

Teaching Philosophy Through a Role-Immersion Game: *Reacting to the Past*¹

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1. Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that students achieve learning outcomes at higher rates when instructors use active-learning methods rather than standard modes of instruction. Not only are active methods purported to improve learning outcomes, they can also be more engaging and motivating for students.² Given these findings, and the ongoing shift toward an active-learning model in higher education, it's worth exploring ways to effectively deploy active-learning methods in the philosophy classroom. To investigate how one such method might be used to teach philosophy, we observed two classes that employed *Reacting to the Past* (hereafter, *Reacting*), an educational role-immersion game. Games in the *Reacting* series are set during important moments in history like the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa in 1993, the Indian independence movement in 1945, the emergence of democracy in Athens in 403 B.C., and the disagreement over succession of Wanli emperors in Ming dynasty China. Students play designated roles that assign them a personal history, point of view, and objectives to accomplish while participating as members of decision-making bodies. In the game we observed, *Rousseau, Burke and Revolution in France, 1791* (hereafter, *Revolution*), students participate in constructing a new constitution as members of the French National Assembly. While the setting is, in general, historically accurate, what happens in the game depends on the players.

We chose to investigate *Reacting* because role-immersion games are considered a particularly effective active-learning strategy.³ Professors who have used *Reacting* to teach history, interdisciplinary humanities, and political theory agree that it engages students and teaches general skills like collaboration and communication. We investigated whether it can be effective for teaching philosophical content and skills like analyzing, evaluating, crafting, and communicating arguments in

addition to bringing the more general benefits of active-learning to philosophy classrooms. Overall, we find *Reacting* to be a useful tool for achieving these ends. While we do not argue that *Reacting* is uniquely useful for teaching philosophy, we conclude that it is worthy of consideration by philosophers interested in creative active-learning strategies, especially given that it offers a prepackaged set of flexible, user-friendly tools for motivating and engaging students.

After describing how instructors implemented *Reacting*, we report our findings. We then evaluate its success using instructor feedback and students' input collected through anonymous surveys. While we find *Reacting* promising for teaching philosophy, we discuss some limitations of the method as designed. We then describe some ways of accounting for these limitations, which we think can be largely offset with minor changes to how instructors use the game. We finish by discussing further ways of implementing or modifying *Reacting* for the philosophy classroom. Because *Reacting* is a dynamic, flexible approach, we identify ways that philosophy instructors might adapt the game so that it supports their particular pedagogical aims even more effectively than it does "out of the box."

2. *Reacting* in Context

We observed *Revolution* in two undergraduate philosophy classes. The first was a lower-division general education course in ethics. The second was an upper-division course in the history of political philosophy. The first class was a required course for the 228 students enrolled. The second was an elective with 19 students. Humanities majors were a small minority in both classes. The larger course was the second in a two-course series in ethics and society.⁴ To our knowledge it was the largest class ever to use *Reacting* in any discipline.

The lower-division course met twice weekly for all-class lectures and each student attended a weekly discussion section led by teaching assistants. Lectures were used to discuss course material

and to introduce the game. Once the game began, lectures were shortened to allow students time to meet and prepare for the game. Typically, *Reacting* is played in classes with fewer than 40 students, where the entire class can play the game together during regular meetings. Considering the size of the lower-division class this wasn't possible, so eight groups of approximately 30 students played separate games in their weekly discussion sections. After a brief introduction to the course, *Reacting*, and readings from key texts, the students played the game during six consecutive meetings.

The upper-division elective class had a more conventional structure for *Reacting*, with all 19 students participating in one game. This class didn't have discussion sections and consisted of two weekly class meetings. As with the lower-division class, preliminary class meetings were devoted to explaining the game, assigning roles, and analyzing texts by Rousseau, Burke and other thinkers that students were required to draw on during gameplay.

Students were selectively assigned roles by the instructors using a two-step process. First, students completed a short survey which asked students for game-relevant information, including whether they considered themselves outgoing, were comfortable with public speaking, were knowledgeable about Christianity (which is quite helpful for some roles), or had any interest in taking on a role with relatively greater responsibility. These responses informed role assignments along with students' academic records, which were consulted to ensure factions were relatively well-balanced in terms of academic abilities. This reduced the possibility of accidentally stacking the deck in favor of a faction by disproportionately populating that faction with especially strong students. One role assignment, the Marquis de Lafayette was not determined by the instructors but via a student vote, meant to reflect his widespread influence and popularity among the French at the time when the game begins.

As the name suggests, the game we observed, *Revolution*, is set during the French Revolution.⁵ In it, students work to draft a new constitution for France while historical currents,

both internal and external, complicate and influence those efforts. Each student is assigned a role to play for the duration of the game. Roles are all French historical figures somehow involved in the Revolution, ranging from King Louis the XVI to the Marquis de Lafayette to George Jacques Danton, and even to Maximilien Robespierre. Each role has a set of victory objectives, or gameplay goals—for example, “End the monarchy” or “Revoke . . . the provisions ending the nobility”.

Most roles assign students to one of five groups. Four of these are political factions that work together to pursue their aims as the French National Assembly drafts a new constitution. The factions represent positions on the spectrum from radically revolutionary to old-guard royalism—respectively, the Section Leaders of Paris, the Jacobins, the Feuillant, and the Conservatives. Members of a fifth group, the Indeterminates, play as individuals who don’t belong to any faction. Rather they are neutral, undecided, or not yet committed to factions. Factions seek to control the National Assembly proceedings as much as they can and to produce a constitution which conforms to their political views. For a faction to succeed, it’s critical that they garner support, and especially votes, from Indeterminates.

In *Revolution*, as with *Reacting* in general, the main point is for students to engage with ideas that were influential during pivotal moments in history and to take ownership of their own learning. Students learn the theoretical underpinnings of the various perspectives in play so they can represent their character’s point of view and make arguments that appeal to others’ commitments. *Reacting* models real deliberation involving engagement with core values like equality and freedom by asking students to assign weight to various, relevant considerations and make all-things-considered judgments. All of this takes place against a student-centered backdrop. Students presided over and structured the game sessions, which consisted entirely of students’ speeches, questions, rebuttals, interruptions, and calls for order or votes.

