

# Playing for peace: Complex role-play gaming in high school history

A case study

Rachel Bolstad

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# 1

## Introduction

As history teachers I think we actually have an obligation to teach [students] that things are complex. One of the things I am most frightened about as a teacher is how powerful my narrative is in the classroom. I think we can use that influence in good ways. But the thought of a student leaving the classroom thinking they understand a thing completely ... that's frightening to me. (Andrew, history teacher)

The simulation [game] made me realise how complex [things are]. I think last year, looking at the conflict we [were studying at the time], we just saw there were easy solutions. But there's so much that comes into play. (Year 13 history student)

Can the study of history help to prepare young people to navigate life in an increasingly complex, globalised, and hyperconnected world? What value can games add to secondary school history education when teachers have these goals in mind? What do teachers need to know about games—and about the nature of history as a discipline—to make effective use of games in their classroom programmes?

This report seeks to address these questions—and more—through the story of one complex peace-building role-play game, played over six class periods, by two Year 13 history classes and their two teachers at Wellington High School in late 2016. The game, called the Tanderian Simulation, challenged students to take responsibility for negotiating a peaceful resolution to an outbreak of serious conflict in a disputed (fictional) landmass. In this report we draw together data from teacher and student interviews, a student survey, and classroom observations of the game “in play” to consider the potential for role-play games to support complex learning outcomes in relation to the study of history.

The case study was undertaken as part of NZCER's exploratory *Games for Learning* research project, which aimed to investigate the role various kinds of games can play in supporting “transformative learning opportunities” for diverse learners in diverse New Zealand schools. The project aimed to better understand how learners and teachers think about games in relation to learning, what personal and pedagogical choices they make when games are used in learning environments, and what happens in the learning environment when games are part of the picture.<sup>1</sup>

We chose a case study approach as being most appropriate to address the “what”, “how”, and “why” of a situation (Yin, 2003). The advantage of a case study approach is that it can provide the “force of example”

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about the project and to read other reports, working papers, and blogs related to the study, see <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/games-learning>

(Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228) as a source of understandings. A case study “can ‘close in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235).

Our story begins with the two teachers, Andrew and Michael, the collaborative force behind this case study. Chapter 2 discusses their philosophies regarding the teaching of history, and why they felt it was worthwhile to allocate time for a complex role-play game in their senior history classes. Chapter 3 describes how the game played out over six periods. Chapter 4 documents students’ perspectives after the gameplay experience, and Chapter 5 discusses teachers’ reflections after the game. The final chapter considers what we can learn from this case study by comparing it with other research on games in history education, and other classrooms we have visited as part of the *Games for Learning* research project.



## 2

# Andrew and Michael: The gamer and the scholar

The two teachers in this case study were experienced history educators with a strong collegial bond. They clearly liked being able to bounce ideas off each other, and appreciated the different strengths the other brought to their collaboration. Andrew was the “gamer” teacher in the pair, while Michael was the “scholar”, involved in ongoing academic research into history education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Both enjoyed thinking deeply and critically about history education, and continuously scrutinising their teaching practice.

Andrew was the one who had instigated the use of games in the history classroom, having brought them into his practice over several years. In 2016, when this case study was undertaken, both teachers fortuitously had Year 13 history classes with identical timetables. This made it possible to connect and collaborate on their teaching programmes on multiple occasions over the year, sometimes bringing both of their classes together for particular sessions. It was also Michael’s last few terms of full-time teaching at the school, after which he would be starting PhD studies. Michael was keen to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about Andrew’s game-based practices before leaving the school.

We interviewed Michael and Andrew together twice, first in August 2016 (about 6 weeks prior to the Tanderian Simulation game), and again in November, about 8 weeks after the game. This chapter examines some of the key ideas and experiences that had contributed to shaping their approaches to teaching history, why Andrew’s use of games in the classroom interested Michael, how each felt they benefited from their collaboration, and activities they had done with their classes leading up to the Tanderian Simulation.

### Andrew: The gamer

Andrew’s love for tabletop games was evident during our first interview in his office, amongst shelves stacked with books and a range of strategy, role-play, and board games based around various socio-political and historical scenarios. He liked finding and playing new games himself, as well as using them in his teaching.

I’m that guy who plays board games by himself at night time, you know, I do it for my own entertainment.  
(Andrew)

He had first started using games in his history classes 6 or 7 years prior, motivated by a frustration that senior history teaching wasn't going far enough in supporting students to think about the complexity of social history. At the time he'd been playing a game called *Andean Abyss* which simulated the complex and devastating conflict in Colombia between the government, drug cartels, and guerrilla armies, with players taking on the role of different factions.

What interested me about the game was it's designed to show how one decision in a game can have unintended consequences that you can't necessarily predict or that you actually have to accept as part of your process. There'll be something that happens that you don't want to happen, but that might be a cost you're prepared to pay in the short term. (Andrew)

The complexity and messiness of conflict within games like these contrasted with the way his students seemed to be encountering the study of historical conflicts in school.

I started thinking about how being a history teacher a lot of the time we teach almost a linear narrative or stories, so if you're teaching the origins of World War 1, there are agreed start and end dates that you work with or not ... and it's very tidy.

He felt that one consequence of this "tidy" presentation of history was that students would sometimes make sweeping judgements or draw simple conclusions about history that seemed to lack empathy or an appreciation of complexity. He remembered one student particularly, years ago, at a previous school:

We were talking about how empire expands and as empires get bigger and incorporate more and more ideas they get more complex and the further away you get from the centre the more chances are that there is going to be atrocity ... we're looking at Rome and Barbarians and all those kind of things, and I asked the question 'So what could Rome have done to stop itself from imploding at this point, it's huge', and one of the students said 'Oh well I would have if I was in charge I would have rounded up everybody who didn't agree with me and I would have eliminated them because then we'd have peace.' And I was shocked by that and he said 'Well it's pragmatic isn't it, that's actually true if we got rid of all the dissent we'd be okay.' And he was very linear and kind of super rational about it. I felt that sometimes the teaching led to that because yeah the maths of it was clear to the students but the people part of it was lacking. That's I thought games might be a way to particularly get boys<sup>2</sup> interested.

This motivated him to try to experiment with bringing game experiences into the classroom.

I felt that my teaching had become so driven by assessment I wanted to put aside time where I said ... 'We're not going to do anything but discuss the human elements of our interactions here and what that might mean for understanding the First World War.' (Andrew)

He started off by introducing the *Diplomacy* game to his students, after they had been studying the origins of the First World War. He hoped the cognitive and emotional challenges that students would face in this simulated experience might help them to develop their ability to relate cognitively and emotionally to history, moving past overly simplistic ideas about people and events from the past.

This early experiment proved successful, with the game sparking good conversations in the classroom, so Andrew continued to explore the potential of other games. He began actively looking for recommendations for simulations or role-play activities to use in history classes, and reading about their strengths and weaknesses. Through the years he developed a lot of experience getting students to play all different kinds of games. An important aspect of game-based learning in his class was the discussion that happened before, during, and after the actual gameplay, and he always tried to be explicit with students about the purpose of the games they engaged in.

[I say] 'We're going to do this; we're going to do it at this point because ... and here's what we hope to learn.' (Andrew)

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2 At the time of that incident, Andrew was teaching at a boys' school.

Summing up how his use of games in the classroom related to his overall philosophy about the purposes for learning history at school, Andrew said:

I think it's about preparing students to be able to participate in society with at least some information about the deep complexity of the world that they live in, that 'right' and 'wrong' are very difficult ideas, that you can't just take a stand, you need to take a stand appreciating that [it] comes at a cost, or it comes at a compromise. I couldn't put it in a nutshell but I think you get the gist of that, it's about participation, about pragmatic and idealistic participation in society.

The year prior to this case study Andrew had taught his own Year 13 history class using the *Tanderian Simulation* game, and reported that this had been particularly successful. The year of this case study (2016) was the first year Andrew and Michael would run the game together with their combined classes.

