Reacting to the Past
Game Designer’s Handbook

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Introduction

Games were what originally interested me in history. A boyhood spent playing hex-based historical games with my uncle and grandfather encouraged me to develop the notion that history is not so much a record of things said and done as it is a series of decisions – high stakes decisions.

When I started teaching, I took this idea with me into the classroom. I experimented with published games like Diplomacy and SIMSOC, and I developed games of my own including a text-based historical role-playing game, tabletop battles with military miniatures, and various short role-playing exercises. Through trial and error, these efforts taught me a great deal about game design.

When I first discovered Reacting to the Past (RTTP) in 2001, I was surprised and gratified to find another instance of gaming in the humanities. Then I attended my first Reacting conference; initially I was suffused with joy – there were other people like me! Soon though, I became depressed; I realized that their games were better, bigger, and more ambitious than mine. After regaining my equilibrium, I began incorporating RTTP into my classes, and I shifted most of my game design efforts towards the RTTP approach.

For many instructors, RTTP represents their first exposure to game-based pedagogy, and in many ways, RTTP is revolutionary, but we must recognize that it is not alone in its efforts to use games to teach important things. Military and policy gaming have been burgeoning and well-funded fields for decades. Game theory
is an established field of mathematics, and largely thanks to the electronic gaming industry, game design has become an academic discipline in its own right. The work of scholars and professionals in these fields is complemented by the creative efforts of designers of new sports, social games, pervasive games and street games. Consequently, useful scholarship about game design is rapidly increasing. This handbook represents my efforts to bring some of this scholarship together with my experience as a RTTP instructor, playtester, and designer.
Table of Contents

1. Conceptualization ................................................................................. 9
   Learning objectives ............................................................................. 9
   Series standards .................................................................................. 10
   Students ............................................................................................. 14

2. Research ............................................................................................. 17
   Annotated bibliography ......................................................................... 17
   Historiography ................................................................................... 18
   Systems modeling ............................................................................... 18
      Systems modeling in Revolution in France .................................. 19
   Identifying major actors ..................................................................... 20
   Defining essentials .............................................................................. 21
   Modeling external factors ................................................................... 22
   Concept mapping ............................................................................... 23

3. Game mechanisms .............................................................................. 25
   The Plausibility Corridor ................................................................... 27
   Agency and choice ............................................................................. 30
   Determining outcomes of player actions ......................................... 31
   Conveying the results of player actions .......................................... 33
   Conveying results of external events .............................................. 35
      Injections ...................................................................................... 35

5
Demi-roles .......................................................... 36
Avoid surprises .................................................... 36
Instructors (The GMs) ......................................... 38

4. Introducing players to the game: *The Gamebook* ....41
Opening sessions ................................................. 41
Vignettes .................................................................. 41
Historical context .................................................. 42
Rules ....................................................................... 42
Quizzes .................................................................... 43
Sequence .................................................................. 44

5. Integrating players into the game: *The Roles* ..........47
Creating liminality .................................................. 47
Orientation: A place within the game ..................... 49
Who am I? ............................................................. 49
  Zealots ............................................................... 50
  Factions ................................................................ 50
  Indeterminates .................................................... 51
  Tangential issues ................................................ 52
  Composite roles .................................................. 53
  Hi, I’m Jesus ........................................................ 53
What must I do? ..................................................... 54
How do I win? ........................................................ 54
  Stair-stepping objectives ..................................... 55
  Raise the stakes .................................................. 57
What do I think? .................................................... 57
What can I do? ........................................................ 58
What do other people think about me? .......................... 59

6. Deepening involvement: *Playing the game* ................. 61
   Simplicity and precision ...................................... 62
   Unavoidable complexity ....................................... 64
   Player introductions .......................................... 65
   Initial debate .................................................. 65
   Keeping the game in motion .................................. 67
      Recordkeeping ................................................ 68
      Preventing lockup .......................................... 68
      Quest for compromise ...................................... 69
      Can I kill someone? ......................................... 69
      Inventiveness ............................................... 70
   Endgame .................................................................. 71

7. Reflection: *Debriefing the game* ................................ 73

8. Development ................................................................ 75
   Preparation for use by others: The IM ....................... 79
   Modifications by others ......................................... 80
   Benediction .......................................................... 82

9. Recommended reading ................................................ 83

10. Acknowledgements .................................................... 87
1. Conceptualization

Learning objectives

At the outset, be as specific as possible about your learning objectives. Do this by asking, *what, exactly, do you want people to learn by playing your game?* Game designer Cathy Stein Greenblat considers this a critical first step. She insists,

> This stage is too often skipped or undertaken casually, and the world-be designer’s initial enthusiasm is translated into only a vague formulation such as ‘I want to design a game about local politics,’ with no thought given to what the gaming-simulation is supposed to convey, to whom, and under what conditions of play. The result is often total failure or a product that is totally inappropriate for the intended audience.¹

In an effort to avoid these grim outcomes, clarify your learning objectives by developing answers to the following questions:

- What is the broad historical context for your game?
- What concepts and ideas will your game focus upon?
- Are there rich and diverse arguments about these concepts?

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• Are there interesting and fairly accessible historical documents that relate to these arguments?
• Why will devoting a substantial amount of time to playing your game be more instructive than reading a book, attending a lecture, or participating in a traditional discussion?

Then, consider the resources that are available to you for developing the game. Researching, writing, and developing a good RTTP game takes years of work. You might brainstorm the basic structure quite quickly, but once you start writing the gamebook and role sheets, you will find that the interlocking elements require careful writing and thoughtful design. Even if you are already an expert in the area, learning how to design a game is tantamount to developing expertise in any other genre of historical writing. It is harder than you may think.

Furthermore, playtesting ends up being far more time consuming than other methods of peer review. Plan on repeatedly playtesting your design in your own courses, but also recognize the need to remotely assist numerous test-runs at other institutions, as well as the need to run the game at multiple conferences.

**Series standards**

Once one grasps the essential elements of any game, it becomes easy to grasp games with similar structures. For example, once you learn one card game, others are fairly easy to pick up because you understand the materials. On the other hand, if you must learn an entirely new structure and system of player interactions every time you learn a new game, a good deal of time and effort must be expended comprehending mechanics rather than actually playing the game.

Consequently, there are some shared conventions to the RTTP series. This facilitates easy adoption by instructors and quick
orientation for students who have played other games in the series. Every published RTTP game includes the following elements:

**Historical context.** RTTP games are set in the past. Players become oriented to the past world they will inhabit in the game through several opening days of traditional instruction.

**Roles.** The dynamism of RTTP comes from its role-playing aspect. Every player is given a historical persona with objectives to achieve and ideas to promote. (There should be at least ten; there can be many more).

**Rich texts.** Growing out of the Columbia University Great Books curriculum, the first collection of games developed by Mark Carnes feature Plato’s *Republic*, Confucius’ *Analects*, and the *Bible* as key sources. RTTP games now include texts from outside the canon, collections of shorter texts and works from the visual and performing arts, but every game remains firmly grounded in exceptionally rich historical source material.

**Intellectual collisions.** Roles need to be placed in intellectual opposition, so they can debate the merits of various interpretations of the texts that accompany the game.

**Multiple issues.** If a game only includes a few issues, it may lock up and become a rigid debate. Consequently, RTTP games deal with multiple issues. The interplay of ideas, their historical context, and the competing objectives of the players drive the game and keep it dynamic.

**Persuasion.** In order to prevent rigid debates, at least a few roles in every game must be undecided or “indeterminate” on some of the
issues. The opportunity to persuade these players gives life to the intellectual collisions at the center of every game.

**Real choices.** It must be possible for player actions to have an impact on the game. Recognizing this often creates discomfort for instructors. The games teach about historical topics, but in order to function as games, they must allow historically false outcomes. If they do not, they cease to function as games and become, in essence, reenactments.

**An intellectual arena.** The setting must facilitate a meaningful and informed exchange of diverse ideas from a variety of points of view. Although the use of force is present in most games, it is important for players to spend most of the time engaging one another with ideas rather than threats. Such opportunities are hard to find, so many designers create counterfactual situations.

**Multiple meetings.** Most games require around ten class meetings. In most cases, the first three meetings are devoted to traditional instruction and initial player meetings to set up the game, while the last meeting is devoted to debriefing. The content of the meetings at the center of the game – the “game sessions” – tend to be more variable in structure and intent. Many game schedules roughly break down as follows. (The italicized days are game sessions):

**Typical game schedule**

1. Introduction to gaming and historical context.
2. Exploration of key texts; role distribution.
3. More of the above; initial faction meetings.
4. *Scripted initial issue begins the game.*
5. *Players feel their way forward; instructor meets indeterminates.*
6. *The game is in full swing – players understand the game mechanism and their place within it.*
7. Complications arise – players discover that the game is more complicated than they expected.
8. Additional complications or the culminating issue arises.
10. Debriefing.

**Schedule for Forest Diplomacy**

1. Introduction to gaming and historical context.
2. Additional context [optional]; role distribution
3. Exploration of key texts. Initial faction meetings.
4. **Act I:** Extended faction meetings in separate venues.
5. **Act II:** Everyone is brought back together. Players contend with a scripted initial issue.
6. Complications arise.
7. An agreement is reached (or not).
8. **Act III:** Factions separate and decide the degree to which they want to uphold the agreement.
9. Debriefing
10. Reflection on treaty document creation [optional]

**Schedule for Greenwich Village**

1. Introduction to the game.
2. Introduction of issue/faction one.
3. Introduction of issue/faction two.
5. **Faction one presents its position.**
6. **Faction two presents its position.**
7. **Indeterminates present individual positions.**
8. Player-generated presentations.
10. Climax and false ending.
11. Reorientation to a new context.
12. Debriefing
Students

RTTP games are designed for use by undergraduates, and they are used in different formats and configurations throughout the undergraduate curriculum. Many are used as part of three-game “Reacting courses,” which often become part of students’ first or second year. They are also used as stand-alone games in both introductory and advanced undergraduate courses. Regardless of where they fall in the curriculum, they create excitement, engagement, and energy, but they also tend to create some potentially counter-productive feelings. These fall into three basic categories.

RTTP creates anxiety because it differs from most classroom experiences. In addition to being unfamiliar, some students initially recoil from raised expectations. RTTP classes typically require an increased level of:

- Active participation. Players must be active participants even though they lack high levels of expertise.
- Accountability. If players do not familiarize themselves with the game materials they risk public shaming.
- Peer interaction. Other players, rather than the instructor, become the locus of their interactions.

RTTP creates confusion because people generally consider play a voluntary activity. One may choose whether to “play cards” without an obvious institutional compulsion to do so. RTTP is different. In order to complete the course you must play the game. The only way to opt out of the game is to not take the class. Since participation is mandatory rather than voluntary, RTTP “games” might be more properly considered “simulations,” “matches” or “exercises.”

