

## **Guidelines for Game Masters Addressing Student and Faculty Discomfort in Reacting Games**

### **The Purpose and Goals of These Guidelines**

The Reacting Consortium Board embraces the historical tensions and conflicts that are inherent to the Reacting pedagogy. We recognize that historical conflict and our understanding of it shapes our response to events and decisions that resonate in contemporary society. We seek to promote deep reading and understanding of complex evidence that is the essence of critical thinking, but we also are keenly aware that some issues are more difficult to manage than others. They include stances often thought to be morally reprehensible in modern life: racism, defenses of slavery, fascism, imperialist or triumphal views of a national history, and sexism are the most common. Additionally, some students have difficulty dealing with issues around social class, paternalism, morals, and religious beliefs that differ from their own.

The games take place in a wide variety of classroom settings on an equally wide variety of campuses. We have discovered that it is difficult to predict what may cause discomfort in a given game or even a particular iteration of a game. This is complicated by each institution's religious affiliation, racial/ethnic demographics, mission, values, culture, and geography. Even when you have a good sense of your classroom, the mix of specific student personalities may cause issues to arise that would not ordinarily.

The advice offered here is neither comprehensive nor complete. You, as a classroom instructor and game master (GM), know your students best. We also acknowledge that there is no one solution for any given issue or situation that may arise during a game. Discomfort can be experienced when you least expect it, making it very difficult to anticipate all issues that may strike a chord (or a nerve) with a particular student or faculty.

These guidelines are designed to be flexible and to maximize the voices of experienced instructors in support of those who are newer to Reacting, new to a particular game, or just facing an unusual situation. We expect that new scenarios and solutions will arise on a regular basis. If you would like to contribute to these guidelines either with a new question or an alternative solution/advisory, please contact the chair of the inclusion committee: [reacting@barnard.edu](mailto:reacting@barnard.edu).

## FAQs

### ***BROAD CONCERNS***

#### ***Why is conflict part of Reacting games?***

Reacting games revolve around important turning points and decisions that shaped individual lives and society as a whole. Almost inevitably, the events dealt with in Reacting games and the structure of those games will generate difficult discussions. The goal, however, is to guide students through the discussions in a way that teaches how the present emerges out of complex decisions made in response to particular historical moments.

#### ***What kind of conflicts do Reacting games typically include?***

In order to immerse students in the past, games require them to reflect historical points of view when they are speaking and writing. We have identified racist language, sexist ideologies, ethnocentric values, homophobic ideals, and calls for religious discrimination as examples of issues that created controversy in both historical contexts and the present day. While this list is not exclusive, these are issues that have created known student discomfort in the past.

These controversies can manifest through visual symbols as well as written and spoken work. Visual symbols can be especially powerful and troubling, not to mention difficult to manage outside the classroom. For this reason, we encourage instructors to think very strategically about how to support the use of visual symbols in a way that is appropriate for the context of your own classroom and student needs.

For example, the French Revolution game might prompt certain students to create images of powerful figures who have been beheaded by a guillotine. Instructors might consider engaging their classes in an explicit conversation about how viewing images of dead or mutilated bodies might impact students differently. This framing can allow students to think more empathetically about the impacts of the images they create. After discussing the options with their students, GMs may decide to prohibit this sort of imagery altogether.

Typically, what heightens controversy to the point where it is disruptive to the learning process is a student playing a role that includes representations of values that other students find repulsive.

#### ***What about the use of well-known symbols of oppression and racism?***

This is a complex and challenging issue that implicates questions of cultural sensitivity, historical relativism, academic freedom, and the emotional well-being of our students. The Reacting Consortium Board is committed to working closely with game authors on issues involving hateful discourse or symbolisms; these games have received extra attention and vetting, and they include substantial guidance for instructors on how to negotiate these issues. If you are using one of these games, please see the Instructor's Manual for additional information

and direction. Nevertheless, during set-up, instructors should discuss the use of such symbols within the game and restrictions on circulating such symbols beyond the game.

***What about the use of costumes (and props)?***

The use of costumes is a difficult matter. On the one hand, well-executed costumes can provide a useful element of liminality that enhances student engagement with a game. Appropriate costumes may also help players identify with their roles and help them speak and act through their roles. For those reasons and others, many designers encourage players to use full or partial costumes or symbols, sometimes using costumes as a game mechanic or making wearing a costume a victory objective.

On the other hand, inaccurate costumes may misrepresent the historical setting of a game. Costume elements may also serve to reinforce tropes about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, or other aspects of identity that work against a welcoming and inclusive educational experience. Certain iconography, for example symbols associated with white supremacist states or movements, may raise even more serious questions about inclusivity. Finally, obtaining costuming may impose an oppressive financial burden on some students, too many of whom struggle with basic needs of housing and food.