### Michael: The scholar

Michael told us he had wanted to better understand how Andrew was using games in his teaching, and Andrew said that having a reflective critical friend in Michael had already been valuable, particularly in the few months leading up to our first research interview.

[Michael] has passed that critical eye over what I've been suggesting and said 'So what's your point? Are you sure you're doing this for our educational outcome or do you just want to make that next 50 minutes fun for you?' It's good to have that critical friend when you're doing these things. (Andrew)

Michael's scholarly interests during his teaching career have led to his involvement in a variety of research projects and fellowship opportunities to examine history education practices in New Zealand. His research has explored, amongst other things, how history education in New Zealand can become more culturally responsive and "place-conscious", what kinds of learning opportunities arise when teachers and students engage with critical questions about the memorialisation of history (through monuments, sites of historical significance, etc.), and how the study of history and other social sciences at school can contribute to the development of critical, active citizens.<sup>3</sup>

Like Andrew, Michael was interested in the question of what it takes to support students to learn to "think historically". As both teachers explained, many people, including many students, mistakenly think learning history is about the acquisition of facts about events, dates, and historical figures. But learning to think historically really means understanding that

... history is a living thing and it's an interpretative act. So, if you don't understand that, then you can't teach history. (Michael)

According to Michael, this was a realisation he had come to during his own teaching career, not during his initial university studies.

I wasn't taught to think historically at University, I was delivered really good research. Not once did an academic, historian say, 'Ah, well I was in the archive yesterday and I had this source and I couldn't make it work. I couldn't interpret it and then I found this source', or just somehow model the kind of challenges that an historian faces. All they did was deliver what they've researched. (Michael)

Michael was provoked to start thinking and reading about these deeper dimensions of history education when a visiting academic had come into his classroom years ago.

I started to read his book while he was in my classroom ... Then I started to get into the educational literature on how you develop historical thinking in young people and that's kind of how I came to it. (Michael)

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Harcourt, Milligan, & Wood (2016), Harcourt & Sheehan (2012), Harcourt (2015, 2016).

The teachers discussed the strength of their collaboration several times during their interviews.

I think I'm probably more kind of academic/abstracted than Andrew, and I think that's why the co-operation between us has been quite useful because that's how we get the middle ground. (Michael)

I'd agree with that completely. Michael's much more learned than I am as an academic. He has brought structures and methodology and frameworks that have helped me feel not so kind of 'Wooo'. [Laughter] (Andrew)

## Weaving complexity and empathy into history teaching

Whether through games or through other activities, Michael and Andrew's history teaching sought to promote students' engagement with the complexity of history (and its interpretation). They also wanted to help students to look beyond their own modern world views and assumptions to consider how people from the past may have thought or felt, thereby developing "history empathy" (Davison, 2010).

A common assumption of young people is that people in the past acted differently because they weren't as smart as we are today. (Michael)

When we did our first interview in August 2016, the teachers had just begun to test the readiness of their classes to take on the challenge of an extended role-play game—the *Tanderian Simulation*—by the end of the year. They had used various smaller-scale simulation activities that involved some degree of role-play or perspective taking related to the history topics they were exploring.

One activity occurred when the students had been studying issues of poverty in 19th century New Zealand. The classes did an activity to explore the question "Who are the deserving poor today?" Students were given a budget and had to decide who were the most vulnerable groups, how much they were going to give to each group, and why.

It revealed all sorts of assumptions about who is deserving. We pointed out these are all the sorts of things the liberal government of 19th century NZ had to deal with. In terms of empathy, it was getting them to empathise with historical governments. In terms of complexity, it's easy to beat up against Seddon, or 'The Man'... (Michael)

...It's easy to think that governments are just cruel or out to get you—it's way too simplistic, way too bland. The way that civilisations work, it's not all that straightforward. (Andrew)

Another activity was "The ISIS Crisis", a Matrix game<sup>4</sup> the classes played after studying the causes and consequences of Islamic fundamentalism and the events of the Arab Spring. In this activity, the students were divided up into six different factions who had clear goals they wanted to achieve in the region. A scenario was generated, and the students had to draw on knowledge they had gained through their studies to make arguments about what their faction would do, and why. The rest of the class had to judge the plausibility of those arguments, or make counterarguments using other pieces of evidence. The activity had a game-like aspect, in that once a proposition was deemed to be plausible, a dice was rolled to determine whether or not that event "happened", and moving the scenario forward into a new set of possibilities to be debated.

While the activity fostered students to take on a perspective and to try to build plausible arguments "from" those perspectives, the teachers had debated extensively about the potential ethical tensions of asking students to imagine and seek to represent the perspectives of real groups involved in present-day conflicts. They could see the value of students learning how to objectively articulate what a group

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4 Andrew and Michael adapted and modified their version from a version on Tom Mouat's Matrix Games website: <http://www.mapsymbols.com/wdmatrix.html>. Mouat has devised many Matrix games, based on a system originally devised by Chris Engle. Further details of how the game system works are available on the website.

might be thinking, and why. However, they felt uncomfortable with the idea of students role-playing or identifying with people in groups responsible for violence and terrorism.

And so we made a rule that you're not allowed to use first person pronouns when you're playing these games. You have to talk about it as you know 'the Shia militias would likely in this situation' or 'I think that the ISIS group would most likely want this to happen if this was the situation based on what I know about ISIS.' If they started saying 'We want this to happen' or 'I would do this' we're saying 'No, stop, that's not right, you're not this group. You're [supposed to be] thinking about it through a learner's lens. We're asking questions *about* these groups, not *being* those groups.' (Andrew)

Andrew and Michael were transparent with students about the ethical tensions they were grappling with when they introduced the activity in the classroom, and built in time for discussion and reflection after the activity as well.

At the beginning of the class we talk about the ethical challenge we feel, and why we've decided to trial it anyway, and the outcome was it really I think worked for that group, and they responded to that, and they were able to see what we were trying to achieve. (Andrew)

Even with this careful framing, Andrew said the ethical tensions still played on his mind. However, he did not want to let these niggling discomforts stop him from trying these sorts of activities, and the feedback suggested it had been impactful for students.

When we went back to more traditional learning they were much more able to participate in the work because they felt engaged so ... I wouldn't want to stop doing it because of its dangers. I just think I need to keep educating myself on what those are. (Andrew)

The examples above help frame the context for the students' encounter with the Tanderian Simulation. The teachers and some students brought up the ISIS Crisis and other activities in their final interviews when talking about the Tanderian Simulation (see Chapters 4 and 5).

# 3

## The Tanderian Simulation

The Tanderian Simulation game (or “Tandera”) was created by CRISP, a Berlin-based non-profit, non-governmental organisation that specialises in the design and facilitation of simulation role-play games relating to key themes of conflict management and other scenarios involving complex social, political, economic, and environmental negotiations.<sup>5</sup> The games are typically used as a learning tool by tertiary students and professionals in the field of conflict management. Andrew had discovered CRISP and their games while searching the internet for games he could use with his students. He made contact with the organisation and gained their permission to use the game materials, first in 2015 with his Year 13 class, and again in 2016 with the two classes discussed in this case study.

Because the Tanderian Simulation takes several hours to play, in 2016 Andrew and Michael decided to run the game early in Term 4, after students had completed all their NCEA internal assessments, and before they started revision for their end-of-year exams. Andrew hoped this would allow them to focus on fully participating in the experience.<sup>6</sup>

### Setting the scene for the role-play

Although the Tanderian Simulation was a more involved role-play than the ISIS Crisis, the teachers felt less ethically challenged since it was set in a fictional situation, with largely fictional roles. The Tanderian Simulation game factsheet explains the premise for the game:

The simulation game focuses on the dynamics that evolve around a secessionist’s conflict. The setting is the fictional island of Darun, which consists of two states: Aponia and Betunia, which are respectively for the most part inhabited by one ethnicity. However, Tanderia, a region located in Aponia, is, nonetheless, mainly populated by Betunians. Yet, Aponians are dominating the political and public administration as well as the business sector. For a long time Betunians have demanded independence, but only recently tried to achieve this goal by violent means, including a rebel army. This had led to an escalation of the situation. The simulation game takes place in the framework of an international peace conference. (Tandera Factsheet)<sup>7</sup>

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5 See <http://work.crisp-berlin.org/en/simulations/civic-education/>

6 We asked students about the pros and cons of running the game at this time of year and not linking it with NCEA credits (Chapter 4) and asked the teachers about this again in their final interview (Chapter 5).