Prior to game sessions, students set the agenda for the Assembly. During game sessions, students play their roles in character, pursuing a range of aims, but mostly proposing additions or modifications to the constitution. They then discuss, debate, and vote on these proposals. Each character has a predetermined number of votes at their disposal. This number can change, depending on in-game events and as a reward for good gameplay. Students are also encouraged to meet with their own factions and others to strategize or make deals and compromises to further their victory objectives.

This isn't equally easy for all factions. For example, the Feuillant faction are well-positioned to control the National Assembly proceedings at the outset. In contrast, the Section Leaders are not officially permitted to speak from the podium at the Assembly. They have the power to riot, so if the Assembly doesn't grant them the right to speak during its meetings, they can initiate public disorder and in so doing cause other players or factions to lose delegates. An especially effective riot might even allow the Section Leaders to take control of Paris and, in turn, the National Assembly.

During game sessions, instructors or teaching assistants play the role of "Gamemasters" (GMs). GMs promote and reward good play, enforce the rules, make rulings where the rules are not decisive, encourage students to act when appropriate or necessary, and inform the National Assembly of the consequences of their choices and relevant historical developments.

Which faction wins the game is determined by the balance of power at the game's end. Do the revolutionaries seize control? Is the old order restored with Louis the XVI on the throne? Do they find a compromise between revolution and tradition birthed by the Assembly's moderates? This balance of power is the result of gameplay in conjunction with occasional dice rolls meant to simulate the vagaries and convergence of historical forces. It is by the roll of dice that the game determines whether attempted riots succeed or are defeated—likewise with regard to a foreign

invasion. On this scheme, superior gameplay on the part of a given faction can strongly influence who wins the game, but it does not guarantee it.⁶

Students in both classes were assigned readings from philosophical texts such as Rousseau, Burke, and Montesquieu, as well as historical texts relevant to the French Revolution—many of which were provided in the student gamebook. In the lower-division class, students also learned fallacies of argument. Teaching fallacies of argument was motivated by the general goal of employing *Reacting* to teach philosophical skills in addition to other learning objectives. The class incorporated this material into gameplay to further emphasize quality argumentation. Specifically, the class added an additional “house rule” to the game. According to this rule, students could, at any time, invoke a “fallacy challenge” if they thought that a speaker had committed a fallacy of argument. If the speaker had indeed committed a fallacy and the challenger correctly identified it, then the speaker’s total votes would be reduced and the challenger’s vote total would be correspondingly increased. If the challenger was mistaken, the challenger would lose votes and the speaker would gain them.

Student’s assessment during the game was based on their participation and writing assignments. Participation was evaluated according to the quality and frequency of students’ contributions to game sessions, overall game engagement, and quality of role-playing. All factions were required to produce “newspapers” during the game. Newspaper articles were in-character writing exercises, in which students were to argue for a position their characters would endorse. Possible topics included the enfranchisement of women, continuing or ending slavery, and nationalizing the Catholic Church in France. The writing assignments for Indeterminates varied. For example, some were assigned to journal about their travels, write letters to their characters from family members or constituents, or respond to previously published newspaper articles. To emphasize argumentation and other philosophical skills, these writing assignments were advertised

as opportunities to make philosophical arguments grounded in the assigned texts. They were evaluated for their quality of argument and analysis and feedback from instructors focused on these themes.

3. Evaluating *Reacting* for Teaching Philosophy

Our overarching goal in examining *Reacting* was to investigate how effective this method might be for teaching philosophy, and the extent to which the general benefits of this form of active-learning pedagogy could be harnessed for this end. In our investigation, we emphasize the following philosophical learning outcomes: interpreting philosophical texts, engaging with and debating philosophical issues, identifying and critically evaluating arguments (including the assumptions and evidence operative in those arguments), and crafting good, well-evidenced arguments.

We evaluated results in two ways. First, from the point of view of informed, experienced philosophy instructors. Second, by analyzing anonymous student surveys from the large, lower-division course.⁷ Overall, the survey results aligned with instructors' assessments and our observations.

Students voluntarily completed surveys at the end of the course. Surveys contained both open- and closed-ended items. The former invited students to discuss any ideas for improvement and to compare their experience with *Reacting* to other courses, particularly philosophy courses, that didn't use *Reacting*. Closed-ended survey items asked students to draw comparisons with the first course in the two-course series regarding specific dimensions: overall learning experience, classmate engagement, and individual philosophical skills—such as written argumentation, analyzing arguments, verbal argumentation, and identifying fallacies. Nearly all students in the class had taken the first course, including roughly 98% of survey respondents. The first course was comparable in nearly all aspects save for *Reacting*, providing survey respondents with a comparative basis that is

typically unavailable in educational research.⁸ We can't entirely isolate variables in educational settings, but asking students to compare their experience in the first course, taught using a standard lecture-discussion model, with the second course, taught using *Reacting*, warrants some confidence in their responses.⁹

Instructor and student evaluations isolated themes among the strengths and limitations of using *Reacting* within the course. The strengths we found suggest *Reacting* can bring the general benefits of active-learning to philosophy classrooms. Existing studies base their evaluation on general criteria like levels of engagement, enthusiasm, participation, time spent preparing for class, self-esteem, empathy, and collaborating with classmates. To our knowledge, none evaluate its success in terms of written and verbal argumentation skills, students' ability to analyze arguments, or engagement with *philosophical* texts and ideas. Using these criteria, we identified some strengths and limitations that aren't currently represented in the literature but are likely to be of interest to philosophy instructors. We consider these strengths and limitations in turn. In response to the limitations, we offer some analysis and go on to recommend adjustments that might better serve these philosophical aims.

