *The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148* to be used as a model for their final output, together with a few sample role packets from the same

31 Horobik, “Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course.”

32 Qualters, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing.”

33 Cavlovic, “Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing.” As José Bowen puts it, “Reacting is about relationships,” and this easily fosters connections that go beyond the classroom walls. Bowen, “Reacting to the Past Will Revive your Teaching.”

34 See the section on Reacting Fellows/Preceptors in “‘Reacting to the Past’: Pedagogical Introduction.”

game and Nicolas Proctor's *Game Designer's Handbook*.³⁵ Proctor's text is a useful manual for developers of text-based historical role-playing games stemming from the author's first-hand experience as a game designer, teacher of game design seminars, and observer of numerous RTTP classrooms at several institutions around the country. The handy chapters proved particularly helpful for my students as they cover, in a detailed and systematic way, the multiple interlocking elements a developer should incorporate in the game (roles, schedule, etc.), providing step-by-step guidance from the initial conceptualization of the project to the final playtesting and dissemination. In addition to several individual and group meetings with me in which the graduate students were invited to formulate and present the basics of their game in development, they also had the opportunity to observe a debate on the Second Crusade game. While they were not required to be present in class during the four weeks the simulation took place, I encouraged them nonetheless to attend at least one session to gain a better idea of what the actual discussion part would be like. Indeed, assisting in one or more game periods helped them see how the role-playing simulation pedagogy looked in the classroom.

The graduate students were invited to conceptualize their proposed role-immersion games starting from the selection of an episode from the history of the crusades of interest to them. Critical for the success of the game mechanics was to choose a historical moment in which a fundamental decision took place, making possible the formulation of one or more debate-form questions. One student decided to focus on the siege of Antioch during the First Crusade, revolving her discussion around the position to assume in response to the claims of Peter Bartholomew, the French crusader who asserted that Saint Andrew had appeared to him to reveal that the Holy Lance laid buried under the ground of the church of St. Peter there in the city of Antioch. The envisioned saint instructed him to exhort the crusade leaders to retrieve it. "What will the knights do when presented with the vision of Peter Bartholomew about the Holy Lance? Will they listen to it, or will they dismiss it as a hallucination by a crazed man in the middle of war?"³⁶ Another student set his game at the time of the Fourth Crusade, making the crusaders debate among themselves on whether they should accept the Byzantine prince Alexius Angelus's proposal to divert the expedition to Constantinople to restore as legitimate emperor his father, Isaac II Angelus, in exchange for money and troops.³⁷

After choosing the setting for the game and doing the necessary background research, graduate students then had to draft the different parts of their game handbooks, including:

- **Introduction and Setting**

The introduction is written in narrative form, with the goal of setting the context for the game and the debate. It provides all the basic information a player needs to jump into the game, even without extensive prior knowledge of the time period and the events that constitute the background for the simulation. It should introduce the scene in a way that stirs the player's curiosity and raises his or her enthusiasm. As typical in role-playing games, the introduction opens with the second person narrative ("You are..."), which facilitates the process of making the student one with the protagonists of the historical events. Images and maps of the key game locations are also included in this first section to further help visualize and imagine the facts narrated there.

- **Debate**

The debate at the center of the game is formulated as a question and ends with a vote, public or secret, that

35 Nicolas W. Proctor, *Game Designer's Handbook* (New York, NY: Barnard College, 2013).

36 Christina Atkins, "Antioch: The Discovery of the Holy Lance and the Fate of the City" (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

37 Derek Edwards, "The Fourth Crusade and the Proposal of Alexius" (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013). Historically, Alexius Angelus' agreement terms included, in return for the crusaders' diversion to Constantinople, the payment of 20,000 silver marks, an army of 10,000 men to join the expedition, the permanent maintenance of five hundred knights in the Holy Land and the return of the Greek church under Rome. Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades. Updated Student Edition*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 105.

resolves the issue at hand. The main argument is also ramified in several sub-questions, or “Issues for Debates,” which constitute a handy, yet not exhaustive, agenda of points the factions should prepare and discuss. For example, one student focused on the discussion that ensued during the Third Crusade after the leader of the German army, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, fell into the deep waters of the river Saleph in Anatolia and drowned. He framed the debate in these terms: “To stay or to go: What will happen to the Germanic Faction after the Death of Fredrick V, the Holy Roman Emperor?” and then detailed several issues for debates, including: Should the German Faction return home after Fredrick’s death? Should the German Faction remain on the crusade? What will the Church and Western Factions do to keep the Germans in the crusade? What will the Eastern Faction do in light of what happened?³⁸

- **Key Elements of the Game**

The mechanics of the game should include the basic rules and a clear explanation of how to win the game, detailing which actions or outcomes allow the players to achieve or lose points. Creative students may want to add more sophisticated elements to enrich the role-playing simulation. A graduate student who set her proposed game in front of the walls of the city of Antioch at the time of the First Crusade, for example, decided to weave within the rules the knowledge she acquired through her thesis research on the conception of masculinity in the ancient world.³⁹ In her simulation the crusade leaders, while debating over the most effective strategy to retake Antioch, were also required to maintain their position as knights by displaying their masculinity, expressed in four main elements (authority, piety, military prowess, and intellect) each corresponding to a certain number of chivalry points won or lost by the players in the course of the game.