Perhaps the RTTP experience is best compared to involvement in team sports. By enrolling in the course you opt to become part of the team. Therefore you have agreed to actively participate in
the team’s *practices* (the opening days of the game) and *scrimmages* (the days when the game is actually running). To draw the metaphor out fully, the game mechanics are the *rules* and the instructor becomes the GM (or Game Master) who is both *coach* and *referee*.

Still, not every student in every course that employs RTTP specifically opted into the game experience. Consequently, while many other concepts that we generally associate with “play” are present, every designer must remember that for some players participation is, to some degree, *involuntary*. Every instructor and institution deals with this in a particular way, and while deep consideration of possible approaches to this situation are beyond your responsibilities as a designer, you should keep it in mind because it yields players with a wide variety of motivations and levels of engagement. The design upshot of this is: your game must be able to work even if some players fail to play well.

*RTTP creates bewilderment* because many players will know next to nothing about the subject of the game. The gamebook and opening days of traditional instruction go a long way to addressing this, but the most important instrument for reducing confusion is the role sheet, which acts as a life preserver for many players. They cling to it for safety and reassurance. The information it provides is essential for players to begin functioning in the game. Unlike the gamebook, which is (theoretically) read by everyone, at most a handful of players read a role sheet. Often, only a single player reads it. This may tempt designers to focus on game materials that everyone will read. *Do not fall prey to this temptation!* Role sheets probably are the most important written elements of any RTTP game. They become the touchstone for every player’s experience with the game.
2. Research

In order to refine your learning objectives you need to understand your topic well, but do not think that you must be a certified expert to write a good RTTP game. Indeed, it is sometimes more difficult to write a game that falls squarely in your area of expertise because you know too much.

Annotated bibliography

As you begin compiling sources, record all of them and your thoughts about them in an annotated bibliography. This will be helpful for you, playtesters, and players. Keep this document open as the game evolves so that you can continue dropping additional sources into it. Then, in your final draft, break your list down into three categories:

Include a list of undergraduate-friendly sources in your gamebook as recommended readings. Try to limit the books on the list to those that small college libraries can reasonably be expected to possess, but include ISBN numbers so that people can order copies if they do not have them. These books may then be put on reserve for the players with ease. If you include electronic sources, find the most stable URL possible.

Drop your whole works consulted list into the Instructor’s Manual (IM) in case GMs want to investigate certain topics in order to adapt the game to their particular needs. Or, maybe they are just curious.
**Historiography**

Recognize that as the designer of an RTTP game you are writing a peculiar genre of history. Like other works of history, a game develops a peculiar representation of the past. Consequently, you should remain as conscious of your interpretative decisions as the author of any other historical work. Like a book, article, or museum display, the game is a unique conceptualization of the past, which will be conveyed to the people who play your game.

If you conceal your interpretative decisions, your choices will be invisible to anyone who is not an expert when the game is played. Consequently, it can be quite helpful to include a short historiographical essay in either the gamebook or IM explaining your interpretations.

Most of what you read will be historical, but you may need to do some non-historical research too. It is easy to imagine projects where a working understanding of numerous fields would be useful.

**Systems modeling**

As you continue to conceptualize your game, it is a good idea to think about your game as a dynamic collection of interacting systems. These systems together create your game mechanism.

Given the complexity of the past, it is tempting to create byzantine clockworks, which model multiple systems. However, an extensive set of systems requires extensive rules. This has two major drawbacks: If players do not understand the game mechanism, they cannot engage in the game. If the rules are extensive, players cease focusing on intellectual collisions.

Consequently, most RTTP games feature a single, primary system at the core of in their game mechanism. Players must understand the primary system, and they must know how to interact with it. This means the functioning of the primary system must be absolutely transparent. In most RTTP games, the primary
system is a structure for voting. The basics of these systems are easily grasped by the players. This allows them to interact with the game mechanism early and often.

Adding secondary systems makes your game mechanism more complex. There are virtues to including secondary systems in your design – most commonly, the addition of secondary systems allows for more accurate historical modeling. Secondary systems are also good devices to shake up the primary system in the middle or end of the game. Consequently, secondary systems are often critically important to the functioning of the game, but they might only need to be understood by a handful of roles fairly late in the game. It may be important to keep some secondary systems concealed at the outset of the game, but when these systems begin to exert a major influence on the primary system, their functioning must become clear to everyone. Once you get to Emerald City, the Great Oz must be revealed.

While players may possess incomplete understanding of the secondary systems, make sure the GM can easily understand them all by describing their function, timing, and reason for existing in the IM.

Systems modeling in Revolution in France

Rousseau, Burke, and the Revolution in France, 1791 provides a good example of a primary system that interacts with the phased introduction of secondary systems. Together, these compose the game mechanism.

Primary system: Voting in the National Assembly.
Understood by: Everyone.
Frequency of use: Every session.
Complexity: Simple at first, but Crowd action complicates it.

Secondary system: Mob Violence.
Understood by: The Crowd and Lafayette.
Frequency of use: Three or four times, but not in the first session.
Complexity: It’s pretty complex. There are tables and such.

Secondary system: Austrian invasion.
Understood by: Inchoate understanding by a few, which takes clearer form as the game progresses.
Frequency of use: Once, at the end of the game.
Complexity: Simple. It’s resolved by a modified die roll.

The primary system comes online during the first session. Initially, almost everyone has the same number of votes to cast, so once a resolution is passed, it is an easy system to understand. Mob violence is prohibited during the first session, so everyone has the opportunity to become comfortable with the primary system. Once mob violence begins, players can clearly see how it interacts with the primary system.

The invasion of France by émigrés, Austrians, and Prussians occurs during the final session of the game. The functioning of this system, which is largely managed by the GM, determined the end state of the game. Ideally, these results can be affected by the resolutions that emerged from voting (primary system) and the bloodletting that emerged from the mob violence (secondary system).

Identifying major actors
Use your understanding of historical causation to identify and describe the major actors in your systems. They drive the action. Make sure you list the objectives, activities, and resources for all of the major actors. (Remember “resources” can be things like power, votes, social capital, or access to information). Many (but not all) of the major actions will become roles.

Initially, throw all of the major actors you can think of into the mix. Then figure out how they interact with and influence one another. (In game design jargon, this is often referred to as charting
out the “objects and relationships.”) Ideally you can find a way for them to interact with one another through the exchange of resources.

Some of the major actors will be individuals. Others will be institutions. Others will be interest groups (or factions). Figuring out how to represent the major actors is the next big challenge of refining your design.

**Defining essentials**
Review your materials and decide which of the systems and major actors you consider the most important to your game. When making these determinations, consider the particular concepts you want the players to grasp as a result of playing the game. Keep this foremost in your mind and ask yourself: *What potentially connects your roles and binds them together into a structure of exchange?* If you can answer this question, you have identified your primary system.

Once you begin to clarify the primary system, you can begin to figure out the roles. Begin this process by asking: What major actors could be converted into roles that will advocate for *ideas* that you want to feature? That is essential for the game to work as a pedagogical tool. No less important is a question which is important for your design to work as a game: Which major actors could be developed into roles that are *dynamic and fun to play?*

You can also start figuring out what secondary systems you might need to move the game along, so ask yourself: What events must occur in order for the *intellectual collisions* you have planned to happen? Again, keep your other eye on playability by asking, what events must occur in order for the *game* to function?

Use these questions to help you decide which systems and major actors should be eliminated because they are peripheral. Those that remain essential to your learning objectives should be incorporated into your game mechanism. In doing so, consider
which of them are represented by primary systems and secondary systems. This will help you decide which of them should be handled by players and which of them should be managed by the GM.

Try to fold the elements that are fairly static into the game mechanism, while making the most dynamic actors into roles. Greenblat notes that “Not all the roles you identified in the conceptual model need to be represented by players. Indeed only those persons who make decisions that affect the outcome should generally be included in the role set.”

Furthermore, as is noted above, minimizing necessary interventions by the GM is usually a good idea. If some critical recordkeeping or administrative functions (e.g. writing down laws or managing classroom discussion) can be associated with particular roles, it allows the GM to step back from actively managing the game.

This winnowing down should simplify your game mechanism, but keep notes about the elements you eliminated. Almost inevitably, you will end up resurrecting some of them later in the design process.

**Modeling external factors**

External factors that lie beyond the scope of your game may affect your game mechanism, but you may still want to take them into account if they have some sort of impact on the systems and/or major actors.

For example, fluctuations in gasoline prices can eventually have an impact on the fuel efficiency of automobiles, but a detailed model of the global petroleum market would be unnecessary if you are simulating municipal debates about where to build a new highway. Alternatively, in a game simulating debates about national energy policy, such a model could be worthwhile.

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2 Greenblat, 62-63.
In most cases, developments that are external to the game are introduced by the GM through injections. If this is the case, they should be the timing and rationale for these events should be described in the IM.

**Concept mapping**

A visual representation of the systems in your game is a good tool for developing a fuller understanding of how your game mechanisms will need to function, so consider creating an organizational chart or concept map for each system and then show how they interact. Make sure that you use a big piece of paper because even a simple game features multiple feedback loops and interconnections between different elements.

Some of the connections between various game elements are obvious, but others are subtle, so it is a good idea to update your chart regularly as your game develops. If you don’t do this, you will quickly lose track of all your interconnections, and forget how some components relate to one another. When it comes time for playtesting you will thank yourself for sketching this out at the outset. It makes adjusting different components of your game fairly straightforward.

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3 The concept map for the Darwin game is online at: http://www.darwingame.org/Darwin%20Game%20Cmap.html
3. Game mechanisms

RTTP games are tools for learning, but designers must not lose sight of the fact that they are also games. If they do not work as games, they will not work as instruments for instruction.

This section draws heavily upon current scholarship about game design. Those who are inspired to learn more should consult Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, 2nd ed., and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Both of these books emphasize electronic gaming, but they are well grounded in game design in general. I’ve tried to bring their most salient ideas into this text.

When exploring the structure of various game mechanisms, these designers maintain focus on the ultimate goal of any game: *meaningful play*. Salen and Zimmerman describe this as something that “emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played.” The latter part of this is comparatively easy. Players who read the gamebook and attend the opening sessions should at least grasp the basics of the game context.

The greater challenge is getting players to interact with one another and the game mechanism. Importantly, while players often chat with one another – and this is a beginning of interaction – the

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most important element to build into the structure of your game is the interaction between players and the game mechanism. This is an essential first step because most of them are entering a game in the company of strangers. They need to understand how they relate to the game before they understand how they relate to one another.

So, the essential first step is for players to engage the game mechanism. Given player anxiety, confusion, and bewilderment this can be a significant obstacle, so the objectives of every role must include a compulsion to interact with the game mechanism. Players must need to take action even if they do not want to. If players only act when they feel like it or when the GM goads them, the game ceases to function.

Once players take action, in order for play to become meaningful, they must be able to see the relationship between their action and the game mechanism. If players cannot see this relationship, the game begins to seem arbitrary and/or remote and players lose interest.