3.1 Strengths

Overall, students responded positively to *Reacting*, and strongly so. As one student indicated:

“*Reacting* has completely revolutionized the way I learned this quarter. Not only did it force me to be engaged with the topics, grasp a broader understanding of the history with respect to the [actual] people that lived through it, and reverse what had been previously blander discussions (Phil 27) to be fueled with a sense of competition and rigorous debate, but also I feel like I will retain what I learned in this class a lot more than [previous] philosophy classes.”

This remark identifies several key areas in which *Reacting* worked effectively by the lights of the instructors and students: engaging and motivating students, learning content and skills effectively, understanding and interpreting historical materials.

Student Engagement and Interaction

The most robust finding among instructors and students alike concerns engagement and motivation. Students reported that they found *Reacting* more engaging and stimulating than other courses, including philosophy courses. A significant number reported finding it easier to participate in class compared to other philosophy classes. Among them were students who identified themselves as shy and uncomfortable with speaking in class generally. Students also observed *Reacting* motivated them to devote more effort to learning the course material than they otherwise would, in part because it involves collaborating with peers. The following, representative, student remarks make this clear:

Reacting to the Past has been one of the most engaging experiences I've had in my four years experience. Compared to other philosophy courses, where the primary objective is for the Professor or TA to lecture and for the students to listen, *Reacting* proves a truly engaging format that cannot be matched by a standard lecture format.

Initially I had some major problems regarding *Reacting to the Past* because I believed that I would end up hating the classroom environment that the course would bring. Being an introverted, shy person, I thought that: I would never get involved, the game would play without me doing anything and I would end up failing...However, as the game progressed, I became more and more involved until by the end of the game I was genuinely enjoying it...I thought the game was absolutely fantastic. In fact, even without the participation rewards to draw me in, I think I would have been just as involved in the game just because of how interesting playing my character was.

Because I was given a specific role and an image to uphold and follow throughout the discussion sections, I was much more motivated to actually pay attention during lectures and come to discussion prepared and informed so that I would be able to participate in that week's debates. That was the most I have ever participated . . . and I could tell that the rest of the class was engaged and always excited to come to class.

These trends were apparent to instructors as well and are consistent with prior studies of *Reacting*'s efficacy in motivating and engaging students.¹⁰ Though students in previous studies overwhelmingly enjoyed *Reacting* and report increased engagement, the studies don't indicate the direction of causation. For the most part, participants in previous studies voluntarily chose to take a course using *Reacting* and so we don't know whether the study population accurately reflects students more generally.¹¹ In the lower-division course we observed and surveyed, students were required to take the class and couldn't easily opt out, though students in the smaller, upper-division class participated voluntarily. That many of the students we observed have a strong basis for comparison (given their completion of prerequisite coursework) and that the course is compulsory supports the suggestion that *Reacting* can increase engagement across the students who exhibit varying levels of engagement in similar settings.

By its nature, *Reacting* is highly collaborative. To effectively pursue a winning strategy, intra- and inter-faction meetings were crucial. Similarly, during game sessions, students would engage in sidebar conversations, try to whip votes or broker deals and compromises. As has been noted elsewhere, *Reacting* is a powerful method for producing student collaboration and interaction.¹² Not only did we find this to be true in our case, the students noted it as well. Students agree with our assessment that the level of interaction and collaboration far exceeded other philosophy classes. Many survey respondents named this aspect as their favorite part of the class, citing it as a primary reason they enjoyed the class.¹³ The following representative remarks illustrate these trends:

Reacting to the Past made [class] far more engaging and interactive.

It was nice to have the whole class participate and interact with each other, which is rare.

The real-life feel of the game and the fact we had a faction (a group of people) to work with also made the class more fun since we had to plan with others the next move we were going to make in the game.

Learning the material and skills effectively

But students didn't merely find themselves more interactive and engaged by *Reacting*, they also thought it effectively supported learning both the course material and philosophical skills. These remarks bear out our evaluations of student learning, not to mention prior studies of *Reacting*:¹⁴

I think the class . . . taught us important skills in crafting well-made and robust arguments. For instance, because our articles were presented to everyone in class, and many of us gave speeches on the topics we wrote about, I think [we were] forced to spend a considerable amount of time crafting our essays and speeches in comparison to writing essays for other classes in which we knew only the TA was going to read them. Because we knew our arguments were liable to criticism from many of our peers, I think many students... spent much more time in making sure their arguments were logically sound.

Reacting not only provided me with more in-depth analysis of the philosophical issues of the time-period we studied as well as the philosophical texts we used but it allowed me to brush up on other vital academic skills like writing and public speaking.

Because I had to make arguments defending my character's viewpoints I felt like I got to understand the historical texts more than I normally would have.

I felt with the newspapers, debates, and politics of the game I was able to better understand the ideas of Rousseau. I was also better able to understand the theory and ideas of his critics and have gained a more complex view of social contracts and their relation to government and rights.

Notably, these students explicitly identify *Reacting* as a potentially rich avenue to for coming to grips with understanding historical currents in philosophical thought and the contexts relevant to those currents.¹⁵

The survey responses don't merely suggest *Reacting* as an effective method for learning philosophical skills and content, they indicate that the students themselves judged that they learned as much or more via this method than they did in other courses, generally, and other philosophy courses, specifically. This may be related to students' increased engagement with course materials and effort. Nearly 80% of student respondents reported learning the same or more with *Reacting*

compared to other courses, generally, while nearly 75% said the same in comparing *Reacting* to philosophy courses.

I was able to [better] grasp the readings and the concepts of the philosophy lessons compared to just sitting in a lecture hall.

I thought that the *Reacting* program was a great approach to expanding education beyond typical didactic methods. I am a graduating senior and just looking back at all the courses that I have taken these past years, I am confident to say that I have unsuccessfully retained much of the information. This is likely because many of my courses were simply based on memorization and regurgitation of materials. *Reacting* was a ‘fresh take’ on taking learning beyond the classroom. By integrating multiple dimensions of instruction in variable contexts (i.e, role-playing, speeches, writing, performance, etc.), I feel that I am more likely to remember the experience and content beyond the life of this course.

