

2014 Mini Grant Application  
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Enhancing Engagement through Intensive Role Playing

*Basic pedagogical ideas to be explored*

In March, I attended the regional Reacting to the Past [RTTP] Conference hosted at Gustavus. RTTP is a consortium of faculty who design and deploy intensive, historically-oriented role playing games designed to give students an opportunity to see the complexities and nuance of key decision points in history by adopting the perspectives of the stakeholders involved. The game I participated in was titled “India at the Eve of Independence.” The faculty participants like me who had not taken part in RTTP before came away with a sense of awe about how deeply this exercise required us to consider the many variables in that highly fraught historical moment, how much more clearly we were able to grasp the main factors determining action, and how bloody hard it was to stop thinking about the game! It was simply the most engrossing learning experience I have ever had.

I have dabbled with role-playing in my classes before, but on a minor scale. I have seen the interest and energy it can generate and its potency in temporarily dislodging students from their own deeply-held personal positions on a controversial matter—or to move them to investment in a completely alien one. RTTP opens up wonderful new avenues for my teaching, and I want to become adept at using it in my classroom as soon as possible. The basic pedagogical ideas I seek to explore center on the proper implementation of RTTP and other role playing models: What courses/topics are most suited? How does one facilitate role playing effectively? What are the weaknesses in this approach? How much is too much? The primary question I want to answer is, “How do I design my own effective and robust role playing experiences for the classroom, particularly in the context of social justice concerns?” Though I see strong applications for existing role-playing modules aligned with topics I teach, I see still more potential in the custom creation of new ones tailored to my needs and in the extension of my curriculum into new areas that could utilize these methods most effectively.

*Course focus*

Most immediately, I would expect to deploy role playing in a class I teach quite often, Media and Society. I currently use a short role playing game in this class to teach the dynamics of political economy of the media. There is an extant RTTP module in development that addresses the Hollywood motion picture “code” of 1930, an excellent model to illustrate decision-making among the growing media giants and the consideration of the public good. It would fit very smoothly into my Media & Society course and allow me to extend it into other related areas as well.

A second piece of low-hanging curricular fruit would be the inclusion of a well-known RTTP game called “Suffrage, Labor, and the New Woman” in my Communication and Gender course. This germinal moment in U.S. history had profound effects for the ongoing construction of gender roles in our society, and the

role play would allow students to see and feel the kinds of forces that have shaped those key cultural norms so influential in their lives today.

A third ready-made opportunity would be the inclusion of any of the games with a journalism component into my Perspectives on the News course. For example, journalists play a minor role in an RTTP game that covers the end of apartheid in South Africa. The game could be readily adjusted to bring that role to the fore to help students see the potential influence journalists can have in shaping key world events (and in protecting or commoditizing human dignity).

Most important for me, though, is learning how to develop role playing games from scratch. This would benefit me enormously across all my curricula, particularly in media studies where “pre-fabricated” game modules seem to be sparse. I could refine my current mini role play for COM 235 as well as add an additional role play to simulate ethical decision points in broadcast practices. Role plays could also potentially enhance my students’ work in Media, Culture, Power in a variety of ways both historical (exploring the motivations and consequences for the media’s response to the L.A. riots of 1992) and hypothetical (playing out the roles of various stakeholders in developing a reality show that is both profitable and culturally “sensitive”).

Perhaps the most intriguing opportunity is developing a special topics, FTS, or IEX course oriented around role playing that takes up issues of social justice. Several of the RTTP game topics have excellent potential in this regard, ranging from Cherokee removal (“Trail of Tears) to the roles of aid organizations in the Rwanda genocide to the persecution of Anne Hutchinson in Puritan New England. Role playing games, when offered in conjunction with proper historical and theoretical grounding, seem to offer amazing promise for helping students grapple with the various complex dimensions of social issues. They can particularly help students become more sensitive to the unstated assumptions and often invisible motivations that drive the “powers that be” to act the way they do, important in the deconstruction of oppressive hegemonic forces. I am very excited at the prospect of developing courses with this emphasis and have already started discussions with colleagues in other departments to seize upon the strong interdisciplinary opportunities such classes would provide.