The visibility of this relationship depends on feedback loops. As Salen and Zimmerman explain, “When a player makes a choice within a game, the action that results from the choice has an outcome. In Chess, if a player moves a piece on the board, this action affects the relationships of all of the other pieces.”5 In an abstract game, which reveals all of the pieces and moves, this is easily done. However, in a RTTP game, many of the results of player action are concealed or so subtle that they cannot be easily detected.

Consequently, in addition to making the functioning of the primary system clear and easily understandable, it is essential to make feedback loops robust, numerous, and self-sustaining so the relationships between actions and outcomes become “both

5 Salen and Zimmerman, 33.
discernable and integrated into the larger context of the game."\textsuperscript{6} This allows the players to develop situational awareness so that they may see the interplay of their actions with the game mechanism. In essence, they need to be able to understand what is happening, why it is happening, and what is has to do with them. If they can see this, they continue interacting with the game mechanism, and that results in their engagement with the other players.

The complexity of RTTP games necessitates a gradual and focused introduction to the totality of the game. Your design should give players objectives, but do not overwhelm them with options (especially at the outset). This gives them some focus and allows them to adjust to the game. If you just turn them loose, many become paralyzed with indecision while others take actions that are irrational, implausible, and excessively impulsive. It is tempting to think of the game as a sandbox where the players can freely explore the historical setting you have developed, but this rarely results in the sharp intellectual collisions that would benefit most learning objectives.

Consequently, you must give them problems that need to be solved. These problems must be laid out with some immediacy. Otherwise, players will enter the game lackadaisically. You need to drive them to your planned intellectual collisions. Once they arrive at the problem you want them to have, give them the freedom to solve it, but make sure that the problem they are solving is your problem and that the solution lies within the realm of historical plausibility.

**The Plausibility Corridor**

In order for a game to work, players must have real choices. If they do not, they become disinterested and disengaged fairly quickly.

\textsuperscript{6} Salen and Zimmerman, 34-35.
Similarly, if the decisions they are making feel scripted, the game fails. In comparing games to set narratives, game theorist Greg Costikyan put it this way:

Games are inherently non-linear. They depend on decision-making. Decisions have to pose, real, plausible alternatives, or they aren’t real decisions. It must be entirely reasonable for a player to make a decision one way in one game, and a different way in the next. To the degree that you make a game more like a story – more linear, fewer real options—you make it less like a game.⁷

This can create real tension for a designer, particularly if you know your historical material quite well. Designing a game that may deviate from historical outcomes is disturbing to many scholars who have laboriously constructed a detailed and nuanced understanding of a particular period or event. Yet, if a game design provides no opportunities for real choices it will fail.

Even so, player actions must be circumscribed to some extent, so they do not make choices that result in truly odd or implausible outcomes. Much of the art of designing a good RTTP game is creating a structure that imposes reasonable constraints while preserving enough of what Salen and Zimmerman call the “space of possibility” to engage the players.⁸

Setting the width of such a historical “plausibility corridor” is a designer’s choice, but it must be conveyed by the game – particularly if historical outcomes of the events modeled in the game are likely to be familiar to the players. They do not need to

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⁸ Salen and Zimmerman, 66-67, 69.
convict Anne Hutchinson, but they must have historically plausible reasons for finding her innocent.

Generally, players accept reasonable limits on their actions as long as they still possess an extensive set of options and do not feel railroaded into certain positions. Playtesting reveals player strategies that result in historically implausible outcomes, which are usually clever compromises. In most cases, these should be counteracted through revisions to the structure of the game.

The existence of the plausibility corridor is part of the genius of RTTP. It animates players to “improve” upon the historical outcome (at least as they see it from the point of view of their roles), but understanding the limits placed on their actions makes them aware of historical realities, while understanding the various courses of action that are available gives them a sense of historical contingency. Together, these create a real sense of historical dynamism that is often lost in more traditional approaches to the study of the past.

The plausibility corridor creates the mental space for the game to take place. Salen and Zimmerman see it this way,

Game designers do not directly design play. They only design the structures and contexts in which play takes place, indirectly shaping the actions of the players. We call the space of future action implied by a game design the space of possibility.  

In RTTP this space initially gets defined by the gamebook, but it takes on meaning only when the players inhabit it and begin interacting with the game mechanism and one another as they strive to achieve their goals. Designing the proper balance between possibility and chaos is difficult. It requires a well-designed game

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9 Salen and Zimmerman, 67.
mechanism, and tuning the mechanism requires extensive playtesting.

Agency and choice
Players need to be able to initiate a variety of possible actions, and in order to understand their options, players need information. Without it they will be paralyzed or they will behave erratically and ahistorically.¹⁰

Players must know some context. Knowing what happened before the historical moment the game begins helps players understand the choices that lie before them. The vehicles for this information are the materials in the gamebook and the role sheets. Without this information, players have difficulty entering into the game.

Players must know that a choice is being presented to them. Games fall flat if players do not recognize that a choice lies before them. Plays must understand the game mechanism in order to know how to act upon their choices. The possibility of choice is best conveyed by role sheets, but they should be supported by the gamebook. Set game schedules may seem constraining, but they often give players some structure to operate in and greatly reduce player uncertainty about the moments when important choices are laid before them.

Players must know how to initiate action. If players have the opportunity to vote, they need to know voting procedures. If they may riot, they need to know how to instigate a riot. Again, role sheets and the game rules are the best instruments for conveying this information.

Initially, players must be compelled to act. RTTP can be so bewildering that many first-time players become paralyzed. To

¹⁰ Much of this rubric is modeled on “Anatomy of a choice” from Salen and Zimmerman, 64.
counteract this, the structure of the first session of the game should compel every player to take some sort of action that utilizes the primary system of the game mechanism. Even if this is something as small as casting a single vote, it is a first step into the game.

**Determining outcomes of player actions**

Basic arithmetic should suffice for determining the outcome of most game mechanisms. This is good because it is easy for GMs to use and it is easy for players to understand. In many RTTP games, the game mechanism determines outcomes through voting. For example, the climax of *Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor, 1587* is the determination of the degree to which the members of the Han-lin academy line up behind the emperor. The final memorial by each member of the academy is essentially a vote “for” or “against” the Emperor. The outcome may be unknown until the final few memorials, but calculating the final outcome is very straightforward.

Voting systems may be simple, but various factors often complicate the number of votes each player may cast. In *Rousseau, Burke, and the Revolution in France, 1791* every member of the National Assembly initially controls a large number of votes, but mob violence reduces these numbers as the game progresses. In the latter case, making the number of votes players cast into a dynamic variable is a critically important aspect of the game, but it can lead to some headaches for the GM. So, if possible, keep the voting mechanism simple. If you cannot do so, provide a worksheet or task certain players with the responsibility of monitoring the numbers.

Other player actions that are important for the outcome of the game may involve giving one another tokens. These may be distributed publicly or privately by the GM or by players. If tokens are significant to the outcome of the game, they should be countersigned by the GM in order to prevent forgery and player
skepticism. In most cases, tokens that are distributed by players should be appended to role sheets. For example, in *Confucianism and the Succession Crisis* the First Grand Secretary may channel tremendous power from the throne. Consequently, he possesses an “automatic win token,” which may be bestowed on one of the Grand Secretaries. In other cases, GMs may distribute tokens as the game progresses. In the Crusades game players who give particularly good speeches receive holy relics, which increase their influence as the game progresses.

Other outcomes are determined when the GM consults charts. These can be provided in role sheets or the IM. Since charts usually resolve results mathematically, it is often best to withhold the exact odds from the gamebook and role sheets. If the game becomes an exercise in number-crunching, it may become tedious or players may simply focus on the mathematics of scoring rather than the intellectual collisions that supposedly drive the game. The numerical charts appear in *The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C.* are a good example of this; they often distort the game because juggling the numbers allows players to broker implausible but mathematically sound compromises. Consequently, when charts appear in the gamebook, use prose rather than numbers to describe how likely certain outcomes are (unless mathematics is an important part of your game).

Embedding charts in role sheets can be a good way to convey detailed information to certain roles. A handful of the role sheets in *Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence, 1945* include detailed charts describing the possible results of the Communist player’s attempts to foment rural rebellion. This information is very important for these roles, but others need not be burdened by the details even though they may care very much about the results. Some players appreciate having all of this information available so that they can weigh their options, but others become daunted by their complexity. So, unless there is a special and extenuating
circumstance, as is the case with the gamebook, it is best to reduce objectives in the role sheet to prose.

 Regardless of how much numerical information you make available to the players, give the GM numerical charts in the IM. This allows quick resolution of events. However, even if you are satisfied that your mechanisms for determining the outcomes of player actions are easy to understand, some GMs will find them daunting. For some, things like die roll modifiers are impenetrable. Consequently, keep the GM in mind as you design any mathematical models for your mechanism, and make the charts as simple as possible. Processing data and calculating odds are difficult and time consuming – especially for first-time GMs.

 Whatever approach you use to determining the outcomes of player actions, make sure you explain the simplifications and distortions of historical reality that you made in the IM. This will help GMs during their debriefings.

 **Conveying the results of player actions**

 In addition to understanding their ability and need to act, players must be able to see the impact of their actions.\(^\text{11}\) If they do not receive timely feedback, players often lose interest in the game, so it is imperative for the feedback loops to be both robust (actions have consequences) and tight (you can link cause and effect). The more immediately feedback is conveyed the better; quick results allow players to see themselves as important parts of the game.

 The need for robust and tight feedback is one reason voting is such a popular instrument in RTTP designs. Players have a choice presented to them. They vote. They immediately see the outcome, and they probably note how others react to it. As is noted above, it may be desirable for their position on the first vote to be scripted.

\[^{11}\text{Salen and Zimmerman, 56-67, 336-346.}\]
That way they can confidently cast it. Later votes should become more intellectually and politically complicated.

Players need to know how the results of their actions potentially affect their future choices. In some cases, game materials or player-generated outcomes may make this clear, but given the variety of possible player actions, this information may need to come directly from the GM. Feedback that comes directly from the GM should be unimpeachable even if it is incomplete. *Don’t make the GM lie!* If players start to think the GM is “messing with them,” they step out of the game and often become disengaged. Options for conveying feedback from the GM all have strengths and weaknesses.

Many GMs send flurries of email immediately after each class session. These messages may be tips on the readings, scolds, or well-earned praise. Given the occasional emotional rawness that develops in RTTP, such notes are often a good idea, but they can create the impression among players that the GM is acting as a puppet-master.

During game sessions some GMs send handwritten notes to players for similar reasons. More obtrusive that the GM email, these prompts may be necessary to goad an inactive player, but even if they are distributed discreetly, most players track the passage of the note across the room with anxious eyes. Consequently, the use of such notes should be a personal choice. Avoid requiring it of your GMs.