Self-reports may provide reliable insights about students’ experiences in the class, but they are hardly sufficient for assessing learning outcomes. While it’s difficult to confirm from our vantage point whether students, in fact, learned more in this context, that so many students took themselves to have learned as much as or more using *Reacting* than more conventional methods is itself noteworthy.¹⁶ When self-reports are critically interpreted in the context of first-hand observations of *Reacting*, we believe they do present defeasible evidence of the method’s effectiveness.

Applying practical skills

We observed that *Reacting* provided students with opportunities to put philosophical skills and content to use as they debated specific proposals and actual, if historical, cases. Students also noted that they valued this opportunity and applauded the game for demanding (and providing opportunities for) strategizing and thinking on one’s feet in a dynamic environment and speaking publicly.¹⁷ These responses suggest that students found *Reacting* valuable for practicing practical skills that they don’t normally associate with academic philosophy.

I think one main purpose of a philosophy course is to teach students how to formulate arguments on their own. I feel the only time this is practiced in traditional philosophy courses is writing papers. In *Reacting to the Past*, this is constantly practiced whether it’s writing a

newspaper article, making a speech, or asking questions. *Reacting to the Past* also helped me to think about the arguments in a different perspective.

I think the whole concept of this class teaches students a lot of important skills such as speaking in front of a group of people, being persuasive and argumentative.

I also enjoyed the opportunity to give speeches and hold debates with fellow classmates. It felt like my opinions on subjects actually mattered and that encouraged me to do more of my own research into what the writings of Rousseau, Burke, and others actually meant and how they could be realistically applied.

I enjoyed being able to work with philosophical ideas in a non-standard setting. In particular, I think the ability to argue based on ideas discussed in lecture actively with other students as opposed to privately in the form of essays worked well for understanding how philosophical ideas could be used in real situations.

As these last few comments indicate, a potential upshot of using *Reacting* in philosophy classes is that the game demonstrates the import of ideas and theory for actual practices and policies. The games are oriented around philosophical ideas that are relevant to their lives and had a visible impact on historical events. Considering that students often think that philosophy is impractical, we would do well to capitalize on the lesson *Reacting* offers in this regard.

Besides advertising philosophy's influence, *Reacting* asks students to apply philosophical skills and ideas in (albeit simulated) practice. By situating students within real world scenarios, *Reacting* encourages students to consider, in their deliberations about what to do, the values and ethical commitments in philosophical texts such as *The Social Contract* alongside practical and feasibility constraints. In this way, *Reacting* models real deliberation concerning policies and practices that serve competing interests.¹⁸

Confronting challenging views

Prior to the game, we predicted that it would be valuable for students to confront views that they, themselves, oppose or find counterintuitive. Our observations were consistent with this prediction.¹⁹ Students were challenged by the fact that they had to try to understand, defend, and respond to

views that they found anachronistic (only tax-paying citizens should vote) or even abhorrent (slavery is just). They reported that they found this challenge valuable. While this challenge frustrated a few students, who found it difficult to invest in their roles, those who attempted to understand tended to agree that it was beneficial, albeit challenging. The following comments highlight these trends:

Such an experience, depending on the role received, allows for great potential to consider new viewpoints and to seriously engage with a belief system that may be far removed from what we are accustomed to in modern American society.

[*Reacting*] . . . helped me learn a lot more about history and personally, I learned to really look at the French Revolution through the eyes of a conservative because I was given the role of King Louis. I feel like in a normal philosophy class, I would not consider looking at things through the conservative point of view because it's very much opposite of my own point of view.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that in order to cultivate “habits of empathy and conjecture,” American college professors should assign works of literature written by minorities and people from foreign societies.²⁰ By so doing, Nussbaum argues, students will no longer regard such people as “forbiddingly alien and other.”²¹ Instead they would come to see “what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself.”²² Mark Carnes, the inventor of *Reacting* games, has said that one of the purposes of the game is to overcome a problem that can occur when instructors seek to follow Nussbaum’s advice. Class discussion of unfamiliar or challenging moral views can easily result in students merely parroting the pieties of the day or responding with cleverness rather than sustained reflection. Carnes suggests that students are more likely to empathize with a strange or unfamiliar perspective when they have to play the role of a historically distant person who espoused it. Carnes view gains support from previous research on the effect of *Reacting* games on students in non-philosophy classrooms, which found their scores on a Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale to be higher than that of college peers who did not take *Reacting* classes.²³ Against this backdrop, we think it is plausible to interpret the self-reports of students cited above to

suggest that their capacity to sympathetically engage with a radically unfamiliar view was similarly engaged.

Taken together, the above observations suggest that *Reacting* is a creative active-learning platform that supports philosophical learning objectives while powerfully engaging and motivating students. As experienced instructors are likely aware, devising and implementing one's own active-learning strategies to promote this depth of engagement and motivation can be time-consuming and difficult. It is partly for this reason that we find *Reacting* worth considering in the philosophy classroom. It is a user-friendly, prepackaged tool that engages and motivates students all while being suited to teaching philosophy.

3.2 Limitations and Suggested Alterations

Though in our estimation, and as suggested by student surveys, *Reacting*'s merits in the philosophy classroom are notable, it is not without limitations. As with any pedagogical method, implementation matters. Using active-learning techniques effectively tends to require that instructors be flexible so that they can draw relevant lessons from the answers/outcomes students produce. This is as true with using *Reacting* in the philosophy classroom as it is with other active-learning methods. Some features of *Reacting* as designed can lead to learning outcomes or gameplay choices that might not deliver precisely what philosophy instructors seek. Fortunately, there are some choices in structuring and running the game, and preparing students in advance of it, that help in this regard. We begin by identifying some tensions between the game as designed—and the gameplay it can promote—and some philosophical learning objectives. We then describe ways of using *Reacting* in the service of such objectives while avoiding the pitfalls we identify.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in using *Reacting* for teaching philosophy is that the content and skills it most overtly emphasizes and supports are not precisely philosophical. This was evident

to instructors (and was also noted by students) who observed that, as designed, *Reacting* seems best suited to teaching history. In the courses we observed, instructors' explicit attempts to focus on philosophical skills as the game unfolded were more effective for advanced students in the small, upper-division elective course than in the compulsory, lower-division course. One explanation for this outcome is that even though *Reacting* provides students with ample opportunities for practicing philosophical skills during gameplay, students must first learn those skills before they can practice them well. Instructors may be justified in expecting students to have the requisite skills to practice collaborating and communicating during the game, but students who are new to philosophy are unlikely to have the necessary skills for an implementation that strongly emphasizes philosophical skills such as argumentation. With this in mind, we suggest that instructors interested in helping their students develop philosophical skills augment the setup phase by, for example, teaching basic argumentation before the first game session. Of course, students won't master evaluating and formulating arguments prior to the game, but introducing these in advance allows using that framework throughout the game. Then, these skills can serve as a basis for formative assessments during the game.

