

REACTING TO THE PAST

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REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS FOR NEW GAME DESIGNS October 2008

I. OVERVIEW

The Reacting Advisory Board (RAB)¹ has allocated funds to promote the development of new Reacting games, as part of its general education initiative funded by the Teagle Foundation.²

Because the RAB hopes that Reacting can someday fulfill the broad curricular purposes customarily associated with the distribution system of general education³, we particularly seek to promote games that pertain to content areas currently not represented in the Reacting curriculum, including mathematics, the social sciences (economics, sociology, anthropology), the fine arts (art, music, and literature [exclusive of drama]), and psychology. Nevertheless, we will consider proposals for games on nearly any subject. A good game in a familiar field would be preferable to a mediocre game in a targeted area. For descriptions of all the current games in the “Reacting to the Past” Series and in development, please visit <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/curriculum.htm>.

The RAB expects to award mini-grants of \$2,000 for up to six design teams. Given funding constraints, it is unlikely that all successful proposals will receive financial support. However, the RAB encourage designers to submit their game-development concepts even if they do not seek to receive a monetary grant from the RAB. All games designated as “approved for development,” regardless of their funding status, will be accorded their own space in the “Game Development” section of the Faculty Forum (<http://beatl.barnard.columbia.edu/forums/index.php>).

II. PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

Prior to beginning their proposal, applicants should review the “Evaluation Criteria” and “Sample Developmental Sequence” sections below.

Proposals may be as short as four to five pages; or they may include sections of a game that is already well-advanced. Those seeking funding should indicate the developmental status in their proposal.

¹ RAB members include Martin Braun (Queens College, CUNY), John Burney (Drake University), Mark C. Carnes (Barnard College), Larry Carver (University of Texas at Austin), J. Patrick Coby (Smith College), John Eby (Loras College), Nancy Felson (University of Georgia), Frank Kirkpatrick (Trinity College), Michael Pettersen (Washington and Jefferson College), and Richard Gid Powers (College of Staten Island, CUNY).

² For further information on Teagle’s “Fresh Thinking” In Liberal Education Program, see <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/grantmaking/education.aspx>.

³ For a summary of current thinking on general education, the RAB recommends: Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton UP, 2006) and, briefer, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007), at http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/GlobalCentury_final.pdf.

The proposal should consist of:

- 1) Cover sheet indicating:
 - a) The title of the proposed game design;
 - b) An abstract (250 words);
 - c) The developments status of the game (initial, advanced); and
 - d) Contact information for the designer(s).
- 2) Narrative describing the intellectual rationale for the proposed game, which includes the following components:
 - a) A summary of the game and an outline of the historical setting (1 page);
 - b) A discussion of the key intellectual collisions and textual foundations that will inform the student debates (1–2 pages);
 - c) A brief outline of the curricular elements (pertaining to general education outcomes) that the game would likely address (2–3 paragraphs);
 - d) An explication of the most serious challenges the designers expect to confront (1 page); and
 - e) A statement of the qualifications of the designer(s) (2–3 paragraphs).
- 3) Bibliography of primary and secondary sources to be addressed in the game.
- 4) Work Plan outlining rough deadlines for completion of the game (refer to sample developmental sequence below).

III. SUBMISSION, REVIEW, AND SELECTION PROCESS

Proposals should be submitted via e-mail to Dana Johnson (djohnson@barnard.edu) by November 15, 2008.

All submissions will be circulated among the RAB for review. During the review process, the RAB may contact applicants for further elaboration of certain design elements. Applicants will be notified of the result of their proposal via e-mail on or before **December 15, 2008**.

IV. EVALUATION CRITERIA: ELEMENTS OF A GOOD REACTING GAME

In preparing a proposal, designers should consider the following elements that the RAB believes constitute the foundations of a good Reacting game.

Not Just a Simulation

Reacting differs from the simulations that have been a commonplace of political science and economics research, and of graduate instruction in business and law schools. In Reacting, students do not apply the skills they have learned to “solve” some problem found in the past; rather, they are induced to set aside

their existing preconceptions and immerse themselves in ways of thinking markedly different from those with which they are familiar.