Opening and closing announcements from the “GM News Service” may be the best device for conveying aggregate results of player action. They also allow for some degree of guidance/correction through the use of injections or public adjustments to the game mechanism. It may also be advantageous for the GM to provide injections in the course of a session. These may or may not be the result of player action.
Maintaining a robust and tight feedback loop may require a significant outlay of time on the part of the GM, so build as much feedback into the game mechanism as possible. Otherwise, the GM quickly becomes overwhelmed.

**Conveying results of external events**

Some events that are critical to the pacing, action, and outcome of the game are not determined by player action or the functioning of the game mechanism. These are, instead, external events. They can be useful for several reasons:

- They can help maintain historical accuracy.
- A fresh crisis reshuffles relationships between players.
- They can recalibrate discussion of an issue to new circumstances.
- By altering the functioning of the game mechanism, they can easily introduce a new issue, secondary system, or complications to player-generated compromises and alliances.

As is noted above, any changes to the functioning of the game mechanism should be made public.

**Injections**

The easiest approach to introducing external events is through the use of injections. These are usually announcements of the “GM News Service.” For example, *Patriots, Loyalists & Revolution in New York City, 1775-76* is structured by a series of injections describing events in London, Boston, and elsewhere in the colonies. When these are introduced by the GM, they shift the situation. Consequently, they shift the debates. They also introduce new secondary systems to the game. In addition to the quick announcements made by the GM, more detailed briefings are provided to one of the players who then more clearly explains the shifts in the situation through the publication of a newspaper.
Demi-roles
Small, one-day roles played by visitors to the class require less overt GM intervention than injections. In addition, they provide an excellent opportunity for people who are not in the class (administrators, faculty members, prospective students, etc.) to get a taste of the RTTP experience. In *Greenwich Village, 1913: Suffrage, Labor, and the New Woman*, a conservative newspaper reporter demi-role allows the appearance of a point of view that is not shared by any of the others roles. In this case, the demi-role serves as a provocateur. The final day of the Art in Paris game features the display of works of art, all of which are for sale. Some of these works are bought by surprise visitors playing demi-roles of historical art buyers. In this case, the buyers provide players with the opportunity to explain their aesthetics to people outside of the game. This creates a pedagogical capstone to the experience.

Avoid surprises
Surprise alterations of the scenario can be pedagogically useful, but if they benefit some players more than others they often create substantial resentments among the players who do not benefit. Alterations can also throw off play because everyone starts looking for the next surprise instead of engaging in meaningful play. So, if you do have an injection in store, make sure that you mention it in the gamebook.

If your design models external factors with a measure of chance, try to minimize it unless randomness is an important aspect of the ideas you are trying to convey. In addition, it can be a good idea to let players have some influence over the outcome of the external events. Possessing some ability to alter the outcome is more satisfying than a bolt from the blue. It confirms player  

agency. If three weeks of work culminates with a single, unmodified die roll that determines the final state of the game, most players will feel kind of cheated.

Regardless of the role of chance, prepare players for possible external events in advance. If players can anticipate possible external influences on the game, they may plan for them, and this deepens their engagement. You may provide them with varying levels of information, but you should always give enough so that clever players can “mitigate the damage.”

Game designer Tracy Fullerton provides some useful advice on how to bring external events into a game without destroying the players’ sense that their actions matter.

A good rule of thumb is to caution your players at least three times before hitting them with anything catastrophic. Random events that have a lesser impact require smaller warnings or even no warning at all. … If you follow this rule, the events won’t appear to be arbitrary and your players will feel like they are in control of their destiny.

There can be very good reasons to introduce an injection without any warning whatsoever. It can force players to reevaluate their positions in relation to one another and/or big ideas that drive the game. For example, *Greenwich Village* features a “false ending.” Players think the game is over when the GM announces that there is another session that is set four years later after the United States entered the First World War. Objectives shift with the context.

Alternatively, in a game where players are responsible for completing background reading on the game context, the designer may want to force them to rely upon their own knowledge to assess and anticipate the potential for the intervention of external forces

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13 Fullerton, 336.
14 Fullerton, 336-337.
in the game. For example, the materials for *Threshold of Democracy* do not emphasize the strong possibility of Spartan intervention if Athens begins to remilitarize – it relies on players to introduce this possibility into the debates of the Assembly. If they fail to make this point strongly enough, the game ends with invasion.

So, in general, you should bring external events into the game sparingly. If they become commonplace, they erode player agency, and many players will become passive. They will begin waiting for the GM to make announcements rather than interacting with one another.

If you introduce external events, it is usually best to do so in a predetermined sequence. Otherwise, an inexperienced GM may have difficulty bringing them into the game. This sequence may be concealed from the players, but the GM should be given clear direction. Alternatively, you may want to make injections optional. If you do this, use the IM to make it clear when and why certain injections should be use. Regardless of the approach you take, make sure you provide detailed information about the use of injections in the IM.

**Instructors (The GMs)**

After the opening days of traditional instruction, instructors cease being the center of attention. They shift into what appears to be a more passive stance, but it is actually – in most cases – a more active and time-consuming method of instruction; it just is not as visible.

Once the game begins, the GM’s email inbox often fills to overflowing with queries. Many find this delightful, but as a designer you must provide everyone (players and GMs) with enough information and direction to work independently. This prevents the time commitment from becoming unmanageable.
Since this style of interaction is different from that which most students are accustomed, it is important to clarify the role of the GM to both the players and the instructor at the outset. Are GMs *umpires* who resolve disputes, *facilitators* who help players coordinate their efforts, *gods* who hand down decisions, *technicians* who manage the game mechanism, or are they some combination of these?
4. Introducing players to the game: The Gamebook

Bringing players into the game presents a number of challenges. This section focuses on how designers can facilitate this process with game materials.

**Opening sessions**

RTTP designs customarily devote several days to traditional instruction before play begins. These days draw heavily upon the gamebook and any accompanying texts. These days include discussion of the historical context, a brief walk through the salient issues that arise in the game documents, an explanation of the game mechanics, and the distribution of role sheets. They also often include opportunities for players to interact informally and in role.

Encourage players to being engaging the central ideas of the game by breaking down the key positions and disagreements throughout the game materials. Address them in the vignette, contextualize them in the historical essay, and chart out procedures for debating them with the rules.

**Vignettes**

The vignette is the first part of the gamebook most players read. They generally read it before the class has discussed the content or
structure of the game and before they read their role sheets. Consequently, it must be very accessible, and they should be 4-6 pages in length.

The vignette is a brief piece of historical fiction that introduces the game. It may lift up some of the key issues that will drive the game, but its most important function is to begin immersing players into the cultural milieu of the game. To this end, many designers write vignettes from a first or second person point of view. Often these are written as cinematic “walking tours” of the venue for the game, which allow the players to become briefly acquainted with the issues, personalities, and ideas that drive the game.

**Historical context**

The essential historical background for the game should be provided in an essay that is textbook-like in tone and quality. As the game progresses, it often serves as a reference tool for the players, so it should be clearly organized with section titles. In early stages of game development, designers often use several chapters of a scholarly secondary source as a stand-in for this essay, and this often initially works well, but as the game develops, and the needs of the players become clearer, writing an original, purpose-built piece becomes desirable. These essays do not usually require original primary source research; instead they digest recent work on the topic into an undergraduate-friendly essay. They should be 20-40 pages in length.

**Rules**

The explicit rules are the ones that actually get written down. They are, in essence, a description of player interactions with the game mechanism and one another. Consequently, they should focus on explaining how to take action. You generally want players focused on the experience of the game rather than making sense of the
rules. Consequently, in most cases, explicit rules make up the shortest part of the gamebook. It may only be a few pages long.

Most gamebooks address the fact that they only model a few aspects of the historical situation. Consequently, many more “rules” exist in the historical events that form a dense background than the explicit rules in the gamebook. For example, *Patriots, Loyalists & Revolution in New York City* does not have a rule forbidding New York from sending an army to invade Great Britain. Nonetheless, this is a constraint on player action, which should be apparent from even a cursory reading of the game materials. Therefore, this prohibition is an implicit rule of the game. The existence of this vast array of implicit rules facilitates the brevity of the explicit rules.

The relationship between these two categories can be fluid. Many designs encourage inventive players to mine this wealth of information for inspiration and, potentially, the creation of new explicit rules.

**Quizzes**

In order to make sure players familiarize themselves with the key elements of the historical context, many games include reading comprehension quizzes, which can be taken home or completed in class at the instructor’s discretion. For the most part, these are straightforward multiple choice quizzes.

In addition to encouraging close reading of game materials, quizzes can provide an opportunity for team-building. If they are completed in groups they can begin melding those players together. An added (or alternative) incentive for strong performance on quizzes can appear in the form in-game advantages for high scorers.
Sequence
In order to compel players to act, you may want to script the different elements of your intellectual collisions through the structure of the game by providing a sequence of events. It is tempting to let players explore the issues for themselves, and this may work in the later stages of the game, but at the outset, they need some guidance. The trick is to provide enough structure to focus debate without truncating it or making the game seem more like a scripted reenactment. This can leave players – particularly those with roles that historically “lost” the conflicts that appear in the game – with a sense that the game is rigged against them. Generally, a sequence of events creates a happy medium between a rigidly structured schedule and chaos.

_Patriots, Loyalists & Revolution in New York City_ treads this path well. Once certain decisions are made by the players, the GM provides scheduled injections that introduce new issues and/or complications to old issues. In order to advance towards their ultimate objectives, role sheets compel some players to get certain issues resolved. This encourages them to push the discussion along toward some sort of action (often a vote). This, in turn, helps advance the game. The combination of these player-generated outcomes and the outside events that are introduced by the GM move the game along at a good clip without requiring a rigid schedule. The debate never becomes stale because the context in which the debate occurs is constantly shifting, but it never shifts so dramatically that students feel cheated.

To prevent this sense from developing players should be able to anticipate the content of the next one or two sessions, but they do not need to see where the game will ultimately end up. Indeed, if they do, many players will start developing endgame strategies. For example, the gamebook in _Kentucky, 1861: A Nation in the Balance_ only describes the discussion topics of the first day of the game. The topics for subsequent days are introduced by injections
that are delivered by the GM. However, some role sheets require certain players to make certain arguments on the second day of the game. They do not need to know exactly what the situation on the second day will be in order to do so. Furthermore, all of the players must register to produce a newspaper for a certain game session. They do so without any idea about what will be occurring on those sessions, but as their deadline approaches, the issues that they must address in their papers become increasingly clear.

Even if concealing the future from the players makes for good game play, the plan for things to come must not be hidden from the GM. The IM must provide a full schedule that clearly describes the sequence that the game should take. Any options for the timing of injections must be made very clear so that the GM can review them in order to see the trajectory of the game as a whole.
5. Integrating players into the game: 
*The Roles*

Most players are eager to plunge into the game, but they need to have questions answered about where they stand in relation to the game mechanism and one another. The different materials in the gamebook provide some answers, but the real doorways to the game for most players are their roles.