Making and Responding to Arguments: Role Constraints and Rhetoric

Our observations indicate that *Reacting's* design may incline some students to adhere more strictly to their roles than desired. That is, during the games many students tended to resist straying much from their role sheets, and perhaps understandably: *Reacting* doesn't specify the extent to which students *can* change their minds without departing too far from their roles. While inhabiting one's role is a core game element, hewing too closely to their roles leaves students unable to respond to the arguments presented by their classmates. As a result, instead of evaluating the arguments raised in

gameplay, some students based their votes solely on what their role sheets prompted. Doing so is in tension with the philosophical aim of letting the better force of reason win out.²⁴

On their surveys, 12% of students described how this ambiguity impacted their experience. For example, one student reports feeling disengaged, writing: “Personally, since my opinions were given to me, I wouldn’t even bother listening to the speeches because I had already formed an opinion based on my character on the particular issue at hand.” Others became frustrated. A student explains, “at times I felt quite frustrated with the process because it seemed that all my efforts were futile and ultimately worthless . . . I believe that the game should ultimately be more balanced where orally delivering arguments helps promote more influence in the game, which should also encourage participation.” Another student expresses a similar sentiment: “A lot of the time the speeches and arguments felt really pointless as everyone just voted off of their role sheet, and especially as a conservative faction member that felt really bad. Because our arguments took a lot more effort to make (not many of our arguments hold up very well today) it felt really unrewarding.”

As these comments suggest, strictly following roles can undercut the need to strategize, deliberate, and make good arguments thereby threatening the features that make *Reacting* attractive for teaching philosophy. *Reacting* includes a partial remedy to these concerns by including Indeterminates, who are open to persuasion regarding many agenda items. The factions are supposed to convince Indeterminates, or other players, to vote their way, though it doesn’t explicitly instruct them to do so by offering arguments. Interestingly, where in-game speeches did sway students, rhetoric, rather than reason, appeared to do the work in some cases. That the game might incentivize rhetoric over sound reasoning is also worrisome for teaching philosophy.

These observations imply that instructors would do well to encourage careful argumentation generally, and as a primary means of recruiting Indeterminates. To emphasize this part of the game, instructors might increase the number of Indeterminates to make negotiations between them and

factions even more crucial for winning the game. Or, they might use *Reacting* as an engaging way for students to *practice* argumentation within a class that *teaches* those skills, rather than relying on *Reacting* to play both roles. In any case, instructors should plan to spend time unpacking what happened in the game. In cases where rhetoric in-play provides greater pay-offs than well-reasoned arguments, instructors can facilitate discussions about those trends, evaluating them and, perhaps, even comparing them to contemporary politics. It should be noted that the game, as designed, provides instructors with an in-game remedy for incentivizing good gameplay in the form of good philosophy. As the rules make clear to instructors and students alike, instructors are free to award players additional delegates for good gameplay. Where students opt for rhetoric over reasoning, instructors are also free to deduct player delegates.

Disparate Challenges Assigned to Roles

The character-specific objectives and writing tasks *Reacting* assigns are somewhat uneven. Even if students have the same speaking and writing requirements in terms of quantity, their substance can vary considerably. Such differences may not be problematic in themselves, but our observations suggest that roles provide significantly different opportunities to learn philosophical content and practice skills. This led to two suboptimal consequences. First, not everyone in the class had the same opportunity to achieve the learning objectives the instructors emphasized. Second, some students' grades depended on demonstrating philosophical knowledge and skills to a lesser degree than others'. This was clear to instructors, but also apparent to some students. One student articulates this concern especially well:

Depending on the characters we were given, it seemed like there was a huge difference in focal point between the characters and this affected the relevance of the characters with the philosophical texts we learned in class. For instance, I played a financial advisor in the National Assembly whose goal was to educate the members on the economic issues that France was facing at the time. It was very clear in the character role sheet that the character argued based on statistical facts and reasoning rather than philosophical reasoning or rhetoric.

This made it quite difficult when writing my essays since it was mandatory to reference a philosophical text to support my character's claim. Had I been given a character that was a member of the church or a Jacobin, it would have been much easier and straightforward to connect the philosophical texts we learned in class to the character's idea and claims.

This type of issue may not arise in classes that don't focus on argumentation or other common philosophical aims, since roles supply roughly equal opportunities to engage, collaborate and enjoy the game. Using *Reacting* effectively in a philosophy class that focuses on such aims may require adjustments to even out opportunities for students across roles to practice philosophical skills while playing the game. Alternatively, students could play two games or an abridged version of the same game twice to balance role demands across a given course.

3.3 Further Potential

The limitations we identify don't register when success is measured according to general active-learning criteria. That is encouraging for instructors aiming for these outcomes, but philosophers aiming to inculcate the skills we have been emphasizing may prefer to frame *Reacting* differently to better suit their needs. Just as existing studies do not depict the same limitations, they also do not demonstrate *Reacting's* potential for teaching philosophy.

