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Using Role-Immersive Games in the History Classroom
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As a CTL fellow, my intention was to incorporate a role-immersive game into an existing course in the History department, HIST 116: The Rise & Fall of the Roman Republic. I have taught this course previously and used a traditional lecture/discussion format (50-minute class periods MWF, with Fridays largely dedicated to small-group discussions of a text or artifact and a related historical issue). What I noticed in teaching this course was a pattern: about 10-12 of the 35 students regularly participated in discussion; another 10-12 or so participated less frequently; and 6-8 were consistently quiet. This tended to be the case even on Fridays in the small-group formats.

My sense was that much of what we were discussing -- even an institution like the Roman constitution, which has a link with the 18th-century framing of the U.S. constitution -- felt remote to many students. It was even more difficult for students to keep the relevant geography and the territories of the Roman Empire in this period at the top of their minds, even after they studied and took a map quiz. At the same time, this difficulty could affect their grades: the syllabus made clear that participation was an important part of the course and an area of performance in which students would be evaluated. I was concerned that student engagement was fairly shallow, and that this was preventing them from doing as much with, and in, the course as they could.

As a result, I wondered if there was a way to innovate and change the mode of the course, even temporarily, in order to increase the level of student engagement. My hypothesis was that if I could find a way for students to connect more strongly with the assigned texts, they would start thinking more deeply about some fascinating issues (such

as the precariousness of the Roman government created by the lack of a written constitution, and the Romans' continued reliance on tradition and rejection of formal checks and balances for keeping order in the government) that are in fact crucial for understanding the history of the Republic and its collapse in the first century BCE.

After researching different possibilities for modifying the course, I discovered 'Reacting to the Past,' a series of role-immersive games published by Barnard College. Not re-enactments or simple simulations, Reacting games are set at pivotal moments in history and engage students in debating and making decisions that affect the course of history. Each student plays a character -- in our case, a figure from the second-century Roman Republic -- and must read and write about relevant primary texts as part of experience of playing the game. Reacting games do not have a predetermined outcome: students must take on the intellectual or philosophical stance of the figures they are playing, but they also decide on their own course of action in an effort to win the game. Students who read carefully are rewarded because they are able to deploy passages from texts they have read to their advantage in the game.

After attending a Reacting to the Past faculty workshop at Barnard in Summer 2018 and participating as a novice game-player, I decided to devote four weeks of HIST 116 in Spring 2019 to 'The Republic of Rome: The Senate 190 to 187 BC,' a game created by Prof. Mike Nerdahl (Bowdoin College) for use in his course on the History of the Roman Republic. 190-187 BC, a period between the Second and Third Punic Wars, is chosen deliberately: Rome had defeated the Carthaginian general Hannibal in 202 BC and was expanding rapidly in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the Roman government, with its constitution in place, was still fairly stable. Assigned to their roles, students were

expected to read a student guide and role sheet carefully and act in character, and to accomplish their goals based on the parameters of the game. Each class period was one meeting of the Roman senate; each week was one year. Students were charged with negotiating deals, giving speeches, debating issues with each other, and running for elected office. Some of these issues were familiar from the material we covered in previous weeks, and from their midterm examination, but the game also required students to take a new and much more active first-person perspective. If students didn't know where Liguria or Magnesia was, they were motivated to look it up: they might have clients or other interests there! These features of the game were meant to complement and reinforce our coursework in the first part of the semester.

Students, then, were in charge of doing all the things the Roman senate did: they were responsible for sending legions to provinces, for sending public or private aid to areas affected by food shortage, for dealing with natural disasters such as earthquakes or fires, for deciding on whether senators should be able to engage in trade and other business beyond the traditional realm of agriculture, for interpreting omens and signs from the gods, and for debating whether residents of particular areas of the empire should be granted citizenship. While not every student took to the public speaking required by the game, a number of students developed comfort and confidence speaking in front of their peers over the 13-14 sessions. All the while, outside of class time, students were taking on the challenge of meeting with each other to form small-scale alliances in order to achieve the individual career goals and ambitions described on their role sheets. Indeed, senators were supposed to work for the public good, but they also were driven to build

their own power and wealth: the tension between these two priorities was at the heart of the game.

Assignments during the game were designed to ensure that students had a firm grasp of how the Roman senate functioned in the second century BC, and to understand what kinds of issues the senate considered. Two substantial reading assignments asked students to read selected chapters from Livy's *History of Rome* carefully with attention to its description of the activities of the Roman senate in a given year. Because each week of the game was a year in the life of the Roman senate, and each chapter of Livy covers a year of the Second Punic War (and Senate activities), the text was a great fit. Students were required to list examples of senatorial business, to examine the role of Roman religion in Senate decision-making, to discuss what magistrates such as consuls and praetors were doing, and to analyze the description of elections. All of these examples taken from Livy's text were paralleled by what students were doing in the game.

As a portion of the final assignment for the course, I asked students to reflect on their experience with the game. They wrote not only about how difficult they found it to balance their own interests with those of the public good, but also about a very different topic: who were the Romans who were invisible or voiceless in the game? One of the most interesting responses I received from students was to this question, as they had to think seriously about which areas of Roman life, and what members of the Roman population, were underrepresented in the game. I asked students to consider, amid the game's focus on traditional political issues (foreign policy, warfare, legislation on financial matters, large-scale civic concerns), why the Roman senate failed to consider particular topics/issues/people that we would identify today as important for the

government to attend to, and what consequences that might have had for the Roman state. Students took it seriously when they wrote about the women, the slaves, and the ordinary citizens whose interests were often overlooked or crowded out by the priorities that they themselves, as senators, had taken as the focus of their attention with the goal of building their family's wealth or climbing the political ladder. One student commented that she had never thought of Roman senators as being particularly abusive of power, but she had a new perspective on them now as a result of taking on their concerns, sometimes (or perhaps often) in a way that conflicted with her own morals.

As I reflect, too, on the experience of 'flipping the classroom' to put myself on the sidelines and let students lead these four weeks of the course, I realize that I probably did not need to worry as much as I did about everything going perfectly according to plan. While the teaching assistant for the course and I certainly had our share of one-on-one meetings with students to discuss their plans for achieving their goals and objectives, the best moments of the game were those when students' preparation -- their good speeches grounded in reading they had done -- met up with spontaneity and spirited debate in class. Debates led to votes and decisions that sometimes went the way history did, and sometimes went a different way. This offered students a sense of inhabiting a moment in history, and I believe it successfully addressed the problem of 'shallow engagement' that I had initially identified as a concern in the traditional lecture/discussion mode. I would definitely incorporate a role-immersive game again into a course, and I am grateful that the 2018-2019 CTL Fellows program provided me with the support to give it a try.