#### *Work during grant period*

This grant would be used to fund my travel to and participation in the RTTP Annual Faculty Institute at Barnard College in New York City this summer. The institute offers participants the chance to “play” two different RTTP games in order to test them and become familiar with their function and administration. There are also a number of informational sessions to help facilitate the effective use of RTTP in the classroom. The session topics are not yet posted for this year’s institute but are likely to include panels on assessment, game development, effective preparation for role plays, testimonials regarding the student experience, etc. Through my participation in these test games and sessions, I would expect to become well-grounded in the fundamentals of deploying RTTP role plays in my own courses and would be able to move forward throughout the summer on two fronts: integrating a role play into my Media and Society course and developing a proposal for an IEX

course, hopefully in partnership with one of my colleagues, that would use role plays to explore issues of social justice.

The initial integration of a role play into Media & Society will require the adaptation of existing curriculum, including removing some components to make room for the role play within the semester. As I know this content well and already have ideas about the potential “fit” of a role play, I expect this transition to go smoothly, though this will remain uncertain until after I learn more at the institute.

The development of a new course seems less certain given the many variables. Though I can clearly conceptualize several possibilities and identify extant role playing games to fit them, staffing shortages in my department make my availability to teach outside of our standard curriculum unpredictable at this point. This needn't stop me making preparations for a new course, naturally, and that work can continue over the summer and in the lead-up to the appropriate course proposal deadline as I assemble appropriate supporting materials and develop the course structure into which the role plays will be embedded. Ideally, this work would occur in collaboration to capitalize on the interdisciplinary capacity of such a course. David Obermiller (History) and I have already had some conversations in this vein, and he is also considering attending the institute to facilitate this collaboration as well as the use of role playing in his own work.

### *Outcomes*

Student work related directly to the role plays would be assessed via written assignments and oral presentations embedded within the game as well as a participation component measuring variables such as sharing burdens with the group, responsive communication, active engagement in role play tasks, support of others in the class, preparation for their role, etc. The participation assessment would happen in conjunction with student feedback on the performance of their peers through a structured rubric; as the students will know each others' participation work more intimately than I over the course of the role play (much of which happens outside the classroom), their feedback is imperative.

Longitudinal outcomes are most easily measured in Media & Society, where I have a deep pool of data in the form of student evaluations. Comparing these past data to future data collected once a concerted role playing component is in place would provide a starting point for evaluation. Additional questions would be added to my usual end-of-semester student evaluations targeting the role playing experiences as well. Additionally, I plan to implement an in-class student debriefing of the role play immediately upon its conclusion to garner feedback about how well it worked, how much work it involved, what the weaknesses of the game were, how engaging the experience was, etc. Similar devices could be used in any new course, though the longitudinal component will be obviously absent.

Additionally, some faculty in the RTTP consortium are collecting and publishing assessment data for their own research and have invited others to use their assessment tool in exchange for sharing collected data for a national sample. This method would offer a field-tested assessment tool and reference points for measuring the outcomes in my class versus others. This assessment emphasizes engagement particularly.

Another strong avenue for assessment in certain circumstances is a measure of attitudes toward people aligned with various stakeholder positions within the games, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. The parasocial contact hypothesis suggests that exposure to marginalized people in media representations tends to shift our biases in ways that favor acceptance of those people in the real world. In a social justice context, it would be important to discern if role playing a person from a marginalized group (or even taking part in a role play that requires virtual interaction with people from a marginalized group) has an effect on attitudes toward those people in the real world. This would have major implications for developing student awareness of issues of privilege in its various forms, a notoriously difficult concept for people of privilege to fully grasp.

*Completion date*

If the institute reveals that adapting a role play to fit Media & Society is feasible and beneficial, these changes could be made in time for spring semester 2015. If new course development proves to be a viable option in light of staffing concerns, that work could be completed in time for the submission deadlines for IEX 2016 (Sep. 2015 deadline) or Fall 2015 (Jan. 2015).

*Budget*

See attached form.