Among other things, philosophy pedagogy concerns argumentation and, more specifically, arguments regarding philosophical issues. *Reacting* offers a platform for students to engage with philosophical issues in practical contexts by advancing and evaluating verbal and written arguments. It's rare for students to be engaged in argumentation to such a high-degree during traditional philosophy classes. *Reacting* is flexible enough for instructors to adapt the game in ways that capitalize on its potential to further their aims. What we have suggested so far are modest supplements to use alongside *Reacting*. Next, we suggest some possible in-game mechanisms that require more substantial alterations, but may positively contribute to *Reacting's* success overall, and especially within philosophy courses.

3.4 Suggested Variations

There are surely many possible variations philosophers could develop to build on *Reacting*'s potential for teaching philosophical content and argumentation in an engaging, effective way. We offer two suggestions. First, using alternative writing assignments that take advantage of *Reacting*'s strengths to facilitate in-depth textual analysis and argumentation skills. Second, player objectives, a variant that preserves *Reacting*'s collaborative element while attaching more importance to individual performance. Though these certainly are not necessary for the game to succeed, they may be appealing to some philosophers and, at the very least, effectively demonstrates its plasticity.

Alternative Writing Assignments

To further emphasize crafting rigorous, strategic arguments to particular audiences, instructors using *Reacting* could assign strategy papers that ask students to explain how they plan to argue for particular claims. Writing about argumentative strategy encourages students to think about what their audience is willing to accept and argue from shared premises or provide an alternative argument that might work for one audience but not another. For example, convincing conservative Catholics to vote against the monarchy likely requires a different argument than convincing atheists.

Once they deliver their arguments in the game, students can *evaluate* their own strategy. *Reacting* provides students with the rare opportunity to see how their arguments affect their audience. Once players deliver all arguments and vote, they can reflect on the degree to which their strategy succeeded and the reasons behind that outcome—did they miscalculate? Did the voters vote irrationally? Did other factions provide a better argument? Did they miscalculate? Who was convinced? Strategically producing multiple arguments for the same claim and reflecting on their efficacy can enrich student learning while deepening their understanding of how arguments are

constructed and how context matters for effective argumentation. Introducing this dimension may foster even greater philosophical sophistication in student work while using *Reacting*.

To maximize the benefits of this variation, arguments must be effective within the game. Supporting a shift toward more strategic argumentation may require encouraging greater flexibility for players to exercise judgment. To ensure that students are attentive and responsive to arguments, instructors could assign brief written responses where students explain why their character would accept/reject the arguments offered under the circumstances of the game. Requiring students to justify their votes in writing explicitly highlights evaluating arguments and reflecting on further implications that may stem from voting outcomes. For example, an Indeterminate may judge that a Jacobin has offered the best argument but decide that the potential ramifications of voting accordingly provide better reasons to either abstain or vote another way. Because voting explanations challenge students to think carefully about how to vote and articulate their reasoning, it may help to reduce temptation toward voting arbitrarily or in response to passionate rhetoric. Further, instructors wishing to emphasize argumentation could use these assignments as formative assessments that help students evaluate their own argumentative strategies.

Instructors can also use writing assignments to capitalize on *Reacting*'s capacity to promote in-depth textual analysis. *Reacting* invites students to engage with important texts and to see the role of these texts in critical moments in history. Students learn how texts were interpreted and used by historical figures and groups. Recall that students primarily use the texts as their roles instruct, writing in-character newspaper articles and giving speeches. We observed some high-quality newspaper articles that were written entirely in character yet exhibited a high degree of philosophical rigor and offered lucid and thought-provoking interpretations of class texts, especially in the upper-division course. Nevertheless, some instructors may want to facilitate even more in-depth

interpretive work. *Reacting* provides ample opportunities, although assignments written in students' own voices may present more options than in-character writing alone.

In reading the texts, students can analyze competing interpretations from the perspectives of multiple characters, the beliefs or commitments underlying those disagreements, and whether the most popular or influential interpretations are also the most plausible. Discussing and evaluating competing interpretations can occur before the game in the setup phase if instructors choose to prioritize rigorous textual analysis. Doing so could help solidify the theoretical basis that students then rely on during the game. But in-game variations are also available. As students familiarize themselves with their roles and relevant texts during the game, instructors can assign essays focused on textual analysis.

For instance, students might be asked to interpret a central idea from the text on their own and compare it to their character's interpretation and use of it, or they might vigorously defend their character's interpretation with textual evidence. For example, in *Revolution*, Jacobins interpret Rousseau's conception of the "general will" as the output of a democratic process, or majority preference. Accepting the democratic conception has led some to paint Rousseau as a totalitarian democrat²⁵ Students may associate Rousseau with the reign of terror that ensued after the revolution, thinking that his work can justify an elite imposing violence in the name of the general will. There are other plausible readings of Rousseau which avoid the potentially unappealing implications of the Jacobin reading.²⁶ Those concerned with adjudicating textual disputes and inculcating analytic skills may find it profitable to explore such dynamics. Diagnosing differences between historical interpretations may be especially edifying.

Alternatively, students can analyze and evaluate the interpretation that motivates another faction's position. Doing so might complement strategy papers by compelling students to employ

resources that will help them formulate their argumentative strategies. Textual analysis papers also offer opportunities for students to practice reconstructing complex arguments in their own words.

Since adding these alternative writing assignments alongside the default newspaper assignments may overburden students with writing, reducing or eliminating the latter may be advisable in classes that pursue this option. Even with more philosophically-oriented instructions for newspapers, alternative writing assignments may be more effective for some learning outcomes common to philosophy classes—especially in lower-division courses. Additionally, it's likely that assigning essays that more closely resemble the type of writing philosophers usually assign will make it easier to assess the degree to which students are meeting philosophical benchmarks while playing *Reacting*. Further, such writing assignments provide the instructor with more resources for determining grades. In *Reacting*, participation carries significantly more weight than in traditional courses, but it can be difficult to track during lively game sessions. Strategy papers, voting explanations, and textual analysis papers may offer helpful insight into nonverbal forms of participation. Though these suggestions mostly involve writing out of character, they facilitate reflection that may help increase learning and retention while potentially capitalizing on the greater course-engagement that the game generates.