Instructors should refer to key principles regarding costuming. If an instructor encourages the use of costumes, pre-game set-up discussions should cover costuming “dos and don’ts,” with the purpose of identifying appropriate and inappropriate costumes and costume elements. When possible, instructors should consider the use of inexpensive symbols (ribbons, etc.) as markers of faction affinity, etc. When instructional budgets allow (hah!), instructors may provide costume elements for student use. Students should never be penalized when they are unable to obtain costumes or costume elements. Thus, appearing in costume should never be presented as essential to playing a role.

***What about the use of accents and dialects?***

Instructors should discourage the use of accents and dialects, as they are often subtle markers of regional, cultural, religious, and even class identity. Adopting a dialect or accent when presenting a role can degenerate into parody. It also risks unintentional offense to other players. However, by altering their voices with accents allows some students to distance themselves from roles that are responsible for presenting ideas that are clearly not their own. Again, the best way to deal with this is probably to raise the issue in a pre-game discussion.

***What should I do if the media inquires about tensions and conflicts in my game and what might I consider saying?***

Please contact the Reacting Consortium office for help and support before addressing media inquires: [reacting@barnard.edu](mailto:reacting@barnard.edu).

## ***PREPARING STUDENTS***

### ***How might I prepare students for role play and liminality overall but particularly during debates?***

There are many ways to prepare students for role play. First, check out the suggestions in the instructor's manual associated with the game you have chosen. You may download an introduction to the pedagogy from the game library at <https://reacting.barnard.edu/> or [https://reacting.barnard.edu/sites/default/files/inline/reacting\\_pedagogical\\_introduction-9-20-2010.pdf](https://reacting.barnard.edu/sites/default/files/inline/reacting_pedagogical_introduction-9-20-2010.pdf). The pedagogy manual discusses basics such as individual agency, working with counterfactual history, etc., and is a guide for students.

Stress to your students the importance of reading and studying key sources identified on their role sheets. The idea is to spark their historical imaginations and build empathy for their character. Some instructors try a micro game first to give students a chance to practice and others try role quizzes to ensure preparation.

Another source of discomfort that some students may experience is with the public speaking aspects of Reacting. Using and practicing with the “speaking skills videos” that are also in the Sample Materials for Instructors in the game library helps put students at ease for the public speaking aspects of their roles. Be sure to view and consider using the speaking skills videos and exercises available from Reacting at <http://reactingconsortiumlibrary.org/speaking>. <http://reactingconsortiumlibrary.org/>. This may help create the inclusive setting in which Reacting thrives.

The more comfortable your students are with public speaking, the more at ease and effective they will be during debates. However, this may also lead to situations where ideas that ought to be challenged within game play create discomfort. Your preparation, and even anticipation, is key to addressing this.

### ***How do I prepare students to play a game in which I anticipate some content might cause discomfort?***

Set-up and debriefing are key to the critical framing of Reacting games. During the set-up, emphasize that students are aiming to represent ideas in a particular historical context. This context may or may not be quite different from the context in which the game is taking place now. Encourage students to try to understand why their characters thought and acted in certain ways by directing their attention to the connections between the character's context and the student's role sheet. Make your learning outcomes clear and bring them up during the preparation to ensure students see the connections.

If the game content resonates with current events for your students, acknowledge the connection to current issues. Encourage students to discuss the initial connections they might see, and come back to those in the debrief as a good assessment exercise and measure of impact. If the

connections to current issues are clear and among your learning outcomes, consider devising a writing assignment that asks students to make those connections and talk about how understanding the historical issue has affected their understanding of current affairs.

### ***What if a student refuses to play a role?***

First, investigate the reasons for refusal. Make the learning outcomes clear—here’s what I expect you would learn from playing this role and here’s what the class will learn. Would some strategy such as reminding other players that you are simply playing your role alleviate the concern enough for the student to proceed?

Some students may need additional support balancing their own ideas with the task of expressing the character’s ideas. It is helpful to meet with them to devise strategies that will help them manage this task. Students themselves come up with effective strategies—brainstorm with them. One student who played a role that required a positive defense of slavery started major speeches with a reminder that this was her role. That small announcement allowed her to feel comfortable enough to proceed. Another approach could be for you as the GM to remind the students before classes begin that the session is in-role for everyone, or perhaps students may make use of rituals to mark everyone coming into and out of roles.

Your class may or may not agree that these particular strategies are necessary or helpful. Talk with your students during set-up and whenever a disruptive situation arises to come to an agreement about what is appropriate for the class as a whole.