**Creating liminality**

Game theorist Johan Huizinga writes engagingly about the ability of games to draw a “magic circle” around the participants. By playing, they step into a place apart from their ordinary realities. The cry *play ball*, shuffling of a deck of cards, or an opening cut-scene for a video game all signal the creation of a special, temporary reality. Tracy Fullerton describes the liberation that comes from stepping into this circle,

> Bound by the rules of play, we perform actions that we would never otherwise consider—shooting, killing, and betrayal are some. But we also perform actions we would like to think ourselves capable of and have never had the

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15 See Salen and Zimmerman, 94-99.
chance to face—courage in the face of untenable odds, sacrifice, and difficult decision making.\textsuperscript{16}

Describing the same phenomenon, game designer and theorist Mary Flanagan notes, “Play traverses ordinary life and allows players to take on difficult issues from an insulated position.”\textsuperscript{17} This precisely describes the RTTP classroom. The game gives players permission to engage in difficult issues while insulating them from the harsh consequences that often attend vigorous engagement in “real life.”

One of the great strengths of the RTTP pedagogy is its ability to immerse players in this different world. The shift is powerful, often dramatic, and difficult to organize, but there are things a designer can do to facilitate the shift. In particular, most RTTP designs include an initial “liminal event” that signals the beginning of play. Ideally, these events are scripted into certain roles. This compels certain players to put these events into motion.

For example, \textit{Threshold of Democracy} begins with a pig sacrifice. The gamebook makes it clear that the specifics of this event are unknown to history, which gives players the freedom to improvise without fear of “getting it right.” The oddness and absurdity of this event helps to draw the circle.

Arguably, roles are the key element of RTTP designs because they draw players into the game, creating a potentially liminal space where players may become something other than what they are; roles provide guidance about what that “something else” might be.

\textsuperscript{16} Fullerton, 49.
Orientation: A place within the game

In order to develop this sense, roles must provide players with several things. Foremost among them is a place within the game. They need to understand how they fit into the big picture intellectually and functionally. To facilitate this, they need to know where they stand in relation to:

- Central intellectual collisions
- Game mechanisms
- Other players

Most GMs want players to prioritize their thinking about relating to the game in this order, however most players reverse the order, so game materials must stress the intellectual collisions above all else. If they lack this information, players still engage the game politically but they push many of the big ideas aside.

Some games (especially while in development) rely on sketchy roles. This may present opportunities for players to determine their own positions on different issues, which is empowering, but without research and consultations, players may inadvertently take stands that are anachronistic or implausible. So, in order to fully integrate players into the game, make sure that each role provides answers to the questions that follow over the course of this chapter.

Who am I?

Give players biographical background for their roles. By helping them understand their past relations with the central ideas, the game mechanism, and other players, they are better situated to engage in the game.

You cannot provide information about everything, but if certain aspects of a role seem likely to come up in the course of the game, even if only in a peripheral or tangential way, provide explicit instructions that the player should create historically appropriate details about the role. For example, in Trial of Anne
Zealots
The primary function of some roles is to promote certain positions. They ensure that the intellectual collisions that you have planned will occur. These can be difficult roles to play because their inflexible, dogmatic outspokenness often leads other players to shun them. In many cases, shunning quickly leads to attempted assassination. Consequently, it may be useful to clump several of such roles together into a faction.

Factions
The strongest relationships between roles exist when they are gathered into factions, which are important structural elements of many RTTP games. These provide players with like-minded allies, which allows for bonding, cooperation, and teamwork. In some cases, factions must complete joint assignments. In Revolution in France, factions must compile, edit, and publish newspapers.

Making the identity and objective of faction members identical facilitates strong bonds of trust and cooperation. This can be particularly useful for inexperienced players – it eases them in to the pedagogy with a peer group. Creating variations in identity and objectives among faction members weakens these bonds, but it allows:

- A more complicated dynamic within factions
- Additional ideas to be brought into play
- More accurate modeling of complex historical situations
**Indeterminates**

Indeterminate roles are central to RTTP because they ensure that it becomes something other than a debate or yelling match. They are an in-game audience, which is open to persuasion. Without the opportunity to actually swing someone to their position, players become disengaged.

Indeterminates possess the ability to swing game outcomes toward the objectives of the different factions, so they possess an enormous amount of power, but many find playing these roles emotionally demanding because being an indeterminate can be lonely. Consequently, indeterminate role sheets should boost the morale of indeterminate players by assuring them that they are very, very important. In addition, instruct players who are part of factions to lobby the indeterminates in an effort to persuade them to join their factions. Finally, use the IM to encourage GMs to touch base with the indeterminates.

Indeterminates need not be fully indeterminate. Indeed, if they are, they become rather difficult to play because it is difficult to get intellectual traction. The important thing is to make sure that there are roles open to persuasion on every issue that is central to the game. Instead of fully indeterminate roles, many games include a degree of indeterminacy in every role. This requires significantly more work to ensure design and balance, but it can result in a game with a higher degree of historical accuracy.

Since players with indeterminate roles often easily become passive, use their role sheets to suggest possible alliances as well. If indeterminates lack such cues, they often simply wait to be approached. This may be important to the dynamic for particular roles, but most of the time, you want to encourage them to interact with other players.

If you have a large number of indeterminate roles, you may want to develop a sort of “matchmaker” or “party whip” role to get them to talk with one another. *Greenwich Village* features socialite
Mabel Dodge. Part of her function in the game is to push indeterminates together.

**Tangential issues**

If you want an idea that falls outside of the central intellectual collisions to be a part of the game, associate it with a role. This player then becomes an advocate and spokesperson for that idea. Tying an additional, supplementary text to such a role can give a peripheral idea space in an already full game without requiring everyone to read about it in depth.

Sometimes these roles are essentially indeterminate. Once players understand and articulate their position on the single issue that is central to their role, they are free to interpret the other issues in the game through this lens. For example, in *Threshold of Democracy* the Bearded Artisan role is tasked with bringing gender issues to the Assembly, but the player is free to be persuaded on the other issues. Without this role in play, ideas about gender sometimes get lost. For some GMs, that is just fine, so this role could be swapped out for another indeterminate.

Other times, individual indeterminate roles are “wreckers.” In other words, their positions are so far outside that of the majority of players that they may try to get the central negotiations of the game to collapse. In *Defining a Nation* the leader of the Communist Party seeks something that no other role does: an uprising of the working class.

Not every GM wants this issue to become central. Consequently, it is important to provide guidance in the IM about the ideas different tangential roles might introduce. Ideally, the structure of your game should allow the GM to dispense with any of these roles. That way they may tailor the game to meet their particular needs.
Composite roles
Many games include roles that are composites of historical figures rather than actual individuals. This approach has much to recommend it, but the chief benefit is that it allows the designer to fit roles more neatly into the game mechanism. The primary downside is that players often become more engaged in the game when playing roles that are modeled upon particular historical figures.

Consequently, it is best to exhaust reality before turning to invention. Often, the idiosyncrasies of particular historical figures humanize roles that as composites become simplistic expressions of particular ideologies.

Hi, I’m Jesus
This problem becomes more intense when the historical figure is some sort of “celebrity.” Players often have difficulty separating the historical actuality of the figure from their preconceptions. In addition, some players may struggle greatly with the challenge of adopting certain historical personas.

Several games deal with this by removing central figures from the mix. For example, Defining a Nation separates Gandhi into two roles of “Gandhi supporters.” Threshold of Democracy keeps Socrates off stage even though he is on trial for part of the game.

Other games, like Trial of Anne Hutchinson and Charles Darwin, the Copley Medal and the Rise of Naturalism, 1861-64 use the “friend of” approach, which drops the specificity of celebrity identity while retaining the ideology of specific historical figures. Both approaches have advantages, but they often result in player confusion. Whenever possible, just bring celebrities into the game as roles.
What must I do?
Many players experience anxiety about their responsibilities in the game. The more explicitly the role sheet describes the duties and obligations associated with the role, the less anxious the player. The degree of explicitness about assignments in the role sheet is usually inversely proportional to the level of anxiety at the beginning of the game.

If the structure of the game requires certain player-generated events to take place, make sure that you assign this responsibility to multiple roles. Building in redundancy helps ensure that the event will occur, and it minimizes the need for GM interventions.

For example, in *Forest Diplomacy* the Lt. Governor must give an oratory at a particular point in the game. If this oratory is not given, the game can lurch to a halt. Consequently, the role sheet of his secretary, Richard Peters, explains that he must take steps to make sure the Lt. Governor does not show up unprepared. In the unlikely event that Richard Peters also fumbles, a third role, the Irish Trader, is charged with picking up the pieces with an *ad hoc* oratory.

Another way to build in redundancy is to make roles with positional leadership less secure. That way, if a player in a key position is not meeting the obligations of the role, the GM can arrange a substitution. In *Acid Rain and the European Environment, 1979-89* the UN Representative is a crucial role. It is not always possible to anticipate how well the player assigned the role will perform, so the role is assigned only for the first two game sessions, and the player is warned that she may be replaced by the UN Secretary General (the GM) if she fails to achieve a satisfactory result.

How do I win?
Game designer Cathy Stein Greenblat explains that “good game play” in an educational game can be defined in several ways:
• Achieving victory conditions
• Immersing oneself in the simulation
• Learning the material

She goes on to note that the first often motivates players the most, even though it is arguably the least important aspect of an educational game.\textsuperscript{18} Don’t fight this! Help players find motivation within the liminal world of the game by providing them with plenty of objectives. These may range from the very specific to general. Most players prefer the former because they give clear direction.

Some prefer vague objectives because they allow players to discover roles on their own terms, but this often leads to confusion, disconnection, and/or implausible compromises. They also usually culminate in debriefings in which everyone claims victory because they poorly understood what was being asked of them.

Clearly structuring objectives in the gamebook and role sheets allows players to move more quickly into debating the merits of various ideas rather than spending a great deal of time figuring out the particulars of wording or logistics. Use the gamebook, role sheets, and IM to explain how players can translate their desire to fulfill objectives into action. As is noted above, in general, it is best to avoid describing objectives in numerical terms unless you want players to focus on the math.

**Stair-stepping objectives**

Consider breaking large and/or complex issues into a few smaller objectives that build upon one another. For example, in *Japan, the West, and the Road to World War* the Japanese government must pass a petition from the military preparing for operation “East Wind, Rain” (the attack on Pearl Harbor) before it is able to

\textsuperscript{18} Greenblat, 63.
actually launch the operation. This keeps the intellectual collisions in the foreground.

Breaking large issues down into smaller component objectives presents players with a series of manageable debates. Rather than needing to grapple with the entire scope of an issue all at once, players may contend with a sequence of smaller, interrelated components. Additionally, forcing players to debate the merits of preparing to take dramatic, game-changing action prevents them from rushing into it.

Stair-stepping objectives can restrain especially passionate players who want to take dramatic actions that are potentially disruptive and distracting. If, for example, a player wants to murder another player, make it necessary for the game to have progressed through a sequence of player-generated outcomes and/or external events before such an attempt could be made.