7 See <http://work.crisp-berlin.org/en/simulation-games/conflict-transformation/tandera/>

### 3. The Tanderian Simulation

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On the first day of the role-play, the classes had a double period of history, with one session before lunch, and another session after lunch. In the period before lunch, Andrew introduced the game, recapping the game's storyline, showing students a large map of Darun and the disputed territory of Tanderia, and explaining the conflict that has erupted (Figure 1).

The teachers had pre-assigned students into a variety of different roles they would play during the game (Table 1).<sup>8</sup> During the first period, Andrew brought out a bag full of plastic badges with flags and titles to identify which group or organisation each player was representing. This caused an audible stir of excitement in the room. As well as being part of a particular group, some students were also assigned a particular character role within that group, adding the potential for individual players to have motivations that could be in tension with the overall goals of their groups.

For the rest of the period, Andrew and Michael went around the room handing out specific background documentation for each group, giving them time to become familiar with the simulation scenario, as well as background information for their specific group/organisation role, including information about that group's goals and aims.

In the first period, one or two students said they didn't want to be part of the role-play, and were permitted to leave to do independent exam revision instead. Over the six periods of the game, a few more students drifted out of the game or missed classes, but most students stayed for most of the game. Out of a complete cohort of around 50 students, approximately five or six opted not to attend the role-playing sessions.

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<sup>8</sup> The number of students in the class exceeded the number of designated roles in the game, so a few additional roles were created. The teachers assigned students to roles and groups based on what they thought would work well, and who they thought would work well together.



FIGURE 1 Andrew explains the situation in Tandra. Paper documents (foreground) are also part of the gameplay

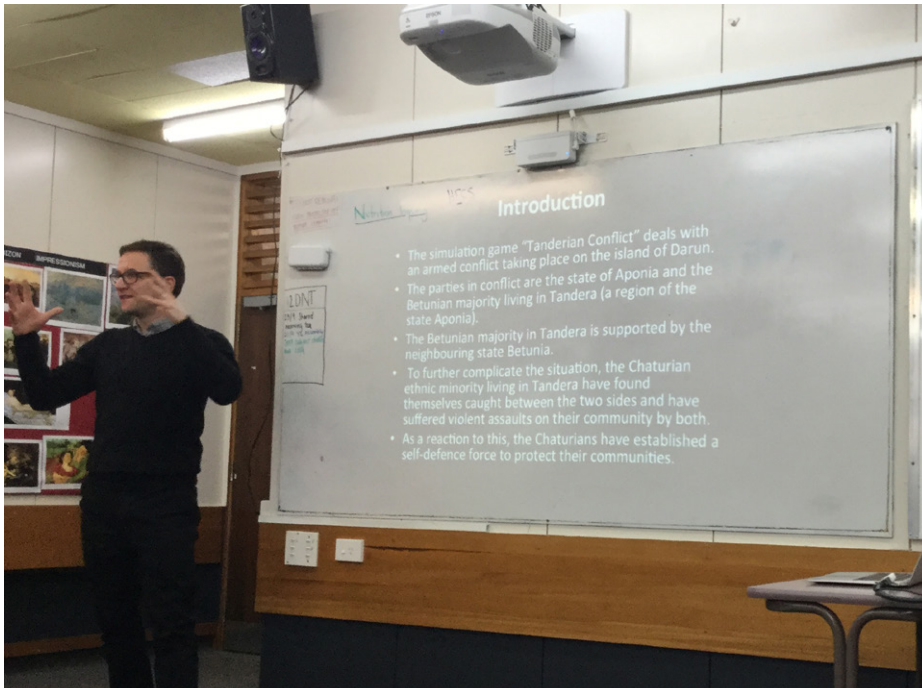




TABLE 1 **A selection of roles played by students (abbreviated list)**

<b>Character</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Gabriela Haber	Aponian Relief Service (ARS)
Janine Wood	Special representative European Union
Farid Bugti	UN Special representative
Flora Picot	UN Human Rights Office representative
Thomas Muldy	UN representative (assistant to Bugti)
John Morsi	Tanderian Liberation Army Commander
Nero Galdes	Tanderian Liberation Army Deputy
Abram Boffa	Tandera Freedom Party Deputy
Brigit Arigo	Tandera Freedom Party Leader
Adam Lando	Institute for Dialogue and Peace
Michelle Tanti	Institute for Dialogue and Peace
Karla Shau	Deputy Governor of Tandera
Ron Bonnett	Governor of Tandera
Julianne Garbo	Deputy Head of the Chaturian People's Organisation
Konstanza Moretta	Head of the Chaturian People's Organisation
Maria Debonno	Betunian Foreign Minister
Odette Corso	Deputy Betunian Foreign Minister
Grigor Sant	Aponian Security Force
Sandy Cohani	Aponian Security Force
Anna Cassar	Minister of the Interior of Aponia
Emily Borg	Foreign Minister of Aponia
Mary Grey	Under Secretary of the State Department—USA Assistant Under Secretary of State—USA
Nina Ramo	Tanderian Resource Centre Media Liaison Officer for TRC
Alexsei Shukov	Russian Federation Assistant to Russian Foreign Minister

## Playing the game

The gameplay began in the period after lunch. Students were reminded that the goal of the game was to broker agreements with other groups with the overall objective of reaching an agreed peace treaty to be ratified at the UN. During each class period, students were to try to negotiate deals with various groups and bring their proposals to the UN to put forward as articles for inclusion in the final peace agreement. At the end of most periods, the UN would read out each of the received proposals, and they were voted on for a majority rule. Three member states represented in the role-play game had the power to veto any given proposal: Russia, the United States, and the European Union.

In addition to establishing negotiations with other groups, each group had been given particular “action” cards that they could choose to play—or not—during the game. As an example, the students playing the Aponian Security Forces could make a *progress* action (The ASF disarms 200 local Aponian militias, and hands over weapons to the Aponian government), or a *spoiler* action (The ASF recruits and trains more fighters from Aponia and Tandra).

As gameplay began, some students immediately took to their feet and began moving around the classroom to start proposing ideas, in role, to other groups. Certain players, such as the student portraying Russia, were seen actively moving around the room and sometimes brokering conversations between different groups and factions. Others appeared less comfortable and engaged, staying in their seats or wavering in and out of focused attention to the game.

In an effort to add tension and intrigue to the game, some students had been assigned media roles. Their job was to circulate around the room, eavesdrop on discussions or interview other players, and produce news stories that would be shown at the beginning of each new period of gameplay. However, the students assigned to these roles had started to drift out of the role-play and eventually stopped showing up,<sup>9</sup> so Michael and Andrew took on this role instead, setting up a Twitter account and using this to post mock news stories pulled from events that played out during the game. The news feed was projected onto the screen and reviewed at the beginning of each period of gameplay (Figure 2).

The game played out over six periods. Over the first few periods, students were still trying to make sense of how to play the game and, in particular, how to shape up proposed articles to be presented and voted on at the UN. Andrew and Michael would periodically step out of their media role and back into “teacher role” to provide tips, advice, or assistance to the whole group, or to individual students.

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<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile their non-attendance was recorded and followed up through normal school processes.