Intellectual Weight

Big ideas should be at the core of a Reacting game. Students may forget the historical particulars of any Reacting game, or even “get them wrong”—that is, push the actual history in an ahistorical direction. But in a good game, students will learn the ideas on which the game is based and retain these long after the historical particulars have been forgotten. Designers should therefore address the following questions: Does the proposed game encompass a significant intellectual collision? Are those ideas rooted in texts of sufficient depth and complexity to inform student positions and papers?

Intellectual Symmetry

For the collision to generate real intellectual sparks, both sides of an argument should have a decent chance of taking positions and writing papers of comparable depth and complexity. The issue must be one that allows students to understand how a paradigm that seems quite wrong to us today could in its day have been persuasive and hard to overthrow. For instance, students are not normally monarchists, but they can find strong arguments supporting that position in Burke; and while Aristotle’s physics has long since been abandoned, his theories have strong appeal, because they are so thoroughly grounded on everyday experience. For this reason, designers should always consider whether the proposed subject matter provides students in all major factions with solid textual or intellectual foundations on which to base their arguments.

Liminality

A Reacting game should elicit an emotional response. That this does occur has been demonstrated by psychologist Steven Stroessner’s multi-campus study of Reacting students and control groups on four different campuses. He found that the experience of taking a single Reacting course changes the psychological dynamics of students in several interesting ways. (Copies of Stroessner’s study are available in the “Course Design, Curriculum, and Pedagogy” section of the Faculty Forum). We do not know how a Reacting game generates this psychological transformation. But the RAB believes that a major distinctive component of any Reacting game is liminality. “Liminality” is the transitional state, as observed in rites of passage in various cultures, whereby people are jolted from their usual intellectual and emotional moorings. This allows them to think about familiar things in new ways. Liminal institutions are often characterized by status inversions, playfulness, intense drama, absurdity, and often a combination of all of these. A good game makes a conscious effort to convey to students that they will not just be debating ideas, but that they will also be moving into a weird and even wonderful realm of play, emotion, imagination, and drama. A good Reacting game consequently does much to signal to students that they are entering a very different world from their own.

Designers impart liminality to a Reacting game by incorporating historically accurate features that convey this differentness. Sometimes the liminal features are superficial, such as the use of costumes or sets to evoke an historical setting, or arranging seats in a classroom to suggest the semi-circular configuration of the Pnyx in Greece or the linear pews of a church in Puritan Boston. Sometimes the liminal features are ritualistic, as in the sacrifice of a pig in ancient Athens, the kowtowing by Hanlin academicians to the Wanli emperor, the singing of songs in revolutionary France or of “God Save the King” in the Royal Society in Darwin’s England. Creativity is itself an element of liminality; the sole restriction here is that the liminal devices be rooted in historical fact.

Historical Authenticity

Any world evoked by Reacting is false, often hilariously so. Yet designers should base their game on the actual past. Designers may take some liberties with history—nearly all Reacting games include counterfactual premises—but the classroom should insofar as possible mirror some actual historical reality. That is, a Reacting game would not include a debate between Caesar and Socrates, or Mao

Zedong and Calvin. Nor should it be set in Lewis' *Narnia* or aboard Melville's *Pequod*. The game, though an imaginary contrivance, should be built on mostly factual, synchronous history.

Indeterminacy

Because Reacting is an intellectual collision, some students must function as neutral adjudicators who help determine who wins. Reacting faculty have reported that students often write and speak more persuasively because they are doing so for their peers. For that reason, the best “judges” of the intellectual debates are students who have been cast in the role of “indeterminates”—i.e., they are substantially free to be persuaded by what they hear. On the other hand, purely indeterminate roles are often less fun and engaged than the faction roles. How to generate indeterminacy is a matter of art: the “pure” indeterminate role can plunge students into research and reflection and force partisan students to sharpen arguments; the pseudo-indeterminate role (which gives the illusion of indeterminacy but actually pursues independent goals) can enliven the game and introduce new levels of complexity; factions that are defined loosely combine the social advantages of group work with the possibility for independent (and indeterminate) initiatives; highly individualized roles, with thorough scripting, can ensure that students behave in unpredictable (i.e., indeterminate) ways.