You may be concerned that this much structure will straitjacket the players or result in an overly scripted game. Don’t fret. Even if you impose the order in which objectives must be met players find all sorts of ways to subvert the order (through both action and inaction). Furthermore, as long as you provide them with sufficient room, the ways in which they make and support their arguments within the structure you have imposed will be myriad.

This is especially true if they need to provide technical details about their plans. For example, in *The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148* the leader(s) of the crusade must provide details about their planned military operations. The GM may opt to give well planned operations a bonus when resolving the outcome of the crusade at the end of the game. Without this kind of structure, players often flounder about and get bogged down in technicalities.

Finally, it is important to construct each role with at least one objective that remains unresolved until the final session of the
This gives a player who has been repeatedly beaten a reason to stay in the game. Players often become demoralized and disengaged when they “can’t win,” but if the resolution of a culminating issue is held off until the final session, they have good reason to stay engaged.

**Raise the stakes**

Use role sheets to make it clear that the outcome of player actions matters. If they fail to achieve their objectives, the results should be dire – *Your entire way of life will be wiped out.* Conversely, if they achieve their objectives, the results should be impressive and probably ahistorical – *The loyalists have triumphed! New York repudiates the Declaration of Independence!*

**What do I think?**

In order to foreground intellectual disagreements at the outset, it is a good idea to provide roles with specific textual references to support their positions. In addition to providing intellectual grounding, this helps ensure that players incorporate the documents that accompany the game into their arguments. Without these cues, some players fall back on arguing from their ahistorical, present-day convictions.

Once the game is in motion, many players become deeply engaged, but their engagement is often with the most political aspects of the game – forming alliances, trading favors, building coalitions, and stabbing one another in the back. These may all be important factors in the game, but it is essential to keep intellectual collisions front and center.

Many players become enmeshed in politics and lose track of your planned intellectual collisions and big ideas. This heightens the need to ground the roles in particular documents in an effort to draw players back to the readings that lie at the intellectual core of the game. There are several ways to do this:
• Direct players to re-read specific sections of the assigned documents.
• Require players to reference certain documents or ideas in writing assignments and/or formal speeches.
• Require players to reference a specific number of documents in their writing assignments and/or formal speeches.
• Make the use of ideas contained in the documents critical to the functioning of the game mechanism.

Gamebooks should include supplemental documents, which can be useful in rounding out the historical context. This is particularly useful for games that are built around central texts. However, unless these documents are tied to specific roles, they often go unread and unused by all but the keenest players. Consequently, role sheets should guide certain roles to specific documents.

Supporting documents are particularly important if certain roles are posed in opposition to the ideas promoted by a central text. If these roles lack obvious resources upon which to draw an intellectually rich position, they often collapse.

**What can I do?**

Use the gamebook to explain how roles fit into the game mechanism by describing the resources that each role controls (e.g., influence, votes, land, money, troops, etc.). If a particular role controls a disproportionate amount of any resource, make this clear in the gamebook, role sheets, and IM.

Some games are set in times of chaos so it is not entirely clear what powers are associated with certain roles. In the French Revolution game, the actual powers of the king differ considerably from the powers ascribed to him by tradition. If a constitution is passed, those powers will likely shift again, and they may not be congruent with the powers described in the constitution. In general,
students accept and understand this situation if it is clearly laid out to them in the introduction to the game.

Players love having secret powers, and even if they do not have them, they like knowing they are out there. However if a secret power is employed against them, they may become resentful. Consequently, secret powers should generally dispense blessings rather than curses.

**What do other people think about me?**

Explaining the relationships between roles allows players to more fully inhabit them. The gamebook should include a *dramatis personae* section that sketches out the important *public* information about all of the roles. Use this section to provide information about particularly important or intense relationships. Make public as much information as possible, but use role sheets to provide any *private* information about relationships between various roles. It can be useful to include lists of friends and enemies on role sheets, but make it clear that everyone does not fall into one of these categories.
6. Deepening involvement: *Playing the game*

Together, the written elements described above should convey the essence of the game, and you should hone and polish them for clarity rather than comprehensiveness. Together, they form the gateway to the game; they are not the game itself.

In describing how he designs simulations, Clark Aldrich describes the delicate balance of deciding how much information to impart:

If you present *too little* information to the end-learner, the person can become lost and frustrated. The user would turn on the simulation, have no idea what was going on, flail about, do badly (or worse, do well!), and end the experience with a negative feeling. If you present *too much* guiding information, the simulation becomes linear content … The player then is just following instructions, never bringing in his or her own judgment of skills.\(^19\)

Finding this balance can be tough, but it usually emerges as a result of playtesting.

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Simplicity and precision

Make your game mechanisms and the explicit rules that govern them as simple as possible. As Tracy Fullerton reminds us, “The less well that players understand your rules, whether rationally or intuitively, the less likely they will be able to make meaningful choices within the system and the less sense they will have of being in control of the gameplay.”

Simplicity must be accompanied by precision. Unlike a book where the reader is pulled along by the narrative despite possible misconceptions or oversights, the non-linear nature of games means that, as wargame designer James Dunnigan puts it, “minor mistakes or ambiguous passages that might not seriously harm a nonfiction work can cause grave problems in a game.” This is an unforgiving medium.

Unlike most historical writing, which encourages the treatment of wide ranges of actors and ideas, game designs need to be limited in scope. The easiest way to deal with this problem is to have very few rules, focused on certain problems in a specific venue at a set time. (These are the explicit rules described above).

Simplicity facilitates ease of play and understanding, but be aware that a mechanism that seems simple to you may be opaque to players and GMs. Consequently give as many chances to understand the rules as possible by explaining your mechanism repeatedly. Provide an overview in the gamebook, and let players know how they should plan on engaging the game mechanism in their role sheets.

Players must understand the broad outlines of the systems that you are modeling in the game mechanism before they begin to play. Some of this comes from the gamebook and role sheets, but

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20 Fullerton, 71.
recognize that many will not master the rules until the game is well underway. As game designer Steve Semler points out, “Often, a game can make a concept easier to understand by embedding the concept into the rules and play of the game. As people play the game, they can grasp the idea of how the concept actually works.”

Intuitive game mechanisms also ease player entry into the game. The more closely the results produced by your mechanism model the expectations of the players, the easier it is for your players to become immersed by the experience of the game.

If your mechanism is too complicated, everyone will spend more time trying to understand its workings than they do exploring the ideas that should drive the game. Consequently, as you draw up the rules you must simplify historical processes a great deal. This can give designers fits because of their commitment to historical accuracy, but sacrifices are necessary if your game is going to work as a game. (Disclosing your simplifications in the gamebook can help salve these pains). For example, in games with legislative procedures many elements of the historical processes (committee meetings, legislative procedures, multiple houses, etc.) are eliminated so that attempts to master these procedures do not come to dominate the game unless that is a learning objective of the game.

All this is more easily said than done. Dunnigan notes that “It is very difficult to keep a game design project simple. Once you get going there are tremendous temptations to add this and add that.” Avoid this temptation until you begin playtesting the game. At that point, players can assess the level of complexity and GMs can tell you what (if anything) they are missing.

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23 Dunnigan.
Unavoidable complexity

Strive for simplicity but recognize that complexity may be unavoidable. If this is the case, there are some things you can do to ease players into an understanding of your game mechanism.

- **Quizzes.** Include material about the functioning of the game mechanism as part of a simple quiz at the conclusion of the introductory sessions.
- **Speeches.** Assign some roles speeches explaining the functioning of the system early in the game.
- **Player officials.** Task some roles with the responsibility to maintain different aspects of the game mechanism.
- **Specialization.** Do not ask players to master every aspect of the entire game mechanism. Make sure everyone grasps and interacts with the primary system and then focus individuals on particular secondary systems.

If you have a complex game mechanism, you should reveal it in stages. Introducing the rules incrementally prevents players from becoming overwhelmed. Importantly, even if you think your game mechanism is very simple and straightforward, some players always fail to grasp the rules in their entirety.

Introducing the game mechanism in stages ameliorates this problem, but it does not eliminate it entirely. Furthermore, if you use this approach and simplify the operation of the game mechanism for the opening session(s), make sure you inform players that the complexity will increase as the game proceeds. Otherwise they will complain that the game is being rigged against them or, worse yet, that the GM has it in for them.24

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24 Greenblat, 63.
**Player introductions**

Even if game rules do not call for it, many GMs find it useful to devote part of the first game session to a series of short introductory statements from all of the players so that everyone has a better basic sense of where people stand as the game begins. If your roles are particularly varied, it may be useful to incorporate this into the structure of your game. It also accustoms players to speaking in role.

It can also be useful for players to have nametags or placards identifying them for the first few sessions of the game. Instead of burdening the GM with the job of making and distributing these, consider making it a responsibility attached to a certain role (or roles).

**Initial debate**

In order to ease players into the cut and thrust of debate, most RTTP games begin the first game session with a predetermined initial debate on a single issue. This achieves several ends. It provides a procedural model for subsequent game sessions, sets events into motion, and invites players into the “magic circle” by:

- Requiring action on the part of many or all players (at the very least, they need to vote).
- Revealing some allegiances.
- Modeling the functioning of the game mechanism.
- Dramatizing differences between the game world and the present.

After such an initial game session, players possess a more confident ownership of their roles and they begin to see how the game materials (context, roles, and documents) can all come together. (Alternatively, they freak out because they have not yet
done much of the reading.) There are several ways to construct an initial debate, but most games begin with a specific problem.25

For example, *Threshold of Democracy* begins with the issue of the Reconciliation Agreement. The question is: what shall Athens do to mend itself after the ejection of the Thirty Tyrants? The resulting debate:

- Involves many of the players (a member of every faction presents a speech).
- Reveals some allegiances (one faction gets isolated).
- Shows how the game mechanism works (Officers of the Assembly perform their duties, the players vote, a law is written).
- Challenges present-mindedness (free speech loses).

In many ways, this initial session serves as a sort of dry run through the game mechanism. Some players will not understand what is happening. They must be able to improve their understanding of the system through trial and error. Consequently, the initial issue should be either incidental to the rest of the game or the deck should be so stacked that only one outcome is really possible. Otherwise, if a few players make some key procedural errors at the outset, it can sour the entire game.

Peter L. de Rosa, a history instructor, provides some good real-world advice about player comprehension of the game mechanism. He found that the biggest problem using games in the classroom is rules comprehension. This is because many players,

> do not read the rules carefully if at all. They often treat this like any other assignment and do as little as possible. Others cannot make the necessary conceptual leaps on their own. … Overall, about one-fourth learn the rules by

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25 Greenblat, 62.
reading them, another quarter after listening to explanations, a third group from attending the dry run, and the rest by playing the game.²⁶

An initial vote can help you deal with this problem in a number of ways. First, it allows players to learn by playing. Second, it is a good opportunity for the GM and the players to see who has and has not understood the rules. In games with strong factions, players provide some peer correction for players who misunderstood their roles or the game mechanism. In games without strong factions, the GM should communicate with players who took actions that were not in keeping with their roles.