FIGURE 2 A selection of “media” tweets posted during the gameplay

-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
Governor of Tanderia corruption scandal!
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
Russians hack governor of Tanderia's server and publish misinformation...
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
IPD organises youth demonstrations against both govts.
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
Betunia and Aponia cooperate to rein in ASF and TLA
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
EU freezes all \$\$ to both governments
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
ARS allowing ASF recruitment in camps!
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 14 Oct 2016  
As a response to the violence of the TLA - Governor of Tanderia has called for strikes..suspended rights of Betunian public sector worker
-  **Tanderian Simulation** @tanderiasim · 12 Oct 2016  
Evidence of collusion between the terrorists and Betunia surfaces



## Tension builds

As the game picked up pace, a variety of conflicts erupted, alliances were forged and broken, and some groups played action cards that triggered serious consequences. Governments and civil service organisations fractured along ethnic lines. Refugees were displaced, and their fates hung in the balance. Combatant groups began to recruit fighters from refugee camps. Minority groups found themselves caught up in conflict and had to determine which, if any, alliances might provide them with some degree of protection and security. Borders were closed and reopened. Accusations of corruption were made against civil leaders. Parties involved in known acts of violence sought to broker agreements to gain amnesty from future prosecution, in return for laying down arms.

At a certain point, border negotiations involved assertions about which territories would have pipeline access to offshore oil rigs as part of final settlements, and the game-world conflict between the governments of Aponia and Betunia led to an intense, emotionally charged debate between the two groups of students playing each group. The Betunian government representatives were yelling objections and complaints of injustice across the room as deals were struck that seemed stacked in favour of Aponia's long-term economic and political interests.

Finally, as the game reached its last few periods, Michael and Andrew reminded students of the goal to build a sustainable peace agreement that could be ratified by the UN. The students were encouraged to think about some key areas under which specific articles could be listed (for example, power-sharing, reconciliation, etc.).

In the final session of the game, the list of proposals students had put forward were read out and voted on. This was the end of the game, as the teachers briefly pointed out how, in the real world, certain agreements or the way they were worded would be the subject of years of scrutiny and debate by international lawyers.

## Debriefing after the game

The session after the game was set aside for a whole-group debriefing discussion, led by the teachers. Students were also invited to complete an optional NZCER survey devised specifically for this case study, and some students also volunteered to take part in a follow-up focus group interview with NZCER researchers a few days later.

# 4

## Students' perspectives after the game

This chapter discusses student responses and perspectives on the game, based on two sources of information: the short survey (completed by 28 students),<sup>10</sup> and the focus group interviews (comprising 10 student volunteers, interviewed in two groups of five). The whole-class debrief at the end of the game was not part of the formal data collection; however, the researchers sat in and took general notes about what was discussed.<sup>11</sup>

### Survey findings

Figure 3 show students' responses to a series of questions about the overall game experience, and Figure 4 shows their responses to questions about feelings they may have had during the game. The responses suggested most students found the game worthwhile. Most (25 out of 28) students agreed or strongly agreed the game should be offered again to the next Year 13 class, and half or more agreed or strongly agreed that:

- It helped me understand current real-world conflicts
- I enjoyed the Tanderian Simulation game
- It helped me develop or practise skills that will be useful in life
- I learned a lot from playing this game (although more than a third gave a neutral response).

Students gave more equivocal responses to the following statements:

- I thought about the game outside class time
- It helped me understand specific historical conflicts I have studied.

Most students disagreed that the game was hard to follow or confusing (although a few indicated they did find it so). Interestingly, only a few agreed that they "really got into role" during the game. Few thought it was helpful for their NCEA, though this is perhaps not surprising as the game was not intended to be directly linked with any NCEA credits. Just two students asserted that the game was a waste of their time, with most (24 out of 28) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement.

<sup>10</sup> The survey and focus groups were voluntary. Some students were absent on the day that the surveys were given out. Ten students volunteered to be involved in the follow-up focus group interviews.

<sup>11</sup> Most of the ideas discussed during the whole-class debrief were raised again in the focus groups and the final teacher interviews.

FIGURE 3 Students' overall thoughts on the Tanderian Simulation (n = 28)

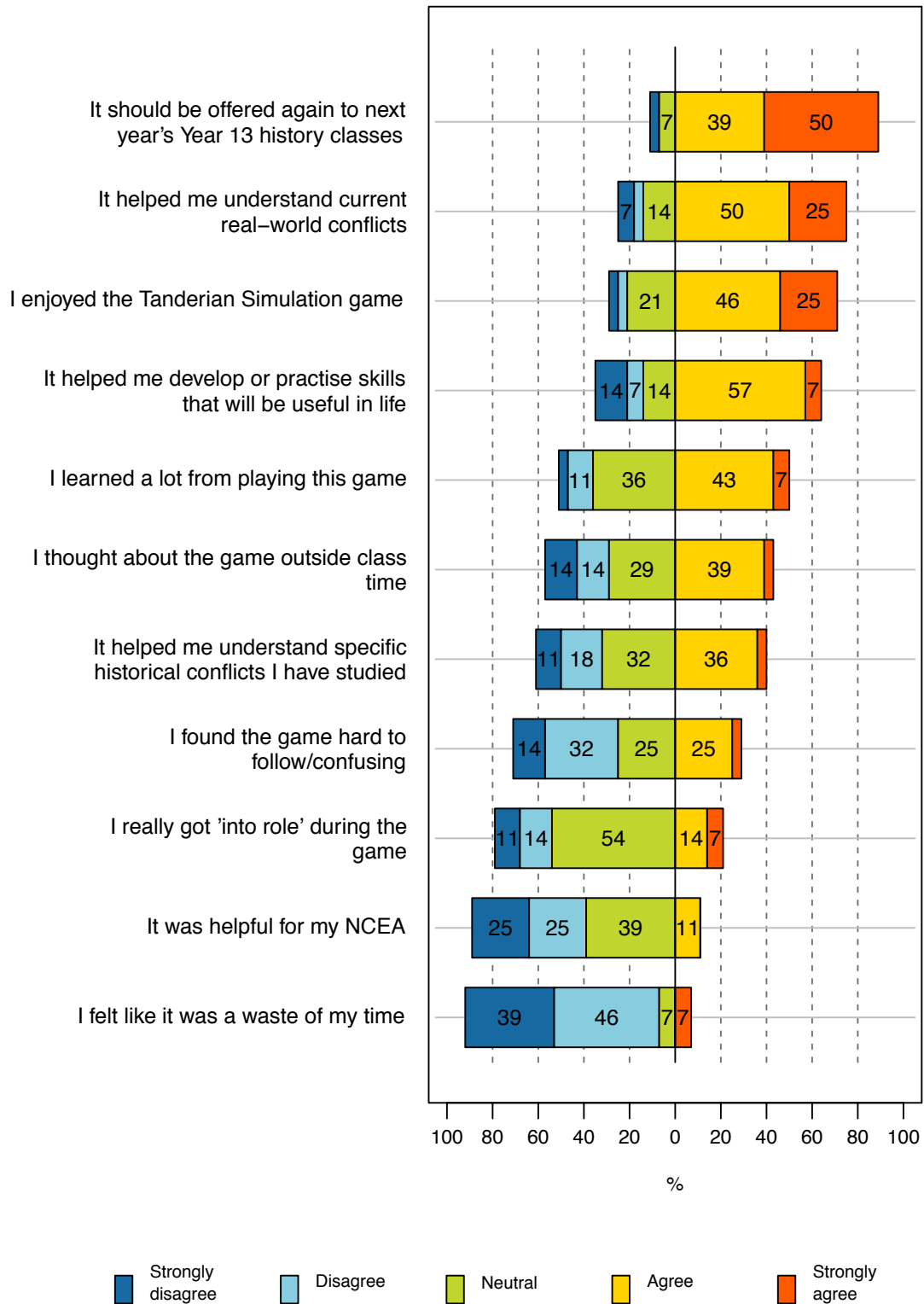
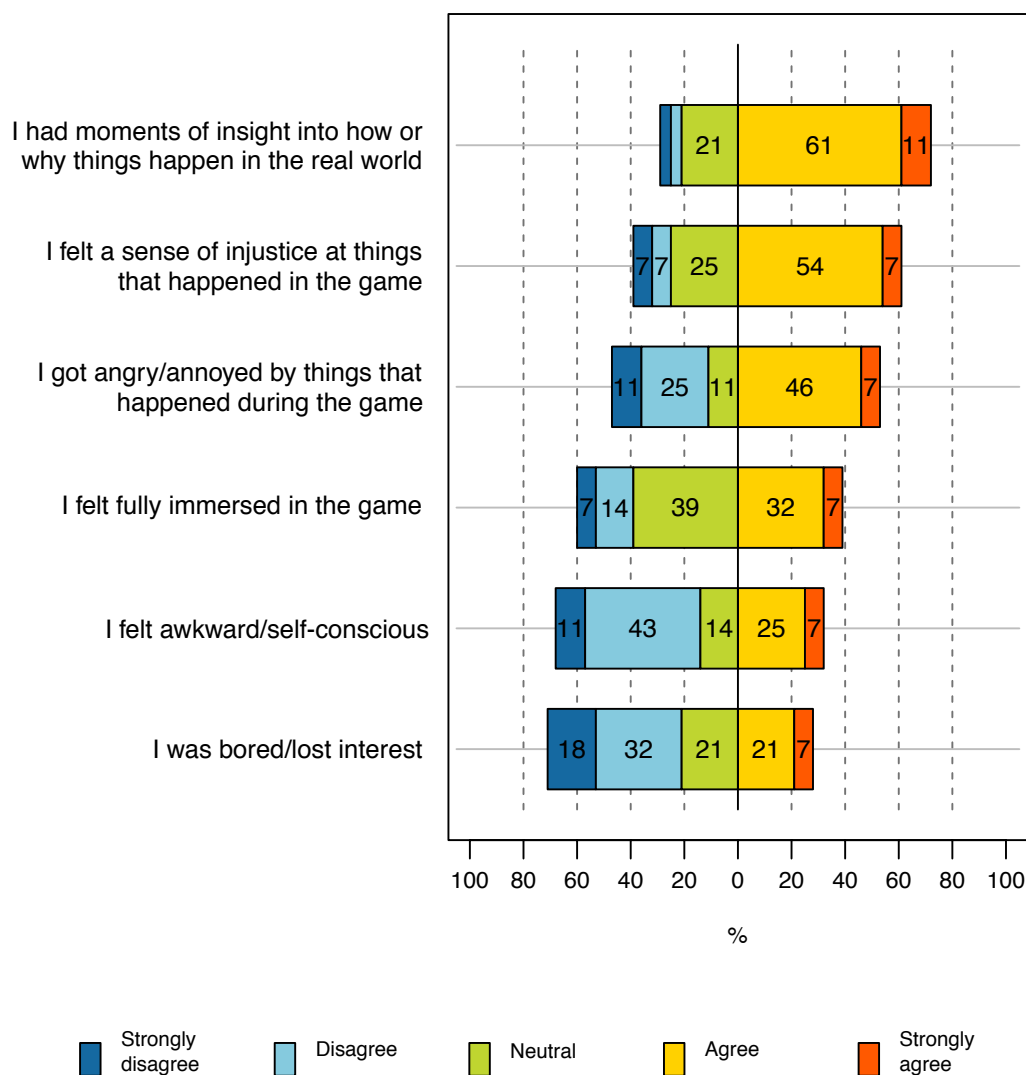