- **Factions and Roles**

The protagonists of the historical episode at the center of the game are divided into a number of different factions, whose profile and main objectives are here sketched. Essential for simulation mechanics is the inclusion of the additional group of the “neutrals,” who at the outset of the game do not belong to any faction and do not have their objectives clearly formulated. They are expected to form their own opinions and make their own voting decisions on the basis of what emerges in the debates and individual negotiations. For each main character, graduate students prepare a one to three-page role packet containing a brief biography and an explanation of the person’s goals during the debate, with an overview of the strategy suggested to accomplish them and a clear summary of the objectives. Contemporary images and essential bibliographical indications to know more about the history of that character or the context they lived in may also be included.

- **Appendix of Historical Documents**

The appendix of the game handbook collects excerpts from the key primary sources relevant to the debate in question. Each document is prefaced with a brief introductory paragraph explaining the text, contextualizing the passage within the work, and providing brief biographical information on the author.

- **Bibliography**

Graduate students provide an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources related to the key issues and historical events explored in the simulation, including also websites, databases or other tools which can be helpful to the players.

Through this assignment, graduate students are required to explore in depth a specific moment in the history of the crusades, going beyond the basic understanding of the facts that happened and facilitating the formation of

38 Anthony J. Pruss, “The Kings’ Crusade” (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

39 Amber L. Green, “The Siege of Antioch. A Game of the First Crusade” (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

an interrogatory attitude towards historical events. The conceptualization of a central debate, victory objectives, and other elements of the game forces them, in fact, to reflect upon the motivations that informed the decisions of the key protagonists, also analyzing the consequences of their actions and decisions and envisioning the potential alternative scenarios that different choices or different events might have produced. Moreover, the compilation of an appendix of historical documents fosters a mastery of the primary sources and an understanding of their significance in shaping, or reflecting, the mentality of the time. Great game ideas can be developed further, under the instructor's guidance, and then play-tested in the classroom.

“But...are they learning anything?”

“In the Fall of 2013, the three of us took a course on the crusades, where for one month we participated in a role-playing game focused upon the Council of Acre in 1148, at the climax of the Second Crusade. By the game's end in November, our entire class had researched the source material so effectively that we became emotionally attached to our characters and factions,” recounts one of the students more than a year later in front of a crowd gathered to hear the adventures of three undergraduates who spent the summer volunteering at a crusader castle archeological dig in Western Galilee.⁴⁰

“Yes, they are playing and having quite some fun, but are they learning anything as well?,” colleagues often wonder. The story of these three students, albeit anecdotal, may offer an interesting insight into the potentiality of RTTP pedagogy and its longer-term impact. By the end of the Crusades class, the students had developed such a strong interest in the subject and the time period that I decided to invite them to attend the Third International Symposium on Crusades Studies in St. Louis two months later, in February 2014.⁴¹ Ten out of thirty students decided to go, financing the trip with funds they obtained from a local senator and from the university.

At the conference, they reveled in the occasion to attend lectures and presentations. They were particularly fascinated by the archaeologist Adrian Boas of Haifa University's keynote speech, so much so that they approached him at the end of the lecture to thank him and ask questions on his research and digs at the crusader castle of Montfort, in the north of Israel. In reply, Dr. Boas invited them to join him that summer for the next season of excavation – an offer that three of them promptly accepted. After several weeks of digging for crusader artifacts in Galilee, once back at the university, the three spent most of the following fall and spring conducting research on crusader castle architecture in Israel and France.⁴²

Clearly, RTTP is not a magic recipe for reigniting into the classroom a passion such as engulfed these three students. Sometimes, as Mark Carnes warns, “the magic fizzles, and class ends with bewildered students staring at the professor-gamemaster in the back of the room; and sometimes the magic is too potent, and entranced students play too hard, clinging tight to their roles,” as happened to the King of Jerusalem in my Council of Acre, who, resentful that a character from another faction managed to assassinate his role in a crucial moment of the debate, decided not to come to class for the following two weeks.⁴³ Yet, the story of the three students embarking

40 Derek Benson, Shane Cavlovic and Matthew Kennedy, “From the Classroom to the Holy Land: The Academic Pilgrimage of Three Students in Search of Archeological Illumination” (lecture, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, March 18, 2015). On the affective dimension of this type of experiential learning, see Bowman, *Role-Playing Games*, 113, 123. Bowman argues that role-playing simulation scenarios engage “visceral, emotional memory,” fostering fundamental skills and transferable outcomes such as oral communication, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and personal growth.

41 Crusade Studies Forum, <https://www.crusadestudies.org/> Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

42 Research conducted by Burenkova et al. (2015) supports what the case of these three students illustrates: role-playing often sparks interest in doing deeper research within particular subject areas. Gamification in education is not just about making learning fun and engaging; more importantly, it helps students connect their classroom experience with the real-world demands of their future careers. Olga M. Burenkova, Irina V. Arkhipova, Sergei A. Semenov & Saniya Samarenkina (2015). “Motivation within Role-Playing as a Means to Intensify College Students' Educational Activity.” *International Education Studies*, 8(6), 211-216.

43 Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 13.

from the classroom to the Holy Land is less an exceptional case than one may think, as amply documented by the dozens of analogous examples collected in Carnes' *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. "It would seem that our game cast a long shadow upon us all, for we never truly stopped learning," concluded the students upon their return from the crusader castle in Western Galilee. And perhaps, is not this what we all hope at the end of every semester, walking out of the classroom after the last session?⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Benson, Cavlovic, and Kennedy, "From the Classroom to the Holy Land."