For all of its advantages, scripting the initial issue does have some potential drawbacks. If a certain outcome is required, make sure that the voting instructions on the role sheets are very, very clear. In addition, stack the deck high in case several players are so lost that they abstain on the vote. All this is tricky because you must avoid making the outcome of the initial session obviously inevitable. If one group of players is pre-ordained to lose the initial issue, you might consider adding some in-game advantage for those who argue their point particularly well. This can take away some of the sting.

**Keeping the game in motion**

Games should move forward as a result of internal logic of the game mechanism and schedule. Initial debates lead to complications, which require additional debates. It can be pleasant to watch a game cruising along, but the GM must remain attentive. Sometimes the game needs to be slowed or quickened.

Recordkeeping

Once the game begins, things often move quite quickly. Players start taking important actions; they pass laws, make deals, and vote (even if they do not fully understand the potential significance of their actions). Regardless of their level of awareness, it is important to design a recordkeeping instrument (e.g. a record of votes or laws, the results of military actions, etc.) for the players and the GM to consult as the game proceeds.

Transparency is the best policy for record-keeping because then everyone is keeping track of the records. If there are a lot of records to keep, consider making one or more of the roles into a historian/banker/scribe so that there is an official written record kept by someone other than the GM. This relieves the GM of this responsibility or, at least, provides a check for it. For example, Greenwich Village features a role, Polly, with a primary function as a record-keeper.

If the game includes a climax, records often become critically important because they often modify the terms of the culminating issue. Make sure that the GM can easily corral all of this information in anticipation of this final session so that it goes smoothly. HavingGMs perform calculations on the fly quickly becomes taxing and it potentially raises the specter of an unjust or arbitrary GM.

Preventing lockup

Ideally, the dynamic of RTTP games is coalition-building rather than alliance-building. In other words, roles should be able to come into alignment on some issues, but they should find themselves in opposition on others. Creating small alliances, like factions, can be good for the game, but if players can build an alliance into a permanent majority the game may collapse. Attempts to persuade

27 Greenblat, 64.
give way to voting blocs, and the intellectual center of the game – persuasion – withers. Sometimes this is referred to as “lockup.”

Indeterminate roles provide the best defense against lockup, but a good design includes other elements that prevent this from happening as well. They include:

- Some indeterminacy within the objectives of each role.
- Make provisions for the injection of new information or the creation of a new situation that requires realignment.
- Complicate factions (i.e. members agree in the beginning of the game, but as the game goes on, they begin to encounter issues that they disagree about).

**Quest for compromise**

Players usually try to achieve some sort of compromise. They do not want anyone to lose. For some games this is not a problem, but for others, it is. Consequently, you must take active steps to prevent historically implausible compromise from developing. If compromise is the desired outcome, complicate the situation so that compromise cannot happen quickly or easily.

For example in *Acid Rain*, the historical outcome was a compromise, but the initial objectives in the roles prevent compromise at the outset. As the game progresses, the objectives for certain roles are modified, which gradually allows for a higher degree of compromise.

**Can I kill someone?**

The first question most GMs receive from their players is “Can I kill someone?” On campuses where RTTP is an established part of the curriculum, this question may come before the course even begins. Acceptable answers range from yes, to no, to maybe. Whatever the case, the answer must be decided by the game designer and it should be made clear throughout the game materials.
Recognize that many players gravitate toward violent solutions. They think they are fun and straightforward. As a result, if there is the opportunity to kill, many players cease thinking about big ideas. They cease thinking about game politics. They will just think about how to kill one another. Consequently, only add killing to your game if you have a very good reason to do so. Furthermore, if you do add killing as an option, make sure that there are other, easier ways for players to achieve the same ends that can be achieved by murder or create a number of preconditions that must be met before a murder may be attempted. Finally, as is noted above, if you are going to allow murder, make it necessary for players to achieve an intermediate goal before they can proceed to an actual assassination attempt.

**Inventiveness**

Keen players often research the historical context and their roles in an effort to gain greater understanding of the game. Often, they pursue this research in order to gain an advantage over their peers. When they complete this research, it is usually in order to request some sort of special power from the GM. Many gamebooks explicitly encourage players to develop new rules, but even if they do not, players will attempt to do so.

Recognize that this *will* happen, and provide your GMs with guidance. The first consideration you should address is the question of new rules in general. Should GMs even *contemplate* new rules? If your game mechanism is very finely tuned, perhaps not.

However, you should probably err on the side of permissiveness. Besides encouraging independent research, provisions for inventing new rules can help your game develop. Some of the explicit rules that now appear in published games began as efforts by striving players to gain advantage. If new rules
are a possibility, the following may be useful procedural requirements for player-created rules:

- Wait at least one session before imposing a new rule. Adaptations that are made on the fly often overlook repercussions on the game mechanism as a whole.
- Require players to support new rules with historical documentation.
- In addition to the above, GMs might require players to present a rationale that the new rule will “make the game better” rather than simply providing tactical advantage.

In addition, new rules should not simply create new “special powers” for the players that propose them. GMs should remind players that new rules may operate in unexpected ways. In fact, they may backfire on the proposer. In addition, these rules may not operate in secrecy. This means that their existence must be announced to all of the players. Furthermore, if they depend upon the actions of outside forces, they must be specifically and purposefully invoked by the proposing player as part of the game.28

**Endgame**

Ideally, your game will come to some sort of final climactic showdown. This keeps the players involved through the end, provides some resolution to major conflicts, and heightens emotional involvement in the game.

Ending the game is a delicate matter because, as Greenblat points out, “It is important to guard against artificial ends of play (endgame strategies). Sometimes the end is obvious and reasonable: a period of time is given to the culminating parliamentary session, and play ends when the decision is reached; a vote is taken to see who has won the election.” But, even in these

cases, it is important to guard against players taking an “end-of-the-world strategy” (e.g. backstabbing everybody at the last minute). If military action is possible, the best way to avoid last minute suicidal charges is to construct objectives that encourage the preservation of forces. Similarly, if money is involved, create some benefit for not spending everything at the last minute.

Alternatively, you may want to provide for an abrupt ending. If the game suddenly ends when everyone is planning their last moves, they will be disappointed, but you avoid the implementation of endgame strategies. You can always use the post-game discussion for examining “what would have happened if…”

Regardless of the exact form of the end of the game, many players become depressed and demoralized after a game ends, so it can be good to usher them back into the real world with a social event. Watch a movie about the period your game covered. Go out to eat at an appropriate restaurant. Burn someone in effigy.

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29 Greenblat, 63.
7. Reflection: *Debriefing the game*

Just as designers neglect the initial stage of setting learning objectives, most GMs set aside insufficient time for reflection. Marieke Kleiboer’s assessment of the importance of this stage for crisis simulations also applies to RTTP:

Systematic feedback to participants is a crucial aspect of simulations … For the analyst, the feedback stage is a chance to obtain participants’ recommendations for improving the simulation. For the participants themselves, the feedback stage provides an opportunity to review and evaluate their own behavior, explain the reasoning behind their actions during the simulations and discuss the problems and frictions encountered during the simulation. Participants should be given a clear review of the strengths and weaknesses of their performance during the simulation.\(^\text{30}\)

Since everyone will have different learning experiences make sure that you allot sufficient time for them to share their experiences in

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the post-game debriefing. This will enrich everyone’s experience.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, this may be the most significant stage of your game in terms of learning. Do not sell it short. The players need an opportunity to come out of the game and to relate to one another outside of their roles. Give them this time.

The debriefing must include an opportunity for the GM to clarify the ahistorical points of the game while describing the actual events that occurred. A good IM provides post-game discussion prompts, which are tied back into the overarching learning objectives of the game. In the cut and thrust of the final sessions, everyone (including the GM) often lose track of these; the debriefing is essential to bring everyone back to the educational point of it all.

\textsuperscript{31} Greenblat, 63.
8. Development

A completed game is one that can be managed by an instructor who is not an expert in the content area or in RTTP pedagogy. Getting your game design to this stage is neither easily nor quickly done.

Playtesting & Dissemination

Playtesting is the gaming equivalent of sending an article out to peer readers, and putting together a group of playtesters is more challenging than finding peer readers because playtesters must allot a significant amount of time in their classes to make room for your game. Friends and colleagues are great playtesters because they will do this for you at an early stage, but remember that in order to develop your game fully, strangers must play it.

Since playtesting requires other people to make copies of your game, it is important for you to clearly understand your rights in publicizing and distributing your game in the various states of publication – including how you retain rights over the game (particularly copyright) when various versions of it are circulating around the Internet.

One way to simply and easily describe expectations for use is to place a Creative Commons license on your work. CC licenses were developed specifically with the intent of allowing content creators to retain copyright to their work while allowing others to use the work in various ways. Creating a CC license is an
extremely easy process and should take no more than 3-5 minutes. It will allow you to think about your expectations for the work, answer questions about both non-commercial and commercial use of the work by others, and consider the possibility of derivative works created by others. Find the Creative Commons license chooser at: http://creativecommons.org/choose/

It is very straightforward, and it will produce a description of the license parameters you choose. You can then paste the text into your work. In addition, you should probably add a note about how you would like to receive feedback on your game. (For an example, see the second page of this handbook).

Playtests usually result in revisions, so figure out a good way to make sure your playtesters are using the most current version of the game. Perhaps you want to publish a new version on some sort of schedule. You could state on your copyright page that you expect to publish every July so you have time to incorporate feedback from the Summer Reacting Institute at Barnard College in time for the new edition to be disseminated and copied for fall classes.

You also may want to use a “versioning number” for your game. You can follow the model of software development, and start with 0.1 during testing, move to 0.2, 0.3, etc. and then release version 1.0 as your first “playable by others” game. You can then use 1.1, 1.2, etc to make changes, and move to 2.0 when you make a major overhaul. If you pursue this course, consider whether your game booklets and instructor manuals will change version numbers together or separately. Is it possible that your student booklet can be on version 3.2 while your IM is on version 1.0? Or should these both change together?

Some designers want to ensure that a small number of game manuals can be copied for educational use and while the copier can recoup the cost of copying, the games are not to be sold at a profit. This is certainly possible, although there is no specific CC
licensing provision for this. You can simply add a statement onto the license that states that educators wishing to use the game for a course can make a small number of copies of the game and charge enough money for them to cover the costs of copying.