FIGURE 4 Students' feelings during the Tanderian Simulation (n = 28)



More than two-thirds of students (20 out of 28) agreed or strongly agreed that they had moments of insight during the game into how or why things happen in the real world. Just over half said they felt a sense of injustice at things that had happened during the game, or got angry/annoyed by things that happened during the game. Fewer than half said they felt fully immersed in game, and more than a third gave a neutral response. Students were less neutral about whether they felt awkward or self-conscious during the game—they tended to either agree or disagree with this statement. A few indicated they had been bored or lost interest in the game, but more disagreed than agreed with this statement.

We asked students what the most interesting or useful aspect of this experience had been for them. All but three students wrote a response. Most responses related to one of two main themes: observations about player dynamics during the game, or extrapolating from those dynamics and making connections with real-world scenarios, or both.

TABLE 2 What students saw as the most useful or interesting aspect of the experience

Theme	Number of comments
Extrapolating from the game dynamics to real-life situations	11
Player dynamics during the game	8
Other	5

The following comments are illustrative examples from the first two categories:

Definitely how it exposed me to the 'reality' (or a certain degree of reality) of the international relations decision-making process. Made me more aware of how multi-dimensional peace making is and that it isn't so black and white.

Watching how other groups got into their roles, made emotional decisions and went against potentially the logical choice. How groups with a lot of power assume a superior role/persona.

It was interesting to see how important and influential even some of the smaller groups were in the movement for peace. It was useful learning to compromise, sacrifice, protect and take in not only your own wants but that of others. Crazy seeing the complexity of the movement for peace in the simulation and realising how much more complex it must be in real life.

Seeing the class work together beautifully at the start of the simulation, then totally turn into putty at the end.

Other comments included remarks about the mechanics of the game (e.g. "The proposals were a good way to actually make things happen", or "using critical thinking"). Only one student said they didn't like anything about the game.

We also asked students whether they talked to anyone else about the game outside class times (Table 2). Around half said they talked with students from the class, or friends from outside the class (or both). A few said they talked to their family, and eight students said they hadn't talked to anyone about the game outside class time.

TABLE 3 Who students talked to about the game outside class time (n = 28)

	Number of student responses
Students from this class	15
Friends who aren't in this class	13
Parents/family	6
No one	8

## Student focus group interviews

Two focus group interviews were carried out with students several days after the whole-class debrief, without their teachers present. During these interviews, students animatedly discussed their experiences of the game, and what they had taken out of it.



### Engagement in the game

We asked about their own feelings of engagement in the game, what it was like to be in role, and what they noticed about other students' engagement and participation. Some students thought the game suited the "more confident, dominant people in the class". Interestingly, others suggested that the roles themselves contributed to players' feeling of power or powerlessness, and hence their engagement with the game.

I was quite happy with my role but felt bad for other groups like Institute for Peace and Dialogue or Tanderian Resources Centre ... They didn't really have any power, so for them, perhaps they would struggle to be engaged because they were so restricted in what they could do.

I think the whole thing for engagement was to do with the role. [For example] The Institute for Peace and Dialogue. I heard that name at the start and don't think I heard it again once, they didn't make a single proposal, and yet for the rest of the time you've got the Betunians in the corner shouting across arguing with the Aponians.

Reflecting further, one student pondered whether students found it harder to envisage what actions certain kinds of groups might take, and therefore believed, correctly or not, that they couldn't do much with the role they were assigned.

It's a weird thing to try to simulate, like it's easy when you can simulate big actions but harder to simulate small things like a resource centre might actually do. Or maybe they just weren't entirely aware of the influence they could have.

We asked students what they thought about their classmates who had opted to stop coming to the class during the Tanderian Simulation. Most thought it was better that those who were not willing or able to fully engage or commit opted out of the game, so that it didn't interfere with the experience for others. Students said some of their peers simply had other priorities, such as the need to study for exams, which outweighed their interest in taking part in the game. Overall, students thought the experience was one where "what you put into it was what you got out of it".

If you get really into your role and like really into what you are trying to stand for, your goals, then you get something out of it.

### Being in role

The students all said they took their roles seriously, even if it was harder some days to "feel it" than others.

If you feel people around you aren't taking it seriously it can be quite frustrating. Like two of my teammates, they are my friends but quite lazy. Sometimes I felt I can't be bothered because they can't, but other times I was motivated to do things to prove a point.

You know everyone in the room and you kind of judge them on who they are. Getting past existing relationships was probably the hardest for me.

Students described moments in the game when they felt most engaged in their roles, or noticed that the players around them were feeling very immersed.