Adding Player Objectives

Introducing an additional set of *player* objectives to accompany *Reacting's* character or faction objectives can serve multiple purposes, some specific to philosophy courses and some more generally desirable. As we conceive of them, player objectives are student-oriented rather than character-oriented. They reward students for participating in important ways and accomplishing tasks that require engagement and support gameplay whether or not they contribute to their character-oriented victory goals. For example, one player objective might be to achieve something through negotiation. Students get points for this if they convince another player to vote a certain

way. Another might be for students in factions to take charge of strategy for a game session. Player objectives may be individual or collaborative. Importantly, philosophers can use player objectives as an in-game mechanism for requiring students to practice the philosophical skills they wish to emphasize.

Satisfying player objectives can be another way to earn participation points and “win” in some sense. Adding player objectives opens the opportunity to award participation points for achieving some set number of goals that might involve victory objectives, player objectives, or a combination of both. Or, more radically, winning the game overall could be reconfigured to require some combination of victory objectives and aggregated player objectives. Taking this route assuages some student complaints canvassed above by giving students reasons to stay engaged throughout the game regardless of their role or prospects for achieving their victory objectives. If winning requires player objectives, the group with the greatest historically-imposed competitive disadvantage could still win the game if they stay engaged and put in more effort than other groups. In this way, player objectives may be useful for those using *Reacting* in general.

Player objectives may also be useful for reining in some gameplay strategies that might help students succeed in-game, but at the cost of common aims in teaching philosophy. For instance, players might be able to win votes using strong rhetoric absent sound reasoning, but if player objectives reward high-quality arguments over rhetoric, then students would have an incentive to avoid relying on rhetoric where good arguments are available. Further, such objectives would provide opportunities for instructors to intervene or provide feedback to students where their gameplay strays from philosophical learning objectives.

Adding player objectives can provide two further benefits. First, it can help to mitigate player frustration regarding game outcomes, including those determined by dice rolls, which some students reported.²⁷ Even if these frustrations don't necessarily indicate a problem, the game goes best when

students play to win and some were discouraged from doing so because much depends on dice rolls and other factors beyond their control.²⁸ Player objectives are unlikely to fend off player frustrations entirely, but they may encourage continued participation for those whose victory objectives are unattainable due to events in the game. Second, player objectives allow students who are shy or nervous about public speaking opportunities to substantively advance their participation via means other than simply giving more speeches or speaking up during the game.²⁹ Not only does that encourage those players, but it offers a way for them to contribute to their group's success.³⁰ Player objectives are responsive to these concerns.

4. Conclusion.

Instructors of philosophy have long known that games can be an effective pedagogical tool. In political philosophy, for example, there is a tradition of teaching using games such as The Hobbes Game, The Rawls Game, The Nozick game, etc.³¹ *Reacting* is more complex than these and other existing philosophy games. Existing games commonly last for a class session or less and the roles students play are generic, e.g. a person in the state of nature or behind the veil of ignorance. *Reacting* is truly role-*immersive* in that it sees students play a richly defined individual role across multiple class sessions, against the backdrop of a dynamic historical setting. Moreover, it arrives ready to play in a user-friendly format for both players and game masters. Philosophy instructors interested in using active-learning methods to make students better speakers, writers and listeners, particularly as they engage complex and intellectually alien texts, should consider *Reacting* games. Instructors primarily concerned to train students in philosophical argumentation may also find that *Reacting* games provide flexible tools, which can be enhanced with the amendments we have outlined above. It is a testament to the power and flexibility of the pedagogy that it can advance these and many other educational goals.

Notes

¹ Authorship is equal. Names listed in alphabetical order.

² “Active-learning” refers to pedagogies that place students in an active, participatory role. It is compared to standard methods based on lectures and independent tests and essays wherein students are “passive” recipients of information. Some studies have identified positive effects on student-learning. See Scott Freeman, Sarah L. Eddy, Miles McDonough, Michelle K. Smith, Nnadozie Okoroafor, Hannah Jordt, and Mary Pat Wenderoth. "Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 23 (2014): 8410-8415; Cari Crumly, Pamela Dietz, and Sarah d'Angelo. *Pedagogies for Student-Centered Learning: Online and On-Ground*. (Fortress Press, 2014).

³ Advocates of active-learning pedagogies often recommend games as an instructional strategy. See Russel Francis, “Towards a Theory of Games Based Pedagogy.” In *JISC Innovating e-Learning 2006: Transforming Learning Experiences online conference*. (2006) URL: <http://www.onlineconference.net/jisc/content/Francis%20-%20games%20based%20pedagogy.pdf>; Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Bente Meyer, and Birgitte Holm Sorenson, eds, *Serious Games in Education: A Global Perspective*. (Aarhus & Copenhagen: Aarhus University Press, 2011); Markus Montola and Jaako Stenros, eds., *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*. (Helsinki: Ropecon, 2004); Steven Stroessner, Laurie Susser Beckerman, and Alexis Whittaker, “All the World’s a Stage? Consequences of a Role-Playing Pedagogy on Psychological Factors and Writing and Rhetorical Skill in College Undergraduates,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101 (2009): 605-620.

⁴ The first course in this series was also a philosophy course for nearly all students. What’s more, many students had the same instructor for both the course observed and the previous course in the series. Of the students who took the survey, a slim margin (roughly 2%) didn’t take this first philosophy course because they had fulfilled the relevant requirement via other coursework.

⁵ We’ll focus on particularities of *Revolution* in the classes we observed, but *Reacting* games are similar in structure. It is reasonable to expect similar strengths and weaknesses, so the adjustments we recommend should transfer to other games.

⁶ This reflects a limitation of using *Reacting* to teach philosophy that we address in section 3.

⁷ Students were offered modest extra credit for completing the anonymous survey, which was distributed electronically and collected by someone without ties to the course. It was approved by our university’s Institutional Review Board.