If you can’t hit on a satisfactory approach, listen to your student. Think of ways to include the student. For example, you might create a new role with different tasks in the game for that student. Many games have roles that are less central to the debate that can be added at the last minute. Roles labeled “historian” or “reporter” function to allow a particularly reluctant student to still play but in more of an observer role. Even if not included in the game you chose, they can easily and quickly be created by you.

### ***How can I encourage productive argument and tension among my students?***

Reacting games ask students to debate and argue. For some students, Reacting will be their first experience with deliberate and productive argumentation, which is a skill that should be learned, practiced, and viewed as a form of effective communication. Introduce some of the basics of effective communication to students.

Guide students to be sure to allow time for others to talk. Really listen and process what others are saying. Be accurate with facts and concise whenever possible. Try to understand the opposition’s point of view—understanding the other side will strengthen the arguments. Use effective metaphors and stories where appropriate. Be sure to use the key texts—short quotes can be very helpful and persuasive. Unless their role sheet directs them otherwise, instruct them to try not to personalize the argument, etc.

It often helps to set up a quick, low-stakes debate during the preparation sessions and let them practice in pairs or groups of three. Sports are a good topic and can be regionalized to create some emotional stake in the debate that isn't overly divisive.

### ***How can I pre-empt unproductive controversy that prevents learning?***

Students will often self-regulate and do so effectively. But on rare occasions, a game might veer into controversy that becomes personal, is based on an incomplete understanding of the historical context, or just isn't going anywhere useful. To decrease the chances of this happening, strong preparation about the topics at the center of the game, practice in public speaking, and a low-stakes practice debate can be helpful.

If a game starts to head down a path that seems unproductive, as the instructor, you may want to start thinking about a preemptive intervention that addresses the specific situation at hand. Instructors have reported a number of interventions that operate in the context of the game and don't stop play. Sometimes the instructor makes a character disappear (unexpected death, a long trip out of the country, etc.) and brings the student back as a newly arrived character with modified goals and a different part to play.

You can introduce new historical facts into the game, such as: a war just broke out in X and a diplomatic mission needs to be organized, strike breakers have been spotted in town and a new strategy must be devised by labor, a huge storm destroys the armada and that changes everything. Be creative and historical. The Reacting Inclusion Committee encourages all game authors to incorporate suggested interventions, that are appropriate to their games and historical contexts, into the Instructor's Manual.

Faculty often relate interventions on the faculty Facebook site. If you haven't joined, go to: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/reactingfacultyounge> and sign up today!

## ***DURING THE GAME***

### ***When should I intervene as the instructor?***

When and how to intervene as the GM will depend on circumstance and class dynamics, and may vary widely from one game to the next, one group of students to the next. That said, below is a list of some of the common situations that arise that may require you to step out of your role as GM and back into your role as instructor.

- When a student steps out of role. Often, this takes the form of comment or criticism directed at individual students, rather than in character and related to the relationships within the game.
- If you find tension rising to the level where you're concerned about a fight or altercation.
- If students are getting so far off track that they're breaking down the walls of what Nicolas Proctor calls the "plausibility corridor." That is to say, if students leave the world

of the game and begin to create their own fictional reality in such a way that it becomes unproductive or inappropriate to the game.

- The world of recreational LARPS (Live Action Role Playing games) includes a great deal of information about “managing bleed.” There’s “bleed in,” which is when the real world influences gameplay and “bleed out,” which is when gameplay starts to seep into your real world interactions. This is a good entry point:  
<https://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/>.

***What should I do if a student abruptly leaves the room and the game or becomes overly excited and disruptive of the game play?***

For a disruptive student, your response will depend, in part, on the other students in the class. It may be that they will regulate each other and calm the person on their own. If this isn’t the case, here are some steps (in order of escalation) that you might follow, to regain order:

- Send that student a private note, suggesting proper decorum.
- Inject as the Game Master, calling that student away or offering some consequences for the disruption.
- Intervene as the instructor, pulling that student aside and speaking with them privately – either while class is taking place or after the session has ended.

***Similarly, for a student who abruptly leaves the room, your ability to respond will depend on that level of engagement and responsibility of the rest of the class.***

- As the instructor: it may be that you’re able to follow the student (either immediately or after (s)he has a chance to “cool off”). Alternately, you may find that you need to address the student after class, either by email or in person.
- As the GM: consider offering a consequence for the game itself. Perhaps their absence shifts a critical voting bloc. Perhaps they’ve left to conspire with an external force. Consider how that person’s absence would affect the world of the game, and instruct the students accordingly.