Everyone sort of wound each other up and got more involved.

I felt most into it definitely when you got to do things. Me and [my team mate] played our action card it was so exciting. We kind of made a proposal then just because we wanted to do something.

When people were yelling at each other across the room, I loved that, it was awesome. Like they kind of forgot they were in a history class and were getting genuinely hostile. At those times people were most absorbed in their roles.

Others talked about the physical and emotional effects of being so fully in role.

By the end of the lesson you got so stressed so it was good just to have time to calm down and to breathe. It got quite intense.

### **Managing multiple or conflicting goals**

Some students said they had conflicted feelings about their roles, particularly if they had been assigned a character role that had slightly different agendas than their overall group role. In some cases, players abandoned the particulars of the character role in order to stay focused on the goals of their group.

I found there was a clash between what I wanted to do and what the character outline said.

Other students stuck with their individual character's or their group's role, even at the expense of the "greater good" goal of the game being to build an agreed peace settlement.

I stopped caring about the outcome and concentrated on my role. Everyone wanted the peace treaty so we kind of went the other way ... That's why we did that thing with the action card—calling the Aponian Government to back us up with their military ... It was like a really big move against peace...and everyone was going like 'What are you doing?!' I was like, 'I don't care' because that's what my [individual assigned] character would do.

I feel like different groups had different ideas of winning—like for a lot of groups it was getting the peace treaty. For our group it was more about reaching our personal goals.

Keeping track of the different individual, group, and overall goals of the game was a challenge.

People lost sight of it [the goal to succeed in peace treaty] for a while. [The student playing] Russia kept reminding us 'Come on guys we really have to get this peace treaty signed. Come on guys we will lose if we don't do this.'

Another student noted that this was an interesting point.

[In the game] Russia just comes over and says 'Hey we just need to do this.' It probably does happen in real life too.

Again, some students commented on the internal struggles they felt being in role, and observing the consequence of their role.

... Because I disagreed with my character part of me didn't want to succeed and part of me did.

### **Making connections with real-world conflict**

Students felt the game helped them understand the complexities involved in resolving conflict. Some related the experience to real-world conflicts they had studied.

I definitely had a newfound respect for that kind of negotiation.

Last year we studied the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the simulation made me realise how complex [things are]. I think last year looking at the conflict we just saw there were easy solutions. But there's so much that comes into play.

It reminded me of Rwanda because of the different ethnic groups.

They appreciated the ways their teachers helped to point out links to real-world events at key points in the game.

It made the game feel more real.

The connections back to real life reminded me that decisions like we were making have impact on real lives.

Some students commented on the burden of these realisations, particularly when reflecting on the differences between a game simulation and real life.

The end kind of reminded me of South Sudan independence in 2011. Because they really wanted this independence but as soon as they got it, it was war again. Conflict broke out straight away because there was no infrastructure. When we were signing the treaty I thought 'Oh my god, this is like South Sudan, it's not going to get better from this.' We had to sign the treaty because we wanted to win the game and we had that advantage that we didn't have to deal with what happened next because it wasn't real. We didn't have to deal with the consequences of our actions.

One student talked about how all of the background information in the game helped to make the situation feel like it was reflecting a complex realistic context.

It was interesting how [the game designers] created all of this context. Like understanding that when youth unemployment was high, you bring that into the game, well the likelihood of me being able to recruit new fighters is high because there are all these angry disengaged youth. Having all that context below it sort of informs your decisions. Mr Savage said earlier in the year about ISIS' tendency to go for the misguided youth, the poor and underprivileged, how they are easy to manipulate and convince. It starts to feel really real when you have all the stats behind it.

Other students speculated about whether the human behavioural dynamics that came up in the game could be extrapolated to real-world politics.

I think it's funny in these games, people when they have a lot of power rise up, they are the ones yelling and getting involved because they feel the most powerful. Just to let people know they are important, that they have the power to veto things. So in that sense it is realistic!

Students also commented on the role of the media (played by the teachers) and how this paralleled real life.

It starts to make it feel real. Like when we had a huddle and were whispering and thought we had got away with it—then saw a picture and headline in the Twitter feed!

I sort of got really irritated by how the media would twist everything I said and I couldn't really control it at all. I didn't have time to clarify. [One of the media reports came out saying] 'Aponians want to squash all influence in Tanderia' and I was like 'No, that's not what I was saying' but I didn't have time to sort it out.

Probably happens a lot in the real world. Everyone knows countries hide things. Things that leak out can be a big controversy but that is only probably 1 percent of 1 percent of what actually goes on.

### **The Tanderian Simulation compared with "The Isis Crisis"**

We asked students about how the Tanderian Simulation compared with the ISIS Crisis activity they had played earlier in the year. Most students echoed the teachers' view that the fictionalisation of the Tanderian Simulation made it feel slightly more comfortable to "play".

I think it's important that they were fictional situations because I felt a little bit we were trivialising issues and I think it's important to separate what's actually reality from a simulation, which is what we were doing in the Tanderian game.

[The Tanderian Simulation] worked better because it was fictional, because your decisions weren't hurting anyone.

To have students play ISIS is like really intense like super scary, it kind of does trivialise it a bit, and it feels really wrong.

However, at least one student preferred the ISIS Crisis activity *because* it was set in a real context.

## Is it a good way to learn history?

The students thought role-plays like this were a good way to learn history, as long as the content and context were also part of the learning.

[It's good for learning] the way some historical events unfold.

You need the context.

I don't think I learned facts.

It gave insight into historical ideas—like turning points, and how people don't realise the big turning points at the time.

## Does it matter whether it is useful for NCEA?

These students didn't think it mattered that it did not connect directly with NCEA, nor were they keen on the idea of it being turned into an NCEA assessment. They argued that it wouldn't be as fun, and it would be hard to make it a fair assessment for everyone.

You'd have to add all this criteria and structure to the game—it's better without it.

People would just focus on credits.

It would take away from the fun experience.

You'd be focusing on an arbitrary set of things rather than what the game is actually about.

They thought the timing of the gameplay was good *because* it was a break from NCEA assessments, but also added value to their learning.

At this time of year, doing the game was really refreshing. Having a break [from all the NCEA credits work] and doing something that we don't do in any other classes and learning in a completely different way, and learning different skills.

We asked the students what they thought about the common lament that “students are only interested in learning when there are credits attached”. Most of the students we spoke to rejected this assertion, or attributed the problem to the NCEA rather than to students' motivation to learn.

Whether doing it consciously or not, with credits I feel 'I have to learn it' which can feel like stress, whereas this year in history there has been a lot of 'I want to learn it.' If you feel you have to, it is a chore. If you want to, you absorb more.

I feel really disengaged when I am just chasing credits. When you look at all the assessments everyone does, they are basically all the same, just different words. I felt way more engaged with this because it was fun, but there is also a people side, you are not just getting talked at.

The students liked feeling that they were learning beyond what they might need to know for their NCEA. They felt they got this in their Year 13 history classes, not just in the Tanderian Simulation but across the year.

I think this whole year both our teachers have tried to teach us, kind of more like global learning. I have learned a lot this year even if that is not relevant to the NCEA.

It's good learning just for the sake of learning. Everything is so much pressure on assessment. History has been one of my favourite subjects this year because we went so far beyond the 'causes and consequences' ... like we can still write about causes and consequences but it was not like just 'OK, here is what you are going to write.'

Interestingly, a few students went on to discuss the way that their exposure to the complexity of history in their school learning made them feel a responsibility to help other people to understand this too.

I feel like I have a responsibility to talk about what actually happens because so many people are clouded by what they have heard, but it is wrong.

We learned so much about the causes and consequences of 9/11 and now when you hear someone speak about it from an uneducated point of view...or see something really annoying...[you want to say something].

#### **What do teachers need to be able to run a game like this?**

The students thought games like this could work in other subject areas too.

For things like history, philosophy, and things that affect real life, definitely. Even economics, accounting, business. Stuff where it is multifaceted or real-world. I think you still need the knowledge, to have a bit of a base before you go in.