The bottom line is that licensing your work is an easy process, and more importantly, licensing is a necessary process to communicate with others your expectations for how your work will be used. Not understanding licensing or your own rights does not make the problem go away. Creative Commons is an easy way to define, design, and assign licenses to your work, but there are other mechanisms for licensing available to you as the author that you may want to investigate.\footnote{Many thanks to Megan Squire for writing up an excellent description of Creative Commons, which served as the basis for this section. Hopefully, my editing did not greatly corrode the clarity of her ideas.}

**Critique**

At some point you must beta-test your game (have it played by someone other than you). This can be very revealing because the game needs to stand on its own. Good feedback is essential, so design a questionnaire to elicit useful responses. Consider the following questions as a possible template.\footnote{Greenblat, 123, 125.}

### Sample Questionnaire

*Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:*

1. **Identity**
   - What game did you play?
   - Were you a player or a GM?
   - If you were a player, what role did you play?
   - How much experience do you have with RTTP games?

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2. Pedagogical soundness
What were the main learning objectives?
Were the featured intellectual collisions clear?
Did you feel intellectually challenged?
Did players engage the ideas or were they just playing politics?
Did players use the assigned texts when making their arguments?
Did anyone draw on a text that was not part of the game materials?
Which issues engendered lively debate? Which fell flat?

3. Historical Accuracy
Did you understand the historical context of the game?
Did the game mechanism accurately model the systems it was designed to simulate?
Did any important historical factors appear to be absent?

4. Plausibility
Did the game seem like it was modeling reality?
Did anyone take historically implausible actions?
Did the outcome of the game appear to be historically plausible?

5. Playability
Did the game mechanism function smoothly?
Were players ever confused?
Was the tempo of play satisfactory?
When did players particularly engaged or disengaged?
Did anything seem stacked in favor of a particular outcome?
Was there equity in assignments between the different roles?

6. Operability
Did everyone know what was expected of them?
Did you have sufficient time (inside and outside of class) to do everything you needed to do?
Did the GM have sufficient time to maintain a tight feedback loop with the players?
Can some functions of the GM be automated, eliminated, or taken over by players?
7. Positives
What texts resonated most strongly for you?
What roles appeared to be the most interesting to play?
What was your favorite part of the game?
What, if anything, did you learn by playing the game that you do not think you would have learned otherwise?

Please propose solutions to problems and suggestions for additions.

Preparation for use by others: The IM
In addition to the game materials, you need to write an instructor’s manual. Often the last component to get written, many sections in the IM emerge from playtesting, but the sooner you begin sketching it out the better because the IM provides instructors what they need to administer the game as GMs. It is difficult to send your game out for playtesting by others without an IM that includes the following:

- Rules, an explanation of why they exist, and suggestions regarding GM approaches to player-generated rules.
- The structure of the game (and how it might be modified to fit different formats). Provide notes on the expected pace of the operation of the game. If certain things are supposed to happen at certain times, indicate that here.
- A description of the primary and secondary systems in the game mechanism and an explanation of how they are best managed by the GM.
- An answer to the pressing question: *Can I players kill one another?* Sadly, this does need its own section.
- Injections (optional and otherwise), and an explanation of the role they play in the game.

The IM also includes all privileged player information, which is disseminated by the GM, including the role sheets and a role
assignment table, which allows GMs to balance the roles for classes of different sizes. If certain roles work best when played by people with specific character traits (vociferous, chatty, prompt, etc.) indicate that here.

The IM should also provide GMs with what they need to administer the game as instructors. A clear statement of your learning objectives should be foremost among these elements. These objectives should, in turn, inform the content of the reading prompts and discussion questions you provide for the opening days of traditional instruction. GMs also need notes for leading the debriefing discussion(s), which should include:

- Discussion prompts for the “big ideas” that drive the game.
- A synopsis of actual historical events in the period modeled by the game.
- A brief essay outlining “what happened next” and the historical importance of the events modeled in the game.
- The historical fates of as many roles as possible. Players love to know what ended up happening to their personas.

In addition, the IM should include information that allows instructors to administer the game as scholars. Elements of each of the following should already appear in the gamebook, but you may want to go into more detail in the IM. This includes:

- A full list of works consulted in addition to the list of recommended readings in the gamebook.
- An explanation of and rationale for any counterfactuals.
- An explanation of any historiographical debates implicitly reflected in the game design.

**Modifications by others**

The development of RTTP modifications (or “mods”) bears particular resemblance to electronic gaming community because RTTP games are, in essence, open source, which means that
through careful reading and attentive play GMs (and to some extent, players) can develop a full understanding of the game mechanism and the functions of all of the game components. This allows GMs to manipulate your game to fit their interests and the particular demands of their courses. Many mods create new game elements, including:

- New roles
- New pre-game and in-game assignments
- New documents

Some mods are posted to the RTTP online forum. They are quite varied and are often dazzlingly creative.

The development of mods says a great deal about the inventiveness and dedication of the RTTP community. In this, they are reflective of gaming communities in general. As game designer and design theorist Mary Flanagan notes, “Because they primarily exist as rule systems, games are particularly ripe for subversive practices.” However, RTTP games are difficult to mod because the complexity and balance of the game mechanisms are often obscured. Even after running or playing a game several times, you may not fully understand how the components should work in concert, but since people are inevitably going to modify your game, you should strive to make this process as easy as possible for them.

Regardless of the long hours you put into perfecting and fine-tuning your design, you must recognize that mods are an inevitability. Consequently you should document and explain your design choices by explaining the functioning of the game mechanism, the various roles, documents, and injections in the IM. That way, when people start to modify your game for their own uses, they will not severely imbalance the game mechanism.

34 Flanagan, 11.
The most common mods adapt the structure of games by manipulating assignments and role distribution to accommodate large and small classes. This is fairly easy to do as long as you provide a role distribution chart. Other modifications are more complex.

GMs also frequently truncate games in order to fit them into fewer sessions by deleting readings (in part or in entirety) and combining game sessions. This is quite difficult to do if you lack a full understanding of the game design. It is particularly difficult to accomplish when a set game schedule is presented in the gamebook because multiple versions of the schedule confuse players. Consequently, it may be apt to include draft game schedules in the IM so that they can easily be modified to fit the special requirements and formats of a wide variety of courses.

**Benediction**

Designing for RTTP is as rewarding as it is demanding. So take a moment to ask, *why will people want to play my game?* Then ask, *what will they learn by playing my game?* Pose these questions early and often. Once you can answer them with confident assurance, keep them foremost in your mind and proceed.
9. Recommended reading


Amanda Houle, “Reacting to ‘Reacting,’” *Change* (July/Aug. 2006).


Graham Walmsley, *Play Unsafe: How to work less, play harder and add stories to your game* (Lexington, KY: n.p., 2010).

For more readings see the “Selected Publications” page of the RTTP website: http://reacting.barnard.edu/news/publications


10. Acknowledgements

I hope this handbook is useful, but it is a dim candle beside the most valuable resources for designing games for RTTP: the Reacting community. My conversations and correspondence with other members of this community about their experiences running and designing games permeate this work.

Mark Carnes deserves many thanks for coming up with the RTTP concept in the first place. His tireless efforts promoting, supporting, and refining RTTP and his apparently fathomless generosity are more impressive still, but these efforts would all be for naught without Dana Johnson. She is the Atlas upon which the whole enterprise rests.

I’ve benefitted greatly from discussion on the RTTP Forum as well as the numerous exchanges I’ve had with David Henderson, John Burney, Richard Powers, Mary Jane Treacy, Adam Porter, David Stewart, Paula Lazrus, Tony Crider, Kelly McFall, Karman Swanson, Heather Keaney, and many others. I’m particularly thankful for Megan Squire for her work on the Creative Commons materials that appear above, and Bartholomew Sparrow, Paul Fessler, Bill Offutt, Eric Connon, Al Lacson, Jace Weaver, and Laura Weaver for providing detailed feedback from playtests of my designs in their classes.

I’ve also learned about good game design from Justin Green and Karl Serbousek. They are dedicated and thoughtful gamers who provide excellent perspectives on gaming in general. The
same is true of the participants in the 2010 Come Out and Play Festival. I had many interesting and insightful conversations over the course of a few short days. Andrew Ashcraft and Christopher Weed stand out in my memory as particularly thoughtful and generous.

Most of the ideas in this work emerged from conversations with my Simpson College history department colleagues Rebecca Livingstone and Judith Walden about our regular use of RTTP. Their work figuring out how to run games well has dramatically multiplied my experience with the day-to-day workings of these games in the classroom.

My conversations with students who are particularly devoted to RTTP have continually reassured me that the future will be better after all. It rests in good hands. Sumaiya Khalique, Dani Holtz, Ellie Saxton, Vincent Massimino, Maura Finn, and Eric Welkos all probably exceed my enthusiasm for RTTP. They are real power-houses and I’ve enjoyed working with them all at a number of conferences.

As I noted in the introduction, I discovered most of what I know about game design as a result of trial and error. Consequently, students from my home institution deserve particular thanks for the patience and good cheer with which they have endured my half-baked ideas and open-ended syllabi with notations like: April: playtest until satisfied and/or exhausted. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, my students regularly rise to the challenge. Laura Keller, Derek Haugland, Allie Walker, Tyson Wirtz, Jordan Osborne, Ben Williams, Scotty Schuknecht, Andrea Seehusen, Jenn Arnold, Dustin McNulty, Daniel Ginger, Brandon Hyde, Derrick Rodgers, Lara Roy, Mike Pearson, Leah Groethe, Adam Rademacher, Ted Heying, Maddy McAreavy and Alex Koder all deserve special recognition for pushing the potential of RTTP further than I thought it could go.
I particularly thank the students from my Historical Simulation Design seminars, which used early drafts of this work as a course reading. My experience facilitating the process of developing their outstanding prototypes – *Speak of the Devil: Hell-bent for Blood in Salem Village, 1692; America, the Great War in Europe, and Mexican Intervention, 1915-17; Revolution in the Heartland: The Farmers’ Holiday Association, 1932-33* and *Vietnam: The Eve of Escalation, 1964-65* – greatly informed this most recent version. These seminars certainly helped me refine my ideas about game design, but the best thing about them is that they gave me the opportunity to play the games. The students certainly made the most of it. As a consequence, I was demoted in the party hierarchy, imprisoned without trial, and pressed to death with heavy stones. On the up side, I got to initiate a milk riot, but as things turned out, this meant that I got beaten unconscious by hired thugs.

I like to pretend that it is work when I’m collaborating with gifted and devoted faculty to develop forthcoming designs for RTTP. Gretchen McKay and Michael Marlais (*Modernism vs. Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-89*), Margaret Storey (*Kentucky, 1861*), Jon Truitt (*Colonial Mexico*), John Moser (*Yalta, 1945*), and David Higbee and Stephanie Jass (*Montgomery, 1955*) are great collaborators one and all. Working with them is not really work; it is play.

Anything that is good or useful in this booklet is due to the efforts of all these folks. I’m just glad I had the opportunity to throw it all together. Maybe it will keep you from making the same mistakes as me. Let me know; I’d like to update these ideas with a new print edition.

Finally, this little book is for James, Posy, and Christine, who constantly remind me that we play games for lots of reasons, but mostly because they are fun.

Des Moines, April 2011