⁸ Finding adequate comparison groups is notoriously difficult in educational field research. A common strategy asks students to compare their experience with a *Reacting* course to other courses through focus groups or surveys. For example see Matthew Weidenfeld and Kenneth E. Fernandez. "Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement? An Empirical Evaluation of the Use of Historical Simulations in Teaching Political Theory," *Journal of Political Science Education* 13(1) (2017): 46-61. Findings from studies using this method are limited by the fact that courses students have taken previously likely differ in many important ways beyond the method under investigation—not to mention differences in students’ academic histories that may impact comparisons. Alternatively, researchers, including Stroessner, et al. “All the World’s a Stage”, compare courses operating simultaneously with different students. Still, students are not randomly assigned. Differences between students in *Reacting* classes and students in comparison classes make it impossible to isolate the variable (i.e. *Reacting*) entirely. This dilutes the results to some degree. See Nancy Cartwright and

Jeremy Hardie. *Evidence-Based Policy: A Practical Guide to Doing it Better*. (Oxford University Press, 2012); Adrian Simpson, "The Misdirection of Public Policy: Comparing and Combining Standardised Effect Sizes." *Journal of Educational Policy* 32(4) (2017): 450-466.

⁹ Many students had the same instructor for both courses in the Ethics and Society Sequence.

¹⁰ Mark Higbee, "How Reacting to the Past Games" Made Me Want to Come to Class and Learn": An Assessment of the Reacting Pedagogy at EMU, 2007-2008." *The scholarship of teaching and learning at EMU* 2, no. 1 (2009): 4; Ann Davison and Sue Lantz Goldhaber. "Integration, Socialization, Collaboration: Inviting Native and Non-Native English Speakers into the Academy through 'Reacting to the Past.'" In *Reclaiming the Public University: Conversations on General & Liberal Education*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Tracy Lightcap, "Creating political order: maintaining student engagement through reacting to the past." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42(1) (2009): 175-179; Weidenfeld and Fernandez (2017).

¹¹ Stroessner, et al. "All the World's a Stage?", observed several classes most of which were electives, though they also observed multiple compulsory classes that used *Reacting* at a different university.

¹² Weidenfeld and Fernandez "Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement?"; Stroessner et al. "All the World's a Stage?". Davidson and Goldhaber "integration, Socialization, Collaboration".

¹³ Sixty-seven percent of respondents spoke favorably of *Reacting's* collaborative elements within their open-ended responses and over half reported finding *Reacting* fun largely because of collaboration with peers. Less than 1% of respondents found their class with *Reacting* to be the same or less collaborative than other philosophy classes.

¹⁴ Stroessner, et al. "All the World's a Stage?" found that *Reacting* diversifies student experience and produces psychological benefits and improves general academic skills. Notably, students' rhetorical skills did improve, as did their self-esteem.

¹⁵ We emphasize *Reacting's* potential here, given that survey results were markedly more mixed on this score than in the other trends we note.

¹⁶ Even students who judged that they had learned comparatively less with *Reacting* than conventional methods identified at least one dimension in which they thought *Reacting* did better than other philosophy classes. Of respondents, less than 10% (15 students) report learning less than in other philosophy courses, and in other non-philosophy courses, than in their course using *Reacting*. All 15 identified at least one other specific way in which it was superior to the prior philosophy coursework. This suggests that even students who review *Reacting* less positively drew benefits from it.

¹⁷ Two thirds of survey respondents mentioned practical skills in the open-ended portion of the survey without prompting.

¹⁸ Students may not make these connections on their own—they aren't highlighted by the gamebook. Communicating *Reacting's* philosophical value can occur during setup when instructors introduce students to the game. As we discuss in 3.4, in our estimation more might be required in this regard than is provided by the game as designed, depending on the pedagogical aims of the philosophy course in which *Reacting* is used.

¹⁹ This finding is consistent with the literature which suggests that it can lead to greater empathy with others and with historical perspectives. See Stroessner, et al. "All the World's a Stage?".

²⁰ Nussbaum, quoted in Carnes *Minds*, 218. Mark Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. (Harvard University Press, 2014).

²¹ Nussbaum, quoted in Carnes *Minds*, 219.

²² Ibid.

²³ Stroessner et al. “All the World’s a Stage?”

²⁴ It also undermines the value of the competitive elements of the game. Part of what is engaging about the game is that it’s not mere re-enactment: it’s competitive. It ceases to be competitive if students don’t innovate while embodying their roles—we all know how it turned out in history. Knowing how it ends reduces motivation to play well.

²⁵ Rousseau has, for example, been interpreted as advancing a totalitarian democratic interpretation of Rousseau. Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952). For a discussion of Rousseau’s legacy, see Christopher Bertram, “Rousseau’s Legacy in Two Conceptions of the General Will: Democratic and Transcendent,” *The Review of Politics* 74 (3) (2012): 403-419.

²⁶ Bertram “Rousseau’s Legacy”.

²⁷ Though this sort of frustration seems *prima facie* negative, it’s a possible sign of how effectively *Reacting* engages students—after all, as Weidenfeld and Fernandez “Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement?” point out, players are unlikely to feel real frustration about the outcome of a game in which they aren’t invested. Stroessner, et al. “All the World’s a Stage?” also appreciate the lessons students draw from realizing they are not the locus of control.

²⁸ Only 9% of survey respondents complained about dice rolls, but it was a common theme in post-mortem sessions following the games we observed. The game does attempt to mitigate some randomness by modifying dice roll outcomes in response to a range of player accomplishments.

²⁹ In our survey 8% identified as shy and found verbal participation taxing and anxiety-provoking to a degree that was detrimental to their performance, in their estimation.

³⁰ This is especially important for those students for whom English is a second-language, who reported difficulty speaking during the game due to insecurity or the fast-paced debate. Without prompting, 4% of survey respondents identified as ESL students and reported feeling left behind because the discussions moved too quickly. Notably, 4% of respondents counts for only a small portion of ESL students in the study.

³¹ John Immerwahr, “The Hobbes Game.” *Teaching Philosophy* 1(4) (1976): 435-439; Ronald Green, “The Rawls Game.” *Teaching Philosophy* 9 (1) (1986):51-60; Galen Barry, “The Nozick Game.” *Teaching Philosophy* 40 (1) (2017): 1-10.

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