One student summed up what they thought teachers would need to know or be able to do in order to use games effectively.

They need to have imagination and some kind of flexibility. Someone who can be really engaged and passionate, but also being able to hand control over. He [teacher] didn't tell us what to do, but he got involved to make things happen. He really helped to keep us engaged by acting as the media and prompting us with new ideas.

# 5

## Teachers' reflections after the game

### Was the game a success?

We asked the teachers how they felt students had engaged with the game. Like the students we interviewed, they speculated that those who got the most out of the game were probably those who had put the most into it. Andrew reflected on the differences between this cohort, and his previous year's class. The latter had played the game earlier in the year (Term 2) and in his view had been more "prepared" and strategic in the way they approached the gameplay itself, achieving greater success in the details of in-game negotiations, and taking a more academic approach to analysis of the resulting agreement and whether it was likely to yield a lasting peace.

This year's class had struggled a bit more in how to play the game, and there had been more noticeable tension arising from students' interpersonal dynamics intersecting with game dynamics. However, this in itself had yielded some interesting learning opportunities in terms of how much one's "active participation" might influence success in a real-world negotiation.

One thing I took away from [this year's game] is how important ... if you're going to get any leverage in any negotiation, actively participating is really important. People who choose not to participate can sway and skew things just as much. As a teaching point that's interesting to me. If you sit there and do nothing, the outcome of that negotiation was favourable to the people who were prepared to do work. There were some groups who felt they were helpless, they didn't look for angles, they didn't use the leverage they had, or didn't engage enough with the material to make good arguments or put ideas forward. And the more that went on the less agency they felt and they just bailed out. And in the fantasy of the game it meant that certain people or groups came out with nothing. (Andrew)

The fact that the game could play out differently, thus emphasising different takeaway messages, was part of what Andrew thought made the game interesting and worthwhile.

I think that part of the experience is how flawed people in general are. The part I get most excited about is talking to the students afterwards, like in the halls: 'Why do you think that happened, why do you think it was that way?' (Andrew)

Andrew commented that he still looked for answers in the game, each time it played out. We asked what question(s) he was looking for answers to.

How can we make peace? [Laughter]. For instance, in that game, how can we actually make sustainable peace? Say, if one of those kids goes on to work in foreign service or becomes a diplomat or something like that, I hope that they enter those negotiations or enter their policy briefings or whatever with an understanding that this isn't about just what we want, you know? ... or the next time they hear someone talking about what's wrong with the world, they can say, 'Hang on, we need to kind of weigh this stuff up so that we can come to a middle way.' (Andrew)

### Complexity and emergence

Returning to underlying themes of complexity and empathy that ran through their practice, we discussed the idea that the game modelled one feature of a complex system, namely the emergence of events that can't necessarily be predicted in advance, or outcomes that can be different each time the simulation was played out. The teachers thought this was part of why games like this had so much educational value.

The idea of an emergence is that you put the systems in place where you hope that something unexpected will happen and that's kind of ideal because if you know what's gonna happen, then it's not actually very educational. I think the thing with good games is that they do create that space where pretty much anything could happen, and you just don't know what it's going to be, and that's what's exciting about it. (Michael)

Being cognisant of this property of the game was part of what enabled the teachers to be effective in scaffolding, but not "controlling", the game or any other similar kind of activity.

Your job is to be nimble enough to observe what's happening to be, you know agile, to that's a moment that we should talk about or remember that or this is something that's worth considering next time. (Andrew)

And, it doesn't have to be games. (Michael)

Yeah that idea of emergence is, I think, exciting as part of it. I always think what can really go wrong? It can really be disastrous but we can probably work something out from there even if, during a complete catastrophe, you can sit down and build your lesson from that. (Michael)

### The teachers' role in a complex game

We asked Andrew to explain how he knew when to interject into the game in his teacher role.

I think I listen really hard and if there's something that I think is curious or of interest and that people might have missed, I think I can't not let that moment be noted.

It was sometimes a judgement call about when the game did or did not need his input. Sometimes he interjected when energy in the game was dropping, because "intervening at that moment ups the ante sometimes as well". At other times he let things go "otherwise you're not letting them play".

### The limitations of games for teaching history

Andrew and Michael thought it was important to recognise what games were and weren't good for in teaching history. For example, the primary purpose for the games they used was *not* to teach history content, but to give students a more complex and interesting way to reflect on historical content knowledge they had already read or studied, or to introduce situations and contexts that could pique students' interest to learn more about an aspect of history that they might encounter for the first time via a game.

They said it would be a big mistake to try to teach everything through games.

I don't think games are the answer to history education ... they're a part of the big picture. (Andrew)

He suggested teachers unfamiliar with using games in the classroom needed to consider carefully why and how they were using them.

Games have a bit of a wow thing, you're playing a game in class. Wow, you're doing something creative or interesting and I think teachers often feel that they've done something right just because it's different. (Andrew)

Mistakes they thought a novice teacher might make in attempting to use games in history teaching included:

- using games to try to teach content, rather than to teach complexity
- not being conscious of, and unpacking, complex issues or tensions (including ethical issues) that could arise as part of the gameplay
- not taking into account who was playing the game, or considering students' readiness or sensitivities that might be triggered when playing games that intersected with real-world issues that might personally affect students in the game.

Andrew also thought it was important for teachers to let themselves play around with the games they were going to use, and learn from their own mistakes in trying game-based activities with students. This had been Andrew's journey with games, and he had in turn provided encouragement and support to Michael, who mentioned one of his early game-based teaching experiments as "a disaster".

The idea of doing it in my head was really cool but [would not have worked] without being able to just watch and observe and play around and make up a really basic one for the junior students and then muck it up... (Michael)

Then I'd come and observe and we'd talk about what worked well and what didn't. I'm not an expert in it except that I play games all the time. (Andrew)

## Games and the NCEA

Andrew and Michael clearly felt that the Tanderian Simulation and other games deserved time and space in their programmes irrespective of whether they were attached to NCEA credits.

I like using the games as it brings different skills out in the classroom too...like if you're doing reading, close reading and analysis you get the same people talking and the same people feeling confident to participate. But if you play the game you get people participating or saying things, profound ideas that come out of the experience. They would never do that if they were just doing a reading about, say, the Middle East. (Andrew)

Michael noted that there were some new credits currently in development that could potentially be attached to the Tanderian Simulation in the future. But, like the students we interviewed, Andrew seemed reluctant to consider using the game in this way, saying he would "feel a bit sad if the game had credits attached to it".

I love what NCEA offers in lots of ways but it's also really easy to learn how to do it, you can learn the tricks of NCEA pretty quickly and students are really wily. (Andrew)

He recalled suggesting to a student in a previous year that the student could make a game for their NCEA project.

I said to him 'Why don't you try this for your activity for NCEA?' I think I said to him 'Could you make a game which poses the problem?', and he said 'I could do that but I know that I'll get excellence if I write an essay.' So he said 'I'm happy to participate but I won't do that for an assessment.' And so engaging people in learning opportunities if it's not attached to some kind of credit is quite tough and so that's why, one of the reasons why, I've cut back on the standards that I offer so I can create space for games. I've had to actively create space in the year so that that can be made important. (Andrew)



# 6

## This case study in context

What can we learn from this case study? This final chapter considers this example in relation to other research on games and role-play in history education. We also consider emerging themes shared with other game-using classrooms we have researched as part of the *Games for Learning* project.

### Role-play games for history education or conflict resolution

This case study resonates with other research on role-play games in history education (e.g., Beidatsch & Broomhall, 2010; Shiloah & Shoham, 2002), peace-building or conflict resolution programmes (e.g., Powers & Kirkpatrick, 2012), and examples such as the world peace game created by John Hunter.<sup>12</sup> This body of literature suggests that role-play games can be successfully used with students of varying ages to achieve a complex mixture of learning outcomes, yielding student reflections similar to the kinds we saw from the Tanderian Simulation. Most other examples appear to share the same deep goals:

- cultivating students' understanding of the complexity of human interactions (and hence the complexity of historical events or contemporary conflicts)
- encouraging them to empathise with, or disrupt their own assumptions and prejudices about, other people (including people from the past) and how those people might think or act.