Few designers resolve their approach to indeterminacy at the outset; but the RAB encourages game designers to devote a couple of preliminary sentences to this concept in their proposal.

Special Point on Game Length and Complexity

Most of the published Reacting games are long; and with each revision, games acquire more depth and complexity. This may make them less accessible to new faculty and harder to fit into the time constraints of some courses. Many faculty seek shorter, simpler games; some call for “mini” games of two to three classes. While encouraging designers to think in terms of big games, the RAB will give full consideration to shorter games as well, especially those focusing on a single text and a fairly brief historical moment.

V. SAMPLE DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE

Stage 1: Getting a New Game in Playable Shape

Designers should determine the main intellectual positions and the texts; assign positions to factions; devise indeterminate roles; and create the scaffolding for the game. A game can be played by a designer with his or her own students when it is still fairly thin. Having students play even an incomplete game contributes to its development: student questions and suggestions greatly accelerate development.

Stage 2: Revising the Stage 1 Game

If the changes are significant, the designers may wish to play the game again with their own students; if not, they may move directly to Stage 3.

Stage 3: Posting the Game on the faculty forum

After testing the draft game with their students, the designers should submit the game files—student booklet, roles, and instructor's manual—to the Reacting program administrator (i.e., Dana Johnson) for posting in the “Game Development” section of the online Faculty Forum. This allows other faculty to download the materials for use with their students. Designers should encourage such faculty to post frequent questions, suggestions, and illustrative student papers. Over the course of several semesters, the game will grow and evolve.

Stage 4: Drafting a Comprehensive Instructor's Manual

Often faculty who have designed a game fail to appreciate how much guidance is needed by faculty who are new to that game. Also, designers often get in the habit of providing their own students with valuable assistance that new faculty might not have readily available. Therefore, this guidance must be written into the roles and the instructor's manual.

Stage 5: Submitting the Game to RAB

When the designers believe that their game is substantially developed, they may present it to the RAB. The RAB will then "learn" the game by playing it collectively at a conference. Based on this review, the RAB may request more revisions or it may recommend that the game move to Stage 6.

Stage 6: Preparing the Game for Publication

Once approved for publication, the RAB will instruct Longman/Pearson to issue a standard Reacting contract to the designers. The author's share of the royalties is 10% of net income. If a game has multiple authors/designers, the team will decide how to allocate royalties (i.e., 2% for A, 7% for B, and 1% for C). The designer(s)/author(s) will then work with the Reacting administrators to prepare the files for submission to Pearson/Longman. This process includes (1) manuscript formatting, copyediting, and proofreading; and (2) identification of any reprint permissions necessary for copyrighted material included in the game book, placement of images, and creation of front and back matter for the published game. Longman will acquire the permissions, file for copyright, and publish the book.

Stage 7: Shifting the Game's Placement in Faculty Forum

Once the game is published, it will be moved out of the "Game Development" section of the Faculty Forum and included in the "Reacting to the Past Series" section. Designers will likely receive more faculty questions and suggestions—and more opportunities to thicken roles and modify the instructor's manual. Because these will mostly appear online, they can be revised nearly continuously.

Stage 8: Revising the Published Games

Longman/Pearson has expressed a willingness to republish Reacting games fairly frequently. Designers who seek to publish a new edition should be aware that it takes time to fit a game into the Longman/Pearson production schedule.

Games that Are Not Endorsed

The RAB will recommend for publication only those games that have attained the standard it endorses for the Reacting to the Past Series. Game designers own the rights to their games until they sign an authors' contract with Longman/Pearson. If the RAB eventually declines to publish a Reacting game, even one that has received Reacting financial support, the designers of that game are free to do what they wish with it.