***What if conflict spills out into the hallway or elsewhere outside the classroom?***

- You might consider finding a way to offer consequences within the world of the game. Think about the nature of the conversations taking place and how they might affect the course of actions of the game, and respond accordingly as the GM.
- If the conflict has escalated too far, or you see a need for additional intervention, switch roles from GM to instructor and find a way to talk to your students outside of the world of the game. This may be a classroom conversation, or may take the form of an email. Remind them of the difference between productive and unproductive debate, and of the mutual respect and responsibilities that Reacting requires. Show them the real world consequences of their actions, beyond the “game world” consequences.

***What if the use of social media for game purposes becomes a source of concern for students in or outside of my class?***

- Suggest or require students to end game-related emails or chats with an indication that this message is to be understood as part of a classroom activity and not as the sender's own words. This could take the form of an email signature or chat tag, for example.
- If using open platforms like blogs or Twitter, suggest that the students not associate the game character account with their own personal account and that everyone clearly state that the content is part of a classroom activity.

***What if instructors or other campus employees ask questions, try to intervene, or just want information about a game?***

First, explain Reacting to the Past to them and direct them to the Barnard Reacting website for a comprehensive look at the pedagogy and quantitative information on its merits. Second, consider welcoming them to observe your class. This is a productive opportunity to introduce others to Reacting to the Past and showcase the work that your students are doing. In this, you have two options:

- Invite them to observe a session. This option is generally the less invasive of the two, and doesn't change the general character of the game.
- Offer them a guest role for the day, one that will not meaningfully impact the direction of play but might push students to consider particular issues or questions in new ways.

## ***DEBRIEFING AND AFTER THE GAME***

***How can the debriefing session usefully address controversies that broke out during the game?***

At the outset, it is often helpful to provide students with a ritual that allows them to exit from their roles and from the game. Make it clear that people's roles are distinct.

- If you are interacting electronically, ask everyone to change back to their real names.
- Ask each member of the class to thank their game persona for teaching them something, and then have them comment on at least one way in which their role is like them and one way in which their role is *unlike* them.
- Remind players that they have all done something remarkable together.
- Informal reflective writing assignments can be helpful.

During the debriefing, invite students to talk about their characters, what was difficult to play, what was fun, what rang true, what didn't. If there were secrets that remained unrevealed or undiscovered, ask students to bring those out into the open. Ask students to talk about character traits that befuddled them or were unpleasant or difficult to carry out. It may lead to some students announcing observations about the challenges of expressing ideas they do not personally share. Make sure there is plenty of time during the debriefing for students to reflect on returning to their own voices after giving voice to ideas they may have found objectionable.

Keep track of sticky issues that slowed the game down, caused unproductive debate, or where students seemed confused or upset but not enough to stop the game. Come back to what happened historically. How did this argument really turn out? Or is debate still going on? Ask students to think about what makes this issue so controversial. Have our standards really changed? Everywhere? Can we imagine how and why, in this particular historical context, people believed and/or supported this position?

***Should I ever stop and debrief while a game session is underway?***

Yes, but judiciously. If you or your students need to pause the game, consider using that time to discuss the historical context of the specific moment they are reacting to, and tell them what actually happened if necessary. Give students the space to voice their discomfort out of character and discuss how the classroom environment can be altered to make the debate possible. For example, maybe a different agreement about standing, sitting, or speaking in the classroom would help them move safely back into the debate. Consider adjourning for faction meetings to get the game back on track or move to the next issue.

***Where can I engage in discussion with other instructors using Reacting?***

- Sign up for the Reacting [Faculty Lounge](#) on Facebook. Faculty teaching Reacting courses frequently discuss issues related to game management, discomfort, advice seeking as well as triumphs.
- Watch for concurrent sessions at Reacting Conferences. You will find the schedule at <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>.

***When and how should I contact the Reacting Consortium for additional help and support?***

We want to hear from you. Have you found a good solution to a student and faculty discomfort? Do you have additional questions you would like to see addressed here? For general information and issues that are not time-sensitive you may contact us at:

**Reacting to the Past**

Barnard College  
3009 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027-6598  
Tel: 212.851.2112  
Email: [reacting@barnard.edu](mailto:reacting@barnard.edu)

Has a game with controversial content gone viral on social media? Are you facing a barrage of questions about controversial content from your supervisor, parents or other students?

If you need help right away, please call at 212.851.2112 or email [reacting@barnard.edu](mailto:reacting@barnard.edu).

---

*Academic Freedom: The RTTP Publications Committee views academic freedom as fundamental to the intellectual and teaching mission of the RTTP Consortium. AAUP poses academic freedom in its documents as follows: “institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.” This includes what they refer to as “unfettered teaching and research in institutions of higher education.”*

Updated September 7, 2020