Depending on the educational purposes for the activities, role-plays or simulations may be situated within fictionalised scenarios, real historical contexts, or invite participants to draw on experiences from their own lives. Recurring themes across the literature include the need for skilled facilitation and the importance of structured time for out-of-role reflective discussion after the role-play experience.

Powers and Kirkpatrick (2012) underscore the importance of having both oral and written components to debriefing activities. Their programme for graduate students, 'Playing with Conflict', uses a range of games, simulations, and experiential exercises. They have found that oral debriefing sessions are important for students to vent emotions, particularly after long and intense exercises, but not all students feel comfortable to participate in this way. Structured written reflections give students an opportunity to organise their thinking, to describe, interpret, and evaluate their experiences, and to provide feedback to teachers that can help to improve the experience.

This raises an interesting question: Did our research involvement with the Tanderian Simulation case study, which also included opportunities for written reflection and group discussion after the role-play,

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<sup>12</sup> The world peace game, used with elementary school students in the US, been the subject of a documentary and several TED Talks. See <http://worldpeacegame.org/>

also help to amplify or consolidate the students' and/or the teachers' reflections about what they had learned from the experience? Perhaps, but it is also possible that the clarity of the narratives gathered through our research was enhanced because of the frequent reflective discussions the teachers were already having, and had built in to the learning activities we were examining. Either way, the importance of building in processes for evaluative and reflective activities around games and simulations in the classroom seems clear.

### **Using role-play games to develop an understanding of the historian's practice**

A learning goal that was less emphasised in Tanderian Simulation was the explicit goal of learning about the techniques of historians' practice; for example, how historians construct accounts of history from various sources.<sup>13</sup> Other studies suggest that games and role-play can be used to explicitly support this goal. For example, Shiloah and Shoham (2002) describe two different examples of sequencing a role-play activity in 10th grade history classes in Israel. In the first example, students were asked to role-play a situation and make argued cases about what 19th century Prussian statesman Otto van Bismarck should have done to keep France weak and isolated, *prior* to having studied historical accounts of the actual sequence of events that unfolded.

The purpose for sequencing the activity in this way was to take away the advantages of "hindsight", by first encouraging students to envisage different possible solutions to the "problem" facing the historical figure. Students were then supported to critically study accounts of the actual events to consider how historians undertake their work, including considering what leads historians to build particular interpretations, and how they attribute significance to different sources in constructing those interpretations.

In the second example, students had opportunities to first gather information from various sources then split into different groups to build a case for different options that Bismarck could have taken, and finally looked at how their scenarios compared with historical sources giving Bismarck's own explanations of his decisions. The students also role-played different states trying to broker an alliance agreement and then compared this with real text from an alliance agreement between those states. Shiloah and Shoham (2002) conclude that in both cases students were motivated to learn. However, some students had difficulty with the more independent learning approach or struggled to bring a critical lens to their historical imaginations and were "drawn into personal fantasies unrelated to historical reality" (Shiloah & Shoham, 2002, p. 50).

Beidatsch and Broomhall (2010) researched several different kinds of role-play in one Australian undergraduate history class to examine what kinds of exercises, used in which ways, could support students' understandings of the complexities of human motivations in past events, as well as their understanding of the historian's practice. In Beidatsch and Broomhall's example, each fortnight was dedicated to one broad theme, comprising three lectures, one tutorial, and one workshop. Each workshop involved a different role-play or game activity, generally involving discussion as well as physical movement in the classroom.<sup>14</sup>

Analysing a variety of data gathered from students after these activities, the researchers found that activities requiring students to take individual actions and "think on their feet" seemed to have the greatest impact on students' abilities to make sense of the complexities of human behaviours and/or to empathise with people from the past. In terms of understanding the work of historians, students' structured reflections after

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<sup>13</sup> Although this was not the strongest focus of the Tanderian Simulation, the idea that it is important for students to learn about how historians actually work was discussed in the teachers' interviews, particularly by Michael.

<sup>14</sup> This example shares some similarities with Andrew and Michael's use of different games and structured thinking activities in different units over the course of the year but, unlike our case study, data were gathered systematically over the course of all the units.

the workshops also suggested they could link the role-play/game experiences to an enriched understanding of historiographical practices. Interestingly, however, the researchers noted that they could not discern whether the students gleaned these insights purely from the workshop tasks and post-activity discussions, or whether the research questionnaire itself was instrumental in assisting students to make and articulate this understanding.<sup>15</sup> If so, they pointed out, posing the question for explicit reflection could be an important tool for clarifying the learning purposes of such sessions with students.

Looking beyond live-action role-play games, other researchers have looked at the educational use of commercial history-themed digital games (e.g., Fisher, 2011) or purpose-built digital games to address specific episodes of history (e.g., Kee & Bachynski, 2009), and theorised about how digital games can be used to cultivate students' understanding of how historical accounts are constructed (Clyde, Hopkins, & Wilkinson, 2012). This interesting field of research is beginning to integrate deep theoretical perspectives on the nature of history and history education, with theories around game design and game mechanics, to produce what Clyde et al. (2012) call a "gamic mode" of history.

### **History as a "problem space"**

One idea that seems pertinent across all the digital and non-digital game-based research we have reviewed, as well as in the Tanderian Simulation, was something Michael mentioned. We had asked the teachers what they thought it was that enabled them to use games in their history teaching.

I think it goes back to that idea of history as a problem space. (Michael)

The problem space in history is defined by the parameters of what can be accepted as a valid historical account within the discipline of history. Michael and Andrew both grounded their history teaching from an understanding that historical accounts and interpretations taught in the classroom are constructed interpretations, grounded in research sources and evidence used by historians. Where this approach connects neatly with gaming is in the recognition that games and simulations, digital or non-digital, are *also* problem spaces (McCall, 2012). They are constructed with particular constraints and affordances that shape what the player can experience as "the game".

For history educators, this idea may provide a useful framework for considering when and how any kinds of games might be used effectively in the classroom. By being conscious of the ways in which historically-themed games and simulations construct a particular problem space for learners, teachers can pay attention to the strengths and limitations of any particular game, and consider what additional ideas and facts need to be explicitly taught, or reflected on, outside the game experience.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that, to be effective teachers of history through game-based approaches, teachers need to be sufficiently knowledgeable and confident in two domains. First, understanding the nature of history as a discipline and the pedagogical purposes for teaching history, and second, knowledge about various kinds of games and their affordances. With a confident grounding in both these areas, teachers can navigate the balance between allowing students to play with historical ideas through games, and attending to structures and processes that ensure learners can also step out of the game space to discuss and reflect on their experiences, including their strengths and limitations as tools for learning history. This case study suggests that the depth of expertise teachers might need across both areas could come through high-trust partnerships and collaborations between teachers, or through connections with peers in research/academia, or gamers, game designers, or potentially even their own game-knowledgeable students.

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<sup>15</sup> The students were asked to write a reflective response to the question: "How has this session helped you to understand the historian's task better?"

<sup>16</sup> See also Sue McDowall's (2017) working paper on critical literacy and games.

## Other game-using classrooms in the *Games for Learning* project

This case study is thus far the only example of an extended complex role-play game in our *Games for Learning* project, and the only example from a history classroom. Nevertheless, we can already see some interesting similarities between this case study and some of our other classroom examples, including some that involve primary-aged students undertaking game *design*. The themes of complexity in the classroom, teachers creating the conditions for emergent learning opportunities, games as conduits between classroom learning and real-world contexts, and teachers and students learning to navigate through uncertainty, learn from failures, and “think on their feet” will be addressed again in forthcoming case studies and syntheses of themes across cases.

# 7

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